

Commitment and Conquest: The Case of British Rule in India

Mandar Oak

School of Economics

University of Adelaide

Adelaide SA 5005 AUSTRALIA

mandar.oak@adelaide.edu.au

Anand Swamy¹

Department of Economics

Williams College

Williamstown MA 01267 USA

aswamy@williams.edu

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Abstract

Contemporary historians usually attribute the East India Company's military success in India to its military strength, and to the mutual distrust of Indian regimes. We argue these explanations, though correct, are incomplete. The credibility of the Company's commitments, even though imperfect, was essential to its success.

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¹Corresponding author. Phone: 413-458-0352; fax: 413-597-4045.

.... [W]ithout the cooperation of the Marratas I could not flatter myself with a certain prospect of the speedy conclusion as well as the decided success of the war [against Mysore].

– (Governor-General Cornwallis to Captain Kennaway, envoy to the Nizam of Hyderabad, June 7, 1790).²

You can also remove all his apprehensions respecting the stability of our treaties by stating to him that as all treaties which are made in India must now be communicated to the King's administration in England, whose duty it is to take care that the national honor shall not be injured by a breach of public faith, there will not be the least risk that any future Governor-General will venture to infringe any of the treaties that shall be concluded by me.

– (Governor-General Cornwallis to Captain Kennaway, envoy to the Nizam of Hyderabad, April 12, 1790.)³

1 Introduction

Why was the East India Company (commonly referred to as the Company) able to conquer India? There are four explanations in the literature: (i) The Company was militarily strong; (ii) Indian regimes did not trust each other and hence could not collaborate against it; (iii) The Company had good military intelligence; and (iv) Indian regimes were myopic, and did not anticipate the long-term threat posed by the Company.^{4,5} In this paper we accept these

²From *Poona Residency Correspondence*, Volume III, p. 157.

³From *Poona Residency Correspondence*, Volume III, p. 102.

⁴Bayly (1999, p. 97) argues that the British "were able to conquer the Indian subcontinent within a period of two generations because they commanded the Indian seas and the Bengal revenues," but also goes on to emphasize the importance of its success in information gathering and military intelligence. Gordon (1998, p.194) highlights the role of "credit, artillery, and training."

⁵The introduction to Regani (1963, p. i), by P. Sreenivas Char, quotes M.S. Mehta on the short-sightedness of Indian regimes: "It is a sad commentary on their sagacity and judgment that they should have failed to understand the simple phenomenon that mutual enmity and disunion were bound to destroy the sovereignty and independence which they so proudly wished to preserve." A variant of this view (Stein 2001, p. 209) emphasizes the Company's organizational structure, arguing that in the middle decades of the 18th century Indian regimes were "lulled" into a false sense of security because they were aware that authorities in London

explanations, with the exception of the fourth (see below) but highlight the importance of another factor: the credibility, even if less-than-perfect, of the Company's commitments. We trace this credibility back to the Company's institutional structure, in particular the constraints imposed on its Indian officials by superiors and critics in London.

While we believe our argument applies fairly broadly for the century-long period of conquest, we primarily make our case by examining a key episode in the late 18th century, the Third Mysore War (1790-92) in which the Company decisively defeated the Indian regime (Mysore) that has been described as its most "formidable and most determined foe" (Moon 1990, p. 291). Indeed Thompson (1943, p. 4), in his classic work *The Making of the Indian Princes*, writes that "Haidar and Tipu [the two rulers of Mysore, father and son] brought the East India Company nearer to ruin than any other Indian foes had brought it, and nearer than any subsequent foe was to bring it." The striking feature of this defeat of Mysore is that it was accomplished *with the help of the Marathas*, the only other non-European power on the subcontinent on par with Mysore⁶. Given their subsequent conquest by the Company, this decision by the Marathas is puzzling. Didn't the Marathas recognize that they were next in line? Indeed, even some contemporary observers were surprised by their decision to ally with the Company. In 1792, after Mysore had been defeated by the Company and its allies, French observers in Pondichery commented that "at last both Nizam [of Hyderabad, see note 5] and the Marathas must surely have their eyes opened, and begin to see how unwise they been in warring against Mysore, thereby enfeebling the only power '*qui puisse en imposer aux anglais*' [that would impress the English]" (Thompson 1943, p. 4).

Our explanation of the Marathas' behavior proceeds in the following steps: (i) In the late 1780's the Company did not have an overwhelming military advantage over Mysore – it needed the Marathas' support; (ii) The Marathas were not myopic – they knew the Company could, after defeating Tipu, turn

(with oversight over the Company in India) were conservative, and opposed to risky warfare.

⁶The Company's "Triple Alliance" against Mysore also included the Nizam of Hyderabad, a much weaker player, who we discuss below.

on them; (iii) Therefore, to win the Marathas' support the Company had to make some credible promises; (iv) The Marathas took the Company's promises (written agreements) seriously because they knew its officials were answerable to London, where superiors and critics would frown upon contractual violations, whereas they had little reason to trust Tipu Sultan's commitments; (v) *Ex-post*, the Company did show some restraint, as expected. Thus the constraints on the behavior of Company officials in India, even given their limits, were key to its success.

Establishing motives is intrinsically difficult – we usually observe the decisions of various players (in our case the Marathas' decision to ally with the Company), but not the thinking behind them (in our case, the Marathas' trust that the Company's commitments had some value). In the case examined in this paper, however, we are fortunate to have access to the *Poona Residency Correspondence*, letters exchanged between the Company's Governor-General and his representative to the Marathas' court in Poona, as well as other communication. These provide a blow-by-blow account of years of negotiation between the Company and the Marathas. This allows us to show that the Marathas knew the Company's institutional structure, and had some reason to think its agreements could not be lightly abrogated. Of course, as mentioned above, we also follow through and discuss the extent to which Maratha expectations were borne out.

The following five sections of this paper flesh out each step of our argument. The next section provides some historical background regarding the Company's history in India and establishes its need for help in the crucial Third Mysore War. The following section shows that the Marathas were thinking strategically – they were keenly aware that the Company could turn on them subsequently. To clarify the third step of our argument we present a simple game-theoretic model which shows that in a three-person game the strongest player can never find an ally unless he has some commitment ability. The next section returns to the history, and describes the sources of this commitment ability. We first show that the Company in India was restrained by London, and then that the

Marathas were aware of the influence of London, which gave the Company's treaties some weight. We then turn to the aftermath of the Third Mysore War, and to events of the 19th century, arguing that allies of the Company had, at least from the point of view of narrow self-interest, placed the right bet; their *ex-ante* expectations were not so far off the mark. The final section discusses other 19th century events which we view as consistent with our argument, and concludes the paper.

2 The Company and its Rivals, 1785-1800

2.1 The Regimes

The English East India Company had operated in India since the early 17th century, initially as a purely commercial enterprise. The unstable political environment motivated the Company to develop its military strength to protect its trade, and to fortify its trading settlements. Over time, local rulers found it advantageous to seek the Company's help in various military disputes. Still, until the mid-1700's the Company's explicitly military/political role was small. However, competition with the French Company for local political influence drew the Company into Indian politics, and it was emboldened by its military successes. In 1757, after disputes with the Nawab of Bengal, the Company rather easily won the famous Battle of Plassey, and over the next decade consolidated its control of Bengal. It also defeated, and established as a client state, the North Indian state of Awadh (1764). However, militarily speaking, the Company had a long way to go before it controlled the subcontinent. There were at least two other militarily formidable players: the Marathas, and Mysore. A fourth player, the Nizam of Hyderabad, who ruled a large area Southern India, also features prominently in the literature, but is usually considered unimportant in the military sense. This paper therefore focuses on the strategic behavior of the Marathas, the Company, and Tipu Sultan. However, we do comment on some aspects of the Company-Nizam relationship, because they are revealing as to

the Company's credibility.

The Marathas, who emerged in opposition to the Mughals in the 17th century, are often referred to as a "confederacy." Beginning with a centralized power structure, with its base in Poona (in present-day Maharashtra) "centripetal tendencies" (Gordon, 1998, p.54) had, by our period, led to the emergence of other powerful Marathas players, including the Holkars, based in Indore (in the southern portion of present-day Madhya Pradesh) and especially the Scindias, based in Gwalior (in the northern part of present-day Madhya Pradesh). Still, the Court of Poona was the "nerve-centre of the confederacy" (Sen 1974, p. 17). Much of our discussion focuses on the Court of Poona, though we provide detail on other factions, where appropriate.

Mysore (centered in present-day Karnataka) was the up-and-comer. In the mid-18th century the Hindu regime of the Wodeyars had been undermined and replaced by Haidar Ali, a Muslim mercenary, followed by his son Tipu Sultan. In contrast with the loose-knit structure of the Marathas, Mysore was tightly centralized around the authority of Tipu Sultan. Mysore was very effective in raising taxes, employing harsh methods when required. This fiscal success laid the foundation for the expansion of its military.

The Nizam, based in Hyderabad (in present-day Andhra Pradesh), ruled a "successor state," i.e. a province that had broken away from the Mughal empire. Though large in terms of territory (though some of it was arid and not very productive), it was, especially by our period, not very significant militarily. After his tenure as Governor-General, Warren Hastings, on his way home in 1784, analyzed political conditions in India. He wrote of the Nizam that "his military strength is represented to be most contemptible" (Thompson 1943, p. 1).

The various players, Company, Marathas, Mysore and Nizam were intermittently at war in different permutations and combinations from the 1760's to the 1780's.⁷ By the end of the 1780's however, the Company had decided to elimi-

⁷Because the Nizam's military strength was slight, and did not determine major military outcomes, we have reduced discussion of his role.

nate Tipu Sultan, who it viewed as aggressive and threatening to its possessions in South India.⁸ In his turn Tipu viewed the Company as expansionist. War between Mysore and the Company seemed inevitable. The key question was: What would the Marathas do?

2.2 Military Strengths

The Company was the strongest power; there was a long history of relatively small numbers of disciplined and well-armed and well-led Company forces defeating much larger armies.⁹ But the Company's superiority over Tipu was not overwhelming. By the 1780's Mysore was growing in strength, and was "arguably the strongest antagonist of the British" (Ramusack 2004, p. 66). Mysore had held its own in conflict with the Company in the early 1780's, and the Company's prestige had diminished somewhat. Tipu had bested a coalition of the Marathas and the Nizam in the mid-1780's (Sen 1974, Hasan 1971). His success is sometimes attributed to his adoption of European military tactics and hardware (Brittlebank 1987, Hasan 1971). Moreover, the Marathas lacked internal cohesion, whereas Tipu had a more unified force, which he personally commanded.

The potential threat from Tipu was also periodically enhanced by the fear that he would receive assistance from the French, though by the 1780's the French were not militarily important in India. The Company's own perception was that if it attacked Mysore it would probably win, but it could do with some help. In the build-up to the decisive conflict with Tipu Sultan, the Third Mysore War, Governor-General Charles Cornwallis wrote to Charles Malet, his emissary to the Marathas' court in Poona on January 27, 1790 (*Poona Residency Correspondence*, Volume III, p. 55) emphasizing the importance of their sup-

⁸Henry Dundas, at the head of the Board of Control [discussed in section 5.1] in London, wrote to Cornwallis on November 13, 1790: "I ardently wish for the annihilation of that restless tyrant, for while he exists, there can be no certainty of peace in India..."(Sen 1974, p. 87).

⁹One of the Company's strengths was its superior artillery. Indian regimes could employ these weapons, and could hire Europeans (e.g. French) to man them. However, they were prone to desert at crucial times, especially if the opponent at hand was also European (say, the Company), and if political relations between the two European powers improved.

port: "It is unnecessary to explain to you that the cooperation of the Marathas in this contest would be of the greatest importance to our interests..." On April 26, he again argued on similar lines(*Poona Residency Correspondence* Volume III, p. 146):

I need hardly state to you that though it would be desirable to obtain terms of precise equality in our treaty with the Marrattas, yet as their hearty and early cooperation with us is of utmost importance to our interests, I would even designedly give them some advantage rather than retard the commencement of operation of their forces.

Similarly, in a letter to Pitt in 1790 (Sen 1974, p. 98) another Company official wrote:

The sufficiency of our military force in that part of the world, for such an undertaking, is, I conclude, unquestionable; but the resources for the inevitable expenses, and for supplies of stores and provisions, necessary for so important an undertaking, must be less certain. It will be fortunate if the politics of the two courts, of the Marathas and the Nizam are found sufficiently steady to be counted upon, in the pursuit of a great political plan.

The "great political plan" came to be: the central component of the Maratha confederacy, the Peshwa in Poona, formed an alliance with the Company and the Nizam of Hyderabad, and played an important role in defeating Tipu in the Third Mysore War¹⁰. At the end of this war Tipu surrendered as much as half of his territory. He remained in power, much weakened, and the Company eventually delivered the *coup de grace* in the Fourth Mysore War in 1799 when Tipu was killed. The Peshwa's minister, Nana Fadnis, could see what would

¹⁰Of the other two main players in the confederacy, Scindia stayed out, but supported Poona's decision to join. In a letter to the Court of Directors describing the negotiations that led to an alliance with the Peshwa in Poona, Cornwallis made it a point to mention the role of "Mahratta Chief Mahadji Scindia who, we believe, contributed by his own representations to forward the alliance" (*Poona Residency Correspondence* II, p. 521, letter 364). The third important player, Holkar, did not approve of the alliance, and kept out.

follow (Sardesai 1968): "Tipu is finished; the British power has increased; the whole of East India is already theirs; Poona will be the next victim. . . There seems to be no escape from destiny." This is the same Nana Fadnis whose agent had negotiated the treaty with the Company before the Third Mysore War. Why had the Marathas allied with a power that was, within a decade, perceived as such a threat?

3 Were the Marathas myopic?

A possible explanation for the behavior of the Marathas is that they were just naive, and did not anticipate the future threat posed by the Company. There is ample evidence that this was not the case.

For instance, Nana Fadnis, the Poona Peshwa's minister had written to Haidar Ali, the ruler of Mysore in 1780, regarding the Company:

Divide and Grab is their main principle. . . . They are bent upon subjugating the states of Poona, Nagpur, Mysore and Haidarabad one by one, by enlisting the sympathy of one to put down the others. They know best how to destroy the Indian cohesion.¹¹

Similarly, Ahilyabai Holkar, at the head of an important component of the Maratha Confederacy had earlier warned of the risks of allying with the Company:

Other beasts, like tigers, can be killed by might or contrivance, but to kill a bear it is very difficult. It will die only if you kill it straight in the face, Or else, once caught in its powerful hold, the bear will kill its prey by tickling. Such is the way of the English. And in view of this, it is difficult to triumph over them.¹²

¹¹Quoted by Ray (1998), p. 519.

¹²Cited by Kamath and Kher (1995, p. 126).

The reader will also see below, as we discuss the negotiations that preceded the Third Mysore War, that the Maratha negotiators were far from naive. Indeed, they were thinking strategically (and in the British view opportunistically) at every step. Why did the Marathas, if they were strategic thinkers, join the Company? We argue that this is because the Company's promises had some credibility. The next section of the paper makes this argument analytically: in a three person game the strongest player can find an ally only if its promises have some teeth.

4 A Model Of Coalition Formation

Consider a world with three risk-neutral players: the Company (player 1), Tipu (player 2) and the Marathas (player 3). These players are assumed to be in a conflict with each other over division of a surplus which we normalize to 1. To this end the players can fight wars, either individually or in alliance with each other. In a war, the faction which emerges victorious survives into the next period and the losers are eliminated.¹³ When peace is established – either because a sole victor emerges, or because there is no incentive for the remaining players to fight further – the surplus is divided amongst the ultimate set of survivors.

Each player i is endowed with military strength which we represent by a scalar $p_i \in (0, 1)$ such that $\sum_i p_i = 1$. Military strengths influence the probability of winning as follows: if a subset of players with collective military strength p goes to war against another subset with collective strength p' , then the probability of the former emerging victorious is given by a function $F(\frac{p}{p+p'})$. The probability of the latter emerging victorious is $F(\frac{p'}{p+p'})$ which is equal to $1 - F(\frac{p}{p+p'})$. We further assume that $F(\cdot)$ is an increasing function with $F(\frac{1}{2}) = \frac{1}{2}$. The relative military strength also influences the *default* division of surplus amongst the ultimate set of survivors.¹⁴ In particular, we assume that if $I \subset \{1, 2, 3\}$ is

¹³Alternatively, we can assume that the losers' military strength is reduced down to zero while the winners retain theirs.

¹⁴By *default* division we mean the division in the absence of any credible surplus sharing

the ultimate set of survivors after the war(s), then the default share of surplus obtained by player $i \in I$ is equal to

$$\frac{p_i}{\sum_{j \in I} p_j}.$$

This means the surviving players receive surplus in proportion to their military strength. The players who do not survive to the end get 0.

While both the probability of winning and the default share of surplus are increasing functions of military strength, we assume, as seems natural, that

Assumption 1 $F(\frac{p}{p+p'}) > (=) p$ if $p > (=) p'$.

This assumption implies that the militarily stronger player gets a greater expected payoff by attacking the weaker faction than by maintaining peace. An immediate implication of this assumption is that if there are only two players remaining, then in absence of any previous agreement, the stronger player will attack the relatively weaker player.¹⁵

In the following analysis we assume that there is a war between players 1 and 2. Player 3 can either stay neutral or join one of the players. We will examine how player 3's incentives are affected by player 1's ability to make credible promises regarding the post-war outcome.

4.1 No commitment ability

This sub-section analyzes the incentives of the three players in the absence of any commitment ability. The lack of credible commitment ability means that any player i cannot promise player j that he (i) will not attack him (j) in future, nor can any player promise a division of surplus in a manner other than the default division described above.

arrangement.

¹⁵Of course, this is not always true. War leads to deadweight losses and a stronger player's victory may come at too high a cost; in such a situation a war might not occur. In our context, though, as described earlier, wars were frequent, and deadweight losses do not seem to have been a deterrent.

Motivated by the description in the previous section, we assume that the military strengths of the three players are as follows:

Assumption 2 $p_1 > p_2 > p_3$.

This assumption states that the British were militarily the strongest and the Marathas were the weakest. The reader should note that, while we believe this to be the correct ranking, the arguments of the paper do not depend on the relative ranking of the Marathas and Tipu Sultan, i.e. we could make the Marathas player 2 and Tipu Sultan player 3, and the argument would still hold.

Given that players 1 and 2 are at war, player 3 has three options: he can stay neutral, or join player 1, or join player 2. We will examine each of these options.

Stay Neutral In this case player 3 and the winner of the 1-2 war will survive into the next period. However, as described above, the victor of the 1-2 war, being stronger than player 3, will have an incentive to attack him. Hence, player 3's expected payoff is

$$F\left(\frac{p_1}{p_1 + p_2}\right)F\left(\frac{p_3}{p_1 + p_3}\right) + F\left(\frac{p_2}{p_1 + p_2}\right)F\left(\frac{p_3}{p_2 + p_3}\right). \quad (1)$$

Ally with player 2 If player 3 allies with player 2, their chance of surviving the war with player 1 is $F(p_2 + p_3)$. However, in the next period player 2 will attack player 3. Hence, player 3's expected payoff is

$$F(p_2 + p_3)F\left(\frac{p_3}{p_2 + p_3}\right). \quad (2)$$

Ally with player 1

Similar to the case above, player 3's expected payoff from allying with player 1 is

$$F(p_1 + p_3)F\left(\frac{p_3}{p_1 + p_3}\right). \quad (3)$$

Observe from equation (1) that player 3's expected payoff from remaining neutral is a convex combination of $F(\frac{p_3}{p_1+p_3})$ and $F(\frac{p_3}{p_2+p_3})$. It is therefore bigger than the smaller of the two terms, viz. $F(\frac{p_3}{p_1+p_3})$. Also, as seen from equation (3), player 3's expected payoff from allying with player 1 is smaller than $F(\frac{p_3}{p_1+p_3})$. It follows that

Remark 1 *In the absence of commitment ability it is never in the interest of player 3 to ally with player 1. Player 3 will either remain neutral or ally with player 2.*

The above remark is the key to understanding the potential problems for the Company in seeking alliances with local rulers. Given its relative military superiority, the Company could have been *unattractive* as allies. The weaker local powers could have preferred to either remain neutral or ally with each other against the Company. While the above analysis is conducted in terms of player 3's incentives in case of a 1-2 war, similar analysis will show that in the event of a 1-3 war player 2 has similar incentives – it is never in his interest to ally with player 1.

Note that if player 2 had an ability to make credible commitment to not attack player 3 in the future, then it further undermines the case for player 3 to side with player 1. We have chosen the case most favorable for the Company (Tipu Sultan has zero commitment ability) and will show that even with this extreme scenario, the Company needed credibility to find allies..

4.2 Credible coalition promises

We now introduce the possibility of player 1 making credible commitment to his allies. The commitment takes the form "if you ally with me against my enemy, I will not attack you in the next period and give you a surplus X ." We show that a necessary condition for such a commitment to be credible is that there is a cost $c_1 \geq 0$ incurred by player 1 for violating it. In the next section of the paper we describe the institutional sources that generated such costs for Company officials in India.

Suppose that player 1 has promised amount X to player 3 upon defeat of player 2. Conditional on surviving into the second period, player 1 has the following options and corresponding payoffs π_1 and π_3 for players 1 and 3, respectively.

- Honor the promise. In this case we have

$$\pi_1 = 1 - X \text{ and } \pi_3 = X. \quad (4)$$

- Don't honor the promise but don't attack. Now player 1 incurs the cost of breaking his commitment. This gives

$$\pi_1 = \frac{p_1}{p_1 + p_3} - c_1 \text{ and } \pi_3 = \frac{p_3}{p_1 + p_3}. \quad (5)$$

- Don't honor the promise and attack. This gives

$$\pi_1 = F\left(\frac{p_1}{p_1 + p_3}\right) - c_1 \text{ and } \pi_3 = F\left(\frac{p_3}{p_1 + p_3}\right) \quad (6)$$

Comparing the above equations, player 1's promise is credible if

$$1 - X \geq \max\left\{\frac{p_1}{p_1 + p_3} - c_1, F\left(\frac{p_1}{p_1 + p_3}\right) - c_1\right\}.$$

Given our assumptions, we know that the max in the equation above will be attained at $F\left(\frac{p_1}{p_1 + p_3}\right) - c_1$. Hence the condition for 1's coalition promise to be credible is

$$X \leq 1 - F\left(\frac{p_1}{p_1 + p_3}\right) + c_1. \quad (7)$$

4.2.1 Player 3's choice

Suppose player 1 has offered a credible X to player 3. What should he do, and what are his corresponding payoffs (in the *ex-ante* sense)?

- Join player 1 and get

$$F(p_1 + p_3) \cdot X. \quad (8)$$

- Join player 2 and get

$$F(p_2 + p_3) \cdot F\left(\frac{p_3}{p_2 + p_3}\right). \quad (9)$$

- Stay neutral and get

$$F\left(\frac{p_1}{p_1 + p_2}\right) \cdot F\left(\frac{p_3}{p_1 + p_3}\right) + F\left(\frac{p_2}{p_1 + p_2}\right) \cdot F\left(\frac{p_3}{p_2 + p_3}\right) \quad (10)$$

Let Y denote the maximum of player 3's payoffs from joining 2 or staying neutral. Player 1 will be able to attract player 3 as a coalition partner by promising an X such that

$$F(p_1 + p_3)X = Y$$

or

$$X = \frac{Y}{F(p_1 + p_3)}.$$

For a (1,3) coalition to be feasible the smallest X player 3 will accept must be smaller than the largest X player 1 can credibly offer:

$$\frac{Y}{F(p_1 + p_3)} \leq 1 - F\left(\frac{p_1}{p_1 + p_3}\right) + c_1$$

or

$$c_1 \geq \frac{Y}{F(p_1 + p_3)} - F\left(\frac{p_3}{p_1 + p_3}\right). \quad (11)$$

We know that by definition $Y \geq (10)$, and we have argued earlier that $(10) \geq F\left(\frac{p_3}{p_1 + p_3}\right)$. Since $F(p_1 + p_3) \leq 1$, the right-hand-side of (11) is positive. Hence, equation (11) will be satisfied only if c_1 is strictly positive. Thus, for a (1,3) coalition (Company-Maratha), the Company had to have some cost for breaking contracts.

Our model has demonstrated a simple point: if the Company was strong, but not credible, it would not have found allies. However, if it had some credibility,

and its rivals did not, it might well obtain allies. The Company's envoy seems to have employed an argument very similar to ours in negotiations with the Marathas. At a difficult point in the negotiations between the Marathas and the Company, Charles Malet argued that even if the Marathas stayed neutral, the Company and Tipu would still go to war. If the Company won, it might offer the Marathas something, but would not feel obliged to treat them well. On the other hand, if they joined the Company, it would be generous in sharing in the spoils. However, if the Marathas stayed neutral and Tipu Sultan won, they could expect the worst:

I begged however that the minister in weighing this question [of whether to stay effectively stay neutral by not compromising in the negotiations] would naturally weigh the consequences and recollect that the event of a separate war between Tippoo and the Company would be the ascendancy of one party or the other. If it fell to the Company, they would either make peace on their own terms or admit this state [the Marathas] to a participation of the benefits of that ascendancy on their own terms, both of which precluded that reciprocal claim which was now offered to this Court. On the other hand should Tippoo be successful against the Company, I left the Minister to judge what progress the Marratas expected to make against this power, confirmed and invigorated by such success... (Charles Malet to Cornwallis, March 28, 1790, *Poona Residency Correspondence* III, p. 93).

Malet's argument seems to have prevailed. What was the source of the Company's credibility? The next section turns to this question.

5 The Company's Credibility

5.1 Scrutiny of the Company's Indian Officials

The East India Company was a hugely influential and visible entity in London. Employment in the Company was much sought-after and this gave it a source of patronage. The Company's shareholders, keen to protect their dividends, were a vocal group. But as the Company began to acquire territory in India it attracted criticism. There was considerable press reporting of corruption and other abuses by the Company's officials in Bengal in the 1760's, including allegations against Robert Clive, the famous general at the Battle of Plassey, and later governor of Bengal. There was concern that the Company's greedy officials were impoverishing Bengal, which was expected to be a highly productive long-term asset for Britain. This concern was intensified after 1771, when in a major famine, as much as a third of the population of Bengal may have died.

Besides the press and the public, the Company's officials in India were also accountable both directly, and through their superiors, to more formal sources of authority. There was the Company's own Court of Directors, eager to maintain profits and dividends, and avoid the heavy costs of war. But the Court of Directors was itself answerable to Parliament. The Company had often depended on the King's troops. More important, it had often approached the government for what we would today call financial bailouts. This gave the government leverage over the Company, in the form of the Regulating Act of 1773 and subsequently, and especially relevant for us, Pitt's India Act of 1784. Pitt's India Act established a "Board of Control" which supervised the Company's administration, trade, and diplomacy. Its most prominent member, Henry Dundas, served on the Board from 1784 to 1801, and, according to Marshall (1968, p. 47) was the equivalent of a Secretary of State for India.

A key clause in Pitt's India Act explicitly discouraged war: it stated that "to pursue schemes of conquest and extension of dominion in India, are measures repugnant to the wish, the honour, and policy of this nation" (Marshall 1968,

p. 167) The Act also warned against alliances or treaties that were likely to draw the Company into war in the future. The purpose was to ensure the Company would go to war only in self-defence, or in defence of allies it was already committed to.

There is ample evidence that the Company's officials in India were acutely aware of the scrutiny of London. Edmund Burke, the famous conservative and critic of the Company published a description of an alleged massacre of civilians by Company troops in a publication called the *Annual Register* in 1784. The allegation was vigorously refuted, but its impact is reflected in the fact that Wilks (1810), a Company official who wrote perhaps the best-known political history of South India of that period, still felt the need to address this issue decades later. The best example of the accountability of Company officials is, however, the famous, highly visible, and protracted trial of Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General (1772-1784), upon his return to England (Dirks 2006). Key articles of impeachment pertained to political decisions, not just personal corruption. One allegation related to Hastings's treatment of the Raja of Benares, a Company client: Under financial pressure, Hastings had increased his demands for taxes, beyond the contracted amount. Chait Singh had resisted, negotiated, and finally rebelled. Another charge against Warren Hastings pertained to the demands he placed on the Begums (Queens) of Awadh, a Company ally, again to obtain resources for the Company. For our purposes it is not especially relevant whether or not Hastings was guilty (he was acquitted) – our point is he was answerable to superiors and political enemies in a way that Indian rulers were not. Even Richard Wellesley (on whom more below), often considered the most aggressive Governor-General, was vulnerable to his critics. In 1804 he became enraged with a subordinate for reasons his personal secretary explained as follows: "Whatever your motives may have been, your conduct has certainly placed Lord Wellesley in a very embarrassing position. . . Your having shown a great disposition to admit the justice of Scindiah's right to Gwalior and Gohud is likely, Lord Wellesley thinks to give his enemies in Leadenhall Street room to found an accusation against Lord Wellesley of injustice and rapacity. . . "

(Thompson 1943, p. 98).¹⁶

It is also clear that Pitt's India Act's injunctions against war were taken seriously, especially by Charles Cornwallis, who arrived in India in 1786, and was Governor-General in the period preceding and during the Third Mysore War. When Cornwallis arrived in India he found that his predecessor, Charles Macpherson, had committed to providing the Maratha Peshwa three battalions to be used in defence of his territory, but not offensively. The Peshwa's minister, Nana Fadnis took this to mean the Company would help if the Peshwa attacked Tipu to recover territories previously seized by him. Cornwallis wrote to another official in 1786 (Sen 1974, p. 47):

To my utter astonishment I find this Government pledged to lend three battalions of sepoy from Bombay to the Marathas to defend the possessions of the Peshwa, but not to act offensively against Tipu....The business now is to get out of this scrape. I must declare to the Marathas that I have brought particular powers and instructions and that I cannot confirm that engagement of the former government as I am positively prohibited from interfering in the disputes of any of the Country Powers except those whom we are bound by treaty to assist.

Cornwallis stuck to this view despite the fact the Marathas, whose military assistance he coveted, were offended¹⁷. However, he had his opportunity when Tipu Sultan attacked Travancore (December 29, 1789). At the conclusion of a previous conflict a treaty (1784) had been signed between Tipu Sultan and the Company, according to which the Raja of Travancore was explicitly mentioned

¹⁶We do not mean to suggest that Governors-General did not violate their agreements with Indian regimes. This was especially true for Lord Wellesley, who became Governor-General in 1798. Our point is that Governors-General faced some constraints: A good example of this is provided by Fisher (1987). In 1800 the Company was tempted to annex Awadh, a rich but militarily weak region that had been its ally/client since 1764. The Company was, however, restrained by the fear of reaction in London and India, so it annexed merely half of Awadh! Thus, the Company in India acted in "constrained bad faith."

¹⁷On another occasion, Cornwallis restrained himself in a dispute with the Marathas, writing to Malet that though military action was consistent with "the injunctions of the Act" it might "occasion some alarm at home" (*Poona Residency Correspondence*, Volume II, p. 141, letter dated May 5, 1789).

as a "friend and ally" of the Company, whom Tipu was forsworn not to attack.¹⁸ Now that Tipu had, in Cornwallis' view, violated the agreement, he felt free, under the terms of Pitt's India Act, to negotiate a treaty with the Marathas against Tipu. Cornwallis now approached the Peshwa. He wrote to Malet to tell the Marathas that "being now set at liberty by Tippoo's breach of treaty, we will further agree to contract a defensive alliance with them for the mutual guarantee of the territories of which we may be respectively possessed at its conclusion"(*Poona Residency Correspondence* letter # 60, volume 2, p. 55). Thus, Cornwallis not only appears to have taken the injunctions of Pitt's India Act seriously, he seems to have repeatedly communicated to the Marathas its influence on his decision-making. Indeed in another letter to Malet (Feb 28, 1790, *Poona Residency Correspondence* III, p. 78), he alludes to the fact that "we have uniformly professed that unless Tippoo should violate the late treaty of peace we were not at liberty to contract any alliances of an hostile tendency to him."

5.2 Marathas' Knowledge of Company's Governance Structure

The discussion above suggests that the Company's representatives themselves had given the Marathas information about London's supervision of their activities. But there is also other evidence to suggest that the Marathas were aware of the organizational structure of the Company, and sought to use this information strategically. In 1778 Raghunath Rao, a Maratha chieftain and former Company ally who had fallen on bad times composed a letter to the English King appealing for support, and asking him to supersede the author-

¹⁸Article 1 of the Treaty of Mangalore began as follows: "Peace & friendship shall immediately take place between the said Company, the Nabob Tippoo Sultan Bahadur & their friends, and allies, particularly including therein the Rajahs of Tanjore & Travencore, who are friends & allies to the English and the Carnatic Payen Ghaut, also Tippoo Sultan's friends & allies, the Biby of Cannanore, and the Rajahs or Zemindars of the Malabar coast, are included in this treaty, the English will not directly or indirectly assist the enemies of the Nabob Tippoo Sultan Bahadur nor make war upon his friends or allies, and the Nabob Tippoo Sultan Bahadur will not directly or indirectly assist the enemies, nor make war upon the friends or allies of the English."

ity of Company officials in India. Rao sent a team of emissaries to London to deliver the letter to the King. The team, which reached in 1781, was strongly supported by Edmund Burke (and other critics/enemies of the Company), who housed them, and helped arrange various meetings. Still, the team was bounced from set of authorities to another, and was eventually unsuccessful in obtaining British support for Raghunath Rao. However, Fisher (2004, 661) reports that "the mission gained valuable intelligence, especially highlighting the divisions within British domestic politics." Indeed, the mission was remembered even a century later, and its precedent was invoked to allow high-caste Hindus to cross the seas without losing caste.¹⁹

The Marathas repeatedly invoked this knowledge in the buildup to the Third Mysore War. Malet wrote to Cornwallis on June 3, 1789 (*Poona Residency Correspondence*, Volume 2, 143).

At the same time Behroo Punt [the Peshwa's negotiator] started the old topic of this Courts' sending a minister to England....I think it sufficient to acquaint your Lordship that the design seems founded on an idea that has been conveyed to this Court from some quarter or other, of the distinction between the King and the Company and of an opening thereby presenting of advantageously pursuing its interests by a skilful [sic] conduct of its negotiations with the Company or His Majesty's ministry as circumstances might dictate...

Cornwallis responded to this letter on 26th August, 1789 (*Poona Residency Correspondence* Volume II, p. 151) endorsing Malet's efforts to deflect this proposal, but also noting the following:

You may on all occasions assure the ministers with confidence that although I am well convinced that the powers which have been delegated to this government are fully adequate to every point of

¹⁹This was not the first time an Indian regime had attempted to go over the heads of the Company administration in India. The Nawab of Arcot had done something similar in 1767 (Bowring 1899, p. 82).

negotiation which is compatible with the present pacific system of Britain, yet if they should be of opinion that any advantage could arise to the Mahratta State by sending a deputation to England I shall not only give my ready consent, but shall also be at pains to procure a convenient passage for their envoys as well as an honourable reception for them upon their arrival in Europe.

Three months later, on (December 18, 1789, *Poona Residency Correspondence* Volume 2, p. 161) Cornwallis returned to this issue:

I conceive it very consistent with the finesse and cunning of the Brahmin character to throw out occasionally their intentions of sending their ambassadors to England without actually having any idea of carrying this design into execution, but only with the hopes of rendering this government more pliant from an apprehension that the negotiation of any points on which difficulties may arise may be carried from hence into another channel.

Clearly, the Marathas had some awareness of the checks and balances that were central to the Company's governance.

This discussion notwithstanding, our point is not that the Company was entirely trustworthy, or that its commitments were taken at face value. It is merely that its officials in India faced some restrictions on their behavior, whereas the rulers of rival Indian regimes did not, and Indian regimes were aware of this. In contrast with the Company's Governors-General Tipu Sultan was not answerable to anyone, and there are numerous examples of contractual violations by him. In 1785, Tipu and the Marathas entered into a dispute involving the taxation of a minor chieftain whose land, formerly in Maratha territory, was now under Tipu's control. After mutual threats and military mobilization by both parties, an agreement was reached, which guaranteed the safety of the chieftain. Duff (1826, p. 5) reports that Tipu then practiced a "gross deception." The chieftain and his family were "treacherously seized; his daughter was

reserved for the Sultan's seraglio, and the rest were immured in a Cabuldroog [a fortress] where they perished."²⁰ Another example of contract violation occurred after the war of the mid-1780s referenced above (Tipu Sultan versus Marathas-Nizam) was ended by the Treaty of Gajendragad. Tipu immediately violated the agreement and seized a region called Kittur. This incident was later invoked by Charles Malet, persuading the Marathas to join the Company against Mysore: "...[H]as he [Tipu] not lately infringed the treaty concluded with you, and insulted your honour by the violent seizure of Kittor...?" (Sen 1974, p. 70). There was a plausible case to be made that the Company's commitments were reliable than Tipu's and the Company's negotiator seem to have successfully done so.

5.3 The Nizam's decision-making

The decision-making of the Nizam of Hyderabad, though not important in determining military outcomes, is revealing regarding the relative credibility of the Company and other regimes. As we have mentioned earlier, the Nizam was the weakest of the four players; his long-term goal was survival, not expansion²¹. Tipu failed to acquire the Nizam's support despite his appeals to their shared religious background (Muslim) and even talk of inter-marriage as a way of sealing their collaboration (Duff 1826 Volume III, p. 41). Even more remarkably, when the Triple Alliance (Company, Marathas, Nizam) was being negotiated, the Nizam was concerned that if he joined the attack on Tipu Sultan, the Marathas might attack his capital when his troops were away, and sought guarantees from the Company that it would protect him in that eventuality (Cornwallis to Captain Kennaway, *Poona Residency Correspondence* III, April

²⁰Tipu Sultan is a much-vilified figure in Indian history, and we should worry about "orientalist" descriptions of him, especially by contemporary British writers. However, this incident is described in a similar manner by Sardesai (1968, Volume 2, p. 178), considered a standard source on Maratha history. And in any case, for our purposes, it is the perceptions that matter.

²¹Even during the Third Mysore War Malet wrote to Cornwallis (Sept 14, 1791, *Poona Residency Correspondence* II, p. 215: "...[S]ince your Lordship will have collected from dear bought experience of the Nazim's force that his Hs.'s weight must be derived more from management than efficient power, and that while the Peshwa's object is predominance, his is safety; in a word that the Peshwa is our rival in power, the Nazim a candidate for security..."

12, 1790, p. 102). Cornwallis's view was that to include such guarantees in the treaty would be insulting to the Marathas but he told his envoy to tell the Nizam "in the most explicit terms" that if he lived up to his end of the bargain, the Company would protect him. Finally, as we noted at the beginning of this paper, to reassure the Nizam of the credibility of his own (treaty) commitments, he explained the Company's accountability to the King in England.

6 Did the Company honor its commitments ex-post?

The Third Mysore War was long and hard-fought, with a Triple Alliance (Company, Marathas, Hyderabad), taking on Tipu Sultan. Hostilities effectively began on December 29, 1789, when Tipu Sultan attacked Travancore, the Company's ally. After two years of struggle, Tipu finally acknowledged defeat, and opened negotiations for peace on February 6, 1792. He had to surrender as much as half of his territory. We have argued the decision by the Nizam and the Marathas to ally with the Company was a rational choice – they had some reason to believe the Company would live up to its commitments. Were their expectations met? During the course of the war the Company was at various points unhappy with foot-dragging by its allies, and felt it had done the lion's share of the fighting.²² However, when it came to the distribution of the spoils of war, the Marathas and Nizam did well. Tipu's territories were assessed to have a revenue of 24 million, of which he surrendered one-half. Each of the allies received areas with revenues worth four million (Forrest 1970, p. 192). The Marathas received Dharwar, a region they and Tipu had repeatedly fought over.

At the end of the Third Mysore War Tipu was considerably weakened. As

²²Malet wrote to Cornwallis in 1791 that he was "apprehensive that you will experience a strong tendency on the part of the allies to evasion and delay in commencing the operations...[consistent with] their object of reducing, rather by holding up in terror than by striking the dreaded blow, the enemy to their terms..." (*Poona Residency Correspondence* III, p. 511). And indeed, in the Company's perception, that is precisely how events played out.

Ray (introduction to *Poona Residency Correspondence*, Vol, III, p. xix) puts it his "real power" was gone and he was left "utterly crippled." The *coup de grace* was delivered by the next Governor-General, Lord Wellesley, who adopted a very aggressive posture, in 1799, in a short war, lasting only two months.²³ The Nizam of Hyderabad again allied with the Company²⁴. The Marathas dilly-dallied, entertaining emissaries from either side – before they could make up their minds, Tipu Sultan had been killed. Still, at the point when it really mattered (1790-92), the Marathas had allied with the Company, as had the Nizam.²⁵

How did the Company treat the Maratha Peshwa and the Nizam after the Fourth Mysore War of 1799? At this point Tipu Sultan was dead, and the British installed a new puppet regime in Mysore. For his (very limited) contributions to the Fourth Mysore War the Nizam of Hyderabad shared substantially in the spoils.²⁶ Though the Company could easily have taken over Hyderabad,

²³Company troops, led by General Harris, crossed the border into Mysore on March 4, 1799 (Forrest 1970, p. 275); Tipu Sultan was killed on May 4.

²⁴Not without some persuasion. In 1795 the Nizam and the Marathas had gone to war. The Nizam believed that the Company had committed to protect him in this eventuality. However, the new Governor-General, John Shore, a cautious man, believed he had been given (by London) a mandate of non-interference in the affairs of "Native powers." Also, as mentioned above, Cornwallis had been careful in crafting the treaty preceding the Third Mysore War – the parties were committed only to protecting each other from Tipu Sultan, not from each other. Finally, the Company was in deep financial straits, and in no position to go to war (Furber 1933, p. 8). The Nizam was easily defeated by the Marathas, and having lost faith in Company protection, resorted to building up a contingent of French troops. It took considerable persuasion by Governor-General Wellesley to bring the Nizam back into the Company's fold for the Fourth Mysore War.

Can the Company's behavior in this instance can fairly be called breach of faith? The Nizam certainly appears to have believed this. However, even going by his interpretation, the Company's long-run behavior is not inconsistent with our argument. As we will discuss below, the Company did at least abide (for 150 years) by its own commitment not to attack the Nizam.

²⁵The Marathas' *de facto* neutrality in the Fourth Mysore War can be in principle be understood in the framework of our model. With the aggressive Lord Wellesley as Governor-General, British credibility may have fallen, making them less attractive allies. We have also argued in section 4.1 that player 1's strength could make him a less attractive ally, and indeed the Company had gained considerably in strength in the 1790s. We do not wish to push this interpretation too hard, though. It appears that the Peshwa was being pushed by Nana Fadnis to ally with the Company, but pressured against this by Scindia, who now feared the strength of the Company. The Company's own historian (Duff 1826, Volume III) highlights the importance of the personal qualities of the Peshwa, who he views as untrustworthy and indecisive. The picture is further complicated by the fact that the Peshwa himself had been severely weakened in internicine warfare among the Marathas – more on this below.

²⁶After Tipu Sultan's death the Company restored the (Hindu) Wodeyars to power in Mysore. Some of the territory was seized and shared by the Company and the Nizam. After

the Nizam and his descendants remained in power all the way up to Indian independence, in 1947. To be sure, the Company extracted surplus from him by various means; the most common method was to insist that he pay for a military contingent under the Company's control. But the Company still had to worry about its critics and could not act entirely arbitrarily. And after the takeover by the Crown (1858, see below), Hyderabad's position became more secure. Towards the end of British rule Thompson (1943, p. 13) wrote that Hyderabad was "in a class apart from the other Indian states"; the Nizam was referred to as "His Exalted Highness" and "Our Faithful Ally." This was not a bad outcome for a regime which, as we have seen before, Warren Hastings had described as "militarily contemptible." Over the long haul, it does appear that by allying with the Company, the Nizam of Hyderabad had made a good bet. The commitments it had made to the Nizam did have some substance after all.

The case of the Maratha Peshwa is more complex, for two reasons. First, unlike the Nizam of Hyderabad, who had (albeit after considerable persuasion) joined the Company in the Fourth Mysore War, the Peshwa had stayed out. From the point of view of the Company this violated the terms of their prior agreements. Second, the status of the Peshwa changed because of ferocious (and puzzling) internecine conflict among the Marathas.

After the Fourth Mysore War, even though the Peshwa had remained neutral, Lord Wellesley offered him some of the territory seized from Tipu Sultan in exchange for entering a "subsidiary alliance." This was an arrangement under which the Peshwa would maintain Company troops at his expense and defer to the Company in the management of his relations with other powers. The Peshwa resisted this until 1803, when after defeat in war with the Maratha chief Yeshwantrao Holkar, he was driven to take Company protection. The Treaty of Bassein, 1803, in which the Peshwa accepted a subsidiary alliance, now split off the Peshwa from Scindia and Holkar, whom the Company subsequently fought and defeated separately. Over time, the Peshwa chafed against his subordinate

deductions for Tipu Sultan's relatives and generals, the additional revenue was shared equally by the Company and the Nizam (Forrest 1970, p. 307).

status, and the Company in turn followed its traditional policy of turning the screws on its partner in the subsidiary alliance. Eventually, the Peshwa and the Company went to war in 1818, and the Peshwa was defeated. It is striking, though, that even then he was given a substantial pension, amounting to an annual amount of Rupees 2,210,000. This is when the net revenue of the area formerly administered by him was 9,969,700 (Fisher 1991, p.192); this works out to almost 23%, a very substantial amount for a defeated adversary. This is consistent with the view we have expressed earlier: the Company might act in bad faith, but there were constraints on its behavior. The Peshwa had lost his crown, but if he was to be at the mercy of an adversary, the Company was probably his best bet. Thus, the initial decisions by the Nizam of Hyderabad and the Maratha Peshwa to ally with the Company in the Third Mysore War did not turn out so badly, allowing for the other uncertainties and vicissitudes of the times.

7 Concluding Remarks

The history of the rest of the nineteenth century reinforces our argument regarding the importance of the credibility of British commitments. Over the 19th century, as the Company became more secure in India, authorities in London encouraged a more aggressive policy. In 1841 the Court of Directors told the Governor-General not to give up any "just and honorable accession of territory" (quoted by Fisher 1996, p. 21). This policy was vigorously implemented, especially by Governor-General Dalhousie (1848-56), and various Indian states (such as Nagpur, Satara) were annexed under legal pretexts, and the catch-all "misgovernance." Pensions of some deposed rulers were withdrawn, including the one received by the son of the Peshwa. Finally, in 1856, Awadh, which had been partly taken over in 1800, was now fully annexed. The Company was also resented for its interference in indigenous religious and cultural practices, and its alteration of long-standing land tenure rights in some regions. The Mutiny/Civil Rebellion of 1857 followed, in which Indian soldiers in the British

army rebelled, supported by local populations in some areas, and deposed rulers like the Rani of Jhansi and the ruling family of Awadh played important roles. Many other Indian rulers (including the Nizam of Hyderabad) who had retained their status remained loyal to the Company. The Rebellion was crushed, and the Crown took over direct rule of India in 1858. The importance of British commitments to Indian rulers was recognized, and Queen Victoria pledged to respect their privileges. The "Native Princes" were recognized as allies of the British Raj, and their position was henceforth secure. Evidently, the honoring of promises, or at least some acknowledgement of the constraints they imposed, was necessary not only for acquiring power, but also for retaining it.

While this paper has highlighted the role of the institutional structure in giving the Company's promises some credibility, we should also consider other reasons why the Company may have been more credible than its rivals. One is that the Company was a new regime, which had not yet had the time to build up long-term enmities; this could have facilitated alliance formation. This argument is *a priori* plausible, though we should note that repeat business can generate cooperation as well. More to the point, there was a new regime in Mysore too; Tipu Sultan was only second in line – the dynasty had been founded by his father, Haidar Ali.

Fisher (1991) has argued that the relative restraint shown by the Company in the treatment of defeated adversaries came from a cultural factor – the respect for aristocracy among British elites. We view this explanation as complementary to ours. We have argued that the Company officials in India feared the outrage of critics and superiors in London; here we have a description of the cultural roots of that outrage.

Finally, our analysis has an interesting relationship with the literature on "sub-imperialism," the idea that far-off officials on the ground promoted conquest, even against the wishes of superiors in the home countries. We suggest that in the Indian context the very accountability to authorities in the home country made sub-imperialism more successful.

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