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The Strength of the Uni-Multipolar System
The Concert of Europe

The History of European Relations is the study of war. Time and again any period of European peace is shattered by war and every war is ended with a renewed commitment to peace, a commitment that ultimately fails. War and peace, and how the two evolve into the other, is the most basic system of understanding for Europe's fractured past. For political scientists the method of analysis is Realism's balance of power involving the rise and fall of Europe's many empires. Power is the idea that country A is able to cause country B to pursue policy that they otherwise wouldn't by using tools such as military might and economic and cultural influence.

Balance of power is a method of analysis that focus on the system level of country interaction and concerns itself with who has the power in a system and how they use it. In Europe the actors were the various empires that have risen and fallen. Because of their diversity as well as their geographic proximity to one another, Balance of power is appropriate given the changing dynamics through the centuries of European power politics. Kenneth Waltz makes the argument that the most stable form of power is a bipolar arrangement, when two powers share the majority of the influence such as the situation during the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States. There is also the unipolar world; exemplified by the situation the United States found itself in immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Huntington, 36). Conversely a world where more than two powers share the most influence is called a multipolar world

and is known as the most unstable form of power distribution. Political theorists would argue that the uncertainty inherent in international relations, coupled with the power available to so many actors makes the system less stable and more prone to war. They would point to situations such as the lead up to both World Wars, as well as the situations before the Napoleonic and Thirty Years Wars. The problem, they argue, is that powerful countries take the initiative in solving Mearsheimer's "911 problem:" the idea that because there is no world policeman countries must be aggressive and offensive to fix all problems, real and imagined (Anarchy and the Struggle for Power, 56). Multipolar devolution has often led to the World's most destructive wars and the system is mistrusted with reason. This argument about the systemic instability surrounding a multipolar system does not hold water however when one regards the successes of the Concert of Europe from the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 to the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, a period of peace that lasted 55 years!

On November 9, 1799 a gifted French commander with a penchant for unlikely military victories took control of the French Revolutionary Government and created the First French Empire. Napoleon Bonaparte did more in 15 years to shape European affairs than any single individual in European history since Charlemagne. It is unnecessary and impossible to cover all the topics of the Napoleonic Wars in 15 pages. Understanding however the basic events of the wars are essential in understanding the peace that followed.

Napoleon took command over a France that was already at war with its neighbors in Europe. The revolutionary government had taken the unrest of the people following the French Revolution and transformed it into an expansionist drive. This was seen in France

as a logical resolution, they were simply taking the ideas of the revolution; liberty, freedom, and republicanism and freeing the people's of Europe from monarchy. Napoleon followed this thought process and throughout his reign fought against old empires and kings while allying with republics, creating republics in conquered kingdoms (World Book, 14).

After Napoleon came to power his first success came in defeating the Second Coalition that had formed in response to the resurgent France's power. The Republic of France had defeated the First Coalition in 1797 with Napoleon as its victorious commander in service of the people. Within a year of coming to power and declaring himself Emperor Napoleon crushed the Austrian Empire and conquered Italy, ending the threat from the Coalition. Notably however, Britain remained, still able to harass France's interests overseas with its navy, which was the largest in the world. From the end of the Second Coalition in 1801 to Napoleon's final defeat in 1815 The French Empire expanded and controlled the largest area of land since the Roman Empire. From Spain to Poland Napoleon's France had either conquered or forced dozens of countries and territories into the new French Empire (World Book, 16).

The seeds for Napoleon's final defeat took place in 1812 on the plains of Russia. By this time France had defeated all of its major Continental rivals and had deposed many of the old monarchs leaving none but the Russian Czar Alexander I. In his invasion of Russia Napoleon sought to remove one of his longest and strongest enemies. With more than a half a million men Napoleon started his invasion in the summer and reached Moscow by winter. But with the scorched Earth policy of the Russians and the harsh winter the army was forced to turn around. By the time Napoleon got back to France in

1813 there were only 27,000 fit men left from the original 650,000. Faced with this disaster Napoleon could do little as a Sixth Coalition led by Russia and Great Britain marched into Paris and exiled Napoleon. In 1815 Napoleon escaped from the Island of Elba and tried to recreate his Empire but was finally defeated at Waterloo.

The Napoleonic Wars are noteworthy for several reasons. They marked the first war of the Industrial Age with armies on a scale that had never been seen before. They introduced the concept of total war, with mass conscriptions of many combatants. Most importantly the wars left the political and social landscape of the entire continent changed. Along with French rule Napoleon also introduced French revolutionary values to the conquered lands of Europe. Though the Kings of Europe returned they would never again have the power they once wielded and were forced to concede civil liberties such as representation and adhered to the French system of law introduced within Napoleon's empire.

To understand the peace that followed it is necessary to understand the Congress of Vienna, where representatives of all the powers met to discuss the shape of post-war Europe (World Book, 363). All major powers were represented, France, Britain, Russia, Prussia, and Austria. Also present were minor powers that fought, Spain, Portugal, Sweden, and the Netherlands (which included the future country of Belgium). France's involvement in the talks was essential to the peace that followed. Originally France was not meant to sit in on conferences with the other great powers. However thanks to the skillful maneuvering of the French ambassador Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord who drafted a plan of protocol for the conference that put France on a level playing field with the other powers. Talleyrand was able to do this because he was not there

representing Napoleon who actually came back from Elba and was still fighting during part of the Congress, which took place from November 1814 to June 1815. Talleyrand was there representing the exiled Bourbon royal line who had ruled France before the revolution. The Bourbon dynasty signed its own peace accord with the Sixth Coalition in May 1814 when Paris was overrun and the French people decided they'd had enough of Napoleon. The other monarchs of Europe did not want to risk alienating a King that they wanted as an Ally when the war ended. Talleyrand was able to leverage the monarchy's position into favorable decisions made on behalf of France that were not punitive in nature, an outcome a few of the Allies, particularly Austria and Russia desired (World Book, 363).

The formation of the Concert of Europe can be called an attempt by European Leaders to move beyond relying solely on balance of power to maintain peace (Elrod, 161). Since the Peace of Westphalia two centuries prior, balance of power had been the de facto mode of peace in Europe, a situation sought by Great Britain, who tried to keep their commitments with the Great Powers to a minimum. For decades England "...had traditionally equated the promotion of her interest, if not indeed her survival, with the fragmentation of power on the continent." (Albrecht, 25) The desire for diplomacy was the work of land based powers, particularly Russia (28).

The involvement of France is a key component to the post war peace that was so long lasting despite being set in an era when there were many great powers. Historians characterize the Congress of Vienna as being nearly devoid of any attempts to punish the "instigator" of the war that preceded the conference. Among many others this is one of the primary reasons that peace was able to last for so long. The people of France were not

left bitter at their former enemies and the Kings of Europe had their status quo back. If anything France made out better at the end of the war than they did in fighting the war. Numerous resolutions of the Congress dealt with trade and in all instances trade among the powers became much more open, particularly over land trade. While the other powers did split up certain French lands, they were not lands that had ever been historically French. In a geographic sense the Congress defined modern Europe. Borders were drawn that last today. No power outside France lost land, and even then the land lost had never been considered "French." Indeed, it is said, "The most striking feature of the post-Napoleonic peace settlement was... the leniency shown towards the vanquished power." (Schenk, 45) Among the great powers present at the Congress of Vienna none could say they "lost."

What grew out of the Congress of Vienna and the Napoleonic Wars was resentment to war and a commitment of all the people and governments of Europe to never fight another great war in their lifetimes (Elrod, 160). From this commitment grew the Concert of Europe; an informal agreement between the Great Powers that sought to continue the tradition of communication and diplomacy that had thrived at the Congress of Vienna. Though the system was never formalized (there were never founding documents or written rules) all members felt it was in their best interests to attend the conferences. There they could address grievances with the members and reach a consensus on ways to deal with problems that involved European Countries who were not present at the various Congresses. The Concert's primary concerns at each meeting were in maintaining the balance of power among the Great Powers and prevent the rise of another Napoleonic figure among European States. Among the many successes of the

system were the reintegration of France and the removal of occupation troops in 1818, the peaceful creation of Greece (1830) and Belgium (1831), and most importantly preventing a full-scale war among its members until the Franco-Prussian war in 1870. Therein lie the most important and lasting achievements of the Concert of Europe. Leaders who had worked in an air of cooperation sought to continue that tradition in peacetime (Elrod, 162) Why, if a multipolar system is so unstable, was the Concert of Europe successful for a period of over 50 years? Indeed the only wars that took place in the period were small local wars that were never fought between two members of the Concert, such as the Crimean War involving the Ottoman Empire in 1854. Were the successes due to the actions of the Concert itself as Idealists would like to believe, or was it due to something larger?

Of the members of the Grand Alliance that finally defeated Napoleon's France, none benefited more from the peace or came out of the war with the most gained than Great Britain. During the war Britain was delivered the means to govern and protect its empire on a silver platter. In October 1805 the Royal British Navy defeated the combined French and Spanish fleets, each of whom were the only European States that possessed overseas holdings comparable to Britain's (World Book, 16). This decisive victory gave Britain uncontested rule of the seas which would continue until the end of World War One and the rise of America a full 120 years later. At the same time the battle set back the ability of France and Spain to even contest the ability of the British overseas. With this security Great Britain was able to effectively govern its overseas holdings however it wanted without needing to answer to any other powers. The British turned this advantage in trade to an advantage in economy, combining its burgeoning industrial capacity and

trade surplus making it by far the richest European nation in the nineteenth century.

Britain became a hegemon that did not need to rely on its military for strength, preferring to use its considerable economic assets.

Once Britain was well established as a benign hegemon (Huntington, 40) it could use its influence to foster peace, after all, war would do nothing but disrupt business. Because Britain controlled the majority of the foreign sea trade with Europe they were allowed to make the rules. War would be bad for their interests because they would lose a large segment of their market as well as not being able to focus on their colonies. For the Europeans a war would mean that they would not get good treatment from Britain, it would always be better to be on London's good side. It's clear that the world of 1816 was not a multipolar world, but was a uni-multipolar world. A uni-multipolar world is one with many small powers, in this case Russia, Austria and the like. Above those smaller powers however is one large hegemon who can dictate to the smaller powers (Huntington, 39)

Similar to the present day role of the United States, the Europe of the 19th century wasn't truly a multipolar system. As Huntington argues, Britain was acting as a regional hegemon (40). The title of regional hegemon is the goal of all great powers. Being a regional Hegemon means a power is in complete control of the part of the world it occupies. At the same time the Hegemon can dictate its wishes to the smaller powers. In the 1800's all the land based empires competed against one another to be in the position Britain was in.

While Britain did not have the largest military of the era, its influence in World affairs and World trade were unrivaled for nearly 100 years. There were none who could

ever hope to compete with Britain alone. This fact alone inspired a form of peace. It made much more sense for two countries such as France and Austria to work together to form a bloc against Britain and potentially gain power, than fight each other and waste their diminished power on each other. This also meant that Britain could direct many decisions of other countries by using their significant leverage. If there were a conflict that required intervention, Britain would essentially declare a *de facto* victor in bringing the weight of its empire and its riches to bear. In essence, the specter of British involvement in a conflict was deterrent enough without the use of military power. Thomas Schelling argued this point, true power is the *threat* of force, when force is used the power that comes from that threat of force is gone (Diplomacy of Violence, 302). Like the United States, Britain's power was primarily based on Economic might, what political theorists would call "soft power." While Britain did have a highly trained military, their numbers were such that they could not hope to compete in a one on one fight with another European power on their home turf. In that way, it also remained in Britain's best interest to maintain European peace; both to protect their trader partners, and to avoid overextending military resources they did not have. In this Britain used what Mead called "Sticky Power," making other countries *want* what you want through complex interdependence. According to Mead, economy causes trade and trade causes peace (Mead, 50).

It seems then, that the reason peace lasted so long after the Napoleonic Wars had less to do with the Concert itself and more to do with the stability granted to Europe by Britain as a regional hegemon. The Concert was a product of the peace, not a cause.

While it may be true that the peace was so successful due to the work of Britain as the unipolar power, the Concert of Europe was not a complete waste. Never before had the powers of Europe ever attempted to conduct foreign affairs in an open forum. The idea of Functionalism, or “peace in pieces” was very new in 1816 and it didn’t resemble anything one considers functionalism in today’s world. There wasn’t the collective security agreement of the League of Nations nor was there the carefully organized assembly of today’s United Nations. Yet the goal and drive for diplomacy still existed in 1816 as it does now in 2007. The Concert of Europe represented the first time the states of Europe looked to diplomacy and organized relations in an open forum as a way to solve problems before they went to war. It’s incredible to think that the Congress of Aix-la-Chappelle in 1818 that withdrew all occupying troops from France was the first peacetime meeting of European leaders ever! (Schenk, 116) As far as collective government however there was nothing in the way of written rules and regulations that needed to be followed. The Concert was a strictly voluntary affair. Yet this still shows the willingness and desire for peace in Europe by those who took part.

In a larger sense the world of post Napoleonic Europe has lessons that can be applicable today. The same qualities that made the Concert of Europe and its peace so noteworthy (regional hegemon, long period of peace, first attempt at liberal institutionalism) makes it significant and applicable to world politics today and in the past century. The Institutionalism that the Concert was built on remains in an evolved form in the United Nations. The role of Britain as a regional hegemon maintaining peace is the role that the United States plays in today’s world. These examples also tend to

prove the idea that peace, at least in these cases, is maintained by a strong unilateral power and less by large international organizations or congresses.

In 1919 the most devastating war in history had just ended and the Napoleonic Wars seemed like ancient history. At US President Woodrow Wilson's urging the great powers of the world created and pledged support to the newly formed League of Nations. The membership of this league was more diverse than the Concert 100 years previous, it still featured old European Empires but was also open to the new powers throughout the world such as Japan. Significantly the United States did not join the League, right at a time when its rising power made it essential to keep the peace. Britain was still a great power but with advances in communications and transportation, particularly over the oceans, the world was shrinking and Britain's power counted for less. The world was no longer a uni-multipolar world; it was again a multipolar one. Britain did not have the ability to influence world affairs as it once did and when the situation deteriorated in the 1930's with Germany there was little it could do effectively. Significantly, when the Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain looked to broker a deal with Hitler respect for Britain's power had sunk so low that the German leader said, "If that funny little man comes up here again, I shall kick him down the stairs."

After the horrors of World War II the world looked to fix the problems of the League of Nations with the creation of the United Nations. The UN sought to fix many of the problems that plagued the League. One of the primary problems was the inability of the League of Nations to use military force to back up its resolutions. The UN fixed this problem with the creation of a Security Council that had the authority to send the UN to war. The Security Council has at its core the militarily strong countries that were the

winners in World War 2, in short, countries capable of maintaining peace if needed. The UN also learned a lesson from the Concert and the and separated the powers and responsibilities of the UN among different branches, with the Security Council dedicated to peace and the Economic and Social Council dedicated to development. Most significantly, the United States of 1945 was very different from the country it was in 1919. By the end of the war the United States was by far the strongest country in the world and was in a position that the Britain of the past century couldn't have dreamed of. America was able to not only affect decisions by economics, America also had the most modern military force in the world and was able to send them everywhere in the world to influence policy for its own ends. While the fairness and decency of this practice may be questionable, the result is inarguable. With peace being the United State's main objective, as well as the retention of hegemon status, they have little reason to endorse a war except on their terms. Thus, it becomes the goal of every country to avoid getting on the United States' "bad side." The United States gave the UN legitimacy where the decreasing power of Britain as a great power could not with the League of Nations.

It may be that it was not the strength of America that helped maintain a period of peace but the balance of the United States and the Soviet Union. Their propensity to destroy each other with Nuclear Weapons was a check on the violence of both (For Better or Worse, 331). In the context of looking at the Concert of Europe and League of Nations however, there have been many instances of a bipolar system supported by many smaller powers. Pre World War I there was Britain and Germany, which were both powers that competed with each other, but in the end, it was the ability of Britain to broadcast its power that maintained peace beyond mistrust they had for Germany. In the context of

Regional Hegemony, both America and the Soviet Union held enormous sway over their respective parts of the world. As successful they were at avoiding war with each other, both powers had a stake in maintaining peace within their spheres of influence.

There are many lessons that politicians and leaders can learn from the early 19th century after the Napoleonic Wars ended. Firstly and perhaps most significantly in the period immediately after the conclusion of hostilities the loser should be present at the peace talks with equal footing as the winners. This accomplishes two things: the loser feels like they have a stake in the peace and can help create a system they can maintain. Secondly it also avoids the tendency to enact punitive clauses in the agreement such as those present in the Treaty of Versailles after WWI (Kegley, 73). By many accounts the clauses present in the treaty that sought to cripple Germany in reality led them to seek revenge on the attack on their country and made them turn to Hitler.

Another lesson learned from the Concert of Europe is the importance of having a system in place where powers could meet one another in a neutral forum to talk about disagreements. While this development may have more to do with modernization and less to do with diplomacy in 1816 its importance remains. The goal of providing a forum is one shared by all three international systems of the past two centuries. The Concert and the groups that followed it also show that if you are going to have groups who seek to solve problems, give them the tools to do so. Often this has meant the use of military power, a concession that only the United Nations made. This is the goal of Institutionalists, who believe that peace requires a body to enforce it made up of states with peace as their overriding desire.

Seemingly most importantly in order for peace to prosper there needs to be one state strong enough to enforce it. Before the Concert of Europe the only “empires” were land-based or were not organized in a fashion to promote order. At the end of the Napoleonic Wars Britain was in a unique position to create peace not only in Europe but also around the world because of their ability to transmit power. They were the best in all areas, economic, or what is called “soft power,” and military power (hard or “sharp” power) (Mead, 48). Part of the reason World War One broke out was because it took place at a time when Britain’s role in the world was changing and there were no other powers capable of filling its shoes. Before World War II there were no powers that were capable (or willing in the United States’ case) to maintain a peace by creating a uni-multipolar world.

The necessity of a strong regional hegemon seems to indicate that when talking about something as vague as “world peace” the patterns seem to indicate the validity of Realism’s viewpoints. While institutionalism is nice and moral it seems that military power as wielded by a strong power with a stake in the peace is more effective at avoiding war. An international organization certainly helps to address grievances, but if those grievances are to be fixed it takes the intervention of a strong power with the will and ability to cause change.

So finally it seems that the theory best supported by the continual emergence of hegemons is long-cycle theory. Political Scientist Paul Kennedy argues that over the past 5 centuries every large war is followed by the rise of a singular strong power and institution building (Kennedy, Washington Post). In that same vein, every large war is the result in the decline of that power and the rise of another. This theory holds a great deal

of water if one looks at the cycle of the Napoleonic Wars and the two World Wars using France, Britain, and finally America as the successive Hegemons and the Concert of Europe, League of Nations, and the United Nations as their respective institutions. It seems fitting to bring in Samuel Huntington's idea of a benign hegemon, which is a hegemon that utilizes its economic might before its military might. Power comes from cooperation not from coercion. It is Huntington argues that the benign hegemon is the solution to Mearsheimer's "911 problem" (Huntington, 47). The benign hegemon *is* the world's police, traveling the world to protect weaker countries, maintaining peace as well as the balance of power.

It appears that political scientists are correct in their claim that the most unstable balance of power is a multipolar system. While some credit goes to the Concert of Europe for maintaining peace for so long from 1815 to 1870 a large part of that success had to do with the rise of the regional hegemon in Great Britain. With the decline in Britain's relative power in the beginning of the 20th century came the return of a multipolar world, and war broke out. Today's extended period of relative peace can be laid at the feet of another regional hegemon, the United States. It may be appealing and easy to lay the success on the Concert alone, but it seems it is Realism that provides most of the answers for its successes. Without a strong power to balance weaker powers the weaker powers are apt to go to war.

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