THE MARATHON INITIATIVE

Marathon Working Paper

Mastering the Multi-Front Challenge:
The Diplomatic Strategies of Metternich and Bismarck

This paper examines how the 19th Century European statesmen Klemens von Metternich and Otto von Bismarck dealt with the problem of multi-front competition in grand strategy. Both men devised systems of diplomacy that enabled the Austrian and German Empires respectively to avoid the calamity of two-front war and lay the foundation for the longest period of systemic peace in Western history.

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I have a feeling that I am in the middle of a web which I am spinning in the style of my friends the spiders… A net of this kind is good to behold, woven with artistry, and strong enough to withstand a light attack, even if it cannot survive a mighty gust of wind. –

Klemens von Metternich

A French newspaper said recently about me that I suffered from 'le cauchemar des coalitions' [the nightmare of encircling coalitions]. This sort of nightmare will last for a long time, maybe forever, an entirely justified worry for a German minister.

Otto von Bismarck

I. Introduction.

How long can a Great Power resist simultaneous pressures from more than one major rival without recourse to force of arms? For certain types of states, this question looms especially large because the danger of multi-front war is unusually acute. Great Powers at the center of the chessboard face unremitting pressure from multiple directions. For such states, wide is the gate and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, for geography itself invites conflict yet makes virtually every logical path to improving the state's security fraught with peril. Such states face a constant temptation to strike out at rivals, yet the very act of acquiring the military means for such a remedy is likely to trigger the hostile coalitions that it is attempting to avoid. Nor is the countervailing path of conciliation and appeasement any less dangerous; rarely can flanking powers be safely bought off in the manner that the Byzantines sated the appetite of the Huns, for their demands involve objects more precious than gold. And while it may often be necessary for the central power to sequence rivalries, such moves are expediencies that buy time and offer no more than a momentary reprieve from the strains of multi-sided competition.[*]

For Great Powers at the center of the gameboard, then, the quest for security ultimately becomes a search for some means by which to *transcend* the game altogether. Because virtually every crisis is likely to involve something that matters to the central power, it needs a way to avoid multi-front war not through *ad hoc* adjustments but by

[*] I use the term "central power" to simply mean a Great Power occupying central geography placing it between other large and powerful states.

anticipating and heading off calamities before they can occur. And because the array of potential dangers almost always exceeds the military might of even the strongest of states, the remedies arrived at must not depend upon continual tests of strength or a scale of armaments that would, by straining the economy and inviting reciprocal build-ups, render the state *less* secure. In short, *the central power needs diplomacy in its highest and most strategic form, as an instrument of political power for reducing the likelihood of conflict on a standing basis and keeping foreseeable military threats within a range that can be handled by limited military resources.*

Few Great Powers better exemplify the dilemmas of the central position or the heights that an enlightened statecraft can attain in alleviating those dilemmas than the 19th Century land empires of Austria and Germany. Each occupied vulnerable geography at the heart of Europe and were inured through long experience to the harsh realities of multi-front warfare. Each in its turn would carry the mantle of Charlemagne in attempting to organize the middle lands of Europe into a defensive body capable of resisting encroachments from east and west. And each would devise intricate systems of diplomacy that not only succeeded in addressing multi-front pressures but provided a foundation for the stability of Europe as a whole that lasted, collectively, for the better part of a century, from the defeat of Napoleon to the outbreak of the First World War.

This long season of peace was the handiwork of two statesmen who reflected, in their tastes and attitudes toward power, the traits of the empires they represented: Klemens von Metternich, the cosmopolitan emissary of a Habsburg Monarchy that, even at its zenith in 1815, was entering the autumn of its existence as a Great Power; and Otto von Bismarck, the brooding architect of the Second German *Reich*, an adolescent Great Power of immense insecurities and unexampled latent strength. The diplomatic strategies employed by Metternich and Bismarck shared a preoccupation with maintaining a stable political and territorial status quo, grounded in mutual restraint and war prevention. In pursuing these aims, both statesmen had to contend with bidirectional danger—from a France susceptible to recurrent paroxysms of revolution and an intermittently expansionist Russian Empire—while simultaneously heading off the menace of revolution. Both ultimately came to see themselves as not only constructing order in a narrow sense but in erecting barricades against chaos and precipitous change.

From a strategic perspective, the distinctive feature of Metternich's and Bismarck's statecraft at their apogees was their emphasis on systems (alliances and Concert diplomacy) to prevent conflict rather than merely sequencing rivalries in order to gain

advantage in one individual contest before proceeding to the next.[*] What makes them so compelling when examined alongside earlier and later historical examples is that both men attempted to deal with multi-front pressure by, in effect, changing the rules of the game in ways that mitigated the escalatory effects of power balancing and rendered major war unlikely. In today's terms, managing simultaneity was for both a continuous effort over many years rather than a one-off exercise in avoiding imminent danger. The development and operation of their systems to achieve this end required discipline not only conceptually but bureaucratically, in keeping the state's attention focused on certain strategic imperatives, resisting the tug of lesser problems, and mitigating the opportunity costs that arose from such prioritization.

This paper does not attempt to recount the European legacies of Metternich and Bismarck. Both have been the subject of numerous biographies, and the virtues and defects of their statecraft retold at length. Historians have assessed their statecraft through a European lens, emphasizing the palliative effects that their efforts yielded for the continent as a whole. My approach is different; I want to know how Metternich's and Bismarck's methods worked for mitigating multi-front pressures from the national-strategic perspectives of the empires they led. Whatever their European credentials, both men were, in the first instance, Austrian and German statesmen charged with securing the interests of the states and sovereigns they served. Such benefits as their labors rendered for the general peace—and those benefits were indeed immense—were derivatives of the primary aim of alleviating the predicaments that Austria and Germany faced as centrally-located powers. This paper evaluates their systems in exactly that light, by assessing how they succeeded or failed in underwriting Austrian and German security and, in particular, diminishing the pressures of multi-front competition at an acceptable cost in blood and treasure.

The experiences of Metternich and Bismarck are directly relevant for the United States today. The return of great-power competition has confronted the United States with geopolitical dynamics that have more in common with the multipolar landscape of 19th Century Europe than with the permissive environment of the immediate post-Cold War era or even, for that matter, the bipolar ideological rivalry of the Cold War. Increasingly, the United States finds itself managing the central position of Metternich's Austria or Bismarck's Germany on a global scale, between a rising China and an atavistically

[*] Obviously, this description does not apply to the early phase of Bismarck's career, when he excelled in using diplomacy to isolate adversaries in advance of major wars—namely Denmark (1864), Austria (1866), and France (1870). This essay focuses on Bismarck's diplomacy at its height, following the unification of Germany, which was preoccupied with consolidating geopolitical gains from these earlier conflicts rather than launching new ones.

revisionist Russia.[*] As outlined by the 2018 National Defense Strategy, the United States neither possesses nor aspires to obtain the scale of military capabilities needed to defeat these large rivals in a two-front war. As such, it follows that the United States must either find a way to limit its military attention to one primary threat (presumably China) or grow defense budgets by orders of magnitude beyond their current levels. While the latter course is advocated by some latter-day promoters of containment as a presumed remedy against China and Russia, the emerging competition lacks the features of U.S. material dominance and ideological rigidity that were preconditions for the success of that strategy in the Cold War. In such circumstances, the experiences of earlier Great Powers that were able to achieve an affordable security while maintaining a stable (and in both cases, surprisingly prolonged) strategic dynamic with multiple major rivals should prove instructive.

The study consists of three parts. In the first two, I examine the multi-front dilemmas facing 19th Century Austria and Germany and the systems of statecraft that Metternich and Bismarck respectively devised for addressing these dilemmas. In brief, Metternich's method was to diplomatically isolate and achieve military concentration against the more immediate danger (France) by caucusing with the other flanking power (Russia) and enmeshing both in a system of consultative diplomacy that prioritized political equilibrium over the one-off gains of conquest and spared an economically weak empire burdens beyond its ability to bear. Bismarck, too, sought to isolate the more urgent threat (again, France) and align with Russia, though his system rested not on legitimacy but on a dense network of overlapping alliances, backed by the strategic use of foreign investment, aimed at rendering Germany's strength less threatening and thus less in need of counterbalancing restraints.

In examining the Metternichian and Bismarckian systems, I will ask a series of questions:

(1) How did Metternich and Bismarck use diplomacy to reduce tensions with one or more flanking rivals?
(2) What impact did Metternich's and Bismarck's diplomatic strategies have on military spending and planning in their states' primary and secondary theaters? What risks and opportunity costs did they generate, and how were these risks and costs managed?

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[*] Today's Russia would perhaps seem to replicate the central position most directly, given its status as a land-locked power between rivals. But the emphasis in this essay is on the combination of system leadership and central geography, the latter of which is only partially mitigated by the insulating effects of oceans.

(3) How did both statesmen ensure that their empires remained focused on the priorities generated by their strategies over a period of many years? How did they impose their will bureaucratically and politically over the states they led?
(4) How successful were both systems? Why did they eventually fail, what were the consequences of that failure, and was it inevitable?

In the third section, I compare the Metternichian and Bismarckian systems and identify applications for the 21st Century United States. I argue that the success of both statesmen lay in their use of diplomacy to achieve concentration on the main threat, limit the number of active contests requiring military attention, and organize a sufficiently wide allied commercial-technological base to sustain protracted competition on terms favorable to the central power. While both systems emphasized consultation among the Great Powers to mitigate the risk of general war, it was not consultation in itself that brought security but rather the use of consultation for strategic ends—namely, keeping all but one of the major players (the most dangerous) aligned with or at least not in open conflict with the central power. Both systems stopped short of attempting what today would be called containment, allowing for political and economic intercourse with the main rival in parallel with geopolitical competition.

Both systems required an ordering of the threat environment that depended on a clear conception of priorities, maintained through discipline of the state bureaucracy and eschewal of lesser aims that would have impeded concentration on the main threat. The success of both systems rested on a recognition of the inherent fragility of political order and a concomitant acceptance of limits, both territorially and aspirationally, in the mission of the state. It was when these limits were discarded by Metternich's and Bismarck's successors in favor of a more emotionally satisfying but elusive quest to militarily subdue threats in multiple directions simultaneously, that the empires in question took on burdens beyond their abilities to bear and both systems collapsed.

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II. The Metternich System.

"[T]hreatened by the preponderance of these two empires [France and Russia], [Austria] can find repose only in a wise and measured policy, in benevolent relations with…[her] neighbors…"

Klemmens von Metternich

The conference that would lay the foundation for the longest period of systemic peace in European history was negotiated over an eight-month period between the winter of 1814 and the summer of 1815 in Vienna, the capital of the Austrian Empire.[1] The meeting of victors and vanquished at the Congress of Vienna would prove to be one of the most consequential events in the development of the modern world. It marked the only time in Western history when the entirety of the European continent's reigning class—some 221 dynastic and princely families, representing five Great Powers, numerous middling states, minor principalities, and stateless aspirants—would gather in one place to make peace.[2] Neither the deliberations at Westphalia a century and a half earlier nor the peace conferences at Paris and Yalta in the following century would equal the proceedings at Vienna in splendor, ambition, or longevity of effect.[3] If, as the historian Barbara Tuchman has written, the months leading up to 1914 were the sunset of the old world,

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[1] There is a large literature on the Vienna Congress, though not quite as large as one would expect for a historical event of its world-historical repercussions. For a succinct and readable account of the Congress, it is hard to beat Harold Nicolson's 1946 classic *The Congress of Vienna: A Study in Allied Unity* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1946). The most familiar source for students of contemporary diplomacy remains Henry Kissinger's *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace 1812-22* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957). For a more detailed account of the negotiations and politics of the Congress and its aftermath, see chapters 12 and 13 in Paul Schroeder's magisterial *The Transformation of European Politics 1763-1848* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1994). For a more up-to-date account that questions previous judgments and conveys the sheer spectacle of the Congress without losing the political plot, see Zamoyski's *Rites of Peace: The Fall of Napoleon and the Congress of Vienna* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008). See in particular Zamoyski's bibliography (pp. 599-617).

[2] See Palmer, *Metternich*, p. 130. Only the major powers exercised a decisive influence on the final peace.

[3] The depth and durability of the peace that ensued after the Vienna Congress is a subject of some debate among historians. Paul Schroeder sums up the majority view in his eulogy of the 1815 settlement as "the one and only time in European history when statesmen sat down to construct a peaceful international system after a great war and succeeded; the only settlement, unlike 1648, 1713-14, 1763, 1919, 1945 and many others, that was not accompanied or quickly followed by renewed or continued conflict, revived tensions, arms races, and competitive balance of power dynamics." See Schroeder's essay "Did the Vienna Settlement Rest on a Balance of Power?" in David Wetzel, Robert Jervis, and Jack S. Levy, Eds., *Systems, Stability and Statecraft: Essays on the International History of Modern Europe* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), p. 57. More recently, Adam Zamoyski has criticized the "long peace" school, pointing out that the 19th century was punctuated with a number of conflicts, including the Crimean War of 1854 and wars of German and Italian unification. See Zamoyski, pp. 550-555.

then the proceedings at Vienna a century earlier were that world's high noon—a rare moment of moderation and foresight, distilled from two decades of bloodshed, when Europe's statesmen devised a lasting peace grounded in reason and restraint rather than the eternal law of conquest and revenge that dominated most post-war settlements before—and since.

It was fitting that this gathering should occur at Vienna, for no power had suffered as much at the hands of Napoleon as Austria. In 22 years of warfare, the Habsburg Monarchy suffered more combat fatalities than all of the other major allied combatants combined; lost around a third of her territories and population, including the entirety of her holdings in Italy and the Austrian Netherlands as spoils of war; endured the dissolution of the 1,000 year-old German *Reich*[*] over which Habsburg monarchs had presided as elective heads since the 15th Century; and, perhaps most humiliatingly for Europe's oldest dynasty, been reduced to betrothing a Habsburg princess (Marie Louise, the Emperor Franz's eldest and favorite daughter) in propitiatory marriage to Napoleon. By war's end, Austria was poor and exhausted, with millions in unpaid war loans, a debased currency, and an economy bled white by the peregrinations of countless campaigning armies. So depleted were Habsburg finances that during the Vienna Congress the Austrian Emperor had to serve his fellow monarchs on porcelain painted to simulate the appearance of gold, since all of his gold plate had all been melted down to pay for the war of 1809.[4]

EUROPE'S VULNERABLE CENTER

This was not Austria's first reckoning with the wages of geopolitics. Long before Napoleon arrived on the scene, geography had made the old empire an epicenter of the continent's power struggles. Austria was no centralized Great Power on the mold of France or Prussia; a geographic expression as much as a state, the Habsburg Monarchy was a wild assortment of territories amassed over the preceding half millennium through conquest, marriage, inheritance, and the grace of God. Its heartland fell at the intersection of Europe's middle spine of mountains with the westernmost grasslands of the Eurasian steppe, centered on the Austrian *Erblande* (home territories) and

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[*] The terminology surrounding the various Germanic imperial configurations is notoriously confusing. For simplicity, I use "German *Reich*" for what is usually rendered in English as "Holy Roman Empire" and "German *Bund*" for the German Confederation that followed in its wake. I use "Second German *Reich*" for Bismarck's unified Germany, and use "Austria," "House of Austria," "Habsburg Monarchy," and "Austrian Empire" interchangeably; I switch to "Austria-Hungary" to denote the transition to a dualist power-sharing arrangement between Austrians and Magyars after the 1867 *Ausgleich*. I use "Monarchy" in upper case as a shorthand for "Habsburg Monarchy," and "empire" generically, in lower-case, as a shorthand for both the Austrian and German states of the period.

[4] See Zamoyski, chapter 17.

neighboring middle-Danubian lands of Bohemia and Royal Hungary.[5] A natural defensive space with a riparian heartland surrounded by mountains, the Austrian Empire's contours are readily visible on a topographical map as the hermit-crab shaped recess between the Alps and the Carpathians. Civilizationally as well as geopolitically, this was Europe's quintessential central empire —a riverine realm spanning the middle mass of the continent from the Polish Plain to the Adriatic and from the river Po to the Black Sea Delta.

Source: The Map Archive

Austria's central real estate inured her from an early age to the danger of two-front war. Habsburg princes, more than most, needed eyes in the back of their head. The sprawling

[5] For an overview of Habsburg geography and how it shaped the Monarchy's behavior as a Great Power, see the author's *Grand Strategy of the Habsburg Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), chapters 2-4.

nature of Habsburg possessions ensured that virtually any dispute, anywhere in Europe, would eventually become a Habsburg dispute. In their long wars with the Valois kings, the Habsburgs had to watch the Magyars; in their wars against the Lutherans, they had to watch the Turks. The two-front dilemma reached a savage climax in the *kabinettskriege* of the 18th Century. In the war of Spanish succession (1700-1714), the Habsburgs found themselves under simultaneous attack by Spanish armies in Italy, French armies in Germany, and Hungarian armies in the *Erblande*, the latter of which, under the intrepid renegade prince Rákóczi, made it as far as the outskirts of Vienna. This was but a foretaste of the war of Austrian succession (1740-1748), when Prussia, France, and Bavaria attacked Austria from three directions in a bid to dismantle the Monarchy and partition its lands between them. In the thirty years of intermittent warfare that followed, Austria would be repeatedly invaded and brought to the brink of extinction as a Great Power.

It was against this backdrop not just of the long wars with Napoleon and Revolutionary France but the broader span of more than a century of almost unceasing warfare that Austria entered the post-war deliberations at the Congress of Vienna as a survivor as much as a victor and host. An ancient empire rooted in tradition and treaty rights, the House of Austria symbolized through its longevity and stability the monarchical principle as a basis for legitimacy and antipode to the political and moral chaos of the revolution. More than any other power, Austria carried the scars of predatory balance-of-power politics. She had the most to lose should the victors place the peace of Europe on unsound foundations and revert, after a decorous interlude, to their old ways.

Metternich as Austrian Statesman

Given the gravity of what was at stake for Europe after the Napoleonic Wars, it is natural that the story of the Vienna Congress would be known as a European story. From the vantage point of the bloody 20th Century and the failed peace of Versailles, it represented an earlier and more successful episode in the reconstruction of a shattered continent. In a broader perspective, it was an attempt at realizing the ideal of a just equilibrium of nations long incubating in Western thought, most recently in the writings of Kant and his predecessor Leibniz. Yet in a narrower if no less meaningful sense, the Vienna Congress must be seen as a triumph of Austrian diplomacy—the formulation, pursuit, and realization of policies that set the security of the Habsburg state on surer foundations than it had known before or would ever again. That Europe at large benefitted, given its inextricable entanglement in and relationship to the problems of this, its most central power, was a salutary but secondary result. And while success never has just one father, one man more than any could claim to be father of the Congress' outcomes—Austria's celebrated Foreign Minister, Klemens Wenzel Nepomuk Lothar Count (later Prince) Metternich.

At the time of the conference, Metternich was forty-one years old and at the peak of his career. It is one of history's small ironies that, like his arch-nemesis Napoleon, Metternich was a foreigner in the land of the prince whose court he served. A Rhinelander by birth, Metternich was a transplant to Austria who had experienced first-hand the upheaval caused by the French Revolution when his family had been forced to flee their estates in Germany. Like Kissinger in a later time, he would make a name for himself in his adopted homeland through intelligence, guile, and longevity. An indication of his ambition can be seen in the fact that he married the daughter of none other than Kaunitz, Maria Theresa's famous Chancellor and the man Metternich most wished to emulate. Metternich rose to the rank of Foreign Minister in the midst of Austria's lonely and disastrous campaign against Napoleon in 1809, when his memoranda on wartime strategy caught the attention of the Emperor Franz and other members of the imperial court. He would retain this post (in tandem, from 1821, with the position of State Chancellor) until the revolutions of 1848, making him, alongside his idol Kaunitz, one of Austria's longest-serving statesmen.

Few individuals in the history of diplomacy have attracted as much commentary as Metternich.[6] A scion of the old German *Reich* reared and educated in the waning days of the Enlightenment, Metternich embodied, in his tastes and worldview, the aristocracy of the *ancien régime* at its pre-Revolution zenith. Handsome and vain, Metternich possessed a native charm and facility for obfuscation that allowed him to navigate the intricacies of salon diplomacy—in the words of Treitschke, "as happily as a fish in [a] glittering whirlpool." Known for his volubility and inexhaustible patience, he had an uncanny ability to bring even the most determined opponents under his spell; as his

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[6] Metternich has probably attracted more attention from historians than the Vienna Congress, with more than two dozen biographies published in the almost two centuries since his death. Most of these draw on Heinrich von Sbrik's multi-volume *Metternich: Der Staatsmann und Der Mensch* (München: F. Bruckmann, 1925). The assessments of German historians in the nationalist era are to be taken cautiously, as these tended to blame Metternich excessively as a retardant to German unification and state-building. The interwar English historian Algernon Cecil began the process of resuscitation for English readers, a task that Alan Palmer and Desmond Seward continued after World War Two. Of these three, Seward's *Metternich: The First European* (New York: Viking Press, 1991) is the most enjoyable to read as a pen portrait. Henry Kissinger and Paul Schroeder remain the foremost American scholars to deal with his life and work. The German historian Wolfram Siemann's *Metternich: Strategist and Visionary*, the English translation of which was published in 2019 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), was the first major treatment of Metternich to go beyond the sources and foundation of Sbrik by delving into the "Acta Clementina" in Prague and the extensive Metternich family archive. Siemann's work challenges many long-accepted conceptions about Metternich's life and outlook, including most notably his political philosophy. A good starting point for understanding the major historiographical debates about Metternich's legacy can be found in Siemann's introductory chapter (pp. 1-10), alongside Paul W. Schroeder's dated but still serviceable 1961 essay, "Metternich Studies Since 1925" in *The Journal of Modern History*, September 1961, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Sep., 1961), pp. 237- 260. Metternich's own memoirs are an indispensable if inevitably stilted source.

(third) wife once joked, his idea of revenge was to invite an enemy to dinner. For all of his capacity for cold-blooded realism, Metternich was a sentimentalist at heart who wept at performances of Rossini, wrote interminable epistles to his lovers, and left crumbs on the floor for the mice inhabiting his office at the Ballhausplatz.[7] He once directed Austrian agents to surreptitiously monitor the ailing Italian composer Donizetti, on the grounds that his continued health was of inestimable value to the world of opera and therefore, presumably, to the national security of Austria.[8] Metternich's numerous love affairs were legendary even by the standards of his day and included his arch-adversary Napoleon's own sister Caroline, the Princess Bagration (the so-called "naked angel"), and the influential Wilhelmine de Sagan, whom he momentarily shared as a lover with the Tsar of Russia and with whose charms it is said Metternich was so preoccupied on one particularly eventful evening at the Vienna Congress that he missed an opportunity to acquire the kingdom of Bavaria for the Habsburg crown.[9]

Like Kaunitz before him, Metternich was a connoisseur of power. He cemented his influence through assiduous cultivation of the man at the top—this being, in Metternich's case, the cautious and plodding Emperor Franz, with whom he came to form a symbiotic relationship not unlike that of Kissinger and President Nixon in a later era. "The emperor always does what I want him to do," Metternich once said, "but I never want him to do anything else but what he has to do."[10] With his sovereign Metternich shared the aspiration of restoring the stability and legitimacy of the old European order and placing it on foundations better able to resist the forces of change.[11]

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[7] Metternich's favorite piece of music was Rossini's sweetly sentimental duet *Mira la bianca luna*. Bismarck's was Beethoven's introspective and dramatic *Sonata Appassionata*. See Seward, p. 224. and Robert Massey, *Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War* (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 52.

[8] For the Donizetta story, see Seward, pp. 223-24.

[9] Siemann devotes an entire chapter to Metternich's love affairs; see pp. 463-498. Metternich's letters to his lovers are exhibits in the application of reason to the pursuit of passion that contain frequent glimpses of his approach to diplomacy and political philosophy. Siemann argues that Metternich's chief pleasure from these affairs was intellectual rather than physical. For the Sagan story, see Seward, p. 75. For anecdotes about Metternich's relationship with Bagration, see Zamoyski, pp. 258-9 and 283, *inter alia*.

[10] Siemann, p. 691.

[11] There is some debate among historians regarding Metternich's political philosophy. Kissinger effectively challenged the depiction of Metternich by liberal historians as a hidebound reactionary and attempted to place him in the continental European tradition of "rationalist conservatism," juxtaposed with the English Whig tradition of "historical conservatism." Schroeder rejected Metternich's conservatism altogether and described him as an unthinking practitioner of "standstillism." Siemann draws on extensive and previously unearthed material to argue that Metternich was a "historical conservative" on the mold of

An arch-rationalist who was steeped in the mixed constitution of the German *Reich*, Metternich's conception of political order, like that of James Madison, was of a natural equilibrium that occurs when opposing forces are brought into balance. His was a clockwork universe that resembled Professor Drosselmeyer's mechanical castle in ETA Hoffmann's *The Nutcracker*, in which finely tuned gears move intricate pieces in synchronized harmony.[12] He saw his life's purpose as restoring that harmony, which the French Revolution had destroyed, by replacing but also rearranging the gears on which it operated, both internally in the functioning of states and externally in the relations between them.[13]

The image of Metternich that most sticks with us is that of a cosmopolitan statesman who anticipated European integration and pursued peace as an end in its own right, more or less unencumbered by the narrower considerations of state interest. This is an image that Metternich himself cultivated; as he once commented to the Duke of Wellington, "for a long time now, Europe has had for me the value of a mother country (*patrie*)."[14] Ironically, this image was reinforced by the negative appraisals of German nationalist historians in the decades following his death, who saw in Metternich's efforts to prop up the supranational Austrian Empire a detached preoccupation with Europe as an idea that had retarded the development of the German nation. The image was further cemented, although in a more positive vein, by later English and American historians for whom Metternich's pan-European architecture looked more promising in the aftermath of the two world wars spawned by its collapse and in light of attempts by a new U.S. superpower to rebuild international order on its own terms.

Edmund Burke. Late in life, Metternich told an American visitor that, had he been an American, he would have been "of that old party of which Washington was originally the head. It was a sort of conservative party, and I should be a conservative almost everywhere, certainly in England and America." See Siemann, pp. 714-15. See also the author's essay on Metternich's politics, "Conservatives and Geopolitical Change," *National Review*, April 2, 2020, https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2020/04/20/conservatives-and-geopolitical-change/

[12] The use of mechanical imagery to describe the functioning of political order has a long pedigree in the 18th Century and was especially prominent in Vienna in the decades leading up to Metternich. See Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, *Maria Theresa: The Habsburg Empress in Her Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), pp. 191-94. Metternich himself liked to describe Austria in his time, somewhat unconvincingly given its relative weakness, as a rock protruding from turbulent ocean waves. Perhaps the most memorable modern metaphor is Paul Schroeder's depiction of the Vienna system as a catamaran which Austria was a vulnerable but crucial middle plank between two sturdy outriggers (Britain and Russia) that required "constant attention and seamanship to keep it afloat." See Schroeder, *Transformation*, p. 591.

[13] As Schroeder put it, Metternich "viewed the world in Zoroastrian terms as an arena of perpetual struggle between two world-governing principles, that of order and good versus that of evil and anarchy." Schroeder, *Transformation*, p. 258.

[14] Quoted in Seward, p. 139. Metternich cultivated the image of pan-Europeanist later in life, clearly with posterity in mind, once writing that he never had "any purpose other than to give solidarity to the leading European powers in maintaining the common peace."

The picture of Metternich as a European statesman has tended to obscure the fact that Metternich was, first and foremost, an Austrian diplomat charged with providing for the security of the Habsburg Monarchy. Metternich's own memoirs and letters make it clear that his was, at heart, an Austria-focused policy; it being, in Metternich's own words, "up to us to direct ourselves according to our own calculations."[15] Whatever his credentials as a promoter of pan-European harmony, the foremost question in Metternich's policies was, as the historian Paul Schroeder put it, "simply one of Austrian interests," there being "not a single major aspect of his policy in this period which is not best and most simply understood as an effort to secure power, peace, and internal security for the fragile Austrian monarchy…His remarkable success in achieving his goals under the guise of European principles, and not the validity or the sincerity of the principles themselves, constitutes his own particular brand of greatness."[16]

THE GHOST OF TILSIT

No Austrian interest loomed larger at the time of the Vienna Congress than the need to alleviate the multi-directional pressures that were certain to bear down upon the Habsburg Monarchy in the post-war period from her numerous flanking powers, and in particular, from France and Russia. For all his acclaimed preoccupation with broader principles of a continent-wide peace, Metternich saw this danger to Austria clearly, as well as the impossibility of attempting to escape from it by military means. As he wrote the year before the Vienna Congress:

> The relative attitude of [the Great Powers] varies according to their geographic situation. France and Russia each have only a single frontier that is hardly vulnerable. The Rhine, with its triple barrier of fortresses, ensures the safety of France's hinterlands, [while] an inhospitable climate affording barely three months of campaigning season renders the Niemen a no less formidable barrier for Russia. [By contrast] Austria and Prussia, as central powers, are exposed on all sides to attacks from their neighbors. Continually threatened by the preponderance of these two empires [France and Russia], they can find repose only in a wise and measured policy, in benevolent relations with one another and with their neighbors… [17]

Given these geographic realities, a determined military push from either France or Russia would, in itself, be a lethal threat to Austria, containable only with the combined support of the other powers; arrayed together, France and Russia would be in a position to threaten Austria's very existence and partition Central Europe. Metternich had gotten

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[15] Paul Schroeder demolishes the notion that Metternich was anything less than, as he puts it, "Austria-first" in outlook. See Schroeder's lucidly argued account in *Metternich's Diplomacy at its Zenith 1820-1823*, pp. 43 and 257.
[16] Ibid.
[17] See Metternich's memorandum to Prince Schwarzenberg dated March 28, 1813, reproduced in full in Wilhelm Oncken, *Österreich und Preussen im Brefreiungskriege* (Berlin, 1876), vol. 1, pp. 439-445.

a glimpse of the nightmare that a combination of these two powers could pose for Austria in the 1807 Treaty of Tilsit, when Napoleon and Alexander effectively divided Europe into spheres of influence between them.[18] In terms that prefigure the division of Cold War Europe into antagonistic blocs, Metternich observed with foreboding: "They remodeled the whole of Europe. Two empires, one in the west and the other in the east, would draw round them the small confederate States to serve as reciprocal intermediaries."[19] This danger had not vanished with the end of the war; as Friedrich Gentz, Metternich's secretary, wrote in 1818, "such an alliance [between Russia and France] is possible; it is even one of the least unlikely and the most frightening possibilities of the future."[20]

It would be hard to overstate the impact that Tilsit had in shaping Metternich's eventual conceptions for a grand strategy to deal with Austria's two-front predicament. Looking at the post-war map, Metternich could imagine a day when France would have fully recovered from the war and would return to its age-old quest for dominance in Germany and Italy, perhaps animated by a fresh bout of the revolutionary distemper that Metternich was convinced had not been permanently stamped out with the restoration of the Bourbons. As for Russia, it took little imagination to see the dangers that that huge power would pose after the war. At the close of hostilities, the Tsar retained sizable forces in France and Germany, and a bellicose spirit permeated the Russian officer corps. A Russian general summed up the mood when he observed at the start of the Vienna Congress, "one does not need to worry much about negotiations when one has 100,000 men under arms."[21]

Adding to Metternich's worries about Russia was the erratic behavior of her eccentric ruler, the Tsar Alexander I. While committed in principle, for reasons of dynastic self-preservation, to the monarchical principle, there was in reality very little that was fixed in the mind of Alexander. A "Byzantine of the decadent era," as Napoleon called him, Alexander was a man of mystical religious convictions, known for his susceptibility to sudden and often extravagant enthusiasms. Metternich's own dealings with Alexander demonstrated this volatility. On one occasion, the Tsar invited Metternich to a dinner party at which a plate had been laid for an invisible guest—"our Lord Jesus Christ"; on another, he threw his sword on the table and challenged Metternich to a duel, only to

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[18] As late as 1814, Metternich still worried that the two flanking powers would do a deal "over his head." See Zamoyski, p. 64.
[19] Siemann, p. 224.
[20] Friedrich von Gentz, "'Considerations on the Political System Now Existing in Europe,' 1818" in Mack Walker, ed., *Metternich's Europe: Selected Documents* (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 83.
[21] Quoted in Nicolson, p. 120.

repent of his anger a few days later and offer a bribe of £100,000 to repair the damage.[22] As Metternich reflected in his memoirs, the Tsar's mind, "refined and keen as it was, had no depth; he was as easily led astray be an excess of distrust as by an inclination to erroneous theories."[23] In any ruler such traits might have been dangerous, but in one who sat at "the head of the one standing army really capable of action in Europe today" they were a source of great anxiety. "All Europe fears his power," as Gentz noted, "and has reason to fear it."[24]

On paper at least, 1815 Austria was in a better position to resist the pressures of the flanking powers than she had ever been. At war's end Vienna not only regained the territories she had lost over the course of the previous two decades but added new ones. These included most importantly Venice (which was traded for the Austrian Netherlands and combined with other northern Italian holdings to form a new kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia), the full length of the Dalmatian coastline, the Polish province of Galicia, and the district of Tarnopol in modern-day Ukraine. With these accretions the House of Habsburg reached its greatest extent since the 16th Century, becoming the largest European land power of her time second in size only to Russia.

This apparent strength, however, masked profound structural weaknesses in the Habsburg state. Economically and militarily, Austria ranked among the weakest of Europe's five Great Powers. The debt load with which she remained saddled from twenty years of warfare approximated in scale that which Britain carried at the end of World War Two. And while the Monarchy would eventually move into a period of sustained economic recovery, fueled by a postwar baby boom and mechanization of Bohemian textiles, this process would not begin in earnest until more than a decade after the Congress of Vienna.[25] In the meantime, the Habsburg economy remained in a state of depression and financial crisis, its rebound hampered by the far quicker recovery and boom in British manufactures and Russian commodities.[26]

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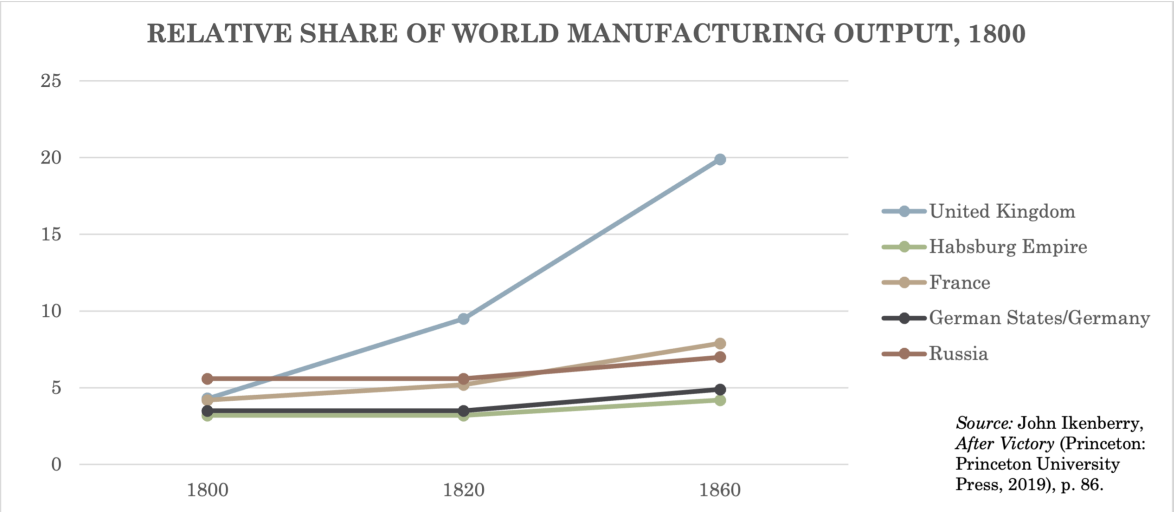
[22] The Tsar conveyed this offer through a masked intermediary at a costume ball. In addition to the cash, he offered to restore Metternich's affair with Wilhelmina de Sagan which, it turned out, the Tsar had secretly undermined as a way of gaining leverage over Metternich in negotiations over the future of Poland. See Zamoyski, pp. 330-31. For the Jesus story, see Seward, p. 83.
[23] See "Metternich's Portrait of Alexander I, Czar of Russia" in Walker, p. 99.
[24] Gentz in Ibid., p. 80.
[25] See the surprising statistics on Austrian postwar recovery and growth in David F. Good, *The Economic Rise of the Habsburg Empire, 1750-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 45-50.
[26] Adolf Beer cited in F.R. Bridge, *The Habsburg Monarchy among the Great Powers*, (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1991), p. 27.



In such circumstances, thrift was the order of the day for the Austrian Army. Rapid demobilization was followed by penny-pinching so severe that it prompted the Finance Minister to quip that Austria was "armed for perpetual peace." As Gentz noted in 1818, the Monarchy had "reduced her military forces even beyond the limits and proportions that prudence allows. She has neglected her army in all respects…[In the event of war] she would have no liquid funds, emergency taxes would not pay for half a campaign, sources of credit are dried up for a long time to come…"[27] This stark reality defined the realm of the possible for Habsburg foreign policy. Simply put, it meant that Austria was in no position to navigate a major external crisis—in Gentz's words, she "must most seriously fear any alteration in the European system that might tend directly or indirectly to draw her into new wars." Indeed, as later events would show, even small crises requiring the use of force would exceed her limited abilities to sustain.

METTERNICH'S 'CENTRAL DIKE'

Against this backdrop, Austria's quest for peace in 1815 went beyond the normal desire for a period of tranquility that pervaded among victorious nations after a major war. The Habsburg Monarchy not only needed peace, it needed a *different kind* of peace—one that, as Metternich put it in his memoirs, was not just a "second edition of the former peace in rather a different form."[28] As Austria's top diplomat, Metternich's job was not only to arrange a favorable peace settlement for Austria in the narrow sense, but also to find some means of avoiding future storms altogether, to give the beleaguered Monarchy breathing space and time to recover. This called for a vision of peace in which

[27] Gentz in Walker, pp. 74-5.
[28] Clemens Wenzel Lothar Metternich, *Memoirs of Prince Metternich*, (London: Forgotten Books, 2012), p. 251.

underlying power realities would be rearranged, to the extent possible, to Austria's advantage, even as the range of future scenarios in which it would need to yield that power would be systematically (and in Metternich's mind, scientifically) limited.

The concept that inspired Metternich's strategy was one that had been germinating in his thought for some time. It was to counteract the pressures bearing down on Austria at their source, by building an politically and economically interdependent middle zone—a "central dike," as Gentz would later call it—sufficiently strong to resist encroachments from the flanking powers. At its heart would be a strengthened Habsburg Monarchy, its resource base not only improved by judicious acquisitions but, in his original conception, through prudent economic reform and federalization. Around this strengthened core, Metternich envisioned a belt of smaller satellite states, corresponding to the Monarchy's historic buffer territories in Germany and Italy. The entirety of this edifice, effectively knitting together the middle bulk of the European continent under a Habsburg aegis, would be encased in a reconstituted European political equilibrium in which the major powers would resolve crises according to the principles of legitimacy and treaty rights rather than armed force.

Various strands of this concept can be seen in Metternich's writing as early as 1801 and by the time of the 1813 war of liberation had congealed into what would be the essence of his policy for the next four decades.[29] It was by no means Metternich's first attempt at conceptualizing a strategy to address Austria's multi-front dilemma. In 1806, when Napoleon seemed unstoppable, he had developed the idea of an eastern rampart of Austria, Russia, and Prussia, bound in a mutual defense pact and sealed off from French aggression behind a triple line of fortifications along the river Weser.[30] Six years later, on the tail of Napoleon's defeat in Russia and with a Russian counter-offensive appearing inevitable, Metternich's thinking swung in the opposite direction—this time, involving a western alliance in which Austria and France would jointly manage Germany and combine forces to keep Russia contained behind the Carpathians.[31]

These earlier strategic ruminations, both involving conceptions which never materialized, are important because they demonstrate both the extent to which the need to mitigate the insecurities of Austria's middle position lay at the heart of Metternich's strategic thought and the narrow range of viable options that existed for mitigating this problem. They replicated earlier patterns of Habsburg policy, when Austria had gyrated

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[29] See Siemann, pp. 171-177 and Schroeder, *Zenith*, p. 8. One early German historian to grasp and develop the theme of Metternich's middle zone concepts was Emil Lauber, who argued unconvincingly that this was an early effort at building a greater Germany. See Lauber's *Metternichs Kampf um die europaische Mitte: Struktur seiner Politik von 1809 bis 1815* (Vienna: A. Luser, 1939).
[30] See Siemann, p. 197
[31] See Zamoyski, p. 40.

from east to west in a never-ending quest to counter-balance the hegemon *du jour*. Metternich's schemes to align more closely with France recall Kaunitz's diplomatic revolution of 1756 and its centerpiece, the unpopular marriage of Marie Antoinette to Louis XVI, while his concept of an eastern bloc recalls the practice, back to the reign of Joseph II, of aligning with Russia in anticipation of hostilities in the west. The problem with these machinations was that, with each new swing of the pendulum, Austria always found itself making new concessions to keep one flanking power onside at the other's expense. The end result was always that the Habsburg Monarchy was left with less independence of maneuver, bargaining with its putative allies over the lands that made up its own patrimony in order to counterbalance the strength of the power on the other flank.

It was this age-old straightjacket of Austrian policy that Metternich sought to break out of at the Vienna Congress. He did so not by picking the right side at the right moment but by attempting to render that old choice moot and transcending the high wire act altogether.[32] Doing so required not just improvisation or a one-off bargain of the kind that had so often followed Austria's earlier wars, but an entire system of statecraft encompassing the other powers. It is appropriate to use the term system, in the sense that the elements fit together conceptually and were meant to reinforce one another's effects, and in the sense that Metternich himself saw it as such.[33] A child of the Enlightenment, Metternich viewed the world of diplomacy generally and the task of methodical restoration he had undertaken specifically in these mechanical terms, not unlike the cogs and wheels in Drosselmeyer's mechanical castle. It is worth reviewing each piece in turn.

1 A FEDERALIZED HABSBURG MONARCHY.

For even the most elegant and inspired conception of order at the European level to work, Metternich saw that Austria as the central power had to regain the ability to play at a level approaching that of the other Great Powers. On her own post-war Austria did not possess the strength to play such a role. Even in her sprawling new territorial

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[32] In this, too, Metternich's maneuvers recall the search of earlier Habsburg ministers for an escape hatch from Europe's perpetual power balancing. In Bartenstein's quest for a pan-European legal sanction for Maria Theresa's succession and Kaunitz's search for a just equilibrium after the wars with Frederick the Great, one can see Europe's most vulnerable empire groping for a moral and legal framework to supersede the balance of power and alleviate the omnidirectional pressures bearing down upon it. Metternich's concept was a logical culmination of this quest, albeit on a much more ambitious scale. See Kaunitz's memorandum, "Reflections on the Concept of the Balance of Power in Europe," reproduced in full (in French) in Franz A. J. Szabo, "Prince Kaunitz and the Balance of Power," *International History Review* 1, no. 3 (1979): 399-408. For an extended meditation on what transcending the balance of power meant in practice, see Schroeder, "Vienna Settlement," pp. 37-57.

[33] See the discussion on 'systems' thinking in Habsburg strategy in Mitchell, *Grand Strategy*, pp. 112-17.

acquisitions, she had taken on responsibilities that were as much liabilities as augmentations to her resource base. But the problem went deeper and was rooted in the complexities and contradictions of the Habsburg Monarchy itself. Putting Austrian security on a firmer footing therefore began, in Metternich's mind, with reorganizing and rejuvenating the Monarchy internally.

Successive Habsburg monarchs had attempted to improve the empire's security in the absolutist fashion of other continental Great Powers of the time, by creating a stronger state apparatus with which to organize resources for war. In Austria's case, however, Metternich saw that further centralization was likely to backfire by fueling resistance at the local level. To avoid this trap, Metternich proposed to reorganize the Monarchy along federal lines, with a streamlined imperial bureaucracy overseeing a series of semi-autonomous chancelleries corresponding to each of the Monarchy's major ethnic groups.[34] The concept was intimately linked to Metternich's broader strategic thinking about the post-war era; he wanted Franz to grant greater local power not because doing so would necessarily make Franz wise and just (though Metternich thought that too) but because it would expand the empire's disposal power base, on the logic that self-governing units generate more revenue and are less likely to revolt. The logic for domestic reform was geopolitical and aimed at improving Austria's performance as a Great Power.

2. BUFFER STATES.

The next component in Metternich's system was the construction, or rather reconstruction, of a belt of independent buffer states around Austria. These lay in clusters on every side of the Monarchy. The most important were the mosaic of small states to the northwest ruled by the princes of the former German *Reich* (the "hummingbird kings," as Metternich called them). To the southwest, there were the similarly-arranged small states of Italy. And to the east, there was the amorphous expanses of Poland and the Ottoman Empire, nominally intact but already in an advanced state of decay. Maintaining these territories as independent states gave the Austrian Empire a strategic depth it otherwise would have lacked. They were the rough equivalent, in Austrian strategic thinking, of England's channel and Russia's steppe—an encasement around the otherwise vulnerable Austrian home territories that bought time in a conflict and reduced the need for frontier defenses, and thus larger defense budgets, in peacetime.

The maintenance of secure buffers was among the highest objectives of Metternich's diplomacy at the Vienna Congress. Pursuit of this aim brought him into what would

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[34] For an elaboration of this concept, see Siemann, p. 533.

become the two most serious disputes of the conference. One involved Saxony, which Prussia wanted to annex, and the other involved Poland, which Russia wanted to absorb in its entirety. Both scenarios were unpalatable from an Austrian security perspective. Saxony was the only buffer separating Austria and Prussia and had played a prominent role in the former's wars against Frederick the Great. Poland was even more important; "situated between three major powers," as Metternich wrote, "Poland prevented the frequent collisions which always occur if there is immediate contact and for that reason alone it had a decided value for each of the three powers."[35] The value of both states explains why the otherwise unflappable Metternich was willing to risk the success of the Congress on them (it was over Poland that the Tsar had challenged him to a duel). The resulting compromise saw Prussia take only a portion of Saxon territory and allowed for a partition of Poland; not Metternich's ideal outcome, but far better than seeing these buffers perish entirely.

While fending off these land grabs, Metternich sought to organize Austria's western buffers into federative structures under Habsburg leadership. His aim was "to remove our country from direct contact with France, and thus put an end to the wars which had been in consequence of this contact perpetually occurring between the two neighboring empires."[36] The centerpiece of these efforts was the creation of a reimagined German *Bund* from the wreckage of the old *Reich* (which, it will be remembered, was demolished by Napoleon in 1806.) At the Vienna Congress, Metternich reformulated this ancient structure, slimming its membership from 300 kingdoms and principalities to 39 enlarged federal states. He retained and amplified its defensive qualities; under *Bund*'s Article 47, members could invoke a mutual defense pledge not unlike NATO's Article 5 and draw on a common federal army to repel French or Russian attack. In place of the status of elective Emperor that the Habsburgs enjoyed in the old *Reich*, Metternich arranged for Austria to hold the permanent presidency of a new Federal Diet. He was careful to coopt Prussia into the status of sidecar in these arrangements in order to contain the growth of Prussian influence while ensuring that Germany itself did not become a place of revolutionary unrest.

Metternich wanted a similar arrangement in Italy. Here, in addition to their possessions in Lombardy-Venetia, the Habsburgs maintained informal primacy over most of the peninsula, with dynastic links to Tuscany, Modena, Parma, and Piacenza, a garrison in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, and extensive influence in Piedmont-Sardinia.[37] Consistent with his wider federalization schemes, Metternich wrote to Emperor Franz

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[35] See Siemann, p. 177. There is a remarkable symmetry in Metternich's thinking on buffer states and that of Kaunitz, who worried about the frictions that result from states becoming "directly adjacent." See Kauitz's 1789 memorandum on Russia quoted in Mitchell, *Grand Strategy*, p. 231.
[36] Metternich, *Memoirs*, p. 264.
[37] See Schroeder, *Zenith*, p. 9.

that "the countries here must be governed from here"; what he envisioned was "a federal system of defense in Italy that would be able to secure a solid and also lasting peace and domestic calm."[38] These arrangements were to be accompanied by administrative reform, a cessation of attempts at 'Germanization', and, with time, new infrastructure projects to integrate the region's economies with the Austrian *Erblande*.

Metternich's vision for a Central European 'dike' was not only political; it was also economic. He wanted to create of a wider German economic zone, whose members would be integrated through shared infrastructure (including railroads), the elimination of internal agricultural and industrial barriers, and the maintenance of a common external tariff.[39] The motivation was partly that Austria, with her internal regional disparities and agrarian eastern provinces, risked falling behind other German states in industrialization, and partly rooted in the fears generated by Prussia's efforts to create a German Custom's Union excluding Austria.[40] Ultimately, Metternich saw that, to compete against flanking rivals with extensive non-European territorial holdings, the Habsburg Monarchy would need access to the largest commercial and technological base possible. While his plans foundered (they collided with the powerful agrarian interests of Austria's Bohemian nobles and were left to die, in Habsburg fashion, in a commission formed for their further study), they demonstrate the extent of Metternich's ambitions for creating an integrated middle zone capable of fending for itself against Europe's flanking powers.

3. Congress Diplomacy.

It was as a capstone to his construction of the middle European dike that Metternich conceived of the elaborate system of coordination among the Great Powers that became known as the Congress system. At its most basic level, this can be seen as an attempt to perpetuate the habits of consultation that had been established by the wartime coalitions against Napoleon. Austria in particular had gained from these coalitions, which had given her access to a scale of support, in the form of (mainly English) subsidies and (mainly Russian) manpower that would have been unimaginable in her

[38] Quoted in Siemann, p. 525.
[39] Metternich's economic thinking appears to have been influenced by the writing of the Swabian mercantilist Friedrich List, whose ideas were in currency at the time and are discussed in greater detail in the Bismarck section below. Unlike Bismarck, Metternich seems to have been only partially convinced by List's logic and, in keeping with the English underpinnings of his political philosophy, leaned more toward free trade. See Siemann, pp. 657 and 680.
[40] See the discussion in Ibid., pp. 677-681.

earlier wars.[41] But Metternich aspired for more; what he envisioned was nothing less than a conscious renunciation of methods by which the major powers had sought security in the past—"the rejection," as he put it, "of the system of conquest, and the establishment of the system of restitution and equivalents in the forming of kingdoms and states."[42] He wanted this "rejection" to occur not just once, but repeatedly over time, by continuing the Congress method established at Vienna on a standing basis and avoiding a reversion to the old methods of intimidation, offensive alliances, and force.

The two components of the Vienna system that would become the most important from the perspective of Austrian security were the two that, not coincidentally, involved formal treaties. The first was the Quadruple Alliance—a grouping of Austria, Russia, Prussia, and Britain formed to prevent renewed French aggression. The Alliance was a central pillar of Metternich's strategy for managing multi-front pressures, representing a mechanism for containing the flanking power that was most likely to threaten Austria in the future. Ironically, it was with the aim of reducing this threat that Metternich resisted attempts at the Vienna Congress by the Russian and especially Prussian delegations to impose punitive peace terms on France. Instead, he insisted on restoring France to her natural frontiers, on the logic that doing so would help to give France a stake in the perpetuation of the system. Through the Quadruple Alliance Metternich sought, in effect, an insurance policy—a safeguard to keep the France that he had restored within the boundaries that he had set, while at the same time ensuring that Russia was blocked from courting France bilaterally and that she would be outnumbered in any deliberations about France's future by Austria, Prussia, and Britain.[43]

The second important component was Austria's alliance with Russia herself. This took the form, informally at first and, from 1833, formally, of the so-called Holy Alliance. Proclaimed by Alexander in a fit of mystical euphoria while watching 150,000 Russia troops parade on the plain of Vertus outside Paris in 1814, the alliance was initially vague to the point of meaninglessness—in Castlereagh's judgment, a "piece of sublime

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[41] Given Austria's military weakness, it was, as F.R. Bridge writes, "only common sense" that Metternich should wish to extend the spirit and template of great-power coordination into the peacemaking negotiations and beyond, for Austria disproportionately benefited from a suspension of traditional power balancing, however long that could be sustained. See Bridge, p. 30.

[42] Metternich later wrote that his goal was the "establishment of international relations upon the basis of reciprocity, under the guarantee of respect for acquired rights, and the conscientious observance of plighted faith…" See Metternich, *Memoirs*, pp. 37 and 250.

[43] F.R. Bridge wrote of the Quadruple Alliance that it was "a neat device whereby [Austria] both isolated France and contained Russia in a minority of three to one." See Bridge, p. 31.

mysticism and nonsense."[44] But in succeeding years, Metternich would refine it into an instrument for restraining Russia through appeals to monarchical solidarity. For Austria, the treaty's utility was directly linked to the two-front problem; as Metternich would later write, without these seemingly nebulous moral commitments, "an alliance would be effected between France and Russia" and, given the latter's superior strength, "Germany, as well as Italy, would range herself under [Russia's] banner."[45]

The foregoing comment reveals the extent to which the regional and European levels were interconnected in Metternich's logic. If, by ensconcing Austria in layers of friendly buffer states, Metternich hoped to create a middle zone strong enough to resist aggression from the wing powers, then by wrapping the entirety of this edifice in a system of treaty diplomacy, he hoped to turn off crises at their source and avoid tests beyond the ability of the fragile center to bear. Both constructions (the regional and the continental) derived from an essentially federative notion of power, the pieces of which were mutually reinforcing: Austria's hegemony in Central Europe gave her weight with the flanking powers, while her diplomatic coordination with the latter freed her up to police internal crises in Central Europe. Both roles implied a utility for Austria that made her, in a sense, irreplaceable. To buffer states, she was just strong enough to provide protection against the flanking powers but not strong enough to become threatening herself; to the other Great Powers, she was strong enough to prevent the contagion of revolution in her empire and buffer regions but not strong enough to pose a direct military threat to them.

The pieces of Metternich's system worked to mitigate the pressures of simultaneity. As long as Austria could claim leadership of Middle Europe, a Franco-Russian combination would be deterred. As Gentz put it, France and Russia:

> …are rendered incapable of harm as long as the *middle line*, formed by powers whose only interest and whose only desire is peace, is not broken. [These powers]…are the true rampart of the common security of Europe; and the colossi that occupy the two extremities, breaking against this central dike for as long as it lasts, must for a long time to come seek their advantage and their glory in preserving an order of things they cannot hope to destroy.[46]

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[44]In its original configuration, the Holy Alliance merely obliged the three courts to "remain united by the bonds of a true and indivisible fraternity and…[to] on all occasions and in all places, lend each other aid and assistance." See Seward, p. 82. Under the later formulation developed by Metternich, Austria and Russia committed to coordination in crises involving the Eastern Question, to provide mutual assistance against revolution, and together with Prussia, to assist other monarchies against liberalism. See A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848-1918* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1954), p. 2.

[45] Schroeder, *Zenith*, p. 55.

[46] See Gentz in Walker, pp. 83-4.

In propping up this 'central dike,' Metternich could usually count on the assistance of Great Britain, which for centuries had encouraged Austria and the small German kingdoms to form defensive groupings to foil periodic attempts at hegemony on the European continent. In the event that this central dike, with Britain's support, failed to deter an attack by the most dangerous of the two flanking powers (France), Austria could fall back on the formal protective clauses of the Quadruple Alliance. If the impasse occurred with Russia, Austria could, at least in theory, invoke the provisions of the Holy Alliance to restrain her large eastern neighbor, appealing to conservative solidarity to keep St. Petersburg sufficiently aligned to avoid war and, on the basis of those two courts' thicker ideological affinities, avert Russian coordination with France. And in both cases, Austria's tight synchronization with Prussia, cemented by Metternich's cultivation of the Prussian king's anti-revolutionary zeal, and soft control over the defensive edifice of the German *Reich* provided a failsafe that, in the last resort, ensured that she would still be able to count on strength beyond her own if all other aspects of the system failed.

How Metternich's System Influenced Austrian Military Planning

Metternich's system made sense for Austria precisely because she was militarily weak. But it should not be inferred from this fact that military power was not an integral component of Habsburg security in this period. For even the weakest state, the ability to wield lethal force is a fundamental component of sovereignty and security. For post-1815 Austria it was a prerequisite to Great Power status as well as a guarantor for the survival of the Habsburg dynasty, whose identity was interchangeable with that of the state itself.[47] As the saying of the time went, the Habsburg throne rested on "the army, standing; the priest, kneeling; the bureaucrat, sitting; and the spy, rampant."[48] For all of his politesse, Metternich understood this fact and its corollary—that should Austria fail to maintain an adequate number of men under arms, all the diplomacy in the world would not avail to keep Austria in the first rank of European states.

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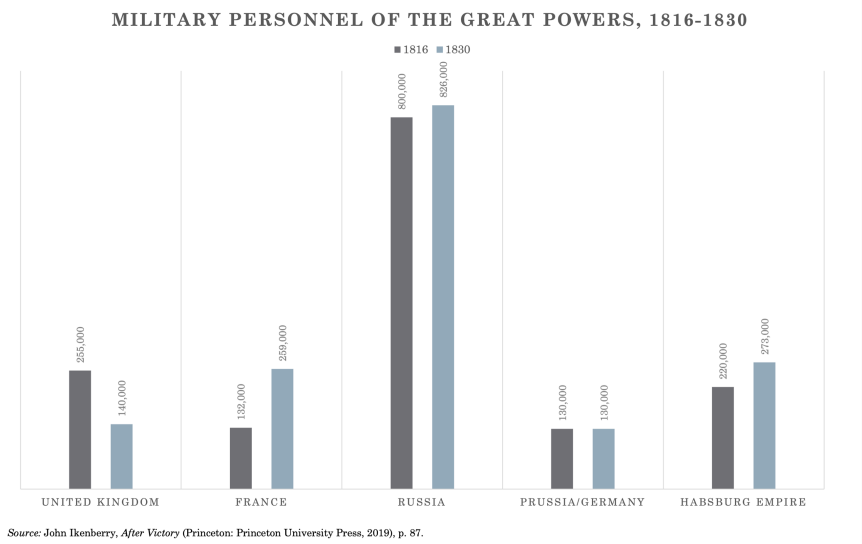
[47] Not a lot has been written on the subject of the Austrian military in the era of the Vienna system, in contrast to the preceding Napoleonic and subsequent Franz Josef periods. The essential source remains Gunther Rothenberg; see his 1968 article "The Austrian Army in the Age of Metternich," *The Journal of Modern History* 40, no. 2 (June 1968): pp. 156-165 and *The Army of Franz Josef* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1976), especially pp. 1-38. See also István Deák, *Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps 1848-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). Finally, there is the recent work of Richard Bassett, whose *For God and Kaiser: The Imperial Austrian Army, 1619-1918* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015) delves into the intricacies of politics and strategy in this era and provides a reinforcement to Rothenberg's lonely attempts to educate modern readers on the Austrian Army's forgotten qualities as a supranational institution and fighting force.

[48] See Bridge, p. 49.

On paper, the Austrian Army of Metternich's day seemed up to the task. Even after the cuts of the immediate post-war period, its strength hovered at around a quarter of a million men well into the 1830s and would grow even larger after that.[49] These figures compare favorably with the other European land powers of the time, being second numerically only to Russia and well ahead of France until that country's recovery in the mid-1830s.[50] And as 19th Century armies go, Austria's was an especially splendid one. This was the kaleidoscopic host of mustachioed hussars and dusty frontier outposts immortalized in the watercolors of Rudolf von Ottenfeld and the exploits of family Trotta in the novels of Josef Roth. Drawn from every province of the multi-national realm, the Army was by far the Habsburg state's most successful supranational institution. Conservative and defensive-minded, its strength lay in resilience rather than fighting prowess. Commanding it was a largely Catholic, German-speaking officer corps, drawn from the Habsburg crownlands of Austria and Bohemia and the warlike provinces of the Croatian frontier, known for its incorruptibility and loyalty to the person of the Emperor.[51]



The nominal size of Austria's army was, however, misleading, masking serious organizational, operational, and logistical shortcomings. These stemmed in part from

[49] Rothenberg puts the figure at 400,000 but appears to be generalizing for the entire period from the 1848 estimates provided by Rudolf Kiszling in *Die Revolution im Kaisertum Österreich 1848-1849* ("315,000 infantrymen, 49,000 cavalry, 26,000 artillery, 5,400 technical troops, and a wagon train of 4,000"). The numbers prior to the late 1840s were much lower. See Rothenberg, "Austrian Army," p. 161. See also the data compilation comparing European force strengths in Mitchell, *Grand Strategy*, p. 66.
[50] Based on figures from Ibid.
[51] For an overview of the officer corps' background, makeup, training and reputation, see Deák, chapters 1-3.

the rigidity of the officer corps, which unlike its counterparts in Prussia had emerged from the Napoleonic wars with a deepened resistance to change and devotion to the virtues of defensive and attritional warfighting.[52] And while the difficulties arising from the Army's multi-ethnic character should not be overstated, these inevitably presented problems in training and (unevenly) morale that gave the Austrian Army an uneven quality compared to its continental rivals. Above all, there was the problem of financial constraints and the Army's diminishing share of the budget, which declined from half in 1817 to less than a quarter by 1830 and a mere 20 percent by 1848.[53]

Austria's military leadership was of course well acquainted with the danger that a two-front war would present to the Monarchy, and no one more so than General Joseph Radetzky von Radetz, its most famous general of the period.[54] A professional soldier who had come of age in Austria's wars against Napoleon and who had served as Metternich's military aide at the Vienna Congress, Radetzky was a pugnacious

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[52] The development of Austrian military-theoretical thought and strategic culture after the Napoleonic wars has received less attention, for obvious reasons, than that of either Prussia or France in the same period. Where the latter two militaries would coalesce around the writings of Clausewitz and Jomini respectively, the Austrians looked to the work of their own Archduke Charles, the Emperor Franz's brother, who had inflicted a narrow defeat on Napoleon at Aspern-Essling in 1809 and wrote a short treatise on the art of war. Charles' approach, while not entirely unoriginal, was largely an attempt at adapting 18th Century military thinking, with its emphasis on attrition, fortresses and lines of communication, to the conditions of the Napoleonic era. Charles added an emphasis on "strategic points" (geographic locations that carry outsized strategic value in warfare) similar to Jomini. Clausewitz singled out Charles for special criticism in his treatise *On* War, writing that he "never entirely understood the reasoning of the famous general and writer," which probably helps explain why subsequent military intellectuals in Germany and the United States have given him short shrift. See: Archduke Charles, *Principles of War*, Daniel I. Radakovich, Trans. (Ann Arbor: Nimble Books, 2009); and Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, Trans. Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 247. See also Günter Brüning, *Militär-Strategie Österreichs in der Zeit Kaiser Franz II (I)*, doctoral dissertation, unpublished, Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität zu Münster, 1983; and Manfried Rauchensteiner; "The Development of War Theories in Austria at the End of the Eighteenth Century" in *East Central European Society and War in the Pre-Revolutionary Eighteenth Century*, edited by G.E. Rothenberg, B.K. Kiraly, and P.F. Sugar (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982); Gunther Rothenberg, "The Shield of the Dynasty: Reflections on the Habsburg Army, 1649–1918." *Austrian History Yearbook* 32, January 2001: pp. 169–206; and Gunther Rothenberg, *Napoleon's Great Adversary: Archduke Charles and the Austrian Army, 1792-1814* (Boston: De Capo Press, 1995).

[53] These figures come from Rothenberg, "Austrian Army," p. 156. So paltry was the military budget that when, in 1820, the Army was called up to suppress a small uprising in Naples, Vienna was forced to undertake a loan from the Rothschilds, with the condition that the people of Naples would repay the expense themselves, with interest (thus managing to make a profit on the war). Again in 1830, Metternich had to abandon a plan to intervene militarily to restore France's king Charles X after the July Revolution due to insufficient money and men (Austria could only afford to muster 170,000 troops compared to the 250,000 men that Prussia, a far smaller power, could put in the field. See Schroeder, *Transformation*, p. 612 and Seward, p. 174.

[54] The essential English-language Radetzky biography is Alan Sked's 2011 *Radetzky: Imperial Victor and Military Genius* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris and Co., 2011).

commander equally popular with the Army rank-and-file and the (otherwise anti-Habsburg) populace of the Italian provinces where he spent most of his career. In a lengthy memorandum of 1828, Radetzky reviewed the threats facing the Monarchy. "You can see the dangers looming from all sides," he wrote, and "should there be another moment when Russia is linked to France," Austria would struggle to hold onto even its most insulated interior possessions.[55] While pleading for larger Army budgets, Radetzky understood that military means alone could not secure the Monarchy unless her diplomats created the political conditions for those capabilities to achieve their best effect. "The means must always be adapted to the end, based on an accurate read of the political situation and according to the needs of the moment"; and these required the intelligent use of Austria's buffer states "who need protection in our part of the world and gratefully accept it when offered" as well as alliances with larger states to offset the immense defensive burdens facing the Monarchy.[56]

The political offset that Radetzky needed was precisely what Metternich's diplomacy provided. By de-emphasizing military power in relations among the Great Powers, the Vienna system fostered international conditions in which the Army could reasonably assume that it would not face tests of strength with major opponents for the foreseeable future and therefore focus on consolidating Austria's hegemony over the European middle zone envisioned in Metternich's strategy. These burdens were further defrayed by the military resources of the buffer states themselves.[57] Through the *Bund*, Austria could count on the active assistance of the smaller German states as well as permanent access to federal fortifications stretching to the frontiers of France. These, as well as similar garrisoning arrangements with the Habsburg client kingdoms of Italy, represented a significant extension of Austrian military power, the costs of which were borne almost entirely by taxpayers other than her own. They allowed Austria to largely de-emphasize Germany militarily in the knowledge that this region would be covered, from a defensive standpoint, with a minimum of their own effort.

The chief military virtue of Metternich's system was the freedom that it gave the Austrian Army to focus on the Habsburg Monarchy's most critical theater—Italy. The Italian lands had held pride of place in Austrian strategic thought since at least the early 18th century, when the dynasty wrested control over a large portion of the peninsula from the Bourbons in compensation for the loss of Spain. Italy's significance lay in its geography. Militarily, the Lombardy plain and Po river valley formed a natural invasion

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[55] See Johann Joseph Wenzel Radetzky Von Radetz, "Militärische Betrachtung der Lage Österreichs," 1828, in *Denkschriften Militärisch-Politischen Inhalts Aus Dem Handschriftlichen Nachlass Des K.K. Österreichischen Feldmarschalls Grafen Radetzky* (Stuttgart and Augsburg: J. G. Gotta'scher Verlag, 1858), p. 426.
[56] Radetzky, *Denkschriften*, pp. 426-8
[57] Ibid., pp. 423-451.

route by which French armies could attack Austria south of the Alps. Economically, northern Italy was a populous and resource-rich region directly adjacent to the *Erblande* that was far more valuable than comparably sized Habsburg holdings in the Monarchy's impoverished east. In the decades after 1815 Vienna poured investment into the new province of Lombardy-Venetia in a bid to boost industry (textiles, silk, glass), agriculture (primarily tobacco), and infrastructure, with the result that by the mid- 19th century these territories produced a quarter of all Habsburg tax revenue.[58]

It may seem surprising that Italy was Austria's foremost security theater, given the Habsburgs' historical and cultural connections to Germany. But unlike Austria's Italian territories, which were incorporated directly into the Monarchy and therefore part of its tax and resource base as a Great Power, the German lands were made up of politically independent states. Moreover, from a military standpoint, Germany was a much lesser concern because of the cooperative defense structures of the *Bund*, which allowed Austria to outsource most of the security there to the German states, whereas Italy required continual military attention both to suppress domestic uprisings and to thwart predatory moves by Austria's principal military rival, France. At the time of the Vienna Congress, it was widely assumed that after a decorous interlude France would resume her centuries-long quest to eject the Habsburgs from Italy. As such, the primary task for Austria's military in the years after the Congress was to ensure the security of these territories. This would be difficult if not impossible to achieve if, at the same time, the Army had to worry about war with Russia (which Radetzky considered "Austria's indisputably most dangerous neighbor" over the long-term), not to mention the forces of Prussia and, for that matter, the weaker but still significant player to the south, Turkey.[59]

Given the crowded threat environment and the limited means at their disposal, what Austria's soldiers needed most from her civilian leaders was the attenuation, by political means, of the threats on *all* Habsburg frontiers except Italy, the primary theater. And this is precisely what the Vienna system gave them. By enmeshing Russia and Prussia into a system of consultative diplomacy, Metternich effectively "turned off" these eastern and northern frontiers as active theaters of military competition and allowed the Austrian Army to concentrate in Italy. The effect was particularly dramatic in the case of Russia, which shared an 800-mile border with Austria, the defense of which would have

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[58] For a discussion of Italy's importance and place in Austrian military planning, see Dennis Showalter, *The Wars of German Unification* Second Edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 53 and Geoffrey Wawro, *The Austro-Prussian War: Austria's War with Prussia and Italy in 1866*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 47.

[59] Radetzky, *Denkschriften*, pp. 440-1. See also Heinrich Benedikt, *Kaiseradler über dem Apenin: Die Österreicher in Italien 1700-1866*, (Wien: Verlag Herold, 1964) and Hans Kramer, *Österreich und das Risorgimento* (Wien: Bergland, 1963).

required an enormous expenditure on fortifications and most if not all of the Habsburg Army to defend. As it stood, Austria was able to more or less totally ignore this vast frontier—so much so that when, forty years later, she finally found herself involved in a crisis that required significant troop numbers in the eastern provinces of Galicia and Transylvania, there was virtually no infrastructure with which to support the concentration.[60]

In the case of Prussia, Metternich's diplomacy not only largely neutralized the northern kingdom as a threat but effectively harnessed its military to Austria's own, in the format of the German federal army, as a *de facto* arm of Habsburg state aims in Germany. The development of the Austro-Prussian tandem—the foundation of Metternich's independent central dike—rested on the shared interest that both Germanic powers had at this stage in their history in recovering from the Napoleonic wars and the solidarity that the two thrones shared in seeking a durable bulwark to the forces of revolution. Metternich assiduously cultivated this alignment, building a bond with the Prussian king Frederick William III and treating Prussia as a kind of co-equal in everything but name in the running the affairs of the German *Bund* even though Prussia technically possessed no more agenda-setting power than the other, smaller members. By showing deference to Prussia and consulting with her leaders ahead of important decisions, Metternich forestalled the development of revisionist aims in Berlin and, critically, closed off openings that otherwise would have allowed France or Russia to drive wedges between the two.

Coordination between Austria and Prussia was decisive not only in ensuring Metternich's ability to stamp out any embers of revolution that should appear in Germany but in providing Austria with a military deterrent of last resort toward the other Great Powers. This was especially important vis-à-vis France since, in the event of war, Austria would be able to concentrate her forces in Italy in the knowledge that Prussia and the other *Bund* forces would block France's other invasion route north of the Alps, along the Rhine and Danube valleys.[61] But it even applied, if need be, in the case of Russia, as Gentz wrote in 1818:

> As long as Austria and Prussia hold together, Russia will not be able to undertake limited and isolated campaigns [against Austria]. To attain any end comparable to the vast projects attributed to her, she would have to move on an immense front, from the Memel to the Carpathians. Five

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[60] In his assessment of Austria's defensive prospects against Russia, Radetzky lamented the near-total absence of fortifications on this frontier, which, "in the always distressed financial circumstances of the Monarchy" was unlikely to be remedied quickly. See *Denkschriften*, p. 441.

[61] Radetzky considered these matters at length in an 1834 memorandum emphasizing the role of German federal forces and fortresses in allowing the Austrian Army to concentrate on the defense of Italy. See "Wie kann man gute und grosse Heere mit wenig Kosten erhalten" in Radetzky, *Denkschriften,* pp. 543-52.

> hundred thousand men would not be too many for such an undertaking. At the beginning she would find little resistance; for…defenses would not be good. But little by little the opposing forces would form; all Germany, more attached to her independence than ever, would be aroused, and would provide Austria and Prussia with the help needed for swift reestablishment of the equilibrium.[62]

The effects of Metternich's arrangements on Vienna's ability to militarily prioritize the Italian theater can be seen in the number of forces that she kept there. By the early 1830s, this amounted to almost half of the Austrian Army (some 104,500 troops) maintained on a war footing, including most of its elite regiments, the cream of the Habsburg officer corps, and the bulk of its offensive striking power.[63] As important as the troops themselves was the network of large fortifications that Austria constructed for holding the region—the so-called 'Quadrilateral' forts of Verona, Legnago, Mantua, and Peschiera. Located astride the Lombardy heartland, these massive structures with their large garrisons and modern artillery—by far Austria's largest and most extensive military installations of the era—demonstrated to external rivals as well as domestic opponents the Monarchy's determination to remain the paramount power in Italy.

With Italy secure, Germany defended by the reorganized *Bund*, and the eastern frontier safely demilitarized by the alliance with Russia, Austria was able to devote what remained of her military energy to the turbulent frontier with the Ottoman Empire. Here, Austria had since the 18th Century maintained the famous *Militärgrenze*, or Military Border, a series of frontier districts lined with watchtowers and palisades and manned by the famous *Grenzer*—Serb and Croat soldier-settlers who were given land grants and religious and tax benefits in exchange for lifetime service to the Habsburg monarch.[64] It was important that the Army maintain this mission, for while the Turks themselves no longer posed a serious threat, Ottoman mismanagement generated rampant banditry and cross-border raids. To this must be added the Army's job of maintaining internal security within the Monarchy herself—a critical function in a realm that, until 1850, lacked a dedicated *gendarmerie* force.[65] This role the Army performed admirably, often assigning as much as half of its strength to internal stations, with scrupulous observance of the rule maintained by polyethnic empires since antiquity that units not be assigned to districts sharing their ethnic composition.[66]

In all of these cases—Italy, the Military Border, and internal security—the point is that the Army was able with limited manpower and on a shoestring budget to fulfill its most

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[62] Gentz in Walker, p. 82.
[63] Rothenberg, "Austrian Army," p. 42 and Rothenberg, *Army of Franz Josef*, p. 15.
[64] A good source on the Military Border is Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Military Border in Croatia, 1740-1881: A Study of an Imperial Institution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).
[65] Deák, p. 46.
[66] Rothenberg, *Army of Franz Josef*, p. 19.

important functions because Metternich's diplomacy had removed the need for active defense against Russia and Prussia. In today's parlance, the Vienna system enabled the Habsburg Army to deliver "peace on the cheap." This it did effectively, putting out the flames of revolution in Italy in 1821 (Naples and Piedmont) and 1847 (Parma and Modena); waging small wars in the Balkans in 1819, 1831, 1834, and 1845-46; and quelling internal unrest in 1844 (Bohemia), 1846 (Croatia and Poland), and 1848-49 (empire-wide).[67] Notably, in all of the external crises in this list, Austria enjoyed the diplomatic support of Russia and Prussia and often their military support as well. During the intervention in Naples in 1821, Austria enjoyed the back-up support of 150,000 Russian troops placed by the Tsar in Volhynia expressly for this purpose. What is more, at the moment of supreme crisis, during the revolutions of 1848-49, Austria was able to call upon Russia's help for suppressing uprisings inside the Monarchy herself. Had Metternich's relaxation of tensions with Austria's rivals and especially Russia not occurred, the Army would have faced these challenges alone while carrying the burdens of pacifying Germany, manning the Elbe frontier, and guarding the eastern flank that would have vastly exceeded its powers. In the event, Metternich's diplomacy not only quieted Austria's longstanding rivalries with both powers; it actually mobilized Russia and Prussia into willing helpmeets in securing the empire.

How Metternich Maintained Bureaucratic Focus

Metternich's system lasted a remarkably long time—the better part of half a century, from 1815 to the Crimean War. While Austrian foreign policy evolved during this period to meet the exigencies of various crises, it remained until the 1850s consistent in its objects: maintenance of secure buffers in Italy and Germany, cooptation of Prussia, alliance with Russia, and prevention of renewed French aggression. How was this consistency maintained? In part, it was imposed by necessity. A relatively weak power exhausted from a quarter century of warfare, the Austrian Empire simply did not possess the strength to pursue a more adventuresome foreign policy. A reversion to the old power balancing of the 18th Century would have been a disaster for her. Territorial expansion by military means was out of the question and, besides, what was left to take by sword that had not already been won at the negotiating table? But nor could Austria retreat into a shell to become a kind of giant Belgium or Switzerland: geography forbade a course of neutrality and necessitated an active diplomacy backed by a large land army.[68]

Even if other paths had been theoretically open to Austria, the fact is that throughout almost the entirety of his time in office, Metternich enjoyed a degree of control over the conceptualization and implementation of policy that made him virtually impervious to

[67] Ibid., p. 17 and Rothenberg, "Austrian Army," p. 163-65.
[68] See Bridge, p. 2.

challenge by any faction that might have sought to steer a different course. The foundation for this dominance was the Chancellor's close personal relationship with the Emperor. Franz was by nature a reclusive tinkerer who would have preferred, in the words of one biographer, "to avoid history in the making" and spend his time gardening and arranging books in his library.[69] While maintaining a firm hand on the domestic management of the Monarchy, he conceded to his Chancellor a wide latitude in the conduct of Austrian external affairs, which Metternich utilized to the full.

Reinforcing Metternich's dominance over foreign policy was the convoluted nature of decision-making in the Austrian Empire. Franz's leadership style was autocratic, intimate, and cloistered. This was not a ruler who believed in the value of what today would be called the inter-agency process. Franz disliked holding regular councils of state, which he found boring and corrosive to his authority. Instead he preferred to make decisions on the basis of highly personalized relationships with individual courtiers whom he kept in the dark about the goings-on at other ministries, with the predictable result that officials competed for the Emperor's attention and were routinely unaware of what one another were doing.[70] This pattern held for Metternich too, despite not only his uniquely close friendship with Franz but holding nominal title (Chancellor) that should have given him a far wider remit than he possessed.[71] Nevertheless, where Metternich did hold authority, that power was near-total. Foreign policy was a fiefdom that Metternich could run largely as he saw fit, down to the selection and management of individual diplomats. This dominance would remain unchallenged long after Franz had died and Metternich's efforts to expand his bureaucratic power into domestic matters had been defeated.

That is not to say that Metternich lacked opponents in the court and imperial bureaucracy. Chief among the former was the Emperor's third wife, the young and beautiful Empress Maria Ludovica, who held a grudge against him for arranging the marriage of Franz's daughter Marie Louise, just a few years her junior, to Napoleon. More seriously, there was Franz Anton Count Kolowrat-Liebsteinsky, Austria's Finance Minister and Metternich's chief bureaucratic opponent. The rivalry between the two men had many causes, including Kolowrat's dislike of Metternich as an interloper within the Habsburg aristocracy, his desire to protect the economic interests of the land-owning Bohemian nobility (of which he was a scion) against Metternich's commercial schemes, and the threat that Kolowrat undoubtedly felt from Metternich's efforts at

[69] Dorothy Gies McGuigan, *The Habsburgs* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), p. 277.
[70] See the description in Siemann, pp. 263 and 685.
[71] Seward, p. 201.

amassing greater power over domestic policy.[72] But the main policy disagreement between the two men involved money: Metternich wanted bigger defense budgets and Kolowrat did not.

There is an inescapable irony in the fact that Metternich, the arch diplomat who built perhaps the most famous system of war-avoidance in history, designed precisely to reduce the military burdens on the Habsburg Monarchy, should go down as a determined advocate for larger outlays on defense. This he did for decades, consistently aligning with the generals in their requests to claim a larger share of the budget. That does not imply, of course, that Metternich envisioned a viable militaristic course of the kind that German generals would later advocate as *an alternative* to a diplomacy-intensive foreign policy. Rather, it was a manifestation of Metternich's conviction that Austria had to possess a respectable army for even his irenic policies to achieve their effect. So weak were the Monarchy's forces in this era that continued cuts threatened to remove her from the ranks of the Great Powers altogether. For his part, Kolowrat appears to have been responding logically to the incentives for thrift created by Austria's economic realities as they existed from the standpoint of his ministry. Should Austria yield to the temptation of "spending too much on [a] 'forest of bayonets" Kolowrat believed, the Army would be emboldened to pursue adventure abroad, to the ruin of its finances.[73]

The feud between Metternich and Kolowrat demonstrates the extent of the strategic dilemma facing Austria throughout this era—namely, that its safety and cohesion depended upon conditions of international peace, the maintenance of which, *even with the Vienna system in place*, had to be backed by a level of hard power that, in practice, proved difficult to sustain. Metternich's problem was not keeping the bureaucracy committed conceptually to the priorities implied by his system; virtually everyone, including for that matter Kolowrat and other critics, could see that that system disproportionately benefited Austria and indeed, was probably its only truly viable course. The problem rather was mustering the *de minimis* military strength needed to sustain even the non-confrontational course that Metternich had charted.

The Weaknesses of Metternich's System

Given these realities, it is remarkable that the Vienna system held up as long as it did.

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[72] See Siemann, pp. 683 and 691. So great was Kolowrat's antipathy that he once attempted to have Metternich dismissed on the grounds that he had mismanaged travel expenses and lost receipts some thirty years earlier. See Sieman, pp. 722-26.
[73] Seward, p. 201.

Elegant in conception, it worked by and large as intended from 1815 into the early 1830s and, in broad form, for another quarter century thereafter.[74] Despite several tense moments, the Great Powers not only agreed to a peaceful distribution of territories at the Vienna Congress but continued in the years after with a rhythm of regular consultations of varying degrees of practical value that helped to keep the Great Powers in basic alignment for most of the period. They used the Congress method at Aix-la-Chapelle in 1818 to deal with the question of France's place in the post-war order, at Troppau in 1820 and Laibach the following year to deal with crises in Italy, at Verona in 1822 to deal with problems in Greece and Spain, at St. Petersburg in 1825 to deal with a crisis in Turkey, and at London in 1830 to deal with a crisis in Belgium.

Yet the system had serious weaknesses, which became more evident with the passage of time. Most fundamentally, the Congress method only worked as Metternich had envisioned as long as all of the Great Powers participated, for defection by even one major player created the potential for crises that could pull in the others. This unanimity did not hold for long, however. Early on, it became clear that France was at best a half-hearted supporter of the system that symbolized her defeat. "[S]he will never forget the treaties of 1815," Gentz observed three years after the Vienna Congress, for "the desire to avenge these insults is in every Frenchman's heart" and "[h]er interest is, on the contrary, to dissolve it as soon as possible."[75]

More damaging for the Vienna system was the departure of Great Britain. The island power's active involvement had been especially important for Austria, as her interests were most aligned with Metternich's concept of an independent middle zone. Britain's abrupt exit from the Concert following Castlereagh's suicide in 1822 cannot have surprised Metternich or other continental statesmen, given Britain's longstanding aversion to peacetime alliances and the obvious incompatibility of her liberal form of

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[74] Historians disagree on the lifespan of the Vienna system. The first notable failure occurred in the lead-up to the Greek crisis of 1826-29, when Russia in frustration sought a bilateral solution with Britain outside the concert. Zamoyski joins other critics in placing its demise much earlier, in the aftermath of the Congress of Vienna in 1822. But the system continued to function even after the Greek crisis and rendered notable service in averting war during the Belgian crisis of 1830. If key aspects of the system (including especially the Holy Alliance) and the method of consultation are included in its definition, then a defensible case can be made that it survived the revolutions of 1848 and was still operating on the eve of the Crimean War of 1854, justifying an aging Metternich's claim in 1853 that "the Vienna order had fulfilled its purpose of preventing another great European war of the kind that had been possible before 1815." See Siemann, p. 423 and Schroeder, *Transformation*, pp. 675-7.

[75] Gentz in Walker, p. 78. Inevitable though this dynamic of revenge may have been, it is worth pondering in light of the shopworn claim that punitive peace settlements produce retributive mentalities in the vanquished while charitable ones do not. The Vienna settlement's conspicuous avoidance, at Metternich's insistence, of a punitive peace stands in contrast to the terms imposed by Germany upon France in 1871 and by the *Entente* powers upon Germany in 1919. Yet France after 1815, too, longed for revenge. Apparently treating defeated powers charitably does not necessarily lead to notably different results.

government with the autocratic principles that increasingly brought the three eastern powers closer together.[76] This divergence had begun as early as the Congress of Troppau in 1820, when Metternich chose Russia over Britain by endorsing the Tsar's concept of a standing principle of intervention in the internal affairs of other states in order to uphold monarchies threatened by revolution, and was complete by the time of the Congress of Verona two years later. While preferring Britain, if he could have her, Metternich nevertheless saw Russia's unique substitutionary value; as he wrote at the time:

> The close union with Russia—and in this matter it is both intimate and impossible to doubt—is a blessing which cannot be sufficiently valued. England is dead so far as the Continent is concerned… If I have accomplished anything, it is this: to have united all our neighbors with us. Once [they are] bound and *compromised* on a matter of this sort, their retreat is no longer possible.[77]

By "all of our neighbors", Metternich meant Prussia and Russia. His was, after all, a primarily westward-facing system aimed at one chief objective: the containment of France and, therewith, revolution.[78] If he could not attain this end through a genuine Concert operating in clockwork fashion and with Britain as an energetic cog restraining France, then the next best (and indeed only) thing to do was to have Russia underwrite the whole arrangement.

There was a certain logic to this way of thinking—namely, that Britain was likely, based purely on her own centuries-long effort to prop up a stable middle zone of weaker states, to continue to act as a factor in the balance of power that naturally aligned with Austria's interests, on the merits, *even if* Britain did not consider itself a member in good standing of the Concert. By contrast, Russia was a nearby and very powerful actor with a much more immediate and consequential bearing on Habsburg interests. Austria needed at a minimum tacit Russian backing or, as events should require, active military support, to keep France in check in Italy and revolution at bay in Germany. Thus, it made sense for Metternich to enmesh Austria as closely as possible with Russia, as the linchpin of both Austrian security and the overall system. For this reason, when crises arose in the east, Metternich was careful not to position the Habsburg Monarchy as an active opponent to Russia's plans, even when not fully supporting them.

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[76] Britain's exit has usually been depicted as an entirely British impulse, but it was at least as much the byproduct of Metternich's own calculation that Austria's best interest lay in a close alignment with Russia, behind a more aggressively conservative agenda of monarchical solidarity, even if this eastward orientation came at the expense of the alignment with Britain. See Paul Schroeder's development of this line of argument in *Zenith*, pp. 252-3.
[77] Quoted in Schroeder, *Zenith*, pp. 252-3.
[78] See Taylor, *Struggle*, p. 281

Metternich's choice of Russia, however, came with costs. The more dependent Austria became on Russia's goodwill for maintaining her position, the harder it became for her to oppose Russian interests when these diverged from Austria's and the more she unwittingly fueled the creation of an Anglo-French liberal bloc.[79] The problem was most acutely felt, of course, in the East, where Russia and Austria collided over the fate of the Ottoman Empire—which, from the outset, had been the system's blind spot. Metternich had to an extent foreseen this and attempted to include Turkey as a party to the Vienna settlement, but to no avail. Not that it would have mattered much, for the Porte's decrepitude and congenital instability made it inevitable she would become an engine of recurrent crisis in the decades after Vienna as her Christian provinces launched bids for independence, beginning with uprisings in Greece and the Danubian Principalities in 1821 and continuing with her other Christian territories until the century's end.

Turkey's death throes presented a dilemma for the Vienna system because they exposed a tension between the principle of intervention (which Russia wished to invoke in support of her Orthodox co-religionists, the Greek revolutionaries) and the principle of monarchical solidarity against changes to the status quo (which Austria feared, if relaxed, could inspire revolutionaries elsewhere). Either path posed problems for Austria. On one hand, consenting to the Tsar's desires could lead to the dismemberment of one of the Habsburg Monarchy's most important buffer states and spark war between Russia and Britain, Turkey's main European sponsor. On the other hand, resisting the Tsar's desires could sour Austria's own ties with Russia, jeopardizing the most important source of support for its position in Central Europe and providing a basis for Russian alignment with France, which astutely saw in the recurrent Eastern crises a recurring opportunity to engineer the collapse of Metternich's entire system.

Initially, Metternich was able to handle this tension in his usual manner, through personal diplomacy, appealing to the Tsar's messianic streak and fear of revolution to thwart the efforts of liberal elements in the Russian court to engineer a military intervention in Greece.[80] But there were limits to the effectiveness of this method, which relied on the transient application of interpersonal chemistry to paper over divergent and enduring geopolitical realities. The harsh reality was that Austria had little ability to impose its political will in the crises in question. The underlying power disparities would

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[79] Kissinger describes an earlier iteration of this dynamic, even before Castlereagh's death: "a vicious circle was set in motion the stronger Britain's isolationist tendencies, the more Metternich, aware of Austria's material weakness, came to rely on his most effective weapon of restraining the Tsar the appeal to Alexander's moral fervor. But the more Metternich flattered the Tsar's exaltation, the more difficult it became for Castlereagh to engage in any joint action" See Kissinger, *World Restored*, p. 230.

[80] Alexander's susceptibility to appeals to moral zealotry can be seen in his description of the aim of the Congress of Laibach: "Our purpose is to counteract the empire of evil, which is spreading rapidly through all the occult means at the disposal of the Satanic spirit which directs it." Quoted in Seward, pp. 119-20.

only grow more acute with the passage of time, eventually prompting Russia to jettison the intricacies of Concert diplomacy altogether and work directly with the other strongest power, Britain, to impose a bilateral solution on the Ottomans.

While this episode did not bring about the collapse of the Congress system, which would continue to operate intermittently and often successfully in subsequent years, it nevertheless exposed in dramatic fashion the limits to how far Austria could go in using consultative diplomacy alone to steer events to her advantage. These limits, and the underlying dilemma facing Austria in the East, would continue to vex Habsburg diplomacy until the end of Metternich's life and, indeed, until the end of the Monarchy itself.

WHY METTERNICH'S SYSTEM FAILED

Given these realities, it is not hard to see why historians have tended to view Metternich's system as more style than substance – an elegant façade masking a wide disconnect between Austria's responsibilities as a Great Power and the real power capabilities at her disposal.[81] At base, Metternich's methods were those of an unusually cunning diplomat at the helm of a militarily weak state. Metternich himself clearly recognized this fact when he described the system as a spider's web that was "good to behold, woven with artistry, and strong enough to withstand a light attack, even if it cannot survive a mighty gust of wind."

And yet, the undeniable fact is that Metternich's web, for all of its apparent frailness, *did* withstand the gusts of wind that could have most threatened Austrian security, and did so for a remarkably long period of time. There is no shortage of examples of crises in the half century following the Vienna Congress that could have led to war but did not. These include the eastern crisis of 1821-23, when Russia was dissuaded from attacking Turkey; the crisis of 1830-32, when France was dissuaded from taking advantage of the revolution in Belgium; and innumerable collisions that could have occurred between France and Austria in Italy.[82] Given Austria's central geography, virtually any of these could have morphed into a two-front war of the sort to which she had proven so susceptible in the past. That they did not is a testament to the continuing utility to Austria of key features of Metternich's structure, even after that structure had evolved in important ways that deviated from its original conception.

But arguably the greatest success of Metternich's system, from an Austrian security perspective, came late in its life, in the revolution of 1848-49. With uprisings not only in Italy and Hungary but also in the traditionally reliable Austrian *Erblande* and Bohemia, the

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[81] See *inter alia* Bridge, p. 27.
82 See the list in Schroeder, "Vienna Settlement," p. 51.

revolution presented the gravest danger to confront the Habsburg Monarchy in its long history. At its peak, the violence reached Vienna, endangering the Habsburg family and leading to the abrupt dismissal of Metternich himself as a symbol of the conservative order that the revolutionaries sought to overturn. The Habsburg Army would ultimately prove itself equal to the task of quelling the unrest, but not before Vienna had invoked the mutual assistance provisions of the Holy Alliance, the Metternich system's ideological and military last redoubt. The intervention of Russian troops into Hungary in the revolution's final phase put down the last pockets of rebellion, thereby restoring the prospects and prestige of the embattled Habsburg state.

Yet it was also in this moment of victory that the foundation would be laid for Austria to discard the system she herself had created. Austria's political leaders took as their primary lesson from the revolution that the Army alone could secure the dynasty and guarantee the Monarchy's continued existence as a Great Power. The years that followed marked a sea-change in Austrian grand strategy, as a new Emperor, the youthful but rigid Franz Josef I, sought to rebuild the Habsburg Monarchy on the twin pillars of neo-absolutism and militarism.[83]

Ironically, given the role that Russia had played in the dynasty's salvation, Franz Josef and his new advisors sought to reduce their reliance on foreign alliances, including that with Russia. That required a bigger army. Gone was the penny-pinching of the Metternich era; in the space of just a few years, the defense budget increased by fivefold, from 50 million florins to 250 million.[84] Interestingly, the strategic (as opposed to budgetary) aspects of this transition were opposed by the senior generals, who knew better than anyone how fundamentally the Monarchy's strategic position rested on cooperation with Russia.[85] Under the new dispensation, the Army itself was dramatically expanded under the personal command of the Emperor. In place of the nuance and dilatory indirection that had guided Metternich's approach, the Monarchy's leaders embraced a *tous azimuts* bellicosity that sought security through military feats of strength, underwritten by an expanded military inculcated with a new offensive *Geist* of preemptive war.

The new direction in Austrian strategy crystallized under Metternich's successor, Schwarzenberg, who served as Austria's Minister-President and Foreign Minister from 1848 until his premature death in 1852. Emboldened by the dynasty's victories over the revolutionaries and determined to place the Monarchy on firmer foundations going forward,

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[83] One of the many noteworthy parallels between Franz Josef in his youth and Germany's Wilhelm II a few decades later is that both rulers received personalized lessons in statecraft from aging, outgoing maestros (Metternich and Bismarck respectively) that, in both cases, appear to have fallen on barren soil.
[84] For an analysis of Austrian military spending early in Franz Josef's reign, see the data, graphs and sources in Mitchell, *Grand Strategy*, pp. 279-80. See also Showalter, p. 51.
[85] Deák, p. 43

Schwarzenberg pursued policies that were, in both style and substance, the antithesis of Metternich's system. Where Metternich had sought to federalize the empire, Schwarzenberg saw centralization as the only cure against the forces of disorder. Where Metternich grounded Austrian security on diplomacy, Schwarzenberg, a soldier, wanted to reduce her reliance on foreign allies. Where Metternich had managed the affairs of the *Bund* with finesse and indirection, always careful not to position Austria as an imposing force that would trigger counterbalancing by the weaker states, Schwarzenberg sought to dominate the *Bund* and make the Austrian Empire in its entirety, including its non-Germanic portions, a member of the Confederation.

One of Schwarzeberg's most damaging deviations from Metternich's methods came in his handling of Austria's relationship with Prussia. From the earliest days of the Vienna system, Metternich had recognized the importance of a stable and friendly relationship with Prussia for establishing his middle European 'dike,' and had always been careful to treat Prussia with courtesy as a co-manager of the *Bund*. Tensions between the two German states had been growing for time, mainly for economic reasons, driven by Prussia's development of the Ruhr coal fields and leadership of the German *Zollverein*, or customs union, excluding Austria.[86] As Prussia's power grew, her leaders sought increased influence among the North German states (and eventually, Prussian military command of the *Bund* forces there), which Franz Josef resolutely refused to grant. In place of Metternich's longstanding efforts to keep Prussia satisfied under Austrian hegemony, Schwarzenberg sought to cow it into submission as an inferior supplicant on par with the other, much smaller, German states.[87]

At first, Schwarzenberg's more assertive approach seemed to work. In 1850, Austria used a massive show of force, through the mobilization of more than 300,000 men, to dissuade Prussia from attempting to form a new German Confederal body under Prussian leadership. At Olmütz that winter, with backing from Russia, Schwarzenberg imposed humiliating terms on Prussia, forcing it back in line, in Karl Marx's memorable description, "like a repentant sinner."[88] The resistance engendered by the new approach was not slow to form. A year later at Dresden, the German states combined to thwart Schwarzenberg's bid to incorporate the eastern provinces of the Austrian Empire, supply a now-aggrieved Prussia with ample recruiting grounds to organize opposition to Habsburg overreach.

However, the true test of Austria's new policies came, not surprisingly, in the East, in the form of yet another emergency involving the Ottoman Empire. The Crimean crisis of 1853-56 began

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[86] For more on the sources of conflict between Austria and Prussia in this period, see Showalter, pp. 42-44. See also A. J. P. Taylor, *Bismarck: The Man and Statesman* (London: H. Hamilton, 1985), p. 37.
[87] As Taylor writes of the change in Austrian behavior, "Her rulers had acquired new confidence... They despised Metternich's gentle methods and thought that rudeness was the best diplomatic method." See Taylor, *Bismarck*, p. 32.
[88] Quoted in Showalter, p. 58.

with a dispute between Austria's two flanking powers, Russia and France, over the Holy Land and quickly escalated into a confrontation to determine who would control the destiny of Turkey, Constantinople, and the approaches to the Black Sea. In this show-down, the Russian Tsar Nicholas I believed that Austria, in keeping with the provisions of the Holy Alliance and in gratitude for Russian help in the revolution of 1849, would side with his empire against the western powers. He had not reckoned, however, with the new men in Vienna. Schwarzenberg's successor, Count Karl Ferdinand von Buol, jettisoned Austria's longstanding neutrality on Eastern crises and cast in his lot with France and Britain. By mobilizing Austrian forces on the Russian frontier (a first in 150 years of relations between the two empires), Buol forced Russia's commanders to divide their manpower and aided in the eventual Anglo-French victory.

In choosing the western powers over Russia in the crisis, Buol effectively reversed the strategic choice that Metternich had made at Troppau without producing anything of lasting value for Austrian security. Backing his choice with military strength required the Monarchy to move the bulk of its military strength—some eleven corps, or 327,000 men—to the naked frontier with Russia, leaving only three corps for the defense of all-important Italy.[89] With this one maneuver, Buol moved Austrian diplomacy out of the careful synchronization it had maintained with Austrian military power for the prior half century. In effect, Buol imputed to the Balkans the role of primary theater when, by any cold-blooded reading of Austrian strategic interests, that region remained a decidedly secondary theater which, in any event, the Monarchy lacked the power to defend concurrently with its true priority of Italy.

Buol's reasoning was straightforward but short-sided. He worried that a Russian victory would hand the Tsar control over the Danubian Principalities, which Austria had long fought to preserve as independent buffers, and give Russia the power to impede Austria's vital trade route through the Black Sea.[90] He also worried that if Austria sided with Russia, she would expose herself to a French attack in Italy, where France had of late been fomenting unrest. But Austria's new leaders were also simply more convinced of their own strength than their predecessors had been, and more determined to demonstrate their capacity for independent action. In supporting France and Britain, Buol defied the advice of the senior echelons of the Habsburg military, including Radetzky, who immediately saw the negative implications for Austria's primary theater in Italy. With impeccable logic, they argued that the Austrian military was, by long design, better prepared to counter a French move on Italy, courtesy of its quadrilateral forts and large garrisons there, than to counter a Russian attack on Galicia, where Austria's defenses were non-existent.[91] Joining their side in the argument was an aging Metternich who argued that Buol should follow Austria's past practice of never coming out

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[89] Friedjung, p. 98 and Rothenberg, *Army of Franz Josef*, p. 50.
[90] For a discussion of internal Austrian debates on the Crimean crisis, see Mitchell, *Grand Strategy*, pp. 268-274.
[91] See Heinrich Friedjung, *Der Krimkrieg und die Österreichische Politik* (Stuttgart: J.G. Gotta'scher Buchhandlung Nachfolger, 1907), p. 77.

explicitly against Russia in the East, even when their interests diverged.[92] In rejecting this advice, as the historian F. R. Bridge argues, Buol "embarked on an ambitious policy; but he was in no position to pursue it by military means."[93]

It would be hard to overstate the negative implications that Buol's reversal of Russia policy had for Austrian security. In the years that followed, Russia abandoned her policy of friendship with Austria and assumed a posture of distrust bordering on hostility that would endure intermittently until 1914. As a result, Austria would have to devote significant military attention to fortifying and manning a vast eastern frontier that, courtesy of Metternich's diplomacy, it had previously been safely able to ignore. Not surprisingly, given France's longstanding hostility to the Vienna system, Austria's extemporaneous alignment with the western powers over Crimea did not bring about a lasting alleviation of the pressures bearing down on it in the west. To the contrary, France correctly saw in the sudden collapse of Russian support for Austria the removal of the main prop to her status in Italy. Within barely two years of the Crimean war, France had backed the kingdom of Sardinia in a bid to eject the Austrians from their position in Venetia-Lombardy. The resulting war of 1859 saw Austria lose the majority of her holdings there. But its most lethal effect would come a few years later, when, inspired by Italy's victory, a far more capable adversary—Bismarck's Prussia—would launch a devastating war that resulted in the loss of Austria's German and Italian buffers and the downgrading of her status as a Great Power.

In the Austro-Prussian war of 1866, the Habsburg Monarchy fought against two rivals attacking from different directions without a single ally—precisely the kind of crisis that Metternich for the prior half century succeeded in preventing. It was only in the aftermath of the Monarchy's defeat at Sadowa that the full extent of the advantage that the Vienna system had rendered to Austria would become visible and only after the cataclysm of the First World War that the benefit it had provided to all of Europe would become so. The service rendered was the same in both instances—namely, that it had provided a means, however imperfect, by which the weak-but-necessary power at the center of the chessboard could avoid situations in which the full extent of its weakness would be exposed, through diplomatic isolation and recourse solely to its own military resources, in a way that pulled in the rest of the system.

How inevitable was the collapse of the Vienna system? It was inevitable that post-1815 Austria would face tests beyond her ability alone to bear—and that this, in turn, would produce dangerous dependencies. But it was not inevitable that Austria would abandon the very system she had designed and become an author of her own demise. History is replete with polities that survive, despite deep dependencies, due to the service they render to the system as a whole.

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[92] Quoted in Alan Palmer, *Metternich: Councillor of Europe* (London: Orion Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 334-5
[93] Bridge, p. 55.

The old German *Reich* and late-phase Ottoman Empire are both examples, as is Yugoslavia and perhaps today's European Union (EU).

It may be true of such states, as one German historian has written, that "one [who] has a weak heart should not go mountaineering." But the genius of Metternich's system was that it surrounded a weak-hearted Austria with so many willing Sherpas and sturdy belays that a fall was impossible without pulling the other climbers into the chasm with it.[94] That Austria would, with the passage of time, lose many of the supports that held her in place for so long so effortlessly was inevitable; that she would willingly throw away those supports and leap into the chasm on her own accord was not. The results for Austria and for Europe were as predictable as they were catastrophic.

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[94] Brunner quoted in Bridge, p. 2.

III. The Bismarck System.

"Even if we are victorious against a Franco-Russian alliance, what shall we have fought for?"

Otto von Bismarck

Nearly a third of a century after Metternich's death, it looked as if the great European war that he had striven for so long to avert had finally arrived. Throughout the summer and autumn of 1887, large formations of Russian troops massed along Germany's eastern frontier. For several months, Austria and Russia had been squaring off over yet another problem in the Balkans—this time involving the fate of the fledgling kingdom of Bulgaria. Hardly a day passed without demands from the St. Petersburg newspapers to humble Germany and destroy the Habsburg Monarchy as the foe of all Slavdom. By degrees the Russian Empire began to mobilize her gargantuan army. Austria too was now rearming as quickly as her rickety structures would allow. And because it was widely assumed that Austria would lose the coming war, the generals in Germany, Austria's closest ally, were nervous. Even Moltke, Germany's octogenarian chief of the General Staff, believed the time had come for a preventive war against Russia. "Only if we take the offensive," he wrote to the Emperor Wilhelm, "will our chances be favorable."[95] Better to attack in the coming winter months, he reasoned, when the fields would be hardened by frost, than allow the Russians to attack at a moment of their choosing in the spring.[96]

Standing in the way of the German Army's plans for a preventive war was the formidable Prince Otto von Bismarck, Chancellor of the Second *Reich* and, for more than a quarter of a century, the dominant force in European diplomacy.[97] Over the preceding decade and a half, Bismarck had presided over the creation of a new German Empire that was already the mightiest economic force on the continent and well on its way to being the strongest Great Power in the history of Europe.[98] Bismarck was no stranger to war; in building this new

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[95] Moltke's letter is reproduced in its entirety in Graf Moltke and Ferdinand von Schmerfeld, *Die deutschen Aufmarschpläne, 1870-1890*. (Berlin: E. S. Mittler & Sohn, 1929).

[96] Literally: "Only an offensive war against Russia in the winter offers us a chance, for the frost will elevate the viability of the theater of war and offer the possibility of overcoming the prepared positions of the Russians." In reading this passage, it must be kept in mind that Moltke was referring to nearby Poland, then part of the Russian Empire, and not to Russia proper. See Moltke, *Aufmarschpläne*, pp. 144-45.

[97] Bismarck was made a prince of the German Empire and awarded the country estate at Friedrichsruh by Wilhelm I in the spring of 1871 as a reward for his services to the Prussian state during the war with France.

[98] There is an ongoing debate among historians about the nature and origins of German unification and, in particular, the extent to which it was the culmination of a long organic historical process as opposed to the product of deliberate political and military actions. For an overview of the historiographical debate, see Showalter, pp. 1-4.
See also the new book by Katja Hoyer, *Blood and Iron: The Rise and Fall of the German Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming 2021).

empire, Germany had waged a series of short, decisive, offensives to defeat a succession of rivals and forge the small states of Germany into a unified polity. Unlike Metternich, Bismarck had at his disposal a large and lethal military instrument, in the form of Moltke's finely-tuned German war machine, that was efficient, blooded and eager to take the field.

EUROPE'S JUVENILE GIANT

Yet Bismarck had good reasons to want peace. For all its latent strength, his new *Reich* was vulnerable. Like Metternich's Austria, Bismarck's Germany was a quintessential central power, exposed on every side to danger. If anything, geography had been less kind to Germany. Where Austria enjoyed the protection of the Alps, Germany sat exposed on the North European plain, bounded only by rivers in the west and east, where she faced the most powerful foes, and by mountains and sea in the north and south, where she needed no protection. This geography had made Germany a natural highway of invasion in earlier centuries. No European land had suffered as much in the vicious Thirty Years' War or the supposedly restrained *kabinettskriege* of the 18th Century. Germany's exposure was total and tragic, making her the scene of innumerable atrocities and the source of the deepest insecurities, summed up in the old Lutheran hymn, "Lord keep us in Thy Word and Work, Restrain the murd'rous Pope and Turk."

Like Poland in a later era, contemporary onlookers assumed that exposure to interminable warfare would consign the German lands to perpetual poverty. But the curse that location brings in war can be a blessing in peacetime. By the mid-19th Century, Germany's geography was becoming a source of unexpected wealth. The discovery of large iron-ore deposits in the Ruhr valley fueled an explosion of industry and wealth across northern Germany, effectively tripling the number of coal, metal, and machine plants in less than a decade.[99] Coinciding with rapid population growth, the sudden abundance of coal—the very life blood of Europe's Industrial Revolution—transformed what had formerly been an impoverished, agricultural Prussia into a powerhouse in the making. Production skyrocketed and capital swelled. Banks tripled in number, rail lines doubled.[100] Prussia's leaders looked for ways to exploit it to the full; coal deposits might be a gift from God, but converting coal to man's uses was a role for the Kaiser. In Germany's industrial boom, Bismarck and his contemporaries saw a chance to catch up to rivals who had been graced much earlier with the gifts of industrialization. But they didn't intend to wait patiently for the free market to deliver her fruits; embracing a mindset that would be familiar to today's Chinese leaders, they rejected the then-ascendant philosophy of *laissez-faire* and embraced an aggressive statist program calculated to elevate Prussia's

[99] See the description in Hajo Holborn, *A History of Modern Germany 1840-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) pp. 122-28.
[100] Ibid.

power and glory among the Great Powers.[101] This included the systematic promotion of manufactures and technological development, sheltered by tariffs and backed by a generous program of government subsidies for strategic enterprises.[102]

Source: The Map Archive

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[101] Tellingly, many modern Chinese leaders have found inspiration in the commercial and industrial policies of Bismarck's Germany. As one group of scholars relate, "the 19th Century general Li Hongzhang—who suppressed the Taiping rebellion, engineered a coup, and served as a high-level Qing official—kept a photograph of Otto von Bismarck in his study and admired Alfred Krupp as a model for how to industrialize China." See Markus Brunnermeier, Rosh Doshi, and Harold James, "Beijing's Bismarckian Ghosts: How Great Powers Compete Economically," *The Washington Quarterly*, Fall 2018, 41:3, pp. 161-76.

[102] To an even greater extent than with Metternich, the writing of Friedrich List (1789-1846) exercised considerable influence among Bismarck and other Prussian leaders of this time. List drew inspiration from the protectionist policies of Alexander Hamilton, which he observed during a stay in the United States. List's ideas made inroads in Prussia in the 1840s and may have found its way to Bismarck around this time by way of a pamphlet authored by his rural neighbor Ernst von Bülow-Cummerow. List's scheme was later taken up as a practical policy program by Bismarck's economic advisor Lothar Bucher. For an introduction and further sources, see the discussion in Barry Bascom Hayes, *Bismarck and Mitteleuropa* (London: Associated University Presses, 1994), pp. 60-68.

In shepherding Germany's strength, her leaders didn't only seek riches; they believed they were equipping their state with the means to overcome or at least mitigate the strategic danger of multi-front competition. Yet the stronger Germany became, first economically and then, inevitably, militarily, the more fearful her neighbors grew. In this, Bismarck had inherited the dilemmas of the earlier Prussian king Frederick the Great, who by creating a kind of Sparta on the Baltic had triggered a powerful coalition of flanking states that tried and only narrowly failed to wipe Prussia off the map. Bismarck was well aware of this precedent; if, as he liked to boast, his was a bold policy carried out "according to the principles of Frederick the Great," it also carried the risks that had beset Frederick, of surrounding Germany with bitter enemies. This "nightmare of encircling coalitions," as Bismarck called it, was ever present in his calculations and would dog the German Empire from its founding to its defeat in 1918.

Avoiding a so-called Kaunitzian combination—that is, the alignment of Prussia's flanking powers, France, Austria, and Russia, that the Austrian Chancellor Kaunitz had accomplished during the Seven Years' War— had been a chief object of much of Bismarck's diplomacy in the years leading up to the crisis of 1887.[103] And while his diplomacy had done much to limit the scale of any foreseeable coalitions against Germany, the threat of two-front war remained very real. In the latest standoff between Austria and Russia, Bismarck saw the makings of a general conflict that had the potential to imperil his life's work. Irrespective of how such a war began, Bismarck knew that it was likely to escalate and draw in Europe's powers one by one. Already, Russia was itching for show-down with Austria-Hungary not only to establish paramountcy over the Balkans but to get even for Austria's betrayal during the Crimean War, three decades earlier. Germany would not be able to stand idly by while the Habsburg Monarchy suffered a defeat that could lead to her collapse, opening up a chaotic vacuum in Eastern Europe. Britain, too, was bound to get involved, given her interest in protecting the remnants of the Ottoman Empire and blocking any Russian move on the Bosporus Strait.

But most of all, Bismarck worried about France. Ever since Napoleon III's disastrous defeat at the hands of Prussia in 1870, the French Third Republic had been a resolute opponent to the new German state.

Unwisely, Prussia's generals had convinced her king to saddle France with a large war indemnity and to strip away the provinces west of the Rhine, Alsace and Lorraine. Adding insult to injury, they had proclaimed the creation of the new German Empire on French soil, in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, while the siege of Paris was still underway. The French nation

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[103] References to Kaunitz's coalition as a fearful precedent for the new German *Reich* appear frequently in Bismarck's letters and memoranda. One representative example can be seen in Bismarck's lengthy strategic memorandum to the Emperor Wilhelm I on August 31, 1879; another in his note to the Emperor on November 16, 1883. The text of both memoranda can be found in *Die Grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette 1871-1914: Sammlung der Diplomatischen Akten des Auswärtigen Amtes*, vol. III (Berlin: Deutsche Veragsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1922), pp. 26-36 and pp. 302-5, respectively.

chafed at these injuries, kindling a cult of revenge around the lost territories and husbanding strength until an opportunity arrived to settle the score. Now more than ever, the French looked east, hoping for an alliance with the Russian Empire. At the first sight of hostilities between Germany and Russia, it was widely assumed that France would attack from the west, pinning down the German Empire in a two-front war of unknown duration.

German leaders were, of course, well aware of the danger of a war on two fronts; the question was how best to deal with it. Already by the late 1880s, her General Staff, under the talismanic thrall of Clausewitz and with the lightning victories at Sadowa and Sedan still fresh in their memories, had begun to work out their own solution—one geared to mobilization timetables, reserve strength, and railway schedules. These formulas would go through various iterations in the intervening years before settling on the famous Schlieffen plan, but they all shared the same thesis: that the best remedy to a two-front war was a carefully sequenced series of military offensives to take out one of the flanking powers before the other could mobilize.[104] It was this remedy, grounded in its own ruthless logic, as much as the threat posed by Germany's rivals, that Bismarck fought to defeat as the fall of 1887 drew to a close.

BISMARCK THE UNLIKELY PEACEMAKER

At first glance, Bismarck was an unlikely man to oppose the German generals. A towering figure with a broad frame, ponderous gait and walrus mustache who is usually depicted in *pickelhaube* and cuirassier's frock, Bismarck looked the very picture of a warlike Prussian Junker. [105] In 1887, Bismarck was in the late glow of a career that, by the time it ended abruptly

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[104] For an analysis of the evolution of German military planning in the late Bismarckian and early Wilhelmine periods using original documents, see Terence Zuber, *German War Planning 1891-1914: Sources and Interpretations* (Woodbridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[105] Historical interest in Bismarck and interpretations of his legacy have been closely tied to geopolitical events in the decades since his death. Like Metternich, Bismarck left behind an autobiographical work (*Gedanken und Erinnerungen* – which he used to settle scores), the first volume of which was published in 1898 and the final, controversial volume of which was published in 1921. Interwar German historians were critical of Bismarck's failure to build a greater Germany encompassing the Austrian *Erblande* but tended to see Bismarck's pursuit of national interests as preferrable to the collective security arrangements that prevailed after the Treaty of Versailles. Anglo-Saxon historians disillusioned with Wilsonianism picked up on this thread shortly before and immediately after World War Two. Joseph Vincent Fuller set the tone with his 1922 work *Bismarck's Diplomacy at its Zenith* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), which praised Bismarck's *Realpolitik* while calling into question the sustainability of their effect. William Langer's 1931 *European Alliances and Alignments 1871-1890* continued in this vein; while modern historians may take issue with Langer's charitable interpretations of Bismarck's motives, the book is valuable for the detail it devotes to analyzing Bismarck's diplomacy (as opposed to domestic politics and his private life). A. J. P. Taylor's 1955 *Bismarck: The Man and Statesman* (London:

in 1890, would see him serve four monarchs, fight three wars, and build the most powerful empire in European history. Born just a few days after Napoleon's escape from Elba, while the Vienna Congress was underway, he had come of age in the waning days of Metternich's Concert, the demise of which he hastened and rendered definitive. At 71, he was undiminished in mental faculties and command of state, which he wielded in service of the power and greatness of Prussia-Germany and his own uncontestable control of its foreign policy.

Bismarck was not a typical Prussian Junker. An intellectual and romantic at heart who in his youth had read Heine and flirted with radicalism, Bismarck shared Metternich's capacity, when he chose, to charm his foes.[106] But Bismarck was no polished creature of the salon; he was a man of stormy extremes and unplumbed insecurities. If Metternich personified the Enlightenment ideals of reason and equipoise, then Bismarck embodied the full range of human emotions idealized by the Romantic poets.[107] He radiated an outward gentleness, accentuated by a soprano voice, that often took contemporaries off guard. Yet at the core of his persona was a demonic energy fueled by personal ambition and obsessive hatreds. He nursed elaborate grudges and was known to persecute enemies long after they had retired or even

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H. Hamilton, 1985) is the most lively account of Bismarck the man but should be read cautiously; while by no means uncritical, Taylor saw Bismarck as embodying his own cherished thesis as a historian that human events are driven by chance and accident rather than by design. Hajo Holborn's 1969 *A History of Modern Germany 1840-1945* is helpful for placing Bismarck's accomplishments in the wider context of modern German social and political history. Edward Crankshaw's 1981 *Bismarck* (New York: Viking Press, 1981) deals more with the political aspects of Bismarck's career than his personality and expands on the theme of Bismarck as an opportunist, albeit in a less adulatory light, depicting the statesman in terms recognizable from Greek tragedy as a manipulator who eventually fell victim to his own machinations. The work of the German historian Otto Pflanze is comprehensive and highly valuable; his three-volume *Bismarck and the Development of Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) remains the best overall treatment of Bismarck's life and career in either German or English. Bascom Barry Hayes' 1994 *Bismarck and Mitteleuropa* (London: Associated University Presses, 1994), though less widely known, is noteworthy as an attempt to situate Bismarck's work for an English-speaking audience in the context of the often parochial intra-German political debates of the time. The most important recent biography is Jonathan Steinberg's *Bismarck: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), which devotes less attention to Bismarck's diplomacy than to his psychology and legacy in the context of subsequent 20th Century German history. While Steinberg's political judgments of Bismarck seem unduly harsh, his book draws on heretofore unutilized archival material and adds to our understanding of Bismarck's thought and motivations.

[106] For a memorable portrait of Bismarck's student days, see Steinberg, pp. 37-46.

[107] The question of the underpinnings of Bismarck's personal philosophy is a source of debate among historians. Perhaps the most persuasive analysis is that of Hajo Holborn, who argues that Bismarck was what might be termed a romantic-realist—his was "not the romanticism which looked for an escape from the realities into a realm of artificial beauty or of religion… but those romantic efforts that led to a clearer grasp of reality." The picture that Holborn paints is of a native skeptic who was nevertheless moved by the *pathos* of the human condition; a Lutheran who accepted God's existence but doubted divine intervention in human affairs; and a realist who rejected the rationalism of the Young Hegelians and embraced a skepticism, bordering on fatalism, that Holborn traces to Spinoza and the Stoics. See Hajo Holborn, "Bismarck's Realpolitik," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Jan.-Mar., 1960), pp. 85-86.

died.[108] Criticism of any kind sent Bismarck into paroxysms of rage so intense they often made him physically sick. If Metternich's idea of revenge, as his wife said, was to invite an enemy for dinner, Bismarck's notion of revenge was to *have* the enemy for dinner—to systematically destroy the person's career, reputation, and finances. The more public the humiliation, the better.

Bismarck's frequently volatile personality masked an aversion to warfare as the political instrument of choice. This aversion was not, as it had been for Metternich, a studied reaction to the horrors of war; though Bismarck certainly desired a period of peace for the new empire following the wars of unification, he had been perfectly willing to employ military conquest when it suited his political needs. Rather, the aversion was rooted in a recognition, partly philosophical and partly practical, of the chaos that war creates and the dangers that it poses to political order. War was for Bismarck a tool of last resort—a means for accomplishing the political aims of the state to be used sparingly; and never preemptively or in ways that diminished the honor of the state.[109] Once unleashed, it followed a course and logic of its own. While Bismarck may have been a gambler at heart, he insisted on being the one holding the dice. War placed the dice in the hands of the generals, with unpredictable results for the German state and for his political career. Even if successful, the resulting chaos undercut the influence that he maintained over the king and, through that influence, his political enemies.[110]

Bismarck's views on war are indicative of his broader philosophy of politics. Some historians have detected in Bismarck the absence of coherent political principles other than the aggrandizement of his own power. Certainly, he defied easy ideological categorization and was capable of remarkable tactical flexibility in the pursuit of his objectives. In this sense, he was a party of one, a force apart, who sided variously with and against the parties and was perfectly willing to betray his caste and closest allies when required for achieving his objectives. As he said to the *Reichstag* in 1881:

> I have never been a doctrinaire…. Liberal, reactionary, conservative—those I confess seem to me luxuries… Give me a strong German state, and then ask me whether it should have more or less liberal furnishings…. I've no fixed opinions, make proposals, and you won't meet any objections of principle from

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[108] See for example the recounting of Bismarck's feud with the progressive politician Eduard Lasker in Crankshaw, p. 382 and Steinberg, pp. 379, 401, 468 and 477.
[109] Holborn identifies elements of Lutheran just war teaching in Bismarck's view of conflict. See Holborn, "Realpolitik," p. 90.
[110] As Taylor, reflected, "Bismarck aspired to control events. He would go to war only 'when all other means were exhausted' and then for 'a prize worthy of the sacrifices which every war demands'… War was for him a clumsy way of settling international disputes. It deprived him of control and left the decision to generals whose ability he distrusted. A civilian to the core, he always wanted to back a winner; and Moltke, the greatest Prussian general, told him repeatedly that nothing was certain in war." See Taylor, *Bismarck*, p. 79.

> me. Many roads lead to Rome. Sometimes one must rule liberally, and sometimes dictatorially, there are no eternal rules.[111]

However, it would be wrong to conclude from such statements that Bismarck was devoid of principle. Like Metternich, he believed in a natural order ordained by providence, the maintenance of which was the highest duty of the statesmen. But unlike the arch-rationalist Metternich, Bismarck saw no basis for assuming that this order reflected a mechanical plan that could be known, much less implemented.[112] Where Metternich saw legitimacy as the glue of international order, Bismarck looked to a strong state wielding power in pursuit of its own interests. The guiding principle for Bismarck, in other words, was Prussia itself—its permanence, prosperity and prestige. He was perfectly willing to ally with liberals, whom he otherwise detested, or make common cause with German nationalists, with whom he otherwise had little sympathy, when doing so advanced Prussian interests. And he had no qualms about working against friends when they were in conflict with his conception of Prussian interests. "When I have been asked whether I was pro-Russian or pro-Western," he said, "I have always answered: I am Prussian…as soon as it was proved to me that it was in the interests of a healthy and well-considered Prussian policy, I would see our troops fire on French, Russians, English or Austrians with equal satisfaction."[113]

To a much greater extent than Metternich, Bismarck was able to pursue his state's interests through the medium of the empire that he led. Like Metternich, he was the highest-ranking appointed civilian decision-maker in a hereditary, semi-autocratic monarchy. But where Metternich was, even at the height of his powers, a foreign-policy virtuoso who never enjoyed the powers implied by his title of Austrian Imperial Chancellor, Bismarck was in the fullest sense master of the German Second *Reich*. This was, after all, a house that he, in large measure, had designed and built. The constitution of the North German *Bund*, which Bismarck almost single-handedly drafted, and which formed the model for the constitution of the later German Empire, invested enormous authority in the role of Chancellor. Articles 11 and 12 placed executive power in the hands of the king of Prussia; article 15 put the federal Chancellor, named by the king alone, at the head of most government functions.[114] Jonathan Steinberg puts it well: "Bismarck designed [the constitution] for Bismarck," building a "fragile structure not only to suit himself but also to suit an arrangement in which a strong chancellor bullies a weak king."[115]

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[111] Quoted in Ibid., p. 138.
[112] As Holborn writes of Bismarck's conception of order and human agency, "the concrete plan of God was unknown to man, except that it was clear that in all history the decisions had been reached by power used for selfish interests, and that this *raison d'etat* could be studied and acted upon." Holborn, "Realpolitik," p. 89.
[113] Quoted in Massey, p. 54.
[114] See the analysis in Steinberg, pp. 267-8.
[115] Ibid.

And bully him he did. Like Metternich, Bismarck maintained a symbiotic, multi-decade relationship with an idiosyncratic monarch, the King and later Emperor Wilhelm I. And like Metternich, he frequently found himself at odds with his master's wife. Bismarck's feud with the Empress Augusta dated from the earliest days of his career, when the Empress came to distrust the statesman's motivations (she believed he was an unpredictable reactionary and was half-right). The relationship was further strained in later years when Augusta, who was Saxon, opposed what she saw as Bismarck's harsh treatment of the small German kingdoms absorbed into the new *Reich*. But the main reason for the feud was Bismarck's own paranoia; in the Empress, he saw an implacable enemy who, to an even greater extent than his enemies in parliament, might be able to undermine his sway over the Emperor.[116] In this respect, it's worth pausing to note the similarity between Bismarck and not only Metternich but also the Byzantine eunuch Chrysaphius, examined in part one of this study, both of whom counted empresses among their most powerful enemies. While Augusta (like Maria Ludovika and unlike Pulcheria) appears to have avoided participation in strategic policy debates, the fact that "she had the breakfast table at her disposal" made her, to Bismarck, a uniquely dangerous threat.[117]

Not that it made much difference in the end. For to a much greater extent than either Metternich or Chrysaphius, Bismarck was able to overcome objections from the imperial household and, for that matter, any other quarter, and more or less completely dominate Wilhelm. Where Metternich had used charm and indirection to "manage upward," never fully overcoming Franz I's jealously guarded domestic prerogatives, Bismarck used emotional manipulation and blackmail to almost always get his way. The tone for their relationship was set early on, when Wilhelm, having promised Augusta not to hire Bismarck, was bowled over by his charisma and hired him on the spot.[118] In the 26-year partnership that followed, Bismarck developed reliable, if not altogether scrupulous, techniques for overcoming Wilhelm's objections to his plans. These ranged from feigned illnesses to threats of resignation, which Bismarck employed with great flourish and frequency in response to even mild opposition. Steinberg relates one memorable episode in which Bismarck, having submitted his resignation over the appointment, against his wishes, of a minor postal official, wrote to a friend:

> I am sick to death and have gall bladder problems… I have not slept for 36 hours and spent the entire night throwing up. My head feels like a glowing oven in spite of cold compresses… Fortunately it is a Sunday, because I fear otherwise that I would have done myself some bodily harm to let out my fury.[119]

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[116] So great was Bismarck's hatred for Augusta that it is said he barred the playing of Wagner in his presence because one of the Empress' advisers liked Wagner's music. Steinberg characterizes the feud between the two as "unnecessary" and attributes it to Bismarck's paranoia – see Steinberg, p. 266 and, in defense of Bismarck's paranoia, Taylor, *Bismarck*, p. 43.
[117] Steinberg, p. 471.
[118] Taylor, *Bismarck*, pp. 51-2.
[119] Steinberg, pp. 277-79.

The fact that Bismarck was willing to pitch such a fit over such a petty issue demonstrates the extent of his volatility but also the lengths to which he was willing to go to cement his hold over policy. This control he wielded, with very few constraints, within his own bureaucracy and in interactions with the court and parliament alike. By such methods he was able to create a zone of fear around himself that acted as political insulation for his decision-making. He would retreat for long periods of brooding to his rural estate at Varzin some five hours from Berlin, in which he would remain deliberately cut off from not only the bureaucrats at the Foreign Ministry (whom he distrusted) but also the foreign diplomatic corps for weeks or even months at a time.[120] This self-isolation was not only physical but political, as Bismarck shunned the normal bonds of party or personal friendship. That he was able to maintain this distance from the processes of governance while maintaining a highly effective control over policy is a reflection of Bismarck's superior intellect and indispensability. Of such an individual it could be said by Wilhelm I without irony or exaggeration, "he is more necessary than I am."[121]

BISMARCK'S PUNCHING DOLL

Bismarck was not, as A.J.P. Taylor put it, "a system-builder in the sense that Metternich had been"; "the statesman's task," he famously said, "is to hear God's footsteps marching through history, and to try and catch on to his coattails as he marches past."[122] Where Metternich saw politics as a science—literally, "the science of the vital interests of states," Bismarck saw it as "not a science based on logic" at all, but an extended exercise in improvisation, of seeing the "art of the possible" and "choosing at each instant, in constantly changing situations, the least harmful, the most useful."[123] In keeping with this mindset, Bismarck practiced a largely hands-off foreign policy for the first few years of his career. Even after the unification of Germany, he tended to view the balance of power as a natural phenomenon that would, with occasional nudges, take care of itself. He liked to picture Europe as a punching doll in which Germany formed a heavy weight at the base. As long as Germany did not shift its immense weight to the side of any other power, the doll would not tip over, no matter how severe the gust of wind.

The problem, of course, as the Austrians had found at their zenith in the 18th Century, is that the balance of power is never a self-adjusting system; like all other things involving human

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[120] Bismarck's called the bureaucracy a "boa constrictor" and resented its influence both on philosophical grounds, as an incubator for liberalism, and on practical grounds, as source of restraint on his own power, despite the obvious irony that his system could not have functioned without it. See Holborn, "Realpolitik," p. 94.
[121] See the discussion on Bismarck and systems in Taylor, *Bismarck*, p. 137.
[122] Ibid., pp. 109-110. See also Holborn, "Realpolitik," p. 95.
[123] Metternich, *Memoirs*, p. 36; Taylor, *Bismarck*, p. 115 and Holborn, "Realpolitik," p. 95. In this sense, the otherwise reliable Kissinger may err when he writes that "in Bismarck's estimation, foreign policy had a nearly scientific basis"—an observation perhaps better suited to Metternich. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, p. 130.

interactions, it requires continual effort to sustain and, in the case of 19th Century Europe, to actively avoid catastrophes. The storms that arose in Europe in the two decades following the unification of Germany were of a cumulative and steadily intensifying nature that would not permit Bismarck a hands-off approach. Just keeping the punching doll upright required a regularized diplomacy grounded in a clear and consistent conception of German interests, the parts of which were mutually supportive or, at a minimum, not at odds with one another—in other words, a system. Bismarck summed up the goal of this ersatz system succinctly as, to always be *à trois* in a system of five. While the tactics for attainting this object shifted according to circumstances, the underlying principles remained more or less constant from the early 1870s onward and can fairly be said to represent the essence of the Bismarckian system.[124] These were: the isolation of France, the preservation of Austria, and friendship with Russia.

1. THE ISOLATION OF FRANCE.

It was probably inevitable, given the implacable hostility generated by the cataclysm of 1870-71, that France would become the immovable object in Bismarck's diplomacy. This was initially more by default than by design, as Bismarck had, early in his career, actually sought to *align with* France in order to overturn Austrian leadership of Germany. Even at the moment of France's great defeat in 1871, he appears to have held out the possibility of avoiding a permanent Franco-German estrangement; as he would later claim (with partial accuracy), he advocated for a lenient peace, albeit with much less conviction or success than Metternich had done in 1815 or than he himself had done after the war against Austria five years earlier.[125] In later years, Bismarck never fully abandoned the hope of working with, or at least not being in a state of perpetual antagonism against, France.

These efforts notwithstanding, the reality of France's hostility dictated that Bismarck treat her as a standing threat to his system. An isolated France was, for Bismarck, a safe France; by herself, the Third Republic could not really hurt Germany; such was the extent of the new *Reich*'s economic and demographic superiority over her western neighbor that the latter would never again pose a serious danger to Germany as she had done with regularity in preceding centuries. Rather, what made France dangerous was her motivation to overturn Germany's leadership role in Europe. In her determination to reverse the territorial verdict of 1871, France

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[124] Even A. J. P. Taylor, who instinctively ascribed most human events to chance rather than forethought, saw the period from 1871 onward as constituting "in retrospect 'Bismarck's system.'" See Taylor, *Bismarck*, p. 139.

[125] Historians have contested Bismarck's claim, later in life, that he had opposed the annexation of Alsace and Lorraine. See Halborn, *History*, 222; Steinberg, p. 313; Crankshaw, p. 273; and Taylor, *Bismarck*, p. 213. Nevertheless, there is some evidence that he only wanted to take Alsace, not Lorraine, on the grounds that, as he put it, "I don't like so many Frenchmen in our house, who do not want to be there." (Taylor, Ibid. p. 133).

represented a standing source of opposition to Bismarck's system not unlike that which post-Napoleonic France represented for Metternich.

The need to isolate France should not be misinterpreted to mean that Bismarck remained inveterately hostile to her. To the contrary, the fact of French hostility often led Bismarck to pursue exactly the opposite approach, seeking conciliation in any form that could be found, as long as it did not involve the return of the contested territories of Alsace-Lorraine. To this end, Bismarck *encouraged* French colonial exertions and colonial expansion, even going so far as to actively run interference for those designs against opposition from other powers. But the goal of these efforts was the reorientation of French attention away from competition with Germany. Failing this reorientation, which in the event never materialized for more than a few years, Germany had to be on vigilant guard against a durable French alignment with any other major power in the European system and, in particular, with Germany's other flanking power, Russia.

2. THE PRESERVATION OF AUSTRIA.

The other fixed object in Bismarck's system from the late 1870s onward was German friendship with Austria. This is not without irony, given that ensuring Austria's defeat had been a prerequisite to the creation of the German empire and indeed the animating goal of the first decade of Bismarck's career. The object of these machinations evolved over time, from the initially modest aim of winning Prussian leadership of the armies of the northern states of the German *Bund* and thwarting Austria's plans for entry into the German customs union, or *Zollverein*, to defeating Austria and kicking her out of German affairs entirely.[126] As a young diplomat, Bismarck had advocated for Prussia to exploit Austria's difficulties in both the 1853-56 Crimean War and 1859 Austro-Italian War to demand concessions in Germany and had even flirted with the idea of arranging, with France and Russia, a three-way conquest of the Habsburg Monarchy worthy of Frederick the Great.

Bismarck's attitude toward Austria changed abruptly following her defeat in 1866. No sooner had the smoke cleared from the battlefield at Sadowa than Bismarck embraced a tone of moderation, blocking the German generals' plans to annex Austrian territory and generally eschewing moves that might destabilize the etiolated giant.[127] With a clairvoyance that the generals could not possess, he remarked, "we shall need Austria's strength for ourselves later."[128] The war's effects were devastating enough for Austria. She was ejected from the

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[126] Parenthetically, Bismarck immediately saw the negative geopolitical consequences for Prussia of Austria's plans for reform of the German *Bund* in the early 1860s, including especially for a tightened directorate and federal army under Austria command for use in Italy and the Balkans. See among others Taylor, *Bismarck*, pp. 67-8.
[127] Crankshaw, *Bismarck*, pp. 216-23.
[128] Quoted in Taylor, *Bismarck*, p. 88.

German lands over which Habsburg rulers had held sway for four centuries and stripped of her prized Italian territories. In effect, Austria became overnight a Balkan power. Recognizing these harsh realities, Bismarck worried that the polyglot Monarchy would be pushed too far and collapse entirely. Rather than humbling Austria (or Austria-Hungary, as she would formally be known after 1867), his calculations now swung in the opposite direction, to ensuring that she would remain a cohesive polity with the *de minimis* requirements of Great Power status.

While keeping the Habsburg Monarchy alive, it is typical of Bismarck that he would find its ethnic complexity an irresistible target for intrigue and manipulation.[129] In particular, he saw in the Magyars, who composed a third of Austria-Hungary's population, a sufficiently numerous and recalcitrant bloc to support his policies should Vienna pursue a revanchist course after the war. With the authority that only a victor in war can wield, Bismarck suggested that Austria shift her center of gravity eastward by moving the capital to Budapest and pushed the war-weary Franz Josef to accept a new political co-habitation in which power would be shared between the Austrian and Hungarian halves of the empire.

Even with these precautions, Bismarck worried about Austria. Virtually any course of action taken by Vienna could be dangerous for Germany. A vengeful Austria, even if weak, could form the rallying point for a Kaunitzian coalition alongside France and Russia—a course favored by many Russophile officers in the Austro-Hungarian Army. If on the other hand Vienna proved antagonistic to Russia in the Balkans, she would very likely be defeated and might succumb to internal pressures, which would throw open the nationality question in a vast expanse of territories that both Prussia and Russia coveted but neither could hope to govern.[130] It was with these concerns in mind that in 1879 Bismarck took the fateful step of brokering a bilateral defensive alliance with Austria-Hungary under which each state committed to come to the other's aid if attacked by Russia. The so-called Dual Alliance is important, not only because it involved a much more formal security commitment than any that Bismarck had previously been willing to countenance but also because of the novelty of its format.[131]

Bismarck's willingness to undertake such a commitment was directly linked to fears of two-front war. In a series of memoranda to the Emperor, who was reluctant to support the alliance

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[129] Bismarck's effort over the succeeding two decades to prop up but also manipulate Austria-Hungary through interventions in Habsburg domestic politics is a story unto itself that forms a kind of separate foreign policy within his foreign policy. The definitive English-language source is Hayes, *Bismarck and Mitteleuropa* – see in particular chapters 5 and 6.

[130] Crankshaw, p. 413.

[131] Taylor observes that the Dual Alliance was the first formal alliance of its kind in peacetime since the outbreak of the French Revolution a century earlier (*Bismarck*, p. 192). Schroeder argues that the Dual Alliance marked a transition away from "alliances of management" to "alliances of security," and that this shift was decisive in sowing the seeds for later conflict. See Paul W. Schroeder, "Alliances, 1815-1945: Weapons of Power and Tools of Management," in Wetzel, et. al, p. 211.

concept on both dynastic and geopolitical grounds, Bismarck argued that only the creation of a strong defensive Central European core would dissuade Russia from attacking Austria-Hungary and forestall the latter from drifting into the arms of France.[132] Like Metternich, he assumed that, Britain's accustomed aloofness notwithstanding, the island nation would, in the final resort, support the maintenance of a middle tier of European states as a guarantee against disruptions to the status quo.[133] In this, Bismarck's thinking had come full circle back to the Metternichian concept of a Central European dike, centered on Austro-Prussian leadership of the smaller German states and steadied by British support, to ward off attacks by the flanking powers. The parallel was not lost on Bismarck; as he explained to the Emperor, the alliance would "give (Germany) the same protection she enjoyed in the days of the German Confederation."[134] Only now, the roles were reversed, with Berlin the driver and Vienna the side-car.

To a greater extent that Metternich, Bismarck's concept of an independent *Mitteleuropa* included an ambitious program of economic integration.[135] A dedicated mercantilist, Bismarck believed that only by creating a sufficiently large and protected commercial and industrial base stretching from the Rhine to the shores of the Black Sea could Germany ever hope to go toe-to-toe with continental rivals and the British Empire. Creating this space, in Bismarck's thinking, required not only alliances but state-directed capital.[136] By the mid-1880s, Austria-Hungary and its Balkan neighbors accounted for more than a third of German foreign investment in Europe, with heavy concentrations in strategic sectors such as railways and banking.[137]

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[132] The first of these memoranda is especially valuable as it lays out the overall strategic picture in great detail. It can be found in *Die Grosse Politik*, vol. III, pp. 26-36. Wilhelm I did not want the Austrian alliance, and Bismarck's memoranda were designed to convince his master of a reality that Bismarck was already swiftly making a *fait accompli*. See the discussion in Langer, pp. 177 and 180.

[133] For more on Bismarck's benign view of Britain, see e.g. Halborn, *History*, pp. 243-44.

[134] Langer, p. 180.

[135] Bismarck's concept of a *Mitteleuropa* and the debates among German and Austrian leaders about the form it should take are covered exhaustively in Hayes' *Bismarck and Mitteleuropa*. For the period discussed here, see in particular pp. 430-39.

[136] For much of the era covered by this study there was a scarcity of German capital that could be easily spared from domestic uses. German industry tended to favor a protective approach to the loan market, while agricultural and other political interests inveighed against movements of capital abroad. The volume of German capital expanded prodigiously in the 1880s as interests fell and credit eased across Europe. See Herbert Feis, *Europe The World's Banker 1870-1914: An Account of European Foreign Investment and the Connection of World Finance with Diplomacy Before the War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930), pp. 68-70 and 160-88.

[137] See the data in Julia Bersch and Graciela Kaminsky, "Financial Globalization in the 19th Century: Germany as a Financial Center," George Washington University Working Paper (September 2008): 29. Recent scholarship has called into question the extent to which German capital in this period responded to political as opposed to market incentives. See Rui Pedro Esteves, "Between Imperialism and

Bismarck envisioned forming an integrated Austro-German economic union with aligned commercial and fiscal policies, a program of jointly coordinated capital investments, and shared infrastructure. The concept bears a striking resemblance to the idea that Metternich had advanced late in his career of an intra-German free trade area. For Bismarck, too, the need for such measures was intimately linked to the two-front danger; by forming a large, politically and economically aligned bloc at the heart of Europe, he believed would Germany be able to simultaneously deter France and be strong enough for "the Great War with Russia" that he believed was bound to come eventually.[138]

German Foreign Investment in Europe 1883-1897

	Government	Railroad	Bank, Industry & Mortgage	Bond	Equity	As Share of Total Issuances
Austria-Hungary	49.7%	30.3%	20.0%	91.2%	8.8%	21.3%
North & Central Europe	46.7%	17.1%	36.2%	84.8%	15.2%	9.5%
Russia	49.4%	46.8%	3.8%	94.4%	5.6%	21.8%
South Europe	33.1%	57.2%	9.6%	87.4%	12.6%	15.6%
South-East Europe	74.7%	22.9%	2.4%	98.5%	1.5%	11.5%

Source: Julia Bersch and Graciela Kaminsky.

While this strategic rationalization made sense in theory, the analogy with the past did not work in one important respect—namely, that the old German *Bund* had been a defensive structure, the value and durability of which derived from the fact that it was designed to protect weak states that posed no threat to their neighbors. That Bismarck had defensive motives is certain, but the strength of his empire was vastly stronger state than anything Europe had seen before. Moreover, the Austro-Hungarian Empire to which Germany was now yoked was in an increasingly offensive state of mind and determined to seek out tests of strength to prove her vitality as a Great Power. It was inevitable that the latter would be emboldened by an alliance with the former. Thus virtually from the moment the Dual Alliance was signed, Bismarck's chief task became to restrain his new ally from attacking Russia. The challenge was to exercise

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Capitalism: European Capital Exports Before 1914," (Mimeo, University of Oxford, 2008), pp. 16-20. In a similar vein, Feis observed, "Investors, no matter how patriotic, have judgments and tastes of their own; banks, no matter how desirous of serving the nation, have obligations, interests, connections which they steadily preserve." See Feis, p. 162.

[138] See the description of Bismarck's August 1889 conversations with Szögyény in Hayes, p. 438.

this restraint in a way that reassured the Austrians of German backing *in extremis* while convincing them of the limits of that backing, should Austria herself become the aggressor.

3. FRIENDSHIP WITH RUSSIA.

By far the most consistent component of Bismarck's system, and its conceptual cornerstone, was Prussia's and later Germany's political alliance with Tsarist Russia. The foundation for this link was partly dynastic (the German Emperor Wilhelm I was the Tsar Alexander II's uncle) and partly geopolitical (the two empires shared a border in, and substantial portions of, the old kingdom of Poland, the partitions and management of which, in the quest to suppress revolution, had formed a common cause for Prussian and Russian monarchs since the time of Frederick the Great). The bond between the two empires had been further strengthened by astute Prussian statecraft in the years immediately preceding German unification: unlike Austria, Prussia did not side against Russia in the Crimean War. Russian restraint, in turn, had been a crucial ingredient in allowing Germany to first isolate and then defeat Austria in 1866 and France in 1871.

The strategic case for continuing this favorable state of affairs is clear enough: with all other foreseeable rivals defeated, only Russia, with her geographic proximity and immense military manpower, had the ability to strangle the new German state in its cradle. To this must be added the French factor—that with Germany's western neighbor sulking from her 1871 defeat, there was a constant danger that even a momentary lapse in German closeness with Russia could create an opening for Franco-Russian alignment. In this, too, the danger facing Bismarck was not very different from the problem Metternich had faced, albeit with a now much more avowedly revanchist France. All of this pointed to the need for Germany to maintain a close and effective link with her eastern neighbor, demonstrating, as Bismarck said, that the secret to success in geopolitics is "to make a good treaty with Russia."[139]

The most natural political instrument by which to maintain the link with Russia was the Holy Alliance, which had the dual virtue, from Bismarck's perspective, of being vague in its provisions and including Austria in its format (all the better to restrain her). But with the Holy Alliance dead as a result of the new Austro-Russian antagonism that followed the Crimean War, a new dispensation was needed. The format arrived at, in the form of the League of the Three Emperors, was simply the Holy Alliance in new clothing. The League was formed at Bismarck's instigation immediately after the defeat of France, consisting of a general agreement to consult and avoid open conflict among the three empires. Bismarck called it a "triangular rampart"—terminology Metternich would have understood—the goal of which was to underwrite stability and preserve the three imperial courts. The League was renewed and

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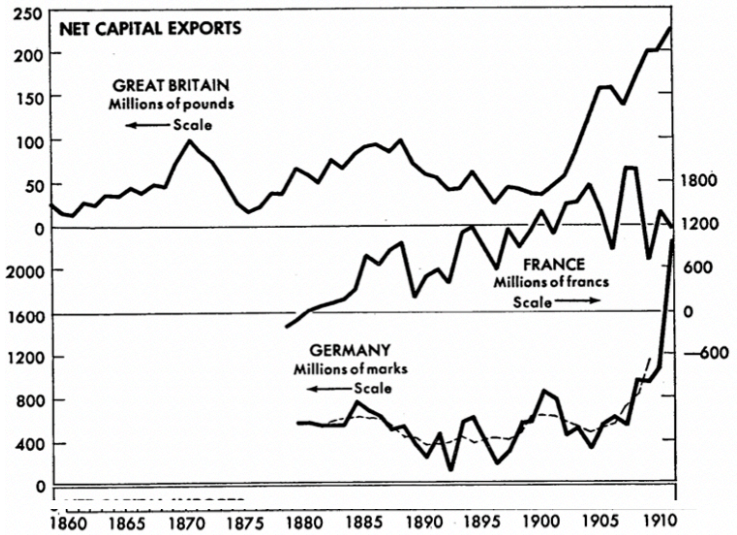
[139] Quoted in Taylor, *Bismarck*, p. 210.

upgraded in 1881 to commit the three powers to remaining neutral in the event that any of them became involved in a war with a fourth power.[140] It was renewed again in 1884 with great fanfare in Skierniewice, then part of the territories of the Russian Empire, with all three emperors in attendance.

British, French and German Net Capital Outflows, 1860-1913



Excerpted from: Arthur I. Bloomfield, "Patterns of Fluctuation in International Investment Before 1914," *Princeton Studies in International Finance, No. 21* (1968): 8.

Diplomacy was not however the only glue binding the two empires; they were also kept close by deep economic interests. Germany's leaders sought to cement ties with Russia by using financial investments as a means of advancing state political objectives.[141] In Russia's case, German capital mainly took the form of bond financing for government and strategic industries.[142] Between 1883 and 1897, more than a fifth of all German investment in Europe went to Russia.[143] Of this, nearly half went to railroads. By 1887, the *Reichsbank* was home to more than half of all externally-held Russian securities (around two Billion marks), and Germany was a major supplier of weapons to the Russian army. Altogether in this period

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[140] The original text of the 1881 agreement, along with addendum protocol, can be found in *Die Grosse Politik*, vol. III, pp. 176-79.
[141] The best source on European capital exports in this era is Albert Fishlow, who builds on the earlier work of Feis to examine the regulatory and institutional differences driving the free-market British ("developmental") and interventionist French and German ("revenue finance") approaches. See Fishlow's "Lessons From the Past: Capital Markets During the 19th Century and the Interwar Period," International Organization (1985) 39: 383-439 as well as Feis, pp. 68-70 and 160-88. See also the discussion in Esteves, pp. 1-25.
[142] Bersch and Kaminsky, p. 20.
[143] Ibid., p. 29.

around 55 percent of all German foreign investment in Europe found destinations east of the *Reich*. These investments distinguished Germany from Britain, whose approach to foreign investment was *laissez faire* and geographically diffuse, but brought Germany into sharp competition with France, which was a major source of investment in eastern Europe and, like Germany, sought to use capital as a tool for cementing political influence.[144]

The maintenance of close political and economic relations with Russia constituted twin, reinforcing pillars to Bismarck's strategy for avoiding two-front war. In binding Russia to remain neutral in the event of a French attack on Germany, the League, together with Russian dependence on German foreign investment, substantially diminished Russia's incentives for aligning with France. More broadly, by grouping Russia and Austria together in a consultative format, Bismarck's diplomatic arrangements lessened the likelihood of a conflagration in the east that could draw in Germany and create an opportunity for France to attack, while reducing pressure on Germany to act as a bilateral peace broker between its two eastern neighbors. As long as this state of affairs held, France's ability to enlist Russia in an alliance to check Germany's growing military power was tightly constrained.

BISMARCK'S BULGARIAN BLINDSPOT

The pieces of Bismarck's system tended to work together to reinforce one another's effects, in much the same way that Metternich's had. Keeping France focused on her colonies while avoiding provocative moves reduced the motivation for France to seek a hostile combination with Russia. Keeping Russia bound to Germany, diplomatically and financially, removed the opportunity for such a combination. Keeping a tight leash on Austria lessened the potential for an Austrian provocation of Russia that would complicate the latter's ties with Germany, throw Russia into France's arms, and cause the entire edifice to collapse. Should these arrangements prove insufficient, the Austro-German alliance provided a kind of insurance policy, or defensive redoubt, not unlike Metternich's central 'dike', that would equip Germany with the largest resource base possible for withstanding an assault from two directions.

Elegant as this system may have been in theory, it remained a fragile structure rooted in Germany's willingness, at Bismarck's personal direction, to be the sluggish weight at the base of the punching doll—which is to say: it depended upon Germany's willingness to remain not only broadly status quo in *intention* but also unwilling to allow her weight to be pulled in one direction or another by the gusts of European politics. As had been the case for Metternich, the gusts most capable of tipping over Bismarck's doll came from the east, where the empires of Russia and Austria were embroiled in a competition of mounting stakes and narrowing options. The source of the problem was the by-now spiraling decay of the Ottoman Empire, which presented for St. Petersburg an irresistible temptation to realize the age-old Russian

[144] See Esteves, pp. 4-5 and Fishlow, pp. 399-402.

dream of controlling Constantinople and the Straits, and for Vienna the lethal danger of a greater Slav state on her southeastern fronter. Bismarck himself had contributed to the problem, both by pointing Austria toward a Balkan vocation after the war of 1866 and by encouraging Russian ambitions in the Balkans as a region of avowed German disinterest. His preferred solution—a partition of the entire region between Austrian and Russian spheres—was desirable to neither of his eastern partners mainly because both powers saw themselves as gradually gaining the upper hand.

In this winner-takes-all confrontation, each new crisis became a test of wills involving exertions out of all proportion to the immediate objects at hand. The first signs of serious trouble for Bismarck began to appear after the 1878 Congress of Berlin, where Bismarck had attempted to mediate a peaceful outcome to a Russo-Turkish war of the previous year. The war had been a decisive victory for Russia that resulted, under the provisions of the Treaty of San Stefano, in the creation of a greater Bulgarian state that, it was widely assumed, would become the Tsar's cats-paw in the Balkans. The stunning scale of Russia's success seemed to confirm that the Ottoman Empire was a rotten edifice on the verge of collapse and that new Russian satellites could be carved from this edifice to speed Russia's descent upon the Turkish Strait. Not surprisingly, other Balkan states and most of Europe, including especially Austria-Hungary, saw it differently; for them, the war conjured the specter of an expansionist Russia poised to devour the remnants of Turkey and upset the European balance of power.

It was in his efforts to devise a corrective to San Stefano acceptable to the other powers, and especially to Austria and Britain, that Bismarck irretrievably lost the status of friend and "honest broker" he had for so long maintained with the Russians. At the Congress of Berlin, Bismarck pared back Russia's wartime gains, returning some ground to the Turks and placing limits on Russian expansion in the region.[145] While Bismarck saw himself as keeping the scales even (by awarding south Bessarabia to Russia as compensation for its losses), the main geopolitical outcome was that Russia lost what would have been a dominating perch on the approaches to the Strait. To the pan-Slav elements in the Tsarist court, this constituted not only a signal setback but also a betrayal, in which Russia's earlier support for Bismarck's wars with Austria and France had not been reciprocated with a German willingness to now support Russia's ambitions in the East.[146] The effect was immediate and lasting: prior to 1878, the

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[145] Original texts from the deliberations and side negotiations at the Congress can be found in *Die Grosse Politik*, vol. II, pp. 167-337.

[146] As Langer writes of Russian anger at Bismarck, "Whatever gains they [the Russians] had made through the decisions of the Congress, the fact remained that the Treaty of Berlin was unimpressive as compared with the Slavic peace of San Stefano." See Langer, p. 171. It is interesting that Schroeder and Taylor independently conclude that Russian behavior in the Metternich and Bismarck eras respectively came to

Russians had taken Bismarck at his word when he encouraged their Balkan appetite and told them that the region was of no direct interest to Germany; after 1878, Bismarck's credibility with Russia was never fully restored, and his options for maintaining peace in the Balkans narrowed proportionately.

It was in this setting of growing Russo-German distrust and deepening Austro-German commitments that the latest phase of the Bulgaria crisis broke out. The details were complicated but the underlying issue was elementary: whether Russia or Austria-Hungary would control Bulgaria. The main measure by which the answer to this question was gauged was the identity of the occupant of Bulgaria's new throne. Matters came to a head in 1886 after the German-born Bulgarian king was unceremoniously ousted in a Russian-backed coup, throwing open the question of who would replace him. It is an understatement to say that these intrigues did not interest Bismarck, who saw in the entire Balkan peninsula nothing but grief for the German Empire. "We are completely indifferent who rules in Bulgaria and what becomes of it," he said at the time with characteristic bluntness.[147]

Yet Bismarck more than anyone could see the danger that the struggle over Bulgaria posed for his wider edifice of peace. Unlike earlier crises, this one was not resolvable by the established components of Bismarck's system. Indeed, it placed the two most important of those components—friendship with Russia and alliance with Austria—in deep tension and threatened to turn the system itself into a recipe for instability. This tension could no longer be resolved in the way that Bismarck and Metternich before him had resolved it, by consultation between the three eastern empires. The League of the Three Emperors was in ruins, a victim of the growing antagonism between Russia and Austria-Hungary.

As tensions mounted, the very existence of Germany's alliance with Austria-Hungary seemed to spur the rush to war, as Vienna treated Berlin's backing as motivation for taking a more rather than less aggressive line. Egged on by senior German military officials (including not least the German military attaché in Vienna, a certain major von Deines) the Austro-Hungarian high command perceived an opportunity to bring about a war that would decisively resolve things to Vienna's advantage, relieving the pressures on Austria-Hungary's Balkan flank and

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be motivated by anger over St. Petersburg's perception that its earlier support for Austrian/German policies in these two western empires' respective spheres of influence was not reciprocated by Austrian/German support for analogous Russian moves in hers. In Austria's case, this perception emerged early in the Congress era, when, having backed Metternich's military action in Italy following the Laibach Congress in 1821, Russia failed to receive Austrian support for military action in the 1826 Greek crisis. Russia's frustration with Austria peaked after the latter's refusal to back Russia in the Crimean crisis despite Russia's earlier military intervention in Hungary in support of the Habsburg dynasty in 1849.

[147] Quoted in Taylor, *Bismarck*, p. 220.

restore her prospects as a Great Power.[148] Russia, too, saw an opportunity in the crisis, both to claw back some of the influence that Bismarck had stripped away at the Congress of Berlin and to exact revenge upon perfidious Austria, which, as the impediment to realizing Russia's Balkan destiny, had become the object of vitriolic attacks in the pan-Slav press.

In short, the Bulgarian crisis of 1887 represented a kind of perfect storm for Bismarck's system. It placed Germany in the unenviable position of, as Bismarck put it, "standing between Austria and Russia like a man between two vicious dogs."[149] His dilemma was not unlike that which had confronted Metternich in the mid-1820s, when Russia first began to spin out of the orbit of the Congress system and seek a separate resolution of the Eastern Question. But the stakes were now much higher. If the danger in Metternich's time was that Russia's Balkan gambits would impose a settlement that conflicted with the legitimist principles of the Concert, the danger in Bismarck's time was that Russia and Austria would go to war and pull Europe into the abyss with them. Metternich's solution had been to prioritize power over principle and maintain stable ties with the strongest player in the equation (Russia), thereby maintaining Russia's backing for Austria's position in Italy. In effect, he had allowed Austria to be sidelined in a secondary theater in order to maintain her position in the primary theater.

Bismarck's solution for the crisis of 1887 was much more involved—and risky. Stated simply, it was to erect parallel constraints over (1) Russia and (2) Austria-Hungary while (3) creating back-up security guarantees for the latter from other powers so that, if (1) or (2) failed, Germany would still be able to stay out of an eastern war and keep her hands free against France.

The first goal, restraining Russia, required a new mechanism, since the Three Emperors' League had broken down. This took the form of a secret Russo-German security agreement that would become known to posterity as the Reinsurance Treaty. Negotiated over the late spring and early summer of 1887, this was arguably the greatest diplomatic accomplishment of Bismarck's career.[150] In substance, it committed Germany and Russia to benevolent neutrality

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[148] For a sample of von Deines' dispatches and the sense of intimacy with the Austrian command that they conveyed, see his November 9th note in *Die Grosse Politik*, vol. VI, pp. 4-6.
[149] Quoted in Langer, p. 370.
[150] The deliberations on the treaty can be found in *Die Grosse Politik*, vol. V, pp. 209-68 and the text of the treaty on pp. 253-55. Historians differ on the importance of the Reinsurance Treaty. Langer (p. 425) called it "the very keystone of the Bismarckian structure" and mounted a point-by-point rebuttal (pp. 423-24) of its critics. Taylor (p. 317, *Struggle*) says it "really did not amount to much." Crankshaw (p. 403) doubts that, had it been renewed, it would have prevented World War One. Steinberg (p. 423) does not comment on the treaty's merits but sees it as marking the end of Bismarck's range of maneuver. The American diplomat George F. Kennan is probably closest to the mark in acknowledging the treaty's shortcomings but emphasizing its practical, strategic value in buying time for Germany. See Kennan's *The Decline of Bismarck's European Order: Franco-Russian Relations, 1875-1890* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 337-38.

if either were attacked by a third country. The Russians had wanted this provision to be framed more broadly to apply to *any* form of conflict with a third party, so that they would be able to attack Austria-Hungary without fear of German response, but Bismarck insisted on a narrow formulation precisely in order to rule out this option. As compensation, a second article of the treaty promised German neutrality if Russia made a grab at the Turkish Straits.

In effect, the Reinsurance Treaty affirmed Russia's aspirations in the Balkans in principle but attempted to redirect her energies a few degrees of longitude to the southeast, away from conflict with Austria-Hungary and toward Turkey. This was a dangerous game to play, given the bellicose spirit that prevailed in St. Petersburg, but it was not all that different than the game Bismarck had been playing in the east for most of his career. From Germany's perspective, the treaty significantly reduced the main risk to herself of a two-front war, at least so far as a *Russian* attack was concerned.

Restraining Austria-Hungary, the second component of Bismarck's solution, was if anything harder than the first, and demanded his highest efforts as a politician and diplomat. "So long as I am minister," Bismarck declared at the height of the debate in the winter of 1887, "I shall not give my consent to a prophylactic attack upon Russia."[151] Given the enthusiasm among the German General Staff for such an attack, averting it meant reigning in Bismarck's own countrymen while make it bluntly clear to the Austrians that they could not expect German help in a crisis if they were the aggressor.

These herculean efforts notwithstanding, there was a very real possibility that Austria-Hungary, with that mixture of insecurity and belligerence so characteristic of the late phase Habsburg state, would still choose war. It was with this contingency in mind that Bismarck had embarked on the third part of his solution: the construction of expedients to reduce the burden on Germany for defending Austria-Hungary should his other methods fail. The first of these was the so-called Triplice, or Triple Alliance, a defensive arrangement first negotiated in 1882 that bound Germany, Italy, and Austria-Hungary to mutual help if attacked. Bismarck renewed the treaty in the spring of 1887, with the goal of forestalling any Russian courtship of Italy that would have, by placing Austria-Hungary in its own two-front vise, only spurred calls for preemptive war in Vienna.

As a makeweight to the Triplice, Bismarck engineered, over the same months that he was pursing the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia, a parallel set of agreements among Austria-Hungary, Britain, Italy and Spain to which Germany was not a formal party. Collectively known as the Mediterranean Agreements, they committed the parties to "maintenance of the status quo in the Orient" and provided for military support to any one of the three that was

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[151] Quoted in Langer, p. 445.

attacked.[152] Bismarck essentially engineered these understandings from the sidelines, personally intervening with a series of letters to persuade Lord Salisbury, the famously non-committal prime minister and foreign secretary, to throw Britain's weight into the arrangement.[153] The ostensible purpose was to build a defensive hedge against French adventurism in the Mediterranean—a goal that Britain, with her tenuous link through the Suez to India, and Italy, with her nascent colonial ambitions in north Africa, shared. But Bismarck's real motivation was to provide Austria-Hungary with a secondary line of support that would alleviate the burden on Germany. As Bismarck put it, the agreements were intended to create "a basis of defense upon which Austria could stand in case of necessity."[154] By creating a large base of international support for Austria-Hungary, Bismarck simultaneously assuaged Vienna's fears of abandonment (a key driver of the war fever) and ensured that, if it came to blows, Austria-Hungary would not be solely dependent upon the German alliance, thus relieving Berlin of much of the risk of two-front war. In short, the Mediterranean Agreements allowed Germany to keep her friendship with Russia, even as they worked to check the Russian ambitions that Bismarck had, through the Reinsurance Treaty, encouraged.

It is a sign of how far Europe's war fever had progressed that, even with these efforts, Bismarck almost failed. Even after the signing of the Reinsurance Treaty, the Russians remained on edge; as reports continued to arrive of new troop deployments, Bismarck worried that St. Petersburg was using the treaty to play for time. In a last-ditch effort to dissuade Russian aggression, Bismarck employed financial warfare. In early November, at the peak of the war scare, he issued an order for the *Reichsbank* to no longer accept Russian bonds as collateral for loans—a move that was interpreted by the markets as indicating that the German government (which held more than half of all Russian debt) had lost confidence in Russian credit.[155] The resulting sell-off, clearly intended for strategic effect to make Russia more politically amenable to Bismarck's approach, came at a moment when Russia was attempting to stabilize the ruble and pay down large debts. As a result of Bismarck's intervention, Russia would be cut off from access to German capital markets for seven years (until 1894).[156] While the move had a chilling effect on Russian military plans in the near term, it planted seeds of lasting bitterness in the Russo-German relationship and opened the door for France to supplant Germany as the primary financial backer of the Russian state, as later events would show.

Even as Bismarck employed increasingly desperate measures to restrain Russia, he continued to exert enormous energy to rein in the Austrians. It was in the same month as Bismarck's

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[152] The deliberations of these agreements are covered in *Die Grosse Politik*, vol. IV, pp. 333-95. For more on their provisions and deterrent effect on Russia, see Langer, pp. 440-41.
[153] Bismarck's correspondence with Salisbury, comprising the momentary convergence of two of diplomatic history's great originals, can be found in *Die Grosse Politik*, vol. IV, pp. 376-80, 386-88, and 380-81.
[154] Quoted in Ibid., p. 402.
[155] This episode is covered in Bersch and Kaminsky, p. 15; Fuller, pp. 255-56; and Langer, pp. 441-2.
[156] Bersch and Kaminsky, p. 15.

crisis diplomacy with the Tsar that the generals redoubled their lobbying efforts for a preventive war and opened staff talks with the Austrian military.[157] Only when Bismarck published the secret text of the alliance with Austria in its entirety, thus revealing the limited, defensive nature of the arrangement, was the war fever finally quenched.[158] While the move threw cold water on the machinations of the two militaries, most of whose senior members had not been aware of its exact provisions, the fact that it was required at all demonstrates the extent to which by this date Bismarck had to apply as much restraint to his own side, perhaps even more than toward Russia, in order to hold it all together and avoid war.

How Bismarck's System Influenced German Military Planning

The lengths to which Bismarck had to go to avoid a preemptive German military attack on Russia underscore an important difference between the German Empire and the Habsburg Monarchy of Metternich's time. The latter had used diplomacy to mitigate multi-front pressures because, as a weak power, it was her only option. By contrast, Bismarck's Germany was a martial empire with a capable and well-practiced army. The solution that Germany's high command had in mind for the two-front problem, while less peaceful than Bismarck's, was no less logical. Their method, too, had a place for diplomacy: to create the political conditions for the Army to achieve military concentration, and sequentially defeat, Germany's enemies. It is only with the benefit of hindsight that it seems obvious that Germany would opt for Bismarck's diplomacy rather than Moltke's preventive war. But this was by no means inevitable; the allure of the latter was very strong, for it had been precisely through such methods that German unification had been achieved. The success of Germany's earlier wars, with their limited scope, short duration, and decisive effect, seemed to suggest an outsized potential for military power as a tool for accomplishing political objectives.

Much of the appeal of the generals' approach lay in the sheer lethality of the military instrument at Germany's disposal. The German Imperial Army was a fighting force *par excellence* that had, in recent memory, defeated in rapid succession two of the most powerful states in Europe, each of which possessed bigger armies than Prussia's which in turn were each held to be superior in experience and doctrine to her own.[159] The foundation of Prussia's surprising success in these wars had been laid in the reforms of the 1860s, when a small handful of staff officers had undertaken a systematic overhaul of the Army aimed at achieving faster mobilization times in reaction to Prussia's embarrassments by Austria in 1850 and

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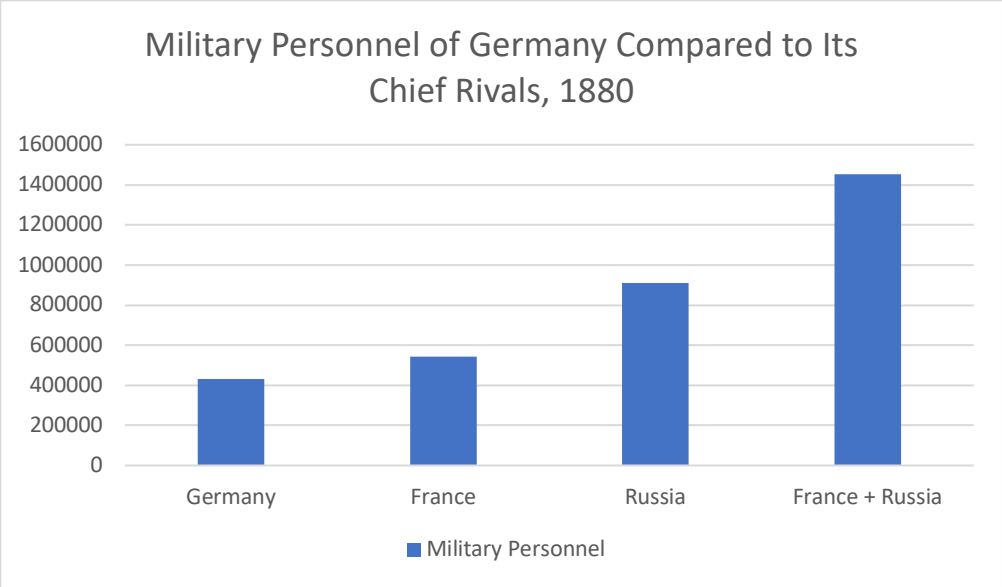
[157] Langer, p. 446.
[158] Ibid., pp. 448-50 and Kennan, *Decline*, p. 367.
[159] See the discussion in Archer Jones, *The Art of War in the Western World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 397-98.

France in 1859.* The driving force behind this transformation was Helmuth von Moltke, an energetic Prussian officer and committed Clausewitzian who one biographer has called "an acid concentrate of pure Prussianism."[160] As chief of the General Staff from 1858 to 1888, Moltke would comprehensively revamp the Prussian military organization, doctrine, and tactics.[161] At the heart of his reforms lay a quest for speed and mobility aimed at achieving theretofore unimaginably wide envelopment in battle.[162] Under his leadership, Prussia created a modern general staff specifically trained for large-scale operations and became a pioneer in adopting new technologies such as the telegraph and railway to military use.[163]



Source: Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*.

* By the1850 embarrassment, I am referring to the events leading up to the so-called Olmütz Punctuation, described in an earlier section of this paper, when Austria mobilized her Army to force Prussia into abandoning an attempted reorganization of the German *Bund* at Austria's expense; by the 1859 embarrassment, I am referring to the slow speed with which Prussia had mobilized to support Austria against France in Italy, which Franz Josef believed contributed to Austria's defeat in the ensuing war. Both incidents had an impact in convincing Moltke and other reform-minded German officers of the need for a faster system of mobilization.

[160] Quoted in Walter Goerlitz, *History of the German General Staff 1657-1945* (London: Westview, 1985), p. 69. For a compelling portrait of Moltke's personality and intellect, see Goerlitz, pp. 69-102.

[161] There is an unremarked similarity in Bismarck's view of politics as an act of continuous improvisation and Moltke's view of strategy as a "system of expedients." For an accessible overview of Moltke's approach, see Hew Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1983), pp. 98-99 and the list of suggested readings on pp. 106-7.

[162] See the discussion in Wawro, p. 19.

[163] See, for example, Strachan, pp. 126-7.

Integral to the success of Moltke's reforms was an effective partnership with Bismarck, one of whose first major political acts after coming to office in 1862 had been to engineer the passage, against the opposition of Germany's liberals, of ambitious legislation to expand the size of the Army. This increased from 100,000 in 1859 to 300,000 in 1866 to nearly half a million by the mid-1880s, as the forces of all but a few of the formerly independent German kingdoms were merged into a unified army under Prussian command (those of the southern kingdoms remained semi-autonomous).[164]

Needless to say, the size and recent warfighting record of Germany's Army made it inherently intimidating to her neighbors. In geopolitics, power matters more than intent. German unification had, within the space of barely a generation, placed a war machine of unexampled potential at the center of Europe. The fear and resentment created by this development would be hard to overstate. Nor were these sentiments restricted to France. Austria-Hungary chafed at German power and many of her senior military officers pined for a return to the old dynastic tie with Russia. The Tsarist empire too grew more wary of German capabilities from the late 1870s onward; whom else, barring the seabound British, could she conceivably fear? For all of these states, Germany became, virtually overnight, the noise in the night—the assumed antagonist in wargames and the yardstick against which to measure their armies. All had noted the ease with which she had rolled over enemies one after another. It was inevitable that such capabilities would provoke fear, and thus attempts by those same neighbors to rearm and counter-balance the new giant in their midst.

Thus Germany faced a paradox: the stronger her armies grew, the less secure she became.[165] Even the Army of Moltke, for all its renown, could not overpower all of Europe. In 1887, at the moment it looked like Europe might go to war, Germany had 435,000 men under arms, yet France had an army of 524,000 and Russia an army of 850,000.[166] Even if the Austrians were brought into the picture and reserves were taken into account, France and Russia would still be able to field 1.68 million *more* troops than Germany and her allies. Given these realities, it was questionable whether Germany could secure herself using military means alone. In a war against her most likely antagonists, Germany's forces would be numerically outmatched and forced to disperse to cover two, and (should Austria-Hungary or Italy decide to join on the flanking powers' side) as many as three, frontiers.

Moltke's proposed solution to this problem was quintessentially military: to mobilize more quickly than Germany's enemies in order to achieve a decisive victory despite the odds. In a

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[164] Wawro, p. 16 and Kennan, *Decline*, p. 247.
[165] Germany's situation in this period is a classic example of the so-called security dilemma, a subject on which there is a vast academic literature. For an introduction, see Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): pp. 167-214.
[166] Figures from Michael Howard given in Kennan, p. 247.

war with Russia and France, he reasoned, Germany's advantage lay not in numbers but in the speed with which she could bring her armies to the decisive theater. To this end, Moltke had over the preceding decade advocated successfully for an aggressive expansion of the German railway network. The density of this network, combined with the efficient system that Moltke's staff had devised for getting the troops to their depots and staging areas, gave Germany an impressive advantage over Russia, whose vast spaces, poor roads, and inadequate rail lines ensured a much longer mobilization period. It was by this method that Moltke sought to offset the strategic disadvantage of Germany's central geography and to render it a virtue.

Though compelling from a purely military perspective, Moltke's system had the serious flaw, from Bismarck's standpoint, of doing nothing to make war less likely; indeed, followed to its logical conclusion, it made war *more* likely by increasing the temptation for Germany to undertake preventive strikes at one or both of the flanking powers.[167] Once such a war had been launched, Bismarck knew that political control would effectively be lost, as the generals took charge and a host of unforeseen factors came into play to divert the state's objectives. Even in the best of Moltke's scenarios, Germany would have weeks if not days to achieve a decisive victory in one theater before needing to shift a large part of her attention in the other direction.

Bismarck's solution to the two-front problem differed conceptually from Moltke's primarily in the fact that he wanted to avoid such a war altogether. Like Moltke, Bismarck proceeded from the premise that concentration was necessary—but as a preventative, not an aid, to conflict. He sought to achieve concentration not by speed in combat but by placing so many troops in the decisive theater that the more aggressive flanking power (France) would not attack. Of course, this only worked if the other flanking power (Russia) had political reasons not to also attack; otherwise, it would invite disaster. Herein lay the military importance of Bismarck's diplomacy. By prioritizing close relations with Russia, Bismarck, like Metternich, ensured that the empire's longest and most vulnerable frontier could be safely deprioritized in favor of concentration on the frontier with France. Without Russia in the equation, France faced much less favorable odds of victory. Thus it was widely assumed that France would not attack Germany unaided and, if she did, would be defeated. By allowing the Army to focus on France, Bismarck not only made a two-front war unlikely, he also made war in general unlikely.

The blind spot in all of this, as Bismarck was very well aware, was that Austria-Hungary and Russia could go to war and thereby force Germany to pick sides, thus bringing the French threat back into play. Left to themselves, Germany and Russia had little over which to spar, given that both benefited from a stable partition in the only significant territory separating them: Poland. It was only an Austro-Russian conflict that could drag the two into war with one another. It was for this reason that Bismarck laid so much emphasis, from a very early point after German unification, in restraining *both* Russia and Austria-Hungary. After the creation of

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[167] See the discussion in Bruce Waller, *Bismarck at the Crossroads: The Reorientation of German Foreign Policy after the Congress of Berlin, 1878-1880* (London: Athlone Press, 1974), p. 139.

the Dual Alliance in 1879, this became more complicated, as Austria-Hungary could, as events would show, easily construe Germany's support as a blank check for her to attack Russia unless clearly and credibly told that this was not the case. Russia, too, given her historic comity with Germany, could easily misinterpret Bismarck's blanket support for Russian expansion in southeast Europe as a green light to challenge Austria-Hungary unless emphatically warded off by Berlin. In both cases, even a momentary failure of German diplomacy to keep in sight its chief aims could lead to a dramatic explosion in the Balkans capable of undoing Bismarck's delicate arrangements and thrusting Germany into a two-front war.

It is therefore unsurprising that the German generals' push for preventive war intensified sharply after the collapse of the Three Emperors' League. The sense of urgency in Moltke's staff was heightened by its analysis of Russian war preparations. In a memorandum to the Emperor, Moltke's deputy, the Quartermaster General Albrecht von Waldersee, calculated that Russia's deployable manpower was considerably greater than previously estimated and indeed more than Russia had ever been able to put in the field in its history—some 3.1 million men, or three times greater than it had been in 1879.[168]

Germany's generals believed that Russia was preparing to use this massive force in a surprise war against either Austria-Hungary or Germany. "Since spring," Waldersee argued, "there have been repeated signs that Russia is making preparations for a warlike state of affairs in the not-distant future," including via upgrades to frontier fortresses, lengthening rail-lines, forward prepositioning munitions, and generally raising war readiness.[169] The significance of these preparations—comprising, in effect, a stealth mobilization—lay in the corrosive effects that they would have on Germany's edge in mobilization time. For this reason, as Moltke made plain in a cover-letter accompanying the memorandum, and because Russia's force levels were only likely to grow in coming years, the generals judged that Germany had a favorable but perishable window in which to strike.[170]

It was against this backdrop of an apparent collapse of Bismarck's system and a growing Russian military danger that Waldersee and the General Staff saw a gap to fill in Germany's security that conformed to the General Staff's longstanding plans and desires. Bismarck's acrobatic diplomacy in this period can be seen as an attempt to cover the gap with new expedients that were not only consistent with the main principles of his diplomacy but also capable of restoring the ability of the German Army to remain concentrated against France and

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[168] See Moltke, pp. 137-8.
[169] Ibid., p. 141.
[170] Moltke appears to have had in mind a spoiling attack against Russia followed by a defensive war in East Prussia to allow the German Army to concentrate primarily on war in the west with France. See the discussion on the historiographical debates surrounding this episode in Zuber, pp. 51-52. For a comparison of the approach that Moltke the Elder and Waldersee took to planning for a two-front war and the approach of their successors, von Schlieffen and Moltke the Younger, see Hayes, pp. 440-441.

thus, most likely, obviate the need for the offensive military remedy. Critically, Bismarck understood the *military* logic for maintaining Germany's westward concentration *even if* Austria-Hungary were attacked, which explains the lengths to which he went to enlist Britain and Italy as security backstops to his ally. As he wrote at the time:

> We must try to keep our hands free…so that we shall not be drawn in at once if it comes to a break with Russia in matters of the East, for we need all our forces against France. If we can stand aloof in a war of Austria and her allies against Russia, we can spare ourselves a war with France, because France will not be able to go to war, so long as we remain neutral and are not drawn into the struggle… It cannot be doubted for a moment that France will attack as soon as we get into armed conflict with Russia… If we maintain the political attitude I have sketched, it is very likely that each of the two wars with which Europe is threatened can be fought separately.[171]

As this comment reveals, Bismarck worried about the solvency of his own system. He knew that the Reinsurance Treaty was at best a patch – a provisional remedy that, however brilliant in execution, nevertheless called into question by its very existence the sustainability of the overall edifice that it was meant to support. While undoubtedly hoping that the new arrangement would last as long as possible, it is clear that Bismarck assessed the value of the Reinsurance Treaty in temporal and military terms, as a means of buying time for Germany to prepare for a war that might, in the end, prove inevitable.

It did this in two ways. First, as Bismarck outlined in a memorandum at the time, the new treaty with Russia made a Franco-Russian alliance politically unlikely for at least three years.[172] Second, the Reinsurance Treaty created practical impediments to effective Franco-Russian military coordination even if the two powers managed to align politically. As Bismarck's son Herbert wrote shortly after the treaty was signed, "in the event of serious complications [the treaty] keeps the Russians off our necks some six or eight weeks longer than would otherwise be the case."[173] By impeding Franco-Russian coordination, the treaty would buy a small but crucial window during which the German Army could maintain its concentration against, and defeat, France, before turning its attention back to Russia.

In both cases, the point is that Bismarck was conscious of the impact that his diplomacy had on German military planning and that he took the latter into account in formulating the former. Nor was he trusting that diplomacy alone would suffice once his arrangements wore out; indeed, he intended to use the time afforded by the new treaty with Russia to step up military preparations and close the yawning numerical gap between Germany and her two rivals. In the same month that his diplomacy was at its most intense and that the military was advocating for a preemptive war, Bismarck introduced a bill to extend the age of military service for reservists to 45 years, thus increasing the number of troops that Germany could call up in wartime by

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[171] Langer, p. 403.
[172] Kennan, *Decline*, pp. 337-38.
[173] Ibid.

600,000.[174] In parallel, Bismarck pushed Austria-Hungary to accelerate her own rearmament, on the rationale that a stronger Habsburg Army would, by reassuring Vienna, make war less likely and, should one break out anyhow, make her less reliant on German support.[175]

Viewed in this light, Bismarck's diplomacy was not an exercise in trying to use chicanery as a substitute for real power. To the contrary, Bismarck possessed an integrated concept of political and military power and an intimate understanding of how these components depended upon one another for their effectiveness. He was all too aware of the power that the German military could unleash as a remedy to the two-front dilemma but saw this as fundamentally less desirable, both from the perspective of German security and the general peace of Europe, to a well-tended system of alliances backed by a convincing (because concentrated) military deterrent against the main threat. The underlying concept could be summarized as: *Avoid war if possible, sequence it if necessary, and in any event, concentrate.* To modify Bismarck's analogy of Germany as a punching doll, his method was to spare no effort to ensure that the doll did not tip too far in either direction and thus cause war but to also ensure that, if it *did* tip over, it would bring so irresistible a weight to bear as to achieve the most decisive effect possible.

How Bismarck Kept Bureaucratic Focus

The success of Bismarck's system depended, just as Metternich's had, on the ability to maintain the diplomatic priorities that enabled a concentration on the main threat. For Metternich, this had meant the alleviation, by political means, of Austrian competition with Russia over the Balkans to free up Austrian military focus on the French threat to northern Italy. For Bismarck, it meant the alleviation of competition with Russia in the east to free up German military focus on the French threat along the Rhine. In both cases, Russia was the stronger of the two flanking powers in aggregate and long-term capabilities, while France was the more politically motivated and geographically immediate threat. As had been the case for Metternich, maintaining the alliance with Russia that enabled the isolation of France was not cost-free; it required consciously foregoing other potential policy objectives, many of which had strong advocates in German government and business.

The most obvious of these opportunity costs was that Germany had to forego territorial expansion outside her own borders. It is obvious only in retrospect that Bismarck would

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[174] Pflanze, *Bismarck*, vol. III, p. 271.

[175] It is worth noting that Bismarck saw the value of the German alliance with Austria-Hungary increasing in proportion to the latter's willingness to bear a greater share of the burden for its own defense, without which the Habsburg Monarchy would not only be a net liability but a risk-acceptant one at that. Bismarck wanted the Austro-Hungarian Army to be stronger yet to also remain dependent upon Germany; he resisted, for example, Magyar efforts both to gut Austro-Hungarian defense budgets and to create a separate Hungarian Army. See Hayes, p. 430.

concentrate Prussia's energies in the forging of a great empire strictly on neighboring German lands. Indeed, it had long been the norm in European geopolitics to seek territory from defeated enemies in wartime. This was exactly what Wilhelm I had wanted to do at the conclusion of the wars with Austria and France. Even after these wars had ended and Bismarck embraced the policies of a 'satiated' power, it was far from obvious to Germany's neighbors that he would not resume the warpath with an eye to grabbing more territory. Doing so would almost certainly have triggered the Kaunitzian coalitions that Bismarck most feared; yet foregoing these temptations won the lasting enmity of the German generals, creating enemies who would eventually come back to haunt Bismarck.

Bismarck's strategy also necessitated a cautious approach to acquiring overseas colonies. A latecomer to the game of imperialism, Germany faced strong domestic and commercial temptations to look for markets and resources beyond Europe. Demographic growth generated population pressures which, in the absence of overseas colonies, inevitably drove German emigration of talent to North America and the territories of the British Empire.[176] Germany's rapid industrialization created demand for both raw materials and markets that could not be met from Central Europe alone. Indeed, a compelling argument can be made that Germany had a more pressing need to develop overseas outlets than either of the older colonial empires, Britain and France, both of which, at this stage, possessed large and well-established overseas markets and were shifting focus to foreign investment and finance.[177]

Not surprisingly given these pressures, German industrialists and merchants, led by the great commercial houses of Hamburg and Bremen, pushed the government to seek colonies in Africa, and German adventurers often tried to force its hand by staking claims.[178] Bismarck was not unaware of these motives or the economic rationale they reflected but consciously eschewed acquiring territories for the first decade and a half after German unification. This changed in the mid-1880s, when Bismarck consented to a flurry of tropical acquisitions, beginning with the formation of a German protectorate, against British opposition, at Angra Pequena Bay in the spring of 1884 and continuing with the establishment of German colonies in Tongo and Cameroon later that year and Tanganyika and New Guinea the following.[179] The reason for the sudden shift was a thaw in Franco-German relations made possible by the election of a premier, Jules Ferry, who was more interested in expansion in Indo-China and North Africa than the bid to reconquer Alsace-Lorraine. This represented a long-awaited opportunity for Bismarck to deflect French energies away from competition with German. In practice, it required Germany to support French moves overseas in the face of opposition to Britain, which was also aggravated by German acquisitions. At the Congo Conference of 1884-

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[176] Langer, p. 289.
[177] Ibid.
[178] Taylor, *Struggle*, p. 293.
[179] For a description of these acquisition and how they fit into Bismarck's overall strategy, see Holborn, *History*, pp. 244-46.

85, Bismarck sought to reassure the other colonial powers about German intentions by pushing for the demarcation of Africa into zones of interest—the same template he had advocated for avoiding conflict in the Balkans.

Bismarck's interest in overseas empire was, however, short-lived, ending abruptly after Ferry's fall from power and the rise of the sworn Germanophobe and *revanchist* George Boulanger, which coincided with the renewed Austro-Russian crisis in Bulgaria. The point to emphasize is that even when Bismarck allowed the momentary focus on Africa, it was in keeping with his overall strategy in Europe—namely, the deflection of the more antagonistic of Germany's flanking powers and thus the alleviation of her two-front problem. It was done only when conditions on the continent permitted, and even then, in a way that set clear limits on friction with Britain, whose support Bismarck knew he might someday need to offset a Franco-Russian alignment. Throughout, Bismarck's focus remained on Europe; when conditions there no longer permitted colonial adventures, they ceased. As Bismarck famously said, "Here lies Russia and here lies France, and we are in the middle. That is my map of Africa."[180]

However, by far the greatest opportunity cost created by Bismarck's strategy was not in Africa but closer to home, in Germany's relations with Austria-Hungary and Russia. In particular, the novelty of a bilateral security alliance with Austria, coming at a time when alliances had always been very fluid structures, was initially met with opposition even from Wilhelm I, who felt honor-bound to maintain dynastic closeness with his blood kin, the Russian Tsar. With time, however, the criticism swung in the opposite direction, as the Dual Alliance became popular with the German public and officialdom, neither of which fully understood its terms and yearned to back Austria-Hungary in her showdown with Russia. Friendship with Russia, by extension, became ever more questionable to German observers who increasingly viewed the relationship as a contest that could not be deferred indefinitely. The loudest proponents of this view were, not surprisingly, in the General Staff, who grew ever closer to their German-speaking compatriots in the Austro-Hungarian high command and longed to fight Russia as the only major neighbor Moltke's legions had not yet defeated.

It is a paradox of Bismarck's career that he was a champion of a large military establishment that, in the end, proved to be the chief opponent to maintaining the priorities demanded by his strategies. In this, he bears only a partial resemblance to Metternich, who also had advocated, albeit less effectively, for a larger army but who had tended to have a collegial bond with Austria's generals. Much of the glue for this political-military alignment was undoubtedly the paucity of Austrian military power and the resulting lack of viable alternatives to a diplomacy-intensive security. In Germany's case, by contrast, the lethality of the military tools at the state's disposal allowed for a compelling strategic-conceptual alternative to Bismarck's diplomacy—namely, that of discarding the Russian alliance, backing Austria-Hungary, and

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[180] Ibid., p. 294.

knocking out Russia and France in rapid succession. By the time of the 1887 crisis, this conceptual alternative was well-formed and favored by a large, self-confident, and institutionalized military elite whose preferred strategy seemed, with the dissolution of the Three Emperors' League, to have a reasonable claim to better matching Germany's security needs than Bismarck's diplomacy.

The roots of antagonism between Bismarck and the generals, it has to be said, had little to do with any of this. Then as now, disputes about strategy were as often about personalities and power as the concepts at hand. Early in his career, Bismarck had maintained a close and effective relationship with Moltke; indeed, his appointment had come about in large measure because Wilhelm I saw in Bismarck's forceful personality the key to defeating parliamentary liberals opposing a standing military—a feat that Bismarck promptly achieved. The problem arose in the years that followed, as Bismarck and Moltke expanded their powers and cast ever larger shadows over Germany's foreign and military affairs. In a new empire of immense strength, led by individuals of unusual talent in diplomacy and war, it was inevitable that the question would arise whether the politicians controlled the military or vice-versa.

It is unsurprising that this question would surface most intensely in wartime. The initial breach occurred during the war with Austria in 1866, when Bismarck, having been deprived of a say in the conduct of the war, insisted on shaping the peace.[181] Moltke and his generals wanted to taste the undiluted spoils of war with a victory parade in Vienna and annexations of Austrian territory. Opposing them, Bismarck insisted on a lenient peace. Bismarck got his way, but in the process earned the lasting enmity of the General Staff. Four years later, when Prussia went to war with France, the feud resumed. Over the course of the 1870 campaign, Bismarck became embroiled in a running duel with Moltke's adjutants, who barred the diplomat from war councils, forcing him to follow developments in the newspapers.[182] Bismarck derisively called these officers 'the demigods,' commenting that "none of them except good old Moltke could stand up to critical scrutiny."[183] The struggle reached a crescendo in disputes over whether to bombard Paris (which Bismarck favored), and whether to impose punitive peace terms (which Bismarck partially opposed).[184] In the concluding peace, Bismarck was able to resist the generals' demands for an occupation of Paris and the dismantling of French fortresses.

The residue of acrimony from these disagreements, and the underlying civil-military power struggle they symbolized, carried over into the post-war period and only intensified with time. One demigod who would later develop an especially intense rivalry with Bismarck was Alfred

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[181] Moltke believed that Clausewitz's subordination of strategy to political objectives applied only in peacetime; once war broke out, he believed that the generals must be able to act freely to annihilate the enemy, without interference from civilian leadership. See Halborn, *History*, pp. 186 and 218-19.
[182] See Taylor, *Bismarck*, p. 126. See also Crankshaw, p. 287.
[183] Taylor, *Bismarck*, p. 126. See also Steinberg, pp. 293-5 and 299-301.
[184] See footnote 105 above.

Count von Waldersee, a Moltke protégé who would succeed his master as Chief of the General Staff. In today's parlance, Waldersee was a climber, known for his vanity, guile and vaulting ambition.[185] A hidebound reactionary, Waldersee contemplated leading a *coup d'état* to prevent the liberal Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm from taking the throne and was perhaps history's first general to run a full-time PR operation to groom his own image with the public (manned by the appropriately named "press hussars").[186]

By the time of the 1887 crisis, Waldersee was second only to Moltke in military authority. While he and Bismarck had maintained a cordial relationship in the past, the mood soured as cracks in Bismarck's system opened up new vistas for Waldersee's rise. Waldersee saw himself as Bismarck's natural successor and saw in the unstable young Wilhelm II (to whom he had access via his wealthy American wife) a vehicle for attaining this lofty goal. Waldersee disliked Bismarck's diplomatic system on the merits, calling it "the policy of the see-saw." For him, the "decisive theater" was not France but Russia.[187] Years earlier, he had tried unsuccessfully to foment a war against Russia; by 1887, he was convinced that the final window of opportunity had arrived for winning such a war. To do so, he advocated boldly offensive moves backed by huge increases in the defense budget.

Waldersee's challenge to Bismarck's strategic priorities in the crisis months of 1887 was heightened by two structural factors that worked to the general's favor. The first was the right that Waldersee won in 1883, through much effort and intrigue, to direct, discreet access to the Emperor.[188] The second was his access to the network of military attachés stationed at German embassies abroad.[189] Correspondence with the attachés and, through them, foreign governments, enabled Waldersee to run what amounted to a parallel foreign policy in contravention of formal diplomatic channels—meaning, in contravention of Bismarck.[190] It was by these means, late in 1887, that Waldersee initiated talks with the Austro-Hungarian General Staff aimed at planning for a joint war against Russia along the lines Waldersee and Moltke had been advocating in their memoranda to the Emperor.

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[185] Steinberg calls Waldersee "a full-time intriguer"; more damningly, Goerlitz says that "his tragedy was that…he was at heart too simple to know how completely he was unfitted for his post." See Steinberg, pp. 294 and 428, and Goerlitz, p. 111. For a portrait of Waldersee and his approach to people, politics, and strategy, see Goerlitz, pp. 103-26.
[186] Goerlitz, p. 109.
[187] Ibid., pp. 106 and 109.
[188] The existence of this network is reflective of the fact that the German Army of this period saw itself, rather than Germany's civilian leaders, as the sole legitimate decision-making body for the country's foreign policy See Goerlitz, p. 108.
[189] As Gordon Craig describes this attitude, "the leaders of the army regarded the military establishment as the true embodiment of the national interest." See Gordon A. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army 1640-1945* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 255 and the entirety of chapter VI.
[190] For more on the German military's attempts to circumvent civilian foreign-policy structures in this period, Craig, pp. 255-56. See also Crankshaw, pp. 405-8.

In countering Waldersee's designs, Bismarck could not rely on any well-oiled process of civil-military coordination. Indeed, Bismarck's civilians and Moltke's generals existed in largely parallel bureaucratic universes, motivated by diametrically opposing conceptions of national strategy; the only medium for converging the two universes was the person of the Emperor.[191] Rather, Bismarck won out through his usual methods of craft, persuasion and force of personality, buttressed by a convincing logic of peace. In the margins of Waldersee's memoranda and his own remonstrations to the Emperor, Bismarck made an impassioned case against preventive war. What, he asked, would be the political object of such a war? How did the Army intend to extract itself if that object was not quickly met, and would it know when to stop in the event that it was successful?[192] "Even a victorious war," he warned, could bring disaster, opening up a chasm that would be filled by small, weak states susceptible to revolution.[193] The force of this logic was aimed at Wilhelm I, whom Bismarck knew shared his desire for peace. So effectively did he prevail upon the 90-year old monarch to fear the catastrophe of war that the old man was supposedly overheard by servants, in the nights leading up to an 11th-hour crisis meeting with the Tsar, feverishly reciting the talking points from Bismarck's memoranda in his sleep.

Wilhelm I's temperamental alignment with Bismarck proved decisive in reining in the generals. Part of the reason Bismarck won in the end is that Moltke, too, for all his eagerness to prove the German Army's mettle, respected the principle of political control over the military—at least in peacetime.[194] As Moltke commented in affirming Bismarck's veto of the recommendations in Waldersee's memorandum, the matters in question ventured "into the political arena…[and therefore are] up to the *Reich* Chancellor alone to decide"—a sentiment that, as events would show, his successors did not share[195] Yet even if Moltke had not consented in this fashion, the reality is that Bismarck held all the cards. Chief among those cards was his sway over the supreme decision-maker, the Emperor, which by this late date was at its peak. There was also the structural component, of the constitutional powers invested in the role of Chancellor broadly and specifically over strategic matters, prerogatives which Bismarck had jealously guarded by thwarting the creation of a Cabinet-level position for the Army on par with those that existed for Foreign Affairs, Navy, Colonies, Justice and Finance.[196] The result—a deepening of the concentration of military authority in the person of the Emperor, over whom Bismarck exercised near-total control—placed the Army, *de facto*, under

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[191] As Craig puts it, "In no previous period of German history had there been so obvious a need for careful coordination of planning and action between the political leadership, the diplomatic representatives, and the armed services of the nation. No such coordination was ever achieved…" See Craig, p. 255.
[192] Kennan, *Decline*, p. 399.
[193] Langer, pp. 442-43.
[194] See the discussion on Moltke's view of the role of political leadership and diplomacy in war and how it differed from Clausewitz's views in Strachan, pp. 102-3. See also Langer, p. 446.
[195] Moltke, *Aufmarschpläne*, p. 147.
[196] Taylor, *Bismarck*, p. 180.

the Chancellor's control as well. With a different Chancellor, and a different Emperor, the results could have been very different, as indeed they would be 27 years later.

WHY BISMARCK'S SYSTEM FAILED

To an even greater extent than had been the case for Metternich, the fate of Bismarck's system was tied to Bismarck's fate as a statesman. His fall from power came more swiftly than he himself wanted or could have foreseen. The death of his master, Wilhelm I, in the spring of 1888 was followed in rapid succession by the crowning of Wilhelm's son, the cancer-stricken Friedrich III and, just 99 days later, by the accession of Wilhelm's volatile grandson, the 29-year-old Wilhelm II.[197] This unexpected change in the tides took Bismarck by surprise; the Chancellor who had for so long dreaded and prepared against the moment of Frederick's ascension was wholly unprepared for Wilhelm II's. In the strutting and insecure Wilhelm II, Bismarck found a ruler more impulsive than himself and one far more determined than Wilhelm I to put his personal stamp on German foreign policy. The same constitution that Bismarck had designed to make his position exclusively dependent upon the malleable will of a decent and longsuffering Emperor now subjected him to the whim of an Emperor who was neither.

Wilhelm II's unceremonious split with Bismarck came in the spring of 1890, almost exactly two years after Wilhelm I's death and the resolution of the war crisis with Russia.[198] As is so often the case in history, the arrival of a new ruler opened a moment of creativity in which grudges long inhibited could be acted upon and orthodoxies long established could be overturned. It is not surprising that Bismarck's long tenure had created a reservoir of both; what is surprising is how unprepared the power-minded Bismarck proved to be for defending himself against these inevitabilities.

The grudges didn't take long to surface. Chief among these were of course Bismarck's old feuds with the 'demigods' and, in particular, Waldersee, who in his new role as Chief of the General Staff saw in the changing political seasons a long-awaited moment to undermine the Chancellor's dominance. He found a willing ally within Bismarck's own staff, in the person of Friedrich von Holstein, a career civil servant who for years had led the political department at the Foreign Service.[199] Holstein's beef against Bismarck was personal but also substantive; he saw the friendship with Russia as humiliating and the Reinsurance Treaty in particular as

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[197] Wilhelm I's last words, apparently, were about the danger of two-front war. See Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: MacMillan, 1988), p. 11.
[198] Holborn writes simply that Bismarck fell because of "the desire of Wilhelm II to rule by himself." Holborn, "Realpolitik," p. 94.
[199] For more on the machinations against Bismarck, see Pflanze, *Bismarck*, vol. III, pp. 295-301 and Steinberg, p. 425.

constituting an act of bad faith toward Germany's ally, Austria-Hungary.[200] These views obviously aligned with Waldersee's, and the two made natural additions to a camarilla that formed around Philipp Count von Eulenberg, a close and colorful personal friend of the incoming Emperor.[201]

Bismarck's ouster in the spring of 1890 was followed by the gradual unravelling of his system of diplomacy. The men who came after him—Leo von Caprivi at the chancellery and Adolf Marschall von Bieberstein at the foreign ministry, both at Holstein's instigation—were cautious men who feared to make a dramatic departure from the old master's approach.[202] But the restraint that had come so naturally to Bismarck was not in the DNA of the new Kaiser or the military men around him, who kept up a steady drumbeat of pressure for war.[203] When the Reinsurance Treaty came up for renewal, Berlin declined, to St. Petersburg's alarm and Paris' delight. In parallel, Wilhelm II doubled down on the alliance with Austria-Hungary and undertook a military build-up that saw the German Army almost double in size, alongside the launching of a new High Seas Fleet.[204] The new men abandoned Bismarck's attempts at building closer relations with Britain and embarked upon an ambitious *Weltpolitik* of colonial saber-rattling and fleet construction that almost immediately triggered the Anglo-German friction that Bismarck had for so long avoided. In place of Bismarck's firmly continentalist strategic outlook and emphasis on an integrated *Mitteleuropa* as a guarantee against Germany's exposed position, Wilhelm II and his new advisors sought security through status, markets, and influence on a global level.[205]

The effects of these changes in Germany's behavior on the calculations of her neighbors were swift and profound. Here at last was the menacing giant that Europe had always feared would arise from German unification. Where Bismarck had sought to reassure the other powers of Germany's peaceful intentions, his successors often seemed to go out of their way to antagonize them. In response, Germany's neighbors did what states confronted by a rising hegemon have done for millennia: they banded together to counterbalance the rising power's strength. Within hardly a year after Germany's decision to let the Reinsurance Treaty lapse, Russia had reached

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[200] Langer, pp. 500-1.
[201] A few years after Bismarck's dismissal, Eulenberg would become enmeshed in a sexual scandal among Wilhelm II's inner circle. It has been claimed that Bismarck amassed sensitive evidence attesting to carnal escapades on the part of the Kaiser, and that these documents remain, to this day, in the safe of the Bismarck estate at Friedrichsruhe. See Pflanze, Bismarck, vol. III, pp. 402-3.
[202] Taylor sees traces of Bismarckian restraint all the way to 1914, even though it was no longer the dominant template for German foreign policy. See Taylor, *Bismarck*, p. 250.
[203] Kennan, *Decline*, p. 399
[204] It is worth contrasting the armaments race that occurred in the lead-up to 1914, which contributed to the outbreak of war, and the armaments race that occurred in the lead-up to the 1887 crisis, which did not. See Paul Kennedy, "Arms-Races and the Causes of War, 1850-1945" in *Strategy and Diplomacy 1870-1945: Eight Studies* (London: Fontana, 1984) p. 167.
[205] See the discussion of the *Welpolitik* vs. *Mitteleuropapolitik* debate in post-Bismarck German foreign policy in Hayes, p. 439.

a political understanding with France. Bismarck had unwittingly helped pave the way for this development with his ill-considered financial warfare on Russia, which the French exploited to the full, with help from the Rothschilds, by providing a series of well-timed, low-interest loans totaling 800 million gold rubles that served to relieve the debt pressures on the Tsarist state and propel an aggressive new round of Russian military expenditures.[206]

The Franco-Russian Alliance, of which Russia was until the last moment a reluctant party, created an earthquake in European diplomacy. It was followed within a few years by two aftershocks: the resolution of colonial disputes between France and Britain (1904) and the understanding between Russia and Britain over Central Asia (1907). Both were a consequence of the changes in German foreign policy that followed Bismarck's departure. As a result, Germany fell more and more in the net of the encircling coalition that Bismarck had for so long feared—and avoided. In place of the fluid patterns that had prevailed since the Congress of Vienna, a much more rigid landscape began to appear in which two hostile blocks squared off at one another.[207] When war finally broke out in 1914, Germany found herself embroiled, for the first time in more than a century and a half, in a conflict on two fronts.

How inevitable was the collapse of Bismarck's system? [208] The standard account of why it broke down is that Bismarck himself was no longer at the helm. So complex were the system's parts, so the argument goes, that only a genius of Bismarck's magnitude could keep it all in motion. This is an explanation that Bismarck himself encouraged from retirement; as his son Herbert told Holstein, "The more tangled the mesh, the more difficult it was to find one's way about in

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[206] See Feis, p. xii and Kennan, *Decline*, p. 403.

[207] While it is beyond the scope of this paper to assess whether alliances contributed to the outbreak of World War One, there is a large literature on this question. Kissinger and Kennan both answered in the affirmative. See Kennan's *The Fateful Alliance: France, Russia, and the Coming of the First World War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) and Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), chapters 7 and 8. A classic articulation of the countervailing case can be found in George Liska, *Nations in Alliances* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), which argues that alliances dampen the prospects of war by placing constraints on risk-acceptant members. An extrapolation of this line of reasoning can be found in Robert Osgood and Robert Tucker, *Force, Order and Justice* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1967). For an assessment of cases beyond World War One, see Paul Schroeder, "Alliances," pp. 195-222; Alastair Smith's "Alliance Formation and War" *International Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (Dec. 1995): pp. 405- 425; and Ido Oren's "The War Proneness of Alliances" *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 34, no. 2 (Jun. 1990): pp. 208-233.

[208] Fuller argued (pp. 321-25) that the system's complexity ensured its eventual collapse even if Bismarck had remained in power and, somewhat implausibly, that Wilhelm II may, by diverting Russian attention to the Far East, have actually prolonged its viability. Steinberg's assessment (p. 423) is that Bismarck had by 1887 exhausted all options for managing rivalries in his old manner ("all the squares on the board had now been blocked") and that the game was therefore up. Schroeder ("Alliances," p. 209) writes that "…the system was probably unmanageable in the long run, and Bismarck's creation of a powerful Prussia-Germany was partly (though only partly) responsible for this condition of inherent unmanageability," though he hastens to add (p. 211): "Bismarck was so ingenious, however, that one cannot be certain that he could not have managed Germany's alliance problems at least for a while longer."

it without Prince Bismarck. My father is the only person who can handle this business."[209] Bismarck's detractors were among the main propagators of this explanation.[210] In their telling, the very sophistication of Bismarck's methods was evidence of his deceitfulness. It was all too complicated for his successors, who were "simpler, more direct, and (it was implied) less devious" men concerned more with Germany's honor than with momentary geopolitical advantage.[211] Here were echoes of the age-old criticism of high diplomacy as a path to national dishonor or even devilry that had cost Metternich his job and Chrysaphius his life.

That Bismarck's system was complex cannot be denied. Wilhelm I was close to the truth when he described it, with an air of pity for Bismarck, as an attempt to juggle oranges while riding horseback. By the 1880s, this juggling act had gotten a lot harder, as the Dual Alliance tied Germany to a deadweight in the east even as her options in the west remained constrained by the permanent hostility of France. Not surprisingly, the alliance with Austria-Hungary has therefore been singled out by many historians as the fatal flaw in Bismarck's diplomacy, in that by committing Germany irrevocably to one side in the east it significantly narrowed the options for keeping a free hand in the west. To this line of argument it could be countered that the alternative was worse: As Schroeder put it, "geographical and military considerations made this alliance a virtual necessity for both powers. The German-Austrian frontier was so long and exposed that they would either have to be allies or else enemies, constantly armed against each other."[212] It could be added that the alternative path for Germany, of not deterring Russia from attacking Austria-Hungary, would almost certainly have resulted in a cataclysmic defeat for the latter, potentially threatening its existence and thereby drawing Germany even deeper into the management of East-Central Europe and therefore friction with Russia.

Long before Bismarck's diplomatic gymnastics in 1887, there was an obvious tension between Germany's commitments to Austria-Hungary and Russia, the reconciliation of which required ever greater feats of improvisation by Bismarck. Yet the fact remains that his methods were, at the moment of Bismarck's dismissal, *working*, and had achieved their aim of preserving peace at a time of grave danger. They rested not on alchemy but written treaties and a supporting culture of diplomatic flexibility that, by this point in Bismarck's tenure, was well-established at the Foreign Ministry. Bismarck himself had outlined the principles of his system in a series of letters to the new Emperor.[213] They were manifestly defensive and revolved around the unifying principle of discouraging any power that would act offensively against another. As long as this principle held, the punching doll remained upright.

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[209] Steinberg, p. 424. To emphasize the point, in 1896 a spiteful Bismarck publicized the contents of the (previously secret) Reinsurance Treaty, as if to underscore the scale of his own accomplishments and the incompetence of his successors in allowing the treaty to lapse.
[210] Langer doubts Wilhelm II's capacity for grasping Bismarck's methods and notes that Caprivi, perhaps in contrast to Holstein, was convinced Bismarck's system could not be continued. See Langer, p. 505.
[211] See Kennan, *Decline*, p. 408
[212] Schroeder, "Alliances," p. 209.
[213] See Kennan, *Decline*, p. 401.

The real reason that Bismarck's system ceased to function was not because his successors were less intelligent or more moral but because they made a conscious choice not to continue the system. It was Germany that declined to renew the Reinsurance Treaty, Germany that encouraged Austria-Hungary to press her claims in the Balkans, and Germany that ended the efforts at an Anglo-German understanding, embarked upon *Weltpolitik*, and began construction of a High Seas Fleet. None of these things would have happened under Bismarck, not because he was necessarily more intelligent (he was) or because the moves in question were intrinsically more honorable (they weren't), but because none of them promoted the one thing that was Bismarck's consistent goal throughout the final two decades of his career: Peace. What Bismarck possessed that his successors lacked was a persistent desire for peace and a willingness to invest his enormous energy and creativity, through the medium of diplomacy, into the pursuit of that object.[214] At the root of Bismarck's complex diplomacy was the choice for peace—not a peace at any price, to be certain, but rather a peace of strength—not once but over and over. That is what Germany lost when Bismarck left and the new men came onto the scene.[215]

The manifestation of this loss was the removal of the only conceivable check on the power of the German General Staff. As long as Bismarck was Chancellor, a preventive war against Russia was impossible. Wilhelm I was a more or less consistent if changeable makeweight to this preventive, as in his own way was the old-fashioned Moltke. With all three removed from the picture, in the space of just a couple of years, a new vista opened for long-suppressed heterodoxies—for the "secret longings for war," as Kennan put it, "on the part of lesser figures now at last relieved of the imposing presence and authority of the great statesman."[216] These longings were held not just by one or two stray officials but large swaths of the German establishment, backed by the reputational weight of an exalted officer corps whose meticulous maps, timetables, and force-ratio comparisons were daily placed before an insecure and impulsive Emperor. Here was an institution that embodied opposition to Bismarck's system, carrying well-laid and continually practiced plans, colliding with a mind, in Wilhelm II, of middling abilities eager to break with the orthodoxies of the recent past.

Like the Austrians who followed Metternich, the Germans after Bismarck were weary of the constraints of a system which they themselves had built. Both wanted to discard a complicated but still largely functional system of diplomacy in favor of an unproven but conceptually

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[214] As Kennan observes, Bismarck's departure "removed from the scene the last great personal opponent of a closer military-political relationship between Russia and France; and with the lapse of the Reinsurance Treaty there disappeared the last serious formal impediment to such a development." See Kennan, *Decline*, p. 410.
[215] Bismarck himself seems to have foreseen the sea change that was coming under Wilhelm II when he observed, "While the old Kaiser was on the throne, one could no longer bring about war… But once the young and militant crown prince ascends the throne, the situation will be different." See Pflanze, *Bismarck*, vol. III, p. 308.
[216] Kennan, *Decline*, p. 407.

cleaner and emotionally more satisfying resolution to the multi-front dilemmas facing their empire. It is no coincidence that, in both cases, the turning point for a bolder policy came at the onset of the reign of a new monarch. Both Franz Josef and Wilhelm II were tempted by the thought of military success and overestimated the real power at their disposal. In Wilhelm's case, the military temptation was abetted by a large and motivated set of advocates with ready-made solutions at hand who saw in the new monarch an opportunity for a bureaucratic as much as conceptual triumph. It should not be forgotten that the tenets of what would eventually become Wilhelm II's policy—antagonism toward Russia, solidarity with Austria-Hungary, and rivalry with Britain—were far more popular in German society than had been Bismarck's secretive designs; in this sense, ironically, Wilhelm II actually brought Germany's policy into closer alignment with the popular will of her people.

The appeal of the military solution for Germany's leaders lay in part in its promise of an elegant simplicity in the face of vexing complexity. In place of Bismarck's tangled webs, the well-groomed adjutants of the General Staff offered predictable outcomes backed by slide rules and railway timetables. The linear accessibility of the military's solutions helped to justify the decision, rooted in frustration, to relinquish self-imposed limits. The frustration arose from the contradiction between Germany's obvious economic and military power, then still a novelty, and the familiar old constraints of geography and history arrayed against her. Offensive military power offered a way to break out of this dilemma that was satisfying to the German Army. It was a confidence rooted in experience, for these were the same armies that had, not that long ago, unified Germany through three victorious wars in six years. Where the military had always played a supporting role in German diplomacy when Bismarck and Moltke were in charge, the pattern after them would flip, with the soldiers setting strategy on the basis of the technical requirements for victory and the politicians providing support. As Kennan writes:

> Never, surely, was the issue more clearly drawn than here between the duty of the statesman to avoid, if possible, the horrors of war in the modern industrial age, and the perennial tendency of military leaders to see as inevitable any war for which they are asked to plan and prepare, and to wish to begin that war at the time, and in the circumstances favorable to their side.[217]

The war for which they "were asked to prepare" was the two-front war that had long haunted the German imagination and fueled Bismarck's fears of a Kaunitzian coalition. It was the harsh dictates of a flexible diplomacy for avoiding such a catastrophe that the military sought to overcome in their plans for a preventive war; forgotten were the nightmares that had made those diplomacies necessary.

Bismarck had always kept the nightmare in the forefront of his mind; his remedy required, above all, a sense of limits. It was probably inevitable that Germany, with her vast latent energy, impetuous generals, and anchorless political class would eventually

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[217] Kennan, *Decline*, p. 365.

produce leaders who did not respect such limits.[218] But it was not inevitable that they would lose this sense of limits so abruptly, at a moment when the gears in the system were working in their favor. It was inevitable that Germany's diplomatic technique would have to evolve after the 1887 crisis, as it had evolved so often in the past; it was not inevitable that Germany would discard diplomacy altogether and choose war as the solution to multi-front pressure.[219] In the end, Bismarck's system failed not because Germany's leaders lacked the intellectual ability to operate it but because they imagined an attainable peace was possible without that system, on the basis of an army that, they believed, could defeat all of the empire's enemies simultaneously. The results of their error are still with us today.

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[218] It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter the debate about whether World War One was avoidable. There is however a vast literature on this subject for the intrepid reader. A good introduction is Paul Schroeder's playful essay "Embedded Counterfactuals and World War I as an Unavoidable War," in Wetzel, et. al., pp. 157-191. For the case that the war was avoidable, see for example R. N. Lebow, "Franz Ferdinand Found Alive. World War I Unnecessary," unpublished paper presented at the Mershon Center, Ohio State University, Feb. 4-5, 2000; and Niall Ferguson's provocative reconsideration of the British role in *The Pity of War* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), chapters 1-3. For a broader take on counterfactuals in history, see Philip E. Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, eds., *Counterfactual Thought Experiments in World Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). For a range of counterfactuals, see the essays by James Chace, David Clay Large, and Dennis E. Showalter under "The What Ifs of 1914" in Robert Crowley, ed., *What If? The World's Foremost Historians Imagine What Might Have Been* (New York: Penguin Random House, 1999).

[219] In particular, the tension between the commitments of the Dual Alliance and Reinsurance Treaty was bound to increase—a fact that Bismarck was well aware of and appears to have been maneuvering to address just before his dismissal. See Schroeder, "Alliances," p. 211.

IV. Application.

Of the many reasons for studying Metternich and Bismarck today, perhaps the most important is that the systems of statecraft they constructed demonstrate the possibility for prolonged stability among vigorously competing great powers. The modern American strategic mind, steeped in the experience of the Cold War, struggles to imagine a category of competition that does not culminate in either cataclysmic war or the internal transformation of the opponent's system of government. The 19th Century provides a helpful counter-example. It show that it is possible to compete within a framework that delimits the boundaries of conflict, while effectively concentrating national power against and deterring the main threat. Wars happened, but they were limited in their destructiveness; there was an ordered constraint that allowed evolutions in the international system without the catastrophes of the Napoleonic and World Wars, or the brink of catastrophe upon which the world teetered in the Cold War. Metternich and Bismarck are important, in other words, because they supply a source of imagination for navigating new realities for which the Cold War is an incomplete or even misleading model.

Both of the systems of diplomacy examined in this paper emerged in large measure in response to the problem of multi-front pressures that exceeded the state's ability alone to handle, the most dangerous manifestation of which would have been a systemic war against rivals in two directions. Neither system can be understood without grasping this arch danger and the motivations it created for effective strategy—and sustainable peace. Both statesmen sought to cope with the danger not by dominating their rivals but by constructing elaborate systems of diplomacy aimed at making war less likely, backed by determined efforts to create the largest allied political-economic base possible for an advantage in sustained competition. Both succeeded for a season in transcending the normal functioning of the balance of power: Metternich by creating a collective security system that prioritized political equilibrium over the one-off gains of conquest and spared a weak empire burdens beyond its ability to bear; Bismarck, by creating a labyrinth of overlapping alliances that made an immensely powerful empire less threatening to her neighbors and thus inviting fewer counterbalancing restraints.

It does nothing to diminish the European credentials of either statesman to say that, for each, ensuring the interests and security of his state counted as the highest object of his diplomacy. Metternich's challenge was to extend the power and influence of a vulnerable Habsburg Monarchy that could never hope on the basis of her own strength to stand toe to toe with the other Great Powers. He did this by ensconcing Austria in a confection of tributary relationships with the smaller German and Italian states, underwritten by a pact with Austria's stronger eastern rival (Russia) that, as long as it held, quelled the ambitions of her restive western rival (France). Bismarck's challenge was to consolidate the strength of a new German empire that had been gained through war without triggering a new war by Germany's nervous neighbors or her own generals, the former of which could not be blamed for fearing German power and the latter of which cannot be blamed for wanting to use it. He did this by ensconcing Germany in

contradictory security commitments, all tilted decisively against the offensive urge, the collective effect of which was to integrate and steady her least stable neighbor (Austria), redirect her strongest one (Russia), and dissuade her most aggressive one (France).

Both men were fighting the natural tendency of Great Powers to lash out militarily. What each sought was an affordable peace after a period of war in which to digest the fruits of victory. Both employed diplomacy not as a substitute for what today is called "hard power" but as a complement to it. Their aim was to concentrate military power in order not to have to use it. Both used diplomacy to deflect pressure from the center of the chessboard and free up decisive military strength for contests with the most dangerous or significant aggressor. Metternich's federalized burden-sharing in Germany and alliance with Russia all but removed what otherwise would have been consuming security burdens on Austria's northern and eastern frontiers, enabling the Habsburg Army to concentrate its manpower on the most important theater, Italy. Bismarck's restraining alliances with Austria and Russia allowed the German Army to largely neglect the eastern frontier and concentrate its manpower on the Rhine. In both cases, the power that posed the greatest threat was France, which though less powerful than the other flanking power, Russia, was closer at hand to vital interests and—critically—motivated to overturn systems that embodied what she saw as unjust postwar verdicts against her.

Both systems endured for a remarkably long period of time; Metternich's Congress system lasted altogether from 1815 to 1854; Bismarck's system from 1871 to the early 1890s, with aspects continuing all the way to 1914. This longevity was possible, in the first instance, because of the manifest benefits that the systems rendered to the states in question and indeed to all of Europe, which gave other powers an incentive to assist in perpetuating them. But also because of the extraordinarily long amount of time that the two statesmen were in power. At their peak, both maintained unchallenged authority over the conceptualization and implementation of foreign policy in their respective empires, courtesy of close relationships with monarchs who acted as effective buffers to bureaucratic opposition.

Both systems used what might be called a chaperoned caucusing among the Great Powers, whether in aggregate or sub-sets, to avoid systemic conflict. But the logic behind each was different. Metternich's system operated on the principle of coordinated action and movement by the whole, while Bismarck's system operated on the principle of checks and balances.[220] The currency of the first was legitimacy, that of the second was power. The first represented an attempt by a weak empire to impose moral restraints on powerful rivals, the second an attempt by a strong central empire to restrain herself and thereby obviate the need for the external restraints that her power provoked. Both systems contained an element of deterrence—in Metternich's system, this was the fear of ostracization and isolation, in the face of revolution,

[220] For expansion on the latter point, see Taylor, *Struggle*, p. 195, and Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, chapter 5.

by an authority capable of denying legitimacy; in Bismarck's system, it was fear of isolation as well, but in a raw power sense, of being forced to stand alone while rivals joined in alliance.[221]

APPLES AND ORANGES?

How comparable is the geopolitical setting of the 21st Century with that of the 19th Century? Differences abound. One of the biggest is the time and space that policymakers have for pursuing a consistent strategy. Even very senior government officials in a constitutional republic do not have the luxury of remaining in office for multiple decades to see their plans through to completion; even if they did, the divided nature of representative government, coupled with the sifting effects of large bureaucracies and congressional oversight, would prevent any one individual, however talented, from ever exercising the unchecked sway over national security that Metternich and Bismarck enjoyed in their time. U.S. policymakers must consider a much larger map than either of these statesmen, both of whom could focus their energies almost entirely on the interactions of a handful of states in the crowded confines of Europe. Both shared long land borders with major rivals; neither had the advantage of separation from other major states by large oceans like the United States.

An especially big difference about geopolitics today compared to the 19th Century is how alliances operate. Until late in the 19th Century, alliances were narrowly instrumental constructs that shifted frequently. Most were intended to manage another power or restrain it from doing something impetuous rather than to provide military assistance against a third party or attain a positive objective.[222] Alliances with binding security commitments tended to be devised for a specific, time-bound object, like an imminent war, and quickly discarded afterwards. Neither Austria nor Germany were encumbered by the kind of pre-existing security arrangements that tie the United States to the defense of a large number of states around the world today. Both arguably enjoyed a higher degree of cultural similarity with their rivals than is the case for the United States vis-à-vis China and Russia, though one should not understate the political differences that existed between the eastern autocracies and western liberal powers in Metternich's time, or between Wilhelmine Germany and Republican France.

Another big difference is technology. Metternich and Bismarck lived in an era before nuclear weapons, when the gravest imaginable threat to a country was conventional invasion followed by indemnities or loss of territory. Their efforts to manage multi-sided competition did not have to take account of long-range airpower, geography-defying ICBM launches, hypersonic

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[221] As Schroeder put it, deterrence in the Congress system was grounded in "moral and legal political pressure, the threat that reckless or unlawful behavior would cost the offending state its status and voice within the system, leading to its isolation from it and the attendant loss of systemic rewards and benefits." See Schroeder "Vienna Settlement," Jervis, p. 51.

[222] See Schroeder's analysis of the evolution of alliances from the 18th Century to the present day in "Alliances," p. 211.

missiles, or cyber attacks. In this sense, both had the luxury of maintaining a narrow focus on the one or two big, proximate land powers that possessed sufficiently large armies to threaten the territories of their empires. Communications technology, too, was still in its infancy. Both statesmen operated at a time when secrecy in diplomacy was much more achievable than it is today and public scrutiny was more difficult. These differences have to be acknowledged and, with them, the inherent limitations of attempting to find lessons in the past for application in the present.

And yet, for all the obvious differences, there is much about the time in which Metternich and Bismarck lived that is relatable to today, and most of the similarities are more fundamental and essential than the differences. Perhaps the foremost similarity is that geopolitics remains geopolitics—a competition for power, as measured in territory, influence, technology, and the safety and wealth that these things bring. In this competition, states, and especially the biggest states, remain by far the most important actors, and the arch imperative for states remains survival. The pursuit of survival requires states to engage in strategy, which in turn remains a pursuit of rationality amidst the chaos of geopolitics to align finite means with seemingly infinite ends. States must still give top-of-mind attention to the capabilities rather than the intentions of their adversaries and, to this end, labor to hold the commanding heights of economic power and technology. However revolutionary Artificial Intelligence may prove to be in coming years, the telegraph, the railroad and breechloaders were at least as revolutionary in their time.

Today's world also bears a notable resemblance to the 19th Century Europe for its high degree of interdependence. Whatever the achievements of globalization, capital and people moved more freely between the German Second *Reich* and French Third Republic than between many large powers today. The current international order, like the European order of the late 19th Century, is the outworking of several decades of attempts at regularized economic cooperation, albeit with perhaps less success in integrating the system leader's main geopolitical rivals into that framework. To an even greater extent than in Bismarck's time, today's system shows signs of decay and crisis as a result of changes in the underlying distribution of power and the pursuit, by major powers, of revisionist territorial claims. The overall configuration of the emerging system, with multiple power centers and concurrent patterns of rivalry and cooperation, more closely resemble the competitive landscape of 19th Century Europe than, say, the rigid, ideological bipolarity of the Cold War.

America's strategic circumstances, too, bear some similarities to the states that Metternich and Bismarck led. There is the obvious geographic similarity, America's oceans notwithstanding, of facing threats on multiple fronts that likely exceed our military-technological capabilities to simultaneously defeat. If anything, the global and regionally diverse nature of the theaters in which the United States operates makes the multi-front problem more salient today, as does the greater diversity of military-power formats and operating environments. There is a similar impulse in the United States to that which existed in the 19th Century, to attempt to overawe the multi-front problem by outspending and outgunning all rivals. And there is the similar

challenge, as old as mankind, of mustering the skills and foresight required to build a durable diplomatic framework to deal with the problem.

Approached with humility and the appropriate caveats, then, the events of Metternich's and Bismarck's time can be instructive for our own. Both men had a sharp sense of history and their place in it. Both thought about the future and speculated on the shape of events to come. Neither would be surprised, if alive today, by the multi-directional challenge facing the United States; both would probably see in today's debates echoes of the debates in their own time. The scale is larger, involving continent-sized players colliding at a global level, but the essence of strategy and geopolitics is the same.

Three sets of applications seem relevant for today: those related to diplomacy toward rivals; those related to alliances; and those related to institutions.

(1) Applications for diplomacy toward rivals

Effective diplomacy prioritizes the main threat. Both Metternich and Bismarck developed an early focus on the most dangerous threat facing their empires, established the need to deal with that threat as a strategic and bureaucratic priority for the state, and maintained this prioritization over a period of many years. Preoccupation with the main threat forms the linchpin of both systems; it is from this prioritization that both statesmen derived the other components of their statecraft and, in particular, the imperative of a durable political arrangement with the other flanking power. In this, the two cases confirm the pattern from the historical cases examined in part 1, in all four of which the Great Powers in question prioritized the main threat, whether by diplomatic or military means, and found ways to at least temporarily deprioritize other, even very serious, threats facing the state. What makes the Metternich and Bismarck cases unique is the length of time over which they were able to maintain this prioritization, and the fact that they did so in prolonged conditions of peace, as opposed to achieving prioritization as a prelude to, and in preparation for, war with the threat in question.

What stands out about the contemporary United States, when viewed in this light, is the extent to which it has not yet achieved strategic prioritization of the main threat. While U.S. strategic documents, including the 2018 National Defense Strategy, have identified China as the chief danger facing the United States, this prioritization has not been reflected in U.S. foreign policy, which for the most part has simply grafted the need to deal with the China challenge into a preexisting list of international objectives not all that different from those that existed ten or even twenty years ago. This is historically atypical; in all the cases surveyed in this series, achieving and maintaining threat prioritization, and proactively managing resultant tradeoffs, occurred within a relatively short period of time after the designation of the main threat. Critically, the imperative to prioritize applied irrespective of the relative power of the state in question; both Austria, which was a relatively weak Great Power, and Bismarck's Germany, which was strong, prioritized the main threat.

To be sure, prioritization is not easy. Its difficulty is partly conceptual, in that it requires the state to do something that is, at face value, counter-intuitive. If, as Edward Luttwak has written, strategy is a paradox, then the paradox of two-front strategy is that, in order to deal with serious dangers in two directions, the state, in a sense, must *not* deal with one of them. It must deprioritize one threat, which is perhaps hardest for democracies, since it involves choices that inevitably involve reducing attention or resources for what some segment of the public, political leadership, or bureaucracy see as *the most important* threat. In America's case, there is also the temptation, especially strong for a large and rich country, to believe that we can avoid prioritization by producing ever-larger defense budgets, as well as the ideological factor of opposition to seeking détente with any rival that is authoritarian in nature. To these must be added familiarity; unlike Metternich and Bismarck, both of which were building a system from scratch in the aftermath of recent wars that had focused their mind on the main threat, America's moment of abstraction occurred thirty years ago and the power that it would now prioritize as the main threat (China) is not one with which it has a long history of major rivalry.

However valid these may be as explanations of the fact of non-prioritization, none of them is strategic. If history is any guide, the imperative for prioritization is exactly that—an imperative, which foists itself onto the state in the quest for survival. The strategic challenge is to make the needed adjustments for avoiding two-front war before the event that makes it necessary (the war itself) has occurred. In the end, states prioritize because the costs of failing to do so far exceed those involved in the act of prioritizing.

Effective diplomacy isolates, but doesn't necessarily 'contain,' the main threat. The practical goal of diplomacy for both Metternich and Bismarck may with only a little exaggeration be expressed in the principle: *Isolate thy enemy*. Both men showed remarkable consistency in placing this goal at their heart of their statecraft over a period of many decades. Long before 1815, Metternich had labored to sequester France behind a stable frontier and prevent her from linking up with Russia; the Vienna system was merely the choreographed peacetime pursuit of this aim. Long before 1871, Bismarck had worked to diplomatically isolate Prussia's enemies, first Austria and then France, as a prelude to the wars of 1866 and 1870; his system afterwards was merely the regularized pursuit of what had previously been done through instinct and improvisation against a France that was now a settled peacetime foe. In both systems, the length of general peace corresponded to the length of time that diplomatic isolation of the main threat was maintained. System breakdown went hand-in-hand with the failure or inability of Metternich's and Bismarck's successors to continue to ensure this outcome—Austria, with the collapse of the Russia alliance and the lonely wars in 1859 and 1866; Germany, with the collapse of the Russia alliance and the war of 1914.

Isolating the main enemy did not, for either Metternich or Bismarck, mean what would today be called containment. Neither sought to ideologically and economically quarantine the main

enemy from intercourse in the European states system; rather, what they sought was *positional isolation*: to prevent the rival from forming alliances with other major powers. True, Metternich worried about a liberal contagion spreading from France if she succumbed to another revolution; but his efforts were overwhelmingly about keeping a Bourbon France enmeshed in the Vienna system even as he restrained her militarily. Similarly, Bismarck did not seek to contain France—to the contrary, he actively worked to *promote* French energies in a direction that did not conflict with Germany's primary interests, while keeping her from finding a base of support among the other powers for a *revanchist* war. In both cases, diplomatic isolation of the main threat was a prerequisite not only to avoiding war but to Austria and Germany respectively having a constructive relationship with that rival. System stability did not require the main threat to be sealed off in the way that the United States did with the Soviet Union; rather, it required that the main threat not be able to form a military combination with other major powers.

The United States is likely to find positional isolation along Metternichian and Bismarckian lines a more realistic goal than Cold War-style containment vis-à-vis its main threat, China. The American foreign-policy elite struggles to conceptualize a category of behavior toward rivals between "engagement" and "containment." This is partly due to the modern impulse to simplify policy options, and partly to the tendency of the American political mind to define competition as a clash of competing political systems. To be sure, there are significant ideological differences between the U.S. and Chinese systems that will inevitably figure into competition between the two powers. But Chinese behavior is not principally motivated by ideology in the way that Soviet behavior was, nor are the material bases of Chinese strength self-restricting in the way that Soviet Russia's were. China's strength and intentions demand U.S. resistance, yet its wealth and centrality to global trade foreclose containment along Cold War lines. Given these constraints, the older diplomatic concept of isolating a rival by denying it alliance options may be more attainable. It entails not only undermining China's relationship with Russia and drawing other states close to the United States, but the much less obvious act of encouraging alignments between third parties, as Bismarck did with the Mediterranean Agreements. The overarching point is that there is a wide array of options between confrontation and alliance that have been neglected in recent policy thinking that may prove more serviceable to U.S. strategy than the Cold War dichotomies.

EFFECTIVE DIPLOMACY DEFLECTS AND REORIENTS RIVAL AMBITIONS. Overlooked in American political culture's binary emphasis on containment and engagement is a technique that was among the most commonly used by Bismarck: strategic deflection. This is the practice of attempting to reorient a rival's energies in a direction that is less in conflict with one's own state. Bismarck used this technique, to varying degrees of effectiveness, with each of the three rival powers he confronted in his career. After Austria's ejection from Germany and Italy, Bismarck pushed it toward a strategic focus on the Balkans. After France's defeat in 1871, Bismarck sought to push its focus away from the Rhine and toward colonial expansion in Africa and Asia. In both cases, the aim was to alleviate multi-front pressures by channeling one rival's activities away from a vital theater and toward competition with a third power; in both,

deflection came in the wake of Prussia's military defeat of the rival in question; and in both, Bismarck encouraged the strategy's success by using positive diplomatic and economic incentives to make the new area of expansion more attractive to the rival in question.

A strategy of deflection may hold merit for the United States. It is hard to imagine China, given the global scale of its ambitions and extent of its comparative economic strength, being channeled toward regions that are of low strategic interest to the United States. Russia, by contrast, possesses a much more obvious outlet to which to profitably steer its energies, in the form of the large, neglected hinterlands of the Russian Far East and Central Asia. These regions are of minimal direct strategic interest to the United States and, on the basis of Chinese economic domination, are likely to merit greater Russian strategic attention in the years ahead. A Bismarckian strategy would seek to deflect Russian energies in that direction, probably through a combination of closing off Russia's preferred, westward line of expansion and encouraging economic partnership with other Asian powers in the East to supplant Chinese investment. Hard as such a course may be to imagine at present, Bismarck's handling of Austria and France suggests that strategic deflection can succeed, provided that the negative and positive incentives are present.

EFFECTIVE DIPLOMACY CONCENTRATES FINITE MILITARY POWER. From a military-strategic perspective, the most distinctive feature of Metternich's and Bismarck's diplomacy is the effect that prioritization and isolation of the main threat had in enabling a concentration of military resources against that threat. The fame that has attached itself to both men for achieving prolonged peace at the European level has tended to obscure the fact that this peace was a byproduct of the successful management of their empires' primary security contests, which was made possible by the deterrent effect of being able to concentrate militarily on the primary theater. Without the systematic pursuit of political accord with Russia, Austria would not have been able to concentrate force in Northern Italy and Prussia would not have been able to do so in its primary theater of the Rhine. In this, the two cases repeat the pattern from the earlier cases in part 1 of this study, all of which used diplomacy to reduce commitments in secondary theaters and support a military focus on the main threat.

Examined in this light, the current U.S. situation of sustained military tension with two major rivals simultaneously is historically anomalous. The anomaly is particularly acute given that U.S. defense plans have formally abandoned the goal of being able to wage concurrent war against both of these states and indeed are premised upon an assumption of not possessing adequate military resources to do so. The U.S. situation is in some respects the inversion, not only of the German case but many of the other cases considered in the first part of the study, in which political leaders sought to avoid two-front wars by political means while the military planned for the contingency of diplomacy's failure and, in some instances, actively sought to undermine the diplomats and launch an all-points attack. In the U.S. case, it is the military that is making adjustments to reflect reality first, while the civilian leadership has consistently lagged in its willingness or ability to make the diplomatic changes that the military's adjustments indicate are necessary. The historical pattern suggests that this is unsustainable:

to have practical strategic meaning, military recognition of a main threat must be accompanied by a political reduction in tensions with one of the two rivals.

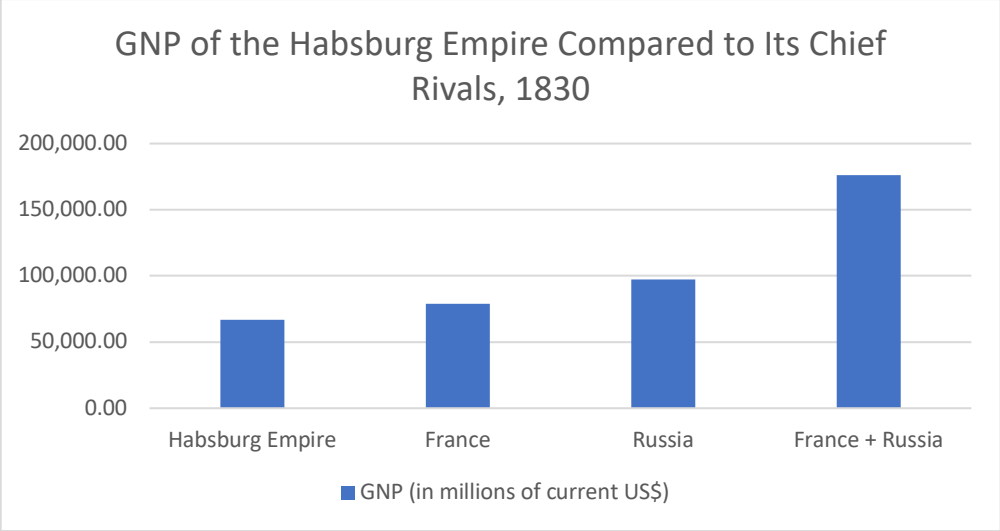
Importantly, the role of diplomacy in concentrating military power remains valid despite the changes brought about by the nuclear revolution. To be sure, America's rivals possess nuclear weapons that, by their very existence, necessitate the maintenance of capabilities for deterring both—capabilities that, given quantitative and qualitative differences in Russian and Chinese arsenals, will probably require bifurcated U.S. capabilities tailored to each. This requirement is unlikely to go away, irrespective of how effective U.S. diplomacy someday proves. However, unlike in the Cold War, when the size and integration of nuclear forces in military planning made it likely that any war would eventually lead to general and unconstrained nuclear war, in today's environment it is not hard to imagine a purely conventional war or a limited nuclear war between the major powers. The United States, China and Russia routinely train for such scenarios, in which nuclear weapons are increasingly reserved for risk manipulation and escalation. In this environment, diplomacy is more relevant than at any point in many decades as a tool for supporting the development of favorable correlations of forces at the regional level to deal with multi-front pressure.

THE MOST DETERMINED FOE CAN BE THE MOST DANGEROUS. Both Metternich and Bismarck to a large extent prioritized military competition with the weaker of the two rivals flanking their empires—France. In Metternich's time, post-Napoleonic France remained the most potent military force in continental Europe and, while relatively stronger than Austria, was already entering its long decline as a Great Power. By Bismarck's time, France was a much-diminished force in European politics and significantly overshadowed in wealth and might by both Germany and Russia (see graphs below). That the French threat was Metternich's central priority is indisputable; in Bismarck's case, a reasonable case can be made that, particularly by the end of his career, Russia had begun to loom larger in the German strategic mind as the feud between it and Austria-Hungary intensified. But even then, in military terms, France remained the focus and the reason that Bismarck devoted so much effort to keeping a "free hand" in the west. This was the heart of the debate between Bismarck and the German generals, who saw Russia as the greater danger and wanted to alter German strategy accordingly. At least until the end of Bismarck's tenure, however, his preferred military prioritization of France remained intact.

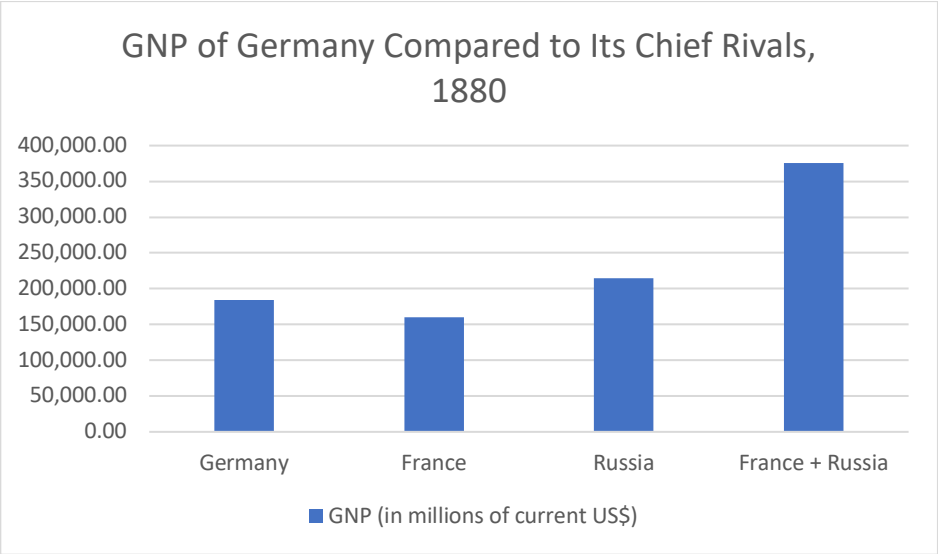
If capabilities matter so much more than intentions in geopolitics, why did the Metternichian and especially Bismarckian systems prioritize what, from a raw capabilities perspective, was the weaker of two threats? The answer lies partly in geography: France was physically closer to both the Austrian and German home areas and the regions of greatest importance to both. France's Army was also, in both periods, considered more advanced than the Russian Army, being composed of a higher proportion of long-service professional soldiers and capable of faster mobilization, courtesy of a more compact landmass and modernized infrastructure. By this metric—the "spendability" of power—France was in fact the more capable rival, while Russia was the more distant threat. To this, however, must be added the factor of French

motivation. In both the Metternich and Bismarck eras, France was reeling from defeat in a recent war and motivated by revenge. It was, by virtue of its continued status as a Great Power, a standing rebuke to the prevailing European order and, inevitably, the nucleus around which any countervailing coalition could—and eventually would—form to overturn that order.

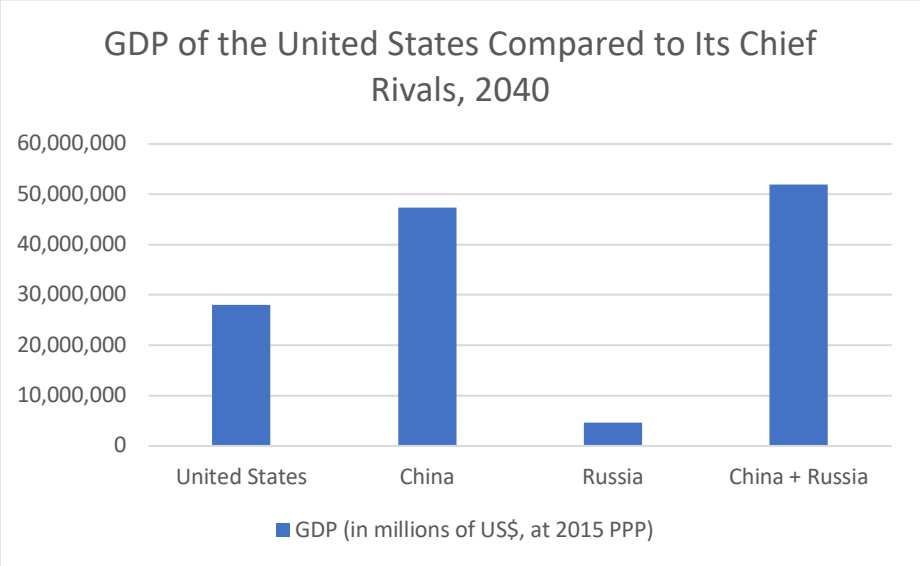
The power differentials between the United States and its chief rivals (China alone, as well as China combined with Russia) differ in important ways from the two empires examined in this study. China is on course to enjoy a wider economic advantage vis-à-vis the United States than Russia possessed vis-à-vis Metternich's Austria or Bismarck's Germany, while the modern-day Russian Federation is vastly weaker relative to the United States than France was proportionally to Austria or Germany. As such, on a purely power basis, the cases confirm that the United States must view China as its most serious threat.



Source: Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers.*



Source: Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers.*



Source: OECD.

However, the cases also clearly show that while capabilities matter most for assessing threats, intentions aren't irrelevant. Russia's vengeful stance toward the post-1989 system is reminiscent of France's attitude toward the post-1815 and post-1871 systems. Like France then, Russia's grievance today is rooted in the loss of both prestige and territory. The Baltic States and Ukraine aren't all that different in Russian thinking from Alsace and Lorraine in late 19th Century French thinking. Those who believe that Russia would prove a more amenable partner if she regained these territories should consider Bismarck's observation that French "bitterness will be just as great even if they come out of the war without loss of territory" – an instinct

validated by the experience of Metternich, who was far more generous with France in the 1815 settlement. Both cases demonstrate the irreconcilability of an aggrieved power to a new system embodying its loss. The takeaway for the United States is that the deeply ingrained Western impulse to conciliate a rival that lost the last war is unlikely to render that power any less hostile to the status quo.

THE PUNITIVE USE OF FINANCIAL POWER CAN DRIVE RIVALS TOGETHER. Great Powers inevitably look to all of the tools at their disposal for enhancing their strategic position. Yet the German case shows the limitations of attempting to use financial heft as a tool for altering the behavior an economically-interdependent rival. Bismarck's calculation appears to have been that by restricting Russia's access to German capital and thus reminding her leaders of their dependency on Germany, he would be able to convince Russia to deescalate and, in a sense, fall back into line. What Bismarck overlooked was that providing *too painful* a reminder of Russia's capital dependence on Germany would have exactly the opposite effect and lead the Russians to conclude that their dependency represented a liability that must be urgently reduced to ensure the state's capacity for independent action in the future. This decisively tipped Russia to look for an alternative strategic financial backer, which inevitably meant deeper ties with France. Thus rather than driving Germany's rivals apart, Bismarck's financial warfare drove them together.

The takeaway is to beware the unintended effects of attempting to employ financial leverage for strategic purposes, particularly at moments of geopolitical fluidity. Using these tools may have carried less risk in a unipolar environment, when the geopolitical stakes are lower and alternative sources of funding less readily available. But in a strategically contested and economically multipolar environment, in which America's main rival is itself a source of great wealth, such tools are likely to have strategic reverberations, as states seek to limit their financial dependencies for political reasons. At a minimum, history suggests that pressuring the weaker of two rivals will fuel its strategic-political dependence on the stronger rival. More generally, as Bismarck found, using the financial weapon can be just painful enough to alter behavior, but in ways that move rivals deeper into hostility and self-insulation, thus undermining the overall strategic goal and eroding the efficacy of the tools in question over time.

(2) APPLICATIONS FOR DIPLOMACY TOWARD ALLIES

EFFECTIVE DIPLOMACY MOTIVATES AND RESTRAINS ALLIES. Metternich and Bismarck both used alliances with weaker states to offset the security burden vis-à-vis at least one of the major threats facing their empires. Metternich's recreation of the German *Bund* as a defensive structure allowed Austria to largely outsource the security of Germany, freeing up Habsburg military forces to concentrate on Italy. Bismarck's alliance with Austria-Hungary provided additional military resources for defending Germany's eastern frontier in the event of war with Russia, allowing the German Army to focus its resources on the western frontier with France.

To work, both arrangements required that the smaller states in question maintain sufficient military capabilities to fulfill their part of the bargain and not become net security drains in their own right. And both came with liabilities that had to be actively managed. This was especially true in the case of Bismarck's alliance with Austria-Hungary, which had the potential to create perverse incentives for Vienna to *both* do less for its own defense *and* act provocatively toward Russia—the worst of all worlds from the perspective of German security.

Bismarck clearly recognized this problem. He handled it partly in the conventional way, of prevailing upon the Austro-Hungarians to increase their defense spending. This he did repeatedly and emphatically throughout the 1887 crisis, clearly seeing the connection between the robustness of Austria-Hungary's independent defensive capability, the odds of dissuading a Russian attack, and the ability to keep Germany's Army concentrated in the west against France. But he used another method as well—namely, placing explicit limits on the extent to which Austria-Hungary could count on German help in the event of a war. It was when this question came into doubt, largely as a result of the collusive planning of the two general staffs, that Bismarck took the bold step of publicizing the full text of the treaty, thereby showing not only Austria-Hungary but also Russia the restricted nature of the arrangement. The point to emphasize is that, from the standpoint of managing Germany's two-front problem, the two tasks went hand-in-hand: pushing Austria-Hungary to arm, and giving her the incentive to do so by demonstrating that Germany would not simply bear the entirety or even bulk of her defensive problem on her behalf.

For the United States, the takeaway is that motivating allies to do more for their own defense may sometimes require transparency with allies on the limits of what we can do for them. Of course, in America's case, this is more difficult than it was for Bismarck, given the more extensive nature of U.S. commitments to allies and the inherent danger of attempting to retract or renegotiate downward those commitments. And as Bismarck's experience shows, maintaining crystal clarity about intentions is critical for deterrence. Yet the underlying logic of his signaling to Austria-Hungary remains valid: Allies will only do more for themselves when they have compelling self-interested reasons to do so, and when the need in question is not already being met by a more powerful benefactor.

A CONSOLIDATED ALLIED ECONOMIC BASE IS THE BEST INSURANCE POLICY. One of the most striking similarities between Metternich's and Bismarck's systems is the emphasis that both placed on building a strong European middle zone to augment the economic and military capabilities available to their respective empires. Metternich's 'dike' and Bismarck's *Mitteleuropa* were both manifestations of this goal. Both statesmen could see the advantage in long-term competition swinging in favor of ever-larger territorial units and, to compensate, sought to build integrated allied blocs around their own empires in which economic cooperation (low trade barriers, coordinated investment, and shared infrastructure) would reinforce political and military alignment. By doing so, both statesmen hoped to develop the larger scale needed for propelling economic growth and ensuring their empires' ability to keep up in the innovation race for new technologies of the Industrial Revolution—scale that Austria

and Germany lacked in comparison to flanking powers that enjoyed access to much larger, global empires.

This aspect of the two cases is directly relevant for the United States today. Even as it seeks to cope with and to the extent possible mitigate the direct effects of simultaneity, it would behoove the United States to build up as large as possible a demographic, economic and political 'base' in world affairs. If anything, emerging technologies, with their reliance on the aggregative advantages that accrue from access to large data sets, make the quest for scale even more important now than in the era of the railroad and telegraph. The obvious focal point for a U.S. global base is Europe, where the United States enjoys historical and cultural bonds broadly analogous to those that bound together the German states in the 19th Century. NATO and the U.S.-EU relationship provide pre-existing mechanisms by which to build the modern equivalent of Metternich's central 'dike.' But the historical examples also shed light on what the central purpose of U.S. diplomacy in managing this 'base' should be. Both Metternich and Bismarck sought proactively to reform the functioning of Germany's federative structures in order to derive greater value for their empire's own interests in the context of protracted competition. They used these structures to prevent weaker confederates from aligning with external rivals, to shift and share defensive burdens that freed up attention for the primary theater, and to nurture long-term economic-technological advantages. Their experiences indicate that a state's success in Great Power competition hinges upon its ability to organize and shore up a wider economic and political base. Far from being a distraction to U.S.-China rivalry, the fate of Europe is intimately tied to its outcomes.

IT PAYS TO BUTTRESS SECONDARY POWERS. Both Metternich and Bismarck backstopped and co-opted weaker players whose participation in the system provided strategic benefits vis-a-vis more powerful opponents. Bismarck's propping-up of Austria-Hungary is especially interesting because the latter still possessed many of the traits of a Great Power and had only recently fought a major war with Prussia. To abet even a depleted rival is unusual in geopolitics. Bismarck's reasoning was, however, not altruistic but strategic: Pulling Austria-Hungary close ensured that the latter's still-significant resources would augment the German economic and technological base and prevent Austria from being pulled into rival orbits. At the same time, Bismarck engaged in what might be called geopolitical engineering *within* the domestic structures of his new ally, exploiting Austria's pluralistic makeup to influence her foreign, commercial and defense policies in ways that favored German interests.

Bismarck's methods may hold relevance for future U.S. dealings with states like India and the EU. In a world characterized by intensifying competition, these second-tier powers take on new significance as players in their own right that have the potential to decisively alter power differentials between the United States and China. Their importance is if anything even greater in today's technological landscape, in which access to large populations conveys advantages in the development of data-based platforms, and in which non-peer players (especially the EU) have an outsized capacity to shape global standards in ways that impact U.S. innovation. The United States is likely to derive value from elevated engagement with these players not only as

a means of building traditional diplomatic coalitions but to ensure the largest global base possible for maintaining favorable access to the data flows that will drive innovation in the fields like AI and quantum computing that will most decisively shape future military competition. Now, as in Bismarck's time, there are advantages to remaining *à trois* in a system of five.

DON'T TRY TO USE ALLIES TO HANDLE A THEATER OTHER THAN THEIR OWN. Both cases in this study demonstrate the regional nature of alliances and geographic limits of their effective use. Perhaps the best example can be seen in the late period of the Austrian case, when Metternich's successors attempted, unsuccessfully, to reformulate the German *Bund* in a way that would allow Austria to utilize the federal forces of her smaller allies outside the confines of Germany, which for centuries had been their strict remit, for missions in Austria's other strategic theaters, Italy and the Black Sea basin. The opposition engendered among the German states, which saw the move as Austrian overreach, helped accelerate Prussia's challenge to Habsburg leadership and the demise of the *Bund*. A countervailing example can be seen in Bismarck's creation of the so-called Mediterranean Agreements. This was a shrewd expedient whereby Germany alleviated much of her own burden for defending Austria-Hungary by recruiting Italy and Britain as surrogate props to Austrian interests in the Near East. What made the arrangement ingenious, from a German perspective, was that it achieved a system-level effect (freeing up Germany to focus on the west, and thereby deterring general war) by appealing to the highly specific, regional interests of other powers that, at least in Britain's case, would never have consented to a Europe-wide commitment—all without Germany herself being a party to the arrangement.

The point is that alliances tend to increase in efficacy in proportion to the specificity of their provisions to the region in which the allies in question have the strongest interests. This should be obvious but bears stating insofar as there is a modern conceit that allies of a global power will have an interest in acting alongside it at a global level—which is to say, outside their own regions. The impulse of an overstretched Great Power to recruit extra-regional allies to share the defensive burden in its own (but not necessarily their) primary theater is understandable and grounded in self-interest. But so too is the desire of allies to resist such recruitment. This insight is relevant for the United States as it contemplates the prospects of soliciting help from e.g. India or European NATO states into the Western Pacific. History suggests that, for a Great Power faced with multi-front pressures, the greatest contribution that allies can make to general stability is to do their utmost for the stability of their own neighborhood.

(3) APPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONS

INSTITUTIONS ONLY MITIGATE COMPETITION IF BACKED BY REAL POWER. Both Metternich and Bismarck derived value from regularized channels of consultation with rivals. The effect was especially pronounced for Metternich, who was able for several years after 1815 to appeal to what would today be called the shared "norms" of monarchical solidarity to dampen the effects of strategic competition and keep the Great Powers focused on shared objectives at the

European level. Yet Austria's experience also shows the limits of using such methods to paper over inadequate power capabilities. As the gap between Austria's international aspirations and actual military-economic power became evident, her rivals had fewer incentives to accept the constraints of the Vienna system and simply ignored or worked around it. It is partly for this reason that Metternich lobbied throughout his career for larger defense budgets. Strategic rivals only accept mutually-agreed boundaries on competition if the alternative to those boundaries, in the form of self-help by the system's architect, is less palatable. Unless backed by real power, even the most elegant of cooperative structures is irrelevant.

Austria's experience puts in proper perspective what future U.S. policymakers can reasonably expect from international institutions for mitigating the effects of great-power competition. There is a prevailing notion that the United States can revert to a more intense utilization of international institutions and multilateralism broadly as surrogates for national power. On this view, the United States could, for example, reduce the pressure of competition with China by enmeshing the latter in cooperation on, e.g., climate change, *irrespective of* the relative power relationship between the two powers. Austria's experience suggests that the opposite is likely to be the case—that the usefulness of international structures is likely to decrease in proportion to reductions in U.S. economic and military power. Should the United States in coming years continue to cut real defense spending while its rivals are increasing their defense budgets, it should expect to see such institutions become even less efficacious for promoting global peace and stability than they are at present. As relative power relations change to our disadvantage, Austria's experience suggests we should expect to see major rivals either bypass such structures or hijack them to apply greater constraints to U.S. behavior.

A related takeaway is that cooperative structures hold strategic utility for a Great Power in proportion to how effectively they can be used to achieve specific national interests. Insofar as the Vienna system is held up as an example of cooperative norms trumping power competition, the record suggests that Austria saw it not as an end in themselves but as instruments for temporarily suspending competition in one area in order to focus military resources in another. In this sense, A. J. P. Taylor may be closer to the truth when he likens Metternich's methods to a smokescreen or conjurer's trick, than, say, John Ikenberry, who saw in the system an abnegation of interests in pursuit of a greater good.[223] That's not to say that the goal was not to at least temporarily suspend the more abrasive aspects of the balance of power; rather, it is to say that the goal of transcending the balance of power had value insofar as it corresponded to specific, time-bound strategic interests. Put differently: it's not a system of international consultation that generates peace, it's what that system allows its architect to *do* that generates peace.

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[223] See John Ikenberry, *After Victory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019): chapter 4.

SUCCESSFUL CONCERTS ARE BUILT BY TERRITORIALLY SATIATED POWERS. The methods that Metternich and Bismarck used to corral rivalrous powers into peaceful Concerts are often held up as models for managing great-power competition in the 21st Century.[224] The two cases provide clues about the conditions that need to be present in order for such Concerts to form and endure. One condition that is frequently cited is ideological alignment among the participants. Certainly, Metternich's ability to find agreement with Prussia and Russia and inability to do so with Britain stemmed in part from the fact that the three eastern monarchies saw in liberalism a mortal threat to their existence. Bismarck, too, found coordination with Russia and Austria-Hungary eased by dynastic ties. Yet this factor alone does not explain the success of the two systems. Both men found ways to co-exist with a liberal France. Metternich was frequently at odds with the Tsar over the Balkans and even Germany. Bismarck found regime similarity inadequate to pull Austria-Hungary and Russia back from the brink of war and was, at the end of his career, in the process of bringing liberal Britain more fully into the scales to counterbalance the Tsarist state with which his empire supposedly had so much in common.

The decisive ingredient for success in both cases was not ideological but territorial in nature—namely, the relative absence of causes for major conflict in the form of territorial disagreements. Metternich's system is especially notable in this regard; the Vienna Congress' creation of what amounted to separate spheres of hegemony in which each Great Power exercised near-total sway over a set of territories corresponding to its historic zone of interests allowed the Great Powers to achieve a political equilibrium in which their energies could be reoriented from competition for territory toward pursuit of shared interests.[225] Tellingly, the power that most resisted the system (France) was the one that saw itself as least satiated from a territorial standpoint and coveted neighboring regions on the Rhine and in Italy. Similarly, the stability of Bismarck's system can be explained in large measure by the fact that all of the Great Powers presided over large, secure resource bases corresponding to their historic zones of influence. The desire to preserve this territorially-grounded stability is what drove Bismarck to seek colonial satisfactions for France to compensate for her grievance over Alsace-Lorraine; when the system's final crisis came, it was over conflicts regarding territory rather than regime type.

The record of the Metternichian and Bismarckian systems does not bode well for a Concert model in our own time. Simply put, the conditions for such a Concert do not exist in the current or foreseeable geopolitical landscape. Neither China nor Russia can be described as

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[224] For the notion of a U.S.-Russia-China trilateral concert, see Thomas Graham, "It's Better to Deal with China and Russia in Tandem," *Politico* (February 4, 2021). For an articulation of the Metternich analogy to today, see Kurt Campbell and Rush Doshi, "How America Can Shore Up Asian Order," *Foreign Affairs* (12 January 2021).
[225] See Schroeder's development of the point about equilibrium through regional hegemonies in "The Vienna Settlement," p. 57.

territorially satiated; indeed, both have active revisionist claims, the unresolved nature of which motivates much of their competition with the United States and its allies. In this setting, there is nothing for a Concert of powers to treat as common cause—at least nothing that outweighs in importance the problem of territory. The only role for such a Concert, from a Russian and Chinese perspective, would be to seek concessions and, from a U.S. perspective, to resist or manage concessions. In other words, the Concert would itself be an expression of the absence of an agreed delineation of the world, the prior existence of which is the precondition for its functioning. Attempting to use the Concert to find agreement, whether through existing international institutions or a new format, would likely to heighten, rather than dampen, Great-Power antagonisms.

BUREAUCRATIC HETERODOXY IS EASIER TO 'SELL' WHEN IT INVOLVES STRATEGIC EXPANSION. Both systems studied in this paper gave birth to bureaucratic insurgencies that wanted to overturn them of in favor of more aggressive strategies aimed at resolving the multi-front dilemma. For Metternich, the insurgency arose after the 1848 revolution created a visceral reflex in the dynasty to prove its military vitality and discard diplomatic methods that appeared to the young new Emperor and his clique to be insufficient to the task of consolidating the Monarchy's position in an age of revolution. For Bismarck, the insurgency arose in response to growing Russian hostility after the Congress of Berlin created a heightened threat perception among the General Staff and corresponding concern that Bismarck's diplomacy was delaying the inevitable, eventual confrontation. In both cases, the opposition was rooted in substantive but also emotional claims that the prevailing system did *too little* to protect the state against looming threats. And in both cases, this critique was promoted by groupings within the bureaucracy for whom an expansion in the state's strategic responsibilities would bring an expansion in resources and prestige.

In the United States today, strategic heterodoxy would appear to lie with those who argue that the country's foreign and defense policies are trying to do *too much* rather than too little. Advocates of this view share with bureaucratic challengers to the Metternichian and Bismarckian systems an acute sense that elements of the longstanding policy status quo are increasingly out of alignment with emerging international conditions and will, unless they evolve to keep pace with these changes, imperil the state's security. But where bureaucratic insurgents in the two historical examples argued for an expansion in their empires' strategic commitments, today's insurgents see grounds for reducing U.S. strategic commitments. Interestingly, the prescriptions of today's insurgents are more obviously consonant with geopolitical and financial realities than were their 19th Century predecessors. A defender of the Vienna system could have reasonably argued against Franz Josef's plans for a more muscular, military-backed foreign policy on the grounds that the prevailing system, for all its faults, was still solvent with respect to Austria's two-front problem and its interests in Italy in particular, just as a defender of Bismarck's system could have reasonably argued against Waldersee's desire for a preventive war against Russia on the grounds that the system was solvent with respect to Germany's main interests on the Rhine. Today it would be much harder to argue that

the post-Cold War U.S. strategic paradigm remains capable of meeting the country's main security needs without significant modification.

And yet, in spite of this fact, today's insurgents face a steeper uphill climb for bringing about strategic change, for two reasons. First, refocusing priorities would inevitably generate bureaucratic winners and losers in bureaucracy, the latter of whom would be adversely affected, including in budgetary terms, and therefore would resist the change. One can imagine Radetzky's reaction if, virtually overnight, Vienna decided to shift resources from his Italian command to the theretofore neglected Russian frontier. Second, actualizing the aims of today's insurgents would involve downward adjustments in national ambition that are difficult to sell politically until the more painful reckoning with reality occurs. Part of why Franz Josef and Kaiser William II were so attracted to doing more is that it seemed to involve taking a proactive hand in deciding their empires' fates. Doing less is an even harder sell in a democracy, where accusations of weakness are politically irresistible. For these reasons, achieving strategic reprioritization along the lines of the 2018 National Defense Strategy is likely to prove difficult in practice, *even if* the old post-Cold War paradigm is no longer financially or strategically sustainable, barring a major crisis that dramatically exposes the status quo's insolvency.

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V. Conclusion.

Neither Metternich nor Bismarck can be said to have been especially humble men; Metternich possessed a vanity out of all proportion to the power of the fading empire of which he was an emissary, and Bismarck was an insufferable egotist with an invincible, if not altogether misplaced, confidence in his intellectual superiority to those around him, including the Emperor. Yet at the heart of both men's statecraft was a sober recognition of the limits of all forms of power and human achievement. Metternich gave voice to this sentiment when, in an uncharacteristically pensive mood while standing on a balcony and looking out across the rooftops of Paris, he commented:

> This city and this sun will still greet each other when there will be nothing but memories of Napoleon… and of my own self. The unchanging laws of nature…will always be the same, while we wretched creatures who think so much of ourselves, live only to make a little show by our endless activity, by our dabbling in the mud or in the shifting sand. [226]

In a similar vein, Bismarck once wrote, while riding on a train to St. Petersburg:

> Peoples and men, folly and wisdom, war and peace, come and go like waves and the sea remains. Our states and their power and honor are nothing to God but ant-heaps and beehives which are trampled by an ox's hoof or snatched by fate in the shape of a honey gatherer.[227]

These comments reveal an instinctive appreciation for the inherent fragility of order and the transience of not only of their own accomplishments as statesmen but of what the empires they led could expect to achieve under even the most auspicious of circumstances. Despite being byproducts of two of the most energetic and confident moments in Western history (the Enlightenment and Romantic periods respectively) neither statesman fell prey to the conceit that he sat at history's apex or that his state's highest ideals and aspirations, if realized, would bring perpetual safety for their empires or perfection for the human condition. Their objects were specific, definable and, they both knew, perishable.

From this may be derived a final lesson from this study: that *successful Great Powers have a sense of their own limits*. These limits were, for Metternich and Bismarck, not merely philosophical but rather part of the warp and woof of practical statecraft. It was only on the basis of knowing limits that they were able to develop the clarity about priorities that is the foundation of coherent policy.

This sense of limits is observable in the goals of their statecraft. Metternich did not attempt, even at Austria's pinnacle after 1815, to humble France or resurrect the old Holy Roman Empire; he willingly disgorged the Austrian Netherlands and sought to limit rather than profit

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[226] Palmer, *Metternich*, p. 151.
[227] Taylor, *Bismarck*, p. 44.

from the partition of Poland. Bismarck did not attempt, in the wake of Prussia's victory in 1866, to take Austrian territory; he resisted steeper punishments on France in 1871 and, thereafter, consistently opposed military machinations to knock out Russia. Both embodied Goethe's dictum that "genius is knowing where to stop."[228]

Limits are also evident in the means that both men employed. Neither believed that military power could be used to subdue their rivals; indeed, if anything, the two cases underline the impossibility of seeking a military solution to the multi-front problem. This proved true even for a Great Power as strong as Bismarck's Germany; in fact, the eventual outworking of the German case in 1914 shows that a military solution (or, more precisely, an unbalanced relationship in which diplomacy is a preparation for the military, rather than the other way around) is self-defeating. By contrast with his successors, Bismarck, like Metternich before him, saw geopolitical threats as problems to be managed, not solved, and saw military power as laying the foundation for diplomacy to play that managing function, not vice-versa.

This sense of limits was integral to both men's successful handling of multi-front pressure. Each saw that he needed to deprioritize at least one major theater, which in turn meant not only accepting limits but proactively defining them. The leaders who came after both men did not share this sense of limits. At the heart of the young Franz Josef's militant assertiveness was a conviction that Austria could, with big enough army budgets, establish a new hegemony in Germany while staring down France and, if necessary, opposing Russia; the same could be said of Wilhelm II, who came to believe that sufficiently large armies and fleets could compensate for lost allies and allow Germany to handle simultaneous antagonism with France, Russia and Britain. In both cases, departure from the limits that had been established and carefully tended by Metternich and Bismarck proved disastrous.

The 21st Century United States is blessed with many favorable attributes, but an instinctive sense of limits in her foreign policy is not one of them. Americans in recent memory have simply not had to give much serious thought to defining limits to either national goals or means. An expansive definition of the former was probably inevitable in the extraordinarily permissive conditions that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, which itself seemed to vindicate the highest conceptions of what America can achieve in the world. As for means, it is hard to think of any empire in history, with the possible exception of Rome at its pinnacle, that could reasonably posit, as the United States did in the 1990s, the ability to simultaneously defeat *all* foreseeable rivals by military means concurrently.

In this unprecedentedly favorable setting, the sense of limits that formed the foundation of both Metternichian and Bismarckian statecraft was alien to the United States. The organizing task became one, not of defining limits, but of maximally exploiting the ahistorical

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[228] See Taylor's use of Goethe's famous dictum in his analysis of Bismarck in Taylor, *Bismarck*, p. 265, and Schroeder's similar point about Metternich in *Transformation*, p. 583.

potentialities made possible by the absence of structural constraints. In such an environment, U.S. foreign policy embraced expansive goals, backed by expansive means. In this setting, diplomacy's job was to midwife the transition to what was maximally attainable—to foster the development of a more favorable environment literally worldwide, by the employment of 'soft-power,' the efficient running of international institutions, and the consolidation of a democratic peace after America's small wars.

Whatever the merits of these things at the time, all share the distinction of having been derivatives of the seemingly limitless potentialities made possible by a peerless environment and surfeit of military power. By contrast, the middle decades of the 21st Century, it seems increasingly clear, will be characterized by new constraints both domestically, in the form of historically unprecedented debt growth, and externally, in the form of shifts in the military-technological balance of power away from U.S. dominance. These new conditions will inevitably place boundaries on the United States' ability to pursue a foreign policy unbounded by limitations and force it to make choices about what to prioritize and deprioritize.

The specter of two-front war with China and Russia is only the most immediate, if dramatic, manifestation of this new reality. That it represents a danger is clear and can hardly be overstated. But from the historical examples reviewed in this study, it also represents an opportunity—a prompt for the country to reimagine strategy in ways that are better aligned to geopolitical realities. For both Metternich and Bismarck, it was fear of a catastrophic two-front war, at least as much as any other single factor, which helped to spur the development of systems of statecraft that, by proactively confronting strategic tradeoffs in diplomatic form, helped to prevent those tradeoffs from being forced upon their empires in violent form. Their examples are a warning to the United States to proactively adjust to emerging conditions. But they are also an inspiration in demonstrating the ability of states much weaker and more encircled than our own to safeguard their interests while avoiding Great Power conflicts that, were they to occur in today's world, would hold catastrophic potential for ourselves and for all humanity.

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