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The eighteenth century international system: parity or primacy?

JAMES R. SOFKA[1]

'No man profits but by the loss of others'
—Montaigne, *Essays*, I: 21

The conceptual foundations of the eighteenth century international system, long neglected in narrative diplomatic histories, are enjoying increased attention with the recent contributions of Jeremy Black, Paul Schroeder, and Michael Doyle. Nevertheless, in political science literature the period is routinely treated as an interesting—yet quickly dispatched—'prequel' to the post-1815 order which matured in the Bismarckian alignments of the late nineteenth century. Indeed, as a field of study the period has been all but ignored in the discipline of international relations.[2]

For this reason, interpretive characterizations of the period between the War of The Spanish Succession and the advent of Napoleon have not changed significantly from 1907, when Arthur Hassall concisely titled his study of *ancien régime* diplomacy *The Balance of Power*. In the intervening years Ludwig Dehio, Inis Claude, and Edward Gulick echoed the same theme: the eighteenth century system revolved, as a Copernican model, around the idea of a 'balance of power' in which no state could escape its gravity. Indeed, Paul Schroeder invokes the late eighteenth century period as an archetypical balance system directed by clearly articulated 'rules' in order to establish the pivot point for his declared conceptual 'transformation' in international relations after 1815. The interpretation Hassall provided almost a century ago was reaffirmed by Michael Doyle as late as 1997 when he proclaimed that eighteenth century Europe 'constituted as perfect a laboratory of classical balance of power politics as history is likely to afford'.[3]

For over ninety years, therefore, the assumption that the eighteenth century system was evocative of and dictated by balance of power theory has been a

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[2] See, for example, Michael Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace* (New York, 1997), ch. 5; Paul Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848* (Oxford, 1994), ch. 1; Jeremy Black, *The Rise of the European Powers 1679–1793* (London, 1990) and *British Foreign Policy in An Age of Revolutions, 1783–1793* (Cambridge, 1994), esp. ch. 11; T.C.W. Blanning, *The Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars* (London, 1986).

[3] Doyle, p. 175. M.S. Anderson offered a similar hypothesis in 1993, noting that 'the eighteenth century ... saw the balance of power more generally accepted as a guide to the conduct of states than ever before or since'. In an important qualification, however, he continues that 'Yet it was also an age

reflexive impulse in international relations literature. Indeed, the establishment of this 'truth' has served a critical intellectual purpose: *ancien régime* diplomacy is frequently invoked as a contrast and 'baseline' for surveys of later state ambitions. The 'hegemonic' campaigns of Napoleon are routinely delineated from the 'moderation' of the eighteenth century, and the French Revolution has—until recently—been invoked as a fundamental turning point in the development of the international system from an era of classical/limited war to a period of revolutionary/total war. The events of 1789–1793, therefore, are interpreted as the genesis of a 'new' or 'transformed' international system, much in the same manner as 1648 or 1945.[4] Given that the prevailing assumptions as to its workings have seldom been questioned, the eighteenth century system has served as a useful and necessary theoretical foundation against which to analyse the actions and motives of later generations of statesmen.

Yet as the superstructure of international relations theory has matured upon this axiom, and as an ever-increasing weight of 'balance' literature and historical parallels is added to it, the soundness of this foundation must be surveyed. As Black and Blanning have proved with reference to the continuity of political alignments after the French Revolution, careful scrutiny of the period reveals structural weaknesses in the traditional interpretation.[5] Constructed upon a shaky footing, balance of power interpretations of the eighteenth century have become elasticized to the point of vagueness and have been seriously corroded by recent research. Indeed, a general review of the period indicates a more disturbing pattern: instances where balance theory applies in the eighteenth century are more exceptions than norm.

Rather than attempt to rebuild a structure whose underpinnings are less than secure, it seems safer to construct a new architecture upon a different premise. An examination of the broad patterns of Great Power politics after Utrecht reveals that the major states operated according to hegemonic, rather than balance of power, objectives. While an unsteady balance of power may have been the unintended effect of eighteenth century international relations, balance of power calculations and motivations were seldom the cause of political action. The thesis of this study is that the ambition for primacy, rather than the attainment and maintenance of parity with rival states, governed the diplomatic calculations of the major powers throughout the century. There was, in fact, greater continuity between the *ancien régime* and

during which the whole idea was subjected to often very hostile criticism'. *The Rise of Modern Diplomacy, 1450–1919* (London, 1993), p. 176. See also his earlier and extremely perceptive 'Eighteenth Century Theories of the Balance of Power' in R.M. Hatton and M.S. Anderson (eds.), *Studies in Diplomatic History* (London, 1970). For an interesting brief counterpoint, see Black, 'The Theory of the Balance of Power in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century: A Note on Sources', *Review of International Studies*, 9 (1983), pp. 55–61. On the persistence of the balance of power interpretation in general, see Schroeder, *Transformation of European Politics,* pp. 5–11; Arthur Hassall, *The Balance of Power 1715–1789* (London, 1907); John Wolf, *The Emergence of the Great Powers, 1685–1715* (New York, 1951), ch. 3; Ludwig Dehio, *The Precarious Balance* (New York, 1962), chs. 2 and 3; Inis L. Claude, Jr., *Power and International Relations* (New York, 1962); Edward Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power* (New York, 1955).

[4] In the political science literature this pattern of creating a post-1789 'Revolutionary' or 'Napoleonic' system distinct from the preceding period began with the pioneering and influential—but not extensively researched—work of Hans J. Morgenthau, who interpreted the French Revolution as a paradigmatic shift in international relations. See *Politics Among Nations*, 3rd. edn. (New York, 1961), ch. 14.

[5] Black, *British Foreign Policy*, ch. 11; Blanning, *Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars*, conclusion.

Revolutionary order than has been assumed. The failure of various states to secure hegemony does not negate hegemonic impulses: Napoleon merely succeeded in his ambitions where his precursors did not.

The shortcomings of balance theory: the myth of a '*status quo*' in the eighteenth century

It is beyond the scope of this study to offer a thorough examination of balance of power literature, which has been ably provided elsewhere.[6] While the balance is a relatively straightforward concept in theory, its protean nature makes it difficult to isolate in practice.[7] Central to balance theory is the idea of multiple state actors possessing roughly equivalent capabilities and operating in an anarchic international system. Balance theory posits that wars are likely to be limited due to the security dilemma: a state's ambitions must be measured against the costs of pursuing them.[8] According to balance theorists, peace results because states will be deterred from hegemonic and system-disruptive campaigns by mutually reinforcing external and internal restraints. Externally, the pressure imposed by rival powers limits competition to modest goals. Internally, statesmen will ideally conform to a 'cult of restraint' and seek only 'moderate' aims in the framing of policy, thus making the system self-regulating. Ambition, in the Madisonian formulation, will be made to counteract ambition and a parity of assets will tend to yield stability, if not general peace.

To be sure, eighteenth century authors spoke glowingly about a 'balance' of power and the concept was celebrated in both philosophical and press literature.[9] Enlightenment texts routinely analogized politics to astronomy, geometry, chemistry, physics, magnetism, gravity, and other neatly compartmentalized scientific phenomena.[10] This Newtonian political logic, with its emphasis on countervailing forces of producing an 'equilibrium,' was unquestioned by 1750. Indeed, Frank Manuel noted that the 'whole vocabulary of international politics was an adaptation from the materialist philosophy and scientific language of the age'. Anderson bitingly commented—with some justice—that the 'balance' literature was so extensive and consuming in the eighteenth century that the idea was often invoked simply 'to inhibit thought'.[11]

[6] Most notably by Doyle, ch. 5; Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power*; Dehio, *The Precarious Balance*; Claude, *Power and International Relations*; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York, 1979), ch. 6; Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York, 1977), ch. 5; Arnold Wolfers, 'The Balance of Power in Theory and Practice', in *Discord and Collaboration*, (Baltimore, MD, 1962). An entire issue of *The Review of International Studies* (vol. 15) was devoted to the theory and practice of the balance of power in 1989 and should be consulted.

[7] Inis Claude noted that 'the trouble with the balance of power is not that it has no meaning, but that it has too many meanings'. *Power and International Relations*, p. 13.

[8] See Doyle, ch. 3; Glenn Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY, 1997), pp. 192–9.

[9] Black has commented on this extensively: see 'The Theory of the Balance of Power'; and *British Foreign Policy in the Age of Walpole* (Edinburgh, 1985), ch. 8; *Rise of the European Powers*, pp. 157–62.

[10] See Anderson, *Rise of Modern Diplomacy*, pp. 166–70 and 'Eighteenth Century Theories of the Balance of Power'.

[11] Frank Manuel, *The Age of Reason* (Ithaca, NY, 1951), p. 114; Anderson, 'Eighteenth Century Theories', p. 185.

Certainly eighteenth century monarchs and diplomats echoed the same formulas used in descriptions of the natural world in their political writings. References to 'the balance of Europe', 'equilibrium,' and 'the natural repose of the continent' are strewn throughout the papers of Fleury, Kaunitz, Vergennes, Frederick II, and Panin, to name but a few. Virtually every important treaty signed after 1713 offered obliging references to the balance of power as a 'natural' or desired state of the international system.[12] Given this glut of writings, it is not surprising that many have assumed that balance theory carried prescriptive weight. By linking contemporary references with the absence of conspicuous hegemonic wars, many scholars have concluded that the 'balance of power' was both cause and effect in eighteenth century international relations. The relative 'moderation' of international politics, the argument goes, was created by general acceptance of the ideology of 'equilibrium'. As Enlightenment authors would put it, Nature, in both its scientific and political dimensions, imposed constraints and limits on behaviour: a state would no more rationally seek hegemony than an individual could defy the law of gravity. Through deductive logic, statesmen could use the balance model to arrive at a 'natural' policy for their state to pursue.[13]

An essential ingredient in both the theory and practice of the balance of power is the concept of the *status quo*, against which states are frequently classified as conservative system-maintainers (the norm of balance theory) or revisionists (the departure from balance theory).[14] As Waltz notes, all states will tend to support the system and its 'rules' and will rationally seek security through competitive, rather than absolute, means.[15] States that do seek to radically—and, under the theory, irrationally—alter the existing system will be deterred by countervailing powers, all of which, despite heterogeneous interests, will reject subjugation to one dominant power.

Applied to the eighteenth century this *status quo*, or commonly accepted frame of reference as to the architecture of the international system, is generally assumed to be the 1713 Treaty that ended the Wars of the Spanish Succession. Utrecht is routinely invoked as the 'breaking point' with the seventeenth century, much as nineteenth century international politics is said to begin in 1815. This *status quo*, it is assumed, lasted for fifty years, was revised after the Seven Years' War, and endured until 1792. Hence balance logic would indicate that the eighteenth century can be separated into three systems: 1713–1756; 1763–1792, and 1792–1815. Balance theorists

[12] See Franz A.J. Szabo, 'Prince Kaunitz and the Balance of Power', *International History Review*, 1 (1979), pp. 399–408. Frederick II's 'Political Testament' (1768) is littered with balance of power language.

[13] Indeed Black notes that 'the idea of policies "natural" to each particular state was very common in the period. Each state was believed to possess only one policy, and any alteration from it was a distortion, a perversion of sound policy wrought by corruption or incompetence, the product of misguided monarchs and evil ministers … such a mechanistic interpretation was in accord with and essential to the concept of the balance of power. A few brave spirits dismissed the balance of power as a childish and erroneous concept, but most saw it as essential to any correct operation of the international system'. Jeremy Black, *The Collapse of the Anglo-French Alliance, 1727–1731* (New York, 1987), p. 87.

[14] Gulick, pp. 37–42 develops the status quo aspect of balance theory with particular reference to the late eighteenth century. See also Wolfers, 'The Pole of Power and the Pole of Indifference', in *Discord and Collaboration*, op. cit. on this point.

[15] See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 117–21; Schroeder, *Transformation of European Politics*, pp. 5–11; Doyle, pp. 161–74.

routinely invoke the Aix-la-Chapelle treaty of 1748, which ended the War of the Austrian Succession on roughly *status quo ante bellum* terms, as evidence of the balance in action, as well as the Treaty of Teschen of 1779, which resolved the Bavarian succession crisis on essentially conservative principles.

This idea of an agreed-upon *status quo* is essential if the balance of power is to be followed as a model, or set of 'rules': without it a balance system cannot endure. If all powers are revisionist, and few accept the *status quo* as legitimate, a major war is all but assured unless a new formula can be improvised. This was the case, for example, in the Locarno Pact of 1925, which refined the Western European security provisions of the Versailles Treaty. Without an accepted or recognizable *status quo* the balance of power as a temporary condition may exist by 'fortuitous' means, yet the notion of the balance as guide to state behaviour and policy calculations is virtually meaningless, and the causal linkage of balance thinking to state behaviour is greatly diminished.[16]

In my view, two essential attributes of balance of power theory were absent throughout much of the eighteenth century, and this void seriously weakens mono-causal explanations of state behaviour in balance terms. First, as the following analysis will make clear, the idea of a viable and commonly accepted *status quo* was decisively rejected by all of the major powers throughout the century. All powers were, at some time after 1713, revisionist: Britain in America, India, and the Carribean after 1739; France in America and Central Europe in the 1750s and again under Choiseul after 1770; Austria against France in 1725 and in Germany after 1748; Frederick II with Silesia in 1740 and again in Bavaria in 1778; and Catherine II consistently in Poland and in the Balkans after 1768. In these instances states rejected balance logic with its emphasis on limited objectives and instead attempted to achieve hegemonic ambitions.

Second, the self-regulating aspect of balance theory—that is, the internally and inherently understood constraints on state behaviour in relation to diplomatic ends—was lacking throughout the century. Balance logic teaches that statesmen will limit their appetites to avoid disrupting the system; hence wars will be fought for clearly limited ambitions.[17] In simple terms, powers recognize ambiguous yet commonly understood parameters in the international system over which they dare not tread for fear of provoking war. Thus, in the ideal, the balance of power sustains and enforces itself.

Again, the empirical evidence refutes this logic. Throughout the eighteenth century monarchs and statesmen displayed ingenious and ruthless attempts to dismember, depopulate, demilitarize, and destroy rivals without regard to fidelity to a doctrinal set of rules. Often this was attempted through manipulation of a dynastic crisis, as with Austria in 1740, Poland in 1733 and 1763, Sweden in 1773 and Bavaria in 1778, to name but the most conspicuous examples. Partition schemes were legion and the ambition of the complete destruction of an opponent—usually thought to begin with Napoleon—was painfully evidenced throughout the century, though such attempts usually failed in practice. France supported uprisings in Scotland against Britain in 1715 and 1745; Russia and Prussia, beginning in the late seventeenth century, contemplated dividing Poland and Sweden several times;

[16] See Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge, 1981), ch. 1, esp. pp. 12–15.
[17] Bull, *Anarchical Society*, ch. 5.

Britain sought to annihilate France's position in North America and the Carribean after 1754; Kaunitz sought the destruction of Prussia, and not just the return of Silesia, in 1756; Catherine contemplated the evisceration of the Ottoman Empire, Poland, and for a brief period Sweden; Austria was a favourite target of Bourbon partition schemes throughout the century; Austria and Spain contemplated annexing parts of France in 1725. This is, of course, but a cursory list. Indeed, eighteenth century diplomats are better characterized as frustrated Napoleons rather than parity-seeking power 'balancers'.[18]

What prevented the attainment of these grandiose revisionist impulses was not the teachings of balance doctrine, but rather the limited resources available to most eighteenth century governments.[19] Only Britain was able to raise the resources necessary to achieve its objectives under Newcastle and Pitt during the Seven Years' War, but at prohibitive cost. Enormous debts and the tremendous expenditures of raising mercenary armies and expensive navies made sovereigns and ministers reluctant to risk these assets in extended campaigns, while the administrative and logistical support necessary to maintain prolonged combat was only slowly developed after the 1760s. France's debt after the Seven Years' War, compounded by Choiseul's frantic naval construction, highlighted the obstacles faced by *ancien régime* governments in pursuing their ambitions of primacy. With tax structures that protected the clergy and nobility and armies that fought solely for pay, governments could finance hegemonic wars only rarely, if at all. This pursuit of formidable objectives with exceedingly slim budgets yielded incessant, yet inconclusive and relatively brief, wars after 1713.[20]

To credit balance of power theory with producing this 'moderate' international system is misleading. The gulf between hegemonic objectives and military and financial means was unbridgeable throughout most of the century. Even in debt-ridden France, Turgot's cold-blooded appraisal of the dire straits of the Treasury did not deter Louis XVI and Vergennes from entering the American War in 1778.[21] Rather than view the political equation through the traditional allegory of chess, a

[18] Dennis Showalter sums it up admirably: 'In diplomatic contexts the eighteenth century's principled commitment to balance of power politics must not be exaggerated. Major and middle-sized powers regularly contemplated and frequently attempted significant aggrandizement … [Yet] pragmatically, even the best of the *ancien régime's* armed forces could not hope to dominate its adversaries enough to implement the diplomat's grand designs'. *The Wars of Frederick the Great* (London, 1996), p. 3.

[19] On this point see Eric Robson, 'The Armed Forces and the Art of War', in J.O. Lindsay (ed.), *The New Cambridge Modern History*, vol. 7: *The Old Regime, 1713–1763* (Cambridge, 1957); M.S. Anderson, *Europe in the Eighteenth Century, 1713–1783*, 3rd. edn. (London, 1987), ch. 7; Showalter, ch. 1; Black, *European Warfare, 1660–1815* (New Haven, CT, 1994).

[20] On the British debt issue and its relation to international politics, see John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State, 1688–1783* (New York, 1989); Nancy Koehn, *The Power of Commerce: Economy and Governance in the First British Empire* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), ch. 1; Lawrence H. Gipson, *The British Empire Before the American Revolution*, vol. 9 (New York, 1965). On France, J.C. Riley's *The Seven Years' War and the Old Regime in France: The Economic and Financial Toll* (Princeton, NJ, 1986) is definitive. See also H.M. Scott, 'The Importance of Bourbon Naval Reconstruction to the Strategy of Choiseul After the Seven Years War', *International History Review* 1 (1979), pp. 17–35. On the ends/means relationship of war to political objectives, see Blanning, *Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars*, ch. 1, Showalter, ch. 1; Black, *European Warfare*, ch. 3; Michael Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford, 1976), ch. 3.

[21] See Orville Murphy, *Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes: French Diplomacy in the Age of Revolution, 1719–1787* (Albany, 1982), ch. 20, and Jonathan Dull, 'France and the American Revolution Seen as Tragedy', in Ronald Hoffman and Peter Albert (eds.), *Diplomacy and Revolution: The Franco-American Alliance of 1778* (Charlottesville, VA, 1981) for a development of this argument.

more accurate metaphor would be poker: eighteenth century governments played ambitious moves without sufficient resources to cover their bets. This led to the conspicuous faith in a 'grand strategy' which could potentially stack the deck in one's favour and which were offered, in Kaunitz's phrase, as 'geometric proofs'.[22]

Contrary to the predictions of balance theory, the eighteenth century system remained a zero-sum game in which gains for one state invariably came at the significant expense of another. The 'Ricardo principle' of balance theory expressed in the law of comparative advantage—under which states would seek modest gains in a competitive system similar to that of firms in a market economy—simply did not obtain.[23] The international system was not sufficiently organized or ordered to allow for this rational actor behaviour. As one British offical noted in 1773, 'there is no real system anywhere, no grand bond of union and therefore not knowing who and who is together, every court stands upon his own bottom, and lives from hand to mouth without any great principle of policy'.[24] Rather, a drive for monopoly, with its emphasis on primacy rather than mutual vulnerability through competition, remained the dominant leitmotif. If a 'balance' did exist, as in North America from 1748–54, Germany after 1740, or Poland from 1773–95, it was usually to everyone's dissatisfaction rather than delight and occurred in spite, rather than because, of calculated policy. Throughout the century, each state desired more than the prevailing system provided.[25]

This thesis can be sustained through an overview of two mutually reinforcing axes of the eighteenth century system: the maritime struggle between France and Britain, particularly in North America, and the tripolar central European axis between Russia, Austria, and Prussia in Germany and Poland. In both spheres, the restraining influences of balance theory were overtaken by a ruthlessly predatory hegemonic policy. In most cases the means of diplomacy and warfare could not match these ends; yet, the limited gains that resulted did not radically transform intended objectives, which continued to view primacy as the Polar Star in the charting of foreign policy.

The colonial axis: the Anglo-French contest for commercial hegemony

As David Horn notes, the struggle for mastery between Britain and France was the 'single dominant idea running right through the century' after 1713. Indeed, with the exception of the 'astonishing' *entente* between the two powers from 1716–31, Britain and France were either in a state of 'cold' or real war after 1735.[26] This chronic hostility can largely be attributed to the mercantilist ideology underscoring their

[22] Szabo, 'Kaunitz and the Balance of Power', Anderson, *Rise of Modern Diplomacy*, p. 167. In doing so *ancien régime* governments inadvertently proved Morton Kaplan's legendary maxim that states will fight rather than forego potential gain. *System and Process in International Politics* (New York, 1962), p. 23.

[23] For a development of the market analogy to balance theory, see Gilpin, *War and Change*, ch. 3.

[24] Cited in Black, *Rise of the European Powers*, p. 207.

[25] A development which affirms Claude's perceptive conclusion that 'the balance of power works best when it is little needed'. 'The Balance of Power Revisited', *Review of International Studies,* 15 (1989), pp. 77–85, at p. 80.

[26] David B. Horn, *Great Britain and Europe in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1967), pp. 382; 44–5.

respective trade policies. This economic theory, which equated wealth with power and posited the supply of economic resources as fixed, led British and French ministers to conceive of the chief areas of colonial rivalry—North America, the Carribean islands, and India—in zero-sum terms. One British merchant expressed this logic with unusual astringency by noting that 'our trade will only improve by the total extinction of theirs'.[27]

Governed by this relentless and predatory economic orthodoxy, both British and French ministries practised overt hegemonic policies in relation to the colonial axis of the international system. The 'Balance of Trade', as Hume noted, was the 'balance of power' and under this mercantilist ethos a mere parity of resources was an insufficient guarantor of security.[28] On the continent, Britain viewed France in negative terms; that is, it sought to prevent France from allying with a third power and distracting London from its lucrative overseas trade.[29] After Walpole's ministry, successive British governments frequently expected other European states to be as Francophobic as the Board of Trade and tended to interpret European politics through the prism of respective support or opposition to France.[30] France, for its part, began seeking hegemony in Europe under Fleury and favoured alliances—particularly the Prussian entente in the 1740s—only if its partners 'were prepared to accept an international system presided over by France and in which French interests were given free rein'.[31]

The curious Anglo-French entente of 1716–31, which may be termed a 'diplomatic revolution', was the only aberration in this century of apocalyptic rhetoric and incessant hostilities between the two powers.[32] In the 1720s both London and Paris recognized the domestic political imperative of maintaining European peace, given the fragility of the Hanoverian succession in Britain after 1714, the equally uncertain succession question in Regency France, as well as mutual concerns about the direction of Spanish policy. Although Black argues that the entente could have formed a primitive collective security system for Europe, much in the fashion of the

[27] Cited in Walter Dorn, *Competition for Empire, 1740–1763* (New York, 1940), p. 9. On mercantilism and its relationship to international politics in this period, Eli Heckscher's *Mercantilism*, 2 vols. (London, 1935) remains standard. See also Richard Pares, *War and Trade in the West Indies, 1739–1763* (Oxford, 1936); E. Lipson, *The Economic History of England*, vol. 3: *The Age of Mercantilism* (London, 1943); Klaus Knorr, *British Colonial Theories, 1570–1850* (Toronto, 1944), chs. 3–4; Charles Andrews, *The Colonial Period of American History*, vol. 4 (New Haven, CT, 1964); Jacob Viner, 'Power Versus Plenty as Objectives of Foreign Policy in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century', *World Politics,* 1 (1948), pp. 1–30; Charles Cole, *Colbert and a Century of French Mercantilism* (New York, 1939); Jeremy Black, *Natural and Necessary Enemies: Anglo-French Relations in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1986), ch. 5.

[28] David Hume, 'Of the Balance of Trade' (1752) Eugene Miller (ed.), *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* (Indianapolis, 1987). As Dorn succintly noted, 'power politics and economic policy became interchangeable terms'. Dorn, *Competition for Empire*, p. 9.

[29] A strategy brilliantly dissected by Pares in 'American versus Continental Warfare, 1739–1763', *English Historical Review*, 51 (1936), pp. 429–65.

[30] Pares, 'American versus Continental Warfare', p. 433.

[31] Black, *Natural and Necessary Enemies*, p. 33. See also the excellent study by Arthur Wilson, *French Foreign Policy During the Administration of Cardinal Fleury, 1726–1743* (Cambridge, MA, 1936), esp. ch. 11. He observes that, by 1740, 'So completely had Fleury isolated the British that it actually became discreet for him to challenge them in their own element. It was a policy coolly considered, and by no means foolhardy.' P. 324.

[32] Richard Lodge notes that the pact 'is quite as deserving to be called a diplomatic revolution as the Austro-French alliance of 1756, to which the term is usually applied'. 'The Anglo-French Alliance, 1716–1731', in A. Coville and H.V.W. Temperley (eds.), *Studies in Anglo-French History* (Cambridge, 1935), p. 3.

Conference System of the 1820s, the alliance never enjoyed enough support in either capital to become an institutionalized feature of the international system. Rather, the pact was a contingency of international relations rather than a norm: As Horn notes, the most amazing feature of the entente is that it lasted as long as it did.[33]

Indeed, the 1716–31 agreement proved incapable of transforming the fundamental assumptions governing both powers' approach to the international system; rather, it merely suppressed their hostile effects until the domestic political structures of both states became more secure after 1725. The axiom that trade was the lifeblood of the state, institutionalized by Colbert and Law in France and the Board of Trade in Britain, led to an increasingly acrimonious relationship between the two powers and a corresponding inability to compromise. Any gain for one side was an automatic loss for the other and security could only be obtained through the destruction of the other side's resources and assets. This tendency was particularly pronounced in North America: William Shirley, the Governor of Massachusetts, put it best in 1749 when he noted that 'I can't but look upon the point now coming on in Dispute, as what must finally determine the Mastery of this Continent between His Majesty and the French King'.[34]

French officials perceived the stakes to be equally high. Governor Vaudreuil of New France reported in 1716 that 'should a new war break out with the English … it cannot be, for an instant, doubted but the English … would employ all their efforts to seize the whole of Canada, and consequently the entirety of North America, whence might follow the loss of Mexico, from which they would expel the Spaniards in a few years without any resistance. … It is impossible to express how much the power of England would increase should she seize the remainder of North America, and how formidable that power would be in Europe'.[35] This eighteenth century variant on the 'domino theory' led to entrenchment on the part of both powers: in a zero-sum system to compromise was to lose, and 'balance' was at best a temporizing measure. For this reason both Britain and France aggressively sought to prevent neutral states such as Sweden, the United Provinces, or Russia from encroaching on their established trade networks.[36]

Given the prevailing view of the international system on the part of both London and Paris it is not surprising that wars between them were so common or their objectives so vast. A 'balance', if one could even be said statistically to exist in the century, was certainly a less desirable outcome than undisputed domination of lucrative trade routes, and the latter remained the *ultima ratio* of foreign policy throughout successive ministries in both states from the 1740s to the 1780s.

[33] The best study of the issue is Black's *The Collapse of the Anglo-French Alliance, 1727–1731* (New York, 1987). He notes that 'the efforts in the late 1710s and early 1720s to preserve the Utrecht settlement and to prevent any major change in international relations can be seen as an important attempt to use a system of collective security to maintain peace and a given international order'. *Rise of the European Powers*, p. 163. Horn, *Great Britain and Europe*, p. 45.

[34] Shirley to the Duke of Bedford, May 10, 1749; cited in Max Savelle, *The Origins of American Diplomacy: The International History of Angloamerica, 1492–1763* (New York, 1967), p. 550. This important work should be consulted in relation to developing the thesis of 'inevitability' of conflict in Anglo-French relations after 1748. See esp. ch. 18.

[35] Vaudreuil to the Duc de Orléans, February 1716. cited in Savelle, *Origins of American Diplomacy*, p. 233.

[36] See Pares, *Colonial Blockade and Neutral Rights, 1739–1763*, (Oxford, 1938), and Isabel de Madariaga, *Britain, Russia, and the Armed Neutrality of 1780* (New Haven, CT, 1962), chs. 1–3.

Indeed, the only Anglo-French pact concluded on even remotely 'balance of power' terms—the Aix-la-Chapelle pact of 1748—proved unworkable and undesirable from the moment it was signed.[37] Reaction to the Treaty, which generally restored territories seized during the War of the Austrian Succession, was scathing in both London and Paris. The lack of consensus on a *status quo*, which the Treaty ostensibly preserved, led both French and British statesmen to castigate the agreement as worthless, and skirmishes in the Ohio Valley and Carribean began almost as soon as the ink was dry. The agreement was little more than a 'breathing space' in a period of general war, similar to the Amiens pact of 1801 during the Napoleonic Wars. Indeed, Parisian wits coined a new expression at the Treaty's expense: 'bête comme la Paix'.[38]

This drive for hegemony became most pronounced during the Seven Years' War, which began in 1754 over a dispute as to the Anglo-French border in the Ohio Valley. Pitt's energetic conduct of the war after three years of defeat, along with the ministry's willingness to greatly augment the national debt, contributed to the unprecedented magnitude of the British victory in 1763.[39] France, whose allies Austria and Russia could not win the decisive victory over Prussia that Kaunitz predicted, received little tangible support in its American campaign and large segments of its army were required to remain in Europe.[40]

Ironically Britain's gains in 1763 did not fundamentally transform the primacy-seeking security concerns synonymous with the mercantilist ideology. Its enormous debt and growing problems in the American colonies left its gains open for potential French reprisals, which were realized with the resumption of war with the Bourbons after 1778. Britain's fixation with consolidating the victory in the colonies left it exposed in Europe, with no allies and little or no influence over political dynamics in the East, especially Poland and the Balkans.[41] France, while effectively marginalized in North America, continued an aggressive policy in the Carribean during the 1778–83 war and again after 1793.[42] Given the parameters imposed by mercantilist

[37] In an interesting epitaph Lodge termed it 'perhaps the nearest approach in history to that "peace without victory" that President Wilson at one moment seemed to regard as the ideal ending of a war. It cannot be said that this particular peace gives much support to the President's view. The war in its erratic course had raised a number of problems, but the treaty settled none of them'. Richard Lodge, *Studies in Eighteenth Century Diplomacy, 1740–1748* (London, 1930).

[38] Basil Williams, *The Whig Supremacy, 1714–1760* (Oxford, 1939), p. 251.

[39] See Richard Middleton, *The Bells of Victory: The Pitt-Newcastle Ministry and the Conduct of the Seven Years' War, 1757–1762* (Cambridge, 1985), chs. 2–3. Much of this expense went to Berlin in the form of subsidies, thus adding some weight to Pitt's famous assertion that 'America was conquered in Germany'. See Lodge, *Great Britain and Prussia in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1923) and the important study by Carl Eldon, *England's Subsidy Policy Towards the Continent During the Seven Years' War* (Philadelphia, 1938).

[40] The cost of this struggle for primacy was enormous. Koehn notes that 'between 1689 and 1793, England fought five major wars with France. The two powers spent 36 of these 94 years in expensive combat. During the war years, the British government devoted an average of 67 per cent of its total expenditures to military purposes. If we include debt service charges, the proportion of total public outlay committed to war costs rises to between 75 and 85 per cent in each of the 36 years'. *Power of Commerce*, p. 4. On French policy in general, see Frank Brecher, *Losing a Continent: France's North American Policy, 1753–1763* (Westport, CT, 1998).

[41] For a gifted analysis of England's approach to the international system after 1763, see Scott, *British Foreign Policy in the Age of the American Revolution* (Oxford, 1990), ch. 3.

[42] See Blanning, *Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars*, ch.1; Scott, 'Bourbon Naval Reconstruction', R.E. Abarca, 'Classical Diplomacy and Bourbon *Revanche* Strategy, 1763–1770', *Review of Politics*, 32 (1970), pp. 313–37, and John F. Ramsey, *Anglo-French Relations 1763–1770: A Study of Choiseul's Foreign Policy* (Berkeley, 1939).

logic, conflict was interpreted as a routine form of statecraft and both British and French ministers throughout the century sought hegemony rather than parity, an objective that endured as long as the fundamental assumptions motivating behaviour on both sides went unchallenged.[43]

In short, balance of power theory cannot be invoked as a causal explanation of British and French colonial policy in the eighteenth century, as the zero-sum nature of the mercantilist system was in direct opposition to balance ideology. When 'balances' were contrived, such as in 1748 and again in 1783, they never endured because both powers desired to transcend a *status quo* and seek security at the expense of the other.[44] Only in the Seven Years' War was the objective of primacy briefly attained by London; however, this victory was unusual, given the dynamics of the European war which forced France to conserve resources on the continent along with atypical British willingness to float massive amounts of debt. Nevertheless, the hegemonic objectives of statecraft on the part of both governments was remarkably consistent—the 'expedient' peace of 1716–31 notwithstanding—from 1713 to 1815. Neither power viewed security as a divisible concept, and both pursued strategies aimed at the total capitulation of its rival. There was, in brief, little daylight between the fundamental strategic intentions of Pitt in America from 1757–60 and those of Napoleon in Europe from 1805–1807.

The continental axis: the contest for mastery in central and eastern Europe

On the continent similar hegemonic ambitions prevailed, and evidence of satiated powers is exceedingly sparse. Power dynamics rotated around two mutually reinforcing poles: the growth of 'dualism' in Germany between Austria and Prussia and the meteoric rise of Russia after 1763.[45] With Spain's role on the continent rapidly declining, Britain all but impotent in Central Europe after the loss of the Prussian alliance in 1762, and France vainly struggling to reassert its traditional role in Poland and the Ottoman Empire, these three powers largely determined the course of politics in Central and Eastern Europe.[46]

In Germany the seemingly impulsive Prussian invasion of Silesia in December 1740 further weakened the already fragile Holy Roman Empire and cost Maria Teresa one of the wealthiest provinces of the Habsburg Monarchy. Vienna's inability

[43] One British author noted in 1723 that 'France and Great Britain are as natural enemies, as old Rome and Carthage were, and the power of the former can never be increased with safety to the latter'. Cited in Black, *Natural and Necessary Enemies*, p. 99. This logic animates popular characterizations of the eighteenth century as a period of a second Hundred Years' War between the two powers.

[44] One British author noted in 1744 that 'the pretence [for war with France] is the Balance of Power. What this Balance of Power is no Parliament ever yet has explained nor one member ever yet once mentioned it in the House of Commons though it has cost the nation above 300 millions'. Cited in Black, *Rise of the European Powers*, p. 161.

[45] Anderson notes that 'the growth of Austro-Prussian antagonism, of "dualism" in Germany, was the most important development in the politics of eighteenth century Europe apart from the emergence of Russia'. *Eighteenth Century Europe*, p. 306.

[46] For a general overview of this dynamic, see Schroeder, *Transformation of European Politics*, pp. 12–52; Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great*, chs. 12–15; McKay and Scott, ch. 8; Scott, *British Foreign Policy in the Age of the American Revolution*, ch. 7; Black, *Rise of the European Powers*, ch. 3; Blanning, *French Revolutionary Wars,* ch. 2.

to wrest control of Silesia by force during the ensuing War of the Austrian Succession led Austrian policy to shift towards a more anti-Prussian, rather than anti-French, direction. Kaunitz's legendary 'diplomatic revolution', by which Austria allied itself with France and later with Russia against Prussia, was designed as a means of crushing the 'upstart' Prussian state, regaining Silesia, and partitioning the Brandenburg kingdom. Austria's aims in the Seven Years' War were no less than the dismemberment of Prussia, rather than the maintenance of a 'balance' in Central Europe similar to the model of the German Confederation after 1815.[47]

Prussia's victory in the Seven Years' War, partially obtained by lucrative British subsidies and poor co-ordination by the three allies, confirmed its Great Power status but did not recreate the *status quo* of 1740. Both Austria and Prussia were drained militarily and financially by the war, yet they continued to manouevre for primacy in central Europe. In 1778 the death of the Elector of Bavaria touched off renewed war. Yet mutual reluctance to sacrifice large armies so soon after the destructive conflict of 1756–63 led to a relatively bloodless 'campaign' which ended with the Russian-mediated settlement at Teschen in 1779.[48]

While both Austria and Prussia ultimately accepted the 1779 Treaty, at least until the Napoleonic period, neither was wholly content with the arrangement. Certainly the idea of power balancing satisfied none of the chief actors involved and it clearly did not carry prescriptive weight in the charting of foreign policy, Frederick's protestations to the contrary in his Political Testament notwithstanding. Maria Teresa, Kaunitz, and Joseph II fumed over the loss of Silesia and the rapid ascendancy of Prussian power, while Frederick sought to consolidate his gains and expand upon them. Central Europe remained, therefore, in a state of cold war between Vienna and Berlin, and no constructive settlement of the German question was offered until Metternich's proposals in 1815. Any rapprochement between these powers throughout the latter half of the century was, in Frederick's own words, 'as inconceivable as an alliance between fire and water'.[49]

The German powers' struggle for primacy was compounded and augmented by the ascension of Russia after 1762 under Catherine II. With the relative weakening of Berlin and Vienna through the Seven Years' War, Russia emerged as the decisive actor on the continent in the 1760s and 1770s. Indeed, one British official noted that 'the Russians may now be considered as the arbiters of Germany, since it is evident that their conjunction with either [Austria or Prussia] must overwhelm the other'.[50]

[47] On Kaunitz's 'reversal of alliances' and its motives, see the brilliant analysis by Horn, 'The Diplomatic Revolution', in J.O. Lindsay (ed.), *The New Cambridge Modern History*, vol. 7: *The Old Regime, 1713–1763* (Cambridge, 1957). See also Doyle, ch. 5 and the older—yet still perceptive—study of the alliance by Richard Waddington, *Louis XV et le renversement des alliances, 1756* (Paris, 1896).

[48] A development which, as Schroeder correctly notes, 'had nothing to do with the moderate aims of the belligerents'. *Transformation of European Politics,* p. 29. On Teschen, see Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great*, pp. 380–92; Scott, *British Foreign Policy*, pp. 300–4.

[49] Cited in Wolfgang Michael, 'Great Britain under William Pitt the Elder', in A.W. Ward, et al. (eds.), *The Cambridge Modern History*, vol. 6: *The Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1934), p. 398.

[50] Cited in Black, *Rise of the European Powers*, p. 130. In a masterful summary Otto Hötzsch argued that Catherine's diplomacy was based on 'the consistent assertion of the strength of Russia in the interests of Russia; nor was it devoid of a Machiavellian note. Catherine never allowed her country to be taken in tow by another Power. To her, alliances and understandings were, simply and solely, means for increasing the strength of Russia with a view to securing for it the status of a really European power. And herein she was so successful, that, apart from the acquisition of territory,

With the central axis of Europe dominated by the bipolar division of Germany, Catherine embarked on a two-pronged expansionist policy in the 1760s. The 'Greek Project' aimed at securing the Crimean Peninsula and other adjacent Black Sea territory from the Ottomans and projecting Russian power to the south, and the 'Northern System' sought to neutralize Swedish or Prussian opposition to Russian trade and naval power in the Baltic. In both the Balkan and Baltic spheres, therefore, Catherinian Russia followed a careful yet deliberate policy of annexationism.[51]

Frederick's realization of Russian hegemonic ambitions in Central and Northern Europe—expressed in his famous aphorism that he feared nothing so much as Russia—led him to seek an alliance with Catherine in 1764.[52] Eager to gain Russian support for his inconclusive struggle with Austria, Frederick cultivated Catherine, even though many Russian diplomats viewed Prussia as obstructing Russian designs on Poland.[53] Frederick supported Catherine's candidate for the Polish throne in 1763–64, much to the distress of France, which had gone to war in 1733 over the succession in Warsaw.[54]

The Ottoman declaration of war against Russia in 1768 formally opened the 'Eastern Question', as it would come to be known in the next century. Catherine's victories against Turkey in 1769–70 alarmed both Austria and Prussia, both of which recognized Russian dominion of the Black Sea and Balkan regions as hostile to their interests. Frederick's 1771 proposal for the partition of Polish territory between Russia and Prussia was intended to distract Catherine from her expansionist policy in the Balkans by compensating Russia in an area susceptible to Prussian monitoring and influence.[55]

The First Partition, though rationalized in terms of classical balance of power logic, was in fact a fallback position for Catherine.[56] Unwilling to risk war in Central

which in itself furthered her aims, she almost attained to the position of arbitress in the affairs of central Europe. She was able to avail herself of the strong antagonism between Prussia and Austria, siding now with one and now with the other, and thus dependent on neither. In … 1778, both Powers sought her help at the same time; so that she could announce her intention to stand surely for the Consititution of Germany, thus assuming a role hitherto played by France...an indication of the change in the European status of Russia, even as compared with that reached under Peter. It was at Teschen that Catherine laid the foundation of the political influence exercised by Russia in Germany, and more importantly in Prussia, which lasted far into the nineteenth century'. 'Catherine II', in Ward (ed.), op. cit., p. 676–7. On Catherine's general policy after 1763, see Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine*, ch. 12.

[51] Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine*, chs 12–15; Schroeder, *Transformation*, pp. 20–3; Both projects appealed to different constituencies in St. Petersburg, and Catherine sought to placate both camps. See D.M. Griffiths, 'The Rise and Fall of the Northern System: Court Politics and Foreign Policy in the First Half of Catherine II's Reign', *Canadian American Slavic Studies*, 4 (1970), pp. 547–69.

[52] He wrote to his brother Prince Henry in 1769 that 'Russia is a terrible Power which in half a century will make all of Europe tremble'. Cited in Albert Sorel, *The Eastern Question in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1969), p. 40.

[53] Indeed Elizabeth I's Foreign Minister, Count Bestuzhev, anticipated as early as 1755 that Prussia was an obstruction in Russia's designs for Eastern Europe, similar to Sweden in the 1710s. McKay and Scott, pp. 185–6.

[54] Scott, 'Frederick II, the Ottoman Empire, and the Origins of the Russian-Prussian Alliance of April 1764', *European Studies Review*, 7 (1977), pp. 153–75; Sorel, chs. 1–2; Schroeder, *Transformation*, pp. 11–18; Herbert Kaplan, *The First Partition of Poland* (New York, 1962), pp. 20–2.

[55] Schroeder, *Transformation,* pp. 12–12. As he notes, 'partition … came about mainly as a by-product of events, a means to other ends'.

[56] Madariaga, pp. 221–5; Schroeder, *Transformation*, p. 12: 'Catherine and her advisers would have preferred to maintain Poland outwardly intact under Russian domination'.

Europe and the Balkans simultaneously, and persuaded that maintaining the Prussian alliance temporarily served Russian interests, Catherine agreed to divide a third of Polish territory with Prussia and Austria in 1772 to prevent a rupture with these powers while she continued the war against the Ottomans. Kaunitz, 'uneasingly tagging along' in the partition in order to prevent the outbreak of war, remained sceptical of Russian motives and manouevred to replace Prussia as Russia's German ally, a move which was consummated in the Austrian-Russian entente of 1787.[57]

The First Partition was hardly a decisive Russian triumph; indeed, Kaplan convincingly argues that Catherine ideally desired both the entirety of the Polish state in addition to considerable gains in the Balkans.[58] Again, the fundamental contradiction in ends and means became strikingly apparent in the East: Russian eagerness for primacy was checked by a reluctance to fight an Ottoman and possible German war simultaneously and by Catherine's desire to maintain Prussian co-operation until the Balkan war was concluded. The anti-Russian coup in Sweden in 1772–73 further reinforced the need for a Baltic ally.[59] The precise disposition of Polish territory, despite considerable Prussian concerns regarding Danzig, was effect rather than cause of the Partition. Frederick desired Catherine's support for a future decisive contest with Austria; Catherine, for her part, masterfully manipulated German tensions yet sought to minimize conflict in Central Europe while her armies fought for gains from the Porte.

Both French and British officials clearly perceived the hegemonic objectives of Russian policy. In 1773 French Foreign Minister D'Aiguillon proposed an Anglo-French entente reminsicent of the 1716–31 pact to restrict further Russian penetration of eastern Europe and the Balkans, a proposal at first welcomed by George III but later rejected by the ministry. Commenting on this development, a British official noted after the tripartite partition of Poland that 'one could say that these three powers are the sovereign masters of the Continent and could partition it as they wish, and I am very afraid that they already have plans to achieve this'.[60]

Russian gains in the 1780s and 1790s were considerable. Catherine's triumphant role as mediator in Germany secured a Russian claim to influence in Central Europe by 1780; the Treaty of Kutchuk-Kainairdji of 1774 had given Russia unprecedented gains in the Balkans; the Crimea was annexed in 1783; a new war with the Turks brought additional gains from 1787–91; Poland was partitioned again in a manner favourable to Russia in 1793 and 1795. By the time of her death in 1796 Catherine had secured a decisive role for St. Petersburg in Europe and achieved her objective of Russian primacy in Poland and the Black Sea. 'Who gains nothing, loses', she noted in a revealing aphorism in 1794.[61]

[57] Scott, *British Foreign Policy*, p. 192. On the 1787 Austro-Russian agreement, see Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine*, chs. 24–25.

[58] In a controversial conclusion, Kaplan argues that the partition was in some respects a 'failure' for Catherine given the strong Austro-Prussian pressure applied against her in Central Europe. *First Partition of Poland*, p. 189.

[59] Indeed, Anderson suggests that the Swedish coup was the only serious defeat Catherine suffered in international politics throughout her 34 year reign, a verdict that is difficult to challenge. *Eighteenth Century Europe*, p. 268.

[60] Cited in Black, *Rise of the European Powers*, p. 125. On French and British reaction to the First Partition, and to eastern developments generally, see Blanning, French Revolutionary Wars, ch. 2; Scott, *British Foreign Policy*, chs. 7–8; Black, *British Foreign Policy in an Age of Revolutions, 1783–1793* (Cambridge, 1994), chs. 2 and 4; Murphy, *Vergennes*, chs. 10–11.

[61] Cited in McKay and Scott, p. 211.

As in the colonies, the continental dimension of the eighteenth century international system was dominated by hegemonic ambitions. Balance of power logic, with its emphasis on parity and satiation, was useful only as a temporary respite at times when powers were engrossed in multiple conquests, as in the case of Russia from 1768–74. The desire to avoid conflict soon after the costly Seven Years' War led to a 'balanced' solution to Poland in 1772, yet the arrangement satisfied none of the partitioning powers and was revised twenty years later. Russia scored commanding gains through the 1774 and 1783 settlements with the Porte and its annexationist objectives were conspicuous, much to the dismay of Vergennes and Pitt by the 1780s.

In Germany, both Austria and Prussia were dissatisfied with the 1763 settlement and desired revision. Frederick sought Russian support in 1764 and Austria followed in 1787; yet, Catherine prudently saw no reason to sanction a major central European War, and preferred to focus Russian attention to the south. The rejection of bipolarity, and the mantra of one power emerging triumphant in the dualist contest for Germany, was a constant refrain in official circles in both Vienna and Berlin. Mutual suspicion about Russian motives in the Balkans and the course of French politics after 1791 provided the only point of common interest between the capitals.[62]

In brief, the eastern dynamic between 1740–1791 represented a two-tiered contest for primacy: between Austria and Prussia for Germany and Russia against the Ottomans and, at times, the German powers for mastery in the Baltic, Poland, and Balkans. The only restraint on state ambitions was the issue of cost: neither Austria nor Prussia desired a repetition of the Seven Years' War, especially with France weakened; hence, the Bavarian War was relatively brief.[63] Catherine approached foreign policy objectives sequentially and was wary of overextension: the First Partition provided less than she initially desired, but came without the cost of a two-front war. To argue, as Schroeder does, that the Central and Eastern European dynamic of the international system 'conformed to all the eighteenth century balance of power assumptions—indeed, to realist assumptions in any age' is misleading.[64] Each power was continuously seeking more than the *status quo* provided and the 'balance' in Poland in 1772 or Teschen in 1779 was more effect than cause. These arrangements were ephemeral and did not deter ministries from their ultimate objective: dominance in Central and Southeastern Europe.

Conclusions: the prescription of primacy: hegemonic impulses reviewed

Our investigation of the continental and colonial axes of the eighteenth century state system has revealed a conspicuous absence of balance of power theory in practice. Each of the five major powers pursued hegemonic policies aimed at attaining primacy at the cost of the territorial amputation, economic ruination, or in

[62] A development which culminated in the Pillnitz Declaration of 1791. Blanning notes, however, that 'the Austro-Prussian *rapprochement* was not an instinctive reaction to the collapse of the old regime in France', pp. 80–9.

[63] Showalter, *Wars of Frederick the Great*, pp. 341–52.

[64] Schroeder, *Transformation*, p. 19.

some cases physical eradication of rival states. That these sweeping aims were not realized in practice owed more to the constricted budgets of *ancien régime* ministries and their reliance on expensive mercenary armies. Ambition, in brief, outran power. Eighteenth century international relations represents a curious and striking imbalance of ends and means: declared objectives could not be met with existing capabilities, yet limited resources only grudgingly—and rarely—translated into reduced appetites. Hence systemic conflict was common throughout the post-1713 period and peace settlements were inherently temporary as they failed to address the underlying causes of state action: the tendency to seek predominance rather than maintain an equilibrium.

The modern attraction of balance theory as an explanatory device is certainly understandable given the 'moderate' *effects* of eighteenth century politics as well as the copious references to this 'scientific' model in Enlightenment texts. Certainly a rough balance of measurable forces existed at specific periods in the century, most notably in the mid-1730s, early 1750s, and mid-1780s, yet interpreting the international system as regulated by balance doctrine is to mistake effect for cause. International politics operated in an exceedingly competitive and unstable universe, which was frought with contingencies: any disruption, such as the death of a sovereign or minor territorial gain, could trigger a general war. If a contemporaneous philosophical or literary allegory to the state system must be offered, it would be the predatory and conquest-oriented salons of Laclos rather than the ordered and harmonious political laboratory of Holbach.

The implications of these hegemonic impulses are considerable both for interpretations of the period as well as broader themes in international relations. Conceiving of the systemic dynamics in this manner enables us to see beyond the traditional—yet artificial—division of *ancien régime* and Revolutionary foreign policy: through this lens 1789, 1792, and 1799 appear as less dramatic points of departure than frequently assumed. As Black notes in a specific reference to France, yet one capable of generalization, 'though revolutionary emotion altered much of the tone of French policy it had much less effect on its substance and thus the situation after 1792–3 was one of the pursuit by greatly expanded means of aims which were not in themselves essentially new'. The restructuring of the taxation system in France and the *levée en masse* provided Napoleon with resources that Louis XV or Vergennes could not have imagined, even though diplomatic aims remained constant. Looked at solely in terms of objectives, the shift from an '*ancien régime*' to a 'Napoleonic' international system is almost imperceptible.[65]

Therefore, the Revolution did not 'transform' the international system from a balance of power to a hegemonic model. Rather, it made the the achievement of primacy now appear possible, especially for politically, socially, economically, and militarily restructured France. Reading back into the eighteenth century antecedents of the conservative maintenance structures of the Bismarck period ignores the

[65] Black, *British Foreign Policy in an Age of Revolutions*, p. 542. He further argues that 'However radical the speeches made by revolutionary orators, many of the presuppositions underlying government policy were usually to a large extent traditional'. Blanning concurs with this judgment, noting that after 1792 'the old European alignments reasserted themselves in a manner that would not have seemed strange to Europe before 1756: France allied to Spain versus Great Britain and Austria plus, occasionally, Russia. The old firms were back in business again'. Blanning, *French Revolutionary Wars*, p. 207.

fundamental reality of *ancien régime* politics: a predatory struggle for dominance rather than a system composed and preserved by more or less satiated powers. As Charles Andrews put it in a succint epitaph, 'In international relations states were construed as in a condition of perpetual conflict with each other, each endeavouring to gain all it could at the expense of the rest. Whether the contest was for territory, or for markets, trade routes, staple products, negroes, gold, silver or other metals, or for such commercial advantages as would enrich one state at the expense of the others, the situation was the same—what one state gained another state lost'.[66]

This is a far cry from Bismarck's dictum that parity and alliances would yield stability or Metternich's insistence that a general war was injurious to the interests of all powers. Peace was not interpreted by responsible ministers as the natural or even desired state of international relations—as Clausewitz later noted, the best intentions of Enlightenment philosophers could not make two and two equal five in politics. The idea of a satisfied major power did not exist in the eighteenth century system and with this assumption went the rejection of conservative balance of power policies aimed at preserving or only marginally revising a *status quo*. The rapid deterioration of pledged agreements whenever deemed advantageous to a state—such as in the cases of the Austrian Pragmatic Sanction in 1740 or the Aix-la-Chapelle agreement of 1748—is evidence of the ephemerality of eighteenth century attempts at stability. Kant was more correct than he may have imagined when he remarked in 1792 that to achieve 'a permanent universal peace by means of a so-called European balance of power is a pure illusion'.[67] The desire for primacy, which seemingly offered greater security than the comparative advantage model of the balance of power, remained the motivating force of international relations on the part of all major powers throughout the eighteenth century.

[66] Andrews, *Colonial Period of American History*, vol. 4, p. 8.
[67] 'Theory and Practice', in Hans Reiss (ed.), *Kant's Political Writings*, 2nd. edn. (Cambridge, 1991), p. 92.