



*Marathon Working Paper*

# Strategic Sequencing: How Great Powers Avoid Multi-Front War

This paper examines how four great powers in history have handled strategic simultaneity. Byzantium, Venice, Habsburg Austria, and the British Empire were all confronted, at important moments in their life cycles as empires, with the appearance of new threats both more powerful and different in kind than anything they had previously encountered.

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This paper is the result of a project conducted in the summer of 2020 for the Pentagon Office of Net Assessment examining the two-front problem in strategy. The concept grew out of a fellowship with the Harvard Belfer Center's Applied History Project and will culminate in a forthcoming book with Princeton University Press that uses applied history to understand great-power competition.

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*Truly, sir... you know that no empire, however great,  
has been able to sustain many wars in different areas for long.*

*– Habsburg diplomat to Philip II, 1600*

## I. INTRODUCTION

**What is a great power to do when confronted by more than one peer competitor at the same time?** Throughout history, empires have had to deal with the problem of omnidirectional danger. In its worst form, this problem can involve several enemies coordinating their moves to present simultaneous crises at multiple points on the compass. But even when enemies do not conspire, the mere fact of their existence in different directions from the home area presents dilemmas in diplomacy and military planning. The prince who injudiciously dispatches his armies to one frontier without anticipating how his enemies will react elsewhere is unlikely to remain a prince for long. For this reason, avoiding multi-front war, and ensuring the state's preparedness for its contingency, must surely rank among the foremost demands facing great states throughout history, and success in these objects among the highest skills of statecraft.

Never are the pressures of simultaneity more sharply felt than at times of intense geopolitical change, when shifts in the balance of power bring to the fore new peers that previously did not exist or only existed in distant or attenuated form. At these moments, great powers have found themselves confronted, often very suddenly, with an emerging challenger of unexampled strength. Inevitably, these moments concentrate the attention of the state's leaders. Yet the emergence of new foes does not mean that old problems—the rivalries with which the state has long been preoccupied—go away. They must still be dealt with, but in a way that does not detract from, and if possible actively furthers, the goal of dealing with the new challenger.

Such moments represent perhaps the gravest danger that a state can face short of imminent invasion, for they present a tension between the arch-imperative of survival, which requires states to avoid tests of strength beyond their ability to bear, and the natural tendency of leaders to react to crises as they emerge, which if applied to too many enemies simultaneously, can quickly lead to financial and military overextension. These are clarifying moments, in which the margins of error shrink and leaders must accurately match finite means to expansive ends. In short, they are moments that require strategy in its essential form, as an exercise in the use of rationality, foresight and cunning to compensate for limitations in material strength.

This paper examines how four great powers in history have handled simultaneity. Byzantium, Venice, Habsburg Austria, and the British Empire were all confronted, at important moments in their life cycles as empires, with the appearance of new threats both more powerful and different in kind than anything they had previously encountered. Even as these new challengers emerged, the empires in question continued to endure pressure from other peers that had formerly comprised their chief security threats. The Eastern Roman Empire at the time of Theodosius II was embroiled along its southern frontiers with Sasanian Persia when Attila and his fast-moving horsemen irrupted from the steppe to threaten Constantinople. Venice was at the height of its powers as a maritime republic was enmeshed in a running feud with old rivals on the Italian mainland when the Ottoman Turks completed their conquest of Anatolia and emerged as a major power in the Eastern Mediterranean. Similarly, Habsburg Austria was habituated to dynastic duels with its hereditary enemy Bourbon France when, early in the reign of Maria Theresa, Frederick II of Prussia unleashed his well-drilled armies into Bohemia to threaten the old monarchy's very existence. And closer to our own time, Edwardian Britain was focused on colonial rivalries with France and Russia when Imperial Germany emerged to threaten Britain's supremacy at sea and upset balance of power in continental Europe.

This study does not rehash the oft-told tales of the rise and falls of these empires. By now, the basic facts of the Byzantine-Sasanian, Venetian-Ottoman, Habsburg-Hohenzollern, and Anglo-German rivalries are well known. Rather, my purpose is to understand how the leaders of these states thought about and ultimately dealt with the problem of competition with more than one large opponent simultaneously. Understanding how they fared is relevant for the United States today. After nearly three decades of relative tranquility, China has emerged as not only a peer competitor, but the first rival in America's modern history that is demographically and economically equipped to achieve a stronger military position than the United States. China's rise, however, does not occur in a vacuum; simultaneously, America faces pressures from another great power, its legacy rival, Russia, and a third, regional power, Iran.

Managing more than one major power simultaneously in peacetime is not a challenge that the United States is accustomed to dealing with.<sup>1</sup> For the first several decades of the 20th Century, America was latently powerful but not an active participant in

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<sup>1</sup> For a cogent overview of the debate about simultaneity in the context of the 2017 National Defense Strategy, see Jim Mitre, "A Eulogy for the Two-War Construct," *Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2019, 41:4, pp. 7-30. For a historical perspective on the simultaneity problem, see the author's book *The Grand Strategy of the Habsburg Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. ix-xi, 82-117. See also: David Edelstein, *Time, Uncertainty and the Rise of Great Powers* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2020); Hal Brands and Evan Braden Montgomery, "One War Is Not Enough: Strategy and Force Planning for Great Power Competition," *The Strategist*, Vol. 3, Issue 2, Spring 2020, pp. 80-92; and Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (Yale University Press, forthcoming).

international balance of power, which was then still centered in Europe. During the Second World War, America vied with two great-power opponents, but in conditions of open warfare (that is, it was managing a multi-front war that had already broken out, rather than avoiding one). Similarly, during the 1950s, America had to contend, in force and posture planning, with a militarily active China that distracted resources and attention from Europe. But this was an underdeveloped, agrarian state, not a peer competitor. And while the United States did have to manage simultaneous *crises* in multiple regions during the Cold War, these were emanating from the actions of one primary peer, the Soviet Union. For most of the period since, the United States has been able to safely assume the absence of large rivals capable of deranging the balances of power in the world's most important regions.

Insofar as America has had to grapple with problems of strategic simultaneity, it has become accustomed to being able to overcome them with the overwhelming material strength made possible by U.S. industrial and military-technological superiority. The ability to outproduce, outgun, and outdistance the enemy, courtesy of North America's size, resources, and geography, was the key to U.S. success against all of its 20th Century major-power opponents—Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan and Soviet Russia. In World War II, America was able to produce fleets and armies capable of dominating two oceans and two continents in opposite directions from the U.S. mainland. In the Cold War, the advent of long-range strategic airpower and atomic weapons enabled the United States to envision victory against the Soviets in the Euro-Atlantic and Asia-Pacific theaters simultaneously.

This legacy persisted after the Cold War with the Pentagon's two-war standard, albeit with regional players rather than great powers in mind. In these genial conditions, in which it could safely assume enduring material superiority over any foreseeable challenger, the United States has simply not had to develop a culture of flexible strategic statecraft attuned to the fluidities and exigencies of multi-player games that were the norm for earlier great powers. But China's ascent as a first-rank economic power capable of achieving a commanding lead in new technologies, together with its own and the Russian Federation's growing capacity to successfully resist U.S. entry into portions of the Asian and European theaters, call these assumptions into question. In coming years, U.S. leaders are likely to find themselves confronting the problem of strategic simultaneity in circumstances more akin to the historical pattern, with limited means available for managing multiple rivals, one of which may be stronger than itself in certain domains. In such circumstances, the experiences of earlier great powers that lacked the assurance of technological overmatch yet endured in part due to strategy, may prove instructive.

The study is organized into seven parts. In parts 2-5, I examine the cases, respectively, of Byzantium, Venice, Austria and Britain. In each case, I ask four questions:

- (1) What was the logic that guided strategy before the appearance of the new rival?
- (2) What about the new threat made the old logic break down?
- (3) What options were considered for managing the new threat, which was selected, and why?
- (4) What was the result of the strategy—did it work or not, for how long, and at what cost?

Across the cases, I examine not only episodes in which the great powers in question dealt effectively with simultaneity but, by way of comparison, several instances in which they did not. In the sixth section, I compare the cases and highlight patterns as a way of elucidating when simultaneity occurs, how leaders go about ranking threats, and what commonalities characterized successful (and unsuccessful) strategies. I argue that the states which succeeded in avoiding multi-front war were those that achieved concentration against the primary rival—specifically, that developed political strategies to de-prioritize secondary threats and enable military concentration in the main theater. Finally, I examine the means by which concentration was achieved and, drawing on the cases, examine the role of leadership and organizational reform as enablers of strategic adaptation. In the seventh section, I develop a general menu, derived from the historical cases, of strategic options for managing a multi-competitor environment with the not-so-distant future United States in mind.

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## II. STRATEGIC DEFLECTION: THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE.

In 441AD, Theodosius II, emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, was notified that a large mounted army of Huns, led by their famous captain Attila, had suddenly appeared in the province of Thrace, not far from the imperial capital of Constantinople.<sup>2</sup> At the moment of Attila's arrival, Theodosius' armies were concentrated hundreds of miles away, along the unstable frontier with Sasanian Persia. What remained of available Byzantine manpower had recently been sent to Africa, where the Vandals and their intrepid leader Gaiseric had seized Carthage and threatened the empire's grain supply.<sup>3</sup>

The dilemma facing Theodosius was how to deal decisively with the immediate threat from Attila without weakening the empire against Persia or losing the ability to deal with the less urgent but still important problem of Gaiseric. In pondering these very different threats, Theodosius could draw upon the resources of a large but sprawling and vulnerable realm.<sup>4</sup> At its center lay the magnificent capital of Constantinople, which since 395AD had ruled the eastern half of the Roman world. To the northwest of Constantinople lay the Balkan peninsula, where numerous mountain ranges offered some protection from the migratory tribes of the Eurasian steppe but were also punctuated by valleys through which fast-moving horse armies could appear with little warning just miles from the capital. To the south and west of Constantinople stretched the Mediterranean Sea and the provinces of Libya and Egypt, which constituted a major revenue base and the primary source of grain for most of the empire. To the east and south of Constantinople lay the coastal provinces of Asia Minor and the arid Anatolian massif and, beyond that, the immensely long frontier with Persia, arch-rival to Rome since the days of Julius Caesar, stretching from the Caucasus to the Red Sea.

### I. THE PRE-ATTILA BYZANTINE SECURITY SYSTEM.

Prior to Attila's arrival, the Byzantines had protected their sprawling possessions with a combination of frontier garrisons, field armies and treaty diplomacy. Priority was given to Persia, which alone among the empire's enemies was a peer rival possessing sufficient resources and military sophistication to defeat the empire's armies and permanently

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the terms Eastern Roman Empire and Byzantium are used interchangeably. Unless otherwise noted, "Roman" refers to both halves of the empire.

<sup>3</sup> For a description of Attila's arrival and effect it had on Byzantine strategic thinking, see Warren Treadgold, A History of the Byzantine State and Society (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 93-5 and Edward Luttwak, The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2009), pp. 49-52.

<sup>4</sup> For a succinct overview of the empire's main strategic theaters, see Mark Whittow, The Making of Byzantium 600-1025 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 38-53. Whittow appraisal of the geopolitical landscape of the early 7<sup>th</sup> Century is in most regards equally applicable to Theodosius' time.

occupy its territories.<sup>5</sup> To deter this threat, Byzantium maintained elaborate networks of fortresses along the full length of the eastern frontier manned by fully two-thirds of its military establishment. By the late 4<sup>th</sup> Century these included 150,000 *limitanei* (garrison troops) scattered across 15 independent commands backed by 20,000 *comitatenses* (mobile troops).<sup>6</sup> Beyond this line lay numerous Byzantine tributary states (Armenia, Lazica, Abasgia, and later the Khazars) which acted as both a buffer between the two empires and, intermittently, a source of auxiliary manpower for the Byzantines. The fact of rough military parity between Byzantium and Persia tended to produce long periods of stalemate in which diplomats swapped border strips and brokered truces of varying duration. Such seasons of peace were always uneasy and usually short-lived; episodic Sasanian aggression necessitated not only a watchful eye, especially during dynastic transitions, but the standing presence of large Byzantine garrisons even in times of peace.



Courtesy of the Map Archive

### *Europe and the Mediterranean, c. 454 C.E.*

By comparison, the other two theaters, the Mediterranean and Balkans, tended to receive less attention and resources. In early Byzantine history, large swaths of both

<sup>5</sup> As Whittow points out, the Persians’ possession of Iraq gave them “the only other region of the Near East with a comparable agricultural output to that of Egypt.” See Whittow, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed breakdown of Byzantine military commitments by theater, see Treadgold, pp. 105-7. His figures are for the period about 50 years after the arrival of the Huns and thus perhaps somewhat higher than they would have been at Theodosius’ time, before the acceleration of the crises of the western empire.

regions were in practice jointly managed with the Western Roman Empire. The typically small Byzantine navy was sufficient to clear the sea-lanes of pirates and thwart naval threats to Roman coastal possessions and shipping. In this context, Gaiseric's seizure of the rich Roman province of Africa and its capital Carthage was significant, not only because of its immediate impact on imperial revenues and food supplies but because that city's extensive ship-building facilities gave Gaiseric the gift of a navy with which to threaten Alexandria or even Constantinople itself.

The Balkans were often the lowest priority for Byzantine military resources.<sup>7</sup> By this date migrating eastern tribes were appearing with growing frequency from the nearby Pontic steppe. But prior to Attila's arrival, serious threats from this direction had been infrequent and the old Roman system of security in this theater largely solvent. That consisted of: (1) networks of outposts, wooden palisades, and flotillas along the Lower Danube—the famous *limes*, still managed by the western rather than eastern empire—to dissuade all but the most aggressive of tribes; (2) treaties of settlement (usually involving some exchange of land and grain for fealty); and (3) as a last resort, expeditionary armies to cow or defeat those tribes that were not amenable to other forms of suasion.

The Byzantine method for managing these three frontiers worked in tandem: eastern forts sheltered the empire's interior from large-scale Persian attacks; Egypt provided grain and taxes to feed and fund armies and build fortresses to guard the east; the Balkans provided manpower and, by not requiring large standing garrisons, freed up reserves for the east; and diplomatic and military coordination with the western empire reduced the exertions that would otherwise have been needed to guard the maritime provinces. Together, these elements enabled a concentration of force in the east while leaving room to manage secondary threats should they emerge in the other theaters. With this system Byzantium had the flexibility to handle one major war and a second smaller, regional war at the same time—in today's terms, a one-and-a-half war standard. Thus when Gaiseric's army of Vandals and Alans took Carthage in 439, Theodosius was able to quickly organize an expeditionary force of 1,100 ships and 50,000 men, taken mostly from Balkan garrisons, under the Gothic general Ariobindus without having to draw down force levels on the Persian frontier.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Whittow describes the Balkans as a “a zone of defense-in-depth” for the Byzantines. See Whittow, p. 50.

<sup>8</sup> Citing the contemporary chronicler Theophanes, Luttwak puts the size of this force at between 30,000 and 50,000 men—a significant number when one considers that the entire Byzantine garrison for Thrace and the Balkans at this time was probably around 45,000 men. See Luttwak, p. 51 and Treadgold, pp. 105-7.

## 2. WHAT MADE ATTLILA DIFFERENT.

What the Byzantine system was not designed to handle was 2 major wars simultaneously. This was exactly the prospect with which Attila confronted the empire. While the Byzantines had faced threats from migrating tribes before, Attila was different. His armies were larger, faster and more lethal than anything either Byzantium or for that matter Rome had ever faced. Attila's mounted forces were capable of a 2-to-1 speed advantage over conventional cavalry and therefore deep penetration into Roman territory, while their horsemanship and mastery of the composite reflex bow ensured that they could defeat in detail any Roman force they might meet along the way.<sup>9</sup> Critically, unlike earlier steppe tribes encountered by the Romans, the Huns were capable of conducting successful sieges against walled cities. Together, these traits meant that, in contrast to the empire's previous opponents, Byzantine armies had no hope of either setting the pace of operations against, nor establishing escalation dominance over, Hunnic armies—facts which gave Attila not only a tactical and strategic advantage over Byzantine armies, but a psychological one as well.

There was also the question of Attila's aims. Earlier tribes had been interested mainly in small-scale plunder raids or in settling down, usually with some degree of brokered subservience, beneath the imperial aegis. But Attila seemed to have bigger ambitions. After murdering his brother Bleda, he charmed and coerced a number of other tribes—Alans, Gepids, Heruli, Greuthungi, Ostrogoths, Rugi, Sciri, Suebi—to rally around the Hunnic banner at a base of operations in the Pannonian Plain, just beyond the Danube.<sup>10</sup> This was no mere raiding party. Politically significant was the fact that many tribes under Attila's thrall were formal supplicants to the emperor. His mastery of these tribes and the sheer geographic extent of the territory over which they ranged, from Crimea to the river Elbe, suggested an expansive potential. As a Roman diplomat who met Attila observed, "he was aiming at more than his present achievements."<sup>11</sup>

Faced with such a threat, the logic of the old Byzantine security system broke down. It had been built around the assumption that the empire could either deter or quickly defeat any threat that appeared in the empire's two secondary theaters—the Mediterranean or Balkans—in order to keep the bulk of Byzantine forces concentrated in the east. But Hunnic threat was something on an altogether different scale. It meant that, at least for the time being, the Romans could not automatically assume that they would be able to continue prioritizing Persia while still having the ability to hold the

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<sup>9</sup> For a comparative analysis of the tactical, operational and theater-strategic attributes of Byzantine and Hunnic armies, see Luttwak, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> Luttwak, p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

west. Virtually overnight, threats had emerged in both the Mediterranean (Gaiseric) and far more urgently the Balkans (Attila). To make matters worse, the same year that Attila appeared in Thrace, Persia's new king, Yazdegerd II, launched attacks on Byzantine positions in the Caucasus and Mesopotamia.<sup>12</sup> Thus a system that had been designed to handle one-and-a-half threats suddenly faced two-and-a-half threats, two of which (the Huns and Persians) were capable, under the right conditions, of destroying the empire.

### 3. THEODOSIUS' OPTIONS.

What were Theodosius' options for dealing with Attila and Persia simultaneously? By the time Attila arrived in Thrace, the usual practice of halting tribes on the Danube, at a safe remove from the capital, was out of the question. The wolf was already at the door. At that moment, Byzantine troops were deployed in the empire's primary theater (the east) and secondarily in Sicily. Nor was the later practice whereby Byzantine emperors, in a forerunner of the French *alliance de reverse*, would enflame the tribes to the rear of a powerful opponent in order to splinter and distract his forces yet in evidence; as Edward Luttwak points out, Attila's grip over the lesser tribes was too total, and his territorial holdings too extensive, to permit such an expedient. In principle, this left Theodosius with four basic options:

*OPTION 1.* Defeat Attila militarily. This option appears to have been favored by Theodosius' most senior generals, including Aspar the Goth, Ariobindus, and Zeno, and possibly the emperor's sister Pulcheria.<sup>13</sup> To even entertain such an option, Theodosius would need to recall Byzantine forces en route to Carthage, if not also from the east, and countenance larger troop levies, with the accompanying pressures of higher taxation and a debased coinage.

*OPTION 2.* Deter Attila from launching deeper attacks into imperial territory but keep the focus on the east. To be credible, this option, too, would have required a major redeployment of forces along the lines of the first option, even if immediate field operations were not envisioned. It would necessitate stronger fortifications in the landward approaches to Constantinople, many of which had been allowed to deteriorate in preceding years. An advocate of this option appears to have been Cyrus of Panopolis, prefect of the east, a court favorite of the empress Eudocia.<sup>14</sup>

*OPTION 3.* Co-opt Attila. On this option the Huns would be convinced to accept some degree of Byzantine overlordship. The usual method for doing so would be to grant land

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<sup>12</sup> Treadgold, p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> For a description of these internal factions and debates, see Treadgold, pp. 94-98.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

for Hunnic settlement in peripheral provinces. This option was not without significant risks, not only because it would detract from the empire's tax base but because warlike tribes made truculent and unpredictable neighbors. In any event, such a course cannot have been an option in anything but theory, as Attila had shown no indication, on the basis of his repeated deep forays and secure Pannonian base, to follow the path of earlier tribes in accepting even nominal fealty to the emperor.

*OPTION 4.* Bribe Attila, either with an eye to buying time for further defensive preparations or to deflect his wrath from the empire altogether. Bribery was a well-established tool in the Roman repertoire for handling barbarians and had been used successfully on a smaller scale with Attila's father, Rua, a few years earlier. The champion of this strategy appears to have been an astute palace eunuch named Chrysaphius who vied with the generals for control over imperial policy and amassed considerable influence with the emperor.<sup>15</sup>

Initially Theodosius seems to have favored a military option, for he recalled the general Ariobindus from his mission to Carthage and sent him and his army to reinforce Aspar's forces in the Balkans. The ease with which Attila destroyed this combined force after demolishing several Roman towns in Dacia must have established beyond any doubt the impossibility of a military solution. Such was the Hunnic military superiority over the Romans that even an all-out effort by Byzantine troops from *all* frontiers would likely have ended in defeat.

So Theodosius appeased Attila.<sup>16</sup> In 442, the Byzantine emperor directed his diplomats to arrange a system of tribute whereby the empire would pay 151,200 *nomismata* per annum, to be supplemented by a one-time payment of 432,000 *nomismata*, in exchange for a general cessation of Hunnic raids on all lands of the eastern empire. In parallel, even before the negotiators had begun haggling over gold weights with Attila, Theodosius laid the groundwork for a longer-term solution to the Attila problem.

The cornerstone to this solution was a *détente* with Yazdegerd II, in the form of an armistice under which the two empires would cease hostilities and forgo the construction of new fortresses in order to focus against their shared foe. For the time being, Theodosius abandoned entirely his campaigns in Mediterranean and Africa, essentially leaving the western empire to its own devices. Theodosius also intensified the expensive, multi-year effort begun in his father's reign to extend the walls around

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>16</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I use the term *appeasement* to refer to the practice of one state making concessions to another to dissuade it from aggression against that state. I use the term *détente* to refer to a negotiated de-confliction arrived at by mutual consent between two states, on the basis of some shared goal.



Constantinople, eventually building a formidable double line of battlements 2,000 yards west of the walls built by Constantine a century earlier and commissioning a seawall to guard against Gaiseric's fleet.

In short, Theodosius' answer to Byzantium's multi-front dilemma was to prioritize the urgent threat of Attila, postpone conflict with the stronger long-term threat of Persia, de-escalate against the least dangerous threat, Gaiseric, and, in parallel, to make military preparations—moving troops from the de-prioritized frontiers to support a concentration of force in the north and building seawalls—should his attempts to dissuade the Huns and deter Gaiseric, respectively, fail.

#### 4. RESULTS AND COSTS.

How effective was Theodosius' strategy? In his own time, the policies that the emperor undertook to save the empire from Attila attracted criticism from the army leadership, court, and imperial family. A prominent modern historian has characterized his decision to bribe Attila as stemming from weakness of character and claims that it placed a major economic drain on the empire.<sup>17</sup> The policy's architect, the eunuch Chrysaphius, was excoriated for having pursued what was seen as a humiliating policy of self-abasement. When Theodosius died, Chrysaphius was executed by the next emperor, Marcian, who officially repudiated Theodosius' subsidies for the Huns (yet, tellingly, persisted with the policy of *détente* with Persia).<sup>18</sup>

These judgments notwithstanding, Theodosius' strategy has to be seen in retrospect as generally effective, not only in handling the immediate threat from Attila at an acceptable cost in money, lost opportunities, and future stability. Initially, the peace held for five years, from 442 to 447, at which point renewed small-scale Hunnic raiding led Theodosius to forego tribute, provoking Attila to again invade Dacia and Thrace. A short war ensued that followed the earlier pattern: Byzantine defeats followed by a new and larger tribute. But this time Attila left for good. Glutted with Byzantine gold, he turned his attention to the Western Roman Empire, where he advanced as far as Gaul before being defeated, retreating to his Pannonian roost, and dying suddenly in 453. Thus the essence of Theodosius' strategy can be said to have been deflective, in that it had placated Attila not merely to buy time but to divert Attila's focus to softer targets. In the event, it succeeded in both objects, buying enough time to strengthen Constantinople's defenses, concentrate Byzantine forces in the north, and launch a successful punitive mission (under Theodosius' successor) into Pannonia while Attila

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<sup>17</sup> John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium: The Early Centuries* (New York: Viking Press, 1989), pp. 153-54.

<sup>18</sup> Treadgold, p. 98.

was raiding in the west. The Huns did not threaten Byzantium again in force and thus the policy must be judged successful with regard to its main object.

How did Theodosius' policy leave the empire's overall strategic position? In the immediate term, it succeeded in avoiding a multi-front war beyond the empire's ability to win. While imperial troops were for a brief moment in 441 simultaneously engaged in all three theaters, it is a testament to Byzantine statecraft that the generals did not prevail in their desire for a military solution to the Hunnic threat, which almost certainly would have ended in disaster. But nor did the empire become enmeshed in a draining war in the east while keeping Attila seasonally at bay. What the Byzantines sought and achieved was a comfortable margin of safety, which was impossible without peace in the east. The treaty with Persia brought a general armistice, ban on further fortress construction, and certain degree of cooperation against the Huns.<sup>19</sup> It proved durable, lasting sixty years until the outbreak of the Anastasian War in 502 AD—the longest period of peace in the history of the two empires. While most attention has been paid to Theodosius' handling of Attila, the peace with Persia was arguably the keystone achievement of Byzantine foreign policy in his reign.

It is worth pausing to consider why Theodosius' détente with Persia, the power that had most vexed Byzantium in the past and would do so again, and which stood to gain the most from its preoccupation with Attila, fared so well. One major factor was the fact that the two empires shared an obvious common enemy, the Huns, that was a greater threat to each than they were to one other. It was when the White Huns had relented in their attacks on Persia that Yazdegerd launched offensives against the Byzantines and when the Huns resumed their attacks on Persia that Yazdegerd proved amenable to Theodosius' entreaties. Another factor was that the two empires had something tangible over which to barter: pieces of territory, mainly on the Euphrates and Caucasus, that could change hands to cement an understanding without sacrificing their prestige or security.<sup>20</sup> And finally, the Persian détente was aided by an effective deterrent; even while prioritizing the Hunnic threat, the Byzantines maintained a substantial military presence in the east to guarantee the peace.

The success with Persia notwithstanding, Theodosius' strategy did come with costs. Financially, the amounts required for bribing Attila were significant, though far from crippling for the imperial treasury; Edward Luttwak calculates that the 2,100 pounds of gold paid annually to the Huns was roughly equivalent to the annuities of six senior

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<sup>19</sup> Treadgold, p. 95.

<sup>20</sup> The two also shared a culture and language of professional diplomacy; for all the bitterness of their two empires' long rivalry, Theodosius' diplomats had trained counterparts on the other side with whom to conduct sophisticated negotiations very different from the crude and episodic bribery used with the Huns.



court officials.<sup>21</sup> Since the Huns, as a tribal people without manufacture, used money to purchase cloth and trinkets from the Byzantines, most of the tribute they received ultimately returned to circulation in the Byzantine economy. The costs required for Theodosius' fortification projects were orders of magnitude greater, but provided a high return on investment in protecting Constantinople from numerous attacks over the ensuing millennium. The costs of both bribery and fortifications have to be weighed against the outlays that would have been needed to support a full-on military response to Attila, which would have required enormous sums for new troops and inevitably entailed long periods of lost revenue from territories seized by the Huns as well as the indirect costs in agriculture and lost revenue of soldiers being absent at harvest, and even then would probably still have required a large tribute to Attila anyhow.

There were opportunity costs to Theodosius' strategy, especially in Mediterranean theater, where the recall of Ariobindus' expeditionary force left a vacuum for Gaiseric to exploit. It was with this threat in mind that Theodosius, likely at the prodding of the prefect Cyrus of Panopolis, ordered the construction of the seawall around Constantinople.<sup>22</sup> In the event, and to an extent Theodosius cannot have anticipated, the very sight of the large Byzantine fleet at anchor off Sicily, just before its recall, was sufficient to frighten Gaiseric away from attacking either Byzantium or Alexandria. Much as he did with Yazdegerd, Theodosius brokered a durable peace with Gaiseric, which also lasted for sixty years. When the Vandal attacks finally came, they fell on Italy rather than Byzantium, culminating in Gaiseric's successful assault on Rome in 455.

Herein lies perhaps the greatest long-term strategic cost of Theodosius' policies: the weakening of the western empire, which for years had relied on Byzantine military expeditions to help prop up its position, especially in Africa. The abrupt end to this support left it vulnerable at exactly the moment when migratory pressures were growing and Rome was unprepared to handle greater security burdens. Combined with Theodosius' probably deliberate deflection of the Huns toward Italy and France, the sudden unavailability of eastern soldiery undoubtedly hastened the collapse of the western empire. Over time, this would greatly affect the security of the eastern empire, not only because it removed the military and diplomatic cooperation the latter had enjoyed from the west but because it exposed it to threats from frontiers that had previously been in friendly hands, thus creating the need for larger armies, more fortifications, and ever nimbler diplomacy.

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<sup>21</sup> Luttwak, p. 54.

<sup>22</sup> Treadgold, p. 94.

## 5. THE JUSTINIAN POSTSCRIPT.

The extent of Theodosius' extemporaneous success in managing the pressures of simultaneity can perhaps best be seen by comparing it to the strategic exploits of the later and much more famous Byzantine emperor, Justinian (527-565AD). Like Theodosius, Justinian sought to avoid multi-front war, though with the more ambitious aim of freeing up resources to undertake a series of offensives to regain lost Roman lands in Africa and Italy.<sup>23</sup> As it had been for Theodosius, the centerpiece of Justinian's strategy was a treaty of détente with Persia, the so-called Perpetual Peace, brokered with the Persian king Khusrau in 532AD, which sought to postpone conflict with Persia to focus Byzantine manpower on the western conquests. Like Theodosius, Justinian used bribery to cement this détente, essentially paying Khusrau 11,000 pounds of gold (792,000 nomismata) not to attack Byzantine towns in the east.

Justinian's strategy, however, met with only partial success. Unlike Theodosius, who had, even at the high point of the Hunnic threat, continued to backstop his Persian détente with a large residual eastern garrison, Justinian withdrew most of his troops from the eastern frontier and the Balkan provinces for use in the western campaigns while suspending the pay of the garrisons that remained behind in order to pay for the large tribute to Khusrau.<sup>24</sup> Initially, the Persian peace held, giving Justinian's famous commander Belisarius time to invade Africa and Italy. But the absence of troops in the east and north attracted opportunistic aggression. In 540AD Khusrau attacked up the Euphrates, quickly overwhelming the depleted and demoralized garrisons and sacking many of the Byzantines' largest eastern cities. In parallel, the Byzantine client-state of Lazica, with Persian encouragement, launched attacks in the Caucasus, as did the Caucasian Huns and a large army of marauding Bulgars attacked the weakly-defended Byzantine positions in Thrace, penetrating as far as the outer walls of Constantinople. While all of this was happening, the recently-subdued Ostrogoths, who also were in communication with the Persians, also rose up to threaten the Byzantine position in the west.

Faced with attacks on four sides, Justinian was able to restore order only by redeploying Belisarius from Italy, in fire brigade fashion, to douse the flames. It is a testament to Belisarius' skills as a commander more than Justinian's skills as a statesman that the crisis was eventually contained, albeit at great expense in lives and treasure and the devastation of several important towns. Thus despite being justly regarded as perhaps the greatest of Byzantine emperors, Justinian failed to avoid multi-front war where his

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<sup>23</sup> Treadgold, pp. 182; 190-96.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

much less remembered predecessor Theodosius had succeeded. The most obvious difference between the two is that Justinian's strategy, being offensive in nature, had pared the military resources on the two de-prioritized frontiers to such an extent that it invited aggression. As this example shows, détente alone does not bring peace; indeed, even the most carefully crafted and dearly bought attempts to deescalate with a rival, if not backed by deterrence, can invite aggression and thus indirectly fuel the very problem of multi-front war they are meant to avert.

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### III. DEFENSIVE ACCOMMODATION: THE REPUBLIC OF VENICE.

A little over a thousand years after Theodosius' death, the walls that he had built were besieged for the final time as Mehmed II prepared to storm Constantinople in the early summer of 1453. With Byzantium's fall, the Ottoman Turks, who had been steadily expanding in Anatolia and the Balkans for the previous century, turned their attention to maritime expansion in the Mediterranean and the Christian states of the south European littoral.

The irruption of Ottoman power into the Western world posed a particular problem for the Republic of Venice, then the leading commercial and military power of the Eastern Mediterranean. From its origins in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century as a prosperous Byzantine outpost, Venice had rapidly expanded to become the dominant player in the burgeoning trade between Europe and the Levant. Aiding Venice's ascent had been its favorable geography as a cluster of lagoon-encircled islands off the northwest coast of Italy, with easy access to both the Adriatic and the Alpine passes into Central Europe.<sup>25</sup> Venice was also advantaged by certain domestic characteristics: A high degree of social stability and cohesion as a constitutional republic, early mastery of sailing technologies (the compass and galley), and a precocity for credit and deposit banking. Thus endowed, Venice had, by the early 15<sup>th</sup> Century, accumulated an extensive maritime empire stretching from the Adriatic to the Aegean and Black Sea.<sup>26</sup>

In the decades leading up to Constantinople's fall, Venetian leaders had debated what to do about the slowly emerging Turkish threat. Complicating the Republic's strategic position was the recurrent challenge, from the nearby Italian mainland, of rival city-republics. Venice's victory over its historic foe Genoa in the War of Chioggia in 1381 brought only temporary relief; by the early 1400s the Duchy of Milan had launched a bid for hegemony over Lombardy, thus threatening the strategically-important provinces adjacent to the lagoon. The question facing Venice's leaders was how to juggle the simultaneous pressures bearing down on the lagoon from east and west—specifically, how much attention to give to an Ottoman power that, while still emergent, could someday endanger the commercial empire upon which the Republic's strength rested, and an Italian neighbor that, while smaller in scale than the Ottomans, could threaten the mainland resources (food and raw materials) upon which the fundamentals of Venetian power, and a good deal of the Republic's prestige, rested.

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<sup>25</sup> For a compelling description of the geopolitical foundations of Venetian power, see Jakub J. Grygiel, Great Powers and Geopolitical Change (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), pp. 55-62.

<sup>26</sup> For an overview of the background, creation and organization of Venice's maritime empire, see Frederic C. Lane, Venice: A Maritime Republic (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1973), chapters 5-7.

## I. PRE-OTTOMAN VENETIAN STRATEGY.

In contemplating this question, the Venetians had to take account of far-reaching strategic commitments. They tended to think of their geopolitical environment as comprising three distinct theaters: (1) the home area of Venice itself and the islands, lagoons and waterways around it; (2) the seas beyond Venice, or *Stato da Mar*, which was further divided into the inner seas of the Eastern Mediterranean and the outer zone of the Black Sea, or “Romania”; and (3) the adjacent provinces of northern Italy—the *Terra Firma*.<sup>27</sup> Historically Venice had tended to give priority to the second of these, the *Stato da Mar*. Essential to the sustainment of this maritime empire was the cultivation of special trade privileges among the lands through which eastern luxury goods passed on their way to European markets. Such privileges, continually renegotiated and renewed over the centuries by the Byzantine emperor, allowed Venice to develop trade missions, depots, and transit rights on more favorable terms than Genoa, its chief Italian city-republic rival from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> Century.

Two things followed from Venice’s maritime and commercial preoccupations for its grand strategy. First, they entailed a non-committal foreign policy. Because Venice needed to keep channels open with all parties in support of uninterrupted trade, it could not afford the danger of enmeshments in local feuds that could jeopardize its middle-man status. Thus Venice typically eschewed permanent alliances in favor of transient alignments that shifted on the basis of Venice’s needs of the moment.

Second, Venice’s prioritization of the sea dictated a defense policy preoccupied with the retention and protection of specific locations—namely, the sea routes connecting Venice to its markets, and the islands or promontories that overlooked those routes. Thus Venice came to prioritize the acquisition, through a variety of expedients, of a string of ports from the Bay of Venice down the Dalmatian coastline to the headlands of the Peloponnese, across to Crete and the Aegean through the Bosphorus to the Black Sea. To manage this network, the Venetians used a combination of forward diplomacy, naval squadrons, and sea forts to deter rivals and keep the sea lanes operating to Venice’s advantage.

The corollary to Venice’s maritime prioritization was that it needed to keep to a minimum any exertions on the Italian mainland. Its typical posture here was a balance-of-power policy that sought to prevent any city-republic rival (usually Genoa or Milan) from dominating the provinces adjacent to the lagoon.<sup>28</sup> To this end Venice typically used subsidies and mercenaries to intermittently assist weaker cities resisting would-be

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<sup>27</sup> An overview of Venetian grand strategy and the Republic’s traditional approach to managing its main strategic theaters can be found in Grygiel, pp. 63-68.

<sup>28</sup> See the discussion in Lane, p. 226.

hegemony, keeping Venice's scarce manpower focused on the building and manning of fleets. The system's components were mutually reinforcing: Revenue from overseas trade funded merchant and naval fleets, while a *de minimis* mainland presence avoided provoking the antagonisms that would have demanded larger armies to manage, keeping expenses on mercenaries low and avoiding tax burdens that would have dented private industry and commerce. The system ensured that, on the rare occasions when Venice did face enemies from two directions, as it did when the Genoese and Hungarians entered into league with one another, it enjoyed sufficient strategic flexibility, through fast galley fleets, low standing garrisons, and large budget surpluses, to shift resources from one theater to another without jeopardizing the home area. In today's terms, all of this meant that Venice could maintain a 2-war standard on the cheap.

## 2. WHAT MADE THE OTTOMAN THREAT DIFFERENT.

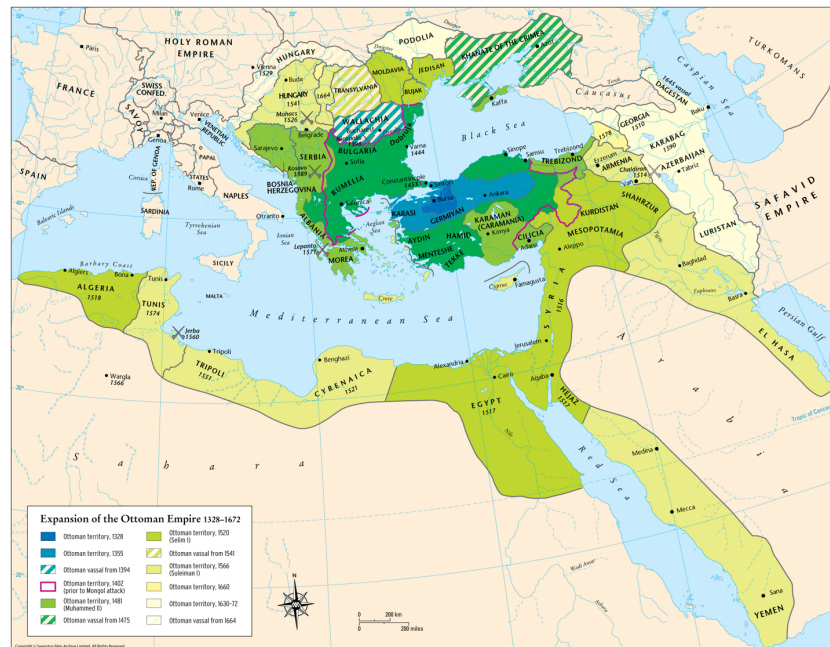
The Ottoman Turks presented a threat unlike anything the Venetians had previously faced. The most obvious differentiator was their empire's immense geographic size and, because of that, the immense land power they could put into the field. To date, Venice's bitterest rival had been Genoa, with which it had waged serial warfare since the Middle Ages. A city-republic situated on the opposite side of the Italian peninsula from Venice's lagoon, Genoa's lack of a significant hinterland and failure to develop a stable form of government placed constraints on the scale of military resources it could mobilize. This meant that while Genoa could often pose a serious threat to Venice, it ultimately lacked the ability to fully capitalize on its attacks.<sup>29</sup>

By contrast, the Turks were a geographically expansive, politically confident giant capable of summoning vast resources for war. Already by the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, they had conquered a swath of territory encompassing Anatolia and much of the Balkans. Turkish armies were large, combining aspects of mounted steppe warfare with the trained infantry and siege technology of contemporary European armies. On land, they were for all practical purposes invincible against Christian armies for most of the early modern period. And crucially from a Venetian perspective, there was no reason to assume that the Turks would not be able eventually to convert the resources at their disposal to use at sea, using the forests of Anatolia and nautical skills of the newly conquered peoples of

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<sup>29</sup> The Byzantine Empire too, while being a large land power with which the Venetians frequently clashed, was for most of the period of Venice's ascendancy a declining rather than rising power, lacking in the domestic stability or offensive power capabilities that would have been needed to pose a sustained threat to the Republic.

the Aegean coastline to build and man fleets many times larger than those of Genoa or Venice.<sup>30</sup>



Courtesy of the Map Archive

### *The Expansion of Ottoman Power, 1328-1672*

One byproduct of Ottoman superiority on land was an aptitude for artillery. The Turks made earlier and more effective use of black powder in naval warfare than the Italian city-republics.<sup>31</sup> The nature of Ottoman war with the Byzantines and Christian kingdoms of the Balkans, involving frequent sieges against fortified cities, spurred the development of ever larger and more sophisticated cannon. It was a natural evolution for these cannon to be turned toward the ships at anchor in nearby harbors, first extemporaneously and then more systematically in the construction of fortified towers along the Bosphorus. Concurrently the fledgling Ottoman navy began to pioneer the use of light cannon on ships, confronting Venetian captains with an altogether more lethal

<sup>30</sup> An early indication of the vast fleets that the Ottomans could produce came a few years after the fall of Constantinople in 1470 when a Turkish fleet appeared off of the Venetian outpost of Negroponte that was six miles long and contained more than 300 ships. By comparison, a century earlier Genoa, then at the height of its strength, had laid siege to Venice itself in the Chioggia War with a force of no more than 47 vessels. See John Julius Norwich, *A History of Venice* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 348.

<sup>31</sup> Lane, pp. 356-57.



opponent than they had faced in the Genoese. Already unbeatable on land, by the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century the Turks bid fare to dominate the sea as well.

The Ottomans also differed from Venice's earlier rivals in goals. Genoa had fought Venice to supplant its monopolistic position in the lucrative trade of the Eastern Mediterranean. While this inevitably brought the two city-republics into conflict over possession of strategically-located naval bases, the territories in question were of instrumental rather than intrinsic value—the object was not conquest but domination of markets. For this reason, islands and ports frequently changed hands in these contests. By contrast, the Turks saw the acquisition and occupation of territory itself as the goal. The motivation was not primarily commercial so much as empire-building in the purest sense; the Turks sought not trade concessions but physical space, to hold, fortify and tax. To this must be added the civilizational element, that the Ottomans Sultans saw themselves as holding a spiritual vocation, endowed with the sacred mission to spread the Islamic faith that their Seljuk forbears had embraced in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. Whether their view of this mission was sincere or instrumental (as some historians attest) is immaterial as far as the Venetians were concerned; the Ottomans were zealously expansive in warfare.

These factors gave wars with the Ottomans a more savage character than Venice's earlier contests. Venetian-Genoese wars were often fierce, but they were tempered by the common language, culture and religion that the two republics shared. Similarly, the Byzantine Empire, to which Venice had originally belonged but with which it frequently fought, was a Western and Christian power, a fact that (usually) set bounds on conflict and made peace, trade and intermarriage a more natural state of affairs than war. By contrast, Venice's clashes with the Ottomans were, from the outset, notable for their ferocity. Prisoners were rarely taken by either side; torture and massacres were commonplace; and truces, parleys or other Western conventions of war were frequently flaunted or abused.

Together, the larger scale and uncompromising nature of the Turkish threat posed a special problem for the traditional Venetian security system. That system had revolved around a concept of *affordable empire*—that is, of Venice being able to reap the benefits of extensive maritime holdings without carrying the full costs normally associated with a large empire, which Venice, with its small population and resource base would in any event have been unable to sustain. The system's solvency had depended on two conditions holding: (1) that the power occupying the eastern transit routes to Europe be, at a minimum, not hostile to Venice's middle-man status; and (2) that whatever enemies Venice faced be amenable to a style of warfare in which any territories lost in battle could, for the right price, be regained. The Ottomans were the first threat the Venetians had faced that brought both conditions into question. Unlike the Republic's earlier enemies, the Ottomans played for keeps.



### 3. VENICE'S OPTIONS.

The Ottoman ascent to regional dominance would only seem inevitable in retrospect; as is usually the case in history, events at the time appeared much more contingent and unpredictable. Nevertheless, it may be fairly said that Venice's leaders were aware that Turkish expansion was quickening in pace and that it held grave implications for their Republic's economic and security position. By the early 1400s, Venetian doges and the Council of Ten (the main decision-making body in the republic) had begun to debate two broad strategic options:<sup>32</sup>

*OPTION 1.* Strengthen the maritime empire. Under this option, Venice would focus on improving its overall position in the Eastern Mediterranean in anticipation of, and where possible to firmly delimit the boundaries of, further Ottoman expansion. A vocal champion of this strategy was Tommaso Mocenigo, doge from 1414 to 1423, who, with backing from the merchant class and shipbuilders, pursued a classic sea power strategy of engaging with the Ottomans commercially while using powerful fleets, strengthened fortifications and counter-raids to deter Ottoman aggression. Consistent with the strategy's focus on containing Ottoman power to the lands already acquired by the Sultans, Mocenigo sent military aid to prop up Byzantium as a bulwark to Ottoman naval expansion and sought to avoid deeper entanglements on the Italian mainland.<sup>33</sup>

*OPTION 2.* Acquire larger territories on the Italian mainland. Under this option, Venice would jettison its ancient balance-of-power strategy in Italy in favor of territorial expansion, interventionist diplomacy and forward military presence. The chief advocate of this policy was Francesco Foscari, a hawk and political opponent of Mocenigo who served as procurator of San Marco (the second-highest political post in the republic) and would eventually succeed Mocenigo to become Venice's longest-serving doge.<sup>34</sup> Like Foscari, Mocenigo preferred to appease the Turks where possible. But unlike Mocenigo he sought to shift military resources away from the *Stato da Mar* to the mainland, including by redirecting its fleets from the Aegean to the Po River valley and hiring large

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<sup>32</sup> For a description of Venetian foreign policy debates, see Lane, pp. 225-39 and Norwich, *Venice*, pp. 297-99.

<sup>33</sup> A sense of the emphasis that Mocenigo placed on sea power can be gleaned from his 1423 farewell address, excerpted in Norwich, *Venice*, p. 298. Mocenigo's approach to the Turkish problem may have been shaped by his experiences as a young man, when in 1396 he had accompanied the Venetian fleet to extract the shattered remnants of the Crusader army that had been defeated by the Turks at the battle of Nicopolis. This episode cannot but have left a deep impression in Mocenigo of Ottoman military prowess. See Norwich, *Venice*, p. 293.

<sup>34</sup> Like Mocenigo, Foscari's thinking may have been influenced by his earlier experiences with the Turks, when he served for a time as Venice's emissary to the Sultan. The Ottomans' amenability to peace at that time, coming at a moment when they were preoccupied with the conquest of Constantinople and still harassed by threats to their rear, may have led Foscari to see the Turks as a lesser threat than they actually were. See Norwich, *Venice*, p. 293.

mercenary armies.<sup>35</sup> It is not altogether clear to what extent this emphasis on mainland expansion was driven by a desire to form a larger resource base for future competition against the Turk or simply the desire to secure Venice's immediate access to raw materials and acquire estates for the land-hungry nobility.

Initially, Venice pursued the first of these two courses. Under Mocenigo's dogeship, the Republic hewed to its traditional policy of prioritizing the *Stato da Mar* and eschewing entanglements on the *Terra Firma*. A test to this policy came in 1416 when the fledgling Ottoman navy, first accidentally and then undoubtedly at the direction of the Sultan, began to harass Venice's shipping and probe the defenses of its maritime outposts. Almost concurrently, the Republic faced attacks from land by Sigismund, king of Hungary, who had conspired with the German ruler of Aquileia to evict Venice from its outposts on the Dalmatian coastline.<sup>36</sup> The ensuing conflict prefigured, in miniature, the two-front dilemmas that Venice would later face in much more severe form as Turkish power waxed stronger.

Mocenigo's handling of this crisis was consistent with the self-restrained tenets of earlier Venetian statecraft. In essence, he sought to avoid a two-front war by at once deterring the Turks and launching an offensive against the immediate threat from Sigismund. In support of this strategy, he sought a calculated response to Turkish naval harassment that would not jeopardize Venice's trade privileges yet also not invite further aggression. When his entreaties to reconfirm the 1413 peace treaty were rebuffed by the Sultan, Mocenigo approved a stiffer naval response, in the form of counter-raids, knowing that the Turks lacked the naval heft to sustain a war at sea. Deterred, the Sultan reaffirmed the treaty on terms favorable to Venice, continuing its trade privileges and vouchsafing its colonies.

In tandem, Mocenigo dealt surgically with the threat from Sigismund. While this task required the use of force on the mainland, Mocenigo's aims were characteristically limited: To secure the buffer region of Friuli (which held a strategic importance for Venice similar to that of the Low Countries for Britain in a later era) but avoid a generalized conflict that would pull resources from the empire. To support this strategy, he brokered a defensive alliance with Milan, a traditional foe, lest it enter the war on Hungary's side. Thus localized, the threat from Sigismund was quickly dealt with and the fighting kept short. Ironically, at war's end Venice acquired the territories of Friuli in their entirety, effectively doubling the republic's holdings in the *Terra Firma* in one stroke.<sup>37</sup> Crucially, Mocenigo's aims remained restricted to control of the Friuli buffer; he was not tempted by Venice's military successes into grabbing additional territory.

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<sup>35</sup> Lane, pp. 228-29.

<sup>36</sup> Norwich, *Venice*, p. 295.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

But others were. As the war wound down, Florence, a longtime friend of Venice, appealed to it for help against Milan, which was growing more confident under the ambitious Visconti family.<sup>38</sup> A realist, Mocenigo resisted these appeals on the grounds that the defensive alliance with Milan, while seemingly unnatural to Venice's hawks, was a serviceable backstop for avoiding continental entanglements. However appealing on sentimental grounds, the friendship with Florence would almost certainly drag Venice into the very scenario of a mainland war that Mocenigo wanted to avoid.

Leading the argument against Mocenigo in these debates was Foscari, who called for a clear and substantive commitment to Florence, undoubtedly with a view to not only checking Milan but adding to Venice's holdings in the *Terra Firma*. With his election as doge in 1423, Foscari committed Venice to what would become a protracted land war spanning three decades and encompassing most of the northern half of the Italian peninsula. Foscari's policy was to seek security not through indirection and overseas commerce but by creating for Venice a larger hinterland and resource base close to home. He stripped the navy and maritime outposts of men and resources for use on the *Terra Firma* – even going to the extraordinary length of having Venetian galleys hauled overland to Italian lakes.

To aid this westward concentration, Foscari sought to stay on friendly terms with the Ottomans and, to avoid antagonizing the Sultan, withheld decisive aid the by-now-desperate defenders of Constantinople. Even as Mehmed's armies tightened their ring around that city, Foscari held to a policy that one historian has called *festina lente* ("make haste slowly"), maintaining the appearance of helpfulness while dispatching only a trickle of men and arms (notably, paid for by private rather than public funds) to the citadel.<sup>39</sup> Even if Foscari had wanted to send more aid, and there is no evidence that he did, most of Venice's available manpower and munitions were now tied up in the fight against Milan.

Only when Constantinople fell in 1453, outgunned and with no more than a handful of Venetian soldiers to aid in her defense, would the full extent of the Ottoman peril become obvious. In response, Foscari hastily brokered an end to the mainland war with Milan and dispatched emissaries to Mehmed to renew their peace treaty.<sup>40</sup> In parallel,

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<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of the debate about Florence, see Lane, p. 229. Lane notes that Foscari favored "an adventuresome assertive policy in both directions." That may be true, but the practical effect of his policies was to strip resources and attention away from the *Stato da Mar*.

<sup>39</sup> As Norwich puts it, "If Venice did not come to the relief of Constantinople in time, it is because she had no real desire to do so." Norwich, *Venice*, p. 330.

<sup>40</sup> For a description of the impact that Constantinople's fall had on the Venetian strategic mindset, see *Ibid.*, pp. 331-33. "Now, perhaps for the first time," Norwich writes, "the Venetians began to appreciate the full significance of what had occurred." Norwich, *Venice*, p. 331.

he sent instructions for Venice's overseas outposts to begin strengthening their long-neglected defenses for the storm that now loomed on an uncomfortably close horizon. But by then, as Venice would soon discover, it was too late.

#### 4. RESULTS AND COSTS.

In short, the strategy that Venice embraced on the eve of the Ottoman irruption into the Eastern Mediterranean was one of engaging commercially with the rising power while generally de-prioritizing the immediate theater around it and neglecting the local allies which might have slowed its advance while concentrating the bulk of the Republic's attention on its landward, western frontier.

What were the results of this strategy for Venice's contest with the Turk and for its strategic position more broadly? The most immediate was that Ottoman power expanded at a faster pace than would probably have been the case had the Turks faced stauncher opposition at an earlier point in their rise. Foscari's distraction with Italy came with opportunity costs in the east—namely, not succoring Constantinople as a Christian bulwark, not organizing coalitions that might have checked Turkish advances, and not stoking resistance to the Turks among the tribes to their rear.<sup>41</sup> Of course, it is debatable how much of a difference any or all of these steps would have made. Even if it had held out longer, Constantinople was by now bereft of the territories that would have enabled sustained resistance to the Ottoman tide. Even if they had applied themselves more fully to containing the Turks, Venice's Christian allies were divided and militarily inferior to Ottoman armies. Such rearward opposition to the Turks as the Venetians might have stoked was very limited from 1400 onward, after the threat from Tamerlane had been dealt with. Nevertheless, the absence of concerted efforts by Venice, the strongest military power in the region, to bolster any of these sources of resistance only ensured a faster Turkish ascent and a more complete Venetian isolation once Constantinople had fallen.

There were also significant costs to Venice from the Italian wars themselves. Thirty years of warfare left Venice's military depleted, its treasury empty, its population war-weary and saddled with debt.<sup>42</sup> Fighting in Lombardy impeded the east-west trade routes, disrupted established markets, and diverted private investment from commerce to war-making. Years of neglecting the *Stato da Mar* translated into smaller fleets, dilapidated seaside fortresses, and, it must be assumed, a general diversion of R&D from

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<sup>41</sup> Lane (p. 199) argues that dealing with the hinterland threat from Tamerlane and the Golden Horde delayed the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople for fifty years. This may have contributed indirectly to the period of respite in the east that allowed Foscari was focused on Italy.

<sup>42</sup> Norwich, *Venice*, p. 326.

naval to land warfare. All of this meant that the Republic was exhausted and in need of peace at precisely the moment when the Ottomans turned their full attention westward. The practical effect was to limit Venice's strategic options at this crucial moment to one—an appeasement of the most supine and lopsided variety, since Venice, in its depleted state, lacked recourse to any other path.<sup>43</sup>

Of course, against this ledger has be placed the advantages that Venice gained from having access to an enlarged resource base on the Italian mainland. Historians debate whether the new territories in *Terra Firma* were a net drain or benefit to the Republic, but on balance they seem to have been the latter.<sup>44</sup> New lands ensured access to raw materials for a great power that was, after all, only a cluster of islands. This included, not least, access to larger forests for galley construction at a moment when the timber stands of Venice's handful of wooded islands were nearing depletion. The possessions in *Terra Firma* also gave Venice access to a substantially larger population base, with concomitant increases in the Republic's tax base and pool of military manpower – all of which amounted to a net increase in Venice's overall resource base, even when the costs of mainland fortresses and mercenaries are accounted for.

The real strategic impact of Foscari's policies would only become clear in later years. In retrospect, Venice's focus on the mainland had coincided with an improbable and impermanent reprieve from the brunt of Ottoman might during the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century made possible by a confluence of Constantinople's unexpected durability, the Ottomans' internal distractions and perhaps most importantly, a succession of Sultans who for reasons of personality or circumstance were not intent on westward expansion.<sup>45</sup> All of this changed with Mehmed II, who became Sultan in 1451 near the end of Foscari's tenure and who would present the Venetians with an altogether different and more aggressive opponent. Together, Mehmed's messianic aspirations and the sudden erasure of even a residual Byzantine check on his naval aspirations brought a dramatic surge in Ottoman aggression across the Eastern Mediterranean.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> The British historian Andrew Lambert argues that Venice's prioritization of the *Terra Firma* was a strategic mistake comparable to Athens' Sicilian expedition. Lane is more ambivalent. He gives a breakdown of Venetian spending on the mainland and overseas territories respectively that shows convincingly that the tax receipts from the former made protection of the latter possible. He points out that the mainland provided about a third of Venetian revenues compared to a quarter of revenues from overseas territories but is focused only on state revenue and overlooks the wealth generation that overseas territories enabled. See Andrew Lambert, *Seapower States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), p. 123 and Lane, pp. 235-39.

<sup>45</sup> These included Mehmet I, who reigned from 1413 to 21 and was a more peaceable Sultan than most, and Murad, who reigned from 1421 to 1444 and was preoccupied with expansion in the Balkans and Anatolia.

It was in the ensuing struggles of the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century that Venice would be confronted with the full costs of its prioritization of the mainland over the sea. Above all there was the political cost of the impact that the wars would have on Italy's future ability to recruit mainland allies. While Venice had always been known as a fickle partner at best, Foscari's wars enmeshed it in local grudges and feuds of the type that earlier Venetian statecraft had carefully avoided. Even natural friends like Florence felt betrayed by Venice's constant maneuvering. This did not preclude anti-Turkish leagues from forming among the Italian statelets, but it did suffuse these groupings with a residue of distrust that often limited their effectiveness. Entanglement on the mainland also imposed a kind of flexibility tax, committing Venice to the standing defense of positions in Lombardy, Europe's most fought-over territory, that would continually pull it back into these struggles and eventually place it in the cross-hairs of emerging continental empires like Spain, France and the Habsburg Empire which otherwise would have been natural allies against the Turk.

Within less than a decade of the fall of Constantinople, Venice would find itself alone at war with the Ottomans and forced to concede on humiliating terms that included the loss of the Republic's most significant territories and its all-important trade privileges. While the Republic's prospects would fluctuate afterwards, the general mold was set for what might be called defensive accommodation – alternating opposition to, and engagement with, the Ottoman Empire. The former was necessitated by the recurring fact of Ottoman aggression, which was of a violently acquisitive zero-sum nature; the latter by Venice's dependence on access to the Ottoman lands for the trade flows upon which the Republic's economic and military strength ultimately depended.

The sheer power differential between Venice, an island commercial power, and the Ottomans, a sprawling land power, ensured that this contest would be tilted against the Republic. It is questionable whether a different strategy in the Foscari era, along the lines preferred by Mocenigo, would have dramatically altered Venice's later prospects. What is certain is that, once this thirty-year window of opportunity had closed with the fall of Constantinople, Venice would never again have meaningful strategic options or the potential, even in theory, to preclude or constrain its new rival.

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#### IV. OFFENSIVE DIPLOMACY: HABSBURG AUSTRIA.

In the winter of 1740, Frederick II, newly-crowned king of Prussia, invaded the northern Crownlands of the Habsburg Monarchy. Opposing him was the 23-year-old Maria Theresa—inexperienced, pregnant and not yet two months into her reign. In the ensuing struggle, the young empress would see her sprawling empire invaded on multiple sides, with Prussian armies ravaging Silesia and Moravia, a Bavarian force penetrating Upper Austria, a French army laying siege to Prague, and another French force, with Spanish help, attacking Habsburg possessions in northern Italy. While Austria was, with great effort, able to fight these numerous enemies to a standstill, the War of Austrian Succession brought the Habsburg Monarchy to the brink of destruction. The ensuing peace, agreed at Aix-la-Chapelle after eight years of fighting, was just a temporary truce in what would become a running, 20-year contest between Austria and Prussia for supremacy in Central Europe.

Prussia's sudden and violent emergence as an aggressive rival presented Maria Theresa and her advisors with a dilemma. For decades, Austria had been locked in a competition with Bourbon France, which was widely viewed in Vienna as the Monarchy's most dangerous, hereditary enemy.<sup>46</sup> On two occasions in the forty years leading up to Frederick's invasion, Austria had fought protracted wars across much of Europe to prevent the spread of Bourbon influence. Frederick's invasion had not removed this French threat; to the contrary, as the recent war had shown, France and Prussia were liable to join forces against the Monarchy. In addition, while Ottoman power had abated significantly since its apogee in the previous century, the Turks were far from a spent force; as recently as 1739, their armies had proven capable of inflicting major defeats on Austria.

The question facing Maria Theresa and her advisors was how to contend with the new threat posed by Frederick without neglecting the threats from France and Turkey. The stakes for Austria could not have been higher: if effectively combined, the empress' enemies could dismember her empire and divide its richest territories between them. To fend off these threats, Maria Theresa could not rely on military force alone. Despite a dramatic expansion and professionalization prompted by the war with Frederick, the Austrian army was not strong enough on its own to deal with Prussia, France and Turkey simultaneously—let alone handle these tasks while also securing the long eastern frontier with a rapidly expanding Russia. To survive, Austria would need to find a way of avoiding a multi-front war with all or most of her enemies at the same time.

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<sup>46</sup> For an overview and chronology of the Franco-Habsburg rivalry, see Paul W. Schroeder, "A Pointless Enduring Rivalry: France and the Habsburg Monarchy, 1715-1918" in William R. Thompson, ed., Great Power Rivalries (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999).

## I. PRE-FREDERICAN HABSBURG SECURITY.

In the years leading up to the war with Frederick, the Austrians had come to rely on an ersatz mix of fortresses, under-funded field armies, and aging alliances to secure their realm. The physical extent of the Habsburg Monarchy—roughly the size of Texas—and the diversity of terrains among its various frontiers made defending the empire a conceptually and logistically complex task. Habsburg statesmen and soldiers tended to conceptualize these territories as three or four distinct strategic theaters, each corresponding to one of the empire’s main external threats, and each with its own special characteristics and defensive challenges.<sup>47</sup>



Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

*Europe after the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, 1748*

To the south and east of Vienna was the long frontier with the Ottoman Empire, whose armies after the fall of Byzantium had conquered in rapid succession the small kingdoms of the Balkans, leaving Austria as the southern glacis of Christendom. By the

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<sup>47</sup> For an overview of Habsburg leaders’ compartmentalized thinking on their empire’s various frontiers, see Charles Ingrao, “Habsburg Strategy and Geopolitics during the Eighteenth Century,” in Gunther E. Rothenberg, Belá K. Király, and Peter F. Sugar, Eds., War and Society in East Central Europe, Vol. 2 (New York: Brooklyn College Press, 1982).



early 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Austria had, under the inspired generalship of Prince Eugene of Savoy, reconquered a substantial portion of these territories, including Hungary and Transylvania, to form a new frontier with the Ottomans running from the Adriatic to the Carpathians. Along this frontier, the Habsburgs built a sophisticated security system, the so-called *Militärgrenze*, or military frontier, composed of a line of evenly-spaced frontier watchtowers backed by fortresses and strategically-located arsenals and depots. The military frontier was manned by standing garrisons of Balkan soldier-settlers, the so-called *Grenzer*, who were given land and tax exemptions in exchange for lifetime military service to the dynasty. The job of the *Militärgrenze* was to deter low-intensity raids and tie up larger Ottoman invasions long enough for Austrian units to converge on the scene from other theaters. To deal with the semi-Asiatic tactics of mounted Ottoman armies, Habsburg field armies in this theater to be highly mobile and offensive, containing a higher ratio of cavalry (as much as 50 percent) to infantry.

In the west, the Habsburg frontier with France ran from the Lombardy plain over the Alps and along full the length of the Rhine River to the Austrian Netherlands (modern-day Belgium). Unlike in the south, Austrian security in this theater centered on the management of extensive buffer territories in the form of the numerous small kingdoms and principalities of the Holy Roman Empire (in German, *heiliges römisches Reich*), which the Habsburgs had presided over as elective emperors since the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, as well as a similar patch-work of princely territories to the south, in Italy. A loose confederative body, the Holy Roman Empire served a mainly defensive function, in voting troops and taxes for use against common enemies (invariably the French or Turks) and thereby acted as an important force multiplier to Austrian military power. In wartime, leadership of the *Reich* enabled Habsburg forces to man the *Reich* fortresses of the Rhine and Po rivers, which served the dual purpose of impeding French invasions and providing forward positions from which to launch invasions of France.

By comparison with the southern and western frontiers, both of which had seen repeated action throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Austria's eastern and northern frontiers had been relatively quiet and were largely neglected as military theaters. In the east, the Habsburgs were aware of the growing power of Russia, which had only recently begun what would become a century-long southwesterly expansion toward the Danube and Black Sea that would eventually bring it into direct contact with Habsburg territory in Poland and the Balkans. For now, Russia was separated from Austria by the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth, a large but decrepit state incapable of offensive military action. Partly for this reason, the Habsburgs were able to safely de-prioritize their eastern frontier and kept neither fortresses nor large standing garrisons in this theater.

Similarly, in the north, prior to Frederick II's violent arrival, Brandenburg-Prussia had not represented a threat to the Monarchy. Indeed, as a member of the German *Reich*, Prussia's Electors were nominal supplicants to the Habsburg emperor, and had consistently sided with Austria in most of its earlier contests with France, including

most recently the disastrous War of Polish Succession (1733-35). Unlike its eastern and western frontiers, Austria's northwestern borders did not enjoy the benefit of extensive buffer states, with only the small kingdom of Saxony partially interposed between Habsburg and Prussian territories. The terrain of this theater, which ran the Black Forest to the Tatras Mountains, did offer some natural barriers to invasion. The Austrians' chief liability here, as subsequent events would show, was the province of Silesia, which lay exposed beyond this line of obstacles. At the time of Frederick's invasion, Silesia was weakly defended, containing four poorly defended fortresses.

The level of strategic prioritization that the Austrians attached to their respective frontiers could be roughly gauged by the number of forts they maintained on each, as well as in the composition of their alliances. By the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century, threat #1 was France. Accordingly, Austria had over time formed close relationships with the maritime powers, England and Holland. This made sense both geographically, in aligning Austria with the two other powers most consistently threatened by French power, and militarily, in forcing Bourbon kings to split their forces between France's seaward and landward frontiers in the event of a war with Austria. There was also the financial benefit that the often-penurious Habsburg rulers derived from access to wartime subsidies from Holland and England, both creditor nations, and from being able to raise capital on the money markets in Amsterdam and London.

Habsburg strategy of the pre-Frederican period was not a well-oiled system on par, for example, with earlier Byzantine strategy or Austrian strategy of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Nevertheless, the combination of southern fortresses, western buffer states, and maritime alliances equipped the Habsburgs with serviceable tools for managing multi-front dynamics. The *Militärgrenze* allowed Austria to hold down the Ottoman frontier with minimum effort and concentrate the bulk of its army on the more important western theater, where the auxiliary armies and tutelary fortresses of the *Reich* could delay French advances in Germany and allow Austrian generals to focus their scarce manpower on preventing Bourbon gains in revenue-rich Italy. Used in tandem, these tools enabled an otherwise militarily weak Austria to maintain an informal two-war standard that it would not have been able to maintain on the basis of its military strength alone. This enabled it to keep its two most serious enemies—France and Turkey—at arm's length and safely neglect the otherwise-vulnerable Habsburg heartland around the Danube. It was with such methods that Austria had been able, in Spanish succession struggle, to successfully juggle a two-front war in Italy and Germany.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> For a description of how the Habsburgs juggled resources and priorities in this war, see Lothar Höbelt, "The Impact of the Rakoczi Rebellion on Habsburg Strategy: Incentives and Opportunity Costs," *War in History*, 13, no. 1 (2006): 2-15.

In these earlier contests, it helped that Austria had been able to count on the talents of an unusually gifted general, Prince Eugene of Savoy, whose battlefield victories, including most famously alongside Marlborough at Blenheim, had stopped the French advance on the Danube and allowed Vienna to subsequently take the field against the Turks in a war that added most of modern-day Hungary, Romania and Serbia to Austria's territories. Ironically, Eugene's exploits had the unintended consequence of lulling Habsburg monarchs into a prolonged period of strategic complacency, during which defense spending shrank, Austria's numerous fortresses were neglected, and its army diminished in both size and quality.

That is not to say that the Austrians did not foresee or worry about a recurrence of multi-front war on the Spanish succession mold. Indeed, the emperor Charles VI (Maria Theresa's father) and his ministers were preoccupied with avoiding such an eventuality, which would inevitably result if Austria's rivals seized on the ascension of his daughter (who, by Salic Law, could not inherit the throne) to contest the succession. Charles' strategy for avoiding this eventuality was essentially legalistic in nature, consisting of a wide-ranging, multi-year effort to buy support from Austria's rivals for a legal instrument—the so-called Pragmatic Sanction—consenting in advance to Maria Theresa's succession. This effort was expensive in both time (taking up the full bandwidth of Austrian diplomacy) and money (requiring large-scale bribery in foreign courts). Partly in consequence, and against Eugene's counsel, Charles downgraded the military components of traditional Habsburg security, cutting funds for forts and the army.

As a result, by the end of Charles' reign, the Austrian army had atrophied to its smallest size in decades and was thinly spread, with its best units concentrated in Hungary and Italy. As Eugene warned before his death in 1736, these realities weakened Austrian deterrence, inviting predation of exactly the kind that the Pragmatic Sanction was meant to forestall. It was because this earlier strategy of avoiding multi-front war ultimately failed that Maria Theresa would have to contemplate the problem urgently and repeatedly throughout her reign.

## 2. WHAT MADE FREDERICK DIFFERENT.

Frederick II was a different kind of challenge than anything the Habsburg Monarchy had yet faced. He posed a far more lethal military threat than either the French or Ottoman armies of the time and would come to represent the gravest danger to Austria's existence until Napoleon. Unlike Attila, Frederick could not be easily deflected. Like Attila, he could out-fight, out-maneuver, and defeat in detail even numerically much larger opposing forces. The Prussian army's speed, offensive fighting power and proximity to the Habsburg home territories deprived the Austrians of the time-distance advantages they enjoyed against France and Turkey. The absence of extensive natural barriers or major fortresses on the northwestern frontier allowed Frederick's armies to

penetrate the Habsburg heartland and threaten Vienna while living off the land and depriving Vienna of revenue from three of the Monarchy's richest provinces. The fact that such an enemy demanded the full attention of the Habsburg army in the north meant that Austria would not have the bandwidth to prioritize the retention of the economically-important Italian territories as it had done in past conflicts.

Frederick also posed a different kind of political problem for Austria than it had faced from other rivals. Unlike France or the Turks, Prussia was a German state and member of the Holy Roman Empire. This deprived the Habsburgs of an important psychological advantage (rallying German sympathies against a foreign foe) and complicated the process of mobilizing the military resources of the other German states against what, after all, one of their fellow members. Moreover, because the Prussian Elector was a nominal supplicant to the Habsburg emperor, an attack from this quarter posed a direct challenge to the Habsburg dynasty's authority, prestige and *raison d'être* as protector of the weaker German kingdoms.

Frederick had more expansive ambitions than other Habsburg rivals to date. Not since the wars with the Ottomans at their peak in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century had Austria faced an enemy as determined and capable of physically destroying the Monarchy. Beyond his professed desire to "round off" his sprawling territories, Frederick wanted to permanently truncate Austria. He was motivated by a deeply-felt rationalist, anti-Catholic antipathy toward the Habsburg dynasty that bordered on an obsession. Where earlier Habsburg-Bourbon "cabinet wars" were about prestige, suzerainty over smaller states (whether via marriage or conquest), or limited territorial acquisitions in intermediary regions, the wars with Frederick, as events would show, were about the very existence of the Habsburg Monarchy. The Prussian king sought to dismember Austria and divvy up its lands with neighboring states, reducing it to the size and status of Germany's many smaller pocket kingdoms.

Fourth, Frederick was more dangerous than the Habsburgs' earlier opponents due to the coalitions that he could mobilize against Austria. In the War of Austrian Succession, Prussia recruited France, Spain, Bavaria, Savoy and Saxony into an offensive alliance animated by a political program of curbing Habsburg power in Central Europe. This was a far larger and more capable enemy coalition than Austria had faced in previous wars. By comparison, France had typically only been able to count on help from Bavaria, a handful of minor Italian states and, from 1700 onward, Bourbon Spain, by then a second-rate power. The Ottoman Empire had rarely been able to enlist any European allies at all in its wars against Austria. By successfully roping France into its war against Austria, Prussia not only presented the Monarchy with a multi-front threat that would be difficult to manage in any event, but ensured that the armies facing Austria on these frontiers would be the large and sophisticated forces of great powers, capable of overwhelming available Austrian manpower. This was more than the contemporary

Habsburg security system, with its emphasis on shuffling small armies from place to place, could bear.

While bringing more states against Austria, Prussia also posed challenges to Austria's established system of alliances. The utility of England and Holland for the Monarchy lay in these states' geographic proximity to, historical antipathy toward, and maritime tools for fighting, Bourbon France. Both were natural enemies of France. England in particular saw in Austria's wars an opportunity to keep Belgium out of French hands and, by cultivating a "continental sword" against Bourbon land power in Europe, gain an advantage in global colonial competition. By comparison, neither the English nor the Dutch had much to offer in wars against Prussia. The north German kingdom's lack of an overseas empire set it out of competition with Britain, and its location made it less accessible to the guns of the Royal Navy. Indeed, subsequent events would show that Prussia was in many ways a natural ally to England. As Austria would find in the opening wars with Frederick, Habsburg and British wartime objectives diverged in ways that made London a half-hearted ally and often led it to take positions that undercut the Monarchy's position in the final peace negotiations.

For all of these reasons, Frederick represented a kind of "circuit breaker" to traditional Habsburg strategy. He could not be placated with limited concessions or marriage in the way that the Austrians had often dealt with the French and could not be outfought in the way that Eugene had outfought the Turks. When Frederick fought, in league with another large power like France, the resulting war was a life-or-death struggle that strained every nerve of the Austrian army and state, stretched Austria's alliances to the breaking point, and risked the destruction of the Monarchy itself. This was not a challenge that could be handled using Austria's existing defense structures, with their assumption of offsetting burdens to the *Reich*, emphasis on economy of force, and spatial concentration on the Rhine and lower Danube. A new approach was needed.

### 3. MARIA THERESA'S OPTIONS.

After the Austrian succession war ended, Maria Theresa and her advisors surveyed the strategic landscape. No one doubted that the peace would only be a momentary pause in hostilities; Frederick was far from a spent force and Maria Theresa chafed at the loss of Silesia. The Austrians formed commissions to review lessons learned from the war while reforming the Army, launching an overhaul of state administration and revenues, and comprehensively reassessing the Monarchy's diplomatic options.

The imperative for Austria was not so much to avert another war with Frederick, which in any event seemed inevitable and even desirable insofar as it could result in the return of Silesia, but rather to avert another multi-front war of the kind it had just experienced. Above all, this meant avoiding a continuation of the alignment between the Austria's

two most capable opponents, Prussia and France. The empress and her councilors debated several options:<sup>49</sup>

*OPTION 1.* Stick to the alliance with England and Holland, with France as the main enemy. The chief advocate of this position was Count Friedrich von Harrach, a member of the Privy Conference who until recently had served as acting Governor General of the Austrian Netherlands.<sup>50</sup> In Harrach's view, Prussia's recent aggression did not alter the fact that France was Austria's strongest and most natural opponent. For Harrach, separating Prussia from France, while desirable, was less important than keeping up the pressure on France itself, which exceeded Prussia in wealth and manpower. As such, Austria's interests would, on balance, continue to align with England's *even if* the latter sometimes differed from Austria on important wartime objectives.

*OPTION 2.* Stick to the alliance with England and Holland, while driving a wedge between Prussia and France, but without drawing France into a formal alliance. On this view, Austria should try to have it both ways: maintain British subsidies while ensuring that France was not an enemy of Austria in the next war. Such a scenario was attractive because it would combine the maximum financial support for fighting Frederick and the minimum geographic distraction for the Austrian army by neutralizing the threat from France on the western frontier. The obvious difficulty was that Britain's main reason for supporting Austria in the first place was the latter's opposition to France.

*OPTION 3.* Drop the link with the maritime powers and enter into formal alliance with France. The main advocate for this option was Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz, Austria's chief negotiator in the peace talks at Aix-la-Chapelle, who would later become ambassador to France and eventually one of Austria's most famous state chancellors.<sup>51</sup> To a greater extent than any of Maria Theresa's other advisors, Kaunitz understood that the empress' resentment over the loss of Silesia implied an offensive goal: not just to

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<sup>49</sup> A series of meetings were held at the Austrian State Conference (roughly the Habsburg equivalent of the U.S. National Security Council) over the spring of 1749 to map out the Monarchy's post-war strategic options. The minutes of the final session of these debates can be found in Adolf Beer, Ed., Aufzeichnungen des Grafen William Bentinck über Maria Theresia (Vienna: C. Gerold's Sohn, 1871), pp. 129-42. The options outlined in this paper are taken from a later memo, in Kaunitz's hand, dated June 27, 1755. See the discussion in William J. McGill, "The Roots of Policy: Kaunitz in Vienna and Versailles, 1749-1753," The Journal of Modern History Vol. 43, No. 2, June 1971 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 228-44.

<sup>50</sup> It could be that Harrach's views were shaped by his experience as an Austrian diplomat in Belgium, where for geographic and historic reasons the need for British and Dutch strategic support against France was more keenly felt than it was in Vienna. See the discussion of Harrach's debates with Kaunitz in McGill, p. 232.

<sup>51</sup> For background on the factors that led to Kaunitz's shift in thinking on Austrian alliances, see Franz A. J. Szabo, Kaunitz and Enlightened Absolutism 1753-1780 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 16-19.



contain Frederick but to retake these ancestral Habsburg lands.<sup>52</sup> Kaunitz questioned whether England was the right ally to accomplish this goal.<sup>53</sup> As he pointed out, England had deep Protestant sympathies with Prussia, had proven as committed to restraining Habsburg power as that of France, and was in any event a maritime power too distant and lacking in sufficient reach to affect military outcomes where Austria needed it most—in Central Europe.<sup>54</sup> By contrast, Kaunitz both France and Russia possessed large land armies capable of assisting Austria in re-conquering Silesia and restraining Frederick.

*OPTION 4.* Join with, or appease Frederick. In principle, Austria could have tried to neutralize the threat from Prussia by offering to support Frederick in a campaign against a third state, perhaps in exchange for the re-acquisition of Silesia. Kaunitz hinted at such an option in one of his memos, which would have resulted in an Austro-Prussia-Russian alignment. While in theory accomplishing Austria's goal of dividing Prussia from France, the obvious problem with this option was the deep antagonism that now existed between the two Austrian and Prussian courts, and the essential difference in goals between Maria Theresa, a deeply conservative monarch, and Frederick, a militarily acquisitive gambler determined to bring about the reduction of the Habsburg state.<sup>55</sup>

Initially, Vienna pursued option 2, the safest course given the Monarchy's depleted post-war state and continued dependency on English help in *Reich* internal politics.<sup>56</sup> It was a compromise solution that sought to blend the preferences of the two strongest views in the Privy Council and, in the event, satisfied neither. Nevertheless, in his new role as Austrian ambassador to France from 1750 onward, Kaunitz dutifully began what would be a five-year effort of trying to shift Versailles away from Frederick without offering an Austrian alliance in return.

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<sup>52</sup> As Kaunitz put it in his 1755 memo: Austria's aims should be "...not only to defend and secure ourselves against his aggressions, but, when he weakens, to limit his power and to retrieve the lost lands." Quoted in McGill, p. 232.

<sup>53</sup> As Ingrao points out, Kaunitz was simply acknowledging England's long habit of undercutting Austria's territorial gains after European wars, including in the earlier treaties of Ryswick (1697), Carlowitz (1699), and Utrecht (1713). At Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748 London continued this trend by insisting that Austria give up the territories it held in Silesia, Milan and Bavaria at the end of the war. See Charles W. Ingrao, *The Habsburg Monarchy 1618-1815, Second Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 172.

<sup>54</sup> Kaunitz's thinking revolved around the notion of bringing Austria into alignment with other Catholic, continental monarchies—not just France but Russia and the smaller German states.

<sup>55</sup> Maria Theresa would use a variant of later in her reign, in the 1770s. As the historian Martin Rady points out with some irony, it was in concert with Frederick II that Maria Theresa made her biggest territorial gains, in the partitions of Poland in 1770, 1793, and 1795, which collectively added 2.6 million people and 32,000 square miles to the Habsburg empire. See Martyn Rady, *The Habsburgs: To Rule the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), pp. 185-86.

<sup>56</sup> Specifically, Austria needed England's support for ensuring that a Habsburg rather than Bavarian candidate acceded to the elective position of King of the Romans.

In parallel, Kaunitz sought to strengthen Austria's ties with Russia, which he saw as a vital precondition to renewed warfare with Prussia. Up to this point, Russia had not been a very active participant in Western European politics. From the 1710s onward, Austria had begun to recognize the implications of the eastern giant's gradual westward expansion and had pursued a broad policy course of allying with Russia in order to restrain its objectives. These arrangements, however, were mainly about the east—specifically, the co-management of Turkey's decline in the Balkans. However, Kaunitz recognized that if Austria was going to cage Frederick, it would need more than just coordination with Russia in the Balkans; it would need to bring Russia's full military weight to bear in the west, on the frontier of Prussia.

To this end, Kaunitz brokered a renewal and overhaul of Austria's 1746 Treaty with Russia with the explicit aim to “make war against the King of Prussia’ in order to reconquer Silesia and Glatz and place him in a position whereby he could no longer disturb the peace.”<sup>57</sup> Under the terms of the treaty, the two empires committed to mutual aid against either Prussian or Turkish attacks and, in a foretaste of Kaunitz's eventual treaty with France, agreed to a secret provision to repatriate Silesia and partition Prussia. In other words, Kaunitz had converted what was a largely defensive Balkan pact into an offensive Western European one.

The terms of the treaty with Russia underscore an important fact about the underlying aim of Austrian diplomacy in this period: it was offensive in nature. While Austria's geopolitical position vis-à-vis Prussia was defensive, in the sense that her policies were a reaction to Prussian aggression, Austrian diplomacy was offensive, insofar as it sought to organize collective action to defeat Frederick and take back lost lands. For Maria Theresa, the re-conquest of the lost province of Silesia was the top objective for Habsburg foreign policy. To accomplish this, they needed to not only neutralize the states that Frederick had recruited to his side in the recent war; they needed to motivate as many of those states as possible to attack Prussia on *its* various frontiers—in other words, to present Frederick with a multi-front dilemma of his own.

In this task, Kaunitz had the advantage of being able to exploit the fears that Frederick's behavior was bound to stoke in other European powers. The successful treaty with Russia was grounded, above all, in the fact that Catherine the Great “feared the Prussian ‘usurper’ and was unwilling to accept him as an equal player on the East European stage.”<sup>58</sup> Courting France was harder, partly because Versailles, being further from Prussia's path of conquest, did not share their anxieties about territorial loss. But also

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<sup>57</sup> Herbet H. Kaplan, Russia and the Outbreak of the Seven Years' War (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 122.

<sup>58</sup> Ingraio, Habsburg Monarchy, p. 172.



because French strategic perceptions, like Harrach's, continued to be shaped by the old Habsburg-Bourbon feud. Kaunitz's therefore initially tread cautiously very cautiously, seeking to woo Versailles into benevolent neutrality rather than to wow it with offers of an open alliance, as Kaunitz had originally proposed in the State Conference—all while taking care not to alienate England.<sup>59</sup>

Not surprisingly, France proved unenthusiastic about being maneuvered into a position of neutrality in which it would have to give up its alliance with Prussia without receiving a countervailing line of support from another great power. This fact revealed a key weakness of the have-it-both-ways approach of option 2: by trying not to offer anything to France that would upset England, Austria constrained herself from offering anything of value to France. Moreover, however appealing this approach had seemed in principle to Vienna, it was out of alignment with Vienna's overall, *offensive* strategy, which required not just the neutralization of the states that had supported Frederick in the last war but their mobilization as belligerents against Prussia in the coming war. Realizing these limitations, from the summer of 1755 onward, Kaunitz shifted to pursuing a formal alliance with France.

It was Frederick himself, however, who ultimately did the most to drive France into Austria's arms. For while Kaunitz had been laboring away at cutting Franco-Prussian ties, Frederick was working to drive a wedge between Austria and *its* main ally, England. With the 1756 Convention of Westminster, he succeeded: Prussia and England agreed to a *de facto* division of labor whereby the former would concentrate on the European continent and the latter would focus on colonial competition with France. In forming this pact, Frederick seems, somewhat surprisingly, to have calculated that it would not push France toward Austria. So strong was the Habsburg-Bourbon rivalry that even the Prussian king could not imagine the two powers resolving their differences with one another, as long as he did not directly threaten France.

His calculation proved incorrect: the new Anglo-Prussian alliance frightened both France, which now faced the prospect of diplomatic isolation, and Austria, which saw Kaunitz's longstanding apprehensions about fickle English support suddenly and dramatically confirmed. Thus the conditions were set for Kaunitz's famous *renversement des alliances* – the overturning of Europe's traditional alliance camps and realignment of Austria, France and Russia against Prussia and England. The crowning achievement of this new structure was a formal alliance between Austria and France, embodied in two treaties: the first a mutual defense pact and the second a more ambitious, offensive one whereby Louis XV committed to support Maria Theresa's goal of forcibly repatriating Silesia to the Habsburg Monarchy.

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<sup>59</sup> McGill, p. 242

Under the terms of the second treaty, France promised in the event of war to send 105,000 men to campaign against Frederick in Germany plus a contingent of 30,000 to Austria itself, as well as a staggering 12 million livres in subsidies (the equivalent of 15 percent of France's peacetime government expenditures) to replace Austria's lost English lifeline.<sup>60</sup> In exchange for help regaining Silesia and France's concession of Italy as a Habsburg sphere of influence, Vienna promised to cede the Austrian Netherlands, France's main object in the previous war. In the event of victory, secret articles provided for the partition of Prussia between Austria, France, and the other allies Kaunitz had recruited—Russia, Saxony and Sweden.

One element of Kaunitz's success was his appeal to these states that Frederick's aggression represented a threat to the established order and peace of Europe. This went beyond normal power balancing and hinted at a higher principle of statecraft that should inform the balance of power. As Kaunitz wrote later in life, the underlying principle was that "no state can infringe on any property gained legitimately, nor afford, without obvious injustice, to demand this of any other state"—or, in plainer language, "do unto others as you would have done unto you."<sup>61</sup> Prefiguring Metternich, Kaunitz sought to mitigate Austria's multi-front problem by convincing its neighbors to coordinate their actions in defense of the status quo against disturbers of the peace. This was something more than just anti-hegemonic balancing; it marked the first stirrings, however tentative, of what in later generations of Austrian statecraft would become an effort to "transcend" power dynamics through a system of overlapping alliances and collective security.

While these efforts were underway in Europe, Kaunitz had not forgotten about Austria's other, less threatening but still capable rival, the Ottoman Empire. In the event of renewed fighting with Prussia, Vienna needed the south to remain quiet. In the lead up to, and throughout, the Seven Year War, Kaunitz instructed Austrian diplomats at the Porte to employ large-scale bribery (lavishly outspending Frederick on the Sultan's favorite concubines and eunuchs) to placate the Turks and keep them from opening a second front in the conflict. Austria backed these blandishments with a convincing deterrence, in the form of well-garrisoned frontier forts, to convince the Turks that it was still capable of punishing any attacks—a combination of détente and force strikingly similar to the methods that Theodosius used with Persia.

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<sup>60</sup> See Gerard Araud, *Ten Episodes from French Diplomatic History*, forthcoming.

<sup>61</sup> See the excerpt from Kaunitz's memo entitled "Reflections on the Concept of the Balance of Power in Europe or: Thoughts on What We Call the Balance of Power in Europe," in Mitchell, *Grand Strategy*, pp. 234-35.

#### 4. RESULTS AND COSTS.

In sum, Austria's method for avoiding multi-front war was to diplomatically engage two traditional rivals (France and Turkey) and to "activate" a third, previously under-engaged rival (Russia) to form a coalition against the strongest threat (Prussia). All of these arrangements required Austrian concessions, whether financial (with Turkey), by promises of territory (with France), or by consenting to cooperation in a third, unrelated area (with Russia). Austria's usages of all three powers corresponded to its assessment of their capabilities and intentions as potential threats to Austria as well as to Frederick—thus, France and Russia, both large, status quo land powers, were brought into close arrangements aimed at harnessing their big armies to Austria's political objectives, while the weaker Turkey was simply cowed and coaxed into not opening a new front that would distract from the main focus in the north.

It is with good reason that Kaunitz's exertions are often described as having brought about a "diplomatic revolution." In the space of barely six years, he had completely reversed the circumstances that Austria had faced in 1741. The main benefit of his strategy for Austria was that it averted a recurrence of multi-front war. Where Frederick had been able to confront Austria with five enemies on three sides in the previous war, Kaunitz's diplomatic arrangements ensured that, when the Prussian king attacked again in 1756, he threatened the Monarchy on only one front. This in turn produced the military advantage for Austria of being able to concentrate its newly modernized army in the crucial theater—Bohemia—from which Austrian units had continually been pulled away to douse fires on other frontiers in the previous war.

Kaunitz's arrangements ensured that Austria's limited military capabilities were augmented not only numerically but specifically by those states with the military tools that Austria most needed for outclassing Frederick and achieving Vienna's offensive political aims in Silesia. Where the Austrian army had in the previous war fought virtually unaided on land, it now had the help of the sizable foreign armies, as well as the forces of a host of smaller German states, a total of some half a million men, which was more than double Frederick's available manpower.<sup>62</sup> This was the chief military virtue of the *renversement des alliances* – that it traded the help of a distant England, whose sea power was unable to affect outcomes where they mattered most for Austria in the Central European interior, for the help of states that specialized in land power and were within striking distance of the key theaters of operation around the Habsburg home area.

To this military ledger has to be added the impact that Kaunitz's alliances had in altering and constraining Frederick's strategic plans. It is with some justice that Bismarck later

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<sup>62</sup> Figures cited in Rady, p. 185.

called these encircling alliances Frederick's *cauchemar des coalitions*. Whereas in the previous war the Prussian king could concentrate his military machine in one direction, the participation of France, Russia and the German principalities on Austria's side forced him to anticipate fighting in three or even four directions, reducing the resources he could safely concentrate against Austria.

What were the costs of Kaunitz's strategy? The most obvious was the effect that it had on Austria's relationship with the maritime powers, and in particular England, which for decades had formed the Monarchy's main base of support. In retrospect, however, it is questionable how much this cost really existed. Kaunitz was correct in seeing that the benefits of allying with England were less than Austrian statesmen had long supposed. In the event, the loss of English subsidies was made up for by French financial help, and the loss of the benefit provided by England's fleets was more than compensated for by French pressure on Frederick's western and southern frontiers. Nor did any of this have any meaningful long-term impact on Anglo-Austrian relations; within half a century the two powers were once again allied, against Napoleon.

One cost of Kaunitz's alliance with France, had Austria won the war, would have been the Austrian Netherlands, which it had promised in exchange for French help regaining Silesia. This was not an inconsequential concession; however, from a strategic standpoint, the geographic distance of these territories from the Austrian home area made them more of a liability than an asset—a fact that was already apparent to Kaunitz as early as Aix-la-Chapelle and would prompt a later generation of Habsburg statesmen to eagerly divest from these territories when the opportunity presented itself in 1797. Exchanging Belgium for the reacquisition of Silesia and a stronger position in Italy, both of which were richer than Belgium but territorially contiguous with Austria and thus in line with the goal of "rounding off" Habsburg holdings into a more compact and defensible empire, made good sense strategically and financially.

Perhaps the greatest cost of the diplomatic revolution arose not from Austria's new alliance with France but its dealings with Russia. The need to deal with the arch-danger of Prussia pulled Austria into what would prove to be a deep and lasting enmeshment with its eastern neighbor. While Vienna had already been moving in the direction of a closer link with Russia since at least the reign of Joseph I, Kaunitz's renewal of the 1746 treaty for offensive purposes in the west took this relationship to an unprecedentedly beneficial but also risky new plane. To be sure, doing so came with big, lasting benefits for Austria, effectively relieving Vienna of the defense burden for fortifying and garrisoning the Monarchy's longest frontier (some 1,000 miles in length). But it came at a price. By acting encouraging Russia's entry into the scales of the European balance of power, Austria created a link between its eastern and western diplomatic objectives that would, in the years ahead, complicate and constrain Austrian foreign policy. In practice, these arrangements tied Austria to supporting Russia in the east—including in the prosecution of Balkan wars that were of doubtful benefit to Vienna—in order to ensure

Russia's support in the west. This pattern, which was set in response to Frederick, would persist for more than a century and only be broken when Austria estranged Russia during the Crimea crisis and lost its eastern line of support for dealing with western threats.

But that lay in the future. Assessed by how well it fit Austria's strategic needs at the time, Kaunitz's *renversement des alliances* was an unqualified success. Just how good a deal Austria got out of this bargain can be seen by looking at it from the perspective of Versailles. In exchange for supplying more than 180,000 troops (the flower of its army) and 12 million livres, France got a capable new enemy, promise of territory that was never delivered, and a new strategic commitment to Germany that prevented it from concentrating resources on what, from France's perspective, was the main theater of the war: the contest with Britain for the Ohio river valley.<sup>63</sup> While the Austro-French treaty involved France deeply in Austria's feud with Prussia, it did not, in the event, enmesh Austria in France's feud with Britain.

It would be hard to find a better deal in diplomatic history. That this and Kaunitz's other alliances did not result in the decisive victory to reclaim Silesia that Maria Theresa had hoped is a reflection less of Kaunitz's failings as a diplomat than of Frederick's genius as an innovative and indefatigable military commander.

##### 5. THE METTERNICHIAN POSTSCRIPT.

Austria's experiences against Frederick succeeded where the War of Spanish Succession had failed in jolting the Habsburg Monarchy into the business of grand strategy on a standing basis. Most importantly, the wars with Frederick amplified that strand of Austrian diplomatic culture which saw systems of well-maintained alliances as the key to avoiding multi-sided contests beyond the Habsburg Monarchy's ability to maintain. Kaunitz sought heightened cooperation with Austria's neighbors to "transcend" the balance of power, first in his coalitions against Frederick and then in using consultation with Prussia and Russia to avert war in the crises of Polish partition. When a new military challenge emerged in the form of Napoleon, Austria replicated Kaunitz's earlier diplomatic successes by reconciling with the old enemy Prussia and combining the states of Europe against France in defense of the *ancien regime*.

After the wars with Napoleon, the Austrian chancellor Klemens von Metternich was able to expand on the Kaunitzian example to construct an elaborate system of congress diplomacy aimed at proactively averting another general European war. The heart of this system was a series of overlapping treaties committing Europe's major powers to

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<sup>63</sup> See Gerard Araud, *Ten Episodes from French Diplomatic History*, forthcoming.

defend the peace, backed by networks of frontier Austrian forts. Most analysis of Metternich's system has examined it from a European standpoint, emphasizing the palliative effects that congress diplomacy had as a method of conflict resolution. What is often overlooked is the utility of Metternich's elaborate structures from an Austrian security perspective, as tools to cope with strategic simultaneity. That they succeeded in avoiding a general conflict for a century is a reflection both of Metternich's skills as a statesman and the lesson, learned cumulatively by Austria's leaders in earlier wars, that preventing multi-front wars is preferable to reacting to them after they have already broken out.

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## V. PRECLUSIVE ACCOMMODATION: EDWARDIAN BRITAIN.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Great Britain, then at the height of its powers as a global empire, was suddenly confronted with the rise of an industrially vigorous and militarily assertive Germany. Just three decades had passed since the cunning Prussian statesman Otto von Bismarck had forged the scattered kingdoms of Germany into a unified great power. Great Britain had been an ardent supporter of this unification process, believing that a strong state at the center of the European chessboard could act as an effective counterpoise to France and check the westward ambitions of Russia. But as the new German empire grew stronger economically, it became apparent that a state of its latent power potential would pose a threat to the balance of Europe. With the ascent to the German throne of an ambitious new Kaiser in 1888, Germany moved to assert itself as a world power, inaugurating a major naval buildup and expanding into regions long dominated by Britain.

Germany's rise did not occur in a vacuum; by the time of its ascent, geopolitical pressures were beginning to bear down on the British Empire from every direction. In the Mediterranean, where France competed with Britain for Egypt and neighboring regions, French naval expansion threatened the critical sea lanes connecting Britain to its eastern possessions. In Central Asia, where Britain and Russia were locked in a decades-long cold war, new Russian railways held the potential to upset the military balance of power and jeopardize Britain's position in India. And on the far frontiers, the rising economic and naval strength of Japan and the United States placed ever greater demands on an already tightly-stretched British military and naval establishment.

Collectively, these shifts in the global balance of power threatened to overwhelm the British strategic system, overstretch its limited naval and military capabilities, and undermine the global networks of finance and commerce on which its status as a great power depended. The question facing turn-of-the-century British leaders was how to deal with the arch-challenge from Germany without neglecting the danger from the empire's traditional enemies, France and Russia or taking on security responsibilities beyond Britain's ability to sustain.

### I. THE PRE-WILHELMINE BRITISH SECURITY SYSTEM.

By the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the British Empire encompassed nearly a third of the world's surface area, stretching from equatorial Africa to the Indian subcontinent and from Canada to the Far East. British empire-building had followed the Venetian pattern of acquiring littoral and archipelagic real estate, but on a vastly larger scale. Accumulated over three centuries of expansion, most British possessions had originated as strategically-located trading stations or naval outposts along key trade routes and



rarely extended more than a few hundred miles inland. By the reign of Queen Victoria, Britain had come to control, either through direct rule or local proxies, the majority of the marginal maritime zones or “rimlands” lining the Eurasia land mass.



Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

### *The British Empire, 1907*

A small island with limited resources and manpower, Britain lacked the wherewithal, even at the height of its powers, to hold such a vast empire by force in the face of determined opposition by multiple great powers.<sup>64</sup> To work, British strategists of the Victorian era recognized that the empire needed two conditions to exist: a balance of power in Europe and a generally passive Asia.<sup>65</sup> As long no single hegemon controlled the resources of continental Europe, Britain could afford to divert its military resources away from the British home area. And as long as Asia was not home to an antagonistic great power, Britain could run its eastern possessions on a shoestring, using native contingents backed by a smattering of regular army garrisons and Royal Navy cruiser

<sup>64</sup> For a concise formulation of British grand strategy during this period, see Paul Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy, 1870-1945* (London: Fontana, 1984), chapter 1. Kennedy’s argument is that the British Empire owed its longevity to a mixture of “selective appeasement” and “self-financing.”

<sup>65</sup> John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System 1830-1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 482.

squadrons to deter all but the most determined opponents and, if necessary, defeat those that could not be deterred without unduly straining the Treasury.

Like Venice, Britain's great-power status rested on seapower—specifically, its ability to maintain technological and numerical superiority in warships over other major powers. In 1889, the British Admiralty adopted a formal metric by which to monitor and measure this dominance. Under the so-called two-power rule, Britain committed to maintaining a fleet of capital ships equal to those of the next two largest naval powers combined.<sup>66</sup> Because it was assumed that the states possessing such fleets would be European powers, adhering to the two-power standard allowed Britain to ensure the physical security of the British Isles while having more than enough ships to also police the empire. Such was the extent of British naval strength that the Royal Navy was able to maintain permanent naval stations, each with a squadron of ships not only in England and the Mediterranean but in the West Indies, Pacific, South America, South Africa, East Indies, Australia, and China.

A second pillar of British grand strategy was India. Compared to other major European powers, Britain was conspicuous in its lack of strategic depth and resources. The Indian subcontinent filled this gap by giving Britain access to raw materials, markets and manpower that it otherwise would have lacked, and that were out of reach to Britain's rivals. It would be hard to overstate the impact that possession of India had in extending Britain's power capabilities. As a general rule, Britain used regular army units based in the British Isles to handle crises west of Suez and native troops from India to handle problems east of Suez. Because the latter were financed by local taxes, they did not add to the military budget borne by British taxpayers. Thus by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, India was effectively footing the bill for an astonishing two-thirds of the total expenses of the British Army.<sup>67</sup>

Britain's self-sufficiency enabled it to largely forego standing commitments with other major powers. Backed by the immense wealth of its empire, Britain could, not unlike Venice, use a combination of naval power, subsidies and surgical deployments of its small professional army to defeat bids at European hegemony by continental rivals at moments of its choosing. Thanks to the combination of a peer-free environment in Asia and Britain's large Indian garrison, it could operate in the East largely as it saw fit,

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<sup>66</sup> For an analysis of the debates surrounding the creation of the two-power standard in the context of Britain's global strategic situation, see Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 146-52.

<sup>67</sup> This figure includes both Indian regiments and those British Army regiments which, once stationed in India, were required to be paid for by the India government from its own revenues. As Lord Salisbury put it, India was for Britain an "Eastern barrack in the oriental seas from which we may draw any number of troops without paying for it." See Darwin, p. 183 and Friedberg, p. 219.

without needing European allies to backstop its territorial acquisitions or parry bids for compensation by European rivals. As a result, for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, British statesmen were able to pursue a self-described policy of “splendid isolation,” hanging back from European affairs and focusing mainly on imperial expansion.<sup>68</sup>

By the 1880s, however, this system had come under growing pressure from Britain’s traditional colonial rivals, France and Russia. Competition with France had intensified significantly following Britain’s intervention in Egypt in 1882 and subsequent extension of control over the Suez Canal. While justifiable on military-strategic grounds, given Egypt’s commanding position on the sea route connecting England and India, the move entailed British military intervention into territories that France traditionally viewed as its special preserve. In the event of conflict, France, which had recently inaugurated a naval build-up in the Mediterranean, could effectively sever the lines of communication running from Britain, via Gibraltar and Suez, to India.

An even greater pressure on the British security system came from Russia. Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century British and Russian power had been in a state of intense competition in a long strip of intermediary territories from the Balkans to Central Asia. The defeat of Russian expansion into the Balkans at the 1878 Berlin Conference led it to turn its attention to the east. In Central Asia, Russia undertook an ambitious railway construction program aimed at enabling a rapid concentration of force on the Indian frontier. From this period onward, Russia also became more active in destabilizing Persia, Afghanistan, and Tibet—all Indian buffer states—and, exploiting the creeping decrepitude of the Manchu dynasty, began to aggressively expand its commercial and political influence in China.

The Russian threat to India loomed large in the minds of British defense planners. The geographic scale of Anglo-Russian rivalry, encompassing as many as four or even five frontiers, meant that, as Arthur Balfour put it in 1901, “a quarrel with Russia anywhere, about anything, means the invasion of India.”<sup>69</sup> Such a conflict, if it came, would be a land war, far from the reach of the Royal Navy’s guns. And here, the Russians were at a distinct advantage, having at their disposal the largest land army in Europe. The extent to which this contingency weighed in British thinking can be seen in imperial force posture in the final years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: out of 142 infantry battalions, 18

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<sup>68</sup>The term, used frequently by some British statesmen of the period but debated by modern historians, is somewhat misleading because it implies a higher degree of British aloofness from European affairs than actually occurred. Britain did, of course, utilize partners on the continent during this period, but only in the restricted sense of using temporary alignments to achieve limited objectives, usually in areas outside of or at the margins of Europe, as opposed to treaty alliances involving standing security commitments.

<sup>69</sup> Darwin, p. 259.

were in island outposts, 3 were in Egypt, 3 in South Africa, 52 were in India, and the rest were in Britain.<sup>70</sup>

Taken together, the Russian and French threats called into question both of the conditions upon which Britain's traditional grand strategy had rested. Franco-Russian collaboration threatened the security of Britain's home area and the routes connecting it to India via the Mediterranean, while Russia's growing attention to the East effectively confronted Britain, for the first time, with a great-power competitor in Asia.

These pressures forced a modification of the British strategic system. In 1887 the Conservative government of Lord Salisbury (1895-1902) undertook a series of diplomatic understandings with the powers of the Mediterranean littoral—Italy, Austria-Hungary, and Spain—aimed at alleviating Franco-Russian pressure on the lines of communication between Britain and India. The so-called Mediterranean Agreements involved little in the way of an explicit commitment from Britain other than to “cooperate heartily” to prevent Russia or France from increasing “their dominion over the shores of either the Mediterranean, the Aegean or the Black Sea.”<sup>71</sup> Diplomatically, the agreements marked the first tentative steps toward ending Britain's diplomatic “isolation.” Geopolitically, they brought Britain into closer alignment with the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy and with it, the complicated, interlinking system of alliances that Bismarck used to keep the European system in balance.

The Mediterranean Agreements had the desired effect of shoring up Britain's position and preserving the basic elements of its global strategic system. They worked because they implicitly placed Britain on the more numerous and powerful side of the scales in European power politics. While France and Russia together represented a formidable force, even an implicit alignment of Britain with Germany and its two weaker confederates, Austria and Italy, was more than sufficient to deter aggression by Paris and St. Petersburg. All of this was possible because Germany itself, under Bismarck's leadership, was a conservative, status quo power. It also didn't hurt that Bismarck saw Germany as having few strategic interests in colonial regions, beyond exploiting disputes there to gain positional advantages inside continental Europe. This largely kept Germany out of serious conflict with Britain in Africa and Asia.

As long as this state of affairs held, Britain was able, with only minor diplomatic adjustments, to continue to adhere to its traditional grand strategy. It could meet its sprawling global military and naval commitments without absorbing the full costs that a

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>71</sup> Andrew Roberts, *Lord Salisbury: Victorian Titan* (London: Phoenix Press, 1999), p. 432.



more contested environment would have demanded, and without being forced into deeper entanglements on the European mainland.

## 2. WHAT MADE THE THREAT FROM KAISER WILHELM DIFFERENT.

Wilhelm II's Germany represented an altogether different threat than anything Britain had faced since Napoleon. Shortly after taking the throne, the new Kaiser dismissed Bismarck and steered German foreign policy onto a more assertive course than it had pursued in the years immediately following unification. Where Bismarck saw Germany's main interests as lying in Europe and viewed colonial developments as a distraction, Wilhelm believed that, to establish itself as a great power, Germany must acquire wider access to international commerce and resources. For Wilhelm, ensuring such access necessitated that Germany develop a foreign policy of truly global outlook—a *Weltpolitik* by which Germany would stand toe to toe with, and where necessary contest the claims of, existing colonial powers to have its “place in the sun.”

A corollary to this way of thinking was that Germany would need to possess the tools appropriate to a world power—specifically, a larger navy and merchant marine. Where Bismarck had resisted requests by German admirals for a bigger fleet on the grounds that it would siphon resources away from the large army that Germany needed against Russia, Wilhelm was a naval enthusiast from outset. Within two years of his coronation, the German parliament had passed two consecutive navy bills providing funds for ambitious fleet construction. The program was overtly anti-British, naming the Royal Navy as the main threat and aspiring to equip Germany with a surface fleet capable of attaining a 2:3 ratio in capital ships.

Like Germany, France and Russia, also possessed colonial aspirations and fleets. What made Germany different was that, by any measure of economic or latent military strength, it was significantly more powerful than either France or Russia—indeed, potentially more powerful than both combined. Moreover, where French and Russian interests were in conflict with Britain in the periphery, involving issues that were far removed from the Britain home area, Germany's growing power and aspirations threatened the balance of power in continental Europe. A setback at French hands in the Sudan or even Mediterranean or at Russian hands in the Khyber Pass was one thing; losing naval mastery in the North Sea something altogether more serious.

Together, Wilhelm's global strategic and naval aspirations profoundly altered Britain's threat environment. They meant that the empire would face greater security challenges, in more places, and from a more powerful opponent, than ever before in its history, at the same time that it still had to deal with the traditional challenges from France and Russia. While adding substantially to Britain's global burden, the turn in German behavior also called into serious doubt the viability of Britain's preferred diplomatic method to that point of aligning with the Germanic powers to balance France and

Russia. Such a course had been possible so long as Germany under Bismarck retained an essentially status-quo posture; with Wilhelm at the helm, this was no longer the case.

The event that most revealed the extent of the German challenge and the unsustainability of Britain's traditional security system was the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. Unlike the native opponents that the British had faced in previous colonial wars, the Boers proved capable of inflicting defeats on modern British field armies led by the empire's ablest commanders. What should have been an easily-suppressed uprising by a handful of Dutch farmers would, in the end, require three years and 400,000 British troops to settle. The war stretched the military-logistical sinews of British power to the breaking point. That system had been designed on the premise that the empire could be policed sparingly, largely with Indian troops, and therefore held economically, through a combination of naval force and small British garrisons.

The Boer War demanded far more than that. It required enormous resources from both Britain and India (the latter providing supply and other support functions due to sensitivities about pitting Indian regiments against a European opponent) while revealing serious shortcomings in British command structure, posture, tactics and logistics. By war's end, the army's exertions had led to a quadrupling of British military spending. If untrained irregulars could stretch the British army to such lengths, what would happen when it faced a modern European foe?

The war's biggest effect, however, was geopolitical, in the dangers that it revealed about continuing to pursue a policy of diplomatic "isolation." Throughout the war, Britain had found itself simultaneously at odds with all three major continental powers, Germany, France and Russia. The publics in all three countries had sympathized with the Boers and unofficially supplied volunteer units; more seriously, Germany had provided encouragement and modern weapons, including machine guns and artillery, to the Boers. Had hostilities erupted at the same in another part of the empire or in Europe, Britain could have found itself alone against the combined resources of multiple Great-Power adversaries while the bulk of its small army was tied down nearly 6,000 miles away—exactly the kind of scenario that British strategy, with its emphasis on continental balances and economy of force had been designed to avoid.

The Boer War sharpened Britain's military predicament in India. After it ended, the British general staff devoted fresh attention to old assumptions about what would be needed to hold India in the event of a Russian attack.<sup>72</sup> The conclusions were sobering: where previously the British had been able to maintain no more than 70,000 British troops in India at any given moment, Lord Kitchener (Commander-in-Chief of British

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<sup>72</sup> For a detailed analysis of these assessments and the bureaucratic feuds they prompted, see Friedberg, pp. 230-77.

forces in India) and analysts at the War Office calculated that in the event of war it would need anywhere from 150,000 to half a million men.<sup>73</sup> If acted upon, such requests would have required a considerably larger military budget, with correspondingly less funds available for the navy.

At the same time, Britain was absorbing the financial and strategic ramifications of the naval build-up underway in other major powers. Germany's construction of a high seas fleet dictated that Britain concentrate more of its capital ships in the Atlantic and North Sea, while Russian, French, Japanese and U.S. fleet expansions called into question the viability of existing Royal Navy strengths in a slew of global stations. Counteracting the effects of these changes while maintaining the two-power standard would require significant increases in naval spending.

In all of this, Germany's posture was the critical variable. Even with the mounting pressures that Britain faced on the periphery, it could arguably have justified a continuation of its old system of non-committal diplomacy in Europe and gossamer defenses across the empire as long as the large power at the center of the European chessboard remained a status quo player interested primarily in countering Russian land pressure in Eastern Europe. It is at least plausible that a post-Boer War Britain could, with a Bismarckian Germany still in place, have persisted with some variant of Salisbury's Mediterranean Agreements and the minimalist entanglements they entailed, in the knowledge that German power would be more than sufficient, if a major crisis came, to tie down France and Russia on their eastern and western frontiers and indirectly alleviate pressure on British positions in the Mediterranean and India. Instead, Germany seemed to have its enormous power aimed not at these old rivals but at Britain herself.

### 3. BRITAIN'S OPTIONS.

By the turn of the century, it was therefore increasingly clear to British statesmen that significant changes would have to be made in the country's foreign and defense policies to safeguard British interests in vital regions. While realization of the need for change had been growing for some time, the debate about what to do came to a head in the final years of Lord Salisbury's term as prime minister and the early tenure of his successor and nephew, Arthur Balfour (1902-5). This took the form of two overlapping debates, one naval and one diplomatic.

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<sup>73</sup> British debates about force requirements for India are covered in detail in Friedberg, pp. 235-48.



The naval debate centered on how to meet the minimum force requirements necessary to secure naval dominance against as many as five potential opponents, all with expanding fleets. As the Boer War drew to a close, British strategists considered two broad strategic options<sup>74</sup>:

*OPTION 1.* Abandon the old two-power standard and build a strong enough fleet to handle all of Britain's potential Great-Power enemies in Europe while also keeping up a numerical advantage in all remaining naval stations around the empire. On this option, Britain would attempt to be strong everywhere, accepting the burden of progressively larger naval budgets. If achievable, this option held out the attraction of Britain being able to continue some degree of diplomatic aloofness from Europe.

*OPTION 2.* Maintain the two-power standard while tacitly relinquishing the goal of naval dominance against some of Britain's potential enemies. In practice, this option meant prioritizing the European theater at the expense of the security of the empire and in particular British positions in Asia. This option entailed considerably smaller naval budgets than the first option, but would require Britain to dramatically reassess its foreign relationships with an eye to reducing the number of active rivals facing the empire—in short, abandoning diplomatic isolation, with all its advantages.

While the first option may seem impossible in retrospect, it is important to bear in mind that Britain had been accustomed to more or less total naval dominance since at least the Napoleonic Wars. Nineteenth-Century British strategic culture was grounded on the assumption that maintaining larger fleets against all of the empire's biggest enemies was not only possible but necessary. The two-power standard was merely a convenient rule-of-thumb for capturing the essence of this naval dominance, mainly for the purposes of the annual naval estimates; the underlying assumption had always been that navies other than those of the the next two largest powers would be of virtually no account in any war. To envision a world in which these assumptions no longer held, and in which Britain could conceivably lose naval dominance across much of its empire, required a tectonic change in British strategic psychology.

That Britain ultimately pursued option 2 is a reflection not only of the extent of changes that had occurred in its strategic environment but of the foresight and creativity of British leadership at the time not only in the Royal Navy but in the British civil service and diplomatic corps. On the navy side, the appointment of Lord Selborne as First Lord of the Admiralty in November 1900 was decisive. Under Selborne's leadership, the navy leadership confronted comforting but false assumptions about British capabilities in light of the changed threat environment. Selborne successfully advocated for

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<sup>74</sup> See Friedberg, pp. 168-69.

maintaining the two-power standard against Britain's primary European enemies rather than adopting a ruinously expensive three-, four-, or five-power standard. This meant two things: concentrating more of Britain's available fleet assets on one primary theater, Europe (and accepting tradeoffs in other, less important regions); and putting the Navy's political weight behind such diplomatic arrangements as would enable Britain's concentration on the main theater.

In the latter task, Selborne had an able partner in Lord Landsdowne, who Salisbury put in charge of the Foreign Office the same month that Selborne arrived at the Admiralty.<sup>75</sup> Under these two men, Britain's naval and political leaderships sustained a high degree of coordination in pursuit of a new template for British grand strategy. In support of Selborne's effort to concentrate naval resources in the European theater, Landsdowne pursued a diplomacy of targeted de-escalation with potential rivals aimed at alleviating pressure on key frontiers and limiting the number of big-power adversaries Britain would have to face in a conflict.

He started at the thin end of the wedge, with the United States. Within weeks of coming to office, Landsdowne launched negotiations with Washington that resulted in the Hay-Pauncefote Treaty, under which Britain relinquished naval dominance in the Western Hemisphere. Significantly, where the Royal Navy had previously opposed any moves in this direction, under Selborne the Admiralty supported the new diplomacy, which had the practical effect of scratching the American navy from Britain's two-power standard calculations of the and buying precious headspace for the Royal Navy in the 1901-1902 estimates.<sup>76</sup>

Just a few months after coming to terms with the United States, Britain inaugurated a diplomatic denouement with the other major peripheral power, Japan. Even more than had been the case in the U.S. negotiations, the Admiralty was a primary instigator for reaching an understanding with Japan. From Selborne's perspective, an alliance with Japan would have both a force posture and deterrence benefit: (1) by adding Japanese naval strength to that of Britain against the shared threat of Russia, it freed up fleet assets for home waters and (2) by discouraging France's entry into any Russian war against Japan, it would deter both powers from seeking opportunity in Asia. Encouraged by this logic, Landsdowne negotiated the 1902 Anglo-Japanese Alliance, which

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<sup>75</sup> To understanding the impact that Landsdowne would have in reordering British diplomacy, it is important to keep in mind that, prior to his appointment, Lord Salisbury himself—the architect of Britain's policy of “splendid isolation”—had simultaneously headed the Foreign Office while serving as Prime Minister. The extent of Salisbury's intellectual dominance in British foreign policy in the final years of Queen Victoria's reign would be hard to overstate. Landsdowne, like Selborne, therefore represented new blood, coming onto the scene at an unusually plastic moment in policy formulation.

<sup>76</sup> Friedberg, pp. 173-74.

committed the two powers to support one another if attacked.<sup>77</sup> Britain's first peacetime alliance, the arrangement marked the effective end of splendid isolation.

With the U.S. and Japanese understandings in place, Britain had reduced from five to three the number of potential rivals it would have to face in the event of war. From a strategic perspective, Lansdowne had started with the most distant and least threatening powers, with which Britain had the smallest differences of interests. The far harder task confronted British diplomacy in Europe. Selborne's revised naval strategy committed Britain to outmatching the next two largest navies; even with America and Japan out of the picture, it faced three: France, Russia and Germany.

The ensuing diplomatic debate therefore centered on the question of which of these powers Britain should seek to align itself with. Two broad alternatives were actively considered:

*OPTION 1.* Reduce tensions with Germany. On this option, Britain would seek to remove Germany as potential third member of the Franco-Russian combine (Britain's nightmare scenario) and free up naval resources for competition with France and Russia in the Mediterranean and Asia. Such a recourse was in many ways Britain's most natural option, given the depth of animosity toward, and outstanding colonial disagreements with, France and Russia, which in 1891 had entered into a formal alliance with one another. Forming a stronger link with Germany was also the most logical corollary to Salisbury's Mediterranean Agreements and consistent with the tradition, dating back to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, of viewing Germany as Britain's main ally on the continent.

*OPTION 2.* Reduce tensions with France—and eventually, perhaps, Russia. On this option, Britain would jettison its decades-long hostility toward one or both of the members of the Franco-Russian Dual Alliance as a means of alleviating the naval and military pressures on various colonial frontiers. While advocates of this option tended not to explicitly frame it as anti-German, its logical effect would be tacitly designate Germany as the main threat facing Britain and pave the way for a reorientation of naval resources from the Mediterranean and outer empire to the home waters around Britain.

The debate about these diplomatic options coincided with the final phase of Lord Salisbury's tenure and was driven by younger, emerging voices in the British government and bureaucracy. Perhaps the most forceful of these was Joseph Chamberlain, member of the Liberal Unionist party and Colonial Secretary from 1895 to 1903.<sup>78</sup> Chamberlain favored option 1. On his view, Russia was and would remain

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<sup>77</sup> A 1905 revision extended its provisions to include Japanese and British positions in Korea and India respectively.

<sup>78</sup> At the time, the Liberal Unionists were in coalition government with Salisbury's Conservatives.

Britain's natural enemy.<sup>79</sup> Together with other Unionists, Salisbury's heir apparent Balfour, believed that an active alliance between England and Germany, possibly also including the United States, was needed to counterbalance the Franco-Russian Dual Alliance.<sup>80</sup> In particular, from Britain's perspective, friendship with Germany was needed to force Russia to concentrate its army in Poland, far away from India.

Chamberlain approached Germany on no fewer than three occasions between 1898 and 1901 to discuss the parameters of an understanding between the two powers. It didn't work. In the end Chamberlain's efforts failed, not for lack of effort on Britain's part but for lack of interest on Germany's. The simplest explanation for why Germany rejected Chamberlain's entreaties was that it believed it could get more than was being offered. From the perspective of the German Kaiser and his chief advisors, Britain's repeated approaches suggested that Britain was approaching it from a position of weakness and, as such, could eventually be maneuvered into greater concessions once the full extent of German naval power became apparent.<sup>81</sup> To this must be added the fact that Anglo-German antagonism was required to sustain the domestic support needed to maintain expenditures on the Kaiser's naval building program. As Friedrich von Holstein, one of Wilhelm's top advisors, wrote in explaining the reason for rejecting a British alliance, "The Kaiser wants a fleet like that of England and wants to direct the entire domestic policy to that end—i.e., to a fight."<sup>82</sup>

Britain's countervailing scenario, of reducing tensions with France and Russia, gained in credibility in proportion to Germany's belligerence. Favoring the French option were most of the professional diplomatic corps, key Conservative members of Parliament, and, eventually, Lord Landsdowne. Aside from Germany's ham-fisted behavior, several factors gave this option momentum. One was the acceleration of Selborne's plans to overhaul the Navy. Selborne himself was an advocate for coming to terms with France as a means of alleviating the Royal Navy's burdens in the Mediterranean much as the understanding with America had done in the Western Hemisphere. In this task, Selborne had an ally in George Clarke, a navalist and civilian defense analyst whose trenchant analyses of the logistics on the Northwest Frontier helped to defeat the Army's

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<sup>79</sup> This view had a long pedigree in the British politics, tracing its roots to the start of Anglo-Russian antagonism during the Palmerston government and calls for "forward presence" by regionalists like David Urquhart and John McNeill in the 1830s. For British Liberals, the threat from Russia was not just strategic but ideological, stemming from the Russian Empire's avowedly autocratic nature. For an analysis of the evolution of the debates about Russia in British domestic politics, see Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 166-87.

<sup>80</sup> To some extent, the aging Salisbury appears to have agreed with this assessment, though he stopped short of endorsing a formal alliance.

<sup>81</sup> See Norman Rich and M. H. Fisher, Eds., *The Holstein Papers: The Memoirs, Diaries and Correspondence of Friedrich von Holstein 1897-1909*, Vol. I. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 184.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* Vol. IV, p. 28.

more grandiose manpower demands, which might have come at the expense of resources for the Navy.<sup>83</sup>

By 1904, Landsdowne's agreements with America and Japan had made possible a far-reaching strategic consolidation whereby the naval stations for the South Atlantic and China were closed and those in the East Indies and Australia merged into one combined Asian hub, enabling the redeployment of five battleships and four cruiser squadrons to home waters.<sup>84</sup> In parallel, Jackie Fisher, the newly-named First Sea Lord, was spearheading the development of a new, heavily-armed, all-big-gun battleship that would be capable of outfighting any extant battleship. Together, these evolutions placed a tool at hand, in the form of an upgraded British main battle fleet, directly adjacent to a power, Germany, that had, by repeatedly rejecting Britain's repeated alliance offers and persisting in a naval buildup, behaved as Britain's main foreign threat.

All of this added weight to those in the British bureaucracy arguing for a French entente. In 1904, Britain and France resolved the main sources of colonial friction between them. At the heart of the deal was an understanding that Britain would abandon its claims in Morocco in exchange for France foregoing its claims on Egypt. Numerous secondary disputes were also settled: Britain ceded some islands off the African coast and caved to French demands involving the demarcation of the Nigerian border and the upper Gambia valley; France gave up its old claims to Canadian fisheries and came to terms with Britain on zones of influence in Burma. In short, the two empires settled all accounts, putting to rest a mélange of disagreements that, on more than one occasion in prior years, had brought the world's two largest empires to the brink of war.

In some ways, Britain's understanding with France implied a de-escalation with Russia, given that the latter two were formal allies.<sup>85</sup> By the time the prospect had ripened, a new Liberal government had taken office under Henry Campbell-Bannerman (1905-1908). The new government's ambassador to St. Petersburg, Sir Arthur Nicolson, was an effective advocate for coming to terms with Russia. He was supported by the Foreign Office, which saw the arrangement as a natural corollary to the deal they had just completed with France, and in particular, the capable and well-connected Sir Charles Hardinge, previous ambassador to Russia who now served as Permanent Undersecretary at the Foreign Office. Nicolson and Hardinge enjoyed backing from key

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<sup>83</sup> Clarke argued aggressively against the case presented by the venerable Lord Roberts, at one point calculating that the Army's war plans in Afghanistan would require more than 234,000 camels to supply. See Friedberg, pp. 260-61.

<sup>84</sup> Darwin, p. 259.

<sup>85</sup> As Edward Grey, foreign minister at the time, wrote, "we could not pursue at one and the same time a policy of agreement with France and a policy of counteralliances against Russia." Quoted in See David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Holt and Company, 2009), p. 31.

members of the cabinet, including the new foreign secretary, Edward Grey, as well as Viscount Haldane (Secretary of State for War) Lord Morley (Secretary of State for India), and Asquith (Chancellor of the Exchequer), and King Edward.<sup>86</sup>

Even with such powerful supporters, Nicolson faced a difficult task. Where Landsdowne had been able, in his efforts with France, to build on a tradition of cooperation during the 1854-6 Crimean War and more recent flirtations in the 1880s, its relationship with Russia was difficult in the extreme. The rivalry between the two powers was intensely felt, involving disagreements that were both fresher and about more important strategic interests than those in Anglo-French relations. To a much greater extent than had been the case with France or even with Germany, Britain's efforts to de-escalate with Russia faced entrenched opposition from across British politics and government bureaucracy. Many Liberal members of Parliament opposed the idea because it would join Britain in common cause with the world's largest autocracy.<sup>87</sup> Supporting them were influential regionalists like Cecil Spring Rice (former Minister to Persia) Conservative Imperialists like Lord Curzon (former Viceroy to India) and Earl Percy (former Undersecretary of State for India), and most of the Indian Government, which saw the deal as imperiling India, as well as senior officers in British Army who sought to use the need for reinforcements on the Northwest Frontier to gain an upper hand in budgetary and bureaucratic fights.

However steep the obstacles may have been, certain factors worked decisively in favor of an Anglo-Russian détente. The biggest, as had been the case with France, was fear of a shared enemy, Germany. There was also the matter of Russia's defeat in the 1905 war against Japan, which left its economy in shambles and its military looking for ways to relieve Russia's own multi-front dilemmas and, specifically, the cost of large standing defense commitments in Central Asia. Finally, and not insignificantly, Russia and England had something with which to barter—namely, the large swath of lands from Persia through Afghanistan to Tibet that separated British India from the Russian Empire, in which there was sufficient flexibility in what each power could present as constituting defensible interests to support a series of localized trade-offs, provided that the political will for such understandings was in place.

Another factor was Britain's lack of military tools with which to prosecute a fight against Russia. In the event of war between the two empires, Britain's main hope would be to hold down the Northwest Frontier while opening a second land front on Russia, ideally

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<sup>86</sup> Harold Nicolson, *Portrait of a Diplomatist: Sir Arthur Nicolson, Bart. First Lord Carnock, A Study in the Old Diplomacy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company), p. 151.

<sup>87</sup> These concerns came to a head following in 1906 after the infamous *Bialystok pogrom*, which produced a political backlash in Britain and almost led the Campbell-Bannerman government to call off talks. See the discussion in Nicolson, pp. 162-3.



in the Black Sea region. The difficulty of naval access to Russia's southeastern flank made it hard for the British general staff to even imagine a way to attack Russia from the west. All of this amounted to the absence of a credible British theory of victory against Russia. As the former Commander-in-Chief, Lord Roberts, asked in an 1885 memorandum, "What are Russia's vulnerable points?" A quarter-century later, Selborne concluded, "Compared to our Empire, hers is invulnerable...because there is speaking generally and roughly no part of her territory where we can hit her."<sup>88</sup>

By contrast, the Royal Navy did have a credible theory of victory against Germany, whether it was Jackie Fisher's "Copenhagening" of the High Seas Fleet or simply blockading Germany in the event of war to starve it into submission. To this has to be added the Admiralty's far savvier cultivation of effective relationships with Britain's political leadership, which compared favorably with the Army's incessant haranguing of senior ministers. In the end, the Navy ultimately won the fight for resources, and by extension, ensured the prioritization of the North Sea over India's Northwest Frontier, because its strategic assessment aligned with both the budgetary realities (the impossibility of a *tous azimuts* force posture) and political winds (coming at a moment of German bellicosity that roused Parliamentary and public ire).

In 1907, to the surprise of the rest of Europe, Britain and Russia concluded the Anglo-Russian Convention. Compared to Britain's arrangement with France, which encompassed much of the world, this one was narrow in scope, essentially amounting to a series of compartmentalized understandings, corresponding to the two powers' three main areas of disagreement in Central Asia. Under the terms of the Convention, Afghanistan was placed under de facto British suzerainty, Tibet was recognized by both states as a neutralized buffer under Chinese suzerainty, and Persia was divided into three spheres of influence: British, Russian, and a neutral zone.<sup>89</sup> The two powers did not promise to assist one another as Britain and Japan had. But what they had done was ensure their respective ability to concentrate force on their most important frontiers with a fair degree of certainty that they would not be attacked from another quarter while doing so.

With the completion of the Russian agreement, Britain's diplomatic response to the threat of multi-front war was complete. In the space of just six years, two consecutive British governments had brokered understandings with four of their five rivals, effectively defusing potential flashpoints in Venezuela, the Caribbean, Guinea, Gambia, Nigeria, Egypt, Morocco, Burma, the New Hebrides, Newfoundland, China, Tibet, Afghanistan, and Persia. The demand signal for Britain's diplomatic adjustments was

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<sup>88</sup> Friedberg, pp. 216-17.

<sup>89</sup> J.A.R. Marriott, Anglo-Russian Relations 1686-1943 Second Edition (London: Methuen and Company Ltd., 1944), pp. 161-62.



primarily naval and military in nature, trickling up from alterations in defense planning and force requirements that were required in response to threats on specific frontiers and the budgetary pressures they produced. The shift in British strategic attitudes was as dramatic as Kaunitz's diplomatic revolution but on a global scale.

#### 4. RESULTS AND COSTS.

Any assessment of Britain diplomatic realignments in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century has to begin by comparing its results against what Britain's statesmen themselves had set out to accomplish. The object of their toil had been to remedy the collapse of the old security system brought about by the simultaneous rise of multiple large rivals—in short, to prevent British isolation. They sought this not as an end in itself but as an expedient to avert a circumstance in which Britain would either be overwhelmed in a multi-front war or, conversely, would have to purchase continued isolation at an impossibly high price in new fleets and armies. In other words, their aim was to align Britain's diplomacy with military and strategic reality.

In these objects, they succeeded. The understandings with America, Japan, France and Russia achieved what they were meant to achieve both militarily and financially. They alleviated Britain's diplomatic isolation in ways that enabled her to safeguard the empire and maintain her privileged international position without overextending her resources. Britain was not cornered into a ruinously expensive defense program involving simultaneous naval and military build-ups. Most importantly, when war finally did break in 1914, Britain did not face any of the nightmare scenarios her defense planners had feared at the turn of the century. She was not confronted with the combined strength of two or more of the next largest powers. France and Russia were not aligned with the Triple Alliance. America and Japan did not move opportunistically to seize her possessions in the Western Hemisphere or Far East. Militarily, she did not have to worry about simultaneously parrying a Russian land attack in the Khyber Pass and a German naval push through the Kattegat. Instead she faced one, main enemy, on one, clearly-prioritized frontier.

Britain's diplomatic arrangements also ensured that she had the right tools at hand when war came. Resource prioritization paid off with an enlarged and technologically superior fleet. The *de facto* addition of the French, Russian, and Japanese fleets on Britain's side in the naval balance enabled her to concentrate the bulk of the fleet in home waters without hazarding the security of the Mediterranean link to India or the waters around China. Through these alliances Britain also effectively filled the gaps in her own military capabilities by ensuring recourse to the complimentary tools of other powers—namely, the massive land power capabilities of the French and Russian armies. There were also the salutary effects that concentration had in freeing up British resources that otherwise would have been tied down against other threats. Above all, this was true of the British Army, which was able to concentrate its main fighting power

on the Low Countries. But it also applied to the Indian Army, which was freed up for use in the Middle Eastern theater that would have exerted a drain on regular army units.

Britain's *détentes* were not cost-free; each came at the expense of British concessions. In North America, she conceded, most tangibly, America's exclusive control over a canal through the Panama isthmus that British naval planners rightly foresaw would forever alter the balance of power in the Atlantic. In Asia, Britain gave up numerous naval stations and tacitly conceded to a non-European state the status of top naval power in Asia, without any long-term plan for regaining her position there. With France, Britain gave up any future hopes of becoming the dominant power in a large swath of northern and equatorial Africa. With Russia, she foreswore suzerainty over Tibet, long an object of British desire, and, far more consequentially in the eyes of critics like Lord Curzon, gave away too much in Persia, "hand[ing] over to Russia not only the trade route from Baghdad but also the important marts of Ispahan and Yezd," while failing to "safeguard our position in the Gulf" and expos[ing] ourselves to bitter criticism in the Islamic world."<sup>90</sup>

None of these things seemed trivial at the time. In all four cases Britain conceded territories or positional advantages that it had nurtured for years or even decades, the continuation of which was supported by vocal advocates in politics, the business community, and the bureaucracy. Britain's concessions to Russia, in particular, struck many contemporary observers as excessive, constituting a "surrender" in which Britain had "thrown away the efforts of our diplomacy and trade for more than a century."<sup>91</sup> In the case of Persia, they weren't entirely wrong, as events quickly showed. Within months of the Anglo-Russian Convention, the Tsar's government had undertaken a program of intervention exceeding anything envisioned in the treaty and plainly aimed at rendering the nominally independent portion of the country a Russian satellite.<sup>92</sup> Had circumstances in Europe not constrained Britain to swallow these and other flagrant Russian abuses of the agreement, it is likely that the two empires would have quickly found themselves on a war footing in Persia *despite* the terms of the treaty. Only against the backdrop of the First World War can we say that the concessions that Britain made unambiguously outweighed what she got in return, in the form of affordable security vis-à-vis the one rival most capable of impinging upon her prosperity and safety. In this, the chief measure of statecraft, Britain's strategy must be seen as a success. For what

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<sup>90</sup> Nicolson, p. 187.

<sup>91</sup> Criticism was especially harsh with regard to the Convention's provisions for Persia where, it should be kept in mind, Curzon had labored in his time as Viceroy of India to impede Russian efforts at gaining access to the Persian Gulf. This was a longstanding British goal which critics saw the Convention as conceding. See Nicolson, p. 187.

<sup>92</sup> G. P. Gooch and J. H. B. Masterman, *A Century of British Foreign Policy* (London: Council for the Study of International Relations, 1917), pp. 79-80.

would it profit the world's greatest empire to hold the "marts of Ispahan and Yezd" if she could not hold Flanders?

Still, the ledger is not complete unless one takes into account the longer-term picture. It is a largely forgotten fact of history that Russia eagerly reverted to its historic posture of antagonism toward Britain after the First World War. Even as Britain demobilized her forces in Europe and the Middle East, Russia's new Bolshevik government undertook a campaign of vigorous subversion and military pressure against Britain's possessions in the Middle East, Asia Minor, and Central Asia far more determined and ambitious than anything the Tsars had ever countenanced.<sup>93</sup> The resulting competition would continue to saddle a war-weary Britain with expenditures and manpower demands in Persia and the Middle East throughout the 1920s, 30s, and would only abate when the British Empire shut down and *de facto* ceded the field to America and Russia after World War Two.

There were other long-term costs of Britain's ententes. In Asia, Britain's arrangement with Japan effectively deferred to a later date the question of how she would secure her eastern possessions, once the German threat had been dealt with. Japan's subsequent naval expansion and imperial expansion was probably inevitable. But once she had given up her flexibility in this region and embarked on a course of active alliance with Japan, one could argue that Britain's only practical strategic recourse was to continue to hold the wolf by the ears and use the arrangement as a mechanism of restraint—a course of action that far exceeded Britain's limited political will and, as later events showed, would have exposed the inherent tension in her Pacific *détentes* with two powers, Japan and the United States, that were themselves natural rivals.

It is in Europe however that the greatest long-term costs of Britain's ententes would be highest. In committing irrevocably to France and Russia, Britain permanently gave up whatever advantages of strategic flexibility she had possessed as a balancing force vis-à-vis continental Europe. Most notably, Britain had, in previous years, acted as a buttress to Austria and Turkey, two fragile states that acted as stabilizers to the European system. By removing the potential for continued British support of these states, the

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<sup>93</sup> To some extent, Russian behavior after the First World War validated the concerns of Kitchener and other senior British military officers stationed in India and the Middle East that without vigilant British counterforce the Russians would be emboldened to press for advantages in a broader swath of territories, to include the remnants of the Ottoman Empire. The Liberal government of Lord George enthusiastically took up the mantle of the earlier Liberal policies of Campbell-Bannerman and continued to defend attempts at friendship with Russia using the old 1907 rationale even in the face of repeated Russian provocations throughout the Middle East. See Fromkin, pp. 97-98 and pp. 471-74.

ententes with France and Russia effectively undermined both stabilizers.<sup>94</sup> They especially hurt Austria. The defusing of tensions in Central Asia came at the implied cost of Britain supporting (and indeed actively encouraging) Russian expansion in the Balkans, which became its main field of interest following the defeat by Japan. In addition to fueling a Austrian-Russian rivalry that would create the conditions for the First World War, Britain's alignment with Russia and France, both increasingly committed to an anti-Austrian policy, hastened the collapse of an ancient polity—the Habsburg Monarchy—whose continued existence was the most important guarantee against German or Russian hegemony in Europe. With Britain fixed in the scales against it, Austria was doomed to dependency on Germany and dismemberment after the ensuing war. The result was a power vacuum in Eastern Europe that would destabilize the continent and invite geopolitical predation from both Germany and Russia.

##### 5. THE CHAMBERLAIN POSTSCRIPT.

Some thirty years after Britain's turn-of-the-century *détentes*, her leaders would again face the threat of multi-front war, in the period leading up to the Second World War. As in the earlier episode, British decision-makers in the 1930s were confronted with the prospect of fighting several major powers simultaneously—this time, Germany, Italy, and Japan. Also as before, it was well understood in Britain that such a war would be well beyond the empire's military capabilities to bear. But compared to the early 1900s, Britain in the 1930s had an even less favorable margin of military power vis-à-vis her rivals and was burdened with far greater budgetary constraints, being in the midst of a sustained postwar economic contraction while having to guard an empire that was larger, having taken responsibility for former Turkish and German colonial possessions after Versailles. Crucially, where the rise of Imperial Germany had confronted Britain with one main strategic challenger against which to concentrate her strength, by the 1930s, she faced two major threats—Nazi Germany and the Japanese Empire—located at opposite ends of the Eurasian landmass.

The fact that Britain ended up fighting a global war against all three Axis powers tends to obscure the fact that she foresaw, planned for, and tried to avoid exactly that outcome. Under the back-to-back Conservative governments of Stanley Baldwin (1935-37) and Neville Chamberlain (1937-1940), Britain pursued a strategy aimed at limiting the number of active opponents it would have to face in the next war and limiting the

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<sup>94</sup> See Paul W. Schroeder, "World War One as Galloping Gertie: A Reply to Joachim Remak" in Paul W. Schroeder, 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), pp. 137-55.

extent of naval and military advantage that its enemies would possess, should the first objective fail.

Like in the 1900s, Britain's need to reduce the number of rivals it would face in a future conflict was necessitated by the inadequacy of naval power capabilities to deal with the potential threats at hand. Like their predecessors, the 1930s Admiralty calculated that Britain would need a fleet equal to those of Germany and Japan combined in order to deter and defeat both powers, producing cost estimates that the Treasury deemed impractical.<sup>95</sup> It was largely in reaction to these constraints, and in consideration of the length of time it would take to build up a larger fleet, that British leaders undertook to alleviate the pressures on Britain through diplomatic means using methods that would have been recognizable to, and were direct outgrowths of, those that their predecessors employed in the 1900s.

While the appeasement of Germany has attracted the most attention from historians, Chamberlain in fact favored easing tensions with all three of Britain's potential enemies.<sup>96</sup> His rationale would have been recognizable to earlier British statesmen. A new treaty with Japan would enable Britain safely shift fleet elements from the Far East to the European theater, which Chamberlain correctly identified as the main priority; reaching an understanding with Italy over Abyssinia, would remove a possible enemy in the Mediterranean and secure the route to India. In parallel with these *détentes*, the series of naval treaties that Britain had brokered after the First World War would, it was hoped, provide restraint German, Italian and Japanese shipbuilding programs long enough for the construction of Britain's "new model fleet."

In short, Chamberlain's strategy was to sequence Britain's contests so that, if it came to war, the empire would fight Germany first and then turn its attention to Japan.<sup>97</sup> It is in this context that Chamberlain's goals with Hitler have to be understood. He sought a general settlement not as an end in itself but to buy Britain time to rearm. What is curious, when looked at through the context of early 1900s British diplomacy, is that Chamberlain's strategy did not have much of a place for alliances with other, non-rival states. Perhaps most famously, Chamberlain did not want a formal alliance with France, mainly because it entailed too much continental commitment and might estrange Germany. Although the United States of the era was already in an isolationist posture,

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<sup>95</sup> Darwin, p. 426.

<sup>96</sup> There is a very large literature on the subject of appeasement. A good starting point is Paul M. Kennedy, "The Tradition of Appeasement in British Foreign Policy 1865-1939," *British Journal of International Studies* 2 (1976), pp. 195-215. Kennedy traces the roots of Chamberlain's policies to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century and places the Edwardian era agreements with the United States, France and Russia in this tradition. See also Paul Kennedy, "A Time to Appear," *The National Interest*, June 28, 2010.

<sup>97</sup> Darwin, p. 488.

Chamberlain was in any event uninterested in U.S. help and even resisted efforts to broker Sino-Japanese peace for fear of upsetting Japan. And though it would have been difficult to pursue, Chamberlain showed no interest in forming an alliance with the Soviets.

Herein lies the primary flaw of Chamberlain's strategy. Insofar as it was premised on what one historian has called the ability to "shuffle" forces from one theater to the other, it would have needed a powerful fleet and, in Europe, onshore allies capable of bearing the brunt of land fighting while Britain conducted a prolonged blockade.<sup>98</sup> Yet Chamberlain favored neither allies (seeing the balance of power as self-correcting and not requiring a staunch line of support from Britain to motivate resisters) nor a larger fleet (preferring bombers as a deterrent to Germany).

Thus in practice Chamberlain's strategy came down to a multi-directional appeasement undergirded by arms control but weak military capabilities. It prioritized Europe like the British strategy of the 1900s but failed to cultivate the flanking powers that, in 1914, had proven so crucial in activating Germany's own multi-front dilemma. It over-estimated the durability of the international legal framework of the League of Nations system, which so bore the imprint of the British imperial system, as a means of alleviating global strategic pressures while under-estimating the need for a strong deterrent force for backstopping and giving credibility to diplomatic *détente*. The result was a disastrous multi-front conflict which, while probably unavoidable, occurred on terms highly unfavorable to Britain.

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## VI. APPLICATION.

This paper's aim has been to arrive at a clearer picture of how great powers historically have dealt with the problem of strategic simultaneity and, specifically, how they have gone about avoiding multi-front war. Each case, of course, is different, and reflects constraints and ways of thinking that were specific to the state, decision-makers and time period involved. The experiences of Byzantium, Venice, Austria and Britain cannot be reduced to eternal axioms or principles. But they do exhibit some patterns. And those patterns support a handful of generalizations, both about the attributes of simultaneity itself, as a special problem of statecraft, and the strategic options that present themselves to decision-makers confronted with it.

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 494.



***SIMULTANEITY FORCES PRIORITIZATION OF THE MAIN THREAT.*** No power in history could do it all. The appearance of a novel enemy while the state is contending with legacy opponents forces leaders to make hard and often fast choices about which threat should be the focus of scarce military and political resources—and conversely, which threats it should be willing to de-prioritize. As a general rule, states tend to prioritize for military resistance the danger closest to home territory (that is to say, which poses a direct threat to its heartland).

The constancy of this pattern is striking. The fact of summoning the clarity and will to make this choice is itself a notable historical fact. In *all* of the successful examples of great powers avoiding multi-front war that were examined here, decision-makers consciously sought to prioritize the main threat facing the state.<sup>99</sup> Some did so early and others late. But all did it eventually. It was a do-or-die matter that entailed some inevitability if the state wanted to survive; the only question is how well or quickly it occurred.

But while all came around at some point or another, failure to prioritize quickly and well often accelerated the advent of multi-front war. Austria's Charles VI presents an example of the painful penalties of delay. He sought what could be called a *tous azimuts* threat amelioration on the not-unreasonable fear that the failure by any neighboring state, whether big or small, to ratify his daughter's succession could lead to a feeding frenzy. But in doing so, he degraded Austria's defenses and failed to see the peculiar danger, on the basis of both established capabilities and foreseeable appetites, posed by Brandenburg-Prussia, and inadvertently fueled the very war he had hoped to avoid.

That is not to say that correct identification of the main threat necessarily led to success. Neville Chamberlain had a crystal clear understanding that Germany must be Britain's main focus but failed in his government's goal of avoiding multi-front war because he eschewed the alliances that would have been minimally necessary for enabling the desired theater concentration, which may in any event have been out of Britain's reach.

In none of the successful cases did decision-makers seriously consider trying to satisfice or fight all rivals. Theodosius' Gothic generals appear to have initially counseled him to confront Attila and the Persians at the same time; some of Foscari's advisors wanted to be tough with the Turks and mainland Italian enemies simultaneously; and Kaunitz's rival Harrach and his clique seem to have been resigned to fighting France and Prussia, jointly, a second time. But these were almost all minority factions that quickly lost favor in strategic debates, which overwhelmingly became preoccupied with finding the

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<sup>99</sup> This would appear at a casual glance to also be true in a number of cases not reviewed in this paper where a great power used offensive wars to sequence its conflicts—as Bismarck, for example, did in launching quick, limited attacks on Denmark (1864) and Austria (1866) in preparation for the main effort against France (1870).



quickest practical way to focus resources on the enemy most directly and immediately capable of imperiling the existence of the state in question without exposing the state to unreasonable risks in other quarters.

This finding is of great relevance to the contemporary United States. History suggests that the question is not whether but when and how the United States will make the tough choices about what to prioritize and what to not—including by making difficult, unpalatable and previously un contemplated arrangements. This may seem self-evident but is worth stating explicitly, insofar as the emerging U.S. strategic debate is about balancing, on some basis, *tous-azimuts* dangers.

***SIMULTANEITY REQUIRES UNCOMFORTABLE OR EVEN RADICAL STRATEGIC CHANGES.***

The combination of a novel threat and multi-directional danger creates pressures for the state to contemplate strategic options that would have previously been inconceivable. Prior to arrival of the new threat, the state had certain parameters for how it conceived of and provided for its security: certain budget levels, force dispositions, and diplomatic and alliance relationships that reflected the accumulated strategic wisdom of its previous geopolitical contests. Simultaneity removes those parameters, or rather creates the possibility for them to be challenged, often in a very short period of time. It compels consideration of strategic options that in the pre-simultaneity environment would have been seen as unacceptable, and enables elements within the political leadership or bureaucracy of the state to promote such options.

In other words, simultaneity brings novel risks that compel fundamental reappraisals. For Byzantium, new risk took the form of a more far-reaching détente with the arch enemy, Persia, than had ever been contemplated, as well as giving a much larger bribe to barbarians than the empire had ever before used for this purpose. The first was risky because it could invite Persian aggression; the second because it could attract attempts at extortion from other steppe tribes. For Venice, risk took the form of a continental commitment to the *Terra Firma* that Venetian statesmen had previously abjured. For Austria, it was a theretofore unthinkable rapprochement with the Habsburg Monarchy's *Erbfeind*, Bourbon France. For Britain, it was a downshift with two previously hostile states as well as a willingness to accept greater risks to the all-valuable India.

***SIMULTANEITY FORCES MILITARIES TO ADAPT—BUT HOW WELL AND HOW QUICKLY THEY DO SO IS VARIABLE.*** A defining attribute of simultaneity is that it presents the state with an urgent problem that cannot be safely ignored. That is because it involves a novel threat that the military of the great power in question cannot, as theretofore configured, reasonably presume to deter or defeat *while also dealing with the established threats facing the state*. It is this “cold shower” that triggers the realization that strategic change is urgently needed and drives the quest for both military and diplomatic adaptation.

It is almost always the military, rather than the political leadership, that feels the shock first for the simple reason that it sees the gap between its own and the new enemy's capabilities. The military sees an opponent with tools that it cannot immediately match or overcome without giving up something else, somewhere else (or in some cases, can't match at all)—for Byzantium, mounted Hun archers; for Venice, large Ottoman land armies; for Austria, Frederick's legions; and for Britain, the Kaiser's fleet. It is the realization of this gap between what the military is tasked with, and capable of, performing, and the demands of the new threat that probably produces the greatest demand signal for strategic adaptation.

Interestingly, despite often sensing the change first, the military is often unable to grasp the magnitude of adaptation that will be needed to deal successfully with the new threat. Like any large, hierarchical organization faced with a previously unimaginable threat, militaries historically have often, though not always, responded to simultaneity by doubling down. Theodosius' Gothic generals surely saw more clearly than anyone, on the basis of their frequent defeats at Attila's hands, that military power would be insufficient for handling the Huns. Yet it was the generals who continued to push for military solutions and the political leadership who ultimately devised the novel methods for dealing with the danger. Similarly, as the Russian land threat to India intensified, Lord Kitchener and his staff produced ever larger estimates of the reinforcements that would be needed to secure India, eventually arriving at numbers that were orders of magnitude beyond anything Britain had ever spent on the Army and well in excess of what the Treasury could afford.

But this is not always the case. The Austrian Army proved resilient and adaptive in the face of the threat from Frederick, undertaking difficult reforms that made it more effective component of overall Habsburg strategy as time passed. The Royal Navy, like the British Army, used the changing threat environment to justify bigger budgets, but unlike the Army, its leadership couched these requests within a comprehensive and carefully-developed global strategy that showed an organizational willingness to sacrifice (through reductions in long-established naval stations and even entire categories of cherished but obsolete ship types) in order to achieve concentration. While both services gravitated toward the threat best suited to its tools, the Navy had the good sense, probably because it had a longer history and culture of engaging in serious high strategy than the Army, not only to absorb the implications of the new threat but to provide senior politicians with the "correct answers to the exam," in the form of a comprehensive strategy, while the Army did not.

***SIMULTANEITY CLARIFIES WHAT STATES FEAR MOST.*** Attempting to defend in all directions, then, is historically anomalous. Successful great powers sooner or later stagger their threats. They do so by inserting the time variable into strategic competition and postponing or resolving one competition in order to focus on another, more important one. The question is: How? On what basis do statesmen decide which threat

to prioritize and which to postpone? From the cases reviewed here, several factors seem to have been especially important.<sup>100</sup>

1. *GEOGRAPHY*. Proximity of a threat to core interests is an important determinant of whether to resist or postpone it. As noted earlier, states tend to prioritize for military resistance the source of danger closest to home territory. Had Byzantium possessed an army capable of defeating the Huns, its first recourse would have been defense rather than tribute. Venice found it most natural and convenient, despite its earlier better judgment, to use force on the Italian mainland. Austria does not appear to have ever seriously considered appeasing Frederick—a coiled spring aimed directly at the *Erblande*. Britain chose to resist rather than postpone the threat (Germany) that lay immediately adjacent across the North Sea.

As a corollary, in three of the cases, states chose to postpone rivalry with opponents which lay in close proximity to core commercial interests. Venice sought to placate the Ottomans because of the threat that a hostile Turkey would pose to the Republic's main markets in the east. British leaders accommodated the two rivals—France and Russia—that most directly impinged upon the empire's main commercial interests (the Mediterranean lifeline and India, respectively). Byzantium postponed the threat (Gaiseric) that imperiled its grain supply routes.

2. *RIVAL STRENGTH*. Not every threat is equally powerful. The Huns combined immediate military prowess with a lack of internal cohesion that indicated this threat was likely to dissipate with time.<sup>101</sup> The Ottomans were far stronger than any previous threat the Venetians had faced; Frederick was Austria's most powerful foe, though his margin of strength was less than that of the Huns the Ottomans; and Germany was by far Britain's most capable opponent. Without fail in these cases, leaders zeroed in on the rival with the greatest military strength on an immediate-to-near-term horizon.
3. *RIVAL GOALS*. Some rivals have aims that lend themselves more to postponement. Viewed from Constantinople, the Huns were a wildly mobile threat intent on plunder; why do anything other than encourage them on their way with sweet

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<sup>100</sup> I owe this insight to Jakub Grygiel, whose comments in the supporting seminar for this paper were useful in composing the following section.

<sup>101</sup> Indeed, the internal composition of the Hunnic confederation, which required Attila to continually cement his leadership status through emoluments to lesser chieftains, suggested boundless amenability to Byzantine bribery.

inducements?<sup>102</sup> Once it became clear that the Ottomans were interested in territorial conquest, Venice could not avoid dealing with it. Frederick was less deflectable than Attila because he sought land; as the Austrian State Conference's deliberations about the merits of détente with various rivals demonstrate, the Prussian king was by far the least deferrable threat facing the Habsburgs. Imperial Germany's aims, as became clear from its spurning of London's alliance offers, were the least reconcilable of Britain's rivals.

4. *RIVAL TOOLS*. Some opponents possess tools that lend themselves more to postponement than resistance. Byzantium's lack of mounted archers capable of defeating the Huns implied the need for a non-military solution with Attila. Britain lacked large land armies to deal with the Russian threat to Afghanistan but possessed abundant ships of the kind the Kaiser was building and both better understood sea power and saw superiority in this domain as more vital to the security of the state and its primary interests.
5. *THE DEFENDER'S TRADESPACE*. Every great power has a hierarchy of needs, and these needs may influence its decisions about whom to deflect or oppose. Byzantium's leaders concluded that they could give up money or even territory more easily than manpower or military resources.<sup>103</sup> Venice needed food and raw materials from the Italian mainland more than it needed silk from the empire. For similar reasons, the Habsburgs needed the tax revenue and manpower of Silesia, a German-speaking territory contiguous to the Austrian heartland, more than they needed rich but distant Belgium. And Britain needed the foodstuffs and raw materials that came via sea-lanes that Germany threatened more than it needed ports in Morocco, or the "marts of Isphahan and Yezd."
6. *THE ENEMY'S DASHBOARD*. One's enemies often have simultaneity problems of their own that may make them more amenable to compromise and hence postponement. Yazdegerd was receptive to an expansive understanding with Theodosius because he needed peace on *his* western frontier to deal with Attila's enterprising cousins, the White Huns. It is telling that the Ottomans became less amenable to Venetian blandishments as the Golden Horde and other rearward threats abated. Kaunitz's approaches to Versailles fell flat until Frederick courted England and touched a nerve on France's seaward frontier. And Edwardian

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<sup>102</sup> In the event, the Byzantium also delayed fighting the Persians, but this was done as a contingency to support military concentration in Thrace if the attempt at bribing Attila failed; the main focus of postponement was on the Huns.

<sup>103</sup> Similarly, they concluded that grain supplies from Sicily (a very valuable thing indeed) were more recoverable than Constantinople, the seat of eastern Roman political and religious identity, which if even lost partially to a Hunnic raid could have devastating consequences for Byzantine power and prestige.

Britain's attempt at a colonial understanding with Russia flourished in no small part because the latter was preoccupied with more pressing concerns from Japan and Germany.

Of these variables, the most important historically have probably been the first two, followed by some combination of the others. Nothing motivates state to adapt quite like a powerful threat close to the home area. What a state fears most—because it is or is becoming very powerful, is close at hand, plays for keeps, and has tools that are lethal but that the state has some hope of countering—is mostly likely to be prioritized for resistance. Threats that are powerful but only endanger secondary interests, or that are menacing but territorially satiated, internally lacking in cohesion, or distracted by their own simultaneity concerns tend to get postponed in some fashion.

***SIMULTANEITY NECESSITATES CONCENTRATION.*** Prioritization is done with an urgent aim: to enable concentration of scarce military resources on what the state deems, on the basis of some combination of the variables above, to be the most important theater. The great powers that were the most successful at avoiding multi-front war were those that made diplomatic preparations to ensure their armed force's ability to focus on and win one war. The main strategic debates in all four cases were about how to *bring diplomacy into line with the new geopolitical reality, and thereby enable military concentration against the main threat.* Notably, even those powers that postponed the main enemy did so in tandem with, and in support of, a concentration of force toward the frontier with this primary threat. Byzantium was shifting forces from its eastern garrisons to Thrace even as it sent wagonloads of gold to Attila. After the peace of Lodi, Venice was dispatching envoys to the Sultan even as it repaired neglected forts at exposed outposts in the *Stato da Mar*.

***PRIORITIZATION IS NOT COST-FREE—BUT THE COSTS CAN BE MITIGATED IF THREAT PERCEPTIONS ALIGN.*** Concentrating on one primary theater requires sacrifices in other places. The cost of de-prioritization is usually calculated in concessions on the theater nearest to that rival. Generally speaking, that cost rises in inverse proportion to how much the rival on that frontier shares the initiating power's assessment of the main threat. Byzantium gave up little to achieve a downshift with Persia because the latter feared the Huns more than it feared the Byzantines. Austria gave up little (the future promise of Belgium, which Austria didn't want anyway) to gain France's friendship because the latter feared and resented the Anglo-Prussian treaty more than it feared the Habsburgs. Britain's concessions to France and Russia were minimal because both feared Germany in Europe more than they feared Britain in Africa or Central Asia. By contrast, Britain's concessions to Germany in the 1930s were greater because Germany (like the Huns) saw its interlocutor itself as a target. That is to say, appeasement of a main threat costs more than détente of an old threat because the former tends to involve preemptive concessions to change the other side's objectives, whereas détente assumes,

on some level, common objectives (a shared threat) and typically involves trade-offs by both parties.

***DE-PRIORITIZATION CAN COST CREDIBILITY WITH OLD FRIENDS.*** States often give up something intangible, whether an opportunity for future action or reputation, in theaters that they de-prioritize. The act of de-prioritizing can itself diminish the credibility of the state among its smaller allies and clients on that frontier, which usually formed their alliance with the state precisely because they shared its animosity to the old rival. This credibility loss grows in proportion to the extent of the downshift on the de-prioritized frontier. It is no accident that the Byzantine client state of Lazica, unnerved by Justinian's ambitious "perpetual peace" with Persia and near-total withdrawal of local Byzantine garrisons, switched allegiances to join Persia in an opportunistic war on this frontier. The later Byzantines, besieged at Constantinople, correctly saw themselves as disadvantaged by Venice's mollification of the Ottomans, though by this stage they were too weak to do anything about it. It was with good reason that Curzon worried that Britain's coming-to-terms with Russia would "expose [it] to bitter criticism in the Islamic world"; the Persians in particular were discomfited by the arrangement, which helped to create instability in the years that followed. And while not formal allies of Britain, Austria-Hungary and Turkey, both of which had been aligned with Britain in almost every previous European war for two centuries, were alienated by the Anglo-Russian Convention and would fight against Britain in World War I. Thus the effort to de-prioritize a frontier, by changing the calculus of local allies, can ultimately raise the costs of defending it. This points to an important role for statecraft in mitigating the secondary effects of prioritization.

***DE-PRIORITIZED FRONTIERS STILL REQUIRE ATTENTION.*** For these reasons, even when the state succeeds in postponing competition on a secondary frontier, that frontier still generates risk that must be managed. Mitigating the risk on this secondary frontier both diplomatically and militarily is crucial for avoiding multi-front war. There is a strong correlation between a state's willingness to maintain some form of deterrence structure on a secondary frontier and its success in de-prioritizing that frontier to support a concentration in the main theater.

The cases of Byzantium, Venice, and Austria are instructive. A major reason that Theodosius' Persian peace succeeded was that he maintained the frontier fortresses at sufficient levels even while shifting focus to Attila. Doing so underscored to both local allies and to Persia itself Constantinople's determination to hold this frontier despite the other, larger threat. By contrast, Justinian's Persian détente failed because he stripped the eastern fortresses bare for his wars in Italy. Like Justinian, the Venetian doge Foscari denuded the defenses of the *Stato da Mar* to propel the Republic's wars in Italy, substantiating Ottoman impressions of Venetian weakness that fueling later attacks. Like Theodosius, Maria Theresa's maintenance and garrisoning of the line of fortresses on Austria's southern frontier throughout the wars with Frederick lent weight to her



détente with the Porte, in favorable contrast to her father's promotion of the Pragmatic Sanction while neglecting Austria's defenses.

Both the Byzantines and the Habsburgs understood the value of maintaining a glacis in the secondary theater—what the National Defense Strategy calls “blunt” layer—both to backstop détente and create a hedge against opportunism. In both cases, the residual defense presence in this theater was a more economical structure than what would normally have been maintained there—an expedient made possible by the extensive use of fortifications, which historically have fulfilled precisely this role. Despite being pared down from “normal” force levels, the forces retained on these frontiers proved effective because it was tailored to what, by long experience, was known to be the offensive mindset and methods of the nearby rival.

***CONCENTRATION IS NOT A BILLIARD BALL—LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION MATTER.*** Avoiding multi-front war requires the state to develop a new strategy and tools suited to the main threat. This comes at the expense of other types of tools and existing strategies, which inevitably generates opposition in some corners of the bureaucracy or military-political leadership. In this sense, the novelty of the new challenge often makes adaptation difficult insofar as it entails changes that upset the sociology of the existing organization and culture of the state.<sup>104</sup>

Opposition to change tends to be strongest among segments of the bureaucracy with the deepest investment in the status quo. The Byzantine generals, all of whom must have seen that the army's inability to defeat Attila would reduce its sway over policy (and their own influence and opportunities for self-enrichment), opposed Chrysaphius' strategy of bribing Attila as unworthy of a great empire. In a similar vein, it was the older members of the Austrian State Conference like Harrach who had built their careers in the reign of Charles VI who opposed Kaunitz's effort to jettison Austria's alliances with the maritime powers, presumably for fear of seeing the younger Kaunitz gain influence at their expense with the new empress.<sup>105</sup> Likewise senior officials in the Indian government, which had in Salisbury's final years in office gained an outsized role in imperial decision-making, saw in Nicolson's efforts at a Russian entente a threat not only to India geopolitically but organizationally, insofar as it would mean less influence and resources for them in internal fights.

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<sup>104</sup> There is a large literature on bureaucratic politics and the role of organization and bureaucracy in foreign policy. The two seminal sources are Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1971), and Morton H. Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Washington: Brookings Press, 1974). For a classic critique see Lawrence Freedman, “Logic, Politics, and Foreign Policy Processes: A Critique of the Bureaucratic Politics Model,” in *International Affairs*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, July 1976), pp. 434-49.

<sup>105</sup> It would not be inconsistent with 18<sup>th</sup> Century diplomatic practice, or considered unethical by the standards of the day, if Harrach and others on the council were in fact on the British or Dutch payroll.

Given the strength of opposition in all of these cases, it is reasonable to ask how the decision to refocus the state's strategy ever came about. A few factors stand out as having been important:

1. *EXTERNAL EXIGENCIES*. Arguably the most decisive enabler of strategic adaptation was the enormity of the sudden danger posed by the new enemy to the state. In all four cases, the same sense of novelty that threatened existing parts of the bureaucracy also jolted other parts of the state into contemplating change. Big external dangers often gave momentum to new political blood with a vested interest in challenging old ideas. The challenge posed by Joseph Chamberlain and other 'young Turks' to the long dominance of Lord Salisbury is a case in point; Maria Theresa's conscious break from the dilatory diplomacy and inefficient administration of her father is another. These changes also powered previously sublimated parts of the bureaucracy that were less invested in the old way of doing things and more risk-acceptant, as will be discussed below.
2. *STRONG LEADERSHIP*. Having the right ruler often determined how well or how quickly the state took cues from the external environment. In three of the four cases, the state benefited from having an unusually capable personality at the helm at the critical moment in the emergence of the new threat. Venice's Francesco Foscari was an effective politician with many decades of experience who took a keen interest in foreign policy and was determined, for better or for worse, to abandon Mocenigo's policy of maritime restraint. Maria Theresa was a highly intelligent and independent-minded ruler committed to overhauling the state in all fields, including high strategy, and willing to back her best ministers in internal debates. And Lord Selborne, while often overshadowed by his colorful successor Jackie Fisher, was among the most intellectually and politically gifted individuals to serve as First Lord.
3. *DELIBERATE STRATEGIC PLANNING*. In arguably the two most successful cases, Austria and Britain, the emergence of the novel threat prompted or went hand-in-hand with a comprehensive process of review and reconfiguration in key areas of military posture, technology, and administration. In both cases these were the byproduct of catastrophic wars—the War of Austrian Succession and the Boer War respectively—which had served to call attention to military shortcomings and give flesh to worst-case possibilities that the state with its current geopolitical relationships was not in a position to meet. Through these experiences, both Britain and Austria would develop not only better armies but a higher competence for incorporating grand strategy into policy.
4. *BUREAUCRATIC CHAMPIONS*. Britain and Austria seem exceptional in having been jolted into strategic self-reflection by a lost war; all too often, organizational

reform was absent. For that matter, so was good leadership: Theodosius I was by all accounts a weak ruler, yet he avoided a multi-front war while Justinian, possibly Byzantium's greatest emperor, did not. For that matter, Neville Chamberlain was a confident leader and capable administrator who failed. Perhaps the most decisive factor in all four cases for prompting concentration was the presence of a determined champion of change inside the bureaucracy. In almost every case, it is possible to identify a handful of unusually active civilian officials who played an outsized role in putting the state on a new path.

The court eunuch Chrysaphius is an archetype in this respect, as he appears to have possessed the intellectual creativity, risk-acceptance and cunning to steer what was a novel (indeed, hated) policy through the labyrinth of court politics. It can be assumed that Chrysaphius was, unlike the generals, not deeply invested in pre-Attila Byzantine military policy and probably saw in the novel threat an unexpected opening to advance his career at others' expense. Kaunitz is another example, being a somewhat pedantic outsider whose brilliance and peccadillos earned the distrust of the old guard in the State Conference. Kaunitz's memoranda were, by contemporary standards, noted for both their analytical precision, effective prose, and clarity of argumentation. British diplomatic officials like Hardinge and Clarke fit a similar profile. Like Kaunitz, Clarke possessed a rare combination of an ability to communicate complex strategic concepts in digestible forms to political superiors, willingness to adopt minority or even unpopular intellectual stances, and aptitude for manipulating arcane bureaucratic processes to influence policy outcomes.

Bureaucrats like Chrysaphius, Kaunitz and Clarke played a decisive role in bringing about strategic change for their states. Such individuals saw clearly the implications of the sudden change in the external environment and were sufficiently divested from the old status quo to gamble with their careers on a bold idea for how to deal with it. All three were willing to take on prolonged trench warfare with powerful bureaucratic opponents to advance their ideas (Chrysaphius with the generals and emperor's family; Kaunitz with Harrach; and George Clarke with Lord Roberts). It certainly helped to have an effective personal relationship with a ruler who was conceptually aligned or at least educable and willing to command the resources of the state in the new direction—as Kaunitz had with his empress and Clarke had with Selborne and Balfour. But in his own way, a weak leader like Theodosius could also provide an opening for the right ideas, insofar as the leader did not have strong ideas of his own and was willing to delegate strategy to his counsellors.

***SUCCESSFUL DÉTENTES REQUIRE A SHARED ENEMY AND TEND TO BE PARTIAL AND TRANSIENT.*** Avoiding multi-front war usually requires a state to ease tensions with one or more of its less serious rivals. Theodosius sought an armistice with Yazgherd in order

to shift military resources to the frontier threatened by Attila. Venice sought commercial co-habitation with the Turks while building up its defenses in the maritime empire in preparation for the inevitable war. Austria sought active military alliances with France and Russia to wage war on Prussia and was willing to pay for the help using either her own territory (for France) or promises of Prussian territory (for Russia). Edwardian Britain's sought colonial understandings with France and Russia rather than an attempt to build alliances (in this sense, both differed from the Anglo-Japanese alliance).

In all of these cases, the effort at peace represented a deviation from what would otherwise constitute the normal state of affairs existing between the two powers. They were necessarily risky for both states, since they entailed intentionally suspending some amount of belligerence, though not necessarily distrust, in order to pursue some higher aim that both states tacitly share. Some fared better than others. There were two main characteristics of successful *détente*:

1. *SHARED ENEMY*. By far the strongest motive for two rivals to make peace is the presence of a novel force that threatens both. This was a common denominator in all of the cases: Byzantium and Persia, Venice and its mainland rivals, Austria and France, and Britain and France/Russia. In each case the glue is the presence of a powerful threat to both states. Justinian's peace with the Persians collapsed because the Persians no longer felt a threat from the White Huns; Austria's alliance with Britain faltered when the latter ceased to see Prussia as a threat; and Chamberlain's courtship of both Germany and Italy failed because of the absence of a common enemy.
2. *PARTIAL AND TRANSIENT*. Successful *détentes* are typically limited in scope. That is to say, they do not aim at a generic "reset" or improvement in atmosphere between the two states but rather discrete and carefully-defined objectives. Theodosius and Yazgherd agreed to specific territorial adjustments in the east and joint protection of the mountain passes through which the Huns would have to move in order to threaten both empires. The Venetians and Ottomans enumerated terms of trade and status of specific islands. The Habsburgs and French agreed to detailed forms of cooperation against the shared threat, with specified objectives for victory. And the British arrangements with France and Russia were limited colonial understandings over specific pieces of territory.

In all of these cases, peace between old rivals was understood by both parties as a provisional construct, or expedient, brought about by the new strategic environment. Its premise was that both states share, on some level, an essential but transitory political objective that supersedes but does not altogether obviate their previous disagreements unless otherwise specified.

**DÉTENTES BUY TIME BUT DON'T LAST.** The main object of détente is usually to gain time rather than to alter the objectives of the new threat. In a certain sense Byzantium policy aimed at both, since it sought to alter Attila's trajectory but only for awhile since it was probably assumed that the Huns would eventually boomerang back in Byzantium's direction. Venice's policies certainly sought to buy time, especially in the precarious period right after the fall of Constantinople, but within the overall aim of finding a long-term *modus vivendi* with the Turks, whose great military strength and control of key trade routes effectively removed the possibility of an eventual decisive military victory. Maria Theresa's temporary truces with Frederick, first in the midst of the Silesian wars, and then at Aix-la-Chapelle, aimed to buy time for recouping Austrian military strength before rejoining the contest. In contrast, her father's tireless efforts to sell the Pragmatic Sanction, including through the use of bribes, was an attempt to dissuade other European states from pursuing the objective of territorial gain at Austria's expense after he died.

Few détentees lasted very long. At sixty years, Theodosius' peace with the Persians was a notable exception. Britain's understandings with France and the United States laid the foundation for what would prove to be long-lasting peace and cooperation with these states. The rest were fairly short-lived. Justinian's peace with the Persians lasted just long enough for Belisarius to subdue Africa and the Italian peninsula. Venice's various understandings with the Ottomans stretched intermittently for a couple of centuries but were punctuated with frequent warfare. France ceased compliance with the terms of Kaunitz's treaty before the Seven Year's War had ended, though it served its purpose in mobilizing French help early in the conflict and avoiding French hostility after that; within three decades the two states would find themselves in a string of wars against one another that would last twenty years. Britain's alliance with Japan lasted two decades. It is debatable whether Russia ever fully abided by the terms of its 1907 understanding with Britain; even if it achieved its aims in Europe, Anglo-Russian competition throughout Central Asia and the Middle East would only intensify under the Bolsheviks.

**REVISIONISTS TEND TO SELF-INJURE.** It is striking how frequently threatened powers are aided in their attempts at concentrating against the main threat by the actions of the main opponent itself. This is not surprising insofar as rising powers usually elicit countervailing coalitions.

What is somewhat surprising is how often the revisionist commits the unforced error of driving two old enemies into one another's embrace. Put differently, sequencing by defensive powers is often aided by the lack of sequencing on the part of offensive powers. The Huns could have concentrated more force against Byzantium if they had not attacked Persia at the same time—a move that led the two old rivals to an unprecedentedly long truce. This was also true of the Ottomans, whose actions often did more to unify an internally feuding Christendom (including Venice and its traditional enemies Genoa and Milan) than any strategic foresight or wisdom on the part of the

West. Perhaps most spectacularly, without Frederick's move to form an alliance with England, France would probably never have accepted Kaunitz's approaches, even with his offer of the Austrian Netherlands. Similarly, the growth in German power and the Kaiser's bullying behavior indirectly propelled Britain's efforts at de-escalation with other powers.

The point is that revisionists tend to do things that inadvertently aid in bringing about a détente between old rivals. In this one sense, time, which is otherwise often an enemy of states in their efforts to come to grips with simultaneity, can be an ally, in that the growth of power on the part of the main threat almost inexorably produces both fear and points of friction between it and other powers. Importantly, this phenomenon seems to occur *even with those states that the rising power might otherwise aspire to have as partners*—Frederick's loss of erstwhile ally France and Imperial Germany's loss of Russia (despite a long alliance and Wilhelm's dedicated efforts to woo Nicholas) being cases in point.

***SIMULTANEITY IS ALSO AN OPPORTUNITY.*** Simultaneity creates big problems for great powers. It forces a reevaluation of military posture, the sources of economic strength, and the political assumptions that have guided the state's behavior for years or even decades. Collectively this amounts to a shock to the country's political leadership and its civilian and military bureaucracy. But with the shock comes a rare and valuable opportunity to change ossified forms of behavior that had accumulated through long exposure to a less dangerous environment and which may not be conducive to the state's survival and wellbeing. The shock of simultaneity creates the possibility of new diplomatic configurations, not just with the previous threat to counter the new one, but with the existing set of allies and partners. It can serve as a spur to needed adjustments domestically (e.g., fixing the military, adjusting economic imbalances, reawakening society for the common good). In this sense, for all its inconveniences and dangers, simultaneity can bring a corrective to strategic stagnation—a state of affairs which, for all its deceptive normalcy, brings special dangers all its own.

## VII. CONCLUSION.

The experiences of Byzantium, Venice, Austria, and Britain underscore the extent to which great-power competition and the quest to deal with multi-front pressures have been the norm in geopolitical history. They show just how much the greenhouse conditions of the post-Cold War era, in which the United States faced no peer competitor and enjoyed seemingly limitless financial resources, were an anomaly. For most of history, great powers have had to contend intermittently with numerous rivals without the assumption that they could either outgun or outspend all of these rivals simultaneously, producing the need for prioritization and concentration. Simultaneity, in short, is the problem *par excellence* of great powers.



As China's rise accelerates and Russia continues to act militarily in ways that defy predictions of its imminent demise, simultaneity will compel America's leaders to establish priorities among competing national desires. Failing to do so is likely to present unacceptably high costs to the country, requiring a scale of international burdens that is beyond its ability to bear in an era of rising external threats and internal pressures on the federal budget in the form of growing entitlements expenditures and debt. In this sense, the National Defense Strategy's jettisoning of the two-front war construct in favor of winning a war with the main rival anticipates strategic prioritization and is consistent with the historical pattern. If anything, the cases suggest that fulfillment of many of the NDS' aims lie less with the U.S. military than with U.S. diplomacy.

One insight from the cases is that simultaneity is a phenomenon that confronts great powers at specific moments in time. It is a serious—indeed, lethally serious—problem but also a temporary one that requires adjustments which are usually also temporary. In all of the cases, simultaneity seems to have arisen when a new threat arrived on the scene that was very different in character and scope from the kinds of threat the great power in question previously faced. That is to say, it is not just the fact of two or more threats alone but the fact that one of those threats is dangerously novel that makes it a serious problem.

The fact that the simultaneity problem combines a quantitative dimension (a new and powerful threat) and a qualitative one (the fact of multiple enemies on different points of the compass) is important because it differentiates it from two other strategic phenomena. One is the so-called "Thucydides trap," which focuses on the dynamic between a status quo and rising power but largely sets aside the former's pre-existing strategic commitments.<sup>106</sup> The other is the 360-degree or *tous azimuts* thinking prevalent in U.S. defense thinking after the Cold War, which is preoccupied with simultaneity in a generic sense (the mere fact of problems in multiple directions) but lacks the crucial component of a peer competitor. Both, for different reasons, neglect the problem of interaction dynamics (what Clausewitz called "friction") that arises from the presence of multiple players—the first because de-prioritization of secondary threats is assumed as a given; the second because the ability to defeat every threat is assumed as a given.

It is the shock of interaction dynamics on a big scale that jolts states into making necessary strategic adjustments to set priorities and achieve military concentration

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<sup>106</sup> For a compelling articulation of this phenomenon in the context of the U.S.-China rivalry, see Graham T. Allison's articulation in [Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?](#) (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

against the main threat. Like earlier great powers, America has numerous goals that it wants to achieve, many of which carry historical meaning and importance. The pressures of simultaneity are likely to show that some of these goals are not compatible with others, or with our means as a nation. Simultaneity, in other words, brings a reckoning between different national goals. It requires the state to contemplate tradeoffs it otherwise would not have contemplated, to think about risk differently, and to consider strategic options that it would not have previously considered because they were unnecessary.

Making such changes may prove more difficult for the United States than for earlier great powers. This is both because of the far greater scale of what America wants to accomplish in the world and because its elite and public have lived through a long period in which it could be reasonably assumed that all of the nation's goals were equally attainable. Nevertheless, just like earlier great powers, the United States will be forced to make choices. It will need to find a way to sequence its strategic contests. While there are differences across the cases, those examined here point to a handful of options for dealing with consistent patterns, each with its own advantages and risks. Briefly stated, these could be thought of as:

- *THE BYZANTINE OPTION: DEFLECT BUT QUARANTINE THE RIVAL WITH THE LEAST STAMINA; BUY TIME VIS-À-VIS THE LONGER-TERM THREAT.* Under this option, the United States would, on the Byzantine maxim of “watch and wait,” effectively learn to live with Russian revisionism in theaters of lesser strategic importance, in the knowledge that that country’s weak economy and demographics will, with time, relegate it to a much less lethal form. In parallel, the United States would build the equivalent of Theodosian walls around vital interests and regions within Russia’s reach, such as the Baltics, but keep the bulk of its military resources concentrated on Asia. It would seek to sap Russian strength wherever possible without becoming enmeshed in larger military confrontations that could present an opportunity for China. It would seek episodic détente with China but not lose sight of the fact that this is the long-term threat facing the country. A strategy of this type would hinge on the utility of deflection with a Russia that, unlike the Huns, sees territory acquisition rather than merely raids as a major geopolitical aim.<sup>107</sup>
- *THE VENETIAN OPTION: CO-HABITATE COMMERCIALLY WITH THE STRONGER RIVAL; CONSOLIDATE STRENGTH IN THE SECONDARY THEATER.* Under this option, the United

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<sup>107</sup> Interestingly, one analyst sees raiding as Russia’s preferred method. See Michael Kofman, “Raiding and International Brigandage: Russia’s Strategy for Great Power Competition,” War on the Rocks, June 14, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/06/raiding-and-international-brigandry-russias-strategy-for-great-power-competition/>.

States would acknowledge the extent of its economic interdependency with China and treat the maintenance of favorable terms of access to that country's market as its foremost interest, even superseding traditional considerations of national security where necessary, and deliberately de-emphasize points of disagreement between the two states. In parallel, it would seek to fortify its economic and political position in the secondary theater, Europe, both as a recruitment ground for allies and as a larger resource base upon which to draw for protracted competition with China.

- *THE MOCENIGO VARIANT*: Selectively but unequivocally resist Chinese encroachments insofar as they involve core U.S. interests; proactively bolster defenses in geographically vulnerable outposts in Asia; deal decisively and even aggressively with threats from Russia but as a prelude to, and means of, downscaling the military commitment in Europe to conserve strength for Asia.
- *THE FOSCARI VARIANT*: Take a permissive attitude to Chinese encroachments, at least for a season, even where important interests are concerned, and be willing to allow a certain degree of vulnerability in Asia to support a surge in the European theater, with a view to settling accounts and staking out a consolidated political and economic base for protracted competition with China.
- *THE BRITISH OPTION: CONCENTRATE OVERWHELMING ATTENTION ON THE STRONGER THREAT; 'TURN OFF' FIGHTS WITH EVERYONE ELSE*. On this option, the United States would proactively and expeditiously resolve differences with secondary rivals to free up maximum political, economic and military bandwidth vis-à-vis China. This would presumably entail some combination of targeted de-escalations with Russia (e.g., on Ukraine, Syria, the Arctic) and Iran, as well as amelioration of e.g. trade disputes with the European Union and allies and partners in Asia, and efforts to cultivate India as a more active factor in the Indo-Pacific theater. Following the British model, the emphasis would not necessarily be on forming formal alliances in all of these cases so much as resolving disagreements that could, unless alleviated, distract from the main focus. A major goal of doing so would be to free up military resources from secondary theaters, including especially greater outsourcing of security burdens to European NATO, to allow a greater concentration of effort on the primary theater.
- *THE AUSTRIAN OPTION: ISOLATE THE MAIN THREAT USING ACTIVE ALLIANCES, UNDERGIRD BY LEGITIMACY*. On this option, the United States would seek to achieve maximum concentration against China but, unlike on the British model, would do so not merely by de-escalating tensions with secondary rivals but by roping them into a coalition of alliances, either ad hoc or institutionalized, to

curtail Chinese power. Importantly, it would do so not only using balance-of-power logic (appealing to other states' fear of China) but by appealing to higher principles as a means of retaining a reputational edge in long-term competition.

- *THE KAUNITZ VARIANT: EXPLOIT CHINA'S OWN MULTI-FRONT DILEMMA.* On this variant, the United States would seek to recruit other major powers into alliances or close partnerships explicitly aimed at achieving a diminution of Chinese power. This would include both existing alliances in Europe and new, under-developed relationships. In particular, it would focus on cultivating states that pose a rearward challenge to China, like Russia and India, as a means of dividing its attention.
- The Metternich Variant: 'Transcend' the China problem by enmeshing it and other rivals in a system of consultation and conflict-resolution. On this option, the United States would seek a wide coalition to contain China but would include China itself in that grouping. The idea would be to constrain Chinese power not through isolation but by giving China incentives to achieve its goals in a cooperative framework of give-and-take alongside other major powers, including the European Union, Russia, Japan, and India. This could take an institutionalized form, using some part of the existing international framework, the form of a less formal 'concert' system, or some combination of the two.

Each of these is, of course, a simplification. Nor are they all mutually exclusive.

Even weighing the options in abstraction, one can see differences between the United States today and past great powers. One has to do with alliances. In all of the cases examined here, alliances were fair-weather constructs that came and went in response to changes in the threat environment. Alliance formation was highly fluid. A state's credibility was rarely tied to the fate of these constantly-shifting arrangements. By contrast, America's alliances today are much more fixed, entailing longstanding treaty commitments, the maintenance of which is deeply intertwined with American strategic credibility and the effectiveness of its deterrence against rivals. This fact alone would greatly complicate any effort to emulate the methods of Kaunitz or Landsdowne in today's international environment.

The character of America's alliances presents both advantages and constraints for dealing with simultaneity. The advantage is a large pool of friendly states who should, at least in theory, be recruit-able into political coalitions to prevent regional hegemony and shoulder a majority burden in secondary theaters. European NATO in particular could be serviceable in this regard, playing a role not unlike that the states of the Holy Roman Empire played for Austria in its wars with Prussia and with France. It and U.S. alliances and partnerships in Asia are helpful for avoiding multi-front war insofar as they

strengthen deterrence vis-à-vis one of the rivals; otherwise, their usefulness lies mainly in managing multi-front dynamics once such a war has broken out. Both advantages assume a willingness to assume burdens considerably greater than those that allies carried in the pre-simultaneity era. Such a transition is more likely from those allies most exposed to the intensifying pressure of rivals than from insulated allies.

The constraint of fixed alliances is less diplomatic maneuverability. Attempting a détente with either of America's major rivals would have downstream implications for allies and partners in the theater closest to that rival (Europe and Asia). History shows that these ripples would need to be proactively mitigated. As Justinian's Persian treaty, Foscarini's entreaties to Mehmed II, Charles VI's Pragmatic Sanction, and the U.S.-Russia reset all demonstrate, engaging a rival while weakening one's defenses in his region can be provocative, signaling to local allies and rivals alike the advent of a more permissive and therefore more dangerous environment.

Among the former, this can in extreme cases result in allies hedging bets or even switching sides. Among the latter, it can invite risk-taking. In this way, an "anchorless pivot" can do the opposite of what it was meant to do, making multi-front war *more* likely and drawing more resources to the very frontier that it was designed to de-prioritize. This suggests that any move toward the British or Byzantine options in U.S. foreign policy would need to be accompanied by retention of a strong enough but economical glacis—or "blunt layer," in the NDS terminology—in the secondary theater, not only to guard against the contingency of attack but also to support any eventual move toward détente on that frontier. It's important to remember, of course, that too strong a layer defeats the point of concentration in the main theater; the trick is finding the balance that Theodosius and Maria Theresa found.

Another difference is the comparative rigidity of the modern ideological landscape. In the cases examined here, moral standards, to paraphrase Hans Morgenthau, were not the central stakes of competition. This was important because it allowed diplomacy to be about the mutual accommodation of conflicting claims, or compromise, enabling de-escalation even in instances where political or religious systems were violently at odds. Without this recourse to compromise, there would have been no medium of conciliation by which old rivalries could be soothed and concentration achieved against the primary danger.

By comparison, the United States, China and Russia each in different ways views itself as being in a competition of political and economic systems in which the space for a traditional diplomacy of compromise is narrowed. To be clear, there is nothing new about the fact of rivals possessing different and even intrinsically antagonistic systems of government. What *is* new is the extent to which post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy has come to identify the moral standards themselves as the stakes of the competition, effectively rendering diplomatic concourse with a non-democratic rival a concession,

and compromise an act of “surrender.” By extension, both Russia and China seek demonstrations of the insolvency of the democratic system that the United States embodies, and instinctively grasp the value that even the appearance of an American pursuit of détente would have in signifying the opening of a new era of creativity in which their status is enhanced.

Both sources of rigidity—alliances and ideology—are likely to be particularly relevant when it comes to Russia, the traditional U.S. rival that, on the historical mode, would be the most logical starting point for a strategy on the Kaunitzian-Edwardian mold. To pursue the 1907 British option with Russia, would require, at a minimum, a convincing suspension by Russia of what are, in effect, serial acts of aggression against the United States and its allies; and a willingness on the part of the United States to treat with, and thereby on some basis concede political legitimacy to, an avowedly autocratic rival. Both are hard to envision. But it is worth remembering that very similar strains existed between the British and Russian states in the years leading up to the Anglo-Russian Convention that were outweighed by the presence of other, weightier considerations—namely: Tsarist Russia’s economic and military need for de-escalation, brought about by loss in a major war; the availability of a medium (Central Asia) at a safe remove from vital interests over which to barter; and the existence of an obvious, shared threat to both powers in the form of Imperial Germany.

Russia today has not lost a recent war; to the contrary, it is riding a multi-year high of geopolitical victories (Georgia, Ukraine, Syria), which means Putin probably does not share Tsar Nicolas’ (or Gorbachev’s) baseline need for détente. Nor do the United States and Russia have a clear and tangible object over which to “barter”; the fact that Putin, unlike the Tsar, appears to be territorially un-satiated suggests that any Western concessions could well be met by greater Russian demands elsewhere. And despite much analytical remonstrance to the contrary, there is little reason to believe that Russia sees China as an urgent threat (yet)—indeed, for the foreseeable future the two states appear on a trajectory to view any disputes between themselves as being of far lower priority than the more pressing, and shared, competition with the United States.

Two circuit breakers could change this situation. One would be if Russia suffered a significant enough defeat to force its leaders to reexamine their state’s diplomatic position in the way that the Russo-Japanese war forced the Tsar and his advisors to do. Only in such a condition is Russia likely to be in a mindset to entertain détente as a genuine state need rather than an opening for pursuing new gains. Put differently, Russia, too, has a simultaneity problem, and a major setback on one of its frontiers could compel its leaders to seek new diplomatic solutions to that problem.

The other possible game-changer is a dramatic increase in Chinese military capabilities that is accompanied by assertiveness in major regions. A finding from this study is the tendency of rising powers to inadvertently aid in bringing about a détente between old



rivals. The very fact of a larger Chinese nuclear and conventional force would compel Russia to reexamine current defense assumptions, which are predicated upon some degree of multipolarity existing in the near future in which Russia remains a significant factor and retains a high degree of strategic independence from Beijing.<sup>108</sup> In conditions of military bipolarity, Russia would have to contemplate the scenario of becoming a sidecar to Chinese ambitions in a mold not unlike that of early 1900s Austria-Hungary to Imperial Germany. Such a state of affairs could make some permutation of the British option more viable.

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However formidable the impediments to strategic concentration, if history is any guide, adjustments of some kind must and will occur. A key finding of this study is that strategic modification in circumstances like those facing the United States today is inevitable. For however rigid current alliances and the contemporary ideological landscape may be, there are even less tractable realities, in the form of the national debt, defense burden, and public willpower, that are of greater importance to the nation's long-term survival.

Crucially, all of the options above are built on the assumption that there is still time to avert a multi-front war, as opposed to merely planning for its contingency. They are modeled on the experiences of great powers that recognized, accepted, and made the necessary organizational, budgetary and strategic modifications to cope with simultaneity in a relatively short period of time. It took Byzantium no more than a handful of years to agree that Attila was the main threat and fight the bureaucratic battles to agree on a policy for dealing with it. It took Austria seven years—roughly from the time of Aix-la-Chapelle to Kaunitz's conclusion of the Treaty of Paris—to complete the "Diplomatic Revolution." Britain needed altogether a little less than decade, from Germany's spurning of Joseph Chamberlain's second alliance attempt to the conclusion of the Anglo-Russian Convention, to settle on Germany as the main threat and reach diplomatic understandings with no fewer than four rivals.

By comparison, the acknowledgement of the need for strategic concentration in the NDS is occurring late in the game. In this sense, the United States is perhaps most similar to Venice, which went for the better part of a half-century before shifting its main attention to the Ottomans and beginning to strengthen the *Stato da Mar*. By that point, Venice had little recourse, given the extent of Turkish power and Venetian dependency on the Ottomans for trade, but to make accommodation with the new threat on diminishingly favorable terms to itself.

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<sup>108</sup> I am indebted to Elbridge Colby for this insight.

The United States has been slow to make the adjustments that will be required to achieve concentration and avoid a great-power war. This is partly because it is exiting a long period of peace but also because of the complex, federated nature of its system of government. The chance to anticipate and adapt early is now mostly gone; going forward, America's efforts to grapple with simultaneity will occur in a non-static environment where its options are constrained by the moves of alert rivals which are if anything further along in mitigating their own simultaneity problems than we are. The alignments are hardening and the hour is late. But the United States possesses enormous advantages compared to Byzantium, Venice, Austria, and Britain. The earlier in this century it can bring those advantages to bear, the better.

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