

The “Congress System”: The World’s First “International Security Regime”¹

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In his State Paper of May 5, 1820, British Foreign Secretary Lord Castlereagh argued that the post-Napoleonic alliance of great powers was never intended as a “union for the government of the world, or for the superintendence of the internal affairs of other states.”²

Notwithstanding Castlereagh’s powerful denial, was this new system, known to historians as the “Congress System,” an attempt at great-power supervision of the rest of Europe?

Was it, as Professor Beatrice de Graaf has suggested, a new type of “security regime,” or as Dr. Stella Ghervas contends, a novel and innovative approach for the maintenance of peace after two decades of bloodshed? Was this new system, as Professor Brian Vick asserts, inextricably linked to constitutionalism—perhaps constitutionalism extended to Europe at large?

A handful of scholars would deny that this system existed at all, or at least they would argue that its impact was negligible. Others go to the opposite extreme and see it as part of a new system of norms and self-restraint that replaced traditional balance of power rivalries.³ And still others would decry its existence as a repressive conspiracy of monarchs against their own peoples.

My contention is simply that there was such a system. My focus will be on the set of concrete institutions created in Paris in November 1815, which loosely bound together the European great powers during the first decade after the Napoleonic Wars. The Congress System was indeed, despite Castlereagh’s later disavowal, an audacious attempt at multilateral world government, but it never developed a strong institutional basis and eventually foundered on differences between the powers over the question of counter-revolutionary intervention. Despite its failure, the Congress System still influences today.

The primary questions are these: What was the Congress System? When did it begin and when did it end? Was it aimed at maintaining peace, combatting revolution, or achieving security? At suppressing internal unrest or at preventing great power aggression? Did it restrain the great powers, or furnish them with an additional mechanism for pursuing their rivalries? Or are all of these merely artificial distinctions?

As a historical entity, the Congress System might be usefully compared—metaphorically, of course—to a living organism. It had its own ancestry and it passed through its own life cycle with conception, birth, a happy and exuberant youth, a mid-life crisis, old age, a final collapse, and a somewhat surprising resurrection. So, for the next fifteen minutes, we will briefly revisit these key moments in its short but influential life span.

Ancestry: The Philosophers of “Perpetual Peace”

Major wars often seem to be followed by the sudden appearance of idealistic and pacific projects. Walter Alison Phillips, author of *The Confederation of Europe* and the first holder of the Lecky Chair at Trinity College, Dublin, insisted in 1914—on the eve of the Great War and long before the more recent “cultural turn” in history—that our study of the Congress System must begin by exploring its intellectual roots in the philosophers of “perpetual peace,” most notably Henri IV’s minister the Duc de Sully, the Abbé St. Pierre, and Immanuel Kant.

Sully’s design, at the end of the French Wars of Religion, would have reduced Europe to fifteen states of roughly equal size, which were to elect representatives to a general council.⁴ Each member state was to contribute soldiers and warships to an international army and navy, to be placed at the disposal of the council for use against aggressors and to quell internal unrest.

Three-quarters of a century later, the Abbé de Saint-Pierre, one of the French plenipotentiaries negotiating the Peace of Utrecht, published an influential “Project for Perpetual Peace.”⁵ Saint-Pierre proposed that the sovereigns of Europe form “a permanent and perpetual union,” represented by 24 deputies in a “perpetual Congress” (or Senate), which would guarantee the government and borders of each member state. Most striking of all was his plan for the compulsory arbitration of disputes: if one sovereign had a grievance against another, the claim was to be submitted to the European Congress for mediation, followed by binding arbitration. Jean-Jacques Rousseau later became custodian of Saint-Pierre’s papers and published a famous summary of his plan in 1761.⁶

Twenty years later, on the eve of the French Revolution, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote that the destructiveness of wars would eventually lead states to form a universal federation to guarantee peace, much as individuals had joined together to form states to end civil strife. Kant repeated these arguments in 1795, at the height of the revolutionary conflict, in a celebrated essay entitled “On Perpetual Peace”:

Each nation, for the sake of its own security, can and ought to demand of others that they should enter along with it into a constitution, similar to the civil one, within which the rights of each could be secured. This would mean establishing a federation of nations.

Friedrich von Gentz, the future “Secretary” of the Congresses, studied under Kant and wrote a lengthy article of his own on “perpetual peace” in 1800. Although “everlasting peace” was unrealizable, Gentz argued that humanity must nevertheless strive towards it.⁷

What all of these philosophical speculations—from Sully to Kant—shared was their vision of a future federation of states to preserve world peace.⁸

The violence of the French Revolution and the bloodshed of the Napoleonic Wars added a new urgency to the search for a more stable international order. How was the period of constant turbulence and flux ushered in by the Revolution of 1789 to be terminated?

Conception: The Anglo-Russian Exchange of 1804-1805

This brings us to the immediate background of the Congress System—its moment of conception—in an Anglo-Russian diplomatic exchange of 1805. Not surprisingly, statesmen joined the philosophers in reflecting on the means of ending the prevailing state of international anarchy.⁹ In 1803, Prince Adam Jerzy Czartoryski, the Polish companion of Tsar Alexander of Russia, presented the Tsar with a comprehensive memorandum on the future of Russian foreign policy, which bore an uncanny resemblance to the ruminations of the speculative philosophers on perpetual peace.¹⁰ Czartoryski blamed the recent expansion of France on the dissatisfaction that had existed throughout Europe with the *ancien régime*. Russia and Britain therefore needed to create a new stable order, especially in Central and Southern Europe, capable of withstanding French revolutionary propaganda and the military might of Napoleon. This could only be achieved, Czartoryski contended, by recasting Europe into national states divided along ethnic frontiers, by granting liberal constitutions, and by forming regional federations. Czartoryski's Polish identity gave him a profound awareness of the growing force of nationalism.

Czartoryski's memorandum provided the basis for a Russian offer, conveyed by Ambassador Vorontsov to the British the following year, to form a new coalition against France. Echoing Sully and the Abbé Saint-Pierre, the Russian proposal ended by calling for the creation of a league of states to prevent all future wars:

When peace is made, a new treaty should be drawn up as a basis for the reciprocal relations of the European states. Such a treaty might . . . bind the powers never to begin a war until after exhausting every means of mediation by a third power, and lay down a code of international law which . . . would, if violated by any one of them, bind the others to turn against the offender.¹¹

The British Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger, enthusiastically agreed. His response to the Tsar also ended by recommending the conclusion of “a treaty to which all the principal Powers of Europe should be parties, by which their respective rights and possessions, as they then have been established, shall be fixed and recognised; and they should all bind themselves mutually to protect and support each other against any attempt to infringe them.”¹² The turmoil of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars had thus led these eminent statesmen to conclude that the independent powers of Europe must establish some formal system of collective security to resist French aggression.¹³

The Allied Powers and the Treaty of Chaumont

The Congress System thus provides a salutary demonstration of the power of ideas. Yet the system also required particular material conditions before it could take shape. The next step in the formation of the system was the shared experience of fighting the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. In September 1813, eight years after the Pitt-Vorontsov exchange, British Foreign Secretary Lord Castlereagh sent a proposal from London to his allies for the formation of an “Alliance Offensive and Defensive Against France.” His proposed treaty contained an important provision for the continuation, even after peace with France was concluded, of “a perpetual defensive Alliance for the maintenance of such peace, and for the mutual protection of their respective States.”¹⁴

Only three months later, Castlereagh embarked on a mission to the Continent to meet the other allied leaders in person. Witnessing their divisions led Castlereagh—the man who had bribed the Irish Parliament out of existence—to the brilliant insight of tying his renewal of British financial subsidies for the allies to their acceptance of his proposal for a general alliance. In March 1814, he invited the other powers at allied headquarters at Chaumont to negotiate a “Treaty of Concert, Alliance and Subsidy.”¹⁵ In this agreement, each of the four allies solemnly pledged not to sign a separate peace.¹⁶ They further consented “to concert together on the conclusion of a peace with France, as to the means best adapted to guarantee to Europe, and to themselves reciprocally, the continuance of the peace.” Even after the termination of the present conflict, if any of the signatories were attacked by France for the period of the next twenty years, each of the allies promised to come to its assistance with a force of 60,000 troops.¹⁷

The Treaty of Chaumont thus constituted a decisive step in the development of the future Congress System. For here, as Czartoryski and Pitt had first proposed, the allies agreed to continue their wartime coalition into peacetime. Ten days after the signature of this treaty, the allied armies were at the gates of Paris.

The Congress of Vienna and the Question of a General Guarantee

In the negotiation of the First Peace of Paris and at the Congress of Vienna, the allied powers took the next essential step towards creating a peacetime coalition—by removing all the territorial issues—like so many thorns in the lion’s paw. Agreement on the territorial reconstruction of Central Europe was reached by early February 1815—almost exactly 200 years ago to this day.

Before leaving Vienna for London, Castlereagh therefore put forward a new proposal, harkening back to the original ideas of Czartoryski and Pitt: that of a general guarantee of the final territorial settlement by the allied powers, to be maintained by force: “the best alliance that could be formed in the present state of Europe was that the Powers who had made the peace should by a public declaration at the close of the Congress announce to Europe . . . their determination to uphold and support the arrangement agreed upon; and further, their determination to unite their influence, and if necessary, their arms, against the Power that should attempt to disturb it.”¹⁸

The Tsar warmly embraced Castlereagh's idea and Gentz actually completed a first draft of the proposed guarantee. The Tsar was reportedly moved to tears when Gentz's declaration was read to him.¹⁹ However, the project was frustrated by a failure to agree on whether to extend this guarantee to the European possessions of the Sultan.²⁰ Despite the failure to conclude a general guarantee before Castlereagh's departure, the notion continued to hold great appeal, especially for the Tsar. A Russian diplomatic circular was issued in May, still announcing that "the Cabinets intend to establish the inviolability of the acts of the Congress by reciprocal guarantees."²¹

The Birth of the "Congress System": The Quadruple Alliance of November 1815

The real trigger for the Congress System, as I point out in my book, was Napoleon's brief return during the Hundred Days, an event that palpably demonstrated the continuing fragility of the international system. A specter was haunting Europe, and, in the eyes of the allied statesmen, that specter was the French Revolution, personified by Napoleon.²²

It was therefore in Paris in the autumn of 1815—and not at Vienna the previous year—that the "Congress System" was actually born, revealing that the allies' fear of revolution was far greater than their love of peace. To shore up the Bourbons in France and to stabilize Europe, the allied leaders took four steps: (1) France was to be temporarily occupied by allied troops for up to five years; (2) France was forced to pay reparations and to make slight territorial concessions along its eastern frontiers; (3) an "ambassadorial conference" was created in Paris to supervise the governance of the French monarchy, while similar ambassadorial conferences were later established in other European capitals to tackle issues as they arose, such as the abolition of the slave trade; and finally, (4) a new allied agreement, the "Quadruple Alliance," was concluded between the four allied powers on November 20, 1815.

In Article II of the latter treaty, the allies pledged to consult in the event of a new revolutionary disturbance in France:

[I]f the same revolutionary principles, which had supported the last criminal usurpation, might again, under other forms, convulse France and thereby endanger the repose of other states, the High Contracting Parties . . . engage . . . to concert amongst themselves, and with His Most Christian Majesty [the King of France], the measures that they may judge necessary for the safety of their respective states, and for the general tranquillity of Europe.²³

Article VI of the same alliance actually laid the foundation stone for the new Congress System by calling for periodic meetings:

[T]he High Contracting Parties have agreed to renew their meetings at fixed periods, either under the immediate auspices of the Sovereigns themselves, or by their respective Ministers, for the purpose of consulting upon their common interests, and for the consideration of the measures which at each of those periods

shall be considered the most salutary for the repose and prosperity of Nations and for the maintenance of the peace of Europe.²⁴

Besides these steps, there was an important fifth measure—an assertion of moral principles—sponsored by the Tsar in the form of the “Holy Alliance” in September 1815.

Exuberant Youth: The Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle

The youthful phase of the Congress System lasted from 1815 to 1818. Allied cooperation was marked by a joint military occupation of northeastern France, the construction of barrier fortresses in the Low Countries, and the actions of the French ambassadorial conference in advising Louis XVIII and, as Professor Beatrice de Graaf has shown, in attempts to handle the problem of French refugees in Brussels.

The first peacetime congress after Vienna and Paris was convened at Aix-la-Chapelle (today Aachen) in the fall of 1818. Its ostensible purpose was to end the allied occupation of France, the unpopularity of which was casting discredit on the restored Bourbon monarchy. In fact, the four allied powers and France went to Aix to concert on many outstanding issues, ranging from a territorial dispute between Bavaria and Baden to the fate of the Spanish colonies, the treatment of Napoleon and the abolition of the slave trade. The Tsar, Metternich, Castlereagh, Hardenberg, Gentz, Wellington—all the leading allied statesmen—were present. France participated in the discussions although other powers, such as Spain, were pointedly excluded.

The most important issue facing the allies was how to treat their former adversary, France. Should France be admitted into the alliance that had been initially formed against her? The elegant solution was to maintain the Quadruple Alliance without France, but to invite France to participate in the future periodic reunions of the powers, as a full-fledged member of the new European pentarchy.

At Aix, there was also much debate on the nature of the alliance itself. The Russians submitted a proposal for a broader alliance similar to the guarantee floated at Vienna—in effect, an allied guarantee of borders and thrones. Castlereagh objected to such an “alliance solidaire” on the grounds that the powers could not blindly protect all rulers, some of whom were scarcely deserving of allied support—“nothing would be more immoral or more prejudicial to the character of government generally than the idea that their force was collectively to be prostituted to the support of established power without any consideration of the extent to which it was abused.”²⁵ Privately, Castlereagh assured the Tsar that he still sympathized with his goals, although he feared that any formal British commitment would be rejected by Parliament.

The new scheme for the government of Europe was therefore clear enough. The great powers would discuss issues at periodic conferences and then exploit their overwhelming command of military force to impose their collective will on the rest of Europe. The sheer range of topics discussed at Aix-la-Chapelle belied Castlereagh’s later denial that this

was not a species of embryonic world government. Of course, everything hinged on the powers being able to reach agreements among themselves.

Mid-Life Crisis: The Revolutions of 1820 and the Congresses of Troppau and Laibach

The Congress System's relatively carefree youth ended abruptly around 1820. While Bonapartism was largely dead, signs of growing social discontent were appearing across Europe. The cold winter of 1816, followed by poor harvests, changes in the textile industry, and disgruntlement by liberal army officers, university students and handloom weavers contributed to rising social tensions. The assassination of the conservative playwright August von Kotzebue in 1819 led Metternich to propose a series of measures to censor publications and to monitor universities in the German states, known as the Carlsbad Decrees. The British House of Commons passed the similarly repressive "Six Acts" after a violent attack on demonstrators at Manchester, known as "Peterloo." The same year was also a turning point in the defeat of plans for moderate constitutional reform in Prussia, and in the Tsar's growing disappointment with the conduct of the independent Polish *Sejm* (national assembly).

When a revolution broke out in Spain in January 1820, the Tsar—still maintaining a colossal standing army of 800,000 men—proposed to send his forces across the Continent to intervene on the Iberian Peninsula in the name of the alliance. In his State Paper of May 5, 1820, Castlereagh alleged that the alliance had only been intended to protect Europe against France "in its military character." In truth, British actions during the Hundred Days and the negotiation of the Quadruple Alliance cast doubts on this assumption, but for the moment Castlereagh won the day and persuaded the Tsar not to act.

Seven months later, another revolution broke out in the Kingdom of Naples. Metternich was determined to suppress it, lest it stimulate unrest all over Italy. Castlereagh privately urged Metternich to act quickly but unilaterally, while the Tsar insisted that the powers should convene a formal Congress and that Austria could only intervene in Naples on behalf of the alliance as a whole. A meeting of the three eastern powers was held in the Silesian town of Troppau. The two constitutional states, Britain and France, protested the meeting and only sent their local ambassadors as observers. The Tsar's liberal minister, the Greek Ioannis Capodistrias, secretly schemed with the French to reach an accommodation with moderates in Naples in order to avoid military intervention and achieve a liberal constitutional settlement. Metternich's aim was to win over the heart and mind of the Tsar, whose liberal sympathies he still perceived as Europe's greatest threat. He was fortuitously helped by unrest in the Tsar's own favorite regiment of imperial guards back in St. Petersburg, the Semenovsky Regiment—an event that Alexander viewed as the work of the secret revolutionary "directing committee" in Paris. After this incident, Alexander totally abandoned his earlier liberalism and became Metternich's virtual lackey. This was indeed a critical juncture in the history of the alliance. Metternich placed the capstone on his work by inviting the King of Naples to meet with the allied sovereigns at Laibach, the town where allied discussions resumed

after the winter holidays early in 1821. Meanwhile, Austrian troops marched into Naples, where the revolution was crushed.

The Congress System thus became an instrument of counter-revolutionary repression. The powers at Troppau began drafting a series of documents that announced their right to intervene in the domestic affairs of states undergoing revolutionary change and which posed a danger to neighboring states. “Every revolution,” Gentz wrote in a proposed Act of Guarantee, “becomes . . . the object of a just and legitimate intervention by foreign powers”²⁶ When the Troppau Circular appeared in the press, Castlereagh was forced to repudiate its principles openly. Behind the scenes, the British Foreign Secretary remained sympathetic to most of his allies’ goals. Most remarkable, and generally ignored by historians, is the fact that, given a choice between sending French or Russian troops to Piedmont in Northern Italy, where another revolution erupted in 1821, Castlereagh preferred the use of Russian troops.²⁷ Russia could only act in Italy in the name of the alliance since it had no direct security interests at stake there. Castlereagh was therefore far from abandoning the alliance at this time.

Old Age and Collapse: The Congress of Verona

Castlereagh’s ties to the Continental allies were further strengthened by events further east. In 1821, a Greek Orthodox revolution erupted in the Danubian Principalities (present-day Romania) and quickly spread to the Greek mainland. Both regions were under Ottoman rule and raised the so-called “Eastern Question”: what would happen if the Ottoman Empire suddenly collapsed? Castlereagh and Metternich equally feared the growth of Russian power in this region and set aside their previous differences. A new Congress was scheduled to discuss Italy, the Eastern Question and Spain, which Castlereagh fully intended to attend, but he suddenly committed suicide in August 1822. George Canning, the new British Foreign Secretary, generally opposed the Congress System, but his appointment took place so close to the opening of the Congress of Verona that he reluctantly permitted Wellington to proceed there.

By this time, the Spanish Revolution had reached a more radical phase. After Austria’s successes in Italy, the Tsar was especially keen to intervene on the Iberian Peninsula. Having halted him in the east, the allied statesmen were reluctant to tie his hands in the west. French statesmen were divided over the issue. François-René de Chateaubriand and the Comte de Villèle wanted France to intervene in Spain as an independent power, and not as an agent of the alliance; but the French foreign minister, the Duc de Montmorency, would have preferred the latter. The Tsar was willing to let France act in Spain on its own—not because he thought that the French would be successful, but paradoxically because he thought they would fail, giving him another chance to march Russian troops into Paris to set things right.

Acting unilaterally, France sent a force of 100,000 men across the Bidassoa River into Spain in March 1823. They defeated the Spanish revolutionaries, and restored the vindictive Ferdinand VII to his full powers. Canning failed to stop them, although he issued warnings to protect Portugal and the former Spanish colonies in the Americas

from French interference. In 1825, the Tsar died, and it became increasingly obvious that the Congress Era was over. When a new revolution broke out in France in 1830, the precise *casus foederis* under the Quadruple Alliance, the four allied powers even failed to consult one another (although Metternich and Nesselrode met at Carlsbad). By then, we can say for certain that the Congress System was a dead letter.

Reflections on the Congress System

The Congress System was essentially the brainchild of three men—Tsar Alexander, Viscount Castlereagh and Prince Metternich. Each statesman possessed slightly different motivations for wishing to extend their wartime collaboration into peacetime.

For Alexander, the notion of a European alliance dated back at least to Czartoryski's memorial of 1803, and was literally meant to provide stability and peace in the form of a supra-European form of government.

Castlereagh is frequently credited by British historians as the principal architect of the Congress System. His earliest hopes for a system of European cooperation also dated back at least as far as the exchange between his mentor Pitt and Czartoryski. To defeat Napoleon, Castlereagh recognized the necessity of a European coalition in which all the allied great powers acted in unison. The experiences of 1812 to 1814 had proven with a vengeance that the Continental powers might collaborate with complete disregard for British interests. The fruitful cooperation between the allied leaders that brought the contest with Bonaparte to a victorious conclusion thoroughly convinced Castlereagh of the absolute superiority of face-to-face negotiations over the usual channels of diplomatic discourse. His notion of a Congress System therefore consisted in the convening of periodic conferences or summit meetings to discuss important issues and to attempt to resolve them peacefully through negotiation and compromise. In an age before the telegraph and telephone, this made perfect sense. It also gave full rein to his own formidable bargaining talents. Castlereagh further hoped to cooperate with the Continental states in repressing the revolutionary spirit still stalking Europe, but to manage this collaboration in a manner that could withstand parliamentary scrutiny, or even better, avoid it altogether.

For Metternich, the Congress System afforded a unique opportunity to use diplomacy and negotiation to achieve Austrian objectives rather than to rely solely on exertions of military power. From the standpoint of great-power politics, he sought to prevent the strengthening of Russia, France or Prussia. At the same time, he sought to resist revolutionary change, in part because such change might threaten the fragile unity of the multi-ethnic Austrian Empire. Metternich believed he was engaged in mortal combat against a well-organized, highly disciplined, monolithic secret society, which stood behind all the multifarious manifestations of revolution breaking out across the face of Europe. Because he viewed these demonstrations of popular unrest as the product of a vast international conspiracy, Metternich believed that international cooperation was essential. Like Alexander and Castlereagh, he regarded the European alliance as the most powerful weapon in his arsenal for defeating the revolutionaries, whom he viewed with much the same horror that many

look on political terrorists today.²⁸ Indeed, Metternich hoped to create a common European center for reporting and sharing counter-revolutionary police intelligence, although he never quite succeeded in doing in this.

In general, the allied leaders appreciated the need to cooperate against the dangers of revolution, but they proved largely unwilling to sacrifice their own freedom of action. Alexander sought the moral approval of the other allied leaders and more than once refrained from action without their support, but he also continued to maintain a vast standing army far in excess of Russia's security needs. The British benefited from a Continental peace that allowed them to concentrate on trade and overseas expansion. Metternich relied on the support of his allies to maintain the stability of the Austrian Empire and its immediate neighbors.

A Post-Hegemonic International Security Regime?

Political scientists have attempted to identify the main elements of the Congress System in order to compare it meaningfully with other systems. In 1982, Professor Robert Jervis identified the Congress System—which he saw as the “strongest” phase of the “Concert of Europe”—as a type of “security regime”—a “regulated environment” consisting of “those principles, rules, and norms that permit nations to be restrained in their behavior in the belief that others will reciprocate.”²⁹ While there has never been a world government, Jervis later noted that the Congress System remains the closest that states have ever reached towards that goal.³⁰ He sees such systems as typically arising after the experience of fighting a total war against a hegemon like Napoleon, since “such a conflict produces significant ties between the allies, undermines the acceptability of war as a tool of statecraft, and perhaps most important, increases the incentives to cooperate.”³¹

Many other political scientists agree. Charles Kupchan categorizes the Concert of Europe as a “security community”: “The Concert operated as a directorate of Europe's major powers, providing a forum in which they forged a set of rules and norms for regulating their relations and peacefully resolving disputes. . . . [S]trategic rivalry was significantly muted and armed force effectively eliminated as a legitimate tool of statecraft among its members.”³² Ian Clark refers to the Congress System as a form of ‘collective hegemony’—which he defines as “great-power control over international society.”³³

A few political scientists—often depicting themselves as “realists”—have questioned whether there was much of a Congress System at all. In her analysis of the Greek crisis in the 1820s, Korina Kagan found that each of the great powers essentially pursued its own interests, and therefore concludes that the Congress System was “a weak and ineffective institution that was largely irrelevant to great power behavior.”³⁴ Branislav Slantchev argues that the great powers essentially achieved what they wanted at Vienna, where they established spheres of influence; afterwards, according to Slantchev, the system became largely self-enforcing.³⁵ Matthew Rendall attempts to combine these approaches to explain why, in some cases, the powers pursued their own interests, and why, at other times, they seemed to exercise a large degree of self-restraint.³⁶

Speculation: Why the System Failed

Once we grasp the fundamental nature of the Congress System, the next question is: why did it fail? The first explanation, and certainly the most obvious one, is that the main purpose of the Congress System was counter-revolutionary. As the memory of the great revolution faded, national rivalries revived and slowly tore the Congress System apart. “[T]he so-called Congress System broke down under the pressure of divergent national interests,” writes historian Alan Sked. Robert Jervis believes this explanation has more general application, transcending the experiences of 1815 to 1823:

Congress systems decay . . . [I]n general the passage of time alters the unusual postwar situation and reestablishes the balance-of-power assumptions. As the memories of war fade, the bonds erode that helped to hold the blocking coalition together . . .³⁷

Powers thus tend to unite in times of crisis, but separate once the crisis is overcome.

One problem with this explanation, at least with respect to the Congress System, is that in 1823 the cycle of European revolutions was far from complete. Although the memory of the French Revolution may have faded, new revolutions were constantly occurring to take its place. Moreover, all of the leaders of the later 1820s—George Canning, Wellington, Metternich, Nicholas II, Nesselrode, Charles X, Polignac, Louis Philippe—still had personal memories of the French Revolution.

A second explanation is that the Congress System was actually riddled with ambiguity from the outset. The Russians intended it as an embryonic world government; the British as a system of conference diplomacy; the Austrians as a way to contain the Russians and Prussians; and the French as a means for redirecting the focus of the allies away from themselves. It can be argued that these dissimilarities in interpretation reflected deeper differences between its members. In particular, Britain and France with their constitutional systems and active middle classes could not be effectively bound together with the more autocratic eastern powers.

Although there were these conflicting aims within the alliance from the outset, this explanation begs the question of why these differences widened instead of narrowed. Once the institutions of the Congress System were established at Paris and Aix-la-Chapelle, why was the new system unable to strengthen itself, or even to acquire new functions as time passed? Why, instead, did those tensions tear it apart less than five years after the Congress at Aix?³⁸ Compare, for example, the fate of the Congress System with that of NATO at the end of the Cold War.

A third explanation is that the Congress System did not endure because of the failure of its leading statesmen to establish any form of “institutionalized cooperation.”³⁹ The Congress statesmen were on the verge of establishing periodic summit conferences at fixed intervals, territorial guarantees, and even the enunciation of a set of general principles to govern intervention, but then pulled back. Ironically, it was Castlereagh who

insisted that the workings of the system be kept shrouded in secrecy because he knew its largely counter-revolutionary aims could not be defended in the British Parliament. This meant, however, that the Congress System had no chance to develop more permanent institutions or to evolve.

The Congress System thus remained overly dependent on the handful of individuals who had formed it. As a virtual secret society, the system could not outlast its founders. The meetings of the Congress System, despite the provisions of the Quadruple Alliance, remained largely *ad hoc*. The alliance created no permanent body, formal rules or secretariat with an institutional memory. As the individuals who formed the Congress System passed away, the system itself evaporated. Their replacements did not share their experiences, views, or commitments. Canning did not possess the enthusiasms of Castlereagh, and Tsar Nicholas did not hold the strong internationalist beliefs of his older brother, Alexander.

A fourth explanation is that the system failed because its authors did not sufficiently take into account the twin forces of liberalism and nationalism. Among liberals and nationalists, the “Holy Alliance” was viewed as an instrument of repression and became a term of abuse. The greater democratization of Britain and France in the early 1830s only led to increasing public condemnation of the actions of the eastern autocracies, making international cooperation ever more difficult. The failure of the system, it is argued, was caused by its identification with the preservation of an autocratic and aristocratic way of life. The Congress System failed simply because it was on the wrong side of history. Sensible as this argument may appear, it also leaves two unanswered questions—first, why did the system disintegrate as early as 1823-1825, and second, why did it prove unable to accommodate these rising forces?

Resurrection: From the Concert of Europe to the League of Nations and United Nations

On the other hand, some would argue that the system did not really fail or pass away at all; rather, it evolved. The British historian F.H. Hinsley epitomized this view: “When the Congress system proved unworkable the notion of a coalition of leading states, founded on a public law for the defence of that law, was not abandoned . . . A looser association of the Great Powers continued in existence—an attenuated Congress system limited to dealing with problems as they arose, not seeking to anticipate them or to iron them out of existence. . . [which] came to be called the Concert of Europe.”⁴⁰

The use of ambassadorial conferences, the survival of agencies such as the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine, and frequent interaction between the great powers and the lesser states thus continued for the rest of the century in the form of the Concert of Europe. Even a handful of formal Congresses—such as the Congress of Paris in 1856—were convened at the end of wars.

In another important way, moreover, the Congress System is still here with us today, for it served as a precursor to both the League of Nations and the United Nations.

The creation of the League of Nations in 1919 was based on President Wilson's Fourteen Points. Wilson, as Professor Mark Mazower has recently reminded us, was a vociferous opponent of secret diplomacy and what he deemed to be "Holy Alliance" politics.⁴¹ Yet the first detailed plans for the new League organization came mainly from the British: Lord Robert Cecil suggested that a working committee be established to look "particularly from a juridical and historical point of view, into the various schemes for establishing by means of a League of Nations, or other device, as an alternative to war as a means of settling international disputes."⁴² In examining the question of international organization from the "historical point of view," the new committee, chaired by Sir Walter Phillimore, was well aware of the earlier Congress System. They proposed a "conference of Allied States" that might have been taken straight out of the pages of the Quadruple Alliance itself—it was to hold its meetings as the occasion required.⁴³ The Phillimore Committee would have preferred to restrict the new League to the great powers whose efforts had won the war—in effect, almost an exact replica of the Congress System. This view was rejected on the grounds that all nations should be afforded some opportunity to participate in the League. But the idea of a special role for the great powers did not die—it was simply submerged into the organization of the League as a whole. In November 1918, Lord Cecil presented a new plan, which was shared with the American delegation in January 1919, and which effectively became the first draft of the Covenant of the League of Nations. It proposed a permanent secretariat, an assembly of all member states to meet every four years, and a "Council" of the five great powers, which was to meet for "regular conferences" on an annual basis—again a recognizable successor to the Congress System.⁴⁴ Cecil's proposal was modified by adding rotating members to the League's Executive Council, chosen by the Assembly, but otherwise it defined the structure of the new League. And through this conduit, the Congress System exercises a continuing influence to this day: during World War II, the allies decided to scrap the League of Nations in favor of a new organization—the "United Nations." In the summer of 1944, the League's "Council" became the "Security Council," its "Assembly" became the "General Assembly" and the League Covenant was replaced by the United Nations Charter.⁴⁵ But the roots of today's Security Council can still be clearly traced through the "Council" of the League of Nations directly back to the Congress System itself. Thus it is no mere coincidence that we have five nuclear-arms-bearing, veto-yielding permanent members on the United Nations Security Council, just as we had five powers in the European pentarchy of old. They are the true heirs of the Congress System, a historical precedent that deserves to be better remembered and better understood.

NOTES

¹ This paper summarizes sections of my book, *The Congress of Vienna and its Legacy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

² Kenneth Bourne, *The Foreign Policy of Victorian England, 1830-1902* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 198-207, citing F.O. 120/39.

³ “Here there was unmistakable structural change. A competitive balance-of-power struggle gave way to an international system of political equilibrium based on benign shared hegemony and the mutual recognition of rights underpinned by law.” Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763-1848* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994). See also Matthias Schulz, *Normen und Praxis: Das Europäische Konzert der Großmächte als Sicherheitsrat, 1815–1860* (München: R. Oldenbourg, 2009).

⁴ Elizabeth York, *Leagues of Nations; Ancient, Mediaeval, and Modern* (London, 1919), pp. 100-103; David Ogg (ed.), *Sully’s Grand Design of Henry IV* (Grotius Society Publications, No. 2, 1921); F.H. Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 23-29. Sully said the Council was based on the Amphictyonic Council of ancient Greece, a league of city-states originally formed to protect the temple of Apollo at Delphi.

⁵ The Abbé de Saint-Pierre continually revised and modified his plan throughout his life. M. G. de Molinari, *L’Abbé de Saint-Pierre: Sa Vie et Ses Oeuvres* (Paris, 1857), pp. 77-84, reprints the original five articles; for the English translation of the twelve articles printed in London in 1714, see York (1919), pp. 170-178; see also, Walter Alison Phillips, *The Confederation of Europe* (London, 1920), pp. 26-27, for a restatement of Saint-Pierre’s plan in six provisions.

⁶ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Plan for Perpetual Peace, On the Government of Poland, and other Writings on History and Politics* (Hanover, 2005), pp. 23-60; Grace G. Roosevelt, *Reading Rousseau in the Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia, 1990), pp. 90-119, 199-229; Hinsley (1967), pp. 46-61.

⁷ Gentz published his article in the last issue of the *Historisches Journal*, an anti-revolutionary periodical he published with Prussian support from 1799 to 1800. See Paul Robinson Sweet, *Friedrich von Gentz: Defender of the Old Order* (Westport, 1941), pp. 52-57.

⁸ Eric Easley, *The War over Perpetual Peace: An Exploration into the History of a Foundational International Relations Text* (New York, 2004), pp. 2-3; Paul Kennedy, *The Parliament of Man: the Past, Present and Future of the United Nations* (New York, 2006). Kennedy notes: “It comes as no surprise that most of these texts were composed near the end of, or shortly after, a great and bloody war. They were efforts to find a way out of international anarchy, to escape the repeated struggles between cities, monarchies, and states, and to establish long-lasting peace. All of them sought to constrain selfish, sovereign power, usually by some form of league of nations that would take action against a country that broke the existing order. The mechanisms were therefore reactive, assuming humankind’s propensity to conflict but trusting that such dangerous drives could be headed off. . . . To say that this was idealist would be gross understatement” (pp. 3-4).

⁹ For the flurry of contemporary peace movements in Britain in reaction to the war, see J.E. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace: Anti-War Liberalism in England, 1793-1815* (Cambridge, 1982).

¹⁰ Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, “Czartoryski’s System for Russian Foreign Policy, 1803: A Memorandum edited with Introduction and Analysis,” *California Slavic Studies*, vol. 5; Adam Gielgud, *Memoirs of Prince Adam Czartoryski and his Correspondence with Alexander I* (London, 1888), vol. ii, pp. 41-51; Marian Kukiel, *Czartoryski and European Unity, 1770-1861* (Princeton, 1955), pp. 41-51; Zawadzki, *A Man of Honour: Adam Czartoryski as a Statesman of Russia and Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp.106-110. In fact, Saint-Pierre’s project had appeared in Russian translation in 1771, while Rousseau’s *Extrait du Projet de Paix*

Perpétuelle de Monsieur l'Abbé de Saint-Pierre appeared in Polish in 1773, and Kant's essay on perpetual peace in Polish translations in both 1796 and 1797. See Zawadzki, pp. 88-89. In his own subsequent writings, Czartoryski explicitly compared his plan to Sully's seventeenth-century "Grand Design."

¹¹ Gielgud, *Memoirs of Prince Adam Czartoryski*, pp. 41-51.

¹² Webster, *Foreign Policy of Castlereagh, 1812-1815*, p. 427.

¹³ *Ibid.* In Pitt's case, as Webster points out, this may have been less a plan for perpetual peace than to unite simply Europe against Napoleonic hegemony.

¹⁴ Castlereagh to Cathcart, September 18, 1813, enclosing "Projet of a Treaty of Alliance," in C.K. Webster, *British Diplomacy, 1813-1815* (London: Bell and Sons, 1921), pp. 19-25. Note Castlereagh's use of the word "perpetual."

¹⁵ Circular of Lord Castlereagh to Metternich, Nesselrode and Hardenberg, 1 March 1814, Chaumont, National Archives (Kew), F.O. 92/3, ff. 69-70.

¹⁶ "The High Contracting Parties reciprocally engage not to negotiate separately with the common enemy, nor to sign peace, truce, nor convention, but with common consent. They, moreover, engage not to lay down their arms until the object of the war, mutually understood and agreed upon, shall have been attained."

¹⁷ For the Treaty of Chaumont, see Edward Vose Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power*, (New York, 1955), pp. 151-160, which includes the text of the treaty; Webster, *Foreign Policy of Castlereagh, 1812-1815*, pp. 211-232; Kraehe, *Metternich's German Policy, 1799-1814*, pp. 302-310; Fournier, *Der Congress von Chatillon*, pp. 178-183.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 428. Webster suggests that on the eve of his departure from Vienna, Castlereagh was aware of potential divisions in Europe, especially if France and Austria insisted on the removal of Murat by military force, and Russia and Prussia opposed it. Agreement on a guarantee might have averted conflict.

¹⁹ Castlereagh sent a circular letter to the members of the British diplomatic service announcing that the Congress would crown its labours with the guarantee — "there is every prospect of the Congress terminating with a general accord and guarantee between the Great Powers of Europe, with a determination to support the arrangement agreed upon, and to turn the general influence, and, if necessary, the general arms, against the Power that shall first attempt to disturb the continental peace." See Webster, *Foreign Policy of Castlereagh, 1812-1815*, p. 429.

²⁰ Gentz to Prince Karadja, Hospodar of Walachia, 1 January 1816, in Friedrich von Gentz, *Dépêches Inédites*, vol. i, pp. 198-199. In fact, Castlereagh was still urging the Turks to resolve all issues with Russia in order to salvage his guarantee proposal, just hours prior to his departure from Vienna. Gentz later wrote that the Turks rejected the offer because they did not want to place Britain in the position of mediator between themselves and Russia.

²¹ Webster, *Foreign Policy of Castlereagh, 1812-1815*, pp. 431-432. Moreover, the Tsar later accused the British of abandoning the plan for a general guarantee. In 1816, Gentz also wrote that it was the British who had in fact refused to agree to the guarantee. Gentz, *Dépêches Inédites*, vol. i, pp. 198-199 ("the ministers of England declared they were not authorized to sign it, and the article was abandoned").

²² "The force that cemented the union between the four cabinets," Capodistrias would later write, "was the fear inspired by the Revolution personified by the man on St. Helena." Capodistrias, "Agenda - Résumé de tous les rapports reçu de nos missions," April 11, 1820, in U.S.S.R., *Vneshniaia Politika Rossii, 1815-1830* (Moscow, 1976), Series 2, vol. iii, p. 337.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ E.E. Hertslet, *The Map of Europe by Treaty* (London: Butterworths, 1875), vol. i, pp. 372-75; d'Angeberg, *Le Congrès de Vienne*, vol. ii, pp. 1636-38; see also, Russian-Austrian treaty, 8 (20) November 1815, Paris, in USSR, *Vneshniaia Politika Rossii, 1801-1815*, vol. viii, pp. 609-12.

²⁵ Webster, *The Congress of Vienna*, Appendix, viii; Webster, *Foreign Policy of Castlereagh*,

1815–1822, pp. 150–53; Phillips, *Confederation of Europe*, pp. 173–75. Webster thought that none of the other allied powers ever received a written copy of this important pronouncement, but Metternich clearly did: there is a copy in the Austrian state archives, entitled “Memorandum on the English point of view on the *casus foederis*,” on which is written in pencil: “communicated only to the Austrian Cabinet. [Communiqué au seul Cabinet autrichien].” Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv (Vienna), Staatskanzlei, Karton 17 (Alt. 30), ff. 75–93.

²⁶ Schmalz, *Versuche einer gesamteuropäischen Organisation*, pp. 84–92, with the text of the proposed guarantee on pp. 87–88, fn. 71; Schroeder, *Metternich’s Diplomacy*, p. 87.

²⁷ N.A. (Kew), F.O. 165/35, Castlereagh to Gordon, 5 April 1821, Foreign Office, “Secret & Confidential”; also in British Library, Add. Mss. 41523, ff. 134–38, enclosed in Castlereagh to A’Court, 5 April 1821 (No. 5). In *The Foreign Policy of Castlereagh, 1815–1822*, Webster briefly mentions this dispatch on page 330 but underplays its significance. See Jarrett, *The Congress System and its Legacy*, p. 284.

²⁸ Historian Alan Sked has recently reminded us that, “Metternich’s career was dedicated to waging war on terror and he did this without resorting to torture, or undermining the rule of law, although he negotiated what would today be seen as international anti-terrorist conventions, employed a mild, if efficient censorship and used a secret intelligence service (or police). . .” See Alan Sked, *Metternich and Austria: An Evaluation* (London, 2008), p. 3.

²⁹ Robert Jervis, “Security Regimes,” *International Organization*, vol. 36, no. 2 (Spring 1982), pp. 360–368, reprinted in Stephen Krasner (ed.), *International Regimes* (Ithaca, 1983), pp. 173–194.

³⁰ Robert Jervis, “From Balance to Concert: A Study of International Security Cooperation,” *World Politics*, vol. 38, No. 1 (Oct 1985), pp. 58–59; and “A Political Science Perspective on the Balance of Power and the Concert,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 97, No. 3 (June 1992), pp. 716–724.

³¹ Jervis, “From Balance to Concert,” p. 60.

³² Charles A. Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends: the Sources of Stable Peace* (Princeton, 2010), pp. 188–189. Kupchan identifies a sequence of stages, starting with the 1805 exchange between Pitt and the Tsar and the self-restraint exercised by both Britain and Russia. Then he points out that Britain and Russia “refrained from constructing a bipolar order, instead elevating the status of Prussia, Austria and France in order to put all of Europe’s major states on a more level playing field.” (p. 191) The next step was the creation of “Concert diplomacy” followed by the creation of “institutionalized restraint.” (p. 192) The “core strategic concept,” according to Kupchan, “was that the five powers would bind themselves to one another sublimating their individual interests to the preservation of group cohesion.” (p. 192)

³³ Ian Clark, *Hegemony in International Society*. (Oxford, 2011), pp. 73–97 (“Collective Hegemony: The Concert of Europe, 1815–1914”). On page 74, Clark lists a number of issues that continue to divide international relations theorists in dealing with the concert—whether it existed at all, what were its guiding rules, and whether it contributed to the relative peace of the nineteenth century.

³⁴ Korina Kagan, “The Myth of the European Concert,” *Security Studies*, vol. 7, no., 2 (Winter 1997–1998), pp. 1–57 (p. 3)

³⁵ Branislav L. Slantchev, “Territory and Commitment: The Concert of Europe as Self-Enforcing Equilibrium,” *Security Studies*, vol. 14, no. 4 (October 2005), pp. 565–606: “The Vienna territorial settlement structured incentives in such a way as to make enforcement endogenous—it generated credible commitments to uphold it because it delineated spheres of influence such that any significant changes would impinge directly on the interests of enough powers to allow them to counter any such revisionism.” It was this careful alignment of interests that accounted for the powers’ subsequent behavior “rather than some illusory system of normative and legalistic checks and balances . . .” Slantchev correctly notes that “The Concert worked without an overarching

principle, a formal organization to resolve disputes, or a system of collective security to enforce its rules” (p. 566). In this, he sees evidence for his argument that the Congress System was essentially “self-enforcing” and arose out of the territorial settlement at Vienna. However, it could be argued that the Congress System was equally a reaction to the Hundred Days and that the common fear of revolution led to an unparalleled decree of collaboration, although not the formation of more permanent institutions. Slantchev agrees with Jervis that concert systems tend to arise after a war against a hegemon, and in conditions in which short-term alliances are not profitable. *Ibid*, p. 576.

³⁶ Matthew Rendall, “Defensive Realism and the Concert of Europe,” *Review of International Studies*, vol. 32, no. 3, (2006), pp. 523-540.

³⁷ Jervis, “From Balance to Concert,” pp. 61-62.

³⁸ Wellington to Metternich, 24 February 1824, in Wellington, Arthur Wellesley, *Despatches, Correspondence and Memoranda of Field Marshal Arthur Duke of Wellington, K.G.* Edited by his Son (London, 1867), vol. ii, p. 221-226.

³⁹ Among international relations theorists, Ian Clark thus poses the question—why did the Concert of Europe not ‘tip’ into a more institutionalized form? See Clark, *Hegemony in International Society*, p. 96.

⁴⁰ F. H. Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace: Theory and Practice in the History of Relations between States* (Cambridge, 1967).

⁴¹ Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (New York: Penguin, 2012), pp. 124

⁴² Lord Robert Cecil, cited in F.S. Northedge, *The League of Nations: Its Life and Times, 1920-1946* (New York, 1986), p. 27. See also, George W. Egerton, *Great Britain and the Creation of the League of Nations: Strategy, Politics and International Organization, 1914-1919* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), pp. 99-101: “The Cecil plan can be taken as representative of Foreign Office thinking on the league question. . . . The league was conceived essentially as a great power conference system, an improved and regularized version of the Concert of Europe extended to include America” (p. 100); Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 40: “Rather reluctantly, therefore, the cabinet accepted that it could not espouse a simple return to the diplomatic procedures that many blamed for the war in the first place, and it moved toward the idea of a great power conference system based on the Concert of Europe that have been established in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars.”

⁴³ Northedge, *The League of Nations*, p. 29; Charles Howard Ellis, *The Origin, Structure and Working of the League of Nations* (Boston, 1929), Chapter 5 (“Constitution and Membership of the League”).

⁴⁴ “Universal war places the main responsibility for all major activities on the great powers,” wrote Sir Charles Webster, “a responsibility which is inevitably extended into the period of peace. From that fact came the European Alliance of the great powers in 1815, and in 1919 Lord Cecil at first suggested that the Council of the League should be solely composed of the great powers,” Sir Charles Webster, “The Making of the Charter,” in *The Art and Practice of Diplomacy*, p. 73.

⁴⁵ “[T]he truth is,” writes historian Mark Mazower, “that the UN was in many ways a continuation of the earlier body.” *No Enchanted Peace*, p. 14.