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THE ROLE OF OVERSEAS COLONIES IN THE EUROPEAN POWER BALANCE

1793-1815

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During those long years of inconclusive warfare between 1793 and 1815, both Great Britain and France sought on several occasions to end their fight to reach a mutually satisfactory peace settlement. The issues which the plenipotentiaries and delegations attempted to resolve were as varied and complex as only those of a world-wide struggle between opposing international power groups can be. Through all the kaleidoscopic changes of ideological warfare, competing national aspirations and economic rivalries, one theme, however, stands out with extraordinary consistency, the attempt to reach a balance of power between England and France. It was the key to peace in a world at war. The central issue of Anglo-French diplomacy was the relating of French ascendancy in Europe with British supremacy beyond Europe. In terms of crude bartering, it meant equating British concessions in overseas colonies for French concessions in Europe.

The first occasion on which the two nations came directly to grips over this problem after the outbreak of war in 1793 was at peace negotiations in Paris in the late autumn of 1796. Considerable doubt has been cast on the sincerity of both participating governments, especially in view of the failure of either side to achieve a really decisive military decision in Europe or overseas. Nonetheless, the British sought a return to the *status quo ante bellum*. They tried to induce the French to accept restitution of their overseas losses in exchange for the relinquishment of their Continental conquests. It was "His Majesty's intention," wrote Lord Grenville, the Foreign Secretary, to his plenipotentiary, Lord Malmesbury, "of employing the effects of his successes during this war in compensating France for restitution of such of her conquests on the continent as may be necessary to satisfy the claims of His Majesty's allies and to preserve the political balance of Europe."[1] The central issue, of course, was the Austrian Netherlands. Belgium, too important strategically and economically for Britain to see pass unopposed into French hands, was, in fact, occupied by the French armies. An exultant French nationalism seeking its natural boundary on the Rhine could regard this British *sine qua non*, restitution of the Belgian territory, only as "*cette condition déshonorante.*" When, therefore, Malmesbury received orders to quit Paris within forty-eight hours, he merely remarked that it was a rather "sudden tho' not unlooked for close to my mission."[2] The first British attempt to

[1]Public Record Office, F.O. 27/46, Grenville to Malmesbury, no. 11, December 11, 1796.

[2]*Ibid.*, F.O. 29/46, Malmesbury to Grenville. no. 30, December 20, 1796.

limit Continental France by equating it to *France outre-mer* was a signal failure.

Six months later, during the summer of 1797, France and Britain again sought to reach a peace settlement. The Austrian recognition of the French conquest of Belgium by the armistice of Leoben in one sense resolved the principal source of dispute between Franch and England by removing this whole question from the range of subjects for discussion. At the same time British domestic, economic and naval difficulties brought the country to the nadir of its fortunes in the generation long conflict with France. Moreover the withdrawal of Austria meant the loss of the ally who had borne the main burden of the conflict.

Despite such an unpromising situation, Grenville instructed Malmesbury to lay stress on the fact that Britain had suffered no losses in her war with France, but on the contrary had made sizeable and important conquests at the expense of the latter. For the sake of peace, Britain would be willing to restore all these colonial conquests. But, since French conquests had enormously strengthened the power of that country in Europe, and the possession of Holland and Spain as satellites had augmented the naval power at her disposal, Britain must be expected to retain some of her colonial conquests at the expense of Holland and Spain as compensation, however inadequate, for acknowledging the gains made by France.[a]

The coup d'état of Fructidor blasted all hopes of peace. With the French position seemingly so secure in Europe, the new Directory refused to accept the British terms of peace, even though the price would be paid not by France but by its satellites. Despite the embarrassment of the situation, the British government would not and could not safely make the double sacrifice of recognizing French expansion in Europe and at the same time fail to secure some colonial *quid pro quo*.

After four more years of war, i.e. in 1801, peace was made between Great Britain and France on almost the same terms as those which had failed in 1797. By this date both countries had, in general, consolidated their respective positions in Europe and overseas, and their domestic political establishments seemed more stable than earlier.

In exchange for recognizing French acquisition of Belgium and the Rhine frontier, of Nice and Savoy, and effective control of most of Italy, Holland, Spain and the implication of their overseas empires, Britain acquired Ceylon and Trinidad and right of access to the Cape of Good Hope.

Even by modern standards this would be considered a rather poor exchange in diplomatic power politics, but by eighteenth century standards the disparity seemed far greater. It must be noted, however, that the possession of Ceylon assured a strategic advantage in the Indian Ocean and the Coromandel Coast which confirmed the ascendancy on the sub-continent won in battle during the war. Trinidad was also considered an equivalent for French acquisition of the Spanish part of San Domingo.

In part, no doubt, the willingness of the British government to accept so unbalanced a peace was due to the wishes of the new Adding-

[a]*Ibid.*, F.O. 27/49, Grenville to Malmesbury no. 1, June 29. 1797.

ton administration. In part, it was due to the fact that nearly a decade of war had achieved no more than the defeat of Britain's allies, and the aggrandisement of the enemy. The desire to "try the experiment of the peace" was widespread. Most of all it was due to Bonaparte's conquest of Egypt. This gave the French a bargaining counter of tremendous importance, enabling them to exact colonial concessions from the British for its abandonment, while at the same time keeping their European position outside of the range of effective British bargaining. Contemporary French opinion may have overrated the potential value of Egypt as a colony, but its vital importance in Eastern strategy was nearly as important then as it is to-day. The British were as keen to get the French out of it as the French were anxious to stay. When finally compelled by British intransigeance to forego their new conquest the French exacted a very heavy price; but it was a price which the British were prepared to pay.

Fighting did not cease with the opening of peace pourparlers in London. On March 8, 1801, after negotiations had begun, British infantry stormed ashore in the face of heavy enemy fire at Aboukir Bay and began the campaign for Egypt. Troops were also gathered from Ceylon and India for a campaign from the Red Sea — the first enterprise for the Eastern part of the Empire in the Suez region which has played so large a role in British overseas engagements. Hawkesbury therefore carried on the negotiations with the understanding given to the French that "in the event of authentic intelligence being received previously to the signature of preliminaries of the evacuation of Egypt by the French forces, or a convention having been agreed to for that purpose, His Majesty will not adhere to the conditions . . . in their full extent."[4]

Doubtful of the outcome of the Egyptian campaign Hawkesbury yielded ground to Otto all during the summer of 1801 in order to secure by diplomacy a point which in fact was being won in battle. He relinquished the claims to Malta, Berbice, Demarara, Essequillo, Tobago and Martinique, which the British Government had originally demanded, in addition to Ceylon and Trinidad, as the price of peace. With a keener perception of the military prospects in Egypt, Bonaparte conjectured that Alexandria could not hold out past the third week of September, 1801. Anxious to capitalize on British concern about Egypt, the First Consul issued instructions to Otto on September 17 that the British must sign peace by October 2, or expect war. On October 1, still with no word on the fate of the Egyptian expedition, Hawkesbury signed the Preliminaries of London with Otto. "Les ordres du Premier Consul sont remplis; les preliminaires ont été signes . . . " wrote the French plenipotentiary to his chief in Paris.[5]

Eight hours later a courier arrived from Constantinople with dispatches from Egypt and the news that the last French garrison had surrendered to the British forces on August 27 preceding.[6] The under-secretary of state, Lord Jersey, informed Otto of the arrival of the

[4]Archives Etrangères, Angleterre, volume 594, Otto to Talleyrand" memorandum, 22 Germinal An 9.

[5]*Ibid.*, volume 596, Otto to Talleyrand, le 9 Vendémiaire An 10.

[6]*Ibid.*, volume 596, Otto to Talleyrand, le 10 Vandémiaire An 10.

Egyptian dispatches and said that had the news arrived the previous morning the terms of peace would not have been agreed upon.[7]

Nevertheless, an armistice had been made, and the wild scenes of rejoicing both in England and France proved how deep and heartfelt was the popular desire for peace on both sides of the Channel. Despite a determined and sustained diplomatic offensive on the part of the French to secure more favourable colonial terms in the negotiations at Amiens, (an attempt which nearly wrecked the frail fabric of peace) a definite treaty was eventually signed and ratified. The terms of the Peace at Amiens were essentially those reached in the Preliminaries of London.

Bonapart's influence, so great and decisive on the revolution in France and on the French position in Europe, was equally great in the overseas conflict with Britain. His conquest of Egypt had not only shown that France did not accept the verdict of British colonial triumph. It had also opened up a whole new realm of conflict in the Mediterranean Sea.

The whole of the negotiations for the Peace of Amiens and the uneasy year of peace which followed it were dominated by the fact that Bonaparte was ardently espousing the traditional colonial policies of France in America, Africa and Asia, and pressing the newer schemes in the Mediterranean. Little wonder that Britain resisted such a revival of French colonial pretensions when the exigencies of the moment compelled her tacitly to recognize in Europe the French settlement so un'-favourable to British interests and the balance of power. The French assumed that Britain could accept this exclusion from European concerns and at the same time recognize an uneasy and unstable equilibrium in colonial affairs in the face of continued French expansion both in Europe and overseas. Such a conclusion was mistaken. Yet this was precisely what Bonaparte tried to impose upon the British Empire.

The signposts along the road to war were marked by forward French actions in San Domingo, Valais, Helvetian and Batavian Republic, Piedmont, Parma, Elba, by the threat of occupying Algeria, and by the continued interest in Egypt and the Near East so dramatically publicized in the famous Sebastiani Report. When the French consolidated their European position and pressed their colonial aims, the British began to look to their colonial "equivalents". The only satisfactory equivalent for England was Malta, which stood squarely in the way of a forward colonial policy in the Mediterranean. In this way all the European colonial issues between France and England became focussed on the small Mediterranean island.

By the terms of the Treaty, the British garrison was to be evacuated, but every French action indicated to British eyes the danger of such a proceeding. "Whatever may be the resolution of the First Consul," wrote the British Ambassador in Paris, Lord Whitworth, to the Foreign Secretary, "we may be sure that his views on Egypt will not be abandoned. All his feelings are engaged in that object; . . . I do not hesitate to declare to your Lordship my most perfect conviction, that from the moment that His Majesty's troops are withdrawn [from Malta] we can no longer depend on the preservation of peace on any

[7]*Ibid.*

terms with this country, supposing that the occupation of Egypt by France is to be resisted . . . These reflections . . . will certainly go very far to justify an assertion however paradoxical it may appear, that the continuance of peace does not depend upon our fulfilling, under the present circumstances, the Treaty of Amiens, but on keeping in our hands those possessions, the immediate reoccupation of which by the French would force us into a war under every disadvantage, and for the doing of which we have sufficient justification in the conduct of the First Consul from the moment of the conclusion of the treaty to this very day."[8]

Bonaparte, meanwhile, was privately assuring Whitworth that he woud rather see the British in possession of the Faubourg St. Antoine than Malta, and publicly boasting that "the Government says, with conscious pride, that England alone cannot maintain the struggle against France."[9] He therefore argued that any refusal to evacuate Malta would be a breach of faith on the part of Great Britain, that the terms of the Peace of Amiens had been freely negotiated and accepted by both nations. His was an appeal to the traditional British sense of honour. Whitworth's views here enunciated (and these were the views which prevailed in British government circles) were realistic rather than idealistic: the British evacuation of Malta would be swiftly followed by French occupation of both it and Egypt; this would mean a resumption of war on unfavourable conditions. It was not practical politics to yield to the enemy places which had been conquered with great difficulty and which could be retaken only by similar exertions. It was a sad dilemma for the British government. Evacuation of Malta would entail war. Retention of Malta would entail war.

In an official Note to Talleyrand Lord Hawkesbury stated the whole British case and the necessity of equating English power overseas to French power in Europe. "His Majesty," wrote the Foreign Secretary, "has entertained a most sincere desire that the Treaty of Amiens might be executed in a full and complete manner; but it has been impossible for him . . . ; if the interference of the French government in the general affairs of Europe since that period [i.e. the signing of peace] ; if their interposition with respect to Switzerland and Holland, whose independence was guaranteed by them at the time of the conclusion of the Treaty of Peace; if the acquisitions which have been made by France in various quarters, but particularly those in Italy, have extended the territory and increased the power of France, His Majesty would be warranted, consistently with the spirit of the Treaty of Peace, in claiming equivalents for these acquisitions, as some counterpoise to the augmentation of the power of France."[10]

The refusal of either side to yield on the issue of the evacuation of Malta in due course led to war. The Treaty of Amiens had failed to secure or maintain the precarious balance between the two powers. The "experiment of the peace" had failed. Britain could not face without

[8]Public Record Office, F.O. 27/67, Whitworth to Hawkesbury, no. 11, February, 1803.
[9]*Annual Register*, 1803, Chapter V, 67.
[10]Archives Étrangères, Angleterre, volume 600, Note from Hawkesbury to Andréossy, March 15, 1803.

fighting the expansion of France either in Europe or overseas. France refused to be shackled by any British limitations in the hey-day of her expansion.

Three years later the British and French again sought to reach a balance in their respective positions in the peace negotiations of the summer of 1806. Trafalgar had established British naval and colonial supremacy beyond reasonable prospect of serious challenges. Napoleon had crushed Austria and Russia in the lightning stroke of Austerlitz and once more bound the Hapsburg Empire in the Peace of Pressburg.

Charles James Fox, the new British Foreign Secretary in the Ministry of All the Talents, wrote to Talleyrand, the French Foreign Secretary, suggesting peace negotiations between France, Britain and Russia. Talleyrand offered to negotiate separately but rejected the idea of Britain negotiating in concert with Russia. He claimed that British naval power was greater than all the rest of the world combined, yet Britain would allow no encroachments upon this colonial and naval preponderance. France was equally the most powerful country in Europe and saw no reason why, if Britain arrogated to herself alone such naval and colonial hegemony, France should allow her to interfere in matters of continental concern.[11]

This somewhat premptory French reply in fact set the tone of the ensuing negotiations. There was little real prospect of agreement. Sicily, then occupied by British troops, served as the principal bone of contention in much the same fashion as had Malta at an earlier stage. Various proposals for British control of overseas colonies to compensate for French expansion on the Continent were made and all were rejected. Towards the end of the negotiations the French sought to give force to the terms of peace they offered by threatening, if they were not met, to take over Austria, Spain and Portugal. The British government merely pointed out that such action would not be a serious blow to England, and threatened in retaliation to take over the transatlantic possessions of Spain and Portugal, in other words, the whole continent of South America. Nowhere is the extraordinary whirling of Anglo-French power rivalry better illustrated than in this instance. Unable to get at each other, the "centrifugal" forces drove France more and more to the complete possession of the continent of Europe, while the "centripetal" forces drove England more and more to acquire the world beyond Europe.

Although other attempts to open negotiations between the two countries were made later, the negotiations at Paris in 1806 were the last detailed discussions until the final collapse of Napoleonic France. During the negotiations at Chatillon in the spring of 1814, the French tried to link their colonial cessions to England with their continental concessions to other powers. In exchange for yielding colonies, France wanted compensation in Europe. Such an aim was widely at variance with the existing military and naval situation and the facts of power. The British government flatly rejected it. Nevertheless, Britain did restore a considerable part of the French Empire, so wrote Lord Liver-

[11]Public Record Office, F.O. 27/72, Talleyrand to Fox, le 1 avril, 1806.

pool, "for the sole purpose of improving the conditions of the continental peace."[12]

It would perhaps be presumptuous to claim that overseas colonies at that date in their development constituted for Britain a sufficient balance against the ascendancy which France acquired in Europe. Yet that was the ground on which colonial conquests were retained according to all the arguments of every British diplomatic servant who negotiated with the French during the long years of struggle. When the French position in Europe passed beyond the power of England to control or affect, such a development merely added weight to the British argument. This is amply illustrated in the final terms of peace actually reached at the end of the wars. French, Spanish and Dutch colonies held or claimed during the years of French continental ascendancy were returned without quibble when continental France was returned to her former limits and power. The colonial possessions which Britain retained, with several exceptions, after the Napoleonic wars were designed to strengthen the existing fabric of empire from a strategic point of view. The frantic search for British security could only be ended in Europe, where the main challenge arose. French defeat and restoration of the old power balance achieved this, and with it passed the necesity of trying to balance overseas colonies against European conquests.

[12]*Ibid.*, F.O. 37/66, Liverpool to Clancarty, January 21, 1814.