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200 Years After the Congress of Vienna

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An Evaluation of the Society of States Created in 1815 / 1816

The Congress of Vienna in 1815 was a landmark in the history of European international society. It introduced a novel method of diplomacy to the conventional balance of power concept of Europe. Balance of power politics before 1815 was power politics of confrontation. Its violent nature 'generated intolerable international tensions, produced increasingly serious armed conflicts, and inspired progressively extravagant plans of aggression' (Elrod 1976: 161). The pre-1815 concept of the balance of power was a pernicious one which did preserve neither peace nor stability (Ibid.). In this essay it will be argued that the development of congress diplomacy, the "Metternich system", in 1815 was an efficacious remedy which alleviated the harsh nature of Europe's eighteenth century balance of power. It elevated balance of power thinking to the next level where balancing acts did not rely on power anymore (Kissinger 1994). Instead, balancing acts were considered in reference to a moral equilibrium which repelled hegemonic and revisionist ambitions. This moral equilibrium was based on congress diplomacy among the great powers which bestowed upon them a common sense of responsibility for Europe (Elrod 1976, Osiander 1994). The development of congress diplomacy had therefore profound ramifications on the European society of states.

Congress diplomacy donates to diplomacy by congress or conference. In case of an international crisis the great powers of the nineteenth century convened and tried to work out 'European solutions to European problems' (Elrod 1976: 162). As soon as a European international issue arose, diplomats of the great powers approached each other and evaluated their colleagues' positions on the respective matter. The next step was a *pourparler* where statesmen further explored each others' standpoints which could then be officially discussed at an international conference. In addition to that statesmen and diplomats met regularly to manage each other's commitments in previously negotiated settlements. This was a revolutionary method of diplomacy. In the subsequent sections of this essay the nature of congress diplomacy will first be elaborated. Its roots from within the mayhem over territorial disputes caused by the Napoleonic wars will be highlighted. It will be argued that the Quadruple Alliance, comprised of Britain, Austria, Prussia and Russia, was the driving force for congress diplomacy. A thorough understanding of congress diplomacy is essential for understanding its profound ramifications on the European society of states from 1815 to 1853. This argument will be discussed in the second section. In the process of discussion it will become clear that the concept of congress diplomacy not only impinged on the society of states immediately after 1815, but that it also has strong contemporary currency.

The rise of the concept of congress diplomacy can be ascribed to various factors. Those factors have their roots not only in the developments at the end of the eighteenth century, but also in the proceedings occurring at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This has to be emphasized because the concept of congress diplomacy cannot be exclusively explained based on an ideological clash between conservatism on one side, and liberal radicalism resulting from the French Revolution on the other side. This ideological discord was only of minor concern for the Congress of Vienna between 1814 and 1815. Although ideological reservations due to the French Revolution and its liberal radicalism were of concern for especially the Austrian Foreign Minister Metternich (Kissinger 1964), at the heart of the Congress of Vienna were wide-spread territorial issues resulting from the mayhem caused by Napoleon's military conquests across the Continent (Osiander 1994) in the early nineteenth century. Engagement with those wide-spread territorial issues required a 'pan-European assembly' (Ibid: 168) which consisted of over 200 states, cities and associations. However, the members of relevance at the Congress of Vienna were the eight original

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signatories of the Treaty of Paris from May 1814 (*Ibid*). From those eight signatories only the four most powerful ones, the great powers of Europe, had significant decision-making power and directed the Congress behind closed doors. Austria, Russia, Prussia and Britain formed working groups and set the agenda. They constituted an exclusive group, a 'magic circle of the elite and powerful' (Elrod 1976: 167). Kissinger (1964) also highlights this exclusive setting of the Congress where the "Big Four" made decisions and then submitted them to France, Spain and the rest of the Congress for ratification. Within this "magic circle of the elite and powerful" a special sense of peer-community developed. This special sense of peer-community was characterized by the recognition of common responsibilities (Osiander 1994: 186; Clark 2007) as related to trans-European issues on the agenda of the Congress of Vienna. At the heart of that agenda were the territorial disputes over Poland and Saxony. This is juxtaposed with the common belief that the Congress of Vienna was exclusively an instrumental device by the Holy Alliance to contain France. France was of lesser concern. Britain, for instance, represented by Castlereagh, was far more concerned with Russia and its expansion into Europe (Kissinger 1964). In fact, Kissinger (1964) argues that at Vienna the threat of France was eclipsed by the danger from the East (148). In addition to that he argues that for Austria, represented by Metternich, it was of utmost importance that 'Prussian predominance was impossible' (147) in Germany and central Europe. Austria and Britain were in particular concerned with increasing Russian influence in Eastern Europe (Osiander 1994; Kissinger 1994) and Prussia's demands in Saxony. Therefore, they argued for a repartition of Poland among Russia, Prussia and Austria. At the same time Prussia should only receive a part of Saxony. The disagreements between Russia and Prussia on one side and Austria and Britain on the other side were so severe that war between the two parties became conceivable. Austria and Prussia therefore formed a secret alliance with France. This brought France into the inner circle of the Congress (Osiander 1994). In the end, Russia and Prussia grudgingly agreed to a repartition of Poland and Saxony. In addition to Poland and Saxony, further territorial disputes were settled. Russia, for instance, acquired Finland from Sweden, whereas Sweden acquired Norway from Denmark. The settlement of such territorial disputes revealed two characteristics of the relationship between the great powers: first, it disclosed the high level of cooperation and liaison necessary for solutions amenable for all great powers. Holistically accepted solutions could only be achieved through fruitful cooperation which took into account a variety of factors like the interest and prestige of each great power (Elrod 1976). Through this form of cooperation during the Conference of Vienna the great powers became used to working with each other closely together and at the same time respected each other. However, it also has to be taken into account that great power cooperation worked better when issues concerned lesser powers, instead of the great powers themselves (*Ibid.*). This became obvious during the territorial disputes over Poland and Saxony juxtaposed with the agreement over the perpetual neutrality of Switzerland. Second, it highlighted a great deal of common interests within European affairs among the great powers. According to Osiander (1994) this became obvious during the dispute over Poland and Saxony. He also cites Talleyrand who wrote in the preface of his memoirs that the interests of France are never contrary to the interests of Europe. Talleyrand also emphasized this in a letter to Metternich where he argued as related to the Saxon question that the interest of Austria and the interest of Germany coincide with the general interest of Europe (172). Talleyrand wrote a similar letter to Castlereagh arguing that the interests of Britain, France and Europe do coincide. Castlereagh did not deny Talleyrand's words in principle, as Elrod (1976) argues.

Appropriate steps taken by the former anti-Napoleon alliance as related to France arose only after the Final Act of the Congress of Vienna was signed on 9 June 1815. After Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo the territory of France was 'reduced to the frontiers of 1790' (Osiander 1994: 170). France was also occupied until 1818. Whereas concerns as related to an aggressive France under Napoleon have so far only been simmering and circulating in diplomatic mail – as for example in the official communication to the Russian Ambassador to London by the British Prime Minister William Pitt on 19 January 1805 (Webster 1921) – from the moment of Napoleon's return to Paris to his nemesis at Waterloo previous concerns over France were now publicly expressed among the great powers. France was considered as 'a chronically aggressive, inherently destabilizing power' (Kissinger 1994: 82). This perception revived the Holy Alliance, comprising Austria, Russia and Prussia. The chaos and incessant conflict caused by Napoleon developed within the Holy Alliance 'a culture and concept of international relations emphasizing restraint' (Black 2002: 236). It is reasonable to assume that this common sense for restraint was present before Napoleon's revival and prevented the Holy Alliance plus Britain from going to war over territorial disputes in Poland and Saxony during the Congress of Vienna.

However, it would be an erroneous assumption to claim that the Holy Alliance solely used its power at the Congress

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to contain France. Metternich was still willing to conclude peace with France in March 1814 and Austria in general was the country most willing to leave Napoleon in power (*Ibid.*). Although France was an issue of second-rank as territorial settlements with the Kingdom of Sardinia and the Austrian Netherlands showed, the key issues at Vienna were Poland and Saxony. Kissinger (1964) argues that Metternich and Castlereagh, the two architects of the post-1815 society of states, were less concerned with France than with territorial issues over Poland and Saxony. Especially as related to Metternich, he argues that what guided Metternich and his policies throughout his life was the idea that equilibrium among states within Europe had to be achieved which was not based on considerations of power. His second concern was that the power of France had to be curtailed within that equilibrium. However, a containment of an ostensibly aggressive state should not be based on the strength of the other actors of the international system but on their 'resolution to use it' (14). Actors' restraint of resorting to the use of their physical strength was at the heart of congress diplomacy.

Therefore, the peculiarity of the Congress of Vienna was the development of congress diplomacy. Congress diplomacy was a novel method of diplomacy embedded in the conventional balance of power setting. As outlined above, the Congress of Vienna facilitated the development of congress diplomacy for the following reasons: first, the procedural scheme of the Congress devised by the great powers Austria, Russia, Prussia and Britain (later France as well) instilled a special sense of peer-community in the group. This engendered recognition of shared responsibility for a common cause after the crusade of Napoleon. Second, the successful cooperation of the great powers in various, primarily territorial issues showed the high degree of interstate competences which included mutual respect for each other's interests and prestige. Third, also closely tied to the successful resolution of issues during the Congress was a relatively great deal of common interests. It was often the case that at least two, sometimes three actors had the same interests.

At this stage it can be concluded that congress diplomacy, which developed during the Congress of Vienna in 1815 was mainly contrived by Castlereagh and Metternich (Kissinger 1964). Whereas Castlereagh's primary objective was a physical balance of power, meticulously calculated on the basis of strength and territorial possessions, Metternich added the concept of a moral equilibrium, based on common interests, responsibility and mutual respect. Congress diplomacy comprised both of those aspects. Its very footing was Castlereagh's physical balance of power, a setting necessary for the moral equilibrium to work. It was primarily on the basis of balancing considerations that the great powers of Europe convened and resolved contentious issues peacefully. The "Metternich system", on the other side, disarmed the highly aggressive and orthodox balance of power concept inherited from the previous centuries. It forged a common sense of unity among the great powers based on the collective commitment to peaceful resolutions of arising issues. How this common sense of unity had its effects on the society of states after the Congress of Vienna will be discussed in the next section of this essay.

According to Bull (2002) 'a society of states (or international society) exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions' (13). Although different forms of international societies, especially religious ones, have existed before the Congress of Vienna, the concept of congress diplomacy made Europe, according to Bull's definition, between 1815 and 1853 the purest society of states until after the Second World War. The European society of states between 1815 and 1853, especially the great powers of Europe, were very conscious of certain common interests. The core of the Congress, the Quadruple Alliance, was previously united by their aim to defeat Napoleon, and later, after his return, to keep "the aggressor state" in check (Kissinger 1994). The Holy Alliance, Russia, Prussia and Austria, was united in their fear of the spread of the revolution. According to Kissinger (1994), Metternich was convinced that democracies were unstable, unpredictable and aggressive due to his experiences with France and Napoleon since the French Revolution. After the Congress of Vienna France developed an increasingly bellicose attitude towards the settlement and Russia and Austria were committed to preserve their conservative systems (Taylor 1954). Russia and Austria also, despite their quarrel over Poland, committed themselves to maintain the status quo in Turkey (Taylor 1954). And as argued above, Austria and Britain were united in opposing an advancing Russia into Eastern Europe, especially Poland, and an increasingly strong Prussia by annexing Saxony. The great powers were also bound by common values, despite the ideological rift between liberalism in the West and conservatism in the East. Bull (2002) argues that the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century witnessed a Europe overcoming an

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identification based on Christianity. The “new” Europe was identified as European, not as Christian anymore (see also Armstrong 1993). This was also the time when political theorists started to make explicit references to “Europe” in their works. Therefore, Bull argues for a rise of a European character of the society of states in the early nineteenth century.

However, although societies of states like the ancient Greek city-states or societies of peoples like those bound by a common religion with common interests and values have existed before, congress diplomacy introduced an unprecedented texture of an international society. Given the preconditions of common interests and common values, congress diplomacy instituted a new legitimacy to the European international system. After Napoleon’s defeat in Russia the international system was wrecked. It needed a new form of legitimacy which was not build on force. This was the ambitious aim of Metternich who argued ‘that legitimacy depends on acceptance, not imposition’ (Kissinger 1964: 21). For Metternich, a moral equilibrium among states within Europe had to be achieved which was able to curtail the power of France and ensure that ‘Prussian predominance was impossible’ (Kissinger 1964: 147). Therefore at Vienna Metternich advanced his idea ‘to achieve an international order based on agreement and not on force’ (160). For Clark (2007) the post-1815 international system whose legitimacy was based on agreement and consent was a regulative peace which settled the ‘role of the great powers, and the cognate development of the principles of a concert’ (87). He argues that at Vienna the old European logic of balance was paired with new arrangements to manage and restrain power. The management and restraint of power was achieved by regular meetings to maintain existing settlements (Clark 2007). Hinsley (1967) summarizes the procedural conventions of congress diplomacy as follows:

Great powers agreed to renew at fixed intervals...meetings for the purpose of consulting upon their common interests, and for the examination of the measures which at each of these epochs shall be considered most salutary for the repose and prosperity of the Nations and for the maintenance of the peace of Europe (Hinsley 1967: 194–5).

Congress diplomacy therefore achieved that the states of Europe after 1815 were ‘knit together by a sense of shared values’ (Kissinger 1994: 79) which in addition to the balance of power engendered a moral equilibrium which reduced the desire to apply force in international relations. For Armstrong (1993) this form of legitimacy, a legitimacy of consent, is a form of socialization in the society of states whereby states conform to the convention of the international society and whereby an increasing entanglement within an existing structure homogenizes states’ behaviour. Congress diplomacy achieved this increasing entanglement through regular meetings and the alignment of states’ interests and standpoints on certain issues. This engendered a form of association which transcended simple respect for sovereignty (Armstrong 1993) and engendered a society of states which was the cradle of modern-day international law where ‘treaties concluded by a government were binding upon its successors’ (Bull 2002: 34). Such a “second generation” international society gave rise to inter-state organizations like the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine, founded in 1815. For Armstrong (1993), this is what made the post-1815 society of states special: intensive diplomatic inter-state cooperation as the basis for governments’ permanent commitment to previously made concessions. Therefore the post-1815 society of states was an international society where promises of adherence to legal agreements and rules of conduct in international politics were grounded in general consent. This was achieved by Metternich’s congress diplomacy which deepened and intensified the society of states and therefore developed the post-Westphalian society to a “second generation” international society which has not existed before. The post-1815 society of states was an upgrade of the society of states which gradually arose after 1648 and the Peace of Westphalia and the cataclysmic events of the Napoleonic Wars. For Bull (2002) this second generation of an international society was tied together by certain principles like that all members have the same basic rights, that ‘obligations they undertake are reciprocal’, that ‘rules and institutions of international society derive from their consent’ (33) and that actors outside of Europe should be excluded from this international society. Despite considerable shocks to the post-1815 society of states by revolutions and war (Armstrong 1993) in 1848, 1853 – 1856, 1914 – 1918, and 1939 – 1945 Bull’s principles, sustained by congress diplomacy, are still vested in our contemporary European society of states, the “third generation” of an international society. Those contemporary shared values and principles in the European international society are put down in writing in each treaty from the Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951 to the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009. Furthermore, congress diplomacy is still the ultimate method of diplomacy. Within the Council of the European Union, for instance, Foreign Ministers of member states meet approximately once a month. One of the key remits of the Council is to

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coordinate member states' policies, whereas the Council deals with a plethora of issues like fishing quotas, the management of Europe's water resources, rules on inspections of vehicles, or the alignment of EU policies with its neighbour Russia in matters related to trade, energy policies or international conflicts like Syria. This form of congress diplomacy, where statesmen regularly meet to discuss each other's policies has its roots within the Congress of Vienna of 1814/1815 and the Metternich system of congress diplomacy.

It can be concluded that the society of states after the Congress of Vienna in 1814/1815 was one of increasingly intermeshing inter-state relationships and commitments where 'the idea of international society assumed a different form' (Bull 2002: 31). Congress diplomacy achieved that 'the preservation of a balance of power was elevated to the status of an objective consciously pursued by international society as a whole' (35). The development of congress diplomacy and its subsequent repercussion on the post-1815 international society could only be possible because the great powers of Europe at the Congress of Vienna realized a changing nature of inter-state relationships. They appreciated to share a common responsibility for Europe, learned to purposefully cooperated and respect each other in diplomatic negotiations, and recognized common interests, based on which the beforehand mentioned cooperation could be fruitful. Without this groundbreaking change taking place the "Metternich system could not have been possible. And without the development of congress diplomacy the post-1815 society would not have been as rewarding for contemporary times as it was.

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