

British Foreign Policy, 1689-1790: Origins, Aims and Dynamics

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Historically, the foundational principles and anatomy of 18th century British foreign policy are embedded within the broader, evolving international or "Great Power" system dating from the late 1400s—a system shaped in turn by the ever shifting power distributions between the core states it comprised, Britain (then England) included. This differentially expanding power, aided by improvements in governmental, fiscal and military organization had inevitable implications both for the units within the system and for the system per se: as member states expanded their productive potential, some portions of this growth and development were transposed to the systemic level, a process of adjustment consolidating the links between state action and the dynamics of the system as a whole.

Development of the western segment of the state systems increasingly encompassed northern and eastern Europe, as well as (via commercial links) the extra European world. The more frequent interaction of states throughout the century—in many more contexts, and with appreciably greater mutual effect from relatively lesser effort—resulted in greater potential for armed conflict in the pursuit of national interests and goals. In addition, the parallel expansion of armies, combined with improvements in military technology, and the greater efficiency of bureaucratic and fiscal agencies, better enabled states to mobilize their energies, and thus made warfare more likely both inside Europe and within the colonial sphere.

The same intensity of coexistence that fuelled interstate conflict likewise fostered the refinement of collaborative devices on a continental scale, notably diplomacy through an increase in the number of permanently resident ambassadors, and the growing effectiveness of the bureaucracies directing and

coordinating their work. Hence, in the century from 1689, the number of English diplomatic posts in foreign countries increased while, at home, the departments of state presiding over foreign affairs became more professionalized and more politically important. This institutional adaptation to the European collectivity of states was a symbol of underlying systemic unity and procedural consensus adapted to new political realities. Contacts with non-European states also became more frequent (though less common than within the Continent) and were often conducted by military figures, consuls, or agents of British commercial companies rather than diplomats accredited to the Crown, such as the Levant Company. Official concern with the dealings of these unofficial agents intensified, however the Crown lacked the understanding of indigenous cultural or ideological norms to take on this role itself. Colonial governance, in the last resort, rested on authoritarian notions of superiority, which paralleled the absolutist conventions of the Ancien Régime.

The growing integration of Europe with the trans-maritime realm during the century 1689-1790 came to provide the transformative context in which British foreign policy was designed and executed. For most of this period, rivalry with the Bourbons was a central guiding theme. From the years of warfare against Louis XIV emerged the basic structures of British imperialism: a dominant parliament as the nucleus of domestic politics; naval/fiscal expansion; agro/industrial production; and the Bank of England assuring economic mobilization and control. Henceforth, England became the axis from which economic change and progress would shape the forces

of the Industrial Revolution, which in the 19th century would sweep through Europe and then the world.

The French wars also fostered one of the major developments in European politics during the 18th century—namely, the increasing role of colonial issues in determining the priorities of European states. Struggle for overseas territory, hitherto largely separate from the great power clashes in Europe, gradually merged into an interactive network of hostilities embracing both colonizing nations and their dependencies.

England's rise to world empire entailed constantly shifting alliances and treaties, combined with flexible forms of selective continental intervention designed to check attempted French hegemony and thereby sustain an "equilibrium" of competing political forces: the so-called "balance of power." This concept, first mentioned by Charles Davenant in *Essays on the Balance of Power* (1701), reflected the growing tendency of diplomats to view Europe as a distinctive configuration of alignments based purely on state interest that could be measured, regulated, and transmuted into a balance which functioned with a mathematical precision analogous to the Newtonian solar system.

By the early 18th century, the balance of power concept had received extended study in England and became a presiding theme during the Spanish Succession War (1702-1714), and was explicitly put forth at the conferences leading to the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) that ended the war. Here, aside from registering England's maritime supremacy, Spanish possessions were divided for the express purpose of preserving the "balance," which was mentioned several times in the

agreement and referred to as "a fundamental and perpetual maxim." Power symmetry was also sought in economic matters, for example by the delegates regulating commerce and trade; when providing for the dismantling of Dunkirk (France's most formidable naval arsenal); and when arranging Anglo-French joint rights to the fisheries off Newfoundland.

After 1714, the importance of this balance was given added force during the reigns of George I and George II, whose Hanoverian connections fostered a policy of continental interventionism that became a chronic source of contention between crown ministers and parliament throughout the period. This was often accompanied by bitter, nationwide debates over broader foreign policy goals and priorities, such as: over the inter relationship between sea power and land war; over the primacy of naval versus military allocations; and over which strategy best served Britain's "true national" interests in wartime.

Predominant here were two opposing arguments, or schools of thought, which reflected respective party affiliations: Whig versus Tory. The Whigs advocated staunch British military commitment abroad as a vital prerequisite to the containment of France and thus imperial success. The Tories favored isolationism and vigorous naval operations as the key to national prosperity and strength, denying the need for European intervention or a standing army.

Protected by the Anglo-French alliance of 1716, Hanover remained relatively secure during the immediate aftermath of Utrecht, but became vulnerable when the alliance collapsed in 1730-1. Once again, England's continental involvement was necessary during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748), as well as during the Seven Years War

(1756-1763). This latter conflict witnessed the formulation of a "Grand Strategy" under the Pitt-Newcastle ministry (1756-1761)-one that adroitly harmonized the war's main theatres - Europe, North America and the high seas - in the realms of diplomacy, operations, and logistics. Within this integrative strategic scenario, war was a means of promoting commercial growth whilst seeking to achieve a military/diplomatic equilibrium as the essential condition for extending, and defending, trade. Land/sea cooperation, therefore, was both defensive and aggressive. It was defensive in Europe with the protection of Hanover, the coverage of Britain's coasts against invasion and the containment of France through continental diversions. It was aggressive across the oceans in the quest of imperial dominion.

Interventionism abated following the accession of George III-who was, at best, lukewarm to Hanoverian concerns-and under the ministry of the Tory "blue-water" enthusiast Lord Bute (1762-1763). Under fiscal and parliamentary pressures, Bute curtailed Britain's wartime European commitments and instead shifted greater allocations to overseas ventures, which were seemingly more relevant to the current national security needs.

The resultant marginality of the Hanoverian system persisted throughout the American crisis. However, defeat in America was not due to Britain's diplomatic isolation, or an inability to distract Bourbon resources by means of a continental diversion, but because of insuperable strategic difficulties in the colonies, exacerbated by military/naval mismanagement. Despite Britain's undeniably diminished stature after the American war, which resulted in part from an unwillingness to meet the demands of possible

European allies rather than the inability to secure such allies, the nation's unwavering focus on opposition to the French/Spanish crowns during the Revolutionary era centered primarily on colonial and naval rivalry, rather than continental intervention. Even Britain's actions against France under the Younger Pitt were based less on ideological grounds than on prewar concern with Bourbon power and ambitions. In other words, the outbreak of Anglo-French hostilities in 1793 must be seen as a continuation of the transoceanic contest earlier in the century, thus constituting a vital aspect of Britain's evolution as a colonial/maritime power with the capacity to shape global affairs.

Much of the daily narrative underpinning "the Balance of Power" can be discovered in the letterbooks and dispatches now in the State Papers series SP 105 "Archives of British Legations".^[1] The bulk of them are the papers of the Levant Company but also found here are diplomats', commissioners' or agents' letterbooks and other papers documenting British diplomatic missions throughout Europe including the Holy Roman Empire.^[2] For example, the series includes the memoranda and letter books of diplomat and poet Matthew Prior, who acted as plenipotentiary at Utrecht. Prior's papers, dating from 1712- 1715, offer a valuable record of the Paris peace negotiations (SP 105/27-29). This material is supplemented by the Letter Books of the Secretary of State, documenting the Peace Negotiations at Utrecht (1713-1714) and the peace negotiations with Spain (1711- 1714) (SP 105/264 and SP 105/269-270). Elsewhere in the series, details of England's weakening alliance with France (1717), and the role played by Spain and Italy in worsening relations between England and Austria, can be found in the 1724-

1725 correspondence of Lord Polwarth and Whitworth during the negotiations at Cambrai (SP 105/30-31).

The SP 105 series also offers valuable accounts of the commercial and trade negotiations of the era. For example, the papers include the out-letter book of Ralph Woodford, who served as envoy extra ordinary to Denmark from 1772-1774, and whose correspondence is an important source for the study of Anglo, Danish, and Swedish commercial relations in the period (SP 105/2). An account of the attempts to develop English trade and settle commercial differences with Austria and the Austrian Netherlands, can also be found in the Letter Book of Samuel Tufnell MP (1737-1740), who was sent as a delegate to Antwerp (SP 105/19).

Finally, of the many letterbooks and documents contained in SP 105, some of the most notable are of course the Levant Company papers, which mainly concern the Crown; diplomatic agents at Constantinople; trading issues (1590-1804); jurisdictional disputes; and issues of piracy (see SP 105/116- 217B). Until 1804, the company paid envoy salaries and emphasized mercantile tasks over purely political services, which explains the predominant emphasis in the papers on defending economic interests. However, Company assignments that fell within the strictly political realm increased by the 1700s, which illustrates the multifaceted character of British diplomacy at this time and the broadening zones of interaction.

Thus, these State Papers offer a valuable body of source material for studying the shifting origins, aims, and dynamics of British foreign policy between 1689 and 1790. Studied together, this material underlines the volatility, if not vulnerability, of international

arrangements in a dynastic age, and illuminates the trajectory of Europe's diplomatic strategies throughout the 18th Century.

NOTES

^[1] This series, which is organized by type or format of record, contains vital material that does not appear in the main State Papers Foreign series (classified by region or country). As these documents were sorted long ago, by the government department responsible for record transfers, the National Archives has no record of the criteria governing their selections. Custodians at Kew believe they were not chosen systematically but on the basis of "an arbitrary quota system." The papers appear to have been among those state papers which a commission, appointed on July 16, 1764, was to have calendared and indexed, but that were merely haphazardly sorted and resorted. This Body was revoked in 1800 and 25 years later, a new Commission was formed under whose auspices many of the most important documents were selected and printed, though none belonging to SP105. In 1852, the State Papers were placed under the supervision of the Master of Rolls and a regular system of calendars and guides was established. See *Guide to the Contents of the Public Record Office* (vol. II) (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1963), pp. 2-3; Communication from Neil G. Cobbett, www.nationalarchives.gov.uk.

^[2] Here can be found four letterbooks of Samuel Tufnell MP, John Drummond MP and Onslow Burrish, commissioners to the conference at Antwerp covering the mission to Antwerp from 1737 to 1744; two letterbooks of Colonel John Armstrong, Colonel Thomas Lascelles, and Joseph Day on the demolition of the fortifications of Dunkirk 1728-1740; three letterbooks (1771-1781) from the envoy extraordinaries to Denmark, Ralph Woodford and then Morton Eden; four memoranda and letterbooks covering France from 1712-1725 and one for Colonel John Blaquiere, secretary of the embassy at Paris, with the secretary of state, for the year September 1771 to September 1772; two further letterbooks of Onslow Burrish covering his missions to the German states, Bonn, Mayence, Nuremberg, Surnefurth, Anspach, Frankfurt, Ulm, Munich in 1745 and 1746; 16 books covering the Holy Roman Empire belonging to the ministers to Bavaria and the Imperial Diet, or chargé d'affairs to Munich; and 51 letterbooks covering Tuscany most belonging to Sir Horace Mann, resident minister to the court of Tuscany as well as some volumes of draft dispatches from Philip von Stosch at Florence to the secretary of state, concerning the movement of the Old Pretender and the Jacobite court at Rome. The largest section of documents in this series is made up of the papers of the Levant Company - 82 letterbooks, registers of the Chancery and account books of the treasurer at Constantinople, registers of the Cancellaria at Smyrna, order books, account books and letterbooks of the Secretary of State on various peace negotiations.

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