British Foreign Policy During the Seven Years’ War (1749-63)

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Both before and during the Seven Years' War (1756-63), British foreign policy primarily reflected a strategic rivalry with France. The two powers confronted each other during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48), but British leaders extended the contest into peacetime. British diplomatic activity made France appear weaker around the globe and isolated in Europe by 1752, but crucial missteps soon undermined both the peace and Britain’s international standing. By 1756, a dramatic reversal of alliances caused contemporaries to proclaim a diplomatic revolution. With allies limited to Prussia, Hanover and a few smaller German states, British policy also shifted from extensive alliance diplomacy to limiting their own commitments. Ministers sold the public on “winning America in Germany,” but Anglo-Spanish and Anglo-Prussian relations suffered as Britain triumphed in the Atlantic World. By 1763, the Treaty of Paris formalized the largest territorial transfer of the early modern era—mostly at French expense—while that of Hubertusburg marked the start of Britain’s era of “splendid isolation.”

I.

From 1713 to 1744, the Anglo-French rivalry lay dormant, yet Robert Walpole’s fall and the War of the Austrian Succession combined to reawaken it. Thomas Pelham-Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle emerged from Walpole’s shadow as Britain’s leading foreign policy voice by the mid-1740s, as British and French forces came increasingly into contact. His antigallican streak mirrored the British public’s, following George II’s victory against the French at Dettingen (1743), British colonists’ conquest of Louisbourg, and Hanoverian triumph over the last major Jacobite Rebellion (both 1745-46). During wartime, Newcastle sought continuously to focus his Austrian, Dutch and Sardinian allies against France. During and after the peace negotiations, he sought to contain French ambitions. By 1752, his initiatives had apparently won success overseas and brought much of Europe into alignment with British aims, but his achievement was illusory: its collapse triggered the Diplomatic Revolution of 1756, and ultimately the Seven Years’ War.

The Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle ended the War of the Austrian Succession in 1748, but conflated European and colonial issues, and neglected new realities in Northern and Eastern Europe. Parisian wits mocked it with a new phrase: bête comme la paix. Particularly “stupid” from their perspective was Louis XV’s consent to exile his popular ally and guest, the Jacobite Prince Charles Edward Stuart. British agents eagerly tracked the prince’s whereabouts, and pursued rumours that the neutral island of Tobago had been deeded to French general Maurice de Saxe. Meanwhile, the London Gazette advertised the new settlement at Halifax, which would soon tilt the ethnic and military balance in Nova Scotia in favour of British immigrants. Newcastle and his allies, in short, pursued peace on British terms. That pursuit even exceeded the written scope of the treaty. Anglo-Prussian ties briefly warmed with Henry Legge’s mission in 1748, but the disgrace of French envoy Count Jean Armand de l’Estocq heralded an even greater triumph for Britain’s position in St. Petersburg. A Russo-Prussian-Swedish war scare known as the Northern Crisis invited possibilities for British intervention, yet Newcastle instructed envoys Robert Keith and John Carmichael, 3rd Earl Hyndford, to dampen his allies’ enthusiasm for war. The crisis abated with Britain’s limited accession to the Austro-Russian alliance in October 1750, but Newcastle observed of French subsidy treaties in the Baltic:
“France has now wisely found out, that a little money well applied in peace may save millions in war, (and) enable them to continue a peace, or begin a new war... whenever her interest, or her ambition, shall incline her to it.”

He sought to answer this threat with his own scheme in Germany. He took an idea from Charles Hanbury Williams, his envoy in Saxony, to build a league of German princes around the election of Austria’s Archduke Joseph as King of the Romans, or heir-apparent as Holy Roman Emperor. Votes from Austria (Bohemia) and George II’s Electorate of Hanover would be automatic, and with Anglo-Dutch funds and backing from Austrian and Russian troops, Newcastle anticipated a coalition featuring Bavaria, Cologne and Saxony. Needing only Trier and Mainz for a super-majority, he foresaw a pliant Prussia and a quiet, isolated France. By 1753, Franco-Prussian strains were evident even in London, yet Newcastle failed to address broader concerns about British meddling in German politics, and fears of Prussian aggression ultimately ended serious thought about an early Imperial election.

The Election Plan was, however, only the centerpiece of a larger effort. Commodore Augustus Keppel renewed treaties with the Barbary States in 1751, while British ambassador to Spain Benjamin Keene capitalized on the friendly attitude of Spain’s King Ferdinand VI. A treaty in October 1750 greatly reduced tensions over the Asiento and Gibraltar, and British diplomats aided Spanish reconciliation with Sardinia and Austria, sealed by the 1752 Treaty of Aranjuez. British ascendency in India also seemed assured after victory at Arcot, British settlers and traders advanced in several regions of North America, and British mariners and commissaries kept vigilant against French settlements in West Africa and the Caribbean.

Deadlock in Europe and fluidity overseas undermined the apparent British triumph. Keith could not seal the Imperial Election, Anglo-Dutch talks stalled on troops in the Austrian Netherlands, and new French forts panicked Anglo-American colonists. Instructions of 28 August 1753 called for a vigorous colonial defense, but all efforts failed in 1754 while Newcastle’s position weakened at home. British hopes rose in March 1755, as Austrian State Chancellor Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz requested direct Anglo-Russian talks. Williams took up the task in April, and concluded a treaty in September for £100,000 in peacetime subsidies, £500,000 for wartime. Yet Frederick II of Prussia sought to end Anglo-Prussian tensions, and concluded a convention of neutrality at Westminster, signed 16 January 1756. Both sides believed they had allayed their partners’ concerns; in fact, they had laid the groundwork for a reversal of European alliances.

The Diplomatic Revolution of 1756 is often remarked for the sudden emergence of new coalitions, particularly the Austro-French alliance. The two powers announced the First Treaty of Versailles in June, stunning contemporaries with the news, in effect, of British and Prussian isolation. Newcastle proposed one last scheme: a vast counter-coalition. Joseph Yorke answered from The Hague that Britain had more to gain from watching, waiting, and building an alliance with Prussia.

The Anglo-Prussian alliance was not yet secure, but was quickly becoming so. In May, Frederick welcomed the British envoy Andrew Mitchell and the opportunity for closer ties. As the Treaty of Versailles became
known, he anticipated Yorke’s insights about reducing British commitments, and he took British advice to clarify Austrian intentions before starting his own war.²⁰ British and Prussian envoys worked together in Vienna as early as February, and Frederick advised the British in May of a new French envoy in St. Petersburg.²¹ By August, Walter Titley received orders to work with Johann August von Haessler, his Prussian counterpart in Copenhagen, and to use the three states’ shared official Protestantism as a pretext for closer ties.²² Finally, commenting on Frederick’s invasion of Saxony in September, Northern Secretary Robert d’Arcy, ⁴th Earl Holdernesse, accurately represented Britain’s new diplomatic position: “There is nothing left for us but to wish success to our ally.”²³

II.

Entering the Seven Years’ War, British alliances were more informal than official, resting heavily on Prussia and a treaty with Hesse-Cassel signed in 1755.²⁴ The war effort stalled until 1757, enabling Prussia and Hanover to emerge as key partners; yet despite the collapse of Newcastle’s ministry, the focus on France remained. Pitt’s addition to the ministry added new energy to the war effort, and a major turn in British policy away from Europe and toward the Atlantic World.

The war’s expansion brought numerous reverses by 1756. German mercenaries came to protect England from invasion; the navy failed at Minorca; British colonists felt threatened from Calcutta to the Carolinas.²⁵ The government collapsed at year’s end, forcing Frederick to wait six months before the Pitt-Newcastle ministry took office.²⁶ The king had lost at Kolín by then; blunders in western Germany ended in a convention of neutrality; atrocities at Fort William

Henry highlighted imminent threats to the American colonies.²⁶ Prussian triumphs at Rosbach and Leuthen arguably saved the entire war effort late in 1757, and spurred serious reconsideration of Britain’s role in the German theatre.²⁷

Foremost among Britain’s commitments was the Prussian alliance itself, undergirding Pitt’s vision of “winning America in Germany.” Joseph Yorke and the Prussian Baron Heinrich Dodo von Knypausen joined talks for an official treaty, signed 11 April 1758, featuring a wartime subsidy of £670,000 per year.²⁸ Meanwhile, British leaders nullified Hanover’s neutrality and remobilized “His Britannic Majesty’s Army in Germany,” with all but 5,000 electoral troops funded from British coffers. Frederick offered some cavalry and a new commander for the army—Prince Ferdinand of Brunswick—and British soldiers entered the theatre through Emden in Prussian Ostfriesland.²⁹ British ministers kept a regular correspondence with Prince Ferdinand throughout his campaigns, and Anglo-Prussian relations arguably peaked with a marriage proposal for Frederick’s nephew, the future King Frederick Wilhelm II, in November 1759.³⁰ Behind the lines, British diplomats played vital roles in espionage and secret missions, alongside their public functions. James Hollford monitored the war from Genoa, and Onslow Burrish sent early reports from southern Germany; amid failing Anglo-Austrian relations, Robert Keith forwarded copies of the Vienna Gazette; George Cressener forwarded intelligence and intercepted mail from Cologne and later Maastricht; Dutch agents under the names of Marteville and Wilkinson offered information from Sweden.³¹ James Porter welcomed the Prussian agents Albert Friedrich de Varenne and Karl Adolf von
Rexin in Constantinople; Samuel von Cocceji worked with several British envoys in Italy; James Murray helped Frederick to commission privateers in Venice. Diplomatic intercepts from London fill another 28 volumes of the State Papers. And while diplomatic orders in Northern Europe trumpeted the “Protestant Cause,” British diplomats in the south briefly sought military aid from Sardinia, and worked more broadly to unite Catholic Spain, Naples, Sardinia and even Venice in their opposition to France and Austria.

More generally, however, British agents sought to limit the war. Frederick appeared at several points to release his British allies for their war on France, and British ministers and envoys duly broke common cause. Despite welcoming Prussian agents, Porter remained skeptical of Ottoman intervention; despite the Russo-Prussian war, British agents favored trade with St. Petersburg over Prussian requests for ships in the Baltic. Pitt’s revitalization of Britain’s war effort galvanized privateers, yet he worked both diplomatically and within the Admiralty to contain their excesses, not least against Spain. Despite what Newcastle dubbed a “glorious reinforcement” in 1760, with British troops in Germany reaching a total of 22,000, the overall effort increasingly focused on naval and colonial operations. British planners likely could not have anticipated the effects of their triumphs overseas, but damage to French finances by 1760 had visible consequences for the fighting in Central Europe.

British victories also affected peace negotiations, beyond the desire of the young King George III to end the war. Already in 1759, there was no question of Britain being senior partner in the alliance, while Prussia struggled to survive. That struggle nearly ended in 1761 as Russian troops seized Kolberg and the Austrians took Schweidnitz; yet at the start of 1762, the death of Czarina Elizabeth and Spain’s entry into the war suddenly reversed the trend. Despite the best efforts of John Stuart, 4th Earl Bute, who took over leadership from Pitt and Newcastle in 1761-62, Frederick denounced all attempts to renegotiate the British tie, set his diplomats to sabotage the new ministry, and closed ranks with St. Petersburg. The war finally ended with two separate treaties, early in 1763. That of Paris was remarkable for the scale of French territorial concessions; that of Hubertusburg mandated among its Prussian, Saxon and Austrian signatories a rarity in eighteenth century diplomacy—a return to the status quo ante bellum. Britain ended the Seven Years’ War in “splendid isolation”: lacking strong diplomatic ties all across Europe, and eminently triumphant over a defeated but vengeful France.

ENDNOTES


[3] London Gazette, nos. 8829-8839; see also TNA CO 5/6

[4] TNA SP 90/64


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