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Why was the Congress system so short lived

In the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars and the Vienna settlement of 1815, the Great Powers of Europe continued to meet together. The purpose of these meetings was somewhat obscure. In the Treaty of Alliance and Friendship, Article IV, Lord Castlereagh makes a vague reference to future meetings:

"...the High Contracting parties have agreed to renew their meeting at fixed periods...for the purpose of consulting upon...the maintenance of the peace of Europe"

Castlereagh, unwilling to commit Britain to a 'Congress system', appears to have made the only document agreeing on such a system intentionally vague. If a purpose can be drawn from this document it appears to be that the Great Powers agreed to consult upon common interests, more particularly to ensure France did not threaten the peace of Europe (this was effectively dealt with after the conference of Aix-la-Chapelle), and to maintain the balance of power agreed in the Vienna settlement.

The vague nature of the Treaty caused many problems that may well have been averted. Almost from the signing of the 1815 treaty, deep divisions emerged within the former wartime alliance. Essentially, with the removal of the common enemy, each power began to work for their own national interest rather than for the peace of Europe. Even the Treaty of Vienna brought the Great Powers to the brink of war over issue such as Russian domination of Poland and Prussian possession of Saxony, this land grabbing was a sign of things to come.

The inclusion of France in a so-called Quintuple Alliance in 1818 at Aix-la-Chapelle further deepened the divisions between the powers. In the years that ensued, Britain and Russia embarked upon a contest to fill the power-vacuum left by the collapse of French hegemony, Britain backed by Austria and Russia with the support of Prussia and France. This resulted in the allied powers becoming increasingly split into two opposing camps, each fighting for the dominant influence in post war affairs.

There were clear conflicting interests between the two sides, for Britain peace meant a prosperous economy, and Austria provided the central-anchor of the newly constructed Europe guarding against the threat from east and west. This commonality of interest brought about increasing Anglo-Austrian cooperation. Metternich, however, frightened of a Franco-Russian alliance, tried to maintain good relations with Russia.

Russia, suspicious of Anglo-Austrian cooperation and resentful at Britain's attempt to keep a check on Russian power whilst advancing her own naval supremacy, looked increasingly towards France to help break their control of the alliance. France, desperate to end her period of isolation, saw an opportunity to link the two greatest European military forces that could in turn be directed against Britain. Even at this early stage it proved near impossible to achieve a commonality of interest between the Great Powers, and in later years, it was to be the conflict between national interests and the peace of Europe that was to tear the alliance apart.

The conflict of interest between the powers continued at the conferences of Troppau and Laibach in 1820 and 1821 respectively. However, these conferences saw a change in the alliances but continued conflict of interest. In the years 1818-20, nationalist and liberalist revolutions had compounded Metternich's problems in Europe. An uprising in Spain

triggered mutiny among the army. Attempts were made to re-instate the liberal constitution of 1812. The rebellion proved successful and news of the success inspired other uprisings in areas such as Piedmont, Naples and Portugal. Metternich, at the head of an empire made up of diverse national groupings saw the revolutions as a threat to the security of the Habsburg monarchy. Although he was prepared to ally with Britain to thwart Russian ambitions in Spain, as the revolutions spread to Italy he looked elsewhere for support. He found an ally in Alexander who was similarly concerned by the spread of French liberalism.

It was this split between the Great Powers that was to prove decisive in the break down of the Congress system. Britain, as expressed by Castlereagh in his State Paper of 1820, was quite content for Austria to act in Italy on her own authority, but not with the authority of the alliance. Britain, as a liberal monarchy, was not prepared to suppress other liberal monarchies emerging on the continent. The result was that Britain only sent observers to the Troppau and Laibach conferences in 1820-21 and France, torn between her friendship with the Eastern powers and her desire not to alienate Britain, followed suit.

In their absence, Metternich was able to consult with Alexander I in private, and, through his brilliant personal skills, influence Alexander's somewhat malleable opinions. The results were the 'Troppau Protocol' and a degeneration of Franco-Russian relations. The former allowed resulted in Britain becoming increasingly isolated from the affairs of Europe, the latter in creating a widening gap between the Eastern and Western powers.

It could be said that the Congress system died at Troppau. The policy laid out so clearly in the State Paper by Lord Castlereagh left Britain little room to manoeuvre. Indeed, from this point onwards, common ground between the Great Powers began rapidly to evaporate. It was essentially a difference of opinion on what constituted the 'peace of Europe' that split the powers. The liberal monarchies of Britain and France, although willing to tolerate intervention by Austria in Italy to protect her own national interest, were not prepared to condone allied intervention when they did not consider the peace of Europe to be threatened.

However, despite the clear splits emerging between the powers, there were still a strong enough relationship between Metternich and his 'other self', Lord Castlereagh to prevent Britain leaving the alliance as Castlereagh threatened. Although relations were stretched to their limits, the ties of friendship and mutual understanding between Castlereagh and Metternich prevented the alliance from disintergrating. In addition, some credit must be given both to Metternich's diplomacy and to the fact that in suited Britain's national interests to remain involved in Europe, at least nominally at this point, in order to exercise some influence over European events.

Castlereagh's decision to remain a member of the alliance was to prove crutial in the months that followed Laibach. The Greek revolt against their Turkish masters unearthed a growing problem. Both Metternich and Castlereagh were concerned for different reasons. Castlereagh was worried that if Russia was to support her fellow Othodox Christians against their Moslem masters, the 'sick man of Europe', the Ottoman empire, might die leaving a power vacuum in the Balkans. This constituted a very real threat to the peace of Europe, an expanding Russia would be more difficult to negotiate with. Metternich, however, cared little for the Greeks and was far more concerned with maintaining the Troppau Protocol, action in support of the Greek revolt by Russia would weaken the Eastern Powers anti-revolutionary stance. The result was that despite differing reasons for acting, the Anglo-Austrian alliance was renewed out of necessity. However, there was no harmony of interest, the alliance simply showed that the ties between Metternich and Castlereagh were still strong enough to sustain cooperation.

Russia caused further problems when revolution in Spain developed into civil war. Alexander proposed sending Russian troops to the Iberian peninsula and the prospect of a Russian army marching through Europe appealed neither to Castlereagh nor Metternich. The Congress of Verona was called in 1922 to discuss these issues. It was here that the Congress system disintergrated. Canning, who had replaced Castlereagh as foreign secretary, instructed the Duke of Wellington 'come what may'[1] Britain would not condone intervention in Spain in the name of the alliance. This policy left little room for negotiation and marked Britain's withdrawal from the Congress system. French intervention in Spain and Russian intervention in Greece was the end result. Metternich's system of European diplomacy had failed.

In one sense, Canning simply maintained the line laid out in the State Paper of 1820 in his early foreign policy. However, one cannot help but feel that had Castlereagh not commited suicide in 1822 the Congress system would not have come to such an abrupt end. In the light of recent negotiations, Castlereagh and Metternich appeared still able to find common ground. Castlereagh had built up relationships with other statesmen through personality and circumstance. The introduction of Canning simply introduced a new personality without the history of circumstance. The accession of a new Tsar further worsened the problem.

Although the Congress system was short lived, when the differing aims and objectives of the five major powers are considered it is perhaps surprising that the Congress system lasted as long as it did. The so-called system was held together by the friendly relationships that had been built up in the years of the Napoleonic wars. There was an understanding between Castlereagh, Metternich and Alexander that was broken by Castlereagh's suicide and Nicholas' accession to the throne and it was essentially the change of personnel that brought an abrupt end to the Congress system and made it much shorter lived than it otherwise might have been. Although the Congress system was inevitably doomed to fail, it could have lasted much longer had the long cultivated relationships remained unbroken.

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[1]Taken from instructions from Canning to Wellington, 27th September 1822, quoted in Harold Temperley 'The Foreign policy of Canning' (1825)