



III

The Balance of Power



BY THE HISTORIC DEVICES OF TERRITORIAL CONQUEST AND military alliances, foreign policy has long operated so as to reduce the number of petty conflicts between small states. But simultaneously there has been an increase in the intensity and destructiveness of such wars as have occurred.

The progress of science, bringing an enormous development in the lethal quality of weapons, is of course the obvious reason why war has become so much more destructive. But it is not the only, nor indeed the underlying, reason.

Wars become more destructive, independent of the character of weapons, as the sovereigns arrayed against each other become more powerful and more determined to eliminate a deadly rival. This tendency, rendered far more frightful by the application of scientific knowledge to warfare, is one with which foreign policy has not yet learned how to deal. No reliable solution has been found by following the theory of collective action against an aggressor state.

As we shall see in subsequent chapters, neither the League of Nations nor the United Nations squarely faced the problem of restraining a powerful aggressor. The organic law of both these world organizations opti-

mistically anticipated that the "Great Powers", to which special constitutional privileges were given, would never be aggressors. It was assumed, with very little historical justification, that wars are customarily started by weak nations, and that the more powerful "peace-loving" nations are then reluctantly drawn in.

Therefore, both the League and U.N. concentrated on procedures whereby a few powerful nations could combine to repress disturbances between small states. Neither organization was constituted to confront the flouting of its will by a Great Power, as Japan in the case of the League and Russia in the case of U.N.

World War I of course did have as its proximate cause aggressive action emanating from a small state. The "overt act" was the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand by two Serb nationalists, on June 28, 1914. The consequent Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to Serbia then led in rapid sequence to the Russian mobilization against Austria, to the German ultimatum to Russia, and then to war between the Dual Alliance, of Germany and Austria, and the Triple Entente of Russia, France and Great Britain.

It is now generally realized, however, that the underlying cause of World War I was not Serbian nationalism, but the deep-rooted rivalry between Germany and Russia in which little Serbia—no longer even existent—merely played the role of pawn. The Austrian annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908 was supported by Germany and would probably have been followed in 1914 by seizure of Serbia itself, had Russia not intervened in behalf of its small Slavic protégé. The Czar did

intervene, because he was certain of French support, under existing alliances, if Germany supported Austria against Russia, as Germany was pledged to do.

World War I came because Europe had been polarized into two camps, creating an explosive situation in which the assassination at Sarajevo was shocking enough to cause detonation. Many volumes have been written to prove, and to deny, that the megalomania of Kaiser Wilhelm, the Balkan intrigues of Czarist Russia, and other important secondary factors, led to war in 1914. Whatever the measure of truth in each and all of these conflicting contentions, it is reasonable to assert that the polarization of Europe really made the disastrous conflict inevitable.

The European alliance system reached a dead-end when it had divided most of that continent into two evenly-balanced hostile camps. The device of annexation ceased to reduce, and instead served to precipitate, conflict after the alliance system made attempts at annexation a *casus belli*. Foreign policy then had no alternative to war, the more so because the English method of balance-of-power had lost its efficacy. This method, because of its ingenuity and long success, will be examined in this chapter. But it is necessary to consider first the tendency towards political polarization, so pronounced today, and so prevalent throughout history, that one is inclined to regard it as a law of politics.

2.

CERTAINLY the tendency towards polarization—leading to a culminating conflict between two Great Powers—was as operative in the ancient world as it is now. In spite of the additional intensity provided by hostile economic and moral viewpoints there is nothing essentially novel or unprecedented in the antagonism between the United States and Soviet Russia. History shows other pairs of supreme rivals contesting for supremacy throughout the area open to their respective foreign policies.

In the Fifth Century B.C., Western civilization was concentrated at the far end of the Mediterranean Sea. This area was successfully defended by the Greeks against the Persians and other Eastern peoples with a lower cultural development. But the genius of Athens proved unable to solve the problems of foreign policy. It drifted into what proved to be a suicidal war with Sparta.

When Athens and Sparta both went under, together with all their allies, Rome and Carthage replaced them as protagonists on a larger stage, including the entire Mediterranean Basin. The tendency towards polarization continued to operate. Each of the giants of that day sought by aggrandizement and alliances to develop its strength for a showdown with the other.

The fight *à l'outrance* came in the three Punic Wars, which raged, with uneasy intervals of peace, from 264

to 202 B.C. "*Carthago delenda est*", said Cato at the close of every speech he made in the Roman Senate. Finally Carthage *was* utterly destroyed as a sovereign power and Rome went on to other conquests.

But all historians seem to agree that the fiber of Rome was weakened, and the seeds of its eventual downfall planted, by the overstrain, and consequent social and political demoralization, of the Punic Wars. The institutions that had served Rome well as a city-state were neither suited, nor were they ever adequately developed, to support the imperial role with permanent success.

Thoughtful students of foreign policy have long brooded over these two essentially similar catastrophes. They provide substantial evidence that the certain consequence of political consolidation, by conquest and alliance, is to produce two supreme rivals within the area in which rivalry can be effectively exercised. Common sense alone would tell us that if one Great Power feels it necessary to build its strength against the other, the latter will react in like manner. The area of neutrality diminishes as that of antagonism expands. Finally the ultimate showdown becomes inevitable.

It is further strongly indicated, if not proven, that when polarization is followed by explosion, the sovereign that appears to conquer is as definitely doomed as the sovereign that is vanquished.

3.

AFTER the exhausted quiescence of the dark ages, states that still exist as world powers began to emerge and acquire national in place of feudal form.

Of all these European people the English have proved politically the most successful, not merely in the generally peaceful ordering of their domestic affairs, but even more so in a foreign policy that enabled a small island, with few natural resources, to spread its influence, prestige and governing skill around the globe.

That the English success was due in very large measure to the doctrine of the Balance of Power is unquestionable. To this simple yet brilliant theory of foreign policy, more than to any other single factor, the British Empire owes the long duration and the great success of its supremacy.

The doctrine of the Balance of Power is simple because it is based on an obvious physical premise. This says that if two forces of approximately equal strength are in opposition, then a third force, though weaker than either of the others, can determine the outcome by application of its strength. It is apparent that this doctrine tends to delay the tendency towards polarization. But it must be continuously applied in order to nullify that tendency.

The brilliance of the Balance of Power doctrine lies in the subtle consideration as to which of the two more powerful forces the third, and lesser, should support.

If X is slightly stronger than Y, then Z can assure the triumph of X by joining it. X + Z will then be much stronger than Y, even though Z puts little weight in the scales.

In that case, however, Z will subordinate itself to X. The rulers of X will regard Z as a dependent and will dominate it not merely during the struggle with Y but even more so after Y is overcome and no longer threatens.

Therefore, according to the Balance of Power doctrine, Z should throw its weight into the scales *against* the stronger and *with* the weaker of the two rival Powers. In doing so, Z need only be sure that its military strength is somewhat greater than the difference between X and Y.

Thus, if X has 500,000 soldiers and Y 400,000, Z, maintaining an army of, say, 250,000 will nevertheless give Y + Z a reassuring margin. Moreover a qualified alliance between Y and Z will hold the former back from attacking X, whereas any alliance between X and Z would merely encourage X to launch an attack which it feels almost strong enough to attempt alone.

There are, it must be realized, two important corollaries to the theory. One is that if war does come, upsetting the balance of power, then Z must be continuously prepared to shift its position in order to restore the balance. If Y + Z overcome X, then Z must first endeavor to see that X retains substantial strength, and must further be prepared to join X against Y, if necessary to keep power in balance.

In other words, any demand for unconditional sur-

render, and any strongly punitive peace treaty, is absolutely incompatible with the policy of balanced power.

The second corollary is that the rulers of the state practicing the balance of power must have a free hand to direct a policy that is necessarily cold-blooded, as well as ingenious and intellectual. If the emotions of the people have been deliberately inflamed against the enemy, and if the flower of their youth has been killed in the fighting, the citizens of Z can scarcely be expected to turn overnight to praising enemy X and denouncing ally Y.

This means that political democracy makes it difficult, if not impossible, for any government to pursue a balance of power policy.

It is certainly no mere coincidence that England abandoned this policy, after practicing it for four centuries, when the aristocratic Foreign Office became subject to the emotional control of a democratic electorate. The Balance of Power policy was terminated by Britain when, in the "khaki election" of 1918, Prime Minister Lloyd George promised to "squeeze Germany until the pips squeak". Under the theory of balanced power the real interest of Britain, in 1918, was to insure that France should be slightly strengthened and Germany slightly weakened. But popular sentiment, seduously inflamed against the "Huns", would not permit this outcome.

Instead, the collapse of Czarist Russia was complemented by the planned destruction of Austria-Hungary and the political humiliation of Germany. It was impossible to re-establish any balance of power on those ruins, in which the new political components of Hitler-

ism and Bolshevism took root and started to polarize in the form of Fascism vs. Communism.

4.

THE DOCTRINE of the Balance of Power did not definitely originate with any single statesman, to meet any particular emergency, but was rather the instinctive adaptation of foreign policy to the political situation that confronted England at the time of Henry VIII.

Unable to dictate to the more powerful monarchs of France and Spain, Henry—or rather his able Minister, Thomas Wolsey—began to develop the idea of allying England against any Continental ruler who threatened to become supreme. Thus England, by leaning this way or that, could maintain a political balance, stabilize peace and simultaneously advance its own interests. Much the same policy had been recommended a little earlier to Lorenzo, the ruler of Florence, by Machiavelli.

Wolsey became Chancellor of England in 1515. Thereafter, for four centuries, every English government consistently directed foreign policy so that its alliances should be of purely temporary nature and calculated to prevent any other power from becoming dominant in Europe.

In maintaining the balance of power England, during this long period, was in turn allied with, or at war with, almost every European country. This situation un-

doubtedly helped to develop the English practice of magnanimity to the defeated foe. When the enemy of one decade was likely to be the ally of the next it was unwise, as well as unsporting, to destroy his recuperative capacity.

Indeed it should be emphasized that the Balance of Power doctrine was necessarily incompatible with punitive peace settlements. As the doctrine maintained that no country should be exalted, so it also prescribed that no country should be humiliated. Any treaty that the loser could reasonably call vindictive would undermine the entire policy of balanced power.

Napoleon, in his final exile at St. Helena, was utterly unable to understand the moderation of Castlereagh towards defeated France. "What great advantage, what just compensations", inquired the fallen dictator, "has he acquired for his country?" But Napoleon, like many lesser men of the same mould, had no sympathy with or understanding of Castlereagh's aristocratic thesis of "security but not revenge".¹

The Congress of Vienna, after accepting Castlereagh's insistence on keeping power in balance, made settlements which preserved the European order, though with diminishing political stability, for another century. After the Treaty of Versailles, however, the balance of power could not be restored. The heritage of the doctrine was strong enough to inspire British resistance to the arrogant Nazi-Fascist Axis. But all remaining semblance of a European power balance disappeared when the close of

¹ Harold Nicolson: *The Congress of Vienna* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company; 1946), pp. 234-35.

World War II brought the triumphant Russian armies to the Elbe and into occupation of both Berlin and Vienna. Since 1945 the question for British foreign policy has been not can the balance of power be restored, but what will replace it?

Viewed in perspective, the historical significance of the Balance of Power doctrine is that it delayed the polarization of power, between two implacable enemies, that characterized both the ancient world, and the era that opened with the close of World War II.

France under Napoleon, Germany under the Kaiser and again under Hitler, made enormous, and temporarily successful, efforts to consolidate Europe under the control of a single government. British opposition, based fundamentally on the Balance of Power doctrine, was mainly instrumental in stopping all these efforts. But the German wars drained British strength almost as completely as the Peloponnesian conflict destroyed that of Athens.

As dominance in the state system then passed from both Hellenic factions, so, between 1914 and 1945, it passed from Europe, to be divided between the United States and Russia, the Rome and Carthage of the modern world.