

## **‘Janus, the God of Two Faces’: Britain’s Grand Strategy during the Napoleonic Wars, 1793-1815**

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### ***Abstract***

The Napoleonic Wars are commonly remembered for political crisis, pan-continental conflict, and French dominance in Europe. More importantly, they also catalysed Britain’s propulsion to hegemony during the nineteenth century. By 1815, Britain administered a global empire that dominated international trade, enjoyed maritime supremacy, and ruled India. And yet, scepticism persists as to the aims of its chief diplomat during this period, Viscount Castlereagh. Viewed as overly concerned with Europe, Castlereagh’s actions have appeared contradictory to Britain’s successes. In fact, Castlereagh operated under a consistent, yet adaptable, grand strategy that complimented Britain’s continental and maritime interests: a ‘Janus-Faced strategy’.

**Keywords:** Grand Strategy; Britain; British Empire; Napoleonic Wars

### ***Introduction***

As the Napoleonic Wars – conflicts caused by Revolutionary and Napoleonic France during 1793-1815 – came to an end, Lord Castlereagh commented that ‘Great Britain may be driven out of a Congress but not out of her maritime rights’.<sup>1</sup> Castlereagh, Britain’s Foreign Secretary during 1812-22, outlined a continental connection that complemented, rather than replaced, its concurrent pursuit of maritime supremacy. However, Castlereagh’s attempt to create a European ‘balance of power’ through the Congress of Vienna – the subsequent peace settlement during 1814-15 – has continually been misrepresented as an anomaly in the broader chronology of Britain’s foreign policy. Daniel Baugh depicts Britain’s grand strategy during the Napoleonic Wars as a departure from the ‘Blue-Water Policy’ that had helped it to achieve imperial and maritime greatness during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For Baugh, Britain’s employment of a large, conscript army during this period signals a shift from its longstanding seaward focus.<sup>2</sup> Even Henry Kissinger’s compliment to Castlereagh as the ‘most European of British statesmen’ carries the implication that his priorities were weighted more towards continental affairs.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, Castlereagh’s commitment to a comprehensive peace settlement on the Continent did reflect British interests. Moreover, it embodied the ‘Janus-faced strategy’ that Britain had pursued throughout 1793-1815; a strategy whose continental and maritime dimensions were ‘complementary rather than antagonistic’.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, it defended its interests through the twin pursuits of imperial expansion and European stability. As the Napoleonic Wars progressed, Britain’s ends encompassed colonial expansion, a secured grip

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh, and the Problems of Peace* (New York: Friedland Books, 2017), 38.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel A Baugh, “Great Britain’s ‘Blue-Water’ Policy, 1689-1815”, *The International History Review* 10, no.1 (February 1988), 41.

<sup>3</sup> Kissinger, *A World Restored*, 34.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Random House Books, 1987), 98.

over maritime trade routes, and an ordered Europe free from the dominance of one single power. In so seeking this strategic double-act, it evokes Janus, the Roman god of transition and duality, of peace and war. Depicted with two faces looking in opposing directions, this deity emblemises Castlereagh's concurrent aims of conservation and expansion. With 'one face turned towards the Continent to trim the balance of power and the other directed at sea to strengthen her maritime dominance', Britain utilised its national resources to attain security in Europe and hegemony overseas.<sup>5</sup>

### ***'Beyond the Buzzword'***

While grand strategy is agreed to be 'long-term' or 'big-picture' thinking, a comprehensive definition is 'a contentious idea at all levels', an issue exacerbated in a context of war.<sup>6</sup> Robert Art's definition of grand strategy as 'how the military instrument can best be used to support foreign policy' barely distinguishes it from conventional military strategy.<sup>7</sup> Nina Silove's division of grand strategy into three categories, however, effectively explains its different forms. Dividing the term into 'grand plans', 'grand principles', and 'grand behaviour', Silove shows their common factor – the holistic application of a state's resources to link its 'means' to its 'ends'.<sup>8</sup> This explains Britain's grand strategy more clearly when combined with Basil Liddell Hart's definition: unlike military strategy, 'grand strategy looks beyond the war to the subsequent peace.'<sup>9</sup> Importantly, Britain's Janus-faced strategy during the Napoleonic Wars and the subsequent peace settlements entailed 'ways, means and ends' – the 'conventional assumption' of what constitutes grand strategy.<sup>10</sup> While a European balance of power was not initially an end in itself for Britain in 1793, John Bew explains that this soon became the best means for maintaining its security and preserving its European interests.<sup>11</sup> The desire for such a balance was reflected by Prime Minister William Pitt's plan of 1805, the basis of Castlereagh's own proposals during 1814-15: the containment of French aggression; the creation of 'more effectual barrier[s]' to further aggression; and the establishment 'general system of Public Law in Europe'.<sup>12</sup> The attainment of this balance was vital for Britain to expand as an imperial power, as well as protecting its interests overseas.

### ***First Thing's First***

Protecting its home isles, however, was the most immediate aim of Britain's grand strategy. The British Isles provided the seat of Britain's political power; they also contained the bulk of its military, maritime and economic capabilities. As such, nullifying the threat of French invasion – most alarmingly shown by an 'Army of England' during 1804 – was crucial. Given Britain's insular position, this threat could most effectively be deterred through the employment of maritime power. As the Secretary of War stated in 1799, Britain's status as 'a small spot in the ocean without territorial consequences', necessitated the destruction of enemy

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<sup>5</sup> Kennedy, *Great Powers*, 98.

<sup>6</sup> Lukas Milevski, *The Evolution of Modern Grand Strategic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3. <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198779773.001.0001/acprof-9780198779773>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Nina Silove, "Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of "Grand Strategy"", *Security Studies* 27, no.1 (August 2018), 45.

<sup>9</sup> Basil Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), 332.

<sup>10</sup> *Comparative Grand Strategy: A Framework and Cases*, ed. Thierry Balzacq, Peter Dombrowski, and Simon Reich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 5.

<sup>11</sup> John Bew, *Castlereagh: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 377.

<sup>12</sup> Muriel E. Chamberlain, *Pax Britannica? British Foreign Policy 1789-1914* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 35.

fleets.<sup>13</sup> Britain's maritime power enabled it to offset its military disparity with France by engaging in 'mobility and surprise'.<sup>14</sup>

Surprise attacks, such as the successful Battle of the Nile in August 1798, did much to reduce France's naval capabilities. The superior mobility of the Royal Navy also made direct engagements such as the Battle of Trafalgar in October 1805, which irreversibly crippled Franco-Spanish naval power, decisive. However, the dangers presented by neutral fleets coming under French control necessitated pre-emptive strikes, an unprecedented tactic. In this way, the Royal Navy destroyed ships at Copenhagen twice after it assumed 'Armed Neutrality', in April 1801 and September 1807 respectively. It is true that British attempts to use targeted amphibious assaults were not as effective as naval power in warding off the threat of invasion: poor planning, inadequate logistical support, and superior French forces proved a difficult combination to overcome. The abortive Walcheren Expedition during 1809, for example, resulted in mass casualties and failed to force French power from the Scheldt River – the most suitable site for invading Britain. However, these failures were offset by Britain's maritime successes elsewhere, allowing it to preserve its domestic security throughout the Napoleonic Wars.

While the threat of foreign invasion was checked by maritime power, stability at home was sought through the implementation of a policy of political repression, levelled at potential French sympathisers. As Jeremy Black shows, securing domestic solidarity by fostering loyalism and suppressing radicalism was pursued throughout the 1790's.<sup>15</sup> In response to a proclamation by French National Congress for sedition against European monarchies, a law banning public meetings was passed by Parliament during 1793. Important steps were also taken to secure Britain's hold over Ireland, a province that was deemed ripe for rebellion after the success of Britain's American separatists during 1776-83. Indeed, Ireland did rebel in 1798 – resulting in the loss 30,000 lives – and again, though less damagingly, in 1803. An attempt to secure Ireland politically was embodied by an Act of Union passed in 1801. This not only gave Britain more authority in Ireland, but also promoted the power of local loyalists, granting them one hundred seats in Parliament.

While these changes quelled dissent within Britain, the threat of French intervention in Ireland – actualised in 1799 and promised by Napoleon in 1802 – prompted the further development of the Isles' defences. Loyalism was encouraged by the increase of militia and volunteer regiments; of the 162,300 troops in Britain during 1798, only 47,000 were regulars.<sup>16</sup> These reforms were coupled with the improvement of coastal fortifications. Moreover, a Board of Ordinance was established in 1801 with the responsibility of organising Britain's defence in the eventuality of invasion. However, while these domestic developments were necessary for Britain's grand strategy, they were not as significant as its European or maritime goals. Maintaining domestic security allowed Britain to protect its most immediate interests throughout the Napoleonic Wars – but it was still a defensive measure.

### ***The 'Money Method':***

Britain's Janus-faced strategy also involved balancing domestic security with the promotion of its imperial priorities abroad. Largely, as labelled by Baugh, this entailed the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>14</sup> Lawrence Freedman, "Alliance and the British Way in Warfare", *Review of International Studies* 21, no.2 (April 1995), 145.

<sup>15</sup> Jeremy Black, "British Strategy and the Struggle with France 1793-1815", *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31, no.4 (July 2008), 555.

<sup>16</sup> Black, "British Strategy", 555.

‘money method’. Namely, Britain mobilised its maritime and financial resources to wage a war of ‘financial attrition’ against France.<sup>17</sup> The power of the Royal Navy enabled Britain to assert its ‘maritime rights’ of stop and search on neutral vessels. This limited the supplies that French territories could import from abroad. Britain further undermined French financial power, while consolidating its own commercial primacy, by acquiring its colonies. As Paul Kennedy observes, Britain ‘systematically captured’ France’s overseas possessions throughout 1793–1815: valuable plantation colonies, St. Lucia and Tobago for example, were taken during the 1790’s while strategic posts, such as Martinique were secured by 1810.<sup>18</sup>

The opportunities for imperial expansion increased as European states fell under French control; Dutch and Danish possessions overseas were occupied once they had become French satellites during the 1800’s. Britain’s financial power was further magnified by the introduction of an income tax from 1799: tax revenues rose from £18.1 million in 1793 to £77.9 million in 1815.<sup>19</sup> This financial power proved crucial in allowing Britain to challenge French military power by subsidising the numerically superior armies of successive continental allies. Indeed, Britain paid subsidies totalling £23.25 million during 1803–12 and £39.5 million in money and armaments in 1813–15.<sup>20</sup> The ‘money-method’ not only made Britain the ‘bountiful mother of all subsidies’ in Europe, it also expanded its imperial possession overseas.<sup>21</sup>

### *A Team Effort*

While Britain’s ‘money-method’ effectively promoted its interests overseas, it could not directly affect affairs on the Continent – that could only be done by coalitions. Indeed, Britain played an important part in forming seven coalitions against France during the Napoleonic Wars. Prior to 1812, however, Britain’s diplomatic ineptitude and relative military impotence undermined the effectiveness of this strategy. As Baugh explains, before 1808, Britain’s contribution ‘to military campaigning on the Continent derived mainly from money and credit’.<sup>22</sup> With only 40,000 regular troops in 1789, Britain could only mobilise its financial power in support of its allies. However, as C.J. Bartlett explains, this was neither ‘appreciated’, nor ‘rewarded with any commensurate influence’ over continental affairs.<sup>23</sup> The lack of any major British military presence in Central Europe prior to 1808 prevented it from diplomatically pressuring its allies into binding treaties against France. While more substantial British forces were committed during the Peninsular Campaign (1808–14) this was largely regarded as a peripheral conflict. Consequentially, the Continental Powers continually opted for peace with France on their own terms that did not take account of Britain’s interests. Peace in 1803 entailed the loss of Britain’s possessions in Hannover, while the Franco-Russian Treaty of Tilsit (July 1807) diplomatically isolated Britain from the rest of the Continent. Indeed, Britain was without any major allies from 1808 to 1813. Clearly, Britain could not guarantee its strategic interests on the Continent through maritime power alone. This lesson would not go unlearnt.

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<sup>17</sup> Baugh, “Blue-Water Policy”, 56.

<sup>18</sup> Kennedy, *Great Powers*, 126.

<sup>19</sup> Black, “British Strategy”, 568.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 568.

<sup>21</sup> Baugh, “Blue-Water Policy”, 56.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

<sup>23</sup> C. J. Bartlett, *Defence and Diplomacy: Britain and the Great Powers*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 8.

### ***Danger Zone***

Diplomatic isolation not only *exposed* Britain's European interests to danger during this period, it also *allowed* Napoleon to infringe upon Britain's commercial primacy by engaging in economic warfare. For the Janus-faced strategy to be successful, imperial expansion had to be complemented by corresponding successes on the Continent. However, the fragility of the Coalitions had resulted in astounding French victories at Austerlitz (December 1805) and Jena (October 1806) that crippled the military power of Britain's continental allies. Moreover, the Treaty of Tilsit turned Britain's remaining allies against it, granting Napoleon near-hegemony over much of the Continent. Issuing the Berlin Decree in November 1806, Napoleon established a 'Continental System' over Europe, shutting off compliant ports from British goods.

This system embodied Britain's failure to protect its commercial interests as, explained by Enno Kraehe, it entailed 'the concentration of the Continent's resources under a single organizing authority'.<sup>24</sup> The loss of valuable European trading partners harmed Britain's exports – although this was slightly offset by smuggling. With 20,000 Britons involved in this illicit business, it was certainly booming. As an unofficial activity, however, the wealth it generated was not so easily tapped into.<sup>25</sup> More importantly, the loss of trade threatened Britain's capacity to field a large navy, as it usually supported it from customs revenues. In turn, this undermined its ability to effectively assert its maritime rights, exposing the British Isles to invasion. Therefore, while Britain had extended its imperial power by 1812, its aims of an advantageous European equilibrium were far from realised.

### ***Preventing a 'Continental Peace'***

While Britain failed to attain the continental dimension of its grand strategy during 1793-1812, Napoleon's invasion of Russia in June 1812 precipitated a series of opportunities to redress this.<sup>26</sup> Britain utilised its diplomatic sway to ease tensions between Russia, Sweden, and the Ottoman Empire, allowing Tsar Alexander I to concentrate his forces on France. However, the crushing defeat inflicted by Russia, Austria, and Prussia on Napoleon at Leipzig (October 1813) was not beneficial for British interests in and of itself. Indeed, the threat of a 'Continental Peace' disregarding British interests was embodied by the lenient Frankfurt Proposals of November 1813; these proposals, offering to leave France with some territorial gains, were at odds with Pitt's plan. Britain's real 'diplomatic victory' however, was achieved by Castlereagh at the Treaty of Chaumont.<sup>27</sup> Concluded in March 1814, during the final months of the war, this agreement cemented the unity of the allies in opposition to Napoleon by binding each nation to seeking a communal peace treaty. As such, Chaumont tied the Continental Powers' objectives to those of Britain, with Pitt's Plan forming a basis for the emerging post-war settlement.

However, these important measures could not have been achieved without the full mobilisation of Britain's military forces. The British army increased from 40,000 in 1789 to 250,000 during 1812-14, a number equal to Continental Powers like Prussia and Austria.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Enno E. Kraehe, "A Bipolar Balance of Power", *The American Historical Review* 97, no.3 (June 1992), 712.

<sup>25</sup> Gavin Daly, "English Smugglers, the Channel, and the Napoleonic Wars, 1800-1814", *Journal of British Studies* 46, no.1 (January 2007), 32.

<sup>26</sup> Chamberlain, *Pax Britannica?* 38.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

<sup>28</sup> Kennedy, *Great Powers*, 99.

Moreover, victories such as Vitoria (June 1813) bolstered Britain's martial reputation and literally entrenched its military presence in Central Europe, with Wellington's forces crossing the Pyrenees during 1813. As Castlereagh commented that same year, the mobilisation of Britain's military, maritime, and financial resources 'put an end to any doubts as to the claim [they had] to an opinion on continental affairs.'<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Britain's international clout was strengthened by Napoleon's 'Hundred Days' of war during March-June 1815. Wellington's contribution to the Anglo-Prussian victory at Waterloo (June 1815) not only entrenched Britain's status as a military authority, but also allowed British troops to occupy Paris – strengthening its negotiating position during the subsequent peace settlements.

### *The God of Two Faces*

The maritime aims and achievements of Britain's Janus-faced strategy were outlined well by Castlereagh in 1816: 'Our policy...has been to secure the Empire against future attack... to do this we had acquired what in former days would have been thought romance – the keys of every great military position'.<sup>30</sup> These 'keys' were embodied by the overseas possessions that Britain retained after the Napoleonic Wars. These possessions were selectively chosen for geostrategic significance, rather than raw wealth; as Barry Gough explains, 'strategic advantages [replaced] old mercantilist connections'.<sup>31</sup> Britain was established as the dominant power in India as its territorial gains on the subcontinent were confirmed. Strategic outposts such as Mauritius, Ceylon and the Cape were also retained to secure the valuable shipping lanes to India. A recent work by Robert Holland also shows that Britain established its own 'blue-water' empire in Europe itself, by occupying key insular positions. Heligoland protected Baltic shipping, the Ionian Islands maintained a Balkan presence, and Malta placed the Royal Navy in the centre of the Mediterranean.<sup>32</sup>

Just as British hegemony was established overseas, its maritime supremacy was accepted in European waters. It was this balance that was sought by Castlereagh. He was able to achieve confirmation of Britain's maritime rights by 1814, allowing Britain to assert its naval power by intercepting foreign vessels. As Black explains, potential sources of future maritime competition were also nullified during the Congress of Vienna. The French fleet at Antwerp was destroyed while ship-building ports that could pose a threat in the future, Genoa, Trieste and Venice for example, were placed under the control of friendly states such as Austria and the newly-formed Piedmont-Sardinia. Certainly, Bartlett's assertion that Britain emerged with the 'greatest measure of naval supremacy in her history' shows the success of its grand strategy.<sup>33</sup>

The continental dimension of Britain's Janus-faced strategy was embodied by Castlereagh's proposals of 1814: the territorial reduction of France, the establishment of buffer-states on its borders, and a balance of power in Europe assured by a congress system. Their prevailing purpose was the prevention of a Continental Power from mobilising Europe's resources against Britain's own interests. While Tim Chapman views Castlereagh's colonial concessions as a strategic failure, such concessions were vital for the maintenance of Britain's

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<sup>29</sup> Bartlett, *Defence and Diplomacy*, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Barry Gough, *Pax Britannica: Ruling the Waves and Keeping the Peace before Armageddon*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Holland, *Blue-Water Empire: The British in the Mediterranean since 1800*, (London: Penguin Books, 2013), 3.

<sup>33</sup> Bartlett, *Defence and Diplomacy*, 10.

own national security.<sup>34</sup> As a British Minister commented, ‘Antwerp and Flushing out of the hands of France are worth twenty Martiniques in our own hands’.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the Scheldt was placed under the control of the Kingdom of the United Provinces, a neutral buffer-state on France’s Northern border; an enlarged Piedmont-Sardinia also protected the South.

Meanwhile, Britain’s own dynastic interest in Hannover was protected by Prussian expansion into the Rhine and the creation of a German Confederation under Austria. Central Europe was further supported against possible Russian expansion. Austria was established in Italy, while British intervention in the Polish-Saxon Crisis prevented Russia and Prussia from taking too much territory in Poland and Germany. Similarly, French power was curbed with a financial indemnity, foreign occupation, and the reduction of its borders to pre-1790 limits. With these territorial transfers, an advantageous equilibrium was achieved in Europe while Britain enjoyed a monopoly of maritime power overseas. The confirmation of the Quadruple Alliance – a treaty binding the European Powers against France – also secured such an equilibrium for the future. As Barry Gough explains, ‘Castlereagh worked urgently to construct the Concert of Europe, but in the end, it was British interests...that most concerned him’.<sup>36</sup>

Lord Castlereagh once commented that it was not his business to ‘collect trophies’ at the Congress of Vienna, but to ‘bring the world back to peaceful habits’.<sup>37</sup> Certainly, a ‘peaceful’ Europe provided the surest way of preserving the ‘trophies’ that Britain had already collected. Britain’s Janus-faced grand strategy was one that turned to Europe and the seas in equal measure. While its means may have changed over the course of the Napoleonic Wars, Britain’s ends of a quiet continent and maritime supremacy never deviated and were successfully achieved through the subsequent peace settlements. However, Britain’s strategy is not only impressive, it also provides lessons for the present day. After the polarising Brexit referendum of 2016, Britain has wavered between its obligations to Europe and its aspirations overseas. Of course, a direct comparison between Britain’s conduct during the Napoleonic Wars and its current position will inevitably founder on the material, practical, and ethical considerations that must arise. That being said, Castlereagh’s implementation of Britain’s continental and maritime interests can still provide inspiration to aspiring scholars of foreign policy. Faced with competing demands and constraints, national activity often resembles a balancing act of priorities. Following in this statesman’s footsteps, however, may point to a more productive alternative – the resolute pursuit of a single destination, facilitating scope for a multifaceted, perhaps double-facing, foreign policy.

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<sup>34</sup>Tim Chapman, *The Congress of Vienna 1814-1815: Origins, Processes, and Results*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998), 17.

<sup>35</sup> C. J. Bartlett, “Castlereagh, 1812-22” in *The Makers of British Foreign Policy: From Pitt to Thatcher*, ed. T.G. Otte (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 59.

<sup>36</sup> Gough, *Pax Britannica*, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Bartlett, *Castlereagh*, 62.