

**THE FOG OF PEACE:  
THE MILITARY DIMENSIONS OF THE CONCERT OF EUROPE**

**Daniel Moran**

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## FOREWORD

Last April the Army War College held its Sixth Annual Strategy Conference. The theme of this year's Conference, "Strategy During the Lean Years: Learning From the Past and the Present," brought together scholars, serving and retired officers, and civilian defense officials from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom to discuss strategy formulation in times of penury from Tacitus to Force XXI.

Professor Daniel Moran of the Naval Postgraduate School is well known for his scholarship on Carl von Clausewitz. In his discussion of the 19th century, Professor Moran made the point that while it was a time of small wars and big riots, Europeans enjoyed the benefits of economic growth, increasingly integrated markets, and cultural interaction due to higher literacy rates and more convenient and affordable means of travel. Additionally, a large and healthy bourgeoisie and working class gradually assumed power from aristocratic elites.

The Concert of Europe, established in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, was the entity which fostered this century of relative peace and progress. Its goals were twofold: to suppress violent political revolution and to avoid general war. To a great extent, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 notwithstanding, it succeeded until 1914 when war burst forth to engulf Europe and bring down the very order the Concert was established to preserve.

In this essay, Professor Moran asserts that in the final analysis, the dominant strategic challenge is not simply how much military strength a nation can muster from available resources, rather the more pressing challenge is to maintain military and political control over existing strength. Prior to 1914, conventional wisdom among military strategists was that the integration of technologically advanced weaponry into their armies and navies would make the next war bloody but short. They were tragically wrong.

As the Army transitions to Force XXI and faces the challenges of the present and the future, neither the nation nor America's Army can afford to be "tragically wrong" about the next war. Because the Army believes it will be better prepared for change if there is a vigorous and informed debate about the dynamics of change, the Strategic Studies Institute presents Professor Moran's views for your consideration.

RICHARD H. WITHERSPOON  
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## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR**

DANIEL MORAN, Ph.D. teaches in the Department of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School. Previously he was a member of the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study and a Visiting Professor of Strategy at the U.S. Naval War College. Professor Moran is the author or editor of a number of works on the history of war and politics in Europe. Most recently, along with Peter Paret, he coedited an English edition of Carl von Clausewitz's *Historical and Political Writings* (Princeton, 1992).

## **THE FOG OF PEACE: THE MILITARY DIMENSIONS OF THE CONCERT OF EUROPE**

The 99 years separating the final defeat of Napoleon from the outbreak of the First World War were by a considerable margin the most peaceful of any comparably long period in European history. Although Europe was by no means free of war, wars were less frequent than at any time since the Middle Ages. They were also less destructive and less deadly to the combatants than the wars of previous centuries.

Europeans at the time were inclined to regard both of these trends—toward peace and toward less deadly and destructive combat—as natural. Economic growth, more integrated international markets, and a general increase in cultural interaction brought about by cheaper travel and popular literacy—all these were thought to weigh heavily against war by raising the stakes to the point where even a victory would begin to look like a bad bargain. The same rising tide of social progress was also shifting the political balance within European states in favor of middle-class and working-class groups that were presumed to be less bellicose than the aristocratic elites they were gradually displacing. And while believers in a utopian future free of war were probably no more common then than they are now, many imagined that technological advance and a more professional approach to military operations would make wars themselves more precise and discriminating instruments of policy.

These ideas retain considerable saliency to this day. Anyone who has read the *National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement* will be aware of the degree to which U.S. hopes for peace are rooted in long-term, nonmilitary processes like the expansion of markets and the spread of democracy. In 1914, however, the Great Powers of Europe firmly supported by the most literate and politically informed societies that had yet existed all went to war against their best customers—a disillusioning moment, but also one that invites a less fatalistic appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of the international order the war destroyed: the Concert of Europe.

The Concert was neither a multinational institution like the League of Nations nor a formal alliance like NATO. Although it arose out of the war-time coalition that defeated Napoleon, its members always looked to the Final Act of the Vienna Congress as a kind of charter. The 11th Edition of the *Britannica*, the last to appear before the outbreak of the First World War, described the Concert as “a vague consensus” and a “habit of acting together” on the part of the Great Powers, which is about right. The name was less a legal definition than a metaphor for a certain relatively harmonious way of thinking and acting internationally.

Whether the years of the Concert were “lean” is hard to say. Given that its history spans a century, a strict answer would obviously have to be “sometimes yes, sometimes no.” The economic dislocations and enormous national debts accumulated during the

Napoleonic Wars were important incentives to keep the peace during the Concert's early decades when military spending was quite low by historical standards. Later on, however, military budgets rose and fell in familiar patterns, going up in response to perceived threats and demands for modernization and falling again when these sorts of pressures eased, usually in the aftermath of wars.

In broader terms, however, one might well argue that the Concert actually inaugurated what we mean by "lean years," at least in Europe—that is, periods when military spending was restrained not by poverty but by political competition for a limited share of governmental and social resources. Government as such expanded far more rapidly than military budgets over the course of the 19th century, and so did nonmilitary demands upon the public purse. Military budgets and military strategy also became increasingly open to public scrutiny and political debate. It is thus no surprise that the Concert's history includes two of the most famous civil-military crises of all time—the refusal of the Prussian Diet in 1862 to pass any military budget at all, which led to Bismarck's appointment as Minister President, and indirectly to the forcible creation of a unified Germany; and the Dreyfus Affair of the 1890s, whose demoralizing effects were still felt in the French army when the First World War began.

These sorts of political and budgetary conflicts were an important feature of the Concert's history from a strategic point of view because, in the eyes of military professionals, they represented threats to their ability to control the sinews of war. And control was always the primary issue. There was never a moment throughout the entire period when any European state was as militarily strong as its social and economic resources would have permitted—which was very much the way military professionals wanted it.

The goals of the Concert were to suppress revolution and to avoid general war. Neither of these were exclusively military problems, but both had important military dimensions. It was also mainly in the military arena that the two missions converged. War and revolution were understood to be closely linked not just in the sense that they sometimes occurred together, but in the more complicated sense that the far-reaching mobilization of social energy achieved by the French Revolution had opened military possibilities that were regarded as dangerous or even fatal in themselves. Europeans who had survived the Revolutionary era thought they knew the secret of total war; and while we today can certainly claim rights to important technical improvements, we continue to share their basic strategic dilemma—no amount of fear and loathing could ever allow them to forget what the secret was.

Europe's consciousness of the grave danger latent in the idea of the nation in arms shaped strategic planning throughout the Concert's history. In the early years the demands of counterrevolution encouraged all states to rely on modest military establishments composed of professional or aristocratic officers, long-service volunteers, and conscripts

selectively drawn from politically reliable segments of society. Later on, fear of revolution reinforced a more dubious faith in the possibilities of strategic preemption and contributed to the collapse of a system it had helped to create—a fine dialectical symmetry that Marx identified with the cunning of History, but which the Greeks would have recognized, perhaps more persuasively, as quintessentially tragic.

In political terms the Concert is best described as an informal but self-conscious oligarchy, dominated from beginning to end by five Great Powers: Great Britain, Russia, France, the Austrian Empire (which became Austria-Hungary in 1867), and Prussia (the core of unified Germany after 1871). Contemporaries routinely attributed special rights and obligations to these five states, which in turn were convinced of their special stake in the system and their special role in maintaining it. Great Power status was jealously guarded, and parvenu aspirants like Sweden in 1815, or Italy after 1870, always got short shrift. On the other hand, none of the five were especially eager to see the others displaced—France, Austria, and Russia all lost important wars during the 19th century without losing their place at the table.

What might be called the moral basis for these arrangements was often criticized. Liberals disliked the Concert's frank acceptance of different standards for the weak and the strong, and would rather have seen both subject to a common international law. Conservatives would have preferred a Concert based on universal principles of monarchical legitimacy and the brotherhood of Christian princes. One of the reasons the so-called Holy Alliance promoted by Russia's Alexander I proved so inconsequential, however, was that it sought to set aside the distinction between the Great Powers and the rest.<sup>1</sup> In practice, preserving that distinction was one of the main goals of the system, and a frank insistence upon the responsibilities and perquisites of power was certainly one of its strengths, even if it seems to have run counter to the democratic spirit of the age.

The Concert's history divides readily into three parts. The first phase began with the defeat of Napoleon in 1815 and concluded with the Revolutions of 1848. These years have been characterized as an era of "small wars and big riots,"<sup>2</sup> during which it was certainly the counterrevolutionary mission of European armies that mattered most. After 1848, however, the atmosphere changed. That the Concert had survived the revolutions was clear enough. Conservative governments were in charge everywhere except France, and the habit of acting together contributed to their survival—it was Russian armies that preserved the Hapsburg Empire. Nevertheless, the revolutions also provided scope for less harmonious impulses. France and Prussia had both shown themselves ready to exploit social unrest for unilateral gain, and the effect was to undermine the mutual confidence on which the Concert depended.

There followed a 20-odd-year period of recurring warfare involving all the Great Powers in various combinations: France and Britain versus Russia in the Crimea; France versus Austria in Italy; Prussia versus Austria for control of Germany; and, finally,

Prussia and Germany versus France, also (in effect) for control of Germany. These are all routinely described as limited wars, although the characterization should not be taken to suggest that these were inconsequential struggles—the Prussian/German army that defeated France in 1870 was larger than the Union army at the end of the American Civil War, which suggests the scale of military effort that even limited objectives could inspire.

Intelligent observers contemplated these developments with growing unease. Gustav Flaubert declared at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war that no matter which side won, everybody was going to become more stupid. Karl Marx thought that the Treaty of Frankfurt, which brought the fighting to an end, would make war itself an institution. In fact, Germany's victory brought the Concert's period of crisis to a close. Except for the hinterlands of the Ottoman Empire, Europe remained untroubled by war until 1914, and even "big riots" had largely become a thing of the past. Friedrich Engels observed that the revolutionary mob was no longer a match for armies equipped with modern weapons.

Obviously peace was not the Concert's fundamental principle. Yet war was no longer so readily indulged, or indulged in, as it once had been. Before 1789 the sole governing value of the international system had been the autonomy of its individual members. The result had been endemic conflict, limited by the rigid tactical characteristics of the armies of the day but still sufficient in scope and violence to grind down the resources and lame the economic development even of rich states. This was not a pattern the architects of the Concert were eager to restore, though the point is sometimes obscured by the nostalgic rhetoric that some of them favored. Even if Talleyrand really believed, as he is supposed to have said, that no one who had not grown up before the Revolution could really know the sweetness of life, there is little evidence that he and his colleagues seriously wished to restore the pre-Revolutionary order, or that they valued the autonomy of the state above all else.

What they did value was security, in a sense that did not entail renunciation of war as such, but still implied a good deal of self-restraint and a willingness to consult the collective interests of the system in addition to one's own. When Britain's Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston declared in 1846 that it was impossible for any state to alter territorial arrangements in Europe "without the concurrence of the other Powers who were party to [the Treaty of Vienna]," he was voicing a principle of Great Power cooperation and joint custody that, however imperfectly implemented, would still have been quite alien to statesmen under the Old Regime, for whom the anarchy of the international arena was a given. The result was a genuinely new pattern of international relations, whose hallmark is the number of major international crises that do not end in war. Paul Schroeder recently observed that in the decades leading up to the French Revolution, no state seriously threatened with war ever succeeded in avoiding it even if it tried hard to do so.<sup>3</sup> This was certainly not the case after 1815.

Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that war was still accepted without question as a normal instrument of international relations; and while forward-looking military planning was not a prominent part of the picture until late in the century, there is no doubt that all strong countries maintained armed forces in anticipation of using them against each other. Although the system as a whole depended in part on multilateral deterrence for its stability, the dominant strategic problem was not how to avoid war as such, which Bernard Brodie identified as the distinctive problem of the nuclear age.<sup>4</sup> In the 19th century the great problem was how to avoid escalation and so preserve war as a useful instrument of policy.

The Concert's success at avoiding what is called horizontal escalation—meaning the entry of third or fourth parties into an existing conflict—was mainly due to the institutionalization of so-called diplomatic conferences, at which ambassadors from the major states gathered to solve problems of common interest. Such meetings were irregular and *ad hoc*, but fairly frequent—26 between 1822 and 1913, some lasting for months at a time. Through them the details of the joint custody articulated by Palmerston were usually worked out.

Unsurprisingly, this aspect of the system worked best in controlling the consequences of actions by smaller states. There were many occasions during the Concert's history when one or more of the Great Powers used unilateral military force to suppress revolt in a neighboring country or to enforce treaty obligations. Such actions were not always universally commended, but they were always preceded by general consultation and never gave rise to wider war unless the territorial ambitions of the Powers themselves conflicted directly.

Even then, there were benefits to consultation. To men like Bismarck and Napoleon III, efforts to isolate prospective opponents also had the effect of drawing a line around whatever conflict was in the offing and provided tacit reassurance to other Powers that the aims for which war was being contemplated were compatible with the basic stability of the system. Bismarck in particular is credited with being a great genius at this kind of diplomacy, which is fair enough as long as one recognizes that he was distinguished only by his skill and success, not by his approach, which was a structural characteristic of the Concert itself.

Managing vertical escalation—meaning the tendency of war once begun to become progressively more violent—was another matter. This kind of escalation was identified by Clausewitz as inherent in the nature of war itself. *On War* begins by proposing that the violence of war knows no logical limit, but must always proceed in theory to the maximum intensity possible for the combatants. In actuality this theoretical potential was seldom realized because of the dampening effects of what Clausewitz called “friction” and because the political goals of the belligerents rarely justified or inspired such a total effort. These factors explained why limited wars were the historical norm, but they

provided no assurance that any given conflict would remain within the bounds assigned to it by its political masters. Clausewitz's work is full of images of rivers overrunning their banks, flames bursting forth, caldrons boiling over—all testifying to his acute consciousness of the escalatory dynamism at the heart of war.

Few of Clausewitz's contemporaries were willing or able to follow all the implications he drew from these basic theoretical elements, but nearly all of them would have accepted that the escalatory potential of modern war was far greater than had been true in the past. This was the chief military legacy of the French Revolution whose paradigmatic expression was the so-called *levée en masse*, enacted by the Revolutionary Convention in the summer of 1793. In the words of the decree establishing the *levée*:

. . . all French persons are placed in permanent requisition for the service of the armies. The young men will go to battle; married men will forge arms and transport provisions; women will make tents and clothing and serve in the hospitals; children will shred old linen; old men will have themselves carried to public places to arouse the courage of warriors and preach hatred of kings and unity of the Republic.

The consequences of this were less than the unstinting national effort the law demanded—as always, friction took its toll. Yet the results were still without precedent and to some extent beyond reason. At the time of the *levée* France had been at war for about 16 months, at which point neither of France's major opponents, Prussia and Austria, had mobilized all of their forces. Only about 100,000 foreigners were fighting on French soil in the summer of 1793, while France had about 350,000 men under arms. Within 2 years, however, the French army numbered over a million men, and what had begun as a routine war of pickets and outposts was on its way to becoming a struggle for the future of Europe.

Far more than the ghost of Bonaparte, it was the ghost of the *levée en masse* that haunted strategic theory in the 19th century, although, like most ghosts, its presence is not always easy to detect. Jomini, the most influential theorist of the age and also one of the most typical, was much less explicitly concerned with the dynamics of escalation than Clausewitz. He presented himself as the codifier of Napoleonic warfare and made much of the importance of seizing the initiative, searching out the decisive point in battle, and maintaining an aggressive attitude. Yet taken as a whole (as they were meant to be), it is easy to see that Jomini's famous "principles of war" were strongly conducive to very limited military operations. Indeed, the more seriously one takes his advice to simultaneously keep one's forces concentrated, maintain secure communications, and fight on interior lines, the more difficult it becomes even to imagine any other kind. Similarly, his repeated insistence on the superiority of the offensive was readily recognized by contemporaries as an argument for professional forces, since it was accepted that in addition to being more politically reliable, only professional soldiers

could deliver an effective attack.<sup>5</sup>

To a degree that may be insufficiently appreciated, it was the nation in arms, rather than the Declaration of Rights of Man and the Citizen, that conjured up the real meaning of revolution for 19th century Europe. It had been the *levée en masse*, after all, that had transformed “hatred of kings” from an incendiary slogan into a foreign policy and made the Revolution an event in the history of Europe as well as France. The early decades of the Concert’s history were therefore rooted in a determination to keep war in all circumstances under the control of military professionals and of the socially responsible groups from which those professionals were drawn.

Some, like Clausewitz, argued from different premises. His experience of the Russian Campaign in 1812 had convinced him that the defensive was the stronger form of war, and he believed that popular forces could be expected to fight well on their native ground. The adoption of such forces by relatively weak powers like Prussia, which lacked the advantages of a flanking position or defensible frontiers, would contribute to the stability of the whole system, in Clausewitz’s view, since the inherent strength and the defensive character of popular forces would simultaneously deter and reassure potential adversaries. He also believed they offered more bang for the buck, also an important argument in lean times.<sup>6</sup> Yet such views inspired far more suspicion than assent. Universal service placed arms and military training at the disposal of the general population, and was linked, logically and historically, to demands for political rights that the monarchical regimes of that era were not willing to concede even in return for a substantial improvement in their military strength.

The overall picture is thus superficially puzzling: a strong theoretical emphasis on the superiority of the offensive, the tactical importance of seizing the initiative, and the essential role of technical expertise; linked to an extremely risk-averse operational approach that made decisive results unlikely, a force structure without strategic reserves, and an international system that strongly favored consensus-building at the expense of unilateral action. Nevertheless, there was no denying the functional coherence of the system. Small, well-trained, long-service armies were suited to an international climate in which no strong country was prepared to challenge the status quo. But it is also important to see that that sort of international climate was maintained in large measure to ensure that such forces would in fact remain adequate.

A number of factors pressed against this consensus, above all technological advance, which emerges as a distinctive issue for European armies with the introduction of breech-loading rifles and rail-based logistics in the 1840s. Then as now, technological change seemed to point in all directions at once. At first, the increasing technical complexity of warfare confirmed and accelerated the drift toward military professionalism. In the long run, however, there was no avoiding the ultimate implication of industrialized war. Between 1840 and 1900 the firepower of European infantry

increased roughly 10-fold. One way or another, regardless of logistical strain, tactical ponderousness, or political risk, armies had to get bigger if they were to survive and operate on European battlefields.

Technological change exerted steady pressure to expand military establishments, which was most acutely felt during periods when the mutual confidence of the Powers was at a low ebb. Prussia, one of the most conservative regimes in Europe, but also one of the most vulnerable, proved especially adept at assimilating selective, short-service conscription to the needs of a professional force and an otherwise illiberal political culture, largely because its leading soldiers had become convinced that the existence of the state was in jeopardy. By 1870, as one French marshal ruefully observed, Prussia had an army the likes of which had not been seen since the time of Xerxes, and the result was a swift victory over what had been until then the most militarily gifted state in Europe.

Yet even that immense and highly professional force was brought up short by a grim reminder of what it meant to conquer a nation. The Franco-Prussian War began in July 1870, and by the end of September all the regular forces of France had been defeated or bottled up inside fortresses from which they could not escape. Yet the war did not end. Rather, the spirit of the *levée en masse* was reborn in the form of terrorists, guerrilla bands, and partisan forces of battalion and even division size, spontaneously organized to attack and harass Prussian formations strung out in isolated sieges that, laid end to end, would have represented a fortified line almost as long as the Western Front in World War I. For such warfare, a million men and more were scarcely enough. Prussia prevailed in the end, partly because French authorities were eager to regain control of their own country and cooperated in doing so. But the last months of the Franco-Prussian War were still an experience that Moltke, the architect of Prussia's victory, would never forget. He remained convinced for the rest of his life that he had gotten lucky in France, and he doubted that similar results could be achieved again.

The Franco-Prussian War thus reminded Europe of what war as a river overrunning its banks was like—which was part of the reason why this particular conflict brought the Concert's period of crisis to an end. At the same time, Prussia's triumph seemed to demonstrate both the possibility and the necessity of large forces and deep reserves. Still, strategic decisionmaking remained strongly influenced by social considerations. Germany would have had a much larger army in 1914 if in previous years it had been willing to conscript working-class soldiers. To have done so, however, would have been to admit potentially subversive elements into the armed forces and required the commissioning of many more middle-class officers, which would have diluted the aristocracy's hold on the privileges of military rank.

The goal of conscription in the 19th century was not to tap the military energy of the nation in arms, but to provide professional soldiers with the tools they needed to do their job, which was most decidedly to wage offensive war in a fashion that preserved

war's political utility. Truly universal service, institutionalized as national defense forces and popular militias, remained a cause of the Left throughout the Concert's history. Its most prominent advocate at the end was the French Socialist Jean Jaurès, who regularly invoked the legend of the *levée en masse* in his speeches, and was accordingly murdered by a more conventional sort of French patriot on the first day of World War I because he was thought to be a dangerous radical.

Even at the end of the Concert's history, then, the dominant strategic problem was not simply how to be strong or even how strong is strong enough. It was how to maintain military and political control over the strength you have. The images of rivers and caldrons invoked by Clausewitz are not merely suggestive of great violence after all, but specifically of violence that has slipped the leash of rational control and become less an instrument of policy than a force of nature.

Early on, the chief safeguard against this escalatory possibility had been to keep armies small and to recruit and train them in ways that enhanced corporate spirit and institutional loyalty. As this became less feasible, prevailing solutions tended more and more toward speed and strategic preemption. Across the whole period, however, the unifying element was the very marked degree of social suspicion that underlay strategic analysis and the plans that arose from it as became fatally obvious only at the end.

Historians have made much of the "short war" illusion that prevailed among European armies in 1914, which they have normally attributed to an almost insane arrogance on the part of military leaders. Yet such illusions are possible and occur at all times. Frederick the Great was certain the Seven Years' War would be short, but that was before he knew it would be called the "Seven Years' War."

What was distinctive about the strategic hubris of 1914 was not its arrogance, but the pessimism and even despair that it concealed. If military professionals were convinced that the next war would be short, and also determined to make it so, it was in large part because they simply could not fathom how it could happen any other way. They possessed quite an accurate appreciation of the destructive potential and even the tactical characteristics of modern war, and, one way or another, it would be over quickly because they could not imagine their own societies standing the strain of prolonged conflict. They underestimated the political loyalty and resilience of their countrymen but not their latent potential for organized violence. In the fall of 1914 Europe's immensely expert professional soldiers finally found themselves bereft of expedients, and the genie of national war escaped the magic bottle of professional strategy in which it had been confined for almost a century. We are still trying to get it back inside. And to that extent, at least, both the history and the failure of the Concert of the Europe continue to shape the modern world.

## ENDNOTES

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