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# Britain's Foreign Alliances in the Eighteenth Century\*

Jeremy Black

One of the greatest problems in the discussion of eighteenth-century British foreign policy concerns the assessment of the influence of the particular character of the British political system. British foreign policy, and thus the country's alliance strategy, was conditioned by the subtle interplay of internal processes, the functioning of her domestic political system, and the international situation. As historians are concerned increasingly to probe the nature of the domestic pressures influencing the formulation and execution of policy, so it becomes more important to define the political, as opposed to constitutional, role of Parliament and public opinion.<sup>1</sup> This is of obvious significance for the study of Britain's relations with her allies. Were these made more difficult as a consequence of the distinctive character of the British political system? There was no shortage of contemporaries willing to state that this was the case. An obvious category of discussion concerned the citing of domestic pressure as a reason why concessions could not be made to foreign powers, both allies and those whose alliance was sought. This was of particular significance when ministries explained why gains made during war could not be surrendered at peace treaties and gains made at the peace could not be yielded subsequently. Their defense of the retention of Gibraltar was based on this argument. Similar arguments were used by British ministers in seeking to persuade allies to do as they wished. Diplomatic pressure on France over the state of Dunkirk or on Spain and Portugal over commercial disputes made frequent use of the argument of domestic pressure.

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<sup>1</sup>E. R. Turner, "Parliament and Foreign Affairs, 1630–1760," *English Historical Review* 34 (1919); M. A. Thomson, "Parliament and Foreign Policy, 1689–1714," *History*, n.s. 38 (1953): 234–43; G. C. Gibbs, "Parliament and Foreign Policy in the Age of Stanhope and Walpole," *English Historical Review* 77 (1962): 18–37; Gibbs, "Parliament and the Treaty of Quadruple Alliance," in R. M. Hatton and J. S. Bromley, eds., *William III and Louis XIV. Essays 1680–1720 By and For Mark A. Thompson* (Liverpool, 1968), pp. 287–305; Gibbs, "Newspapers, Parliament and Foreign Policy in the Age of Stanhope and Walpole," in *Mélanges Offerts à G. Jacquemyns* (Brussels, 1968), pp. 293–315; D. H. Wollman, "Parliament and Foreign Affairs, 1697–1714," (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1970); J. M. Black, "Parliament and the Political and Diplomatic Crisis of 1717–1718," *Parliamentary History* 3 (1984): 77–101; Black, "The House of Lords and British Foreign Policy 1720–1748," in C. Jones, ed., *A Pillar of the Constitution: The House of Lords in British Politics, 1603–1784* (London, 1989).

A clear case thus appears. Britain's diplomatic position was greatly influenced by the domestic political structure of the country and this tended to act to the detriment of good relations with her allies, in particular by causing or exacerbating disputes and by lessening ministerial stability. The difficulty of retaining ministries in the face of domestic political pressure disrupted close diplomatic links. Allies were concerned about the fall of the Whig ministry in 1710, Townshend in 1730, Carteret in 1744, and Pitt in 1761, and about the difficulties that friendly ministries encountered. As a result they interfered in domestic politics in order to ensure ministerial continuity, while other powers intervened to hinder this or to harm ministries.<sup>2</sup>

Shifts in British foreign policy can be attributed to not only domestic pressures, but also to a consciousness of internal weakness, not least in light of these pressures. The British decision to abandon the alliance with France, taken in the late summer of 1730, when it was decided to commence secret unilateral negotiations with Austria, was of crucial importance in eighteenth-century British diplomacy. It ended a relatively stable period of foreign policy that had facilitated the consolidation of the Hanoverian regime and inaugurated eighty-five years of near constant hostility with France that in the short term, in combination with French support for Jacobitism, produced a situation that it might not be excessively fanciful to refer to as the British mid-eighteenth-century crisis,<sup>3</sup> and in the long term was to be of major significance for British political, economic, and colonial history. The decision to approach Austria in 1730 can be attributed to domestic pressures, in particular the fear that the ministry which had been savaged in the parliamentary session of 1730 already for a failure to prevent the Dunkirk works of its French ally, a clear breach of Anglo-French treaties, would be attacked afresh in the 1731 session if the French refused to honor their promise to demolish the works.<sup>4</sup> A clear case can be made that the decision to approach Austria in 1730 stemmed from ministerial concern over

<sup>2</sup> Public Record Office, SP 107/IB fos. 305, 372, Gyllenborg, Swedish envoy in London, to Görtz, Swedish minister, 18 Dec. 1716, Görtz to Gyllenborg, 16 Jan. 1717; Darmstadt, Staatsarchiv, Graflich Görtzisches Archiv F23, 153/6 fo. 35, Schulenburg, Hanoverian courtier in London, to Görtz, Hanoverian minister, 23 Apr. 1717; Cambridge, University Library, Cholmondeley Houghton papers, correspondence 1290, Sinzendorf, Chancellor of Austria, to Palm, Austrian envoy in London, 23 Mar. 1726; Bodleian Library, Ms. Rawlinson 135 fo. 401, Zamboni, Hesse-Darmstadt agent in London, to Landgrave of Hesse-Darmstadt, 22 Jan. 1732; Paris, Archives du Ministère des Relations Extérieures, Correspondance Politique Angleterre, 416 fo. 127, Amelot, French foreign minister, to Bussy, French envoy in London; J. B. Hattendorf, *England in the War of the Spanish Succession* (New York, 1987). p. 250.

<sup>3</sup> J. M. Black and A. Reese. "Die Panik von 1731," in *Expansion und Gleichgewicht. Studien zur europäischen Mächtepolitik des ancien régime*, ed. J. Kunisch (Berlin, 1986), pp. 69–95; Black, "British Intelligence and the Mid-Eighteenth Century Crisis," *Intelligence and National Security* 2 (1987): 217–18; Black, "Jacobitism and British Foreign Policy, 1731–35," in *The Jacobite Challenge*, ed. Black and E. Cruickshanks (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 142–44.

<sup>4</sup> P. Langford, *The Eighteenth Century* (London, 1976), pp. 102–03.

the parliamentary consequences of the failure to persuade Britain's principal ally to act in accordance with the wishes of the political nation, that, in short, domestic political exigencies dictated an end to acceptance of the tension natural to every alliance.

A similar pattern of domestic causation can be discerned in Britain's abandonment of her next alliance, with Austria, which was discarded when she chose neutrality in the War of the Polish Succession. Such an interpretation was advanced by contemporary commentators, such as the French envoy Chavigny.<sup>5</sup> It was suggested that the Walpole ministry, destabilized by the Excise Crisis and the subsequent political crisis at court, anxious about the forthcoming general election of 1734, and fearful of the domestic consequences of war with France, chose neutrality in a deliberate attempt to regain the political initiative domestically. Again the outbreak of war with Spain in 1739, the War of Jenkins' Ear, has been attributed to the pressure of public opinion on the ministry, to the manner in which a popular outcry limited crucially the parameters of diplomatic maneuver.<sup>6</sup> Similar episodes of confrontation can be found on other occasions in the century, with domestic causation advanced by contemporaries and historians as an explanation of diplomatic action. The French foreign minister, Saint-Contest, suggested in 1753 that the attitude of the British government towards the Imperial Election Scheme was determined by their unwillingness to present Parliament with anything other than an unanimous election.<sup>7</sup> The abandonment of the convention negotiations with Prussia (the decisions to approach Austria and to not renew the subsidy agreement with Prussia) taken in January 1762 can be seen as a response to domestic pressure for peace as can the abandonment of preparations to coerce Russia in 1791, which led to the collapse of the Anglo-Prussian alliance. Conversely, the move towards war with France in late 1792 can be regarded as a response to domestic concern about French and British radicalism.

This interpretation defines Britain as an unstable alliance partner, because the nature of her political system permitted the manipulation of diplomatic strategies acceptable to the government. This accords with the view of Britain as an unstable state held widely in contemporary diplomatic circles. In 1718 the British envoys in The Hague reported the French envoy as telling Fagel, the Secretary of the Dutch States General, that changes in Britain were so frequent that her French ally could not rely on assistance from her. Two years later a French agent urged his government to insist on what it wanted in discussions with its

<sup>5</sup> AE.CP. Ang. 380 fo. 62, 387 fo. 6, Chavigny to Chetardie, envoy in Berlin, 14 Apr. 1733, Chavigny to Chauvelin, French foreign minister, 4 July 1734.

<sup>6</sup> P. Woodfine, "The Anglo-Spanish War of 1739," in *The Origins of War in Early Modern Europe*, ed. J. Black (Edinburgh, 1987), pp. 185–92.

<sup>7</sup> AE.CP. Palatinat 78 fo. 9, memorandum by Saint Contest, given to Grevenbroch, Palatine envoy in Paris, 9 Jan. 1753.

British ally as the critical position of the British ministry would force them to accept. In 1727 the Austrian diplomat Baron Pentenriedter, who had served in London, expressed amazement that France should rely on so unstable an ally as the Walpole ministry, whose corrupt control of Parliament could not last. Six years later Chavigny observed that British policy generally changed with the ministry, but that the latter were not able to fulfil all their obligations, and also added that in the British political system it was difficult for the king to pursue unpopular policies. The latter point was repeated the following year by the Austrian envoy in London, Count Kinsky, who added that his correspondent, the Austrian minister Prince Eugene, was well aware that Britain was never without faction and opposition. In 1735 Horatio Walpole, brother to the first minister and British envoy at The Hague, wrote to Thomas Robinson, his counterpart in Vienna, to report his discovery that the Austrian government had decided ‘‘to let things continue upon the same foot they are whatever may be the consequence until our Parliament shall meet, in hopes that the English nation is so alarmed with the pushes of the House of Bourbon, that the Walpoles will be obliged to declare publicly in favour of The Emperor, or to resign their places.’’ In 1761 the Spanish government planned to delay war with Britain until the beginning of the parliamentary session, when they hoped it would cause the maximum disruption.<sup>8</sup>

The view that British foreign policy was made unstable by domestic circumstances was also expressed by some British diplomats and commentators. Unstable and thus unreliable, it was unsurprising that Albion acquired a reputation for perfidy. Ministries could not offer allies or potential allies agreements that they believed to be necessary because they feared the domestic, particularly parliamentary, consequences of such commitments. Britain could sometimes offer subsidies, but the very provision of them created political difficulties by encouraging expectations in powers that it was difficult to fulfil, so that at times, such as the early 1750s, the very currency of diplomatic interchange seemed to be subsidy demands. In 1751, the Duke of Newcastle, the effective foreign minister, complained about the Saxon envoy: ‘‘Count Flemming is constantly harping upon subsidies, and I am as constantly forced to tell him, that there is no possibility of granting them.’’ Foreign subsidies were a contentious parliamentary

<sup>8</sup> British Library, Additional MS. 37368, fo. 333, Cadogan and Whitworth to Craggs, 5 July 1718; Paris, Archives Nationales, Archives de la Marine, B<sup>7</sup> 279, report from L’Inventaire, 4 Apr. 1720; Vienna, Haus-, Hof-, und Staatsarchiv, Nachlass Fonseca 21 fo. 341, Pentenriedter to Defonseca, Austrian envoy in Paris, 22 Mar. 1727; Münster, Staatsarchiv, Archiv. Nordkirchen, Nachtrag B 104 fo. 49, Chavigny to [Friedrich Christian von Plettenberg?], 16 Apr. 1733; AE.CP. Ang. 380 fo. 194, Chavigny to Chauvelin, 22 May 1733; HHStA, Grosse Korrespondenz 94(b) fo. 234, Kinsky to Eugene, 16 Feb. 1734; BL, Add. MS. 23796 fos 1–2, Walpole to Robinson, 1 Jan. 1735; AE.CP. Prusse 171 fos. 260–61, 310, Saint-Contest to La Touche, envoy in Berlin, 22 May, 22 June 1753; AE.CP. Espagne 533 fos. 431–32, Ossun, envoy in Madrid, to Choiseul, French foreign minister, 17 Sept. 1761.

issue. Aware that the prospect of Russian military assistance would be useful, Guy Dickens, British envoy in St. Petersburg, wrote in 1760 to his counterpart in Vienna, "But how our Parliament will relish such great subsidies in time of Peace, our great ministers at home are best able to judge."<sup>9</sup> The difficulties that demands for subsidies encountered were the most obvious way in which domestic circumstances inhibited the response to the demands of allies and potential allies.<sup>10</sup> An inability to provide what Britain's allies were entitled to expect delivered her to isolation, in 1735–42, 1762–87, and 1791–93.

This attractive analysis can be questioned for several reasons. First, differing explanations can be advanced for decisions that might be attributed to domestic pressure. Secondly, continental states did not offer a stable counterpoint to British developments. Thirdly, all states in this period encountered difficulties with their allies. Fourthly, the stress in recent studies on the power and significance of eighteenth-century British monarchs, both in the political system in general and in foreign policy in particular, offers a note of stability in the treatment of British policy. The collapse of the Anglo-French alliance provides an obvious instance of the way in which differing explanations can be advanced for decisions that might be attributable to domestic pressure. Instead, it is possible to provide a convincing account of the British decision to turn to Austria that is essentially based on diplomatic considerations. Secret approaches to Austria had been made prior to the Dunkirk episode. The British ministry clearly did not see their French alliance as a fixed entity, a sensible view in light of the unpredictability of French policy, with so much apparently dependent on chance factors of life and death, particularly that of the young Louis XV and his aged and pacific first minister Cardinal Fleury. This situation was brought home when Louis' smallpox attack in late 1728 was accompanied by obvious preparations by his uncle Philip V of Spain to seize the French throne, a move that would have been very unwelcome in Britain and would have destroyed the Anglo-French alliance. Louis survived the attack and lived until 1774, but this was no more predictable to contemporaries than the fate of Czar Peter II of Russia, born five years after Louis, who succumbed to smallpox in 1730, with significant consequences for Russian policy. If the British ministry was already considering abandoning her dependence on France prior to the political storm over Dunkirk, added weight was lent in 1730 by the greater vulnerability of Hanover that followed the failure of Sir Charles Hotham's attempt to negotiate a reconciliation with Prussia, the failure of the Fontainebleau discussions to give teeth to the Anglo-French-Spanish Alliance of Seville and the consequent danger that

<sup>9</sup> P. R. O., SP 88/72, Newcastle to Hanbury-Williams, envoy to Augustus III of Saxony-Poland, 8 Feb. 1751 (os); BL, Add. MS. 35468, fo. 60, Dickens to Keith, 18 Feb. 1750 (os); Turin, Archivio di Stato, Lettere Ministri Inghilterra 57, Perrone, Sardinian envoy in London, to Charles Emmanuel III, 2 Mar. 1752.

<sup>10</sup> M. Roberts, *Splendid Isolation, 1763–80* (Reading, 1970).

Britain's other principal ally, Spain, would approach Austria, and the extent to which France was increasingly pressing diplomatic plans that suited neither George II nor his British ministry. Dunkirk was doubtless important, but the Anglo-French alliance had faced significant domestic criticism from its inception without succumbing; only the previous years sustained pressure for war with Spain in order to punish Spain for her depredations on British commerce had been unsuccessful.<sup>11</sup>

Again, British neutrality in the War of the Polish Succession (1733–35) can be explained from a diplomatic perspective. It is not generally appreciated that the Anglo-Austrian alliance had to all intents and purposes collapsed in 1732. The alliance had always been weak as a consequence of the failure to comprehend in its provisions Austria's principal allies, Russia and Prussia, and their differences with Britain and Hanover. In 1732 Austria refused to heed British and Hanoverian wishes on a wide variety of topics, instead preferring to retain already strong links with Prussia. Britain had been excluded from negotiations in which Austria was involved, both those relating to the Polish Succession and those leading to the Treaty of Copenhagen. In turn, Britain's unwillingness to take a forceful role in European affairs had already been displayed prior to the Excise Crisis, when in 1732 the British had refused urgent requests to send a fleet to the Mediterranean to deter an apparently imminent Spanish attack on Britain's two Italian allies, Charles VI and Charles Emmanuel III. It needs to be appreciated also that, irrespective of domestic consequences, there were sound reasons for Britain not intervening in the War of the Polish Succession. The conflict was not a French walkover. Instead, obvious features of the war were the vitality of the Austro-Russian alliance, the consequent defeat of French influence in eastern Europe, and the resilience of the Austrian military effort in North Italy. Furthermore, the argument that British neutrality led to an increase in French power and decline in Austrian influence and strength, all of which would prove inimical to British interests, as was to be seen at the time of the War of the Austrian Succession, is overstated, an exaggeration of Britain's significance and capabilities. Austria's principal problem in 1740–41 was the Russian failure to intimidate Prussia, as she had done in the mid-1730s, a task Britain could not have achieved. In addition, the overall impression of 1741–42 is of Austrian resilience.<sup>12</sup> A similar interpretation stressing diplomatic consider-

<sup>11</sup> R. Lodge, "The Anglo-French Alliance, 1716–1731," in *Studies in Anglo-French History during the Eighteenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, eds. A. Coville and H. Temperley (Cambridge, 1935), pp. 3–18; Black, "The Anglo-French Alliance 1716–1731," *Francia* 13 (1986): 303–10; Black, *The Collapse of the Anglo-French Alliance 1727–1731* (Gloucester, 1987). On French problems with their allies see J. Black, "French Foreign Policy in the Age of Fleury Reassessed," *English Historical Review* 103 (1988): 373–83.

<sup>12</sup> J. Black, "1733-Failure of British Diplomacy?" *Durham University Journal* 74 (1982): 199–209; "British Neutrality in the War of the Polish Succession, 1733–1735," *International History Review* 8 (1986): 345–66.

ations can be advanced for Anglo-Spanish relations in 1738–39. Spanish inflexibility played an important part in the breakdown of negotiations, and this can only be understood in terms of Spanish concern over imperial finance. The timing of the outbreak of war can only be explained by locating it in the context of diplomatic relations. If public pressure was so significant why did not war between Britain and Spain break out in 1729 or 1738? Diplomatic explanations cannot be suspended by invoking a surge of domestic opinion.

These differing explanations for events in 1730, 1733, and 1739 can be extended for other episodes in the century. Studies by Doran and Schweizer stressing the diplomatic fragility of the Anglo-Prussian alliance during the Seven Years' War minimize the importance of George III in ending it. Doran argues that Frederick II was really concerned about Russia and would have got rid of his British alliance as soon as he could gain that of Russia. He suggests that had Bute not existed he would have had to be invented by Frederick to justify his shift.<sup>13</sup> Irrespective of the domestic opposition to any alliance with France in 1772 or to any joint response to the First Partition of Poland, there were sound diplomatic reasons for hesitation in the face of French approaches, not least the weakness of the French ministry, the Prussian threat to Hanover, and the military futility of action against the partitioning powers.<sup>14</sup> The failure of George I's misguided attempt to intimidate Russia in 1719–21 was not a good augury for similar action in 1772. There were also sound strategic and diplomatic reasons for withdrawing from confrontation with Russia in 1791, not least the quixotic instability of Prussian power. William Eden, Lord Auckland, who urged prudence, did so not in response to public agitation, of which his view, stemming from his experience of commercial negotiation with France, was poor, but for sound reasons derived from his justified views of the consequences of the hijacking of British policy by the envoy in Berlin, Joseph Ewart.<sup>15</sup>

Explanations stressing diplomatic considerations can be advanced for the episodes commonly cited as evidence of the significance of domestic pressure. These explanations indicate the ambiguous nature of many of these episodes, the danger of accepting simple interpretations, and the value of thorough archi-

<sup>13</sup> P. F. Doran, *Andrew Mitchell and Anglo-Prussian Diplomatic Relations during the Seven Years War* (1986), pp. 382–83; K. W. Schweizer, "Frederick the Great, William Pitt and Lord Bute: The Origin, Development and Dissolution of the Anglo-Prussian Alliance, 1756–63" (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 1976), Schweizer, "The Non-renewal of the Anglo-Prussian Subsidy Treaty, 1761–1762: A Historical Revision," *Canadian Journal of History* 13 (1978): 383–93; Schweizer and C. S. Leonard, "Britain, Prussia, Russia and the Galitzin Letter: A Reassessment," *Historical Journal* 26 (1983): 531–56.

<sup>14</sup> J. Black, *Natural and Necessary Enemies. Anglo-French Relations in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1985), pp. 77–78.

<sup>15</sup> Cambridge University Library, Add. MS. 6958, No. 891, Auckland to Pitt the younger; Bodleian, Bland Burges papers 30, fos. 93, 124, 129, 132, 136, Auckland to Burges, Under Secretary at the Foreign Office, 10 Jan., 13 Feb., 1, 5, 19 March 1791.



val research. These differing explanations are advanced not in order to deny any role for domestic pressure, but simply to place such versions in perspective. The same is true of instances in eighteenth-century British domestic history when policies and ministries are said to have collapsed before the force of public opinion. Without being so foolish as to deny all weight to the latter, one might suggest that public opinion is often adduced when people cannot otherwise explain events or cannot do the hard work of examining the specific nature of individual crises. The study of popular politics is a valuable complement to that of ministerial and parliamentary affairs, but it cannot serve as a substitute for it.

The existence of popular as much as parliamentary politics did not make Britain distinct from the continental states. Aside from the countries that also possessed powerful representative assemblies, it was also the case that other states had to consider domestic views, whatever their institutional expression. These views might not relate to foreign policy, but they might affect the capability of states to conduct it, not least in terms of their ability to raise money. Poverty did not preclude war or active diplomacy, but financial and political difficulties could affect the ability to project an image of power which was a crucial component of a successful foreign policy. In response to the Whig split of 1717 George I instructed the Earl of Stair, British envoy in Paris, that when the French brought up the issue of British divisions, he was to reply by speaking of those of France, which were neither less serious nor more edifying. The French supporters of Philip V were compared to the Jacobites.<sup>16</sup>

The instability of the foreign policy of many continental states did not stem from domestic pressures only. More significant was the nature of monarchical authority and ambition. Monarchical authority was greatest in foreign policy, where the wishes of rulers were not constrained by the compromises that underlay the facade of absolutism. Dynasticism provided a major theme and significant idiom for the international relations of the period. With expansion still principally a matter of dynastic gain rather than conquest or domestic growth, it was not surprising that chance factors of birth and death dictated the kaleidoscopic nature of international relations in which the stability of alliances could not be assumed. The personal views of monarchs were paramount as when Czarina Elizabeth's death in 1762 launched Russia on the path of a Prussian alliance and toward war with Denmark, both of which were prevented by Peter III's removal later in the year. Similarly, the death of Frederick the Great in 1786 cleared the way for an Anglo-Prussian alliance, as his nephew Frederick William II did not share his doubts about the value of a British alliance. Britain's experience with foreign allies, such as Spain in 1733, scarcely suggest that

<sup>16</sup> Edinburgh, Scottish Record Office, GD. 135/141/11, Robethon, advisor of George I, to Stair, 12 July 1717.

monarchical power and the absence of powerful representative assemblies led to a more stable alliance system. This helps to explain why all states in this period encountered difficulties with their allies. In 1742 Amelot, the French foreign minister, observed that France was suffering through considering her allies, and that he was anyway unsure of Frederick the Great, an accurate anticipation of the latter's history of betrayal. Five months later Amelot noted that all of France's hopes were founded on the weak basis of better relations with her allies. His correspondent, Fénelon, the French envoy at The Hague, claimed that France's policy had been wrecked by her allies,<sup>17</sup> while one of those partners, the Emperor Charles VII, wrote of the essential need for cooperation among allies, but himself took part in secret unilateral negotiations with France's enemy Britain.<sup>18</sup> An anonymous French memorandum of 1744, possibly by François de Bussy, formerly French envoy in London, discussing the best way to approach Carteret in order to begin Anglo-French negotiations, suggested that the Austrian Succession war would only serve to ruin both powers, and argued that as heads of the competing alliances they were oppressed with all the burdens of the war. French anger with her Austrian ally in 1772 led to a refusal to guarantee Austrian gains and the ministerial observation that an alliance could not last when mutual confidence was lacking.<sup>19</sup>

Eighteenth-century European alliances were unstable and prone to divisions.<sup>20</sup> This was true even of alliances that appeared central to the European system, such as the Austro-Russian pact negotiated in 1726.<sup>21</sup> A combination of dynastic concerns and royal independence converted the tension natural to any alliance into a more volatile situation. It is at this point that Britain appears less distinctive. Over the last decade there has been an obvious shift in studies of British politics in the eighteenth century as to the role of the monarch, an empirically derived conclusion that predates more recent revisionist arguments about the ideological strength of the royal position. In the case of foreign policy the capacity of the monarch for independent initiatives has been stressed and there has been a concomitant appreciation of the role of Hanover in British foreign policy. Most of this work has centered hitherto on George I and George II; but the same is also the case for George III, and it could be suggested that an important reason for opposition to the latter in the 1760s was suspicion concern-

<sup>17</sup> AE.CP. Espagne 470 fo. 15, Hollande 443 fos. 68, 261, Amelot to the Bishop of Rennes, envoy in Spain, 16 Jan. 1742, Amelot to Fénelon, 25 June, Fénelon to Amelot, 18 July 1742.

<sup>18</sup> Munich, Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Bayerisches Gesandtschaft, Dresden 821, Charles VII to Baron de Wetzel, Bavarian envoy in Dresden, 29 June 1742.

<sup>19</sup> AE. Mémoires et Documents Aug. 40 fo. 103; J.F. Flammermont, *Les Correspondances des Agents Diplomatiques Étrangères en France avant la Révolution* (Paris, 1896), pp.66–67.

<sup>20</sup> *Le Secret du Roi. Correspondance secrète de Louis XV avec ses agents diplomatiques, 1752–1774*, ed. Duc de Broglie, 2 vols. (Paris, 1878), 2:415.

<sup>21</sup> K.A. Roider, *Austria's Eastern Question 1700–1790* (Princeton, 1982).

ing his personal views on foreign policy, just as the Opposition two decades later was to criticize George's version of the *secret du roi*.<sup>22</sup>

Royal influence emerges more conspicuously as attention is devoted to the private papers of British ministers and diplomats and to foreign archives. This is true of all three Georges: George II insisting on his trip to Hanover in 1741 that the Anglo-Russian treaty could not be ratified in London without his express instruction, or George III being perceived by French envoys in the early 1790s as controlling a king's party that was more anti-French than that of his first minister, Pitt the younger.<sup>23</sup> Monarchs could be kept in the dark, such as when Newcastle suppressed information concerning French intentions in 1740 that would encourage George II to go to Hanover against ministerial advice. However, this was not unique to Britain. The endemic factionalism that characterized the court and central governmental life of continental states affected their foreign policy and diplomatic representation also. Monarchs could be kept uninformed, just as they could seek to keep their ministers in ignorance. In the late 1720s Reichenbach, the Prussian envoy in London, conducted a secret correspondence with the Prussian minister Grumbkow. In 1773 Viscount Stormont, Secretary of State for the Southern Department, wrote to the Earl of Rochford, British envoy in Paris:

As there is but too much reason to suspect, that the Duke d'Aiguillon does not always make full and exact reports to the King his master, of what may be said to him by foreign ministers, when it tends to thwart any favourite project he has in view, and as this was most evidently the case, in what he said in the Council of the 28th past, I humbly submit it to your Lordship's better judgment whether it might not be advisable, to use our utmost endeavours to prevent the French King, whose sentiments are known to be pacific, from being deluded into an opinion, that the naval armaments of France, will be looked upon by us with indifference. It seems to me, that the best and most natural way of doing this would be by a memorial, which the Duke certainly would not venture to suppress.<sup>24</sup>

An emphasis on royal power leads to a reassessment of eighteenth-century British foreign policy. Not only was continuity provided by the long-lived mon-

<sup>22</sup> J. Black, "British Foreign Policy in the Eighteenth Century: A Survey," *Journal of British Studies* 26 (1987): 39–44; Black, "Sir Robert Ainslie: His Majesty's Agent-provocateur: British Foreign Policy and the International Crisis of 1787," *European History Quarterly* 14 (1984): 270–71; J. W. Marcum, "Vorontsov and Pitt: The Russian Assessment of a British Statesman, 1785–1792," *Rocky Mountain Social Science Journal* 10 (1973): 49–51. For the position in the 1690s see G. Davies, "The Control of British foreign policy by William III," in *Essays on the later Stuarts* (London, 1958), pp. 91–122; S. Oakley, *William III and the Northern Crowns During the Nine Years War, 1689–1697* (New York, 1987), p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire Record Office, Trevor papers, 27, Horatio Walpole to Trevor, 10 June 1741 (os).

<sup>24</sup> Chewton Mendip, Chewton Hall, papers of James first Earl Waldegrave, envoy in Paris, Newcastle to Waldegrave, 27 Feb., 11, 18 Apr. 1740 (os), Hull, University Library, Hotham papers, DDHO 3/3, Reichenbach-Grumbkow correspondence; P.R.O. SP 78/287 fo.191, Stormont to Rochford, 7 Apr. 1773.

archs of the period, but the point of political tension in foreign policy was generally one of monarch and ministers, not ministers and Parliament, a situation similar to that on the Continent. Clearly, the extent to which foreign policy was formulated by the monarchs varied. All three Georges appear to have had a far greater interest in continental than colonial issues; within the former German and Baltic affairs received more attention than their Mediterranean counterparts. As parliamentary and popular concern was concentrated on colonial and commercial disputes, particularly with France and Spain, a study of these might reveal relatively limited royal control of British policy. Though George II was eager to control Anglo-Russian negotiations at the beginning of the 1740s, he was prepared to leave the deployment of the navy to the discretion of his ministers in London even though there was a risk of naval action precipitating war between Britain and France. In 1740 the Earl of Harrington, the Secretary of State accompanying George II to Hanover, wrote, "as their Excellencys the Lords Justices are upon the spot, and have immediate opportunities of information as to the circumstances and condition of our naval force, the King leaves it entirely to them to make such farther dispositions thereof, both with regard to Europe, and to America, as they shall see fitting." Thus one historian has written recently of the "struggle between politicians controlling the Treasury and those responsible for foreign affairs," without mentioning the Crown.<sup>25</sup> However, were the attention to be directed toward continental affairs, toward the bulk of British diplomatic relations, then the role of the Crown appears more significant.<sup>26</sup> As Electors of Hanover, the Georges were more aware than their British ministers of the changes produced in the European system by the rise of Austrian, Prussian, and Russian power, and they tended to conceive of France largely in terms of her views in continental affairs and her ability to implement them. Thus George I's determination to obtain French support against Russia, despite the opposition of some of his ministers, played a major role in the negotiation of the Anglo-French alliance in 1716. George II saw French attitudes in the Russo-Swedish dispute as the litmus test for Anglo-French relations after the War of the Austrian Succession, rather than the colonial disputes that concerned many of his ministers and much of the press, and George III was interested in France's stance in 1772 at the time of the First Partition of Poland and the Swedish revolution.<sup>27</sup>

Any argument that Britain's relations with her allies were not distinctive because of the nature of her political system has to consider the issue of parlia-

<sup>25</sup> P.R.O., SP 43/93, Harrington to Newcastle, 25 Sept. 1740; P. Luff, "Henry Fox and the 'Lead' in the House of Commons 1754-1755," *Parliamentary History* 6 (1987): 34.

<sup>26</sup> U. Dann, *Hannover und England, 1740-1760: Diplomatie und Selbsterhaltung* (Hildesheim, 1986).

<sup>27</sup> H. Roberts, "Great Britain and the Swedish Revolution, 1772-73," *Historical Journal* 7 (1964): 1-46; Roberts, *British Diplomacy and Swedish Politics, 1758-1773* (London, 1980).

mentary influence. It would be foolish to deny that Parliament's constitutional rights in the field of foreign policy were matched by considerable political importance. In 1739 Chavigny, then French envoy at Copenhagen, informed the Danish minister that British policy towards Denmark was influenced by a wish to prevent the difficulties that could arise in "un État populaire." In the same year Earl Waldegrave, British envoy in Paris, suggested to Benjamin Keene, his counterpart in Spain, that the latter's reports "will bring our friends at home under great difficulties. . . . The warmth which has been expressed in the House of Lords upon the past delay of the payment of the ninety five thousand pounds, will I doubt leave no room for future management in case this last dispatch arrives before the Parliament be up." In January 1750, the Duke of Bedford, Secretary of State for the Southern Department, told Mirepoix, the French envoy, that even if George II and his ministry supported Russian offensive moves in the Baltic, the situation of affairs and views in Britain was such that no minister would dare to lead the country into new causes of foreign expenditure.<sup>28</sup> Parliamentary management could create considerable difficulties in the field of foreign policy.

It is important to neither exaggerate these difficulties nor ignore the advantages that Parliament produced. In March 1746 Robert Trevor, British envoy at The Hague, wrote to his counterpart in Vienna, "I readily agree with your Court, that we want men, and they want money; but then I am not quite of their opinion, that we can spare the latter, so well as they the former. What will I fear render this land war unpopular in England, and consequently impracticable, is our allies' presumption upon our opulence; and expecting to be paid, and prayed for fighting their own quarrels."<sup>29</sup> This was a reasonable comment on Anglo-Austrian relations, but in fact the British commitment to the land war increased. It came to an end in 1748 not because of domestic unpopularity, for the general elections of 1747 and the session of 1748 were very favorable for the ministry, but because French successes threatened the overrunning of much of the United Provinces. The decision that year to return the conquest of Cape Breton to France in the peace settlement, despite vociferous demands that it be retained, suggests that domestic opposition was far from being a determinant of policy, as does the success of pushing through peacetime subsidies to allies in the early 1750s, despite claims that Parliament would never accept it. Governmental success at general elections and the resources available for parliamentary management did not prevent serious criticism of British foreign policy, but it

<sup>28</sup> Iden Green, Mill St. House, papers of Edward Weston, Chavigny to Schulin, 1 March 1739; BL, Add. MS. 32801, fo. 59, Waldegrave to Keene, 22 June 1739; AE.CP. Ang. 428 fo. 77, Mirepoix to Puyseulx, French foreign minister, 30 Jan. 1750.

<sup>29</sup> BL, Add. MS 23822, fo. 245, 35363, fo. 119, Trevor to Robinson, 26 March 1746, Philip Yorke, ministerial M.P., to his brother Joseph, aide-de-camp to the Duke of Cumberland, 17 Apr. 1746 (os).

lessened their impact. It is salutary to contrast the criticism of peacetime subsidies voiced in Parliament and the press in the early 1750s with their minor role in the general election of 1754.

The parliamentary system could be a source of considerable strength in foreign policy and was recognized as such by some contemporaries. By regarding Parliament as partly a sphere in which the disputes of politicians in and out of favor could be contested, it was a stage for, rather than a source of, political difficulties. These difficulties were not unique to Britain; they were an essential feature of court-based political systems that lacked the organization and attitudes of disciplined parties. Conversely, Parliament offered a solution to the most serious domestic problem of the states of eighteenth-century Europe—public finance. It provided a means for linking government to the politically powerful throughout the country, a means whose constitutional and institutional expression, was the voting of substantial sums for approved policies. The contrast between Britain and her continental counterparts was not solely a matter of sums raised and the speed with which they were voted and produced. It was also a matter of lower rates of interest, flexible financial methods, sources of revenue that could be anticipated without difficulty and relatively low collection costs, both in administrative and political terms. Politically this led to the voting and collection of large sums without significant levels of public disorder. Parliamentary financial arrangements and taxation were accepted as legal even if they could produce criticism. While many continental states found it difficult to devise politically acceptable methods to raise taxation, largely because the politically and socially powerful were unwilling to increase their commitments, Britain used parliamentary taxation and a parliamentary-secured funded national debt to raise large sums. It also spent them, particularly in wartime. Contributions to Britain's allies were significant. The crude total for British payments to Victor Amadeus II of Savoy-Piedmont for the duration of the War of the Spanish Succession has been estimated at two million pounds. Subsidy payments to Prussia and other German states during the Seven Years' War came to over ten million pounds.<sup>30</sup>

Britain's financial strength made her a more attractive ally because of her ability to sustain a lengthy conflict. It was recognized as important by contemporaries. Haslang, the Bavarian envoy in London, reported at the end of the 1741 session that George II was able to dispose of more than fifty million pounds which the nation had voted, and that due to the help of Parliament there had not been a king since Henry VIII who had been so powerful. The following

<sup>30</sup> G. Symcox, "Britain and Victor Amadeus II: or, the Use and Abuse of Allies," in *England's Rise to Greatness, 1660–1763*, ed. S. Baxter (Berkeley, 1983), p.165; C. W. Eldon, *England's Subsidy Policy Towards the Continent during the Seven Years' War* (Philadelphia, 1938), app. II; P. G. M. Dickson, *Finance and Government under Maria Theresa 1740–1780*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1987), 2:145–67.

year the opposition Whig Sarah Duchess of Marlborough complained of the "Parliament that has brought England into such a distress," and wrote of "those terrible sums which have been given and five hundred thousand pounds more fresh money for the Queen of Hungary," while the French foreign minister Amelot was both impressed by British financial strength and forced to turn down the demands of France's ally Sweden.<sup>31</sup> However, the British financial system was based on credit. Henry Pelham, the first Lord of the Treasury, wrote in 1746, "our credit has supported itself almost to a miracle, how otherwise could we have furnished them with such vast sums of money as we have done this year, and at the same time increased our subsidies to other Princes also." The following year Sir Charles Hanbury-Williams, British envoy in Dresden, noted "the rapidity with which the loan for next year was filled indicates both the great riches of our country and the great confidence the money'd men have in the Administration."<sup>32</sup> Credit and confidence were intertwined, a central feature of the relationship between government and finance in which Parliament played such an important role. Aside from its formal role in public finance, parliamentary support for foreign policy performed the crucial function of creating confidence in the political and fiscal system, a vital function when there was no reliable alternative method of assessing national views and obtaining national support. The system of credit upon which government depended and through which it developed valuable links of mutual dependence was not simply a financial system. Opinion and success also played vital roles in the complex relationships based on financial and political confidence that kept the system in operation. If foreign policy was to be supported, foreign success was essential. Newcastle wrote to his brother Pelham about some negotiations in 1750, "This Spanish affair will give us great credit everywhere; and have a good effect, at home."<sup>33</sup> Conversely, the system was vulnerable at many points, to domestic political instability, adverse fiscal circumstances, and a difficult international situation. The opposition to interventionist policies central to the attitudes of Robert Walpole, Henry Pelham, and, at least in the 1780s, William Pitt the younger stemmed from their conviction that the fiscal, domestic, and international situations were such as to not permit a continual reliance on credit and confidence. This had obvious consequences in terms of these ministers' opposition to greater commitments to allies or an extension of the alliance system. In 1750 Henry Pelham criticized his brother: "I see he will be dabbling with all the

<sup>31</sup> Munich, Kasten Schwarz 17211, Haslang to Charles VII, 12 May 1741; BL, Althorp papers M15(4), Marlborough to grandson John Spencer, 20 Jan. 1742 (os); P.R.O. SP. 107/53, Amelot to Bussy, 3 March 1742; AE.CP.Ang. 414 fo. 275, Espagne 470 fo. 213, Bussy to Amelot, 29 March, Amelot to Rennes, 6 Apr. 1742.

<sup>32</sup> BL, Add. MS 23823, fo. 101, 23826, fo. 290, Pelham to Robinson, 18 July 1747 (os), Hanbury-Williams to Robinson, 22 Dec. 1747.

<sup>33</sup> BL, Add. MS. 35411, fo. 189, Newcastle to Pelham, 25 Oct. 1750 (os).

German Princes; Guarantees for their several successions is not our business.' Pelham had little time for the German rulers' "ransacking obsolete demands, and asking for money to pay debts which have been many years liquidated, and for which this country is now mortgaged for near 3 millions of money by the corrupt correspondence between these kind of Princes and certain commissioners. . . . How can it be mentioned in Parliament, and for what? to buy a Prince of the Empire to do that, which England at best is but collaterally concerned in."<sup>34</sup>

Rather than presenting such attitudes as a consequence of the particular nature of the British political system, it is more appropriate to consider them as a considered opinion in the debate that characterized all governments in the period, namely the best policies to follow in light of national resources and interests. For at the same time that Pelham voiced his doubts about his brother's interventionist schemes, specifically his enthusiastic support for the Imperial Election Scheme, the British political system and the Old Whig ministry appeared secure as joint beneficiaries of the defeat of the Jacobite challenge in 1746 and the discrediting of the Patriots in the 1740s. The reconciliation between George II and the Pelhams after the fall of Carteret revealed the strength of the political system, for in the later stages of the unsuccessful War of the Austrian Succession considerable sums were raised without serious political difficulty for the Pelhams, who had defeated Carteret, and adopted the interventionist policies associated with him. A French visitor to Britain in 1750 reported that royal power was strong in proportion as the monarch affected not to seek it. Two years later Hanbury-Williams was surprised by the views of the Earl of Essex's tutor: "I was talking at table to Lord Essex of the difference between limited and an absolute Monarchy. And I mentioned France and England, upon which Mr. Boyer told Lord Essex that there was no real difference for that the King of England could oppress his subjects just as much as the King of France. The only difference was that the one did it by his own authority and the other by buying his Parliament which was generally the case."<sup>35</sup>

National resources and interests could be interpreted in a variety of ways. Tallard, the French envoy in London in 1701, reported that England was ready to fight despite being short of money and having weak credit.<sup>36</sup> Much of the public and private debate over British foreign policy centered not on a difference of opinion over long-term aspirations, but on the question of which policies to adopt in light of Britain's resources and the policies of other powers in order to achieve them. When Earl Hardwicke told George II's adviser, the Earl of Bute,

<sup>34</sup> BL, Add. MS. 35423, fos. 103, 109–10, Pelham to Lord Chancellor Hardwicke, 19 Aug., 6 Oct. 1750 (os).

<sup>35</sup> AE.CP. Ang. 429 fo. 72, D'Artagnan memorandum, 7 Aug. 1750; BL, Add. MS. 51393, fo. 85, Hanbury-Williams to Lord Holland, 23 March 1752.

<sup>36</sup> AE.CP. Ang. 191, Tallard to Louis XIV, 3, 7, 21 March, 2 Apr. 1701.



in 1762, at the time of a major Whig split, that Newcastle and “his friends adhered to the two grand points, upon which the great difference had broke out viz: the support of the German war, and the preserving of the connection with the King of Prussia,” Bute retorted that he wished “to avoid distinguishing between the parts of the war, about which people were so much divided.”<sup>37</sup> There were substantive points in dispute, both over goals and policies. They focused on the question of the degree to which Britain should intervene in continental issues. This raised issues of goals, policies, and resources, but not that there were clear distinctions between them. These issues were central to Britain’s relations with her allies. There was little doubt about the implications of the attitudes expressed by politicians such as Hardwicke in 1750, “The support of the Protestant interest in Germany *in general* is a point, which the King ought always to have in view, both as King and Elector. But surely it is right policy for the King of Great Britain to stand as clear of their particular . . . disputes as possible.”<sup>38</sup> A powerful strain in the British public debate over foreign policy, one that was particularly associated with Tory opinion, advocated a policy which could be described as isolationism. Though support for isolationist goals was voiced less commonly in ministerial circles, there was nevertheless frequently a division over the policies that should be adopted in which some ministers or diplomats advocated a cautious stance. In light of the Hanoverian commitments and continental perspective of the Georges, ministerial and diplomatic non-interventionist opinion had at times to be circumspect, but it reflected a strongly felt view that Britain’s interests were not served by a close involvement in continental diplomacy, and/or that her resources were not equal to the task.

These opinions centered on the lack of interest of most British administrations after the death of Stanhope in 1721 in seeing fundamental changes in the European system. Some monarchs, ministers, and diplomats were willing to envisage major changes. George II and Carteret were prepared to consider the revision of France’s eastern frontier in 1743 and to encourage Charles VII to turn his ambitions in that direction. Both men were interested in a league of powers directed against Frederick the Great that might entail partitioning his dominions. In 1759 George II suggested to the Bavarian envoy that his country should succeed Austria as Britain’s ally and the holder of the Imperial dignity.<sup>39</sup> In 1790–91 Joseph Ewart, the British envoy in Berlin, advocated British support for Prussia in her plans for major territorial changes in eastern Europe. However, in general, Britain’s continental ambitions were more limited and the desire for Hanoverian expansion did not tend toward interest in a fundamental

<sup>37</sup> BL, Add. MS. 32941, fo. 87, Hardwicke account of conference, 28 July 1762.

<sup>38</sup> BL, Add. MS. 35410, fo. 227, Hardwicke to Newcastle, 1 June 1750 (os).

<sup>39</sup> Munich, Bayr. Ges. London 234–35, Haslang to Bavarian foreign minister Count Preysing, 2, 16 Jan. 1759.

alteration in the European system. Had Hanover been a major military power the situation might have been different, but she was as bereft of a large army as Britain, and did not possess the alternative defense of insular status and naval strength. When in 1753 the Prussian Chancellor told La Touche, the French envoy in Berlin, that he had never imagined that an Elector of Brandenburg would one day dare to stand up to Britain, La Touche replied that such an Elector at the head of an army of 150,400 well-disciplined troops and supported by an ally as powerful as France could attempt anything. The Chancellor then suggested that George II be made to pay as Elector of Hanover for his actions as king of Britain.<sup>40</sup> The Hanoverian expansionism of the reign of George I, was tempered in his son's reign by concern to protect the Electorate from the consequences of Prussian aggression and the balance of power between Hanover and Prussia swung even further against the former during George III's reign. At the crudest level Britain had no dynastic claims to continental principalities to press and sought no share in European partitions, whether of Poland or anywhere else. An interest in isolated naval and commercial bases, Gibraltar, Minorca, and, at times, Ostend did not amount to a sustained desire for territorial expansion, and Britain, thanks to her insular position, did not seek the influence in adjoining principalities that the United Provinces was led to by its security fears and commercial hopes. As a result, Britain was a state that sought defensive rather than offensive treaties, and she could offer little to her allies, whether France in 1730 seeking to drive the Austrians from Italy, Spain seeking Italian gains in 1733, or Russia a year later pressing to extend commercial agreements to political treaties. Similarly, the Pelhams criticized Carteret's schemes and rebuffed Russian pressure for action against Prussia and Sweden in the early 1750s. Russian demands that might have led to war with Turkey were refused in the 1760s. Pitt the younger lost the Prussian alliance in 1791 by rejecting war with Russia, and Britain was consigned to isolation the following year when he refused to join the alliance against France. Whether the alliance of the unpredictable Frederick William II could have been retained for long is unclear. The international context must not be forgotten when discussing domestic pressures on foreign policy.

All alliances entail present or prospective mutual concessions, but Britain, though she could offer financial strength, would provide little else. In both war and peace she was able to play a major role in alliances. Her participation in the Nine and Seven Years' Wars, the wars of the Spanish and Austrian Succession, and the war with revolutionary France revealed that though Britain was the sole major power without a large peacetime army, she could field, partly as a result of subsidies, major forces in times of war which could operate at a considerable distance from Britain. In peacetime Britain could also play a major role in

<sup>40</sup> *Panorama der Friedericianischen Zeit*, ed. J. Ziechmann (Bremen, 1985), p.393; AE.CP. Prusse 171 fos. 239–41, La Touche to Saint-Contest.

alliance diplomacy, as she displayed in alliance with France in 1716–31, with Austria in 1731–33 and, to a lesser extent, in the early 1750s and with Prussia in 1787–91. During these periods she was willing to play an active role in seeking to arrange European affairs in light of her and her allies interests. However, Britain's ability to play a role was limited by a number of factors. Her navy was of limited value in most disputes, particularly after the Mediterranean ceased in mid-century to be a major area of tension.<sup>41</sup> British colonial interests were of scant concern to most continental states. It was only possible to exchange colonial acquisitions for benefits on the Continent for Britain's allies if the alliance was directed against the Bourbon powers, as in 1748 when Cape Breton was returned and Austria regained the Austrian Netherlands. Colonial interests were of less importance if the topic of diplomatic negotiation was Mecklenburg, Poland, or Sweden, and the intention was the creation of an alliance directed against Prussia or Russia. It was not in the interest of Britain's allies to fight so that Britain could gain Canada or India. While Britain's colonial concerns were of scant interest to her allies, they could represent a substantial diversion of British strength. Frederick the Great's reiterated demands that a squadron be sent to the Baltic during the Seven Years' War were rejected on the grounds that Channel and colonial commitments did not permit it. British critics of continental interventionism were to a certain extent correct in arguing that there was a choice between devoting resources to colonial and continental commitments. The notion of conquering Canada in Germany by diverting French resources was neither one that could be expected to appeal to Britain's allies nor an idea for which the Austrian Succession war provided much support. Thus British colonial interests were not necessarily helped by continental commitments while the former were of scant appeal to potential allies. The idea that Britain's imperial success was facilitated by continental intervention—the so-called strategy of “containing operations,” aimed at keeping the French tied down in Europe through the defensive efforts of subsidized allies and British expeditionary forces and at sea by the blockading fleets which formed the covering force for the offensive expeditions in the New World—is correct as far as the fleets were concerned. However, the cost of Britain's allies and of forces sent to the continent is easier to demonstrate than their value. Choiseul, the French foreign minister, argued in 1762 that a Britain free from continental war would be strong enough to prevent France from regaining her colonies and would be able to attack Spanish America.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> J. Black, “The British Navy and British Foreign Policy in the first half of the eighteenth century,” in *Essays in European History in Honour of Ragnhild Hatton* (Lennoxville, Quebec, 1985), pp. 137–55.

<sup>42</sup> D. Baugh, “Why did Britain lose command of the sea during the war for America?” in Black and Woodfine, eds., *The British Navy and the Use of Naval Power in the Eighteenth Century* (Leicester, 1988) pp.149–63; AE.CP. Espagne 536 fo. 60. Choiseul to Ossun, 17 Apr. 1762.

Britain's lack of interest in continental territorial aggrandizement was of limited significance if her commitment, and that of her allies, to international diplomacy was to center on opposition to French expansion. It was in opposition to such expansion that the Grand Alliance of Britain, Austria, and the United Provinces was negotiated and that the tradition of British interventionism in continental affairs developed. However, without such expansion British political commitment to interventionist policies, both ministerial and within the wider political nation, was less clear, and that at a time when Britain's allies were seeking to use her alliance in furtherance of interests that bore little relation to France and traditional conceptions of British foreign policy. It was not so much that there was a choice of goals between an Anglo-Austrian alliance directed against Prussia and the same alliance directed against France, as a choice between an alliance against France that would enjoy considerable support in Britain, and an alliance that seemed without purpose, for both successive British ministries and the political nation there was limited political support for policies that were directed against other states.

During the war of the Austrian Succession this cause of tension in Anglo-Austrian relations, which was to play later a major role in destroying it and, in shattering the Grand Alliance, to weaken traditional concepts of British interventionism, was masked by the fact that conflict with France entailed a justified British determination to focus the actions of the alliance on opposition to that power, and not against Prussia. However, at other times the limited willingness of the bulk of the British ministry and political nation to participate actively in policies directed other than against France had detrimental consequences for Britain's alliances. This can be seen during the Anglo-French alliance, which operated best as a response to threatening configurations in the international system and was endorsed by ministers substantially as an expedient. It collapsed when the French sought to use it for long-term commitments that would entail a permanent lessening of Austrian strength, including an alliance with the Wittelsbachs.<sup>43</sup>

If alliances were for many British ministers and much public opinion essentially devices to resist or weaken France, this opinion and the diplomatic strategies based upon it became significantly less valid during the eighteenth century. After Louis XIV's death in 1715 France became less interested in continental territorial aggrandizement, a development reflected in a substantial reduction of her peacetime army. The arrival of Austrian power in Italy and the Low Countries made French expansion more difficult, and France's principal pre-revolutionary gain, the Duchy of Lorraine, was acquired essentially to prevent the deterioration in her strategic position and the revision of her eastern frontier which was threatened by the dynastic union of Austria and Lorraine. The rise of

<sup>43</sup> J. Black, "Anglo-French Alliance," p.298; Black, "Fresh Light on the Fall of Townshend," *Historical Journal* 29 (1986): 57-59.

Austria, Prussia, and Russia established a new agenda in European diplomacy, one that could not be appreciated accurately in terms of any conflict with France. This agenda was pushed to the forefront of international attention when Peter the Great conquered Sweden's Baltic provinces and defied successfully pressure to return them. The rivalries of the eastern European powers enabled Britain and France to intervene in eastern European affairs and created the impression of an international system dominated or heavily influenced by Anglo-French rivalry; but this was revealed increasingly to be an illusion, particularly as France's *barrière de l'est* displayed greater weaknesses and as Austria became conspicuously less willing to heed the views of her western European allies.<sup>44</sup>

Britain was unwilling to make the commitments necessary to influence eastern European allies while potential and actual allies were willing to develop close links with her only on terms that were unacceptable to most British political opinion, because they were alien to both traditional concepts of British interventionism and current views of national interests. This can be seen most clearly in the case of the alliances directed against Russia in 1720 and 1791 and in the negotiations aimed against Prussia during the War of the Austrian Succession. Unwilling to act against Russia in 1720–21, Britain's alliance system in Baltic and central Europe collapsed, and the experience was repeated in 1791. In 1732 the Walpole ministry refused to become involved in the negotiations necessary to end the Holstein-Gottorp dispute, because they did not wish to entertain new commitments. In 1753, despite the anger of his ally Austria, George II refused to guarantee a treaty between her and Modena. Successive ministries dodged attempts to draw them into negotiations over elections to the Crown of Poland, and the failure to respond to the First Partition looked back to a long tradition of limited interest in Polish affairs. In the early 1750s, when British interventionism was pronounced and an attempt was made, in the shape of the alliance system linked to the Imperial Election Scheme, to produce a prophylactic response to the dual problems of France and Prussia, the British ministry was willing to consider the problem of the eventual Polish succession, but not to adopt an active role in the country's politics. In 1752 Newcastle wrote to Hanbury-Williams:

You will acquaint Count Bruhl that however disposed the King is to favour any views of His Polish Majesty which may not be attended with hazard or expence in return for the King of Poland's exemplary conduct upon the present great occasion, and particularly how material His Majesty may think it for the parties most nearly concerned to take early measures to prevent any disturbance in case of a vacancy of the Crown of Poland, and to secure the succession to the Prince Royal of Saxony the King cannot take any active part in it, much less begin and originally make a proposition relating to it.

<sup>44</sup> The best short guide to international relations in this period is D. McKay and H. M. Scott, *The Rise of the Great Powers 1648–1815* (London, 1983).

Two years later the Earl of Holderness, Secretary of State for the Northern Department, informed Robert Keith, British envoy in Vienna:

The affairs of that Kingdom, and the views which France and Prussia, are supposed to have, in case of the demise of the present King of Poland, have long been an object of His Majesty's most serious attention . . . as His Majesty has no engagements whatsoever, with the Republic of Poland, the King will certainly not take the lead, in what immediately concerns them, but might possibly be induced to support, by good offices, such measures, as may be calculated, for preserving the succession of the Crown of Poland, to the House of Saxony. . . . The material point seems to be, that the King of Poland should take all proper means of gaining the affection, and securing to himself the support of the well-intentioned Poles. . . .

In the same letter Holderness revealed to Keith ministerial exasperation about the conduct of Britain's allies, actual and potential, and the assumption that such powers should share British views, in particular, the British conception of the policies that should stem obviously from their "natural" interests:

It is no less true, that the plain and natural interest of Her Czarish Majesty, is, to oppose too great an aggrandizement in her formidable neighbour the King of Prussia, and it is very unfortunate indeed, if the great powers of Europe will not be brought to take the measures which the honor and interests of their Kingdoms require, unless their assistance is purchased at an exorbitant rate . . . but it cannot be reasonably expected, that His Majesty should bear too heavy a part of the burthen, and in time of peace, weaken those resources, which have been, and ever will be, efficaciously exerted, when the cause of liberty, when the honor and independency of his crown, or his engagements with his allies, shall require it. . . . The refusal to admit an attack upon His Majesty's allies, to be one of the cases in which the troops in question are to be put in activity, if His Majesty shall require it, overturns at once, the foundation upon which the whole negotiation must stand; It was entered into solely with the great and national principle, of preserving the Peace, upon the surest, and most lasting foundation, vizt., the forming such an alliance as should deter other powers from venturing to break it. This is the object His Majesty has steadily pursued, and if it should be frustrated, either by the blindness of some powers to their own interest, or by the ignorance and venality of private persons, the King will have nothing to reproach himself with.<sup>45</sup>

This firm response to the Russian reply to British attempts to negotiate the deployment of troops that could serve to intimidate Prussia suggests the difficulties of adjustment that were to result when Austria and Russia allied with France in the Seven Years' War.

It is important not to exaggerate these difficulties because the alliances had been marked by tension and uncertainty, and Britain had already encountered in the decade beginning in 1735 the experience of close links, actual or in negotiation, between France and these powers. However, Holderness's letter reveals a central assumption of British attitudes that created considerable difficulties in her conduct of alliance diplomacy, namely that it was an obvious, or "natural," interest of Britain's actual and potential allies that they align with her. In 1750

<sup>45</sup> Newport, South Wales, Hanbury-Williams papers, Newcastle to Hanbury-Williams, 28 July 1752; P.R.O. SP. 80/191, 194, Newcastle to Keith, 2 Feb. 1753, Holderness to Keith, 5 July 1754.

Hanbury-Williams referred to Britain as one of the “old and natural allies” of Saxony and told the Saxon first minister Count Brühl “that a French subsidy was not an equivalent for the loss of the confidence and friendship of the ancient and natural allies of Saxony.” A failure to follow natural interests and ally with Britain could be explained by folly and/or malice. In 1773 Sir Robert Gunning, British envoy in St. Petersburg, informed Robert Murray Keith, his counterpart at Vienna that “considering how long a time principles of rational policy have been unattended to, and delusive advantages preferred to invariable interests, it is become difficult to distinguish falsehood from truth and to trace error through all its mazes. In short there seems no longer any criterion to go by.”<sup>46</sup> Blaming the actions of others on folly and/or malice was characteristic of those who defended interventionism and sought to explain its failures, and of those who argued that peacetime alliance diplomacy was unnecessary because in war powers would align naturally with Britain, an argument that essentially derived from a concern with France.<sup>47</sup> This attitude left little role for any informed assessment of the differing interests of actual or potential allies, and the latter view, that powers would naturally align with Britain, proposed a foreign policy that simply defended British interests. In marked contrast, Sir Everard Fawkener, secretary to the Duke of Cumberland, argued in 1748:

Whatever the conditions of the peace may be, they will be rendered better or worse, by the terms upon which the Allies may remain with regard to each other, and it is now more than ever necessary not only to maintain and cement the present Alliance, but to receive into it all such powers as may take umbrage at the growing and dangerous power of France. This seems to his Royal Highness so essential a point, that he thinks it is all we have to rescue Europe from that dependence on France, which so many and so long and bloody struggles have been made to prevent.<sup>48</sup>

Though the issue of resources did play a role in the debate over how far Britain should follow an active strategy of negotiating alliances, particularly over the matter of subsidies in the early 1750s, the debate cannot be explained simply in terms of a division of opinion over how far the demands of such a strategy could be afforded by the country and would be raised without excessive political disturbance. Rather, the debate took note of attitudes that Britain was special because she was uninterested in territorial expansion, and that therefore she could and should adopt a prudent approach to the necessity of alliances, and the desirability of particular allies and their specific requests. Thus, during a dispute between Spain and Britain’s ally Portugal in 1775, British diplomats complained about the extent of Portuguese efforts to enlist British assistance.

<sup>46</sup> J. Black, “The theory of the Balance of Power in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century: a note on sources,” *Review of International Studies* 9 (1983): 56–57; BL, Add. MS. 35006, fos. 18, 36, Gunning to Keith, 7 July, James Harris, envoy in Berlin, to Keith, 21 July 1773; *Monitor* 6 Feb. 1762.

<sup>47</sup> *London Chronicle*, 26 Jan. 1762.

<sup>48</sup> BL, Add. MS. 23827, fo. 356, Fawkener to Robinson, 19 Apr. 1748.

Robert Walpole, the envoy in Lisbon, wrote to the Earl of Grantham, his counterpart in Madrid, "This Court seems to consider England as much a principal in its disputes with Portugal, as itself, which is neither just nor reasonable. . . . It seems to me that the Ministry of this place are endeavouring to draw us into some declaration which may be binding on us at all events which I trust we are prudent enough to avoid." Viscount Stormont wrote from Paris "that the maintenance of the general tranquillity has been the King's constant wish and invariable aim."<sup>49</sup> This caution was matched by a strongly expressed distrust of allies within the political nation, deriving from xenophobia and thwarted expectations,<sup>50</sup> a distrust that acted not so much as a restraint on ministerial policy, but as a source of political scepticism about the value of alliances. If ministries were determined on alliances they could generally obtain political support for them whatever the extent of public criticism. This was clear in the case of the Anglo-French alliance and the subsidy treaties in the early 1750s. However, reservations about the value of alliances and allies was raised repeatedly in debates among ministers concerning foreign policy. Their views of British interests and how they could be furthered reflected widely diffused attitudes in the political community, but they were not determined generally by domestic political limitations on ministerial action.

"Cordiality and friendship can come only from a mutual disposition on both sides; which must arise from an union of sentiment and interest," observed Newcastle in 1751.<sup>51</sup> The extent to which such interest was created by trade, and that commerce acted not only as a lubricant for negotiations but as an inspiration for Britain to seek alliances, is open to debate. Trade has been regarded as an important determinant of British policy. Geoffrey Symcox argued recently that there was a "close relationship between the two fundamental elements in British foreign policy, so often treated as separate and unrelated: the pursuit of a strategic and political balance of power in Europe, and the thrust toward commercial expansion. I would argue that successive British governments in this period saw war as a means of promoting commercial growth and sought to achieve a military and diplomatic equilibrium as the essential condition for maintaining and extending trade."<sup>52</sup>

The evidence for such an argument is limited. Commercial influence on British foreign policy has been exaggerated, though it is clear that the defense of trade was an important issue in the political debate over foreign policy.<sup>53</sup> The

<sup>49</sup> BL, Add. MS. 24162, fos. 141–2, 208, Walpole to Grantham, 6 Nov., Stormont to Grantham, 22 Dec. 1775.

<sup>50</sup> Reading, Berkshire County Record Office, Trumbull papers 136, Ralph Bridges to Sir William Trumbull, 23 Oct. 1711 (os); *Old England* 24 Mar. 1750 (os).

<sup>51</sup> P.R.O., SP. 88/71. Newcastle to Hanbury-Williams, 5 Feb. 1751 (os).

<sup>52</sup> Symcox, "Britain and Victor Amadeus II," pp. 151–52; G. Niedhart, *Handel und Krieg in der Britischen Weltpolitik, 1738–63* (Munich, 1979).

<sup>53</sup> J. Black, *British Foreign Policy in the Age of Walpole* (Edinburgh, 1985), pp. 93–117.



case of Anglo-Portuguese relations provides ample evidence of the extent to which shared commercial interests did not necessarily produce a close political alliance, but could themselves lead to political disputes, not least because commercial dependence produced a situation of commercial and political grievance. The French foreign minister claimed in 1750 that there was nothing more natural and simple than the constant union between Britain and Portugal that had lasted since the beginning of the century. Eleven years later Richard Wall, the Spanish foreign minister, described Portugal as a province of Britain.<sup>54</sup> It was certainly the case that Portugal was one of the few powers Britain was well placed to support. The crucial nature of British military assistance emerged in the dispatch of Admiral Norris to the Tagus in 1735 and in the land operations at the end of the Seven Years' War. In the final resort, diplomatic relations can be seen as resting on military might, with Britain possessing a powerful advantage as a potential alliance partner. The Royal Navy could protect the vital axis of Portuguese imperialism between Brazil and Portugal. With the possible exception of Britain, Portugal was the European state most concerned with her colonies. As Britain and Portugal did not compete in colonial terms, while Portugal and Spain did, the basis was clear for an Anglo-Portuguese alliance, complementing commercial links. However, the relations between the two powers also throws light on why Britain was such an unattractive alliance partner for other European states. Even with a country to whom she was as closely linked commercially as Portugal, Britain proved unwilling to make the military commitments that her ally sought. Successive British ministries were not interested in Portuguese dreams of territorial gains from Spain, or, in Portuguese eyes, in providing sufficient support when Spanish attack appeared imminent.

Trade could be advanced as a reason for intervention in continental affairs,<sup>55</sup> but the contrary could be suggested also; one newspaper in a discussion of imaginary dangers after Pitt's resignation commented that "to fear . . . our trade on the Continent will suffer, unless we embroil ourselves in every quarrel which happens there, as is wisely suggested in a pamphlet published in defence of a late resignation, when we ought really to fear the very reverse."<sup>56</sup> Though ministries sought to aid commercial expansion there is little evidence that they promoted war as a means to aid commercial growth, or that general diplomatic strategy, as opposed to specific negotiations, was influenced heavily by commercial considerations. British conduct in the Seven Years' War may be held to invalidate this claim, but it is important to stress that many ministers had not sought the war and that their defense of it once begun is a poor guide to their attitudes in 1753–54. A policing operation on the American frontier, not a war

<sup>54</sup> AE.CP. Espagne 506 fos. 26, 532, fo. 10, Puy sieulx to Vaulgrenant, envoy in Madrid, 20 Jan. 1750, Ossun to Choiseul, 3 Apr. 1761.

<sup>55</sup> Anon., *The Conduct of the Ministry Impartially Examined* (1760), p. 38.

<sup>56</sup> *London Chronicle*, 26 Jan. 1762.

to conquer Canada, had been the goal then. As the search for allies stemmed from general diplomatic strategy it is unsurprising that commerce featured rarely in this search. Clearly, however, trade played a bigger role in the public discussion of foreign policy, partly because it, like opposition to France, constituted a central and traditional feature of this discussion, which could serve as a means to approach and interpret new or less important aspects of foreign policy and the international situation. The extent to which this discussion of commercial issues affected particular alliances varied. Austrian, Danish, French, Savoyard, and Swedish protectionism, though deleterious in its effects and criticized publicly as a result, did not prevent active British attempts to gain or retain the alliances of these powers.

In the case of Spain it can be argued that commercial grievances had a serious effect, wrecking attempts at good relations between the two powers, despite Britain's need to prevent a Franco-Spanish alliance with its serious strategic consequences, particularly to naval power.<sup>57</sup> In a letter of 1749, in which Newcastle revealingly observed with respect to general diplomatic strategy that "any system is better than none," he suggested that if Anglo-Spanish commercial disputes could be settled, Britain could hope to win Spain's alliance. This argument needs to be handled with care, however. Commercial grievances did not prevent Anglo-Spanish alliances, as in 1731, and other factors emerged repeatedly as more important in relations between the two powers. While telling the French envoy in 1742 that the Anglo-Spanish war was about trade only, Elizabeth Farnese, the Queen of Spain, nevertheless claimed that it would be easy to settle.<sup>58</sup> Though commercial interests were important to the Spanish government,<sup>59</sup> Spain's relations with Britain are best understood by her diplomatic policies, and, in particular, her relations with Austria and France. Italy was crucial to Spain's foreign policy and it was not surprising that Spain began to take a more marked anti-British line from the late 1750s, by which time her Italian interests had been secured and the general and internationally guaranteed stability of Italian affairs had made territorial expansion in that peninsula less likely. While Spanish policy had been dominated by Italy and, in particular, by the wish to benefit from the successions of families that possessed principalities but could not supply male heirs, the Farnese, Medici, and Habsburgs, Spain had been regarded by British ministers discussing diplomatic strategy largely in terms of the peninsula. In the late 1710s and 1731–33 they had sought to pre-

<sup>57</sup> BL, Add. MS 35356, fo. 128, Joseph Yorke to Hardwicke, 13 Mar. 1753.

<sup>58</sup> BL, Add. MS. 35410, fos. 131–32, 35411, fo. 187, 32820, Newcastle to Hardwicke, 25 Aug. 1749 (os), 25 Oct. 1750, Newcastle to Keene, 12 Feb. 1750 (os); AE.CP. Espagne 470 fo. 90, Rennes to Amelot, 5 Feb. 1742; L. B. Smith, *Spain and Britain 1715–1719: The Jacobite Issue* (New York, 1987).

<sup>59</sup> J. McLachlan, *Trade and Peace with Old Spain, 1667–1750* (Cambridge, 1940); G. J. Walker, *Spanish Politics and Imperial Trade, 1700–1789* (London, 1979).

vent an attack on the Italian possessions of Britain's ally Austria, and in 1730 they had been prepared to accept such an attack at a time of Anglo-Austrian hostility. After the War of Austrian Succession the British sought to settle Austro-Spanish differences in Italy in order to construct a more effective anti-French alliance system. In September 1751 Newcastle wrote to his political ally Hardwicke, "if ever my doctrine, and system, ought to take place, it is now, when we have so fair a prospect in Spain." Joseph Yorke, then Secretary of Embassy in Paris, wrote, "it much behoves us to conclude with Spain if possible, I mean as to Italy, because the more doors we shut upon France the better."<sup>60</sup> Spanish neutrality was crucial to British success in the early and middle stages of the Seven Years' War, not least in the destruction of much of the French fleet in 1759. If thereafter relations between the two powers deteriorated it is important to note that while commercial disputes played a significant role, Spanish policy should not be seen as an automatic response to such disputes and to the general situation of colonial rivalry, but rather has to be assessed in terms of a more complex international dimension including Franco-Spanish relations.<sup>61</sup>

Examination of the diplomatic handling of commercial and colonial disputes reveals a resolve not to allow them to determine political relations. At the beginning of 1750 the British ministry pressed hard the Dutch government over the efforts of the Dutch East India Company to prevent British trade in parts of Indonesia where there were no Dutch possessions. William IV of Orange replied to pressure from the British envoy, the Earl of Holdernessee, "that though he was thoroughly convinced, that this country had one and the same interest with His Majesty in every thing, that regards the affairs of Europe, yet that there was and probably ever would remain a jealousy in point of trade between the two nations, and that for his own part he must be very cautious of not giving people any handle to clamour against the partiality he confesses to have towards the English system by carrying it too far in points where there was a real difference of interest."<sup>62</sup> However, there was a willingness to cope with these jealousies in governmental circles, and in general they should not be emphasized as a cause of difficulties in British alliances. If the nature of the constitution and political culture of Britain enabled the airing, often vociferously, of commercial grievances, and thus represented an important sphere where the domestic situation

<sup>60</sup> BL, Add. MS 35412, fo. 16, 35355, fo. 372, Newcastle to Hardwicke, 6 Sept. 1751 (os), Yorke to Hardwicke, 8 Sept. 1751.

<sup>61</sup> R. Middleton, *The Bells of Victory. The Pitt-Newcastle Ministry and the Conduct of the Seven Year's War 1757-1762* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 217-18; J. A. Lalaguna Lasala, "England, Spain and the Family Compact, 1763-83," (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1968); G. W. Rice, "Great Britain, the Manila Ransom, and the First Falkland Island Dispute with Spain, 1766," *International History Review* 2 (1980): 386-409.

<sup>62</sup> P. R. O. SP. 84/454 fos. 6-7, 12-13, 46-8, 89-97, 242-43, 254, Holdernessee to Newcastle, 6, 23 Jan., 17 March, Newcastle to Holdernessee, 2, 5, 16 Jan., 13 March 1750 (os).

could exacerbate relations, the impact of this airing varied greatly and was contingent on domestic and diplomatic factors, including, crucially, the strength, unity, and determination of the ministry.

The role of contingencies raises the question as to how far the influence of domestic circumstances on Britain's foreign policy and Britain's interest in and capacity to negotiate and sustain alliances varied during the century. At present it is possible to suggest tentative conclusions only, because although there has been much study of British diplomacy there has been comparatively little attention devoted to a critical assessment of the domestic factors that influenced the formulation and execution of policy. Clearly, circumstances varied in response to both domestic and diplomatic developments. In the mid-1770s, for example, the international system was reasonably propitious for Britain, and Viscount Stormont, then envoy in Paris, commented on "this state of perfect tranquillity," while in 1790 Auckland wrote, "it will be a great luxury for me when the state of Europe shall be such as to call for only one short dispatch per week. I remember it in that state in the years 74 and 75; but it has never been so since."<sup>63</sup> The role of a small number of individuals in the formulation of policy and the limited need for them to consult or seek approval more widely also ensured that the character of personal views was significant. A classic instance of this was George II and Newcastle's commitment of British diplomatic attention to an interventionist policy, or what Newcastle termed an "active" system, in the early 1750s.<sup>64</sup> At the risk of considerable simplification it could be suggested that during the century both diplomatic and domestic circumstances operated to make an active alliance system less plausible. In diplomatic terms the rise of the eastern European powers, their unwillingness to conceive of their international role in Anglo-French terms or heed the views of either power, made it progressively less realistic to think of a close alliance with Britain. This reflected both an absence of shared interests in acting positively rather than defensively and the realization that any such alliance would entail commitments that were implausible in terms not only of domestic British opinion but also of the assumptions of most British ministers. The 1763 Russian draft treaty for an alliance with Britain was unacceptable because of its stipulations concerning Turkey and its demand for British financial assistance in the event of Russian diplomatic and military intervention in Poland. The prospect of war with Russia in 1791 was also unacceptable.<sup>65</sup> In domestic terms there was little alteration in

<sup>63</sup> BL, Add. MS. 35505, fo. 324, Stormont to Keith, 24 June 1773; Bodleian, Bland Burges, 30 fo. 58, Auckland to Burges, 11 Sept. 1790.

<sup>64</sup> BL, Add. MS. 32858, fo. 333, Newcastle to Holderness, 29 Aug. 1755, Add. MS. 35411, fo. 271, Newcastle to Hardwicke, 27 July 1751 (os).

<sup>65</sup> J. Black, "Anglo-Russian Relations after the Seven Years' War," *Scottish Slavonic Review* 9 (1987): 27–37. A. Cunningham, "The Ochakov Debate," *Middle Eastern Studies* 1 (1964–65): 209–37; J. Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt. The Reluctant Transition* (London, 1983), pp. 3–31.

the dominant attitude that France was the central question in foreign policy, an attitude justified in light of a series of Anglo-French conflicts. Stormont might respond to the First Partition of Poland by writing from Vienna to his successor Robert Murray Keith, “you come just at the opening of a new scene, with which all that passed before this very extraordinary epoch has little or nothing to do,” but in London it was easier to note continuity in tension and rivalry between Britain and France.<sup>66</sup> However, for the reasons outlined above, it was less credible to seek to negotiate with the central and eastern European powers alliances directed against France. Furthermore, the diplomacy of the 1740s and 1750s had revealed how difficult it was to conduct alliances so that they benefited Britain. Austria was unwilling to lend Britain the support requested when in 1755 she confronted France.<sup>67</sup> Negotiations with Russia led to frustration and in the end she preferred to ally with Austria, rather than Britain and Prussia. Frederick the Great proved in 1756 to be an ally difficult to influence. In that year Holdernessee wrote of the Anglo-Prussian engagements:

These were not meant to be, nor would they, in their consequence, have been detrimental to the Court of Vienna; they were meant to diminish the number of the enemies of the House of Austria; to prevent an unjust attack on the part of France, on His Majesty's German dominions . . . and to put the House of Austria, if necessary, in a condition to have withstood any attempts that might have been made against them, in consequence of their alliance with the King; and time might have brought about the happiest event for the welfare of Europe, I mean a good understanding between the Courts of Vienna and Berlin.<sup>68</sup>

In light of the folly of the last remark it is scarcely surprising that Britain's mid-century attempts to organize the powers of Europe into an anti-French concert, to replicate Stanhope's anti-Spanish and Russian system of the late 1710s, failed. It is possible to suggest that the failure played a major role in accounting for the isolationism of the 1760s and 1770s.<sup>69</sup>

In place of politicians who were not only convinced of the values of an alliance system, but had an emotional commitment of some sort to particular powers (Newcastle to Austria and Pitt to Prussia) a new generation of politicians rose to power who, while willing to seek alliances, did not approach them with the same degree of commitment. Their attitude was more prudential, a determination to weigh each proposal on its merits, and this diminished intensity of

<sup>66</sup> BL, Add. MS. 35003, fo. 246, Stormont to Keith, 2 Sept. 1772.

<sup>67</sup> P. R. O., SP. 80/196 fos. 60, 94, Robert Keith, envoy in Vienna, to Holdernessee, 4, 19 June 1755.

<sup>68</sup> P. R. O., SP. 88/79, Holdernessee to Hanbury-Williams, 10 Sept. 1756.

<sup>69</sup> Important recent work on this period includes F. Spencer, ed., *The Fourth Earl of Sandwich: Diplomatic Correspondence 1763–1765* (Manchester, 1961); H. M. Scott, “Great Britain, Poland and the Russian Alliance, 1763–1767,” *Historical Journal* 19 (1976): 53–74; M. Metcalf, *Russia, England and Swedish Party Politics, 1762–1766* (Stockholm, 1977); Scott, “British Foreign Policy in the Age of the American Revolution,” *International History Review* 6 (1984): 113–25; J. Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution* (New Haven, 1985).

commitment made it less likely that ministries would be willing to accept the potentially damaging in a domestic context of compromises and concessions that were necessary for alliances to be negotiated. If some ministers and diplomats continued to hope for the resurrection of old alliances, particularly with Austria, that did not necessarily indicate an inability to accept that the international situation had changed. There was a substantial difference between indicating an interest in such alliances and making their negotiation a crucial fulcrum of policy to which an intense commitment would be made. While Britain had envoys in Vienna and St. Petersburg it cost nothing for them to be instructed to approach the powers, urge a revival of old alliances, and talk in terms of the diplomatic idiom of these alliances. This was not necessarily evidence of anachronism and folly.

Prudential policies were encouraged by the fiscal situation. The Seven Years' War had been financially exhausting. Sir William Irby, M. P., who was ennobled by George III in 1761, pointed out that year to a fellow M. P., "our expences to carry on the war are beyond conception, millions after millions must, and will be raised, and not a word said about it and it is difficult however to know, how we shall be able to carry on the war much longer, or how to make a safe, and honorable peace."<sup>70</sup> Fiscal considerations played a large role in the postwar world and the generation of politicians who sought to tax cider or alter the financial nature of Anglo-American relations were not prepared to act as Europe's paymaster. This attitude, which struck public reverberations, was fused with the criticism of the value and conduct of allies that was so prominent in the mid-century decades.

If domestic and diplomatic considerations therefore led to traditional alliances becoming less possible and less appropriate, the situation was reversed in 1787 with considerable difficulty, not least in terms of a marked reluctance on the part of Pitt the younger, and only because Frederick William II, the new king of Prussia was willing to intervene militarily in the United Provinces and required British assistance in the consequent crisis with France.<sup>71</sup> The change in Prussian policy following the death of Frederick II provides a classic example of the importance of the international context in which Britain's alliances were formed. Alliances were functional, in other words their characteristics were derived from their setting and the manner in which they related to the whole in practice. Being instruments of international politics they were responsive to the multilayered environment in which they operated and which itself changed over time. The subsequent history of the Anglo-Prussian alliance indicated that Britain's

<sup>70</sup> Gosforth, Northumberland Record Office, ZSW. 534/11, Irby to Humphry Morice, 18 March 1761; BL, Add. MS. 32890, fos. 132–35, Newcastle memorandum, 18 Apr. 1759.

<sup>71</sup> A. Cobban, *Ambassadors and Secret Agents. The Diplomacy of the First Earl of Malmesbury at the Hague* (London, 1954); J. Black, "The Marquis of Carmarthen and Relations with France 1784–1787," *Francia* 12 (1985): 283–303.

commitment to eastern European affairs was severely limited when matters came to a crisis, and it was to be France's unexpected success in late 1792 that forced Britain back to the path of alliances and subsidies with all the attendant strains and feelings of being cheated. The other alternatives that had existed for much of the century, isolationism and understanding with France, were also present in 1792 in a different and heightened fashion; but the latter was not plausible, if only because of the unpredictability, ideology, and determination of the revolutionary French, and the former, with the largely useless pedant of Dutch alliance, was tried for a year only. Pitt the younger clearly felt in 1792 that isolationism was a prudent policy, and he may well have been accurate in both diplomatic and domestic terms. However, the French move into the Low Countries destroyed his option. The Earl of Fife reported on the Lords debate on the Address in December 1792: "I always thought when they attacked Holland, that we must from interest and the faith of nations, be a party; can anybody wish to see the ambitious lawless invaders in possession of Holland etc. united in their conquests."<sup>72</sup> It was under the impetus of a serious French threat that the British ministry returned to the policy of 1787, being aware from recent experience that alliances with powerful continental states produced serious problems. They were not to be disabused.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>72</sup> *Lord Fife and his Factor*, eds. A. and H. Tayler (London, 1925), p.237; J. T. Murley, "The Origin and Outbreak of the Anglo-French War of 1793," (D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1959); Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt*, pp. 196–258; T. C. W. Blanning, *The Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars* (London, 1986), pp. 131–59; J. Black "Anglo-French Relations in the Age of the French Revolution, 1787–1793," *Francia* 15 (1988).

<sup>73</sup> M. Duffy, "British War Policy: The Austrian Alliance, 1793–1801," (D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1971); P. Jupp, *Lord Grenville, 1759–1834* (Oxford, 1985), pp. 152–261; K. A. Roeder, *Baron Thugut and Austria's Response to the French Revolution* (Princeton, 1987), pp. 103–360; BL. Althorp MS. G 173, Lord Grenville, Foreign Secretary, to Earl Spencer and Thomas Grenville, envoys in Vienna, 29 Aug., 14 September 1794.