

What is “Concert of Powers” in International Relations?

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After the first decade after the Cold War, it became obvious that an idea of global governance is going to be impossible primarily due to an aggressive US foreign policy as Washington intended to become the world hegemon and global policeman. A turning point in the post-Cold War IR became the Kosovo War of 1998–1999, which resulted in the NATO’s occupation of the south-western region of Serbia based on an idea of „Just War“,^[1] but in practice for the creation of the mafia state of the Kosovar Muslim Albanians.^[2] As a direct consequence of the NATO’s aggression on Serbia and Montenegro in March–June 1999, the patriotic establishment in Moscow around, at that time, PM Vladimir Putin decided to remove Russia’s Western-puppet president Boris Yeltsin from the post in order to change the course of Russian foreign policy. Therefore, a new course was adopted – a course of power politics with the purpose to make post-Soviet Russia great again as one of the members of global Concert of Powers as a GP.

The term Great Power(s) (GP) is associated with the emergence of the Habsburg Monarchy, the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia, the Kingdom of France and the United Kingdom (Great Britain) after the Congress of Vienna in 1815 as the major and most influential European (and global) states. From that time onward, the term is applied to a state seen as playing a cardinal role in international politics and especially in world major affairs. A GP has to have economic, diplomatic, and particularly military power and influence beyond its own borders. The post-1815 European GP during the first half of the 19th century worked together in a close alliance under the agreement that is known in history as the Concert of Europe. Its work was based on the principles of power equilibrium and historical legitimacy.^[3]

✘ With Napoléon’s final military and political defeat in 1815, the major victorious European states formed the Holy Alliance that became the foundation of the later Concert of Europe that was designed to prevent the resurgence of the French imperial power and the spread of the ideas of liberalism and nationalism.^[4] For the matter of protecting the principles of legitimacy, ousted monarchies were re-established across Europe. The principal power of the Concert of Europe till the Crimean War of 1853–1856 was Russia.^[5] The Concert of Europe established the critical principle of collective security and demonstrated that the European collaboration was practically possible to a certain degree between the major powers at the time. Basically, the Concert of Europe was a special system of consultation that was used by the European GP who could initiate international conferences when it believed that collective security and peace of Europe were compromised.

Surely, the best historical example of the system of international Concert of Powers was the Concert of Europe from 1815 to 1853 and, therefore many experts in international relations

(IR) believed that after the Cold War a similar system could be established for the fundamental purpose to protect a collective security according to the principle „one for all and all for one“.[6] In essence, both the idea and concept of collective security are attractive for studying and practical implementation for the reason that they can combine a kind of global government (the UNO) with the fundamental features of a traditional Westphalian system of IR (anarchical state system). The system of collective security has to be founded on the internationally accepted set of legal mechanisms aimed to prevent or suppress aggression by any state against any other state and to protect human rights fixed as such by different international documents. The practical measures of the implementation of collective security range from diplomatic boycotts to economic and other (sport) sanctions. The last measure used against the perpetrator is a military action under the collective (the UNSC) approval. The concept of collective security renounce the use of force to settle the disputes among the member states of the system but allows the use of force to protect the collective security of the system against any aggressor from the outside.

After the WWI, the USA became a member of the global GP club, while after the WWII together with the USSR became a global superpower state taking into consideration its mass destruction weapons capabilities. Subsequently, the bipolar global affairs during the Cold War became shaped primarily by two nuclear superpowers. After the personal dissolution of the USSR by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991, the hyperpower state became the USA, though China's and Russia's growing economic and military strength was going to assure their superpower position in the very coming future. Nevertheless, the USA lost its hyperpower global position already in August 2008 with the Russian military intervention in the Caucasus that was a reaction to the US-sponsored Kosovo self-proclaimed independence in February of the same year - *Zero-Sum Game's* effect. At the same period of time, the UK and France have declined from their former GP status. Nevertheless, the number of GP at any time is considered as a key feature of the international system that is very important in determining the level and nature of war.

The practical influence of each GP upon another one has a direct fate together and the elimination of any one GP from the global arena of IR could, but not necessary, threaten the interests of others. For that reason, the biggest number of GP sought to prevent the domination over the European continent by any single state. That was, in particular, true in regard to the United Kingdom, which entered both world wars in order to prevent a German domination over the continent. To say by another word, the GP traditionally tried to preserve a balancing of power in IR by different means. One of them is a creation of the allying blocs with weaker states against stronger ones for the sake to protect themselves from the treats which are coming from another state(s). In many cases, the bloc alliances are fragile and of short duration that depends on the geopolitical interest of each member and the change of the balancing of power at a certain moment of history. The 18th century, for instance, experienced three wars between the great European powers as a response to one another's attempt to impose a geopolitical domination over Europe.

The Congress of Vienna in 1815, as the framework of the first system of the Concert of Powers in history, restored the old geopolitical order at the Old Continent at least on two levels, spreading the common message that a legitimate (aristocratic-feudal) order cannot be changed by the revolution:

1. The biggest number of former dethroned monarchs received back their pre-1789 power that was the most important in the case of France.

2. The traditional practice of bestowing the land was used in order to reward the victorious actors and to punish those who lost the wars.

The Vienna settlement as well as institutionalized the supremacy of all recognized European GP to have a privileged position in dealing with continental security and international relations: the practice that is maintained up today. In other words, from 1815 up to our days, the terms of the settlement of IR and world order is based on the compromise between GP, which were all the time looking out to firstly satisfy their own particular national interests. The Concert of Europe established by the Congress of Vienna in 1815 was primarily designed by the great European powers to cooperate in geopolitical control of Europe in order to protect their own zones of interest, being at the same time the first global international mechanism and sort of institution designed to guarantee international security and peace. That was clearly successful in the case of the 1848–1849 Revolutions when, except in France, the monarchs and the land aristocracy won against the liberal requirements at least for the time being. The failure of the liberals was mainly due to two facts:

1. That they could not be able to maintain their original goals.
2. That they became defeated with a substantial aid by the external aristocratic-conservative powers, but mainly by the imperial Russia, who became at that time recognized as the „Gendarme of Europe“ .[\[7\]](#)

The military intervention of Russia was in this particular case of a legitimate character, according to the principles of the Concert of Europe, as her army was officially invited to intervene by the recognized and legitimate authority in Vienna into the internal affairs of the Habsburg Monarchy against the Hungarian rebels and revolutionists. The Russian emperor accepted the invitation for the sake to prevent domestic unrest and revolution to spill over into international conflicts.

After the Cold War, it existed a wish that IR and global politics could be run and controlled by the post-1991 political, military and economic-financial GP – the USA, Russia, China, Japan, and the leading states of the EU. However, there are three fundamental differences between GP in IR from the time of the first half of the 19th century and the situation after the Cold War:

1. The Concert of Europe from 1815 to 1853 was composed of more or less five equal GP. However, after the Cold War, it is very difficult to evaluate the distribution of power in global politics.
2. The Concert of Europe after the Napoleonic Wars was created in order to beat the potential political-military threat coming from the region of Central Europe. Nevertheless, after the dissolution of the USSR, the potential threats are not coming anymore from the heart of Europe but from the other regions of the world.
3. All five member states of the post-1815 Concert of Europe shared conservative social and political values differently as the case with the post-Cold War GP. The Concert of Europe’s members accepted the system of power balancing as the common framework of their actions, but after 1989 the same system of power balancing is rather of global nature but not of regional one. In addition, it is today very difficult to believe that China and Russia would accept the hegemonic role of the USA in the new Concert of Powers that is going to be dominated by

one state.

However, exactly the members of Concert of Powers are among the first actors in global politics who are constantly violating the concept of collective security in order to secure their own geopolitical goals (for instance, the USSR's aggression on Afghanistan in 1979, the US' aggression on Grenada in 1983, the NATO's aggression on the FR of Yugoslavia in 1999 or the US' and the UK's aggression on Iraq in 2003). A *domino effect*, for instance, is playing one of the crucial methodical tools for each GP in their coping with the geopolitical ambitions of the other members of the system of the Concert of Powers. It posits that the loss of control or fundamental influence over one state will lead to a domino effect – the loss of control or influence over neighbouring states. As probably the best example in contemporary history of such approach is American military support of South Vietnam as Washington feared that if this country became a communist, its neighbouring states would as well as do the same as a consequence of the domino effect, just as dominos fall one after another. Finally, *diplomacy* is the very practice of GP (and other states as well) by which they are trying to influence the politics of other states by different means like bargaining, negotiating, bribing politicians and other decision-makers, or appealing to the foreign public for support of a position.[\[11\]](#)

Notes:

[1] About an idea and concept of “Just War” vs. “Unjust War”, see in [Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, New York: Basic Books, 2015].

[2] Pierre Pean, Sébastien Fontenelle, *Kosovo: Une Guerre „Juste“ pour Créer un Etat Mafieux*, Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2013. A quasi-academic background for Kosovo's separation from Serbia in 2008 was elaborated in an infamous book by Noel Malcolm [Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo. A Short History*, New York: New York University Press, 1998].

[3] Čedomir Popov, *Građanska Evropa (1770–1871). Druga knjiga: Politička istorija Evrope*, Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 1989, 9–44.

[4] About the Holy Alliance, see in [William Penn Cresson, *The Holy Alliance. The European Background of the Monroe Doctrine*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1922].

[5] The Crimean War was the first major armed conflict between GP in Europe after the Napoleonic Wars of the French imperialism. It represents the West European (British and French) Russophobic policy in regard to the destiny of oppressive Islamic Ottoman Empire [Alan Isaacs et al (eds.), *Oxford Dictionary of World History*, Oxford–New York: 2001, 156–157; Hugh Small, *The Crimean War: Queen Victoria's War with the Russian Tsars*, London: Tempus Publishing, 2014, 7–10].

[6] Martin Griffiths, Terry O'Callaghan, Steven C. Roach, *International Relations: The Key Concepts*, Second edition, London–New York, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2008, 43.

[7] Čedomir Popov, *Građanska Evropa (1770–1871). Druga knjiga: Politička istorija Evrope*, Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 1989, 229–283.

[8] Steven L. Spiegel et al, *World Politics in a New Era*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2004, 693.

[9] Geopolitics can be defined as “an approach to the theory and practice of statecraft, which considers

certain laws of geography (e.g. distance, proximity and location) to play a central part in the formation of international politics" [Paul Cloke et al (eds.), *Introducing Human Geographies*, Second edition, London: Hodder Arnold, 2005, 565]. The term "geopolitics" was coined by Swedish author Rudolf Kjellen in 1899 and soon popularized by British geographer Halford Mackinder [*Ibid.*].

[10] Karen A. Mingst, *Essentials of International Relations*, Third edition, New York–London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004, 316.

[11] On diplomacy, see: [Andrew F. Cooper et al (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015].

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