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The International Orders and the Regional Formations in the Balkans before and after the WWI

Abstract

The objective of this paper, first, is to paint two pictures of international orders; before and after the WWI, and second, to show how each actor in the Balkans adjusted itself into both the international orders and regional formations. Third, this paper attempts to illustrate the shifting international and regional alliances and then consolidation of them as part of adjustment to international order as well as a response to it. While debating on the subject in question the insight given by Neo-Gramscian approach is to be consulted.

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Introduction

One of the main themes of this conference is to assess the effects of the WWI on the Balkans and Eurasia. Given this framework, I attempt to explore the dialectic relationship between the international orders and the regional initiatives in the Balkans. In order to do so, it is appropriate to paint a comparative picture of the international orders before and after the WWI and then to point out whether or not and to what extent the regional formations may be seen as parts and parcels of adjustments to and a response to the international orders.

The International Order before the WWI and the Place of the Balkans

For the sake of clarity and brevity, it is appropriate to begin with examining the international order worked out at the Vienna Congress of 1815¹ since this was one of the major turning points of international order in European history and the Balkans as well as Eurasia. At this congress the major powers of the time (Britain, Austria-Hungary, Prussia, Russia and France, though the last one was a defeated power she was invited to the congress), among other important resolutions, agreed, first, to return to old ruling empire structures with a vain effort, second, pledged not to encourage one another's domestic secessionist movements and

¹ For the Concert of Europe see Soutou, Georges-Henri. "Was there a European Order in the Twentieth Century? From the Concert of Europe to the End of the Cold War", *Contemporary European History*, 9/3, 2000, 329-353.

even further promised to help put down revolutionary social forces if necessary. Third, they agreed to consult to great European powers in any major European affairs and at the same time created an unofficial division between the great and small powers, the formers being the main decision makers. This was the European international order called Concert of Europe.

The objective of the three promises of the Concert of Europe was to get rid of the effects of French revolution and to have a sustainable stability, specifically in Europe and in Eurasia at large. The Napoleonic wars had devastating effects on European economies that exhausted accumulated capital; the European capital thus needed a lasting stable international order that was supposed to sustain stability without which capital generation was at stake. Nationalism was condemned as a source of instabilities. The international order based on Concert of Europe was put into practice from 1815 onwards. To some extent the Concert of Europe worked for about a century² except the Franco-German war of 1870-71, in Europe and thus the industrial output rapidly increased and so did the capital accumulation. In order to show rapidity of industrial output suffice it to say that in the 1840s German industrial output was negligible, however, in 1890s, some 50 years later, the German industrial output increased to a level equal to French and British industrial output combined together. Such a rapid and an unequal increase in industrial output of Germany were as expectedly to have effects on the international order. The Concert of Europe was no longer valid in Europe and to be replaced from 1880s onwards by a new alliance system based on balance of power. Soon after, the two blocks would be formed that would lead to the WWI.

² Hobsbawm, Eric. *Age of Extremes, The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, Abacus, 1995, 1-84

In sum, it may be stated that the European state order based on equality of states that had been a norm since Westphalia accords was replaced by Concert of Europe in 1815 which lasted until 1880s and then went into crisis thus was replaced by an alliance system and this also went into crisis, leading to the WWI. This was the picture of international order at European level in a matter of a century.

What happened at the regional level is also important. It would be misleading to assume that the promises of the Vienna Congress were properly applied at the regional level. As seen in the uprisings in the Balkan part of the Ottoman Empire from 1820s onwards the European great powers - members of the Concert of Europe - acted as opposed to what they had promised and even more they supported revolts. Such a position however did not have much impact on the Concert of Europe until another major event in Eurasia occurred that was the Russian-Ottoman war of 1853-54, the Crimean war. This was a major blow on the Concert of Europe because in this war British and French governments supported the Ottoman Empire against Tsarist Russian Empire the latter being a member of the Concert of Europe. This war was a clear indication of the end of consultation mechanism that had been created at the Vienna Congress. This was a clear failure of the Concert of Europe not only in the Balkans but also in Eurasia at large.

In a similar fashion, another major blow to the Concert of Europe occurred when the Ottoman-Russian war of 1877 took place. As a result of the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in both Balkan and Caucasus fronts, the Russian Empire imposed the St Stefano Treaty on the Ottoman Empire in 1878. This meant that a new state of affairs could emerge at Eurasian level that would have positioned the Russian Empire in an unprecedented supremacy, blocking expansion of major

European powers into the Near East, not to mention the fact that this would have meant return to 1833 hegemonic position of Russia over the Ottoman Empire. The major European powers, including Germany, swiftly responded with a pressure to Russian Empire to revise the St. Stefano Treaty. The Ottoman Empire was pleased to get such a support from the major European powers; however, in return for some more give ins³.

The Berlin Treaty of 1878 may be regarded as a European hegemonic project with which both the Ottoman and the Russian Empires' powers were undermined. At the Balkan regional context, Romania, Serbia and Montenegro's independences were recognized and milestones for the formation of independent Bulgaria in 1908 were laid down. From the Berlin Treaty of 1878 onwards small and medium size powers also entered into the game. This game was to be played among the newly formed small and medium size Balkan powers in the gardens of major European powers.

The small and medium size Balkan powers, first, jointly hit hard the Ottoman Empire in the First Balkan War of 1912, removing out the Turks and Muslim population from the Balkans and then fought against each other in the Second Balkan War in 1913. None of the Balkan power was large enough to win over others. None wished to see any other one to become a hegemon in the region, nor did they achieve acting all together after what they saw as the common adversary - the Ottoman Empire. Each received certain material support, at least diplomatic ones, from one of the major European powers or Russia; however, such supports never lasted long and often shifted from one to another. I'll give one clear example; each of the Balkan power hoped that the Tsarist Russia would

³ For the Ottoman diplomacy during the Crimean War, the St. Stefano Treaty and the Berlin Congress see; Yasamee, F.A.K. *Ottoman Diplomacy*, İstanbul: ISIS Press 1996, 1-18.

provide material as well as diplomatic support from Russia, however, having been defeated at the eastern front against Japan, the Tsarist Russia was unable to sustain her material support and what is more is that when Bulgarian attack in the First Balkan War against the Ottoman Empire went beyond what was considered as a bottom line, regarding the straits issue, the Russian Empire shifted its diplomatic support from Bulgaria to Serbia to the disappointment of Bulgarian policy makers⁴. The regional order during the Balkan Wars was based on not only shifting alliances, but also shifting Russian diplomatic support.

What is clear is that international order based on the Concert of Europe had excluded medium and small size powers from the decision making process and thus each small power tended to align itself with one of the major powers that often shifted. Both the international orders based on the Concert of Europe and the alliance system failed to sustain stability in Eurasia and did fail to provide a room for small and medium size powers. As both the Concert of Europe and the alliance orders based on balance of power failed in European as well as regional levels and as the two opposed blocks entered into rivalry, the end result was the outbreak of the WWI.

The outbreak of the WWI accelerated competition for acquiring back what was considered to be lost lands or some were encouraged to expand at the expense of others in the Balkans. Before and even during the war years some demanded rectifications of the borders as a condition to enter into war on the side of central power and some went on to change her side while the war was continuing. All had one war objective; to benefit from the spoils of the war had its side emerged as victorious, but all lost huge amount of human resources and

⁴ Hall, Richard C. "The Next War: The Influence of the Russo-Japanese War on Southeastern Europe and the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913", *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 17/3, 2004, 563-577.

their existing infrastructures were destroyed. The WWI did not solve the problems, but transformed them.

The Quest for a New International Order after the WWI

At the end of the WWI the existing international order was destroyed and a new state of affairs emerged, however, it did not mean return to *status quo ante*. The war exhausted resources of both victorious and defeated powers. Almost all the powers in Europe were indebted to the emerging hegemonic power, the USA and private bankers in the USA. While the US administration showed its intention to play a leadership role in the formation of new international order, the old dominant actors, such as British and French governments were unable to sustain their former hegemonic positions at the world level. What is more is that a new challenging socialist regime came to power in a reduced place of Tsarist Russia.

Under this new state of affairs there appeared three competing proposals for the construction of a new world order. For the sake of clarity and brevity, these proposals may be called as the Bolshevik⁵, the US and the European hegemonic projects. While the Bolshevik hegemonic project claimed to destroy the existing what they called as capitalist-imperialist international order through permanent world revolution and replace it with socialisms throughout the world, the US president Wilson proposed his 14 points with which to create a liberal international order, within which there would be no secret agreements, no economic barriers and each nation would determine its own future⁶. The third hegemonic project – the European one – aimed to restore the old hegemonic

⁵ Hobsbawm, *Age of Extermes*, 1-84

⁶ Türkeş, Mustafa. “Giriş: Kuş Bakışı Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’ndan Türkiye Cumhuriyeti’ne Geçiş”, *ODTÜ Gelişme Dergisi*, 39/1 Nisan 2012, 1-25.

positions of Britain and France, based on balance of power, aimed to keep Germany under control and encircle the Soviet Union⁷.

On the one hand, the US and the European hegemonic projects had a converging objective regarding the encirclement of the Bolshevik effects; on the other hand the US hegemonic project had certain clashes with the European hegemonic project because most of the 14 points challenged in the first place the British hegemony, particularly in the seas and channels. Taken as a whole, the 14 points of Wilson reflected the interests of the US capital and above all the US administration showed its readiness to take up the leadership in the West⁸. The cooperation and negotiations between the British, French governments and Wilson himself during the period from 1919 to the middle of 1920 at the Paris Peace Conferences clearly indicates partnership between the three and the establishment of an international organization, the League of Nations shows the US impact factor. Withdrawal of the US administration from the Paris Peace negotiations does not necessarily mean as the British and French won over the US hegemonic position, but meant postponement of the US hegemonic position over European affairs. The withdrawal of the US administration from the Paris Peace Conferences did not change the whole project of creation, recreation of enlarged or reduced national states in Europe, for two reasons. First, the European powers were not able to work out a new international order and second, the Paris Peace Conferences had been designed to stabilize European order based on creation of a buffer zone between Soviet Union and Germany. It was because of such a calculation the winners of European powers supported and defended recognition of independent, sovereign states in the Balkans rather

⁷ Rothschild, Joseph. *Return to Diversity*, Second Edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, 3-75.

⁸ Türkeş, "Giriş: Kuş Bakışı Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'ndan Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'ne Geçiş", 15-20.

than proposing establishment of protectorateship over the defeated powers, while for instance the same European powers had advocated and put into practice the mandates in the Middle East with which they tried to sustain their supremacy.

What is clear is that while the US hegemonic project was not sustained as the US Senate did not ratify in June 1920 the position of Wilson and thus the liberal US hegemonic project was to a large extent put aside, giving an outlet to the implementation of the European hegemonic project, the Bolshevik hegemonic project was to be revised from the World revolution to socialism in a single country in the middle of 1920s.

The search for a new world order ended up with a new state of affairs which was not to be sustained because the WWI changed the structure of the international order however what was put into practice did not commensurate the post-war new outcome and thus the realist-liberal hybrid international order failed to produce a workable relationship between the old, new and reduced or enlarged states in Europe and finally that would lead to another armed confrontation – the WWII.

The Regional Formations as Adjustments and Responses to the Hybrid International Order

What was the place of the Balkans within this realist-liberal hybrid international order? How the Balkan states responded to the three hegemonic projects are important questions that need to be explored.

Let's start with analysing the place of the Balkans in the eyes of the Bolsheviks. First, had the Bolsheviks not only abandoned old Tsarist perception of pan-Slavism, but also blamed domestic political structures in the Balkans as conservative and reactionary. All of the kingdoms in the Balkans were against

new socialist regime in Soviet Union and therefore did not establish even an official diplomatic relations until early 1930s. The Balkan states no longer saw the Soviet Union as a reliable source, nor did the Soviet Union furnish them with a patronage. The communist parties in the Balkans were weak and forced to go underground and thus failed to play a role of being connection link, rather contributed to the friction between the Balkan states and the Soviet Union.

While the victorious European powers calculated that the Balkans could play a buffer zone between revisionist policies of both Germany and the Soviet Union⁹, the Balkan states assumed themselves as sovereign independent actors, relying on the modern state system that had developed since the Westphalia treaties. In reality theory and practices did not commensurate, while the Balkan states wished to be treated as equal sovereign actors and attempted to rely on anarchical relations between the states, the victorious powers tried to implement hierarchical relations between the great powers and the small and medium size powers. In fact, it was so ironic that not only were the small and medium size powers weak, but even the victorious great European powers were dependant on fresh capital which could only be provided by the US that decided to withdraw from the European affairs in June 1920. This could give a free hand to the Soviet Union; however, both the so called great European powers and small and medium size Balkan powers were against the Soviet Union. No power was in a hegemonic position. Nor was there hegemony¹⁰ on the question of international order.

⁹ Rothschild, Joseph. *East Central Europe between the two World Wars*, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1989, 1-18

¹⁰ For the concept of hegemony see; Gramsci, Antonio. *Prison Notebooks*, Edited with an introduction by Joseph A. Buttigieg, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, 21.

It is the lack of hegemony that opened up an avenue for regional formations in continental Europe and thus the powers were soon to be divided into two groups; defenders of *status quo* and revisionist powers. While Britain and France defended the post-war status quo, Germany and Italy advocated revisionism; while Germany arguing that the provisions of the Paris Peace treaties were unjust and the entire economic and political burden overloaded to the defeated powers, Italy found post-war territorial settlement as not meeting the promises that had been given to Italy before the WWI, thereby a cheated actor. While the British were satisfied with the destruction of German military power, particularly the navy power, and did not want to see any single power, whether French or German, becoming a hegemon, the French wished to see the destruction of economic, military and political powers of Germany¹¹. This clearly shows the lack of historic block between the British and French powers.

A similar picture at the regional level may also be seen. While the revisionist Balkan states, Albania, Bulgaria and Hungary were dissatisfied with the territorial arrangement reached at the Paris Peace Conferences, Greece, Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (from 1929 on it was to be called Yugoslavia) and Romania defended the territorial arrangements. After the Lausanne Treaty of 1923 Turkey would join in the anti-revisionist group¹².

Such a division prevented them to form hegemony in the Balkans. Each group produced its own hegemonic project which aimed to prevent the other group becoming successful; however historic block was not formed in each group because the members of each group's long term objectives differed.

¹¹ Carr, E.H. *International Relations between the two World Wars 1919-1939*, London, 1985.

¹² Türkeş, Mustafa. "The Balkan Pact and Its Immediate Implications for the Balkan States", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 30/1, 1994, 124.

The linkage between the status quo and revisionists powers at the European and Balkan region was also interesting. While the major European *status quo* powers expected that the small and medium size powers should act within the given framework of hierarchical relations without providing them sufficient amount of fresh credit, anti-revisionist small and medium size powers were expecting that they should be provided necessary fresh credit and be treated within the framework of anarchical relations. While Italy attempted to play a role of championship for raising revisionist claims at the European level, Italy lacked economic power to back up such a relation. While the British and French governments insisted on signing free trade agreement with the small and medium size powers, the small and medium size powers could not sustain such a market economy. Such a clash of approaches would provide the best opportunity to Hitler's Germany to offer the clearing agreements and thus regardless of being revisionist or anti-revisionist small and medium size powers they were drawn into the economic and later military orbit of Germany.

All these clearly show the fact that the relationship between European powers and regional actors were based on a very fragile understanding of cooperation and contests between the two groups. Fragility of hegemony in both groups at the European and regional levels was to be reflected in the existing international order that was not sustained.

Regarding the regional formations, it may be said that there were four significant regional initiatives: the Little Entente of 1920-21, the Four Power Pact of 1933 and the Definition of the Aggressor Treaties of 1933 and the Balkan Pact of 1934¹³.

¹³ Türkeş, "The Balkan Pact and Its Immediate Implications for the Balkan States", 123-144.

It is appropriate to look into each of these regional arrangements. The Little Entente was formed between Czechoslovakia, Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes and Romania in order to encircle Hungarian revisionism. This was supported by France as to create a network of solidarity against revival of German revisionism. However, it should be kept in mind that although the objectives of France and the members of the Little Entente had overlapped to a certain extent, their objectives were not identical; while for France priority was to create a block against Germany, the Little Entente states' priority was to keep Hungary under control. Secondly, while the Little Entente members expected military support from France, the French governments were limited themselves with political support. Once again it may be said that historic block was not formed between the Little Entente members and France.

At the European level the Four Power Pact, which was signed by Britain, France, Italy and Germany in 1933, however was not to be ratified by the French parliament in 1934. The Four Power Pact aimed to create an alternative decision making mechanism to the League of Nations. The reason behind this policy was that Germany and Italy had withdrawn from the League of Nations in the beginning of 1933 for revisionist reasons and Britain and France attempted to keep Germany and Italy within the framework of international system by giving them an exceptional honorary status in the European order. It would not be put into practice because of the French parliament's disapproval. This meant that there was no hegemony among European great powers.

The Definition of the Aggressor Treaty was to be worked out by Litvinov of the Soviet Union to give all of the neighbouring countries of the USSR an impression that the Soviet Union's stance was anti-revisionism. This policy helped the USSR to establish official diplomatic relations with the Balkan states, thereby

normalizing her relations, but did not go beyond this. This also shows that the Soviet Union was no longer pursuing a policy to promote its former hegemonic project of World Revolution. It may be said that no historic block was formed between the USSR and the Balkan states.

The Balkan Pact of 1934 was a genuine regional formation in the sense that it originated from the Balkans, though it should be emphasised that the Balkan Pact was formed within the given framework of the peace and cooperation of the League of Nations. When the idea of creation of a cooperation mechanism through Balkan Conferences was proposed all of the Balkan states were invited to the process. Four Balkan Conferences were held in 1930, 1931, 1932 and 1933. No extra regional actor dominated the agenda and the leadership of the conferences were shared. In the first Balkan Conference it seemed everything went on well, but in the second Balkan Conference Albania and Bulgaria put a condition in front of the Balkan Conference. For Albania and Bulgaria, the minority question had to be solved before any other cooperation or a military pact was worked out. This condition meant that Albania and Bulgaria wanted to raise the territorial revision issues which were extremely difficult to handle. Interesting enough is the fact that each actor in the region talked of minority problems outside of their own territory, disregarding the minority problems in their own countries.

Among the six Balkan states four were in favour of accelerating the process leading to conclusion of a military pact, while two insisted to address territorial revision through minority issues and thus side-lined themselves. Finally in February 1934 the Balkan Pact was signed. While for Yugoslavia and Turkey the Italian threat perception was priority, for Greece it was an impossible task because of her trade route dependency in Mediterranean seas. It finally turned

into a pact that aimed to prevent a joint military attack between a Balkan state in alliance with a major power and to give a message that if any of the Balkan state was to be attacked by a Balkan state the other signatory powers would take up arms against the aggressor and thus military confrontation between the Balkan states would be prevented. Given the fact that Bulgaria was the main actor which kept raising her demand for territorial revision, the Balkan Pact would try to pacify Bulgaria. The Balkan Pact contributed to prevent an armed confrontation between the Balkan states; however it failed to function against extra regional actors because two members, Greece and Turkey each had one reservation¹⁴.

Here again it may be stated that hegemony was not reached among the six Balkan states. Hegemony occurred among the four anti-revisionist Balkan states that the Balkan Conferences and the Balkan Pact showed the fact that there could be cooperation between the Balkan states for the cause of peace and stability, this was a passive revolution.

Conclusion

It may be stated that instabilities in the world and unsustainable international order necessarily affected the Balkans and Eurasia. Both the international orders before and after the WWI failed to address the existing problems in the Balkans. Larger powers treated the problems in the Balkans as local and regional and that they were not large enough to destroy or construct European and international orders. As the Balkan history before and after the WWI shows us the Balkans could affect not only European but also Eurasian orders, though within the given larger international order. The wars and instabilities in the Balkans before the WWI were parts and parcels of adjustments to the international order based on

¹⁴ Türkeş, “The Balkan Pact and Its Immediate Implications for the Balkan States”, 138.

alliance system, while the regional initiatives worked out and implemented after the WWI were responses to the hybrid realist-liberal international order.

The lack of historic blocs and fragility of hegemony at the international level found reflections at the regional level. It was always the instabilities at the international level that had impact on the regional and national levels; it was not the other way round.

It may, finally, be said that among the regional initiatives the Balkan Conferences and the Balkan Pact turned into hegemony. While the Balkan Pact did not produce a sustainable passive revolution, the cooperation, peace and stability discourses of the Balkan Conferences remain to be only passive revolution.

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