

Count Kaunitz's Views on Austrian Foreign Policy (March 24, 1749)

Abstract

Wenzel Anton Kaunitz-Rietberg (1711-94) formulated his views at great length after negotiating the Peace of Aachen (1748), which conceded Austrian defeat at Prussian hands and stipulated the cession to Frederick II of the rich Austrian province of Silesia (whose reconquest Kaunitz saw as Austria's highest priority). Anxiety over Prussia's challenge to Austrian power inspired Kaunitz to seek an end to the longstanding Austro-French rivalry, so as to draw France to Austria's side against Prussia (as occurred in the impending Seven Years War of 1756-63). Kaunitz recommended revitalizing the institutions of the Holy Roman Empire so as to strengthen Austria in the Empire at Prussia's expense.

Source

The Views of Count Kaunitz on the System of Foreign Affairs

Most Gracious Empress, Queen and Lady. Your Royal Majesty has most graciously ordered: "That each conference minister should put his opinion on paper and submit it to the highest authorities within 14 days: What system should be adopted after the peace that has now been concluded, the apparent unrest in the north, against England, France, and the Empire?" Whereby at the same time the most illustrious final purpose is expressed as follows: "How highly necessary it is that a principle and a rule should be put into effect."

This most gracious order, which reached my jurisdiction on March 11, 1749, I hereby most humbly and dutifully comply with; [...]

And I do not wish to conceal from Your Royal Majesty: Whether I have formed a true or false conception of the present nature and manner of thinking of the greatest powers in Europe; and whether, consequently, my opinion given on the future state system flows from erroneous or well-founded suppositions; In order to achieve this purpose, I believe it necessary to describe as briefly as possible the attitudes and intentions of the foreign courts as I see them, and then to go into more detail about what Your Royal Majesty may hope or fear from each court; From this follows a consideration of the circumstances in which Your Gracious Archducal House itself currently finds itself, and what expedient means are to be taken to avert alarming evil as well as to attain and promote its true welfare.

In order to observe some order in this respect, the European courts are to be divided into three main classes according to the common conception that has prevailed for many years in state affairs of the balance between the Bourbon and Your Most Gracious Archducal House, namely

1st those who are natural friends,

2nd those who are to be regarded as the natural enemies of Your Most gracious Archducal House; and

3rd those courts which may take one side or the other depending on the circumstances of the case.

Among the first class, the Crown of England is indubitably to be placed above all others.

[...]

As far as the second class is concerned, that is, the European powers that can be counted among the natural enemies of Your Most Gracious Archducal House, but above all the Ottoman Porte, it is even less possible to make a reliable judgment of its future undertakings.

[...]

As far as the king in Prussia is concerned, he undoubtedly deserves to be placed at the top of the class of natural enemies, even before the Ottoman Porte, and thus to be regarded as the worst and most dangerous neighbor of Your Most Gracious Archducal House.

I consider it appropriate to refrain from renewing the painful memory of what a substantial and immense loss the monarchy has suffered through the loss of Silesia. However, even if the loss in revenue could be born, this is not the case with the overly justified considerations that with Silesia, not a foreign member, but a major part of the body was torn away, thus clearing the path for an enemy who has an army that is superior in number, well provided with everything, well exercised and disciplined, permanently standing, and at the same time has the money in his coffers to raise and maintain several more such armies, for him to break into the heart of the hereditary lands in the event of unrest arising elsewhere, and whenever He deems it in his interest to do so, and to inflict the last fatal blow on the entire monarchy.

Since He will also not doubt for a moment, and will always bear in mind that Silesia is a devastating loss to Your Most Gracious Archducal House, for whose recovery no possible opportunity will be missed; it naturally follows from this that the Prussian policy, in order to protect its conquest, is constantly directed towards weakening Austria more and more, thus depriving it of the power and means to carry out its further intentions, and that in this way the two courts will continue to live in the greatest jealousy and irreconcilable enmity for the future.

It has repeatedly been commented on how the dangerous Prussian expansion intentions relate to the Russian Court's inclinations.

As far as the powers belonging to the third class are concerned, such as the Roman Court, Portugal, Denmark, Sweden, Poland, Naples, and Sardinia, the republics in Italy, the Duke of Modena, and the princes and rulers of the German Empire [etc. etc.], they also have a strong influence in the universal state system, and each of them deserves to be considered most attentively, according to their constitutional context, their bad or seemingly good intentions, as well as according to the most likely means by which they can be drawn into the supreme interest of others.

However, since the same special considerations cannot be confined and exhausted in a few pages, and since opinions have already been given somewhat extensively on the most important courts; It only remains, therefore, to touch a little on the circumstances in which Your Royal Majesty finds Herself with regard to foreign affairs of state at present, and then, in accordance with Your most gracious command, to give my brief views on the system to be adopted in the future, as Your most humble servant.

The internal state of a monarchy is indeed the first and most important thing to be considered and taken into careful consideration in all state deliberations; but I will most respectfully remain silent on this matter, because I do not yet have complete knowledge of it; However, no one can be unaware that, after Your Royal Majesty has had to exert the utmost strength to defend the crown and scepter against so many powerful enemies, and has deployed a greater force than any of Her most glorious ancestors, [. .] this necessarily exhausted the country as well as the treasury, and it is to be wondered how it was possible thus far to provide advice and help on so many occasions that required it. [...]

No less remarkable circumstances are also apparent in the nature and context of foreign affairs, and it can be assumed as an obvious truth, without the slightest exaggeration, that Your Most Gracious Archducal House, with regard to all its allies and worrisome enemies, has never, not even once during a

war, found itself in such precarious, far-reaching, and critical circumstances as it does now.

The Allies are now partly disarmed, partly completely exhausted. [...]

England alone, and without Holland, has never been able, as long as the aforesaid old system has been in existence, to assist Your Most Gracious Archducal House; and on the subject of the English weaknesses, and their probable causes, I have already expressed my humble thoughts as to what is to be expected from said Crown in such cases; as a case in point, what occurred in the war of the year 1733 will provide further instruction.

The greatest hope, according to the present circumstances, rests on Russia; but it is not sufficient in itself, and is subject to the risk of change; also the Northern upheavals, if they escalate into actual war, will keep said court sufficiently occupied.

However, not only has the previous strength of the Austrian alliances diminished, but at the same time the situation has worsened immensely with regard to the enemies of concern; and while our territories were previously only exposed to nearby enemy danger on two sides, now that they share a border with the Spanish Prince, D[on] Philipp, and the King of Prussia, they are exposed on four sides, and at least three of these neighbors are not only equal in power to Your Most Gracious Archducal House, but in some cases very superior; That the aforementioned king also has very concerning agreements with other courts has already been mentioned repeatedly.

Since, the present circumstances of the state undoubtedly differ greatly from those in the past, and have changed completely in the essentials, it seems to me, therefore, that the natural consequence of this is that the so-called old system, which consisted in the union of Your Most Gracious Archducal House and the maritime powers against the Bourbon House, and which in its time was not subject to any well-founded criticism, can no longer contain the whole context of affairs, nor serve as a general rule and guideline, but can only be applied in some appropriate cases.

Now we must respond to the question: What then, according to the present circumstances, would be the most appropriate system for the highest service? The forms the presupposition for the first and principal maxim of the state.

That, since the loss of Silesia cannot be tolerated, and the King of Prussia is to be regarded as the greatest, most dangerous, and most irreconcilable enemy of Your Most Gracious Archducal House, the first, greatest, and most constant care must be taken on our side not only to guard against and protect against the enemy undertakings of said King, but also to weaken him, to limit his dominance, and to recover what has been lost.

In accordance with this latter principle, my most faithful duty requires me to offer my humble opinion most respectfully, without hesitation or reserve: Whether, and in what manner, it is possible to accomplish the great purpose mentioned; and if so, what means are to be adopted?

The old system was directed only against the Bourbon house and so little against the house of Electoral Brandenburg that the latter was counted and included among our useful secondary allies; which shows an essential difference today from previous times.

The fact that the King of Prussia has also acquired a strong following in England, and that no direct and serious aid is to be hoped for from that Crown in order to wrest Silesia back from said King, is confirmed by various already mentioned and other important considerations. [...]

However, after the necessary prudence has been exercised, no offensive measures should be taken unless the hope greatly outweighs the danger, and as far as human judgment can predict, there is no

doubt of a happy outcome; [...]. For this reason, it does not seem advisable to again confront Prussia alone, even supposing that all the other powers would not interfere but sit still; Meanwhile the Prussian power should be considered, if not very superior to Her Royal Highness, at least equal to it, since we must not forget the exhaustion of the hereditary lands.

In my humble opinion, based on the nature of the present circumstances of the state, there is no possibility of carrying out the great intentions mentioned, unless the Crown of France could be persuaded in one way or another not only not to oppose these undertakings, but to lend its hand to them directly, or at least indirectly, and thereby tip the balance.

I realize that, because of the great difficulties to be surmounted, it would seem almost impossible to initiate the matter in the manner described; Moreover, as has already been pointed out, France finds such great and essential benefit in the preservation of the present Royal Prussian power, that it is also to be regarded as a maxim of our state that one should constantly guard against the artifices to which that Crown is accustomed, and that French words and seemingly good intentions are to be trusted only and exclusively in cases where they are in accordance with her true interests, as her one and only political principle.

But just as this supposition extends not only to Your Royal Majesty, but also to the generals and all other powers, from this, too, the further conclusion can be drawn with all probability that if France were to find a greater and more beneficial interest in the overthrow than in the preservation of the King in Prussia, then that Crown might well be able to apply itself as zealously to the latter as it has hitherto promoted the former.

The main question in this respect is whether such a greater interest can be created for the Crown of France?

[...]

10th As far as the current state of the [Holy] Roman Empire is concerned, this is, without a doubt, one of the most important things that has a strong influence on the system *quoad universum*, and deserves all the more attention the more weaknesses manifest themselves in it, and the more the danger grows daily that the weakening and oppression of the smaller estates, as well as the ungrateful disregard for the Supreme Royal authority, will lead to its complete decay and complete overthrow. The evil arises from various causes, but most of all from the Royal Prussian dominance; and if this could be curbed in accordance with our proposal, which has been explained in great detail, and thus the greatest source of misfortune could be stopped, there is no doubt that a far more pleasant order could be hoped for in the [Holy] Roman Empire, and brought to perfection through the usual Supreme Imperial paternal care. In the meantime, other, albeit less effective devices are by no means to be disregarded; and since, in that case, very good expert opinions have already been written and the matter has been exhausted, I take the liberty of referring to them most humbly, and of noting only so much in general: That 1st The principle that every estate should receive impartial and timely justice without prejudice, and should not be hindered in any way by the confusion or other considerations that have arisen, is not only in itself worthy of the magnanimity of the Most Glorious Reigning Queen of the Realm, but is also the surest guideline for discountenancing, if not curtailing, the intrusive behavior of those ill-disposed towards us.

2nd Since a large part of the Imperial authority rests on the Imperial Court Council, it also deserves special and constant care, so that its internal constitution and each member may keep himself pure and free from all justified reproaches, and also fully fulfill his duty.

3rd Since the course of justice is most hindered by the *recursus ad comitia*,^[1] which is becoming customary, it would be most desirable and necessary to work towards a legally binding decision by the

Imperial Diet, and at least to completely cut off all *recursus* in judicial matters where no *gravamen commune*^[2] clearly exists, and even if such a *gravamen* were already expressed, the presumptuous *effectus suspensivi*^[3] could nevertheless be removed as legal recourse. But in order not to miss the great final purpose, it would be necessary to take up confidential correspondence with the best-disposed houses of Electors and Princes, and to prepare the work in such a way that a satisfactory Imperial decision could not well arise. If also

4th The most necessary improvement of Reich Executions^[4] would contribute not a little to the maintenance of justice and the Imperial reputation.

5^{to} [...] Your Royal Majesty's supreme command has authorized me to give my insignificant opinion about these things in a somewhat roundabout and unreserved manner as Your humble servant.

I submit these to the most enlightened judgment, and if I have gone too far in this regard, or have missed the opinion of the Supreme Will due to weakness of insight, I hope all the more to receive the most profound forgiveness, since everything has flowed from a pure, most faithful eagerness to be of service that is also removed from all emotion; And Your Royal Majesty can be most graciously assured by me that, should such a system, which runs directly counter to my thoughts, be prescribed in the future, it will serve as my sole guideline in future deliberations, and I will completely banish my expressed private opinion from my mind.

Vienna the 24th of March 1749.

W[enzel] A[nton] Graff zu Kaunitz-Rittberg

NOTES

[1] An appeal against a decision by an Imperial Court before the Imperial Diet.

[2] A complaint or appeal.

[3] Suspensive effect.

[4] *Reichsexekution* = in the HRE, an imperial intervention against an imperial estate, if necessary by military means.

Source: *Expansion und Gleichgewicht. Studien zur europäischen Mächtepolitik des ancien régime*, ed. Johannes Kunisch. Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1986, pp. 168-239; reprinted in Helmut Neuhaus, ed. *Zeitalter des Absolutismus 1648-1789. Deutsche Geschichte in Quellen und Darstellung*, ed. Rainer A. Müller, vol. 5, Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 1997, pp. 298-312.

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