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# 1

## The Habsburg Puzzle

Take care, Sire... Your Monarchy is a little straggling: it connects itself with the North, the South, and the East. It is also in the center of Europe. Your Majesty must give them law.

—PRINCE EUGENE OF SAVOY

If that ... empire is to be considered the greatest and most powerful which has the most secure borders and the least to fear from its neighbors, then Austria is to be counted among the weak, despite its size and inner resources.

—WENZEL ANTON VON KAUNITZ

ON NOVEMBER 1, 1700, Charles “the Bewitched,” great-grandson of Phillip II and last Habsburg king of Spain, died, childless. With his death, a dynasty that had ruled over much of the known world, from Peru to Prague, was shorn of its largest western possessions and relegated to the back corner of Europe. The new cockpit of the Habsburg imperium was a ragged cluster of duchies and kingdoms a thousand miles to the east, in the violent borderlands between Christendom and the empire of the Turk. Its capital was Vienna, seat of the eastern Habsburg archdukes who for nearly half a millennium had ruled over much of middle Europe, first as march lords, and then as emperors of the German Reich and kings of Bohemia and Hungary.

The eastern realm of the Austrian Habsburgs was different, not only from the dynasty’s western holdings, but from the other European Great Powers forming around it. Amassed over several centuries by marriage, war, diplomacy, and luck, it was an *omnium gatherum* of tribes and languages—German, Magyar, Slav, Jew, and Romanian—bound together by geographic happenstance, legal entailment, and the person of the emperor who ruled them. The lands inhabited by this multiethnic menagerie were a place of war. Formed around the banks of the Danube, its tributaries and outlying plateaus, the

Habsburg Monarchy sat in one of the world's great interstitial geopolitical zones—a triangle-shaped delta at the base of the isthmus formed by the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas. An invasion route for millennia, the lands of the Danube represented both a civilizational and military frontier—the collision point of the Christian, Orthodox, and Muslim worlds converging at Europe's turbulent southeastern corner.

In every direction, the Austrian Habsburgs faced enemies. To the south lay the ancient menace of the Ottoman Empire. For centuries, the lands of the *Marca Orientalis* or “Austria” had formed a Christian rampart against the banners of militant Islam, shouldering a burden of frontier defense bequeathed by Byzantium along with the medieval kingdoms of Serbia and Hungary, which had fallen in rapid succession to the advancing Ottoman armies. To the east sprawled the tractless Great Hungarian Plain, whose wild expanses had only recently been freed from the Turks and whose truculent Protestant princes still resisted rule from Catholic Vienna. Beyond Hungary loomed the colossus of the Russian Empire, whose armies were just embarking on the concentric expansions that would eventually bring them to the banks of the Danube and shores of the Black Sea. To the north lay the still-expanding empire of Sweden and its Baltic neighbors, the precocious military kingdom of Brandenburg-Prussia and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a decaying giant that attracted predation from stronger neighbors. And to the west were scattered the wealthy but fractious vassal states of the German Reich and northern Italy, and beyond them, the military superstate of Bourbon France, dynastic *Erbfeind* to the Habsburgs and centuries-long aspirant to west-central European primacy.

As long as Spain had remained in the hands of the Habsburg family's senior branch, the multidirectional pressures bearing down on the eastern half of the empire had been manageable. Although not administered as a unified whole, the Habsburg domains had tended to support and succor one another in war. At least until Spanish power began to wane in the seventeenth century, Austria could count on Spain to divert French attention and resources, and thus avert the danger of *double guerre*—a two-front war. But with Charles's death and the accession of a Bourbon prince to the Spanish throne, Austria's western line of support vanished (see figure 1.1).

The resulting assortment of dangers was beyond the ability of the Danubian empire to handle through military strength alone. Earlier generations of Habsburg dynasts had occasionally been capable of fielding powerful offensive armies, reaching the cusp of military hegemony under Charles V and the imperial armies of Tilly and Wallenstein. By contrast, the eastern Habsburgs were a relatively impoverished line, hampered in the quest for a large standing army by the continual fiscal and constitutional constraints of their motley realm.

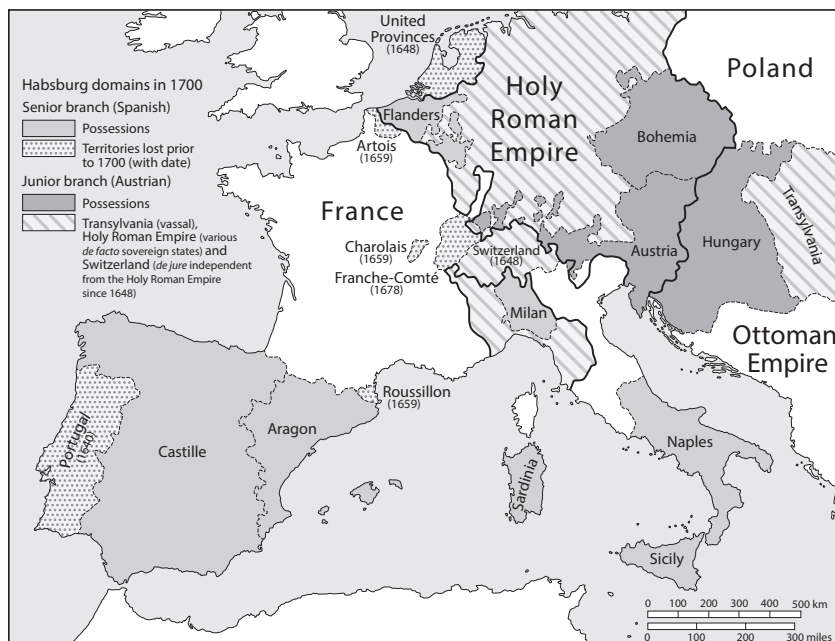


FIG. 1.1. Habsburg Domains, ca. 1700. Source: Alphonso / CC-BY-SA-3.0.

Just how severe a predicament the threats facing Austria could produce became apparent in the war that now broke out following Charles's death. The so-called War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14) brought a Bourbon bid for the Spanish throne that pitted the military machine of the French king Louis XIV against the Holy Roman emperor, Leopold I, whose Austrian armies were a tenth the size of his opponent's. Stripped of their accustomed Spanish support base, the Austrian Habsburgs became enmeshed in a desperate multifront war against five enemies. In Italy, Leopold and his son Joseph I, who succeeded the throne in 1705, faced the combined armies of France and Spain, which sought to retain the rich Italian territories possessed by the Spanish Habsburgs. In Germany, they were confronted with a joint French and Bavarian assault on Habsburg primacy in the German Reich. In the south, the renegade prince Francis II Rakoczi stirred the Magyars to revolt while border tensions flared with an Ottoman Empire that longed to regain lands only recently lost to Austria. And in the north, the powerful armies of Sweden's Charles XII threatened to invade Bohemia in support of Austria's Protestant minorities.

As a rite of passage, the Spanish war previewed in vivid and violent form the difficulties that Austria would face as an encircled power in the topsy-turvy

European balance of power. By the war's climax, the Austrian heartland was threatened by invading armies from both west and east, as French forces marched down the Danube and Hungarian *kuruc* raiders scoured the outskirts of Vienna. By its end, Austria was militarily exhausted and on the brink of financial ruin. As the Emperor Joseph I lamented, "[My allies] know how divided my military power is, scattered about every corner of Europe ... how I stand in Hungary and Transylvania, how difficult it would be for me to raise a force to protect myself should a threat suddenly emerge from Sweden, which still must be reckoned with, how weak I am ... in the Reich where as head I should certainly be the strongest."<sup>1</sup> Yet somehow, despite the seemingly insurmountable threats arrayed against it, the Habsburg Monarchy had survived. Summoning resources far beyond their own, the Habsburgs stopped the French invasion at Blenheim, evicted the Bourbons from Lombardy, deterred the threats from Sweden and Turkey, and resecured the territories of renegade Hungary and the loyalties of its nobles. In the concluding peace at Rastatt, the Habsburgs reaped a territorial windfall that more than compensated for the loss of Spain, bringing control of resource-rich northern Italy and new holdings as far afield as the Low Countries.

Austria's experience in the Spanish succession struggle would be repeated in the decades that followed. Time and again, new wars would erupt around the monarchy's far-flung frontiers. Just two years after Rastatt, Austria was at war with the Turks; nineteen years later—less than the amount of time that elapsed between the first and second world wars—it was embroiled in a new 5-year war with France. Three years later it was invaded on three sides and brought to the brink of extinction by the armies of Frederick the Great, who would subject the monarchy to almost three decades of continuous warfare and crisis. After a brief pause and yet another war with Turkey, Austria was thrown into a 23-years-long contest with France that would see its capital occupied, territories cut down to a rump, and ancient dynasty denigrated to the status of second-rate supplicants and in-laws to Napoleon. Altogether, in the 183 years from 1683 to 1866, Austria was involved in conflict for all but perhaps 75 (see figure 1.2).

Rarely in these military contests was Austria dealt a strong hand. It entered most of its wars with an army of middling quality led by indifferent generals and backed by shaky finances; it ended most of them bankrupt. It routinely faced enemies more numerous or technologically advanced than itself, occasionally commanded by the great captains of history. At all times the threat of a multifront war loomed. And yet time after time, the Habsburg Monarchy survived. It outlasted Ottoman sieges, Bourbon quests for continental hegemony, repeated efforts at dismemberment by Frederick the Great, and no fewer than four failed attempts to defeat Napoleon. Each time, it weathered

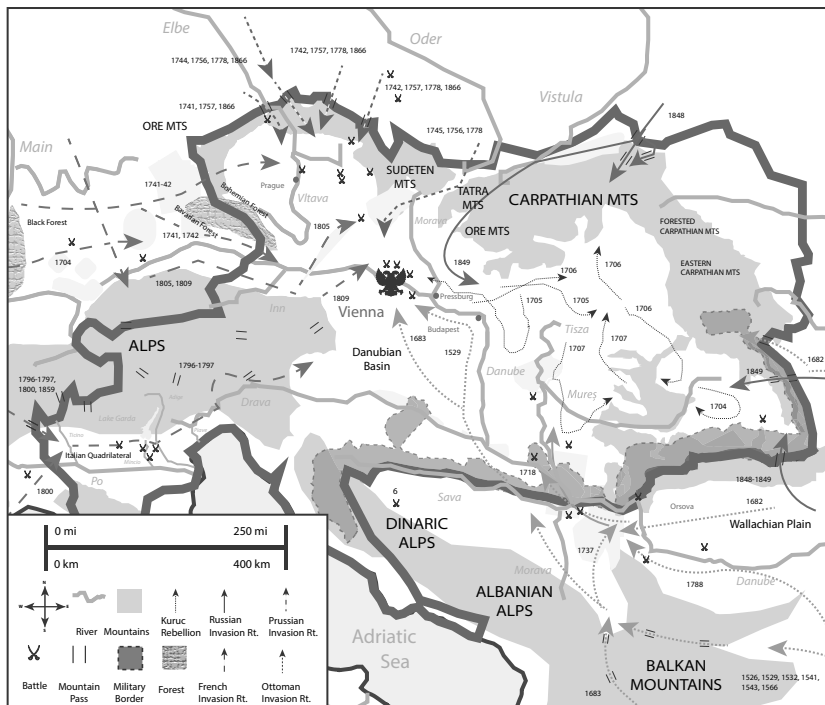


FIG. 1.2. Major Battles and Invasions of the Habsburg Empire, 1680–1866.

Source: Center for European Policy Analysis, 2017.

the threat at hand and more often than not emerged on the winning side. Despite losing most of its battles, it won most of its wars and continued to add territorial holdings long after it was considered a spent force. At times it even came to dominate European diplomacy, exercising a degree of influence over its external environment out of all proportion to its resources. Altogether, the dynasty endured for more than half a millennium, from the Middle Ages to the age of the airplane and automobile. By virtually any standard measure—longevity, wars won, alliances maintained, or influence exerted—the Habsburg Empire must be judged a geopolitical success.

### The Habsburg Puzzle

How do we explain this unlikely success? How did an externally encircled, internally fractious, and financially weak state survive and even thrive for so long in Europe’s most dangerous neighborhood? Had the Habsburgs possessed the attributes normally associated with successful empires, there would

be little to explain. But they did not. Geographically, Austria lacked the natural advantages of many other European Great Powers. Unlike Britain and Russia, Austria had no ocean moats or vast steppes to shelter it from threats. As we will see, its mountains afforded some protection, but these only partially mitigated the multifront dilemma. Where France or Prussia might be confronted, in the severest of emergencies, with a two-front war, Austria faced threats at every point on the compass. At four thousand miles, the Habsburg security perimeter brought the monarchy into contact with enemies of widely differing fighting techniques, from conventional European armies to Tatar raiders and the semi-Asiatic armies of the Ottoman Empire, any one of which could attack with little warning. Coping with them required the Austrian Army to be prepared for combat in military theaters as diverse as the rugged Balkans, snowy Alps, and malarial floodplains of the Danube Delta.

The Habsburgs did not possess a military instrument capable of subduing this forbidding landscape. While more effective than many modern critics have alleged, the Austrian imperial army never attained the fighting qualities of the armies possessed by other large land powers like France, Russia, or Prussia.<sup>2</sup> One historian notes of the Austrians a “cultural disinclination toward wars of conquest,” another that their commanders lacked a “killer instinct.”<sup>3</sup> Loyal and frequently resilient in defense, the Habsburg Army was not in itself a tool with which to overmaster or consistently overpower or deter the empire’s numerous rivals.

Nor can the Habsburgs be said to have possessed the characteristics of an economically domineering state. To be sure, the monarchy had the physical makings of a strong economy. It was large—around 260,000 square miles at its height, or about the size of Texas—rich in natural resources and maintained a population roughly comparable in size to some of its western rivals.<sup>4</sup> But this paper strength was misleading; throughout its history, the Habsburg Monarchy was plagued by a degree of constitutional and administrative complexity that hampered the systematic mobilization of resources. Successive monarchs would labor to impose greater efficiency and uniformity on the state, occasionally bringing the monarchy within reach of its major competitors. Nevertheless, Austria would never be able to achieve a sustained position in the top ranks of European economic powers or realize the vast power potential suggested by the empire’s size.

In none of these categories—geography, military, or economic—can the House of Austria be said to have enjoyed a decisive advantage sufficiently pronounced to secure its position against the number of potential enemies arrayed against it. The outside environment placed Austria in a position of continual danger while the political and economic structure of the empire narrowed the range of viable tools for responding effectively to external threats



and putting it on a secure long-term footing. Summing up Austria's predicament, Prince Kaunitz, the leading Habsburg statesman of the late eighteenth century wrote, "If that . . . empire is to be considered the greatest and most powerful which has the most secure borders and the least to fear from its neighbors, then Austria is to be counted among the weak, *despite its size and inner resources*. It is surrounded by three very dangerous neighbors, in part more powerful and in part equally powerful [as itself]."<sup>5</sup>

One common explanation offered for the Habsburg Monarchy's longevity is that it was a "necessity"—a construction whose continued existence in the troubled lands between the East and West provided a public good so valuable to Europe that its neighbors and even rivals dared not demolish it. In this view, the empire survived for so long, not because of any decisions Habsburg statesmen made, but because other Great Powers *wanted* Austria to survive. Thus, Austria's fellow Great Powers made a calculation, not just once, but repeatedly over several centuries, to prop it up, lest its collapse generate problems beyond their ability to solve.

As we will see, Austria was indeed frequently able to rally coalitions composed of allies motivated, at least in part, by the desire to retain the Habsburg Monarchy, first as a Christian glacis against the advancing Turks and later as a stabilizing ballast to the balance of power. But the idea of Austria as a necessity is, on its own, insufficient to explain its success. On more than one occasion, Austria was invaded by aggressive neighbors who viewed it not as a necessity but rather an anachronistic hindrance to their own aggrandizement and prize to be carved up. In the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–48), to take the most prominent example, Austria would face no fewer than five opponents determined to divvy up its richest territories between them. With the monarchy seemingly on the verge of collapse, neither Austria's enemies nor its traditional allies were particularly disturbed by the possibility of its territorial truncation or even extinction. "Fuck the Austrians" was Frederick the Great's succinct sentiment; "the House of Austria has ceased to exist!" was the exaltation of the French cardinal Fleury.<sup>6</sup> In London, Lord Newcastle said bluntly to the House of Lords, "The preservation of the balance of power and liberties of Europe does not . . . depend upon preserving entire the dominions of the House of Austria."<sup>7</sup>

While an extreme example, this episode demonstrated two salient geopolitical facts of life for the Habsburg Monarchy. First, Austria's status in the eyes of other powers could change rapidly for the worse if it came to be seen as overly weak—indeed, its polyglot composition made it the *most natural* target on the European chessboard for predatory revisionists. Second, the assumption that the balance of power would operate as a kind of geopolitical "invisible hand" was not something that Habsburg statesmen could take for

granted; like all states in history, insecurity was a perpetual reality for Austria, and security too precious a commodity to be vouchsafed to abstract notions of geopolitical surrogacy. Whatever benefit Austria rendered to the balance of power—and as we will see, Habsburg statesmen were very much aware that it did—the mere fact of being a necessity was not in itself a solid enough foundation on which to gamble the monarchy's existence.

### The Missing Link: Strategy

Inherent in the idea of Austria as a necessity is that the monarchy was, to some extent, a ward of the international system, which in turn implies a degree of helplessness on the part of its leaders for guiding, much less controlling, security outcomes. Perhaps it is therefore unsurprising that the question of how the Habsburg Monarchy conceived of and conducted strategy has not received the degree of attention accorded to other large empires in history. At most, there is the vague image of Austria succeeding in its early days through marriage, summed up in the often-repeated expression *Bella gerant alii, tu felix Austria nube / Nam quae Mars aliis, dat tibi regna Venus* (Let others wage war, but thou, happy Austria, marry; for those kingdoms that Mars gives to others, Venus gives to thee). To be sure, there have been many serious and detailed accounts of Habsburg foreign policy in the century since the monarchy's demise.<sup>8</sup> But virtually nothing has been written about Habsburg grand strategy per se.<sup>9</sup> To the extent that historians have considered the question, they have cast doubts on Austria's capacity to conduct strategy in any meaningful sense of the term. Historian Charles Ingrao writes that "it would be erroneous to suggest that [Austria's] statesmen consciously conceived of a comprehensive and well-coordinated program" for dealing with the challenges around their borders; instead, they "invariably concentrated on responding to individual crises as they arose in a particular theater." There is "no evidence," he continues, "that the emperor and his ministers ever conceived or clearly elucidated a strategy for the maintenance of secure buffers beyond the monarchy's borders. Nor are there more than a few instances when they expressed an appreciation of the multiple strategic difficulties that were occasioned by Austria's exposed position in the heart of East-Central Europe."<sup>10</sup> Michael Hochedlinger argues that Austria "had to content itself mostly with preserving the status quo and, if this failed, with last-minute defensive reactions against acute foreign threats."<sup>11</sup> And Manfred Rauchensteiner notes an almost-total absence of the indigenous military-theoretical predilections that normally accompany the development of strategy in major land powers.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps one reason the question of Austrian grand strategy has not received more attention is that the Habsburg Monarchy does not fit the stereotype of a

successful empire. In the standard account, Great Powers win in geopolitics by amassing a preponderance of material resources, which they then translate into armies and fleets capable of territorial expansion.<sup>13</sup> Inherent to this model is the capacity for offensive military action. Indeed, the very idea of strategy in the Western mind is tightly interwoven with the offensive in general and Napoleonic ideal in particular, enhanced by Carl von Clausewitz's later writings, of victory through bold thrusts, maneuver, and speed.<sup>14</sup> Not surprisingly, military historians are drawn to states that succeeded through conquest—Sparta, Macedon, the Roman Empire at its height, Napoleonic France, and above all Prussia. By contrast, the idea of defensive strategy evokes images of passivity, reaction, and even folly—Achaemenid Persia buckling before the armies of Alexander, or the French Fourth Republic sheltering behind the Maginot Line. The result is an offensive bias in the study of war that leads us to look for evidence of strategy where expansion occurred, and impute wisdom to audacity and unwisdom to caution.<sup>15</sup>

In Austria's case, the effect is perhaps reinforced by the unfavorable appraisals of Habsburg behavior left to us by so many of the empire's enemies. Napoleon's alleged comment to Austrian envoys during negotiations for the Peace of Campo Formio that the Habsburg Monarchy was "nothing but an old maidservant, accustomed to being raped by everyone," is about as flattering as Bismarck's comparison of Austria to "a worm-eaten old galleon," anchored at bay, and rotting from within and without.<sup>16</sup> Prussian officers after the Napoleonic Wars cast aspersions on the dilatory methods of their Austrian counterparts, the most damning of which were Clausewitz's acerbic observations about the Archduke Charles's (1771–1847) stubborn adherence to outmoded eighteenth-century attritional warfare. In a similar vein, German officers and military writers after the First World War reflected scathingly on the military-strategic performance of Austrian allies on whose shoulders they placed part of the blame for Germany losing the war.<sup>17</sup> Together with Clausewitz's disapproval, such commentary from the German military professional class—the ultimate font of authority for Anglo-American strategists—cast a pall over the House of Habsburg Monarchy in modern strategic studies.

The fact that the empire in question did not survive only underscored the point; Austria's demise seemed to be written into the Habsburg genetic code, rooted as much in strategic failure as geopolitical inevitability. Thus we are left with the picture of a bumbling empire that was equal parts miracle and albatross—an anachronism that survived for centuries amid the most contested geography without much effort beyond ad hoc reaction to crises as they arose and was, in the long run, doomed to extinction.<sup>18</sup> To the extent that strategy played a part in Austria's perpetuation, it was in the use of well-timed marriages at some misty early moment of history; subsequent survival was

the by-product more of the strategizing done by *other* powers, which possessed the long-term clairvoyance to see the need to keep Austria intact, or even luck, than strategic decisions taken by Austria's own leaders.

## The Necessity of Strategy

The relative absence of Habsburg Austria from the Western strategic imagination is to be regretted. For while perhaps less warlike than other European powers, the Habsburgs were, if anything, more successful for much of their history in staving off defeat and achieving the ultimate goal for any state in geopolitics: survival. In the words of Metternich, Habsburg methods were “not heroic, but [they] saved an empire.”<sup>19</sup> With meager resources and abundant threats, the Austrians managed to erect a sustainable and ultimately affordable safety for the lands of the Danube that would only be replicated with the expansion of Western military and political institutions in the late twentieth century.

This book argues that this track record cannot be explained without understanding the strategies that the Habsburgs devised for coping with their difficult environment.<sup>20</sup> All states need strategy to survive. Great Powers in particular must develop higher or grand strategy if they are to endure in the world of competition with other large states.<sup>21</sup> The term “grand strategy” has been used in many ways in the century since its introduction.<sup>22</sup> For the purposes of this book, it is useful to think of it as consisting of three dimensions: a “what,” “how,” and “when.”<sup>23</sup> The first of these, the functional aspect, is best described by the international relations scholar John Lewis Gaddis, who defined grand strategy as “the calculated matching of means to large ends.”<sup>24</sup> Because the matching of means and ends is not a onetime act but instead occurs repeatedly across the life cycle of a Great Power, it must also be thought of as encompassing a structural component, or a how—a method by which means-ends calculations are transmitted within and between generations. Perhaps the best handling of this dimension of grand strategy is that by the diplomatic historian Hal Brands, who describes it as a “conceptual framework,” or “intellectual architecture that lends structure to foreign policy; the logic that helps states navigate a complex and dangerous world.”<sup>25</sup>

Finally, there is a when of grand strategy—a time frame in the life of a nation or empire in which its leaders are most prompted to confront means-ends trade-offs.<sup>26</sup> While it may be true that states devise grand strategies in times of both peace and war, it is in war, amid the exigencies and dangers that armed conflict presents to a society, that the need for grand strategy becomes urgent. War is a clarifying moment for states; it is a tutorial by which they come to identify gaps between the means at their disposal and ends they wish to pursue. War, especially if it is intense or prolonged, has the effect of focusing the

attention of policy makers' means-ends calculations beyond the imperium of the now and toward the future state, forcing them, as the historian Williamson Murray has written, to "act beyond the demands of the present" and "think about the future in terms of the goals of the political entity."<sup>27</sup>

States develop a grand strategy not because they are wise but because without one they will die. The urge to react to crises as they emerge is a constant for policy makers in any era. But geostrategic threats tend to be a corrective to this urge, forcing states to equip themselves for competition, both mentally and materially, in order to avoid extinction.<sup>28</sup> A state may pursue a particular grand strategy in a given war, but it is through the accumulated experiences of multiple wars, on the basis of trial and error by numerous successive generations of statesmen attempting to square means and ends within the constraints of geography, that the contours of a broader grand strategic framework or logic emerges, unique to that state and corresponding to its peculiar circumstances and geography. In this sense, grand strategy bears a resemblance to learned behaviors in nature; it is to a great state what instinct is to an animal: a set of rules, formed in response to its surroundings, that guides behavior by rewarding certain actions and punishing others. Deviation from this rule set is possible, in the same way that mutations occur in genetics, but it is limited by the constraints imposed by the available resources and geography.

Some states need grand strategy more than others. The necessity of making means-ends calculations frequently and accurately increases in proportion to the demands of the competitive environment in which the state finds itself. A Great Power that enjoys congenial geography or few looming threats has a greater margin of error for putting off the task of bringing order to the array of competing priorities in its foreign policy. True policies of drift—neglecting active diplomacy and military preparation—tend to be found, if at all, in maritime powers with a high degree of insulation from the constant pressure of geopolitics. Thus, nineteenth-century Britain was supposedly able to manage problems remotely through a combination of finance and naval supremacy—in Lord Salisbury's memorable phrase, to "float lazily downstream, occasionally putting out a diplomatic boat-hook to avoid collisions."<sup>29</sup> By contrast, Great Powers that face an imminent threat or possess a naturally weak basis for security have a pressing need to think about how they will match means to ends, and on that basis, set priorities for the state.<sup>30</sup> Vulnerable powers *need* strategy in its purest sense, as a set of stratagems or artifices to compensate for gaps in physical capabilities. For them, strategy is an offset or "substitute" (*Aushilfe*), in the words of the German general Helmuth von Moltke (1800–1891), or a supplement of knowledge and reasoning with which to replace missing aspects of physical power.<sup>31</sup> The greater the gap to be filled, the greater the need for strategy.<sup>32</sup>

## The Case for Habsburg Grand Strategy

This book argues that the Habsburg Empire engaged in the pursuit of grand strategy on all of the levels outlined above, and that the stratagems its leaders devised, more than the strength of their armies or charity of their neighbors, was the primary reason for its longevity as a Great Power. I make four main claims. First, I maintain that the Habsburg Monarchy's geography as an interstitial Great Power necessitated the pursuit of higher-level strategy, not as a means of enhancing territorial power, a dubious enterprise in Austria's case, but a prerequisite for existence altogether.<sup>33</sup> The sheer number of threats penalized reactive crisis management; "collisions," to use Salisbury's term, tended to seek out the boat. While geography did not determine the content of Austrian grand strategy, it did provide powerful cues, which if ignored, would lead to catastrophe. I contend that these cues were already present at the time of the Spanish succession war, but were obscured by the military successes of Prince Eugene of Savoy (1663–1736). The string of defeats following Eugene's death jolted Austria's rulers into the business of strategy, not as an act of wisdom, but as a necessity for survival. Uninterrupted warfare in the decades that followed ensured that the lessons, mind-sets, and formal structures needed to support this grand strategy did not evaporate but rather become ingrained components of the Habsburg Monarchy's DNA as a Great Power.

Second, I argue that the Habsburg Monarchy's internal makeup dictated the kinds of grand strategy that Austria could realistically expect to pursue. Specifically, the lack of abundant and effective offensive military tools, a function of the monarchy's financial constraints and internal composition, effectively ruled out the most obvious and efficacious means by which a land empire in Austria's position would have responded to the cues of its geography. That is not to say that the Habsburgs nursed a philosophical attachment to nonaggression; to the contrary, the dynasty had begun its tenancy of the lands between as frontier warlords, and war was written into the fabric of the Danubian empire from its infancy.<sup>34</sup> Instead, the claim here is that such military force as Austria had on offer, *even at its moments of highest resource mobilization*, was woefully inadequate to the task of achieving security for the state through military means. This central reality reinforced the impetus toward grand strategy as a tool to plug the gap between means and ends while guaranteeing that military force would inevitably be of secondary importance alongside other, nonmilitary tools in any strategies Austria pursued.

Third, from this combination of geographic and internal constraints, I argue that a coherent intellectual framework emerged that was primarily defensive in nature and preoccupied with conserving Austria's fragile position by avoiding tests of strength beyond its ability to bear. For all its vulnerabilities, the

Habsburg Monarchy did possess natural advantages—mountainous frontiers, a loyal army, and the spiritual superiority of Austria as a force for order and legitimacy in the European balance of power. While none was sufficient in itself to endow the monarchy with a basis for policies *de l'audace*, in tandem they provided a means of resisting the audacity of others. I hold that these three toolboxes—terrain, technology, and treaty rights—were employed by the Habsburgs, first on an ad hoc basis and then more synchronously, to bridge the gap between available means and foreseeable ends. Together, they comprised a framework or system of strategy unique to Austria among Europe's continental powers—the pieces of which worked interdependently to reinforce one another's effects.

While important aspects of this system would change over time, I trace three central themes of Habsburg strategy across the period covered by this book:

1. The maintenance of secure buffers around each of the monarchy's frontiers. Intermediary bodies in Germany, Italy, Poland, and the Balkans offset Austria's military vulnerability by interposing defensible spaces between its heartland and rivals while providing a medium—semi-independent client states—by which to extend Habsburg influence without the concomitant costs of formal empire.
2. The preservation of an army-in-being, supported by networks of frontier forts. Lacking in the offensive traits of other large land powers, Austria instead developed the army as a dynastic tool, loyal to the emperor and predominantly Catholic, whose main role was to stay alive and thus underwrite the existence of the monarchy. From this imperative emerged a general aversion to risk taking and the extensive use of props, including most notably terrain-based defensive tactics and fortifications, to achieve economy of force and make maximal use of the empire's internal lines of communication.
3. Allied coalitions. The sine qua non of Habsburg statecraft was a proactive and flexible diplomacy aimed at enmeshing both allies and would-be rivals into relieving the pressure on Austria's vulnerable position. Through confederations of weaker states, Austria sought the benefits of client armies and tutelary fortresses. Through defensive alliances, grouping coalitions, and appeasement, it tried to first channel and later transcend the balance of power in order to suppress attempts at hegemony and cultivate an independent European center under Habsburg leadership.

In employing these tools, I argue, fourth, that Habsburg grand strategy developed a preoccupation with the element of time in strategic competition.<sup>35</sup>

Coping with the danger of multifront war amid resource scarcity demanded the ability to achieve a concentration of force at a particular time and place without incurring unacceptably high risks on other frontiers. This in turn required Austria's leaders to devise tools for manipulating time on two levels—sequencing (which contests occur when) and duration (how long a contest lasts). I argue that the need to contemplate the time factor was muted during Austria's seventeenth-century wars against the Ottomans and French by Spanish help, and again during the early eighteenth century by Eugene's offensives, which allowed Austria to pursue a "radial" strategy of shifting attention from one theater to another.<sup>36</sup> Later wars spurred the development of more formal structures to deal with the problem, first on individual frontiers and then on an empire-wide basis. By manipulating the time dimension in strategy, Austria was able, for the most part successfully so, to alleviate the pressure of multifront war without incurring the full costs of *tous azimuts* defense preparation. When it lost the ability to strike this balance, through changes beyond its control, but also, crucially, by shifting to a more military-centric and offensive security policy that abnegated key tenets of its traditional grand strategy, Austria lost the ability to decisively influence time and suffered catastrophic defeats that sealed its fate as a Great Power.

## Evidence and Approach

The frame of this book is limited to Austria's life span as a stand-alone Great Power and the principle cockpit of Habsburg power in Europe between the loss of Spain at the beginning of the eighteenth century and the military loss to Prussia in 1866. The preceding period, in which the dynasty's interests encompassed a far broader array of issues including Spain and its overseas colonies, entailed qualitatively different grand strategic calculations and a much wider power base for Habsburg decision-making.<sup>37</sup> The period after 1866 and in particular the final years leading up to World War I, heavily covered by historians, were characterized by a degree of truncation in Habsburg power in Europe, through the loss of the monarchy's principle buffers and concomitant constraining of its grand strategic options, so severe as to call into question Austria's real independence as a strategic actor.<sup>38</sup>

In addressing the period between 1700 and 1866, my interest is in understanding how Habsburg leaders approached the task of grand strategy as well as the content of the strategies they pursued. Habsburg grand strategy was not written down in one place in the form of a single, unifying document. Extensive evidence of it nevertheless exists in documentary, institutional, and behavioral form. The ultimate bureaucratic empire, the Habsburg Monarchy was the forerunner of the modern state in producing paper trails of even the



most mundane aspects of power. Austrian military men wrote about strategy and warfare, developed maps to picture the monarchy as a defensive whole, and studied Austria's past wars to learn lessons about their own and enemies' behavior for future conflicts. Habsburg diplomats and monarchs conducted extensive correspondence and wrote memorandums outlining their thoughts on Austria's strategic options in both war and peacetime.

Habsburg grand strategy is also reflected in the institutions that Austria developed for conceiving of and implementing decisions about means and ends in both their conceptual and material dimensions.<sup>39</sup> These included a court war council with specialized roles to prepare for war on a standing basis, a professional and highly competent diplomatic corps, an intelligence bureau, and a general staff. As in modern bureaucratic states, influence over strategic decision-making was fluid in Habsburg Austria, floating between various governmental bodies and individual ministers from one emperor to the next. But to perhaps an even greater extent than today, the person of the emperor and his immediate circles formed a central locus of power that gave continuity of grand strategic perspective, if not necessarily policy priorities, from one generation to the next. Informing their deliberations was a coherent sense of mission as a Great Power, rooted in the monarchy's Catholic disposition and the dynasty's historic roles as emperors of the German Reich and guardians of Christendom against the Turks.

Finally, this book looks for evidence of Austrian strategy in the Habsburg military behavior and physical structures the monarchy left behind. The conduct of the Austrian Army in major wars shows considerable elements of similarity from the beginning of the period following Eugene's death until the beginning of the reign of Francis Joseph. Further evidence can be seen in the extensive fortifications that the Habsburgs built across their realm, eventually including more than twenty major fortresses and scores of smaller forts, towers, and blockhouses strewn across the empire's mountain passes, plains, and coastlines. An equivalent, in expense and symbolism of power, would be today's aircraft carriers. By their physical location and evolution, first on the Balkan frontier, then the Rhine, then Bohemia, then Italy, and finally Poland, we can see what the Habsburgs were most worried about, when and where.

## Purpose

In sifting through these various forms of evidence, my objective is not to expand our knowledge of the basic facts or chronologies of the Habsburg Monarchy. A large number of fine books exist on Habsburg Austria in both English and German.<sup>40</sup> Many provide a high degree of detail about its political

and economic development, the accomplishments and follies of its rulers, and theories about why it rose and fell. In German, a small but valuable literature exists on the subject of nineteenth-century Austrian military and strategic thinking.<sup>41</sup> As noted above, many excellent sources exist in English on the Habsburg Army and the empire's security and foreign policy at various moments in its history.

Instead of trying to replicate these approaches, this study seeks to examine the Habsburg state as a security actor in much the same way that one would look at the drivers and actions of a modern state. It is offered as a contribution to the growing literature on grand strategy, and seeks to highlight patterns and analyze them rather than merely chronicle and describe. The aim is not to contribute to knowledge of history *per se* but instead explore the application of history to the present. As such, the undertaking is explicitly didactic in nature: to gain a better understanding of how a now-dead Great Power succeeded and failed in navigating security challenges, and thus render insights for modern statecraft. It does not pretend that the Habsburgs were consistently wise or that historical analogies work in every instance. But nor does it view history as an impenetrable mass of facts or deny that the challenges confronted by states of the past are similar to those of the present.<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, the experiences of the Habsburgs are not as distant from the dilemmas of our own time as they may at first seem. The twenty-first-century West faces a twofold strategic problem of proliferating threats and constrained resources. Today's threats are multidirectional in nature and encompass an array of challengers, from religiously motivated radicals who wish to attack the West at its civilizational core to large industrialized powers determined to revise the existing balance of power to their advantage. In countering these dangers, the West is increasingly unable to rely on military predominance to sustain its primacy. Battlefield victory is becoming harder to attain, the nature of threats more nebulous, and the quest for short wars more elusive, in ways that call into question the applicability of the classic Clausewitzian model, with its emphasis on full national mobilization to achieve decisive results in war. Perhaps most important, the West increasingly finds that the security problems it faces cannot be defeated or solved outright; rather, they must be managed as open-ended pressures for which a satisfying solution is likely to remain elusive for the foreseeable future. This is a task for which the contemporary strategic mind-set is not well suited, requiring both an acceptance of limits and weary resolve that were the stamps of Habsburg statecraft.

In telling how the Habsburgs approached the task of strategic statecraft in their time, I am aware that many details of history will be overlooked. While writing the book, I have been forced, as a concession to space, to leave out significant aspects, personalities, and events that while interesting or impor-

tant in their own right, I judged to not add substantially to the central point of the text. The book is no doubt poorer for these omissions, but hopefully, what is lost in complexity and nuance will be gained in clarity of argument. As a rule, I have tried to be cognizant of important historiographical debates, make note of these in the footnotes, and where they bear on the main thesis, mention them in the text itself. But I have also kept in mind that this material is well covered elsewhere, and not the main aim or contribution of the text.

The book is divided into three sections. The first (chapters 2–4) examines the constraints on Habsburg power, both external and internal, and the effect that they had on Austrian thinking about strategy. Within this section, chapter 2 describes the monarchy’s physical environment, how it influenced Habsburg perceptions of space, and the vulnerabilities and advantages that it created in competition with other major powers. Chapter 3 looks at the constitutional makeup of the Habsburg state and limitations it placed on the mobilization of resources. And chapter 4 explores the outworkings of geography and administrative complexity on Habsburg conceptions of military force and political power more broadly.

The second section (chapters 5–7) assesses the evolution of Habsburg grand strategy on the level of individual frontiers. It is roughly chronological, reflecting the order in which major threats to the monarchy unfolded. Within this section, chapter 5 looks at the competition with the Ottoman Empire and Russia from the reconquest of Hungary to Joseph II’s (1741–90) final Turkish war. Chapter 6 examines the struggle with Prussia from Frederick the Great’s first invasion of Silesia to the stalemate of the War of the Bavarian Succession (1778–79). And chapter 7 traces the contest with France, from the wars of Louis XIV to the bitter life-or-death struggle with the revolution and Napoleon.

The third section (chapters 8–10) brings the frontiers together in a panoramic view of Habsburg grand strategy in the Metternichian and Francis Joseph eras. Within this section, chapter 8 examines Austria at its post-Napoleonic peak, assessing congress diplomacy and the pecuniary, forts-based system that undergirded it. Chapter 9 traces the breakdown of the Metternichian system from the time of the revolution of 1848 and Crimean War to the debilitating defeats by Italy in 1859 and Prussia in 1866. Finally, chapter 10 provides general reflections and an epilogue offers observations for geopolitics in our own time.

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