Europe's Rising East

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Predictions for much of Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) nearly two decades ago, when the Soviet bloc was disintegrating, were basically of two sorts. The "end of history" scenario envisioned rapid democratization and economic liberalism for the region as a whole. This, however, proved too optimistic a prognosis. The second scenario posited a "return of history," a reversion to perpetual ethnic conflict and interstate turmoil. But this ended up being too sweeping and pessimistic a forecast. Instead, the CEE has witnessed marked diversity, not only in the pace of domestic transformation and democratic consolidation, but also in differing approaches to national security and foreign policy.

Today, the Central Europeans, the Baltic states, and the countries of the eastern Balkans are almost all fully institutionalized Europeans, having attained both NATO and EU membership. But their responses to new security challenges, and their evolving roles in those two key international institutions, are all distinctly different. In fact, the CEE region no longer forms a unified bloc of states. Instead, a dividing line has emerged between the wider Baltic region and that of Central Europe.

The former, which includes Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, feels more vulnerable to pressures from Russia. As a result, it has become increasingly assertive in trying to focus EU policy eastwards, and has voiced greater commitment to the transatlantic relationship and a strong American role and pres-

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ence in Europe. These countries have attempted to mobilize support within the EU for a more effective "Eastern Dimension" that goes beyond the tentative European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) adopted so far by the EU, which keeps the former Soviet satellites at arm's length.

Regardless of partisan coloration, these governments are preoccupied with curtailing Russian expansionism. To this end, they have sought to engage more closely with the remaining Eastern European states that are most vulnerable to pressure from Moscow. They favor enlarging both NATO and the EU eastward. And they are adamant about keeping the U.S. closely engaged in European affairs, especially as a counterweight to an increasingly assertive Russia.

By contrast the latter, Central European, group—which includes Slovenia, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic—has adopted a more circumspect position in its "eastern" policy. Its governments are more focused on deepening EU integration and pursuing economic development. As a result, Central European priorities consist of minimizing defense spending, merging into the EU mainstream, and discarding any significant foreign policy ambitions of their own.

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Increasingly, each CEE capital carries out its own calculus, weighing specific national interests on a range of political, security, and economic issues with those of its neighbors, its regional partners, and the West European (WE) capitals, and gauging the impact on broader EU interests and on transatlantic relations. Those that see more immediate security threats in their neighborhood, or feel that the older EU capitals will not sufficiently defend the interests of new members, tend to be more Atlanticist. They view the U.S. as more capable of providing political and security assistance. Others, however, toe a more nuanced line, responding to domestic public sentiment that is not well disposed toward foreign military engagements or the perceived loss of national sovereignty.

The new shape of European security

Much like the rest of Europe, the CEE countries now face new security threats and complex foreign policy challenges, ranging from ethnic tensions and mass migration to organized crime, international terrorism, weapons proliferation, and energy insecurity. (Some also view the lack of political stability, state weakness, and insufficient international integration among their neighbors as latent security threats.) But in many respects, their most serious security challenge lies in devising cohesive and complementary policies that bridge the divisions between the U.S. and the EU.

In the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks, the U.S. has focused intensively on global security threats. The EU, by contrast, has been preoccupied closer to home, with its own institutional enlargement and integration. The results have been pronounced; the countries of the EU are increasingly ambivalent concerning what global role they should play on

the world stage, and at what cost. Not surprisingly, the Continent has seen a significant decline in support for strong American leadership in world affairs in recent years.

This does not mean that Europe does not have global ambitions. Far from it; many Europeans would very much like for the EU to develop into a major power largely independent of the United States. But, as a practical matter, very few are willing to increase defense spending in order to realize such a goal.

CEE countries have been deeply affected by this trend. Although most are, in the main, more pro-American and Atlanticist than their counterparts in Western Europe, public opinion and political positions have unmistakably begun to shift in a more Eurofocused direction.

Expanding continental institutions

Two forces—European accession and NATO enlargement—play a pivotal role in this regard. With regard to the former, the CEE states bring much to the table. Provided the accession process goes as planned, the coming years could see the emergence of a coherent set of new EU states that remain strong Atlanticists. This, in turn, will aid in Europe's transformation into a politically cohesive, economically competitive, and strategically vital region that can complement and work together with Washington to confront a long list of common challenges.

The EU remains a work in progress, however, and its final shape and structure cannot be easily predicted. A central debate in the CEE has revolved around the future of EU integration and the contours and content of the Union's emerging foreign and security policy. Some CEE capitals worry that their interests would be ignored by the larger WE states, a fear that has reinforced their Atlanticism. Not surprisingly, there is concern in many corners about the drive by some on the Continent to bypass NATO and duplicate its military structures through the development of autonomous military forces.

But this push for a separate and distinct European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) is not without its appeal. Even the staunchest Atlanticists in "New Europe," such as Poland, have increasingly begun to view ESDP as an opportunity of sorts, the chance to create a credible European pillar and prevent the renationalization of European security policy. The emerging EU defense structure has therefore been supported in Poland and other CEE states as a means of creating a more effective partner for the U.S. The central premise has been that the EU should acquire greater military power and cohesion in order to be able to cooperate more effectively with Washington. To this end, Warsaw has backed the creation of the post of EU foreign minister and endorsed the development of the Union's security strategy. It has also become more open to the idea of enhancing the EU's autonomous planning capacities and has supported the creation of a European planning cell at NATO Headquarters.

Officials do not see these initiatives as a duplication of NATO, but as a form of complementarity. The key, from the CEE perspective, is the development of a cohesive European foreign and security policy that supplements NATO, rather than competes with it.

None of this is to say that NATO has become irrelevant. To the contrary, NATO enlargement is seen

in the CEE as a practical method to reinvigorate the transatlantic link and create a larger pool of interoperable countries. NATO expansion has also given Washington additional voices of support within NATO's decision-making process. Nevertheless, whenever the American-European relationship has become troubled, the new Alliance members have found themselves caught between American and EU expectations.

The reduced role of NATO since 9/11 has been greeted with some concern in several CEE capitals, which fear that the organization may become lame and ineffective without American resolve. During the military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, it quickly became clear that the U.S. attached little value to collective Alliance decision-making. This led Polish and other officials to warn against NATO turning into a mere "toolbox" for the U.S. in its varied security missions—a development that would relegate the Alliance to the role of a reserve force for Washington, and eliminate it altogether as a serious security player.

Caught between missile defense and a hard place

Another contentious issue is that of missile defense. Over the past two years, Washington has gone public with plans to place components of its emerging missile defense system—designed to defend against possible attacks from Iran or other rogue states—on the territory of Poland and the Czech Republic. Under plans now being discussed among Washington, Warsaw and Prague, Poland would become the site of anti-missile interceptors, while the Czech Republic would house early warning radars.

Opposition to the initiative has emerged from all sides. Some neighboring EU states claim that the deployment of such defenses is unnecessary—and even provocative. Others contend that missile defenses for the Continent, if and when they are built, should be constructed with the consensus of all NATO states. Russia, meanwhile, has accused the United States of launching a new effort to neutralize its nuclear capabilities and to encircle it, and has placed growing pressure on Eastern Europe to back away from Washington's planned deployment.

The CEE states therefore find themselves caught in the middle of a new international confrontation. Both Warsaw and Prague seem to favor the U.S. missile defense system, calculating that it could entail stronger security guarantees from Washington. However, a prolonged period of negotiations lies ahead before radar sites will be deployed in the Czech Republic and missile batteries positioned in Poland. And in the meantime, rising public skepticism about the strategic utility of missile defense is visible in both countries, as is local concern over the international repercussions of their participation.

Russia, rising

As the foregoing suggests, the biggest challenge to Europe and transatlantic ties might just come from the east, where the past several years have seen the reemergence of an increasingly assertive—and belligerent—Russia.

Europe has struggled to formulate an appropriate approach toward this trend. The Baltic group has been at the forefront of those states that seek a more activist policy toward Moscow. Polish spokesmen believe that the Union should show greater concern over anti-democratic tenden-

cies in Russian politics. The Baltic governments also seek a more concerted NATO response to counter persistent provocations on the part of the Kremlin (such as violations of Baltic airspace and attempts to destabilize incumbent governments there). CEE capitals have been particularly concerned that Russia is seeking to create fractures in the EU by pursuing differing approaches toward the WE and the CEE countries and using its bilateral ties with the former to undermine the latter.

As of yet, however, no common EU strategy has emerged toward Russia. A contingent of older EU members, including France and Germany, has been apprehensive about provoking disruptive conflicts with Moscow and is willing to overlook both negative trends in Russia's domestic politics and Moscow's confrontational foreign policies. The priorities for Paris, Berlin, and Rome in particular have centered on guaranteed energy provisions, a growing Russian market for their exports, and foreign policies that do not create conflicts with Moscow. In their view Russian political stability, strong central control, and territorial integrity helps ensure European security regardless of the state of democracy within Russia and Moscow's relations with its immediate neighbors.

CEE states have not been so sanguine. They have watched with increasing trepidation as Moscow pursues a neo-imperialist policy toward several neighboring countries. Poland and the three Baltic countries in particular consider themselves frontline states facing growing security challenges to their east. None of these governments are supportive of Russia's membership in either the EU or NATO, and are suspicious about close organizational partnerships with Moscow. In response, they have tried to limit Russian dominance on a number of fronts, most prominent among them energy policy. CEE capitals have backed alternative supplies and routes for gas and oil from the Caspian Basin as a way of reducing dependence on Russia, and have vehemently opposed the construction of the new Nord Stream pipeline by Germany and Russia that would bypass Poland and the Baltic states.

Drawing the CEE closer

In theory, all of the countries geographically and politically defined as European states are candidates for EU membership. And all, apart from Belarus and Russia, view their accession to the EU as a strategic objective and priority. However, the EU has not yet set post-Soviet states such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia on an accession track through association agreements, as it has with the Western Balkan countries. Warsaw and other CEE capitals have pushed to have the status of these countries upgraded as a stepping-stone to eventual EU entry.

The European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), devised in 2003 as a "Wider Europe" concept, lays the groundwork for closer cooperation between the EU and its neighbors. EU leaders have underscored the importance of the ENP in promoting democratic reform, the rule of law, and institution building. They contend that in the economic arena the ENP helps to deepen trade relations, enhances financial and technical assistance, promotes participation in EU programs, and gives each country a link with the Union's internal market.

And yet, despite the ENP, the EU has displayed a reluctance to contemplate further enlargement. With the recent slowdown in EU economic

growth, political and public support for further institutional expansion has weakened. Paris, for instance, has announced that any future member would need to be approved by a French referendum—a decision that could delay or derail the accession of various states. The debate in several other EU states, meanwhile, has focused on the limits of EU expansion and a search for an acceptable definition of Europe's ultimate borders.

The European Parliament has been more outspoken. In March 2006, it endorsed a report recommending that all countries bidding for membership should be given a "European perspective," which would include a "privileged partnership" until entry is secured. Nonetheless, some CEE leaders see this as nothing more than a stall tactic on the part of an EU uncertain about their inclusion. And they worry about the creation of durable dividing lines between themselves and the rest of Eastern Europe, which they claim would seriously damage inter-state relations, undermine economic development, obstruct structural reform, encourage Russian revanchism, and unsettle a wider region.

Indeed, Poland and the Baltic countries have sought to generate a more intensive focus on Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and Georgia in both the EU and NATO. They are firm supporters of both NATO and EU expansion, and advocate greater efforts to provide embryonic democracies with a sufficient incentive and momentum to pursue extensive reforms to reach EU standards. Warsaw and several other CEE capitals, for their part, have asserted that the EU and NATO must provide a clear message of openness to new European members. Otherwise, the momentum for reform may expire and these vulnerable states will succumb to negative Russian influence and regional insecurity.

Moscow, meanwhile, has displayed a determination to undermine NATO, EU, and U.S. influence in what it considers to be its primary sphere of interest in the "post-Soviet space." It has accused a number of Western governments of undermining Russian national interests and plotting to stage a "colored revolution" in Russia itself along the Ukrainian and Georgian models.

A new role for "new Europe"

All of this should matter a great deal to Washington. American interests require dependable and predictable partners within the EU and NATO. Such allies would help prevent the EU from developing into a potentially hostile bloc that might oppose U.S. policies on several foreign policy fronts. It is therefore in the U.S. national interest to have a coherent and united set of European allies that can complement the projection of American political authority, economic strength, and military power.

The challenge for Washington is to transform the EU into a partner that complements U.S. strategic goals rather than obstructing or diverting from them. And here, the countries of the CEE are poised to play a pivotal role. In the new post-post-Cold War world, where Russia and the West now confront each other in numerous arenas, from the status of Kosovo and the missile defense shield to the future of the OSCE, the CEE states are both the objects of Russia's assertive policy and new tools by which Western nations can counter it—harnessing NATO and the EU in the process.