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Issue Paper

Exploring Topics of Interest to the Policy Community

MAY 1993

Extending the Western Alliance to East Central Europe

A New Strategy for NATO

Zalmay M. Khalilzad

Introduction

The fluid geopolitical landscape in East Central Europe poses a major challenge for U.S. security policy. The U.S. is confronted with the task of redefining its objectives in East Central Europe and formulating a strategy for achieving them. The stakes are high. If the U.S. and the NATO allies fail to preserve and build on the new order emerging in East Central Europe and Russia, they risk sacrificing the benefits of their Cold War victory. The immediate risk is that ethnic war will spread beyond Bosnia, but the equally dangerous, long-term risk is that an unstable security system will emerge in East Central Europe. This outcome could be brought about by an absence of external security guarantees, by nascent rivalries and suspicions, and by an imbalance in military power. The resulting instability could create a volatile situation that could directly endanger Western Europe.

At the same time, the sweeping changes in East Central Europe and Russia have undermined the Cold War rationale for NATO's existence. Without a new purpose, the transatlantic alliance is in danger of drifting

apart, especially because of the growing economic friction among members. The possibility of NATO's breakup raises the disturbing prospect of a renationalized security policy among the individual West European countries, including Germany, that could lead to arms races and conflict.

Besides focusing on Bosnia and saving Russian President Boris Yeltsin, the Clinton administration needs to develop a comprehensive vision for managing European security affairs as a whole. It can do so by responding to two urgent questions concerning security policy in Europe:

- How can the United States redefine and promote its interests in East Central Europe?
- What is the role of the United States in reorienting and revitalizing the transatlantic dimension of European security?

This paper proposes answers to these two questions. Moreover, it argues that the answers are interlinked. U.S. objectives in East Central Europe should focus on shoring up the newly democratized governments in the region and integrating them into a U.S.-led security

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arrangement. A comprehensive policy for achieving these objectives could constitute the mechanism by which a reinvigorated transatlantic alliance is achieved.

This proposal is likely to draw objections from those who fear that extending the Western Alliance will be perceived as a threat by Russia and will also risk entangling the United States in an unstable, conflict-torn region. This paper argues, however, that the United States and the Western Alliance must adopt a strategy that can include Russia in its future security arrangements. Concerns over East Central European instability are shortsighted. The United States must not behave like the ostrich: If we stick our heads in the sand, the problems in East Central Europe are likely to eventually consume us. Western Europe at the end of World War II presented far greater instability. Nonetheless, the United States successfully led an effort there to create a democratic zone of peace that has lasted nearly fifty years. An opportunity now exists to extend that zone to the nations of East Central Europe.

This paper focuses first on the importance of East Central Europe for the United States in the post-Cold War period; it then assesses the challenges the region faces; and finally it outlines measures that the United States should take to revitalize the Western Alliance and to build a U.S.-led collective security system in East Central Europe.

The United States' Stake in East Central Europe

During the Cold War, the United States treated East Central Europe as an extension of the Soviet empire. The United States condemned Soviet control of the region after World War II but never directly challenged that control. Now that the Cold War has ended, however, East Central Europe has emerged as an important region in its own right.

The Economic and Strategic Significance of East Central Europe

Democracy in East Central Europe is on trial. As the world's leading democratic power, we have a stake in its success. East Central Europe offers new and potentially expansive markets for U.S. goods, investments, and services. Some East Central European countries—such as Poland and Ukraine—because of their size, location, and potential economic and military capability, can have a significant impact on the balance of power in Europe.

East Central Europe is also important because developments there can dramatically affect two adjacent vital regions, Western Europe and Russia. The fate of Russian democracy and the prospects for Moscow's partnership with the United States can be decisively

influenced in East Central Europe. Strengthening the independent states along Russia's western periphery would provide important leverage in encouraging the development of a lasting nonimperial Russian policy and a market economy. The success of democracy and market economy in East Central Europe can facilitate Russia's economic, cultural, and political access to Western Europe.

Conversely, failure by East Central Europeans to consolidate their independence through the development of effective democratic governance, economic prosperity, and national security threatens Russia's political transformation. Instability or the emergence of a fascist regime in Kiev could aggravate concerns in Russia about ethnic compatriots living in Ukraine, thereby helping ultranationalists in the power struggle against nonimperial Russian democrats. A hard-line takeover in Moscow, combined with the rise of fascism in Ukraine, could end in a Ukrainian-Russian war and Russian attempts to reassert control. Already, fear of Russia has made Ukraine wary of relinquishing the strategic nuclear systems located on its territory.

Spillover Effects on Western Europe

East Central Europe figures prominently in Western Europe's security, economic well-being, and political stability. If East Central Europe becomes economically prosperous, Western Europe can have profitable trade and other economic relations with the region. Stable democracies in East Central Europe would provide a strategic buffer for the West if Russia were to take a regressive path and return to a hegemonic posture. Western and East Central European stability is becoming increasingly intertwined. For example, turmoil in East Central Europe could drive hundreds of thousands of refugees into Western Europe—challenging political stability in key countries, especially in Germany. Conflict in East Central Europe could also intensify rivalry among West Europeans because different powers might favor different players. These rivalries have already emerged in dealings with the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia: Germany, the Netherlands, and Austria favor confronting Serbia frontally and with military force, while France and especially Britain are reluctant to abandon their traditional positive relations with the Serbs.

There is also a great deal at stake for Western Europe in the current debate on nuclear weapons in Ukraine. If Ukraine retains its own nuclear weapons, this decision will intensify Ukrainian-Russian problems and could lead to pressure on the Polish government to acquire nuclear weapons of its own. Such a development, in turn, could have important implications for

Germany's nuclear status. Ukraine and several other East Central European countries can also help or hinder our nonproliferation objectives. These states possess weapon technologies and systems that countries hostile to the United States and the West undoubtedly seek to acquire.

Challenges Facing East Central European Security

The ability to overcome the political and economic hardships resulting from the communist legacy will be the principal determinant of whether East Central European nations consolidate their independence and become mature democracies. However, the East Central European democracies face many other challenges, as well.

Some, such as Moldova and Slovakia, are experiencing independence for the first time in this century. Even those that have known independence before are politically fragile. East Central Europe is fraught with ethnic and territorial disputes. Authoritarianism is lurking and could return if disillusionment with democratic regimes worsens.

In addition to these internal challenges, there are important regional dynamics and trends resulting from the end of the Cold War that will affect the future of the region. The most significant of these are discussed next.

The Evolution of Germany and Russia

Because of their location and power, Germany and Russia have traditionally played decisive roles in East Central European geopolitics. Their interests have produced both collision and collusion between them. Today, Germany and Russia are heavily preoccupied with domestic problems. However, it is only a matter of time before they exercise greater external influence than they do now in East Central Europe. And if security affairs are not managed properly, Russia and Germany could reemerge as bitter rivals, struggling over the lands between them. If that happens, Europe will be back to the worst of times. Above all, this is the outcome that U.S. policy should seek to avoid.

At present, it is particularly difficult to discern a clear Russian strategy for East Central Europe. The question is whether or not Russia can become a nonimperial European state. The answer will be determined by Russia's ongoing experiment with democracy. The consolidation of democracy in Russia and a Russian-Western partnership will increase the possibility that Russia will play a constructive role. However, a Weimar Russia would pose a great threat to the independence of East Central European countries and the prospects for democracy to succeed there.

German policy is also important. Despite the unexpectedly high economic and social costs of German unification, Germany is the largest investor in East Central Europe. Germany's efforts are commendable, but the economic challenges in East Central Europe are greater than any single European country can manage. Besides, given European rivalries and special sensitivities about Germany, German dominance in East Central Europe could become a source of concern to its Western neighbors, to East Central Europeans, and to Russians.

The Absence of a Security Structure

As the nations of East Central Europe struggle to consolidate their independence, they do so in a region devoid of any security structure capable of protecting them against threats from outside or inside the region.

While professing to have pan-European objectives, the West has yet to articulate a definitive concept of Europe's future security architecture. Different institutions, specifically NATO, the Western European Union (WEU), and the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), are competing with each other for primacy. Each has developed structures designed to include and assist the East Central Europeans. NATO established the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, which includes East Central Europeans and the new independent states that have emerged from the territory of the former Soviet Union. The same nations are all members of the CSCE. The WEU has a more differentiated approach. It is considering associate membership for Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and, perhaps, Slovakia. However, while all these institutions have articulated interest in peace and stability in East Central Europe, they have yet to define exactly what their commitments are to East Central Europeans. As a result, the existing security arrangements do not give Ukraine, Poland, and other states in the region adequate assurances that their safety and legitimate interests will be safeguarded.

Emerging Disillusionment with the West

The Western orientation of East Central Europeans has been the result of their need for economic modernization and the belief that the most immediate threat to their security comes from the East. However, East Central Europeans are becoming disillusioned with the West, an emerging change that has been signaled in various statements by prominent personalities in East Central Europe. For example, Poland's President Lech Walesa in a speech to the European Parliament in

Strasbourg in 1992 accused the West of abandoning Poland and the rest of East Central Europe.¹

All East Central European democracies feel shunned by NATO because of its refusal to accept them as members. The Ukrainians are more and more frustrated by the West's demand that they become a nonnuclear state, while the West simultaneously refuses to extend to them security guarantees. Hungarians are frustrated by the West's reluctance to address their ethnic grievances against their neighbors. Disillusionment with the West has been further heightened by Western reluctance to stop Serbian aggression in Bosnia. East Central European democrats fear that Serbian success will encourage similar developments in their region.

Reinvigorating the Transatlantic Alliance

Compounding the problem of Western inaction is the prospect of American disengagement from Western Europe. Reinvigorating the transatlantic partnership must be a critical U.S. concern for post-Cold War Europe. The partnership during the Cold War had two rationales: containing the Soviet Union and promoting democracy and prosperity among the Western industrial countries. The first objective is no longer relevant. The second one is relevant and vital, because without it, we are likely to see the renationalization of security policy among West Europeans, including Germany, which could lead to arms races and conflict.

There is a real danger that our relations with Western Europe could decay—especially if our economic relations worsen. East Central Europe's transition process, however, could play a substantial role in reinvigorating the transatlantic partnership. Reconceptualizing the partnership with the objective of stabilizing East Central Europe could give the alliance a new vigor and help preclude its erosion.

Such a reconceptualization would likely produce many other benefits. It could increase East Central European confidence in the United States and the West and help to stabilize the region. East Central Europeans, in general, are more pro-American and pro-NATO than many West Europeans. Most East Central Europeans regard the American presence in Europe as critical to their security and oppose the protective and "European-only" approaches of some West European nations, such as France. They endorse a strong role for NATO and want to join it because of its transatlantic character and proven capabilities. They want NATO to remain strong and relevant. So should the United States.

¹*Foreign Broadcasting Information Service—Eastern Europe and Ukraine, 92-030, 13 February 1992, pp. 13-14.*

Managing the Russian Factor

One of the chief concerns over extending the Western Alliance eastward is the fear that such an initiative would be perceived by Russia as a threat and an attempt to exclude it from Europe. In this view, the result could undermine reform in Russia by weakening the influence of the Western-oriented leaders such as President Yeltsin and Foreign Minister Kozyrev and strengthening the hands of the extreme nationalists and other anti-western groups whose relative power has been growing in recent months.

This argument, which assumes a zero-sum relationship in Western security relations with East Central Europe and good relations between East Central Europe and Russia, has a flawed assumption. Deepening ties between the West and East Central Europe should not result in weakening ties between East Central Europe and Russia. In fact, increased security could help reduce the fear and suspicion of Russia in East Central Europe that is on the rise because of the strengthening of expansionist forces in Russia. This fear of Russia is negatively affecting relations between the East Central European states and Russia and is the main reason why Ukraine is reluctant to give up its strategic nuclear weapons. Clearly, Moscow wants Ukraine to give up these systems. If the Ukrainians do not give them up, Russian-Ukrainian relations will worsen. On the other hand, increased security ties between Ukraine and the West could facilitate the denuclearization of Ukraine and would therefore serve Russian interests.

East Central Europeans recognize that the consolidation of democracy in Russia is in their interest. They also recognize that democratic Russia must be included as a full partner in European security issues. Some East Central Europeans have already taken steps to initiate contacts with Russia on military matters. Hungary, for example, recently signed an agreement that will enable its officers to receive training in Russian military academies and universities. The United States must encourage East Central Europeans to expand such contacts with Russia.

It is not necessarily true that closer ties between the West and East Central Europe would curtail Western relations with Russia. The same objectives of promoting democracy, economic reform, and integration into a U.S.-led collective security system that should guide our strategy towards East Central Europe must also apply toward Russia. In fact, we are already doing more with Russia on a number of security issues than we are with East Central Europe. The special relationship between the United States and Russia was recognized in the Washington Charter of 1992, which emphasized building a "partnership and friendship" based on shared

values and commitment to democracy. The charter commits the two countries to expand their political dialogue; to pursue closer cooperation in multilateral institutions; and to improve defense relationships by including military-to-military contacts, by expanding regional cooperation, and by countering proliferation and terrorism. All these measures will help to strengthen Russia's ties with the West.

The future of our security partnership with Moscow rests on the success of democracy in Russia. Our efforts to promote democratic and economic reform in East Central Europe would strengthen Russia's democratic forces. The collapse of democracy in East Central Europe or the rise of nationalist irredentism or paranoia in the region would harm prospects for Russian democrats and increase the geopolitical distance between Russia and Western Europe. Instability on Russia's western periphery, particularly that which resulted in increased discrimination against Russia's minorities, would only further strengthen the hand of the Russian ultra-nationalists, who do not want stronger security ties between the West and East Central Europe. It is possible that despite our best efforts—which we have not made so far—and independent of what we do in East Central Europe, democracy might fail in Russia, and Russian fascists or some other revanchist group might take charge. Extending the democratic zone of peace to East Central Europe can provide a strong hedge against that possibility.

Instability: A Surmountable Obstacle

A second concern over deepening U.S. and NATO involvement in East Central Europe has been that the West might become entangled in regional conflicts. East Central Europe is too unstable, says this argument, for workable security arrangements with the Western Alliance.

However, the United States has stabilized an unstable region before. We did it in Western Europe. At the time of NATO's establishment, the region faced many potential internal and regional conflicts. We helped build a stable political and economic order. We have coped with negative changes in NATO countries: military dictatorship in Greece and Turkey, the Turkish invasion of Cyprus, French withdrawal from NATO military command, and crises in U.S. relations with several member states. We can limit the potential risks resulting from our increased involvement by choosing the right approach. This approach should be tailored to allow differentiation among nations at different levels of political and economic development. It should be specifically designed to promote stability and then

expanded or reduced with respect to development in each individual state.

A U.S. Strategy for East Central Europe

In Western Europe and East Asia after World War II, the United States played an active and direct role in promoting military security and economic and political well-being. Today, the United States and other members of the Western alliance must play a similar role in East Central Europe. It is in their joint interest that the independence of the states of East Central Europe be consolidated and secured through integration into a U.S.-led system of collective security.

The United States needs a comprehensive strategy with political, economic, and security dimensions for East Central Europe, Ukraine, and Russia. The political and economic fronts should be emphasized. In addition to taking the lead in organizing a major and sustained effort to assist the East Central Europeans and Russians in their transformation to a market economy, the United States should press the European Economic Community to include the former Soviet bloc states in the EC by the end of the decade. Those at higher levels of development, such as Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, should be allowed to join sooner.

However, economic reform and democratization are unlikely to occur if countries in the region are isolated, feel threatened, or worse, are in a state of conflict. Moreover, foreign private investment will not flow into states threatened by instability and war. While military security alone will not promote economic and political reform in East Central Europe, it is a critical requirement for political stability and economic development. To promote stability and security, the United States and its allies should take two overlapping and mutually reinforcing initiatives: the gradual expansion and restructuring of NATO and the deepening of U.S. bilateral security ties with East Central Europeans.

NATO Initiatives

It is in the United States' interest for NATO to become the linchpin of post-Cold War European security. For NATO to perform this role, it must be transformed into an entity with a pan-European operational scope—providing full membership, including Article V guarantees, to East Central Europeans and to Russia once each state has a stable democratic polity and market economy. During the transition period, NATO must immediately enhance ties with those who have made strides in democratization

and establishing a market economy. The United States should also press NATO to do the following:

- Conduct military exercises with associate members, including exercises on their territories. This would strengthen members' self-confidence, familiarize them with Western practices, and facilitate future joint operations. (Such a development would also reduce the restrictions on NATO's training activities; for example, it would be an excellent way to overcome the low-level flying restrictions now complicating our training in Germany.)
- Operationalize NATO's peacekeeping role. Peacekeeping and peace enforcement will be primary responsibilities for any multilateral institution reaching out to East Central Europe. To prepare itself for this function in a way that would deepen its relationship with East Central Europe, the Alliance should: (a) pre-position equipment in East Central Europe—starting with Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic; (b) establish a NATO peacekeeping training and support center in East Central Europe; and (c) conduct peacekeeping and humanitarian relief exercises with Central European militaries.

In addition, the United States and its West European allies must review their current military drawdown, with the aim of developing the capability to conduct military operations in East Central Europe. History shows that it is hard for us to motivate our allies unless we lead the way. To encourage a concerted allied effort for developing appropriate strategies and military capabilities for East Central Europe, we might consider halting the drawdown of our forces from Europe at 125,000 personnel. Plans to reduce our presence in Europe to 100,000 or fewer are not informed by the concept proposed herein—a reinvigorated NATO expanding eastward to stabilize East Central Europe.

Expanded U.S. Bilateral Ties

The U.S. should begin to work on a bilateral basis with East Central European nations to develop armed forces whose size, equipment, and doctrine contribute to the security of the individual states and the stability of the region. Enhancing peacekeeping capabilities should receive special attention.

Conclusion

The dramatic changes in European geopolitics require that we develop a serious strategy to foster East Central European stability and to accelerate its integration into the Western community of nations. The strategy must be appropriate for promoting the objectives of institutionalizing democracy, building a free market system, and developing a U.S.-led collective security system for the region. Such a strategy would help to overcome the many problems that East Central Europe faces, would significantly revitalize the transatlantic dimension of European security, and would serve the interests of and appeal to the idealism of the American people.

Extending NATO eastward will not be without costs. A higher level of military capability, for example, will be required than if NATO did not extend eastward. However, these costs—which must be shared by Western allies—must be weighed against the costs of not providing protection for Eastern Europe, which include the possible nuclearization of Ukraine and increased instability in East Central Europe, with important consequences for Western Europe and for NATO.

Developing and implementing a strategy for stabilizing East Central Europe is one of the most important foreign policy challenges facing the Clinton administration. Although the new administration would prefer to focus on domestic revitalization, it would be making a serious mistake to ignore the dangers and the opportunities presented by East Central Europe.

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