ESSAY

Central European strategies in the new Cold War: between balancing and bandwagoning

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Abstract

This article argues that the security of Central Europe – defined as stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Black See–is based first and foremost on the viability and engagement of the Western alliance, understood as NATO and the European Union. The security and defense policies in the region are designed in relation to NATO and bilateral relations with the United States, with limited attempts to achieve some degree of self-sufficiency. Therefore, to understand the security of Central Europe and its individual nations, it is essential to understand their attitudes and fears related to alliances as well as their perceptions of Russia's intentions. It is posited here that the concept that can best explain the behavior of the nations of the region, allowing also for forecasting future behavior, is the balance of threat theory, as put forward by Stephen Walt. According to the theory, the nations facing threat chose to either *balance* the threatening power by joining forces with other actors and forming alliances or joining in with their predator, which constitutes a *bandwagoning* behavior. Historically, especially during the interwar period, these strategies have been employed by Central European nations. Today, the security environment is arguably very different–we have NATO, EU, and American engagement in the region. However, the international environment has deteriorated recently, especially since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Arguably, Central European states have responded by falling, to some extent, into patterns of behavior familiar from the past, with some clinging to closer relations with their external patron (the United States) and some hedging their bets and opting for relative neutrality or even closer relations with Russia. The article argues that four factors determine states' behavior vis-à-vis the Russian threat: geography, history, predator intentions, and the perception of allied reliability.

Keywords

Central Europe, Security, Defence, NATO, Russia, Ukraine, Alliances, Balancing, Bandwagoning

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Author roles: Zaborowski M: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Writing – Original Draft Preparation

Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information: The author(s) declared that no grants were involved in supporting this work.

How to cite this article:

For printed version: Zaborowski Marcin. "Central European strategies in the new Cold War: between balancing and bandwagoning". *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations* 60, (2024): 129–143. Printed 2024. https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17836.1.

For online version: Zaborowski M. **Central European strategies in the new Cold War: between balancing and bandwagoning.** Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations 2024, **4**:8 https://doi.org/10.12688/stomiedintrelat.17836.1

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine profoundly changed the security environment in Central Europe, especially in countries bordering Russia and Ukraine. As Western leaders are now admitting, a wholescale war with Russia is possible.[1] Should this dark scenario come through, it would mean that the Baltic States, Poland, and perhaps Finland could be directly confronted by war-waging Russia. These alarming circumstances are both new and familiar to Central Europe. They are new for those in the region that conceive of the world through the lens of the post-Cold War order. However, those in a region with a worldview influenced by the region's historical memory are accustomed to the notion of insecurity, predatory neighbors, and unreliable alliances.

More than three decades since the end of the Cold War, Central European states – defined here as stretching from the Baltic States and Poland in the north, through Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia in the centre to Bulgaria, and Romania in the South – have become established members of the North Atlantic Alliance, as well as the European Union. Over this period, the region has become more prosperous, and the standards of living have improved. Although some states have problems with democracy, all hold competitive and mostly free elections (Hungary is a partial outlier). It would seem, therefore, that the curse of Central Europe – a region crowded by weak states in which often malign foreign powers competed for influence and territory – finally ended. However, this changed on the 24th of February 2022 when Russia invaded Ukraine. The region is once again confronted with a war at its very doorstep, with millions of refugees pouring through the borders of states neighboring Ukraine and occasional missile debris falling across the NATO borders. A sense of insecurity has become acute across Central Europe.[2]

This article argues that the security of Central Europe today is based primarily on the viability and engagement of the Western alliance, understood as NATO and the European Union. The security and defense policies in the region are designed in relation to NATO and bilateral relations with the United States, with limited attempts to achieve some degree of self-sufficiency (with Poland being a partial exception here). Therefore, to understand the security of Central Europe and its individual nations, it is essential to understand their attitudes and fears related to alliances as well as their perceptions of Russia's intentions.

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[1] NATO's Strategic Concept adopted in the wake of the war at the Madrid summit in June 2022 identified Russia as its present threat and refocused the Alliance's tasks to prioritise defence and deterrence. See T. Tardy, "NATO's New Strategic Concept," NDC Research Paper no. 25, September, 2022. In March 2024 Poland's Prime Minister Donald Tusk stated that "war looms on Europe" as cited in "Politico," accessed July 19, 2024, https://www.politico.eu/article/polish-prime-minister-donald-tusk-warns-europe-pre-war-era/.

[2] I. Bill, W. Przybylski and M. Zaborowski, "Russian Invasion of Ukraine: How Nine Central and East European Countries will Respond," *Visegrad Insight Strategic Forecast*, February 4, 2022, https://visegradinsight.eu/new-report-russian-invasion-of-ukraine/.

It is posited here that the concept that can best explain the behavior of the nations of the region, allowing also for forecasting future behavior, is the balance of threat theory, as put forward by Stephen Walt.[3] According to the theory, the nations facing threat chose to either balance the threatening power by joining forces with other actors and forming alliances or joining in with their predator, which constitutes a bandwagoning behavior. Historically, especially during the interwar period, these strategies have been employed by Central European nations. When faced with the Nazi threat, some chose to align more closely with the Western Allies (France and the United Kingdom), while others opted to join Nazi Germany.

Today, the security environment is arguably very different–we have NATO, EU, and American engagement in the region. However, the international environment has deteriorated in recent decades, starting with the Russian annexation of Crimea and the subsequent full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Arguably, Central European states have responded by falling, to some extent, into patterns of behavior familiar from the past, with some clinging to closer relations with their external patron (the United States) and some hedging their bets and opting for relative neutrality or even closer relations with Russia.

The article argues that four factors determine states' behavior vis-à-vis the Russian threat: geography, history, predator intentions, and the perception of allied reliability.

Conceptualising central european security after the end of the cold war

International relations scholars' predictions regarding the fate of Central Europe after the end of the Cold War ranged between those who argued that Central Europe would return to instability and hypernationalism that marked it during the interwar period and those who argued that the region would succumb to the expansion of capitalism, which would make its international relations peaceful. Typical of the first school of thought was John Mearsheimer's argument, as put forward in his seminal essay 'Back to the Future'.[4] Mearsheimer's argument is typical of the neorealist school of thought, and as such, it was focused on international structure, which naturally changed in a radical manner following the end of the Cold War. Neorealists credited the Cold War bipolarity to provide Europe with the longest peace period in modern history and expected a considerable deterioration of European security resulting from the rise of multipolarity, which, as Mearsheimer argued, would inevitably set Europe on a course not dissimilar to the

[3] S.M. Walt, "Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power," *International Security* 9, no. 4 (Spring, 1985): 3–43.

[4] J.J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 1 (Summer, 1990): 5–56.

Soviet demise. With regard to Central Europe, Mearsheimer specifically referred to the interwar period and the 'multiplicity of conflicts' that dominated in the region as a reminder of what kind of international relations is to be expected from this part of the world. He also argued that Germany would acquire major power status, which would make it inevitable for Berlin to become a nuclear state and naturally seek to dominate Central Europe. In short, Mearsheimer argued that while the exact fate of Central Europe was to be determined, it was more likely that the region would become unstable and would be exporting this instability globally, just as it did before the outbreak of the first and second world wars.[5]

Others, such as Fukuyama, predicted a contradictory response: namely, the demise of nationalism, the triumph of liberal economics, and the growing role of international organizations.[6] Based on liberal internationalism, Fukuyama focused on the progressive liberalization of Central Europe and other transitioning states such as Russia as the key factor that determines their foreign policies. According to this model, economic liberalization and globalization would blunt nationalist developments in the region and around it, while governments' energies would be focused on increasing prosperity. As economic issues dominate international agendas, the role of international organizations, such as the EU, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, would be expanding with a mollifying impact on international relations.

Three decades after the Cold War, it is clear that Mearsheimer's predictions were too pessimistic. With the exception of violence in former Yugoslavia, which ceased in the 1990s, Central Europe has been remarkably peaceful, and Germany or other Western European powers sought to stabilize and not dominate the region. At the same time, however, Fukuyama's predictions proved too optimistic. While globalization undoubtedly expanded following the end of the Cold War, it did not produce the end of interstate conflicts and the triumph of internationalism. Zooming in Central Europe, it becomes apparent that nationalism is very much alive and, in fact, is on the rise in the region. Russia did not join the West, but under Putin's leadership, regrouped and returned to challenge the West. Importantly, Russia invaded Ukraine and has been increasingly active in Central Europe, often acting with belligerence, especially towards its direct neighbors.[7]

With regard to the security policies of the region's nations, the approach that is best suited to explain international relations in Central Europe is Stephen Walt's

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[5] More on the neorealist and other conceptual approaches towards European security: R. Zięba, *Instytucjonalizacja bezpieczeństwa europejskiego: koncepcje – struktury – funkcjonowanie* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 1999).

[6] F. Fukuyama, "The End of History and Last Man Standing," *The National Interest* no. 16 (Summer, 1989): 3–18.

[7] E. Lucas, "The Whole Story: Towards a Dynamic and Comprehensive Analysis of Russian Influence Operations," in *NATO at 70 and the Baltic States*, ed. M. Voyger (Tartu: Baltic Defence Collage, 2019), 223–235.

Balance of Threat Theory.[8] While the theory derives from the neorealist approach, it emphasizes the importance of threat perception and historical legacies, both of which are of fundamental importance in Central Europe. Walt's approach also emphasizes the importance of geographical proximity in influencing states' decisions to balance against or bandwagon with a potential predator. One vital element that is less pronounced in Walt's approach but is of essential importance for Central Europe is the assessment of allied reliability. It is argued here that this last factor would most likely determine what kind of policy vis-à-vis Russia's direct challenge would be pursued by Central Europeans.

Threat perceptions: weak states in an unstable environment

Since the late 18th Century, Central Europe has been the region where major European empires competed for influence. Shared between the Ottomans, Prussians, Russians, and Austrians, the Central European states disappeared from the maps of the world.

The demise of the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the 19th century undermined the delicate balance of power in the region, which eventually broke down in the early 20th century and perpetuated the outbreak of the First World War. It was in Central Europe, where the First World War started and where some of its major battles were fought.[9] Following the end of the war and the collapse of the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and German empires, a host of Central European nation states emerged. However, they were weak, unstable, divided among themselves, and sought alliances with external powers.

For much of the interwar period, France played the role of security patron for some countries in the region. Having organized a 'little entente' – consisting of Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia, as well as entering into bilateral security arrangements with Poland and France–wanted to prevent the re-emergence of powerful Germany and outflank it both from the west and east.[10]

However, as the revisionist Nazi party assumed power in Germany and went on to break the obligations regarding its military assets and troop presence in the Rhineland as imposed by the Treaty of Versailles, Central Europeans started to wonder about the merits of their alliance policies. The western appeasement policy and the abandonment of Czechoslovakia at Munich in 1938, led to the breakdown of the 'little entente,' which made several Central European states switch their alliances and join forces with the Nazis. Consequently, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania, as well as the newly created puppet Slovak and then Croatian states, became

[8] S.M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1987).

[9] N. Stone, *Hungary: A Short History* (London: Profile Books, 2020).

[10] P.S. Wandycz, *The Twilight of French Eastern Alliances, 1926–1936* (Princeton: Princeton Legacy Library, 1988).

Nazi allies.[11] At the other end of the spectrum were Czechs and Poles, who put their faith in the French and British security guarantees. During the Second World War, Central Europeans who had initially allied with the Nazis were changing sides several times. In other words, they were 'bandwagoning' with the Nazis or the Soviets in direct response to changing war fortunes.[12]

Following the end of the Second World War, all of these nations became part of the Soviet block or republics within the new Communist Yugoslavia. Consequently, all of them lost their sovereignty and ability to conduct autonomous foreign policies. Yet, at the end of the Cold War, they regained their sovereignty and some of them even their statehood, sometimes in violent circumstances, as is evident in the civil war that erupted in the former Yugoslavia.

All these states immediately sought to join NATO and the European Union, which they have done in various stages since 1999. After a heated internal debate and controversy about potential Russian reactions, NATO opened up to include Czechia, Hungary, and Poland in 1999; Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia in 2004; Croatia and Albania in 2009; Montenegro in 2017; and finally North Macedonia in 2020. The enlargement of the EU has proceeded slowly, and has so far included three stages: Czechia, Hungary, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia joining in 2004, Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, and Croatia in 2013.

The efforts to join Western institutions and distance themselves from their communist past constituted the core of the foreign and security policies of these nations during the first decades of their post-communist transformations. This period was marked by unity of purpose mixed with competition to achieve membership status.[13]

However, a quarter of a century has already passed since the early entrants Czechia, Hungary, and Poland joined NATO in 1999. In the meantime, the Western alliance was tested by the events of 9/11, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, the Russian annexation of Crimea, Donald Trump's Presidency in the United States, and the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022. These events and their transatlantic responses have exposed growing divergences in the approaches of the Central European states, with some becoming committed Atlanticists and some failing to invest in the alliance and flirting with increasingly belligerent Russia.

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[11] The Slovak State was created by the Nazis following the German take-over of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 and the Croatian Independent State was created in 1941 following the Italian-German invasion of Yugoslavia. Both were pro-Nazi puppet entities.

[12] R. Kaplan, *In Europe's Shadow: Two Cold Wars and a Thirty-Year Journey Through Romania and Beyond* (New York: Random House, 2016); B. Góralczyk, *Węgierski Syndrom: Trianon* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Dialog, 2020).

[13] G. Kolankiewicz, "Consensus and Competition in the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union," *International Affairs* 70 (July, 1994).

It is argued here that, for a variety of reasons, Central Europeans do not have the same perception of Russia's intentions and have therefore pursued divergent policies.

Geography, history and predator's intentions

Five countries in the region border directly with Russia: the three Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), Finland, and Poland. Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia border Ukraine but not Russia, and Bulgaria has no direct borders with either Russia or Ukraine; however, like Romania, it shares the Black Sea border with both. Czechia is a land-locked country with no direct border with either Russia or Ukraine.

Geography undoubtedly influences the perception of Russia and differentiates between the nations of the region. All five direct neighbors of Russia (Baltic States, Poland, and Finland) have had difficult relations with Moscow, which has increasingly communicated hostile intentions towards these states.[14] All five nations were subjected to Russian rule in the past, being deprived of their statehood, and subjected to policies of russification. They formed their political identity in large part through opposition to Russian rule. Each of these nations was engaged in a defensive war against Russia in the 20th century. Following the Ribbentrop-Molotov agreement between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, the three Baltic States were incorporated into the Soviet Union[15] together with about half of the pre-war Poland. Between 1939–1940 Finland successfully resisted the Soviet invasion, but it had to give up some of its Eastern territories (Karelia) and have its sovereignty reduced in line with the process known as 'Finlandization'.[16]

The other, south of Poland, part of Central Europe, has also had a history of exposure to the Russian threat, but considerably less than its northern neighbors. For example, for Slovakia, Russia did not represent an existential threat; in fact, on some occasions Moscow would even be seen as a historical ally. Until the creation of Czechoslovakia, the Slovak lands were under Hungarian domination, and as such, they were subject to the forceful policy of magyarization. The Slovak nationalists would often adopt imports from Russia Pan-Slavism and would come to see Russia as a fellow Slavic nation, which could rescue Slovaks from Hungarian oppression.[17] These pro-Russian sentiments were tamed by the experience of communism, especially the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact's 'friendly intervention' in

[14] M. Galeotti, "The Baltic States as Targets and Levers: The Role of the Region in Russian Strategy," *Marshall Centre Security Insights* no. 27 (April, 2019), https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/baltic-states-targets-and-levers-role-region-russian-strategy-0.

[15] A. Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States* (London: Palgrave, 2010).

[16] R.D. Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron* (USA: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2016), 26.

[17] J. Kuruc, "Slovak Perspective," in *Russian Invasion of Ukraine*, eds. Bill, Przybylski and Zaborowski (2022), 26–28.

Czechoslovakia in 1968. However, the Communists skilfully applied the 'divide and rule' formula to Czechoslovakia by granting Slovakia greater autonomy in the event of crashing the 1968 reform movement.[18]

The Soviet-led intervention of 1968 is therefore perceived differently between Czechs and Slovaks. For the Czechs, this was a war against Czechoslovakia and its liberal reforms.[19] Meanwhile, many Slovaks were not even aware of the developments in 1968, with one in three people under the age of 35 not having an opinion on the matter.[20] The consequences of these divergent approaches have created a major imprint on public opinion in both countries. Today's Slovakia is one of the most pro-Russian countries in the EU. In 2023, a minority of Slovaks (40%) held Russia responsible for the war in Ukraine, and 50% believed that the United States posed a threat to their country. The corresponding figures for Czechia are very different, with 71% of Czechs holding Russia responsible for invading Ukraine and 16% perceiving the US as a threat.[21]

Pro-Russian sentiments are also strong in Bulgaria and to a lesser extent in Hungary, although Budapest's policies are currently most pro-Russian in the EU. Bulgaria has historically been pro-Russian, as it benefited from Russia's support to regain its independence after centuries of Ottoman rule.[22] There are also a number of cultural affinities between the two nations that share the Orthodox religion, and the economic relations between them remained strong.[23] Consequently, two years into the war in Ukraine, only 34% of Bulgarians perceived Russia as a threat; in fact, the number is almost equal for the United States, with 33% assessing it as a threat. Before the war broke out in 2020, only 3% of Bulgarians saw Russia as a threat.[24]

Hungary has a more mixed history of relations with Russia, marked by the Soviet crushing of the anti-communist uprising in 1956, during which 2500 people were killed and 200 000 were forced to flee the country.[25] However, as in 1991, the last Soviet troops left Hungary and the country no longer borders the Soviet

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[18] S.J. Kirschbaum, *A History of Slovakia. The Struggle for Survival* (Second edition: New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2005).

[19] "The 1968 Invasion of Czechoslovakia," Radio Prague International, accessed March 30, 2024, https://english.radio.cz/it-still-impacts-czech-opinion-russia-1968-invasion-czechoslovakia-8759138.

[20] "Young Slovaks Lack Knowledge on the 1968 Occupation," *Spectator*, accessed April 2, 2024, https://spectator.sme.sk/c/22976567/young-slovaks-lack-knowledge-on-the-1968-occupation.html.

[21] *Globsec Trends 2023* (Globsec: Bratislava, 2023), 18, 19.

[22] S. Domaradzki, "Bulgarian Perspective," in *Russian Invasion of Ukraine*, eds. Bill, Przybylski and Zaborowski, 37–39.

[23] M. Samorukov, "The Balkan Cycle: Why Russo-Bulgarian Relations Are Growing Again," Carnegie Moscow Centre, accessed March 30, 2024, https://carnegie.ru/commentary/76440.

[24] *Globsec Trends 2023*, 37.

[25] Stone, *Hungary,* 198.

Union or Russia. The threat perception has evolved, although not as much as the policies of Victor Orban's government would suggest. Hungarian public opinion is under no illusion that Russia is responsible for invading Ukraine, with 54% supporting this view and 19% blaming Ukraine. Russia also tops the list of security threats to Hungary, at 48%.[26] However, while the public attitudes towards Russia are still pro-Western, the policies of Budapest are clearly anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian. While Victor Orban is probably out to sync with most of his compatriots on his closeness with Russia, anti-Ukrainian sentiments are not uncommon in Hungary because of its primary pro-occupation with the fate of the Magyar minority in the Trans-Carpathia area of Ukraine.[27]

Historically, Romania has had a difficult relationship with both Russia and Ukraine, largely motivated by the rivalry for the control of the Romanian-speaking Moldova, historically known as Bessarabia. Until the late 1930s Romania was a part of the French-led 'Little Entente' but following its collapse in the wake of the Munich agreement in 1938, it allied itself with Nazi Germany, even though, the provisions of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact envisaged that Bessarabia would fall under the Soviet control, which it did.[28] Incorporated into the Soviet Union, Bessarabia was split between the Ukrainian Socialist Republic and the newly created Moldavian Socialist Republic. Subsequent Romanian attempts to recapture Bessarabia in alliance with the Nazis brought no lasting solutions. Since the end of the Cold War, Romania has developed close and privileged relations with Moldova, where it competes for influence with Russia. Until recently, Romania also had an unregulated territorial dispute with the Ukraine.[29] This complicated past has also impacted Romanian attitudes towards the West and war in Ukraine. While Romanians are clearly very pro-Western – support for NATO membership stood at 89% – they are also somehow reluctant to support Ukraine, with 69% being of the view that Ukrainians receive support at the expense of Romania's own citizens. 64% of Romanians perceive Russia as a threat to their country, which places the country somewhere in the middle between the Russia-hawkish north and less concerned countries like Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Hungary.[30]

The role of the external patron

Besides the issues of geographical proximity and history of relations with Russia, the other factor that weighs heavily on Central Europeans' current geopolitical

[26] *Globsec Trends 2023*, 18, 19.

[27] A. Racz, "Hungarian Perspective," in *Russian Invasion of Ukraine,* eds. Bill, Przybylski and Zaborowski, 37–39.

[28] Kaplan, *In Europe's Shadow: Two Cold Wars*.

[29] R. Albu-Comăŋescu, "Romanian Perspective," in *Russian Invasion of Ukraine,* eds. I. Bill, W. Przybylski and Zaborowski, 33–36.

[30] *Globsec Trends 2023*, 18, 19, 37.

orientation is their perception of the reliability and engagement of their main security ally. During the interwar period, France performed this role with consequences that did not bode well to the security of Central Europeans. Currently, the role of the security patron in the region and in Europe is performed more broadly by the United States, which has been re-evaluating its level of commitment to transatlantic security since the beginning of the Western alliance.

Following the end of the Second World War and the onset of the Cold War, American statesmen and defense planners were grappling with the dilemma of the desirable level of America's engagement and responsibility for European security. The key question here was whether the US should do less to encourage its allies to do more and prevent 'free-riding' or should the US do more to prevent the neutralization of its NATO allies?

The delicate balance between these two positions was reflected in NATO's founding act and its provisions concerning mutual defense, as enshrined in Article 5.[31] While the allies were lobbying for the automaticity of America's engagement in the case of a territorial conflict in Europe, the US preferred and eventually pushed for a more watered-down form of commitment. Article 5 states, therefore, that 'an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all,' but it also says that an assisting ally would take 'such action as it deems necessary''.[32] Therefore, against a widely held belief that America's engagement on behalf of an attacked ally is set in stone and automatic, the letter of Article 5 does not actually stipulate automaticity or the character of response.

However, as the Cold War intensified and led to America's direct engagement in Korea and fears of Soviet direct intervention in Europe, especially in West Germany, the US administration decided to opt for an unqualified engagement to send a clear signal to Europeans and other allies. In 1953, a paper of National Security Council called "Basic National Security Policy" stated the principles of American approach towards the European allies in the following words: "If our allies were uncertain about our ability or will to counter Soviet aggression, they would be strongly tempted to adopt neutralist position".[33] This perception guided the US approach towards the allies practically throughout the Cold War period.

With the end of the Cold War and the perceived disappearance of the eastern threat, America applied a balanced approach to European security. On one hand, the US radically reduced its military presence from 300 000 troops in the 1980s to approximately 60 000 in 2020.[34] On the other hand, the US retained its commitment

[31] R. Kupiecki, *Siła i Solidarność. Strategia NATO 1949–1989* (Warszawa: Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, 2012).

[32] "NATO.2019. Collective Defence – Article 5," accessed March 30, 2024, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_110496.ht.

[33] S.M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1987), 3.

[34] R. Kugler, *The Future of US Military Presence in Europe* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1991).

to NATO and championed its alliance's expansion to Central Europe. The US also based some of its assets in Central Europe, including parts of its missile defence complex in Romania, Poland, and other smaller bases in Romania and Bulgaria.[35] However, these commitments were still seen as insufficient among the northern part of Central Europe, who were calling for credible deterrence, contingency planning, and more battle readiness.[36]

The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 was met with NATO's decisions to adopt a deterrence posture at the eastern flank of the alliance, including setting up multinational battalion-size battle groups (around 1500 each) in Poland and the Baltic States. The US became a framework nation for Poland, separately placing its 5th Corps Headquarters in Poznan Poland and contributing troops to battle groups in the Baltic States. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to the further strengthening of NATO's deterrence posture across Central Europe bordering Russia, Ukraine, Finland, and Sweden's application to join the alliance. Following the decisions taken at the Alliance's summit in Madrid, battle groups are growing to the brigade level (3000–4000 each) and have expanded the geographical scope of Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria.[37] The overall number of US troops in Europe also went up again to approximately 100 000 with Poland alone hosting 10 000 US troops and a logistical hub in Rzeszow by the border with Ukraine.[38]

Therefore, the international context of today's Central Europe is considerably more stable than it was during the interwar period, although it is undoubtedly threatening. The two most important elements of the divergence when compared with the interwar period are the existence of the Western security alliance in the form of NATO and the EU, as well as the material presence of American and other Allied troops and other defence assets in the region. However, America's long-term investment in transatlantic security has become increasingly questioned in the United States, especially on the Republican side of US politics. Should this tendency grow and affect US commitment to the defense of Europe, this would undoubtedly affect the strategic choices of Central European capitals, with some of them moving to neutral positions, as predicted in the US Security Strategy from 1953.[39]

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[35] D. Moldovan, P. Pantev and M. Rhodes, "Joint Task Force East and Shared Military Basing in Romania and Bulgaria," G.C. Marshall Occasional Paper, no. 21 (2009), https://www.marshallcenter.org/MCPUBLICWEB/mcdocs/files/College/F_Publications/occPapers/occ-paper_21-en.pdf.

[36] M. Zaborowski, "Eastern Enlargement and EU Defence Ambitions," *International Spectator* 55, no. 3 (September, 2020): 35–49.

[37] "NATO Presence in the East of the Alliance," accessed February 10, 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm.

[38] J. Garamone, "Biden Announces Changes in U.S. Force Posture in Europe," *DOD News*, June 29, 2022, https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3078087/biden-announces-changes-in-us-force-posture-in-europe/.

[39] Walt, "Alliance Formation," 3–43.

Foreign policy behaviour: what we can expect of central europeans

How would Central Europeans behave in the case of Russia's direct attack? The past can provide some clues, although contemporary and historical circumstances are never identical.

As argued here, during the interwar period, the security of many nations in the region was organized via alliances provided by France through the Little Entente (Czechoslovakia-Romania-Yugoslavia) and a bilateral alliance with Poland. Hungary was excluded from the system, as like Germany, it was seen as a revisionist power. Neither have the French security guarantees stretched to the Baltic States, who, however, have close security relationships with the UK.

The French-led system started to unravel in the 1930s and collapsed following the Munich Agreement in 1938, which led to the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia.

France's inability to live up to its security guarantees undoubtedly influenced the strategic choices made by practically all central European states, with some – Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria–choosing to join the Nazis. These states were later joined by the newly created pro-Nazi puppet states in Croatia and Slovakia. This was a classic example of bandwagoning. Meanwhile, Prague and Warsaw were choosing to balance the Nazi threat with Western alliances, but unsuccessfully.

As Walt argues, balancing represents a more frequent behavior than bandwagoning. However, most Central Europeans opted for bandwagoning in the late 1930s, suggesting that their options were severely limited. Walt argues that there are two fundamental reasons why vulnerable states would choose to join in with threatening power: survival is one and expectations of gains is another. By the late 1930s, the security situation in Central Europe was dire and highly unstable. revisionist Germany and Soviet Russia grew in power, Western Europe was self-absorbed, reeling from the economic crises, and desperate to avoid another war. The United States was locked into self-isolation. The Western betrayal of Czechoslovakia in Munich demonstrated to the Central Europeans that they were on their own. Under these circumstances, it is no wonder that the weak and vulnerable Central Europeans accommodated German approaches, especially when they came with the promise of some sort of gain.

Poland stood out in this context, as it did not bend under German demands and became the first nation to actively resist the Nazis.[40] A great deal of emotional mythology has been built around this choice, but there is no compelling reason to see Warsaw's resistance in other than rational terms. A month after Munich, Poland

[40] Although Poland took a limited part in the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia by retaking the disputed area of Trans-Olza/Zaolzie following the Munich agreement.

was presented by Germany with territorial demands, not an offer of potential gains.[41] The recent collapse of Czechoslovakia demonstrated that granting Nazis concessions was a path to the end of sovereignty and statehood. Therefore, Poland never really had the choice that Romania or Hungary had, and Warsaw was compelled to rely on Western security guarantees. Consequently, Poland moved to reaffirm its security alliance with France and signed a new alliance with the UK, both of which were completed in April 1939, a month after Germany reneged on the Munich Agreement, and moved to take over the remaining Czech lands and create a puppet Slovak state.[42]

This experience in the region shows that the states made their choices based on their perception of the predator's intentions, calculations of possible gains, and an assessment of the reliability of their defense alliance. The same elements would determine how Central Europeans would react in a hypothetical case of direct confrontation with revisionist Russia. The states in the first line of confrontation with Russia are their direct neighbors, the Baltic States, Poland, and Finland, which are most likely to resist. This is also reflected in their investment in defense – all of these states have been spending above the NATO-recommended 2% of GDP in building their own capabilities.[43] Poland and the Baltic States have called for a more robust multinational NATO presence in their territories. Finland is still reticent to host NATO troops or nuclear installations in its territory, but this is hardly surprising given that Finland abandoned the decades of its neutrality and joined NATO only in April 2023.[44]

As for other Central Europeans, the perceptions of Russian intentions are more mixed, as argued here. The Bulgarians and Slovaks have a much more muted sense of Russian threat, with very large sections of their populations being actually more anti-Western than afraid of Russia. Hungarians do not really stand out from the European mainstream in their perception of Russia, but their government is the most pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian in the EU. In addition, Vladimir Putin has been tempting Hungary with the possibility of territorial revision in Ukraine. Consequently, the possibility of some potential gains, a powerful argument in Hungary since Trianon, may be entering the minds of those who decide in Budapest on the

[41] R. Moorhouse, *The First to Fight: The Polish War of 1939* (Bodley Head, 2020).

[42] N. Davis, *Heart of Europe. The Past in Poland's Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, New Edition, 2001), 111–113; G. Sakwa, "The Franco-Polish Alliance and the Remilitarization of the Rhineland," *The Historical Journal* 16, no. 1 (1973): 125–146.

[43] "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2023)," accessed February 10, 2024, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2023/7/pdf/230707-def-exp-2023-en.pdf.

[44] P. Vanttinen, "Finns Divided over NATO Bases, Oppose Nukes: Survey," *Euronews,* July 7, 2023, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/finns-divided-over-nato-bases-oppose-nukes-survey.

country's strategic choices.[45] It seems that these three nations are most likely to occupy more neutral positions in the scenario foreseeing the expansion of the Russian threat. Although Romania does not share a direct border with Russia, the country is Russia-weary and clearly pro-Western. The same is true for the Czech Republic, which, although more remote from war theatre, has taken a strong pro-Ukrainian line from the onset of the Russian full-scale invasion.[46]

This quick run of Central European positions regarding Russia and nations' trust in Western alliances suggests that the region is divided in its threat perception and likely responses vis-à-vis a still potential predator. Walt's theory neatly illustrates the behavior of Central European states in the late 1930s. However, today's circumstances are very different, as previously mentioned. It is still very unlikely that any of the Central Europeans would actually bandwagon with a NATO-invading Russia. However, it is possible that a host of pro-Russian states such as Bulgaria, Hungary, and Slovakia would refrain from engaging in defending the NATO territory and, in effect, moving towards neutral positions.[47] Given these states' lukewarm attitude towards NATO and ambivalent views on Russia, it seems that their course of action would be mostly based on their assessment of the reliability of the Western alliance and the level of engagement of the United States, the region's security patron.

Conclusion

Following the end of the Cold War, Central European nations recovered their sovereignty and independence, with some of them (the former Yugoslav Republics) becoming even nation states for the first time in their history. Until Russia invaded Ukraine, the region mostly had a rare window of relative peace and stability. It is not to say that these three decades have been easy for the nations of the region. Post-communist transitions have been painful with all nations in the region initially plunging into economic recession. Yugoslavia split violently through civil wars in the 1990s. However, after years of painful transitions, Central European economies grew, and their borders were secure.

None of this would be possible without a major improvement in the security environment in Central Europe, which rests almost entirely on the resilience of the transatlantic alliance and success of European integration. Central Europe remains home to small nations (with partial exceptions of Poland and Romania), which are unable to provide for their own security. This means that the security and defense of these nations are almost entirely reliant on their allies.

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[45] Góralczyk, *Węgierski Syndrom,* 10–35.

[46] P. Havlicek, "Czech Perspective," in *Russian Invasion of Ukraine,* eds. Bill, Przybylski and Zaborowski (2022), 23–25.

[47] T. Tsolova, "Bulgarian Vote Shows Russia Winning Hearts on EU's Eastern Flank," *Reuters World News*, November 11, 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/world/bulgarian-vote-shows-russia-winning-hearts-on-eus-eastern-flank-idUSKBN13611E/.

Although the security environment of Central Europe is very different from that during the interwar period, there is an element of continuity as far as reliance on allies is concerned. During the interwar period, Central Europeans responded to the threat posed by Nazi Germany through balancing or bandwagoning. Today, while the nations of the region are not directly threatened by Russia, history suggests that, in the case of Russia's success in Ukraine, a direct threat to Russia's Central European neighbors would follow. Russia's direct neighbors in the northern part of the eastern flank are reacting to this threat by boosting their defence capabilities, investing in defence, seeking stronger engagement of the alliance, and closer security ties with the United States. The emphasis in this group was clearly on boosting self-reliance and balancing Russia.

Central European nations that are more remote from Russia do not share this perspective; they reluctantly invest in the alliance and are often slower in investing in their own security. As discussed here, some of these nations, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and to a lesser extent Hungary, have often pro-Russian public opinion.

Why do any of these matters? There are historical and contemporary reasons that suggest that what happens to security in Central Europe will sooner or later have broader ramifications. The First and Second World Wars began in Central Europe. In both instances, the question of alliances and threat perception of hostile powers proved to be fundamental to the outbreak of the war dragging the rest of Europe and indeed much of the world into conflict. Today, while Europe is undeniably safer and more secure than during the interwar period, it is also increasingly challenged both in the South and in the East by Russia, with the latter threat being of more direct relevance for Central Europe. Should Russian belligerence grow and expand to Central Europe, the Western alliance will be tested again. Nevertheless, Central European nations are preparing differently for such scenarios.

Data availability statement

No data are associated with this article.