



Small States and Geopolitical Change: The Case of the Czech Republic

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Introduction

For the past 25 years, the small states of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have not needed militaries. Not really. For that matter, they have not needed security policies much at all—at least, not in the way that small states throughout history have needed them, as tools to guard the state against coercion, invasion or extinction at the hands of stronger actors. That is not to say that they have not had such policies, just that they were not essential to the survival of the state. CEE states needed active security policies to gain entry into, first, NATO and then the European Union (EU). Afterward, many of them found their small but largely ineffectual militaries useful for helping the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan. But for the most part, their relationship with “hard power” has come to look more and more like the EU mainstream. For these states, including the Czech Republic, the military is an anachronism: something to be retained, but no longer necessary.

CEE states have not needed security policies because their environment has not required it. For most of the post-Cold War period, Russia was militarily weak, the United States provided basic security against whatever threat might emerge, and the EU seemed poised to offer a “reinsurance” policy of economic security and someday, so it was thought, possibly military security as well. This environment allowed CEE states, including the Czech Republic, to safely and consistently

under-invest in their own security. Vulnerable states like Poland and Estonia invested more, but even they were spared the exertions required during less stable periods of the region's history. CEE therefore became an anomaly among the world's frontier regions: unlike small-state U.S. allies in the Asia-Pacific region or the Middle East, CEE states seemingly could safely neglect their own security without any negative geopolitical consequences to themselves or anyone else.

That period ended with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Whether they realize it or not, CEE states now face a fundamentally altered strategic environment that will never again—or at least, not for a very long time—be as benign as it was for most of the post-Cold War milieu. Russia is poised to remain a creative and predatory territory-gobbling actor, not only towards states of the former Soviet Union but possibly towards some CEE member states of NATO. At the same time, America's position as a European power is more tenuous than ever; even with the insertion of new “tripwires” or the attentions of a new administration, the U.S. extended deterrent that secured CEE in the past will have less and less utility against the “limited war” techniques emanating from the east. And the EU, despite recent advances in economic governance, is unlikely to provide either the geopolitical solidarity or military ability that CEE states would need to fill the gap left by the United States.



In such an environment, CEE states will have to rethink their relationship with hard power. For the first time in decades, they will actually need security policies at the national level—policies that embrace traditional concepts of force and strategy that run counter to these states' self-images as post-modern EU member states. For the Ukraine crisis is a reminder that the EU system is dependent for its continuation on benign surroundings that were made possible by hard power. As outside sources of security grow less reliable and Russia's destabilizing tendencies become more apparent, even insulated CEE states like the Czech Republic will have to invest more in regional security if they want to retain the conditions that have allowed them to succeed economically and politically for the past 25 years. They will have to embrace mindsets in security that they were able to avoid previously, thinking more like U.S. allies in other frontier regions and less like the EU mainstream. Some are better prepared for this transition than others.

I. The Anomaly of Central Europe

Today's CEE states have not taken security seriously because they have not had to do so. The temperate conditions of the post-Cold War world have spared them from the dilemmas that usually face small states with their same geography. Historically, when confronted with a threatening power (and CEE history has provided many of these through the centuries), these states have had to either arm against it or side with it—in the academic jargon, to

“balance” or “bandwagon.”¹ States that chose the former approach looked for ways to make themselves hard to conquer, usually by investing in a capable army and building defensive alliances. States that took the latter approach looked for ways to obviate the need for an army by investing in various stratagems—keeping a low profile, taking neutral positions that reduce the risk of being a target, or even openly accommodating the threatening state—on the calculation that, given their small size, an attempt at resistance would be futile.

This small-state dilemma is both a practical and a moral one, and has been especially severe at moments of confrontation between larger states. The small states of CEE have repeatedly faced the balance-or-bandwagon dilemma, often with lasting consequences for their survival. In the Interwar period, for example, Poland famously chose to balance against German revisionism, while Hungary, Bulgaria and others chose to accommodate it. Despite much subsequent criticism of its surrender of territory at the Munich Conference, the Czech Republic actually chose to balance against Germany for most of the Interwar period through a combination of military self-help (a strong army and defensive lines) and alliances.² Ultimately, all of these

efforts ended with the same result: invasion, occupation and extinction of the previous independent polity. The only practical difference in outcomes was the order in which these events occurred, whether early or late in the war. Czech general Jan Syrový summed up the tragedy facing CEE small states when he said in 1938 that, “we have run with the angels; now we shall hunt with the wolves.”

Today's CEE states have been spared these dilemmas by three factors. First, they have lacked an outside military threat. The pacification of post-WWII Germany and enervation of post-Cold War Russia removed the traditional predators of the CEE ecosystem. Not since the days of the Habsburg Empire have the Czechs lacked an immediate threat from outside their region; not since the 17th century has Poland lacked a continental rival on either its eastern or western borders. The result has been a permissive strategic environment in which CEE states could largely forget about war in the traditional sense. Second, CEE states have enjoyed the protection of a strong external patron: the United States. By expanding NATO to encompass the former Warsaw Pact, the United States effectively sealed off the CEE region as an area of military and territorial competition for the first time since the liquidation of the early 20th century empires.³ Third, within the context provided by NATO, the eastern enlargement of the European project provided

¹ For an extended discussion of these options in the CEE historical context, see Stephen Borsody, *The Tragedy of Central Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) and Wess Mitchell, *The Mice that Roared: How Small Powers are Responding to and Shaping the Global Power Transition* (Washington, D.C.: CEPA, 2007).

² For a discussion of the unheralded successes of Interwar Czech strategy, see Robert L. Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 221–236.

³ For a discussion of America's historically unique role in CEE, see Ronald D. Asmus and Alexandr Vondra, “The Origins of Atlanticism in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 18, no. 2 (July 2005).



a template for economic security and political stability that made Central Europe's return to Europe as much a civilizational as a geopolitical reality. Unlike the regional Saison-states of the Interwar period, this appeared to give today's CEE states not one, but two geopolitical insurance policies.

Together, these factors suspended the normal laws of geopolitical physics for the CEE region, allowing states to avoid the difficult strategic choices that their position would normally require. With such conditions in place, small states like the Czech Republic could avoid both the hard-power investments required for effective balancing and the complex diplomatic maneuvering necessary to pursue bandwagoning. In such an environment, it did not really matter if a state invested in a good or bad security policy because a larger force (NATO) was absorbing the full burden of balancing on its behalf. Not only did this allow other public goods to be prioritized over defense; it also had the effect of making the region appear more "Atlanticist" than it actually was, obscuring underlying tendencies in the histories or cultures of some CEE states to prefer not to balance against a threat, if forced to choose. It allowed CEE states to underperform on security, and more broadly on strategy, without the penalties that their geography would normally impose for such laxness.

All of this set modern CEEs and their relationship with hard power apart, not only from the experiences of their own history, but from the experiences of small states that occupy frontier regions in contempo-

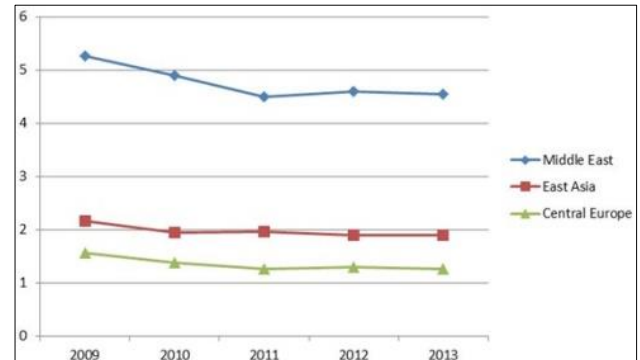
rary global geopolitics.⁴ The small littoral and archipelagic U.S. allies of East Asia, for example, have had to develop stronger defenses to counter the economic rise and military assertiveness of China.⁵ In the Middle East, small U.S. allies like Israel and the moderate Gulf States have had to develop strategies for containing an increasingly aggressive Iran. As in CEE, small U.S. allies in these regions sit next door to a reactivating revisionist power and increasingly doubt the strategic commitment of the United States. But thanks to the special features of the CEE geopolitical environment, states here have for most of the last two decades been spared the strategic dilemmas facing states in these other hinge-point regions. The differences are most noticeable in the area of defense spending where CEE states have been consistently lower than their frontier counterparts [See Figure 1]. Where Taiwan and South Korea spend 2.3 and 2.8 percent of their GDP on defense respectively, and Israel and Saudi Arabia spend 6.2 and 9.3 percent respectively, the Czech Republic and its small neighbors have hovered at or around 1 percent for the last several years (well below the global average of 2.5 percent).⁶

⁴ See for example, A. Wess Mitchell and Jakub Grygiel, "The Vulnerability of Peripheries," *The American Interest*, Spring 2011.

⁵ Sam Nussey, "Tension fuels arms race in East Asia," *Nikkei Asian Review*, February 13, 2014.

⁶ The average for Czech defense spending since the Cold War is 1.8 percent, compared to around 5 percent in the Communist period, when

Figure 1. Average regional military expenditures as percentage of gross domestic product (2009–2013)



Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Military Expenditure Database 2013 (http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database).

A small subset of CEE states—Poland, Estonia and to a lesser extent Romania—have bucked the wider trend and maintained vigilance in national security through the quiet spells of the post-Cold War period. They share the common features of having exceptionally exposed geography, a history of invasion from Russia, subjection to frequent Russian threats and blackmail, and concerns about the long-term support of the United States. Their fears of renewed Russian predation were first validated by the invasion of Georgia, which prompted Poland and Estonia in particular to make greater investments in military self-help. But for the rest of the region—the Visegrád "Core" (Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary), Slovenia, Bulgaria, Latvia and Lithuania—the thought of a military threat from Russia has seemed remote enough to justify less seriousness about hard power, not

Czechoslovakia was the third-largest spender among Warsaw Pact CEE states.



only financially but culturally. For these states, the decision not to invest in security was logical. Not only did it not matter for the preservation of the state, since there appeared to be nothing threatening the existence of the state, but it did not matter in other ways as well:

- **It did not matter to voters at home**, because public money seemed better invested on social priorities, especially following the Eurozone crisis.
- **It did not matter to their more vulnerable CEE neighbors**, because they too were reliant on NATO and (in many cases) also underspending. Without an imminent threat, the fact that, say, Slovakia “cheated” on NATO spending rules did not seem to make Poland any less safe.
- **It did not matter for political ties with CEE neighbors**, because in the absence of an external prompt to elevate security above other policy considerations, underlying divergences in threat perception did not get in the way of agreement on practical issues, thereby enabling, for example, Visegrád coordination in the EU.
- **It did not matter economically**, because the region’s status as a “safe haven” among emerging markets had already been secured as a result of the benign geopolitical conditions created by NATO enlargement and Russian weakness. If anything, there was an economic incentive for some CEE states to spend less on defense in order to comply with EU norms, keep deficits low and speed up entry into the eurozone.

- **It did not matter in the relationship with Washington**, because in spite of occasional U.S. complaints, CEE states could reasonably claim that they were no different in their unserious approach to defense than the rest of the EU. Besides, the United States itself was in any case also downscaling its military presence in Europe—again, because there was no threat.
- **It did not matter in the relationship with Russia**, because without a military capable of acting on its occasionally articulated revisionist intentions, there was little danger that Moscow might see military weakness among CEE states as an invitation to geopolitical adventure. If anything, taking a softer line on security might bring positive results by allowing for closer financial linkages at the commercial, energy and (for individual CEE leaders) personal levels.

In short, it has “paid” for most CEE states to neglect security for the past 25 years. There was no force internally or externally that would impose costs (whether economic, strategic or political) for such behavior. Unlike in other global frontier regions, or even in their own history, CEE states faced no penalties and quite a lot of rewards (political votes, revenue for other priorities, lack of negative attention from Russia, etc.) for devoting little national attention to their own security. Over time, this created a natural incentive structure for leaders and publics in these states to behave like the rest of the EU—as a collection of countries that had been released

from the constraints of geopolitics. And for the most part, they were right.

II. What Ukraine Changed

Then came the Ukraine crisis. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has fundamentally, and perhaps permanently, altered the strategic environment in which states have become accustomed to operating since the end of the Cold War. Events in Ukraine have cast doubts on all three components—Russian quiescence, U.S. protection and EU backstopping—that comprised the foundation of post-Cold War Czech and CEE foreign and security policy. While many of these trends have existed for a while, the Ukraine crisis ratified and amplified them in ways that demonstrate changes in the capabilities and intentions of the main external actor and which reorders their strategic environment. These changes have reintroduced the small-state security dilemma for CEE states while weakening (though not destroying) the key elements that had previously mitigated this dilemma. Over time, they will make it harder for even the region’s most insulated states to continue neglecting security without incurring costs to themselves and their neighbors.

First and most importantly, the crisis has underscored the reality of Russia’s resurrection as a militarily active revisionist power. Compared to its attack on Georgia in 2008, the war in Ukraine suggests a significant upward adjustment in the level of risk that Russia is willing to incur in order to forcibly modify the surrounding geopolitics to its benefit. Unlike Georgia, a remote



country in the Caucasus with little direct military value, Ukraine is the largest and most strategically important country in Eastern Europe. The Russian invasion directly challenged the legal and territorial underpinnings of the post-1989 European security order. Depending on how hostilities play out, the crisis will alter the military geography of the CEE region by placing large Russian troop formations along the central axis linking the northern and southern flanks of the region. With similar pretexts for Russian action across Europe's eastern periphery, it is not unreasonable to assume that Moscow could someday attack other states in the eastern neighborhood or even inside NATO itself.

Moreover, the war in Ukraine suggests something new about Russian military capabilities. While we have known for some time that Russia has the intention to be a revisionist power, the Ukraine war has shown that it is able to act on such intentions on a relatively large scale and prolonged timetable. Unlike Russian military forces in the Georgia War, which were sloppy and poorly equipped, Russian forces in Crimea showed significant advances in training, tactics and military gear. As Russia's decade-long, \$700 billion military modernization process accelerates, it is safe to assume that its capacity to conduct similar small wars in the post-Soviet periphery will increase. As importantly, the crisis has shown that Russia is more capable of military-strategic adaptation than was commonly assumed. With its use of small units to achieve limited political objectives that create

a territorial fait accompli, the invasion of Crimea marked the reintroduction of so-called limited-war techniques that have been virtually extinct in large-power competition since the height of the Cold War.⁷ These changes will make Russia a more active and capable opponent than the Alliance is accustomed to facing in the eastern neighborhood.

Second, the Russia-Ukraine war has exposed significant fissures between the U.S.'s, and by extension NATO's, abilities and the type of defense necessary in the post-Cold War world. Doubts among CEE states about America's long-term staying power as a security actor in Europe are nothing new. What is new is the question of whether the United States would be able to effectively confront the new forms of Russian military activity in the region even if it wanted to. That is not to say that the United States and NATO would be incapable of defeating Russia in a conventional military contest—by any measure, they could. But the limited war techniques used by Russia in Ukraine suggest that the West could lose such a confrontation in its early stages before ever even being able to bring its greater military size to bear. The use of "jab-and-grab" tactics to accomplish limited political objectives represents a form of warfare well below the threshold that U.S. extended deterrence was designed to thwart.⁸

⁷ Jakub Grygiel and Wess Mitchell, "The Return of Limited War: The Case for a Preclusive Strategy in NATO," *The National Interest*, Summer 2014.

⁸ For a broader discussion, see "The decline of deterrence: America is no longer as alarming to its foes or reassuring to its friends," *The Econo-*

As a result of these trends, CEE states will not be able to count on either the continued military inactivity of Russia or the inherent effectiveness of the U.S. security umbrella as a military antidote to Russian military excursions into their own region. Moreover, because NATO's traditional defense-in-depth strategy (leaving frontline territory undefended until a crisis begins) will not work against limited war, the Alliance will need a preclusive defense in which it is able to protect itself in-theater with sufficient local assets to win in the opening phase of a conflict. This will require CEE states to be able to conduct an effective defense of their own region, which has again become the frontline. While still relying on NATO for large problems, even the region's smallest states will have to possess sufficient means for local defense to discourage Crimea-style moves and buy allied forces time to respond. In short, it will require all CEE states to think more seriously and creatively about security than they have had to do since the Cold War.

Learners and Laggards

Some CEE states have noticed these changes and are responding to them. For exposed states like Poland, the Baltic States and Romania, the potential costs of military inaction in the face of Russian aggression in Ukraine are obvious. Previously it was only Poland and Estonia who spent at or near 2 percent, but that is changing as other states in the region adapt

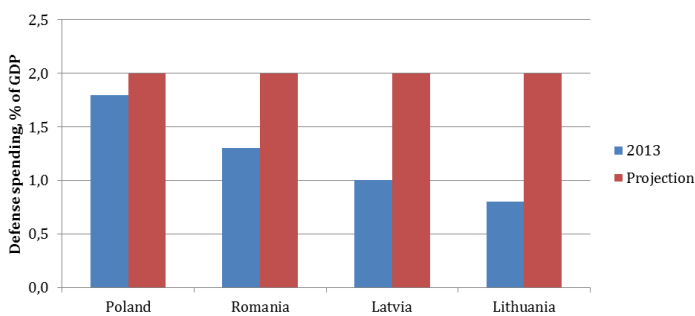
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<http://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21601538-america-no-longer-alarming-its-foes-or-reassuring-its-friends-decline>.



to the changing security environment [see Figure 2]. The Czech Republic has announced an increase in defense spending from 1.0 to 1.4 percent of its GDP, and while Hungary is also flirting with the idea only Slovakia has ruled out an increase in spending altogether.

Figure 2. Defense spending increases in CEE countries post-Crimea crisis*



* Based on statements by CEE officials
Sources: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Defense News and Balkan Insight.

These exposed states on the eastern edge of NATO's periphery stand to lose disproportionately should Moscow launch similar incursions into new-member state territory. Correspondingly, they have responded to the war by not only increasing military spending, but also by seeking U.S. reassurance, and lobbying NATO for permanent military infrastructure. Moreover, these states are rethinking how their small militaries can be more intelligently employed against Crimea-style threats. They are re-conceiving their militaries' doctrines, structures and weapons to be used not for out-of-area operations, as in the past, but for defense of their own neighborhood.

But other CEE states do not see a compelling reason to do more

militarily—mainly because they do not believe that the Ukraine crisis has changed anything. As one senior Czech official said recently, “We are dealing with a stable region without threats of a character that would necessitate American military bases or daily assessments of the security situation.”⁹ Unlike Poland, these states do not perceive an immediate

or even foreseeable Russian military attack against their own territory, because they either are geographically insulated, or have better relations with Russia, or both. Some (particularly the former Habsburg states) do not have a history of military occupation by Russia prior to the Cold War, and many do not possess a strong national military culture. In any case, all are small states with limited power capabilities. Besides, antagonizing Moscow could jeopardize lucrative commercial or energy deals. It might run afoul of large Western European states that see anti-Russian stances by CEE countries as complicating efforts at “conflict-resolution.”

⁹ (“Jde o stabilizovaný region bez hrozeb takového charakteru, aby zde Američané například museli mít své základny a dennodenně vyhodnocovat zdejší bezpečnostní situaci.”) MFA Interview with Petr Drulak, “With the U.S. For the Long Haul, But Only Under the Banner of Europe,” April 24, 2014, http://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/o_ministerstvu/archiv/y/clanky_a_projevy_namestku/clanky_a_projevy_1_namestka_drulaka/x2014_04_24_s_usa_na_vecne_casy.html.

Above all, it could mean diverting economic resources toward defense that publics at home would like to see spent on more popular social programs.

It is for some combination of these reasons that the Ukraine war has not spurred many CEE states to take security more seriously. It's not just that investing more in defense would not seem to “pay” for these states, it's that strategies of opposition to Russia in general would be more trouble than they are worth. Many CEE states have therefore resisted calls to increase defense spending. Some have publicly rejected the idea of U.S. or NATO troops on their soil; a few have refused to support further sanctions against Russia; and a couple have even appeared to implicitly support the aims of Russian action in Ukraine. From the perspective of these states, the costs of resistance to Russia simply seem to outweigh the benefits. The wisest strategy may be for them to hunker down and avoid making themselves a target, attempt to appear diplomatically neutral in NATO-Russia disputes, or even quietly accommodate Russian policy in hopes that it will lead to future payoffs in the commercial or energy relationship with Moscow.

The Era of Consequences

The problem with this behavior is that it assumes a straight-line continuation of the post-Cold War security paradigm, in which Russian military behavior was small-scale and infrequent, other CEE states did not perceive an imminent threat and the U.S. extended deterrence was functioning in relatively good order.



In such a setting, it did not matter if individual CEE states “cheated” by shirking NATO spending rules, allowed their militaries to atrophy or engaged in flirtatious strategic interactions with Russia. All of these things could be done without necessarily jeopardizing their own or the region’s overall safety, economic growth and stability.

But these assumptions are no longer valid. Whether they realize it or not, the emergence of a revisionist Russian military presence along CEE’s eastern frontier fundamentally changes the military calculations for all NATO members in this region, irrespective of size, geographic placement or prior relationship with Russia. For countries like Poland and the Baltic States, the change is obvious; the presence of a live-fire war 500 kilometers away represents a national security threat of the highest magnitude. But even states that do not share Poland’s threat perception have a greater stake than before in ensuring regional security as a result of the Ukraine war. With the structural conditions that permitted these states to neglect hard power now largely gone, what they choose to do in security policy matters to themselves and their neighbors in ways that they did not in the past:

▪ **It matters more for their security.**

While some CEE states may not feel threatened by Russia, the instability generated by an acceleration of the war in Ukraine could directly affect their security—far more, a future incursion into a neighboring NATO member state. Moreover, their baseline assumption may or may not be sound: The future in geopolitics is never certain—

a Russia that does not seem threatening to Czechs today could look very different a decade from now, after acquisitions in Ukraine, Moldova and the Baltic. Moreover, the view that these states’ militaries do not matter because of their small size is grounded in the pre-Ukraine war assumption that the most likely crisis scenarios involved a large conventional Russian military force. In a limited-war scenario, the threat could take the form of columns of “little green men” seeking to create a territorial fait accompli. In such situations, small-state militaries matter immensely, especially in the crucial early hours of crisis. Even tiny militaries could have an outsized impact in deterring and defending against such invasions.

▪ **It matters more for their neighbors’ security.**

In the past, one CEE state could neglect its own security without creating negative spillover effects for others because almost all were defense laggards and, in any case, regional safety was assumed to be in the hands of an outside protector. That is no longer the case. The increased defense spending prompted in some CEE states by the crisis will make those who continue to underspend potential liabilities in a crisis. First, they will be less able to render military aid to neighbors who are attacked. Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico’s comment implying that Slovakia would not help if Poland were attacked was as much a reflection of Slovak military weakness as it was any anti-NATO

political sentiment.¹⁰ Second, in a crisis, states with underprepared militaries, even if they themselves are bypassed, will represent a tactical liability to bordering states that are attacked, requiring extra troops to guard vulnerable flanks and placing an inequitable burden on their already-strained resources.

▪ **It matters more for economic growth.**

International investors dislike wars. The instability generated by months of unbroken hostilities in a neighboring country will eventually impact CEE states’ ability to attract and retain the levels of foreign investment that have provided the basis for their economic success over the past 25 years. Already, CEE currencies are being adversely affected by the crisis, with the Czech koruna at its lowest level against the euro since the height of the 2009 eurozone crisis, the Hungarian forint at its lowest point in two years and even the Polish zloty at a four-month low. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development has warned that the crisis could plunge the region into recession.¹¹

¹⁰ “Už dnes nie je doba, kedy by sa štáty mali pridávať k nejakému inému štátu, ktorý bol napríklad napadnutý v rámci NATO. Rieši sa to úplne inak. Je tu jediný jeden inštitút, jeden mechanizmus, ktorý umožňuje použitie vojenskej sily, a to je Bezpečnostná rada OSN” (“Today is no longer an era where states should be joining [militarily] with other states, where for example attacked within the framework of NATO.”) Robert Fico, in televised presidential debate with Andrej Kiska, March 3, 2014, Slovak Television TA3, <http://www.ta3.com/clanok/1037180/rozhoduju-ci-duel-kandidatov.html> (44:45).

¹¹ Neil Buckley, “EBRD Warns Ukraine Crisis Having ‘Severe’ Effect on Eastern Europe,” *Financial Times*, May 14, 2014,



Should Russia continue intermittently destabilizing neighboring countries in the years ahead, it is reasonable to assume that CEE economies will face negative economic spillover effects.¹² This is a reminder that the region's status as a safe haven among global emerging markets and the ability of its states to enjoy a prosperous EU lifestyle are dependent on external stability, which is in turn dependent on hard power. If NATO and the EU cannot provide that stability for them, CEE states may find that they have to accept greater responsibility for regional security if they want to retain their unique status as safe havens.

- **It matters more for regional political unity.** In the past, CEE states could pursue different paths on security and still cooperate on unrelated policy issues. The Ukraine war will make that harder to do. For threatened CEE states, the Russian invasion has created a securitized policy environment in which *Primat der Aussenpolitik* is magnified and virtually all other priorities will be assessed according to the impact they have on security. If the Visegrád Group cannot agree to prioritize security (or at least to mute internal differences to show external support for Poland), what good is it to Poland?

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/237b040e-db4d-11e3-94ad-00144feabd0.html#axzz3BuCWyC4G>.

¹² David Berman, "Markets brace for Ukraine-Russia crisis impact," *Globe and Mail*, March 2, 2014, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/international-business/european-business/markets-brace-for-ukraine-russia-crisis-impact/article17188828/>.

By neglecting defense, southern V4 states become "free riders" on Poland's stronger military at the same time that they scuttle its political efforts at stronger common security. This is likely to make Poland less willing to use V4 as a policy mechanism, diminishing the gains that all four states would have derived from cooperation in areas outside of security.

- **It matters more for NATO's effectiveness.** Prior to the Ukraine war, NATO maintained virtually no presence on CEE territory for fear of violating the Russia-NATO Founding Act. As a result of the war, there is a growing consensus that NATO should correct this imbalance and place assets on CEE territory. Such efforts are crucial for states like Poland but face opposition from some EU member states. Statements by Czech and Slovak officials comparing a U.S. and NATO military presence to the Soviet military occupation of 1968 make it harder to convince critics in Germany or the U.S. Congress that requests for permanent NATO basing are militarily justified. Alluding that U.S. forces in the Czech Republic would mimic Soviet forces in 1968 while an actual Russian invasion is being carried out in Ukraine is not only absurd, but also hamstringing Poland's efforts while ultimately weakening future deterrence mechanisms for the Alliance as a whole.
- **It matters more for influencing Russian behavior.** CEE states that neglect security do little to impede and much to encourage acts of Russian revision in the region. Militarily, they make their

neighbors easier targets for blackmail, subversion and attack. Politically, they lend credence to Moscow's claims that Russian aggression is inherently reactive and not threatening to NATO. The accommodationist mentality that often accompanies neglect of hard power fuels the impression in Moscow that resistance to its tactics will be minimal, and that those states that decide to resist it can be isolated among their CEE peers. This suggests to Moscow that territorial revisionism can be achieved at relatively low military or economic costs to Russia, making it more likely that Russia will remain aggressive in Ukraine or attempt similar moves elsewhere.

In short, the Ukraine war has raised the costs of neglecting security. Unlike before, when the structural environment permitted, and even encouraged, CEE "free riding" on Western-provided security, the new strategic environment is likely to impose political, economic and even military costs on such behavior. War changes things. In a securitized setting, the actions of even small states like the Czech Republic will matter more than they did before, when open conflict seemed unimaginable. More than ever, the actions of CEE states are intertwined with the fate of their neighbors, the stability of the wider region and the solvency of NATO as a whole. In such a setting, inaction may be tempting and even rewarding at first, but longer-term it is unlikely to remain cost-free. After the Ukraine war, neglecting defense may still be a viable option for



Belgium, but it isn't for the Czech Republic.

III. The Case for Doing More

Many CEE small states are increasingly aware of the costs of continuing to underinvest in security. Whereas before the war only Poland and Estonia spent at or near 2 percent on defense as required by NATO, the security situation of these states has been dramatically altered. As previously mentioned, several states in the CEE region have announced significant defense spending increases in the months following the Russian invasion [see Figure 2]. Even if CEE states slowly begin to accept the rationale for spending more, the question could be reasonably asked, "What does it matter?" After all, these are small states that will be able to field only limited capabilities in even the most optimistic defense budgetary environment.

One of the arguments of this paper has been that small states can positively impact the military balance on NATO's frontier to a greater extent than in the past because of the introduction of Russian limited-war techniques, which have shifted emphasis from large conventional invasions to "jab-and-grab" assaults by small forces with limited political objectives. While this tactical innovation has played to the current strengths of the Russian military, it has also had the effect of leveling the playing field for small states in future military contests. Even the smallest CEE militaries can make a difference against such threats by developing the ability to stop incursions in the early phases

of an attack so that NATO has time to mobilize a wider response.

Against such threats, the military efforts of small states in-theater are the quickest and most effective way to shore up the growing deficiencies of extended deterrence. Since Russian limited-war techniques are often below the threshold required for a full Article 5 response (and are therefore likely to induce political division in NATO), the only way they can be countered is on the ground where they occur. Traditional "trip wires" are an important part of the solution to this problem but are not enough. In a hypothetical Russian incursion into Lithuania, for example, the nearby presence of a small base of 200 U.S. Marines would do little to deter the incursion, since the essence of Russian Crimea-style tactics is to bypass resistance and create a political fait accompli that will be ratified by subsequent NATO political inaction.

Stronger CEE small-state militaries help to address this problem at its root, by raising the possible costs of such attacks before they occur and, in the event of a crisis, allowing the NATO defense-in-depth strategy to come into effect. Small-state U.S. allies in other regions have invested in stronger territorial defense capabilities for this very reason. Their actions model to CEE countries that there is a wide range of actions that small states can take to deter local revisionists, help one another in a crisis, and avoid the negative ripple effects of aggressive moves in neighboring regions without incurring huge costs to procure heavy artillery and the likes which is necessary in conventional warfare.

Drawing on their examples, CEE small states might consider the following:

1. Investing in "access denial." Small U.S. allies in Asia have created more effective hedges against Chinese military revision by making targeted investments in so-called Anti-Access Area Denial (A2AD) capabilities. The goal of A2AD is to use large numbers of precise, inexpensive and overlapping munitions to create "no go" zones that limit the freedom of maneuver and offensive options of a more powerful force.¹³ While pioneered by China with the aim of disrupting U.S. maritime power projection in the western Pacific, the concept is ideal for smaller states using limited means to ward off larger militaries.¹⁴ For small CEE states, such capabilities would represent a cost-effective alternative for achieving a localized deterrent that drives up the costs of attack beyond what even a determined adversary would be willing to pay for an attack on CEE territory.

2. Investing in offensive capabilities. The development of A2AD capabilities by small states like the Czech Republic will be important for allowing larger regional states like Poland and Romania to devote some defense resources to a limited range of offensive strike capabilities. Mid-sized frontier allies like Israel, Finland and Saudi Arabia have pioneered the development of offensive doctrines that could

¹³ See Andrew F. Krepinevich, Barry Watts and Robert Work, *Meeting the Anti-Access and Area Denial Challenge* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments [CSBA], 2003), ii.

¹⁴ For an analysis of A2AD as it applies to allies, see Jim Thomas, "From Protectorates to Partnerships," *The American Interest*, May 1, 2011.



mirrored in CEE. The new “Polish Fangs” component in Poland’s “Komorowski Doctrine” envisions the possession of land- and perhaps submarine-based cruise missiles that could be used to “blind” Russian command and control. Even a small range of such assets could shift the calculation of Russian aggression. Smaller CEE states would benefit from the positive spillover that these postures provide in strengthening conventional deterrence for the region as a whole.

3. Security caucusing. The Visegrád Group has been rendered less effective politically and militarily by the Ukraine war, but that does not have to remain the case. Small-state U.S. allies in other regions have demonstrated that regional subgroupings can coalesce militarily even if they involve uneven threat perceptions. The Gulf States, for example, have overcome significant internal disagreements to cooperate effectively in security, forming the world’s largest network of combined missile defense systems and a 100,000-strong “deterrent force” against possible aggressions. The key to their success has been forming a consensus that the greatest threat to one state in the group has to be prioritized by other members, even if they themselves do not feel immediately threatened. For this principle to work in Visegrád, it would require a move away from the lowest-common-denominator approach and a willingness by smaller V4 states to subordinate lesser policy concerns to the imperative of first dealing with an existential threat to its most threatened state, Poland, who, not coincidentally, is also in the best

position to provide military defense to her neighbors.

4. Resisting the urge to appease. The political mindset that often goes hand in hand with neglect of security is in many ways a greater danger to future CEE stability than the military weakness of individual CEE states. States whose leaders ridicule Polish forward-basing proposals, prioritize secondary issues like ethnic minority rights, or support Russian-led projects that bypass the rest of the region do so because they see no threat to themselves. But such actions ultimately undercut next-door CEE states that are vulnerable, limiting their range of options both politically and militarily in future crises. Even if a state does not see a confrontation between itself and Russia as imminent, it should recognize that it is in its interest to be surrounded by neighbors who are secure. Few regions on earth have states whose geopolitical destinies are as intertwined as CEE’s are. Even non-threatened states should show public solidarity with their neighbors’ efforts to secure the region against Crimea-style attacks; failing that, they should at least avoid public disagreement on security matters that may be secondary to themselves but are of existential importance to states a few kilometers away.

5. Learning to fight proxy wars. Russia’s future ability to destabilize Europe’s eastern frontier depends in part on the outcome of the war in Ukraine today, and that depends on the fighting effectiveness of Ukrainian forces. One critical area where small CEE states can help is providing replacement parts for

Soviet-era military equipment to Ukraine. NATO’s CEE states have large inventories of this equipment that they wish to upgrade to NATO standards. Working with the United States, they should create rollover programs that provide old equipment to Ukraine in exchange for outdated U.S. equipment for CEE militaries. Over time, frontier U.S. allies will need to develop the ability and political willpower to “manage” nearby vacuums created by the departure of U.S. power from their regions, which naturally includes the upgrading of abilities in order to wage effective proxy wars. For the Czech Republic, this will require a more activist foreign policy than in the past.

Conclusion

The previously held assumption that the military might of small states in the CEE region is an inconsequential issue is simply untrue in a ‘post-Crimea’ Europe. With Russia poised to act as a destabilizing military presence on CEE’s doorstep for the foreseeable future, new techniques in “limited war” changing the nature of warfare, and traditional components of extended deterrence becoming less effective by the day, the ability to create effective local defenses must become the focus for frontline NATO states, irrespective of size. For NATO as an Alliance, the new threat environment will require a transition away from concepts of defense-in-depth that were geared for large-scale conventional war waging to a ‘preclusive’ defense aimed at countering small-force and limited objective incursions. For the United





States, it will require more effective forms of strategic reassurance, including personnel and basing for CEE allies. For CEE states themselves, it will require greater investments in defense than were necessary in quieter geopolitical times, with corresponding tradeoffs for public policy.

This will require many CEE states to rethink their customary relationship with hard power. For the first time since the Cold War, even very small CEE states will need effective security policies—not as a perfunctory accoutrement of the modern state, but as a necessity for limiting the disruptive effects of geopolitical change, for their own and their neighbors' safety and prosperity. This will be the case even for those CEE states like the Czech Republic that enjoy relatively protective geography, do not perceive an imminent military threat, or wish to avoid complicating their relations with Russia or large Western European states. To a far greater extent than in the past, their actions in the military realm will matter for the overall security and stability of Central and Eastern Europe and the West generally.

The same holds true worldwide. At moments of systemic change, small states play a significant role in strengthening or weakening the foundations of regional and global stability. In all three global strategic frontiers managed by U.S. power—Asia-Pacific, the Persian Gulf and Central and Eastern Europe—the same pattern increasingly applies to small frontier states facing the determined efforts of revisionist powers to forcibly modify the regional territorial status quo.

Over time, these trends could precipitate a general crisis of the U.S.-led international security order. As the United States transitions to smaller defense budgets, the ability to maintain the stability that world has grown accustomed to for the past several decades will depend on how well small frontline states manage their own security: how well and wisely they are armed, how well they clump together in a crisis, and how well they supplement the gaps in U.S. deterrence. The Czech Republic knows from its history what such moments of geopolitical transition look like, and what happens when they go awry. The end of history has come and gone, and the Czech Republic has an important role to play in ensuring better outcomes this time around.

