

Chapter 13

Central European Views of EU Defense and Foreign Policy

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New members of the European Union in central Europe (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic)—the so-called Visegrad countries—differ in their views with regard to the future shape of the European Union, but all have quite similar notions regarding the future shape of EU common defense and foreign policies.

Differences

The December 2003 summit in Brussels showed that the Visegrad countries are not united with regard to the European Constitution. Poland resisted attempts to change the system of decision-making adopted at the summit in Nice, while the three other countries were much more willing to follow the strong pro-integration visions of Germany and France in particular.

Poland also was one of the staunchest supporters of the United States in its military intervention in Iraq. The three other Visegrad countries were more cautious. While Poland offered combat troops, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia provided more symbolic forms of assistance.

Unlike Poland, those three countries were trying to perform a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, they tried to reassure the Americans that, despite reservations about a weak international mandate for invading Iraq, they continued to be allies of the U.S.. For example, Hungary offered, as its most important contribution, its military bases to the U.S., while the Czech Republic kept its anti-chemical warfare unit in Kuwait, making it clear the unit would be sent to Iraq in case of a humanitarian catastrophe.

The case of the Czech Republic is telling. The Czechs refused to send their anti-chemical warfare unit to Iraq because of what the Czech government and parliament described as the absence of a direct UN mandate for an invasion. At the same time, the Czech Republic was very much interested in staying on the list of U.S. allies—"the coalition of the willing."

While the Czech foreign minister—a Christian Democrat—pushed for more direct expressions of support for the U.S., the government—dominated by the Social Democrats—was more cautious. President Vaclav Klaus, a conservative, was entirely opposed to the invasion, which worsened his relations with the U.S. for a period of time.

This ambivalence worked well for the Czechs with both sides—the U.S., on the one hand, and France and Germany, on the other. The U.S. kept the Czech Republic on the list of its allies, whereas the Germans and French were convinced that the Czech Republic did not directly support the war.

The Czech example is important because it illustrates some of the dilemmas faced by all small central and east European states. With the exception of Poland, which is a mid-sized European power, all other EU candidates from central and eastern Europe were caught between a rock and a hard place. They did not want to be perceived as disloyal partners of either side of the growing transatlantic conflict.

Although they differed as far as the intensity of their support for the U.S.-led war was concerned, they were all trying to assure those EU countries which were most opposed to the war that they certainly wanted to cooperate with them in the process of further European integration and that they even sided with some of their arguments against the war.

This was understandable. Small countries in central and eastern Europe need both the U.S. security umbrella and EU membership. As supportive as they are of the EU, they believe they cannot rely on the EU for protection in case of grave security threats. NATO, in which the U.S. plays a dominant role, is considered by a majority of people in those countries as the only real security guarantee. According to opinion polls, only people in Slovakia and Slovenia are skeptical of their countries' membership in NATO among all countries in the region.

Similarities

Central European skepticism about the EU's ability to guarantee their security has been strengthened by a lack of progress with regard to building a common EU security policy. It is now clear that the EU is still very far from creating an integrated defense system that could be used in a fashion similar to that of NATO.

Individual states in central and eastern Europe tentatively pledged troops to the European Rapid Reaction Force and continued working in the framework of West European Union. At the same time, there is strong opposition in central and eastern Europe against building a European security system separately from U.S. involvement or even in competition with the U.S. Any "decoupling" will be strongly resisted by most central European countries.

In fact, this was one of the reasons why some central European leaders signed the so-called Letter of Eight at the time the U.S. was preparing to invade Iraq. For example, Czech President Vaclav Havel, one of the signatories of the letter, understood the letter to be mainly a warning against creating an unnecessary rift in the transatlantic alliance, and not so much as a direct expression of support for the war.

The document produced later by the so-called "Vilnius Ten" was also not an expression of direct support for Washington's plans to invade Iraq, it was an attempt to show loyalty to the U.S. while not losing the sight of the importance of EU integration. In the end, Slovenia—one of the signatories—stood much more on the side of France and Germany than on the side the U.S.

New Europe?

U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's division of Europe into "new" and "old" was, above all, a clever ploy that helped the Bush Administration get its way by using the old strategy of "divide and rule." But although it reflected real differences between established EU members and the newcomers, it managed to solidify the false impression that the EU's new members share a similar identity and political agenda. Rumsfeld's remarks were divisive because western Europe seems to know even less than the Americans about Europe's eastern half.

Beyond politics, there are vast differences among the economies of the new members, not only in terms of wealth, but also in their structures. Industrialized and urbanized countries, with relatively small agricultural sectors, such as the Czech Republic, Slovenia, or Slovakia, have different concerns than Poland, where farmers form 20% of the population.

Historical traditions also play a role. Although all new member states claim to be “western,” some are more Western than others. The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and parts of Poland share a common legacy of *Mitteleuropa*, formed during the Hapsburg Empire. Moreover, communism in those states was different than that practiced in the three Baltic countries, which were part of the Soviet Union.

Is Visegrad Important?

At the start of the 1990’s, following communism’s fall, the common experiences and the shared legacy of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland was behind the idea of creating the so-called “Visegrad Group,” with the aim of coordinating the three countries’ efforts to join the EU and NATO. The Visegrad initiative worked to some extent, though it was temporarily paralyzed by the disintegration of Czechoslovakia just over a decade ago.

Although the leaders of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia recently declared they wanted to keep the Visegrad grouping alive even after their countries entered the EU, the future of Visegrad cooperation is uncertain. In fact, the fate of this group is perhaps the best example of how the individual identities of the new member states are beginning to assert themselves now that membership in the EU and NATO is secured.

Poland, as its stance over the EU constitution demonstrated, pursues its own specific interests in a united Europe, which may be difficult to harmonize with the interests of smaller central European states. Now that it is in the Union, Poland will have an even freer hand, unconstrained by the need to support the aspirations of other east European countries.

Regardless of what happens, all of Europe needs to move beyond clichés about “old” versus “new” Europe. Poland may find that it has

security and other interests in common with some states of a similar size in the current EU. The three Baltic states will most likely cooperate much more closely with the Scandinavian countries than with the other new members.

It is also time to start thinking about a new way of organizing central Europe. For the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia, close cooperation with Poland may not be the best way to protect their interests in the EU, as their interests and the interests of a big, self-confident Poland may not be identical.

It may be more natural for the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia to strive for closer regional cooperation with Austria and Slovenia, the contours of which can already be seen in some existing regional groupings. Such a regional group would be bound together by a long common history and compatible interests. This would be much more effective and durable than the Visegrad initiative, which lumps together three small states with a country that has more inhabitants than its three partners put together, plus its own agenda.

United Nations

All states in east central Europe also support significant reforms of the United Nations. Some politicians in those countries have supported the ambitions of large countries, such as India or Brazil, to become permanent members of the UN's Security Council. At the same time, some support the idea of the EU having only one joint seat on the Security Council.

All of these countries have also contributed troops to various peace-keeping missions under the auspices of the UN, but—again—politicians in some of these countries have proposed that some missions should be joint EU missions, rather than missions supported and paid for by individual states, some of which are significantly poorer than the countries of “old Europe.”

NATO and the EU

While all Visegrad countries support the creation of some form of a common European defense system and foreign policy, they put much more emphasis than countries associated most commonly with the

notion of “old Europe” on the role of the United States and NATO in a future European defense system.

To put it more bluntly, while the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia do not have problems with further European integration, and while even Poland does not refuse a gradual push toward common defense and foreign policies, all four countries will resist any attempts to separate European defense policies from those of the United States. They will support the continuing role of NATO as a pillar of European defense and, therefore, a continuing security role for the U.S. in Europe.

The Visegrad countries see a future system of European defense and NATO as complementary, not as incompatible. There is also a strong consensus that the role of the United States in helping to ensure European security must not be significantly diminished. Any attempt to use the system of a common European defense and foreign policy to push the U.S. out of Europe (and European affairs in general) will be resisted by all Visegrad countries.

In general, all four countries strongly advocate a balance between further European integration and maintaining strong transatlantic ties. How exactly NATO can be integrated into a common EU defense system in a situation in which some EU countries are not members of NATO, and vice versa, is an issue that will be quite high on the agenda of the Visegrad countries.

EU Foreign Policy

In general, new members of the EU from central and eastern Europe are supportive of further integration, or at least more extensive cooperation, in the area of foreign policy. Although each of those countries voiced specific objections against some aspects of the European Constitution, they in general did not question attempts to create mechanisms for achieving foreign policy decisions representing the entire EU in some areas. They were also not vigorously opposed to the idea of establishing the post of the EU foreign minister.

It is clear that the inability of the EU to speak with one voice on important international issues is not only a political problem, but also a security problem. The EU might have been able to modify some

foreign policy and security decisions of the Bush Administration, had it been able to speak with one voice. The fact that the Americans could so easily divide European nations into competing camps represented in the end a defeat for both the U.S. and Europe.

While it is clear that European nations, including the new EU members, will want to have a final say on issues of vital national interests in foreign policy, a more integrated foreign policy would, in fact, be an important security step. Although the EU's expenditures on defense and the procurement of new weapon system are much lower than those of the U.S., and we hear much about a growing technological gap, the combined military resources of all EU countries are significant—certainly good enough to deter any large-scale threat or to intervene (for example, for humanitarian reasons) outside of Europe.

What has been missing is Europe's ability to speak with one voice and reach common decisions. New member states from Central and Eastern Europe would generally support a closer coordination of foreign policies and the creating of mechanisms needed for reaching "European" decisions. They will not be supportive of such initiatives only if they perceive them as challenging the U.S. security role in Europe.