Soviet Control of Eastern Europe: Morality versus American National Interest

ROY E. LICKLIDER

The American policy of opposing Soviet control of Eastern Europe has not been seriously questioned, probably because morality (encouraging self-determination) seems to coincide with national interest (weakening Soviet power). This article contends, however, that the primary American national interest in Eastern Europe is the prevention of thermonuclear war. Eastern Europe without tight Soviet control would be very unstable due to disputes between the Eastern European countries, problems of national minorities within such countries, and governments without popular legitimacy. A few of these participants might invite outside assistance. Given the importance of Eastern Europe, some of these invitations would be accepted by the Soviet Union and/or Western Europe. The other side would intervene in turn, and the United States would be drawn into a superpower confrontation with a very real risk of war. If these assumptions are sound, it is in the American national interest to keep the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe.

The usual moral argument for opposition to Soviet domination is simply that the peoples of Eastern Europe are entitled to self-determination, that this right is denied to them by Soviet control (as shown most clearly in the Hungarian and Czechoslovakian revolts), and that therefore Soviet control should be opposed. The realpolitik arguments are somewhat more complex: removal of Soviet control would deny valuable human, material, and industrial resources to the Soviet Union; would make it more vulnerable to pressure from abroad; would encourage nationality groups within the Soviet Union to push for self-determination, further weakening the government; and would be a major propa-
ganda blow. Not only would a “free” Eastern Europe thus prevent the Soviet Union from using its resources; it would move toward Western Europe, eventually adding these resources to the Western bloc.¹

The concept of the national interest is not an easy one with which to work.² However, it is generally accepted that it is in the interest of all the people and the government of the United States to avoid a thermonuclear war; there is somewhat less consensus on the proposition that the term also includes foiling any significant threat to the territorial integrity, economic prosperity, and social unity of the United States. This study defines the American national interest in terms of these two broad objectives. Applying them to Eastern Europe yields fairly straightforward results. Nothing in the area seems likely to threaten, or even affect, the territorial integrity, economic prosperity, or social unity of the United States; therefore the major American national interest in Eastern Europe is the prevention of thermonuclear war.

There is certainly nothing unusual in this argument; apparently it was the reason why American officials decided not to intervene in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. However, the argument can be pushed one step further to suggest that, if the American national interest in Eastern Europe is the prevention of thermonuclear war, then it is also in the American national interest to maintain tight Soviet control of Eastern Europe.

This argument, in turn, is based upon assumptions about (1) the condition of Eastern Europe without such control and (2) the likely reaction of outside states, including the United States and the Soviet Union, to such a condition. Each set of assumptions must be set forth and examined in greater detail.

**Instability of Eastern Europe**

Removal of Soviet control would allow many of the festering international disputes among the Eastern European states to develop fully. These primarily concern disputed territory, such as Macedonia (Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Greece), Transylvania (Hungary and Rumania), Northern Epirus (Greece and Albania), Kosmet (Albania and Yugoslavia), Dobruja (Bulgaria and Rumania), Eastern Thrace (Bulgaria and Turkey), and Western Thrace (Bulgaria and Greece). These are all in the southern part of the area, but several of the northern states have unresolved territorial disputes with the Soviet Union over Bessarabia and

¹ It is true that recent research into the contemporary political systems of Eastern Europe suggests that they have some basis of support other than the Soviet army and that therefore, by implication, the moral case against them may not be as strong as many Americans have imagined. (See, for example, Alfred Meyer et al., “Legitimacy of Power in East Central Europe” in Sylva Sinanian, Istvan Deak, and Peter C. Ludz (eds.), *Eastern Europe in the 1970s* [New York, 1972], pp. 45–86.) Nonetheless, this study assumes that the populations of most of these countries are opposed to significant aspects of their current governments; indeed the consequences of this assumption are central to the argument.

Northern Bukovina (Rumania), East Prussia (East Germany), Eastern Galicia (Poland), and Carpatho-Ukraine (Czechoslovakia).

Such territorial problems, while serious in themselves, are less significant than the factors that make for internal instability within these states. The two most obvious are the problems of national minorities and unpopular governments. While some of the national minority problems have been settled by the Soviet Union by forced migrations and new national boundary lines, many remain potential trouble spots. Yugoslavia is the extreme case, with a veritable smorgasbord of ethnic groups: Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Macedonians (Bulgarians), Moslems (Bosnians), Albanians, Hungarians, Montenegrins, and Turks. Even twenty-five years of rule by a nationally respected leader has not solved the Yugoslav ethnic problem. Other similar situations include the Turks in Bulgaria; Czechs, Slovaks, and Hungarians in Czechoslovakia; Ghegs and Tosks, along with a small number of Greeks in Albania; Germans in Hungary; Ukrainians in Poland; and Hungarians and Germans in Rumania.

Pious hopes that such outmoded internal divisions will disappear seem confounded by their reappearance in Western Europe and North America, and there is good theoretical reason to believe that economic development, particularly in its later stages, tends to increase rather than decrease the importance of such divisions. The impact of a Soviet withdrawal on this kind of problem may be seen during both the Hungarian and Czechoslovakian revolts. In 1956 Czechoslovakia and Rumania took stern measures to prevent their Hungarian minorities from being “infected” with the plague from Budapest, and even Yugoslavia showed concern. The Kadar government had to loudly disclaim any irredentist goals after Warsaw Pact troops had placed it in power. During the few months of civil liberties in Czechoslovakia in 1968 there was a good deal of conflict between the Hungarian minority and the Slovaks about the new constitution that was being drafted.

These problems of national division might be overcome by agreement on a set of governing institutions in each country. Unfortunately the institutions of Eastern Europe have been copied from and imposed by the Soviet Union; they would almost certainly have to be changed significantly. Of course the overthrow of government following the departure of a colonial power is hardly novel. But Soviet control has also deprived these countries of the resource used, with varying success, to bridge the gap of legitimacy from old to new institutions: the charismatic leader with a national political base. It is striking that Nagy and Dubcek seemed cut from the same cloth—good but colorless men who developed no particular personal support aside from their roles as symbols of resistance to the Soviet Union. Therefore the only way in which a new leader could gain support would be to appeal to the very ethnic groups that threaten internal stability.

Actually these three kinds of problems can be separated only analytically; in practice they reinforce one another. Thus, Eastern Europe without Soviet control would be a series of states torn by internal conflicts over governmental institutions and competing nationality groups, with a large number of possible points of external conflict, ruled by leaders with no national constituency or legitimacy. Some recent empirical research tentatively supports the intuitively plausible notions that political leaders in such a situation are likely to exacerbate international tensions to create internal unity and that the same governments are easily weakened by intense international conflict.\(^5\) Moreover, in conflicts between such weak forces, there is a strong incentive for the participants to involve outside powers.\(^6\)

But this is only half of the argument. Even if this set of assumptions is accepted, it is still not clear why this instability is a threat to the American national interest. Experience with decolonization suggests that instability is a common phenomenon; this may increase our confidence that it will occur, but it leaves unanswered the question of why none of these experiences has yet produced a world war. What is the link between instability in Eastern Europe and thermonuclear war?

Theorists who support the idea of a "power vacuum" would argue that, with the removal of Soviet control of Eastern Europe, Western Europe and the United States would attempt to establish their own hegemony over the area, that the Soviet Union would resist these efforts, and that the likelihood of war would increase. This theory, however, does not explain why there have been no superpower wars as a result of decolonization in Asia and Africa. Indeed, with the exception of the Middle East, both superpowers seem to be losing interest in most of the Third World, in direct contradiction to the classic power vacuum theory.

The rise of nationalism all over the world has meant that power vacuums are not vacuums at all; the cost to even a superpower of occupying such areas has increased considerably because of the greater likelihood of national resistance. Shifts in the general international view of conquest and support for the right of self-determination, reflected at least for Western democracies in lack of domestic support for such acts, work in the same direction. Moreover, in most of the Third World countries the benefits of such conquest do not seem overwhelming to either superpower. The result has been a general decline in interest in these areas. The one exception may be the Middle East, where the benefits of intervention appear to be unusually high; it is interesting that this is one of the few places where superpower detente is seriously threatened.

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\(^6\) For an interesting theoretical model of this process, based upon historical events in the Balkans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Myron Weiner, "The Macedonian Syn-
REACTION OF OUTSIDE POWERS

An unstable Eastern Europe, unlike Asia and Africa, could not be ignored by Western Europe and the Soviet Union; it is simply perceived as too important. (At least the Middle East is vital only to the West.) In terms of location, it has served as an invasion corridor in both directions for the past thousand years. Most of the Communist governments of the world are contained within its borders, and their downfall would certainly be a shock to the Soviet Union. It has ethnic ties with the areas of both sides, and it is potentially a major industrial center. All of this might not matter if it were controlled by a group of stable, neutral governments such as Austria or Finland, but this is unlikely. It is the combination of perceived importance and internal instability that makes outside intervention so likely.

The second assumption, then, is that the Soviet Union or Western Europe would eventually succumb to the temptation to intervene in the internal quarrels of Eastern Europe, probably by invitation. The other side would intervene in turn, and this would surely involve the United States. The result, as stated earlier, would be a superpower confrontation in Eastern Europe with a very real chance of thermonuclear war.

An illustrative scenario may clarify this kind of process. East Germany dominates an independent Eastern Europe. A coalition of other countries forms against it. Rumanian actions directed toward Germans living in that country trigger East German economic sanctions. The Soviet Union steps in, being strongly opposed to German domination of Eastern Europe, and threatens war. West Germany finds it difficult to remain out of the conflict and covertly allows volunteers to go to East Germany. This in turn leads to an ultimatum from the Soviet Union to West Germany, which forces the United States to take a strong stand.

The point is not the likelihood of this particular sequence of events; rather, something like it seems an almost inevitable result of a Soviet withdrawal from Eastern Europe. Given the consequently higher risk of thermonuclear war, such an action does not seem to be in the American national interest.

CONCLUSION

Let us summarize the argument. The primary American national interest in Eastern Europe is the prevention of thermonuclear war. If the Soviet Union withdrew from the area, it would be extremely unstable. Given the importance of the area, there would be outside interventions; these would escalate into superpower confrontations and possibly thermonuclear war. Therefore it is in the American national interest to keep the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe.
After all of this, it may come as a shock to learn that this is not necessarily an argument favoring an American foreign policy directed at encouraging the Soviet Union to remain in Eastern Europe. It is, rather, a demonstration that there is a conflict between morality and national interest in American policy toward Eastern Europe. Of course, many would argue that the national interest should guide foreign policy at all times. However, morality is and sometimes should be more important than national interest, as it apparently has been in American policy toward Israel. While this author's inclination is to support the national interest in the case of Eastern Europe, it is a very difficult choice. The point is that a choice must be made.

But isn't this all academic anyway? If we assume that the Soviet Union is going to remain in Eastern Europe no matter what the United States does short of war, why can't we call for self-determination for propaganda purposes? Because the Soviets have been so committed to Eastern Europe, the United States has been able to do precisely this for the past thirty years without facing the dilemma implicit in that policy. There are two problems, however, in simply keeping our present policy goal. First, the situation may change. Major change within the Soviet Union is not out of the question (possibly somewhat more likely than within the United States), and a future Soviet government may be tempted to pull out of the area. This argument suggests that an American government motivated by the national interest would do whatever it could to avoid pressuring the Soviets in this direction.

Second, this position, if adopted, would alter American policy on several particular issues. For example, internal difficulties are expected in Yugoslavia after Tito's death, and several authorities have suggested that the Soviet Union may intervene at the invitation of one faction. This argument suggests that such an intervention would also be in the American national interest and that it certainly should not be opposed. Similarly we may want to recognize formally Soviet control of Eastern Europe, through a mutual security pact if appropriate, and avoid tying economic relations with the Soviet Union to increased freedom for the Eastern European countries, as has been suggested.

It should be noted again that the argument does not prescribe American foreign policy in this way. We may very well wish to support Yugoslavia against Soviet intervention, or not recognize the Soviet position in Eastern Europe, or demand concessions for countries in the area. This argument does indicate, however, that policy makers in this area must come to terms with the choice between national interest and morality and that American policy toward Eastern Europe is not an escape from the "necessity for choice" that is the hallmark of foreign policy.