3 Strategic Options for East–Central Europe

When the new, democratic governments came to power in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary in 1989 and 1990, they faced a wide range of security policy options. The primary alternatives open to them were:

- a reformed alliance with the Soviet Union
- neutrality or non-alignment
- regional security cooperation within Eastern Europe
- integration with the West
- pan-European collective or common security through the CSCE
- a realpolitik balance of power policy
- reliance on national defence.

Although not entirely mutually exclusive, these policies represented distinct strategic directions. Which of these strategic directions the countries of East–Central Europe would pursue remained an open question. This chapter examines these differing options, assessing their possible advantages and disadvantages for the countries of East–Central Europe and exploring the dilemmas and problems involved in each.

A REFORMED SOVIET ALLIANCE

When the new East–Central European governments came to power in 1989 and 1990 the most immediate security policy option open to them was to retain a reformed alliance with the Soviet Union. Such a strategy had at least one central advantage: it would avoid antagonizing the Soviet Union. Given the experience of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, Soviet intervention remained a primary security concern. In the worst case, a precipitate attempt to break Soviet alliance ties might provoke military intervention. Short of this, East–Central Europe's high level of economic dependence on the Soviet Union, the continued presence of Soviet troops in the region and ties between Soviet and East–Central European internal security forces and intelligence services meant that the Soviet Union retained significant leverage.
If provoked, it might use that leverage to undermine the East-Central European state’s democratic transitions by cutting crucial economic ties (such as deliveries of oil or gas) or using intelligence and security links to foment political instability.

From mid-1990, conservative forces within the Soviet Union, advocating a continued Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, gained increasing political power. By the autumn of 1990, the Soviet Union was refusing to reform or dissolve the Warsaw Pact, resulting in the cancellation of the alliance’s planned summit. In January 1991 the International Department of the Soviet Communist Party’s Central Committee called for the ‘neutralization’ of ‘anti-Soviet tendencies’ in Eastern Europe and the use of the region’s dependence on Soviet oil and gas ‘as an important instrument of our strategy’. In the spring of 1991, the Soviet Union began to press for new bilateral treaties with the states of Eastern Europe, which would include ‘security clauses’ limiting their foreign and security policy independence. In April Romania became the first East European state to accept the Soviet-proposed treaty (see Table 3.1).

In this context, the possibility of maintaining a reformed alliance with the Soviet Union might be seen as a classical strategy of accommodation with major power interests by small or medium states which cannot compete with larger neighbours in terms of power. Such a strategy might be particularly attractive if it involved accepting Soviet security interests in return for a Soviet commitment not to interfere in the East-Central European states’ internal affairs. Such a strategy might also be more attractive if mutual defence commitments were maintained but the character of the alliance was significantly reformed (for example, through the withdrawal of Soviet forces and greater East-Central European military independence). A continued alliance with the Soviet Union might also contribute to East-Central European security by providing guarantees or diplomatic leverage in relation to other security threats or concerns. For Poland and Czechoslovakia, who in 1989–90 still faced potential German claims on their territory, a continued alliance with the Soviet Union might be seen as providing guarantees against such claims or diplomatic leverage in relation to German unification.

Balanced against these factors, however, were strong arguments in favour of breaking Cold War alliance ties with the Soviet Union. The Soviet alliance system involved a complex web of ties, subordinating the East-Central European states’ foreign and security policies to Soviet interests: the Warsaw Pact, bilateral mutual assistance treaties, Soviet troops in East-Central Europe, integration of armed forces and close