

The Power of Weak States in International Politics

North Korea has been a source of grave international tension and a threat to international security ever since Kim Il-sung launched his war of reunification in 1950. Even though North Korea boasts with nuclear weapons by most indicators it is a weak state that depends on its survival on the aid of other states. But Pyongyang is not the only international midget that poses a threat to international stability. In fact, in the post-Cold War world lesser actors seem to be exerting a growing influence on world politics. Despite their influence and role in international politics, small powers are usually not in the focus of the study of international relations history.

There can be no indisputable definition of weakness. Power can be defined in relational terms only. There are only a few weak states in the world in absolute terms such as Andorra or Lichtenstein. In the interwar period, Poland was weak in comparison to Germany but was more powerful than Czechoslovakia, which in turn was stronger than Hungary. Moreover, some aspects of power are hard to measure. Stalin once mockingly asked how many divisions the pope had. But the Soviet Union's soft power, i.e. appeal in the world may have been smaller than the Vatican's even in the heyday of communism.

For the purposes of this paper, I will define a weak power as an entity that was under the sway – domination or hegemony – of another state at any point in the 20th century. The lands between Germany and Russia, which had long been the source of instability in Europe, all qualify for this distinction. The small nations of middle Europe existed in the buffer zone between more powerful entities. Throughout much of the 20th century, they were policy takers with little or no influence on their position in the international sphere. Occasionally, however they were sometimes in a position to shape international politics. And, in 1989, they generated systemic change in international politics. This will be a history paper. Although historians are better at predicting the past than forecasting the future a few observations on the role of weak states in international politics will be made.

The concept that small states may alter the behavior of their hegemonic powers has long been understood. Gunter Bischof showed the “leverage of the weak” in his important study on Austria's role in the early Cold War. Austria occupies the gateway into Germany and Italy and therefore it was the key state to hold for the West in Central Europe. Bischof has shown how this small state, which compromised itself in collaboration with Hitler's policies, exploited its weakness to extract American political and economic assistance against the Soviet Union. Hope Harrison revealed how in a later stage of the Cold War Walter Ulbricht converted the German Democratic Republic's vulnerability as well as strategic and ideological importance for the Soviet Union into strength to convince Khrushchev to take the risk and build a wall around East Berlin. Soviet diplomacy repeatedly expressed frustration with the actions of the GDR authorities,

which suggests that the GDR's latitude in foreign policy was greater than that of other Soviet client states. It seems that the Soviets tolerated Ulbricht's adventurism because the existence of the GDR was at stake.

North Korea was not strategically vital for the Soviet Union's position as a world power. Even so, the country's leader, Kim Il-sung convinced Stalin to support his program of country unification by force. The historian Chen Jian has claimed Kim may have been a pawn in "Stalin's grand chess game." Yet the evidence presented by Chen suggests that the relationship between puppet master and puppet may not have been clear-cut. It was Kim who convinced an initially skeptical Stalin that a revolutionary situation existed in the southern part of the country and that the war would be over quickly as the people of the south would be ready to rise in support of the northern liberators.

In some cases, the weak states of middle Europe had no influence over their fate in the international system. Paradoxically, even though a state's foreign policy may have been autonomous or even independent, its ability to change its position in international politics may still be zero. The opposite may also have been true. In 1989, the freedom of the Soviet satellite states' foreign policy was severely curtailed yet they transformed the structure of the international system.

In a recent conference at Indiana University, the historian Charles Ingrao made the point that in its long history the Habsburg Empire weathered the challenge of all the great world powers: the French, the Ottomans, the Russians, and the Prussians. Thus, it is ironical that a small power, Serbia caused its demise. The Austro-Hungarian military leadership and Conrad von Hoetzendorf in particular was convinced that Serbian nationalism posed a mortal threat to the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire. The assassination of the heir to the Austrian throne occasioned Vienna's ultimatum, which Belgrade rejected after securing Russian support. In the early stages of the war, the K. und K. army suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Serbians that threw the Austro-Hungarian war plan into disarray. What promised to be a local war with a menacing but weak enemy ended with the disintegration of the Habsburg Empire that had controlled East Central Europe since the Ottomans were driven out of Hungary in 1699.

As Margaret MacMillan has pointed out, "Paris may have housed a world government, but that government's power was never as great as most people, both then and since, have assumed" and that international government was unable to "control events."¹ In fact, low-level officials in the territorial committees charged with drawing the new borders of the successor states of the Monarchy and local armies exerted more influence on the new Central European order than Lloyd George Clemenceau or Wilson. As an example, the peacemakers established a demarcation line between Hungary and Romania pending the peace conferences decision on the final borders in Transylvania. However, the Romanian army with the complicity of the local French military commander,

1 Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War* (London: John Murray Ltd, 2001), 66.

Berthelot, marched beyond the demarcation line and created a *fait accompli* by occupying Transylvania. The fate of the culturally and politically most important city of the province, Kolozsvár [today: Cluj, Romania] was decided in talk between a professor of veterinarian science, István Apáthy and Romanian officials. Apáthy surrendered the city to the Romanians. It cannot be known whether he possessed the authorization of his own government. Czechoslovakia's foreign minister, Edvard Beneš had an inordinate influence on the borders between Hungary and Czechoslovakia assigning his new state territories that were ethnically Hungarian. It was not until 1920 that the peacemakers in Paris saw the new political borders of central Europe. Even though Lloyd George was displeased with the result, it was too late to change them. Due in part to the utter political chaos and their inability to project power and influence into the former Habsburg lands the Entente sanctioned a new order in Middle Europe that rested on contested and ethically untenable borders. Some weak states imposed their will on other weak states in a manner that precluded regional cooperation in politics and economy throughout the interwar period. The new European order was a product of improvisation as much as design. Sir Robert Vansittart summed up the situation in 1930:

All these states like France, are obsessed by anxiety to keep what they got out of the war and to preserve the status quo against those neighbors whom the war despoiled [...]. Their peppery weakness and local brawls have been a disappointment. Conflicts of nationalities [...] and irresponsible chauvinism have, in the case of Yugoslavia and Romania, rendered them unreliable allies in the pursuit of this haunting and evasive "security."²

However, Humpty Dumpty could not be together again. The new states proved poor substitutes to the stabilizing role the Habsburg Empire had played in Central Europe and in 1938, the British decided to replace the nation state system with German hegemony. Munich was not a mistake but a conscious decision to enhance continental stability. This was the point where the small states of Middle Europe lost control of their destiny. This is illustrated by a forgotten episode of the Second World War. From 1942, Hitler's small allies began to explore ways to exit the war and to sign a separate peace with the western allies.

None of these initiatives, which began to gather steam in 1943, were initially taken seriously. Stalin dismissed the Finnish peace initiative as not serious while the U.S. and the British insisted on the formula of unconditional surrender so as not to rouse the suspicion of the Soviets. It is hard to explain why the Hungarian and Romanian efforts were not taken seriously when senior officials such as Adolph Berle understood that if

2 Vansittart papers, Churchill Archives, Cambridge, May 1930, VNST I/1. Quoted in Miklós Lojkó, "Conservative Realignment in British Policy on Central Europe and the Balkans during the Early Interwar Years," in *Európa, nemzet, külpolitika: tanulmányok Ádám Magda 85. születésnapjára* (Budapest: Aura Kiadó, 2010), p. 164.

the Hitler's allies could be induced to defect Germany's south-eastern flank would collapse. The motivation of the Romanians and the Hungarians was to take the risk of breaking with Hitler for better peace terms in the hope that they would be occupied by the Anglo-Americans and would avoid Soviet occupation.

When the date and place for the second front was finally pinned down at the Conference of Quebec these efforts suddenly gained paramount importance. If the Germans could concentrate their forces on the landing site, the operation would be doomed. Therefore, Hitler had to be convinced that the second front would be opened somewhere else and the German forces still in France had to be spread thin. In October the joint chiefs – in harmony with the British – decided to detach both Hungary and Romania from the Axis 'regardless of whether or not such action would be likely to entail full German occupation of these countries.' Allen Dulles, the OSS resident in Switzerland, who was in touch with the Axis peace feelers, was instructed to implement this policy immediately. Ominously he was informed that 'Adolf aware of this decision and informing his boys.' A group of American officers landed in southern Hungary on March 16 with a mission to work with the Hungarian intelligence to collect information on German troop movements. The Hungarians thought that they came to discuss the terms of a separate peace. The Fuehrer no doubt shared the same view as three days later he ordered his troops to invade citing imminent Hungarian treason. The result was the implementation of the Final Solution resulting in the death of nearly half-a-million people. Ultimately, there was nothing the Hungarian leadership could have done to avoid German occupation.

There was nothing the states of Middle Europe could do to avoid Soviet control. The British were concentrating on working out a new European order within the framework of a *modus vivendi* with the Soviets ever since the Eden-Stalin talks. In January 1943, Secretary of State Cordell Hull was handed a document outlining Foreign Office plans. It was so sensitive that the secretary was the sole person who received a copy. The Foreign Office expressed the view that 'Romania will be surrendered to the wolves' and the same will apply to the other adjacent countries too. Shortly before Prime Minister Churchill travelled to Moscow in October 1944 Foreign Secretary Eden, who had championed a territorial arrangement with Stalin since 1941 drew up a list of countries with which Great Britain should have nothing to do with after the war. The list included the Balkan states except Greece as well as Czechoslovakia and Poland. In Moscow Churchill offered to divide the Balkans in the style of classical early 19th century style. As a result, Stalin received from Churchill what he was unable to get from Hitler almost precisely four years before: control of Bulgaria and Romania as well as of Hungary. Theoretically, they agreed on a condominium in Yugoslavia but by rejecting the Balkan option and throwing support behind Tito that country was also surrendered to the Soviets.

Cold War historiography has long focused on only one aspect of Soviet control in Eastern Europe after the war, the introduction of Soviet-type political systems. In fact, there was a simultaneous and interrelated process, Soviet economic penetration and the consolidation of Eastern Europe as Soviet economic space. This process started even

before the war ended. The Soviet-Romanian economic agreement, which provided the framework for the Sovietization of important branches of that country's economy, was signed on VE day. Clearly, the weak powers that fell under Soviet occupation were unable to control their future, which was part of a larger arrangement made between the victorious allies for a new European order.

As Soviet domination mellowed into hegemony, Romania used its increasing latitude to construct a special relationship with China and the U.S. but it remained firmly entrenched in the Soviet bloc. The relative freedom of Romanian foreign policy did not alter the fundamentals of the European order.

In a private letter to Gorbachev Bush claimed that "Together we liberated Eastern Europe and unified Germany." The immodest claim suggests that the transformation that occurred in 1989 was a top down process. In fact, the end of the Cold War resulted from variety of factors. These included high-level decisions made by Gorbachev and the local communist leaderships as well tactical moves of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe and grass roots actions within the former satellites. The assignment of responsibility for the end of the Cold War is a matter of historical accuracy. Secondly, it may help highlight the dynamic of systemic change in international politics.

Most accounts of the end of the Cold War such as Melvyn Leffler's emphasize the role played by Gorbachev and the reorientation of Soviet foreign policy that began in 1987 although some accounts stress the alleged role played by US President Bush. Mark Kramer has pointed out Gorbachev was a necessary but not adequate prerequisite of the change. First of all it was not enough for Gorbachev to "open the door" as the historian John Lewis Gaddis has argued since the domestic communist systems were the most immediate obstacles to democratic transformation in Eastern Europe. The dismantlement of the domestic structure of power was an essential precondition of change and this was not an automatic consequence of Gorbachev's policy.

The collapse of communism in 1989 resulted from a variety of factors. These included severe economic problems, the unintended outcome of communist reform, actions by the democratic opposition and grass roots movements in the context of weakening Soviet control. The Cold War could not have ended without Mikhail Gorbachev. Yet Gorbachev did not end the Cold War alone. In fact, the actions of no individual explain the complex and interrelated set of events that transpired in 1989.

The minimal claim on the role of American foreign policy was that it was a catalyst of change. Publicly the president announced the slogan of "Europe whole and free." Behind closed doors however he and his administration was far less sanguine about the prospects of change. He repeatedly acknowledged that Eastern Europe belonged to the Soviet sphere of interest that he had no desire to cause problems between the Soviets and their allies. He invited Jaruzelski to Washington to emphasize his support. In Budapest, he expressed his belief that the opposition would never come to power. The Bush administration was adamant that there would be no larger effort to finance the transition. Even the idea of visiting Eastern Europe did not originate from the administration. The proposal was broached by an official of the Reagan administration, John Whitehead

already in February. The trip was announced only in May mainly to offset Gorbachev's publicity tour in Western Europe. Even after the meeting with Gorbachev in Malta in December 1989, Secretary of State James Baker spoke about the CSCE process that "could become the most important forum of East-West cooperation." Although it is conceivable that the American non-policy reassured the Soviets and did not impede change, it was hardly a catalyst of change.

Washington's allies in Western Europe were concerned with the rapid change transpiring in Eastern Europe. They shared Washington's concern with Gorbachev's future and concern with stability on the continent. They supported change only to the extent that it did not upset the delicate balance of power and did not lead to instability, which still trumped national self-determination. Tellingly Mitterrand spoke of cooperation between the Soviet bloc and the West even in January 1990.

Although Gorbachev's crucial role is unquestionable, certain points need to be made. Firstly, nobody ever decided to "set Eastern Europe free." Secondly influential as Gorbachev was he did not make Soviet foreign policy alone. Gorbachev and the Soviet apparatus hoped to limit changes to the confines of socialism – whatever they meant by that term in 1989. In fact, Gorbachev was convinced that the changes would "prove the superiority of socialism." On the level of international relations Gorbachev and the military and foreign policy establishment was thinking in terms of the "territorial and political realities" of the postwar period. In March 1989, Gorbachev rejected the dissolution of the WTO and on November 22 Defense Minister Dmitrii Iazov declared that the military organization was a "guarantee of the European balance." The Soviet Foreign Ministry explained that Moscow would not tolerate changes that would alter the realities of postwar Europe and in Malta Gorbachev insisted on the two alliances. Gorbachev's publicly stated 'visions' of the new international order were vague. His notions such as "European brotherhood" would no doubt have been dismissed by Lord Castlereagh as "sublime mysticism and nonsense."

Intentions are one thing and capabilities are another. Stephen Cohen has argued that the Soviet Union may not have been in such a critical economic crisis as many historians assume. But Moscow was no longer in a position to pay for the commodities purchased from its partners in Eastern Europe. Hungary piled up a surplus of one billion dollars on the bilateral clearing account with the Soviets. Even though a paper prepared for the Central Committee of the CPSU called Eastern Europe a military and economic asset for the Soviet Union. Moscow's hold on the periphery was weakening. In July, the Soviet Politburo decided not to use force against Eastern Europe but the decision was not disclosed so as not to weaken the communist regimes. The historian Csaba Békés aptly called this policy the floating of the Brezhnev doctrine. But it is doubtful whether the Soviet Union was in a position to use force against more than one of its allies in any case. In 1956, when the Soviet Union was closer to the peak of its strength than in 1989, the Kremlin would not consider using force against both Poland and Hungary. Even then the first Soviet intervention that took place on October 24 failed to reach its objective of suppressing resistance in Budapest. It is unlikely that the Soviets could have in-

tervened with the hope of winning in more than one satellite in 1989. Finally, the use of force would have deprived Gorbachev's reforms of any domestic legitimacy and would have tarnished his reputation in the West beyond repair. Although Moscow was unwilling and probably unable to keep the periphery with force many of the former tools of Soviet hegemony were still in place. For instance in 1989 there were still 16 Soviet internal security advisors in Hungary. The Soviets were driving a hard bargain on troop reduction. Trade was still oriented towards the Soviet Union. Moscow still insisted on the Warsaw Pact and the Comecon.

The role of the former Soviet client states in the death of the old regime and the birth of the new one was as great or greater as any other factor. Mark Kramer has shown that the relationship between the Soviet Union and the satellite states was not way traffic and the transformations in Eastern Europe played an important role in ending the Soviet Union. Kramer pointed to the international demonstration effect transformed the context in which the Soviet leaders operated undercut the ideological *raison d'être* of the Soviet regime laid bare the illegitimacy of the communist systems and exerted a powerful effect on Soviet elites. But the changes that were taking place within the states of Eastern Europe added up and their cumulative effect was a new order in Europe. One might say that Gorbachev's new course provided the environment in which Eastern Europe changed the prevailing international order.

German reunification would never have been considered without the profound changes that occurred in Hungary. The German Wall was constructed in 1961 to seal the open border and thereby to make the GDR viable. When Hungary opened its borders in September 1989 the GDR was unplugged. A US television network interviewed the reformer Imre Pozsgay about the consequence would be. His reply was unequivocal: the end of the GDR. The author Andreas Oplatka pointed out that the border opening resulted from a series of actions by an emerging civil society and a string of decisions made by the ruling elite, none of which however envisioned releasing the East Germans from Hungary to Austria. An emblematic image of the end of the Cold War showed Austrian and Hungarian foreign ministers cutting down the barbed wire suggesting that the continental division was ended by the actions of political elites. Yet the picture is misleading on several levels. Firstly, the barbed wire had already been removed when the photo was taken. It was partially reconstructed for the photo opportunity. Secondly, the Austrian elites were highly concerned about the removal of the barrier. More importantly, the removal of the border defense system was not meant to lift the travel controls to Austria. One of the most important steps towards the reestablishment of the freedom of movement between Hungary and the West was the organization of the pan European picnic in August 1989. This event was conceived and planned by non-government actors and set events into motion that led to the opening of borders to GDR citizens.

According to neorealist theory as explained by Kenneth Waltz holds that "structures are defined by the distribution of capabilities across units. Changes in the distribution are changes of the system. The structure of a system changes with changes in the distribution of capabilities across units." The dissolution of the Soviet bloc in Eastern

Europe caused such redistribution of power. The Soviet military understood the consequences for Soviet power. Soviet Chief of Staff Marshall Akhromeyev declared that “the Warsaw Treaty Organization and Soviet troops stationed in the territory of Eastern Europe was the bedrock of Eastern Europe’s security. The security system that was created after the war was the foundation on which everything else was based.” General Ivan Mikhailin felt that the “West is isolating us on the periphery of the European continent” while the commander-in-chief of the Pacific Fleet lamented that “the USSR returned to the situation of 1939.” This drastic reconfiguration was caused by the domestic upheavals in states formerly dominated by the Soviet Union. Thus, in fact, the reconfiguration of the international field in 1989–1991 cast doubt on the realist assertion that systemic change in international politics is generated by the redistribution in it. Realists discount the role of the domestic setting of international politics but it does seem that domestic transformations generated the systemic change in the international system.

Weak powers in Eastern Europe exerted their influence on international politics in cases where strong powers were powerless to impose their will on them. In 1918, Austria-Hungary’s collapse created a vacuum. Germany was shattered by defeat and economic collapse, Russia struggled in revolution and civil strife. The victors were also fatally weakened and aside from Italy never had any strategic or economic interest in the region. In 1989, the Soviet Union was interested in the preservation of a reformed version of the post war order and communist regimes that served as that order’s eastern pillars. Central Europe was situated on an important fault line in world politics, filling in the space between Germany and Russia. This translated into extremes either absolute impotence at times when the force field of powers was strong or the ability to shape international order, at times when the force weak was absent or weak.