East and Central European Countries and the Iraq War: The choice between “soft balancing” and “soft bandwagoning”

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Abstract

This study argues that the new concept of “soft balancing” adds to our ability to explain the decisions of East and Central European countries to support the US in the Iraq War. Moreover, it suggests that by emphasizing soft rather than hard bandwagoning we gain a more subtle understanding of the degrees of support that countries offered the US. This approach reminds us that we should not only emphasize the similarities between the foreign policies of these countries but also their differences.

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The shift from the Cold War to the post-Cold War era has been accompanied by a reassessment of our analytical tools in International Relations. Among the new concepts that have been given much attention is the one of “soft balancing.”

The concept of “soft balancing” was initially introduced to explain the surprising lack of traditional balancing in the quasi-unipolar world of the 1990s (Walt, 2002; Joffe, 2002). The term soon became the subject of greater scrutiny as several authors argued for (Paul, 2004; Pape, 2005) or against (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2005; Lieber and Alexander 2005) its analytical and descriptive value. The proponents of the arguments behind the use of the “soft balancing” concept maintained that it complements
the traditional balance of power theories and allows us to explain developments short of actual “hard balancing” in an era when states have not formed formal alliances against the United States. Understanding “soft balancing” is considered especially important as the actions that fall under this category are seen as precursors to future traditional balancing against the US (Pape, 2005: 10).

The concept has come to be broadly accepted as describing “actions that do not directly challenge preponderance but that use non-military tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral US military policies” (Pape, 2005: 10). Its emphasis on non-military uses of force has primarily led to discussions of the formation of political alliances (Paul, 2005) and the use of international institutions as foreign policy tools (Khong, 2004; Grant and Keohane 2005; Stedman, 2007). “Soft balancing” has especially been used to describe the global French, German, and Russian efforts to delay or thwart US plans before the start of the 2003 Iraq war (Paul, 2004). But the concept has also been applied to explain regional policies in Asia (Khong, 2004), the Middle East (Thayer, 2003) and Europe (Layne, 2003; Oswald, 2006).

The literature discussing “soft balancing” has so far focused only on militarily powerful countries. For example, in the post-communist space the concept of “soft balancing” has sometimes been applied to describe Russia’s policies (Paul, 2004; Wohlforth, 2003) but not those of East and Central European (ECE) countries. This is surprising considering that, as mentioned, the methods that are used in “soft balancing” do not necessitate control of the military (or even economic) power and rely more on diplomacy and the use of international institutions. Such tools are also available to weak states. It is especially intriguing considering that small states played an important role at the outset of the Iraq War, the event that has truly sparked the use of the concept.

On March 18, 2003, two days before the first strikes in the Iraq War, Colin Powell made public a list of 30 countries that were to join the US in a “coalition of the willing.” With few exceptions, these countries were relatively weak militarily. But their decision to side with the US was essential as their number contributed significantly to the perceived legitimacy of the Bush Administration’s war efforts, both in the international and domestic realms. About half of the countries on the list were post-communist states. While only six of the 15 EU members (and traditional US allies) were on the list, virtually all EU post-communist candidate countries from ECE were included. This observation led to the well-known distinction between the ECE countries supporting the US (“New Europe”) and those from West Europe, such as France and Germany, not supporting it (“Old Europe”).

The ECE decisions to join the US triggered dozens of articles in newspapers and in academic journals (Rhodes, 2004; Taras, 2004; Bugajski and Teleki, 2005) as well as several edited volumes on the topic (Levy, Pensky and Torpey, 2005; Lansford and Tashev, 2005). This literature offered thorough discussions of the possible common causes of these countries’ decisions to join the US, of the events leading to these decisions, and to their participation in the war. Yet, the vast majority of these works came before the “soft balancing” concept was fully developed and therefore had not considered its usefulness in explaining ECE actions in 2002–2003. This
study intends to complement this literature as well as the literature on “soft balancing” by asking two interrelated questions. Can the dynamics of “soft balancing” offer us an increased understanding of ECE countries’ decisions to “bandwagon” with the US? Conversely, does the case of ECE bandwagoning in the Iraq War offer us a better understanding of the dynamics of “soft balancing?”

The concepts of “soft balancing” and “soft bandwagoning”

In order to answer the above questions, we need to first disentangle the two essential analytical components of “soft balancing.” The first is an extension of balance of power arguments that operates at the structural level and that emphasizes common policies of balancing (or bandwagoning). It builds on traditional theories of balancing. The following sections will show that this first component of the “soft balancing” concept does not offer much, if any, additional analytical leverage for understanding ECE decisions to join the US in the war in Iraq. It is argued that the decisions of ECE countries to formally join the US by signing the “Letter of Eight” and the “Vilnius Declaration” supporting the war, and thus to bandwagon with the sole remaining superpower, can be satisfactorily explained using traditional balance of power theory. The logic of “soft balancing,” does offer some additional reasons for their decisions to not join France and Germany in their efforts to delay or thwart the US-led war in Iraq. Yet, these additional explanations do not add much beyond the contribution of “balance of threat” logics already discussed in the literature (Walt, 1987).

While arguments of traditional balancing and even of “soft balancing” can help us understand whom the ECE countries supported, they do not tell us much about how they offered their support. On the other hand, the study argues that the second component of “soft balancing,” that operates at the decision-making (state) level and emphasizes the subtle (soft) methods used by countries to balance or bandwagon indeed adds to our ability to interpret the nature of ECE actions. More importantly, if we take the argument of “soft balancing” to its logical conclusion and emphasize that bandwagoning and not just balancing can take a “soft” form, we are able to offer a more subtle interpretation of the degrees of their support for the US.

The study will therefore discuss the actions of ECE countries as ones of “soft bandwagoning,” analogous to the “soft balancing” used to describe the French, German and Russian actions before the Iraq War. Just as “soft balancing” implies that policies fall short of actual military opposition to the US, “soft bandwagoning” implies that support for the US is only moderate and/or symbolic. Also, just as “soft balancing” allows for different degrees of opposition to the most powerful country (as the examples of France, Germany, Russia, China and many other states that opposed the war suggest), “soft bandwagoning” allows for different degrees of support for it. It will be shown that, based on the ambiguous rhetoric used by ECE leaders at the beginning of the Iraq War and even on some of their contributions to the Multinational Force in Iraq (MNF), one concludes that in most cases these countries’ support for the US was moderate. As it fell somewhere on a continuum between strong support and no
actual support, we can best understand their positions by considering them as forms of “soft bandwagoning” rather than traditional “hard bandwagoning.”

It is to be expected that the concepts of “soft balancing” and “soft bandwagoning” will be increasingly relevant. This is because the simplistic “black-or-white” divisions of the Cold War are not adequate anymore for describing the subtle policies states need to engage in when they are more likely to have to choose between powerful allies than between states that are on two different sides of a conflict. The traditional balance of power literature was used to describe how countries chose which side of a conflict they would join. It assumed that they had three possible choices: (1) to bandwagon by taking the side of the most powerful state or group of states (that we could denote as “+1”); (2) to remain neutral by not joining any side (“0”); (3) to balance by joining the weaker side (“−1”). “Soft balancing” has been used to describe policies of second-ranked powers trying to delay and thwart war efforts of the US. French and German “soft balancing” implied a de facto neutral position in the Iraq war, at least in the first year. Under these conditions, the “moderate” positions ECE countries were searching for could only fall somewhere on a continuum between not getting involved in the war, as France and Germany chose to do (“0”), and supporting the US in the war (“+1”). Even though in such cases states appear to have fewer options (because their position can only fall on one half of the continuum), in fact, the situation allows for a choice between many different degrees of support for the US. This is a result of the “near-unipolar” nature of today’s international system.

The emphasis on the degree of support that countries offered the US allows us in this study to highlight important differences between ECE troop contributions to the MNF and the contributions of other countries that were part of the coalition. More importantly, the study will show that there were significant differences in the degree of support for the US among ECE countries. This ranged from the decisions of Croatia and Slovenia to not send any troops as part of the US-led coalition, to Poland’s substantial contribution to the war and to the stabilization efforts. This reminds us that our predilection for discussing common positions of groups of states, perhaps a remnant of Cold War understandings of conflict, may not be particularly useful in the complex post-Cold War era. The observation that ECE countries have adopted and continue to adopt different foreign policies should encourage us to pursue more comparative work on this region, in order to understand the factors that may lead some of these post-communist states to move closer to or further from the US.

Dichotomous decisions

Since 1989, ECE foreign policies had been driven by their desire to join “the West” and Western organizations, such as the EU and NATO. Because of that, their policies had become somewhat predictable as they tried to please the US and Western Europe, the gatekeepers to these organizations. There had been some differences between the US and West European countries even before the Iraq crisis of 2002–2003, such as those regarding the International Criminal Court and global
warming. In such cases ECE countries had a hard time finding a position that would please both sides (Linden, 2004).

The 2003 war with Iraq was a rare case where NATO and the EU could not offer ECE countries any guidance for their policies, as they had done so many times in the past, because neither of them was able to bridge the differences between their members. The closest NATO could come in offering a common position on Iraq was a brief statement at the Prague Summit in November 2002, pledging “full support for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1441” and calling “on Iraq to comply fully and immediately with [...] all relevant UN Security Council resolutions” (NATO, 2002). Only in March 2003, after the US-led coalition began operations, were NATO members able to offer another joint declaration on the issue. This one simply discussed the threat posed by Iraq to Turkey and members “expressed their determination to continue to fulfill their treaty obligations to a member nation under threat” (NATO, 2003).

The EU also tried desperately to speak with a common voice on the Iraq issue. Yet, the extraordinary session of the European Council on February 17, 2003, only led to a general agreement “that there should be complete and effective disarmament, in accordance with UN Security Council resolution 1441 and other resolutions” (Embassy of Greece, 2003).

Members of the two organizations could not agree if and when to use force against Iraq. ECE countries were on their own in making a difficult choice between their Western allies. All of them eventually appeared to choose the US position and, just as important, the one of about half a dozen West European states, over the one of France and Germany and of the majority of EU members.

Their support initially came in the form of two well-publicized letters. On January 30, 2003, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, together with five other West European countries (Denmark, Italy, Portugal, Spain and the UK) signed the so-called Letter of Eight (L-8). This letter was in great part intended to show that France and Germany did not speak on behalf of all of Europe. It emphasized the long-standing relationship between Europe and the US. Yet it stopped short of saying that the countries were ready to use force in Iraq. At that time the authors of the letter left the burden of the decision on the Security Council.

Six days after the L-8 was signed, the “Vilnius group,” until then an obscure grouping of ten ECE countries (Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia) whose main purpose was to support one another in gaining NATO membership, signed an even more emphatic letter of support for the US. The letter was made public on the day that Colin Powell addressed the UN Security Council and was intended to be seen as a reaction of support to his presentation of evidence against Iraq. Like the Letter of Eight, the Vilnius Declaration (V-10) made reference to the democratic values that the countries shared with the US. But it went further by stating that Iraq was now in material breach of UN Security Council Resolution 1441 and that the signatories were “prepared to contribute to an international coalition to enforce its provisions and the disarmament of Iraq” (Vilnius Group, 2003).
Before drawing any generalizations based on ECE actions in early 2003, one needs to note the dichotomous nature of the problems they were faced with. By going to ECE countries for support with the two letters, American officials put these governments in a situation where they had to choose quickly between two options: to sign the letters or not to sign them.

Hungarian Foreign Minister Laszlo Kovacs explained that, when presented with the L-8 text, he was faced with three options: to accept the original text, to reject it or to “improve it” (Hungarian Radio, February 3, 2003). It turned out that ECE countries could not “improve” the texts too much due to lack of time and the relative intransigence of the US (Baker et al., 2003). This, in fact, led to only two options for these countries.

For the most part, they did not want to make such a choice. Romanian Foreign Minister Mircea Geoana said “the countries in our region should not fall into the trap of false conflict loyalties and feel obliged to set priorities.” (France Presse, January 30, 2003) Others described the situation less diplomatically. In Croatia, one legislator summed the situation up by recalling a well-known Croat dictum, “When big boys fight, the little ones get under the table” (World News Connection, February 7, 2003).

The dichotomous nature of the problem they were faced with contributed to their common stance. Even though there were also reasons for the ECE countries to side with France and Germany, they all decided that, overall, it was in their interests and/or appropriate to support the US (Mihalka, 2005).

Balancing vs. bandwagoning

Why did all these ECE countries sign the letters supporting the US? Why didn’t any of them side with France and Germany and stay out of the war? Balance of power theory has traditionally struggled in predicting whether a state should balance or bandwagon. (Waltz, 1979: 190) But the literature has offered a series of factors which make it more likely for a state to adopt one of these two policies. For example, there has been a general agreement that the weaker the state, the more likely it is that it will bandwagon with great powers. This is because their lack of power makes it unlikely that they can tilt the balance between two groups of states. (Brawley, 2004: 82) Also, the non-material benefits such as “status” and “prestige,” that have been considered to lead powerful states like Russia to choose balancing over bandwagoning (Ambrosio, 2005), are not likely to be as relevant for small states.

In addition, the literature has shown that small states are especially likely to bandwagon when the powerful state can offer them economic incentives. (Schweller, 1994) This appears to have been true for ECE countries in 2002–2003. Many saw their participation in the stabilization efforts in Iraq as a way to secure substantial reconstruction contracts and, in some cases, to recover debts. Others simply saw this as an opportunity to receive increased financial aid from the US.

Countries are also seen to bandwagon with a powerful country from outside their immediate geographic area in order to balance against regional powers. ECE bandwagoning in 2003 has indeed been interpreted as a form of balancing against the
potentially renascent Russian threat (Elkin, 2003; Budryte, 2005). These countries were very much influenced by Russia’s decision to join France and Germany and not the US on this issue. Most of them were still wary of Russian intentions towards the region. Russia’s alliance with two of the major European powers was interpreted by them as a potential isolation of the US in Europe. ECE countries feared such an alliance because, in the medium and long term, it could weaken US willingness to remain engaged in Europe, something that the smaller states in the region could not accept.

Some have also interpreted ECE actions as a form of balancing against France and Germany (Rhodes, 2004: 432–433). This argument becomes especially powerful if one recognizes that by joining the US, ECE countries also joined a small but significant group of West European powers such as the UK, Spain and Italy that had signaled that they were not pleased with the overly strong role France and Germany were playing in Europe. The three had made it clear that they did not want the two “motors” of the EU speaking on behalf of the entire European Union (Johnston, 2005; Sedgwick, 2005). ECE states also wanted to show that they were not going to be intimidated by France and Germany that appeared to control the European institutions that they were about to join.

Lastly, in order to understand the ECE decision to side with the US, one needs to note the difference between the security guarantees that these countries expected from the US as opposed to the primarily economic benefits they could expect from their membership in the EU. Realist theories, including those of balance of power, emphasize that, states will choose policies that alleviate their security concerns over those that bring them primarily economic benefits. This suggests, once more, that when faced with a choice to back the United States or Germany and France, traditional balancing vs. bandwagoning arguments would indeed have predicted that ECE countries would support the sole remaining military superpower.

Overall, the arguments that have usually been used to explain balancing behavior seem to also account for the decisions of ECE countries to side with the United States in the Iraq war. Can the logic of “soft balancing” offer any additional explanations for ECE positions?

While there are no discussions of “soft bandwagoning” to complement the recent literature on “soft balancing,” we can tease out from existing works the factors that can explain why countries such as France, Germany and Russia decided to engage in “soft balancing” and then determine if these factors were present in the case of ECE countries.

The extant literature suggests that “soft balancing” against the US is due to (1) the threat of potential violence, especially terrorism, that US policy of preventive war can unleash; (2) the increase in US relative gains that would come with its control of Iraq’s oil; (3) perceptions of insecurity due to the prospect of US missile defenses (Pape, 2005: 29–33) and (4) concerns for one’s sovereignty due to US unilateral or even “imperialistic” policies (Paul, 2005: 57–58).

In all four of these respects, ECE countries appeared to be less likely to fear US unilateralism than the countries that engaged in “soft balancing.” Their relative lack of experience with terrorist incidents on their territory led to low levels of fears of terrorist attacks. In spring 2003 it was shown that on average about 20% of the
EU member-state public and just a little over 2% of the public from ECE candidate countries considered terrorism among the two top issues facing their countries (Eurobarometer, 2003a). Also, ECE countries were already strongly dependent on Russia for oil and natural gas (Dempsey, 2004). Their decision to bandwagon was in part due to their hope of securing contracts in oil-rich Iraq (Rhodes, 2004) and to gain greater independence for their energy needs by having an important source of their oil controlled by the US rather than Russia.

Finally, as non-nuclear countries they did not feel threatened by US missile defense as Russia and other nuclear powers did. In fact, US plans for missile defense involve placing anti-missile interceptors in Poland and a radar in the Czech Republic (BBC, 2007). Overall, if ECE countries felt threatened by someone in 2003, whether due to potential unilateral actions, to the control of energy resources, or of nuclear capabilities, it was more likely that it would be Russia rather than the US.

This may be an important reason why the uncertainty of US “benign intent” was not as strong in ECE countries as it was in France and Germany or than in the EU as a whole. While there are no surveys asking the specific question regarding the fear of unilateralism, there are several that ask related questions. A 2003 Eurobarometer poll revealed that only 23% of the public in EU member-countries (and 18% of Germans and 11% of French) believed that the US role regarding peace in the world was mostly a positive one. Fifty-eight percent of EU respondents (and 66% of French and 73% of Germans) considered that the US role is a negative one (Eurobarometer, 2003c). This contrasts with ECE where those who considered that the US had mostly a positive role in promoting peace in the world (34%) slightly outnumbered those who believed it had a negative role (32%) (Eurobarometer, 2003b).

Another poll that has been conducted in about a dozen European countries since 2002, asks how desirable it is for the US to exert strong leadership in world affairs. In summer 2002, before it became apparent that the US was willing to go to war with Iraq even without a clear UN mandate, the number of respondents who considered that it is “strongly undesirable” or “somewhat undesirable” that the US exert strong leadership in world affairs represented a minority within all European states included in the survey. By 2003 such perceptions appear to have changed. Seventy percent of French and 51% of Germans believed US leadership was undesirable. By contrast, only 38% of respondents in the UK, 41% in the Netherlands and 31% in Poland (the only ECE country included in that survey) considered it strongly undesirable or somewhat undesirable (Transatlantic Trends, 2007).

It is true that the public in Poland, like virtually all ECE publics, opposed the Iraq War as much as the West Europeans did (Gallup International, 2003). Yet, it appears that they opposed it for other reasons than fear for US rising unilateralism. For example, Polish Foreign Minister Wlodzimierz Cimoszewicz declared in March 2003 that he was frightened more by “an arrogant Saddam who for years has humiliated the international community” than by the specter of the US as a superpower imposing its will on the international community (Taras, 2004: 8).

What other countries may have perceived as increased unilateralism on the part of the US was interpreted in ECE as simply another example of strong US leadership.
They believed that such leadership and resolve were responsible for their liberation from Soviet control and that continued resolve could act as a security guarantee against future Russian influence in the region (Esterhazy, 2005: 75). Moreover, as countries that had been allied with the Soviet Union for almost half a century, and had experienced very strong Soviet “leadership” in world affairs, it was less likely that they would see US actions as too unilateralist in nature. They had different terms of reference than West Europeans.

The argument made by some in France and Germany that the countries of ECE had never really known what to do with their sovereignty and have consistently sought a “bigger brother” to protect them (Habermas and Derrida, 2005: 5) are exaggerated. But it does appear that they were not as fearful of US unilateralism and were more likely to trust the US “benign intentions” in world politics than the French and Germans.

The above suggests that, in the case of ECE, the decisions not to engage in “soft balancing” against the US are due to the lack of perceived threat posed by the superpower. While this conclusion is important, the explanation only adds one more element to the multiple arguments already offered in the literature describing ECE decisions. Also, the argument does not appear to add much to the one of Stephen Walt, suggesting that states tend to balance against threats (1987).

Overall, based on its ability to explain the bandwagoning behavior of ECE states, the first component of the “soft balancing” concept appears to only slightly enhance our analytical leverage. On the other hand, the following sections will show that the second component, emphasizing the “soft” nature of their support for the US, is indeed a useful one.

Degrees of political support

As soon as the ECE countries signed the two letters of support for the US, most of them engaged in a more subtle kind of diplomacy. In the months following the start of the Iraq War, virtually all of the 13 ECE countries that had signed letters of support for the US tried to backtrack and mend fences with the French and Germans, knowing very well how much they depended on these countries. At the same time, in what the press sometimes described as “tightrope walking” or “acrobatics” (Deutsche Presse, February 24, 2003; Deutsche Presse, March 15, 2003), they continued to show their support for the US. This was visible in their rhetoric, in their positions in intergovernmental organizations (Tully, 2003), and even in their military contributions to the Iraq War.

Even Poland, the most visible of US allies from the region, tried to accommodate the two sides. In May 2003, at a three-way summit with his French and German counterparts, President Kwasniewski “accepted criticism on one point,” acknowledging that “it was an omission not to have consulted Paris and Berlin on the letter [of eight]” (Mcevoy, 2003).

Hungary and the Czech Republic, the other two ECE countries that signed the L-8, appeared to move even closer to the French and German positions. Immediately after Hungary signed the letter, Prime Minister Medgyeessy declared that the
document did not represent any change in the initial Hungarian position (that had so far been against a war). A month later, Defense Minister Ferenc Juhasz told Parliament that Hungary had no intention of joining any military action against Iraq (Hungarian News Agency, February 5, 2003). By late March 2003 the Prime Minister declared that “Hungary is not at war” and that “Hungarian soldiers are not, and will not be, taking part in military operations underway in Iraq” (Hungarian News Agency, March 20, 2003). In fact, Hungary continued to have diplomatic relations with Iraq even after the US requested officially that the Hungarian Foreign Ministry shut down the Iraqi Mission in Budapest (Hungarian News Agency, March 21, 2003). It also refused US requests to use the Taszar air base (that had previously been used to train Iraqi opposition fighters) (Hungarian Radio, February 4, 2003).

In the Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel had signed the L-8 on one of his last days in office. His successor, Vaclav Klaus, called the war “very questionable” (Testault, March 14, 2003a). He refused to support the US war in Iraq any further and allegedly requested to have the Czech Republic taken off the list of the “coalition of the willing.” In April 2003, Prime Minister Vladimir Spidla reiterated that the Czech Republic is not a member of Operation Iraqi Freedom (Testault, April 5, 2003b).

Similar reactions came from the signatories of the V-10. In early April 2003 the Romanian Foreign Minister declared that Romanians “have a feeling of duty and gratefulness towards the Americans, who have helped us destroy communism.” But then he added that French authorities are “the most efficient advocates of Romania’s cause in Europe” (Mediafax, April 8, 2003).

In Bulgaria, the debate between those supporting the US and those supporting France and Germany played out in domestic politics. Just hours after the war began President Parvanov declared that he did not “accept” the war (Tashev, 2005: 139). The United Democratic Forces leader, Nadezhda Mikhaylova, criticized him for not supporting the US more. She argued that, “To Germany and France, Bulgaria remains one of the countries that supported the United States and Britain, while to Washington and London it is a state that is ashamed of its support” (Bulgarian News Agency, March 20, 2003).

On March 25, 2003, the Lithuanian Parliament adopted a resolution explaining that the country’s involvement in Iraq was simply “a humanitarian mission to eliminate the consequences of war.” It also stated that Lithuania was not directly involved in the war (RIA Novosti News Agency, March 27 2003b).

Latvian Foreign Minister Sandra Kalniete declared soon after the signing of the V-10 declaration that her country, in fact, had never supported the war in Iraq (World News Connection, March 3, 2003). In March 2003, she and several other officials met with NATO Assembly representatives as part of Latvia’s process of accession to the organization. During the discussions one Latvian MP candidly declared that: “Latvia ended up in a stupid situation. On one hand, 75 percent of the population do[es] not support the military operation without UN backing. […] On the other hand, Americans are our trusted allies and we are supposed to support them. Which side do we take? We’ve chosen the position of the US” (Elkin, 2003).

Just two days after signing the Vilnius Declaration, Croatian officials declared that their country would not be part of the coalition. Two weeks later, after a meeting
with Chirac in Paris, in a gesture that was described by a German news agency as “diplomatic acrobatics” (Deutsche Presse, February 24, 2003), President Mesic said his country wanted “to cooperate both with the United States and with European partners” on Iraq (World News Connection, February 24, 2003). This was not surprising considering that Croatia had just submitted its formal application for EU membership.

One of the most obvious cases of back-tracking from the initial support for the US took place in Slovenia. A few days after the publication of the V-10 letter, the office of the president issued a statement saying the document was not a formal one and was not legally binding for Slovenia. Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel said that the Slovene government did not support a possible war in Iraq and that the V-10 statement was misinterpreted as backing the US. “I swear that I was not thinking even for a moment in such a way” (Asia Africa News Wire, March 5, 2003). On March 31, 2003, he reiterated his firm stance: “We are not members of the anti-Iraq Coalition and we are not taking part in this war” (Asia Africa News Wire, April 1, 2003).

The ambiguous ECE rhetoric reflected these countries’ interests in maintaining good relations with the US and with France and Germany. They also reflected a desire by ECE elites to show their publics (that for the most part opposed the war) that they themselves were not entirely supportive of the war. These same factors also contributed to their decisions regarding their actual military support for the US.

**Degrees of military support**

In March 2003, the US made clear that those who declared their support needed now to actually contribute militarily to the coalition. At that point ECE countries were faced with difficult decisions regarding the degree of their support. Once more, they tried to please the US but seemed in most cases to also signal that their support would be limited.

In many cases the small numbers of troops ECE countries sent to Iraq were symbolic. Certainly the 31 troops sent by Estonia or the 70 troops from Albania had a very small impact on stabilization in the country. But, precisely for this reason, we need to understand how ECE countries viewed their symbolic gestures.

The decision of how many troops each country should send was made after long debates in parliaments, in the media, and even between officials within the same government. When Poland initially decided to send 200 servicemen, some argued that this was not enough. Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the president of the Law and Justice Party said that “… a country of 40 million sending 200 servicemen does not put itself in the best possible light” (Polish Radio 1, March 18, 2003). In the end, after long debates, Poland sent 2500 troops.

It took the Latvian Sejm nine hours to decide on the exact number of troops to send in support of the US. The debate centered on the country’s “dilemma of dual loyalty”: how to please the United States without upsetting Europeans (Budryte, 2005: 158). With a slight majority, the parliament accepted the deployment of 36 Latvian troops,
less than what the government had proposed (RIA Novosti News Agency, March 20, 2003a). After more debates, the number of troops was later increased to 120.

In May 2003, the Hungarian parliament accepted to open the country’s territory and airspace to the US-led coalition but voted down twice the decision to send troops to Iraq (France Presse, May 6, 2003). In June, the parliament eventually agreed to send a transport battalion of 300. A year later, the parliament lacked a two-thirds majority to maintain its troops there and, by late 2004, Hungary withdrew them from Iraq (Valki, 2005: 251).

Although the Czech Republic deployed 357 nuclear, biological and chemical weapons experts in Kuwait, the Czech Parliament did not allow them initially to intervene in Iraq. Slovakia also refused to allow its 59 soldiers (who were part of the Czech battalion) to enter Iraq (Testault, April 5, 2003).

The number of ECE troops sent to Iraq thus reflected the level of domestic political support each government could muster. Moreover, the decision to limit the number and mandate of troops they sent was intended to show, just as the rhetoric had, that while ECE countries did support the US their support was, on the whole, moderate.

The military contributions of the ECE countries are illustrated in Tables 1 and 2. The tables reflect troop levels for March 2004 (at the peak of military support for the coalition. The thirteen ECE signatories of the L-8 and V-10 sent approximately 4500 troops as part of the coalition, less than one-third of what the five EU signatories of the L-8 sent and less than half of what a comparable number of countries from other regions of the world contributed.

It may not be sufficient to compare the total number of troops ECE countries sent as part of the coalition. Obviously, many of these countries were small and could not contribute much (Rhodes, 2004: 423). Yet, even when one compares the average ratio between the number of troops ECE countries sent to the region to those they could have made available (from the number of active troops they had), it appears that they contributed less to the coalition than other countries.

One can argue that, even the proportion of troops ECE countries sent to Iraq may not be the ideal gauge of their willingness to support the US because (a) these countries lacked funding for sending large contingents and (b) as they were still in the process of reforming their militaries their troops lacked the necessary training to take part in operations such as those in Iraq. But, one should not overstate these two arguments.

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<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Troop contributions to the MNF in March 2004 (groups of states)</th>
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<td><strong>Group of states</strong></td>
<td><strong>Troops</strong></td>
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<td>ECE signatories of L-8 and V-10</td>
<td>4498</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>130000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU states in coalition</td>
<td>13848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All other states in coalition</td>
<td>11600</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For example, in the case of Poland, the largest ECE contributor of troops to the MNF, the US covered the transport and the cost of maintaining Polish troops in Iraq and supplied them with most of their equipment. Poland only paid the wages of the troops (Gazeta Wyborcza, May 16, 2003). Overall, Polish officials declared that the financing of the 2500 troops was relatively small, representing only 2% of the country’s defense budget (Taras, 2004; 13).

The problems of lack of sufficiently trained troops should also not be overstated. It is relevant to note that, in March 2004, while the 13 ECE countries were contributing fewer troops to the Iraq war than their West European partners in the coalition, they were nevertheless contributing more troops to UN peacekeeping operations than the six EU countries in Table 1 (United Nations Peacekeeping Contributions, 2004). In most cases, their contributions to UN peacekeeping remained the same or were even slightly increased in the following years. This may suggest that they did have additional military capabilities that they could have contributed to the stabilization efforts in Iraq, but preferred maintaining them in less controversial operations.

The example of Slovakia is significant in this sense. Even though it only deployed about 100 troops to Iraq in August 2003, it was at that time contributing a little over 600 troops to UN peacekeeping operations (United Nations Peacekeeping Contributions, 2003). Slovakia’s contribution to UN peacekeeping was reduced to less than 400 troops over the next year (United Nations Peacekeeping Contributions, 2004). But this did not translate in any increase in its troops in Iraq.

Similarly, Romania’s contribution of 700–800 troops to the MNF has been considered relatively high compared to other ECE countries. Yet this contribution is smaller than the total 1200 troops that this country sent to the less controversial operations in Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Kosovo.

In June 2003, the Hungarian parliament decided to reduce its contingent in Afghanistan so that it could “focus on the Iraqi mission” (Kossuth Radio, June 5,
But its example was not followed by other ECE countries. Once more, this suggests that in most cases, ECE countries could have contributed more troops.

Perhaps the best gauge of the moderate ECE military support to the coalition is that the US expressed its disappointment with the small number of troop contributions from the countries that had officially declared their support for the war, including from the ECE countries. This eventually forced the US to leave more troops in Iraq instead of sending some home according to initial plans. Even more important is the fact that the German and especially the French press noted the reduced number of ECE troops in the coalition and the US disappointment, just as they had covered the hesitant rhetorical support for the US (France Presse, January 30, 2003; Testault, 2003; France Presse, May 6, 2003; France Presse, May 30, 2003). In other words, if the ECE countries were hoping to signal their moderate support for the US to the French and Germans, it appears that this signal did not go unnoticed.

Overall, based on multiple gauges of military support, the ECE countries appear to have made a relatively small contribution to the MNF compared to other states. Their moderate contribution reflects their “dual loyalties” to the US and to France and Germany and should be seen as a question of degree rather than a dichotomous question of support or lack of support.

This argument leads to an even more important observation. As Table 2 suggests, there were important differences among ECE countries and not just between them and other groups of countries. While one should not consider the numbers an exact gauge of their willingness to support the US, they do reflect important differences between these countries’ decisions. For example, by March 2004, Poland had sent more troops than all other ECE countries combined. It also appears to have made a greater effort than virtually all other countries judging by the number of active troops it had. The troops from its special operations unit (GROM) were the only ones from ECE to take part in the actual invasion of Iraq. Most importantly, Poland was the only country besides the United States and the U.K. that was charged with administering a stabilization sector in Iraq (Taras, 2004).

This especially contrasts with the Czech Republic that sent a much smaller number and proportion of its troops and with Hungary that withdrew its troops from Iraq after a year and a half. Both of these countries were arguably in similar political and economic positions as Poland. All three were already NATO members and were on the verge of becoming EU members. Their relative support for the MNF should therefore have been similar, at least with regard to the proportion of troops that they contributed.

On the other end of the spectrum of military contributions are Croatia and Slovenia that did not send any troops as part of the MNF. It is also noteworthy that, as one would expect, the seven signatories of the V-10 that were expecting to become NATO members in March 2004, contributed more troops and larger proportions of their troops to the multinational force in Iraq than the three other signatories that were not as close to becoming members.

It is interesting to also consider the differences between the Baltic countries. Even though all three sent small contingents, one can notice differences between the contributions they made. Judging by the numbers of troops and by the proportion of troops they contributed from those that they could send, Latvia appears to have
made the greatest effort while Estonia appears to have made the smallest one. This
difference also appears to reflect the differences in pro-US vs. pro-French and Ger-
man rhetoric in the two countries (Baltic News Service, April 26 2003; Esti
Paevaleht, March 21, 2003).

Overall, the troop contributions of these countries as well as the elite rhetoric re-
garding the war reflect subtle yet important differences. This suggests that ECE
countries’ support for the US and their lack of support for the French and German
positions, cannot be viewed as a simple dichotomy, as their initial signatures on the
L-8 and V-10 letters would suggest. By recognizing this fact, we can understand bet-
ter the usefulness of the concepts of “soft balancing” and “soft bandwagoning” as
well as the actions of ECE countries with regard to the Iraq War.

Conclusions

ECE countries did not have to offer their complete political and even military sup-
port to the Iraq War as the US certainly could defeat Iraq on its own, especially after
more than a decade of sanctions and after UN weapons inspections had substantially
weakened that country’s military capabilities. As one Hungarian official argued in
2003, “If 200,000 coalition troops can’t maintain peace in Iraq, the 300 Hungarian
troops will make no difference” (Hungarian TV2, 2003). ECE countries simply
needed to offer some political and military support so as to broaden the number
of countries participating in the US-led efforts and thus to give greater international
and domestic legitimacy to US actions. The dilemma ECE countries faced in trying
to find the right degree of support for the US is one that they, as well as many other
small countries, are likely to struggle with, beyond the Iraq War.

This argument should not be understood as an encouragement for the use and mis-
use of the concept of “soft bandwagoning” (or even the one of “soft balancing”) to
describe countries’ policies. It simply intends to build on and reinforce existing argu-
ments sparked by the literature discussing soft balancing for the need to develop new
tools better understanding the post-Cold War era (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2005: 75).

The previous sections suggest that ECE actions in 2003 can contribute to our
better understanding of the “soft balancing” concept. First, they remind us that,
the literature also needs to consider the presence of “soft bandwagoning” behavior
in the post-Cold War era and not just of “soft balancing.” This type of behavior is
likely to be increasingly common and relevant in the future. More importantly, they
show that this literature needs to also focus on countries that are not powerful
militarily. If “soft balancing” and “soft bandwagoning” do not necessitate strong
military or economic power, we need to reconsider the kind of countries that are rel-
evant for our analyses. The fact that the US courted ECE countries before the Iraq
war shows that their political support was indeed important. Their relevance derived
primarily from their number rather than from their military or economic power. In
an era of increasingly powerful democratic norms, both in the domestic and interna-
tional realm, states’ actions gain greater international and domestic legitimacy when
large numbers of countries back them. The political support that the 13 small ECE
countries offered by signing the two aforementioned letters may have been just as important for the domestic and international legitimacy of US actions, if not more, than the military support of one or two second-ranked powers.

Conversely, the concept of “soft balancing” is useful for helping us better understand ECE position in the Iraq war. It is somewhat useful for its ability to predict ECE bandwagoning with the US. Indeed, when ECE countries were forced to choose between the US, on the one hand, and France and Germany, on the other, they chose to side with the superpower. Their decisions were consistent with the logic of balancing and with the one of “soft balancing.” They chose not to engage in “soft balancing” because they did not perceive US policies as threateningly unilateral.

It should be noted here that, although ECE countries did not appear to be too concerned with US unilateralism in 2002 and 2003, recent polls show that such concerns have now reached the same levels as those in countries that chose to engage in “soft balancing” against the US. For example, in a 2007 poll in Bulgaria, Poland, and Slovakia, just as in all European countries where the survey was conducted (with the notable exception of Romania), a majority now believe that US leadership in world affairs is either somewhat undesirable or very undesirable (Transatlantic Trends, 2007). If “soft balancing” is indeed the result of fears of unilateralism, then this change in opinion may suggest that in the future some of the ECE countries could join those engaged in “soft balancing” against the US.

But, more importantly, it has been argued here that the usefulness of the concept of “soft balancing” derives less from its structural component emphasizing common bandwagoning stances and more from the “soft” character of their support. By extending the logic of “soft balancing” from the literature to actions of “soft bandwagoning” of the ECE countries, the study concluded that there were important differences in policies between these countries and other allies of the US in the Iraq war and, more interestingly, among the post-communist states. This understanding of ECE foreign policies can offer a richer depiction of events than a structural approach alone can offer.

It is noteworthy that, even when studies have discussed foreign policies of multiple ECE states, they have tended to emphasize the similarities between such policies over their differences (Mihalka, 2005). Since the events leading to the Iraq war in 2003, the differences between these countries’ policies have become increasingly visible. Some ECE countries still have troops in Iraq while others have pulled out their contingents. Some states are negotiating to have US military bases on their territory while others are not. Some of them appear to have completely mended fences with France and Germany while others still have not.

The “degreeist” interpretation of foreign policies that derives from the “soft” nature of balancing or bandwagoning allows us to distinguish between states that appear, at first sight, to have similar positions. This observation should encourage us to engage in comparative work that can help answer important questions about these countries. For example, are relatively powerful states in the region (such as Poland and, perhaps, Romania) more likely to support the US in order to play greater roles in Europe and/or in their sub-regions? Do elections and referenda (such as the one in
Slovenia for joining NATO) actually offer a role for public opinion in the shaping of foreign policies in these democracies? Are countries with large Russian minorities, such as Latvia, more likely to side with the US in order to gain greater security guarantees? The answers to these questions should offer significant generalizations that are relevant beyond this region.

ECE countries have traditionally allowed for ideal “most similar system” research designs (Przeworski and Teune, 1982: 10). The acknowledgement that their policies exhibit interesting and subtle differences, and not just similarities, should once more spur comparative research of the foreign policies of these countries.

References


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Polish Radio 1.