

Mitteleuropa Recidivus?

A Realist Analysis

Mitteleuropa is an emotive but elusive concept, one that inspires passionate feelings but remains contested and ill-defined. This essay provides an analysis of *Mitteleuropa* from a structural realist (or 'neorealist') perspective, focusing on the systemic dynamics of international politics in the lands between Germany and Russia.

Mitteleuropa

Let us begin by examining three of the most influential concepts of *Mitteleuropa*. The first – which I shall term 'Habsburg *Mitteleuropa*' – emphasises the distinctive historical, cultural, architectural and religious attributes of the former Habsburg territories of Central Europe, which are broadly Catholic in religion and in which German has served as the *lingua franca*. The spiritual home of Habsburg *Mitteleuropa* is Vienna.¹ Habsburg *Mitteleuropa* is understood to be a distinctive region composed of a kaleidoscopic mix of nations, ethnicities and languages – German, Slavic, Hungarian and Jewish – which has generated a rich cultural heritage. This is the *Mitteleuropa* that produced Freud, Einstein, Mahler, Kafka – and Hitler.² Historically, this *Mitteleuropa* had a distinctively Jewish dimension, given the prominence of largely assimilated Jews in the urban professions, academia and the arts. Jews acted as the leaven in the multi-cultural mix of *fin de siècle* Habsburg Empire, and their destruction in the Holocaust left a deracinated Habsburg *Mitteleuropa* shattered beyond repair.

The second concept of *Mitteleuropa* – 'German *Mitteleuropa*' – is distinctly Teutonic in flavour, and its spiritual home is Berlin, not Vienna. This version of *Mitteleuropa* harks back to the book of that name by Friedrich Naumann, published in Berlin in 1916³. Naumann proposed a solution to Germany's enduring

¹ Erhard Busek: *Mitteleuropa: Eine Spurensicherung*. Wien 1997.

² Brigitte Hamann: *Hitlers Wien. Lehrjahre eines Diktators*. München 1996.

³ Friedrich Naumann: *Mitteleuropa*. Berlin 1916.

geopolitical dilemma of having been 'born encircled'⁴ which involved creating a zone of German economic domination and political hegemony stretching across much of Central and Eastern Europe. Naumann argued that *Mittleuropa* was the natural place for Germany to develop its abundant economic vitality, drawing on the resources of its eastern neighbours. This version of a Teutonic *Mittleuropa* was thoroughly discredited by the atrocities of the First World War and the *Vernichtungskrieg* of the Second, and has been explicitly rejected by successive governments of the *Bundesrepublik Deutschland*. Instead, they have sought to wrap their economic and political influence in the post-communist East in the multilateralism of Euro-Atlantic institutions. Nonetheless, as Germany's economic presence in *Mittleuropa* has been increasingly felt, the political influence of the Berlin Republic in the region has correspondingly grown.⁵

The third concept of *Mittleuropa* emerged in the twilight years of the Cold War, and was articulated by the generation of dissidents who emerged in the post-Helsinki phase of the East-West conflict. The spiritual home of this version of *Mittleuropa* – the 'intellectuals' *Mittleuropa* – was Prague and Budapest, and one of its seminal texts was György Konrád's *Antipolitics*.⁶ This portrayed a *Mittleuropa* ripped apart by the Iron Curtain and forcefully incorporated in the Soviet bloc. It looked to a future in which a neutral and non-aligned bloc of independent nations would emerge in Central Europe between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The 'intellectuals' *Mittleuropa* was articulated by dissident Central European intellectuals who wished to realise the emancipatory impulses behind the 1956 Hungary uprising and the 1968 'Prague Spring'. It was a vision of *Mittleuropa* that defined itself against the Russian 'Other' and, to some extent, against American culture and power.

This concept of *Mittleuropa* thus embodies a dream of escaping from the iron cage of history, geography and *Realpolitik*. It posits the existence – or perhaps creation – of a *mitteleuropäische* 'imagined community' through which to transcend the constraints of geopolitics and escape from the tragedy of Central Europe's past.⁷ It is a vision of *Mittleuropa* based more on identity than geography, and one that both harks back to the lost glories of Habsburg culture and imagines a future in which a multi-national and multi-cultural community of peoples and countries live in freedom and security in the 'lands between' Germany and Russia.

⁴ David Calleo has argued that the 'German problem' stems not from the character of the German people, or even from the nature of the German constitutional order, but from the geopolitical dilemma of having been 'born encircled', i.e., emerging as a nation-state in the context of a European balance of power which could not adjust to the emergence of a powerful *Reich* in the very heart of the continent.

⁵ Adrian Hyde-Price: *Germany and the Reshaping of Europe. Enlarging NATO and the EU*. Manchester 2000.

⁶ György Konrád: *Antipolitics*. London 1984.

⁷ Timothy Garton Ash: *Mittleuropa?* In: *Daedalus*, 119, S. 1–21.

In the immediate wake of the collapse of the Iron Curtain, as the post-communist democracies embarked on their 'triple transformation', the 'intellectuals' *Mittleeuropa* acquired a new political purpose. Many of the dissidents who were instrumental in the downfall of communist authoritarianism actively encouraged cooperation within *Mittleeuropa* on the road 'back to Europe'. For the new political elite, however, this 'return to Europe' was often viewed in competitive, rather collaborative, terms. The *Mittleeuropa* idea was initially manifested in the Visegrad group, but the travails of this body reflect the fading of the dissidents' dreams of an 'antipolitical' imagined community in Europe's post-communist heartlands.⁸

Today, the idea has some continuing currency, but little direct political consequence in terms of multilateral cooperation or institutional structures. *Mittleeuropa* is still a potent idea, but it lacks political, economic or strategic substance.⁹ There is little agreement on where the boundaries of this 'imagined community' lie: Lithuania at one stage defined itself as a 'Central European' not a 'Baltic' country, because it was intent on cultivating a special relationship with Poland, and it hoped that this Central European status might secure its membership of NATO before its 'Baltic' neighbours, Latvia and Estonia. Croatia and Slovenia have also made great play of their *mitteleuropäische* credentials, pointing to their Catholic and Habsburg past. Northern Italy can also lay claim to be part of *Mittleeuropa*, although this is acutely sensitive given the separatist aspirations of the *Lega Nord*. Romania also recognises the advantages that accrue to being perceived as a 'Central Europe' rather than a 'Balkan' country.

The most difficult and potentially explosive case, however, is Ukraine. Parts of Western Ukraine were formerly in the Polish-Lithuanian and Austro-Hungarian Empires, and might claim a Central European identity. But Kiev is also the spiritual home of the Rus, and therefore an integral part of Russia's cultural and historical heritage. Eastern Ukraine is more Orthodox and has a substantial Russian minority, and is therefore more distinctly Eastern Europe, if not Russian. For Ukraine, therefore, the concept of *Mittleeuropa* is both deeply problematic and deeply divisive.

Structural Realism and Mittleeuropa

In contrast to most studies of *Mittleeuropa* which focus on the distinctive historical, political or cultural attributes of the region, this essay analyses *Mittleeuropa* from a structural realist (or 'neorealist') perspective.

⁸ Adrian Hyde-Price: *The International Politics of East Central Europe*. Manchester 1996.

⁹ George Schöpflin and Nancy Woods: *In Search of Central Europe*. Cambridge 1989.

Structural realism is a parsimonious theory that seeks to explain the recurrent patterns of international politics. This involves a high degree of abstraction and simplification, rather than empirically rich description and exposition.¹⁰ Realism assumes that states remain the most important actors in international politics, and that they are functionally similar. Realist analyses thus focus on one key variable: the structural distribution of relative power capabilities between states – primarily great powers – in the international system. Consequently structural realism does not claim to provide a full and comprehensive analysis of all factors determining state behaviour; nor does it provide an empirically rich description of international politics. Nonetheless, as Waltz notes, ‘neorealist, or structural, theory leads one to believe that the placement of states in the international system accounts for a good deal of their behaviour’.¹¹

Applying a realist analysis to *Mittleuropa* involves considering both the distribution of relative power capabilities in the sub-region itself, and in the wider regional security system of which it is a part. From a realist perspective, the single most important structural feature of *Mittleuropa* is that it is sandwiched between two great powers: Germany in the West and Russia in the East. *Mittleuropa* can thus be defined as the ‘lands between’ Germany and Russia, and comprises a patchwork of small and medium-sized states, the most important of which are Poland and Ukraine. History and geography have not dealt the peoples of *Mittleuropa* a very good hand. Tragedy seems to be the *Leitmotiv* of their past, and more often than not, they have been the objects, rather than the subjects, of history.¹² They have suffered whether Germany and Russia cooperate or fight: as a popular saying has it, ‘the grass gets flattened whether the elephants fight or make love’.

Given their relative weakness compared to their great power neighbours on each flank, the countries of *Mittleuropa* have faced two strategic options: either to align with one of the great powers against the other, or to preserve an equidistance between the two, and seek security guarantees from a more distant great power. In the interwar years, they looked to France and the UK – neither of which proved particularly reliable. Since the end of cold war bipolarity, the countries of the region look to the United States – Europe’s ‘off-shore balancer’¹³ – to provide security guarantees through NATO against Russia, the country they perceive as most threatening. At the same time, they have sought multilateral insulation from German economic power and political influence from the EU.

¹⁰ Kenneth Waltz: *Theory of International Politics*. New York 1979.

¹¹ Kenneth Waltz: *The Emerging Structure of International Politics*. In: *International Security*, 2/1993, S. 44–79 (S. 45).

¹² Milan Kundera: *The Tragedy of Central Europe*. In: *New York Review of Books*, 26.4.1984, S. 33–38.

¹³ John Mearsheimer: *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York 2001.

Europe's Balanced Multipolarity

The security of the small and medium-sized states in *Mitteleuropa* depends not just on the power relationship between Germany and Russia, but on the wider constellation of power in Europe. In the early twentieth century and in the interwar years, these countries' security was adversely affected by the destabilisation of the balance of power caused by the emergence of Germany as a potential hegemon. During the cold war, they fell victim to the bipolar pressures of the East-West conflict. Since the end of the cold war, however, a relatively benign security environment has emerged characterised by 'balanced multipolarity'.

With the fading of bipolarity, a multipolar order has emerged in Europe consisting of five great powers: the USA, Russia, Germany, France and the UK. The United States are clearly the predominant power in the international system, enjoying what is termed a 'unipolar' moment. However, given its geographical separation from the continent, its influence on European affairs is limited, and it certainly does not act as Europe's hegemon. Russia and Germany are usually identified as potential hegemonies, but neither is strong enough to pursue a power maximisation strategy aimed at dominating the European security system.

Thus, despite Waltz's earlier suggestion that in post-cold war Europe 'bipolarity endures, but in a modified form', bipolarity has been replaced by a multipolar system. However, it has not resulted in a 'unbalanced multipolarity', the scenario John Mearsheimer explored in his 1990 article 'Back to the Future'.¹⁴ Rather, the contemporary European security system is characterised by 'balanced multipolarity'. In balanced multipolarity, great powers are more sensitive to relative gains than in bipolarity, but security competition is less intense than in unbalanced multipolarity. Although Europe might have gone 'back to the future', the future it has returned to is not that of the early twentieth century or the interwar years, but to the Europe of the early nineteenth century, characterised by Concert diplomacy and great power cooperation in collective milieu shaping.

Balanced multipolarity in the European security system provides a relatively benign environment for *Mitteleuropa*, but there are also sub-regional structural dynamics at work. These derive from its location between the two great powers, Germany and Russia. In the early twenty-first century, there are four important developments of note: the weakening of multilateral institutions; German-Russian relations; Poland's regional ambitions; and the future of Ukraine.

¹⁴ John Mearsheimer: Back to the Future. Instability in Europe After the Cold War. In: *International Security*, 1/1990, S. 5–56.

Weakening Multilateralism

One of the developments which many commentators welcomed was the incorporation of the new democracies of *Mittleeuropa* into multilateral structures of institutionalised cooperation – most importantly, the EU and NATO, but also the Council of Europe, the OSCE and sub-regional organisations like the Council of Baltic Sea Cooperation and Black Sea Economic Cooperation. For liberal-institutionalists, multilateral structures provided the architectural foundations for a stable peace order, facilitating cooperation between states and ameliorating the effects of international anarchy. Realists, however, have no such illusions. Institutions are ‘fair-weather friends’: they can facilitate cooperation between states for collective milieu shaping when conditions are favourable, but have little effect when crises emerge or great power relations deteriorate. The historical record suggests that multilateral institutions are not able to constrain the behaviour of great powers when they perceive that their vital national interests are at stake.¹⁵

With the end of the cold war, the cohesiveness and efficacy of the two main institutional pillars of the Euro-Atlantic community – the EU and NATO – has weakened. The EU was a product of bipolarity: the presence of the American ‘pacifier’ provided reassurance for West European states to pursue a policy of economic integration and political cooperation, and lessened their concerns with relative gains. With the end of the cold war, the EU acquired a new role in collective milieu shaping in Central and Eastern Europe, embedding Germany’s growing economic and political influence in a multilateral framework. However, despite the achievements of EMU, the cohesion of the EU has been weakened by enlargement: institutions designed initially for six member states are now proving inadequate for a Union of twenty-five. The agreement on the EU budget for 2007–13 has only postponed not resolved deep-seated differences over key policies like CAP and the structural funds.

More seriously, the rejection of the EU Constitution by the French and Dutch electorates, coupled with growing euro-scepticism in many member states, has thrown a question mark over the future of the EU. The inability of the EU to constrain the larger and more powerful member states when their vital national interests are at stake is evident from Germany’s breaking of the rules for the Stability and Growth Pact. The EU continues to provide an invaluable framework for cooperation amongst member states, and there are powerful arguments in favour of further developing the European integration process, which has served Europeans so well. But the political realities of multipolar Europe suggest that dreams of an ‘ever closer union’ are just that – dreams. The inescapable conclusion seems to be that the EU is evolving into

¹⁵ John Mearsheimer: The False Promise of International Institutions. In: *International Security*, 3/1995, S. 5–49.

an 'ever looser union', in which the most powerful member states will play the primary role in shaping policy through the European Council, marginalising the Commission and the European Parliament.

As an international actor, the EU remains weak and ineffective. The central problem is that none of the EU's great powers are willing to subordinate their foreign and security policies to the consensus of twenty-five member states. The result is a CFSP that is heavy on declaratory policy and broad statements of principle, but weak on substance and specifics. This is evident from the 'Common Strategy' towards Russia, which remains at the level of generalities because of substantial differences between countries like Germany and France that have a strong interest in cultivating close relations with Moscow, and those like Poland and the Baltic states that are suspicious of Russian policies and intentions. The EU has agreed a *European Security Strategy*, but it too lacks substance and is a statement of broad concerns rather than a security 'strategy'. The ESDP constitutes an important departure from the 'civilian power' legacy, but the EU lacks the capabilities and decision-making procedures to tackle any but the most minor crises. The experience of either Operation Artemis or the 'EU3' initiative towards Iran suggests that the CFSP/ESDP will only be effective when led by the EU's most powerful states, acting 'in Europe's name'.¹⁶

The other main institutional support of the Euro-Atlantic community, NATO, has also lost purpose and direction after the demise of cold war bipolarity. With a democratising and capitalist Russia, growing transatlantic disputes and German re-unification, it is not clear what purpose is still served by an alliance designed, in the words of its first Secretary-General Lord Ismay, to 'keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down'. As with the EU, enlargement has weakened the cohesion of the Alliance and undermined the consensual nature of its decision-making procedures. NATO conducted its first ever offensive military operations in Bosnia and fought a successful war in Kosovo, but the experience of Operation Allied Force led most Americans to conclude that never again would they fight a war by committee. Many Europeans also concluded that American leadership was not always desirable, and that they needed their own capability for autonomous crisis management. Article V was invoked for the first time on September 12, 2001, but the Bush Administration made it clear that they were determined to conduct Operation Enduring Freedom by CENTCOM, and that 'the mission determines the coalition'. NATO is now engaged in peace support operations in Afghanistan, but as the initial reservations of the Dutch parliament demonstrated, many alliance members are wary of NATO missions that might place their armed forces in harm's way.

¹⁶ Adrian Hyde-Price: 'Normative' Power Europe. A Realist Critique. In: *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2/2006, S. 217–235.

The central problem for NATO is that the strategic concerns of the United States have changed with the end of bipolarity. The US welcomed NATO enlargement and the engagement of the alliance in non-article V 'crisis response operations' in the Balkans as a way of asserting American leadership in Europe and winning new allies. US military bases in Europe are useful in terms of its power projection capabilities, particularly to areas of potential conflict such as the Middle East and Central Asia. However, as the world's only remaining super-power enjoying a 'unipolar moment', it does not want its freedom of action constrained by its NATO allies – America, in other words, is not willing to be a 'Gulliver' tied down by a myriad of multilateral threads. The US seeks allies to share in the burdens of non-article V military crisis management (on American terms), but is less interested in providing robust Article V security guarantees. The US attitude thus seems to be 'don't ask what NATO can do for you, ask what you can do for NATO'.

This shift in NATO's strategic focus from Article V to military crisis management and peace support operations has created dilemmas for the alliance's new members from *Mittleuropa*. They joined NATO as security consumers seeking Article V security guarantees, but now find themselves called upon to contribute to stabilisation missions in the Balkans and on the Hindu Kush. Most of them have done the minimum required to modernise their armed forces and contribute to NATO operations. Poland, however, is an exception: as we shall see, it has sought to profile itself as Washington's 'new model ally', both to ensure a continued US commitment to the security of Europe, and to win support for its aspirations for a sub-regional leadership role in Central Europe.

When Elephants Mate

The central geostrategic reality for the countries of *Mittleuropa* is that they find themselves sandwiched between two great powers, Germany and Russia. They have a well-grounded suspicion of the relationship between these two behemoths, because they have tended to suffer both when they cooperate and when they fight. Cooperation between Russia, Austria and Prussia in the eighteenth century led to the dismemberment of Poland, whilst the Hitler-Stalin pact resulted in the invasion and division of Poland, and the incorporation of the three Baltic States into the Soviet Union. The two world wars, on the other hand, led to appalling suffering for the peoples in the 'lands between'.

In the immediate post-cold war period, the focus of German Ostpolitik was East Central Europe. Russia was in economic free-fall and faced a politically uncertain future, and the Bonn Government concentrated on facilitating the 'return to Europe' of the Visegrad countries. By the end of the decade, however,

it was evident that both Berlin and Moscow were interested in a new partnership. With the growing self-confidence of Chancellor Schröder's Berlin Republic, and the economic revival of President Putin's Russia, conditions were ripe for a twenty-first century 'Rapallo'. Chancellor Schröder made clear his intention to place relations with Russia on the same basis as those with Western partners, and neither Russian atrocities in Chechnya nor the creeping authoritarianism that followed the 'September revolution' of 1994 have significantly affected this partnership between neighbouring great powers. The new German-Russian partnership was facilitated by warm personal relations between Putin and Schröder, but was built on hard-nosed economic, strategic and political interests. Economically, relations between the two have grown substantially over recent years¹⁷; Schröder was particularly adept at using his good political relations with Putin to give German firms a competitive advantage in negotiating trade deals and investment. Energy has also been a crucial factor: Gazprom Germany now supplies 44% of Germany's natural gas, and Schröder was instrumental in the project to construct the North European Gas Pipeline under the Baltic Sea, bypassing Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic States (much to their chagrin)¹⁸. Strategically, Germany and Russia have a common interest in sharing intelligence on, and coordinating their responses to, Islamic militants, international terrorist networks and transnational criminal organisations. Politically, Russian membership of the UN Security Council gives it an important voice on global economic and security issues; Moscow's cooperation is vital in addressing a whole raft of international security issues, from proliferation and terrorism, to the search for diplomatic solutions to regional security problems in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Central Asia, the Middle East and South Asia. Last but not least, Russian support is vital for the German campaign to secure permanent membership of the UN Security Council – thereby consummating the Berlin Republic's claims to great power status.

The changed alignment of great power relations made possible by the emergence of balanced multipolarity was demonstrated by the diplomatic preludes to the Iraq war. Germany aligned herself with both France and Russia in opposing American and British attempts to resolve by military coercion the crisis occasioned by Saddam Hussein's persistent non-compliance with successive UN

¹⁷ Germany is now Russia's largest trading partner. Although Russia is only 14th amongst German export markets, exports increased by 23.6% in the first six months of 2004 alone, adding the sense that Russia is a huge and largely untapped potential market. German trade with Russia was worth \$32 billion (£20 bn, €26.4 bn) in 2005, according to Russia figures. Moscow RIA Novosti, 16.1.2006. Since the end of Soviet rule, Germany has invested \$9.3 bn in the Russian economy: in the first nine months of 2005, German investment totally \$1.4 bn, an increase of 19% from the same period in 2004. Forbes, 16.1.2006.

¹⁸ The Northern Gas Pipeline agreement was signed in 2005. The 1200 km pipeline will be built by a consortium led by Gazprom and the German companies BASF and E.ON, at a cost of \$5.7 billion, and is due to come on stream in 2010. Schröder generated considerable controversy by becoming chairman of the project one month after leaving the Chancellor's office.

Security Council resolutions. In so doing, Schröder's government earned not only the hostility of Washington, but also alienated the more Atlanticist-orientated countries of *Mitteleuropa*.¹⁹ These countries were instinctively suspicious of German-Russian cooperation, and resented the Franco-German presumption to speak 'in Europe's name' – a resentment that was aggravated by President Chirac's arrogant dismissal of the 'Letter of Eight' and the 'Vilnius Ten Letter', and his suggestion that they had no right to voice an opinion on a major issue of world affairs that differed from that of Paris and Berlin.

Differences over transatlantic relations and the Iraq war between Germany and the countries of East Central Europe – above all, Poland and the Baltic states – were compounded by the continuing legacy of the Second World War. Germany's relations with its eastern neighbours can never escape the shadow of the past, but historical controversies seem to intensify when other issues complicate bilateral relations. Given disputes over the Northern Gas pipeline, the German decision to build a memorial to those expelled from Poland and the Czech Republic after 1945 was taken by the Poles and Czechs as evidence that Germany was seeking to 'relativise' its war crimes. This led to renewed claims for compensation from both Poland and the Czech Republic, and a marked increase in anti-German rhetoric during the Polish election in 2005. Above all, there was a strong feeling that Germany was succumbing to the temptations of power, and doing deals with Moscow over the heads. The elephants were making love, and once again, it seemed, the grass was being crushed.

With the advent to power of Merkel's 'red-black' grand coalition, an opportunity has arisen to 'rebalance' Germany's *Ostpolitik*. Early indications suggest that greater efforts to assuage the concerns of the East Central Europeans will be made whilst preserving cooperative relations with Russia.²⁰ Relations with Moscow have changed in style but not in substance: Chancellor Merkel has spoken of a 'strategic partnership' with Moscow, rather than 'friendship', and has indicated that this relationship is not underpinned by the same shared values that unite Germany and its western partners. Whereas Schröder described Putin as an 'impeccable democrat', Merkel has openly criticised Russia's clamp-down on externally-funded human rights organisations and its policy towards Chechnya.

¹⁹ As Dominic Moisi of the French foreign policy think-tank IFRI noted, 'If you sit in Warsaw or Prague the last thing you want to hear is that Russia, Germany and France are building a new power triangle'. Unlikely Alliance Built on Opposition to the Iraq War now raises Questions. In: International Herald Tribune, 28./29.8.2004.

²⁰ During her first visit to Poland after taking office, Chancellor Merkel spoke of her desire to improve relations with Poland and pay more attention to the concerns of the smaller EU member states. She proposed establishing a committee to examine how 'third parties' could participate in the North European Gas Pipeline project, and sought to defuse tensions over the 'Centre for Expellees' and the wartime reparations issue. Merkel sieht enge Verbundenheit zu Polen. In: Financial Times Deutschland, 2.12.2005. Gabriele Lesser: Händeschütteln und eine Arbeitsgruppe. In: Die Tageszeitung, 5.12.2005.

She also held a high-profile meeting with representatives of human rights groups during her first visit to Moscow in January 2006. Nonetheless, Russia is simply too important economically and politically to cold shoulder, and it is highly improbable that second order normative concerns will be allowed to impede trade and investment opportunities, or energy supplies.

Under Chancellor Merkel, German *Ostpolitik* is likely to be less focused on Moscow, and characterised more by a concern to balance its strategic partnership with Russia with better relations with Poland and *Mittleeuropa*. Russia will remain an indispensable strategic partner and close diplomatic interlocutor for the Berlin Republic, even though they are likely to clash over milieu shaping in Russia's 'near abroad' – which is now Germany and the EU's 'new neighbourhood'. The focus of these tensions, and the possible catalyst for renewed security competition in the region, will be Ukraine – a country whose future is critical to the sub-regional balance of power in Central and Eastern Europe.²¹ A pro-Western Ukraine anchored in NATO and enjoying a privileged relationship with the EU would severely constrain Russia's ability to assert its interests and influence in *Mittleeuropa*; a pro-Russian Ukraine closely cooperating with Moscow in an informal Slavic union would amplify Russia's power and its influence on developments in Europe. Whilst the primary focus of security competition is Ukraine, differences are also emerging between Berlin and Moscow over Belarus, Europe's last dictatorship and an ally of Russia. Merkel's government seems intent on supporting dissident NGOs in Belarus and giving succour to opposition groups – a policy which is receiving strong support from Poland.

Nonetheless, given the stakes involved, it is highly unlikely that Germany – despite its rhetorical commitment to 'Europe' and the CFSP – will allow its relations with the Eurasian great power to its east to be subordinated to an EU 'Common Strategy' decided on the basis of the 'lowest common denominator', and constrained by the worries and suspicions of those living in the shadow of the Russian bear. Germany has a strong interest in pragmatic and interest-driven cooperation with Russia in the context of balanced multipolarity, and will therefore seek to preserve its own room for diplomatic manoeuvre in order to find ways of balancing its relations with Moscow, Kiev and *Mittleeuropa*. Navigating the shoals and reefs of Central and Eastern Europe's changed geopolitics will prove a stern test for the diplomatic competences of the Berlin Republic.

²¹ Poland has long sought to cultivate a strategic partnership with Ukraine in order to create a solid bulwark between it and Russia. See Ian Brzezinski: Polish-Ukrainian Relations: Europe's Neglected Strategic Axis. In: *Survival*, Bd. 35, Nr. 3 (Herbst 1993), S. 26–37. Adrian Hyde-Price: *The International Politics of East Central Europe*, S. 157–160.

Poland and Mitteleuropa

One of the most significant developments in *Mitteleuropa* since the end of cold war bipolarity has been the emergence of Poland as an important regional actor. In the medieval era, the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth (the '*Rzeczpospolita Obojga Narodow*') was one of the continent's largest powers. As a former great power, Poland has long had a sense of itself as a regional actor of consequence. It aspires to an influential role in Central Europe, and given its size, it has a much more active foreign and security policy than its Visegrad partners.

Poland has historically-grounded fears of Russia, and lingering suspicions of Germany (which were re-kindled in the 2005 election campaign). In the inter-war years, it looked to France and the UK to provide it with security guarantees; in the post-cold war era, it looks to the USA. Poland has sought to profile itself as America's 'new model ally', more loyal than traditional Atlanticists like Britain, Holland and Norway. Not only did Warsaw seek to underline its transatlantic credentials by purchasing US-made F-16s, it was also an enthusiastic supporter of the US war against Iraq. Its willingness to play a military role in the management of post-conflict Iraq demonstrated an attempt to 'punch above its weight', and ingratiate itself with the Bush administration.

Within the EU, Poland has fought assertively – not to say aggressively – to have its voice heard and its interests accommodated. As a country that benefits substantially from the CAP and structural funds, it has a vested interest in maintaining a high EU budget. In this, it differs from Germany, a net contributor to the EU and an advocate of CAP reform and a reduced budget. Poland participates in the 'Weimarer Triangle' with Germany and France, which offers an opportunity to shape the decisions of the EU's dual motor. Warsaw is particularly keen to play a privileged role in shaping the EU's *Ostpolitik* towards Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. It has long sought a 'strategic partnership' with Ukraine, in order to facilitate the containment of Russian power. It also advocates quarantining Belarus. More recently, the Polish government has been highly critical of what it perceived to be trends towards German-Russian condominium. Much of its criticism has focused on the North European Gas Pipeline project, which it perceives as a threat to Polish strategic and economic interests. Chancellor Merkel has sought to diffuse this controversy by establishing a committee to consider the interests of 'third parties' in the project, but it is not yet clear what substance this will have.

Conclusion

A structural realist analysis of *Mitteleuropa* leads to four main conclusions. First, the overarching geostrategic reality of the region is that it consists of a patchwork of

small and medium-sized states sandwiched between two great powers – an unenviable situation at the best of times, a nightmare when the international climate is bleak and unsettled. Happily, the contemporary international environment is relatively benign – which takes us to the second concluding point. As bipolarity has faded, it has been replaced by a multipolar order characterised by a rough equilibrium between the five great powers involved. Balanced multipolarity provides the permissive structural conditions for the emergence of ‘concert’ of great powers, including a new strategic partnership between Russia and Germany.

Nonetheless, ‘the grass gets flattened whether the elephants fight or make love’. The third conclusion is that even in conditions of balanced multipolarity when Russia and Germany are strategic partners, mistrust and insecurity will continue to provide the seeds of security competition. Poland and the Baltic states worry about a new ‘Rapallo’; political conflicts – both domestic and international – over the future of Ukraine and Belarus are inevitable; the rights of the Russian minorities in Estonia and Latvia remain a source of potential tension; and the problem of Kaliningrad is more acute following EU and NATO enlargement. On top of this, energy has emerged as a key lever of Russian influence in *Mitteleuropa* and a consequent source of insecurity for EU member states.

Beyond this, a realist analysis which focuses only on the structural distribution of relative power capabilities is indeterminate. The concluding point is that neorealism can only provide the bare bones of an analysis, and needs to be supplemented by other ‘middle-range’ theories and empirically rich analyses. Much depends on the quality of Russian, German and American statecraft, which falls outside of the purview of a structural realist analysis. Domestic factors have an important role in shaping the response of decision-makers to systemic pressures, and will determine whether Germany can balance its strategic partnership with Russia with its relations with the countries of *Mitteleuropa*, or whether Russia can balance its desire for great power status and influence with its needs for economic cooperation with the EU.

Finally, many of the new security concerns in the region are not a function of great power rivalry, but have to do with more diffuse and multifaceted issues like transnational crime, pollution, illegal migration and arms smuggling – ‘drugs and thugs’, in short. These will affect all states in the region to a great or lesser extent, and provide a clear rationale for cooperative ‘milieu shaping’ in the context of balanced multipolarity and concert diplomacy.

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