



Partisan Conflict Over Grand Strategy in Eastern Europe, 2014-2017

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Abstract: *How should foreign policy analysts understand the American response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014? Despite widespread bipartisan recognition that Eastern European states, from the Baltic States to the Black Sea, were experiencing their most severe crisis since at least the end of the Cold War, the United States responded with little military support to the region. Even though all sides agreed on the need for a larger response, the tepid reaction to the Russian invasion was due to the partisan divide over the means of addressing the issue. This divide foreclosed the two main options for the President: a redeployment of forces from the United States or a larger military and budget. This disagreement over the means, rather than the ends, counter intuitively prevented a response for which both parties expressed support.*

After the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the United States expanded its military presence in Eastern Europe. However, the expansion in Eastern Europe was a small one that allies, American military planners, and a bipartisan set of politicians considered to be too little to deter further Russian aggression or to reassure American allies.¹ Why was the response so modest when seemingly *everyone* was calling for a robust response that included thousands more American soldiers and a permanent U.S. military presence?

The key to understanding the U.S. response in Eastern Europe is that it came at a time of divided government in Washington, D.C. Members of Congress first refused to authorize changes to domestic bases that could save money and provide for flexibility in moving U.S.-based forces abroad. Second, both parties used this restriction as a means to justify a general increase in defense spending. This second stage of the process became a further battle over Democrats' effort to

¹ John Vandiver, "Breedlove: U.S. Must Rebuild Forces in Europe to Confront Russia" *Military.com*, Feb. 26, 2016.

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leverage a need for boosted defense spending into a concomitant increase in domestic nondefense spending as well.

This case shows several things, including: the power that Congress still maintains over foreign policymaking; the role of partisanship in constraining the president's foreign policy options even when the parties agree on the foundational issue; and the extent to which domestic policy fights over distributing resources within the United States can outweigh strategic considerations.

Theoretical Context

Previous studies of strategic issues rarely adequately account for domestic politics within the United States, despite numerous works showing that politics do *not* stop at the water's edge. Many of these studies revealed that partisanship matters most significantly as a mechanism for constraining the President's freedom to use force.² Partisanship influences military spending,³ the invocation of the War Powers Resolution,⁴ and the perception of foreign threats.⁵

Going back at least as far as the 1950s, the field of International Relations has recognized that there are institutionally diverging incentives when it comes to foreign policy.⁶ Congress possesses the ability to constrain the President's ability to make war, regardless of partisan affiliation.⁷ Congress also has a greater incentive to focus on the distributional aspects of foreign policy than the President possesses, as members' electability is closely tied to the economic prospects in their districts.⁸

Partisanship and the division of power in Washington, D.C. can wield a large influence over foreign policy, but strategic considerations still determine a great deal about where U.S. forces deploy, as well as the extent to which strategic necessity can overcome partisan differences.⁹ The strategic considerations in Eastern Europe

² William G. Howell and Jon C. Pevehouse, "When Congress stops wars: partisan politics and presidential power," *Foreign Affairs*, Sept./Oct. 2007, pp. 95-107.

³ Michelle R. Garfinkel, "Domestic politics and international conflict," *The American Economic Review*, 1994, pp. 1294-1309.

⁴ James Meernik, "Congress, the President, and the Commitment of the U.S. Military," *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, (1995), pp. 377-392.

⁵ Benjamin Fordham, "The politics of threat perception and the use of force: A political economy model of U.S. uses of force, 1949-1994," *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 42 no. 3 (1998), pp. 567-590.

⁶ Robert A. Dahl, *Congress and Foreign Policy* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950).

⁷ James A. Thurber, "Representation, accountability, and efficiency in divided party control of government," *PS: Political Science and Politics* vol. 24, no. 4 (1991), pp. 653-657.

⁸ Barry Rundquist and Thomas M. Carsey, *Congress and Defense Spending: The Distributive Politics of Military Procurement* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2002).

⁹ Robert E. Harkavy, *Bases abroad: the global foreign military presence* (Oxford University Press on Demand, 1989); and Christopher T. Sandars, *America's Overseas Garrisons: The Leasehold Empire* (Oxford, 2000).

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