



EQUILIBRIUM UPSET

Paradoxically, Europe is now more secure than it was before the war in Ukraine, although challenges still abound.

21 February 2023, US President Joe Biden at the Royal Castle Gardens in Warsaw, Poland, delivering a speech on the anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as part of a visit to Poland

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If we can judge Europe as being more secure today than it was prior to February 2022, it is because we did not then realize the extent of the threat of Russian aggression against Ukraine and its possible implications, and because we underestimated the Russian president's determination to carry out his plan to "pull together the Russian lands" and return Ukraine to the motherland (which Putin considers to be Russia) using military force akin to what Germany did to Poland in 1939. An overt threat is less dangerous than a covert one, because we can prepare for it. Moreover, we in Europe also overestimated Russia's military capabilities, in the sense of the Russian Army's capac-

ity to fight a modern war. Russia's military potential was regarded as powerful, and its armed forces as the second- or third-ranking military in the world, which could easily crush any country in its neighborhood except China and the bloc of NATO countries. Yet in the course of this war, the Russian Army has proven itself to be sluggish, poorly commanded, underequipped due to corruption, and logistically inefficient. Ukraine is dramatically beleaguering this "invincible" army, causing it great losses in personnel and equipment (albeit at great cost to itself). Thanks to Ukraine, the offensive potential of Russia's armed forces has been greatly reduced.

Standards of security vary for different areas of Europe. Some countries enjoy a high level of security (due to their location, defense potential, alliances); this mainly applies to northwestern Europe. But there are also other countries, mainly in southern and eastern Europe, that are considered less secure. The main dividing line, however, runs between NATO and EU countries on the one hand, and non-members of these



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communities on the other. The latter, irrespective of their own weaknesses, are exposed to intimidation and destabilizing provocations on Russia’s part, even if the latter is not in a position to directly threaten them militarily. The importance of belonging to the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance for the security of European countries is evidenced by the prompt reaction of Finland and Sweden to Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. Both countries – proud of their traditions of neutrality, stretching back many decades – immediately declared their desire to join NATO; Finland has already managed to become a member of the Alliance (in April 2023).

The improvement of the security situation in Europe is not just an ironic outcome of Putin’s catastrophic mistake to launch the aggression against Ukraine, with all the negative consequences of that decision for Russia’s potential and position. We should also mention the Russian regime’s evolution towards totalitarianism, which will hamper the country’s economic performance and developmental prospects, and

consequently its ability to pose a threat to its surroundings. All these factors lie outside Europe’s control.

But there is also the flip side of the coin. Under the influence of the Russian aggression, there has certainly been a security awakening within Europe. The events of February 24 (and thenceforth) sounded a loud alarm bell for European countries. In response, they have taken multidirectional measures to bolster their own, and above all European security.

The North Atlantic Alliance

Sweden’s and Finland’s decision to join NATO is of symbolic weight, evidencing the pact’s great importance for Europe’s security. It has reacted decisively to Russia’s aggression by strengthening its eastern flank (primarily by stepping up the US military presence there) and requiring Member States to boost their defense spending. Back when the Soviet Union was collapsing, a member of the Soviet politburo once warned the Americans that they would have the worst

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thing happen to them: their enemy would disappear. The implication was: “Now it will be difficult for you to maintain the cohesiveness of the West.” Putin has given the West, especially Europe, a common enemy again. Europe, as part of the Alliance, had to react to this. This, of course, is favorable for the security of the entire continent.

The credit for strengthening Europe’s security in the wake of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine is not only due to NATO, but also to the Europeans themselves. The most spectacular manifestation of this change in attitude towards security has been the famous *Zeitenwende* (epochal turn) in German policy announced by Chancellor Scholz three days after the Russian invasion. Although in the Chancellor’s speech before the Bundestag the term *Zeitenwende* was used to describe Russia’s aggression itself, the term was soon used to refer to the attendant shift in German policy. At least three elements deserve to be recalled here. The most important was the announcement of an additional 100 billion euros to strengthen the German Armed Forces and to reach the Allied defense spending threshold (2% of GDP) within a few years. The pivot in Germany’s foreign policy has included a radical turn in Berlin’s relations with Moscow. Russia has been recognized as a threat, which has translated into energy policy: the objective of complete independence from the Russian hydrocarbon supplies. This is indeed a sea change, given the previous special relationship between Germany and Russia, which had deep historical roots (stretching back to Peter the Great). Germany is now poised to become a pillar of European security within 5–10 years.

Energy security

When talking about the security of a country, or even a continent, it is important to clarify the concept in at

least material and geographical terms. In the view of the Copenhagen School, which has been popular for several decades, security has no boundaries in the material sense. As for the criterion of geographic scope, one can argue whether or not the recent high-profile case of Taiwan falls within the concept of “our” security. Until recently, EU and NATO countries were eager to participate in out-of-area operations, away from their borders, because they believed their security required it. Today, that has changed.

Energy security comprises an important part of security by any definition. Although it is not directly related to a country’s independence or territorial integrity, without energy no country can survive or develop. Europeans, especially those in the EU, attach great importance to energy security, all the more so because the Old Continent’s energy resources have been heavily depleted. In Europe, efforts to ensure energy security have for some time now gone hand-in-hand with concern for climate and environmental protection. The two challenges cannot always be optimally combined, and sometimes they are at odds. It is largely thanks to the EU’s programs, which are negotiated and ultimately accepted by the Member States, that Europe as a whole is not faring badly in terms of energy security.

It was only through close cooperation within the EU, notwithstanding the national efforts, that it was possible after February 24 to quickly wean Europe off the supply of energy commodities from Russia – which previously had shown a tendency to treat such supplies as an instrument of its policy, and sometimes as a means of pressure and blackmail. The previous dependence of a large share of the EU countries on Russia was excessive and quite simply unwise. The country’s war against Ukraine helped diversify Europe’s supply of energy resources. In parallel, the EU has accelerated the increase of the share of renewable

Kharkiv, Ukraine,
31 January 2022.
An armored personnel
carrier column, on the move
as Ukraine prepares
to defend itself against
a Russian invasion



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ALEXANDROS MICHALIDIS/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM (2)

energy sources in the so-called energy mix (the proportion of different energy sources that contribute to each country's energy security). There is a priority on energy from wind, solar, and hydrogen, while nuclear power is also returning to favor in many countries. This is combined with the transition to a low-carbon economy and transportation. The whole effort is referred to as the "Green Deal," after the name of the major European Commission program launched in 2019, and reinforced by the European Reconstruction Fund adopted by the EU in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. All this is almost as important for the security of Europe, especially its people, as is increasing the military capabilities of the countries on the continent in the face of Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Other risks

One threat the EU has been facing for some time is uncontrolled migration, which surged about 10 years ago due to conflicts in the Middle East and Africa. Some European countries unfortunately had a hand in triggering or fomenting these conflicts (e.g. in Iraq, Libya, Syria). The ease of entering Europe, coupled with the willingness on the part of some EU countries at the time to accept this increased wave of immigration, has made the EU area the target of constant migratory pressure. Trafficking people into Europe has become a lucrative business for organized crime in the neighboring countries to the south, and also – as in the case of Lukashenko's regime in Belarus – a kind of weapon to be leveled against the community. In European countries, this triggers negative reactions, in the context of cultural security and social cohesion. Combining the requirement of humanitarianism with the requirement of border control is in this case not easy. This problem of the continent's security remains

unresolved despite the increased efforts of individual countries and the EU as a whole to stem uncontrolled migration. Thanks to the close cooperation of relevant services within the EU, the threat of Islamic terrorism, which only 10–15 years ago was taking a bloody toll in Europe and contributing to an atmosphere of fear (including in connection with migrants), has been brought under control. For the first two decades of the 21st century, terrorism, not just Islamic terrorism, was regarded as a major threat to Europe's security.

The Old Continent does not yet feel the threat posed by the transition from a liberal international order to multipolar power politics. China's rising potential and geopolitical aspirations play a great role in this process. China's influence is growing in Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, and Africa. A shift toward a more conflict-oriented Chinese policy could be precipitated by the Taiwan issue. Although the Europeans are trying to prevent a cold war between the West and China, one could nevertheless materialize regardless of their will. EU security policy cannot ignore this problem.

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Europe's security problem remains its dependence and inadequacy when it comes to traditional, military security. Here it must rely on the US and NATO, of which it is a part. The development of a common EU security and defense policy, let alone EU strategic sovereignty, is proceeding with difficulty. In non-military spheres, however, Europe's security is in much better shape. In this respect, the situation of the EU countries and the Union as a whole is better than any other part of the world. The EU deserves great credit for this, as an innovative security community. This is worth appreciating, and the Union itself is worth strengthening. ■

Photo 1
 Finnish President Sauli Niinistö and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at a press conference during a meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Brussels, Belgium, 4 April 2023

Photo 2
 European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (right) and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken making a statement to the media before a meeting at EU headquarters in Brussels, 4 March 2022

Further reading:

Kuźniar R. (ed.), *Bezpieczeństwo Polski w świetle wojny na wschodzie* [Poland's security in light of the war in the East], 2022.

Śledź P., *Europejska współpraca zbrojeniowa* [European Arms Cooperation], 2021.