

Ryszard Piasecki* - 1 June 2023

Perspectives on the Security of Central Europe One Year After the Beginning of the War

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is not over yet, but some fundamental facts are becoming clearer: the rules of the post war security architecture have been broken and the order has not yet been defined even in the slightest form. The fundamental dilemma for the NATO security architecture for 2023 is how to manage the Ukrainian war from now on. There are two knowns for 2023:

First, there is no shortage of resilience of Ukrainians to continue the war until they would liberate Crimea. This is an objective, which cannot be abandoned because of the “sunk costs” for Ukraine and the supporting Western NATO countries.

Second, the USA alone cannot continue to be the major sponsor of the Ukrainian war and especially the rebuilding of the post-war Ukraine, though this support represents only one sixteenth of the total US military budget. The cost of war has to be shared by the EU and other NATO countries.

It seems that the Ukrainian war is a chance for the Europeans to build their strategic value for NATO on their home turf. First of all, the EU should have a **common defense budget** because subsidizing their farmers is not more important than the land on which they do their business. After the open invasion, Europe and the world held their breath. Over the past year, the West has unequivocally condemned Putin’s aggression. NATO has consolidated its defense preparedness and significantly strengthened its military presence in the countries on its eastern flank. The Alliance is welcoming new members: Sweden and Finland. Both countries have strong militaries and significant geopolitical positions. The European Union provides considerable aid to Ukraine, over €50 billion, of which €18 billion is for armaments. The West sanctions against Russia are gradually deepening. The first year of the war surprised with the effectiveness of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and the unexpected weakness of the Russian army. The West’s willingness to support Ukraine was reaffirmed during the Munich security conference

in 2023. President Biden’s surprise visit to Kyiv firmly tied the current US administration to Ukraine’s future. All this speaks in favor of improving the Central European security. On the other hand, the threats have become threateningly tangible. Just across the Polish border, a war of attrition is taking place, with Russia seeking to defeat the Ukrainian military and terrorize the civilian population. The outcome of the war is still undecided.

Today, Central Europe is naturally in the center point of Europe’s security. Ukraine is the frontier land, and Poland and Romania are the transportation hubs for the military supplies and the destination of the hundreds of thousands of the refugees from Ukraine. The Suwalki gap in Poland is a 40 kilometers sparsely inhabited stretch of land between the Russian Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad and Belarus, it has been named the potentially most dangerous place in the world. It is the place where a possible Russian invasion of NATO would take place if it were to happen. Sweden and Finland already take land and air patrols of the Eastern Baltics Sea with the Americans who transferred several of F-35 squadrons from Germany. The Patriot batteries manned by German personnel have been positioned on the Polish-Ukrainian border after some haggling with the Polish right-wing government PIS which wanted to exploit anti-German sentiments to beef up their domestic ratings before the 2023 elections.

Poland’s assistance to the struggling Ukrainian people, which was not questioned internally by any significant political and social forces and served as an example to others is, to some extent, repairing Poland’s previously tarnished image in the international arena. This consensus should be applauded, and Poles should be proud of their reaction to the tragedy of their Ukrainian neighbor. The government’s decision to place Poland among the leaders in helping Ukraine should also be commended. Poland’s military aid is being provided quickly and significantly by all the countries involved in supporting Ukraine.

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Poland has sent by far the most considerable number of tanks (around 300), armaments with a high combat capability, such as the Krab cannon howitzer and the man-portable air-defense system PIRAT. Undoubtedly, Polish support significantly impacted the course of the war in Ukraine. These government decisions were most in line with the Polish “raison d’état”. However, they resulted in a serious reduction in the armaments of the Polish Armed Forces (estimated at between 30% and 40% of the pre-war level). The shortfalls that have arisen need to be remedied while at the same time significantly modernizing the army. Intensive activities to meet this need are undertaken in the conditions of the underinvested Polish arms industry and the problematic international arms market (a clear advantage of demand over supply). We should not forget about the recent fundamental decisions of Poland to send to Ukraine MIG 29 airplanes (4 now and more in the coming weeks), the Slovak Republic (13 altogether), North Macedonia (4 SU-25 airplanes and tanks), Bulgaria (important amounts of ammunition, mortars, grenade launchers etc.). Because of Russian revisionism and the cruel war on Polish eastern borders, modernizing the Polish Armed Forces is paramount. Only an army developed in close cooperation with NATO allies guarantees security. Modernization should strengthen the independence of the European component of NATO. **The ongoing senseless conflict with the EU - including Germany - contradicts the Polish raison d’état.** It will also hinder Ukraine’s path to the EU (Matthijs, 2020).

When assessing the state of Poland’s security, it is necessary to take a longer perspective than one year. Consider what actions the Polish authorities have taken since the rebirth of Russian revisionism in the form of the annexation of Crimea. And also, what will be the consequences of the actions taken now in a perspective of several years, when external threats will not diminish, and perhaps even increase? However, the Central and Eastern European, mostly post socialist states, do not believe in the EU’s potential capacity to defend its borders effectively against Russian imperialism. There is a common conviction that the only serious and capable country to do it is the USA. Even the European NATO bloc, without the USA, would be defenseless in case of Russian invasion. Poland, with its conservative PIS government, is the best example of the extreme

pro-American attitude. This policy is supported by the large number of Poles who generally do not believe in the EU’s capacity to pacify Russian imperialist sentiments. In addition, the politics of Germany and France towards Russia are considered naïve and even cynical, driven by economic profits.

After the USA, the second most reliable country, in their eyes, is the United Kingdom and certainly not Germany, neither France. Poland is the best example of such philosophy. The country is trying to quickly strengthen its military capacity by massive imports of modern planes, tanks, missiles etc. from the USA, South Korea but also from Germany and France.

The new global security system cannot be based on the USA dictating its principles but must develop organically, that is, it has to be determined by voters, in democratic countries. The leaders of Germany and France carry exaggerated sense of their diplomatic weights and importance as representants of their nation states. If both countries intend to build a strategic independence from Washington, they should abandon their complex of clientelism vis a vis the USA. The new security architecture includes a unified EU27 with common army, common navy, common air force with a 6-generation fighter integrated with the US air force. Neither of the country’s sovereignty is 100 percent secure under article 5 of the NATO. Nobody knows how the Spanish, Portuguese or Greek military contingents fight to defend Estonia or Latvia. Moreover, there is also article 4 of the NATO, which says that the contribution of the entire alliance to the war effort depends on the maximum contribution of each of the states to their own defense. The security architecture of the West begins and ends in the Atlantic Alliance. The Ukrainian war, however costly and traumatic has been a wakeup call from a comfort zone for France and Germany. Ukraine regarded at first as yet another war at the peripheries of Europe is at the beginning of 2023 in the center of the EU’s economic and political future. When NATO was created in 1949 the USA had three objectives for the Alliance: Keep Americans in, Russians out and Germany down. The USA presence in Europe has been generally very successful. The active role of the transatlantic partnership was difficult to achieve because 25 out of 27 countries of the EU (including Germany) spent on their defense less than 2 percent of GDP in the last 10 years, which is the NATO minimum (Hamilton, 2023). In January 2022, the first decision of the

German government was to send 5,000 old helmets to Ukraine because it complied with the definition of the defensive, not offensive technology. However, the remarkable special military budget of \$100 billion, which Germany set up is going to be stretched over 5 years.

It took some time for France and Germany to understand that from the US perspective the Ukrainian war is as important as the 1940 Battle of Britain, both in symbolic and strategic terms. It is not just a tragic reshuffle in Moscow's sphere of influence but a blow to Europe's security. But here the analogy to the Battle of Britain ends. The USA is not likely to create another lend lease act program for Europe nor send a million-man army to win the war for the Europeans this time.

Despite Putin's invasion of Georgia in 2008, and of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014, German and French elites continued their policy as usual. Heads of German and French largest corporations traveled privately to Moscow to bring assurances that they would stay in Russia. Angela Merkel government closed nuclear power stations and accepted to hang Germany energy security on two Russian gas-fed Nordstream pipes, Macron insisted on selling Mistral type naval ships and avionics to Russia even when

the US was losing Syria to Russians. Wars are unpredictable and they never play out according to the written scenarios. This time such scenarios are even more untenable because Russia is a mafia state with nuclear warheads. This mafia state is deserted by hundreds of thousands of educated people and Kremlin oligarchs are looking for ways to preserve their loot and status. Russia's opposition is still dormant, frozen by imperial terror or in exile. Most international experts believe that Russian elites and general population must understand, that they cannot win this war and, be aware of the risks of continuing the war. Ukraine's Western-supplied military equipment is superior, and its forces are determined. If Moscow keeps fighting, it will therefore sustain more defeats and casualties and place itself in increasing danger of calamitous and violent collapse. Russia's future will be one of economic degradation; it risks becoming weak and dependent on China. By accepting that it must end the war, it will spare itself the humiliation of a larger unraveling.

Seen from the perspective of Central Europe, a common European defense and the transatlantic alliance are not excluding each other, but are both necessary for our security.

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