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Together Forever?

Alliances in Times of Foreign Policy Uncertainty



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Under threat: the European Security Order

The overwhelming majority of the population in seven European countries fears first and foremost military conflict, followed by terrorist attacks and climate change. This is the result of the representative survey “Security Radar 2019” carried out by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, which covered Germany, France, Latvia, Poland, Russia, Serbia and Ukraine.

The wound: the Ukraine conflict

The Russian navy’s interception of Ukrainian military vessels in the Sea of Azov and the subsequent responses once again demonstrate how quickly a comparatively small incident can pose challenges to European security. The year 2019 marks the fifth anniversary of the beginning of the military conflict in and around Ukraine. Despite unwavering solidarity within the EU with regard to sanctions against Russia, there is little unity among the Member States, especially on the controversial “Nord Stream 2” pipeline, whose construction nevertheless continues.

The initiative: the Franco-German axis

French President Emmanuel Macron has called for a “rethinking of the European security architecture”. He is also committed to the idea of a European army. Germany and France have now signed the Aachen Treaty on Franco-German Cooperation and Integration, which provides for a common foreign and security policy, among other.



Foreign Policy Certainties in Doubt

The experts' analysis is clear: Experienced diplomat and Munich Security Conference Chair Wolfgang Ischinger calls current security policy developments "the beginning of a new era", justifying his assessment by pointing out that many "foreign policy certainties are in doubt". In its 2018 Yearbook the Stockholm Peace Institute SIPRI describes "shifting geopolitical and geostrategic relationships and power dynamics". And a report by the Russian Valdai Discussion Club even believes that "we are living in a crumbling world".

These clear statements are not only emanating from the ivory tower: In the representative survey "Security Radar 2019" carried out by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and conducted in seven European countries (Germany, France, Latvia, Poland, Russia, Serbia, Ukraine), the overwhelming majority (79 percent) is primarily concerned about impending wars and conflicts. Fears of international terrorism and climate change rank a close second and third, respectively.

These are remarkable findings. Ten years ago, a stock-taking of European security would not have revealed such negativity by far. Although the Russian-Georgian war began to cloud the general security situation as early as 2008, Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev, the US and Russian presidents at the time, seemed willing to attempt a reset initiated by the US. Russia introduced a proposal for improving European security that was not rebuffed by the Western allies within the EU and NATO, although the initiative later became bogged down in the OSCE's subsequent Corfu Process.

But the era of the optimistic "reset" is over. Not only have the EU's and NATO's relationships with Russia markedly deteriorated, but cracks within alliances that were not apparent ten years ago have surfaced as well. This transformational feeling in security policy has taken Europe by elemental force. This is not entirely surprising, since the review process initiated by former German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier entitled "A Fresh Look at German Foreign Policy" rightly called for a "new impetus for a just and peaceful international order" in

the future and "more room for strategic reflection" as a result of these new complexities.

However, there was a failure to take into account one development that has less to do with dreaded short-term crises entailing possible medium or long-term negative consequences, or even foreign policy hostility. Instead, it has more to do with insecure allies and weakening alliances. Who could have predicted at that time that the US of all countries would take a critical view of NATO's continued existence? And was NATO member Turkey in particular not considered an undisputed, strategically important country within the alliance? Who could have guessed that populist governments would open up enormous rifts between individual states within the EU, or that the reconciliation between Poland and Germany, begun decades ago and seen as a success since the end of the Cold War at the latest, would once again be endangered?

And who could imagine that states such as Belarus would be thinking out loud about refusing to pledge their powerful neighbor Russia their guaranteed allegiance in all areas, even if only in speeches or proclamations? Fissures are even emerging in the strong ties among the eastern defense alliance known as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Traditional allies of Russia, such as Armenia or Kazakhstan, have been looking to the West for some time now when it comes to achieving progress in their respective countries.

Clear Evidence of Alliance Fatigue

In other words, alliances regarded as stable and designed to last into the foreseeable distant future have suddenly begun to waver. Not all members continue to unconditionally pursue the goals of their respective alliances, whose purpose in Europe during the Cold War – as NATO exemplifies – was to respond politically or militarily via a formal alliance in the event of aggression by non-members. According to this understanding, alliances were necessary in order to meet international challenges.

However, this understanding no longer seems pervasive, although the beginnings of this erosion date



back several years: US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld at the time spoke of a “coalition of the willing” during the war in Iraq, referring to the states supporting the invasion of Iraq. While NATO and CSTO remain relevant as defense alliances, they are subject to internal tensions. One NATO analyst even felt called upon to publish an article entitled “Imagining a World without NATO”, in which he laid out excellent reasons why such a development was not to be welcomed. The same questions are being raised both in the case of the EU and its eastern “counterpart”, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

The reasons for this noticeable alliance fatigue are manifold. On the one hand, after 1991 the confrontation between the two blocs disappeared at least for a certain time, with a weakened Russia unable to pursue its own foreign policy interests. NATO has now expanded eastwards, but the justifications for this were more political than military. In fact, the subsequent period was quite successful, both thanks to a remarkable economic upswing and to the relative security stability after the end of the Cold War. These were miracle years for security policy and for the populations in both the East and the West. Unlike the era of two-bloc confrontation and a massive nuclear arms race, the danger of a conflict between the superpowers had now been averted.

In the meantime, Russia has once again come to be perceived as a threat by Western states. But Russia is now joined by other countries, first and foremost China. While the perceived challenge of Russia is primarily of a military nature, the threat of China is economic. And yet both the EU and the US trade with Russia as well as China, although trade volumes differ significantly. At the same time, Russia remains an important energy supplier for all of Europe, as evidenced by the Nord Stream 2 pipeline under construction, causing considerable tensions within the EU and with the US.

It is not only these extraordinary foreign policy changes, but also rapidly advancing digitalization and the development of new technologies that will entail implications for security policy. Meddling attempts targeting databases, social media and critical infrastructure facilities, and the use of unmanned military drones are just a few examples.

These are the negative developments that are juxtaposed alongside the positive ones described above.

Keeping Options Open

Nationalist and populist parties, currently on the rise in both the EU and the US, are exploiting these negative developments for domestic political purposes. Governments which they form think that interests cannot be realized through multilateralism or regional and long-term alliances, but rather through ad hoc alliances that require far fewer political compromises. The populists believe that this policy provides the electorate with an urgently needed domestic identity and a clear stance against globalization, which has had, in some aspects, a negative impact on the economy of the country in question.

Should the world in fact move once again in the direction of a bipolar confrontation, such as a G-2, it is foreseeable that smaller states will cooperate with the US some of the time, with China on other occasions and, guided by their own short or medium-term interests, will join other alliances as well. Alliances will be fluid. Mark Leonard from the European Council for Foreign Relations considers this development very likely: “Most countries will choose to keep their options open.”

This is nothing new: There are manifest similarities between now and the period following the Congress of Vienna in the 19th century, when rotating coalitions marked by frequently changing partners were referred to as “state quadrilles”. Just under a hundred years later, a similar development in foreign and security policy led to a nervousness already palpable in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century.

Years ago, historian Joachim Radkau explained in his publication “The Age of Nervousness” that the vague fears, weaknesses and overestimations of state actors, but also of populations, at the time led to a desire for a better future and that war was perceived almost as salvation. Any comparison to today would be premature; nevertheless, it can be observed that states in the West and the East are anxious to secure their supposedly fragile national



identities in uncertain times because they feel they are being treated unfairly internationally.

According to the above-mentioned survey carried out by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in seven European countries, people in Russia, Latvia, Poland, the Ukraine and Serbia in particular feel they are not accorded their rightful status in the world. Serbs, Russians, Ukrainians and Poles also have the impression that other countries are actively hindering their respective country's development.

Self-interest is clearly in the foreground, as opposed to values and norms. Prime examples of this approach are China and Russia, but partly also the US. These states can choose among policy options based on their military or economic power, while smaller states have to decide how to behave in this multipolar, but not multilateral, world.

The large states have proven that cooperation and confrontation are possible almost simultaneously. This is just as true for the Sino-US relationship as it is for the Sino-Russian relationship. And the trend towards the US model of going it alone out of distrust of alliances is growing, fears Gideon Rose, editor-in-chief of the influential political journal "Foreign Affairs". He even predicts that "other countries will follow Washington's lead".

Making the EU Capable of Foreign Policy

How can the EU and its Member States secure their future in such a security policy maelstrom? At a time when some understandings no longer conform with the *zeitgeist*, for example that security is to be conceived of cooperatively, the interests of others must be acknowledged and compromises must sometimes be made? How can the effectiveness of international institutions be demonstrated? And how can a security policy increasingly focused on ad hoc approaches independent of alliances be avoided?

Politicians have now recognized this dilemma and are at least endeavoring to come up with ideas and initiatives. According to German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, the European Union must finally be

made "capable of foreign policy" in order to continue to guarantee security in Europe, as "none of our countries is strong enough to meet the current security challenges alone," he points out. A programmatic paper drawn up by the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) for the upcoming European elections calls for a "strong common security and defense policy" in Europe. French President Emmanuel Macron also sees an urgent need to reorient European security. He is even in favor of a European army. The first step is the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in defense; 34 projects were launched as of November 2018.

However, one truth has become clear: There will be no return to the comparatively safe 1990s. Security challenges will proliferate. The EU will have to make it its duty to stand up for internationally binding norms and cooperative security – a basic prerequisite for its own existence – and to counteract the destabilizing policies of other states. This will only be possible by establishing a clear catalog of interests in which the EU identifies both its strengths and weaknesses. Interests can also be pursued that run counter to those of the US without calling transatlantic ties into question. Moreover, it will hardly be possible to develop any concept of European security without taking China into account. To date, Beijing has benefited greatly from free trade in goods and has therefore also expressed an interest in international rules.

The decisive momentum will come by adapting the current security order to cope with existing challenges so as to guarantee stability even in the transition phase. The outcome will then be clearly different from the current order. Nevertheless, in the process of renewal already underway, there is no reason why still-functioning alliances should turn their backs on their common interests and values as long as they are used to pursue peace. And for the time being, the insight of the German Federal Foreign Office's Review Process is applicable for the still urgently needed development of new ideas, concepts and recommendations: "More room for strategic reflection".

FES ROCPE in Vienna

The goal of the FES Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe (FES ROCPE) of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Vienna is to come to terms with the challenges to peace and security in Europe since the collapse of the Soviet Union a quarter of a century ago. These issues should be discussed primarily with the countries of Eastern Europe – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – and with Russia, as well as with the countries of the EU and with the US. The security order of Europe, based until recently on the Helsinki Final Act (1975) and the Paris Charter (1990), is under threat. This is, among others, a result of different perceptions of the development of international relations and threats over the last 25 years, resulting in divergent interests among the various states. For these reasons, ROCPE supports the revival of a peace and security dialogue and the development of new concepts in the spirit of a solution-oriented policy. The aim is to bring scholars and politicians from Eastern Europe, Russia, the EU and the US together to develop a common approach to tackle these challenges, to reduce tensions and to aim towards conflict resolution. It is our belief that organizations such as the FES have the responsibility to come up with new ideas and to integrate them into the political process in Europe.

We support the following activities:

- Regional and international meetings for developing new concepts on cooperation and peace in Europe;
- A regional network of young professionals in the field of cooperation and peace in Europe;
- Cooperation with the OSCE in the three dimensions: the politico-military, the economic and the human.

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