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The Main Security Threats of the West after the Cold War. The Geopolitical Aspect

Główne zagrożenia dla bezpieczeństwa Zachodu
po zimnej wojnie. Aspekt geopolityczny

DOI: 10.34739/doc.2021.18.12

Abstract: The article discusses major threats that the Western society has had to deal with after the end of the Cold War. This issue seems to be of particular concern due to the fact that nowadays certain new trends in the world of geopolitics can be observed. Due to the change in the global balance of power after the year 1991, the role of the main geostrategic actors has also changed while new actors have begun to appear. Among the new challenges for the geostrategic position of the West there are the military ambitions of the Russian Federation and the economic hegemonic aspirations of China. Other threats include terrorism, mass migration, transnational organized crime, infectious diseases, and environmental degradation.

Keywords: balance of power, geopolitics, security threats, West, Russia, China

Abstrakt: W artykule omówiono niektóre z głównych zagrożeń, z którymi musi się zmierzyć społeczeństwo krajów Zachodu po zakończeniu zimnej wojny. Wydaje się, że kwestia ta budzi szczególne zaniepokojenie ze względu na to, iż obecnie obserwuje się pewne nowe trendy w światowej geopolityce. W związku z transformacją globalnego układu sił po 1991 r. zmieniła się także rola głównych aktorów geostrategicznnych i zaczęli pojawiać się nowi aktorzy. Wśród nowych wyzwań dla geostrategicznej pozycji Zachodu są ambicje militarne Federacji Rosyjskiej oraz hegemoniczne aspiracje gospodarcze Chin. Inne zagrożenia obejmują terroryzm, masową migrację, międzynarodową przestępczość zorganizowaną, choroby zakaźne i degradację środowiska.

Słowa kluczowe: równowaga sił, geopolityka, zagrożenia bezpieczeństwa, Zachód, Rosja, Chiny

Introduction

The change in the international balance of power at the end of 1991, without a major war for the first time in the history of the modern world, caused a gradual change in the role of the main geostrategic actors and the appearance of new ones. Before that, for four decades after the Second World War, two superpowers - the USA and the USSR, had dominated global affairs. The countries were rivals for each other and had opposing visions about political, economic, and social policies. The United States promoted democracy and market economy, while the Soviet Union was in favour of a totalitarian regime and a command economy. Moreover, each superpower competed in the area of military arsenal and armies. In this way, both countries “actively promoted the replication of these political and socioeconomic systems in other countries while also resisting the expansion of the other’s system”¹. But after the dismantling of the Soviet state and the end of the Cold War, the equilibrium was destroyed and new geopolitical realities began to appear in the Western world.

Talking about threats it is first necessary to determine **the notion of ‘threat’** itself. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the word ‘*threat*’ means: 1. an expression of intention to inflict evil, injury, or damage, 2. one that threatens, 3. an indication of something impending². In security studies the word ‘*threat*’ is widely used as a political term, and from a security perspective there can be military threats, economic threats, ecological threats, etc. After the Cold War the perception of threat has fundamentally changed as well. As H.G. Brauch suggests, it can be defined as “referring to the dangers the planet earth is confronted with due to the manifold destructive potentials of the environment and its global consequences”³. In the UN Report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, *A More Secure World: Our Shared Respon-*

¹ J.M. Goldgeier, M. McFaul, *Power and Purpose: U.S. Policy toward Russia after the Cold War*, Washington, DC 2003, p. 1.

² Merriam-Webster Dictionary, *Threat*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/threat> (date of access: 10.03.2021).

³ H.G. Brauch, *Security Threats, Challenges, Vulnerability and Risks*, [in:] *Peace Studies, Public Policy and Global Security*, ed. U. Oswald Spring [et al.], *Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems (EOLSS)*, Vol. I, 2010, pp. 102-141.

sibility, published in 2004, the following six clusters of threats with which the world must be concerned were presented:

- *economic and social threats, including poverty, infectious diseases and environmental degradation;*
- *inter-state conflict;*
- *internal conflict, including civil war, genocide and other large-scale atrocities;*
- *nuclear, radiological, chemical and biological weapons;*
- *terrorism;*
- *transnational organized crime*⁴.

New challenges of the West

As far as the main challenges threatening the geostrategic position of the West are concerned, one of them is definitely the Russian Federation with its military potential including high-tech weapons such as hypersonic nuclear-capable missiles and its “expansionist agenda” aimed at undermining the liberal democracies in Europe⁵. Russia’s military operation capabilities have considerably improved during the last few years. The country is among top ten states in the world in terms of military expenditures⁶. In 2016 Russia was in the fourth position in the world in terms of the number of Active Armed Forces⁷. Moreover, it is constantly modernizing and expanding its strategic and tactical nuclear arsenal, in spite of the economic crisis⁸. As R. Białoskórski emphasizes, the fact that Russia is a nuclear power significantly strengthens and determines its military power⁹. Another important issue is the militarization of the Kaliningrad Oblast which causes concern among the states of the Baltic Sea region. The local A2/AD (anti-area/access denial) system

⁴ United Nations General Assembly, Report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*, p. 12, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N04/602/31/PDF/N0460231.pdf?OpenElement> (date of access: 17.01.2021).

⁵ T. Porter, *These are the biggest threats to the US in 2020*, “Business Insider”, 2020, Jan. 3, <https://www.businessinsider.com/here-are-the-biggest-threats-to-the-us-in-2020-2019-12?IR=T#russia-plots-to-subvert-democracy-and-hypersonic-weapons-1> (date of access: 18.01. 2021).

⁶ R. Białoskórski, *The Geostrategic Position of the Russian Federation. A Powermetric study*, Siedlce 2018, p. 47.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 53.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 79.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 80.

built in the European part of the NATO area enables control of a large part of the territories of the Baltic states¹⁰. As F. Klocek notes, it is a priority for the countries of the Baltic Sea region to oppose the threats posed by Russia bearing in mind consistent expansion and modernization of troops as well as cooperation within NATO¹¹. Besides, the occupation of Crimea has allowed Russia to establish an A2/AD zone in the southern sector of NATO's Eastern Flank¹². What is more, according to A. Kacprzyk et. al., the exercises of the Russian armed forces such as Zapad (West) and Shchyt Soyuzu (Union Shield), conducted together with Belarus, and the Ladoga exercise conducted by Russia's Air Forces, show that Russia is performing a systematic preparation of troops in the Western Military District for action in the area of NATO's Eastern Flank¹³. In S. Koziej's opinion, nowadays there is a new, hybrid cold war between Russia and the West in the east of the Euro-Atlantic area¹⁴. This war is different in methods from the classic one waged in the 20th century, but it is identical in its essence and consists in the political confrontation between the two sides which could destroy each other in the event of war between them, and in which means of violence are also used, including the armed forces, but "below the threshold of open, regular aggression"¹⁵.

Another challenge for the Western geostrategic position is China. On the world stage, China aims to become the new hegemon by gaining political and economic influence. As T. Porter puts it, China is "an economic rival with soaring military ambition" as it keeps rebuilding and modernizing its military arsenal while expanding its influence outside the country's borders¹⁶. The Chi-

¹⁰ F. Klocek, *Mocarstwowa polityka Federacji Rosyjskiej współczesnym zagrożeniem dla bezpieczeństwa Polski i regionu Morza Bałtyckiego*, „De Securitate et Defensione. O Bezpieczeństwie i Obronności” 2018, nr 2, p. 151.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 150.

¹² A. Kacprzyk et al., *NATO and the Future of Peace in Europe: Towards a Tailored Approach*, Warsaw 2016, p. 11.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ S. Koziej, *Ewolucja i scenariusze kształtowania się środowiska bezpieczeństwa europejskiego*, [w:] *Bezpieczeństwo Europy w globalnym świecie. Szanse i zagrożenia przyszłości w warunkach przesilen cywilizacyjnych*, ed. J. Kleer, K. Prandecki, Warszawa 2018, p. 291.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ T. Porter, *These are....*

nese nation is currently predicted to become the world's biggest economy by around 2050. It has also demonstrated the new power of the People's Liberation Army organizing huge live-fire military exercises¹⁷. As Porter suggests, China is waging an economic war with the United State "using an army of hackers and spies to steal vital economic information"¹⁸. Apart from that some experts argue that the present crisis in the world caused by the coronavirus pandemic shows that it is China, and not Russia, that is the main force capable of destabilizing the world¹⁹. According to Prince Michael of Liechtenstein, today's confrontation with China is different from that taking place during the Cold War, but it is no less dangerous²⁰. The author does not believe that China will become more democratic as it grows economically. As he notices, "today's contest is not over political philosophy: it is a real and potentially bloody power play"²¹. What is more, by cultivating its soft power, China has won the support of global institutions. It has also created institutions of its own, like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which serves as a tool for economic control²². China also finances infrastructure in many countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America and even Europe, as well as strategic business purchases. Thus, understanding China is important, but this does not mean agreeing with its policies. As Prince Michael of Liechtenstein emphasizes, "attempts to change Beijing are bound to fail and shows of weakness can be fatal"²³.

Other threats that challenge the Western world today are the asymmetric and non-military threats such as terrorism, cyberattacks, mass migration, and international organized crime. Although they have neither the potential nor the aim to endanger the sovereignty or territorial integrity of European states, their long-

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Forsal.pl, „*Le Figaro*”: Zagrożenie ze strony Chin większe niż ze strony Rosji, <https://forsal.pl/artykuly/1475417,pandemia-chiny-glowna-sila-destabilizujaca-swiat-rosje-to-drugi-plan.html> (date of access: 20.01.2021).

²⁰ Prince Michael of Liechtenstein, *Reassessing the geopolitics of rising China*, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/reassessing-the-geopolitics-of-rising-china,defense,3270.html> (date of access: 20.01.2021).

²¹ Ibidem.

²² Ibidem.

²³ Ibidem.

term effects may cause disruption of socio-economic life and weakening of the governance structure. Therefore, they should not be ignored and should be addressed immediately and in a skilled manner.

Conclusion

To sum up, the evolution of the geopolitical system after the Cold War cannot be underestimated. The disintegration of the bipolar world has become an important factor characterizing the nature of modern security environment. We are living in the era of significant changes in the field of global security, especially in the Euro-Atlantic area. Hence, new threats for the geostrategic position of the West have arisen as well. Among them are the military ambitions of the Russian Federation and the economic hegemonic aspirations of China. Other threats include terrorism, mass migration, transnational organized crime, infectious diseases, and environmental degradation. Therefore, in order to tackle all these problems close cooperation between Western states and international organizations is required.

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