

THE INFLUENCE OF CONTEMPORARY GEOPOLITICAL CHANGES FOR THE MILITARY POTENCIAL OF THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

Marek BARWIŃSKI

After the WW II Europe has been divided into two antagonistic politico-military blocks. The central and eastern-European countries for nearly half a century have been assigned to the Soviet sphere of influence. One of the most visible and dangerous consequences of the division of Europe was establishment of two military pacts: the NATO and the Warsaw Pact which resulted in Soviet and American troops stationing in particular countries. The mutual animosity, hostility and distrust led to a massive arms build-up, increase in number of troops and an atmosphere of permanent peril.

In the late 1980s and the early 1990 the geopolitical situation in Europe and the whole world changed dramatically. Democratisation of the central and eastern-European countries, the collapse of the USSR ending the era of Soviet domination, disintegration of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia has radically changed the relations of power in Europe. From the military and also political point of view the most important effect of these events the withdrawal of Soviet troops from European countries and the integration of these countries with economic, political and military structures of Western Europe (in most cases accomplished in 2004).

The geopolitical transformations in Europe caused not only far-reaching changes in the political, territorial, economic and social aspects of the continent but also heavily influenced defence doctrines and military potential in all countries concerned.

Before the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact the geopolitical position of Poland did not warrant the state's security. The presence of a huge number of Soviet troops within the territory of Poland and its neighbours meant a permanent peril which became true in 1956 in Hungary and in 1968 in Czechoslovakia. These days no foreign troops are stationed in Poland. Such possibility depends on decisions of Polish government which, unlike during the period after WW II, are independent of any external influences.

Poland's neighbours possess different military potentials and pursue different foreign and economic policies. All of them, however, keep their militaries ready to defend their sovereignty. Even minute menaces require some armed forces able to react to any danger, not only during a war.

The militaries of Germany and the Czech Republic (a NATO member since 1999) do not affect Poland's security. To the contrary, they add to the stabilisation of our western and south-western border.

Slovakia and Lithuania in November 2002 were invited to join the NATO starting from May 2004. This will significantly improve Poland's geopolitical position since the NATO enlargement will strengthen our southern border and counterbalance the militaries of Belarus and the Kaliningrad District, which borders upon both Lithuania and Poland. The Lithuanian military potential is actually quite insignificant but its situation with regard to the Kaliningrad District, Russia and Belarus is of key importance both strategically and politically (Barwiński, 2004).

After the dismantling of Ukrainian nuclear weapons (completed in June 1996) the nuclear danger in central-eastern Europe has diminished. Ukraine co-operates with the NATO and takes part in peace missions (like in Kosovo and Iraq). Nevertheless, this country does not aspire to join the NATO for this would be strongly opposed by Russia – at least at this stage. Ukraine claims to be a neutral country remaining outside any political blocks. According to this conception it keeps away from Russia-dominated military structures of the Community of Independent Nations. Only after 10 years of independence Ukraine has reached a consensus regarding the border with Russia. The conflict on partition of the military left in Ukraine after the fall of the Soviet Union was settled by the June 1995 agreement, nevertheless Russian troops remain in Ukraine, which accepted that Russia maintain its naval bases (Sevastopol in Crimea) and some other military facilities (Sobczyński, 2002). Ukrainian military of some 300,000 men is at low ebb. None of several modernisation plans has come to fruition. The antiquated armaments and other equipment badly affect its military capacity. In case of a serious armed conflict this army is unlikely to efficiently defend the country. Faced with unsolved problems within its own military and put under Russia's economic pressure Ukraine feels menaced by its big neighbour and seeks some additional assurance. Therefore it tends to establish closer relations with Poland through political contacts and military co-operation (Krawętek, 2002).

Since Russia and Belarus are firmly linked to each other, their militaries can be considered as a whole. Political elites in Belarus do not think in terms of an independent state and do not pursue its own policy in the sphere of foreign affairs and security. Belorussian policy largely depends on Russian interests. It is manifested in many common bilateral undertakings and in advancements of integration of the two states. The integration in the sphere of security is facilitated by communications and commandment links between Moscow and Minsk that

subsist to the present day in spite of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The most developed military co-operation between both countries is in the air defence. Russia needs common defence arrangements to maintain influence on military situation on the area bordering to the NATO countries. For Belarus the co-operation with Russia is the only way to keep up its military. This may be considered as the main danger for Poland that borders upon Belarus.

Neighbouring with the Kaliningrad District Poland is in direct contact with the military potential of this eastern superpower. This small enclave holds some 15,000 troops, including 1,000 strong marines unit. This contingent possesses 500 guns, 850 tanks, 1,100 armoured vehicles, 50 helicopters and 28 airplanes. In addition to that, the Baltic Fleet (with its headquarter in Kaliningrad) has two naval bases. The fleet has 2 submarines, 6 surface vessels, 26 patrol boats, 55 modern airplanes and over 40 helicopters (Military Balance, 2001). This military potential is concentrated in a small area of 15,100 km² adjacent to the Polish territory. The stock of armaments is about a half of Poland's arsenal, which equals to the whole military potential of the Czech Republic and exceeds by far those of Slovakia and Lithuania. This comparison takes into account only the quantity of arms stock; much more important from the military viewpoint is the quality of weaponry. In this respect the Russian military garrisoned in the Kaliningrad District excels in many cases the whole potential of Polish army (Barwiński, 2004).

Table 1.

Military of Central-European countries confronted
with demographic and territorial potential

Country	Area [thousand km ²]	Population [million]	Manpower of the army	Manpower of the army per 1000 inhabitants
Belarus	207,6	10 159	83 083	8,18
Czech Republic	78,9	10 283	53 636	5,22
Germany	357	82 100	275 211	3,35
Lithuania	65,2	3 682	8 880	2,41
Poland	312,7	38 654	194 190	5,02
Russia	4 425,4*	146 539	653 299*	4,46
Slovakia	49	5 395	38 929	7,22
Ukraine	603,7	50 658	310 000	6,12

Source: author's own elaboration based on 'Military Balance 2001'

* in the European part

The above table shows that Russia has the strongest army in the region, and also in Europe. This stems from its status of military superpower and a massive arms build-up during the Cold War. To realise how big was the military potential of the former Soviet Union it is enough to notice that after its disintegration, apart from the Russian Army, the second strongest army in Europe was formed in Ukraine and another strong, less numerous but well-equipped, army originated in Belarus.

Germany disposes of huge military potential, too. It is a result of the unification of two German states that in the past formed a contact zone of two antagonistic military blocks, which stimulated an arms build-up. These days the German military undergoes a far-reaching restructuring and reduction in troops and arms. It became possible after the NATO eastern border moved eastward following the accession of Poland to the pact.

The military forces of Czechoslovakia after the split of the country were divided in relation 2:1 in favour of the Czech Republic. The Czechoslovakia's potential was unevenly distributed throughout the country. Most units were stationed in the Czech Republic whereas the logistic and training facilities along with military industry was concentrated in Slovakia (Krawętek, 2002).

Comparing the military potential of particular countries in relation to the number of population it appears that Belarus has relatively the strongest army in the region. It results from maintaining a big number of troops after the fall of the USSR, mainly because sharing the border with Poland, which after joining the NATO became, according to President Lukashenko, a potential enemy. Slovakia also holds proportionally large contingent of troops. It may be explained by slow pace of restructuring its army. Ukrainian army is also relatively numerous as it inherited a big military potential from the USSR and wants to keep it because of the geostrategic situation, chiefly in the Black Sea region. Lithuania has definitely the smallest army because this country only begins to create its armed forces.

The table 2 shows the defence budgets of particular countries thus reflecting the rank of the defence in the hierarchy of priorities. The countries with a stable financing of the military (Poland, the Czech Republic, Germany and Slovakia) showed in the years 1993-2000 a tendency to decrease the defence expenses thanks to, among others, reduction of the troops and armament. The defence budgets were curtailed in Russia and Belarus where economic crises and limited income forced the governments to allocate money for other sectors to the detriment of the military. Lithuania that only started building its military potential keeps increasing the defence budget. However, the highest increase in defence budget during the last years was in Ukraine. This can be explained by very low military expenses in the early 1990s

and a complicated geopolitical situation of this country that requires vast expenditures to ensure the country's security.

Table 2.

Defence budgets of Central-European countries

Country	1993 [million \$US]	2000 [million \$US]	% GNP	
			1993	2000
Belarus	2 049	(1 169)	2,6	1,3
Czech Republic	1 148	1 141	(2,4)	2,0
Germany	38 185	33 025	2,0	1,5
Lithuania	73,1	154	0,7	1,0
Poland	3 011	3 332	2,6	2,0
Russia	(70 900)	(43 900)	(5,3)	(3,8)
Slovakia	348	363	2,1	1,7
Ukraine	1 445	6 038	0,5	3,1

Source: author's own elaboration based on SIPRI Yearbook 2001
 () estimated data from SIPRI

The defence expenses in relation to the number of inhabitants are generally low in this region (table 3). Germany has clearly taken the lead in this respect owing to great economic potential of the country. Russia, despite enormous economic troubles, goes second whereas the other countries are way behind. In Belarus, the Czech Republic and Ukraine the defence expenses falling to one inhabitant average some 110-120 \$US. Poland with merely 86 \$US to one inhabitant exceeds only Slovakia and Lithuania where this ratio is even lower.

The defence expenses falling to one serviceman follow the same order: in Germany it amounts to 12,000 \$US, in Russia about a half of this sum, while in other countries of the region concerned a couple of times less. It obviously reflects the financial potentialities of these countries and in case of Belarus an excessively big army.

Table 3.

Defence expenses in Central-European countries in 2000

Country	Defence budget [million \$US]	Defence budget per 1 inhabitant [\$US]	Expenses per 1 soldier [\$US]
Belarus	1 169	115,1	1 407,0
Czech Republic	1 141	111,0	2 127,3
Germany	33 025	402,3	11 999,9
Lithuania	154	41,8	1 734,2
Poland	3 332	86,2	1 715,8
Russia	43 900	299,6	6 719,7
Slovakia	363	67,3	932,5
Ukraine	6 038	119,2	1 947,7

Source: author's own elaboration based on 'Military Balance 2001'

The value of Polish military potential depends on the country's economic and political situation and on the military power of neighbouring countries. The amount of armament is limited by the treaty on the conventional arms in Europe (CFE), but as a matter of fact the real arsenal of most types of arms in Poland and the neighbouring countries is indeed smaller than the limits (table 4). Actually, the table shows only the quantitative aspect of the military potential while the quality of the arms is much more important, though more difficult to compare.

Table 4.

The limits imposed by the CFE and the real arsenal of conventional arms
in Central-European countries in 2000

Country	Manpower		Tanks		Armed vehicles		Artillery		Airplanes		Helicopters	
	limit	actual number	limit	actual no.	limit	actual no.	limit	actual no.	limit	actual no.	limit	actual no.
Belarus	100 000	83 083	1 800	1 724	2 600	2 478	1 615	1 465	294	224	80	60
Czech	93 333	53 636	957	792	1 367	1 211	767	740	230	110	50	34
Germany	345 000	275 211	4 069	2 738	3 281	2 415	2 445	2 103	900	517	280	204
Lithuania	-	8 880	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Poland	234 000	194 190	1 730	1 674	2 150	1 437	1 610	1 554	460	271	130	107
Russia*	1 450 000	653 299	6 350	5 275	11 280	9 545	6 315	6 159	3 416	2 733	855	741
Slovakia	46 667	38 929	478	275	683	622	383	383	100	82	40	19
Ukraine	450 000	310 000	4 080	3 939	5 050	4 860	4 040	3 720	1 090	911	330	247

Source: author's own elaboration based on 'Military Balance 2001'

*in the European part

The table 4 shows that Russia still possesses a huge military potential in Europe and the Ukrainian army is the second strongest on the continent. Germany also has a great demographic and military potential. Belarus does not have a numerous army, nevertheless it possesses a huge armament exceeding even that of Poland. Its position is additionally strengthened by an alliance and close military co-operation with Russia. The Czech Republic enjoys at present a favourable geostrategic situation is not compelled to hold a strong army. Poland has one of the strongest armies in the region as far as the number of troops is concerned, but the armament and defence budget is insufficient compared to some neighbouring countries.

The analyses of contemporary geostrategic and geopolitical situation in Central Europe shows that Poland does not match some of its neighbours as regards the military potential and basic arsenal. It seems that the reductions in Polish army are steps in a right direction but it must be coupled with increase in quality and quantity of modern armaments. Contemporary armed conflicts show that the technical equipment and troops' training are main factors of military power rather than the number of troops. Polish army is still chiefly equipped with antiquated post-Soviet weaponry and its modernisation is delayed due to financial shortages. As to the quality of arms, Polish army not only does not meet the NATO standards but also is outclassed by Russian and Belorussian armies that managed to get modernised. Having joined the NATO a few years ago, Poland still has only a couple of small modern and well-armed military units. With all the merits they have deserved in Kosovo, Macedonia and Iraq, these exemplary troops could not change the generally miserable image of Polish army. Recent decisions on purchasing modern airplanes and armed vehicles have raised hopes for some improvements in the future (Barwiński, 2004).

The NATO membership is a warrant of state's security. For instance in Germany some far-reaching reductions in army became possible thanks to a shift of the NATO border eastward after the admission of Poland to the pact. Likewise, accession of new members – Slovakia and the Baltic republics in particular – is in Poland's interest. It would not balance the military potentials of Central-European countries, nevertheless it would improve geopolitical situation of both the NATO and Poland.

Notwithstanding several positive consequences, the accession of central and eastern-European countries to the NATO and the European Union will not solve by itself geopolitical problems in this part of the world. Despite the formal enlargement of the NATO, a "strategic gap" in Central Europe will not disappear in the nearest future until the new member-states improve their military potential. Also, the economic level and political stability in the new

NATO members are not likely to reach the west-European standards soon. Another grave problem is an unstable “geopolitical gap” in Eastern Europe between the new NATO countries and Russia. Today it is clear that after the abolishment of political division of Europe the geopolitical division of the continent continues to exist (Moczulski, 2000).

Bibliography:

1. Barwiński M. (2004): *The Contemporary Geostrategic Situation of Poland*, [in:] Ilies A., Wendt J. (ed.) *Romanian Review on Political Geography*, Annual VI, nr. 1-2, 2004, University of Oradea, pp. 21-26;
2. Krawętek P. (2002): *Geopolityczne uwarunkowania systemu bezpieczeństwa Polski w ramach struktury euroatlantyckiej*, unpublished M.A. dissertation, Department of Political Geography and Regional Studies, University of Łódź;
3. *Military Balance 2001 – 2002*, (2001): Londyn, Oxford University Press;
4. Moczulski L. (2000): *Geopolityka. Potęga w czasie i przestrzeni*, Warsaw;
5. *SIPRI Yearbook 2001 Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, (2001): London, Oxford University Press;
6. Sobczyński M. (2002): *The ex-military areas as an element of contemporary spatial structure of Central-Eastern Europe* [in:] Kitowski J. (ed.) *New arrangements of socio-economic links in Central and Eastern Europe*, The Stanisław Leszczycki Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, Faculty of Economics, University in Rzeszów, Higher School of Administration and Management in Przemyśl, Commission of Communication Geography of the Polish Geographical Society in Warsaw, Rzeszów, pp. 91-109;