

# 20 YEARS SINCE 9/11: THE WORLD IS LESS STABLE AND CENTRAL EUROPE MUST ADAPT

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On September 10, 2001, the world seemed to be heading in a predictable direction. The United States was the obvious and unchallenged hegemon. China grew rapidly, but was still a poor, self-centered, third world country. Russia was weak and recovering from its latest crisis. Vladimir Putin was still relatively new as Russia's President and the West knew little of what to expect of him. The European Union was finally heading towards ending Cold War divisions and opening its borders to the former communist states of Central Europe. At the same time, the EU planned a profound internal reform, the adoption of a constitution and a de facto gradual federalisation. It seemed that the global order would forever be in the hands of the liberal-democratic duopoly of the US and the EU, dictating the rules to which China, Russia and other aspiring countries would have to adapt.

The crisis that preoccupied the West then concerned tiny Kosovo, where NATO forces intervened in 1999 to defend the Albanian and mostly Muslim population. Of course, even in those relatively quiet times, the world was not free from outbreaks of instability. Iraq's ruler, Saddam Hussein, refused to cooperate with UN arms inspectors, which led the US to believe that Iraq was secretly producing weapons of mass destruction. The development of secret nuclear programs came to light in Iran, which was ruled by the theocratic Ayatollah regime, and also within the unpredictable North Korea. Afghanistan was ruled by the extreme Taliban organisation which was suspected of cooperation with the terrorist group Al-Qaeda, with prior attacks launched on American targets in Kenya and Tanzania in the late 1990s. These problems were real, of course, but only the intelligence services, some politicians, academics, and a handful of journalists worried about them. Most people in the US and the EU felt secure, living in the belief that peace and Western hegemony would endure forever.

## Global Implications

The Al-Qaeda attack carried out on September 11, 2001 in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania fundamentally changed the United States and its relations with the outside world. President George W. Bush's administration responded to the al-Qaeda attack by launching the so-called 'war on terror', made up of two dimensions. The first was a vast investment in counterterrorism and other aspects of America's internal security.

The second, was the attempt to eliminate the sources of terrorist threats abroad, which in turn led to wars within Afghanistan and Iraq.

The first aspect was extremely expensive: the budgets of 16 intelligence services increased by an average of 100 percent; a new Department of Homeland Security was set up with a budget of \$ 50 billion annually, employing more than 100,000 people. The new, reformed services took up this fight against terrorism, pushing the boundaries of state interference and virtually eliminating the protection of privacy. New agencies were given permission to eavesdrop and read e-mails not only in the US, but practically all over the world. Unfortunately, agencies which have been granted such empowerment have abused some of their more sophisticated instruments. According to the Washington Post, in only one year, the National Security Agency reads an average of 56,000 e-mails which have no link to terrorism and contain no other internal threat to the US.

American security agencies were not alone in benefiting from such empowerment. Similar processes took place in other countries, including Great Britain, Germany, France, and Russia, each of which adopted new legal frameworks, equipping their services with new, and often abused, competences. An extreme example of this has been Russia, where anti-extremism laws are routinely used to censor independent media or eliminate opposition, including Vladimir Navalny. Today it can be said with certainty that one of the consequences of the 9/11 attack was the restriction of civil liberties and the widespread erosion of privacy. In the case of the USA, Great Britain or France, it happens more or less with society's consent. In Russia, the terrorist threat - many say artificially provoked or even created by the services - has become a pretext for dismantling democratic institutions.

Naturally, the most obvious aspect of the 'war on terror' was war in Afghanistan and Iraq. As we now know today, such military action has failed to improve US security, cost American citizens billions of dollars, led to a loss of prestige and has been significantly to the detriment of a change of world order for the West. In both wars more than 6,000 American troops were killed, alongside roughly the same number of allies, including troops from Central Europe. Human casualties were incomparably greater on the side of Iraqis and Afghans: according to official estimates over 200,000 Iraqis died as a result of hostilities, although, according to the medical journal Lancet, the actual number

of casualties reached 500,000. In Afghanistan, on both sides of the conflict, about 160,000 Afghans were killed. The bloody harvest of these wars has dramatically affected the prestige of the US and the West in both the Middle East and Central Asia.

Aside from the grave human cost, both wars were simply very expensive, costing the American taxpayer hundreds of billions of dollars. According to the estimate of the US Congress, both wars have already reached over \$ 2 trillion, and if you account for interest, the final cost of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan may reach as far as \$ 4 trillion. War-related expenses were largely financed by America's borrowing on international markets, with China massively buying off American debt and emerging, next to Japan, as the US's second largest creditor. The Bush administration's steadily rising debt and loose fiscal policies have also been considered among the main causes of the 2008 global economic crisis that was to depress America's economy for years to come. Whilst the US economy was hit by a massive depression, the Chinese economy raced on almost continuously, becoming a global pole and rival of the United States. In 2001, the Chinese economy was 7 times smaller than America's. 20 years later, China is the second largest economy in the world in nominal terms and purchasing price values (PPP), and has already overtaken the US to become the world's largest economy.

While the USA was stuck in a mire in Afghanistan and Iraq, China dynamically expanded its spheres of influence in Asia, Africa and even Europe, for example, in the Balkans. At the same time, Russia benefited from the expansion of oil and gas prices, which were in no small part the result of the US's wars. In 2001, the price of a barrel of oil was around \$ 20; today it is more than three times higher, on average around \$ 68-70. In 2011, oil cost as much as \$ 95 per barrel. Russia, whose budget depends primarily on the price of raw materials, has simply become richer in the past 20 years, with obvious implications for the budget of the Russian army. In 2001, Russia's armed forces were in decline - today they are among the most modern and best equipped in the world.

In 2000, China was no match for the US in the military field. China's defence budget was only \$ 22 billion compared with a US budget of \$ 320 billion. Since then, even though the US defence budget has doubled to \$717 billion, China's defence budget has grown tenfold, amounting to \$202 billion in 2021. American forces are scattered around the world, whilst the Chinese have concentrated their military resources within the immediate vicinity of the Asia-Pacific region. In 2000, China did not have any aircraft carriers, which seriously limited its ability to carry out operations, for example, against Taiwan. Today, China has two aircraft carriers, one post-Soviet and the other entirely produced in China, launched in 2018. With such strategic resources, China has already become a serious challenger to the US's position in the region of the Asia-Pacific.

In 2001, America was the undisputed hegemon of the world order, which was de facto unipolar. Today America continues to be a leading power, but its leadership position is under threat and the world order has already become multipolar. In Asia, China and the US are competing for spheres of influence, but over time the tide is tipping in China's favour. In Africa, China is already a more important strategic centre than America, which has never invested too heavily in this continent. In Europe, America remains

the undisputed leader, but China's influence is growing, especially to the south-east of the continent. Meanwhile, in the post-Soviet area, Russia is regaining influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. It is very likely, for example, that Russia decided to annex Crimea and wage its war in eastern Ukraine, knowing that the attention of the weakened US was elsewhere.

In short, today we can see that one of the consequences of 9/11 was the weakening of the role of the US and the wider West, and a growing importance of authoritarian states, in particular Russia and China. An important question for us in this context are the consequences of 9/11 for Europe and in particular for Central Europeans.

## Implications for Europe

The US focus on the Middle East has presented Europe with the dilemma of taking more responsibility for its own security and strengthening its own strategic outreach. Mark Leonard, the founder of the European Council on Foreign Relations, published in 2005 his famous book "Why Europe Will Run the 21st century". In the book Leonard argues that in a situation in which the US is militarily involved in the Middle East in which it violates international law, world leadership will be taken over by a consolidated EU that is peacefully changing its environment through its own transformative power and the enlargement process.

The turn of the century was certainly an optimistic moment for the EU. The member states were getting ready to adopt the European constitution, which was to transform the EU into a semi-federation and a global strategic power. The European Monetary Union, which began its operation in 1999, seemed to be a success. The Euro strengthened against the dollar and other member states were knocking on the door of the Eurozone, perceived as an elite club. Two months after 9/11, in November 2001, British Prime Minister Tony Blair declared in Birmingham that Great Britain would join the heart of European integration and adopt the single currency. The European Union was preparing itself to take in 10 new member states, mostly from Central Europe. Turkey was democratising and became an official candidate for EU membership, opening a potential path for the EU to become a leading player in the Middle East.

The following years showed, however, that the hopes of Euro-enthusiasts were not to come true. Instead of building strategic autonomy, the EU split and divided internally in response to the war in Iraq. Great Britain, Denmark, Italy, Spain and the new Central European member states supported the US's decision to invade Iraq but France, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg were staunch opponents of this decision. Over time, Spain and Italy joined the first group. In this atmosphere, building the EU's foreign policy and strategic autonomy became virtually impossible. At the same time, the psychosis associated with 9/11, and the resistance of a large part of Western European public opinion to EU enlargement, led to the collapse of the draft European constitution, which was rejected in 2005 in referendums in the Netherlands and France. Consequently, the project of transforming the EU into a semi-federation failed.

The global financial crisis of 2008 and the Euro crisis in 2010 undermined faith in the European project and gave

wind to the sails of Eurosceptic formations which began to spring up across the EU. The migration crisis in 2015 strengthened the popularity of Eurosceptic formations, which in many EU countries became powerful parliamentary parties, capable of winning elections. In 2016, the British voted to leave the EU, largely due to concerns over migration.

Many of the crises that have plagued the EU over the past 20 years have their origins in the events of 9/11 and the responses to them. European integration survived these crises, and in some cases has even benefited from them. For example, in response to the Euro crisis, the EU set up the Fiscal and Banking Union, which together with an interventionist role of the Central Bank, advanced the level of economic integration in the EU. Since 2004, the European Union has successfully expanded to the east and south, growing eventually from 15 to 27 member states. The knocking on the EU's doors continues, with 5 more countries applying for membership today. Nevertheless, it is difficult to judge the last 20 years as a success story for the EU. The EU does not rule the world today, as Leonard predicted. Today's EU does not aspire to global leadership, has neither that capacity, nor even serious strategic ambitions. In fact, EU foreign policy has been rather marked by stagnation and re-nationalisation. This situation is detrimental for Central Europe and its region of small states with limited resources.

In the 20 years following 9/11, the world order has become less stable and less predictable. The 'End of History' predicted by political scientist, Francis Fukuyama, has not happened. The period of US domination is ending, the role of China is growing, and Russia is trying to rebuild the empire in the former post-Soviet area. It is in Central Europe's interest to maintain the cohesion of the West, gelled by strong transatlantic ties and the unity of Europe. As the last 20 years demonstrated, the United States has been refocusing its attention away from Europe. As the US's rivalry with China grows, so does the need for the EU to assume a greater responsibility for its own security. This is the choice that Central European states should be wholeheartedly supporting.