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European Public Opinion about Security

Who Can Help Us in a Threatening World?

Bernhard Weßels
Richard Rose

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INTRODUCTION

MULTIPLE THREATS AND MULTIPLE ALLIES

Europeans today are threatened by insecurity in many forms. There are threats from the global economy, from military aggression and from climate change. Dealing with security threats calls for action by government, since protecting national security is one of its primary responsibilities. When threats come from abroad, a national government must take into account what other countries do. A government can respond on its own or join an alliance to address a threat common to many countries. Depending on the type of threat, it may look for help to the European Union, to NATO or to the United Nations. A big majority of European states belong to all three of these institutions.

Threats to national security put pressure on the government to adopt policies that have significant costs. This makes politicians hesitant to publicise threats until a crisis is very visible. In response to the war in Ukraine, the United States is putting pressure on European allies to meet their formal obligation to spend more money on defence. The European Central Bank tries to reduce the effect of global inflation by raising interest rates that increase the cost of living and constrain economic growth. Adapting to climate change has big up-front costs to reduce carbon emissions and generate renewable resources, while benefits may take decades to show up. Doing nothing also has costs if inflation persists, if Russia weaponises access to energy, and if climate change creates more extreme heat waves every few years.

Every European government has limited resources to protect security on its own. The median European country's population of fewer than 10 million people places a low ceiling on the size of its military force by comparison with Russia, with a population 14 times larger. Whatever its per capita income, the total size of a country's Gross Domestic Product is limited by its population. Thus, a country such as Denmark has a total GDP much less than that of Poland, because Poland's population is six times larger than Denmark.

National governments have a choice of alliances to increase their security; the European Union is only one potential ally. Hence, this book goes beyond a narrow focus on what is done in Brussels to consider the priority European governments give to NATO for military defence and to the United Nations for dealing with climate change. If no ally is considered suitable, a country may deal with a security challenge on its own.

Because European governments are democratically accountable, they must maintain the support of their citizens for decisions that have major consequences. Relying on the European Central Bank (ECB) to deal with inflation can cost a government votes if the ECB adopts a policy that imposes austerity on the eurozone. Given a cultural aversion to military force following defeat in the Second World War, the German government has been slow to mobilise an increased military force, notwithstanding the statement of the Federal Chancellor that Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a turning point. Dealing with the threat of climate change is politically complicated if it involves policies that require its electorate to reduce use of their car and make expensive alterations to heating their home.

The Book's Aim

Our purpose is to find out whether Europeans see their country facing multiple threats to their security today and if so, do they want their government to deal with threats on their own or get help from the European Union, the UN or NATO? We answer these questions by analysing data from the eight-nation European Security Survey of public opinion. Given substantial differences about security, we test whether people differ in their views due to their political attitudes and social characteristics; their national context; or because of differences between threats and alliances. The results have important implications for the European Union, for Europeans and for democratic governments.

We live in a time of polycrisis with many threats to security. Chapter 1 distinguishes how these threats have evolved historically. Military threats have developed from massing foot soldiers to massing drones and cyber attacks. Threats to the economy were once confined to conflicts between hungry urban residents and farmers who produced food. The development of a global economy has created a political economy in which China is now seen as a source of risk as well as cheap imported goods. When growing populations began clustering in cities this threatened public health and the response was public sanitation. The growth in manufacturing and new life styles have combined to change the climate with potentially dire future consequences.

The impact of security threats is variable. An aggressive attack by a foreign army threatens the territory and lives of all the people living within its path. The global economy has tended to increase prosperity, albeit in cycles in which economic growth raises incomes unequally while inflation hits all consumers. Climate insecurity affects the whole of a country's population, but the form differs depending on proximity to flood risks or being farmers affected by changes in the weather.

For each threat democratic governments have a choice between remaining exclusively accountable to their voters or joining a multi-national alliance to increase the effectiveness of policies while becoming accountable to alliance partners too. Immediately after the Second World War European elites began creating multi-national alliances offering a more effective means of maintaining security than before. Elites relied on an increasingly prosperous and secure public supporting the extension of their protection from their national capital to Brussels and Washington.

A national government's choice of allies tends to differ with the type of threat. Chapter 2 describes the distinctive characteristics of multi-national alliances and their comparative advantages and limitations. The European Union seeks to provide economic security through the European Central Bank and economic growth through the Single European Market. The EU now has a High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy promoting strategic autonomy policies intended to reduce dependence on decisions taken by the American president. However, its military capacity is limited because of the lack of a European army.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) enhances the military effectiveness of European states by magnitudes. Article 5 of the NATO Treaty formally commits the United States to provide assistance to any member state that has been the object of a military attack. The

United States has a population, economy and armed force far bigger than that of any European country. However, because the United States is a hegemon, European governments have much less voice in its policies than in the Council of the European Union. Moreover, decision-making about security is now subject to a polarised American political system and President Donald Trump has declared that European governments must spend more to defend themselves if they want to rely on America's protection.

Climate change is a global problem because pollution crosses continents and more pollution is created in Asia and North America than in Europe. The United Nations' inclusive membership gives it a global reach and it has taken the lead in recommending policies that member governments ought to adopt to protect the climate. However, the UN lacks the power to enforce its recommendations and its biggest polluters, such as China, the United States and India, can ignore its proposals.

In a democracy public opinion matters and voters can be sceptical of alliances that dilute the electoral accountability of decision-makers. Governments must educate their citizens about gains in effectiveness that alliances can bring or risk voters rejecting an alliance, as happened in the United Kingdom with Brexit. There are many theories about why people want their country to go it alone when their security is at risk, as Chapter 3 explains. One is that people are democratic nationalists; they do not want to share their influence on the government with foreign institutions. Another theory is that those who reject alliances are uneducated and distrust foreigners, people whom Hillary Clinton referred to as 'deplorables'.

Our model of how Europeans view a threatening world poses two questions: Do individuals see their country facing big security threats? If so, do they want their government to respond on its own or turn for help to alliances? Public opinion surveys provide appropriate evidence to answer these questions. In this book we analyse original data from the European Security Survey (EuroSec). It interviewed 12,685 people in eight countries—the United Kingdom, Germany, Poland, Sweden, Romania, Hungary, Italy and Croatia. All but the United Kingdom belong to three major security alliances, the European Union, NATO and the United Nations. Interviewing occurred almost a year after Russia invaded Ukraine.

Security threats are not facts: they are subjective political judgments that individuals construct in their minds. While government ministers

responsible for national security cannot ignore risks to national security, ordinary Europeans may do so until they materialise in their own lives through inflation, abnormal weather or bombs dropped by drones. Hence, the first step in the EuroSec survey is to ask whether people think their country faces a fair or big risk from potential security threats. Chapter 4 analyses the replies. Most people see at least a fair risk, but the proportion doing so varies greatly between military, economic and climate threats.

Faced with a variety of threats, governments have a choice of joining an alliance or dealing with the threat on their own. The survey offers respondents who see a significant risk five alternatives: getting help from the European Union, the United Nations, NATO or the United States, or their national government looking after a risk on its own. Chapter 5 reports the extent to which concerned Europeans want their country to work with allies; the size of the majority varies substantially between security threats. Going it alone enables voters to influence directly what governors do. A plurality but less than a majority of Europeans think their country is better-off defending itself on its own from the global economy and climate change. There is, however, an awareness that in military matters their national resources are dwarfed by the United States and Russia; less than one-quarter want their country to go it alone in military defence.

Multi-national alliances offer a country the chance to increase the effectiveness of its security by pooling resources with other countries. European citizens make discriminating judgments about the EU's capacity to provide security. Their opinion of the EU varies according to the type of threat and the EU's resources. Its substantial economic powers are reflected in it being by far the most desirable ally for dealing with the global economy. When the focus is on climate change, the choice of ally is divided. Almost one-third endorse the EU while one-quarter favour allying with the United Nations.

When help is needed to deal with military aggression, Europeans have turned their backs on Brussels and looked across the Atlantic. NATO, which is dominated by the United States, is seen as the best source of military help by a majority of respondents. An additional 9 per cent explicitly choose protection by the United States. However, only two per cent see the United States as a major ally in dealing with climate change and four per cent as an ally in dealing with the global