Whereas now, in the midst of the rule of law spat with the European Union, it is rather the domestic political situation in Poland that draws most attention in academia and among the policymaking community, the country’s foreign and security policy, too, falls under the loop of security scholars and professionals – particularly since Russia’s hybrid overtures in Ukrainian Crimea and Donbas as well as further afield in post-2014 Europe. Written by a renowned Polish IR scholar from Warsaw University and a national security policy insider, *Poland’s Security Policy: The West, Russia, and the Changing International Order*, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2016, provides therefore a well-timed, astute and detailed account of complex national security dilemmas and their management by the Republic of Poland from the period of post-communist transition in 1989 onwards.

Whereas the author’s theoretical approach is briefly presented in the introduction section, the rest of the book presents an endeavour of an in-depth empirical policy analysis, structured chronologically and neatly divided into five main chapters that cast an inside-out and outside-in perspective on Poland's security policy shifts in the international systemic context from the end of the Cold War until today (effectively, early 2015). Starting her empirical deliberations from the historical determinants of Poland's post-Cold War security policy, Zając then discusses the period of the country’s reorientation towards the West, its engagement in regional and trans-Atlantic security and defence policies throughout the 'unipolar moment', as well as its foreign-policy turns in the emerging multipolar world order – not least in the context of international systemic turbulence following the eruption of the so-called 'Ukraine crisis' in 2014.

The author embeds her account of Polish security identity and policies in a relevant and now re-emerging IR theoretical thinking on *middle powers* as well as *neorealist* international systemic reflections. It should be stated that the analytical framework itself is well-suited and rather modestly but well presented in the introduction (pp. xiii-xvii); however, the chapters do not fully embrace and analytically embed the advanced theoretical propositions – perhaps a separately developed guiding theoretical and methodological chapter could have remedied this situation, and the middle-power argument would have been better embedded in the current author's empirical analysis as it has been done elsewhere in the literature. [1] Also – and rather surprisingly, the author only cursorily surveys Poland's National Security Concepts and Strategies since 1989 until 2016, including those of individual political parties (p. 15-24), to trace the evolution of the national security identity and policy development – also in the view of the country's accession to NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004. As a member of the presidential team of experts entrusted with developing Poland’s post-millennial *National Security Strategic Review*, Zając was ipso facto involved in the edition of the 2013 *White Book on National Security of the Republic of Poland*
and thus, more of an insight hereon would have been an advantage of the book.

The book guides the reader through multiple milestone developments and turning points in Poland's security policy – and the effects these had upon national as well as international politics. These include, for instance, the author's accounts of Poland's role in dismantling the Eastern Bloc (pp. 34-37) and the country's subsequent reorientation towards the West (pp. 38-44) up to its accession to NATO (pp. 45-48). Other relevant issues disentangled in the book cover the birth and design of Poland's 'Eastern policy' (pp. 48-55) – or Ostpolitik, as the name is frequently borrowed from FRG Chancellor Willi Brandt's policy of German reconciliation and rapprochement with Eastern Europe and particularly Eastern Germany in the early 1970s – including a specific focus on Poland's strategic partnership with Ukraine (pp. 74-80). The author's insightful takes on Poland's initially skeptical, half-hearted and cautious involvement in both NATO's European Security and Defence Identity (ESDI) and the EU's European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP – later on CSDP) initiatives (pp. 80-85), contrasted with the country's post-2008 reconsidered stance towards the matters (pp. 120-125), are crucial for understanding Poland's turn in European security affairs. At the same time, many other crucial issues in Poland's national security policy, such as the country's bilateral relations with countries like Germany or Lithuania, or regional interactions within the Visegrád Group or the Baltic states (including the revived regional security cooperation projects a là Marshal J. Piłsudski's inter-war 'Intermarium', Międzymorze, or the contemporary Central and Eastern European 'Three Seas' Initiative, Trójmorze) are only occasionally mentioned in the text. As corner stones of current Polish security strategies the latter could have been expected to deserve chapter-length attention and a more detailed assessment.

To an extent, such a selective approach in topic coverage is justified by the subtitle, which explicitly sets the focus on international systemic constraints and enabling factors of Poland's security policy – its geopolitically conditioned juncture position between the West and Russia in both past historical periods and the changing contemporary international order.

The author argues that Poland's growing tensions with Russia started mounting already since 1999 when the country accessed NATO (pp. 88-91). After further increasing since 2000 when Russia assertively resurfaced on the international stage (pp. 104-111) tensions became particularly acute and forcé post-2014 when Russia gravely broke international law, marched against the international order and forcefully annexed Ukrainian Crimea as well as got involved in hybrid warfare – first and foremost but hardly only – in Ukraine's east (pp. 151-154). Significantly, the – since then unfolding – regional and international security crisis, dubbed in the public and academic discourses as 'the Ukraine crisis', has been warranted in the book a chapter-long consideration (Chapter 5, pp. 137-183). The author credibly makes a clear point about the crisis being nothing but 'a clash between the West and Russia' (p. 138), thus challenging rising accounts in the literature that seek to portray it as Ukraine's domestic crisis – if not a 'civil war', a forged narrative that the Muscovy heavily promotes in the international debate on the matter. This book would, therefore, be a particularly valuable read to those perpetuating the ideas of Polish (and, by extension, Baltic states') alleged 'paranoia' in taking Russia's increasingly assertive and bellicose behaviour for what it is – i.e. a considerable national and regional security
threat. Unlike in other European states, territorial defence is Poland's main historically informed fear and a security concern in context – not least due to the close neighbourship with a growingly belligerent Russia, but also the overall anxiety and insecurity along the line of NATO's "eastern flank" including the area of the so-called 'Suwałki gap'. The author invests an effort in explaining the necessity and process of building up of Poland's own defence capabilities (pp. 117-120), reactivation of its allied politics and the quest for stronger Polish-American ties (pp. 112-117) as well as the reinvigoration – against all odds – of its strategic partnership with Ukraine in countering Russian security challenges (pp. 140-145). Poland's involvement in managing the 'Ukraine crisis', including vis-à-vis other EU member states, is being given a critical scrutiny (pp. 145-170), i.e. the country's declared will and some initial actions taken (the book covers a period up to mid-2015 only) are assessed against the backdrop of its less impressive coalition-building capabilities and bargaining power within the European Union, especially when considering its stance in the 2015 EU migration crisis and the now unfolding rule of law spat with Union institutions.

Against the backdrop of rich empirical topic coverage, the indeed very promising but rather scarcely embedded theoretical argument constrains the analytical rigour and holistic shape of this otherwise very important contribution to the field of security studies and Polish studies in particular. A more nuanced and elaborate IR theoretical contribution could have made this publication as well a resonant work in the discipline – be it an author's neorealist take on regional structural confines and opportunities for Poland's security dynamics, or an account of Poland's role as a middle-power in regional affairs and international relations which so far is underrepresented in the literature. This 'wish-list' critique notwithstanding, *Poland's Security Policy* by Justyna Zając provides an excellent and timely read, an empirically well-informed and deftly written account of the entire post-communist security policy development in Poland that currently celebrates its twentieth anniversary of NATO membership and the fifteenth anniversary of EU accession. This critically reflective book will therefore present a real intellectual treat for all those doing or interested in Polish security politics per se. Seen in a broader regional political as well as institutional context it also urges readers from both Central and Eastern European nation-states like Poland as well as from other countries within the European Union or NATO to re-think and re-design their accounts to security and defence policies in light of mounting international and domestic security challenges.

References:


Citation: