

\* \* \* Euro-Atlantic Bulletin \* \* \*

\* \* Evro-atlantski Bilten \* \* \*

\_\_\_\_\_

Publisher/Izdajatelj: EACS / EASS

Vol. 5 No. 6, 2024

Editor/Urednik: prof. dr. Iztok Prezelj

**September 19, 2024** 

ISSN 2712-5270

http://www.euroatlantic.org/bilten/

# Slovenia's Defence System in Front of the New Strategic Defence Review?

#### Pavel Vuk<sup>1</sup>

#### **Abstract**

The geopolitical and security environment in Europe has changed dramatically. With global interconnectedness, more players from states, organizations, and even individuals seek to reshape international rules and norms to their benefit. These changes have implications for Europe's shared democratic values, stability and prosperity. Doing nothing is choosing to lose. Countries have moved out of their comfort zone into a new reality that dictates a strong pace of (re)shaping their security and defence policies. Gone are the days when many countries did not focus too much on national defence issues and there was no need to spend more on the development of defence systems. Gone are the days when countries delayed implementing their defence policy commitments to NATO and the EU, when they rode the "waves" of liberal democratic dominance. In this paper, we analyse Slovenia's response to the changed security context with a critical eye, focusing on the development of the defence system. The analysis focuses on three complex strategic issues (the concept of defence, resources and inter-institutional interoperability) and paradigms of a changing security culture. The discussion on these issues offers, on the one hand, perspectives on the need to strengthen national power, where the defence system plays a significant role and, on the other hand, encourages reflection on a new approach to accelerate the speed and scale of effective changes in the defence area. At the same time, we wonder whether, after eight years, the time has come for a Strategic Defence Review.<sup>2</sup>

**Keywords**: strategic defence review, defence system, Slovenian Armed Forces

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Dr Pavel Vuk holds a PhD in Defence Studies from the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana. He is an employee of the Military Schools Centre, the National Military College, where he researches and teaches topics related to strategic, defence and military studies, theory and practice of strategy, defence planning, sociology of the military.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Note: The views expressed in this paper are the author's own and are not necessarily those of the EACS, nor of the institution in which the author works.

### Some Issues related to the Defence System of the Republic of Slovenia

Slovenia's last Strategic Defence Review was conducted in 2016 (Ministrstvo za obrambo, 2016), at the time of the ending of the financial and economic crisis, which severely hampered the development of the defence system and its capabilities. Today, eight years later, we note that although the security context has changed dramatically, the defence system has not (yet) achieved a developmental or, better said, a defence modernisation breakthrough, despite the political promises and financial impetus. In each of these years, the defence budget has been almost fully spent, and more has been spent each year on the modernisation of defence capabilities, but the capability development gap is so large and extensive that it has not yet been closed.<sup>3</sup> Capability expectations in terms of "state of the art" challenge not only acquisition strategies, but also their users to be able to manage this technology proficiently, in line with modern doctrinal assumptions. Given that the largest absorber of defence capabilities is usually the military, much depends on the state of development of the structure and scope of the Slovenian Armed Forces. Meanwhile, strategic defence issues are just piling up, in fact, it seems that it is difficult to make wise, and even more so quick, strategic decisions in a time of dynamic security and societal change and then to insist on the set priorities.

Since the last Strategic Defence Review, Slovenia has comprehensively renewed its strategic and planning documents. The Resolution on the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia was adopted by the National Assembly in 2019. Then, after a pause of almost five years, in 2024 the government adopted the so-called triplet of strategies in the defence area. This was a renewal of the Defence Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia (Vlada Republike Slovenije, 2024a) while the Military Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia (Vlada Republike Slovenije, 2024b) and the Civil Defence Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia (Vlada Republike Slovenije, 2024c) were adopted in a completely new form. In the area of strategic or long-term planning, the National Assembly adopted

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Similar criticism of the development of the defence system and its capabilities, when reviewing the realisation of the NATO capability targets for the Republic of Slovenia, is nowadays also highlighted by the Alliance without any special political embellishments (the last such assessment was made this spring, but due to the level of secrecy it is not available to the public). However, to understand what is written here, it is possible to read the NATO assessments of 2016 and 2020, which the Ministry of Defence has published on the government portal in the Slovenian language with the permission of all the allies (see NATO, 2016; NATO, 2020). In this context, the understanding of the NATO defence planning process must be seen as much broader than just the framework in which coordinated planning, the adoption of common alliance standards, joint training and international exercises, and international operations and missions take place. It is an important transformational tool for the development of the country's defence capabilities, the Slovenian Armed Forces and the defence system as a whole.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the Government has adopted the Military Strategy once in the past, in 1998, under the title Military Defence Strategy. Since then, the military strategic dimension has been presented within the defence strategy. Even so, military strategies have reappeared in the hierarchies of strategic documents of European countries, especially in the light of the consequences of the war in Ukraine and the escalation of military threats in Europe. The opposite trend has been experienced by the very popular defence white papers of the past, which are now almost erased from defence policies of European nations. This is the first time in Slovenia that the Civil Defence Strategy has appeared in the field of defence. Its relevance and role in the hierarchy of strategies will have to be assessed through its practical implementation. Notwithstanding the fact that civil defence is important for the country's defence activity, it is only a supporting element to the instruments of national power. At this point, it is worth pointing out that Slovenia still relies too heavily on systems theory in determining the hierarchy of strategic documents in the field of defence. This means that the national security system and all its subsystems each have their own strategy. This approach makes it more difficult to achieve the



a Resolution on General Long-Term Development and Equipping Programme of the Slovenian Armed Forces, firstly in 2022 for the period up to 2035 (Državni zbor Republike Slovenije, 2022), and secondly in 2023 for the period up to 2040 (Državni zbor Republike Slovenije, 2023).<sup>5</sup>

Through an analytical prism, it can be concluded that since the Strategic Defence Review, strategic and planning documents have been produced in a hierarchically uncoordinated manner and, above all, with a long time lag. This dynamic, which is primarily the result of an overheated political arena polarised between the left and the right and frequent changes of governments (three governments have changed from 2016 to 2024), has also led to an interesting situation where the triplet of strategies in the defence area had to be aligned with the hierarchically lower long-term plan. Anyway, also from this point of view, we can see, on the one hand, the complexity in which the defence system finds itself and, on the other hand, the many (political) oscillations in strategic ambitions and development plans. Traditionally, each new government has sought to put its own stamp on the country's defence policy. There is, of course, nothing wrong with this, as long as it is a reasonable continuation of the policy and not a discontinuity. Defence development cannot be a political testing ground, but a continuous and sustained process where the gradation of defence is recognised independently of the political colour or pole of the government. National security, although managed by a select political decision-makers, is nevertheless a fundamental universal societal value, important for the existence of the state and its citizens. The question of whether these documents are consistent with each other or whether they provide a clear vision of the development of the defence system cannot be answered unequivocally. The documents are very general and are subject to one interpretation or another. More importantly, from a security perspective, they are very vague in defining what concept of defence is being pursued by the development of the defence system in the first place. The documents contain a mixture of the concepts of resilience, defence and deterrence. All of these are, of course, important and necessary to ensure, but, following the lessons of other countries, it would also be useful to define a core concept around which a defence strategy could then be built (for example, Germany, the Czech Republic and the Netherlands favour a resilient, sustainable and integrated defence, Australia a defence strategy of denial, the U.S. rests on the concept of integrated deterrence). In our view, this is a major strategic issue, which is not much discussed in professional, political or academic circles.

The answer to the above question would imply that both political and military decision-makers know the direction of development of the defence system well, have a unified understanding of it, and

comprehensiveness of national security and defence which is so desirable and emphasised in these documents, and where the primary concern is to integrate and seek synergies between all instruments of national power.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> This rapid change in long-term plans was the result of the new government and its approach to defence development. In its Coalition Work Programme 2022 – 2026 (Vlada Republike Slovenije, 2022), the new government highlighted, among other things, the modernisation of the defence policy concept, the cancellation of the purchase of 8x8 armoured vehicles and the amendment of the law on the provision of funds for investments in the Slovenian Armed Forces in the period 2021-2026, the increase and faster growth of defence expenditure to accelerate the modernisation of the Slovenian Armed Forces, and the increase of national defence preparedness. These ambitions have required a rethink of the long-term development plans for the defence sector and in particular for its strongest component, the Slovenian Armed Forces.



ultimately know what needs to be done first and what comes next. In recent years, many countries (the ones mentioned above), also in the context of a heightened security situation, have put a strong emphasis on concretization when renewing their strategic and long-term planning documents in the defence area. This change of approach from excessive generality to reasonable concreteness has important foundations in the easier, comprehensible and unified visualisation of the milestones of the defence system. Today, society expects first and foremost a defence system that is transparent, rational and ready (to respond effectively) to unpredictable security events in all five security domains (land, sea, air, space and cyberspace).

The second strategic issue relates to resources, in particular the demographic picture of society and the critical staffing of defence structures, the set dynamics of modernisation of the Slovenian Armed Forces and other defence capabilities, the infrastructure perspective, and financial availability. All these questions and many others (including, for example, the prospects for military education) need quite concrete answers. Today, more than in the previous 30 years, the development of the defence system must be based on clear plans for building defence capabilities and achieving a defence posture. In addition, it is also important to work closely with allies and strategic partners who can offer small countries like Slovenia an additional measure of resilience and deterrence in all the aforementioned security domains. The biggest problem here is no longer money, but human resources and time, or a fast and feasible timetable for the modernisation of defence capabilities. The search for the perfect solution or process must be abandoned and the focus must be on delivering timely and adequate capabilities, which is also in the spirit of NATO and the EU. At the same time, the sustainability and availability of resources must be assessed and ensured at all times.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> In the area of resources, the issue of recruiting personnel for the Slovenian Armed Forces remains a pressing issue. For more than a decade, the resolutions on general long-term development and equipping programme of the Slovenian Armed Forces have been pursuing a peacetime strength of up to 10,000 personnel; today, only around three-fifths of this strength is realised. As a result, balancing the structure and organisation of manoeuvre and space forces and increasing the size of the Slovenian Armed Forces reserve represents a major challenge. The nation must also consider the possibility that future conflict could overwhelm the capacity of the active-duty force and should plan now to better prepare the reserve components and, potentially, a broader mobilization. The question of privileges (essential living status of the soldier and his family, tax breaks, etc.) that could significantly enhance the value of the Slovenian soldier is primarily a matter of regulation, which must be considered and approved by both the politicians and the society that can grant these privileges. Another pressing issue is the modernisation of the Slovenian Armed Forces, in particular its combat segment, which is the key strength of national defence. Slovenian Armed Forces lacks both the capabilities and the capacity required to be confident it can deter and prevail in combat. It needs to do a better job of incorporating new technology at scale; field more and higher-capability platforms, software; and deploy innovative operational concepts to employ them together better. The war in Ukraine has demonstrated the need to prepare for new forms of conflict and to integrate technology and new capabilities rapidly with older systems. Such technologies include artificial intelligence-enabled capabilities, electronic warfare, fully integrated cyber capabilities, and vigorous competition in the information domain (see Commission on the National Security Strategy, 2024). Political decisions here are more restrained, as these are mostly capabilities that cannot be justified in society on the grounds of dual- or multi-purpose capability. This can pose a political survival problem for any political decision-maker. Firstly, these facilities are not cheap and can take longer to procure than the lifetime of a government. The second problem is the sustainability of funding (budget constraints), especially when the internal social issues of a society are more important in the context of security than the country's preparedness for external security threats. The third issue relates to the priority order of acquisition of combat capabilities so that modernisation achieves its operational and cumulative effect in the implementation of the familiar concept of defence, alone and with allies. It is a matter of making difficult trade-offs between the necessary combat capabilities of the infantry, air defence, navy. But without a proper solution to the first issue, all modern technology is in vain. The human being, or in our case the educated and trained soldier, is still crucial and



We would additionally draw attention to the approach to defence planning. Given that we know the key actors and generators of security threats, in addition to the "balance" of capabilities, we should also look at the "focus" of capabilities to address current security threats. This means that, in addition to capability-based planning, it would be useful to take advantage of the perspectives of realistic scenarios based on the so-called net assessment. For a successful defence planning, it is essential to be familiar with the defence concepts. Rowell and Fossey (2024) conclude that concepts embody the important creative and clear thinking that is necessary before tough choices (and sometime compromises) are made. The plans of action should be developed and implemented swiftly thereafter.

The third strategic issue we are addressing here is the so-called inter-institutional interoperability. We do so on the premise that inter-institutional interoperability between politics, the military and wider society is the cornerstone of national defence. Involving society in the national defence process has great potential. On the conceptual side, we should start thinking seriously and start a debate on the importance and place of the civilian population in national defence. At the institutional level, the government should recognise and prioritise a whole-of-society approach in defence efforts. Although people across and outside government are talented and dedicated to national security, they are impeded by systems that are outdated, bureaucratic, or too political to move with the urgency required. National defence should not be seen as a matter for the Ministry of Defence or the Slovenian Armed Forces alone. Defence should be 'co-owned' by different national, regional and local actors, and their roles should be reflected first in regulation and then in practice. Public support is always crucial for any national security or defence activity. Last but not least, Slovenia should also invest more in general education of the population, covering a wide range of security and defence topics (see more Vuk, 2023).

It is always worthwhile to conduct a social discourse on this strategic issue as well, and to raise the level of general awareness of the state and prospects of national defence. The responses of society are always an important indicator of expectations and attitudes towards the country's defence efforts. The best national defence is achieved when there is a smart balance between country's military capabilities, strong alliances and a supportive society. In other words, it means that all elements of national power strategy rely on a coordinated effort to bring together diplomacy, economic investment, cybersecurity, trade, education, industrial capacity, technical innovation, civic engagement, and international cooperation. This should not ignore the fact that defence is only as strong as its weakest element. The speed with which the requirements for the best defence are met always depends on the consistency of political decision-makers.

indispensable in achieving this effect. The military strategy (see Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2024c) clearly states that the human being remains the focus of attention - only a motivated, educated, trained, modern equipped and psycho-physically fit soldier will be able to contribute to the realisation of national interests and objectives.

# **Changed Security Culture**

The security culture today is subject to a range of external and internal pressures that are increasingly influencing the development of defence systems, in particular the military. There are major demographic changes in society which will have significant and unpredictable effects on defence systems. The first is related to the unstoppable socio-cultural, value and other changes in contemporary society, which have, on the one hand, significantly improved and regularised the situation of traditionally disadvantaged social groups in the armed forces, and, on the other hand, have imposed on them a considerable responsibility to integrate these groups into their ranks, to ensure that they do not cross the threshold of discrimination and victimisation of their members.

Another social change is the increasing distance of the political elites from the military. We see two great dangers in this. The most obvious is the willingness of political leaders to use the military institutions in a haphazard and careless fashion, as a general reflection of the inability of those who run foreign policy to understand how the world works. The arguments of military experts about the possibilities of technology, with its complete knowledge of the battlefield and its network-centric warfare, to cover up the horrors of war, are also very convenient. Especially among politicians, these arguments are easily exploited for political purposes. In this context, it is very worrying that the political and intellectual elite, who have not acquired basic security, defence or military knowledge and skills through education, should distance themselves from the military by ignoring military and strategic issues (see more Krauthammer, 1999). Such an elite could easily undermine a security culture that is beyond their intellectual grasp. Inevitably, there are significant changes within the security culture itself because of generational shift (generations that have not been exposed to military threats or participation in war) and a poor understanding of the military profession. In this case, the capacity of military leaders, uninformed as their professional cultures have made them about the historical parameters of war, may simply surrender to ill-thought-out demands by civilians to bring the military into line with what civilian leaders regard as the politically correct pattern of civil society.

Security culture has historically played a key role in the effectiveness of defence systems. Given what the past shows, there is no reason to expect that the fundamental nature of war will change in the next century. The culture of discipline has characterised the "Western way of war" over the last four centuries (Bowden, 1999); it has been the glue that has kept armies on the battlefield in the most dramatic circumstances. Today, there are far too many military leaders in the countries of the Western world who will readily (willingly) abandon what is militarily correct in favour of what is politically correct (Murray, 2011). This does not bode well for this century.

Security culture needs to be monitored and adapted from time to time to societal and institutional patterns, but its value in the management of the defence system and its capabilities must always be recognised and enforced by the military, politicians and society alike. This means that security culture can also be a trigger or a framework for identifying problems and designing solutions. If, therefore, we understand security culture as a connective tissue of social relations, reinforced by shared beliefs

that identify a society with the identity of a nation, then we can better understand its value to the defence system and to the society.

## Time for a New Strategic Defence Review in Slovenia

The Strategic Defence Review is considered a landmark document, shaping new ways of thinking about and approaches to national defence, setting the agenda for ambitious and urgent defence reform. It defines specific development orientations for the defence sector with immediate effect, while at the same time presents a methodical and comprehensive document with a long-term vision. The Strategic Defence Review examines the fragments, divergences and deviations in defence development from several perspectives in order to reintegrate them into the whole, to unify and define the way forward, and to identify the constraints (risks) along that way. Such a process is always confronted with tradeoffs and the creation of a common picture, which in turn is the best insurance policy against wrong strategic decisions.

The discourse we have conducted shows the need for serious reflection on complex strategic issues that can be most comprehensively and systematically addressed in the context of a Strategic Defence Review. The timing of the Strategic Defence Review is also favourable; the comprehensive overhaul of strategic and planning documents is complete, the defence policy, strategic and planning processes are in a phase of remission (i.e. guiding the development and monitoring of defence policy objectives), NATO's defence planning process is at the stage of distributing a new set of capability targets to member states to be finalised in the second half of next year, and the financial indicators are favourable for fine-tuning the modernisation of defence capabilities.

Each new Strategic Defence Review is an opportunity to seek answers to tough and long-standing strategic defence questions. It is also an exceptional opportunity for dialogue with politics (government) and society, an opportunity for the active participation of key stakeholders of the national security system, and opportunity to involve external experts from various academic fields. The context of inter-institutional interoperability should be exploited to the fullest extent in such important projects, and in particular the Strategic Defence Review should aim to become a (broader) governmental rather than a (narrower) ministerial project.

### **References:**

- 1. Bowden, Mark. (1999). Black Hawk Down, A Story of Modern War. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.
- 2. Commission on the National Security Strategy. (2024). Santa Monica: RAND. <a href="https://www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/NDS-commission.html">https://www.rand.org/nsrd/projects/NDS-commission.html</a>.
- 3. Državni zbor Republike Slovenije [National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia]. (2022). Resolucija o splošnem dolgoročnem programu razvoja in opremljanja Slovenske vojske do leta 2035



# EURO-ATLANTIC COUNCIL OF SLOVENIA

Kardeljeva ploščad 5, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija, t. +386 (0)1 5805 327, e-mail: info@euroatlantic.org, www.euroatlantic.org

(ReDPROSV35) (Resolution on General Long-Term Development and Equipping Programme of the Slovenian Armed Forces up to 2035). Uradni list Republike Slovenije št. 16/22, pp. 685–699.

- 4. Državni zbor Republike Slovenije [National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia]. (2023). Resolucija o splošnem dolgoročnem programu razvoja in opremljanja Slovenske vojske do leta 2040 (ReDPROSV40) (Resolution on General Long-Term Development and Equipping Programme of the Slovenian Armed Forces up to 2040). Uradni list Republike Slovenije št. 35/2023, pp. 3299–3311.
- 5. Državni zbor Republike Slovenije [National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia]. (2019). Resolucija o strategiji nacionalne varnosti Republike Slovenije (Resolution on the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia). Uradni list Republike Slovenije št. 59/2019, pp. 6990–7002. http://www.pisrs.si/Pis.web/pregledPredpisa?id=RESO124.
- 6. Krauthammer, Charles. 1999. A World Imagined: The Flawed Premises of Liberal Foreign Policy. The New Republic, 220(11), pp. 22-25.
- 7. Ministrstvo za obrambo [Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Slovenia]. (2016). Strateški pregled obrambe 2016 – zaključki (Strategic Defence Review 2016 – Conclusions) (št. 800-1/2016-52, z dne 11. 11. 2016). Ministrstvo za obrambo Republike Slovenije.
- 8. Murray, Williamson. 2011. War, strategy, and military effectiveness. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- 9. NATO. (2016). Natovo obrambno načrtovanje, pregled zmogljivosti Slovenije 2015/16, osnutek pregleda (NATO Defence Planning, Slovenia Capabilities Review 2015/16, draft review) (št. AC/281-WP(2016)0024 North dne 2016). Atlantic Council. (R), https://www.rtvslo.si/files/slovenija/nato ocena slo.docx
- 10.NATO. (2020). Natovo obrambno načrtovanje, pregled zmogljivosti Slovenije 2019/2020, pregled (NATO Defence Planning, Slovenia's Capabilities Review 2019/2020, overview) (št. C-M(2020)0026(SN-PREGLED),  $\mathbf{Z}$ dne 14. 10. 2020). North Atlantic Council. https://www.gov.si/novice/2020-12-18-pregled-zmogljivosti-slovenije-20192020-v-okvirunatovega-obrambnega-nacrtovanja/.
- 11. Rowell, Peter, Fossey, Joe. (2024). 2040 Vision: Designing UK Defence for Advantage in a Competitive Age. *Joint Force Quarterly*, 113(2), pp. 36-41.
- 12. Vlada Republike Slovenije [Government of the Republic of Slovenia]. (2022). Program za delo koalicije 2022 - 2026 (Coalition Work Programme 2022 - 2026). Vlada Republike Slovenije. https://n1info.si/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/18/1652862042-koalicijska-pogodba-tekst.pdf.
- 13. Vlada Republike Slovenije [Government of the Republic of Slovenia]. (2024a). Obrambna strategija Republike Slovenije (Defence Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia) (št. 80300-1/2024/7, z dne 24. 4. 2024). Vlada Republike Slovenije.
- 14. Vlada Republike Slovenije [Government of the Republic of Slovenia]. (2024b). Vojaška strategija Republike Slovenije (Military Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia) (št. 80000-2/2024/4, z dne 24. 4. 2024). Vlada Republike Slovenije.
- 15. Vlada Republike Slovenije [Government of the Republic of Slovenia]. (2024c). Strategija civilne obrambe Republike Slovenije (Civil Defence Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia) (št. 80100-1/2024/7, z dne 24. 4. 2024). Vlada Republike Slovenije.



# EVRO-ATLANTSKI SVET SLOVENIJE EURO-ATLANTIC COUNCIL OF SLOVENIA

Kardeljeva ploščad 5, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija, t. +386 (0)1 5805 327, e-mail: info@euroatlantic.org, www.euroatlantic.org

16. Vuk, Pavel. (2023). Čas za razmislek in revizijo nacionalnovarnostne politike Republike Slovenije? (Time to rethink and review Slovenia's national security policy?) *Evro-atlantski Bilten*, 4(4), pp. 1-11.



Si želite izvedeti več o dejavnostih Evro-atlantskega sveta Slovenije? Vas zanima področje mednarodne varnosti? Pridružite se nam.

Za več informacij obiščite našo spletno stran www.euroatlantic.org ali pošljite sporočilo na info@euroatlantic.org.