

COUNTRY CHAPTER ON POLAND

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Excerpt from the study »Three Visions for NATO – Mapping National Debates on the Future of the Atlantic Alliance«, pages 59–63, full study available at: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/18013.pdf>

POLAND: STRENGTHENING THE EASTERN FLANK

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Poland, a NATO member since 1999, is by far the most important country on the Alliance's eastern flank and one of its most important member countries in general. With currently 118,500 soldiers (including the Territorial Defence Forces), it has the eighth largest armed forces, encompassing all branches. Moreover, together with Norway in the far north and Estonia and Latvia on its eastern flank, it is the only country that shares a land border with Russia along the Kaliningrad Oblast, which is about 230 km long, and a common border with Russia's closest ally Belarus, which is over 400 km long. Of particular strategic importance is the so-called »Suwalki Gap«, the border strip between Poland and Lithuania, which separates Kaliningrad from Belarus with a width of about 100 km and indispensable for access to the Baltic member states. This also enjoys particular attention as the successor to the »Fulda Gap« of the Cold War period.

Poland is also one of nearly ten member countries that have met NATO's 2 per cent target for military spending as a share of GDP since 2018 (in previous years, the figure fluctuated between 1.73 per cent in 2013 and 2.22 per cent immediately after the Crimean invasion in 2015). The Alliance set this goal in Prague in 2002 after the second round of enlargement and reaffirmed it at the 2014 summit in Wales after the Russian annexation of Crimea, with a time horizon of ten years. At the same time, it was determined in 2014 that 20 per cent of military expenditure should be invested in new equipment. Poland registered a marked increase here in 2015 and since then the figure has been well above 20 per cent (24 per cent in 2019). The Polish government's goal is to increase the share of military expenditure in GDP to 2.5 per cent by 2024. However, in terms of military expenditure per capita, Poland only ranked in the bottom third in 2019, at an annual USD 295 (in constant 2015 prices) (NATO 2019).

THREAT PERCEPTION: RUSSIA ABOVE ALL!

Poland's geostrategic location, combined with long historical experience, indicate where the country sees its primary security threat. In the words of the National Security Strategy adopted in 2020: »The most serious threat is the neo-imperial policy of the authorities of the Russian Federation, pursued also by means of military force« (National Security Strategy 2020: 6). There is no serious doubt about this in Poland, neither within the strategic community nor

across political camps and over time. As deeply divided as Polish society and the country's political class are domestically, they are united in this assessment of the overriding Russian threat. And this consensus has changed little over time. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 is therefore not a watershed in the Polish understanding, but, as the representative of a centrist think tank, the Kazimierz Pułaski Foundation, put it, »a gripping lesson on the perils of ignoring history« (Yeager 2014). Among these lessons, according to scholars from the official Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), is that the »return to 'business as usual' in 2009 when Russia did not meet its obligations for a troop withdrawal from Georgia could have been interpreted as a sign of weakness, which might have emboldened Putin to move into Ukraine in 2014« (Lorenz and Godzimirski 2017: 8).

The focus on Russia corresponds to the fact that a large part of the threats registered alongside the military build-up and the increased number and size of Russian exercises on the eastern flank – from cyber warfare to disinformation to the »progressive decomposition of the international order« – are also attributed primarily to Russia. These have been subsumed under the rubric of hybrid warfare with the aim of »destabilising the structures of Western states and societies and creating divisions among the Allies« (National Security Strategy 2020: 6). To a certain extent, this even applies to the southern flank, because Russia's intervention in Syria »put pressure on the Western countries in an additional theatre. For NATO, it meant that Russia was directly undermining Alliance security, not only in the east but also in the south«. Hence »it was Russia that made NATO approach both flanks as one« (Terlikowski 2019: 8). In accordance with this logic, the southern flank is therefore also defended in the east (apart from the challenges of terrorism and migration, which are clearly subordinate threats in Polish discourse).

This threat from the east will not change in the foreseeable future, at least not for the better, »as long as Putin remains in office«, according to Stanisław Koziej, former head of the National Security Bureau of Polish president Komorowski (Koziej 2019b). Therefore, concentrated and concerted efforts are required.¹

¹ This is a widely shared view in Poland, time and again put forward

NATO AND THE EUROPEAN UNION: THE UNITED STATES ABOVE ALL!

Concerted efforts manifest themselves in Poland's alliance policy, which establishes the »external pillars of its security ... through its membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union, the strategic partnership with the United States of America, as well as regional cooperation for security« (National Security Strategy 2020: 10). In this context, the prime focus is on the United States and with that on NATO, because it is the United States alone whose military presence in Europe makes the difference, and it is the US whose »lead role« has since 2014 made NATO adjustments to the Russian threat possible in the first place (Kacprzyk 2018).

In this respect too, there is agreement in principle in Poland. However, this does not apply unreservedly, as the ambivalent relationship to Trump and his administration illustrates, as do relations with France and Germany and thus also the security policy role of the European Union. The latter has become the main subject of dissent, which reached its peak during the Trump era. Incidentally, Trump not only divided NATO but also the Polish strategic community.

As far as Trump is concerned, he was, on one hand, received with some scepticism in the Polish strategic community, which is hardly surprising given his advances towards Russia, for example at his very critically regarded meeting with Putin in Helsinki in 2018 (Lorenz 2018). Moreover, his demonstrative lack of interest in NATO and the pressure on allies to increase defence expenditures were similarly criticized. It is therefore the State and Defence Departments, as well as Congress, that Polish think tanks were counting on, while Trump was said to have limited the administration's room for action (Kacprzyk 2018).

On the other hand, it was precisely this dubious role of the US president that the PiS government sought to exploit to establish a special relationship based on its »ideological and political closeness to the Republican community in the USA«, to which a representative of a think tank close to the PiS, the Sobieski Institute, referred (Pawłuszko 2020b). The »Fort Trump« offered by Polish President Duda during his visit to Washington in 2019, with a view to encouraging a permanent US troop deployment, is the most vivid example. It resulted in a bilateral Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement in 2020, which, in addition to the 5,500 US troops already stationed in Poland, provides for the creation of infrastructure for the stationing of a further 15,000 US troops as part of allied reinforcements (although there has apparently been a lengthy dispute over cost sharing). This special relationship with Trump is not without risk after Biden's election victory, as commenta-

tors close to the PiS worryingly note: »the high intensity of political meetings and the image of 'Trump's ally' deliberately developed by the Polish government may become a burden in relations with the Biden administration. The normalisation of US relations with Germany, the EU and NATO may require Poland to partially change its political agenda in order to maintain its cooperation priorities« (Pawłuszko 2020a).

It is therefore conceivable that the »two schools of Polish security policy« of recent years, the »pro-American« government and the »pro-European« opposition (Pawłuszko 2020b), will have to realign. These two schools came about in accordance with the principle of communicating tubes. The greater the distance between Washington and Berlin under Trump, the closer the relationship between Washington and Warsaw – with the consequence that relations between Warsaw and Berlin were damaged in parallel – to the dismay of many in Poland's strategic community.

While the PiS government – under the aforementioned auspices – has so far relied exclusively on Washington and the purely interest-based approach of the Trump administration, the conservative and liberal opposition, in line with the majority of think tanks, favours more of a balance, involving above all Germany and the EU, not least because it is the EU with which the opposition associates its fight against the alleged dismantling of democracy and the rule of law by the current PiS government (although with respect to NATO the perceived community of values does not play a visible role in the Polish security debate). France, and specifically President Macron, on the other hand, is invariably perceived with great caution, whereby the memory of the »drole de guerre« in 1939, when France declared war on Germany without operational consequences allowing Germany to focus entirely on Poland, may play just as much a role as Macron's repeated overtures to Moscow, which are said to undermine the unity of NATO (Lipka 2019). The irritation is similar with regard to the demands launched by Macron in particular for »strategic autonomy« of the EU or even a European army: they have been unanimously rejected, along with any weakening of NATO that may appear on the horizon.

However, NATO's »unity« and »cohesion« are central goals of Poland's alliance policy, which – and there is widespread agreement on this – is not questioned by those who, like Poland, call for a policy of strength, but rather by those who give Russia the impression of weakness. »Unity«, however, demands compromises, especially with Germany, the big neighbour in the West that is an object of criticism, but indispensable. The ambivalence towards Germany became visible, for example, when Trump surprisingly announced a troop withdrawal from Germany in 2020, although subsequently this was rejected by the US Congress. The fact that Poland was to benefit from this (through the relocation of 1,000 soldiers and the Forward Command of the US 5th Corps) was much welcomed by

among allies wherever a perceived need arises, see, e.g., Dębski et al., 2020.

the Polish government, but there was also criticism, even from think tanks close to the PiS, such as the Klub Jagiellonski. They argued that through Germany is »the only route the US army can take to reach Poland quickly and in large numbers during a crisis« and so »antagonising Germany by Donald Trump’s unilateral and unexpected decisions could set a dangerous precedent.«²

REGIONAL COOPERATION AND NATO ENLARGEMENT: ON THE BACKBURNER

The various regional cooperation formats that Poland initiated and keeps alive are in fact more of programmatic than practical relevance: the Bucharest Nine, the Visegrad Group and the Three Seas Initiative, as well as the Weimar Triangle with Germany and France. On one hand, the Bucharest Nine serves as the common »voice of the eastern flank« in the Alliance, which is not easy in view of the repeatedly lamented divergent threat perceptions (Terlikowski et al. 2018). On the other hand, however, they are intended to underline Poland’s claim to leadership, true to the famous formula depicting Poland as »too big to be small«, while also being »too small to be big« (Janulewicz 2020). While the Three Seas Initiative as a project to expand transport infrastructure and energy diversification away from Russia – paradoxically with strong support from both the United States and with a view to China’s Belt and Road Initiative – is a pet project of the PiS government and particularly of the Polish president, the Weimar Triangle has largely become dormant under the PiS government.

The situation is similar with regard to enlargement of NATO (and the EU). Although Poland remains committed to the »open door policy« of both organizations, enlargement policy is not nearly as active under the current government as, for instance, around 2008, when Poland pushed for the EU’s Eastern Partnership. It is also noticeable that enlargement is currently receiving relatively little attention among think tanks, which is all the more surprising as removing Poland from the frontline would certainly defuse the country’s precarious security situation.³

DETERRENCE AND DIALOGUE: LOPSIDED

Under the current circumstances, Poland sees its security as guaranteed primarily by »enhanced deterrence and defence« within the framework of NATO, »combined with readiness to engage in a conditions-based dialogue«, as stated in the National Security Strategy (2020: 23). There is no significant divergence on this issue either. On the con-

trary, it is repeatedly emphasized that the inclusion of dialogue in the dual strategy is, despite considerable risks, only for the sake of NATO cohesion because Germany, France and the southern members insisted on it as a means to reduce tensions (Lorenz and Godzimirski 2017: 5). PISM scholars refer here to Poland’s exclusive experience of the Warsaw Pact, where it »could closely watch the Kremlin’s tactics of exploiting divisions among the Western powers to strengthen its political and military potential. Today, Warsaw is weary of Moscow using the same tactics and using the dialogue with NATO to insert a wedge between the Allies« (Lorenz and Godzimirski 2017: 6).

In order to keep some allies’ quest for dialogue under control, there is a certain preference for pursuing such dialogue through the NATO–Russia Council. Although it allegedly serves the Kremlin as a »useful tool for exploiting the differences between the Allies«, as a multilateral instrument including Poland it is considered suitable for preventing undue bilateral contacts with Russia. The »Structured Dialogue« initiated by Foreign Minister Steinmeier in 2016 and the founding of the »like-minded countries« group, with 22 members, serve as cautionary examples here (Dyner et al. 2018).

THE NATO-RUSSIA FOUNDING ACT: OBSOLETE

Assessment of the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997, namely of the self-imposed deployment restrictions, is different from that of the NATO-Russia Council. While all commentators welcome NATO’s adjustments, including the Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) in the Baltic States and Poland, as well as the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) and the NATO Response Forces,⁴ this is not deemed sufficient to counter the prevalent scenario of a limited war and a Russian fait accompli at Poland’s expense. In the discourse, not only does Russia’s regional military superiority play a role, but above all its anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capacity in its Western Military District, including the Kaliningrad Oblast (Terlikowski 2019: 7), as well as its alleged nuclear de-escalation strategy which is said to envisage terminating a conventional conflict by introducing tactical nuclear weapons at a fairly early stage (Koziej 2019b).

Numerous commentators therefore argue for a permanent stationing of allied troops in Poland (see, for example, Koziej 2019a) and similarly for a »less dogmatic approach« to the Founding Act, »which would offer additional flexibility in strengthening NATO’s cohesion and influencing Russian calculations« (Dyner et al. 2018). Despite the nuclear risks emanating from Russia, this does not necessarily entail the de-

² Sobiraj (2020). Occasionally one can even read rather outlandish proposals (Konda and Smura 2018: 50) that Germany ought to be the preferred bilateral – not multilateral – ally that should be nurtured, for instance, as giving Poland some leverage over the US, as Andrzej Dybczyński, a scholar from the University of Wrocław, put it.

³ The remainder, Russia’s Kaliningrad oblast, would be even more exposed and vulnerable in such a situation.

⁴ Equally welcome has been the establishment of a NATO Cyber Planning Group because Poland is considered a prime target of Russia’s »disinformation attacks for its strong stance at the NATO Eastern Flank« (Raś 2019: 2). Others therefore call for »offensive« strategies and capabilities (Swiatkowska 2016; Szpyra 2016).

ployment of nuclear weapons in Poland, in contrast to the forced expansion of missile defence as a »potentially essential element of consolidating the US presence on NATO's eastern flank« (Menkiszak and Żochowski 2016). What is more, the debate on German nuclear sharing in NATO initiated by the SPD⁵ in 2020 has so far not been used as an opportunity to bring Poland into play here. Rather, according to a prominent scholar from PISM, the status quo should be maintained as an affirmation of the link between the security of various regions within the Alliance.⁶ And although in the wake of the demise of the INF treaty there have been calls for a »comprehensive post-INF strategy« this not only entails a strengthening of deterrence but also getting ready for new arms control proposals, not least in order to avoid a new arms race and maintain NATO unity (Kacprzyk et al. 2020; Kacprzyk and Piotrowski 2020).⁷

Some commentators, such as Marek Menkiszak, who is in charge of Russia at the Institute for Eastern Studies and who is notorious for his hardline stance, also favour turning away from the Founding Act because this would thwart central and unaltered goals of Russian security policy: »strategic control of the post-Soviet area, the existence of a security buffer zone in Central Europe [...] Initially, the security buffer zone in Central Europe was intended to separate the areas of NATO and Russia (and other CIS countries). However, when this proved impossible, it was to be established inside NATO on its eastern flank« (Menkiszak 2019a: 6). No wonder Menkiszak is equally sceptical about arms control, not only because he considers Russia guilty of eroding the arms control system but also because any fear of an arms race and a new Cold War only serve Russia's aim of obtaining concessions in new negotiations, its lack of the means to sustain a costly arms race notwithstanding (Menkiszak 2019b; 2020).

OUT OF AREA: QUID PRO QUO

The dominant fixation on the Russian threat means that collective defence clearly takes precedence over global crisis management in Polish discourse. However, Poland, as

the »most active participant« of all new NATO members, has also been involved in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan in the past. And even though under the »Komorowski doctrine«, named after the former president, this engagement was reduced after 2014, the PiS government decided in July 2016 to provide the ISIS coalition not only with special forces but also with four F-16 fighter jets (Bil 2018). However, it was clear from the beginning that the goal was predominantly instrumental: »to gain as many political and military benefits as possible from close cooperation in Afghanistan and Iraq« (Pawłuszko 2020a).

CHINA: MIXED FEELINGS

Addressing the most recent challenge – the People's Republic of China – has proved more complicated. The National Security Strategy notes that »the growing strategic rivalry between the United States of America, the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation ... affects the entire international system« (7), but does not go beyond this observation. The rise of China and Russian bandwagoning are not connected at any point. The discourse on the potential security implications of China's rise has itself been restrained so far. After all, Poland is a member of the Chinese 17+1 cooperation format in Europe and hence continues to focus on imminent economic opportunities rather than on a distant threat, because, as an institute close to the PiS puts it, »the further away from the borders of China, the smaller are the Chinese ambitions and possibilities for systemic world governance today« (Jakóbowski 2019). This view is also shared by the China expert at PISM (see Szczudlik 2015, 2020). The Polish Prime Minister Morawiecki is not quite so relaxed and certainly acknowledges the uncomfortable decision-making situation in which Poland could find itself in view of the »strategic rivalry« between the USA and China. In such a situation there is no question that Poland will follow the »trusted and mutual partnership with our transatlantic allies«, even if Morawiecki believes he can position Poland as a »bridge [...] translating European fears and expectations and observations into American language and vice versa« (Werner 2020).

5 The SPD is perceived with some scepticism in Poland because of its alleged pro-Russian leanings. Indicative is the following example from the Institute of Western Studies: »social democratic concepts of eastern policy, being a mixture of naivety and cynicism, all too often developed into a tendency to accept the Russian point of view« (Żerko 2017). This point of view on Germany has gained even more traction under the current government.

6 Kulesa (2020). Similarly OSW scholar Gotkowska, who also pointed to the risk that such a German move could trigger similar reactions in other countries and hence »end the risk and responsibility sharing between the US and its European allies in nuclear deterrence, a deepening US-European and intra-European rifts over security policy, and a decreased level of nuclear deterrence in Europe« (Gotkowska 2020).

7 The nuclear issue is by no means viewed uncritically in Poland, as illustrated, for example, by the signature of a number of prominent Polish politicians from the political left and liberal center – Aleksander Kwaśniewski, Andrzej Olechowski, Dariusz Rosati, Hanna Suchocka – to the »Open Letter in Support of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons« of September 2020.

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