

Poland in NATO: current state and perspectives

Introduction

In March 2024, Andrzej Duda, the Polish head of state flew with Donald Dusk, the Polish Minister to the United States of America on the 25th anniversary of its membership of Poland in the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization).¹ The NATO is a military organization established in 1949 that aims at defending vulnerable populations, fight military threats promote democratic values, and maintain peace and stability around the world.

The alliance was created in response to the challenges of the Cold War and Soviet expansion. Thanks to this Alliance, Western Europe could feel safe in the face of the growing threat from the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics).

As of 2024, NATO is gathering thirty-two states² including many of the world's largest economies – the US, Germany, the United Kingdom, and France. NATO requires members to spend at least 2% of its GDP (Gross Domestic Product) on defense in which it defines defense expenditure as payments made by the national governments of its members to fulfill the requirements of its armed forces.³ In 2023, NATO countries spent USD 1.3 trillion on armaments, of which the US accounted for as much as USD 860 billion.⁴ The size of the organization and the diverging interests of its constituent states have an impact on the slow and inevitable growing crisis in relations between NATO member states, which may affect the future of the alliance.

Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland became NATO members in 1999 despite some opposition from NATO members and a mild Russian position.⁵ During the last years, the NATO was enlarged to Montenegro, North Macedonia, Finland, and Sweden. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Ukraine are countries waiting for their membership.⁶

¹ Source: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_223659.htm, accessed on April 29th, 2024

² In 2024, the total 32 members of NATO are: Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Montenegro, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkiye, United Kingdom, and the United States.

³ Source : <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/breaking-down-1-3t-in-nato-defense-spending/>, accessed on May 20th, 2024

⁴ Source: <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/breaking-down-1-3t-in-nato-defense-spending/>, accessed on April 29th, 2024

⁵ Source: <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/kraj/artykuly/9454493,25-lat-polski-w-nato-nie-ze-wszystkich-zobowiazan-polska-wywiadala-si.html>, accessed on April 25th, 2024

⁶ Source: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49212.htm, accessed on April 29th, 2024

Background

The access of Poland to the NATO was not always a peaceful initiative despite the declaration of the NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner who said that "the door to NATO is open" in March 1992.⁷ The first signals from Poland and other Central European states of a desire to join the NATO were firmly rejected by its politicians and experts. The presence of Soviet troops in Central Europe and a reluctance to irritate relations with the disintegrating and thus unaccountable USSR were the main reasons for Western reticence.

To allay the North Atlantic Alliance's fears of Russian reactions, Poland was assured in the Joint Polish-Russian Declaration signed by President Boris Yeltsin in Warsaw on 25 August 1993 that its membership of NATO did not infringe on the interests of the Russian Federation.⁸

According to the recognized and experienced Polish researcher professor Józef Fiszer, In Poland's eastern policy, Russia has always been and continues to be perceived as a country posing a threat to the fundamental interests of state security. This has resulted in attempts to shape a 'friendly eastern wall' by supporting the independence of Ukraine and Belarus and the processes of democratic transformation of the political and economic systems of these countries. This contributed to a strongly negative reaction from the Russian side (Fiszer 2018: 268).

Russia is the main threat to Polish national security. Consequently, any action by the Russian side toward Poland was treated with suspicion and perceived as a threat. This resulted in a cautious course of Polish policy towards Russia. Its aim became to secure itself against a neo-imperialist Russia by quickly gaining membership of NATO and the European Union. At the same time, Russia was opposed to Poland's Euro-Atlantic aspirations and decisively opposed the idea of expanding NATO to the East. This threat never disappeared. In March 2024, the Polish President Andrzej Duda said that NATO member countries should increase their military budgets from two to three percent of their GDP, as a response to Russian aggression against Ukraine. Meanwhile, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Polish authorities launched a re-armament campaign. Polish authorities want to double the Polish Army's size—to 300,000 soldiers over five years.⁹

The role of Poland in the NATO

Poland joined NATO in 1999, which has enhanced its security by providing a framework for cooperation and collective defense with other member countries.

⁷ Source: <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/kraj/artykuly/9454493,25-lat-polski-w-nato-nie-ze-wszystkich-zobowiazan-polska-wywiadala-si.html>, accessed on April 25th, 2024

⁸ Source: <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1993/08/25/Yeltsin-respects-Polish-position-on-NATO/4309746251200/>, accessed on April 25th, 2024

⁹ Source: <https://www.rp.pl/budzet-i-podatki/art38536711-sily-zbrojne-za-miliardy-kosztowna-budowa-wielkiej-polskiej-armii>, accessed on April 28th, 2024

According to Jureńczyk (2020), a special area of cooperation between Poland and the US was in the framework of multinational military operations. Shortly after joining NATO, Poland supported the legally and politically debatable 'humanitarian intervention' in Kosovo initiated by Washington in 1999. Warsaw's support was more determined than that presented by many traditional US allies. In the following years, beginning in 1996, first as a partner and since 1999 as a full NATO member, Poland has taken part in 13 Allied missions and operations. In 2014, personnel of the Polish Armed Forces were involved in operations in Afghanistan, and in NATO air defense Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) for the Baltic region.¹⁰

The membership to the NATO also allowed major changes in the Polish Army. Allied exercises at various levels, in which Polish soldiers participated to improve their qualifications and experience. In total, during the Polish membership in NATO, by the end of 2008, Polish soldiers took part in approximately seventy major allied or multinational exercises (Gagor 2009: 33).

The Polish American military cooperation

Poland's membership to the NATO has only strengthened military cooperation between Washington and Warsaw. Poland has been one of the largest purchasers of arms and military equipment from the United States for years. The program of modernization of the Polish army has been largely implemented based on US-origin weapons systems. Below are presented two examples of transactions involving these two countries.

In 2002, Poland purchased 48 military aircrafts. The total price of the aircraft, technical support, and training amounted to over USD 3.5 billion. The procedure was then called the "tender of the century".¹¹ Warsaw also purchased Patriot anti-aircraft batteries, HIMARS mobile launchers in 2023, and Black Hawk helicopters.¹²

Poland is not only dependent on the United States when it comes to its military expenses. Warsaw also purchased anti-aircraft missiles worth around USD 2.7 billion from the British subsidiary of European arms group MBDA in November 2023.¹³

Based on the latest available statistical data, in the 2022/23 fiscal year, Poland was the country that placed the largest orders for the supply of US military equipment, according

¹⁰ Source: <https://www.bbn.gov.pl/pl/wydarzenia/15-lat-polski-w-nato/polska-w-sojuszu-polnoc/5295,Korzysci-i-inicjatywy.html>, accessed on April 25th, 2024

¹¹ Source: <https://defence24.pl/polityka-obronna/od-mysliwcow-do-abramsow-polskie-zakupy-uzbrojenia-w-usa>, accessed on April 30th, 2024

¹² Source: <https://www.gov.pl/web/obrona-narodowa/486-wyrzutni-himars-dla-wojska-polskiego>, accessed on April 25th, 2024

¹³ Source: <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/polska-armia-dostanie-tysiac-rakiet-i-sto-wyrzutni-umowa-warta-20-miliardow-zlotych-6960666563267232a.html>, accessed on April 29th 2024.

to data released by the US State Department. US authorities cited Polish orders for more than USD 31 billion.¹⁴

The future of Poland in NATO structures

The future of Poland in NATO is based on the country's continued commitment to the alliance and its participation in collective defense efforts. Poland's involvement in NATO operations, contributions to capabilities, and hosting of NATO infrastructure demonstrate its dedication to the alliance's objectives.

Poland is likely to maintain its strong position within NATO, focusing on enhancing its defense capabilities, strengthening cooperation with other member states, and contributing to the collective security of the alliance. This includes participating in joint military exercises, hosting multinational deployments, and investing in modernizing its armed forces to adapt to evolving security challenges.

On the other side, NATO values Poland as a member due to several reasons: Poland holds a strategic position in Central Europe, serving as a bridge between NATO allies and potential threats from the east. As is also mentioned in this report, Poland has played an active role in NATO operations and contributed troops to various missions, demonstrating its commitment to the alliance's collective defense. With the increased tension in the region, Poland's presence helps bolster NATO's eastern flank, ensuring a more balanced and robust defense posture.

Findings

Poland's presence within this military union constituted a turning point from the point of view of its policy given its allegiance to Moscow until 1991. This change of direction therefore meant that Warsaw completely changed its political orientation in turning towards Western countries.

As a peripheral state, localized between East and West, Poland, in the current situation in Europe and the world, should pursue a realistic policy. Poland cannot leave either the EU or NATO. The EU is the guarantor of the Polish economic security, and NATO of its military security.

Membership of NATO theoretically provides Poland with guarantees in terms of security. There are, however, certain limits to such reasoning. If Russia attacked Poland, NATO could react, however there would be a lag in its reaction and the timing of the Russian attack.

From a theoretical perspective, if Poland feels threatened, Article four of the NATO treaty would be activated. This article stipulates that 'the Parties shall consult each other

¹⁴ Source: <https://www.wnp.pl/przemysl-obronny/polska-zdominowala-zakupy-uzbrojenia-w-usa-amerykanie-zarobia-poteczne-kwoty,799908.html>, accessed on April 28th, 2024

whenever, in the opinion of one of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of one of the Parties is threatened'. Article 4 is accompanied above all by Article 5, which provides for a mutual assistance mechanism in the event of an attack. Article 5 of the Treaty stipulates that an attack against one member triggers a response from the Alliance. It introduces the principle of collective defense and states that an attack against one member is an attack against all members.

From a practical side, in case of attacks, NATO would use its military forces based in Poland. In terms of comparison between NATO and Poland, the Russian technology is weaker than the NATO one. Tank invasion would be also eradicated with anti-tanks aircrafts of NATO troops. Since 2023, in the county of Redzikowo there is a US missile defence base localized at less than kilometers of the Russia border. base near Słupsk, built at a cost of nearly \$900 million, is already manned by US Navy personnel. It has a long-range radar station and has been armed with interceptor missiles capable of shooting down intercontinental missiles. There is also one multinational NATO group which is based in Orzysz, close to the Belarussian border.

As a first reaction, if some Russian missiles were on the Ukrainian side close to the Polish border, they may be destroyed by NATO forces. However, an approval of Ukrainian forces may be requested. Due to the divisions in NATO, Poland must also be ready for a scenario in which not all allies will want to help Warsaw.

Other potential problems which the author of this paper was able to identify during discussions with Polish officers are: The assurance that NATO would support Poland in the event of a Russian attack, as well as the willingness of Washington to take the risk of seeing a world war break out just to save Warsaw. Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz, the current Polish minister of Defense recently said that he would strengthen the Polish Army, increase the number of soldiers, but also the operational capabilities of the army.¹⁵ From a defending approach, the border with Belarussia and Russia will continue to be fortified with an investment of USD 2.5 bln.¹⁶ In reality, this strengthening effort has been made by all governments since 2004, however, it must be noted that this military output has principally increased since five years through a deep cooperation with South Korean and US companies.

The author nonetheless sure and remain convinced that the solution remains in the formation of an independent Polish army or an army which is not solely dependent on Washington.

¹⁵ Source: <https://niezalezna.pl/polityka/co-dalej-z-polska-armia-szef-mon-odpowiada/509436> accessed on May 20th, 2024

¹⁶ Source: <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/kraj/artykuly/9510257,polska-wzmacnia-wschodnia-granice-premier-tusk-oglasza-10-mld-zl-na-.html> ccessed on May 20th, 2024

In relation to this last point, we note the words of French President Emmanuel Macron who recently indicated that he was in favor of a “European army”.¹⁷ The French president is calling for a new European loan dedicated to defense, but some countries are opposed to it. The position of France cannot be underestimated as since the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union, France is the only one of its member states to have nuclear deterrence.

For the first time in its history, In March 2024, the EU established a European Defense Industrial Strategy with a European Defense Investment Program. The latter has a budget of 1.5 billion euros over the period 2025-2027.¹⁸ This project is quite weak in comparison the the previously mentioned reinforcement of the Polish border which is budgeted at around USD 2.5 bln. That is why, the Polish army shall not rely on European initiatives which are far behind NATO capital expenditures.

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¹⁷ Source: <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/monde/france-macron-favorable-a-un-debat-sur-une-armee-europeenne/3204500> accessed on April 29th, 2024

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