

Poland: The Missing Link in European Defence

by Karolina Muti

As EU member states step-up efforts to strengthen defence cooperation and integration, Poland's role and contribution remain an enigma. Traditionally sceptical of EU military and deterrence capabilities, Warsaw has long considered the US as the only military ally capable of protecting the country from a potential Russian attack.

Poland has consequently preferred to strengthen links with Washington and NATO, rather than increasing defence cooperation with its EU neighbours and allies. This is true in terms of the military relationship, with a persistent effort to guarantee a stronger presence of US troops and equipment on Polish soil,¹ but also from the industrial point of view, since US companies are often chosen for major procurement tenders.²

¹ Edyta Żemła and Kamil Turecki, "Poland Offers US Up to \$2B for Permanent Military Base", in *Politico*, 27 May 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-poland-offers-us-up-to-2-billion-for-permanent-american-military-base>.

² Marcin Zaborowski, "Poland and European Defence Integration", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*,

Against this backdrop, Poland's security strategy represents a considerable hurdle to increased defence integration and cooperation in Europe. Recent developments on the international scene, however, should encourage Poland to revisit and further differentiate its strategic outlook, moving to counterbalance Washington's growing unpredictability through closer defence ties with its EU partners.

Key EU states in the defence field – namely France, Germany, Italy and Spain – have welcomed recent steps towards strengthened EU defence cooperation. These include, the 2017 launch of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and the European Defence Fund (EDF).

January 2018, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/poland_and_european_defence_integration.

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Poland, the most relevant Central-Eastern EU member state in terms of defence spending, territory and population has been marginally involved, however, displaying some reluctance to join the European effort. As a result, Warsaw risks being excluded from the process, an eventuality that would further crystalize divisions across Europe when it comes to security interests and defence cooperation.

Through the EDF, the EU budget will for the first time begin financing defence research, initially via the Preparatory Action for Defence Research (PADR), and eventually through a dedicated budget line included under the new Multiannual Financial Framework (2021-2027). These initiatives are part and parcel of a new push towards common European capabilities and more coordination in procurement, starting from research and development (R&D).

A shift towards a more constructive approach to the EDF, PESCO and EU defence cooperation and integration would represent a win-win solution for both the EU and Poland. Benefits are not only found in capability development and reduced costs, but ultimately in strengthening the EU's ability to provide for its own security. Poland's involvement and active participation would also help create a bridge between the militarily more advanced Western member states and their Eastern flank partners.

Being left out of the process and isolated from its most relevant European partners is instead likely to harm Poland's defence posture, not

least in light of Warsaw not being able to pair its defence capabilities with these partners or to benefit from the significant collaborative funds available at the EU level.

The EDF framework has earmarked 590 million euro for collaborative projects on defence research and development in the 2017-2020 period, while 1.5 billion euro a year will be made available from 2021 to 2027.³ At least three member states have to participate on a project in order to respect the eligibility criteria. This initiative is in line with the Polish government's objective of developing a national defence and technological industrial base and should be exploited.

With regards to PESCO, Poland has formally signed-up to only two out of 17 projects presented in 2017.⁴ These include the development of a European Secure Software defined Radio (ESSOR) and a further project aimed at improving the mobility of military forces across Europe – a goal shared with NATO to facilitate reinforcements towards the Eastern flank. Poland has recently noted its interest to propose and join more PESCO projects in 2018, an indication that the country's military brass may be slowly warming to these cooperative opportunities.⁵

³ European External Action Service (EEAS), *Defending Europe. The European Defence Fund*, March 2018, <http://europa.eu/!bT43wJ>.

⁴ Council of the European Union, *Council Decision (CFSP) 2018/340 of 6 March 2018 establishing the list of projects to be developed under PESCO*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:32018D0340>.

⁵ Polish Ministry of National Defence, *To Effectively Use the EU Programs*, 25 June 2018, <http://en.mon.gov.pl/news/article/latest-news/to-effectively-use-the-eu-programs-n2018-06-25>.

Ultimately, real defence integration in Europe is not possible without involving the Eastern flank's core state in terms of budget, demography and geographic location. While still lagging behind major European defence actors, Poland is becoming increasingly relevant in Europe's defence landscape.

Poland is not only among the top European military spenders in NATO – 1.98 per cent of GDP in 2018⁶ – but is also a country which plans to substantially increase its defence budget over the coming years, bringing defence spending to 2.5 per cent of GDP by 2030.⁷

If current economic trends persist, such increases would almost double Poland's defence budget by 2030, with spending growing from 8.8 billion euro in 2016 to 15 billion.⁸ Warsaw would thus move closer to Italy's defence spending (20.7 billion euro in 2017), positioning Poland as the fourth top military spender in the EU, behind Italy, Germany and France

⁶ NATO, *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2011-2018)*, 10 July 2017, p. 3, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_156770.htm.

⁷ Polish Presidency, *President: Bigger Defence Budget Necessary*, 23 October 2017, <http://www.president.pl/en/news/art,596,president-bigger-defence-budget-necessary.html>; Polish Ministry of Investment and Development, *Strategia na rzecz odpowiedzialnego rozwoju do roku 2020 (z perspektywa do 2030)* [Strategy for Responsible Development up to 2020 (with prospects until 2030)], 14 February 2017, p. 357, <http://www.mii.gov.pl/strony/strategia-na-rzecz-odpowiedzialnego-rozwoju/informacje-o-strategii>.

⁸ Marcin Terlikowski, "Defence and Industrial Policy in Poland: Drivers and Influence", in *Ares Group Policy Papers*, No. 18 (July 2017), p. 3, http://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Ares_Defence_Industrial_Policy_in_Poland_July_2017.pdf.

(or fifth if one also considers the UK).⁹

Poland has also added a dedicated "Territorial defence" component to the Armed Forces structure with the aim of strengthening conventional deterrence capabilities, increasing the number of troops from 150,000 to 200,000 over the next eight years.¹⁰ In addition, as part of envisioned defence budget increases and of the Defence Modernization Plan, growing resources are being allocated for equipment modernization in the 2015-2022 period. Starting with 2.75 billion US dollars in 2015, the objective is to reach 4.19 billion US dollars by 2022.¹¹

Opportunities for increased defence cooperation with EU partners may also be spurred by developments in Washington. Donald Trump has made it abundantly clear that US security commitments in Europe – and even vis-à-vis NATO – can no longer be taken for granted.

Coupled with Trump's ambiguous relationship with Putin's Russia, Poland has to face up to the reality that international circumstances underlying its strategic doctrine – centred on a strong NATO and a close relationship with the US – may be changing rapidly. Trump's contradictory statements

⁹ International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2018*, February 2018, p. 71.

¹⁰ Daniel Keohane, "The Defense Policies of Italy and Poland: A Comparison", in *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, No. 219 (December 2017), <http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/90633b69-d719-4ac6-bd0c-6fd73c0c8533>.

¹¹ Marcin Zaborowski, "Poland and European Defence Integration", cit., p. 12.

during the last NATO summit worsened the already tense relationship with the US's European allies. The subsequent bilateral meeting with Putin in Helsinki further deepened these concerns, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe.

In this new international environment, Warsaw needs to rethink its strategy. Enhanced defence cooperation with EU partners could therefore constitute an attractive – and complementary – alternative in Poland's defence posture.

Warsaw's scepticism towards EU defence initiatives is linked to the erroneous belief that such efforts could lead to a weakening of NATO. On the contrary, the experience of other EU member states shows that it is possible to maintain strong links with NATO and pursue enhanced defence cooperation in the EU framework.

The two dimensions can progress in parallel and are indeed largely complementary. The EU-NATO Joint Declaration issued on 10 July 2018 explicitly welcomed both the EDF and PESCO initiatives, viewing them key to the development of European defence capabilities that remain of uttermost importance for NATO as well.¹²

Looking to the future, Poland will most likely seek to maintain its traditional security strategy focusing on closer relations with the US and NATO. However, this risks leaving Poland exposed to the fluid and rather

unpredictable foreign policy of its strongest ally in Washington.

In this respect, Poland's defence strategy could be better shielded from such uncertainties through enhanced cooperation with key continental partners. In the long term, such an outcome would not only help guarantee Polish security interests, but also provide an important contribution to make European defence integration a reality.

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¹² Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation, Brussels, 10 July 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_156626.htm.

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