

Hans-Joachim Spanger  
June 2025

# The Future of NATO

*Country Report Poland*



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# “NATO membership and the bilateral alliance with the United States will remain the bedrock of defence policy”<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 came as no surprise to Poland. Everyone in Warsaw knew that Moscow was capable of such aggression – the government did, the opposition did, all the security experts did. But Poland was not prepared. So it experienced the same “watershed moment” (“Zeitenwende”) that everybody did. But the rhetoric was different, the implementation faster, broader, more thorough. The shift was quickly manifested in legislation. A bill that had been put forward in October 2021 was now expedited. The Homeland Defence Act (Ustawa o obronie Ojczyzny) passed the Sejm almost unanimously on 22 March 2022, just a month after the invasion. There were just five abstentions, from the far-right Confederation Liberty and Independence (Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość). The act came into force on 23 April 2022.

The Homeland Defence Act increased the defence spending target from 2.5 percent of GDP by 2026 to 3 percent of GDP starting in 2023. Spending rose rapidly from there. According to NATO estimates, Poland’s 2024 defence budget represented 4.12 percent of GDP. On 4 October 2024 Defence Minister Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz announced that military spending would rise in 2025 to 4.7 percent of expected GDP (186.6 billion PLN/€43.5 billion).<sup>2</sup> This was accompanied by a massive expansion of the armed forces. The previous defence minister, Mariusz Błaszczak, had set a target of 300,000 soldiers, including 50,000 in the territorial defence forces. At the end of June 2024, the defence ministry put the size of the armed forces at 199,000, of which 130,000 were professional soldiers.<sup>3</sup> As such, Poland’s armed forces are NATO’s third largest.

Since 2022 a large proportion of the defence budget (about 50 percent) has been used for modernisation (the 2014 NATO Summit in Wales called for 20 percent). For example, in 2022 Poland ordered 366 Abrams tanks from the United States and 180 K2 tanks from South Korea. These will supplement (and in the longer term replace) its 247 German Leopard 2 tanks (2A4, 2A5 and 2PL, the latter undergoing modernisation). The Abrams tanks will go to the new 18th Mechanised Division, which will be the most heavily armed of Poland’s four army divisions.<sup>4</sup> The previous government’s planning also foresaw two additional new divisions.<sup>5</sup> The South Korean tank order was associated with hopes for licenced manufacture of another 820 units in Poland, although this will definitely not be possible before 2028.<sup>6</sup> Additional equally large orders have been placed with US defence manufacturers, for 32 F-35 fighter jets (US\$4.6 billion) and two Patriot batteries (US\$4.75 billion). Orders for JASSM-ER air-launched cruise missiles, AH-64-Apache helicopters, and the modernisation of Poland’s F-16 fighter aircrafts followed in 2024, along with another 180 K2 tanks and 12 KA-50 light combat aircraft from South Korea.<sup>7</sup>

In May 2024 the government announced another mega-project, to create an “East Shield” (Tarcza Wschód). This defensive system akin to the Maginot Line will place tank barriers and electronic warfare systems along Poland’s borders with Belarus and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. East Shield is due to be completed by 2028 and is expected to cost 10 billion PLN. Poland is seeking to raise the funds, among others, through the European Investment Bank, because Germany and the Netherlands in particular oppose any form of credit funding for EU projects of this kind (or did so until May 2025).<sup>8</sup> As the politically centrist Casimir Pulaski Foundation (Fundacja im. Kazimierza Pułaskiego,

1 Smura, Tomasz: Polish security and defence policy after the election – no revolution expected, in: *Pulaski Commentary* (26 October 2023); <https://pulaski.pl/en/polish-security-and-defence-policy-after-the-election-no-revolution-expected-2> (accessed 31 March 2025).

2 Boysen, Jens: Collegium Civitas, Warschau, Abwehrbereit? Zum Stand der Einsatzbereitschaft der Polnischen Armee Ende 2024, in: *Polen-Analysen* no. 338 (3 December 2024): 2–7.

3 Czulda, Robert: Poland’s future armed forces take shape, in: *European Security & Defence* (3 September 2024); <https://euro-sd.com/2024/09/articles/40091/polands-future-armed-forces-take-shape> (accessed 31 March 2025). The contribution notes that the current government and most security experts are sceptical about the outgoing government’s expansion plans, and doubt whether the provision of equipment can keep pace with the growth in personnel.

4 Czub, Sebastian, Ina Filote, Pavel Havlíček, Ihor Havryluk, Andrzej Kozłowski, Tomasz Obremski, Matej Rafael Riško & Zsombor Zeöld: Reinforcing NATO’s Eastern Flank, in: *Security Overview of the B9* (October 2024). Warsaw, Casimir Pulaski Foundation: 62–73.

5 Smura, op. cit. (see note 1).

6 Jest obszar wyłączony z politycznego sporu: Tomasz Pawłuszko podsumowuje działania rządu Donalda Tuska w zakresie obronności (There is an area excluded from political dispute: Tomasz Pawłuszko sums up the activities of Donald Tusk’s government in the field of defence), in: *Klub Jagielloński* (4 February 2025); <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2025/02/04/jest-obszar-wylaczony-z-politycznego-sporu-wladyslaw-kosiniak-kamysz-kontynuuje-dzialania-pis-u> (accessed 31 March 2025).

7 Czulda, op. cit. (see note 3).

8 In February 2025 Foreign Minister Sikorsky also floated the idea of a European Rearmament Bank modelled on the EBRD. Cf. Liboreiro, Jorge: Poland pitches rearmament bank to boost Europe’s defence spending, in: *Euro News* (6 February 2025); [www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/02/06/poland-pitches-rearmament-bank-to-boost-europes-defence-spending](https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/02/06/poland-pitches-rearmament-bank-to-boost-europes-defence-spending) (accessed 31 March 2025).



FKP) put it – rather sceptically: “The success of this project depends on the effectiveness of obtaining funds for its implementation.”<sup>9</sup>

The armed forces modernisation programme is also largely credit-financed and subject to considerable uncertainty. For example, the target of about 4 percent of GDP in 2024 comprises 3 percent from the defence ministry’s regular budget and 1 percent from the Armed Forces Support Fund (Fundusz Wsparcia Sił Zbrojnych). The latter is an extra-budgetary instrument, created in 2022 and managed by the Polish Development Bank (Gospodarstwa Krajowego). It is to be funded through the revenues of state-owned arms manufacturers, bank loans, sales through the state Military Material Agency (Agencja Mienia Wojskowego), and leasing revenue for military infrastructure used by Allied forces in Poland.<sup>10</sup> There are doubts as to whether the plan will properly function.<sup>11</sup>

In defence policy (unlike interior and foreign policy) there is thus great continuity between the outgoing government led by the Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) and the current coalition led by the Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO, which is itself part of an electoral alliance, the Civic Coalition). So there was no pressing need to revise the 2020 National Security Strategy. Only in December 2024 an interdepartmental working group was appointed to draft a new strategy document taking into account the new and fundamentally transformed security situation. Poland’s support for Ukraine is also broadly characterised by continuity. Poland was very quick to deliver large quantities of arms when other NATO members were still restricting their supplies to protective equipment. For example, from April 2022 Poland sent more than 300 tanks to Ukraine: between 250 and 300 Soviet-era T-72s, 80 Polish PT-91 Twardys (T-72 derivatives) and 14 Leopard 2A4s. From 2023 Poland also supplied a number of MiG-29 fighters. According to the Ukraine Support Tracker, Poland had supplied a total of €3.6 billion in military support by the end of 2024 (0.58 percent of GDP). By way of comparison Germany’s military contribution was €12.6 billion (0.32 percent

of GDP) by then.<sup>12</sup> Polish deliveries have fallen significantly, however – more for material than political reasons: there is nothing left to send. As then Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki put it in 2023: “We are not giving aid to Ukraine as we are now arming Poland.”<sup>13</sup>

## The salient threat: Russian imperialism and the war in Ukraine

There is a broad consensus in Poland that everything possible must be done to secure Ukraine’s military victory over Russia. This is in Poland’s interest, and NATO’s which by official accounts is believed to face a Russian aggression in three years’ time itself.<sup>14</sup> Polish politicians and security experts regularly call for Poland to step up its efforts – not unilaterally but in the multilateral NATO framework – and to go to the brink of direct participation in the war. Examples include the discussion about establishing a no-fly zone in Ukraine when the war broke out in 2022, emphatic support for providing MiG-29 warplanes (while others prevaricated) and Foreign Minister Sikorski’s demand – repeatedly restated since September 2024 – that Ukraine’s neighbours should be allowed to shoot down Russian missiles themselves.<sup>15</sup>

Given that background, it is no surprise that there is clear and sometimes extremely blunt criticism of the supposedly half-hearted engagement of Poland’s allies. For example, one author at the Centre for Eastern Studies (Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, OSW) identified a growing “gap” between Western Europe and the countries on NATO’s eastern flank (“apart from Hungary”) and the Nordic countries (which quite often are mentioned in the same breath): “They differ fundamentally in their diagnosis of the situation and their vision of what needs to be done. The US and Germany actually wanted to create conditions that would force Russia to negotiate with Ukraine, or at least to freeze the conflict. However, this approach was based on a misreading of the Putin regime’s mindset.”<sup>16</sup> The Kremlin, he argued, interpreted that stance as “weakness,

9 Jastrzębska, Olga: NATO’s Eastern Flank Response to the Russian Threat: Poland’s ‘East’ Shield Programme and the Defence Concepts of the Baltic States and Finland, in: *Pulaski Commentary* (29 August 2024); <https://pulaski.pl/en/natos-eastern-flank-response-to-the-russian-threat-polands-east-shield-programme-and-the-defence-concepts-of-the-baltic-states-and-finland> (accessed 31 March 2025).

10 Oleksiejuk, Michał: The key premises of the Polish Homeland Defence Act, in: *Pulaski Commentary* (18 March 2022); <https://pulaski.pl/en/pulaski-commentary-the-key-premises-of-the-polish-homeland-defence-act-michal-oleksiejuk> (accessed 31 March 2025).

11 Czulda, Robert: Poland’s military modernisation – still many challenges ahead, in: *Pulaski Policy Papers* (27 February 2023).

12 *Ukraine Support Tracker* (update of 14 February 2025); [www.ifw-kiel.de/de/themendossiers/krieg-gegen-die-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker](http://www.ifw-kiel.de/de/themendossiers/krieg-gegen-die-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker) (accessed 31 March 2025).

13 Czub, Sebastian: Central and Eastern Europe Weekly Update: Para Bellum, in: *Pulaski Commentary* (12 December 2023); <https://pulaski.pl/en/central-and-eastern-europe-weekly-update-para-bellum> (accessed 31 March 2025).

14 According to Jacek Siewiera, the head of Poland’s National Security Bureau, who said that NATO therefore needs to be able to withstand “a direct confrontation with Russia” by 2027. Cf. Czub, op. cit. (see note 13).

15 NATO members may discuss intercepting Russian missiles over Ukraine at upcoming meeting, Polish foreign minister says, in: *TVN24* (5 November 2024); [https://meduza.io/en/news/2024/11/05/nato-members-may-discuss-intercepting-russian-missiles-over-ukraine-at-upcoming-meeting-polish-foreign-minister-says?utm\\_source=email&utm\\_medium=briefly-amp;utm\\_campaign=2024-11-06](https://meduza.io/en/news/2024/11/05/nato-members-may-discuss-intercepting-russian-missiles-over-ukraine-at-upcoming-meeting-polish-foreign-minister-says?utm_source=email&utm_medium=briefly-amp;utm_campaign=2024-11-06) (accessed 31 March 2025).

16 Konończuk, Wojciech: Year two of the war: Russia goes on the offensive, the West trapped in its strategic delusions, in: *OSW Commentary*, no. 576 (23 February 2024); [www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-02-23/year-two-war-russia-goes-offensive-west-trapped-its-strategic](http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-02-23/year-two-war-russia-goes-offensive-west-trapped-its-strategic) (accessed 31 March 2025). Conservative commentators close to the PiS are even more scathing: “The eastern flank wants Russia’s defeat in battle and opening of the Western structures to Ukraine. Whereas, Germans, French and Italians simulate help in means of warfare, while they seek to bypass sanctions imposed on Russia and postpone the perspective of Ukraine’s EU membership.” Żurawski vel Grajewski, Przemysław: The war in Ukraine opens a new chapter in the history of NATO and the EU: It is a chance for Poland and for Ukraine, in: *Klub Jagielloński* (23 July 2022); <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2022/07/23/the-war-in-ukraine-opens-a-new-chapter-in-the-history-of-nato-and-the-eu-it-is-a-chance-for-poland-and-for-ukraine> (accessed 31 March 2025).

which must be ruthlessly exploited. ... After all, nothing provokes Russia more than the West's weakness, its internal disputes and its efforts to seek a 'compromise' with Moscow."<sup>17</sup> In light of such analyses, one can well imagine how concerned Warsaw must be by Washington's sudden change of course under Donald Trump.

Poland takes a very hard line on Russia and Putin's regime and shares the criticism – which is also heard in Germany – “that the elements of the West's past political thinking about Russia brought us to this point, and that they have to be put into serious reconsideration”.<sup>18</sup> But the political class in Warsaw had not foreseen the war either. Even Marek Menkiszak, head of the Russia department at OSW and a longstanding and harsh Kremlin critic prone to worst-case scenarios, wrote at the end of 2021 that “the most radical option” of “an attempt at military occupation of the entire Ukrainian territory” was “highly unlikely”. “The minimal – and most likely – scenario would probably involve a local offensive by ‘separatists’ in Donbas.” And he trusted the deterrent effect of the West's “determination” and its “intention to increase the costs of such Russian policies”, for example through the threat of sanctions.<sup>19</sup>

The obvious implication is that the key to restoring a European security order lies in Moscow, at the very minimum requiring the removal of the Putin regime: “The fall of Putin should bring not only democracy to Russia, but should clearly open a completely new state-building process that would eliminate imperialistic thinking from different levels of society.” There can be no return to dealing with the existing regime, “and no space for detente”.<sup>20</sup> The conservative, PiS-aligned Sobieski Institute (Instytut Sobieskiego, IS) goes a good deal further, fundamentally calling into question Russia's existence in its present form. Starting from the premise that the war is not just Putin's, but an outcome of Russia's history and self-aggrandisement, the Sobieski Institute concludes that: “The Russian empire was established in Ukraine and should find its end

in Ukraine.”<sup>21</sup> In the same vein, the Institute's co-founder Paweł Szałamacha also calls for reparations from Russia – not just for Ukraine, but also to reimburse Poland's own costs for defending against hybrid attacks (in the form of migrant trafficking through Belarus), for taking in Ukrainian refugees, and for disruption to transport infrastructure. These reparations had to be made, he said, before sanctions could be lifted.<sup>22</sup>

The prospects of a Ukrainian victory are less clear. On the one hand Polish commentators agree with Kyiv that Ukraine's “internationally recognised borders of 1991” must be restored and Russia so weakened that it can no longer threaten its neighbours. This combines with the criticism of Poland's allies that “fear of escalation still prevents bolder decisions”.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand there are increasing doubts that it will be possible to restore Ukraine's territorial integrity. Hence, the “successful defence of its independence” is promulgated as the criterion for victory. But even that is not certain as long as “the West (or at least a crucial part of it) seems to be mired in its strategic delusions, as if it did not want to realise the stakes of this war”.<sup>24</sup>

However, commentators right across the political spectrum also see opportunities, with “an emerging new centre of gravity” appearing at “the forefront of European security”.<sup>25</sup> This, it is argued, has far-reaching positive implications for Poland's international position: Warsaw could “gain almost full subjectivity on the geopolitical chessboard of Eurasia” and “erase the harmful stereotypes that emerged after the partitions of Poland-Lithuania and the Congress of Vienna” and help Ukraine (and Moldova) to anchor itself in “the community of Western democracies”.<sup>26</sup> And not least it could create “a new regional force pole in Europe, that can become a natural centre for consolidation of the EU eastern flank” That would reduce German and French influence “and would eliminate German and French ideas of distancing themselves from the U.S. and opening to Russia”.<sup>27</sup>

17 Konończuk, op. cit. (see note 16).

18 Kot, Bartłomiej: War and peace – a case for a new Russia policy, in: *Pulaski Commentary*, (18 February 2023); <https://pulaski.pl/en/pulaski-commentary-war-and-peace-a-case-for-a-new-russia-policy-bartlomiej-kot-2> (accessed 31 March 2025).

19 Menkiszak, Marek: Russia's Ukrainian dilemma: Moscow's strategy towards Kyiv, in: *OSW Commentary*, no. 416 (19 November 2021); [www.osw.waw.pl](http://www.osw.waw.pl) (accessed 31 March 2025).

20 Kot, op. cit. (see note 18). See also Lorenz, Wojciech: Strengthening Deterrence a Priority for NATO at the Vilnius Summit, in: *PISM Policy Paper*, no. 1 (212) (April 2023).

21 Zespół IS, Let Russia Bear the Consequences of its Mistake, in: *Instytutu Sobieskiego* (24 October 2023); <https://sobieski.org.pl/en/let-russia-bear-the-consequences-of-its-mistake/?pdf=20370> (accessed 31 March 2025).

22 Szałamacha, Paweł: How Should Russia's War Against Ukraine End? Proposed Position of the RP, in: *Instytutu Sobieskiego* (24 October 2023); <https://sobieski.org.pl/en/how-should-russias-war-against-ukraine-end-proposed-position-of-the-rp/?pdf=20367> (accessed 31 March 2025). The Trump Administration, on the other hand, is demanding compensation from Ukraine and absurdly inflating its own contribution. Its shameless coercion echoes the actions of the German Empire in 1918, which demanded payment in grain in return for protecting the independent Ukraine and installed Pavlo Skoropadskyi as its compliant administrator.

23 Kot, op.cit. (see note 18); Pszczel, Robert: How NATO has changed since 1999, in: *PISM* (1 August 2024); <https://pism.pl/publications/how-nato-has-changed-since-1999> (accessed 31 March 2025).

24 Konończuk, op. cit., (see note 16).

25 Kot, op. cit. (see note 18).

26 Cordes, Miłosz J.: Poland and the advocacy for a wider Central and Eastern Europe, in: *Pulaski Foreign Affairs Policy Paper* (6 March 2023); <https://pulaski.pl/en/pulaski-policy-paper-poland-and-the-advocacy-for-a-wider-central-and-eastern-europe-milosz-j-cordes-2> (accessed 31 March 2025).

27 Żurawski vel Grajewski, op. cit. (see note 16). That is the existential fear of the Polish right (and is occasionally shared more broadly). It surfaces in historical assertions such as the following: “Of course, post-Putin Russia, which could be recognised as ‘democratic’ in Berlin and Paris, with the announced ‘new opening’ in relations with the country ‘that at least since 1815 has always been a part of the European system’, forgetting that it entered it by conquering the Republic of Poland as well as Finland, that is, today's Baltic States, Belarus, Ukraine, and Poland.”

## Ukraine belongs in NATO

Poland has been a firm supporter of Ukrainian membership of NATO since the 1990s. It has an obvious strategic interest, as it would no longer be as much an exposed frontline state.<sup>28</sup> The war has not changed this, quite the contrary.<sup>29</sup> Before the Russian invasion commentators argued that even reiterating the vague promise made in Bucharest in 2008 would help Ukraine “to resist pressure from Russia, defend its sovereignty, and receive support from NATO member states”.<sup>30</sup>

As the war progressed, Ukraine called increasingly urgently for credible Western security guarantees to deter Russian aggression through immediate (or guaranteed later) NATO membership. Polish efforts in that direction have also been concretised and intensified. One strand – running through the NATO summits from Madrid in 2022 to Washington in 2024 – has been to press for a clear roadmap for accession, the other launch concrete steps towards military standardisation and harmonisation. Wojciech Lorenz, head of the international security programme at the Polish Institute of International Affairs (Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, PISM), argued in 2024 that the very least NATO could do was to create a special NATO fund and a NATO mission for Ukraine, and officially confirm that “undermined territorial integrity cannot be an obstacle to NATO enlargement”.<sup>31</sup> Lorenz leaves no doubt that the supplementary or rather alternative “bilateral promises of assistance will be much more costly and risky than ... full NATO security guarantees”.<sup>32</sup>

The Polish debate concentrates above all on the benefits of Ukrainian membership of NATO. According to two authors from FPK, these include the prospect of “new trained, motivated, and capable forces” – which have “become since February 2022 one of the most capable military powers in Europe” – as well as the fact that Ukraine is fighting as a “de facto frontier state of NATO”, making membership a “moral imperative”. Further, membership “could balance security in Europe by eliminating the remnants of the territorial division artificially created by Russia in Europe after the USSR collapsed and could play a significant role in Russia’s internal

transformation”. In that context, the “infamous escalation myth” is labelled “a self-adopted policy trap ensuing from still surprisingly poor analysis and driven by fear of meaningful decisions”.<sup>33</sup>

## NATO was, is and will remain Poland’s ultimate security guarantee

Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski outlined the current PO-led government’s security doctrine in a keynote speech to the Sejm in spring 2024: “The transatlantic alliance with the leading role of the United States remains the cornerstone of Poland’s security. Our goal is to maintain and strengthen US engagement in Europe while strengthening the European pillar of the Alliance in the spirit of strategic harmony between NATO and the European Union.”<sup>34</sup>

Poland’s political camps disagree on many things, but they have no meaningful differences over the importance of NATO and the United States – including Poland’s vital interest in NATO’s current focus on collective defence of its eastern flank. Questioning the US presence and Washington’s leading role in Europe as the fundament of collective defence in the Eastern direction regularly raises alarm: “the destruction of NATO”, the “weakening of the EU” and a general “Finlandisation of Europe”.<sup>35</sup> As far as the Poles are concerned collective defence must mean more than just “political signalling” (certainly since February 2022). It must involve the permanent presence of allied and preferably American headquarters and forces. This process was initiated at the Madrid Summit in 2022 and has been incrementally expanded since then to a point where there is a fully equipped brigade in Poland under US command, and another in Latvia with Polish participation.<sup>36</sup> By 2024 the United States had 10,000 troops stationed in Poland, most of them, however, on the basis of bilateral agreements. There are also Italian F-35s in Malbork and three German Patriot batteries. After some toing and froing, the Patriots were stationed near Zamość, 33 kilometres from the Ukrainian border, from January to November 2023. And in January 2025 they were brought back to replace US batte-

28 Jureńczyk, Łukasz: Poland’s support for Ukraine’s aspirations to NATO membership, in: Marcin Lasoń, Alex Issa, Terry Johanson (eds.), *The Causes, Course and possible Consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian war from the Perspective of Poland, France, and New Zealand (Security, Theory and Practice, no. 3, 2023): 29-40*; <https://btip.ka.edu.pl/pdf/bezpieczenstwo-teoria-i-praktyka-2023-nr3.pdf> (accessed 31 March 2025).

29 Along with Canada and – after they joined – the Baltic states. Cf. Pszczel, Robert: How to win the war and join NATO? The key role of Ukraine’s partnership with the Alliance, in: *OSW Commentary*, no. 609 (28 June 2024); [www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-06-28/how-to-win-war-and-join-nato-key-role-ukraines-partnership](http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-06-28/how-to-win-war-and-join-nato-key-role-ukraines-partnership) (accessed 31 March 2025).

30 Lorenz, Wojciech: NATO in the Face of Russian Aggression against Ukraine, in: *PISM Bulletin*, no. 30 (1947) (16 February 2022).

31 Lorenz, Wojciech: NATO to Consider Increasing, Stabilising Support for Ukraine, in: *Policy Paper*, no. 2 (215) (May 2024). The NATO-Ukraine Joint Analysis, Training and Education Centre (JATEC) in Bydgoszcz plays a similar role. The Polish president unveiled it at the 2022 NATO Summit in Madrid as a flagship project to support Ukraine, and it was finally adopted at the Washington Summit in 2024: “Politically and institutionally, it will bind NATO to Ukraine in the long run, facilitating the task for those members who need to convince others to start the process of Ukraine’s accession.” Pszczel, op. cit. (see note 29).

32 Lorenz, Wojciech: NATO Vilnius Summit Focused on Ukraine, but Still No Invitation, in: *PISM Bulletin*, no. 95 (2214) (14 July 2023).

33 Budz, Iryna: NATO’s Enlargement: How Ukrainian Membership Could Benefit NATO, in: *Pulaski Expert’s Commentary* (20 September 2023); <https://pulaski.pl/en/natos-enlargement-how-ukrainian-membership-could-benefit-nato-2> (accessed 31 March 2025); Pszczel, Robert: NATO summit in Vilnius – will it live up to expectations in comparison to other post-1990 summits?, in: *Pulaski Policy Papers* (8 July 2023). See also the Report of the 2023 Warsaw Security Forum: “Central and Eastern Europe as a New Center of Gravity”, Warsaw, 2023: 18–22.

34 Information of Minister of Foreign Affairs on Polish foreign policy tasks in 2024, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Poland, 25 April 2024; [www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/information-of-minister-of-foreign-affairs-on-polish-foreign-policy-tasks-in-2024](http://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/information-of-minister-of-foreign-affairs-on-polish-foreign-policy-tasks-in-2024).

35 Menkiszak, Marek: The capitulation of Ukraine and the Finlandisation of Europe: Russia’s threats and ‘offers’, in: *OSW Commentary*, no. 606 (18 June 2024).

36 Lorenz, Wojciech: NATO Madrid Summit: A Response to Russia’s Revisionism, in: *PISM Bulletin*, no. 114 (2031) (15 July 2022).



ries at Rzeszów-Jasionka Airport, which is an important logistics hub.<sup>37</sup>

While the “strategic harmony between NATO and the European Union” that Foreign Minister Sikorski underlined in his Sejm speech implies continuity with the previous government vis-à-vis NATO, it also signals a striking change of course towards the EU. In future, Sikorski said, Poland will “make use of the opportunities offered by the EU Common Security and Defence Policy”. Concretely this means that: “Poland will actively participate in further work on the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) and the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP).”<sup>38</sup> The previous PiS government had taken exactly the opposite view. It wanted to “reduce the number of areas under EU competence” and to “focus on areas where the Treaty of Rome gave competencies to the Union and let the rest be guided by the principle of subsidiarity”, as Prime Minister Morawiecki said in his speech on Europe at Heidelberg University on 20 March 2023.<sup>39</sup>

However, Polish experts are absolutely clear that this course correction does not involve European “strategic autonomy” as an alternative to NATO.<sup>40</sup> Nor is anyone in Warsaw enthusiastic about the various proposals – aired for example by Germany – to expand majority decision-making (even if their purpose is to ensure that the EU is prepared for the further eastern enlargements that Poland steadfastly advocates). In other words, Poland wants to exert influence in Brussels, to mobilise additional resources for its own defence of the shared eastern border, and to prepare for the eventuality that Donald Trump could reduce US engagement in Europe – all without decoupling from the United States.<sup>41</sup> In this connection, right-wing commentators insist that Poland must have free use of EU funds, including to purchase arms outside the EU and in particular in the United States.<sup>42</sup>

## Donald Trump, the ambivalent unknown

All this has been thrown into confusion by Donald Trump’s return to the White House and the breakneck implementation of his egomaniacal agenda. Poland originally had rath-

er contradictory expectations. During Trump’s first term Warsaw sought to build its own exclusive relationship, without its European allies and rooted above all in ideological affinity. Even at the time, Trump’s aversion to NATO and his sympathies for Putin were at odds with the security coordinates of the PiS government. But the bet paid off. After years of persuasion, a commitment to cover the costs and a promise to name the US base “Fort Trump”, Trump agreed in 2019 to transfer 1,000 US troops from Germany to Poland (initially only on rotation). This was followed in 2020 by a bilateral Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) and a whole series of arms deals. In view of Poland’s close relationship with Trump, it comes as no surprise that the subsequent Biden Administration had a rocky start – especially after it created the impression in Poland that reactivating the transatlantic relationship meant prioritising relations with Germany (and the Western European allies in general). Biden’s suspension of Trump’s sanctions against the Nordstream 2 pipeline was the last straw.<sup>43</sup>

The factors that led Poland to side with Trump during his first term are no longer salient today. The current government in Warsaw is on the same page as the Trump-critical European mainstream, while Trump has gone off on a dangerous unilateral tangent with his erratic and conciliatory overtures to Russia. Yet, the PiS group in the Sejm broke out the champagne to celebrate Trump’s election. This vexed even some PiS-leaning commentators, one of whom commented that “the idea of a Trumpist international ... is self-contradictory and grotesque”.<sup>44</sup> Some on the right even argued that it was in Poland’s interest “to weaken the United States rather than expanding its sphere of influence”. Otherwise Poland would end up as a “subservient colony”: “If we do not build an agreement and alliances of the middle and weak against the strong, we will only be pawns in the hands of the superpowers. Yes, this also applies to the USA.”<sup>45</sup> But President Andrzej Duda from the PiS party went on to utilize his connection to arrange a visit (as he had already done during the election campaign) to become the first European head of state to be granted an audience. The two leaders met indeed on 22 February 2025, but only at the sidelines of the CPAC international conference of far

37 Czub, Sebastian, Ina Filote, et al., op. cit. (see note 4). See also Deutschland stationiert erneut Flugabwehr in Polen, in: *Polskie Radio* (28 November 2024); [www.polskieradio.pl/400/7764/Artykul/3451794,Deutschland-stationiert-erneut-Flugabwehr-in-Polen](http://www.polskieradio.pl/400/7764/Artykul/3451794,Deutschland-stationiert-erneut-Flugabwehr-in-Polen) (accessed 31 March 2025), and *Polskie Radio* (23 January 2025); [www.polskieradio.pl/400/7764/Artykul/3474351,deutschland-stationiert-erneut-flugabwehr-in-polen](http://www.polskieradio.pl/400/7764/Artykul/3474351,deutschland-stationiert-erneut-flugabwehr-in-polen) (accessed 31 March 2025).

38 Sikorski, op. cit. (see note 34).

39 Morawiecki, Mateusz: Mateusz Morawiecki at Heidelberg University – “Europe at a historic turning point”, Chancellery of the Prime Minister, Republic of Poland, 20 March 2023; [www.gov.pl/web/primeminister/mateusz-morawiecki-at-heidelberg-university---europe-at-a-historic-turning-point](http://www.gov.pl/web/primeminister/mateusz-morawiecki-at-heidelberg-university---europe-at-a-historic-turning-point).

40 Smura, op. cit. (see note 1).

41 Nowak, Bartłomiej E.: Poland’s European policy after the 2023 parliamentary election, in: *Pulaski Commentary* (20 October 2023); <https://pulaski.pl/en/polands-european-policy-after-the-2023-parliamentary-election-2> (accessed 31 March 2025).

42 Thereby nonchalantly reversing cause and effect by denouncing potential new EU funds as “another means” to prevent such purchases. Grosse, Tomasz G.: The challenge for the EU’s defence policy, in: *Instytutu Sobieskiego* (9 November 2022); <https://sobieski.org.pl/en/the-challenge-for-the-eus-defence-policy/> (accessed 31 March 2025).

43 Dąbrowski, Andrzej, Łukasz Kulesa & Mateusz Piotrowski: Relaunching Polish-U.S. Relations in the Biden Era, in: *PISM Strategic File*, no. 6 (98) (14 July 2021); [www.pism.pl/publications/relaunching-polish-us-relations-in-the-biden-era](http://www.pism.pl/publications/relaunching-polish-us-relations-in-the-biden-era) (accessed 31 March 2025).

44 PiS wiwatuje w Sejmie na cześć Donalda Trumpa: A co z suwerennością? Konstanty Piława krytykuje składanie hołdów lennych Wujowi Samowi (PiS cheers in the Sejm in honor of Donald Trump: What about sovereignty? Konstanty Piława criticizes paying feudal homage to Uncle Sam), in: *Klub Jagiellński* (6 November 2024); <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2024/11/06/krzyki-pis-u-w-polskim-sejmie-na-czesc-donald-trumpa-tak-zachowuje-sie-partia-suwerennosciowa> (accessed 31 March 2025).

45 Powinniśmy osłabić potęgę USA. Istnienie jakiegokolwiek mocarstwa jest nam nie na rękę: Daria Chibner na łamach magazynu “Plus Minus” krytykuje poddańczy stosunek do Amerykanów (We should weaken the power of the USA: The existence of any superpower is not convenient for us: Daria Chibner criticizes the subservient attitude towards Americans in the pages of the “Plus Minus” magazine), in: *Klub Jagiellński* (17 March 2025); <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2025/03/17/powinnismy-oslabiac-potegi-usa-istnienie-jakiegokolwiek-mocarstwa-jest-nam-nie-na-reke> (accessed 31 March 2025).

right populists and for just ten minutes – after an hour and a half of nervous waiting. There was a small consolation for Duda, though: Trump – always a talent for empty gestures – confirmed “our close alliance” and reiterated that Washington was not thinking about withdrawing troops, as his Defence Secretary later confirmed.<sup>46</sup>

While Duda massaged Trump’s ego with dubious success, his Foreign Minister Sikorski soon found himself in a public spat with Trump’s techno-oligarch Elon Musk, who was backed up by Secretary of State Marco Rubio. The issue was the use of the Starlink satellite network to support Ukraine, which Poland was funding to the tune of US\$50 million annually. At that point there was a real danger that access to Starlink might be stopped in connection with Trump’s (temporary) suspension of arms supplies to Ukraine. Rubio demanded that the “little man” (as Musk called Sikorski) should show gratitude, very much akin to Trump’s public dressing-down of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on 28 February 2025 at the White House.<sup>47</sup> At the same time the Polish government was making moves – within the EU’s ReArm Europe framework and through the activities initiated by France and the United Kingdom in early March – to rapidly and massively strengthen the European pillar of NATO, both to support Ukraine and to enhance its own defence.

However, it is doubtful whether any of this will warm the Poles to the idea of “strategic autonomy” in the EU framework. And almost all the Polish political parties flatly reject the idea of participating in the European “reassurance force” for Ukraine floated by Paris and London. At any rate, Trump’s words and deeds in the first weeks of his second term confirmed that he was following the strategy documents prepared by conservative US think-tanks in the runup to the election. They all agree that the US presence in Europe should be reduced, whether by restricting the US role to nuclear deterrence and requiring Europe to shoulder the conventional responsibilities, or through concepts like a “dormant NATO” to be activated only in emergencies. Those recommendations categorically reject NATO’s open-door policy, which includes membership for Ukraine, “as it does not align with US interests”.<sup>48</sup> The same applies to reducing or completely abandoning US support for Ukraine, accompanied by efforts to secure a peace agreement with Russia.

In Poland this is firmly regarded as a mistake right across the political spectrum. There is consensus that a forced ceasefire in Ukraine would only provide brief respite from Russian aggression.<sup>49</sup> It is obvious that Trump’s actions endanger NATO’s coherence, as do efforts to accelerate “the development of EU defence competences (strategic autonomy)”, as authors at PISM critically invoked in October 2024.<sup>50</sup>

According to the centrist think tank PISM, that danger should be addressed by strengthening the European pillar as “an alternative to strategic autonomy” – and by “stepping up EU efforts to make developing the member states’ military capabilities a European political priority.”<sup>51</sup> Trump’s Polish supporters, on the other hand, put the nation first and believe, as one observer from OSW put it, “that Poland is an important US ally and a pillar of European deterrence and defence”. “If politicians manage to skilfully leverage this”, it could swing the security pendulum towards Poland during Trump’s second term.<sup>52</sup> Trump’s capriciousness makes this a very dubious prospect. Ideological affinities within the right-populist international and Trump’s random, narcissistic (non-)strategy represent a very sketchy basis for action.

## Out of the grey zone: Abolish the NATO-Russia Founding Act

Poland is exposed to great danger as an eastern frontline state and logistics hub for military support for Ukraine, yet finds its defence constrained by decisions that originate from the time of the “strategic partnership” with Russia: the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997. All the relevant commentators agree that this is a crass contradiction. While the Founding Act is in abeyance, it has not been officially renounced. And that, all the politicians and experts – rightly – agree, has highly unsettling implications for Poland.

As far as the Poles are concerned, adhering to the Founding Act potentially encourages Russia to continue to regard Poland – and with it all the other new members on the eastern flank – as a “buffer zone” whose status is negotiable.<sup>53</sup> This fear was confirmed by Moscow’s December 2021 ultimatums, which demanded that NATO withdraw its forces to its 1997 pattern.<sup>54</sup> At all subsequent NATO summits,

<sup>46</sup> Krzysztof, Aleksandra: Poland’s Duda criticised for chat with Trump in Washington, in: *Euractiv.com* (24 February 2025); [www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/polands-duda-criticised-for-chat-with-trump-in-washington](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/polands-duda-criticised-for-chat-with-trump-in-washington) (accessed 31 March 2025).

<sup>47</sup> Militant representatives of the Polish right, such as the notorious PiS MEP Tarczyński, called for Sikorski’s resignation, but received push-back from their own camp. Cf. Dominik Tarczyński jak Karolina Wigura: Co jest nie tak z polską opozycją? Roch Zygmunt komentuje reakcje polityków PiS na sprzeczkę Musk-Sikorski (Dominik Tarczyński asks Karolina Wigura: What is wrong with the Polish opposition? Roch Zygmunt comments on the reactions of PiS politicians to the Musk-Sikorski argument), in: *Klub Jagiellonski* (10 March 2025); <https://klub-jagiellonski.pl/2025/03/10/dominik-tarczyński-jak-karolina-wigura-co-jest-nie-tak-z-polska-opozycja> (accessed 31 March 2025).

<sup>48</sup> Kohut, Andrzej: The architects of ‘America First’ and the potential consequences of a Trump victory for European security, in: *OSW Commentary*, no. 627 (17 October 2024).

<sup>49</sup> Despite adverse circumstances, a Ukrainian victory is still assumed. Cf. Szeligowski, Daniel: Defining Ukraine’s Victory, in: *PISM-Report*, Warsaw (March 2025).

<sup>50</sup> Markiewicz, Paweł & Mateusz Piotrowski: U.S. Presidential Election: If Trump Wins, Foreign Policy Likely to be Similar to First Term, in: *PISM Bulletin*, no. 160 (2468) (31 October 2024).

<sup>51</sup> Markiewicz & Piotrowski, op. cit. (see note 50); Zajac, Tomasz: Europe in the Shadow of War: Poland Takes Over EU Council Presidency, in: *PISM Bulletin*, no. 187 (2495) (13 December 2024).

<sup>52</sup> Kohut, op. cit. (see note 48).

<sup>53</sup> Lorenz, op. cit. (see note 36).

<sup>54</sup> Lorenz, op. cit. (see note 30).

the Poles therefore called for the organisation to “unequivocally renounce” the Founding Act.<sup>55</sup> The fact that this did not occur even after Russia’s invasion has deepened Poles’ latent mistrust over their allies’ resolve; that applies to the Biden Administration as well as to Western Europe. “Some NATO countries”, critics said, continued to recognise the Founding Act as “the foundation of the European security system, which was to be built together with Russia”.<sup>56</sup> There are also fears that Russia could make ending the war in Ukraine conditional on observance of the restrictions on force deployment laid out in the Founding Act (and reiterated in the 2021 ultimatum).<sup>57</sup> Trump’s overtures to negotiate peace on the basis of the Moscow ultimatums and the Kremlin’s interpretation of the “root causes” of the Ukraine conflict have only fanned those fears.

NATO’s refusal to scrap the Founding Act “stems from a harmful habit of paternalism and second-best treatment of CEE members ... which refuses to die”. While “the geopolitical point of gravity has moved east”, this shift has not been adequately reflected neither in leadership appointments nor in the location of command structures and headquarters, or in influence on decision-making: “Politically it is simply impossible for CEE countries to accept a situation where the same countries in Western Europe, which for years forced on others policies endangering military and energy security in Europe, now (after some meek forms of contrition) insist to be right again on the war in Ukraine.”<sup>58</sup> As another author concludes, “it is time for Central and Eastern Europe to emerge as a more cohesive and coherent geopolitical entity.”<sup>59</sup>

One instrument for advancing that process and strengthening Poland’s security is the regional groupings fostered and promoted by the PiS government: the Bucharest Nine (B9) of 2015, the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) of 2016 and the Lublin Triangle of 2020. However, their impact has been limited.

The B9 group comprises all the NATO members along the eastern flank, from the Baltics to Bulgaria. Poland and Romania are the most active members. To date the group has served more as a collective declaration of shared positions – especially since 2022 – than as a forum for actual political co-ordination. That applies above all to the coherence of NATO and the bilateral cooperation with the United States. With regard to Russia, Hungary’s diverging views (and now also Slovakia’s, since the change of government in Bratislava) have not had a “significant impact on the functioning of the B9” as “an effective platform for strengthening NATO’s Eastern Flank”, a sympathetic commentator from PISM observed.<sup>60</sup>

The Three Seas Initiative was originally established to promote economic cooperation projects in the areas of energy, digitalisation and transport. Its thirteen members are all EU member states. The group also seeks to assert Eastern European interests vis-à-vis Western Europe, which “still does not treat the Three Seas countries as equal partners”: “The Three Seas Initiative is created by countries that know what they want to achieve and strive to shape the EU’s future on an equal footing with others. This is a new dynamic that the West must understand and accept.”<sup>61</sup> However, weaknesses concerning “institutional coherence, funding, and the differing foreign policies of some member states towards Russia” (in connection with energy supplies) continue to endanger regional unity.<sup>62</sup> Since the Russian invasion the group has also acquired a “geopolitical” dimension to strengthen the region’s “strategic resilience”; in practise this means promoting 3SI infrastructure projects that serve to improve military mobility.<sup>63</sup> Right-wing critics in Poland complain that the current government shows no particular interest in the 3SI initiative, having abolished the dedicated government representative for the 3SI thus leaving the sole responsibility with the president and his secretariat.<sup>64</sup> Others see the initiative – at least in theory – as an opportunity to tempt President Trump to engage more closely in the region, tapping into his transactional approach with the prospect of US investment

55 Dyner, Anna Maria, Artur Kacprzyk & Wojciech Lorenz: Consequences of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine for the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act, in: *PISM Strategic File*, no. 6 (114) (June 2022).

56 Lorenz, op. cit. (see note 20). The standard German formulation is that lasting security cannot be achieved against Russia but only with Russia.

57 Lorenz, op. cit. (see note 20).

58 Pszczel, Robert: One year of Russia’s war against Ukraine: Ukrainians fighting for survival, the West adapting its strategy, centres of gravity shifting, in: *Pulaski Defence Policy Paper* (18 February 2023); <https://pulaski.pl/en/one-year-of-russias-war-against-ukraine-ukrainians-fighting-for-survival-the-west-adapting-its-strategy-centres-of-gravity-shifting> (accessed 31 March 2025). Similar also: Pszczel, Robert: How NATO has changed since 1999, in: *PISM* (1 August 2024); <https://pism.pl/publications/how-nato-has-changed-since-1999> (accessed 31 March 2025).

59 Cordes, Miłosz J.: Poland and the advocacy for a wider Central and Eastern Europe, in: *Pulaski Foreign Affairs Policy Paper* (6 March 2023); <https://pulaski.pl/en/pulaski-policy-paper-poland-and-the-advocacy-for-a-wider-central-and-eastern-europe-milosz-j-cordes-2> (accessed 31 March 2025).

60 Piękowski, Jakub & Tomasz Żornaczuk: Bucharest Nine Cooperation Strengthening NATO’s Eastern Flank, in: *PISM Bulletin*, no. 119 (2427) (12 August 2024).

61 Western Europe Still Treats Us Like Children: On the Three Seas Initiative’s Tenth Anniversary: Stanisław Okoński interviews Beata Daszyńska-Muzycka, the Ambassador of the President of Poland for the Three Seas Initiative, in: *Klub Jagiellonski* (30 December 2024); <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2024/12/30/western-europe-still-treats-us-like-children-on-the-three-seas-initiatives-tenth-anniversary> (accessed 31 March 2025).

62 Laura-Pup, Antonia: 10 Years of the Three Seas Initiative: What’s Next?, in: *Pulaski Policy Papers* (21 October 2024). Some also perceive the initiative as an alternative to the long-established Visegrád Group. Its membership is larger, and disagreements within the Visegrád Group with respect to Russia have hindered its work (Poland and the Czech Republic versus Hungary and Slovakia). Cf. Błaszczak, Jędrzej: The Three Seas Initiative after the Vilnius Summit: Security first, in: *Institute of New Europe* (26 January 2025); <https://ine.org.pl/en/the-three-seas-initiative-in-2025-on-the-road-to-its-anniversary> (accessed 31 March 2025).

63 Bornio, Jakub: Znaczenie Inicjatywy Trójmorza dla wojskowej współpracy w regionie (The importance of the Three Seas Initiative for military cooperation in the region), *Institute of Central Europe*, in: *IEŚ Commentaries*, no. 966 (30 September 2023); <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/znaczenie-inicjatywy-trojmorza-dla-wojskowej-wspolpracy-w-regionie> (accessed 31 March 2025). Lewkowicz, Łukasz, Marlena Gołębiowska: The Three Seas Initiative after the Vilnius Summit: Security first, in: *IEŚ Commentaries*, no. 1102, (12 April 2024); [https://ies.lublin.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/ies-commentaries-1102-77-2024\\_brief.pdf](https://ies.lublin.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/ies-commentaries-1102-77-2024_brief.pdf) (accessed 31 March 2025).

64 Musiałek, Paweł: Radosław Sikorski popełnił błąd mówiąc, że nie wyślemy polskich żołnierzy na Ukrainę (Radosław Sikorski made a mistake by saying that we will not send Polish soldiers to Ukraine), in: *Klub Jagiellonski* (11 February 2025); <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2025/02/11/radoslaw-sikorski-popelnil-blad-mowiac-ze-nie-wyslemy-polskich-zolnierzy-na-ukraine> (accessed 31 March 2025).

via the 3SI platform. During his first term he showed some interest and joined the 2017 3SI summit in Warsaw.<sup>65</sup>

The Lublin Triangle of Poland, Lithuania and Ukraine echoes and balances the Weimar Triangle (Germany, France and Poland) – and harks back to the Union of Lublin which in 1569 gave rise to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, at the time one of the most powerful states in Europe. It was established in 2020 to support Ukraine's aspirations to join the EU and NATO; since the full-scale Russian invasion it has provided political and military backing. The Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian Brigade founded in 2014 and headquartered in Lublin could be regarded as a precursor of the Lublin Triangle. It participates in NATO exercises and serves above all to train Ukrainian forces.<sup>66</sup>

## Nuclear sharing and equality in extended deterrence

Nuclear deterrence is an area where the special status of the eastern NATO members remains especially salient, because the NATO-Russia Founding Act included a definite commitment by the Alliance not to station nuclear weapons on the territory of its new members. NATO still adheres to this pledge, although Russian belligerent messaging during the Ukraine war has placed the nuclear question firmly back on the agenda.

Polish commentators agree that NATO should neither be intimidated by Russian nuclear sabre-rattling, nor by the stationing of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus which is seen as having “little strategic consequence to NATO, due to the presence of similar arms in Kaliningrad”.<sup>67</sup> But NATO should communicate this more clearly, including a clear commitment to its doctrine of nuclear first use.<sup>68</sup> And above all it should respond by bolstering its nuclear posture in Europe as “a clear signal to Russia”. Its failure to do so in 2014 is now seen as having encouraged Russia in 2022 to believe “that the West is vulnerable to nuclear threats”.<sup>69</sup>

Against that background, the most effective response would be to include Poland fully in NATO's nuclear shar-

ing, as Polish President Duda officially requested in early March 2025. Ideally this would be accomplished by stationing US nuclear weapons in Poland, or at the very least through nuclear certification of the F-35 fighter jets Poland has ordered from the United States.<sup>70</sup> This is yet another reason to cancel the NATO-Russia Founding Act.<sup>71</sup>

Neither European deterrence nor a Polish nuclear weapon are seen as realistic prospects. Hence there is no alternative to the current model with the United States maintaining the key role. But some experts – in this case from the PISM – do argue for Poland to take up the French president's offer of a dialogue on the potential contribution French nuclear weapons could make to collective deterrence.<sup>72</sup> And there are even some faint hopes that Donald Trump might be interested in emphasising nuclear deterrence in Europe in order to reduce reliance on US conventional forces.<sup>73</sup>

The stationing of American medium-range missiles in Germany is also seen as positive in principle, although they should also be deployed in other states “including those most vulnerable to Russian aggression, such as Poland”. Apparently, the critics say, the United States and Germany feel that such a step would be “too escalatory towards Russia”, both symbolically and because it would enable faster and deeper strikes into Russia.<sup>74</sup> Commentators also welcome the permanent status of the US missile defence base in Redzikowo – which has been operational since December 2023 and officially designated to NATO since November 2024 – while remaining wary of the possibility that it could still be bargained away for an American-Russian arms control agreement.<sup>75</sup>

## Germany – the unbeloved ally

Germany is subject to great animosity in Poland, coming second only to Russia. The reasons for this are no secret. Where the past and present are so inauspiciously intertwined, the relationship demands a sensitive hand. The PiS government did exactly the opposite. It and its foreign policy experts had nothing but criticism, for example about Ber-

65 Markiewicz, Paweł & Mateusz Piotrowski: U.S. Presidential Election: If Trump Wins, Foreign Policy Likely to be Similar to First Term, in: *PISM Bulletin*, no. 160 (2468) (31 October 2024).

66 Pszczel, Robert: How to win the war and join NATO? The key role of Ukraine's partnership with the Alliance, in: *OSW Commentary*, no. 609 (28 June 2024); [www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-06-28/how-to-win-war-and-join-nato-key-role-ukraines-partnership](http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2024-06-28/how-to-win-war-and-join-nato-key-role-ukraines-partnership) (accessed 31 March 2025).

67 Czub, Sebastian: Russia's Atomic Gambit – the deployment of nuclear weapons in Belarus and its consequences, in: *Pulaski Commentary* (31 March 2023); <https://pulaski.pl/en/28962-2> (accessed 31 March 2025).

68 Kacprzyk, Artur: Biden Administration and U.S. Nuclear Declaratory Policy: Implications for NATO, in: *PISM Policy Paper*, no. 21 (207) (November 2021).

69 Kacprzyk, Artur: NATO Nuclear Adaptation: Rationales for Expanding the Force Posture in Europe, in: *PISM Report* (November 2023); Kacprzyk, Artur: Russia Sharpens Nuclear Signaling Towards NATO, in: *PISM Bulletin*, no. 85 (2204) (30 June 2023).

70 Graca, Jakub & Justyna Gotkowska: NATO's nuclear deterrence: Is it time for change?, in: *OSW Commentary*, no. 607 (19 June 2024).

71 Kacprzyk, op. cit. (see note 68).

72 For example, after Macron renewed his offer on 5 March 2025. Kacprzyk, Artur: France Invites Allies to a Debate on Extending its Nuclear Deterrent, in: *PISM Spotlight*, no. 17 (7 March 2025).

73 Kacprzyk, Artur: U.S. Likely to Increase its Nuclear Forces, But Uncertainties for NATO Remain, in: *PISM Bulletin*, no. 189 (2497) (17 December 2024).

74 Kacprzyk, Artur: U.S. Announces That It Will Deploy Medium-Range Missiles to Germany, in: *PISM Bulletin*, no. 107 (2415) (18 July 2024).

75 Piotrowski, Marcin Andrzej: U.S. Missile Defence Base in Poland Now Officially in NATO's Structures, in: *PISM Spotlight*, no. 74/2024 (14 November 2024).



lin's initially hesitant support for Ukraine and its refusal to officially scrap the NATO-Russia Founding Act.<sup>76</sup> Instead the PiS systematically mobilised anti-German sentiment, in ways that did more harm to the coherence and functioning of NATO than anything the PiS could pin on Berlin (and frequently also Paris).

As far as right-wing Polish commentators are concerned, Germany cannot be trusted. Its supposed "pacifism", they say, resulted from the destruction of its imperial militarism in 1945. But the "German imperial idea ... is still doing quite well". Germany is still striving for power and sees itself as "some kind of better civilisation". Its self-image as a "civil power" supposedly gives it the "moral right to become a teacher, who determines the correct norms of acting". And its tradition as a "commercial state" represents little more than a corrupt fusion of politics and industry, with the unfortunate consequence that "Poland and the whole region" are perceived as "a mere contractor, and not a real partner". "From the German point of view," one commentator wrote in June 2022, "the best option would be Kyiv's quick defeat, freezing relations with Kremlin for the time being, and then getting back to the business as usual with Moscow." All in all, the Polish position tends to be: "If Germans will not change their attitude toward Poland and the countries of our region, there will not be any talk about any partnership."<sup>77</sup>

It is hard to see how any partnership can come about, given such a diagnosis. The same also applies to analyses of supposed German geostrategy penned by another author from the PiS-allied Klub Jagiellonski in Krakow. He argued in July 2022 that Germany's real objective had been to dominate only the western parts of Central and Eastern Europe because it lacked the means to subjugate the entire region. Instead, it "willingly" left the parts to the east of NATO and the EU to Moscow, with fatal consequences: "The power of Moscow, hanging directly over the borders of Poland, the Baltic States and Romania, would be a constant 'disciplining threat' for Poles, Balts, and Romanians, showing them the lot of Ukrainians, Belarusians and Moldovans, as an alternative to obedient submission to the will of Berlin, weakening Paris, and to Brussels, compliant to their wishes."<sup>78</sup>

These paranoid "myths and illusions", as Foreign Minister Sikorski called them, are by no means restricted to the Germanophobic margins.<sup>79</sup> In fact they faithfully repro-

duce the words – and actions – of the PiS in government (and since).<sup>80</sup> And they form the ideological background to the attempts by the Polish right to play Poland's Western European and American NATO allies against each other, especially during Donald Trump's tenure.

The new government has put all that behind it. As Poland's "key partner" in NATO, Warsaw wants to set differences with Germany aside. Instead of its predecessor's "path of confrontation" with Germany, it hopes to use "interdependence to strengthen Poland's position". In fact, Sikorski said, the "aversion to Germany was also a consequence of an aversion to the West as such".<sup>81</sup> However, the rift is wide and deep after many years of aggravation. Great effort will be required to overcome it, also because security cooperation is in tatters.

Poland's choice to exclude the Leopard 2 from its tank procurement is a telling example. For decades the Leopard 2 formed the backbone of Poland's armoured forces and connected the Polish army with the German Bundeswehr (and many other Western European armies that operate the Leopard 2). Now it could be phased out. The matter was not uncontested in Warsaw; in the end speed of delivery was seen to be decisive.<sup>82</sup> Another example is the stationing of German Patriot batteries close to the Ukrainian border, together with 300 soldiers to operate them. Germany offered them in autumn 2022 to protect Polish territory (after two people were killed when a Ukrainian anti-aircraft missile came down in Poland). The Polish prime minister was initially surprised but positive. He changed his mind after PiS éminence grise Jarosław Kaczyński intervened with the rather left-field idea that they would be better stationed in Ukraine. In the end he agreed to the proposal after all, at the beginning of 2023. In the same vein, the trilateral German-Danish-Polish corps was created in 1999 to integrate Poland and was headquartered in Szczecin. Today it has become the much broader Multinational Corps North-east and is integrated into the NATO command structure as a High Readiness Force Headquarters (responsible for battlegroups stationed in various countries on the eastern flank). At least Poland has now declared its willingness to join the European Sky Shield missile defence initiative launched by Germany in 2022. The decision was announced in spring 2024, making Poland the last country to join to date.

<sup>76</sup> Grosse, op. cit. (see note 42).

<sup>77</sup> Civil power, radical pacifism, protectional ecologism, *Zeitenwende*: Germans priests of political idealism: Marcin Kędzierski presents the foundations of Berlin's five key traditions of foreign policy, in: *Klub Jagiellonski* (10 June 2022); <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2022/06/10/civil-power-radical-pacifism-protectional-ecologism-zeitenwende-germans-priests-of-political-idealism> (accessed 31 March 2025).

<sup>78</sup> Żurawski vel Grajewski, Przemysław: The war in Ukraine opens a new chapter in the history of NATO and the EU: It is a chance for Poland and for Ukraine, in: *Klub Jagiellonski* (23 July 2022); <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2022/07/23/the-war-in-ukraine-opens-a-new-chapter-in-the-history-of-nato-and-the-eu-it-is-a-chance-for-poland-and-for-ukraine> (accessed 31 March 2025).

<sup>79</sup> Sikorski, op. cit. (see note 34).

<sup>80</sup> Further examples of rhetorical derailments by senior PiS leaders can be found in Vetter, Reinhold: Politische Paranoia: Die antideutsche Propaganda der polnischen Rechten, in: *Osteuropa*, vol. 72, no. 9–10 (2022): 85–107.

<sup>81</sup> Sikorski op. cit. (see note 34).

<sup>82</sup> Czub et al., op. cit. (see note 4).

## China and the Indo-Pacific – (still) undecided

The idea that Europe should reduce its economic dependency on China and restrict its political cooperation was more or less consensus in Poland even before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.<sup>83</sup> The same should apply to the other states of Central and Eastern Europe, which have been connected to China since 2012 by the China-CEEC cooperation. The format currently has fourteen members plus China (14+1; Greece joined in 2019; Lithuania left in 2021, followed by Estonia and Latvia in 2022). However, 14+1 is by no means a homogenous group: the Czech Republic and Romania are explicitly China-critical and have suspended their active membership; Hungary, Slovakia and Serbia form the pro-Chinese core. Warsaw finds itself in the middle, sharing Prague's critical stance but continuing to "pursue the development of economic cooperation outside of strategic sectors and critical infrastructure". Under current circumstances, however, nobody in Warsaw sees any perspective of "improving relations".<sup>84</sup>

Even if Warsaw is not arguing to break off relations, its criticisms of China have been explicit since the Russian invasion. Foreign Minister Sikorski criticised the "limitless partnership" between Russia and China, their efforts to create a new world order, and the "new authoritarian alliance". This, Sikorski said, had brought the world to "the brink of a global rivalry of two blocks".<sup>85</sup> There is no doubt that the China-Russia quasi alliance represents a "threat" which was already promulgated when, in 2022, NATO was still officially only speaking of China as a "challenge".<sup>86</sup> So it is clear that security in Europe is increasingly contingent on security in the Indo-Pacific.

The consequences of this are less clear, aside from an intensification of contacts with the like-minded A-4 partners (Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea). The central question here is: What are the implications of NATO involvement in Asia for Poland's preferred option of collective defence of the Alliance's own territory? Immediately before Russia's invasion one analyst argued that "Allied policy towards China should be limited to areas where that country may have a negative impact on NATO's ability to conduct missions, for example, by attacking NATO in the cyber domain and space, taking control of critical infrastructure, or exploiting a technological advantage."<sup>87</sup>

One author from the centrist Pulaski Foundation took an even more critical stance after the 2022 Madrid NATO Summit: "the open teasing of a state that does not belong to the Area of Responsibility of the North Atlantic Treaty" was "problematic", he wrote. "It's like asking for troubles that NATO has a lot of anyway. And this is not helped by the successive semantic ploys that China is (only) a challenge for the Alliance. NATO does not need it, because it additionally weakens its geopolitical defence direction on which the organisation should be focused. After all, NATO is a North Atlantic alliance, not an international policeman"<sup>88</sup>

Such criticisms are no longer heard today. But there is a shared underlying theme that surfaces in various guises: whatever NATO undertakes in relation to China must not detract from collective defence in Europe. Here some authors see the risk of a zero-sum game, especially for the United States.<sup>89</sup> "If accordingly, the relative importance of Central (and Eastern Europe) on the global security chessboard will decrease", "additional measures" are to be taken. "That would entail" – *horribile dictu* – a "greater contribution to EU defence initiatives".<sup>90</sup> Others are more relaxed. One author from the Institute of Central Europe (Instytut Europy Środkowej, IES) argued that the constellation was "not a binary, all-or-nothing proposition": "It is not feasible to ensure the stability of one [security regime] at the expense of the other. This naturally gives rise to the necessity for cooperation between the states of the two regions."<sup>91</sup>

## The southern dimension of NATO: No weakening of the eastern flank

Concentration on collective defence of NATO's eastern flank, which the Poles unequivocally regard as vital, means that the southern aspect tends to get on the backburner. But that does not mean that there are no challenges to be addressed. The issues revolve around the implications of NATO's great power conflict with Russia and China for the Global South. According to Foreign Minister Sikorski the West should stop thinking of "developmental assistance as global philanthropy". Instead, "we need to support our friends to become more resilient to stand up to our adversaries". If we are in "competition with the authoritarian powers" for influence there is no point "lecturing others on democracy" – which, however,

83 Przychodniak, Marcin: Changes in China's Policy Towards Countries of Central Europe, in: *PISM Bulletin*, no. 34 (1951) (22 February 2022).

84 Przychodniak, Marcin: End of Illusions in Relations between China and Central Europe, in: *PISM Bulletin*, no. 100 (2219) (25 July 2023).

85 Sikorski, Radosław: Reflections on the Present Danger, in: *60th Ditchley Annual Lecture*, Ditchley House (29 June 2024); [www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/on-29-june-2024-foreign-minister-radoslaw-sikorski-delivered-a-lecture-titled-reflections-on-the-present-danger-at-the-60th-ditchley-annual-lecture-in-the-uk](http://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/on-29-june-2024-foreign-minister-radoslaw-sikorski-delivered-a-lecture-titled-reflections-on-the-present-danger-at-the-60th-ditchley-annual-lecture-in-the-uk) (accessed 31 March 2025).

86 Calling for "strengthening of defence and deterrence against Russia and resilience against China". Lorenz, Wojciech: China as a Challenge for NATO: Weighing Its Influence on the Collective Defence of the Alliance, in: *PISM Bulletin*, no. 150 (2067) (15 September 2022).

87 Lorenz, Wojciech: Keeping Collective Defence the Main Priority in NATO's New Strategy, in: *PISM Policy Paper*, no. 6 (192) (April 2021).

88 Fałkowski, A.: Madrid NATO Strategic Concept: Qualitative Change or Semantic Healing?, in: *Pulaski Policy Papers* (14 July 2022).

89 See for example Pietrewicz, Oskar: NATO Intensifies Cooperation with Indo-Pacific Partners, in: *PISM Bulletin*, no. 116 (2235) (24 August 2023).

90 Cordes, Miłosz J.: Central and Eastern Europe's Balancing Act, in: *Pulaski Policy Paper* (19 May 2023); <https://pulaski.pl/en/pulaski-policy-paper-central-and-eastern-europes-balancing-act-milosz-j-cordes-2> (accessed 31 March 2025).

91 Bornio, Jakub: NATO defence ministers meet their Indo-Pacific counterparts: Towards a global alliance?, in: *IEŚ Commentaries*, no. 1234 (209/2024) (31 October 2024).

represents a not unproblematic revival of the democracy-blind practices of the Cold War.<sup>92</sup>

This is not to argue for NATO activities, but for a division of labour with EU missions. Poland should participate in these, for example “where there is a risk of destabilisation as a result of Russian hybrid actions (e.g. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Central African Republic, Sahel).”<sup>93</sup> Poland and other experienced ex-Soviet bloc NATO members also have a role to play in countering Russian anticolonial propaganda in Africa and South America.<sup>94</sup>

NATO crisis prevention and management missions – under the Strategic Concept’s 360-degree approach – are seen overwhelmingly critically in Poland. It is acknowledged that NATO naturally has to tackle what its members regard as the “real challenges”, but “the Alliance [has] spent too much of its political energy pursuing the concept of cooperative security at the expense of collective defence.”<sup>95</sup> Another author notes in the same vein, that “the consequence of an overly wide-ranging approach may be the Alliance’s dysfunction”: “Paradoxically, various NATO activities, not necessarily directly related to defence, may lead to the loss of its ‘military teeth’. An operation to please everyone generally fails.”<sup>96</sup> Hence, it is merely conceded that it is advisable to also respond to the concerns of NATO members to the south if one wants to mobilize understanding for one’s own to the east.<sup>97</sup>

## Acute threats and necessary responses: Hybrid warfare

Unlike risks emanating from the Global South, the phenomenon of hybrid warfare is an enormous issue in Poland, with Russia almost the sole source of concern. In fact, while the fighting is across the border in Ukraine, there is consensus that Poland is a primary target of Russian hybrid aggression, and that Warsaw is therefore directly involved in such a war with Moscow.

Moscow employs a broad spectrum of increasingly aggressive and targeted hybrid means against Poland, analysts say. As one noted, these “are not limited to non-kinetic actions

(e.g. disinformation campaigns, graffiti, cyberattacks) but also take the form of sabotage (including arson), acts of violence, vandalism, or provocations at the border using instrumentalised migration”.<sup>98</sup>

The migration crisis on the border with Belarus is considered Poland’s peculiar problem. Experts broadly agree that this is an act of hybrid warfare, and argue for a collective NATO response and cooperation between intelligence services, as well as countermeasures against the recruitment and trafficking of migrants by Russian mercenaries and inclusion of the issue of migration on the eastern flank in NATO manoeuvre scenarios.<sup>99</sup> They call for financial support from the EU (Integrated Border Management Fund) and NATO (Security Investment Programme – NSIP).<sup>100</sup> But there are other views too. Commentators from the centrist Pulaski Foundation, for example, argue that Poland must not allow itself to be forced into choosing between security and human rights. They argue for the kind of non-military countermeasures employed to address irregular migration in other parts of the EU: “diplomatic efforts to prevent the geopolitical exploitation of migrants by autocratic countries”, “targeted online outreach campaigns in migrants’ countries of origin or stay”, “access to legal and secure migration pathways”, and de-escalation of the migration debate.<sup>101</sup>

Cyberspace has also seen a significant increase in recorded attacks since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. According to the state-supported IT security agency CERT Polska, the number of incidents increased by 35 percent in 2022; 71 percent of attacks were successfully stopped.<sup>102</sup>

Poland acquired a national cyber-security strategy in 2019, to enhance public, private and military resilience. It lists measures to harden digital infrastructure and counter cyber-threats.<sup>103</sup> However, as one analyst wrote, NATO must step up its response to the expansion in Russian activities in this area, and develop concepts for “active defence” – in which Poland possesses specific capabilities.<sup>104</sup> The same is said to apply to protection of critical infrastructure, where “common transnational standards for assessing CI resilience” are required.<sup>105</sup>

92 Sikorski, op. cit. (see note 85). The stance is pithily encapsulated in the phrase “He is a son of a bitch, but he is OUR son of a bitch,” used to describe Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, long-serving dictator of the Dominican Republic, among others.

93 Bryjka, Filip: New NATO Strategy Reshapes the Future of Crisis Response, in: *PISM Bulletin*, no. 118 (2035) (21 July 2022).

94 Dyner, Anna Maria: Russia Offers Vision of a New Global Security Architecture, in: *PISM Policy Paper*, no. 5 (218) (July 2024).

95 Pszczel, op. cit. (see note 23).

96 Fałkowski, op. cit. (see note 88).

97 Cordes, Miłosz J.: Central and Eastern Europe’s Balancing Act, in: *Pulaski Policy Paper* (19 May 2023); <https://pulaski.pl/en/pulaski-policy-paper-central-and-eastern-europes-balancing-act-milosz-j-cordes-2> (accessed 31 March 2025).

98 Bryjka, Filip: NATO Members on Guard Against Russian Sabotage, in: *PISM Bulletin*, no. 112 (2420) (29 July 2024).

99 Dyner, Anna Maria: The Border Crisis as an Example of Hybrid Warfare, in: *PISM Strategic File*, no. 2 (110) (February 2022).

100 Bryjka, Filip: EU and NATO States Investing in Protection of Borders with Russia and Belarus, in: *PISM Bulletin*, no. 154 (2462) (24 October 2024).

101 Talik, Malwina: Between Security and Human Rights: Addressing State-Sponsored Instrumentalization of Migration by Belarus and Russia, in: *Pulaski Policy Papers* (13 November 2024).

102 Czub et al., op. cit. (see note 4).

103 Cybersecurity Strategy of the Republic of Poland for 2019–2024, <https://dig.watch/resource/cybersecurity-strategy-of-the-republic-of-poland-for-2019-2024> (accessed 31 March 2025).

104 Dyner, Anna Maria: Russia Continuing Cyberthreats Against NATO Countries, in: *PISM Bulletin*, no. 172 (2291) (21 November 2023).

105 Bryjka, Filip & Tomasz Zajac: EU and NATO Countries Strengthen the Protection of Critical Infrastructure, in: *PISM Bulletin*, no. 79 (2198) (22 June 2023).

Growing Russian disinformation activities are also observed, with accusations of Polish Russophobia, warmongering and revisionism. The large numbers of Ukrainian refugees in Poland and the historical wounds left by the massacre of Poles in Volhynia by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army during the Second World War are particularly sensitive issues. The broader circulation of anti-Ukrainian narratives that were originally found only on the margins of Polish society is attributed to Russian disinformation.<sup>106</sup>

Generally, analysts note that neither the 2022 NATO Summit in Madrid nor the Strategic Concept have advanced cybersecurity and disinformation any further than the Wales Summit in 2014 (activation of Article 5 for cyberattacks) or the Warsaw Summit in 2016 (cyberspace as an operational domain for NATO).<sup>107</sup> But “Russia is testing how far it can go. Failure to respond decisively may encourage Russia to further escalate its aggression.” Hence the general conclusion, also to be applied to hybrid threats, that a robust response is the order of the day: “strengthening deterrence requires political preparedness to take proactive action in response to Russian subversion”.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Aleshka, Aliaksandr: EAST Center, Polen, in: Veranika Laputska & Andrei Yeliseyeu (eds.), *Disinformation Resilience Index in Central and Eastern Europe in 2024*, Warsaw, East Center: 150–172.

<sup>107</sup> Kozłowski, Andrzej: NATO in cyberspace after Madrid summit, in: *Pulaski Commentary* (8 July 2022); <https://pulaski.pl/en/pulaski-commentary-nato-in-cyberspace-after-madrid-summit-andrzej-kozowski> (accessed 31 March 2025).

<sup>108</sup> Bryjka, op cit. (see note 98).



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## The Future of NATO – Country Report Poland

NATO has been a key security pillar of German and European defence policy from the very outset. Since the end of the Cold War, however, it has undergone a series of international transformations and realignments, driven by developments in the global security environment and pressure from its own member states.

While the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has strengthened NATO's self-perception as a key guarantor of collective security, the change in US administration at the beginning of 2025 raises fundamental questions once again. What role will the US play in Europe's future security, and how might European nations respond to the situation?

This publication is part of a Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung study entitled "The Future of NATO", which summarises and analyses the ongoing debates on the Alliance and current security challenges in 11 member and 3 non-member states. These country studies form the basis of an overarching publication which seeks to provide possible answers to the unresolved questions and propose potential scenarios for the future of NATO.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

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