

# Implications of the Polish Land Forces Modernisation

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*By Jimmy Horjus*

## Introduction

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Belarus' alignment with Russia, Poland went on a shopping spree and returned with 1.000 K2 tanks and 672 K9 self-propelled howitzers from South Korea (Dmitruk, 2022). Earlier, Poland ordered 336 M1 Abrams tanks and requested 500 HIMARS and eight Patriot batteries in the United States (Tiles, 2022). Although most contracts have yet to be approved, the announcements signal Poland's military ambitions of becoming the foremost land army in Europe. The numbers are reminiscent of Western Germany during the Cold War. As a frontline state, Western Germany fielded over 2.000 Leopard 2 tanks and several thousand Leopard 1 tanks. Besides the sheer numbers, the choice of suppliers is equally noteworthy. What does this paradigm shift tell us and how could it affect the European security landscape and the defence industry?

## Polish land force modernisation after 2014

Russian aggression in 2014 and the illegal annexation of Crimea sparked a revised Polish understanding of its security environment, culminating in the 2016 Strategic Defence Review (SDR). Acknowledging that previous strategic documents did not optimise their defence requirements, the Polish used a whole-of-government approach to develop a shared vision and applied new research methods. The realisation that national defence is a whole nation effort is one of the main findings, as well as an increased emphasis on deterrence (Ministry of National Defence, 2017).

Concretely, the SDR identified several needs such as a new division and transformation of the current ones into self-sufficient tactical units rather than administrative ones, improved air defence, a home-grown main battle tank (MBT) and firepower using new artillery systems (Ministry of National Defence, 2017 & 2022).

These needs have been translated into weapons programmes to replace Poland's legacy Soviet land weapon systems with modern, NATO standard weaponry. Several weapons programmes were set up to ensure participation of the Polish defence industry and a technology transfer to increase self-sufficiency.

Under the 'Wilk' (Wolf) programme, Poland seeks to acquire a new MBT. Light tanks used to be favoured by many in Poland because of the higher strategic mobility and consequent ability to fight expeditionary wars. Yet, recent conflicts have demonstrated that heavy armour is needed to enhance survivability. The increased perception of Russia as a threat has altered the Polish focus from strategic mobility to firepower (Kucharski, 2021).

One of Wilk's primary goals is to increase Poland's self-sufficiency in operating MBTs. This inevitably means the Polish options were limited to importing tanks with technology transfer, producing under license or developing a new tank. Another goal is the availability of the new MBT. Due to the rapidly changing security environment, Poland wanted new MBTs in the medium term. The invasion of Ukraine, and subsequent Polish tank deliveries, has accelerated this need to the short term.

This also explains the Polish acquisition of M1 Abrams and K2 tanks. 250 Abrams tanks of the newest M1A2 SEP v3 version will be delivered in early 2025 and 116 second-hand M1 Abrams in 2022. However, the downside is that the US is generally reluctant to share technology or contract execution, rendering the Abrams potentially not a lasting option for the Polish land forces.

The 1.000 K2 tanks are made up of 180 standard K2 version tanks, delivered between 2022 and 2025, and 820 tanks of the newly developed K2PL version. The latter is designed to meet Polish operational requirements and will, from 2026 onwards, be largely delivered mainly by factories on Polish soil. At the same time, the previous 180 K2 version tanks will be upgraded to the new K2PL standard. This standard will sport an omnidirectional observation system, a hard-kill ASOP active protection system and increased armour. Lastly, the South Koreans and Polish will team up and develop a new tank, ensuring the Polish Army's access to the most advanced weaponry and the Polish industry's access to the latest technology (Dmitruk, 2022). What this means for the current Polish inventory of 250 Leopard 2 and 200+ PT91 Twardy tanks remains unknown.

Two other weapon programmes, Wisła and Narew, involve the modernisation of air defence systems and would see the introduction of the US Patriot mobile surface-to-air missile system (Adamoswski, 2022). A total of eight batteries are to be acquired, of which the first come into service this year (EDR Magazine, 2022).

The Narew programme deals with the acquisition of short-range air defence systems such as MBDA's Common Anti-Air Modular Missile (CAMM) that will be mounted on a Polish Jelcz 8x8 truck chassis in combination with a SOŁA 3D radar. Two firing units will be acquired and are expected to be introduced this year (Lenczowski, 2022).

Lastly, the Polish have signed a contract for 212 K9A1 howitzers in 2022-2026 after their AHS Krab, based on the South Korean K9 and British AS-90 Braveheart, performs satisfactorily. However, problematic is that Poland is the only user of the AS-90 Braveheart variant and is therefore singlehandedly responsible for upgrades of the AHS Krab. Furthermore, Ukraine is purchasing newly built Krab howitzers and is prioritised over potential Polish request because of limited production capacity. This explains why Poland has chosen to acquire new K9 howitzers instead of continuing down the AHS Krab path. Besides the K9A2, Poland will acquire 624 locally produced K9PL howitzers from 2024 onwards (Graf, 2022).

### **Poland's choice for South Korea and the US - and not Europe**

What is the reason for choosing South Korean and US suppliers over European ones?

Mariusz Blaszczack, Polish Minister of Defence, argues that the decision for South Korea was among other things based on "the effectiveness of the weaponry, speed of delivery and advantages for the Polish industry (...). It is extremely important that the first deliveries of howitzers and tanks will take place this year." (Blaszczack, 2022)

The effectiveness of the weaponry is enhanced by the fact that the K2 tank and K9 howitzer offer reduced manning due to their autoloaders. As European armies face significant recruitment and retention problems, this is not a non-negligible detail. Furthermore, the speed of delivery enables the Polish Army to faster integrate and use the US- and South Korean-made weapons systems. An additional advantage is that it allows the Polish to send its older tanks to Ukraine and boost the war effort there.

On industrial advantages, South Korea has previously proven to be relatively flexible when marketing South Korean designs elsewhere or not requiring approval for weapon deliveries to countries at war. The latter was the case with Poland's donation of 54 Krab howitzers to Ukraine (Polskie Radio, 2022). Although the specific details of these contracts between South Korea and their foreign customers remain obscured, the relative flexibility compared to the more restrictive German position on weapons exports and the potential possibility to sell their Polish variants abroad could have been considered an additional advantage by Poland.

Previously, Poland had unsuccessfully tried to nestle itself between France and Germany's tank programme, the Main Ground Combat System (MGCS). At the same time, it was always questionable whether Poland's urgent needs would be met in time given the MGCS is not expected to come into service before 2035 (Nikolov, 2020).

Still, there are also potential downsides to the deal with South Korea. The distance from South Korea to Poland, with Russia and China in between, complicates security of supply, especially in times of war. South Korea is a frontline state and a peace agreement with its northern neighbours has never been signed. Can the Polish rely on South Korea to meet their demands if tensions on the Korean peninsula rise?

Furthermore, the K2 and K9 rely on components that have to be imported such as German-designed propulsion systems (Jo, Waldwyn 2022). This begs the question to what extent Poland can engage in future sales or donations of its Polish variants without consulting the Germans.

### **Implications for the European security landscape**

It is difficult not to perceive the purchase by an EU country of such large figures in non-European countries, after decades of defence cuts and dwindling numbers, as a blow to the EU's defence industrial ambitions. Representatives of the European defence industry took time by the forelock and warned that the Polish decision not to buy European will affect interoperability with other European armies. Furthermore, they argued that sustaining these South Korean and US systems would be difficult without other European operators (Drummond, 2022).

Still, the European defence industry has lost significant potential investments that could have accelerated future research and development and contributed to increased European capabilities and interoperability. In this way, the Polish decision to buy outside of Europe could be perceived as at odds with the European Council's commitment at the 11 March Versailles meeting to "step up cooperation through joint projects" (European Commission, 2022). Especially since many EU countries are looking for the same capabilities that Poland is procuring.

With regards to European security, it will take considerable time to integrate these new technologies from non-European platforms into existing Polish ones and train soldiers on how to operate them. This will inevitably affect Polish fighting strength in the upcoming years. Still, the additional longer-term boost fuelled by replacing legacy Soviet systems with modern NATO standard weaponry in significant numbers cannot be ignored.

### **Concluding remarks**

Although the Polish-South Korean framework agreement still needs to be cast in actual contracts and the Polish request for US weaponry in many cases still requires approval, the move signals Poland's strategic reorientation and the urgency that it feels. It will turn the Polish Army into the largest land army in the European Union, elevating Poland's position in that same Union. In the short term, integrating unfamiliar weapon systems will affect Polish fighting strength and the European defence industry, yet boost European deterrence capabilities in the longer-term.

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