

JULY 2023



**POLAND AND THE UNITED
KINGDOM: AN INCREASINGLY
ROBUST PARTNERSHIP**

WRITTEN BY: OLIVER LEICESTER



WRITTEN BY

OLIVER LEICESTER

EDITED BY

MICHELE PUGGIA

SUPERVISED BY

CANSU MACIT KARADUMAN

Abstract

The UK and Poland have what is currently being described as one of the closest partnerships within NATO (GOV.UK, 2022; Martin, 2023). This research paper will examine how this relationship has developed, with a special interest in the signing of the 2017 Treaty on Defence and Security Cooperation. The 2017 Treaty encouraged cooperation between the UK and Poland in a range of areas, including multiple agreements on exchanging military equipment and training of troops. These agreements became even more relevant, and arguably essential in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This research paper will assess how this Treaty has affected interoperability in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Introduction

It is notable that Poland and the UK signed the Treaty on Defence and Security Cooperation (2017), despite these states being members of NATO. The signing of bilateral treaties has become a common way to reaffirm commitments between member states and address new security threats (Zima 2020, p. 43). It has been argued that it was Russia's increasingly assertive foreign policy in the 2010s which encouraged the signing of the 2017 Treaty (Zima 2020, p. 31). Since the Treaty was signed, agreements like the 2022 Memorandum of Understanding and the Arrowhead-140 Statement of Intent have defined this bilateral military cooperation. This progression will allow the "strengthening" of their relationship and deepen the "interoperability of (our) Armed Forces" (GOV.UK, 2023). This progression must be examined in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 to understand why interoperability has become such an important target.

A United Alliance

What history of cooperation exists between the UK and Poland?

There is a long-standing military relationship between Poland and the UK. Zima (2022, p. 32) highlights the fact that it is common for members of the Polish armed services to complete part of their training in British military academies. This is partly explained by the fact that English is widely spoken in Poland, and it is the second most common language (McKinsey, 1998) spoken by Polish soldiers. Furthermore, the two states have trained together both within the NATO framework and on a bilateral basis since the mid-nineties (Zima 2020, p. 32).

When the UK was a member of the EU, the countries shared a similar foreign policy in some key areas due to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). This body used an intergovernmental model, allowing member states the opportunity to veto collective decisions. However, this limited the achievements of the CFSP (Whitman 2016, p. 257) since they were unable to formulate agreements on key international issues. Syria, Libya and Ukraine are notable examples. Bilateral agreements between Poland and the UK could thus be analysed in the context of this policy gap of the CFSP.

This is corroborated by a British diplomat stating that bilateral agreements with Poland can be understood in the context of the conventional threat which Russia poses to its neighbours (Zima 2020, 40). Polish sentiments similarly reflect that the UK is one of the Western European states that best understand the Russian threat (Zima 2020, p. 40). Therefore, the increasingly close relationship between Poland and the UK, and the decision to sign bilateral defence agreements can be partly understood as a response to the threat of Russia.

The 2017 Defence and Security Treaty

The Treaty on Defence and Security Cooperation was written in December 2017 and came into force in 2018. The 2017 Treaty set the groundwork for a “strengthened relationship” in “security and defence” (Article 1). The Treaty outlined a framework for the exchange of information, equipment, cyber defence and for organising military exercises (Article 2). These states are both in NATO, so some of these agreements may overlap with existing legislation. Nonetheless, the Treaty allows these states to reaffirm their NATO obligations in the face of renewed international threats. For example, many elements of the Treaty suggest that the UK and Poland are posturing against Russia on specific topics, such as cyber security. Russia was increasing their use of unconventional cyber warfare in Ukraine at the time the Treaty was signed (Dziundziuk 2022, p. 743). This inclusion speaks to the fact that one of Poland’s primary security concerns is Russia’s increased cyber security threat.

Subsequent Agreements

The 2017 Treaty set into motion a trend of cooperation which led to the signing of the Air Defence Complex Weapons Memorandum of Understanding MOU and the Arrowhead-140 Statement of Intent in 2022. The MOU enables the UK and Poland to cooperate in developing and manufacturing current and future weapons, further strengthening their relationship and the interoperability of their armed forces (GOV.UK, 2022). At the end of April 2023, a £1.9 billion (GOV.UK, 2023) export agreement was signed by the two countries. The MOU allowed the UK company MBDA to equip Poland with the UK’s premier air defence system, The Sky Sabre (MDAA, 2023). MBDA will provide 22 air defence batteries with sophisticated UK Common Anti-Air Modular Missiles (CAMMs) and launchers to Poland. This agreement is one of the largest deals of its kind between NATO states (GOV.UK, 2023).

The Statement of Intent provides for the UK and Polish Governments to collaborate on the “procurement and operation” of three Arrowhead – 140 Frigates (Navy Recognition, 2022). The Polish frigates will be a variant of the UK’s Arrowhead-140, equipped with anti-air missile defences as well as one 57mm and two 40mm Bofors naval guns. This clearly highlights the UK’s joint commitment with Poland to improve their offensive and defensive capabilities both on land and at sea. By following up the 2017 Treaty with this Statement of Intent these Governments have demonstrated their commitment to improving the exchange of military equipment. This will allow both states to rely on very similar frigates, improving on the interoperability of their forces.

These agreements have been successfully put into practice, with missile defence systems being delivered almost immediately after the agreements were signed. Chris Allam, Managing Director of MBDA, praised the remarkably short timeframe for the delivery of this equipment to the Polish military base of Small Narew (GOV.UK 2022). Chris Allam cited the close partnership between Poland and the UK for completing this delivery to Narew, a small town on Poland's eastern border. He further stated that this marks the next step in supporting other missile projects between these states, such as "Pilica+, Miecznik and Tank Destroyer" (GOV.UK 2022 and Martin 2023).

Why Is Cooperation so Important?

In 2022 military expenditure in Europe rose by 13%, the largest annual increase in the post-Cold War era (SIPRI, 2023). Many of these states have increased military spending and the preparedness of their security systems in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (SIPRI, 2023). It is especially NATO's eastern states who have made this move, increasing spending by \$135 billion in 2022, has and encouraging their allies to do the same (SIPRI, 2023). Poland raised their defence spending from 3% to 4% of GDP, the highest relative level in NATO (Allison, 2022; Michta, 2023). This could be partly explained by the fact that Poland shares a large border with Ukraine, demanding robust and prepared defences on their eastern flank (U.S.ARMY, 2023). For example, earlier this year, two Polish civilians were killed at the border by a Ukrainian missile defence system (Slow & Kirby, 2022). In this context, the agreements signed between the UK and Poland may become essential to Polish security.

The 2017 Treaty between the UK and Poland has been essential in the cooperation between Poland and the UK. Article 2 of the Treaty allowed the strengthening of defence, the exchange of military equipment and the exchange of military personnel. The Treaty set in motion closer cooperation between these states which meant that when Russia's invasion of Ukraine began, there were already agreements prepared to better equip Polish defence systems. For example, the agreement with MBDA to equip the Polish air defence batteries with CAMMs was made before the Russian invasion. As the agreement was in place, its implementation (Allisson, 2022) was accelerated when the invasion began, bolstering Polish air defences within an extremely short timeframe (UK.GOV, 2022). Without the signing of the 2017 Treaty, it is possible that these smaller agreements would've taken much longer to implement in the wake of Russia's invasion. Thanks to the Treaty, many of these agreements have also been organised with long-term interoperability in mind. This may have not been possible if the agreements to provide military equipment were drafted over a shorter timeframe.

How Have These Agreements Improved Interoperability?

The agreements in 2022 confirmed the joint production of new weapons or the shared manufacture of existing ones. The UK Government 2022 specifically cited these agreements as an opportunity to deepen the interoperability of their armed forces. It is clear from the language of the UK and Polish Governments that this is not simply viewed as an opportunity to profit from trade agreements. Rather, the agreements are a symbolic and practical opportunity to pursue their shared security interests. From a practical perspective, Poland has improved their air defence capabilities on their eastern borders. Using a common anti-missile system improves interoperability as soldiers from both states can be trained in operating this equipment. This is especially relevant as the UK has a military presence in Poland as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence. An unnamed Commanding Officer said, "we are looking forward to integrating with our NATO partners, physically understanding the regional terrain and supporting Poland in protecting their territorial integrity" (British Army, 2022). Symbolically, these agreements have demonstrated a united front among NATO allies to protect the alliance's eastern territory.

The 2017 Treaty has also allowed further interoperability between the UK and Poland as military personnel have been working and training together. Article 2 (h) provides for joint military exercises, training and education and Article 2 (i) allows for the exchange of military and civilian personnel. From December 2021, prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the UK sent a subunit of engineering troops to work with the Polish military to reinforce their border with Belarus (GOV.PL, 2023). As Belarus is a close ally of Russia, the importance of working towards collective security goals on the border is clear. The Polish Deputy Prime Minister thanked the British for supporting Poland in managing the refugees from Belarus. He also acknowledged the importance of the British Sky Sabre system in Rzeszow (GOV.PL, 2023). Finally, since June 2022, interoperability is being improved by joint military exercises (TPV, 2023). These factors allow for a more robust partnership between these militaries and a more effective response to potential Russian aggression near NATO's borders.

Conclusion

Poland and the UK have a history of close cooperation in security matters. This history of cooperation has led these states to have one of the highest degrees of interoperability between NATO member states (GOV.UK, 2022; Martin, 2023). The signing of the 2017 Treaty was instrumental in this relationship, setting the groundwork to allow an exchange of equipment and training to respond to the threat of Russia. This Treaty enabled a variety of military agreements to be signed in 2022 at the time of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. These agreements, in turn, improved Poland's defensive capabilities and the safeguarding of NATO's eastern border.

References

Allison, G. (2022, October 4). Britain and Poland sign defence deal. Ukdefencejournal. <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/british-and-poland-sign-defence-deal/>

British Army. (2022, October 18). British Army rotates troops in Poland as part of NATO's enhanced forward presence. <https://www.army.mod.uk/news-and-events/news/2022/10/british-army-rotates-troops-in-poland-as-part-of-natos-enhanced-forward-presence/>

Dziundziuk, K, O., Sobol, R., Kotukova, T., & Kotukov, O. (2022). Improved Planning of Information Policy in the Cyber Security Sphere under Conditions of Hybrid Threats Cuestiones Políticas 40(74), 741–763.

Forces.net. (2022, October 4). UK and Poland to work together on 'future complex weapons' development. <https://www.forces.net/technology/weapons-and-kit/uk-and-poland-work-together-development-future-complex-weapons>

GOV.PL. (2023, March 22). Polish and British Soldiers Strengthen Security on the NATO Eastern Flank. <https://www.gov.pl/web/national-defence/polish-and-british-soldiers-strengthen-security-on-the-nato-eastern-flank>

Hunter, R. E. (2002). Looking to the Future' In The European Security and Defense Policy: NATO's Companion - or Competitor?. RAND Corporation. (1) 159–162.

Lis, A. (2011). Military outsourcing in Poland: lessons learned and prospects for further development. Business And Non-Profit Organizations in a Market Economy (1st ed., pp. 124 - 149).

Martin, T. (2023, May 1). Poland, UK close \$2.4 billion PILICA+ short-range air defense deal. Breaking Defense. <https://breakingdefense.com/2023/05/poland-uk-close-2-4-billion-pilica-short-range-air-defense-deal/>

McKinsey, K. (1998, July 9). NATO: Polish Army Learns English. Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty. RadioFreeEurope <https://www.rferl.org/a/1089037.html>

MDAA. (2023). Sky Sabre (Land Ceptor)' Missile Defence Advocacy Alliance. <https://missiledefenseadvocacy.org/defense-systems/sky-sabre/>.

Michta, C. (2023, February 21). NATO's New Centre of Gravity. Politico. <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-new-center-gravity-poland-warsaw-central-europe-germany-war-ukraine/>

Navy Recognition. (2022, October 5). UK and Poland sign Statement of Intent for the three Arrowhead-140 frigates. https://www.navyrecognition.com/index.php/naval-news/naval-news-archive/2022/october/12295-uk-and-poland-sign-statement-of-intent-for-the-three-arrowhead-140-frigates.html#?utm_content=cmp-true

SIPRI. (2023, April). Trends In World Military Expenditure, 2022. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/2304_fs_milex_2022.pdf.

TSlow, O., & Kirby, P. (2022, November 16). Ukraine War: Poland Says Missile Deaths an Unfortunate Incident. BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63640344>

TPV World. (2023, May 23). President lists Poland's Priorities for NATO's Vilnius Summit. <https://tvpworld.com/70056360/president-lists-polands-priorities-for-natos-vilnius-summit>

U.S. ARMY. (2023, May 19). US and NATO Troops Execute Combined Exercise to Expand Battle Group in Poland. U.S. Army Europe and Africa. https://www.army.mil/article/266839/us_and_nato_troops_execute_combined_exercise_to_expand_battle_group_in_poland

UK.GOV. (2022, October 4). Landmark Agreements Strengthen UK-Poland Defence Relations. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/landmark-agreements-strengthen-uk-poland-defence-relations>

UK.GOV. (2023, May 22). Northern Group Partners Meet in Warsaw to Discuss European Security. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/northern-group-partners-meet-in-warsaw-to-discuss-european-security>

Whitman, R. G. (2016). The UK and EU Foreign and Security Policy: An Optional Extra. *The Political Quarterly*, 87(2), 254–261.

Zima, A (2020) When Defence Cooperation Meets Political Use of the Past: British-Polish Relations in Times of Brexit. *European Review of International Studies*. 7(1) 28–51.