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**POLAND'S REACTION TO THE
UKRAINE WAR AND ITS
EFFECTS ON THE EUROPEAN
SECURITY ARCHITECTURE**

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Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 immeasurably disturbed the European security landscape greatly fuelling fear of Russia's neo-imperialistic ambitions, particularly in the former Soviet sphere of influence. In Eastern Europe, especially in the Baltic states and Poland, these fears have grown steadily since Russia's hybrid forms of aggression against Ukraine in 2014. In particular, Poland has felt threatened by various hybrid threat scenarios since the beginning of Vladimir Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, including a potential attack on its own territory. Poland's response to the war in Ukraine has been and continues to be influenced by both geographical and historical considerations (Żęgota & Mironyuk, 2022). With a border shared with Russia's exclave, Kaliningrad, and the escalating tensions since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the fear of a Russian invasion through the Suwalki Gap, a crucial Polish-Lithuanian border, emerged as a concerning potential contingency since the collapse of the Eastern bloc (Szeptycki, 2023). As a result, Poland has decided to act decisively. In concrete terms, this has materialised as the massive expansion of its defence forces and staunch support for its attacked neighbour. This emerging security environment is analysed in further detail within this InfoFlash, as it has the potential to produce far-reaching consequences across the continent for the European security architecture in the long term.

The Polish Situation – Boundaries and the Historical Factor

Poland's foreign policy has been greatly influenced by the goal of bringing Ukraine closer to Western institutions such as the EU, NATO, and the Three Seas Initiative (3SI). Andrzej Szeptycki (2021), Professor of Strategic Studies and International Security at the University of Warsaw, stated that "given the danger of Russian imperialism [...] the creation of an independent Ukraine [...] is, for Poland, a matter of capital significance". Moreover, Russia has historically been a persistent threat to Poland's sovereignty, with Poland being occupied by Russia at different times during the 19th and 20th centuries (Zarobny, 2020). Particularly, the Soviet Union's indirect control of the country from 1945 to 1989 is still very present in Polish collective memory (Rodkiewicz, 2023). It is therefore not a surprise that Poland is feeling sensitive to the threat of a Russian invasion given the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. In addition to a direct attack, fears in Poland also centre on hybrid threat scenarios. After all, Russia began destabilising and undermining the territorial integrity of Ukraine long before the outbreak of full-scale war through its annexation of Crimea and support for the separatists in Donbas. The threat of hybrid warfare, outlined by prominent Polish territorial defence researcher Ryszard Jakubczak (2020), is integral to understanding the evolving security landscape (Jakubczak, 2020). The realisation that hostile actors can, indeed, exert control over foreign territory without deploying official operational forces has led states, including Poland, to recognise the need to address threats below the traditional threshold of all-out war. Subsequently, Poland has realised that it cannot exclusively rely on its conventional armed forces but that it must also emphasise the role of territorial defence forces in countering internal threats resulting from indirect external interventions, such as disinformation and propaganda.

The Polish Reaction to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine - Military Aid and Rearmament

Poland is one of the primary and staunchest supporters of Ukraine. The aid has primarily been of a military nature as, since the beginning of the war, Poland has provided Ukraine with military aid worth €3.04 billion (Bomprezziet al., 2023). Although this puts Poland well behind countries such as the U.S. (43.9 billion euros) in absolute terms, many of the countries sending aid to Ukraine have more economic power at their disposal and therefore much more room to manoeuvre. In reality, Poland spends a larger percentage of its GDP on military aid to Ukraine than its U.S. counterpart (Bomprezziet al., 2023). Poland is also well ahead of other European countries such as the Netherlands, France, and Italy in absolute terms. Regarding the nature of Poland's military aid, Poland has not only supplied Ukraine quantitatively with hundreds of Soviet tanks (T-72 and PT-91s) and qualitatively with western Leopard 2 A4 main battle tanks, but it is also one of the few countries to have supplied helicopters (Mil Mi 24) and combat aircraft (Mig 29). This marks Poland out, as Ukraine has a considerable shortage of such aircraft and few other countries have opted to provide such equipment (Oryx, 2022). In addition, Poland has provided countless other light and heavy weapon systems, including infantry fighting vehicles, howitzers, armoured vehicles, ammunition, air defence systems, and infantry equipment (Oryx, 2022).

Polish support for Ukraine also plays an important role in public perception. While other countries, such as Germany, have often been accused of acting too hesitantly, Poland has acted much more directly. For instance, Poland has all too often been the first country to provide new weapon systems and pressure other countries to follow their lead. This could be observed particularly at the beginning of 2023 when the Polish initiative to deploy German-made Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine led to numerous other countries sending Western battle tanks as well (BBC, 2023).

In addition to providing military and political aid to the neighbouring country under attack, Poland has also begun to massively increase its defence capabilities to prepare itself for worst-case scenario contingencies on its own territory. Poland's rearmament plans include the procurement of new state-of-the-art weapons systems of NATO standards including 366 Abrams tanks, 96 Apache helicopters, HIMARS missile launchers, Patriot air defence systems and F-35 aircraft (Jones, 2023). Cost-effective, readily available high-tech weapons from South Korea are also on the Polish radar, including 980 K2 tanks, 648 K9 self-propelled howitzers and 48 FA-50 fighter jets (Smith, 2022). At the same time, Poland is planning an increase in troop strength to 300,000 soldiers (Chancellery of the Prime Minister Republic of Poland, 2023). The cost of implementing these ambitious plans runs into the hundreds of billions and, in order to raise those funds, Poland's already relatively high defence budget will have to increase to over four per cent of GDP by 2023, a number higher than that of the United States (Jones, 2023).

This is precisely where restrictions arise, as Poland faces major challenges in realising its plans. It is not certain that the Polish economy will be able to cope with such high defence spending in the long term, even if there is strong public support for this policy (Carbonaro, 2023). Moreover, demographic decline is jeopardising the increase in troop numbers (Kopka, 2019) and some of the plans are also potentially dependent on a stable political environment.

For example, the plan to expand militarily dates back to when the Prawo i Sprawiedliwość Party (PiS) was in government. However, at the end of 2023, PiS was defeated in the last elections and it is yet to be determined how consistently and comprehensively the new Polish government will continue to implement the plans even though rearmament currently remains a bi-partisan issue in Poland (Davies & Jung-a & Minder, 2023). Thus, regardless of governmental change, Poland will inevitably continue to invest in its military to some extent and will hence soon have one of the most formidable armed forces in Europe.

Realisation and Implications of New Polish Defence Policy

This new direction for Polish defence policy raises the question of how Poland sees its ambitions and how they are perceived by other countries. This begs the question: to what extent will Poland's growing military power translate into political influence on the international stage?

Poland's primary strategic goal is to protect Ukraine's sovereignty while promoting its alignment with Western institutions. To achieve this, Poland has worked to shield Ukraine from external interference while also actively campaigning for its integration into Western organisations. By employing this dual strategy, Poland aims to foster positive relations with Ukraine and pave the way for Ukraine's alignment with Western values after the war. As Poland's President Andrzej Duda (2023) stated, "Ukrainians want to politically join the Western community and we should help them reach this goal." Success in this endeavour would not only enhance Poland's geopolitical standing but also mitigate the risk of a Russian incursion into Poland, given the presence of a pro-Western Ukraine as not only a partner but a buffer between Poland and Russia.

Following the Russian invasion, Poland promptly bolstered its military capabilities to a formidable extent. Witold Rodkiewicz, Assistant Professor of East European Studies at the University of Warsaw (2023), claims that this initiative aims to "make Russians think twice before they attack." Meanwhile, this strategy also enhances Poland's relative power on the continent. Although Western European and Polish interests have fundamentally converged since Vladimir Putin ordered the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, some voices in Poland remain sceptical at complete reliance on Western European support, such as Roman Kuźniar, Professor of Strategic Studies and International Security at the University of Warsaw, who affirmed in a formal interview that "Poland cannot trust [the Germans and French], [and] how they will behave once the war is over" (Kuźniar, 2023). Likewise, some political scientists have suggested that, by achieving its goal of becoming the strongest army in Europe, Poland could "put an end to the German military hubris" (Dupuy, 2023).

Some authors, such as Thomas Pitney (2023), claim that in addition to balancing Franco-German influence in Europe, Poland aims to hinder any potential improvement in EU-Russia relations following the conflict. This stance aligns with Poland's broader objective of preventing European cooperation with Russia. Pitney (2023) claims that despite the threats posed by the war in Ukraine, Poland sees an opportunity to advance its strategic goal of the warring European-Russian rapprochement. Thus, Poland's efforts to enhance its military strength serve a dual purpose: deterring Russian aggression and bolstering its position within Europe.

The war in Ukraine also allows Poland to reinforce its ties with NATO. Poland's historical and geopolitical context has compelled the country to prioritise a strong relationship with the United States since gaining independence in 1989. The memory of the United States' role in liberating Poland from Soviet influence remains deeply ingrained in Polish collective consciousness. Recognising the United States as its most effective deterrent against Russia, Poland has strategically utilised the war in Ukraine to enhance its position as America's key ally. Zbigniew Rau, former Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, made it clear that through vocal support for Ukraine and actions like increased military spending and NATO reaffirmation, Poland aims to deepen its relationship with the United States and secure significant security guarantees (Rau, 2022).

Poland's initiatives to play a greater role in the defence of its territory and that of the EU and NATO have not gone unnoticed by its partner countries and Russia. Perception of Poland has changed significantly since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. NATO and the EU have never been so unanimous in the belief that the greatest threat to their security comes from Vladimir Putin's Russia, and Poland has a key role to play in this dynamic for a number of reasons. Firstly, Poland's geographical position is of paramount importance as most Western military aid reaches Ukraine via Poland. Secondly, should open conflict erupt, troops must be able to be deployed quickly through the Suwalki Gap to defend the Baltic states and the Polish border with Kaliningrad and Belarus. In the words of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, the "centre of Europe is moving eastward" (Nolan, 2022), thereby recognising the increasingly important role of Poland. Thus, the European West, especially the Germans, have a great interest in Poland growing into a reliable bulwark, shielding Europe from threats emanating from the East.

The Polish initiative have also been perceived very positively in the United States. For a long time, the U.S. demanded in vain that its European NATO partners increase defence spending to two per cent of GDP so that it would not have to bear the costs of security in Europe alone. While still falling short of this target, Poland is a prime example of the opposite in this respect. Consequently, a senior U.S. Army official in Europe stated in 2022 that "Poland has become our most important partner in continental Europe" (Karnitschnig & Kości, 2022).

Poland's reputation within the EU and NATO has improved significantly thanks to its active role in security policy and the change in the threat situation. This process is also supported by the outcome of the elections in Poland in 2023. Previously, Poland's reputation, regardless of its security efforts, had suffered in the EU and the U.S. alike after it was charged several times in the European Court of Justice for the erosion of democratic principles and violations against the rule of law (Karnitschnig & Kości, 2022). If under a new government Poland presents itself as a reliable political partner in the future, there is a good chance that Poland's growing reputation as a result of its armament and support for Ukraine will also translate into greater political influence within the EU and NATO (Jones, 2023).

In addition to the political effects and the reputation of Poland on the international stage, Poland's endeavours in security policy also have an impact on the operational and tactical levels.

The new weapons that Poland wants to procure in large numbers meet NATO standards and are largely produced in the West, especially in the USA, or are modelled on them, as in the case of the South Korean systems. This simplifies interoperability and cooperation with other land forces during exercises due to overlap in ammunition models and communication systems, the potential access to spare parts, the know-how for repairs and maintenance, and the same requirements for transport and supply. At the same time, the procurement of these new systems frees up old Soviet systems that have been decommissioned paving the way for their delivery to Ukraine. Furthermore, with a larger army, Poland can fulfil more tasks within NATO and the EU and provide more troops for exercises and missions. Additionally, there are also long-term consequences. Despite the direct delivery of various weapons systems, some of the deals with South Korea also include contracts for the licensed construction of the systems directly in Poland (Smith, 2022). This eliminates the dependence on the long transport route of the systems and creates another production site for modern high-tech weapons in line with NATO standards in Europe. As the South Korean systems are much cheaper than American, German or British models with comparable performance, this emerges as an intriguing development for European military industry (Smith, 2022). Other economically less well-positioned Eastern European NATO and EU states could also push ahead with the modernisation of their own armed forces with a lower budget and increase interoperability between the European armed forces by using the new systems that meet Western requirements and are designed for interaction in coordinated processes.

Conclusion

Poland's reaction to the war in Ukraine was decisive. At the same time, it became one of Ukraine's most vigorous supporters and suppliers of weapons and began the comprehensive modernisation and armament of its own armed forces, showing more willingness to invest than any other European state. Poland primarily wants to increase its own security with these measures, but they also entail far-reaching consequences for the security architecture in Europe and the balance of power within the EU and NATO. Secured militarily and most likely also politically, Poland will play a more important role in the future. NATO can count on a highly armed, militarily strong land power in a strategically important sphere that includes Russia and Ukraine, which is increasingly growing into the role of a bulwark on NATO's eastern flank. The EU hopes that Poland will once again become an important and reliable political partner in the future and that the increase in military strength will go hand in hand with the desire to assume a leading role within the EU in the future, a trajectory that Poland itself seems very intent on.

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