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INFOFLASH

**FROM PESCO TO EU BATTLEGROUPS:
POLAND'S ROLE IN ADVANCING EU
LAND FORCE INTEROPERABILITY**

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Introduction

In light of recent security crises testing Europe's borders, the role of individual nations in strengthening EU defence capabilities has never been more critical. Situated on NATO's eastern flank, Poland is emerging as a key player in safeguarding united security across the Union. The strategic position presents unique challenges that drive Poland's deep commitment to EU and regional defence initiatives (Lipka, 2024). Its elevated defence spending, proactive stance on interoperability and advocacy for deeper EU-NATO cooperation positions Poland as a leader in shaping a cohesive European defence strategy (Stolarek, 2023). Reflecting on this, the EU's new security and defence framework, outlined in the 2022 Strategic Compass (EEAS, 2022), revisits the potential of a military instrument conceived nearly two decades ago: the EU Battlegroups. This ambitious plan reflects the pressing need for enhanced military capability and for Europe to adopt a more assertive role as a regional security provider (Nicoară, 2023).

This paper explores Poland's role in advancing EU land force interoperability through key initiatives, including its participation in EU Battlegroups and leadership in the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). The Info Flash aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Poland's involvement in advancing EU land force interoperability and the nuanced challenges the mission faces. It does so by briefly exploring Poland's strategic geopolitical position, Poland's role within PESCO and the European Defence Agency (EDA), as well as an overview of Poland's role in EU Battlegroups contrasted with NATO battlegroups. By examining these contributions, one can better understand how Poland's efforts support a more integrated and responsive European defence framework capable of addressing contemporary security threats.

1. Poland's Strategic Position in EU Defence

Located on NATO's eastern flank, Poland occupies a strategic position in Europe's security landscape, particularly as a frontline state in neighbouring regions with a history of instability and Russian influence. This geographic positioning heightens Poland's awareness of regional risks, elevating its role as a vital security contributor both within NATO and the EU (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland, 2024a). Long wary of Russia's ambitions, Warsaw took early steps to build resilience against potential threats, investing in military modernisation and diversifying its energy sources to reduce dependence on Russian supplies (Rzeczycki, 2023). For years, Poland warned its EU partners of the risks posed by Moscow's expansionist agenda, particularly after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, though many were slower to recognise the severity of the threat (Surwillo & Slakaityte, 2024).

Strategically positioned between Western and Eastern Europe, Poland has become NATO's foremost eastern frontline state. When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Poland moved decisively, calling for stricter sanctions, significantly ramping up military aid to Ukraine, and soon ranking among Ukraine's primary military supporters in terms of tanks, artillery and other essential equipment (Kucharski et al., 2023). Poland has supplied Ukraine with 44 military aid packages valued at €4 billion and has pledged to provide additional support through further packages this year (Melkozerova, 2024). Since January 2024, over six million refugees from Ukraine have crossed the Polish border (Sas, 2023). Thanks to its location, Poland has also become the main logistical base for NATO and the EU, overseeing more than 150,000 tonnes of humanitarian and military aid and facilitating the flow of over 90% of military supplies destined for Ukraine (Surwillo & Slakaityte, 2024).

The national memory of Poland being subject to decades of Soviet influence and totalitarian rule fuels its dedication to a strong defence framework, which it views as essential for European stability and resilience (Van Rij & Parzonka, 2024). In response to these security concerns, Poland has become one of the highest defence spenders in the EU, allocating over 4% of its GDP to defence in 2023 (Jones, 2023). This investment, which surpasses NATO's 2% threshold, reflects Poland's dedication to maintaining a robust defence posture on Europe's eastern border (The Economic Times, 2023). Between 2022 and 2023, the Polish defence budget grew in real terms by 46% (Maulny, 2023). Initially, Poland expressed reservations about EU-led defence initiatives, such as PESCO, fearing that these might diverge from NATO's framework and potentially reduce U.S. engagement in European defence (Terlikowski, 2018). However, with recent political shifts and a growing emphasis on EU-NATO coordination, Poland's stance has evolved. Today, it views both NATO and the EU as essential pillars of its national security, actively promoting deeper EU defence integration.

2. PESCO and Polish Investment in EU Defence Initiatives

Permanent Structured Cooperation

Poland considers the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) to be a vital pillar of its national security. Since joining the EU in 2004, Warsaw has taken a dedicated step towards EU defence by actively participating in operations focused on enhancing defence capabilities and crisis response within the framework of the CSDP (Cyrkun et al., 2023). While the country has consistently contributed to the EU's crisis response efforts and military operations, such as EUFOR Tchad, its commitment has deepened under PESCO (Wojsko Polskie, 2024). Within the PESCO framework, Polish forces are currently involved in thirteen projects and serve as observers to an additional twenty-three, each of which addresses different facets of EU defence (Ministry of National Defence Republic of Poland, 2022). One

prominent example is Polish participation in the Military Mobility Project (led by the Netherlands), which facilitates the efficient movement of troops and equipment across European borders, a capability essential for coordinated EU and NATO operations (Lařici, 2020). Moreover, Poland also leads the Special Operation Forces Medical Training Centre (SMTTC), which provides specialised medical training to enhance the EU's rapid response capabilities (PESCO projects, 2022). Beyond these leadership roles, Warsaw participates in a range of PESCO projects that contribute to different areas of EU defence, such as the European Medical Command (EMC) and the Defence of Space Assets (DoSA) (Council of the European Union, 2023). Some notable participatory initiatives within the PESCO framework are the Cyber Rapid Response Teams (CRRT), aimed at enhancing Europe's cyber defence readiness, as well as the European Secure Software-defined Radio (ESSOR) project, which ensures secure communication channels across EU forces (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland, 2021). These projects reflect Poland's versatile approach to strengthening EU defence capabilities.

European Defence Agency

In the same manner, the Polish government participates in 38 EDA projects and programs, accounting for 28% of the Agency's total project portfolio, with a cumulative value of €178 million (European Defence Agency, 2022). Six of these initiatives focus on capability development, including the EU Multimodal Transport Hub Network, EU Satellite Communications Market and Maritime Surveillance (European Defence Agency, 2022). Additionally, Poland engages in 32 research and technology (R&T) projects, fostering expertise and contributing to advanced defence technologies (European Defence Agency, 2022). This symbiotic relationship enables the nation to help shape defence standards, which are then integrated into its national projects that enhance the interoperability and effectiveness of the Polish Armed Forces (PAF) (Ministry of National Defence Republic of Poland, 2022). Poland can subsequently apply the research to address its domestic needs, as well as Polish entities who participate in these programmes and projects as part of the international consortiums can form stronger ties with the European market and support their cooperation.

The significant contribution of Poland to EDA and PESCO initiatives has not gone unnoticed, as reflected in a statement from the Agency's Chief Executive, Mr Jiřĩ ředivý, where he praised Poland's leadership:

"I am grateful for Poland's active involvement in the Agency's work, especially for its leading role in various important collaborative defence research projects run in the EDA framework. We need the leadership of Member States, such as Poland, to push joint

research and innovation within our Armed Forces because new disruptive technologies and innovations are reshaping the whole defence sector. I would also thank Poland for its very active engagement in PESCO where is participating in a range of crucial capability projects which aim to fill existing European shortfalls. All in all, I can only thank the Polish authorities for their strong commitment to EDA's activities and European defence cooperation in general, and encourage them to pursue on this path"
(European Defence Agency, 2022, para. 4).

Among the various notable roles of the EDA, overseeing the Collaborative Procurement of Ammunition (CPoA) is one of them—CPoA expedites joint ammunition procurement by pooling resources and coordinating efforts with the European defence industry (European Defence Agency, 2023). Highlighting this initiative, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell stated, "By procuring together through the EDA framework and mobilising financial support from the European Peace Facility, we will deliver to Ukraine more and faster. We are again breaking a taboo and unlocking the potential of EU cooperation in joint procurement" (European Defence Agency, 2023, para. 4). Echoing this sentiment, former Polish Deputy Defence Minister Marcin Ociepa emphasised Poland's position:

"The big shift in the worldwide security situation associated with the war in Ukraine has changed the perspective on what is the regional status of Poland. This shows how important maintaining a technological advantage over potential adversaries is and how necessary is strengthening investments and efforts in defence, including R&T (...) We believe that the use of available instruments within EU and NATO to improve the effectiveness of activities, and achieve more by acting together is crucial." (European Defence Agency, 2022, para. 5).

In sum, Poland's active participation in PESCO and the EDA shows its commitment to an integrated European defence. By leading and engaging in a diverse array of projects, Poland not only strengthens its defence capabilities but also contributes significantly to the EU's collective security framework.

3. Poland's Role in EU Battlegroups

EU Battlegroups are multinational military units, typically comprised of 1,500 troops, established to strengthen the EU's rapid response capability in emerging crises (EEAS, 2021). Poland has been a committed participant in the Battlegroup initiative, frequently serving as a framework nation, a role involving considerable logistical and operational responsibility. In 2010, it led a Battlegroup alongside Germany, Lithuania, Slovakia and Latvia, managing the

command structure and combat elements (Kulesa et al., 2010). Building on this experience, in 2013, Warsaw led the Weimar Battlegroup alongside French and German forces, overseeing its operations and preparations while on standby (Bieńczyk-Missala, 2016). Last year, Polish forces again led the Visegrád Battlegroup (V4 EU Battlegroup), collaborating with the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. As the leading nation, Poland provided the majority of resources and personnel, standing firmly in its commitment to EU defence and regional cooperation (Bieńczyk-Missala, 2016). On 1 July 2024, the Visegrád Battlegroup began its annual standby duty, with Poland's 6th Airborne Brigade forming the core, bringing over 2,300 soldiers (Czech News Agency, 2024). The manoeuvre battalion of the V4 EU Battlegroup includes troops from Poland's 18th Airborne Battalion from Bielsko, as well as units from the 6th Command Battlegroup, the 3rd Engineer Regiment, the Military Police and the Centre for Foreign Missions Preparation (European Security and Defence, 2019). This year's deployment of the Visegrád Battlegroup to standby duty was directly authorised by the EU's HR/VP Josep Borrell (Ministry of National Defence Republic of Poland, 2023). In early 2023, the Visegrád Battlegroup completed its third standby period since inception, with Poland serving as the framework state for each rotation. This continuity is largely attributed to Poland's substantial military capacity and its status as the de facto military leader in the region (Institute of Central Europe, 2023).

It is necessary to mention that EU Battlegroups tend to face a significant amount of scrutiny due to the requirement for unanimous approval from the Council before they can be deployed (EUROCORPS, 2018). Hence, in the Strategic Compass, there is a new initiative of the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (EU RDC), which aims at enhancing the EU's rapid response capabilities for crises outside the Union (EEAS, 2023). The EU RDC incorporates battlegroups into a larger, flexible framework that includes pre-identified military forces and specialised capabilities from member states (EEAS, 2023). This framework aims to provide both rapid response readiness and flexibility across a full spectrum of crisis management tasks under the Treaty of the EU, though it explicitly excludes collective defence. The EU RDC, which seeks to be fully operational by 2025, allows for the deployment of up to 5,000 troops in high-risk environments, adapting the force composition based on mission requirements (EEAS, 2023). This offers a promising image for member states like Poland to partake in more effective initiatives in the future and ensure their readiness to act.

In addition to its EU Battlegroup contributions, Poland's active role in NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) illustrates its strategic commitment to European security on both the EU and NATO fronts (NATO, 2023). By positioning itself as a key player in both frameworks, Poland enhances defence readiness along Europe's eastern border and reinforces the EU's capacity to respond swiftly to regional threats. Warsaw collaborates closely with NATO allies, particularly the U.S., to strengthen interoperability and conduct

Integration exercises with the Polish Territorial Defence Force (TDF), including intensive battle drills (Foster, 2022). Regular training with multinational partners of the eFP Battle Group Poland fosters a cohesive framework for effective defence across Europe, improving interoperability, aligning protocols and bolstering communication between NATO and EU forces for a unified response to any threat (Foster, 2022). As the previous commander of Battle Group Poland, as well as U.S. 3-8 CAV and 3-1 ABCT, U.S. Army Lt. Col. Sean M. Castilla emphasises, “It is very important to me that my Soldiers train with Polish armed forces and our NATO allies as much as possible because that is what is at the core of interoperability” (Foster, 2022, para. 19). Similarly, U.S. Army Lt. Col. James Ray, the successor of Castilla for the eFP Battle Group Poland, adds, “The entire Battle Group remains vigilant, ready and positioned with credible forces through multinational training opportunities and exercises that enhance cohesion and interoperability” (Foster, 2023, para. 15). This alignment between EU and NATO defence initiatives underlines Poland’s dedication to a cohesive, multinational defence strategy that strengthens the security of the region, bridging EU and NATO goals to create a resilient and unified front against emerging threats.

At the NATO Summit in July 2024, on the eve of the alliance’s 75th anniversary, Polish Defence Minister Kosiniak-Kamysz emphasised the urgency of aligning NATO’s capabilities with those of the EU to maximise budget efficiency and bolster shared security (Polish Ministry of National Defence, 2024). He used PESCO as a prime example of initiatives aiming at deepening defence cooperation among member states (Polish Ministry of National Defence, 2024). Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk also advocated for closer global partnerships, stating, “We cannot rely solely on the EU for our security,” while highlighting the need for strategic unity within the EU (Guccione & Turillazzi, 2024, para. 6). Tusk’s vision promotes a cohesive European defence strategy, one that integrates national initiatives to reinforce the alliance. Poland, a leading force in NATO’s Enhanced Air Policing mission on Europe’s eastern flank, aims to establish its Shield East infrastructure by 2028, showcasing its commitment to military modernisation and cooperation beyond the EU (Guccione & Turillazzi, 2024). Poland’s leadership in EU Battlegroups, particularly within the Visegrád and Weimar Battlegroups, demonstrates its dedication to enhancing Europe’s rapid response capabilities.

4. Strategic Challenges

Despite its pivotal role in advancing EU defence, Poland encounters several strategic challenges that impact its ability to fully realise its objectives. Key among these are political tensions within the Visegrád Group (V4), structural limitations within EU Battlegroups and the ongoing challenge of harmonising EU and NATO defence frameworks.

Political Challenges Within the Visegrád Group

As the lead nation in the V4 Battlegroup, Poland faces political challenges stemming from opposing viewpoints on Russia among the V4 members. While Poland and the Czech Republic advocate a firm approach towards Russian aggression, Orbán's pro-Russia policy strikes a contrasting image, instigating tensions and complicating cohesive defence planning within the group. Despite these divisions, Poland remains committed to fostering cooperation and cohesion among V4 nations in their joint defence efforts (Bonner, 2023, para. 20). The health of the V4 is highly determined by the Polish-Hungarian bilateral relationship, which dates back to the Middle Ages. However, as Poland continues to stand firmly in its support of Ukraine, Hungary refuses to send any arms. Additionally, Slovakia's view is that the Russia-Ukraine "conflict doesn't have a military solution," according to its Foreign Minister, Juraj Blunar, who does not help the alliance (Euronews, 2024, para. 10). However, during the recent summit the Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala, stressed that no one should talk about the V2+2, as it would be an oversimplification (Ferencz, 2024).

On 1 July of this year, Poland began its seventh presidency of the V4, represented by the motto 'V4: Back to Basics', aiming at returning to the group's core values of freedom, human rights, the rule of law and commitment to the process of European integration and cooperation for security in Europe (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland, 2024b). One of the three pillars of this presidential program is citizen safety, which aims to tackle the issues from several dimensions, such as the inclusion of internal security, cybersecurity, health and civil protection, in addition to consular and judiciary cooperation. Donald Tusk, who had previously voiced his concerns about the *raison d'être* of the V4, concludes, "We used to have similar dreams, and they have fundamentally remained unchanged. Our peoples are closely linked, the friendship is still there, but our interests must be aligned" (Ferencz, 2024, para. 5). Poland's presidency comes at a very crucial moment when the EU not only faces a political whirlwind of policy changes but is also exposed to an existential threat from Russia affecting Euro-Atlantic security. Hence, while it is evident that the parties do not share the same perspective on the Ukrainian question, this difference of opinions could be overcome by concentrating on common interests in other areas, strengthened by Viktor Orbán's concluding remark after the summit that "Today's meeting has convinced me that the Visegrád Group is alive" (Ferencz, 2024, para. 5).

Aligning EU and NATO Defence Frameworks

Poland's commitment to both NATO and the EU presents another strategic challenge: ensuring alignment between EU defence initiatives and NATO standards. Poland is aware of the potential redundancy between the two organisations and advocates for deeper

integration, allowing the EU to complement NATO's capabilities rather than duplicating them. As threats from Russia have intensified, Poland has been a strong advocate for NATO's strengthened eastern presence, leading to the establishment of the enhanced Forward Presence Battle Group in Poland in 2017. This U.S.-led initiative, along with the 2020 Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement, which formalised a permanent U.S. military presence, has reinforced Poland's role as a strategic NATO hub. With around 10,000 U.S. troops stationed across Poland, supported by the Aegis Ashore missile defence system in Redzikowo, Poland has become integral to NATO's deterrence strategy and regional security (NATO, 2021).

However, Poland's heavy reliance on U.S. and South Korean defence systems raises questions about its deeper integration into the EU defence sector, as offset investments and technology transfers from these alliances may not fully support its long-term defence industry growth. This limited procurement of European-made defence systems, such as Germany's Leopard 2 tanks, could complicate Poland's alignment with EU defence strategies, which emphasise European defence autonomy and technological sovereignty (Lepiarz, 2023). Additionally, Poland's assertive stance on Russia and its readiness to consider NATO's nuclear sharing policy, expressed in 2024, may create tension with EU allies that favour a diplomatic approach to security challenges, including its Weimar Triangle partners, who prioritise dialogue and arms control.

Domestically, Poland's shift to a more pro-EU government in 2023, led by Prime Minister Donald Tusk, has softened past tensions with Brussels and could open new paths for collaboration within the EU framework. With political instability in both Germany and France, Polish leaders see an opportunity for Poland to play a central role in shaping EU policies, particularly as the transatlantic relationship enters a new phase with Former President Donald Trump's return to the White House (Krzysztozek, 2024). Trump's past stance on burden-sharing within NATO raised concerns about reduced U.S. involvement in European defence, prompting Poland to further solidify its defence commitments. With its spending nearing 5% of its GDP, Poland positions itself as a model NATO member, showing its commitment to European security and stability. However, Tusk recognises that Trump's unpredictable approach could require Poland to strengthen its EU alliances and seek deeper European defence integration to ensure resilience against potential shifts in U.S. support (Krzysztozek, 2024).

In response, Tusk has prioritised fostering ties with European counterparts and NATO allies, including anticipated meetings with leaders like French President Emmanuel Macron, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer (Micheletti, 2024). This proactive diplomatic outreach aims to strengthen a united European stance, especially in

light of the ongoing war in Ukraine and potential Russian influence over any U.S.-Russia dialogue. Despite these challenges, this new approach reflects Poland's ambition to lead within the EU, not only as a bridge to NATO but also as a champion of European defence autonomy, preparing to navigate an evolving geopolitical landscape where European self-reliance may be more crucial than ever.

Conclusion

Poland finds itself amidst significant geopolitical turmoil. While its commitment to European security and its aspirations for a greater leadership role in defence are clear, it will take time for Poland to reach its full potential. Successfully navigating this evolving landscape will require Warsaw to carefully coordinate with both global and European partners, adapting to shifting dynamics with prudence and foresight. The concern for Poland is that any strengthening of European defence may come at the cost of enabling further U.S. withdrawal from Europe. As Poland moves towards a more prominent role in safeguarding European security, it will need to balance this with efforts to maintain a close relationship with the U.S.

This analysis set out to investigate how Poland's participation in PESCO and the EU Battlegroups initiative contributed to advancing interoperability among EU land forces. In the face of evolving geopolitical challenges, Poland has emerged as a key strategic player, placing it firmly in the defence and security spotlight. Key findings reveal that Poland has actively enhanced EU interoperability in critical areas such as military mobility, cyber defence, secure communications, and medical readiness through its involvement in PESCO. Moreover, Poland, one of the leading partners of research and technology (R&T) projects at EDA, reflects a commitment to advancing defence technologies and fostering innovation within the European security framework. Poland participates in several battlegroups, which is largely attributed to Poland's substantial military capacity and strong regional alliances. The upcoming initiatives, such as replacing the outdated EU Battlegroup with the EU RDC, offer EU Member States a beacon of hope for achieving strategic autonomy. These efforts signal a shift towards a more self-reliant Europe, one less dependent on the legacy structures of the Cold War era and better positioned to navigate an increasingly multipolar world.

With Poland setting a high standard among NATO members by committing nearly 5% of its GDP to defence, the country appears well-positioned to foster strong relationships on multiple fronts. Poland is effectively acting as a strategic middleman, enhancing interoperability within NATO while bridging ties between European and Atlantic partners. As Europe advances land force interoperability through PESCO and the evolution from EU Battlegroups to the EU RDC, Poland finds itself in a critical position. With Trump back in

office and Polish elections on the horizon, the political landscape is shifting in ways that could significantly impact European defence cooperation. Poland's steadfast commitment to security and its capacity to navigate these geopolitical changes will be vital for Europe's journey towards strategic autonomy and a resilient, united defence framework.

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