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Poland as an Ally

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By 2016, Poland had been a member of the North Atlantic Alliance for over 15 years. This is a sufficiently long period for a country to establish a track record as an ally. Even a cursory look at Poland's record reveals a number of distinctive features that characterise Polish attitudes towards, and behaviour within, the alliance. These distinctive features have been shaped by three factors: geopolitical location, historical memories and national political traditions.

The first factor is obvious: Poland is a borderline state. In the east it borders three states—Belarus, Ukraine and Russia—which are not members of the alliance, and whose trajectory of development since 1991 has increasingly diverged from the path chosen by Poland and other post-Communist nations in Central Europe. Institutionally and symbolically, this borderline became even sharper following Poland's entry into the European Union in 2004. Moreover, one of those states, Russia, is not only a nuclear great power but also a successor state and the legal continuator of the Soviet Union, the great power that, not so long ago, played the role of a regional hegemon. While in the early 1990s it was open to question how the ruling elite in Moscow would interpret its 'successor' role, by the time of Vladimir Putin's presidency, the 'revisionist' elements in foreign policy thinking of the Russian elite were becoming increasingly evident.¹

1 See, for example, a perceptive analysis by F Splidsboel-Hansen, 'Past and Future Meet: Aleksandr Gorchakov and Russian Foreign Policy', *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2002, pp. 377–96.

The second factor is that of historical memory, which contains several layers. The most recent is the experience of living in a state with limited sovereignty. For the politically active generation that was shaped by the Solidarity period, this involves a memory of the threats of Soviet military intervention that were used as a tool of political pressure by both Moscow and the Communist leadership in Warsaw. A deeper layer consists of memory of the neighbouring power's use of military aggression to bring about a swift destruction of the reconstituted Polish state in 1939. This is also associated with the experience of being 'abandoned' by the Allies. A still deeper layer is that of the experience of more than a century-long period of living under foreign rule, after the final partition of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth at the end of the 18th century.

The third factor is the deep attachment to the right of self-determination both on an individual as well as a collective level as symbolised by the principle of the political culture of the First Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth: *quod omnis tangit, ab omnibus approbari debet* (what concerns all, should be approved by all). The political establishment of post-Communist Poland internalised the so-called 'Giedroyc doctrine',² which claimed that preservation of independence by the new post-Soviet states that lie between Poland and the Russian Federation is a fundamental Polish long-term interest.

'Existential' Alliance

Those factors produced a set of attitudes that influenced the way Poland functioned as an ally. They included first of all the assumption that Polish membership of the alliance is not a luxury or a matter of choice but an 'existential' necessity. It is an axiom for the Polish political establishment as well as for public opinion that, given Poland's geopolitical location and her historical experience, external security guarantees are an absolute must. These convictions are reflected in high levels of public support for membership of the alliance from the time when Poland was entering the alliance up to the present moment. Moreover, the feeling of relative vulnerability and the historical experience of an 'ineffective alliance' produced a conviction that an alliance cannot be limited to mere 'paper' guarantees. Guarantees have to be backed by real military capabilities and the political will to use those

2 Jerzy Giedroyc (1906–2000) was the chief editor of an influential emigré monthly, *Kultura*, which was published between 1945 and 2006, first in Rome and later in Paris.

capabilities cannot be taken for granted but needs to be cultivated. Hence, Poland's interest not only in membership but in keeping the alliance in good shape—both organisationally and politically.

A 'Serious' Ally

Poland treats its membership of the alliance seriously. This is reflected in the fact that Polish defence expenditure, in terms of GDP percentage, never fell below the European average and, since 2009, it has stayed consistently above it. Although it is true that Poland has not been fulfilling the official NATO requirement to maintain defence spending at 2 per cent of GDP, it has never fallen much below that threshold (only in the crisis year of 2008 did it drop to 1.6 per cent). This is particularly striking when one takes into account that, in per capita terms, Poland is one of the poorest members of the alliance and, what is politically more relevant, the poorest among the Central European countries that form a natural reference point against which Polish society measures its standard of living. Moreover, in real terms Poland has consistently increased its defence expenditures—again with the exception of the crisis year of 2008 and of 2013—since it joined the alliance. This spike in defence spending has been especially pronounced in recent years: in 2014 it rose by 11.5 per cent and, in 2015, by an estimated 21.7 per cent. In this respect Poland has become a clear leader in the alliance, overtaken only by Lithuania and (in 2015) Luxembourg.³

The other demonstration of Poland's commitment to the alliance was its significant and consistent contribution to the military operations conducted either by the alliance or—as in the case of Iraq—by the United States and some of its allies. In Afghanistan, the Polish contingent that was present from 2002 until 2014 reached, at the maximum point of engagement—the so-called 8th Rotation from the end of October 2010 – 2,600 military personnel. Overall, over 28,000 Polish military personnel participated in the Afghan mission, suffering 45 casualties.⁴ Polish forces

3 See Tables 2, 3 and 4, in NATO, *Financial and Economic Data Relating to NATO Defence. Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (1990–2013)*, 10 Mar. 2011 (www.nato.int/cps/pl/natohq/news_107359.htm); and Table 3, NATO, *Defence Expenditures of NATO Countries (2008–2015)*, 28 Jan. 2016, viewed Aug. 2016, www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_127537.htm.

4 Official information of the Polish Ministry of Defense, 'Podsumowanie Polskiego Udziału w Misji ISAF', viewed Mar. 2016, do.wp.mil.pl/artykuly/aktualnosci/2015-01-05-podsumowanie-polskiego-udziau-w-misji-isaf.

also participated in the stabilisation mission in Iraq where, between 2003 and 2008, a Polish contingent served as the core of a Multinational Division, responsible for one of the four security sectors in Iraq. In the first years of deployment the size of the contingent hovered around 2,500. Overall over 15,000 Polish military participated in the Iraqi operations, suffering 22 casualties.⁵

Poland also has participated in alliance missions in the Balkans, contributing a battalion-size unit to the NATO Implementation Force (IFOR) mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission in Kosovo. An important detail that should be emphasised is that Polish contingents operated both in Iraq and in Afghanistan with relatively few restrictions (so-called ‘national caveats’), which did not preclude their participation in combat operations.

Proving Commitment

Significant Polish participation in two major, costly and high-risk operations (Iraq and Afghanistan) throws an important light on Poland’s approach to its alliances. Polish public opinion was opposed to Poland’s participation in both operations—in particular in Iraq. This was due to the widespread perception that in both cases no direct Polish national security interest was involved. Poland had no major interest in the Middle East and did not see the Saddam Hussein regime as a particular security threat. Similarly, in the case of Afghanistan, the reaction of the Polish public was shaped by the fact that Poland has never been a target of terrorist attacks and radical Islam was not seen as an immediate threat to Polish security. On the contrary, the heavy involvement of the United States (in Iraq) and of NATO (in Afghanistan) in out-of-area operations was seen as running directly against Polish security interests, since it was diverting US/NATO resources and attention from preparations for the Article 5 contingencies on the Eastern flank of the alliance.

Nevertheless, the decisions to participate in those operations were meant to demonstrate Poland’s commitment to its allies and to the alliance. This was bound up with expectations—that some would describe as

5 P Hudyma, ‘Udział Wojsk Polskich w Misjach Zagranicznych o Charakterze Pokojowym i Stabilizacyjnym, w Latach 1953–2008’, PhD Thesis, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, 2011, p. 98.

naïve—that in this way Poland was creating political and moral ‘IOU-notes’ that could be ‘cashed in’ when Poland is faced with an actual military threat.

America’s ‘Trojan Horse’

Poland’s decision to send military forces to Iraq highlights another important strand in the Polish approach to the alliance. NATO is perceived first of all as an institutional framework that provides Poland with a security guarantee from the United States. This ‘America-centric’ approach has a persuasive pragmatic rationale that is connected with the point already mentioned above—the ‘existential’ nature of the alliance for Poland. Since the alliance is seen as an instrument for providing real military assistance in case of aggression, the gradual and consistent demilitarisation of Western Europe that could be observed after the end of the Cold War, meant that the United States has been the only player that realistically could be expected to have sufficient forces at its disposal to offer significant assistance that would be effective in military terms. Moreover, the United States was credited with greater willingness to use military force than West European nations, and therefore less likely to hesitate when faced with the perspective of deployment that could involve real combat and carry the risk of an escalation into a large-scale conflict.

Therefore, Poland has always been eager to develop bilateral defence ties with Washington, beyond and outside the multilateral NATO framework. This is also why Warsaw decided to back Washington over the Iraq issue, even though this decision put it on a collision course with Germany and France, the two most influential EU states, and even though Poland was then in the process of negotiating its membership of the European Union.⁶ Similarly Poland, after some hesitation and hard bargaining, signed and ratified in August 2008 a bilateral agreement with the United States allowing for the stationing of elements of the American anti-ballistic missile system in Poland.⁷ It is important to note that the bargaining was about the degree to which the project was to be accompanied by

6 On the motives behind the decision, see, M Wągrowka, ‘Udział Polski w Interwencji Zbrojnej i Misji Stabilizacyjnej w Iraku’, *Raporty i Analizy*, no. 12, Warsaw: Center for International Relations, 2004, pp. 6–11.

7 M Wągrowka, ‘Tarcza Antyrakietowa z Polskiej Perspektywy’, in *Amerykańska tarcza antyrakietowa w Europie, konieczność, warunki, akceptacja*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2008, pp. 39–47.

development of other military ties. In effect, Poland was trying to utilise the missile defence project for developing a broader bilateral security relationship with the United States. The Polish aim was to get ‘American boots’ on the ground—a significant and permanent US military presence to guarantee that any military attack on Poland would inevitably mean a direct attack on the American armed forces.

A Recalcitrant Ally

The Polish–American bargaining that preceded the August 2008 agreement on the location of elements of the anti-missile shield in Poland demonstrated another distinctive feature of Polish alliance behaviour. Poland, due to its size, population and history, aspires to be a ‘middling power’ that is capable of articulating and defending its national interests within the alliance. It seeks to express its own vision for the alliance and expects to have its voice heard and taken into account, especially on those aspects of alliance policy that are directly relevant to the alliance’s Eastern flank.

A few cases can be cited where Warsaw demonstrated that it was not about to accept the prevailing winds from Washington but would behave according to its own analysis of the strategic situation. The first such example was the Polish decision not to follow the tendency in the alliance, that was prevalent until the Russian military aggression against Ukraine in 2014, to restructure the military for expeditionary, out-of-area tasks, de-emphasising—and in some cases completely getting rid of—assets and capabilities necessary for conventional territorial defence. Poland tried to keep the balance, retaining a significant land warfare component armed with heavy equipment. Moreover, during the discussions preceding the adoption of the New Strategic Concept at the 2010 Lisbon summit, Poland—together with Norway—argued for retention of the Article 5 tasks (i.e. collective defence of member states’ territories) being given sufficient weight and priority.⁸

Warsaw has consistently raised, almost from the beginning of its membership of the alliance, the issue of the lack of significant military presence and infrastructure on the territory of new members, as well as

8 See, for example, B Górka-Winter & M Madej (eds), *NATO Member States and the New Strategic Concept: An Overview*, Warsaw: Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2010, pp. 79–82.

a lack of contingency plans for their defence in case of military aggression. This was apparently met with a distinct lack of enthusiasm in both Berlin and Washington. In view of their assessment of Russian intentions and capabilities, such plans were redundant, while they might hamper the pursuit of cooperation with Russia by contradicting the official NATO line that it did not perceive Russia as a potential enemy. Nevertheless, Poland's persistence, facilitated by the Russian military operation against Georgia, in demanding contingency plans in case of an attack on Polish territory led to such plans being drawn up between 2008 and 2010.⁹ Poland also was trying to persuade the alliance to hold military exercises on its territory that would not be limited to peacekeeping or crisis management operations but would prepare for Article 5 contingencies.

Conclusion

Poland's exposed strategic location, combined with its historical memories, has shaped its distinctive approach to the NATO alliance. The alliance is seen as an indispensable means of providing a military guarantee shielding the country from military pressure or even military aggression from the Russian Federation. Therefore, Poland attaches particular importance to the cultivation of transatlantic military links, both within the framework of NATO as well as bilaterally. Its primary interest was in the collective defence function of the alliance as opposed to crisis management and out-of-area operations. Nevertheless, it actively participated in out-of-area stabilisation operations conducted by its allies, deploying significant forces for extended periods of time, in order to prove its value as an ally and to accumulate a stock of good will and trust in allied capitals—first of all in Washington—that could be 'called in' in an hour of need. While demonstrating its alliance loyalty, Poland has at the same time revealed itself to be capable of hard bargaining, asserting its own interests within the alliance and of articulating a distinctive position on alliance policy based on its own, independent analysis of the strategic situation.¹⁰

9 B Klich, 'NATO po Afganistanie', in *Piętnaście lat Polski w NATO*, Warszawa, 2014, p. 121.

10 See, for example, R Kupiecki, 'The Security Dilemma Facing Central and Eastern Europe, NATO, the United States, and Transatlantic Security Relations', in R Kupiecki & A Michta (eds), *Transatlantic Relations in a Changing European Security Environment*, Warsaw: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2015, pp. 73–74, 76.

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