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Poland's U-turn on European Defense: A Missed Opportunity?

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In the last three years, Poland has completely overhauled its approach to transatlantic defense cooperation[1]. For most of the last two decades, the large Central European country's overarching security priority was to work with the United States and NATO. Warsaw was wary of European defense efforts which excluded Washington. In addition, Poland's ties with the EU and several of its neighbors – in particular Germany – were marked by mistrust and, at times, open hostility. But since 2009, largely in response to the perceived decline of US attention to European security, Poland has become one of the most vocal advocates of common European Union defense efforts. In addition, it has striven to work increasingly closely with Germany and to be a leading player within the EU.

But Poland's efforts to strengthen European military cooperation have been met by limited interest from its EU partners, most of which have a dwindling appetite for defense. These partners may be missing an important opportunity to improve Europe's fledgling ability to tackle military crises abroad. They also risk making Poland feel so vulnerable that it could create new strains for the EU and the transatlantic alliance.

The quest for insurance policies

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Poland has been on a permanent quest for 'insurance policies' in order to strengthen its security. Like other EU and NATO members from the former Warsaw Pact, Poland remains concerned about potential instability in its eastern neighborhood – notably in Ukraine, Belarus or Russia. Warsaw is principally worried about Moscow exploiting the dependency of its former satellites on Russian gas for political gain. But Polish policy-makers also have lingering concerns that Russia could still pose a military threat, too. The 2008 war between Russia and Georgia exacerbated these concerns.

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[1] The arguments in this policy paper are based in part on extensive off-the-record interviews with officials and experts in Brussels, London, Warsaw and Washington conducted in 2011 and 2012. A similar version of the paper is being published by the Centre for European Reform.

For most of the last two decades, Poland saw NATO as its primary insurance policy. This was largely because the transatlantic alliance included the US. Warsaw considered Washington a more reliable ally than its European partners. From Poland's perspective, European countries by themselves lacked the military capabilities to act as a credible deterrent against Russia. In addition, with France, Germany and several other countries developing close partnerships with Moscow in the aftermath of the Cold War, many Polish politicians doubted the strength of the commitment of their European allies to Poland's security.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, in an attempt to encourage its allies – and in particular the US – to support Polish causes, Warsaw was very keen to demonstrate its commitment to 'allied solidarity'. So although Poland wanted NATO to focus on territorial defense, it supported the American attempts to shift NATO's attention to expeditionary missions. Poland began reforming its armed forces so that they could be deployed abroad. It also made large contributions to military operations which it did not otherwise consider to be in its national interest – notably in Afghanistan and Iraq. Poland's participation in the latter war, which several European countries including France and Germany strongly opposed, showed how Warsaw was willing to strain its ties with EU partners for the sake of a close relationship with Washington.

Poland also considered EU integration as another pillar of its security. But the level of support for EU cooperation waned at times, in particular during 2006 and 2007 when President Lech Kaczynski and his brother, Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczynski, both from the Law and Justice party, led the country. The Kaczynskis' eurosceptic views sparked several EU crises, including delays in the ratification of the Lisbon treaty. Both men also believed that Germany was too close to Russia, and relations with Berlin became very strained.

In addition, for much of the 2000s, Warsaw viewed the EU's nascent 'common security and defense policy' (CSDP) with suspicion. France and the United Kingdom had instigated EU defense cooperation in 1998 in an effort to improve the ability of Europeans to address conflicts which were not of interest to the US. But Warsaw was concerned that EU military collaboration might marginalize the US from European security – a concern that was shared at the time by several Atlanticist EU countries and some influential quarters in Washington.

Poland's wariness of EU defense efforts was nuanced. Even before joining the EU, the country participated in several CSDP crisis management operations, including a police mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and a military deployment to Macedonia. But Warsaw actively opposed French-led efforts in the early 2000s to give the EU a permanent military headquarters. Poland, like Britain and some other EU countries, regarded an EU headquarters as an unnecessary duplication of NATO's own commands. Poland also had initial reservations about three articles in the Lisbon treaty – on 'permanent structured cooperation', 'mutual aid and assistance' and 'solidarity'.

'Permanent structured cooperation' (PESCO) is designed to allow a core group of EU members to deepen military cooperation. To qualify for membership of the group, countries would have to meet certain criteria which demonstrated their commitment to defense. (The innovation has not yet been implemented.) When PESCO was first negotiated in 2002 and 2003, Poland feared that it would be left out of the core. Under the Lisbon treaty's clauses on mutual aid and solidarity, member-states are committed to assist each other if an EU country is the victim of an armed aggression, a terrorist attack or a natural or man-made disaster. Lisbon specifies that NATO remains the foundation of collective defense for EU countries which are also members of the transatlantic alliance. But in

2002-2003 Warsaw was nevertheless nervous about EU commitments which focused on Europe's internal security.

Poland's new found interest in European defense

Since Donald Tusk, the leader of Civic Platform, became prime minister in 2007, Poland has been attempting to diversify its security guarantees. Warsaw has continued to perceive NATO as one of the key pillars of its security. But it has grown increasingly concerned about the credibility of the alliance. The disagreements amongst NATO countries over whom was at fault in the Russia-Georgia war exacerbated Polish fears that certain European countries might not assist their allies in confronting possible threats from the east.

As a result Poland, together with other Central European countries, has demanded that NATO reassure its members that it is ready to defend them against conventional military threats. Amongst other things, Poland led efforts to introduce military planning against potential threats to the Baltic states.[2] Warsaw has also insisted that NATO hold more military exercises focusing on territorial defense. While several European allies, including Spain, worried that Poland's demands would stoke tensions with Russia, NATO has nevertheless agreed to the two requests.

In addition, Poland has lobbied the US to deploy military personnel on its soil. As Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski said during the Russia-Georgia war, Poland is determined to "have alliances backed by realities, backed by capabilities".[3] By 2012, Poland had secured periodic deployments of a battery of US Patriot missiles, the promise of a small permanent US Air Force detachment from 2013 that will support periodic deployments of US F16 fighter planes and C-130 cargo aircraft and US SM-3 interceptor missiles from 2018 as part of the Obama administration's new missile defense system. Warsaw's focus seems less on the particular missile or aircraft than on having US boots on Polish territory.

But from Warsaw's perspective, it has been a struggle to keep the US engaged, and relations with Washington have at times been tense. By the time the Bush administration ended in January 2009, the Polish government had grown disappointed with what it perceived as the limited returns on its support for US-led military operations. Polish officials were particularly frustrated by the lack of contracts for Polish firms in Iraq, and by America's reluctance to allow Poles to enter the US without visas (Poland remains one of the few EU countries not covered by the US visa waiver program). The arrival of the Obama administration created additional friction. The U.S. government's attempt to improve relations with Russia and its abrupt and clumsily announced reconfiguration of the Bush administration's missile defense program – which Poland had agreed to host in the face of strident Russian opposition – led many in Poland to fear that Washington was neglecting its Central European allies.

The Obama administration has repeatedly stressed that this is not the case, and Warsaw has been somewhat reassured since Washington agreed to deploy forces to Poland. But the country continues to believe that the US is progressively withdrawing from European security in order to focus on more pressing security issues elsewhere. The Poles point to Washington's refusal to maintain a leading role in NATO's deployment to Libya in the spring of 2011 and its military spending cuts.

The perceived withdrawal of the US from European security has played a significant role

[2] NATO already had contingency plans for Poland. But the alliance did not have them for the Baltic countries because by the time they joined NATO, in 2004, some of their partners thought the security environment so benign that contingency plans were unnecessary.

[3] Nicholas Kulish, 'Georgian crisis brings attitude change to a flush Poland', New York Times, August 8th 2008.

in triggering Warsaw's new found interest in EU defense cooperation. As discussed earlier, many in Poland still doubt that their European allies would come to their aid if a crisis were to occur in Eastern Europe. But as Foreign Minister Sikorski has stated, "Poland would like to have two insurance policies rather than one", adding that there will be times when the US "might want to take a backseat", and in those cases, "Europe should be able to act in its immediate vicinity".[4] This is a significant U-turn for someone who was for long an outspoken critic of EU defense efforts.

The reasons for Warsaw's interest in EU defense cooperation, however, go beyond the changing US role. The shift has been part of a broader overhaul in Poland's approach to the EU instigated by Donald Tusk. The prime minister thinks that the best way to serve Poland's interests is for the country to become a central player in the EU and develop constructive ties with neighbors. Warsaw has mended its fractious ties with Berlin, and it has sought to work increasingly closely with the Franco-German tandem. Poland has even striven to improve relations with Russia in the aftermath of the 2010 Smolensk air crash, calculating in part that changing the perception of Polish knee-jerk opposition to Russia would help secure it a place with Germany and France at the heart of EU policy.

Poland saw its EU presidency during the second half of 2011 as a way to establish its European credentials, and it played the role with vigor, even announcing an ambitious work program nearly two years before its turn at the EU's helm. Among other priorities, Poland proposed a variety of ways to reinvigorate the EU's defense efforts – from improving EU-NATO cooperation and making EU battlegroups easier to deploy to increasing the participation of the EU's eastern neighbors in CSDP. Warsaw was also keen to support EU efforts instigated by Germany and Sweden in November 2010 to limit the impact of renewed cuts in European defense spending through closer cooperation amongst European armed forces ('pooling and sharing'). And, in a complete reversal of its previous stance, Poland became keen to explore the potential for additional security guarantees offered by the solidarity and mutual aid clauses of the Lisbon treaty. It even worked with France and Germany to propose plans to set up a permanent EU military headquarters. And it collaborated with Belgium and Hungary to lay out options to implement the concept of permanent structured cooperation.

Poland's overtures rebuffed

Not all of Warsaw's ideas on CSDP were good ones. Poland wasted its energy in trying to introduce an EU operational headquarters, despite unequivocal signals of opposition from London. Insufficient planning capabilities have delayed some EU missions in the past. But Europe's greatest military shortcoming remains the deterioration of its armed forces, and Poland would have been wise to focus mainly on capabilities during its presidency. In addition, Warsaw still has a lot to do to fully implement its EU and NATO commitments in defense. The country needs to complete military reforms designed to improve the mobility of its armed forces. And it needs to widen its security horizons and priorities. Warsaw refused to participate in NATO's deployment to Libya last spring, convinced that the turmoil there did not affect Polish interests (and Donald Tusk upset several of his European allies when he publicly insinuated that Britain and France had intervened because of oil). But Poland is taking steps in the right direction. And at a time when the US is increasingly vocal about the need for Europeans to take on more responsibility for their own security – through any means, including CSDP – Poland's EU counterparts should be supporting its efforts to strengthen European defense.

[4] Interview with Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski, Radio Free Europe, June 6th 2011.

Yet most European governments have done little to build on Poland's initiatives. The EU countries which have demonstrated a dwindling enthusiasm for defense over the past two decades have continued to do so. This applies even to Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia, notwithstanding the fact that they share Poland's security concerns about Russia. Although NATO allies are committed to spend 2 per cent of their GDP on defense, in 2010 Slovakia only spent 1.3 per cent, Latvia 1 per cent and Lithuania just 0.9 per cent.[5] Meanwhile France and the UK, the instigators of CSDP, have not been responding particularly positively. Frustrated by the sustained reluctance of many European governments to put a big effort into improving military capabilities, both London and Paris have started to lose interest in EU defense efforts.[6] In response to the economic crisis, they have preferred to focus on increasing bilateral defense cooperation – though they are struggling to implement the joint military efforts they announced in November 2010.

During Poland's time at the EU's helm, Britain and France supported the EU's efforts to encourage greater pooling and sharing amongst European armed forces. They also approved of much of Poland's work on battlegroups, and agreed to plan a new EU civilian mission to assist the EU's anti-piracy naval force off the Horn of Africa. But the UK – quietly supported by several other EU countries – opposed Warsaw's efforts to set up an EU operational headquarters, and protracted debates on the matter blighted much of the Polish presidency. Poland, France, Germany, Italy and Spain became so frustrated with Britain's opposition that they asked Catherine Ashton, the EU's High Representative for foreign affairs, to explore options for sidestepping Britain through PESCO. At the end of the Polish presidency, the parties compromised, agreeing to activate the EU's dormant 'operations center' in order to help conduct the EU's various missions in the Horn of Africa. The operations center is a skeleton planning capability which can be reinforced by military and civilian officials from EU member-states. It will now be used for the first time since it was created in 2007. But such a capability is much more modest than the standing and fully manned headquarters Poland had hoped for.

Warsaw also felt let down by France's preference for defense ties with the UK over cooperation with Poland and Germany under CSDP. Although Paris initially supported Poland's efforts to introduce an EU operational headquarters, the Elysée was never keen on the idea, and by the end of the Polish presidency France had endorsed a compromise on the military headquarters that suited London. That added to the sore feelings left by the sale of French warships to Russia, only weeks before the beginning of the Polish presidency, notwithstanding the strong concerns expressed by Poland and some other former Warsaw Pact countries.

Poland also made precious little progress on improving NATO-EU collaboration, chiefly because Cyprus and Turkey, which have blocked the two institutions from forging closer ties, continue to show no interest in compromising. And none of Poland's fellow member-states shared its interest in exploring the potential implications of the Lisbon treaty's clauses on solidarity and mutual aid. Warsaw also found little appetite from other European governments to expand defense cooperation with the EU's eastern neighbors.

Furthermore, many European governments remained reluctant to increase cooperation among their armed forces to offset the impact of their military spending cuts. While a few European countries, not least Britain and

[5] Data based on current prices, 'Financial and economic data relating to NATO defense', NATO, March 2011, http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2011_03/20110309_PR_CP_2011_027.pdf.

[6] See Clara Marina O'Donnell, 'Britain and France should not give up on EU defense co-operation', CER policy brief, October 2011.

France, have introduced cost-saving joint initiatives over the last two years, most others remain averse to sharing military capabilities with partners. The European Defense Agency managed to get several EU governments to agree to a series of cost-saving projects during the Polish presidency, but the initiatives – on air-to-air refueling and naval training, for example – remain very modest in light of the size of European military spending cuts. (NATO's plans to present new cost-saving initiatives at its summit in Chicago in May are encountering similar difficulties.)

Trouble ahead

In the aftermath of Poland's EU presidency, many Polish officials are expressing disappointment at the lukewarm response of many European countries to Warsaw's efforts to strengthen CSDP. Nevertheless, Poland remains committed to EU defense cooperation and to strengthening ties with its EU partners. But if European armed forces continue to deteriorate while the US moves ahead with its partial withdrawal from Europe and – to make matters worse – the eurozone crisis puts the entire project of EU integration under strain, there is a real risk Poland will feel increasingly vulnerable. This could have a detrimental impact on its current policies.

Poland could lose interest in playing a central role in EU affairs and in strengthening CSDP. The leader of the opposition, Jarosław Kaczynski, remains highly suspicious of Germany and averse to close EU cooperation. In December 2011, his Law and Justice party tabled a motion of no confidence against Radek Sikorski for a speech he gave in Berlin. In the speech, the foreign minister had called for stronger German leadership in order to solve the eurozone crisis. And although Kaczynski at times expresses support for an EU 'army', his aversion to Berlin robs the idea of any credibility. Support for Law and Justice has waned amongst Polish voters in recent years. But the party still won 30 per cent of the votes in the last parliamentary elections – only 9 per cent less than the ruling Civic Platform. So it is possible that the opposition could return to power at some point in the future, particularly if Poles feel insecure.

Even under the current government, if Poland considers that the value of its various security guarantees is diminishing, its support for military operations far from Poland's neighborhood could fall. Like in many other European countries, public opinion in Poland is growing weary of taking part in military deployments out of solidarity. When Warsaw was asked to participate in the Libya operation – in a significant contrast to the predominant Polish mindset when the country deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq – most Poles thought their country had already done enough to demonstrate its commitment to its allies. Even concerning Afghanistan, support for Polish participation has collapsed. In a recent survey of 12 European countries, Poles were the most keen to withdraw troops from the country.[7] If – in addition – Warsaw becomes increasingly worried about its own security, it is more likely to keep its armed forces close to home to counter potential instability in its neighborhood.

A growing sense of insecurity could also adversely affect the modernization of the Polish armed forces. There has been a continuous debate in Poland over the last two decades about where the balance should lie between military capabilities designed to support the country's territorial defense and those geared towards expeditionary operations. Some NATO allies believe that Warsaw already wants to spend too much money on weapons designed for territorial defense. For example, Poland wants to buy Patriot missiles to protect large swathes of Polish territory from missile attacks. Some of its partners believe that such a capability is unnecessary. They would prefer Poland to buy equipment that NATO – and the EU – need to undertake expeditionary

[7] Fifty six per cent of Poles wanted troops removed. 'Transatlantic Trends: Key findings 2011', 2011.

operations, such as large transport aircraft. But if the Polish government feels vulnerable it is more likely to channel a wider proportion of funds towards military equipment designed to tackle conventional threats.

Finally, Polish insecurities could feed a revival of tensions between Warsaw and Moscow, particularly if the Russians adopt a more aggressive stance. Although ties between the two countries improved markedly in the aftermath of the Smolensk air crash, animosities remain. In November 2011, Russia threatened to deploy missiles in Kaliningrad, which borders Poland, if the Obama administration continued its missile defense program. Vladimir Putin could be tempted to exploit a sense of vulnerability within Poland and other former Warsaw pact countries in order to create tensions within NATO and the EU.

Poland is in an uncomfortable position. It has never had much faith in the ability – or willingness – of its European allies to uphold the country's security. And now that Washington's shifting security priorities are forcing Warsaw to increase its reliance on its neighbors, most Europeans are once more cutting their military forces. Poland remains committed to NATO and EU defense cooperation for now. But if most European countries continue to show little interest in defense, they risk weakening Poland's interest in military operations abroad. Worse, they could even undermine the stability of the European continent.

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