



Poland's U-turn on European defence: A missed opportunity?

By Clara Marina O'Donnell

- ★ Worried that the United States is withdrawing from European security, Poland has been attempting to broaden its security guarantees, including through an unprecedented commitment to EU defence co-operation.
- ★ However, Poland's efforts have been met by a limited interest from its EU partners. Their appetite for defence is in most cases dwindling.
- ★ In failing to respond to Poland's new-found interest in European defence, EU governments are missing an opportunity to improve Europe's fledgling ability to tackle military crises abroad. Furthermore, if the deterioration of European military capabilities continues, Warsaw risks feeling so vulnerable that it could give up on its European allies.

In the last three years, Poland has completely overhauled its approach to transatlantic defence co-operation. 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 defence efforts which excluded Washington. In addition, Poland's ties with the EU and several of its neighbours – 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 EU defence 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 co-operation have been met by limited interest from its EU partners, most of which have a dwindling appetite for defence. 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 neighbourhood – 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.

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 defence, 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 co-operation 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 – both before and after it joined the EU in 2004 – Poland viewed the EU's nascent 'common security and defence policy' (CSDP) with suspicion. France and the United Kingdom had instigated EU defence co-operation 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 marginalise 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 defence 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 co-operation', 'mutual aid and assistance' and 'solidarity'.

'Permanent structured co-operation' (PESCO) is designed to allow a core group of EU members to

deepen military co-operation. To qualify for membership of the group, countries would have to meet certain criteria which demonstrated their commitment to defence. (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 defence for EU countries which are also members of the transatlantic alliance. But in 2002-2003 Warsaw was nevertheless nervous about the EU impinging on matters of internal European defence.

Poland's new-found interest in European defence

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 who 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.¹ Warsaw has also insisted that NATO hold more military exercises focusing on territorial defence. 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".² 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

¹ 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.

² Nicholas Kulish, 'Georgian crisis brings attitude change to a flush Poland', *New York Times*, August 8th 2008.

missile defence system. Warsaw's focus seems less on the particular missile or aircraft than on having US boots on the ground 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 programme). The arrival of the Obama administration created additional friction. The US government's attempt to improve relations with Russia and its abrupt and clumsily announced reconfiguration of the Bush administration's missile defence programme – 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 it still cares about Central Europe's security, 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 to the announcement of \$500 billion of cuts to the Pentagon's budget. In January 2012, the Obama administration unveiled a new 'defence guidance' document. This stated that the US would remain committed to NATO, but that the size of the US

³ 'Sustaining US global leadership: Priorities for 21st century defense', US department of defense, January 2012.

armed forces would shrink in the forthcoming decade, and that the US military would shift attention from Europe to the Pacific and the Middle East.³

The US has since announced that it will withdraw around 7,000 combat troops from Europe. And if Congress fails to agree on ways to reduce the federal budget deficit before the end of the year, a further cut of \$600 billion in military spending will automatically be introduced.

The perceived withdrawal of the US from European security has played a significant role in triggering Warsaw's new-found interest in EU defence co-operation. 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 defence efforts.

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

The reasons for Warsaw's interest in EU defence co-operation, 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 neighbours. 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 Smolensk air crash, in April 2010, in which numerous senior Polish government officials, including President Kaczynski, lost their lives. Tusk has calculated that by changing the perception of Polish knee-jerk opposition to Russia he would help secure for Poland 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 vigour, even announcing an ambitious work programme 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 defence efforts – from improving EU-NATO co-operation and making EU battlegroups easier to deploy to increasing the participation of the EU's eastern neighbours 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 defence spending through closer co-operation 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 – the two preceding holders of the EU presidency – to lay out options to implement the concept of permanent structured co-operation.

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 defence. 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 as discussed earlier, Poland is taking steps in the right direction – it has repeatedly deployed its troops to dangerous places, it has begun reforming its armed forces, and it is increasingly keen to co-operate militarily with its EU partners. It is also one of the few European countries which have not significantly reduced their defence spending as a result of the economic crisis. 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 defence.

Yet most European governments have done little to build on Poland's initiatives. The EU countries which have demonstrated a dwindling enthusiasm for defence 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

⁵ Data based on current prices, 'Financial and economic data relating to NATO defence', NATO, March 2011.

NATO allies are committed to spend 2 per cent of their GDP on defence, 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

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

to put a big effort into improving military capabilities, both London and Paris have started to lose interest in EU defence efforts.⁶ In response to the economic crisis, they have preferred to focus on increasing

bilateral defence co-operation – though they are struggling to implement the joint military projects 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 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 centre' in order to help conduct the EU's various operations in the Horn of Africa. The operations centre 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 defence ties with the UK over co-operation 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 defence co-operation with the EU's eastern neighbours.

Furthermore, many European governments remained reluctant to increase co-operation among their armed forces to offset the impact of their military spending cuts. While a few European countries, not least Britain and France, have introduced cost-saving joint initiatives over the last two years, most others remain averse to sharing military capabilities with partners. The European Defence 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 refuelling 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 defence co-operation and to strengthening ties with its EU partners, in particular Germany. 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, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, remains highly suspicious of Germany and averse to close EU co-operation. 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 neighbourhood 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, most Poles thought their country had already done enough to demonstrate its commitment to its allies – in a significant contrast to the predominant Polish mindset

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

when the country deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq. 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 neighbourhood.

A growing sense of insecurity could also adversely affect the modernisation 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 defence and those geared towards expeditionary operations. Some NATO allies believe that Warsaw already wants to spend too much money on weapons designed for territorial defence. 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 – needs to undertake expeditionary 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 defence programme. 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 neighbours, most Europeans are once more cutting their military forces. Poland remains committed to NATO and EU defence co-operation for now. But if most European countries continue to underspend on defence, 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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