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Developing a Strategic Partnership with Poland to Enhance Deterrence against Russia

By Chelsea C. Michta, University of Cambridge

This essay presents a proposal for the United States to develop a strong bilateral security relationship with Poland—a key US ally along NATO’s eastern flank, and a country that has demonstrated its commitment to allocating resources to defense and to working closely with the US military. The objective is to ensure that the defense of the Baltic States and NATO’s eastern flank is not by default reduced to a “liberation strategy” requiring a massive deployment of US troops across Europe as Washington’s only available option.¹ The policy’s goal is to make Poland the lynchpin of a supplemental security and defense architecture in Central and Eastern Europe and to provide, among other benefits, alternative entry points for US forces into Europe by developing the Gdańsk, Gdynia, and Szczecin harbors on the Baltic Sea to supplement existing facilities in Germany.

The overarching strategic objective of this policy is to lower the risk of conflict and to enhance deterrence along NATO’s eastern flank. The policy should include establishing a permanent US Army base in Poland to replace our current persistent rotational deployments, in the process increasing America’s ability to shape its relations with Europe by leveraging Poland’s dominant role in the Visegrád Four (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, and Slovakia). Forming such a close bilateral relationship with a willing partner in Europe under the NATO umbrella will lower the cost of the United States’ security guarantee to Europe, decrease the risk of war, and provide an impetus for NATO to address its security deficits, especially when it comes to defense spending.

The Problem

Since the Russian seizure of Crimea in 2014 and the follow-on Moscow-sponsored separatist war in Donetsk and Luhansk in eastern Ukraine, the United States and its European allies have been confronted with the challenge of securing NATO’s eastern flank against Russian revisionism. Russia’s pressure in Europe has been accompanied by a surge of Chinese power and influence both in Asia and globally. As noted in the 2018 National Defense Strategy,² great power competition is back at the center of US national security priorities, with Russia and China identified in the NDS as the two greatest challengers to America’s global position and interests. The rise of China as a near-peer competitor in the Pacific has lent urgency to the United States’ goal of strengthening the transatlantic alliance to ensure that, in the event of a crisis in Asia, America is not confronted with conflict in two major theaters simultaneously. Hence, developing credible deterrence along NATO’s eastern frontier through close cooperation with allies and partners is a key priority, especially given that, since the end of the Cold War, the US has drastically reduced

its military presence in Europe to approximately 60,000 personnel (of which the Army numbers about 30,000), down from its Cold War peak strength of more than 400,000 troops.³ More important, our European allies have all but disarmed, with only five of NATO's twenty-eight members—excluding the US—meeting the agreed upon 2 percent of GDP on defense spending, and with the Cold War logistical infrastructure all but dismantled.

A key problem facing the United States as it seeks to shore up NATO is the progressive fragmentation of allied consensus when it comes to the nature of the security threats facing Europe, and hence the steps that need to be taken to address current security deficits. Specifically, the largest states in Europe, especially Germany, continue to lag behind when it comes to investing euros in defense, making most of Europe's armed forces only marginally effective and largely nondeployable. For instance, today the Bundeswehr would find it difficult in a crisis to deploy even a brigade, while all six of the German navy's submarines are inoperable⁴ and only four of the country's 128 Eurofighters are able to fly.⁵

The principal challenge for NATO is how to deter Russia so that the United States and its allies are not confronted with an all-out border war. In light of the unwillingness of the majority of European NATO members to spend on defense, it has become increasingly clear that our established assumptions about the extent to which we can rely on our traditional allies need rethinking. Given the increased Russian militarization of the Kaliningrad District, the United States should boost its bilateral relations with allies along NATO's eastern flank, especially those willing and able to support America's foreign and security policy objectives. The most important ally along NATO's eastern flank that remains committed to close cooperation with the United States is Poland. I propose that Washington buttress its relations with Warsaw by making Poland a strategic partner of the United States through the establishment of enhanced defense cooperation, including a permanent US military base on the country's territory.

Analysis

With a population of approximately forty million, Poland is the largest state on NATO's eastern frontier. Among the fastest growing economies in Europe,⁶ it has consistently been spending 2 percent of its GDP on defense, in addition to announcing plans in 2017 to boost defense spending to 2.5 percent of its GDP within a decade and to allocate an additional \$55 billion by 2032.⁷ As part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence, since 2015 Poland has hosted a rotational US Army brigade combat team. In addition to the US Army presence in Poland, NATO has deployed four multinational battalions in the Baltic States and has enhanced its deployments in Romania.

Much of the analysis of the current security situation along NATO's eastern flank has focused on the Baltic States, with the general consensus being that Estonia,

Latvia, and Lithuania are not defensible in an all-out Russian cross-border assault and would have to be liberated after the US brought additional forces to Europe; nonetheless, it is Poland that arguably holds the key to Europe's defense as the so-called Suwałki Gap, a sliver of Polish territory in the northeast, remains Russia's main entry point into Europe should Moscow decide to invade. Hence, reinforcing Poland is critical to the in-depth defense of NATO's territory, not unlike the Fulda Gap in Germany, which during the Cold War was considered to have been the gateway to Europe for Soviet forces had Moscow invaded.

Arguments against establishing a permanent basis in Poland on the grounds that this would "strain cohesion within the alliance"⁸ miss the larger point that much of the current political tension in NATO stems from the willingness of a number of European allies to seek an accommodation with Russia. More important, my proposal argues for an overall rebalancing of US policy in Europe to build a comprehensive and deep security partnership with allies along the eastern flank, especially Poland. It argues that America's deepened strategic partnership with Poland (of which the base would be but the most direct manifestation) would send a strong deterrent message to Russia. This in turn would make the threat of a possible conflict on the eastern flank that might force the United States to intervene that much less likely. Moreover, by upgrading the level of security cooperation with Poland, the United States would be able to influence how the logistical infrastructure in the country, and in Central and Eastern Europe more broadly, would be designed and built, including direct access to Poland's ports in Gdańsk, Gdynia, and Szczecin so as to dramatically reduce the time needed for US reinforcements to arrive should an all-out crisis develop.

Policy Recommendations

Increasing US deployments in Poland, and most importantly going beyond the current "persistent rotational" posture to permanent basing, has several clear advantages and should be US policy going forward. First, the deterrent value of US forward presence was proved during the Cold War and remains the most direct way of forestalling aggression thanks to its "trip wire" effect. Second, considering the current degraded state of European defense infrastructure when it comes to roads, bridges, and access to rail, the US ability to conduct military exercises in Europe is seriously hampered by the need to move troops across Germany into Poland and then into the Baltic States. As recent US exercises have shown, just obtaining national permits for US troops and equipment to move across Europe requires weeks.⁹ Hence, the permanent stationing of US troops in Poland would significantly reduce the time needed to position troops in place for exercises, thereby attenuating the continued significant shortfall in allied exercises when compared to snap exercises conducted by Russia.

Next, establishing a permanent US base in Poland would offer considerable savings relative to the cost of building additional US installations in Germany or Italy,

as the Polish government has already offered \$2 billion to build a base, as well as significant concessions on bilateral Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) rules and access to military proving grounds.¹⁰ This is a significant allied contribution, more in line with what Japan contributes to the cost of US deployments (\$2 billion annually, or 50 percent of the total cost of US bases in Japan), while, in contrast, Germany pays only \$907 million, or 18 percent of the total US cost of stationing troops in the country.¹¹ Also, since Poland has just concluded a deal to acquire the Patriot air and missile defense system from the United States as part of its Wisła air and missile defense program, the US Army would be well positioned to integrate its own systems with those of the Poles. A permanent US base in Poland would also increase interoperability between US and Polish forces both through exercises and daily collaboration, not unlike the close cooperative relationship that developed between US and German forces along NATO's then-eastern flank during the Cold War. Finally, a permanent base in Poland would send a strong political message that the United States stands by its commitment to defend its allies, thereby generating an ancillary stabilizing effect in Scandinavia and the Baltics as well as in south-central Europe.

The overall effectiveness of this proposed policy would be gauged by (1) a significant reduction in US deployment times to the eastern flank during NATO exercises; (2) the savings realized from the host country (Poland) funding a permanent US base versus the cost of rotating and moving troops from the United States across Europe; and (3) most important, its overall deterrent effect against Russia, as measured, for instance, by a reduction of Russian snap exercises along NATO's eastern frontier and a concomitant decline in provocative incidents around the Kaliningrad District and the Baltic Sea area overall. The savings realized through Poland's \$2 billion contribution to the proposed permanent US military basing facilities could be redirected toward other US priority military modernization programs.

Chelsea Michta is a doctoral candidate in modern European history at the University of Cambridge. Her dissertation examines representations of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 in Poland, focusing primarily on developments in the country following the collapse of the Polish People's Republic. This research is supported by the Cambridge Commonwealth, European and International Trust through the provision of a Cambridge International Scholarship. She has interned at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Freedom House. She received her master's degree from Cambridge in 2015 and her BA from Amherst College in Massachusetts in 2013.

¹ This view of US and NATO options, i.e., the "liberation strategy" for the Baltics, has been articulated by David A. Shlapak and Michael Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2016), accessed September 6, 2018, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html.

² *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC, 2018), accessed September 6, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

³ Kristen Bialik, “US Active-Duty Military Presence Overseas Is at Its Smallest in Decades,” Pew Research Center, August 22, 2017, accessed September 6, 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/22/u-s-active-duty-military-presence-overseas-is-at-its-smallest-in-decades>.

⁴ Sebastien Roblin, “Germany Does Not Have One Working Submarine,” *The National Interest*, December 16, 2017, accessed September 7, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/germany-does-not-have-one-working-submarine-23688>.

⁵ “Only 4 of Germany’s 128 Eurofighter Jets Combat Ready—Report,” *Deutsche Welle*, May 2, 2018, accessed September 7, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/only-4-of-germanys-128-eurofighter-jets-combat-ready-report/a-43611873>.

⁶ Lili Bayer, “Europe’s Eastern Tigers Roar Ahead,” *Politico*, April 20, 2018, accessed September 8, 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/central-and-eastern-eu-gdp-growth-economies>.

⁷ “Poland to Allocate Additional \$55 Billion on Defense by 2032: Deputy Minister,” *Reuters*, August 23, 2017, accessed September 7, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-military-spending/poland-to-allocate-additional-55-billion-on-defense-by-2032-deputy-minister-idUSKCN1B31AB>.

⁸ See, for instance, Ben Hodges, “Don’t put US bases in Poland,” *Politico*, June 4, 2018, accessed September 10, 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/dont-put-us-bases-in-poland/>.

⁹ “NATO in Europe Needs ‘Military Schengen’ to Rival Russian Mobility,” *Deutsche Welle*, September 12, 2017, accessed September 8, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/nato-in-europe-needs-military-schengen-to-rival-russian-mobility/a-40470302>.

¹⁰ Kyle Rempher, “Why Poland Wants a Permanent US Military Base, and Is Willing to Pay \$2 Billion for It,” *Army Times*, May 29, 2018, accessed September 7, 2018, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/2018/05/29/why-poland-wants-a-permanent-us-military-base-and-is-willing-to-pay-2-billion-for-it>.

¹¹ John Vandiver, “Germany Irked by Demands for Financial Support for US Bases,” *Stars and Stripes*, February 2, 2017, accessed September 8, 2018, <https://www.stripes.com/news/germans-irked-by-demands-for-financial-support-for-us-bases-1.452175>.