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Poland: The Lynchpin of Security on NATO's Front Lines

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While Moscow's aggressive actions have changed the way many in NATO view the threat posed by Russia, NATO's eastern members have long considered Russia an existential threat and have planned accordingly. Poland, because of its large size, geographic location, and historical experience has become the lynchpin of security in Eastern Europe since joining NATO in 1999.

The U.S. can and should do more to assist Poland in building strong defense capabilities, improving interoperability, and increasing political willingness to use its influence to improve security in the Alliance. It's also vital that the upcoming NATO summit, which will be held in Poland in July 2016, sees real improvement in the capabilities of the Alliance.

Geographically Important

Poland is situated in the center of Europe, sharing a border with four NATO allies, as well as a long border with Belarus and Ukraine, and a 144-mile border with Russia alongside the Kaliningrad Oblast. Poland is the only NATO member state with a land border to the Baltic states. Poland's 65-mile border with Lithuania, as well as Polish ports and airspace, will prove vitally important should the Baltics come under attack. According to reports, NATO contingency plans for liberating the Baltic states,

codenamed Eagle Guardian, call for heavy reliance on Polish troops and ports,¹ which has made some in Warsaw fearful about their own defense in such a scenario.²

In June 2015 in the town of Nowa Sól, the local government removed a memorial to the brotherhood in arms of Polish and Soviet soldiers during WWII, which led to warnings of "most negative consequences" from Russia.³

The Poles know from experience not to consider Russian threats to be empty. The best way to alleviate Polish concerns is for the U.S. to show a renewed commitment to NATO with a permanent and robust presence in Europe. NATO contingency plans must address the risk posed by Kaliningrad and Belarus to Poland. These plans must be frequently put to the test in exercises with strong U.S. participation.

A Net Security Provider

In Independence, Missouri, on March 12, 1999, Polish foreign minister Bronislaw Geremek spoke at Poland's accession ceremony to NATO, promising that "we will not lack the determination, courage, and imagination, needed to reinforce our own capability as a member of the Alliance."⁴ Poland has made good on that promise, spending 1.8 percent of GDP in 2014 on defense expenditures, a figure that is expected to grow to 2.2 percent by the end of this year. Additionally, Poland has served and sacrificed side by side with the U.S., losing 44 soldiers in Afghanistan and 23 in Iraq. Poland currently retains 150 troops in Afghanistan under NATO's Operation Resolute Support.

Poland spends a greater percentage of its defense budget on actual equipment (31.1 percent) than any NATO member except Luxembourg and double the

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NATO average (15.3 percent). Poland plans to spend \$42 billion in the next decade to upgrade its military capabilities, including its submarine fleet, helicopters, missile defense systems, and armored personnel carriers. The U.S. should welcome the new Polish investments and maximize their interoperability with U.S. and NATO capabilities.

Ties with U.S.: Growing, But Permanence Needed

In April 2014, in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the U.S. deployed 150 temporary troops to the Baltic states and Poland. In June 2015, the U.S. announced a temporary pre-positioning of 250 tanks, Bradley fighting vehicles, and artillery across six NATO member states including Poland. While the U.S. has operated a small aviation detachment in Poland since November 2012, in 2014, the U.S. temporarily deployed F-16s to Lask Air Base and 12 U.S. A-10 Warhogs to a Polish air base in Łódź. Finally from March 20 to April 1, 2015, 400 American soldiers and 100 vehicles marched miles across Eastern Europe, including Poland, in a show of resolve named Operation Dragoon Ride.

In the European Command's 2015 Posture Statement, the commander of U.S. forces in Europe, General Philip Breedlove, stated: "Our permanent presence also allows us to maximize the military capabilities of our Allies. Permanently stationed forces are a force multiplier that rotational deployments can never match."⁵ While the new temporary deployments are a welcome step in the right direction, the U.S. should permanently station troops and equipment in Poland.

The Way Ahead

Poland is the lynchpin of security in Eastern Europe and a vital ally deserving full U.S. support. In the year leading up to the 2016 NATO Summit, the U.S. should:

- **Work on making the upcoming Warsaw Summit a success.** As NATO focuses again on collective security, it is only fitting that Poland will host the next NATO summit in July 2016. The U.S. should work with Poland to lay the groundwork now for a successful summit that includes enlargement and fulfillment of promises made at Wales in 2014.
- **Improve interoperability.** The U.S. should encourage frequent NATO exercises, including scenarios that take into account the specific risks that Kaliningrad and Belarus could pose to Poland in the event of a Russian attack. The U.S. should practice robust and consistent participation in NATO exercises.
- **Station U.S. troops in Poland permanently.** The rotational and temporary deployments of U.S. assets are a step in the right direction. However, only a robust, permanent presence will show long-term resolve on the part of the United States to help defend its NATO ally. The U.S. must also invest in Host Nation Support for Poland, which will be critical in the event of a Russian attack on the Baltic states.
- **Allow Poland to join the Visa Waiver Program (VWP).** Allowing Poland to join the VWP will send a strong message that the U.S. stands with the Poles on strengthening security on both sides of the Atlantic while gaining diplomatic, economic, and security benefits. Poland, one of only seven NATO allies who have not yet been admitted to the VWP, should not be automatically disqualified because its visa-refusal rate is above 3 percent.
- **Support the Military Police (MP) Center of Excellence (COE).** Poland is home to the NATO Military Police COE, whose mission is to improve

1. Ian Traynor, "WikiLeaks Cables Reveal Secret Nato Plans to Defend Baltics from Russia," *The Guardian*, December 6, 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/06/wikileaks-cables-nato-russia-baltics> (accessed August 11, 2015).

2. Edward Lucas, "The Coming Storm," Center for European Policy Analysis, June 2015, p. 8, <http://www.cepa.org/sites/default/files/styles/medium/Baltic%20Sea%20Security%20Report-%20%282%29.compressed.pdf> (accessed August 11, 2015).

3. Marcin Goettig and Polina Devitt, "Russia Outraged by Poland's Removal of Soviet War Memorial," Reuters, July 4, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/07/04/us-russia-poland-monument-idUSKCN0PEOH220150704> (accessed August 11, 2015).

4. Bronislaw Geremek, address delivered at the ceremony of deposition of Protocols of Accession, Independence, MO, March 12, 1999, <http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/1999/s990312d.htm> (accessed August 11, 2015).

5. U.S. European Command, "Posture Statement," 2015, <http://www.eucom.mil/mission/background/posture-statement> (accessed August 12, 2015).

the MP capability of the member nations, and to improve interoperability. The U.S. should actively participate in the COE.

- **Lift energy export restrictions.** Russia supplies around 60 percent of Polish natural gas imports and 91 percent of oil imports. A new supply of liquid natural gas (LNG) and oil from the United States, combined with the newly built LNG terminal at Świnoujście and the Gas Interconnection Poland–Lithuania (GIPL), a natural gas pipeline between Lithuania and Poland expected to be completed in 2019, will help decrease Polish dependence on Russian energy.
- **Speed up the implementation of a ballistic missile defense (BMD) system.** The threat of ballistic missiles from Iran or Russia has only increased. The U.S. should deploy a layered, comprehensive missile defense system in Europe, while also supporting efforts by Poland to increase its own BMD capabilities.

- **Promote the export of battle-tested U.S. defense equipment.** The U.S. should, when appropriate, promote the export of U.S. defense equipment to Poland. When a government buys American military equipment it not only receives battle-tested equipment, it also gains a deeper military relationship with the U.S.

Conclusion

Poland has invested in hard military capabilities and has shown a serious commitment to collective defense, becoming a key security contributor within NATO. The Poles have shown themselves deserving of U.S. political and military support. By assisting Poland, the U.S. can advance security in Europe while helping Poland take on a larger leadership role within the Alliance.

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