



A Strategy for Europe from National Perspectives: Poland

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The security environment in and around Europe is becoming increasingly precarious and unforeseeable. As Poland faces an unknown end to Russia's war against Ukraine, the repositioning of the United States, and multi-crises in the EU's southern and eastern neighborhoods, it will support significantly greater EU involvement in stabilizing its surroundings and strengthening the defense capabilities of member states. Polish-German cooperation will be crucial for the credibility of European deterrence and the security of the EU's external border.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Russia's war against Ukraine, China's growing assertiveness, and a United States that is currently repositioning itself toward foes and allies demonstrate that the world has entered an era of increased strategic competition. Under the Trump administration, Washington is preparing to secure and enhance its own political, economic, technological, and military standing – while departing from the principle of the primacy of international law and adopting transactional policies that could have painful consequences for US allies. China and Russia see this shift in US power as an opportunity to challenge the international order, improve their position, and create respective spheres of influence.

From the Polish perspective, Europe needs to respond and adjust to these developments by increasing its ability to defend itself and resist malign influence and interference in its politics, its economy, and – broadly understood – its security. The role of the EU should be to support member states in enhancing

European input into NATO, to make up for the possibility of a partial US disengagement from Europe, and to keep support for Ukraine high on the agenda.

Europeans will be faced with an aggressive Russia for years to come because Russia's war in Ukraine is not about land. Instead, Moscow wants to create its own sphere of influence. It aims to subordinate the whole country of Ukraine or destroy it as a functioning state. Putin hopes to create a buffer zone in Northern and Central Europe (which would directly affect Poland) and to limit the sovereignty of European states to take political and economic advantage of the EU (which would affect Germany). This signifies a profound revision of the European order that has existed since the end of the Cold War. In the short-term, Russia under Putin will continue to use hybrid warfare mixed with military pressure against Europe. In the future, when Moscow sees a window of opportunity, Russia might take direct military action against European countries, particularly on NATO's northeastern flank. Such

a move may well be synchronized with Chinese operations in the Indo-Pacific.

The Trump administration's vision and proposals for how to change US-European burden sharing in NATO and end Russia's war in Ukraine have already challenged Europeans. From Warsaw's perspective, the Europeans should seize this moment and see it as a chance to build a Europe that is more capable in defense – a process in which the EU could be instrumental. Although grave, the current challenges may also be beneficial. They may lead to the Europeans finally taking more responsibility for their own security and to an EU that not only contributes to a much larger extent to European resilience, deterrence, and defense in NATO but also to stability in its eastern and southern neighborhood. From Poland's standpoint, the EU decision to undertake massive defense investments now, along with raising national defense budgets, could be the most effective deterrent for avoiding war with Russia and reducing Europe's dependence on fluctuations in US policy.

AREAS FOR CLOSER COOPERATION

The European Union cannot defend itself on its own. For Poland and other eastern flank countries, deterrence and the defense of Europe is – and still will be – up to NATO because of the irreplaceable structures, processes, and planning it has for that task. The Trump administration has declared its support for an Alliance in which Europe takes responsibility for defending itself. However, Trump might decide on a partial troop withdrawal from Europe. In such a situation, while Warsaw would try to secure the US presence on its territory, the EU could simultaneously serve as an accelerator for building Europe's industrial, military, logistical, and infrastructural capabilities, which could be used for NATO purposes, among others. Indeed, the EU can help its member states to increase resilience, and it can generate funds for the short-, mid-, and long-term support of Ukraine.

With the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO, only four EU member states remain outside the Alliance. Given this fact, Russia's aggression, the overall worsening security environment, and the need to rebalance US-European burden sharing in NATO, the EU can and should play a significant role in contributing to deterrence and the defense of Europe. It must take a larger role in defense investment. France has traditionally articulated such expectations toward Brussels. Poland – together with the Baltic states and, more recently, the Nordic countries – has joined it. Depending on the progress of talks to form a new ruling coalition in Berlin, Germany could possibly get onboard.

Neither treaty reforms nor significant legislative work are needed for the European Union to increase its capacity to act on defense. From Poland's perspective, the EU should under no circumstances engage in fruitless and divisive discussions on institutional reforms at this time. EU institutions and member

states must learn how to deepen cooperation in areas that are essential for common security and prosperity within the existing institutional framework. They should make financing the strengthening of defense capabilities and counteracting the decline in the standard of living in the EU despite unfavorable global conditions their top priority – also by lowering energy prices and revising climate goals that are too ambitious compared to the policies of the United States, China, and the Global South. At the same time, EU authorities should safeguard the Union's most important achievements and prevent their erosion due to unilateral actions by certain member states, particularly regarding the free movement of people, goods, and services within both the EU and Schengen Area.

The first step toward greater EU involvement in the security of member states should be to agree on a clear division of tasks between the EU and NATO. Along with national efforts, the Union should be co-responsible for generating military capabilities, supporting the arms industry, and investing in infrastructure to facilitate collective defense and expeditionary activities that are outside NATO's area of interest but crucial for the EU's security.

There are three main obstacles that hinder European NATO members from meeting the NATO targets regarding collective defense: insufficient military expenditure, too little joint investment, and a too low level of cooperation in modernizing armed forces. Because EU and NATO members from the north-eastern flank are overburdened with collective defense tasks – and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future – EU mechanisms and programs should aim to achieve more equitable burden sharing. European states should strive to narrow the gap in defense spending. The programs prepared by the European Commission to support the arms industry should favor those countries that spend the most on

defense in relation to their GDP. Yet, in addition to national military expenditures, EU states should also consider joining European expenditures for defense purposes.

Representatives from Europe's six largest economies (E6) – France, Germany, Poland, United Kingdom, Italy, and Spain – could work together with the representative from the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8) – Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden – to encourage greater political cooperation among the E6 countries and defense efforts within the EU. It is important to include the UK in such cooperative efforts to preserve that country's strategic proximity to the EU. The resulting E6+ format would be a voice of leadership in Europe on security and defense policy, comparable to the cooperation currently taking place in the Indo-Pacific among Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia. Building on the regional alliance of the Weimar Triangle consisting of Germany, France, and Poland, a Weimar+ format could also seek a convergence of positions on additional EU defense funding and its allocation as well as on further support and security guarantees to Ukraine. An E6+ voice could ensure that Europe is not paralyzed by the risk of the Trump administration making a deal with Russia on Ukraine over the heads of Kyiv and the EU.

The aggressive hybrid activities of Russia (and China) against Europe need a more coordinated and consolidated response from the national and EU level. The directions for joint action are indicated in the [EU Hybrid Toolbox](#), a key part of the [Strategic Compass for Security and Defense](#) from March 2022, and in the report “[Safer Together: Strengthening Europe's Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness](#),” prepared under the leadership of former Finnish President Sauli Niinistö and presented by the European Commission in October 2024. Arguably, the report sets the scene for an EU preparedness strategy

and provides a needed impetus for additional EU legislative and regulatory activity to set out common minimum standards for EU countries regarding compliance with preparedness principles in areas such as education, strategic reserves, construction, energy security, and public procurement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Polish experts and decision-makers strongly believe that breakthroughs are needed in four key areas for the EU to take on a greater role in strengthening defense and deterrence on the continent.

First, the EU needs to translate the shared assessment of the threat posed by Russia into an **increase in national and joint defense spending** across its member states. More robust funding mechanisms for security and defense purposes are needed in the short and medium term. In the short term (until 2027), new financing solutions will be especially necessary. Some additional funding could be found within the EU's current [Multiannual Financial Framework](#) (MFF) and in unused funds from loans for the [NextGenerationEU](#) program or cohesion funds. National defense spending must be treated flexibly in the context of the [Stability and Growth Pact](#). The European Investment Bank could provide more financing for defense needs on better conditions. Governments in Warsaw and some other EU capitals – Paris, Rome, Madrid, and recently also Helsinki and Copenhagen – believe that the EU cannot escape a decision to create a more robust European funding vehicle to meet the defense needs of both Europe and Ukraine. These funds can be generated by Eurobonds resembling the Next-GenerationEU fund or a reformed fund resembling the [European Peace Facility](#), additional EU taxes, and/or frozen Russian assets. In the long term, the EU's security and defense priorities should

be reflected in and financed by its next MFF, covering 2028 to 2034.

Second, the EU needs to **better decide what it funds**. EU support must not only address the goal of developing its arms industry but also closing critical gaps in its defense capabilities. As the EU needs to expedite the buildup of European military capability to gradually replace the contributions of the United States to NATO, it should focus on investing into the research and development of defense industrial products and on a limited, focused list of capability priorities that require vast and imminent investments. Obvious examples that overlap with NATO priorities are air and missile defense, ammunition, long range fires, and strategic enablers. In addition, some new EU funding will need to be found to assist the member states in implementing the higher EU standards in civilian (and military) preparedness that are being planned. At the same time, new funding will have to take over the majority of financing for military support for Ukraine – to replace lost US funding in the short term and to provide continuous funding in the mid- and long term even after the war is over.

Third, the EU needs to **be clearer about who it supports**. In Poland, there is a strong conviction that EU support needs to be more evenly distributed throughout the Union. Additional funding is needed to strengthen the defense readiness of the most exposed countries. It should also be directed toward defense-related infrastructure projects like the [East x](#) in Poland or the [Baltic Defense Line](#). EU support cannot exclude European partners and allies, such as the UK and Norway, and needs to allow for their participation in funding arrangements and grants from these funds. This has been discussed over the last decade but the time has now come to take more conclusive and bold decisions.

Fourth, the EU needs to **improve how it manages its decision process**. Security cooperation among France, Germany,

Poland, Italy, Spain, and the UK – ideally in an expanded E6+ context – needs to be strengthened to work out feasible solutions in and beyond the three areas mentioned above. The EU needs to establish an informal smaller working group to chart a new course in security and defense.

Poland would also be interested in closer cooperation with Germany to ensure security in the Baltic Sea and prevent hybrid threats. The leaders of both countries should closely coordinate their responses to threats related to illegal and uncontrolled migration and work toward preserving the Schengen Area. Accusations of migrant pushbacks between Polish and German law enforcement authorities have become a significant element of the populist narrative in both countries, fueling additional tensions. To thwart the instrumentalization of migration by the Belarusian regime, Germany could support efforts to secure Poland's eastern border.

Poland hopes that the emerging ruling coalition in Germany likely led by Friedrich Merz as the country's new chancellor will be ready to make bold decisions in the field of security and defense. Above all, Berlin is expected to help achieve a breakthrough in the approach to financing these efforts – i.e., through European defense bonds – comparable to the one that led to an agreement on joint debt after the Covid-19 pandemic. From Poland's perspective, long-term decisions regarding the funding of the modernization and expansion of the Bundeswehr will also be crucial. While France and the United Kingdom are implementing their military modernization programs, neither country is shaping its land forces for the possibility of a prolonged, high-intensity conventional conflict. In this context, the capabilities and size of the Polish and German armed forces may prove essential in the event of a significant reduction in the US military presence in Europe.

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The DGAP memo series *A Strategy for Europe from National Perspectives* responds to Josef Janning's "Your Turn, Berlin: A German Strategy for Europe." Janning's text argues that the *Zeitenwende* has rendered Europe's status quo unsustainable and calls on Germany to define and drive the European agenda. Each subsequent piece explores how a key state – Italy, the UK, Poland, and France – envisions its role and priorities in shaping a cohesive European strategy. These contributions provide a broader exchange of perspectives to inform the debate on the EU's future ahead of Germany's snap federal elections on February 23, 2025, and during the negotiations to form its new ruling coalition.