

A close-up photograph of a Polish soldier in a camouflage uniform and beret. The soldier is looking off to the side with a serious expression. The background is blurred, showing the Polish flag and the European Union flag.

Poland's Deterrence and Defense Posture

Preparing for 21st Century Threats

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European Policy
Analysis

Table of Contents

The issue 1

The Eastern threat 2

In allies we trust? 4

Deterrence options 5

What now? 8

Endnotes 10



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THE ISSUE

Russia is back—both politically, in its drive to reassert itself as a great power, and militarily in its ability and willingness to use force against its immediate neighbors and beyond. For Poland and the rest of Central Europe, this brings urgency to the dilemma of how to dissuade Russia from contemplating hostile actions and, if that fails, how to show Moscow in the most convincing way that such an attack would be far more costly than any substantial gains.

Two questions are particularly relevant here: First, to what extent should Poland be prepared to act alone in setting up a credible national-level deterrent? Second, to what extent could and should Poland rely on others—and NATO's deterrence posture—for its own protection? This same discussion periodically resurfaces in the capitals of other U.S. allies such as Japan and South Korea, suggesting the need for a detailed analysis of options available to Poland to strengthen most effectively its own deterrence posture.

The Eastern threat

Beyond its aggression against Ukraine, Moscow has positioned itself more fundamentally as a strategic adversary of the West and NATO. Its most recent military doctrines—published in 2010 and 2014—listed as “military dangers” the consequences of NATO enlargement (and specifically the buildup of defense infrastructure on the territories of new NATO members), as well as the deployment of foreign troops in countries bordering Russia. The updated Russian National Security Strategy, issued in December 2015, warns that NATO activities constitute “a threat to the national security” of Russia.

The Kremlin will thus continue to cite NATO’s military buildup in Eastern Europe as a justification for its own actions along the alliance’s eastern borders. It has also most likely prepared a number of surprising moves—involving the deployment of both conventional and WMD-capable forces (such as theatre ballistic missiles or cruise missile systems)—with details to be unveiled in response to particular actions by NATO or its member states.

Yet it remains unknown under which circumstances Russia would be ready to move from ‘assertive posturing’ to an escalatory crisis with NATO—either by occupying territory outright or a limited strike to “break” the alliance politically, thereby demonstrating its military impotence.¹ So far, Russia seems prepared to engage in conflicts with countries which were either in a state of internal chaos (like Ukraine) as well as those not covered by explicit external security guarantees (like Georgia). In Syria, Russia could actually point to the invitation of the Assad regime as cover for its involvement.



In addition, Moscow's military interventions in Europe have taken place in areas Russia considers to be within its zone of privileged interests—a zone that, for the moment, does not include any of NATO's current 28 members, and certainly not Poland. Finally, unlike “Project Novorossia” in Ukraine, which the Kremlin could quietly abandon in the face of ground opposition, the only way out of a conventional military conflict with NATO—which Russia would most likely start losing at a certain point—would be either by admitting defeat, or by escalation to nuclear war. This is a choice Russia's leadership clearly wants to avoid.

Thus, Poland's basic challenge is to minimize Russia's chances of miscalculating, particularly when it comes to Warsaw's own defensive resolve—as well as NATO's resolve to support a covenant ally. Deterring Russia from aggressive action from the outset is clearly the preferred outcome. Still, the effectiveness of deterrence can be weakened if Moscow concludes at some point that Poland is either isolated from its allies or NATO is divided beyond repair. This is a real risk given Europe's internal cleavages over the status of refugees, divergent assessments on security pressures from the south and east, and the perception in some quarters that the United States may be losing interest in Europe's defense.

Under such circumstances, Russian leaders might be tempted to test NATO's cohesion, most likely by applying military pressure that exists just below the threshold of an Article 5 response. Examples include the use of cyber operations, “little green men” infiltration along the lines of the Crimea operation, the use of criminal networks, or the initiation of military incidents against Eastern members of the alliance.²



In allies we trust?

From the outset, Warsaw's main reason for joining NATO was to counter the detrimental effect that a regional imbalance of forces with Russia would have on Polish security. The need to guarantee support from more powerful partners was obvious. Even the weakened Russian armed forces of the 1990s had at their disposal sufficient conventional capabilities—not to mention nuclear weapons—to prevail against Poland in a hypothetical confrontation.

After NATO's enlargement in 1999, however, it was Russia's turn to conclude that its conventional armed forces would be no match for the alliance. This prompted Russia to modernize those forces while introducing the “nuclear de-escalation strike” concept—to be activated only if faced with a conventional defeat.³ On the Polish side, the assumption of NATO military superiority and the demands of faraway operations in Iraq and Afghanistan led to a certain complacency over deterrence and territorial defense.

Yet even before Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, Poland began to re-assess its defense posture. This resulted in a shift toward robust defenses against air and ballistic missile attacks and potential incursions from mechanized forces. Russia's growing revisionist attitudes, and its military capabilities in these two areas, helped to drive this transformation. The change also resulted from the public's fatigue with out-of-area deployments. Civilian and military leaders grew concerned that Polish troops were becoming too “expeditionary” in character. Such an emphasis hindered their ability to fulfill a more immediate mission: defending Polish territory. The net result was an effort to address neglected capability gaps in air and missile defense, coastal defense, artillery and heavy armor, as well as rethinking the role of Polish air and naval forces in future conflict.

After Crimea, a related concern—one that had worried Polish decision-makers ever since the 1990s—was NATO's credibility and reliability as the guarantor of Polish security. NATO's quick reaction to Russia's 2014 aggression against Ukraine and implementation of its Reassurance Action Plan—spearheaded by the United States—should have helped dispel some of Poland's gravest worries about NATO solidarity and cohesion. However, Polish decision-makers also know that the most influential members of the alliance have resisted calls to deploy permanent and substantial land forces—backed by sufficient enablers—along NATO's eastern flank. Some have interpreted this reluctance as confirmation that Poland's allies—the United States included—may still want to leave open the option of abstaining from engagement in a possible conflict involving Russia, or even of reversing reassurance measures that have already been adopted. In short, the old belief that “in allies we trust” acquired skeptics.

In the medium to long term, Poland fears that the United States will focus on its “Asia pivot,” get distracted by other crises or even reassess and scale down its overall security engagement in Europe.⁴ Indeed, the generation of American politicians and bureaucrats with vivid memories of the Cold War, NATO enlargement and Europe's importance to U.S. foreign policy may be leaving the stage—and Washington's current resolve to stand up to Russian aggression may be short-lived. Meanwhile, Poland's current leaders have little confidence in the European Union's viability as a driver of European integration and cooperation when it comes to common threats, Russia included. Linger in the background is the suspicion that Western European powers may, at some point, be willing to accommodate Russia and rewrite the rules of Europe's security system in line with Russian designs, leaving Poland isolated.

Deterrence options

Taking into account current anxiety over the level of outside support for Poland, it seems only prudent to examine Warsaw's options for maximizing its own indigenous deterrence potential *vis-à-vis* Russia. Such an analysis should also include options that assume a weakening of political resolve or the inability of NATO to come to Poland's assistance. Broadly speaking, Warsaw can adopt three approaches in developing its deterrence posture. These would depend on the nature of the Russian threat, Poland's assessment of its strategic environment, and the reliability of an Article 5 response. These include:

1. Strength in numbers. This approach assumes Poland would likely face any Russian threat alone—as its NATO allies would fail to act quickly enough, or at all, in a crisis—and that such an aggression would be aimed at conquering and occupying Polish territory. Besides efforts to boost national resilience to multidimensional, limited attacks, Poland would need to mobilize and deploy large numbers of regular and support troops to show Moscow that, if it decides to launch an aggression, Poland will force it into a prolonged campaign of attrition along the lines of the Afghan or Chechen campaigns. Adopting such an approach does not require investing in expensive military capabilities—of the kind needed for defending high-value targets and for striking deep into enemy territory—but rather in a mix of armored forces and widely available, low-tech but effective weapons such as portable air-defense and anti-tank systems. In practice, that approach would mean enlarging regular armed forces beyond their current strength, augmented by National Guard and territorial defense units and supported by a large number of reservists. The emphasis by Poland's new defense leadership on such units may indicate that this posture is increasingly attractive from Warsaw's point of view.

This option however, has a serious weakness: it may result in Poland becoming relatively well-prepared to counter the most dangerous form of Russian military action, namely the seizure of territory, while being ill-suited to deal with other forms of military provocations, pressure or precision strikes aimed at disabling its key assets. It would also transform the armed forces into a far less effective instrument to complement NATO in Article 5 operations, as well as deploy for high intensity out-of-Article 5-area conflicts.

2. A quality national deterrent. The second approach is based on different assumptions about Poland's strategic situation and the security environment. In this case, the main threat facing Warsaw wouldn't be territorial conquest, but rather the prospects of a disabling, conventional Russian attack aimed at destroying high-value targets before NATO could mobilize or take countermeasures. Under this scenario, Poland—in order to sufficiently deter the Russians—would need to demonstrate that it has adequate national means to both protect its own critical assets and strike back hard at its opponent.

Warsaw's recent efforts to develop the capabilities of its armed forces followed the logic of developing dedicated 'deterrent' capabilities. This ambitious effort, known as the Technical Modernization Program (TMP), was unveiled by the previous government. If completed, it will allow Poland to defend against short-range ballistic missile threats, ensure the sovereignty of its airspace, protect its coastline, and project power beyond its borders with stand-off JASSM cruise missiles. Additionally, Poland will have longer-range combat UAVs, and long-range artillery and rocket forces. Poland's armed forces will have the "fangs" to deter aggressive behavior in their neighborhood.

Developing these capabilities under the “Polish Fangs” banner makes perfect sense if the aim is to provide offensive and defensive options to the armed forces, thereby increasing their ability to defend Polish territory and the neighboring Baltic states. Likewise, they can also endow Poland with the ability to participate in joint out-of-area operations. Yet questions remain about their stand-alone effectiveness *vis-à-vis* Russia. One challenge is distance. When faced with a national security emergency, Poland may be capable of targeting tactical and operational level assets on the Russian periphery, including Kaliningrad, such as radars and command and control centers. It remains to be seen, however, if Poland’s weapons systems have the range to threaten Russia’s main decision-making centers, let alone damage or destroy crucial military installations—especially if they must first overcome multi-layered Russian defenses. Another obstacle is Russia’s ability to dominate the escalation cycle of a crisis. No matter how strong Poland becomes, Russia will always have the nuclear card—something Poland will not possess. Finally, some of the capabilities being pursued under TMP are expensive and require additional investments (i.e., command-and-control, communications, and Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance capabilities) to make them effective—especially without support from other allies.



Approximate range of Russian Iskander-M theater ballistic missiles.

3. Investing in Alliance strength. The third approach takes as a point of departure the question of how Russia views the balance of forces in Central Europe, and especially Poland's military capabilities. Presently, the over-match between Russian and Polish forces is significant.⁵ At the regional level, Russian planners must consider how Poland's new defense potential requires it to build up the capabilities of its forces in Kaliningrad and the Baltic Fleet. But at the strategic level, Moscow still directs its primary focus on the Pentagon's military profile in Europe. NATO is viewed as a vehicle to fulfill U.S. strategic objectives. Seen from Russia's perspective, the alliance's strength derives mostly from American participation and the deployment of U.S. forces—along with nuclear weapons—in Europe. Consequently, in deterring a Russian attack, coercion or probe of the alliance, the capabilities of Poland and other individual NATO countries—with the possible exception of nuclear-armed Britain and France—will most likely make a difference to Moscow only if they can be deployed together with the U.S. forces. In fact, Russian strategists see Polish territory mainly as a staging ground for a possible U.S. deployment in the region, including forward-deployed conventional forces and the upper-tier missile defense installation in Redzikowo⁶

When acting alone, Poland's plans for a mass mobilization, or its focus on a "national conventional deterrent," are unlikely to deter Russian decision-makers from taking hostile action. Russia's leadership may not even notice the development of Warsaw's own deterrence posture. Yet, if NATO's internal cleavages degrade allied solidarity, or if Poland becomes politically and strategically isolated from its key allies—most crucially the United States—Warsaw's stand-alone national deterrence posture is unlikely to offer adequate protection against Moscow. Therefore, it is crucial for Poland to get its deterrence policy, investments, actions and overall messaging right.





What now?




In order to adequately deter 21st century threats, several points are immediately apparent.

First, Poland will need to swiftly complete the most important projects included in the TMP. The country does not enjoy the luxury of time in fielding new capabilities, especially since many of the most sophisticated platforms that Polish planners want to deploy will take years to fully integrate into the country's armed forces, let alone NATO's wider defense architecture. This means that even if the strategic decisions are taken now, the new assets will not fully protect Poland until well into the 2020s.

Second, the cheapest, most effective, and most immediate way of deterring Russian aggression is Poland's close and continued cooperation with NATO allies. National capabilities will not be enough. Only when operating in tandem with the collective defenses of NATO can Poland benefit from the comprehensive mix of national and allied defenses that might deter Russia, including: nuclear forces, upper- and lower-tier anti-missile systems, and conventional forces, as well as a framework for cooperation in early warning, cyberspace and information warfare operations.

Third, the U.S. must remain an indispensable partner for credible deterrence. Since NATO's 2014 Wales Summit, the alliance has moved toward a "modern deterrence" model featuring the limited—but tangible—forward presence of troops in Central and Eastern Europe. Since this defensive posture relies heavily on U.S. armed forces, there is an elevated need for Warsaw to cultivate the strongest possible bilateral links with Washington. Regarding the nuclear dimension—to which Russia pays particularly close attention—there is no viable substitute for the extended (read nuclear) deterrence provided by the United States and anchored in the collective defense obligations of the Washington Treaty.

Recognizing these factors, next steps for Poland should include:

-  Explicitly framing its decisions on force posture (and new capabilities under the TMP) as contributions that will support NATO's overall deterrent. This means, for example, synchronizing decisions on the territorial disposition of its armed forces with a broader effort—now underway—to establish contingency plans and a continual presence of NATO troops in the Baltic states and Poland.
-  Acquiring military equipment that is consistent with alliance-wide capability gaps identified through the NATO Defense Planning Process (NDPP). That puts a premium on ensuring the full interoperability of Poland's equipment and defense architecture with that of other NATO countries.
-  Planning of the exercises and other forms of regional cooperation in such a way as to complement NATO-level initiatives like the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTV) or the Framework Nations Concept (introduced in 2013).

If Poland is fully integrated into NATO's existing defense planning and architecture, as in the case of its air and missile defense networks, and could field advanced capabilities that were complementary to NATO core missions, then Polish planners could more confidently count on alliance assets—particularly those of the United States—being available in the event of a crisis. This would cost less than fielding a broad spectrum of independent—and expensive—capabilities on its own. Finally, once NATO defenses of Europe's eastern flank have been fortified, Poland should not exclude the possibility of military confidence-building measures with Russia.

Investing in a stronger NATO and working towards maximizing the likelihood for a common response of the Alliance to any future threats will remain the best deterrence policy for Poland. And while Warsaw should act swiftly to establish its own defensive capabilities, it is crucial that these are framed within NATO's wider deterrence posture.

At the same time, poor decisions on deterrence posture now can be politically and strategically costly in the future. The danger is that the outsiders, Moscow included, will interpret signals of uncertainty, delay, or doubts in the resolve of allies, as symptoms of alliance-wide weakness. For countries like Poland, the perils of the 21st century evoke the old adage: either hang together with allies or be hanged separately. Clearly, the former is much more preferable to the latter.

Endnotes

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