

Poland in the Western sphere

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“Moving our country into a whole new geo-political sphere” – this was the answer given by Jerzy Buzek, prime minister at the time of Poland’s accession to NATO¹, when asked about the the goal of membership ten years on. I believe this remark expresses not only the quintessential meaning of NATO membership for a post-Communist country - until 1991 a member of the Warsaw Treaty - and not only the re-orientation of Poland’s foreign, security and defence policy at the turn of the 1980’s and 1990’s, but also the motivation for subsequent international activity. By entering NATO – and five years later, the European Union – the country fulfilled both its strategic objectives, strongly directing its internal development towards a more secure, democratic and affluent state.

Poland had several important motives which urged vigorous efforts towards joining NATO. Some of these, though perhaps in a changed form, remain valid. The main one was related to uncertainty as to the development of the situation in Europe - including the immediate neighbourhood of our country – in the years following the cold war. Political elites originating from anti-Communist opposition, from the “Solidarity” movement, from the Freedom Union (Unia Wolności – UW) and its successors, were convinced that it would be unfavourable to leave Poland in the so-called grey, or buffer zone (which de facto lasted until 1999 and, to our mind, posed a risk, or even meant a relative deterioration of our geo-political standing). In time, the post-Communists began to share this view. The option of neutrality, in any case proposed by very few, was thus rejected along with the possibility of a referendum on the future security status of the country. Neutrality or indecision about accessing NATO could leave us in Moscow’s influence zone, while the whole point of post-1989 changes was to break away from dependence on the USSR, and later Russia. (This need still exists today, as illustrated by the case of energy security policy).

Polish security policy - also after NATO accession - is marked by the notion of threat resulting from a possible destabilisation east of our borders (including the possibility of armed conflict), these borders constituting the Eastern boundaries of NATO and of the EU. It has

¹ Ratification of the act took place on 23/02/1999, and formal accession – on March 12th).

recently been remarked that Russia's campaign in Georgia in August indicated an increased role of the military in security policy. In the national security and defence doctrine, as well as in the statements of politicians of all parties, including the ruling Citizens' Platform (Platforma Obywatelska – PO) and the largest opposition power – the Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – PiS), there has been perceptible concern about Russia's possible moves, or about repercussions of the crises in the post-Soviet region.

The second powerful reason for NATO accession was the conviction about the significance of American presence on our continent for its security – both as a deterrent against a possible attack on the sovereignty and integrity of states, including those in Central and Eastern Europe, and as a counterbalance against the re-nationalisation of the security policies of Western European countries, particularly Germany, which was undergoing unification at the time. Meanwhile in the second half of the 1990s² a sense of satisfaction pervaded in Poland about the Federal Republic of Germany being rooted in Euro-Atlantic structures, and about it acting as our country's "advocate" in the process of its integration with the West.³ Also today, Warsaw appreciates the role of the US in ensuring security, as proven by Polish involvement in the Iraqi operation and by the acceptance of the American missile defence system. Poland assures itself that, should it find itself in danger, it can count on support from the US first. Nevertheless, most experts are critical of the fact that – particularly in the case of missile defence – Poland did not seek a solution that would allow the project to be implemented within the NATO framework.

However, generally speaking, our specific geo-strategic location, experiences from the period of Warsaw Treaty membership and the stationing of the Northern Group of the Soviet Army on Polish territory⁴, and the determination of almost all political parties and opinion-makers in striving towards Europe resulted in the conviction that there is no good alternative to NATO membership. Even the biggest critics of the functioning of the organisation cannot point to such an alternative.

² Cooperation with NATO formally commenced in December 1991, within the structures of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council. In January 1994, the Brussels summit confirmed the "open door" policy and initiated the "Partnership for Peace" cooperation programme. Poland was invited to membership talks in July 1997 at the Madrid summit.

³ The contributions from Manfred Wörner, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, Klaus Kinkel and Volker Rühle are still remembered with appreciation.

⁴ Until 1993, at times up to 450 thousand.

When evaluating the membership, it is important to draw attention to factors crucial for the Polish perception of NATO and for the process of our integration in the political and the military dimension. Poland did not easily consent to the so-called new functions of the Alliance. The Pact's transformation, mainly concerning "out of area" missions, was initially treated with reserve. Our country joined NATO mainly for the security guarantees resulting from article 5 of the Washington Treaty (while the general public, due to the interpretation provided by politicians and the media among other factors, understood them as automatic military guarantees). The situation was changed – paradoxically – by the mission in Afghanistan. At present, maintaining a 1600-strong contingent in the Ghazni province is treated as a sort of warranty ensuring that, should we need to protect our own borders and territory, Poland will be able to count on NATO's support. In other words, Poland grants its support for the Alliance's transformation, for new types of mission and military capacities, but – probably more than any other member country – it wants NATO to keep the traditionally perceived function of joint defence and to maintain the potential necessary for fulfilling this function. For example, our country is interested in expanding the NRF (NATO Response Force) as the Alliance's rapid reaction force, equally capable of defending territory. There is talk of the necessity to "balance" the defence and the expeditionary functions. Warsaw would welcome appropriate assertions in the planned NATO Strategic Concept, i.e. in practice a strengthening of the wording of article 5. The Polish party also raises the question of updating the so-called contingency plan, i.e. providing for specifically assigned forces and resources in the event of our country requiring help in the Alliance's defence planning.

Poland's will to strengthen the defence function of NATO and, at the same time, its own status within the organisation, can be seen in its efforts to locate further components of the Alliance's infrastructure on Polish territory (thus adding to the existing Joint Forces Training Centre in Bydgoszcz). There is a conviction that such objects would be defended by the allies, and along with them the entire territory of Poland, and that their operation would level out the differences in military status between "old" and "new" NATO member countries. According to the 1995 Study on NATO Enlargement and to the declarations of Western politicians, the Pact's enlargement by Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary was not to be accompanied by the expansion of military infrastructure, nor by the deployment of large military units. Obligations of this sort, made in order to neutralise Russia's opposition against the enlargement, are still called upon by Moscow. Russia protested against the inclusion of former Warsaw Treaty members in NATO all along, although with varied intensity. Its objections mainly concerned Poland, as the most important country from a strategic point of

view⁵ and the one with the biggest military potential⁶. Warsaw does not want the Russian Federation to increase its influence upon individual pact members, or upon NATO as an organisation; it would like to work on a new policy towards Russia.

For all the above reasons, one can assume that Poland will show a long-term interest in the existence of a strong NATO, in developing trans-Atlantic relations in a manner facilitating consensus on security and defence policy, as well as in keeping open the option of expanding towards the East, particularly to Ukraine.

Right from the beginning of the accession process NATO constituted not only the most important security institution, but generally the most crucial platform of reference for Polish security policy – in a way, it “organised” military activities and influenced the Polish stance on armament control and non-proliferation, on strategic culture and the shape of the national military forces, to a higher degree than the European Union did⁷.

Military integration with NATO – based on the principles of interoperability and compatibility – is so advanced that Polish armed forces are now practically incapable of independent operation. Some are of the opinion, however, that they should become independent to a certain extent, since in the face of crises within NATO there may occur a need for an independent operation that is longer than previously expected (i.e. over 10 days), before NATO help arrives. The 120 thousand-strong army, currently undergoing a crisis due to funding cuts⁸, is being structured in a manner that allows it to maintain “appropriate proportions” between military capacities necessary for expeditionary operations, and those enabling the implementation of tasks resulting from the need to protect its own territory. Experiences from foreign missions⁹ forced Poland to accelerate the professionalisation of its armed forces, of which 60% is professional at present. A lot of attention is paid to maintaining in good condition, according to NATO standards, the infrastructure prepared for the eventual

⁵ 9% of the European NATO region of contact between the West and the post-Soviet area

⁶ An army of 230 thousand in the mid-1990's

⁷ Political parties and subsequent governments have been interested in maintaining a situation whereby European policy is not “in opposition” to the United States, and where creation of a joint EU policy does not lead to relaxation of the Atlantic partnership. While the thesis that Poland's position in the Union would be as strong as its role in NATO used to be popular, the prevailing opinion is now that Poland's stronger position in Europe will positively influence its significance in NATO and in relations with the United States.

⁸ According to a special act of 2001, it ought to amount to 1,95% GNP, while at least 20% ought to be spent on technical modernisation.

⁹ 3,4 thousand soldiers take part in those missions at the moment. The recently adopted government strategy on foreign missions states that such missions ought to take place only under the auspices of NATO or the European Union, therefore Poland will withdraw from UN missions in South Lebanon and the Golan Heights

necessity of accepting allied support (financed from the NATO Security Investment Program - NSPI - budget). In Poland, the Host Nation Support (HNS) rules prompt the implementation of almost 100 projects enabling the armed forces to operate in greatly improved conditions. The Polish armed forces can therefore readily be considered a beneficiary of integration with NATO.

Membership in the Alliance has from the very beginning become an element of the Polish *raison d'état*. It helped in overcoming the division of Europe, contributed to the stability of Poland and Central Europe, and facilitated internal transformation, including the introduction of democratic control over the army. Currently NATO enjoys the support of over half of the Polish population. Public opinion polls show that this support is conditional on military actions or stabilisation missions. In 2008, support for NATO rose for the first time since 2002, and amounted to 51%, while 45% of all respondents considered it important to improve trans-Atlantic relations¹⁰. The biggest problem for Poland, but also for Poles, in the context of integration with the North Atlantic Alliance is the issue of its credibility and effectiveness.

¹⁰ See the „Transatlantic Trends” reports, www.gmfus.org.