



STRATEGIC FILE

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Poland and France: The (Un)Limited Strategic Partnership

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Very optimistic declarations regarding the possible emergence of a new Franco-Polish engine in security and defence matters seem to a great extent unrealistic. Both countries differ too much to become the closest allies in the EU, from the size of their militaries and defence industries to strategic culture. In addition, the short-term posture adopted by both players in response to the multi-layered repercussions of the Ukrainian crisis means that both Poland and France are having a hard time envisaging the next steps forward. This being said, exploring the reasons why these two key European defence players are willing to cooperate can only help both partners to get the most out of it. There are some areas in which the Franco-Polish duo can, and should, achieve a lot.

2014 saw an unprecedented increase in defence and military cooperation between Poland and France, largely as a result of the North Atlantic Alliance's response to the security challenges posed by the Russian–Ukrainian conflict. In late April, French fighter jets were deployed to Poland in order to both back-up NATO's air policing mission in the Baltic States and train with their Polish counterparts. The cooperation between special forces and reconnaissance units, though kept below the radar, also flourished. In the defence industry dimension, France has developed a comprehensive proposal for involving Polish defence businesses fully in European armaments cooperation. And, last but not least, it has suspended a decision about delivering Mistral-class vessels to Russia, making a move much awaited by Warsaw (although the final outcome remains to be seen).² Altogether, it is fully justified to say that security and defence relations between Poland and France have probably not been as intense as they are now since the 1920s, when both countries formed an alliance guaranteeing mutual military assistance in the event of war with Germany.

How It Started

For most of the post-Cold War history of Europe, Polish–French relations have not been particularly warm, to say the least. A different strategic outlook was mainly to blame. While Poland was attaching weight to the partnership with the United States, France traditionally stayed on the outside of NATO's military structures and criticised American policies, including the enlargement of the alliance and the war in Iraq in 2003. Neither did the vast difference between the military potentials of the two countries help matters. Poland was struggling with the reform of a large, Soviet-style all-volunteer army, which could not be compared, capability-wise, to French forces, developed, even in the Cold War, as a tool of intervention.

¹ The authors would like to thank Nicolas Buhler for his assistance with research on this paper.

² A January 2015 opinion poll suggests that 64% of the French people want the Mistral vessels to be delivered to Russia—www.la Tribune.fr/entreprises-finance/industrie/aeronautique-defense/20150120tribc52dce4ec/les-francais-favorables-a-une-large-majorite-a-la-livraison-des-mistral-a-la-russie.html.

But since making a declaration on a strategic partnership, signed in 2008, both countries have done a lot to fill typical diplomatic formulas with concrete undertakings.

In that very same year Poland supported a stabilisation operation in Chad, conducted under the EU flag but initiated and led by France, providing a significant contingent (more than 400 soldiers and several helicopters). Later on, both countries also built a coalition to reform the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The "Weimar plus" group (also involving Germany, Italy and Spain) ultimately failed to win the support of the EU Council to establish an EU headquarters for CSDP military operations, but only after a strong British "no." In spite of this, the bilateral Franco-Polish partnership has continued to grow, and has gained new momentum under François Hollande's presidency. A framework letter of intent on military cooperation, adopted in May 2013, followed by the signature of a cooperation framework in November, which deepened the 2008 Strategic partnership, laid the political ground not only for closer collaboration between the pair's armed forces, but also their defence industries. In parallel, numerous highly symbolic steps have been taken on both sides, ranging from strong French participation to the 2013 NATO "Steadfast Jazz" military manoeuvres to Poland's own support to the French-led military actions in Mali and Central African Republic.

So what caused France and Poland to seek a closer relation in the sensitive sphere of defence? A number of factors played a part in this development. Identifying them, as well as discussing the remaining differences between the two countries, can help to assess the true potential of cooperation and emphasise the most promising areas.

France: Facing New Defence Economics...

Badly struck by the 2008 financial and economic crisis, France was forced to introduce deep and wide cuts in public spending, including defence. Initially, the defence budget did not suffer, as the total sum for 2009–2012 was cut by a symbolic 3% and France planned to increase the budget from 2012 onwards by 1% above the level of inflation (however, it failed both in 2012 and 2013). But the "Military Programming Law 2014–2019" (LPM) adopted in December 2013 led to a deep re-assessment that left no doubt as regards the impact of austerity on the French defence budget. According to the document, France will freeze the defence budget at the level of €31.4 billion until 2016, and then raise it only slightly to €32.5 billion in 2019. In real terms (including inflation predictions), the budget in 2019 will be 7.2% lower than in 2012, or 1.64% of GDP compared to 1.86% today.³

In a rather frantic search for money to cover fixed costs (such as personnel or non-negotiable defence materiel delivery contracts), France began to sell military radio frequencies, facilities and shares in the defence companies such as Safrane (receiving approximately €0.5 billion in 2013 from the sale of 3% of a 30% stake in this broad-portfolio defence manufacturer) and the Airbus Group (which raised approximately € 1.2 billion in 2013 following the sale of 3.5% of a 22.5% stake).⁴ The country also pursues an ambitious weapon export campaign, the first effects of which (for example winning the exclusive negotiation rights for India's next generation multi-role jet in 2012, and selling weapons to Lebanon through Saudi Arabia, a deal struck in 2013) can already be seen.

But this will not prevent further cuts in capabilities. As part of the new LPM, France is expected to further reduce its overall manpower (both regular and reserve forces) from around 340,000 (2008) to 240,000 in 2019.⁵ Most importantly, it will cut its deployable land troops from 30,000 to 15,000 (two brigades). Furthermore, France will reduce or postpone its flagship armaments programmes, which will cut the number of "Rafale" multi-role jets delivered (from 300 to 225) and "FREMM" frigates (from 11 to eight), and delay production of the nuclear-powered attack submarine "Barracuda."⁶

³ F. McGerty, "Analysis: French Defence Budget Set for Heavy Real-terms Fall," *IHS Jane's 360*, 7 August 2013, www.janes.com.

⁴ H. Carnegie, A. Parker, "France Moves Quickly to Cut Stake in EADS," *Financial Times*, 26 April 2013, www.ft.com; W. Horobin, "France Sells Safran Shares to Invest Elsewhere," *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 March 2013, www.online.wsj.com.

⁵ Although President Hollande announced that the reduction course will slow down after January's terrorist attacks, such a reduction is not expected to be very significant.

⁶ P. Tran, "France Expects 1st Batch of Reapers Soon," 17 May 2013, www.defensenews.com.

...While Maintaining a High Level of Ambition

Despite all of this, the 2013 White Book on Defence and National Security maintains a highly ambitious global security policy, notably through an emphasis on France's need to preserve its "strategic autonomy," the concept at the core of its new strategy.⁷ Paris will seek to sustain freedom of individual actions within the security and defence domain, including crisis management, and shows a readiness to lead coalitions to intervene in Europe's neighbourhood if needed (for example, Mali, and the announcement of readiness to start an aerial campaign against Syria). Since the end of the Cold War, France has probably never had such a window of opportunity to play a leadership role in European security. It is a role it initially sought through the "Europe de la défense" narrative, but which actually never materialised. With the U.S. inevitably shifting away from Europe to prioritise Asia and the Persian Gulf, and also being forced to cut its defence budget, space is being created in Europe for countries such as France that are willing to take responsibility for crisis management in the Old Continent's troubled neighbourhood.⁸

But with shrinking capabilities, such an ambitious agenda can only be achieved if Paris decides to "off-shore" some of its growing capability gaps. That is, it must look for nations that could support its overseas operations (individually or collectively) with much needed assets. Deeply disillusioned by the overall lack of willingness (and resources) of most European states to both participate in overseas operations (for example, in Africa) and invest in defence matters, Paris has demonstrated increasing pragmatism regarding its own role within NATO and the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

The first sign of this new thinking was the Franco-British Lancaster House agreement of 2010, despite the UK's ideological opposition to the CSDP. Two defence leaders of Europe, forced by cuts, decided to share the most expensive military capabilities (aircraft carriers, a virtual test-bed for nuclear weapons, and drones (the Future Combat Air System)) and form a joint expeditionary brigade. French activity within NATO's "smart defence" and EU's "pooling and sharing" initiatives are also testimony to France's new, pragmatic, bottom-up approach towards Euro-Atlantic military cooperation, notably facilitated by former president Nicolas Sarkozy's decision to reintegrate NATO's military command in 2009. Therefore, more than ever before, France carefully selects projects that could help it to overcome gaps in its national capabilities. The mid-air refuelling initiative under the EU's "pooling and sharing" is only one of many such cases. This new logic, as promoted by France, also appeared as the driving force behind the 2013 December EU summit, which addressed defence matters only five years after the last one, and indeed turned out to be utterly pragmatic.

Poland's Role Viewed from Paris

Warsaw could potentially become an attractive partner, augmenting French forces in various operations, as has already been demonstrated in Chad, Mali and the Central African Republic. Through their acquired experience in multiple operational theatres in recent years, Poland's armed forces have proved to be reliable and interoperable in various scenarios, including peacekeeping, training and counter-insurgency among others. Furthermore, Poland operates some relatively modern equipment, such as small and medium transport aircraft (C-295s and C-130s), multi-role jets (the latest version of the F-16), and armoured personnel carriers (the "Rosomak" AMV). While transport aircraft or AMVs can be very useful in stabilisation operations, the F-16s may participate in air interdiction missions or limited aerial bombing campaigns.⁹ Of course, the Polish forces cannot be compared to, say, the British one in all of these areas, but in times of austerity and rising threat perceptions it may be seen as just as attractive as Spanish or Italian participation. Simply, only half a dozen of jets or airlifters can make a difference in an expeditionary operation. Tellingly, the precious help France received from its allies when it came time to launch

⁷ See P. Elman, M. Terlikowski, "Balancing Austerity with Ambitions: The (Close) Future of French Defence Policy," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 9 (462), 25 January 2013, and N. Dufour, "France's Intent at the December Defence Council: Opportunities for Poland," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 138 (591), 17 December 2013.

⁸ J. Da Silva, H. Liebert, I. Wilson III (eds.), *American Grand Strategy and the Future of U.S. Landpower*, United States Army War College Press, December 2014.

⁹ This type of military cooperation has often taken place between the French and the Belgian air forces (also using F-16s) and is highly valued by France.

“Operation Serval” in Mali proved decisive in enabling the deployment of its 4,000 strong land forces and launching air strikes several weeks ahead of schedule.¹⁰

Defence industry collaboration further reinforces the argument about France’s very pragmatic motivation to develop a partnership with Poland. So far, France has remained mostly an outsider in the Polish market. Indeed, Poland ordered only €53.6 million of French military equipment between 2009 and 2013,¹¹ far behind Germany, the U.S. or Norway. France, as the fifth largest global defence exporter, is therefore more than ever lured by Poland’s €30 billion armed forces modernisation plan. In planning to acquire air and missile defence, both support and combat helicopters, submarines and other vessels, Poland can become an important European market for French defence companies.¹² Additionally, this market would be much safer, particularly with regards to the technology transfers (ToT) that nowadays always follow sales of weapons, than Asian or African markets. Poland’s ambitious procurement plans are indeed unique in the scale of the European defence equipment market, which will inevitably shrink.

Expecting to increase its chances of success in the various tenders, France is not holding back in its efforts, and even promptly demonstrated its readiness to transfer the “sacrosanct” Command and Control access (source codes) of some of the proposed capabilities (such as the SAMP/T air and missile defence system), but only if large industrial prospects are foreseen. Moreover, France’s defence industry offer to Poland is presented in the context of building an economically sound and globally competitive European Defence and Technological Base (EDTIB).¹³ It was, notably, suggested that Poland take a share in the pan-European aeronautics and defence company, the Airbus Group. And investments in Poland, technology transfers, and a gradual inclusion of Polish-made components in the Airbus global supply chain are to follow contracts, even regardless of Polish interests in becoming an Airbus shareholder. By such means, France is trying to impose a market-oriented, rather than threat-derived, defence industrial policy on Poland. To what extent the Polish defence sector can effectively integrate with the EDTIB, is, however, an open question.

Of course, gaining access to the Polish defence market or a desire to close capability gaps using Poland’s assets are not France’s only motives. France has, alongside the other EU Member States, acknowledged Poland’s undeniable ascension among European military leaders in recent years. On a political level, Warsaw is now being consulted closely on any security-related initiatives, either in the EU or NATO. In spite of the still clear differences in their respective threat perceptions, developing a strategic partnership with Poland appears therefore as an important asset for the future of France’s European and transatlantic security policy.

Poland: A Re-assessment of the European Security Architecture...

Polish motives for engaging in closer security and defence cooperation with France are of a different nature. They stem from a re-interpretation of the evolution of the European security environment, which has taken place over the last couple of years, and which has greatly accelerated since the beginning of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict.

For a decade following its accession to NATO, Poland considered the alliance as the ultimate and permanent guarantee of its security. Membership of NATO was seen as “the end of history,” at least as regards defence. Reinforced by intense cooperation with the U.S. (Operation Iraqi Freedom, the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, BMD European site plans, and the purchase of F-16s), a belief was built that the transatlantic partnership (understood as an effective NATO with an engaged U.S.) was the only pillar that Polish security really needed. The EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) played a secondary role, with participation in EU operations being seen more as a way to build political clout, rather than a

¹⁰ S. Halifa-Legrand, V. Jauvert, *Mali. Les secrets d'une guerre éclair*, 11 June 2013, <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/monde/20130607.OBS2446/mali-les-secrets-d-une-guerre-eclair.html>.

¹¹ See *Rapport au Parlement 2014 – sur les exportations d'armement de la France*, August 2014.

¹² www.ekonomia.rp.pl/artykul/1166185-Europa-przemyslu-zbrojeniowego---wybor-Polski.html.

¹³ As explained by the European Commission in its July 2013 communication “Towards a more competitive and efficient defence and security sector” (p. 2), the “Defence industry in Europe directly employs about 400,000 people and generates up to another 960,000 indirect jobs. [...] The EDTIB constitutes a key element for Europe’s capacity to ensure the security of its citizens and to protect its values and interests. [...] This necessitates a certain degree of strategic autonomy: to be a credible and reliable partner, Europe must be able to decide and to act without depending on the capabilities of third parties. Security of supply, access to critical technologies and operational sovereignty are therefore crucial.” See <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52013DC0542>.

means to improve Polish security. Bilateral and regional security and defence policy cooperation was even less important. Except for functional collaboration with Germany, Poland did not seek this kind of agenda urgently in its relations with its closest European partners, not least its neighbours.

This approach slowly began to change after a series of events that shook the basis of the European security architecture. In Polish eyes, the 2008 Russian-Georgian war proved that joint political and military threats were still a real challenge in Europe, or at least its eastern part. The cancellation of the BMD (Ballistic Missile Defence) site in the form proposed by the George W. Bush administration, and its replacement with the fuzzy and “Russia friendly” (as it initially seemed) concept of EPAA (European Phased Adaptive Approach), revealed painful truths about the concept of a “strategic relationship” with the Americans. The difficult debate about NATO’s Article 5, prior to the formulation of a new strategic concept in 2010, revealed how little appetite there was among the allies to genuinely prepare armed forces for territorial defence contingencies. The fiasco of attempts to spur on the EU’s CSDP, which meanwhile gained in importance in Polish eyes as a potential cure for NATO’s political weaknesses, only reinforced Warsaw’s reading of Western Europe’s posture towards security policy: feeling unthreatened (at least militarily), both societies and elites generally did not want to invest in defence. Meanwhile, the U.S. appeared less and less committed to underwrite European security policy with its military might and political clout. Following these observations, Poland started to rewrite key assumptions of its security policy, with one clear strategic goal: to make itself, and Central and Eastern Europe, more secure.

...And a Return to Territorial Defence

Initially, before the breakout of the Ukrainian crisis, Poland turned to regional security and defence cooperation to get both NATO and CSDP back on track and thereby improve the security of Europe as a whole, and CEE in particular. Within this concept, Poland viewed military cooperation oriented towards capability building as a tool to meet two distinct goals. The first was to prevent the “disarmament” of Central and Eastern Europe in the aftermath of austerity. Poland perceived a huge decrease of defence budgets in the region as a direct blow to the credibility of its regional partners’ security policies (for example, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary cut defence budgets by between 20% and 30% between 2009 and 2013). Engaging neighbours in military cooperation was then meant to keep their armed forces’ capacity at a minimal credible level. Next, regional activity focused on generating capabilities, which was also seen by Warsaw as a tool to keep the CEE on the U.S. foreign policy agenda and face the decreasing interest of Obama’s administration.

While neither NATO’s Chicago summit in 2012, nor the December 2013 European summit really beefed-up defence in CEE and Europe as a whole, the rapid worsening of the Ukrainian crisis acted as some kind of electric shock for most allies, and provided Poland with additional leeway to achieve its strategic goals. In fact, these events suddenly demonstrated the accuracy of Poland’s (long inaudible) quest for strategic reassurances in the CEE region as well as the re-emergence of this region as a geopolitical object. Despite clear discrepancies between the security understandings of the allies, Poland therefore quickly played a central role in drawing attention to the imperative to upgrade NATO collective defence instruments (contingency plans, training and force posture) on the eastern flank. While trying to maximise the political momentum, Poland perceived the decisions taken at the last NATO summit (September 2014, in Wales) as a frank success; for the first time, the CEE region got the allied attention that Poland had been fighting for. If fully implemented, these decisions will form a concrete set of capabilities, including training patterns and contingency plans, which will be dedicated to defend the CEE NATO members against potential aggression, including in asymmetric and hybrid forms. This undoubtedly appears to be the biggest achievement of Polish security policy since it joined NATO.

But Poland’s efforts within NATO and the EU would not be sufficient, if not complemented by an ambitious armed forces transformation and technical modernisation plan. The 2009 decision to suspend conscription and move to a fully professional force was the first step. The second was the announcement of a new policy towards expeditionary operations, dubbed the “Komorowski doctrine” after the Polish president, who argued for concentrating armed forces on the core task of territorial defence instead of crisis management. A Technical Modernisation Plan (TMP) for the years 2013–2022 then followed. Within this, Poland plans to spend approximately €30 billion on modern capabilities, including multi-layered air and missile defence, support and attack helicopters, submarines, UAVs and rocket artillery. The profile of this investment effort

is clear: Poland wants a modern armed force, primarily able to deter any potential enemy, with an ability to contribute to expeditionary operations taking second place. Acquisition of stand-off weapons, such as JASSM cruise missiles, is also a silent confirmation of the Polish desire to build a conventional deterrent capability. The tenets of this policy were notably reconfirmed as the core of the 2014 “National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland.”¹⁴

France’s Role Viewed from Warsaw

Finding itself heavily exposed on the eastern flank of the EU and NATO, Poland needs strategic partners to revive capability building and strategic thinking that could answer its immediate and long-term threat perception. In this regard, France was quickly revealed to be a key partner at multilateral and bilateral levels. Among other things, France sent four jet fighters to strengthen the Baltic Air Policing Mission, and around 70 troops to Malbork. It made its AWACS available to patrol Polish and Romanian skies, stopped its military cooperation with Russia, and adopted a strong stance on Russia’s participation in multilateral forums (such as G8).¹⁵ Recently, the French defence minister visited Poland to personally announce Hollande’s decision to suspend the delivery of the first Mistral vessel to Russia. On this occasion, France also increased its commitment to reassurance through the deployment of an armoured vehicle unit in Poland.¹⁶ Altogether, only the U.S. has done more to reassure Poland since the Russian-Ukrainian conflict broke out. Thus, on a strategic level, France is now considered a potential strategic European partner of choice, a place never actually taken by any country.

When it comes to military to military cooperation, the long and proven experience of French troops and equipment in various field operations represents a key interest for the Polish armed forces, which have also acquired their own experience in recent years (in Afghanistan, Iraq, Chad, and Mali). Collaboration has already taken place in various fields and is likely to continue. As a way to develop their interoperability, both countries have, among other things, jointly trained their special forces on a regular basis in “exotic” environments, and they have also begun to exchange the programmes of their marine forces. If Poland decided to acquire any of the weapon systems that are already in use by France, more cooperation is likely to follow. Poland is particularly interested in getting access to doctrines related to the use of such weapon systems, and in common training.

Conclusions

The respective transformational paths undertaken by both Poland and France regarding their defence postures in recent years has opened genuine, even if still mixed, opportunities for increased cooperation on strategic, operational and industrial issues.

On the strategic side, deep differences in outlooks and respective threat perceptions too often still turn bilateral contacts into a dialogue of the deaf. Focused on territorial defence, Poland will not be eager to contribute with large contingents to operations in Africa or the Middle East any time soon (the model of engagement in Mali and the CAR could, however, be successfully replicated). Faced with overstretched defence budgets and a high terrorist threat level after the January Paris attacks, France will not completely change its geostrategic view of the CEE and is likely instead to further strengthen its military presence in the south (including the “Operation Barkhane” in the Sahel, and air strikes in Iraq). Moreover, it seems like the still unsettled Mistral dossier between France and Russia will soon re-surface and potentially further infect the relationship.

On the defence industry side, the situation also appears contrasted. France approaches the defence industry with market logic, seeking optimisation, competitiveness and export prospects, and manufacturing weapons remains a politically important business activity that can help form alliances and/or exert political influence. Poland, in turn, perceives the defence sector as a vital part of its national defence system. Hence, such business thinking cannot simply be applied to this sector, which is considered to be the backbone of Poland’s ability to defend itself.

¹⁴ *National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland 2014*, November 2014.

¹⁵ See N. Dufour, “D-Day” for France: Time for Paris to End Its Hedging on Russia,” *PISM Bulletin*, no. 84 (679), 13 June 2014, p. 2.

¹⁶ See www.ambafrance-pl.org/Visite-en-Pologne-de-M-Jean-Yves.

Yet, in some sectors, it might still be possible to combine these two distant defence industry policies. The Polish defence industry and technological base indeed requires an injection of new technologies, capital and fresh management culture. Otherwise, concentrated on the home market and isolated from the international supply chains, it will perish once the state stops subsidising it. In this regard, France could be a valuable partner. Ready to offer more than off the shelf equipment, it is suggesting that Poland becomes a formal partner in the Airbus Group, the European aeronautics and defence company, and the seventh largest such corporation in the world. If followed with real investments and a proper place in the supply chain of top Airbus products (for example, the A400M or the Caracal and Tigre helicopters), this could potentially elevate the capacity, competitiveness and political weight of the Polish defence sector. But even if Poland could choose some of the weapon systems already used by France without making such a move, it would entail further military collaboration such as sharing doctrines, organising joint training programmes and participating in joint operations. Even only one of those would enable new domains of collaboration and help further deepen military cooperation between Poland and France.

The picture is not therefore entirely bleak, and important developments have taken place. While both Polish and French decision makers have been regularly disappointed by the lack of achievements within both the EU CSDP and NATO, they have demonstrated increasing pragmatism to re-activate defence matters and face the multiplicity of crises in their close neighbourhood. With divergent priorities but the very same reading of the security shortfalls of European nations, and the consequences of the American focus on other parts of the globe, Poland and France can become a powerful source of proposals and help to form the core of European defence, reinforcing the existing Franco-German and Franco-British arrangements. The two countries must now use the critical mass resulting from the political and operational cooperation of recent years. While keeping military to military cooperation high on the agenda, this could in particular mean reinvigorating capability programmes run under the auspices of the EU and NATO, or revitalising the idea of a new European Security Strategy, which could also be done with Germany through the Weimar format. In addition, the pair could also seize the opportunity to strengthen their ties during the time between the upcoming EU summit on defence in June and the NATO one in Warsaw in 2016.