

Poland: focus on strengthening the Armed Forces

Description

The parliamentary elections in October 2023 have reshuffled the cards on the Polish political scene. The national-conservative Law and Justice party (PiS, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*), in power since 2015, gave way to a new coalition led by former Prime Minister Donald Tusk (2007-2014). The arrival in control of a new government made up of the Civic Coalition (KO, *Koalicja Obywatelska*, liberal and Europhile), Third Way (TD, *Trzecia Droga*, agrarian, conservative and liberal), and The Left (Lewyca, progressive left), is not without consequences for defense policy priorities.

Succeeding Mariusz Błaszczak, the new Defence Minister Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz (Polish Peasant Party) immediately confirmed the continuation of the modernization and development of the Polish army, which his predecessor had begun. *"Political differences cannot overshadow the greatest objective, which is the national community,"* he declared as soon as he took office, pointing out that unity on these issues was necessary in the context of the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine.



Therefore, Warsaw is maintaining its objective of increasing the country's defense spending to 4% of GDP (3.8% in 2023) and doubling the size of its land forces. The aim is to make Poland a NATO bulwark against Russia in Central and Eastern Europe.

Change with continuity

Overall, during the period in which the PiS was in power (2015-2023), Poland saw the development and modernization of its Armed Forces, particularly its land component. Faced with the imminent threat from Russia, the aim is to make the Polish army the leading army in Europe in the next few years. On the initiative of former Defence Minister Błaszczak, this period was marked by the creation in 2017 of a Territorial Defence Force (WOT, *Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej*). By 2023, this force will comprise more than 40,000 soldiers. During the same period, Warsaw began acquiring a multi-layered air defense system, modernizing the Polish Air Force (with, in particular, the acquisition of F-35s) and building up an armored force, thanks to the signing of contracts with the United States (purchase of M1 Abrams tanks) and South Korea (purchase of K2 tanks). The number of soldiers has also improved, rising from 96,000 on 31 December 2014 (divided into three divisions: the 11th Armoured Cavalry Division, the 12th Mechanised Division, and the 16th Mechanised Division) to around 197,000 in 2023.

As soon as they came to power at the end of 2023, the new authorities in charge of defense and national security issues set the objectives of the new coalition as a continuation of those of the outgoing team. W. Kosiniak-Kamysz immediately assumed this legacy, announcing that no significant changes were envisaged within the Polish Armed Forces: *"[That would create chaos in wartime](#),"* he said, adding that *"rumors that the Civic Coalition would cut the defense budget or cancel contracts were PiS election propaganda."*

Confirming this direction, the Chief of Staff of the Polish Army, General Wiesław Kukuła, said that he aimed to prepare the country for defense by reaching the strength of 300,000 soldiers structurally divided into six divisions. In his view, this number and arrangement are perfectly realistic in the face of the challenge posed by Russia, which would have expanded its workforce to 1.5 million soldiers and would spend more than 6% of its GDP on defense.

Tusk's government also inherited several significant contracts with South Korea to purchase FA-50 light attack aircraft, K9 howitzers, K2 Black Panther tanks, and K239 Chunmoo artillery. Here again, the new defense minister was quick to

dispel rumors circulated by the PiS that the new team might break off the Korean contracts. W. Kosiniak-Kamysz prided himself on [not wanting to repeat the previous government's mistakes](#), alluding to the cancellation in 2016 of the contract to buy French Caracal helicopters, which had cast a chill over bilateral relations between Paris and Warsaw.

The Navy, a new priority?

Despite the presence of its coastline, the importance attached to the sea remains low in Polish social consciousness⁽¹⁾. By its geography, history, and foreign relations, Poland remains an essentially “terror-centric” nation with no colonial empire and no strong maritime tradition. Indeed, the threats to Poland throughout its history have always come from its land borders, which can be explained by the landlocked nature of the country and its lack of mountainous obstacles. The country’s military environment remains marked by this vision: the navy remains the poor relation of the Polish Armed Forces.

With its small, aging, and disparate resources, the Polish Navy has long struggled to establish itself, even within the confines of the Baltic Sea. Its two central surface units—the *Pułaski* class frigates—are former US *Oliver Hazard Perry*-class frigates, acquired in the early 2000s but dating from the 1980s. The Polish Navy also operates an ex-Soviet *Kilo*-class submarine with a mixed operational record. The only modern vessels are the *ORP Ślężak* patrol boat and the *Kormoran II* minehunters.

The centerpiece of Poland’s maritime modernization, the *Miecznik* (Swordfish in Polish) program, launched in 2012 by the former government of D. Tusk, involves the construction of three multi-purpose frigates for the Polish Navy in Gdynia, Poland. The model selected is based on British shipbuilder Babcock’s *Arrowhead 140* frigate (the *Type-31* in the UK). These 140-metre-long [frigates](#) will be used for Poland’s maritime defense, the security of Polish maritime routes and energy infrastructures, and as part of the standing NATO ship teams. The first *Miecznik* frigate is due to enter service in 2029.

The new Polish government’s commitment to modernizing the Navy was highlighted by W. Kosiniak-Kamysz at the ceremony to lay the keel of the first *Miecznik* frigate, the *ORP Wicher*, in February 2024 in Gdynia. He emphasized, *“Many purchases have already been made for the Land Forces. We can now count on the air force, air defense, and missile defense. In the face of the various threats, protecting critical infrastructures, transport routes, and coastal defense is also important. The Navy’s modernization is a strategic move demonstrating our forward-thinking approach to national defense.”*

Jacek Siwiera, the new head of the National Security Office (BBN, *Biuro Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego*, the equivalent of our SGDSN), has also expressed his interest in the Navy by saying that he wants [to reopen the military port on the Hel peninsula](#), north-east of Gdynia: the reopening of this port, which already has infrastructure and logistical connections (rail and energy networks in particular), will meet the needs of the new Polish frigates and will form part of the process of preparing the Polish Navy, in cooperation with NATO.

Suppose Poland’s maritime projects come to fruition. In that case, they will enable Warsaw to play a more significant role in the changing maritime environment of the Baltic Sea, where naval defense is now the focus of attention. In particular, Finland, Sweden, and Germany are improving their capabilities in this area, while the Baltic States are strengthening their coastal defense and mine countermeasures capabilities.

The satellite component

The modernization of the Polish Armed Forces also involves strengthening cutting-edge sectors. At the Parliamentary Defence Committee meeting on 8 January 2024, the Minister of Defence announced the launch of projects to equip the country with a satellite component that can operate thanks to the acquisition of reconnaissance satellites. In December 2022, the Armaments Agency, representing the Treasury, and the manufacturer *Airbus Defence & Space* signed a contract to supply two observation satellites with a receiving station.

The [contract covers satellite systems](#) that will acquire imagery intelligence data (IMINT) with an accuracy of 30 cm (the detailed specification of the system is classified information). The contract's total value is around €575m, and the Polish satellites will be launched by 2027.

Sharing borders with Belarus, the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, and Ukraine, Poland knows that strengthening and modernizing its Armed Forces will be vital in preparing for possible Russian aggression and transforming NATO. While Poland already has a solid defense technological and industrial base (DTIB) and is home to several European and American companies, with its increased investment, it could find itself in a position of regional pivot for military production. At a time when the European DTIB is the subject of many concerns, Poland's geographical position and vast network of road and rail connections could prove crucial.

Note :

(1) Rafał MIĘTKIEWICZ, "Polish Navy in Security of Strategic Fossil Fuels Supplies – Adequate Ships," *Humanities and Social Sciences Research Journal*, n° 28, 2021, p. 102.

Thumbnail: Polish Armed Forces Day, 15 August 2023

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[Link to the French version of the article](#)

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