

Partnering with Poland

The country's pro-democratic, pro-free market multinationalism has become a model for post-Soviet Eurasia

By *per* Concordiam Staff



Less than an hour after Polish commandos stormed a beach in Florida in a tactical demonstration before representatives from more than 50 countries, their commander, Brig. Gen. Piotr Patalong, announced that his goal was nothing less than making his special operations troops the best in Europe.

Poland has been making many such strides in its bid to be a model of multinational military, political and economic cooperation. It has one of the fastest growing economies in Eastern Europe, remains an eager candidate for euro-zone membership and successfully completed the rotating presidency of the European Union. And its commitment to security doesn't stop with special operations forces. The

country will deploy a key component of NATO's ballistic missile defense system, along with Romania and Turkey, and has been a perennial contributor to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan.

Parliamentary elections in 2011 established another benchmark for a democracy that emerged from communist control a little more than 20 years ago. The selection of Donald Tusk as president last year represented the first time since the demise of the Warsaw Pact that a Polish government has been re-elected. The country's EU partners considered it a sign of political maturity, signaling Poland's readiness for greater integration.

"The country sees itself as a pioneer and role model for the 'others' in the East. It wants to become a power in Europe and for Europe, thereby assuming what it has always believed to be its rightful place in the world," *Der Spiegel* wrote in May 2012.

Embracing NATO

For many nations in post-Communist Europe, NATO membership served as a steppingstone for eventual EU membership. In Poland's case, the commitment to the Alliance didn't wane once the EU came calling. Poland not only hosts NATO's Joint Force Training Centre in the city of Bydgoszcz, but has agreed to open a Military Police Centre of Excellence in 2013.

An even bolder step was the country's decision to accommodate ballistic missile defense "interceptor" platforms near the Baltic Sea to protect Europe from airborne weapons of mass destruction launched from possible rogue states. The deployment of the ground-based interceptors is timed for 2018 as part of NATO's Phased Adaptive Approach to European missile defense.

Thousands of Polish soldiers have served in Afghanistan since joining ISAF in 2002-03. A joint Polish-American provincial reconstruction team operated in Ghazni province. Polish troops and civilians built irrigation dams, roads and a sewage plant. They contributed office equipment and cameras to sustain Afghan journalists operating in the province. Polish special operations forces have helped train their Afghan counterparts, earning kudos from other Allies for their high performance.

Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski, speaking on a visit to Chicago during the May 2012 NATO summit, emphasized how valuable his country views the Alliance that acted as a beacon of freedom during the communist era. He said NATO was not just a military grouping but a security community that has spread cooperation around the globe.

"Poland's joining NATO in 1999 at the summit in Washington was our coming home," Sikorski said. "Our shared transatlantic trading and security area now has 800 million people, accounting for half the world's GDP, a third of world trade and more than \$2 trillion in two-way investment. We can and should build on this achievement."



A Polish soldier (right) discusses a mission with Azerbaijani colleagues during a training exercise at U.S. Army Europe's Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany, in September 2012. The Azerbaijanis are wearing Afghan uniforms to replicate the security environment in that country for training purposes.

U.S. ARMY PFC. JAMES STOKES

Economic integration

Poland's decision after the fall of communism to embark on a "crash course" in economic liberalization, including shedding inefficient state firms or parceling them out to private investors, appears to have paid off. Multinational corporations such as Volkswagen and Kraft have pumped capital into what used to be state-run enterprises or established entirely new factories. Poland was the only country in the EU to have avoided a recession during the 2009 financial crisis and has weathered the storm with higher-than-average growth rates, emerging as the EU's sixth largest economy.

Financed in part by EU subsidies, construction has transformed the landscape. By the summer of 2012, in time for the UEFA European Football Championship held in Poland and Ukraine, the country had completed nearly the entire four-lane highway from the German border to the capital of Warsaw, the country's first modern connection to the super highways of Western Europe. "The clichéd western view of Poland – bogged down by communist inefficiency and rusting tractors – is long gone," *The Observer*, a British newspaper, wrote in 2012.

Even as Poles were granted the legal right in 2011 to work across most of Europe, a fulfillment of the EU's promise of full labor mobility, the country's growing economic strength was keeping more and more Poles at home. "In the border region, Polish workers are no longer the only ones crossing the border for cleaning jobs and to cut asparagus. Germans are now searching for more attractive jobs on the Polish side," *Der Spiegel* noted. "Leszek Balcerowicz, one of the fathers of the Warsaw reforms, says self-confidently that his country should set itself a new goal: 'To overtake Germany.'"

And in a bid for energy independence, exploration for natural gas, particularly those pockets of methane trapped deep underground in shale deposits, has become a Warsaw fixation. Initial reports that Poland possessed 300 years' worth of gas seem exaggerated, but Piotr Wozniak, Poland's deputy environmental minister, told news agencies that the country could hold the third biggest deposits in Europe, behind Norway and the Netherlands.

That would be enough to last the country for decades and would lessen dependence on foreign, and sometimes





The inside of a turbine factory in Elblag, Poland, owned by French energy giant Alstom. The country has attracted multinational companies looking for stable investments.

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Polish workers assemble Fiat Pandas at a plant in Tychy. The country has attracted multinational companies looking for stable investments.

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

hostile, energy producers. Though the country can mine enough coal to meet domestic needs, gas is a much cleaner burning fuel, a fact not lost upon environmentalists. “Poland is arguably the biggest focus for shale gas in all of Europe,” Deputy Prime Minister Beata Stelmach told CNN in 2012. “But it is not at all clear how many reserves there are ... that won’t be known for another three to five years.”

Other Polish leaders caution that the country still has a long way to go, pointing to the national unemployment rate of more than 10 percent. Exxon, one of the largest companies in the world, pulled out of efforts to drill for gas in Poland in 2012, citing bureaucratic interference and inefficiency. Despite official enthusiasm for euro membership, a majority of the population, observing turmoil in places like Greece, has a negative view of the common currency. Some economists warn Poland and its neighbors to take care lest too many regulations dampen the very entrepreneurial innovation the region will need to emerge fully from the historic shadow of Marxism.

A regional role model

Poland’s completion of the rotating EU presidency in early 2012 wasn’t the only sign that it was assuming a greater leadership role in Europe. At the forefront of the EU’s eastern policy, Poland plays a vital role in helping stabilize former Soviet republics to the east. Its foreign ministry regards Ukraine as its most important partner outside the EU and NATO and has promised further reconciliation with Russia. In June 2012, Foreign Minister Sikorski announced that Poland was “ready to support [Ukraine] if it definitively chooses a European destiny.” In light of its position on the EU’s frontier, it came as little surprise that Brussels headquartered Frontex, its border control agency, in Warsaw. Frontex expects to assume a larger role in policing Europe’s passport-free Schengen zone.

Regional military cooperation is another way Poland has taken on a larger role. It’s a regular participant in Jackal Stone exercises meant to train special operations forces in Europe. Poland and its close historical neighbor Lithuania hosted the exercise as recently as 2010. Its Air Force is a founding member of a multinational air transport wing based in Pápa, Hungary. In the spring of 2012, Polish flyers also took charge of NATO’s Baltic Air Policing operation and sent jets to Šiauliai Air Base in Lithuania. The country played a leading role at an international special operations forces conference in Florida in May 2012, performing military feats aboard boats and helicopters with commandos from countries such as Brazil, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates and the United States.

The country’s experience in Afghanistan as part of ISAF encapsulated what Poland’s leaders have tried to accomplish in multinational cooperation. Polish forces’ guiding principle wasn’t just Afghanistan reconstruction but ultimately Poland’s reputation among its NATO and multinational partners. Sikorski made such a point in a recent Afghan visit to thank his troops: “Now Poland is a big-league member of NATO with a substantial say in its affairs.” □