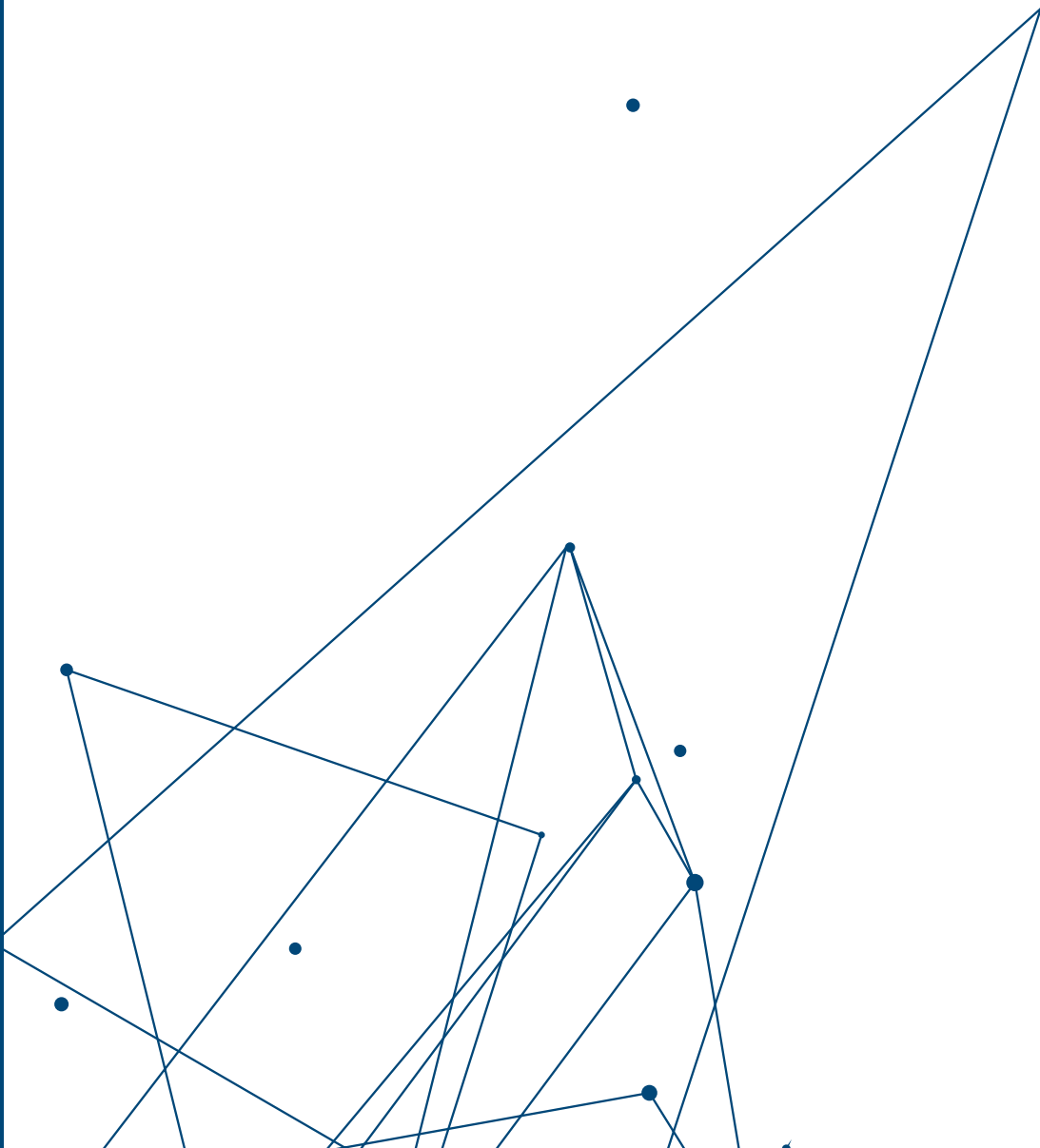


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Poland's Security and Turkey: Apart and Yet Together

Karol Wasilewski



This report offers an analysis of the relationship between Poland and Turkey. It is structured into three sections. The first section, “Re-organizing European Security Amidst Geopolitical Tensions”, explores Poland’s perspective on European security, examining the factors that have influenced Poland’s approach: the imperative to avoid a “strategic vacuum”, establishing security through NATO and the EU, and reinforcing the Eastern Flank. The first section concludes by considering the future direction of Poland’s strategic focus. The second section, “Security and Defence Relations with Turkey”, delves into the historical narratives and political perceptions that shape the interactions between Poland and Turkey, as well as their economic and social connections. It also examines the security and defence cooperation between the two countries, highlighting Poland’s increasing interest in Turkish-made military equipment. The report finishes with conclusions and recommendations. It suggests that the relationship between Poland and Turkey offers insights for EU-Turkey defence cooperation. They include utilizing cooperation to anchor Turkey in Western defence infrastructure, as well as establishing closer coordination vis-à-vis the security future of Ukraine and the Black Sea Basin.

This paper is part of a CATS Network Papers series exploring the role of Turkey in a future European security order, particularly in light of the EU’s ongoing challenges, first and foremost being the war in Ukraine. As part of this series, CATS has commissioned nine country reports for several EU member states, as well as for Ukraine and Turkey, with the aim of identifying both the opportunities and the constraints for enhanced cooperation between Turkey and the EU within an evolving security order.

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1.

Introduction

In 2014, Poland and Turkey celebrated the 600th anniversary of their diplomatic relationship. The unique occasion – rarely can two countries boast of having such a long common history – served both governments as a vehicle to repeat an evergreen political legend of a “deputy of Lehistan”, who never made it to the audience at the Ottoman palace because his country had disappeared from the political map of Europe in the late 18th century.¹ It also became an opportunity to underline the strength of political and cultural ties as well as joint perspectives on the future of transatlantic relations and European integration. Yet, this grandiloquent political messaging failed to transform into something tangible – a structured format or at least a draft of a strategy that would help elevate the relationship between the two to a higher level. One may metaphorically say that although Poland and Turkey stood together while declaring their intentions to strengthen bonds, they also stood apart politically as two entities unable to deliver on the promise.

Since then, the events in Europe and its immediate neighbourhood have meaningfully changed Europe’s security landscape. Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its growing warmongering on the international stage, as most recently evidenced by its invasion of Ukraine; rising tensions between the United States and China, and their “aftershocks” that affect nearly all dimensions of international relations; instability in the Middle East following the deadlock of the Arab Spring in Syria; as well as the worsening relations between Turkey and its Western allies have all reconfigured the Polish-Turkish relationship.

Interestingly, while the perspectives of the two states on international security and its various components – including the role of the United States in preserving the so-called liberal international order and strategies on how to approach Russia’s mounting aggression – grew further apart, Warsaw and Ankara have chosen to keep each other close. Moreover, they have successfully maintained a relatively well-functioning relationship, even during the peak of tensions between Turkey and its Western allies. Although this does not necessarily indicate a strategic partnership emerged between Poland and Turkey between 2014 and 2024, it surely hints at an intriguing phenomenon that deserves further examination, explanation, and – even

¹ More on the legend and its context see: Paulina Dominik, “Where Is the Deputy of Lehistan?”, *Polonia Ottomanica* (blog), 11 February 2014, <http://poloniaottomanica.blogspot.com/2014/02/where-is-deputy-of-lehistan.html> (accessed 11 October 2024).

more importantly – a look into the future.

This report, therefore, scrutinizes the factors and processes that have enabled Poland and Turkey to preserve a stable relationship, despite their growing differences in opinions and interests about international security. The report concentrates on the future of European security and presents recommendations for the relationship between Poland and Turkey that could improve cooperation between the European Union (EU) and Turkey in this area.

The report is divided into three sections. The first part offers a brief yet detailed picture of Poland's perception of European security and the factors that have shaped it. The focus is on the three strategic goals that have guided Polish elites since 1989 and, therefore, helps in better understanding their position vis-à-vis the current turmoil in Europe. Building on this, the second section examines defence and security cooperation between Poland and Turkey within the broader context of their bilateral relationship. The report concludes with recommendations aimed at strengthening EU-Turkey security and defence cooperation.

2.

Re-Organizing European Security Amidst Geopolitical Tensions

This section delves into Poland's perspective on European security, examining the key factors that have shaped its approach. It highlights three core strategic goals – avoiding a “strategic vacuum”, building security around two pillars (NATO and the EU), and strengthening the Eastern Flank – that have guided Polish decision-makers since the end of the Cold War and continue to influence their assessment of the current security environment. Building on this, the section ends with a discussion on the future direction of Poland's strategic orientation.

2.1

Avoiding a “Strategic Vacuum”

To fully understand Poland's perception of security, one has to go back to 1989 – the starting point for the state's rapid and multi-faceted transformation. The dynamic process of decay and, finally, the demise of the Soviet Union brought about a change in the internal organization of Poland: the swift introduction of a free-market economy and the establishment of a democratic multi-party system. It also forced political elites to rethink Poland's international standing and alliances. Decision-makers who evaluated the state's future strategic direction were confident of at least one development. Since the idea of neutrality did not seem feasible in the Polish case,² they wanted to avoid getting into a “strategic vacuum” – an area of non-alignment and uncertainty that, in the future, could make the country prone to pressure from global powers, especially from a reinvigorated Russia.³ Such a strategic assumption was easy to make, given Poland's post-Second World War history. This was especially

² Stanisław Sulowski, “Polish Foreign Policy Since 1989”, *Studia Politologiczne* 31 (2014): 23–37.

³ Adam Balcer, Piotr Buras, Grzegorz Gromadzki and Eugeniusz Smolar, *Change in Poland, but What Change? Assumptions of Law and Justice Party Foreign Policy* (Warsaw: Stefan Batory Foundation, 2016), https://www.batory.org.pl/upload/files/Programy_operacyjne/Otwarta_Europa/Change_in_Poland.pdf (accessed 05 October 2024).

due to the fact that the decisions taken by global powers – at that time the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Soviet Union – had left the country on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain.

Consequently, Poland quickly decided to pursue a policy known as “the return to Europe”.⁴ Yet, the decision was not easy to implement for various reasons. Firstly, there were still Soviet soldiers stationed on Polish soil – they did not leave until September 1993 – which required careful political navigation.⁵ Secondly, there were some obstacles, especially in relation to NATO, such as the Alliance’s identity crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Western states’ initial fear of irritating Russia with NATO’s eastward enlargement.⁶

Still, Polish decision-makers were determined to bring Poland back to Europe. The initial stalemate on the NATO front prompted them to double down on the state’s transformation, which could serve the goal of membership in another important structure that Poland aspired to join: the EU.⁷ Very soon, thanks to the determination of Polish politicians and the leadership of the United States, the mood around the country’s NATO membership started to change. In 1992, NATO’s Secretary General, Manfred Wörner, declared that “the door to the Alliance is open”. Two years later, in 1994, Poland joined the Partnership for Peace programme, and in March 1999, together with the Czech Republic and Hungary, the state became a NATO member. Hence, Poland managed to escape the “strategic vacuum” trap that Polish decision-makers had feared, marking its strategic direction for years to come.

2.2

To Build Security Around Two Pillars (NATO and the EU)

In May 2004, Poland joined the EU as well, achieving yet another milestone of its “return to Europe” policy and completing its transformation initiated in 1989. Soon after, it started to effectively use its membership to enhance its security. The best

⁴ Ryszard Zięba, “The 20th Anniversary of Poland’s Accession to NATO”, in *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War*, eds. Daniel S. Hamilton and Kristina Spohr (Washington D.C.: Foreign Policy Institute/Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, Johns Hopkins University SAIS, 2019): 197–215.

⁵ Marek Kornat, “Why Did Russian Troops Leave Poland as Late as in 1993, not in 1989?”, *Wszystko Co Najważniejsze* (online), 16 September 2023, <https://wszystkoconajwazniejsze.pl/prof-marek-kornat-why-did-russian-troops-leave-poland-as-late-as-in-1993-not-in-1989/> (accessed 05 October 2024).

⁶ Józef M. Fiszer, “Poland’s Road to NATO – Objective and Subjective Obstacles”, *Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej [Yearbook of the Institute of Central Europe]* 20, no. 2 (2022): 47–73.

⁷ Ryszard Zięba, 2019: 199.

evidence of this was Poland's plan to reconfigure the European Neighbourhood Policy, operationalized under the name of the Eastern Partnership (EaP).⁸ The motivation behind this initiative – crafted with the support of Sweden – was to strengthen the EU's ties with its neighbouring post-Soviet countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, and encourage their democratic and economic transformation.⁹ As such, Poland's aim was for the sphere of peace, security, and democracy to spread beyond the borders of the EU. It also wanted to limit Russia's sway over the area that Moscow considered a part of its sphere of influence. The EaP was officially inaugurated in 2009, a year after the Russo-Georgian War.

Meanwhile, Poland also partook in various EU missions such as the EUFOR ALTHEA, EUTM RCA, and EUNAVFOR MED IRINI over the years. Yet, neither Poland's vigour in promoting the EaP nor its broader engagement in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) meant that it prioritized the EU as Warsaw's most essential security provider. On the contrary, the EU was perceived as an “indispensable addition” to NATO.¹⁰ Even though Poland's stance towards the CSDP has generally been guided by the need for the EU to strengthen its military might – quite in line with current European debates around the concept of “strategic autonomy” or the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) – Polish decision-makers see the principles of *non-duplication* and *non-competition* with NATO as essential to this endeavour.¹¹ These two terms emphasize that European defence and security initiatives must reinforce or supplement – rather than replicate or undermine – NATO's capabilities. At the same time, Warsaw thinks that any EU initiative in the area of defence has to

- 1) take into consideration threats coming from within both the eastern and southern borders of the EU,
- 2) serve not only crisis management, but also collective defence, and
- 3) be of help to the defence industry in every member state – not only the largest ones.¹²

⁸ Artur Adamczyk, “The Role of Poland in the Creation Process of the Eastern Partnership”, *Yearbook of Polish European Studies* 13 (2010): 195–204.

⁹ Piotr Buras, *Poland and the Eastern Partnership: The View from Warsaw* (Warsaw: European Council on Foreign Relations [ECFR], 2015), https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_poland_and_the_eastern_partnership_the_view_from_warsaw3038/ (accessed 06 October 2024).

¹⁰ Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Poland, *European Union (EU) Missions and Operations*, <https://www.gov.pl/web/national-defence/eu-missions-and-operations> (accessed 06 October 2024).

¹¹ Marcin Terlikowski, *PeSCo: The Polish Perspective*, Policy Paper #32 (Paris: French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs [IRIS], 2018), <https://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Ares-32.pdf> (accessed 06 October 2024).

¹² Justyna Gotkowska, “Annex 3 Poland and the European Strategic Autonomy Debate”, in *European Strategic Autonomy in Security and Defence: Now the Going Gets Tough, It's Time to Get Going*, eds. Dick Zandee, Bob Deen, Kimberley Kruijver and Adája Stoetman (Wassenaar: Clingendael Institute, 2020): 63–67.

In short, for Warsaw, European transformation and future security and defence policy should not be a tool for recreating a binary of “old” and “new” members, which has been often referred to since the 2004 enlargement in debates concerning European integration.

Poland’s supportive yet careful approach towards European defence and security projects derives from a conviction widely shared among Polish security and defence elites, namely that the United States should be actively engaged in Europe’s security. This arises from a few factors. One of them is rooted in Poland’s strategic culture. When Germany invaded Poland in September of 1939, neither the United Kingdom nor France came to help, despite their legal commitments – this left a deep mark on Polish decision-makers when thinking about alliances involving European powers.¹³ Together with the conviction that Poland has been “one of the biggest beneficiaries of *Pax Americana*”,¹⁴ this historical memory resulted in a firm belief that alliances can be truly secure and reliable only when backed by the military might of the United States.

Intriguingly, these views are also reflected in public sentiments. Recent research by the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) shows that a significantly higher percentage of Polish people see the United States as the most important ally, followed by Germany (46 per cent compared to only 15 per cent). Moreover, most Poles (62 per cent) are either definitely or somewhat convinced that the United States would react militarily in the event of a real threat to Poland’s security.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the tendency to tread carefully about the European defence–NATO nexus also has another rationale. Although Polish security and defence elites believe that Europe should increase its military might – also because of a noticeable change in the security priorities of Washington – they consider this a matter for the future, despite the urgent need for a dramatic increase in European capabilities. This conviction stems mainly from political uncertainties about whether European allies are determined enough to quickly raise their military spending and doubts relating to long production cycles in the defence industry. That is why Poland has been heavily investing in NATO – and particularly in its strategic bond with the United States. In the past, this strategic priority had led Polish decision-makers to support the US war against Iraq. In the last decade, it has manifested itself through a set of political and economic choices, among them an increase in the military presence of American

¹³ Roger Moorhouse, “Poland Was Betrayed”, *Wszystko Co Najważniejsze* (online), 29 August 2019, <https://wszystkoconajwazniejsze.pl/roger-moorhouse-poland-was-betrayed/> (accessed 06 October 2024).

¹⁴ Sławomir Dębski, *Polska w świecie in statu nascendi* [Poland in the “in statu nascendi” World] (Warsaw: Polish Institute of International Affairs [PISM], 2024), <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/polska-w-swiecie-in-statu-nascendi> (accessed 06 October 2024).

¹⁵ Marcin Andrzej Piotrowski, *Polish Public Opinion on the United States and Polish American Relations* (Warsaw: Polish Institute of International Affairs [PISM], January 2022): 26, [https://pism.pl/webroot/upload/files/Raport/Polish%20public%20opinion%20on%20the%20United%20States%20Polish-American%20Relation\(1\).pdf](https://pism.pl/webroot/upload/files/Raport/Polish%20public%20opinion%20on%20the%20United%20States%20Polish-American%20Relation(1).pdf) (accessed 06 October 2024).

soldiers on Polish soil, or the determination to boost the presence of American companies, with the goal of anchoring the United States even deeper in Poland's security or – as some analysts preferred to say – to gain a status of “America's eastern protégé”.¹⁶

2.3

To Strengthen the Eastern Flank

Membership in NATO and the EU anchored Poland firmly within Western institutions, allowing it to finally enjoy its own “peace dividend”. This is best shown by the country's impressive economic growth: Poland's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita has increased more than threefold since 1989.¹⁷ Although Poland could think of itself – for the first time in its modern history – as being safe from external aggression, the momentum of strategic relaxation did not last long. The Russo-Georgian War was a significant turning point in shifting the mood with regard to the future of the state's security. Polish political actors perceived the war as early clear evidence of reinvigorated Russian imperialism. As a testimony to this conviction, the late President Lech Kaczyński said while visiting Tbilisi during the war: “Today Georgia, tomorrow Ukraine, the day after tomorrow Baltic states, and then, perhaps, the time will come for my country, Poland”.¹⁸ This perspective remained neglected by the allies. Even the United States – the most important guarantor of Poland's security – soon had another idea of engaging Russia via the policy of “reset”¹⁹, ignoring numerous warnings from both Poland and the representatives of Baltic states.²⁰

Although it is pointless to celebrate the rightfulness of the Polish foresight about Russia and its motives, it is still worth pointing out the driver behind this forecast, which turned out to be true. It was rooted in the realization by Polish defence and security elites that Russia's growing, aggressive posture is an instrument for delivering the promises made by Wladimir Putin in his infamous 2007 Munich speech, and an endeavour to challenge the West and the Western-led international order. This

¹⁶ Marcin Zaborowski and Kerry Longhurst, “America's Protégé in the East? The Emergence of Poland as a Regional Leader”, *International Affairs* 70, no. 5 (2003): 1009–1028.

¹⁷ Polish Economic Institute, *Od 1989 PKB Polski na mieszkańca zwiększył się ponad trzykrotnie [Since 1989, Poland's GDP per Capita Has More Than Tripled]* (Warsaw, 04 June 2024), <https://pie.net.pl/od-1989-pkb-polski-na-mieszkanca-zwiekszyt-sie-ponad-trzykrotnie/> (accessed 12 October 2024).

¹⁸ “11 Years Since Landmark Speech by Polish Leader in Georgia”, *Polskie Radio* (online), 12 August 2019, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/7785/artykul/2353833,11-years-since-landmark-speech-by-polish-leader-in-georgia> (accessed 12 October 2024).

¹⁹ The White House, “U.S.-Russia Relations: ‘Reset’ Fact Sheet”, Press release (Washington D.C., 24 June 2010), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/us-russia-relations-reset-fact-sheet> (accessed 12 October 2024).

²⁰ Stuart Lau, “‘We Told You So!’ How the West Didn't Listen to the Countries That Know Russia Best”, *Politico* (online), 09 March 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/western-europe-listen-to-the-baltic-countries-that-know-russia-best-ukraine-poland/> (accessed 12 October 2024).

perception further highlighted the urgency of another strategic guideline underlining Polish policy: a need to strengthen NATO's Eastern Flank. At that time, however, the argument did not get enough attention due to a "reset" policy, which was also hesitantly supported by Poland.²¹ Lacking leverage over its heavyweight allies, especially the United States, Polish decision-makers decided to go with the flow of the supposed détente between the West and Russia.

Yet, the mood in the Transatlantic alliance started to change in the first half of 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and started the Donbas war. Although members of the Transatlantic alliance differed in their opinions on the appropriate response – which only enhanced Russia's conviction that the West is incapable of creating a united front towards Russia – it was easier this time around to build an understanding among NATO members on the Eastern Flank. In 2015, Poland and Romania initiated the Bucharest Nine Cooperation (B9) with the goal of strengthening coordination and collaboration among the nine countries forming the Eastern Flank.²² Supported by its allies, Poland engaged in significant diplomatic efforts so that the summits in Newport (2014), Warsaw (2016), and Brussels (2018) could produce the best possible results regarding the security of the Eastern Flank.²³

At the same time, Poland became increasingly assertive towards allies whose stance on Russia remained indecisive. It was particularly concerned about Germany and its new European Eastern Policy, which was seen by Polish analysts as vague, incoherent, delusional, and weak with regard to engaging Russia.²⁴ This was also why Poland conducted intensive lobbying efforts – trying to co-opt Donald Trump during his first administration – against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Polish foreign and security elites saw the investment as yet another signal which would support Moscow's conviction that the West's was incapable of standing up to Russia and, thus, potentially enabling an even more aggressive posture by Russia.²⁵ Such a perception also enhanced Poland's understanding and unwavering support for Trump's position regarding

²¹ "Poland Not Ready to Push Russia 'Reset' Button", *Reuters* (online), 08 December 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/poland-not-ready-to-push-russia-reset-button-idUSTRE6B75VK/> (accessed 12 October 2024).

²² Jakub Pieńkowski and Tomasz Żornaczuk, *Bucharest Nine Cooperation Strengthening NATO's Eastern Flank* (Warsaw: Polish Institute of International Affairs [PISM], 2024), <https://www.pism.pl/publications/bucharest-nine-cooperation-strengthening-natos-eastern-flank> (accessed 12 October 2024).

²³ Anna M. Dynier, Artur Kacprzyk, Wojciech Lorenz, Marcin A. Piotrowski and Marcin Terlikowski (ed.), *Newport – Warsaw – Brussels: NATO in Defence of Peace in Europe* (Warsaw: Polish Institute of International Affairs [PISM], 2019), <https://pism.pl/publikacje/newport-warsaw-brussels-nato-in-defence-of-peace-in-europe> (accessed 12 October 2024).

²⁴ Lidia Gibadło, *Germany's New European Eastern Policy* (Warsaw: Polish Institute of International Affairs [PISM], 2019), https://pism.pl/publications/Germany_s_New_European_Eastern_Policy (accessed 12 October 2024).

²⁵ Agata Łoskot-Strachota, Rafał Bajczuk and Szymon Kardaś, *Nord Stream 2 Divides the West*, OSW Commentary (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies [OSW], 18 June 2018), <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2018-06-18/nord-stream-2-divides-west> (accessed 12 October 2024).

NATO members spending 2 per cent GDP on defence.

Polish decision-makers think that Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 proved Poland's position right. Since February 2022, Polish authorities have doubled down on their efforts to strengthen NATO's Eastern Flank, also by massively boosting the country's own defence budget.²⁶ In 2025, Poland plans to allocate a substantial PLN 186.5 billion (approximately €45 billion) to defence, amounting to nearly 5 per cent of its GDP. This represents a significant increase, marking a 22 per cent rise compared to 2024, a 60 per cent increase over 2023, and a staggering 250 per cent increase compared to the 2022 defence budget.²⁷ Polish authorities also granted unequivocal support to Ukraine, clearly guided by the logic that, should the country lose its battle against Russia, the threat would knock at NATO's door.²⁸ Therefore, strengthening the capabilities of both the Eastern Flank and Poland will likely remain a paramount strategic imperative for the foreseeable future. This is best evidenced by a list of military equipment the country has already bought or intends to acquire. Among the most important transactions, one could mention the following:

- 96 AH-64E Apache attack helicopters + 8 AH-64D on lees (United States)
- 32 F-35A (United States)
- 116 M1A1 FEP Abrams and 250 M1A2 SEPv3 Abrams tanks (United States)
- 20 HIMARS rocket artillery systems, with plans to buy another 124 (United States)
- 32 AW149 helicopters (Italy)
- 96 Krab self-propelled howitzers and accompanying vehicles (domestic contract)
- 48 FA-50 jets (South Korea)
- 180 K2 tanks (South Korea), with plans to co-produce more tanks – up to 820 total
- 290 K239 Chonmoo (HOMAR-K) MLRS (South Korea, with 78 build in Poland)
- 367 K9 self-propelled howitzers (South Korea)
- 3 Miecznik-class frigates (domestic contract with UK cooperation)
- Enhancing air defence system through Wisła (8 batteries of Patriot IBCS) and Narew (23 batteries based on UK CAMM-ER missiles) programmes
- 116 Borsuk IFV, with plans to produce up to 14,000 (domestic)

²⁶ Bartłomiej Wypartowicz, "Unprecedented Defence Spending: Polish Government Approves 2025 Budget", *Defence 24* (online), 29 August 2024, <https://defence24.com/defence-policy/unprecedented-defence-spending-polish-government-approves-2025-budget> (accessed 12 October 2024).

²⁷ "Wydatki na obronność Polski w latach 2022–2025 według MON" [Poland's Defence Expenditure in 2022–2025 According to the Ministry of National Defence], *Dziennik Zbrojny* (online), 07 December 2024, <https://dziennikzbrojny.pl/aktualnosci/news,1,12101,aktualnosci-z-polski,wydatki-na-obronnosc-polski-w-latach-2022-2025-wedlug-mon> (accessed 26 January 2025).

²⁸ Karol Wasilewski, 'For Our Freedom and Yours'. *Poland's Reading of Ukrainians' Struggle Against Russia*, In-Depth Briefing (Camberley: The Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research [CHACR], 2022).

2.4

Poland's Strategic Future

Poland's heavy investment in defence, especially if it is sustained, indicates a strategic aim to substantially increase its military might to prepare for a potential conflict with Russia while acknowledging the possibility of limited allied support. This strategy takes into account several considerations:

- 1) the three strategic guidelines – avoiding a “strategic vacuum”, building security around the EU and NATO, and strengthening the Eastern Flank – imprinted deeply in the thinking of Polish decision-makers about the state's security,
- 2) the fact that Poland's perspective on security and, in particular, on Russia differs from that of its allies, and
- 3) the United States' growing concentration on China and its continuous push for European allies to do more when it comes to defence spending.

Poland's ambition to enhance its military might does not mean, however, that the country will leave behind its past *modus operandi*. It is reasonable to expect that Warsaw will continue to anchor the United States within its security architecture and support NATO's adaptation. At the same time, it will remain open to European defence and security projects that contribute to Poland's security and increase the weight of the defence portfolio in the EU agenda. Warsaw will, however, carefully engage with projects, paying attention to the principles of *non-duplication* and *non-competition* between the EU and NATO. At least for now, there is no indication that Poland would abandon its role as a hesitant supporter of European strategic autonomy and become its ardent advocate – seeing, for example, the growing disinterest of the United States towards the security situation on the European continent. On the contrary, it seems that one of the goals of Poland's strategy remains proving itself, particularly to the United States, as a responsible security actor, a regional security provider, and a vital partner.

The direction of Poland's strategic transformation also seems to suggest that Warsaw is prioritizing the enhancement of its own military capabilities over European defence cooperation as insurance against the potential “withdrawal” of the United States from Europe. For now, one possible scenario that could lead to a change of heart on this topic – resulting in even more active support from Poland for European strategic autonomy²⁹ – is a situation in which the state's defence spending and plans are impaired due to, for example, economic distress or severe problems with personnel

²⁹ Justyna Gotkowska, *European Strategic Autonomy or European Pillar in NATO? Germany's Stance on French Initiatives*, OSW Commentary (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies [OSW], 21 February 2020), <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2020-02-21/european-strategic-autonomy-or-european-pillar-nato-germanys> (accessed 19 February 2025).

and equipment shortages. One might imagine that a sudden change in Poland's approach towards European defence and security projects could also result from an abrupt and deep political crisis in the United States – a scenario that seems less probable, though not totally unimaginable in the context of the high level of political polarization in the country – or an uncoordinated and swiftly executed decision by Washington to completely withdraw European security guarantees.

3.

Security and Defence Relations with Turkey

The second section explores the evolving relationship between Poland and Turkey, examining how historical narratives, political perceptions, and strategic interests have shaped their interactions. It also depicts how Poland's security concerns – particularly the fear of Russia's growing aggressive posture on the international stage – have driven a recent increase in defence cooperation with Turkey, including the purchase of Turkish drones. The section ends with a look at future cooperation between the two countries.

3.1

Political Legends and Images

The relationship between Poland and Turkey is built around a few political legends and stories rooted in their common history. One of them relates to the narrative – still present in modern historiography as well as official messaging³⁰ – that the Ottoman Empire was the only entity that did not recognize the final partitioning of Poland in 1795. The message behind this story was magnified by the fact that the Ottoman Empire soon became a safe haven for Polish refugees – as demonstrated by Adampol/Polonezköy, a Polish village near Istanbul. The following political gestures highlighted “a special bond” between the two countries. Poland became the first European country to recognize the newborn Republic of Turkey in 1923. During the Second World War, when Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union occupied Poland, the Polish embassy in Ankara remained open.

³⁰ Paulina Dominik, “Overview of Polish/Ottoman History”, *Polonia Ottomanica* (blog), <http://poloniaottomanica.blogspot.com/p/overview-of-polishottoman-history.html> (accessed 13 October 2024);
Serwis Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej [Service of the Republic of Poland], *Turcja* [Turkey], <https://www.gov.pl/web/turcja/relacje-dwustronne> (accessed 13 October 2024).

Although it might be easy to overlook the impact of this historical legacy, it appears to form a cornerstone of the “mutual respect” shared by the two countries.³¹ Though such a statement is difficult to prove adequately, appreciation towards Turkey can be traced through Polish politicians’ perceptions of Turkey. Especially the conservative political actors carry a positive image of Ankara. Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość), for instance, repeatedly spoke of Turkey as a “serious state”.³² It was supposed to be a quote from his late brother – the president of Poland between 2005 and 2010 – who had thought Poland needed to be an ambitious and assertive country, fighting hard for its interests on the international stage while underlining its sovereignty.³³ It seems, though, that the “serious state” slogan had connotations exceeding foreign policy, also pertaining to a vision of a centralized country that was able to control and be a driving force of various elements of socio-economic and political life.

Other conservative parties, such as the Confederation (Konfederacja), which is often described as a far-right entity, also use Turkey as a point of reference. Its representatives are especially fond of a multi-vector foreign policy. Krzysztof Bosak, one of its leaders, depicted such policy as a form of diplomacy that is not dependent on a sole partner but instead provides diverse opportunities and options due to relations with a set of different international actors.³⁴ Bosak does not openly reference Turkey, nor has he avoided criticising the country on various occasions. Ankara’s instrumentalization of Syrian migrants to exert pressure on the EU is one such example.³⁵ However, the appreciation of his party’s representatives for a multi-vector foreign policy and, remarkably, their calls for Poland to understand the value of its geographical location and a call to balance its relations with different international

³¹ Jacek Lepiarz and Burak Ünveren, “Poland-Turkey Relations: Cordial and Growing Ever Closer”, *Deutsche Welle* (online), 15 February 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/poland-turkey-relations-cordial-and-growing-ever-closer/a-64708571> (accessed 13 October 2024).

³² Jerzy Kubrak, “Jarosław Kaczyński dla wPolityce.pl: ‘Bardzo potężne siły dążą do tego, żeby Polska nie była tym, czym mogłaby być. Trzeba się temu przeciwstawić’: NASZ WYWIAD” [Jarosław Kaczyński for wPolityce.pl: ‘Very Powerful Forces Are Trying to Prevent Poland from Being What It Could Be. We Have to Oppose It’: OUR INTERVIEW], *wPolityce.pl* (online), 07 June 2014, <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/199640-jaroslaw-kaczynski-dla-wpolitycepl-bardzo-poteczne-sily-daza-do-tego-zeby-polska-nie-byla-tym-czym-moglaby-byc-trzeba-sie-temu-przeciwstawic-nasz-wywiad> (accessed 13 October 2024).

³³ Jarosław Kaczyński, “Przedmowa” [Preface], in *Ostatni Wywiad [The Last Interview]*, eds. Lech Kaczyński and Łukasz Warzecha (The Facto, Warsaw 2016): 5–8.

³⁴ Marek Trojan, “Bosak dla Kresy.pl: Polityka wielowektorowa to praktyczna realizacja dumy narodowej” [Bosak for Kresy.pl: Multi-vector Policy Is a Practical Implementation of National Pride], *Kresy.pl* (online), 29 February 2020, <https://kresy.pl/publicystyka/wywiady/bosak-dla-kresy-pl-polityka-wielowektorowa-to-praktyczna-realizacja-dumy-narodowej/> (accessed 13 October 2024).

³⁵ Mieczysław Rudy, “Bosak wezwał prezydenta do solidarności z Grecją i wsparcia ochrony jej granic” [Bosak Called on the President to Show Solidarity with Greece and Support the Protection of Its Borders], *Polska Agencja Prasowa (PAP)* (online), 03 March 2020, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C597877%2Cbosak-wezwal-prezydenta-do-solidarnosci-z-grecja-i-wsparcia-ochrony-jej> (accessed 13 October 2020).

partners suggest some inspiration from Turkey's foreign policy playbook.³⁶

The remaining actors on the Polish political spectrum do not seem to have such a clearly defined image of Turkey – at least not to the extent that it could help them formulate their political slogans or proposals. This does not mean, however, that their approach to the country is different or lacks a sense of respect. A speech given in 2011 by Radosław Sikorski – the current foreign minister, who also served as foreign minister between 2007 and 2014 – at the Polish parliament is a case in point. Sikorski set the goal of Polish diplomacy becoming “a state not only safe and prosperous, but also more influential. A serious state. So that we could rebuild our former prestige, as Spain or Turkey did in the last decades”.³⁷ Moreover, various representatives of the Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, currently known as Koalicja Obywatelska, which has been part of a ruling coalition since 2023) have continually expressed their appreciation of a historical bond tying Poland and Turkey together.³⁸ Though the leader of the coalition, current Prime Minister Donald Tusk, occasionally took harsh stances towards Turkey, especially during his term as the president of the European Council (2014–2019), he always appears cautious in his criticisms so as not to burn bridges with Turkish leaders. One example is his comment on Turkey's deteriorating right to free speech. Instead of firmly criticizing the Turkish president, he referred to their shared experience – according to him, both politicians served prison terms in the past due to their criticisms of regimes in Poland and Turkey – and explained that politicians need to have a “thicker skin”.³⁹ This caution towards Turkey, mixed with pragmatism, seems to characterize the ruling camp also today. Evidence thereof may be the recent visit to Turkey paid by the Speaker of the Polish Parliament, Szymon Hołownia.⁴⁰ The politician has also tread very carefully when speaking of differences

³⁶ “Kamiński (Konfederacja): Im dłużej będziemy ‘na pasku’ USA, tym mocniej będziemy się pograżać” [Kamiński (Konfederacja): The Longer We Remain ‘on the US Belt’, the Deeper We Will Sink], *WNP.pl* (online), 25 July 2021, <https://www.wnp.pl/parlamentarny/wydarzenia/kaminski-konfederacja-im-dluzej-bedziemy-na-pasku-usa-tym-mocniej-bedziemy-sie-pograzac,154482.html> (accessed 13 October 2024).

³⁷ Sławomir Dębski (ed.), *Rocznik polskiej polityki zagranicznej 2011–2015 [The Yearbook of Polish Foreign Policy 2011–2015]* (Warsaw: The Polish Institute of International Affairs [PISM], 2019): 16.

³⁸ “Tusk: przyszłość należy do Polski i Turcji” [Tusk: The Future Belongs to Poland and Turkey], *Wprost* (online), 08 November 2013, <https://www.wprost.pl/424367/donald-tusk-przyszlosc-nalezy-do-polski-i-turcji.html> (accessed 13 October 2024).

³⁹ “Tusk radzi Erdoganowi, by miał ‘grubszą skórę’ i mówi o podobnych doświadczeniach” [Tusk Advises Erdogan to Have ‘Thick Skin’ and Speaks of Similar Experiences], *Wprost* (online), 24 April 2016, <https://www.wprost.pl/swiat/10004749/tusk-radzi-erdoganowi-by-mial-grubsza-skore-i-mowi-o-podobnych-doswiadczeniach.html> (accessed 13 October 2024); “Tusk to Erdogan: Don’t ‘Weaponize’ Refugees”, *Deutsche Welle* (online), 10 November 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/dont-weaponize-refugees-eus-tusk-tells-turkey/a-50794532> (accessed 13 October 2024).

⁴⁰ Daria Kania, “Marszałek Sejmu w Turcji: wizyta w Ankarze to sygnał podniesienia relacji polsko-tureckich na wyższy poziom” [Marshal of the Sejm in Turkey: Visit to Ankara Is a Sign of Raising Polish-Turkish Relations to a Higher Level], *Polska Agencja Prasowa (PAP)* (online), 19 September 2024, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/marszalek-sejmu-w-turcji-wizyta-w-ankarze-sygnał-podniesienia-relacji-polsko-tureckich> (accessed 13 October 2024).

in approaches by Poland and Turkey towards Russia, signalling his intention to focus on “common areas”, such as both states’ support for Ukraine.

3.2

Economic and People to People Relations

Although it would be wrong to claim that Polish–Turkish relations have been bad since 1989, it certainly would not be a mistake to say that enhancing bilateral relations has not been a primary concern either for Warsaw or Ankara. The relationship has had its bright moments, though, which were driven and facilitated by both countries’ strategic priorities. Among the most significant have been Turkey’s support for Poland’s membership in NATO, and Poland’s ardent and consistent support – despite changing governments – for Turkey’s EU accession process, which continues up until today (even though the process itself remains in limbo due to the de-democratization of Turkey and the EU’s lack of interest in further enlargement). Yet, the relationship has lacked substance, best demonstrated by the low levels of trade exchange, which indeed has remained below the potential of the two growing economies. In 2007, it equalled only €3 billion.⁴¹

Though the relationship between the two countries was elevated to the level of strategic partnership in 2009,⁴² it has evolved slowly, at least compared to Turkey’s relations with other European allies. One reason for this may be the relatively small size of the Turkish diaspora in Poland. According to data from Turkey’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, only 25,000 Turkish citizens live on Polish soil. This – especially during the last few years – has generally left Poland off of Turkish politicians’ radars and naturally limits the space for economic interactions (although it should be noted that there are around 2,000 economic entities in Poland with at least one Turkish shareholder⁴³). Another reason for this comparative lack of intensity in bilateral relations may be due to Polish society’s stance on Turkey and, generally speaking, the limited possibility to interact with Turkey and its culture. The latest survey of the Public Opinion Research Center, a publicly funded research entity, shows that only 27 per cent of Poles feel sympathy towards Turkey (28 per cent of them are neutral, and

⁴¹ Bartłomiej Pawlak, “Obroty handlowe Polski i Turcji wyniosły 12 mld euro w 2023 r.” [Trade Between Poland and Turkey Amounted to EUR 12 Billion in 2023], *Bankier.pl* (online), 06 July 2024, <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Obroty-handlowe-Polski-i-Turcji-wyniosly-12-mld-euro-w-2023-r-8760787.html> (accessed 14 October 2024).

⁴² Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Relations between Türkiye and Poland*, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkiye-and-poland.en.mfa> (accessed 14 October 2024).

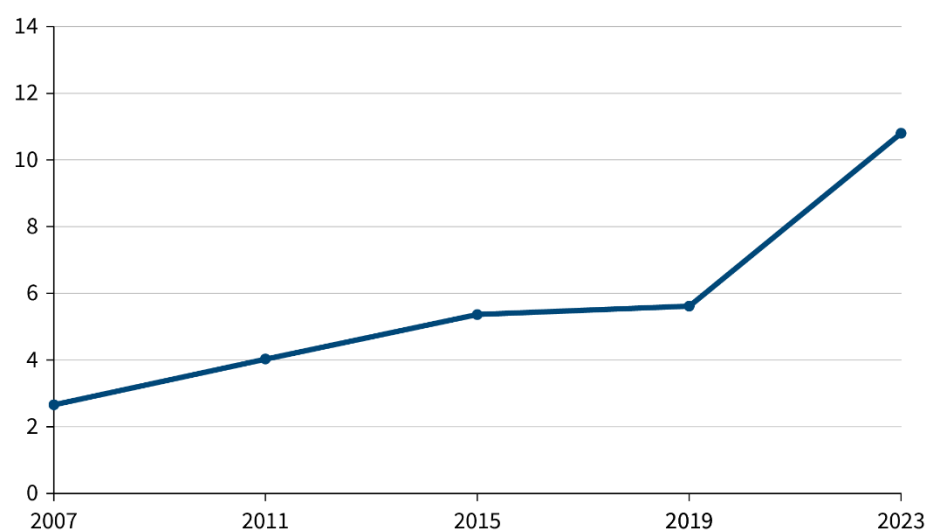
⁴³ Centralny Ośrodek Informacji Gospodarczej [Central Economic Information Center], *Tureckie firmy w Polsce 03-04-2024* [Turkish Companies in Poland 03-04-2024] (Nadarzyn, 03 April 2024), https://www.coig.com.pl/wykaz_lista_firm_ztureckim_kapitałem_wPolsce.php (accessed 14 October 2024).

36 per cent feel aversion towards the country).⁴⁴ Additionally, the Poles, contrary to citizens in many European nations, have only recently started to discover Turkey as one of their main tourism destinations.⁴⁵

Curiously, though, the development of the relationship between Poland and Turkey started to accelerate a few years ago – at a time of growing geopolitical turbulence and tensions in Turkey’s relations with its Western partners. Nothing seems to prove this better than a steadily growing rate of trade exchange, which reached €11 billion at the end of 2023.⁴⁶ Security was one of the most critical factors contributing to this shift.

Figure 1

Trade Exchange Volume between Poland and Turkey
Total trade (exports + imports), in billion euros



Source: International Trade Centre (ITC) Trade Map

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⁴⁴ Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS), *Stosunek do innych narodów rok po wybuchu wojny na Ukrainie. Komunikat z badań nr 33/2023 [Attitudes Towards Other Nations One Year After the Outbreak of War in Ukraine. Research Report no. 33/2023]* (Warsaw, 2023): 2.

⁴⁵ Iwona Kołczańska, “Tego jeszcze nie było. Rekordowa liczba turystów z Polski w wakacyjnym raj” [This Has Never Happened Before. Record Number of Tourists from Poland in the Holiday Paradise], *WP Turystyka* (online), 06 February 2024, <https://turystyka.wp.pl/tego-jeszcze-nie-bylo-rekordowa-liczba-turystow-z-polski-w-wakacyjnym-raju-6992714883361760a> (14 October 2024).

⁴⁶ Bartłomiej Pawlak, 2024.

3.3

Security and Defence Cooperation

The modern history of Polish–Turkish relations is full of ideas about cooperation and projects that have not come to fruition. As Konrad Zasztowt – professor at the University of Warsaw and a former analyst at the Polish Institute of International Affairs as well as at the Centre for Security Studies at the War Studies University – points out, in recent decades both countries have carried out discussions on topics such as air- and missile-defence systems, unmanned aerial vehicles and helicopters (T129 ATAK), the acquisition and modernization of submarines, armoured vehicles (Arma 6x6), satellite reconnaissance systems, the upgrade of frigates and Leopard 2A4 tanks, guided anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles, the modernization of some military equipment, or the purchase of hulls for Krab tracked howitzers.⁴⁷ Despite offerings by Turkish companies, almost none of these discussions have, however, resulted in action for at least three reasons.

Firstly, it appears that for quite a long time, Polish decision-makers were unsure of the quality of Turkish equipment or the country's ability to deliver on promised deals. Secondly, as mentioned earlier, the relationship's relative lack of pace and intensity – particularly with regard to elevating ties to a higher level – might also have served as an obstacle to deepening relations on the security and defence front. Thirdly, Poland's interest in Turkey as a supplier has been limited by the country's clear preference to buy military equipment from its Transatlantic allies, especially the United States, as a tool to facilitate political relationships with them.

Although cooperation on defence procurements has long been stuck in limbo, the political relationship has slowly gained pace. In 2012, Poland and Turkey – joined by Romania, which inaugurated the format – initiated a trilogue of the three allies, representing the largest countries on the Eastern and Southern Flanks, intending to discuss their shared security interests and strategic issues pertaining to NATO.⁴⁸ In 2016, the format was elevated to the level of the foreign ministers of the three countries, concentrating even more on coordinating their actions. The aim was to focus the transatlantic allies' attention on the topics that were crucial for the security of the Eastern and Southern Flanks.⁴⁹ The ministerial meetings continue until today, with the last one having been conducted in June 2024. The aim is to discuss the issues

⁴⁷ Konrad Zasztowt, "Poland", in *Türkiye's Defence-industrial Relationships with Other European States*, ed. Tom Waldwyn (Ankara, Washington D.C.: Center for Foreign Policy and Peace Research [CFPPR] and International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], 2024): 15–16.

⁴⁸ Romania Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Romania – Poland – Turkey Trilateral Meeting* (Bucharest, 28 October 2013), <https://www.mae.ro/en/node/22785> (accessed 16 October 2024).

⁴⁹ Piotr Oleksy and Jakub Olchowski, *Trilog Polska – Rumunia – Turcja [Trilog Poland – Romania – Türkiye]*, Komentarz IEŚ no. 737 (249/2022) (Lublin: Instytut Europy Środkowej [IEŚ], 30 November 2022), <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/trilog-polska-rumunia-turcja/> (accessed 16 October 2024).

that are tied to NATO's Washington summit, especially the situation in Ukraine and the fight against hybrid threats.⁵⁰

Poland's decision-makers also tried to engage Turkey on the highest level. In 2017, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan came to Warsaw for a visit described by some pundits as controversial, due to both the de-democratization of Turkey after the failed coup in 2016 and rising tensions between Ankara's Western partners, in particular Germany and the United States.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the meeting of the two heads of state seemed fruitful, as demonstrated by the creation of a few intergovernmental agreements, among them a declaration of intent between the Ministries of Defence of both states.⁵² The document pointed to areas for further cooperation in security and defence, calling for the strengthening of both countries' efforts to continue adapting NATO to its security threats and challenges as well as increasing the intensity of cooperation between their defence industries. The events that followed the visit also suggest that it helped bring new momentum to the relationship between Poland and Turkey. The best evidence for this may seem a bit paradoxical, though, because it was tied to a crisis that could have ruined the relationship.

The difficult moment came in December 2019 and was tied to Turkey's increasing assertiveness on the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). The YPG is the main component of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and it serves as the official military wing of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).⁵³ US support for the YPG has led to severe tensions in US-Turkey bilateral relations over the years. Turkey's unilateral military incursions into Northern Syria in 2018 and 2019 to curb the YPG's influence ended in a series of arms embargoes enforced by its Western allies.

Convincing its allies to recognize the YPG as a terrorist organization has been a priority for Ankara. The request was also voiced during NATO's London summit in 2019, when Turkey demanded that allies respect its perception of security. As an attempt to increase its leverage, Ankara blocked NATO's Eagle Defender – the updated defence plans for Poland and the Baltic states. This became the catalyst for intense summit diplomacy – performed by NATO's secretary general; the presidents of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia; and Estonia's prime minister. Turkey eventually lifted

⁵⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland, *Trilogue Meeting of Foreign Ministers of Poland, Romania, and Türkiye* (Warsaw, 26 June 2024), <https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/trilogue-meeting-of-foreign-ministers-of-poland-romania-and-trkiye> (accessed 16 October 2024).

⁵¹ Joanna Marszałek-Kawa and Ahmet Burak, "Turkey's View of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Visit to Poland in 2017: Prospects and Conclusions", *Polish Political Science Yearbook* 48, no. 3 (2019): 500–513.

⁵² Kancelaria Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej [Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Poland], *Wizyta Prezydenta Turcji [Visit of the President of Turkey]* (Warsaw, 17 October 2017), <https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wydarzenia/wizyta-prezydenta-turcji,750> (accessed 16 October 2024).

⁵³ SDF was founded in 2015 to support the US-led coalition in the war against ISIS. Ankara sees the YPG as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which it considers – together with the EU and the United States – a terrorist organization.

its veto, reportedly without any quid pro quo.⁵⁴ The plans were effectively endorsed in June 2020.⁵⁵

Although Turkey's veto might have been seen by Polish decision-makers as unfriendly and convinced them that investing in the relationship was a political mistake, the lessons they drew from the crisis were different. In September 2020, two months after Turkey effectively lifted its veto, Polish President Andrzej Duda signed a decision to send a Polish military contingent to Turkey under the framework of NATO's Tailored Assurance Measures mission in Turkey.⁵⁶ Although it remains unclear whether the decision was tied to the discussions during the London summit, it surely was aimed at signalling Poland's commitment to contribute towards Turkey's security.

Furthermore, in May 2021, President Duda decided to pay a return visit to Ankara. The meeting between the two heads of state was a breakthrough for defence cooperation. Both presidents confirmed during the visit that Poland would buy 24 Bayraktar TB2 combat drones produced by the Turkish defence company Bayraktar, owned by the family of President Erdoğan's son-in-law, Selçuk Bayraktar.⁵⁷ Moreover, President Erdoğan announced that Turkey would join NATO Baltic Air Policing – and it did so in July 2021. This was Turkey's first engagement in the mission since 2006. For the first time, Turkish jets were also deployed in a Polish city: Malbork.⁵⁸ Several other agreements were also signed during the meeting. Notably, the leaders agreed that the details of these arrangements would be worked out by the appropriate ministries, which suggests the willingness of the two countries to continue bilateral cooperation.

Poland's decision to buy Bayraktar drones was an enormous win for Turkey's defence sector. Despite the popularity of these unmanned aerial vehicles in the vast geography stretching from Africa to Central Asia, the deal with Poland was the first of its kind

⁵⁴ Edyta Bieńczyk, "Erdogan wycofał sprzeciw: Jest porozumienie ws. planów obronnych NATO dla Polski i państw bałtyckich" [Erdogan Withdraws Objection: There Is an Agreement on NATO Defence Plans for Poland and the Baltic States], *RMF FM* (online), 04 December 2019, https://www.rmf24.pl/fakty/swiat/news-erdogan-wycofal-sprzeciw-jest-porozumienie-ws-planow-obronny,nId,3370156#crp_state=1 (accessed 16 October 2024).

⁵⁵ "NATO Endorses Baltic Defence Plans after Turkey Withdraws Veto", *Lithuanian National Radio and Television (LRT)* (online), 30 June 2024, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1193506/nato-endorses-baltic-defence-plans-after-turkey-withdraws-veto> (accessed 16 October 2024).

⁵⁶ Kancelaria Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej [Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Poland], *Szef BBN: polscy żołnierze pojadą do Turcji w ramach misji NATO [BBN Chief: Polish Soldiers Will Go to Turkey as Part of NATO Mission]* (Warsaw, 16 September 2020), <https://www.prezydent.pl/kancelaria/aktywnosc-ministrow/szef-bbn-polscy-zolnierze-pojada-do-turcji-w-ramach-misji-nato,11762> (accessed 16 October 2024); Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Poland, *Polish Armed Forces in the TAMT Mission in Turkey* (Warsaw, April 2021), <https://www.gov.pl/web/national-defence/polish-armed-forces-in-the-tamt-mission-in-turkey> (accessed 16 October 2024).

⁵⁷ Karol Wasilewski, *President Duda Visits Turkey* (Warsaw: Polish Institute of International Affairs [PISM], 2021), https://pism.pl/publications/President_Duda_Visits_Turkey (accessed 16 October 2024).

⁵⁸ NATO Allied Air Command, *Turkish Air Force Joins NATO Enhanced Air Policing in Poland* (Ramstein, 06 July 2021), https://ac.nato.int/archive/2021/TUR_arrival_eAP_POL (accessed 16 October 2024).

with a NATO country.⁵⁹ Criticism was not absent, however. Some Polish defence experts raised concerns – offering reminders of Turkish debates on the indigenization of production – that procuring drones from Turkey would limit the growth of national defence competencies in this area.⁶⁰

It is important to note that the transaction was based on a special procedure that allows the purchase of military equipment when tied to an extraordinary situation or crisis. Although Poland's security concerns arguably played a role in purchasing defence products from Turkey, political reasons were also influential. Poland aimed to achieve two goals. Firstly, it wanted to convince Turkey to play a more active role in deterring Russia on the Eastern Flank and believed that such a transaction would be proof of Turkey's commitment to defend its allies. Secondly, it wanted to increase the level of distrust between Turkey and Russia by having a NATO country buy Turkish equipment. This goal was further driven by Warsaw presenting the transaction as Turkey's contribution to the Alliance's security. The transaction surely introduced a higher degree of uncertainty in Moscow's thinking about Ankara's motives.⁶¹

Notwithstanding the progress in the relationship between Poland and Turkey, turbulence remain. The most severe controversies were tied to Turkey's role in the migration crisis, which was initiated by Belarus and Russia and hit Poland hard in the autumn of 2021 (migrants often used an Istanbul-Minsk flight route operated by Turkish Airlines). In November of the same year, Poland's prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, went as far as to accuse Turkey of working hand in hand with two hostile countries.⁶² Though decision-makers in Ankara – acting under pressure from Brussels, which threatened to sanction Turkish Airlines – quickly started to implement measures aimed at limiting the flow of migrants,⁶³ their initial inaction

⁵⁹ “Poland Buys 24 Turkish Drones in First for NATO and EU”, *Daily Sabah* (online), 24 May 2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/poland-buys-24-turkish-drones-in-first-for-nato-and-eu> (accessed 24 October 2024).

⁶⁰ Marek Kozubal, “MON tłumaczy dlaczego kupujemy tureckie bayraktary” [Ministry of National Defence Explains Why We Buy Turkish Bayraktars], *Rzeczpospolita* (online), 18 August 2022, <https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art36893761-mon-tlumaczy-dlaczego-kupujemy-tureckie-bayraktary> (accessed 16 October 2024).

⁶¹ “‘Оружие, проверенное временем’: В Польше раскрыли детали закупки турецких беспилотников Bayraktar TB2” [‘Time-tested Weapons’: Poland Reveals Details of Turkish Bayraktar TB2 Drone Purchase], *Военное обозрение* (online), 17 October 2021, <https://topwar.ru/188155-oruzhie-proverennoe-vremenem-v-polshe-raskryli-detali-zakupki-tureckih-bespilotnikov-bayraktartb2.html> (accessed 24 February 2025); Ольга Самофалова [Olga Samofalova], “Чем Россия ответит на турецкую угрозу Калининграду из Польши” [How Russia Will Respond to the Turkish Threat to Kaliningrad from Poland], *Взгляд* (online), <https://vz.ru/society/2021/5/23/1100634.html> (accessed 24 February 2025).

⁶² Ragıp Soylu, “Poland Accuses Turkey of ‘Synchronising’ Refugee Crisis with Belarus and Russia”, *Middle East Eye* (online), 10 November 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/poland-turkey-synchronising-migration-crisis-russia> (accessed 16 October 2024).

⁶³ Andrew Roth and Lisa O’Carroll, “Turkey Bans Citizens from Syria, Yemen and Iraq from Flying to Minsk”, *The Guardian* (online), 12 November 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/12/turkey-bans-citizens-syria-yemen-iraq-from-flying-minsk> (accessed 16 October 2024).

raised doubts among Polish decision-makers about the limits of cooperation with Turkey. Ankara's initial inaction was perceived negatively, also against the backdrop of Ankara's weaponization of migration back in 2020. Still, an increasingly volatile security situation left little room for disagreements. After Russia's reinvasion of Ukraine – seen in Poland as proof that Moscow's aggressive posture is an existential threat – the heads of state met once again to discuss security and humanitarian issues tied to the conflict.⁶⁴ Some months later, President Duda also tried to convince President Erdoğan to lift Turkey's veto concerning Sweden's and Finland's accession to NATO.⁶⁵

3.4

The Future of Cooperation – Only Defence-Focused?

In December 2023, a new government was formed in Poland with Donald Tusk at its helm. Since the new authorities won the elections on the premise of reviewing and revising many of the decisions of their predecessors, one could have wondered about the effects of such promises on defence cooperation between Poland and Turkey. Nevertheless, the situation was clarified quickly. In August 2024, Ankara hosted a delegation from Poland, led by Vice-Minister of National Defence Paweł Bejda, who was accompanied, inter alia, by the president of Polska Grupa Zbrojeniowa, a state-owned capital group gathering several dozen production plants, service facilities, and research centres crucial for the Polish defence industry.⁶⁶ A month later, the Speaker of the Sejm, Szymon Hołownia, also visited Turkey. He underlined that Poland needed to maintain strong security cooperation with its ally, despite their different perspectives on Russia, and he announced work on the roadmap to increase defence cooperation between the two countries.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Kancelaria Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej [Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Poland], *Spotkanie Prezydenta Andrzeja Dudy z Prezydentem Recepem Tayyipem Erdoganem w Ankarze 16 marca 2022* [President Andrzej Duda Meets with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara, 16 March 2022] (Warsaw, 16 March 2022), <https://www.gov.pl/web/turcja/spotkanie-prezydenta-andrzeja-dudy-z-prezydentem-recepem-tayyipem-erdoganem-w-ankarze-16-marca-2022> (accessed 16 October 2024).

⁶⁵ Michał Tomaszewicz, “Duda przekona Erdogana do rozszerzenia NATO? ‘Zakładamy, że się uda’” [Will Duda Convince Erdogan to Expand NATO? ‘We Assume It Will Work’], *Radio Zet* (online), 13 May 2022, <https://wiadomosci.radiozet.pl/swiat/Duda-przekona-Erdogana-do-rozszerzenia-NATO-Zakladamy-ze-sie-uda> (accessed 16 October 2024).

⁶⁶ Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Poland, *Rozmowy o współpracy przemysłowo – obronnej między Polską a Turcją* [Talks on Industrial and Defence Cooperation Between Poland and Turkey] (Warsaw, 22 August 2024), <https://www.gov.pl/web/obrona-narodowa/rozmowy-o-wspolpracy-przemyslowo-obronnej-miedzy-polska-a-turcja> (accessed 17 October 2024).

⁶⁷ “Poland and Turkey Strengthen Defense Cooperation”, *Polskie Radio* (online), 20 September 2024, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/7786/artykul/3427338,poland-and-turkey-strengthen-defense->

Both visits suggest that the future of cooperation between the two countries is embedded in defence, with Turkey playing an important role in the process of modernizing the Polish military and increasing its firepower (evidenced, e.g., by a plan to run joint ammunition factories). There are at least four factors that make such a scenario very probable. The first one is, of course, rooted in an unstable security environment that forces both countries sitting on NATO's flanks to heavily invest in defence. The second lies in an apparent change of perception among Polish decision-makers vis-à-vis the quality of Turkish-made military equipment – earned by Turkey's steady efforts to invest in its defence sector and possibly also due to the proven value of its military equipment on the battlefield.⁶⁸ The third one stems from the joint perspectives of the two countries on some regional issues – although both countries may differ on how to approach Russia, they seem to agree on the need to contain it. Poland and Turkey are also on common ground regarding support for Ukraine and its territorial integrity. The fourth one arises from Poland's conviction that building bridges with Turkey in the defence sector helps anchor the country even more within the Western alliance and simultaneously increases the level of mistrust between Ankara and Moscow, complicating Russia's plans to use its relationship with Turkey to divide the Alliance.

However, several factors may eventually constitute a challenge for further developing closer cooperation between Poland and Turkey. The obvious ones consist of the two countries' different perceptions of the structural actors that should be leading the international order, particularly when it comes to the future role of the United States. Contrary to Turkey, Poland is not against the unipolar world under Washington's leadership. Turkey's potential decision to return to a more assertive – or sometimes even aggressive – policy towards the European Union, as in the period between 2016 and 2020, may also prove to be problematic. As an EU member country, Poland would be forced to take a stand in any serious dispute between Ankara and Brussels (or Turkey and any member state). It seems, though, that the most serious potential crisis is if Turkey contributes towards fuelling a migrant crisis, especially in a way that threatens Polish borders. Poland's authorities are turning increasingly more hawkish on irregular migration, and this position will most probably intensify in the coming years.

Lastly, when hypothesizing about the future of cooperation between Poland and Turkey, one should not neglect Ankara's perspective and its interests vis-à-vis Warsaw. Although Turkey seems satisfied with stronger cooperation on security and

cooperation (accessed 17 October 2024);

“Ważna deklaracja Turcji. Chcą pomóc Polsce uporać się ze skutkami powodzi” [Important Declaration by Turkey: They Want to Help Poland Cope with the Effects of Floods], *Onet.pl* (online), 18 September 2024, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/szymon-holownia-spotkal-sie-z-prezydentem-turcji-padla-wazna-deklaracja/kq6hwrbb> (accessed 17 October 2024).

⁶⁸ Jens Bastian, *Turkey: An Emerging Global Arms Exporter. Growing Competitiveness and Strategic Recalibration of Turkish Defence Industry*, SWP Comment 2024/C 06 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik [SWP], February 2024).

defence with Poland, Turkish diplomats have repeatedly complained to the author of this report that Warsaw should stop looking at their country solely through the prism of security. Such complaints appear to be fully in line with signals sent by Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hakan Fidan, during his last visit to Warsaw. In his press statement, the top Turkish diplomat mentioned, for example, the upcoming Polish EU presidency, underlining his hope to revive the accession negotiation process.⁶⁹ Although the Turkish minister is most certainly aware that any serious renewal of EU-Turkey talks would require democratic reforms – making such a scenario unlikely – he would most certainly hope for at least a revival of the talks about the modernization of the Customs Union between the EU and Turkey. It is doubtful that the Polish presidency would help break the deadlock on this topic. Yet, its focus on security may contribute to feeding the debate about deeper cooperation in the future between the EU and Turkey on security.

⁶⁹ Esra Tekin, "Sanctions by One NATO Ally on Another Contradict Essence of Military Alliance: Turkish Foreign Minister", *Anadolu Agency* (online), 26 June 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkiye/sanctions-by-one-nato-ally-on-another-contradict-essence-of-military-alliance-turkish-foreign-minister/3258965> (accessed 17 October 2024).

4.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The relationship between Poland and Turkey is surely neither as visible nor as eventful as Ankara's relations with many other Western allies, such as France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Also, cooperation between their defence industries is not yet well-structured or deeply rooted in either countries' strategic thinking or orientations. Notwithstanding, a careful analysis of the Polish-Turkish relationship – especially focusing on the most important factors that have brought about changes in its dynamic – may still help formulate some broader recommendations for the future of defence cooperation between the changing European Union and Turkey.

The bond between Poland and Turkey, rooted in their centuries-long relationship, is unique. Yet, some particular features of this relationship are worth considering in terms of recommendations that may be universally valid. First of all, Poland's realism in recognising differences in perceptions and interests with Turkey is worth mentioning. Together with another pragmatic assumption – that Turkey is an essential partner that may help solve some of the issues linked to the core of Poland's security interests – it enables the design of a set of cooperation strategies that allows for continued collaboration, even amidst diverging perspectives and interests.

Secondly, Poland's drive to use defence cooperation with Turkey as an instrument to anchor the country deeper in the Western security architecture and, speaking more directly, create opportunities for Ankara to contribute to its allies' security, is worth a more comprehensive reflection. For sure, it could allow Turkey's Western partners to take a more active approach towards the country, rather than just react to its policies or evangelize its leaders on the harmfulness of their decisions to their country (one example may be Poland's endeavours to engage Turkey in the defence of the Eastern Flank). Of course, such a policy would also come with difficulties – a very basic one would be a struggle to find defence project that are mutually beneficial rather than the ones that provide a disproportionate advantage solely to Turkey. Thirdly, although it is extremely hard to measure the effectiveness of Poland's assumption that establishing closer defence cooperation with Turkey helps to increase uncertainty in the Ankara-Moscow relationship, especially in the longer term, such a strategy is also

worth considering.

Looking at the future of defence cooperation between the EU and Turkey from this angle, it seems reasonable to recommend that Brussels increase its collaboration with Ankara. However, any offer of cooperation should be carefully crafted in such a way that would

- 1) serve both the interests of the EU and Turkey,
- 2) anchor Turkey deeper in the West,
- 3) increase the uncertainty between Ankara and its authoritarian partners at a time of a profound geopolitical shift, and
- 4) increase, over time, the interdependency between the European and Turkish defence sectors. Under such circumstances, the EU may be especially interested in joint projects that could relatively quickly increase its firepower (e.g., ammunition factories).

It could also think of including the Turkish defence industry in public procurement procedures, providing that it succeeds in finding a formula to make Ankara more accommodating towards EU's security interests (recent press suggestions that the EU is thinking of opening armament funds to third parties – providing that they sign additional defence and security partnerships with Brussels – seem like a good idea⁷⁰). In the longer term, or from a more strategic perspective, the EU could also reflect on Turkey's role in the transformation of the European manufacturing sector, including the defence industry. If the EU plans to shorten value chains, build a more technology-savvy, sustainable, and localized manufacturing sector – which innovativeness depends on, inter alia, closer cooperation between the clusters – it could think of enrolling Turkey in this broader transformation. If designed and implemented carefully, such a strategy could, on the one hand, help in achieving the goals for a makeover of European manufacturing, while on the other, it may also increase interdependency between defence sectors, and more generally the economies of the EU and Turkey.

Closer cooperation between the EU and Turkey seems even more of a necessity under current international circumstances. Disruptions that Trump's 2.0. administration has introduced to the Transatlantic Alliance – its intention to “reset” the relationship between the United States and Russia, repeated doubts concerning the profit and loss account of NATO for American interests, as well as Washington's wavering commitment to Ukraine's future, and the administration's general unpredictability – has introduced a solid dose of uncertainty into both the EU's member states and Turkey's security calculations. Under such fluid and uncertain circumstances, both partners could see a stronger relationship as a way to mitigate the risks linked with

⁷⁰ Henry Foy and Lucy Fisher, “EU to Exclude US, UK and Turkey from €150bn Rearmament Fund”, *Financial Times* (online), 19 March 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/eb9e0ddc-8606-46f5-8758-a1b8beae14f1> (accessed 27 March 2025).

Trump's unpredictability and the potential consequences of his actions. Though Turkey and the EU may have different opinions on various issues – ranging from democracy to the future of the world order – they both have a vested interest in the stability of Ukraine and the Black Sea Basin (both doubtful, if Russia is offered a good deal by the Trump administration that would allow it to quickly rebuild its potential). Hence, closer coordination of their positions and joint projects on these two topics – even if done mostly due to the pressure of international events – could be a starting point for broader cooperation on security and defence. It would necessitate renewing high-level political dialogues, mapping both sides' interests and instruments to achieve them, strategizing potential actions, and monitoring the implementation – steps that, if executed properly, could also allow the partners to build the trust and bridges that are essential for expanding cooperation to other areas in the future.

Abbreviations

AANES	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
B9	Bucharest Nine Cooperation
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EUFOR ALTHEA	European Union Force Bosnia and Herzegovina
EUNAVFOR MED IRINI	European Union Naval Force Mediterranean IRNI
EUTM RCA	European Union Training Mission in the Central African Republic
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
PISM	Polish Institute of International Affairs
PLN	Polish Złoty
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
YPG	People's Protection Units

List of Figures

Figure 1: Trade Exchange Volume between Poland and Turkey

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