

Poland at a Crossroads?

Strategic Choices Amid Shifting
Transatlantic Security Dynamics

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Abstract

Poland stands at a pivotal moment, navigating domestic political transitions while adapting to profound changes in the transatlantic security landscape. The outcome of key elections (presidential in 2025 and parliamentary in 2027) will shape the country's strategic direction, as NATO and the EU confront some of the most significant challenges in their history. A second Trump presidency marks a turning point for European security, amplifying EU-sceptical forces and reshaping the regional balance of power. This Strategic Update examines the key domestic and international factors influencing Poland's political and strategic decision-making, and Poland's role in the evolving European security architecture – especially in times of the resurgent populist sentiments on both sides of the Atlantic and increasingly aggressive behaviour of the Russian Federation.

Introduction

Poland stands at a pivotal crossroads, navigating profound domestic and international transformations that are reshaping its political landscape and strategic orientation. The country's recent electoral cycles, marked by the 2023 parliamentary and 2025 presidential elections, have underscored both the resilience of populist and conservative forces and the emergence of a centrist, pro-European government. This dynamic has intensified political polarisation and institutional friction, revealing the limits of rapid systemic change and the enduring influence of identity politics and welfare expectations within Polish society.

Amid these domestic challenges, Poland's role on the European stage has become increasingly consequential. As a frontline NATO state and a key member of the European Union, Poland's strategic choices are reverberating across the continent at a time when the transatlantic security order faces unprecedented tests (Mazurkiewicz and Michnik, 2023). The evolving relationship between Warsaw and its Western allies, including Germany, France and the United Kingdom – shaped by shifting US administrations, resurgent populism on both sides of the Atlantic, and the ongoing war in Ukraine – has positioned Poland as a transformative actor within the European security architecture.

Poland's assertive defense posture, exemplified by record-high military spending – Warsaw increased its defence spending from 2.7% of GDP in 2022 to 4.2% in 2024, projected to rise to 4.7% by 2025 – and active engagement in regional formats such as the Bucharest Nine and the Weimar Triangle, reflects its determination to strengthen both NATO's eastern flank and the European pillar of collective security (Olekiejuk, 2025). If the country maintains ability to balance its deep-rooted Atlanticism with a renewed commitment to European integration, Poland may prove to be critical in shaping the future of transatlantic cooperation and the broader geopolitical landscape in Europe.

This paper examines the key domestic and international factors influencing Poland's political and strategic decision-making, highlighting the country's transformative role in the evolving European security environment. By analysing the interplay between internal political developments and external security imperatives, the paper seeks to provide actionable insights for policymakers navigating this complex and rapidly changing context.

Not All Quiet on the Domestic Front

Poland has experienced a strong political polarisation since 2010. The axis of the dispute has been between the centrist and liberal Civic Coalition (*Koalicja Obywatelska*—KO) with Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska*—PO) as the leading group (led by Donald Tusk) and Law and Justice—(*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*—PiS, led by Jarosław Kaczyński). Law and Justice merged conservatism with a programme of very statist social and economic policy that aimed to meet expectations of groups of lower socioeconomic status. The decline of the post-communist left after 2005 strengthen this polarisation, broadening the electoral base of both parties. The success of Andrzej Duda (PiS) in the 2015 presidential election and the victory of PiS in the 2016 parliamentary elections resulted in the consolidation of power in the hands of Jarosław Kaczyński's party. PiS did not have a constitutional majority (contrary to Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party in Hungary), but nevertheless made significant changes, taking control of the Constitutional Tribunal (constitutional court) and, to a large extent, the Supreme Court. The manner and nature of these changes was criticised by the Venice Commission and the Court of Justice of the European Union. The EU criticised the situation in Poland, demanding the restoration of the rule of law (Pech and Scheppele, 2017).

PiS governments deepened the polarisation of society, but extensive social transfers led to a significant improvement in the standard of living of the working class. The strong position of PiS was also a consequence of the turn towards conservatism and pessimism in assessing the future of the EU in Polish society. This wave of Euroscepticism, despite compelling economic indicators demonstrating the substantial benefits Poland has enjoyed since joining the European Union, raised concerns that the country might follow a trajectory similar to Hungary's illiberal drift – or in a more

extreme scenario, emulate the United Kingdom's path toward withdrawal, culminating in a potential 'Polexit' (Kucharczyk 2021; Piatkowski 2018). Moreover, the strategic use of financial transfers and nationalist rhetoric effectively consolidated the Law and Justice (PiS) party's electoral base, enabling it to retain power for two consecutive terms (Gromadzki, Sałach and Brzezinski, 2023).

In the long term, a lasting legacy of PiS rule appears to be the weakening of state institutions. Jarosław Kaczyński's policy is often explained with Carl Schmitt and his concept of the 'administrative state'. In Poland, a de facto predominance of the executive power has been established, supported by a parliamentary majority. The control of the courts and parliament over the government is de facto limited.

The political conflict with Brussels and ideological closeness to Donald Trump incited PiS to seek support in the US during Trump's first presidency (Crowley, 2020). After the 2020 US Presidential elections, the relations between the new, Democratic Biden administration and Polish President and Government initially remained cool. In the presidential campaign Biden did not hesitate to criticise a state of democracy in Poland. 'You see what's happened in everything from Belarus to Poland to Hungary, and the rise of totalitarian regimes in the world, and as well, this president [Trump] embraces all the thugs in the world', said Biden in one of his campaign's interviews (ABC News, 2020). Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 became a turning point in the relations between the Biden administration and the Polish authorities. It proved how much Poland relied on the US in the field of security and how important Poland is in NATO's eastern flank.

The 2023 parliamentary elections marked a watershed moment in Polish politics. The opposition's victory was widely interpreted, both within Poland and across Europe, as evidence that a center-left coalition with a clearly pro-European orientation could successfully challenge and halt the advance of populist forces (Bremmer, 2023). Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that Law and Justice (PiS) secured the largest share of the vote (National Electoral Commission, 2023). Despite its inability to form a governing coalition, the party's electoral performance underscored its continued capacity to mobilise a substantial segment of the electorate, one that had been consolidated over eight years through expansive social policies and a conservative cultural agenda.

From the very beginning, Donald Tusk's new government has faced many challenges and perils. A significant limitation of this government's scope of activity was rooted in its coalition nature: formed by the left, the Polish People's Party (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe* – PSL) in alliance with the center (leaned to conservatism), and the liberals (PO). Smaller groups emphasise their agenda, wanting to show their distinctiveness. The goals of these groups diverge in important matters. Social issues (such as reproductive rights) have become the subject of dispute within the coalition; more liberal proposals met with resistance from conservatives. Simultaneously, the demand to reduce the taxes imposed on entrepreneurs provoked resistance from the left. Additional obstacles stem from the nature of the Polish political system. The government operated in the years 2023-2025 in a difficult cohabitation with President Duda. The leaders of the new ruling coalition publicly expressed their hope for the implementation of the fundamental goals after the end of Duda's term. The clear poll advantage of the popular mayor of Warsaw and deputy chairman of PO Rafał Trzaskowski strengthened the belief in the inevitability of his victory in the 2025 presidential election (Skiba and Samar, 2025). This election has significantly reshaped the Polish political landscape. Contrary to expectations, the frontrunner was defeated by Karol Nawrocki, a relatively unknown and initially unpolished candidate representing Law and Justice (PiS). Nawrocki's unexpected victory carries substantial implications for Polish governance. With the ruling coalition lacking the parliamentary majority required to override a presidential veto, key policy initiatives – particularly in the areas of judicial reform and reproductive rights – are unlikely to gain presidential approval. Complicating matters further, Nawrocki has signaled that he may advance fiscally burdensome legislation drawn from the coalition's own campaign proposals. 'Isn't that conciliatory?' the president-elect remarked in a recent interview, with notable irony (Nawrocki, 2025, p. A2).

The combination of policy gridlock, growing internal friction within the governing coalition, and unpredictable external pressures may pave the way for a PiS electoral resurgence in 2027. Meanwhile, shifting societal dynamics were evident in the strong performance of the Confederation Liberty and Independence (*Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość*) candidate in the first round of the presidential vote. This far-right formation, known for its Euroscepticism and rejection of progressive values, blends radical

free-market economics with nationalist rhetoric. Though ideologically heterogeneous, the Confederation's appeal underscores a broader trend toward anti-establishment sentiment and political polarisation in Polish society.

In public statements of 2022, the Confederation's Party candidate has openly described himself as a monarchist and a critic of liberal democracy (Mentzen, 2022). The growing popularity of Confederation reflects an intensifying hostility toward immigration, targeting not only non-European migrants but also those arriving from Ukraine. This sentiment is further compounded by a deepening Euroscepticism, particularly among segments of the electorate that feel alienated by Poland's integration into EU structures. Analysts have noted that support for Confederation is not solely rooted in ideological alignment, but also in broader political disorientation and disenchantment with the mainstream party system. Criticism of the Civic Platform and Law and Justice duopoly is growing (Sadura, Sierakowski, 2024; Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, 2024).

Equally significant was the unprecedented level of participation among young voters aged 18–30 in the 2025 presidential election. The official turnout in the second voting was 71.63% whereas the poll says that turnout among young voters was 76.3% (National Electoral Commission, 2025b; Mazzini, 2025). However, rather than aligning with the dominant candidates, many in this demographic cast their votes for representatives of the Confederation or the Together Party (*Partia Razem*), two formations that, while ideologically distinct, share a pronounced anti-establishment profile. 'Razem', often seen as the enfant terrible of the Polish left, openly opposes the current centrist government under Prime Minister Tusk. This electoral behavior signals a profound generational rejection of the prevailing political duopoly and reveals a broader frustration with the perceived stagnation of Poland's political system. If sustained, this shift could herald long-term changes in the country's electoral dynamics and party system (Czekała, Gluza, 2025).

The outcome of the 2025 presidential election underscores several enduring and emerging dynamics within Polish society and politics. First, it confirms the resilience of identity-based politics, often rooted in conservative values, combined with sustained public expectations for a strong welfare state. This blend continues to shape the political preferences of a substantial

portion of the electorate. Second, the campaign and its results signal a growing fatigue or reassessment of Poland's previously unconditional support for Ukraine (Centrum Mieroszewskiego, 2025).

Third, the election highlighted the persistence of deep regional, historical, and socioeconomic divisions. Voters in eastern Poland, overall, more conservative and economically underdeveloped, turned out in significant numbers, contributing decisively to the outcome and victory of Mr Nawrocki. In contrast, electorates in the more liberal and economically dynamic western regions, disillusioned with the performance of the coalition government elected in 2023, failed to mobilise at the same level, undermining support for the liberal-left presidential candidate. Fourth, the results suggest that Poland's party system may be entering a period of transformation. The long-dominant political duopoly is showing signs of erosion, and its place may increasingly be contested by emerging movements or reconfigured versions of existing parties. This evolving landscape could lead to the coexistence of old and new political actors, each appealing to distinct and, at times, previously unrepresented constituencies. Finally, intensifying conflict within the Polish governing elite is likely to consume political capital at a time when strategic focus (also in international politics) is urgently needed. With pressing challenges in the areas of national security, demographic decline, economic competitiveness, and energy transition, such internal divisions could undermine Poland's capacity to respond effectively to both short- and long-term threats in a volatile geopolitical environment.

From this standpoint, the challenge for Tusk's government has been and remains the extensive social policy of PiS. The 2025 election cycle and the strong position of PiS do not allow for a reduction in public spending. The scale of the deficit and debt is increased by the need to cover expenses for security and defense purposes. Poland has achieved one of the highest defense spending ratios in relation to GDP, but at the cost of burdening the state budget. Poland maintains economic growth but growing public spending and lower than expected tax revenues caused significant deficit. According to the IMF, general government gross debt in Poland in 2025 is 60% of GDP (IMF, 2025).

Tusk's government is operating under conditions of social expectations regarding, on the one hand, a reduction in fiscal burdens and, on the other, further expansion of the welfare state. 'We are building a Scandinavian

Poland with Anglo-Saxon taxes', wrote one of economic commentators (Morawski, 2025). Internal divisions within the governing coalition often make the Tusk government appear, in the eyes of its critics, not only overextended but also ineffective.

Post-election foreign policy outlook

Poland's domestic political landscape following the 1 June 2025 presidential election is likely to be shaped by a challenging cohabitation between newly-elected President Nawrocki, a conservative with pro-Trump leanings, and Prime Minister Donald Tusk, who leads a centrist, pro-European government. This configuration presents a complicated scenario for Poland's transatlantic positioning, especially amid the second Trump administration in the US and the broader resurgence of populist sentiment across Europe. While this political dynamic may hinder efforts to deepen Euro-Atlantic security ties, it may also open selective avenues for engagement that could benefit Warsaw.

From this perspective, a key difficulty will be internal political friction and policy incoherence. The ideological divergence between President Nawrocki, supported by the Law and Justice (PiS) party, and Prime Minister Tusk's coalition government may result in contradictory messaging and disjointed policy approaches, particularly in the realm of foreign affairs (Atlantic Council, 2025). Nawrocki, with his right-wing, populist background, is expected to assert his constitutional powers to obstruct the government's domestic agenda, and this confrontation could extend into international relations (Henley, 2025). His limited experience in both foreign policy and executive leadership further underscores the challenges he is likely to face. Nawrocki's ability to quickly navigate Poland's domestic political landscape, particularly within his own political camp and in relation to the governing coalition, will be critical. His early public remarks, including a pointed characterisation of Prime Minister Tusk as 'the worst prime minister since 1989', suggest an adversarial posture that could define his presidency (Szacki, 2025). This confrontational stance, coupled with his potential receptiveness to US overtures, especially if framed through a bilateral, ideologically aligned lens akin to US-Hungary relations, could shape a more polarised and transactional chapter in Poland's foreign policy orientation.

As a result, Poland may struggle to present a coherent foreign policy stance, especially in navigating relations with the US under Trump's renewed leadership. Poland's evolving domestic and foreign policy scene is shaped by three principal areas of tension: deepening societal polarisation, divergent approaches to relations with the US and Europe, and differing stances on the war in Ukraine.

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First, deepening societal polarisation: Donald Trump's policies and persona have exacerbated divisions within Polish society. Supporters of the right-wing opposition, Law and Justice (PiS) and *Konfederacja*, largely perceive Trump as a guarantor of Poland's security (Buras, 2025a). In contrast, most backers of Prime Minister Donald Tusk's liberal coalition view Trump's actions as misaligned with Polish interests and values. This societal split is mirrored at the political level, threatening to erode the longstanding national consensus on Atlanticism, which has historically underpinned Poland's foreign policy. As a result, Poland risks appearing more inwardly focused and less reliable as a transatlantic partner. Recent polling data underscores this divide: only 35% of Poles express confidence in Trump's leadership, a sharp decline from previous years (Notes from Poland, 2025). The politicisation of the US relationship is a new phenomenon in Polish politics, further deepening societal rifts (Rupnik, 2025).

Second, different approaches to the US and Europe: Prime Minister Tusk's government seeks to maintain strong ties with the US while simultaneously prioritising European defence integration and building partnerships with key European states such as France, Germany, and the Nordic and Baltic countries. This approach marks a significant shift from previous governments, which were more sceptical of European defence initiatives and prioritised transatlantic ties above all else (Van

Rij and Parzonka, 2024). In contrast, President Nawrocki and his supporters adopt a pronounced pro-American and pro-NATO stance, sometimes at the expense of deeper European integration. Under the Trump 2.0 'America First' administration, Nawrocki's alignment could be favoured by Washington but risks alienating European allies and complicating Tusk's efforts to strengthen the European pillar within NATO (The Atlantic Council, 2025; Buras, 2025b). The opposition has even accused Tusk of prioritising Europe over the US, further politicising foreign policy and complicating consensus-building (Buras, 2025b).

Third, divergent stances on Ukraine: A second Trump administration began with an (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to bring about a rapid resolution to the war in Ukraine on terms favourable to Russia. Polish right-wing parties, including those aligned with President Nawrocki, have at times echoed Trump's critical rhetoric toward Ukraine and President Zelensky, occasionally adopting an anti-Ukrainian tone despite maintaining strong pro-American positions (Buras, 2025a). While President Nawrocki has pledged continued support for Ukraine's defense against Russian aggression, he has expressed opposition to Kyiv's integration into Western institutions such as NATO, a stance that has drawn criticism from both domestic and Ukrainian officials. As Bartłomiej Kot argued, in the domestic context of 'growing PiS-Konfederation cooperation, a more sceptical stance on Kyiv could harden'. This in turn would give 'Nawrocki space to criticise the Tusk government's 'softness' on Ukraine – especially on historical memory issues such as the commemoration of the Volhynia massacre' (Kot, 2025). Should Nawrocki align more closely with Trump's approach, this could further strain his relationship with Prime Minister Tusk's government, which remains firmly committed to support for Ukraine (Charlish and Erling, 2025). Even though the current populist climate in Poland heralds a change toward a more sceptical attitudes to migrants from Ukraine and other states, there is still a vast difference between Nawrocki's (and PiS) and Tusk's approach to the issue. Such divergence may undermine Poland's standing as a reliable frontline state and complicate the coherence of Warsaw's broader transatlantic strategy.

Yet not all is lost, President Nawrocki's victory could yield certain short-term benefits for Polish-US relations and bolster Warsaw's positioning within transatlantic affairs. The newly elected president may enjoy more direct access to a Trump administration, a level of engagement that his rival,

Rafał Trzaskowski, may not have secured. Nawrocki's established ties to Donald Trump, evidenced by a past visit to the White House and a campaign endorsement, could provide Poland with a valuable backchannel to influence US decision-making (Atlantic Council, 2025). This personal rapport might be leveraged to safeguard key Polish interests, such as maintaining the US military presence on Polish soil and securing continued American involvement in European security frameworks.

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However, such benefits are likely to be limited in duration and scope. The long-term trajectory of US foreign policy has shown a steady pivot toward the Indo-Pacific, reflecting broader strategic recalibrations that transcend Trump's presidency.¹ As this shift accelerates, it underscores the urgent need for Poland and other European allies to prepare for a more autonomous European security architecture. Overreliance on Washington, particularly at the expense of European unity, could diminish Poland's credibility among its EU partners. In a future shaped increasingly by intra-European security cooperation, Warsaw would do well to balance its Atlanticism with deeper engagement in European defence initiatives. This tendency – reinforced during the latest NATO summit in The Hague – appeared to be well understood by the Tusk government, which has repeatedly advocated for stronger European defence efforts (Griera, 2025). Tilting too far toward the US, while alienating key European partners, may ultimately undercut Poland's long-term strategic position. Hence, Warsaw will face a tough balancing act to adapt to shifting US priorities while simultaneously investing in European defence cooperation and maintaining strong ties with EU partners.

1 See: <https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/policy-paper-01-2025.pdf>; <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article/101/4/1499/8141295>

The New Old Divide?

Poland's strong position within NATO and the European Union will depend on its continued ability to lead by example. Effective defence of NATO's eastern flank will require not only well-equipped and resilient frontline states capable of credible military resistance, but also forward-deployed allied forces that can blunt or delay any Russian incursion to the NATO territory. At the same time, NATO must retain the capacity to reinforce remote theaters rapidly while deterring Moscow from resorting to nuclear coercion to force a settlement on its own terms. Within this evolving defence paradigm, Poland's strategic role in regional and continental security becomes increasingly indispensable (Olekiejuk, 2025). There are signs that Europe is increasingly confronted by new security realities. Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk has repeatedly emphasised the 'paradox' of current transatlantic security arrangements, stating that '500 million Europeans are asking 300 million Americans to protect them from 140 million Russians' (Toth and Sweet, 2025). This rhetorical intervention reinforces Warsaw's advocacy for greater European responsibility in defence and for strengthening both NATO and EU security capabilities, including the €800 billion 'ReArm Europe' plan of the European Commission. Tusk has made it clear that Poland's EU presidency in 2025 would be marked by a priority on collective security and a drive for greater strategic autonomy (Budginaite-Froehly, 2025).

Poland's foreign policy is facing a complex and rapidly changing geopolitical environment, from the domestic politics (explained above) to the external shocks of the Russo-Ukraine War, transatlantic rifts and internal European challenges. Its ability to exert leadership will depend on several key factors: ensuring internal political cohesion, particularly under conditions of divided government; adjusting to the possibility of a more transactional transatlantic relationship, especially in light of a return of Donald Trump to the US presidency; and strengthening intra-European unity in the face of mounting security threats. While Poland's renewed pro-European orientation under the Tusk government, along with its strategic location and robust defence posture, provide significant opportunities to shape the future of European security, domestic political trends cast a shadow over these prospects (Buchanan Ponczek, 2024). The election of Karol Nawrocki to the presidency and the resurgence of right-wing populism signals a possible reversion to illiberal governance. Such a shift would likely damage Poland's

credibility within the EU and could complicate its role in NATO's evolving strategic framework. That said, so far, a fundamental consensus on the importance of the transatlantic relationship still anchors Polish foreign policy. Despite variations in emphasis across the political spectrum and potential friction over issues such as European defence integration or US strategic ambiguity, all major parties remain committed to maintaining and deepening cooperation with the United States. This shared understanding provides a degree of continuity and resilience in Poland's foreign policy, even amid internal political volatility and external uncertainty.

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In the realm of the US-Polish relations, particularly under a second Trump administration, Nawrocki's clear pro-American orientation and skepticism toward the European Union may align him more closely with Washington's current trajectory, especially as transatlantic tensions continue to grow. In the context of an increasingly polarised Euro-Atlantic political landscape, marked by mounting mistrust between the United States and several European allies, Nawrocki may emerge as a preferred interlocutor for a Trump-led White House. This would place him at odds with the strongly pro-EU government led by Prime Minister Tusk, potentially intensifying intra-executive frictions and complicating Poland's foreign policy coherence.

From Euro-Atlantic to European security

The 2025 NATO Summit in The Hague offered a clear preview of the evolving direction of European security and the shifting balance of responsibilities within the Alliance. For Poland, the summit not only reinforced existing priorities but also amplified its emerging role as a key actor in shaping NATO's response to renewed threats, particularly from Russia, and ongoing

transatlantic uncertainty. Unlike many allies still adjusting to new defence spending expectations, Poland arrived at the summit already well ahead of the curve. With defence expenditures approaching nearly 5% of GDP, Warsaw has solidified its status as one of NATO's most committed members – far exceeding the Alliance's prior 2% benchmark and setting a performance standard for others to follow (Krzysztozek, 2024). The adoption of the new 5% spending pledge – comprising 3.5% for core military capabilities and up to 1.5% for broader resilience measures – was not a departure for Poland but rather a formal endorsement of policies already in place. Accordingly, Polish officials welcomed the agreement as recognition of the security logic Warsaw has long advanced: that credible deterrence on NATO's eastern flank requires persistent, high-level investment, not just rhetorical commitment. The Polish delegation, including Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski, emphasised the importance of translating spending targets into tangible capabilities, especially for countries directly exposed to Russian hybrid and conventional threats (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, 2025).

For Poland, the debate surrounding NATO's new defence spending framework extends well beyond headline percentages. As a frontline state bordering both Russia and war-torn Ukraine, Warsaw has repeatedly underscored that credible deterrence cannot rest on symbolic commitments or politically flexible interpretations of defence investment. The Polish delegation led by former President Duda and senior ministers emphasised the need for clarity, accountability, and operational results in the implementation of the new 5% spending pledge. They stressed that contributions must be measured not by creative accounting or vaguely defined resilience efforts, but by the timely delivery of concrete military capabilities. These concerns reflect a broader consensus among NATO's eastern members, who remain acutely aware of the immediate and multidimensional threat posed by Russia (Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Poland, 2025) .

Against this backdrop, the summit's softened rhetoric on Russia and Ukraine generated tangible unease in Warsaw. While NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept clearly identified Russia as the 'most significant and direct threat' to the Alliance, the 2025 Hague Declaration described Russia only as a 'long-term threat', grouping it alongside other security challenges such as

terrorism. This shift in language, likely driven by a desire to preserve unity in the face of divergent views within the Alliance, particularly regarding American political sensitivities, was interpreted by many Polish officials as a downgrading of NATO's strategic clarity. The omission of previous summit language referring to Ukraine's 'irreversible path to NATO' and the absence of an explicit condemnation of Russia's aggression were similarly troubling developments, raising questions about the durability of Euro-Atlantic resolve (Temnycky, 2025).

From a Polish perspective, the overall outcome of the summit was mixed. On the one hand, the unanimous adoption of higher defence spending levels was seen as a historic success and a validation of Poland's long-standing arguments in favour of stronger deterrence. The formal recognition of both hard military capabilities and broader resilience measures offers an important basis for enhancing NATO's regional posture (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, 2025). On the other hand, critical implementation gaps remain. The ten-year timeline for achieving these targets dilutes the sense of urgency, and the 1.5% category earmarked for resilience, while important, lacks standardised definitions – raising concerns that it may be exploited by some allies to inflate spending figures without delivering substance. In this context, Polish officials continue to argue that NATO's credibility depends not only on financial commitments but also on rapid adaptation, forward defence, and strategic coherence on its eastern flank. As the US signals a shifting role for itself within the Alliance, Poland now stands as both a principal beneficiary and a central guarantor of transatlantic security – uniquely positioned, yet also uniquely burdened, by the responsibility to lead (Chancellery of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland, 2025).

Beyond Russian Drones: NATO's Response and Poland's Politics

The first major test of cooperation between President Nawrocki and Prime Minister Tusk's government occurred on 10 September 2025, in the wake of a critical violation of Polish airspace by Russian unmanned aerial vehicles (Easton and Lukiv, 2025). This incursion marked a watershed moment for NATO collective defence policy, as it precipitated the Alliance's first direct use of lethal force against Russian assets within a member's territory since

the onset of full-scale war in Ukraine. During the incident, up to 21 drones entered Poland, primarily via Belarus, triggering immediate joint responses from Polish and allied NATO aircraft (Charlish, Kelly and Erling, 2025). Several drones, deemed an imminent threat to Polish territory, were neutralised by an international coalition of air forces. Airports across eastern Poland were closed and the Government promptly invoked Article 4 of the NATO Treaty, triggering allied consultations. Tusk poignantly described the gravity of the situation, warning Parliament that 'this was the closest we have been to open conflict since World War II'(Prochwicz-Jazowska, 2025).

In this context, crisis management served as an unexpected occasion for effective cooperation between the presidential palace and the Council of Ministers, temporarily challenging domestic and international assumptions of unrelenting partisan deadlock. The executive branches demonstrated rapid coordination and decisive action in the common interest of national security, dispelling doubts regarding the ability of Poland's divided leadership to respond to acute external threats. However, once the immediate danger subsided, long-standing political divisions quickly resurfaced. Internal conflicts reemerged (for instance, disputes over ambassadorial appointments), highlighting the persistence of domestic frictions even when faced with existential security challenges (Business Insider, 2025).

This episode highlights a central feature of Poland's current foreign policy: acute crises can catalyse temporary executive unity, yet sustained cooperation between political camps remains rare in the absence of immediate (physical) threat. Only the most urgent and direct external dangers create conditions strong enough to overcome entrenched domestic rivalry. Considering that the Russian threat remains protracted and hybrid, this tendency poses significant challenges for Poland's long-term security posture. The country risks reverting to internal divisions whenever the sense of external urgency recedes, leaving its crisis management capabilities vulnerable in the face of persistent, information warfare against Poland, NATO and the EU.

From a broader, regional perspective, Russia's violation of Polish airspace has forced NATO to consider how to deter further incursions. The issue became even more urgent when, shortly after the drone incident, a Russian

fighter jet violated Estonian airspace. These provocations have pushed frontline states, and NATO as a whole, to debate whether the Alliance should take the radical step of shooting down Russian aircraft.

Uncertainty about the US position initially caused anxiety among Allies. However, when asked publicly whether NATO countries could shoot down Russian aircraft violating their airspace, Trump said yes (Hutzler, 2025). Still, his approval does not resolve the Alliance's wider concerns about the consequences of using such a drastic deterrent. For Poland though, this issue goes beyond alliance politics. Polish Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski addressed the issue directly at the UN Security Council after the Estonian airspace violation: "If another missile or aircraft enters our space...and gets shot down and the wreckage falls on NATO territory, please don't come here to whine about it. You have been warned." (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, 2025b). A warning, however, creates an expectation: to remain credible, it must be enforceable. Sikorski's statement does not explicitly announce that Poland will shoot down Russian aircraft, but it signals that this option is on the table. Implementing it would require changing NATO's long-standing air policing rules, dating back to the Cold War and designed to prioritise de-escalation (Ali, 2025).

Finally, there is also a domestic risk. The airspace violation could further polarise Polish society. Fear of escalation may strengthen political forces calling for neutrality under the slogan 'This is not our war' – a message already used by fringe anti-war movements, the radical right, and leaders of the Confederation party (Rzeczpospolita, 2023).

Conclusions—Bound to Lead?

As the authors argued above, in 2026, Poland appears well-positioned to assume the role of a key player in Europe's evolving security architecture. As a frontline state, bordering Belarus, the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, and war-torn Ukraine, Poland combines strategic geography with a growing industrial base that hosts numerous defence firms from both the US and Europe. These factors make Warsaw a natural candidate to become a regional hub for military production and a critical bulwark on NATO's eastern flank and European Union external border. Poland's location,

coupled with an extensive network of road and rail infrastructure, is central to the Alliance's ability to project force, ensure logistical support, and maintain strategic depth. Its expertise in logistics, sharpened by three years of operational support to Ukraine, further enhances this capacity (Magierowski, 2024).

If NATO is to grow stronger, it must reinforce its entire frontline, from Finland in the north to Romania and Bulgaria in the south. Within this configuration, Poland, situated at the center, holds the potential to act both as a regional leader and a connective node linking Allied deterrence and defence efforts – as vividly demonstrated during Russia's drone incursion in September 2025. However, domestic political instability poses a significant risk to this trajectory. Persistent tensions between the governing coalition and a confrontational opposition including current former President Duda and his successor, Nawrocki, undermine policy consistency. The outcome of the 2027 parliamentary elections will be another key determinant. A political return to the illiberal practices that characterised Poland's governance between 2016 and 2023 would severely compromise its standing within both the EU and NATO, where liberal democratic norms remain foundational. Such a government may, however, rely on Trump administration support and bolster bilateral relations between Poland and the United States in the era of MAGA political domination. Given the radicalisation of political discourse, the increasingly polarised public sphere, and concerning long-term societal trends, the probability of such a reversal cannot be dismissed. In sum, while Poland holds many of the necessary cards to emerge as a leader in European security, it also runs the risk of undermining this role from within. Strategic ambition must therefore be matched by political stability and democratic resilience. ■

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