

Poland and the Defence of Europe Against Russia

Maxime Philaire

Introduction

'They have lost a good opportunity to keep their mouths shut'. In February 2003, the French President at the time, Jacques Chirac, spoke of the support of several new member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and future members of the European Union (EU) for US policy on Iraq, with Poland in the lead. Warsaw's role in Central and Eastern Europe has changed considerably since it joined NATO in 1999, to the point where it would like to compete with the leadership of the Franco-German couple on the European continent as part of its increased credibility in defence and security matters. The illegal invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation over the last three years has plunged Europe back into a situation of high tension, where military spending is becoming crucial to ensure the security of NATO member states, and by extension the EU.

Poland is ahead of the other member states of the Alliance, with an estimated 4.7% of its GDP to be spent on defence in 2025, surpassing all the Allies including the United States in terms of share of GDP, and a good economic situation that places it as the leading economy in Central and Eastern Europe and sixth in the European Union, ahead of Sweden and Belgium in particular.

In 2025, the United States will upset the balance in transatlantic relations. The Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky, was insulted at the White House, the European Union was perceived by Washington as an anti-American organisation and Canada found itself in a trade and verbal war with the United States. At the same time, the war in Ukraine is continuing and Russia is becoming an existential threat to Europe and NATO. But Europe can no longer be reduced to the economic and military powers of Germany and France. Poland is showing its desire to be a major player that has taken this Russian threat seriously by investing massively in its military capabilities and is also one of the biggest supporters of Ukraine. In this context, Canada must broaden its relations with European partners, particularly Poland, with a view to strengthening cooperation in defence and the production of military equipment.

From a far-sighted but pariah state to a major player in crises

As New York Times journalist Andrew Higgins pointed out in 2023, [no one in Europe can tell Poland to shut up now](#). Warsaw is now a crucial player in Europe. Its fears about Russian threats to Central and Eastern Europe have been vindicated by the illegal invasion of Ukraine and [Russian sabotage in Europe](#). Since 2008 and the invasion of Georgia by the Russian Federation, Warsaw had not ceased to alert its NATO and EU allies to the threat posed by Russia, [criticizing](#) the Obama administration's 'reset' of Russo-American relations in 2009 or President Macron's Franco-Russian rapprochement in 2019. The Allies, including Canada, can therefore no longer ignore Warsaw's opinion on the policies decided at NATO and on Ukraine.

This new leadership role for Warsaw was not evident before the second phase of the war in Ukraine (the first being the invasion and illegal annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine's Donbass region in 2014 and 2015). Indeed, since 2015, Poland has been isolated on the European stage due to [the anti-democratic and even authoritarian turn of the sitting governments](#). In the 2015 presidential elections, Andrzej Duda was elected President, and then the parliamentary elections gave an absolute majority to his Law and Justice party (PiS), a party positioned on the centre-right of the Polish political spectrum, which remained in power until 2023. During its eight years in power, PiS introduced a series of reforms that undermined the rule of law, justice, and individual freedoms. In 2017, Poland was criticized by the European Union for these anti-democratic abuses, making it a 'bad pupil' within the union.

However, with the start of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, relations between Poland and its European partners warmed up, as in [the words of former prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki](#): 'We must put an end to the conflict in the West, the real enemy is in the East'. From the outset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Poland firmly opposed the Russian decision, supporting the multiple sanctions, [labelling the Russian Federation a state sponsor of terrorism](#), and has since become the logistical hub for Western military aid deliveries to Ukraine via Rzeszów-Jasionka airport and then via land and rail corridors at the border.

In 2025, the security context in Europe will be called into question by [the potential prospects of a full or partial withdrawal of the United States from NATO, but also from the continent](#). In Central and Eastern Europe in particular, fears of a Russian attack have intensified following the US administration's stance on the war in Ukraine and its relations with Moscow. At the same time, Poland took over the Presidency of the European Union for the next six months, with defence and security as its priorities. This is therefore a crucial period for Warsaw and its potential for leadership in Europe.

Europe's leading army will be Polish

It is true that Warsaw has made the rearmament of its forces an important issue, even before 2022. Since the early 2000s, [Poland has been committed to meeting NATO standards](#) as quickly as possible, with the purchase of the first modern battle tanks (Leopards 2A4 and 2A5) in 2002, as well as the construction of armoured vehicles on Polish soil by the Finnish company Rosomak, followed in 2004 by the order for the first American F-16s.

However, Poland's major rearmament began in the 2010s. The arrival in power of Barack Obama in the United States in 2009, with [his plan to 'reset' US-Russian relations](#) and his policy of pivoting towards the Indo-Pacific and competition with China, [is worrying Warsaw](#), which already sees a degree of American disengagement from Europe. This concern is also fuelled by the US President's decision

[to cancel the deployment of the missile defence system in Europe](#) in order to confirm the new positive relations between Washington and Moscow. [For the Poles, this decision illustrates a certain American naivety about Russia's objectives in Europe](#). Indeed, in 2008 the Russian Federation had already invaded Georgia, creating two separatist regions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Faced with these concerns, Warsaw voted in 2012 for a [technical modernisation plan](#) (PMT - Plan Modernizacji Technicznej), worth 40 billion dollars and covering future military spending from 2013 to 2022.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in Ukraine's Donbass region in 2015 meant that Warsaw had to step up its rearmament programme faster than expected. In 2015, [Poland exceeded the threshold of 2% of GDP in military spending](#), while Germany was at 1.19% and France at 1.78%. Since then, successive Polish governments, while disagreeing on the amounts allocated to rearmament, have all had the same premise about the need to strengthen the armed forces in the face of the [Russian threat and the hybrid threat on the border with Belarus](#). In 2018, the [Wisla programme](#) aimed to revise the plan drawn up in 2012 in order to adapt to changes in the defence situation.

Donald Trump's first term in the White House has only reinforced the idea, for Poland, of the need to rearm itself in the face of a Russia that is increasingly active in destabilising Western democracies with cases of interference in the [2016 US election](#) (seeking to favour Donald Trump) and the [2017 French election](#) (seeking to favour Marine Le Pen). Between 2018 and 2022, Polish orders for equipment increased, with the purchase of [American equipment in particular](#), combining the purchase of quality equipment with good relations with the American president. Poland acquired Patriot ground-to-air batteries, UH-60 (Black Hawk) helicopters and HIMARS multiple rocket launchers. Warsaw also hoped to convince the US President to maintain his presence in Europe as a deterrent to Russia by agreeing to a [permanent presence of US troops on Polish territory](#), and even proposing the [construction of a 'Fort Trump'](#).

On the eve of the invasion of Ukraine, [the Polish armed forces had been considerably strengthened and met NATO standardisation criteria](#). Poland ([797 battle tanks](#)) outnumbered the French ([222 Leclerc tanks](#)) and German ([284 Leopard tanks](#)) fleets and had the largest air fleet in Central and Eastern Europe, but its navy was lagging slightly behind, although it was developing its capacity to secure the Baltic Sea against Russian threats. [Polish budgets for military spending](#) have grown steadily to reach 4% of GDP in 2024, rising in 10 years from \$10.1 billion to \$34.9 billion, representing more than half of France's spending ([\\$64.2 billion in 2024](#)). In 2024, [the Polish armed forces were ranked 3rd in terms of strength](#) within NATO with 216,000 personnel (compared with 204,600 for France), behind the United States and Turkey. Although these numbers were a mix of professionals, reservists, and volunteers, they illustrated Poland's desire to rely on the quality of its modern equipment and on [massification](#) to meet the challenges of high-intensity land warfare.

The modernisation of the Polish armed forces has therefore been designed to [meet the demands of high-intensity combat](#), with the development of deep strike capabilities and the construction of defensive fortifications, particularly on the borders with the Kaliningrad enclave and Belarus. In the summer of 2024, Donald Tusk's government announced [funding for the \\$2.5 billion Eastern Shield project](#) to build fortifications on the border with Belarus and the Russian Federation. The shield will include modern dams and surveillance fortifications. It will be carried out jointly with the Baltic States (Estonia - Latvia - Lithuania), which border the Russian Federation and Belarus. As part of their strategic communication with Russia and Belarus, Polish politicians like to present the Polish armed forces as 'Europe's leading army', ahead of France and Germany. After these efforts, it seems that it is on the way to becoming so, especially in terms of land capabilities.

However, there are questions about [Poland's economic and structural capacity to maintain these efforts over the long term](#). Indeed, the major efforts made by the various governments raise questions about Poland's ability to maintain these efforts over time, while ensuring clear public acceptance of this national effort.

After Paris and Berlin, Warsaw is becoming a major centre of Europe

In January 2025, [Poland took over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union](#) for a period of six months under the slogan "Security, Europe! [The Council presidency allows a trio of states](#), in this case Poland with Denmark and Cyprus, to define the themes and major issues to be addressed by the Council of the EU during this period.

Among the seven main priorities, Poland is giving priority to the defence and security of the European Union. During this mandate, the Polish government wishes to work on strengthening the preparation of European partners in the defence of the continent and thus improve the defence industry in Europe. [At an informal meeting in Brussels on 3 February between a number of European representatives](#), including the British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, the view was expressed that European spending on defence and aid to Ukraine should be stepped up. Poland supports the idea of easing the rules of the [European Investment Bank](#) to help finance defence projects such as the Eastern Shield. These discussions on a European agreement on the financing of projects to strengthen the defence of allies were already part of the discussions of the French Presidency of the Council of the EU in early 2022. However, [Poland is also keen to reflect on improving direct cooperation between the European Union and NATO](#), broadening the players involved, including Canada and the United States.

This Presidency allows Warsaw to be at the heart of all European discussions and to put forward its political agenda at a time when the Franco-German couple, usually the 'leaders' of the European Union, are experiencing a certain slowdown. Indeed, [France has been in an unstable internal political situation](#) since the dissolution of the National Assembly in June 2024 and the absence of a clear majority, which resulted in the fall of a first government last December and strong criticism of the French President, Emmanuel Macron. Nonetheless, [the French President has been very active on the subject of Ukraine and the defence of the European allies](#) since the high tensions between Washington and Kyiv following the [disastrous meeting](#) at the White House at the end of February between Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky.

In Germany, the break-up of the SPD, Greens and FDP coalition last November led Chancellor Olaf Scholz to lose [a vote of confidence in December](#), forcing him to call early general elections. [The conservative CDU won the election](#), but there was a major emergence of the far-right AfD party. Germany's future chancellor, Friedrich Merz, has said he is in favour of [strengthening Germany's armed forces](#)¹ and revising its strategic agreements, raising the possibility of opening the debate on the [idea of a European nuclear umbrella](#), in cooperation with the continent's only two nuclear powers: the United Kingdom and France.

Although France and Germany are rediscovering some form of decision to act in defence of Europe and support for Ukraine, Poland stands out for its stable line on the perception of the Russian threat since 2008, for its current political stability, and also for the investments it has made in its defence since

¹ On March 18, 2025, the Bundestag voted on a [major military spending plan](#) worth hundreds of billions of euros.

joining NATO in 1999. Poland, which also enjoys good relations with the 47th President of the United States, wants to be seen as [a key player in Europe](#).

Poland and the US abandonment of Ukraine and Europe

The large-scale invasion of Ukraine by [nearly 200,000 Russian troops in 2022](#), as mentioned earlier, exposed the extent of the Russian Federation's border revisionist objectives in Europe. However, while the transatlantic community was able at the time to [to respond together to denounce this invasion and help Ukraine](#), three years later the situation has changed dramatically. In 2025, the new American administration is showing its desire to [end the war whatever the cost](#), even if it means abandoning the illegally occupied territories (including Crimea). What's more, the US President has also announced that he will [exclude Ukraine from NATO membership as a security guarantee](#), reinforcing the division between Washington and the European chancelleries over the conduct of peace negotiations. The fate of Ukraine is therefore causing great concern in Central and Eastern Europe about the support of the American 'ally'.

What's more, for several weeks now there has been concern about [the prospect of an American military withdrawal from NATO and hence from Europe](#). Such a departure would leave Europeans with the task of [reorganising themselves to deter any Russian attempt](#) on the eastern flank of the Atlantic alliance. Although the words 'peace' and 'ceasefire' are increasingly being used to describe the war in Ukraine, the Russian Federation does not seem ready to stop its military efforts. The International Institute for Strategic Studies estimates that [Russia's military spending this year will account for 7.5% of GDP](#). What's more, during [his speech on March 5th](#), French President Emmanuel Macron explained that Russia was planning to increase the ranks of its armed forces by 300,000 additional soldiers, as well as increasing its equipment. Even if the war in Ukraine were to end, the European continent would still be under direct threat from a Russia emboldened by its gains in its military campaign.

So, with the risk of the US administration abandoning Ukraine and Europe, the Polish government is not wavering and is determined to demonstrate its determination to defend Europe's eastern flank. Prime Minister Donald Tusk recently announced that the government is working on [a programme to provide every adult male in Poland with basic military training](#).² He also announced a target of [500,000 members of the armed forces](#), speaking of a 'Race for Security'. Despite fears of a US withdrawal, the [Polish government is trying to secure the transatlantic link](#), emerging as the state best placed to talk to the Trump administration. However, the UK and France have shown some leadership in recent weeks, notably by proposing to work [on the potential deployment of European troops in Ukraine](#) as part of a ceasefire or peace treaty, aimed at ensuring compliance with any agreement signed. Poland, for its part, [has opposed any participation in this deployment](#), which could call into question its real determination in the face of the Russian threat. Nevertheless, this decision may be understandable given Poland's need to protect its territory, its borders with the Kaliningrad enclave and Belarus, and also to protect the Polish-Lithuanian border, which provides a land link between the Baltic States and the rest of the European continent.

Political Considerations for Canada

Last January, the former Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, signed a [nuclear cooperation agreement](#) with the Polish government of Donald Tusk aimed at improving Canada-Poland

² This training would only be offered to women on a voluntary basis.

cooperation in the nuclear sector and energy transition. The next Canadian government must continue to deepen relations with Warsaw.

What should Canada remember about the changing balance of power in Europe?

Political considerations:

The forthcoming elections in Poland

In May 2025, the Polish people will be called to the polls. [The latest polls show](#) the party (Civic Coalition or KO) of the current Polish Prime Minister in the lead in both the presidential and parliamentary elections (36% of voting intentions for the presidential candidate, Rafal Trzaskowski, and 35% for the parliamentary candidate). The KO party is considered to be at the centre of the political spectrum in Poland. [However, there is also a high level of opposition parties](#). On the one hand, the former ruling party (PiS), of which the current President, Andrzej Duda, is a member, is credited with 24% in the presidential elections and 31% in the parliamentary elections, with Karol Nawrocki as its candidate. The far-right Confederation of Freedom and Independence (KWOiN) is also on the rise, with 19% of voting intentions for the presidential and parliamentary elections. The positions of the various political parties on foreign policy issues are similar, and the outcome of the elections is unlikely to have a major impact on these two political issues, with a particular desire to maintain [strong ties with the US ally](#). [Security](#) remains a major issue in these elections.

However, the last time the PiS was in government, [Poland was widely criticised for its respect for fundamental rights](#), and the party's return to power could make it difficult to deepen relations between Ottawa and Warsaw.

Poland is a key player in supporting Ukraine

Warsaw is one of Kyiv's most important military and humanitarian supporters. In 2025, [Polish aid to Ukraine will represent the equivalent of 4.91% of Poland's GDP](#), including both direct aid and aid to refugees. Poland has taken in almost [a million refugees since the beginning of the invasion](#). What's more, from a military point of view, [Warsaw delivered a substantial number of resources](#): around 800 battle tanks, almost 500 infantry fighting vehicles and large stocks of ammunition, as well as Soviet-made fighter planes. In addition to its direct aid, Poland has become the focal point for Western military aid sent to Ukraine, thanks to its air, rail, and road infrastructures.

For its part, Canada's military aid to Ukraine in terms of equipment has been more limited since 2022. However, Ottawa was very present in Ukraine before the war with [Operation UNIFIER](#), which was 'a military training mission to professionalise and strengthen the capabilities of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) in support of Ukraine', set up in 2015. Since the war, Operation UNIFIER has moved training missions to Europe, particularly Poland, strengthening the ties between Warsaw and Ottawa in terms of cooperation in aiding Ukraine. [Some 54,000 members of the Ukrainian armed forces have been trained since the start of the Operation](#), giving credibility to Canada's position on aid to Ukraine.

Poland is a key ally in transatlantic relations and economic cooperation

With constant positive growth in its military spending and investment in the defence industry, Poland is becoming a pillar in the strengthening of European capabilities. By engaging with Warsaw on these

issues, Canada could facilitate bilateral industrial and strategic partnerships, serving to strengthen relations with Warsaw. In particular, this industrial rapprochement could enable Ottawa to find new ways of purchasing military equipment (see recommendation 1).

Poland plays a central role in strengthening NATO's eastern flank. Its commitment to regional security makes it a strategic partner for Canada, which shares the same stability objectives in the face of Russian threats, notably through Canada's military presence in the region as part of [Operation REASSURANCE](#). As part of this presence in Latvia, Poland has become a major partner in ensuring the protection of the Suwałki Corridor. Since 2022, [this corridor has been identified as a weak point in the Alliance's posture](#) against the risk of Russian attacks against NATO member states.

Poland's growing role in European politics also offers Canada an opportunity to deepen its ties with the EU through a state that favors enhanced cooperation with North America. This is not about calling into question the role of France or Germany, but rather diversifying its relations with European partners, especially given that there is [a large Polish community in Canada](#), with approximately 1.1 million Canadians of Polish descent.

Why should Poland become a more important partner for Canada?

By capitalizing on Poland's growing influence in Europe, Canada could strengthen its role within transatlantic alliances and strengthen its political activity in Eastern Europe, a key issue for global stability. However, these recommendations must be combined with Poland's priority for defence within NATO, which would increase the budget for military spending.

Recommendations for the Canadian Government

1- Strengthen bilateral cooperation in defence and security

As mentioned previously, Poland and Canada already cooperate in defence and security matters, notably through their participation in NATO military missions and exercises, including their joint participation in the International Security Assistance Force ([ISAF](#)) in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014 and the presence, between 2014 and 2017, [of Canadian troops rotating on Polish soil](#) (between 120 and 220 personnel) in Drawsko Pomorskie. Furthermore, with the invasion of Ukraine, Canada relocated its mission of training Ukrainian troops to Europe, particularly to Poland, as part of Operation UNIFIER. Thus, cooperation between Poland and Canada in defence and security matters is already significant, but it could be further deepened.

As a first step, Canada could strengthen its [bilateral agreement with Poland on general information security](#) by including the same principles as those announced under the [bilateral partnership with France](#). The latter aimed to strengthen cybersecurity and intelligence sharing on various fronts, including interference, espionage, and sabotage. Given [the current state of Russian sabotage in Europe](#), Canada should begin strengthening this cooperation with these targeted states, including Poland, to better prepare for this type of threat, which could be Russian or Chinese.

Second, in the spring of 2024, Poland, in collaboration with several other states bordering Russia,³ announced [an agreement to establish a "Drone Wall"](#) along [the 3,800 km border from Norway to](#)

³ Norway, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

[Poland](#). This drone wall project aims to improve border surveillance capabilities because each drone is capable of [covering a wider area than the usual fixed camera installation](#). Furthermore, the war in Ukraine has demonstrated [the major importance of drones in military operations](#), whether for combat, but also and especially for intelligence and reconnaissance. In 2023, [Canada announced the acquisition of 11 remotely piloted aircraft systems](#), accompanied by the purchase of necessary surrounding resources (control posts, hangars, support services, etc.) acquired from the American manufacturer General Atomics Aeronautical System. Due to political and commercial tensions between Canada and the American administration, it seems necessary for Ottawa to find new alternatives in terms of acquiring military aeronautical equipment. In order to cover its airspace more widely, particularly in the Arctic North, Canada could therefore strengthen its cooperation with Poland in the "Drone Wall" project through the purchase of European drones, with, in return, an expansion of the "Wall" to Canada's northern border. This expansion would make it possible to [cover an area so threatened by Russian aviation and navy](#).

2- Support the emergence of Polish leadership in relations with the EU

Canada and Poland have maintained important bilateral relations since the end of the Cold War. Since 2022, Canada has been [aiding Poland in managing refugees from Ukraine](#). As part of strengthening its relations with Central and Eastern European states, Canada should collaborate with Poland on transatlantic issues to promote common positions in international forums.

Next, Ottawa should encourage Warsaw to play a leading role in the evolution of European policies toward stronger ties with North America. Indeed, Poland remains one of the European states most committed to maintaining good relations with the United States despite current tensions over the war in Ukraine and trade relations with the European Union. With [Canada holding the G7 presidency](#) this year, it would be appropriate to give Poland a more prominent role in an expanded meeting format, thus demonstrating the Canadian government's consideration for the emergence of Polish leadership in Europe.

3- Develop economic and energy exchanges

Poland is Canada's leading economic partner in Central and Eastern Europe. In addition to the nuclear cooperation agreement signed earlier this year, Canada could continue to strengthen its investments in Poland in strategic sectors such as energy. The Canadian government could support energy cooperation agreements, particularly in the areas of liquefied natural gas (LNG) and renewable energies. [LNG Canada](#), the first large-scale LNG export facility, aims to make its first LNG exports as early as 2025. [Other installation projects are planned for around 2027-2030](#). Poland, for its part, is seeking to [diversify its gas imports](#), having relied on Russian gas before the 2022 invasion, and could therefore be a relevant partner for Canada and its liquefied natural gas.