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# 25 Years of Poland's Membership in NATO. Poland's Role in the Changing Security Environment

**Abstract:** *Reflecting on 25 years of Poland's membership in the largest political-military alliance since the end of the Second World War reveals significant changes in the security environment of NATO, as well as Poland's evolving role within its structures. Twenty-five years after accession, it is evident that this decision has not only enhanced security guarantees but, more importantly, has elevated Poland's role and importance on the international stage. Joining NATO necessitated the adaptation of the Polish Armed Forces to NATO standards, significantly accelerating their transformation and enabling the participation of Polish soldiers in international missions. Thus, the anniversary of Poland's quarter-century in NATO prompts scholarly reflection and the search for answers on how Poland's position in NATO has evolved and what role Poland plays in ensuring the security of the eastern flank in a changing security environment. The following conclusions are drawn from this discussion: during 25 years of membership in the North Atlantic Alliance, the Polish armed forces have undergone significant transformation, enhancing Poland's role in the Alliance. Additionally, the security environment has evolved considerably during this time, particularly regarding the need to ensure the security of the eastern flank.*

**Key words:** Security, Poland in NATO, Collective Defence, Membership in NATO

## Introduction

The North Atlantic Alliance was established in 1949 by Western countries in response to the perceived threat from the Soviet Union following the Second World War. Poland officially became a member on 12 March 1999. For nearly 70 years, NATO's core mission has been to provide security for its members. However, due to specific events and newly emerging threats, the Alliance has expanded its role to become a global organisation. Membership in this significant political-military alliance, from the perspective of 25 years, demonstrates that this decision has not only increased security guarantees but, more importantly, has elevated Poland's role and importance on the international stage. Joining NATO required the adaptation of the Polish Armed Forces to NATO standards, significantly accelerating their transformation. It ensured that Polish soldiers participated in international missions and exercises with soldiers

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from other countries. Moreover, forces from other countries have been stationed in Poland for years, and NATO multinational structures have been established on Polish territory. Thus, the anniversary of Poland's quarter-century in NATO prompts scholarly reflection and the search for answers on how Poland's position in NATO has evolved and what role Poland plays in ensuring the security of the eastern flank in a changing security environment. In this research, a range of general theoretical methods were employed, including analysis, definition, comparison, synthesis, and conclusion-drawing. A critical analysis of selected literature and sources, legal acts, and policy decisions was conducted. The works of security science researchers, such as Czaputowicz, Gizicki, and Elak, provided valuable literature for the considerations undertaken. Desk research was also conducted, focusing on expert publications in security and strategic studies. The study defines key concepts and terms essential to the topic. In contrast, the considerations undertaken in this study have led to the following conclusions:

– In the 25 years of its membership in the North Atlantic Alliance, the Polish armed forces have undergone a significant transformation, which has increased Poland's role in the Alliance;
– The security environment has evolved over the course of Poland's membership in NATO, especially with regard to the need to ensure the security of the eastern flank.

## Evolution of Poland's Place in NATO from 1999 to 2024

Poland's security policy after the Second World War has been incredibly dynamic. At the same time, it is fraught with contradictions due to historical circumstances and political subordination within the socialist bloc until 1989, followed by the democratic transition of the last twenty years. For nearly forty years, Poland was part of the Warsaw Pact, and since 1999 it has been a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), an organisation that previously posed a potential security threat to the socialist state, according to its leaders. Today, it is difficult to imagine Poland's security policy being shaped without basing it on the NATO pillar. Such a conviction was essentially shared by all political forces in Poland after 1989.[1] The Euro-Atlantic direction was a key element of post-1990 policy on which there was consensus. The key to success was cross-party agreement and support for membership, reflected in the programmes of successive governments, as well as the effectiveness of diplomats and military personnel in this field. There was a consensus that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation provides the foundation for lasting security in Europe, based on the development of democratic institutions and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. It provides the means to deter any form of attack on the territory of any member state, as

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[1] Gizicki, 2011.

well as to defend itself. Poland joined NATO in 1999, thus gaining benefits such as a guarantee of security and an increase in Poland's position and importance in the international arena.[2] After Poland's accession to the alliance, it actively participated in the implementation of the alliance's objectives and goals, bearing full responsibility for NATO's political and military activities.

During a quarter of a century of NATO membership, as mentioned in the introduction, the Polish Armed Forces have undergone significant modernisation and transformation. Polish soldiers have had the opportunity to participate in many missions abroad, including the 1995 IFOR stabilisation mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 1999, 800 soldiers of the Polish military contingent were part of the NATO forces in Kosovo. Additionally, a mission to Afghanistan was launched on 17 March 2002, in response to a request from the USA after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. On 20 March 2003, the decision was taken to send Polish soldiers to Iraq. Beginning in 1996, first as a partner and since 1999 as a full NATO member, 75,000 Polish soldiers and military personnel have taken part in allied missions and operations. The participation and competence gained by soldiers on stabilisation missions have become an important element in ensuring security in the international system.[3] Poland is not only a beneficiary of common security but also makes a significant contribution to strengthening it. A testament to our country's role in the North Atlantic Alliance was Poland's hosting of the 2016 NATO Leaders' Meeting. The summit, held in Warsaw, was a crucial event in the Alliance's history, marking the beginning of a new chapter in NATO's military adaptation to the changing security environment. Since Poland's accession to NATO, numerous Allied or Alliance-related military structures have been located within our country, and significant investments have been made as part of the NATO Security Investment Programme (NSIP), with a total value of PLN 7.8 billion. The North-East Multinational Corps has been operating in Szczecin since 1999, the NATO Joint Force Training Centre in Bydgoszcz was established in 2004, the Communications Battalion in Bydgoszcz has been operational since 2010, the NATO Military Police Expert Centre has also been in Bydgoszcz since 2013, and the NATO Force Integration Unit in Bydgoszcz since 2015. Allied units have been stationed in Poland since 2017, grouped as the Multinational North-East Division in Elbląg, including soldiers from Poland, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Spain, Canada, Lithuania, Latvia, Germany, Romania, Turkey, the United States, Hungary, the United Kingdom, and Slovakia. In 2023, it was estimated that around 12,000 troops from other NATO member states would be stationed in Poland.

Czaputowicz notes that Poland's accession to NATO was also a benefit for the alliance, as from NATO's perspective, Poland's membership increased the allian-

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[2] Paluch, 2021.
[3] Zaręba, 2023.

ce's capacity to defend itself and conduct peacekeeping operations worldwide, eliminating the grey zone of security in Central Europe created after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. Poland also brought in-depth knowledge of eastern issues. As a member of NATO, it has consistently advocated an 'open door' policy, supporting its eastern neighbours in their efforts to gain membership of the organisation.[4] In the face of the war in Ukraine, Poland is also becoming a frontline state, involved in supporting Ukraine and serving as a kind of security 'hub'.

## Poland's Role in the Changing Security Environment

In February 2022, the world witnessed a disturbing event that not only disrupted the balance of power on Europe's eastern borders but also set off a cascade of events with unprecedented consequences. The invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation opened a new chapter in the history of armed conflict, presenting complex geopolitical, social, and economic challenges amidst the chaos of war. The scale and impact of the conflict transcend national boundaries, necessitating that every state and international organisation grapple with the difficulties this global crisis introduces[5]. Over the past decade, from 2014 onwards, the European security environment has faced numerous tests, presenting security challenges not seen since the end of the Second World War. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has emerged as an unprecedented event and a challenge to the security of Central European countries, particularly those directly neighbouring Ukraine and Russia, with enormous consequences for them. The countries of NATO's eastern flank – more aptly described as NATO's eastern front – perceive this war primarily as the dismantling of the old security model and the ineffectiveness of the previous deterrence strategy against Russia. The increasingly aggressive actions of the Russian Federation, both in the Ukrainian theatre of war and near the NATO flank, alongside the ongoing escalation of the NATO-Russia conflict, compel Central European states to bolster their border security.

In this context, the importance of NATO's eastern flank for the security of Central European countries and the necessity for NATO to adapt to a dynamic security environment must be emphasised, highlighting Poland's crucial role in ensuring regional security. Undoubtedly, the war in Ukraine has intensified the efforts of Central and Eastern European countries to strengthen NATO's eastern flank. Regardless of the alliance's support, these countries must take measures to enhance defence capabilities and military spending. The security of NATO's eastern flank continues to be underpinned by allied guarantees. As a frontline state, Poland plays a pivotal role in ensuring

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[4] Czaputowicz, 2014.
[5] Stępniewski, 2023.

regional security. As mentioned above, a significant factor destabilising both Polish and, consequently, European security, is the ongoing conflict in Ukraine since 2014, which escalated into a full-scale war in February 2022. Additionally, the Russian Federation's aggressive stance on the international stage, including offensive actions against the West and hybrid attacks on NATO's eastern flank, are part of the broader context of Russia's rivalry with the West. It is no longer just Ukraine, Georgia, or Moldova but also Poland and the Baltic states that have become targets of Russian expansion, facing increased pressure to weaken and fracture internally. Russia also seeks to undermine the credibility of states on the international stage and, strategically, to destabilise the entire region and create divisions within the EU and NATO. Countries of Central and Eastern Europe, particularly Poland as noted by Klaudia Jagusiak, are often described as a risk zone, a near abroad, or buffer states that have been forced to redefine their security. The importance of self-defence capabilities has increased, as it is perceived that allied guarantees might not suffice in an era of evolving threats[6]. The situation on NATO's eastern flank should be considered in the context of the current dynamic and unpredictable security environment, as outlined in the National Security Strategy signed by President Andrzej Duda on 12 May 2020. This strategy identifies the Russian Federation as responsible for the progressive breakdown of the existing international order, adversely affecting the security environment and violating the basic principles of international law, thereby undermining the pillars of the European security system. Although the document accurately holds Russia responsible for these violations, since 2020, Russia has been increasingly bold in pursuing its imperial goals on the international stage and, with its provocations against NATO states, has sought to disrupt their unity. In recent years, the situation on NATO's eastern flank has become a key issue in ensuring the security of this part of Europe. Poland, through its international obligations arising from its accession to the EU and the Schengen Agreement, has assumed the responsibility of ensuring the security and inviolability of the Polish eastern border, which is integral to the external border of the European Union and NATO. Security activities and efforts depend not only on a country's defence system but also on a myriad of factors, including geopolitical, historical, and military circumstances.[7] Security determinants should be understood as relatively constant factors that significantly impact the nature of Polish national security. Elak notes that Poland is largely bordered by countries with a converging political orientation, making their security dependent on NATO, the EU, and the US (Lithuania, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Germany, and Ukraine). This provides a platform for cooperation and an effective tool to counter Russia's aggressive policy, which aims to rebuild its world power position by force. However, Russia's sudden actions in Ukraine in 2014 caused

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[6] Jagusiak, 2023.
[7] Zyguła, 2023.

turmoil within NATO and the EU, undermining confidence in the proclaimed guarantees of collective defence under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. In the event of a conflict, Poland would once again find itself on the main route of hostile armies, necessitating a reorientation of its security policy towards national defence. Simultaneously, by engaging in effective political action with the Baltic states, Poland has influenced changes within the Alliance, exemplified by the NATO Summit in Warsaw in 2016 and the deployment of military forces on NATO's eastern flank[8].

Russia's current actions are no longer isolated episodes, necessitating that countries on NATO's eastern flank prepare for a long-term confrontation defined by Russia's aggressive policy in the entire region. The unpredictability of Russian actions is compelling NATO member states to reassess threats from the east. The first significant indication of Russia's imperialist intentions on Ukrainian territory was the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, which preluded further attempts to seize Ukraine. But Vladimir Putin pursued his plan to destabilise the Central and Eastern European region by taking several other actions. Notably, the Russian president instructed the defence and foreign ministries to negotiate an agreement to establish a base for the Russian air force on Belarusian territory to house fighter interceptor aircraft – a decision that demonstrated Russia's intention to influence NATO European states. Since 2014, these states have been observing Russia's provocative moves, including:

➤ Increased reconnaissance flights along the borders of the Baltic States;
➤ Violation of the airspace of the Baltic States;
➤ Disabling transponders, making identification impossible;
➤ Participation in organising illegal migration.

These actions signalled to the alliance countries the need to enhance efforts to strengthen NATO's eastern flank. Consequently, stabilising the situation in the east became the main theme of the 2016 Warsaw summit. The response to the new security environment was to strengthen capabilities in terms of deterrence and defence, as well as to increase NATO's presence in the eastern territories. At the 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw, to bolster the Alliance's deterrence and defence capabilities, members decided to establish four battalion battle groups composed of soldiers from NATO countries, to be stationed in the Baltic states and Poland. Additionally, a document was signed to coordinate EU and NATO actions concerning hybrid threats and the migration crisis. The war in neighbouring Ukraine, with its repercussions felt along Poland's eastern borders, exemplifies Russia's aggressive strategies. Notably, incidents like the detection of missiles in Polish airspace at the end of December serve as deliberate acts by Russia to test Poland's reaction, evaluate the resilience of the Polish state, and

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[8] Elak, 2020.

gauge NATO's response. Resilience here refers to the enhancement and maintenance of capabilities in both civilian and military sectors that substantially hinder adversarial actions. This forms a fundamental prerequisite for security at both national and EU levels, alongside alliance commitments. Consequently, building resilience is a direct response to an array of threats, including regional hybrid threats and broader global challenges. Strengthening state resilience is the responsibility and task of every state and is becoming a vital aspect of security within the EU and NATO frameworks. Jakub Bornio observes that the full-scale war between Russia and Ukraine has led to numerous incidents involving air assault and defence systems in the airspace over Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Many of these incidents are likely deliberate provocations by Russia aimed at advancing its political objectives toward NATO, Ukraine, or Moldova. Addressing these challenges effectively requires CEE countries to boost technical capacities, refine response strategies, and enhance information handling.[9] Moreover, provocations involving aircraft are not uncommon. In 2023, NATO forces intercepted Russian aircraft near alliance airspace over 300 times, with a significant number of these incidents occurring over the Baltic States, where airspace breaches have been consistently reported for years. Such provocations have occurred in other NATO countries, such as the violation of Romanian airspace by a Shahed 136 drone in December 2023, and the incursion into Polish airspace by Belarusian Mi8 and Mi24 helicopters in August 2023. Given Russia's actions on the international stage, it is plausible that some of these incidents were deliberate. However, considering the close proximity of ongoing hostilities and the frequent missile attacks on Ukraine, it is also possible that some violations of other countries' airspace were accidental. At the current level of military escalation between NATO and Russia, there is a possibility that Russia is also gathering technical intelligence to potentially gain an advantage in terms of armament capabilities. Relevant data in this context might include, for example, the rate at which NATO countries deploy aircraft to intercept enemy flying objects, their combat readiness, such as the type of equipment used, time spent airborne, or the identification of air defence radar emission parameters.

In view of the current security situation near NATO's eastern flank, Poland and its security and defence measures are crucial for ensuring the security of the alliance's member countries. Poland's role is particularly significant because, as a frontline state supporting Ukraine in its fight against Russia, it could be a potential target for hybrid and asymmetric actions by the Russian Federation. As a border state between NATO and the European Union, Poland is especially vulnerable to threats from the East, particularly from countries like Belarus, where democracy is poorly established. An example of Belarus undermining Poland is the orchestrated illegal migration on the Polish-Belarusian border since the summer of 2021. The cynical practice of luring migrants to

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[9] Bornio, 2024.

Belarus and then using them to breach the border and attack Polish services, under the approval of Belarusian secret services, was a brutal tactic to test Polish security and border protection systems and an attempt to discredit Poland in the EU as a country failing to protect the alliance's external border.

Given the dynamic changes in NATO's security environment and Poland's ability to adapt, Poland's position on the international stage has significantly strengthened. Poland aims to effectively identify and minimise potential risks, undertaking various security measures for the alliance, thereby becoming not only a beneficiary but also a donor. Poland's serious and responsible approach to security is evidenced by its substantial defence budget, which is the highest among the alliance's member countries. In 2023, the Polish government allocated 3.9% of GDP to defence, compared to the US's 3.5%. According to Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, NATO is currently undergoing 'the biggest overhaul of collective defence and deterrence since the Cold War' in response to the Russian invasion.

## Conclusions

Security today dictates many political decisions, and ensuring it is the primary goal of states and international organisations. It encompasses both a state and dynamic process. Security, conceived as a state free from tensions and threats, is crucial for a nation's survival and the stable development of its society. It possesses a dynamic, ambiguous, and multidimensional nature, as highlighted by M. Pietras, who notes,

> In the context of the fundamental linkages between the security of nations and states and the state of the international environment, security can be seen as a dynamic process occurring within this environment and is subject to perceptions by states, social groups, and individuals.[10]

Throughout its history, NATO has consistently demonstrated its ability to adapt to changes in the Euro-Atlantic security environment. The Alliance has always fulfilled the tasks set before it, and each Concept has undoubtedly been a key strategic document underpinning the implementation of those tasks. Subsequent revisions of the Concept resulted from changes in the international security environment, emerging new types of threats, and practical lessons from operations conducted by NATO forces or experiments undertaken. All Concepts reaffirmed the objectives of the Alliance, the ties that unite its members, and the values and principles that guide them. Further-

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[10] Pietraś, 1994.

more, they have been and continue to be the basis for transforming the Alliance to counter current security challenges.[11]

The decision of the Polish state 25 years ago to join the structures of the North Atlantic Alliance not only defined the security policy for the next quarter of a century but also obliged Poland under Article 3 of the Washington Treaty to develop its national defence capabilities. Under this provision, each member of the Pact must have its own resources capable of maintaining the country's defence until the arrival of allied forces. As Elak rightly points out, the guarantees provided by NATO cannot be the only line of defence in terms of creating one's own international policy, which is an element of a state's strategic cover. It is this policy that should direct the activities of the secret services and the country's defence preparations. It seems that the policy built up over the years is yielding tangible results in the form of security guarantees, not least by building up the deterrent potential resulting from the deployment of allied forces on our territory. On the international stage, they can contribute to the authentication of NATO's immediate response in the event of an attack on our country.[12] The support from the Alliance guaranteed by the provisions of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, which includes the commitment to collective defence, is an additional protective umbrella for Poland in the event of the need to use military force. For a quarter of a century, Poland has made every effort to prove that it is a fully-fledged and responsible member of the alliance, and, aware of the threats coming from the East (from the Russian Federation), through its defence spending, it is demonstrating that it can be a guarantor of security in the region.

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[11] Falecki, 2014.
[12] Elak, 2020.

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