

# Next Steps in U.S.–Polish Strategic Cooperation

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

A model NATO ally, Poland is demonstrating how to build deterrence through serious investment in its military.

Poland should take on a leadership role in Baltic Sea security through enhanced military cooperation with its neighbors.

Washington should continue to support Warsaw through defense-industrial-base cooperation, energy exports, and infrastructure investment.

Over the past decade, Poland has emerged as an anchor of the transatlantic alliance on the eastern flank of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). President Donald Trump’s return to the White House has opened a window to build on the strong relationship he built with Warsaw in his first term. In 2017, President Trump chose Warsaw as his second trip abroad and underlined how a strong alliance with Poland deters great power war.<sup>1</sup>

In parallel fashion, at the beginning of the second Trump Administration, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth visited Poland during his first foreign trip and praised Poland as “a model ally on the continent.”<sup>2</sup> In his remarks at the May 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Secretary Hegseth again noted Poland’s central role in transatlantic security, as well as its global significance by pointing to the flexibility it gives American forces to provide deterrence in the

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Indo-Pacific.<sup>3</sup> Not only are Poland and America's prospects for security cooperation rosy, but conservative Karol Nawrocki's election as Poland's president in June 2025<sup>4</sup> augurs well for political cooperation with Washington, as highlighted by his official invitation to the White House for a September 3 visit.<sup>5</sup>

Opportunities to strengthen the U.S.–Polish alliance abound outside of security matters as well, with both governments emphasizing the importance of national sovereignty in border enforcement and pursuing win–win economic opportunities in the energy and trade arenas. As American and Polish leaders continue to strengthen their partnership, they should double down on the security relationship by positioning Poland as *the* key anchor on NATO's eastern flank, reaffirm support for border enforcement in defense of national sovereignty, and seek to expand bilateral energy and economic ties.

Poland has assumed a leading European role on a variety of issues, but perhaps its most forward-leaning contribution was tightening border security and immigration enforcement in advance of its European peers. Polish focus on immigration was increased by the weaponization of migration by Belarus and Russia in 2021. Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko's regime in Minsk orchestrated the crisis by authorizing visas for numerous visitors, primarily Afghan nationals, to visit Belarus with one-way flights and proceeded to funnel many of the arriving foreigners to the borders with Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia in an effort to destabilize their governments.<sup>6</sup> As tensions rose, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov absolved Minsk of any blame while arguing that Poland and Lithuania were violating humanitarian principles by pushing the waves of illegal migrants back.<sup>7</sup>

Lukashenko's provocation led to thousands of migrants pressuring Polish security forces at the border and triggered the early 2022 authorization and construction of a border fence along the non-riverine portions of the Polish–Belarusian border.<sup>8</sup> (Warsaw has steadily upgraded electronic barriers, monitoring, and swift response forces along riverine sections of the border in tandem.)<sup>9</sup> Minsk's provocations have continued since then, as illegal migration across the European Union–Belarusian border increased by 66 percent in 2024 from 2023 levels, with 90 percent of the illegal immigrants holding a Russian student or tourist visa, demonstrating Moscow's enabling of the crisis.<sup>10</sup> In response, the European Union provided €170 million (\$197 million) in December 2024 to member states that have a border with Russia (Poland's share was €52 million (\$60 million)) to “upgrade electronic surveillance equipment, improve telecommunication networks, deploy mobile detection equipment and counter drone intrusions thereby

ensuring real-time situational awareness and enhance [sic] the mobility of border patrols.”<sup>11</sup> The European Commission simultaneously expanded the legal rules for member states along the EU–Russia–Belarus border region to undertake stronger border security measures.<sup>12</sup>

At a national level, Poland announced its aim to fully fortify its border with Belarus by mid-2025 to durably contain the migration crisis by strengthening existing fencing and installing additional enforcement capacities.<sup>13</sup> In addition, following the deportation of 8,500 foreigners, not all of whom were migrants, from Poland in 2024, Warsaw launched a nationwide crackdown on illegal migrants with a focus on criminals in February 2025. This effort alone resulted in 398 deportations<sup>14</sup> as Prime Minister Donald Tusk provided notice that: “Anyone who visits Poland, takes advantage of our hospitality and brutally violates the law will be deported from Poland.”<sup>15</sup> Tusk’s government also passed measures in March to suspend migrants’ right to apply for asylum for up to 60 days at a time.<sup>16</sup> In May, the Polish parliament voted 366 to 17 in favor of extending the asylum suspension.<sup>17</sup> This forceful legislative response demonstrates Poland’s seriousness about countering illegal migration and weaponized migration in a manner that should be held up as a model European approach.

Poland’s national efforts have been supplemented by cooperation with the United States. In the fall of 2019, during the first Trump Administration, Poland was granted access to the U.S. Visa Waiver Program in recognition of its cooperation with American authorities to reduce visa refusal rates and visa overstay. This has allowed freer people-to-people contacts between the two countries.<sup>18</sup> Official cooperation has expanded from there between Polish authorities and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security with respect to Polish border security measures, as highlighted by former Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas’ visit to Rzeszów in February 2023<sup>19</sup> and current Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem’s visit in May 2025.<sup>20</sup> Taken together, Poland’s vigorous border security enforcements and ongoing cooperation with the United States place it in a leading position to benefit from the Trump Administration’s reported prioritization of migration challenges in discussions with European allies.<sup>21</sup>

## Forward-Leaning Defense Spending

Poland has taken the lead among America’s European allies on securing credible deterrence capabilities in support of its NATO obligations. Set to hit 5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense spending, Poland has secured critical capabilities through purchases such as American F-35

jets and South Korean K2 tanks and investment in Polish 155 millimeter (mm) artillery shell production.<sup>22</sup> In addition, Poland's armed forces have doubled in size since 2014, becoming the third-largest NATO military at approximately 216,000 soldiers.<sup>23</sup>

Polish policymakers have maintained focus on the latest military developments in Ukraine in order to keep Poland's forces and capabilities up to date. As a result, Poland, alongside the three Baltic states, announced its withdrawal from the Ottawa Convention, which banned the production and use of landmines to reintroduce an effective tool in counter-assault tactics.<sup>24</sup> This relentless emphasis on battle-ready capabilities based on the particularities of likely scenarios accords with best practices in reinforcing NATO deterrence.<sup>25</sup>

U.S. forces in Poland also provide a strategic force multiplier through rotational units and key capabilities. The United States is the framework nation for NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) Battle Group Poland.<sup>26</sup> Force size fluctuates due to the rotational nature, but each battle group maintains around 1,000 personnel.<sup>27</sup> The U.S. Army augmented this support in November 2020 when it inaugurated V Corps Headquarters (Forward) in Poznan, Poland, which serves as the key hub for oversight of rotational forces in Europe among other tasks through a permanent U.S. military presence.<sup>28</sup> Finally, Poland serves a vital role in NATO's Ballistic Missile Defense, which relies on a combination of radar and interceptor assets across Europe. Poland hosts one of the Aegis Ashore sites for the mission as part of the limited interception backbone on NATO's eastern flank alongside Romania.<sup>29</sup> While this capability is not intended or sufficient to deter a Russian attack, it is already in place against potential Iranian ballistic missiles.

As Poland's capabilities and manpower continue to grow, maintaining strategic focus will remain essential, but Warsaw can begin to adopt a broader view that recognizes opportunities and threats across neighboring NATO states. The primary task will remain deterrence and defense readiness against a Russian attack whether from the air in the style of the mass attacks against Ukraine, or in a force-on-force confrontation across the borders with Kaliningrad or Belarus.

In this respect, Poland spends its defense budget wisely, with 51.13 percent of its defense spending going to equipment purchases in 2024.<sup>30</sup> This compares quite favorably with other NATO countries, many of which have an unfortunate tendency to spend higher percentages on personnel than they do on equipment. Poland is building real military capacity with lessons learned from close observation of the conflicts in Ukraine and elsewhere, with major purchases of tanks, self-propelled howitzers, attack helicopters, F-35 fifth-generation fighter aircraft, and air defense systems.

One area where Poland has sought a greater role with respect to big-picture deterrence is the NATO nuclear mission, with former Polish President Andrzej Duda having called for U.S. gravity bombs to be stationed on Polish soil.<sup>31</sup> Though such an objective would require much preparation, it should be considered, and as an F-35A customer, Polish pilots could more swiftly be included in NATO's nuclear training missions.<sup>32</sup> Taking this step would strengthen NATO's nuclear deterrence mission by diversifying possible strike origin points and avoiding weaknesses inherent to the longer flight trajectories from the current basing configuration.<sup>33</sup>

One strategic infrastructure security concern for military operations does exist in Poland, and that is Hutchison Port Holdings' ownership of the Gdynia Container Terminal at Gdynia port. (Hutchison Port Holdings is a Hong Kong-based company with deep links to Chinese state-owned enterprises and policymakers.<sup>34</sup>) The second-largest Polish port behind Gdańsk,<sup>35</sup> Gdynia hosts a Polish special forces base, a shipyard constructing Polish missile frigates, and a dock used by the United States to "unload NATO and U.S. military gear for northeastern Europe, as well as equipment bound for Ukraine."<sup>36</sup> Merely a general concern for a while, U.S. Army equipment was denied unloading rights by Hutchison for a slight protrusion into their port zone,<sup>37</sup> confirming Hutchison's hostility and the strategic weak point it presents as Washington considers expanding its military presence in and through Poland.

Poland's status as one of the largest and best-equipped militaries in NATO means that the Polish military can now act as a net security provider beyond its borders in addition to its primary role as guarantor of Polish sovereignty. Poland has long borders with Russia and Belarus and rightly prioritizes its own security. However, it is in the interest of both Poland and Poland's NATO allies for Poland to take a more active role in deterring Russia aggression in its near abroad.

In some cases, Poland has already started this critical mission. The Polish-Lithuanian Council of Defense Ministers, for instance, has played an important role in developing consistent security cooperation between the two countries. In the Suwalki Gap, for example, Lithuania's Iron Wolf Mechanized Brigade and Poland's 15th Mechanized Brigade have trained together.<sup>38</sup> This sort of training will be especially important as Lithuania's military modernizes and procures significant amounts of modern armored vehicles in the coming years. Lithuania has already acquired the wheeled Vilkas infantry fighting vehicle (IFV), a variant of the German Boxer IFV, and is now planning to acquire around 100 new tracked IFVs. Poland can help to operationalize these new Lithuanian units through increased joint training, especially in and around the Suwalki Gap.

Soon, roughly 4,800 German soldiers will be permanently based in Lithuania at Germany's newly constructed military base hosting the armored Panzerbrigade 45.<sup>39</sup> This unit should also be quickly integrated into joint exercises and planning with Polish and Lithuanian units planning for the defense of the Suwalki Gap.

Polish air and naval cooperation with Sweden, Germany, and the Baltic states is also a critical regional mission for Poland, as the entire Baltic Sea is a security concern given the large Russian military presence and the centrality of the sea to key Russian interests like energy exports. The Baltic Sentry mission, wherein Poland cooperates with the Baltic states, Nordic states, and Germany to protect critical infrastructure in the Baltic Sea, is already an excellent example of this sort of cooperation. In recent months, the threat posed to undersea cables in the Baltic Sea has been made especially evident by repeated sabotage committed by Russian- and Chinese-linked ships. Baltic Sentry also protects trade routes and energy supply chains.<sup>40</sup>

As Poland accepts the U.S. Integrated Air and Missile Defense Battle Command System (IBCS) as part of the Polish Wisla (the Polish version of the U.S. Patriot system) and Narew (short-range air defense) air defense programs, it should seriously consider extending air defense protection to the entirety of Lithuania. The IBCS includes command and communications equipment for six existing Wisla and 23 Narew systems.<sup>41</sup> Including the defense of Lithuanian airspace with its robust air defense program would be an impressive demonstration of Poland's commitment to collective defense and reaffirm its status as one of the leading security providers in NATO.

As part of the agreement at the June 2025 NATO Summit in The Hague, NATO members agreed to spend 1.5 percent of GDP on national security-related infrastructure development, along with an increased 3.5 percent baseline for core defense spending. Poland, of course, already well exceeds the new 3.5 percent minimum for core defense spending (one of only a select few within NATO). If Poland is interested in quickly meeting the 1.5 percent infrastructure spending goal as well, Warsaw could meet some critical strategic infrastructure needs. Of particular concern is the ability to move military units from Western Europe to the Baltic states in the event of Russian aggression. U.S. armored assets in Germany, U.S. armored units that might arrive in Europe by ship, German and French armored units, and others would all need to move across Poland to reach Lithuania in the event of conflict. It is of critical importance that Poland, Germany, and Lithuania improve road and rail connections along this route to reduce the time



required for these units to reach the Baltic states. Poland, Germany, and Lithuania should also inaugurate projects to enhance the NATO fuel supply chain through Poland and reduce obstacles to military border crossing.<sup>42</sup> Resilience and redundancy in these key energy and transport connections may qualify for funding through the Three Seas Initiative, which is focused on similar goals, and integrating certain investments for scale could be worth examining.

## Defense Industrial Base Cooperation and Strengthening

Poland has built up its capabilities through foreign weapons systems and munitions purchases but has also sought to develop its domestic defense industrial base. To reconcile these two efforts, the Polish government has taken a unique approach called Polonization. Under this policy, half of defense expenditure abroad must make its way back to the Polish defense industrial base through offsets and contracting production of components, systems, and (or) materials to Polish suppliers.<sup>43</sup> At this point, several successful major partnerships have been forged with American companies within this framework. One example from September 2024 is Lockheed Martin's expansion of its relationship with local Polish industry "to develop and manufacture components of the Patriot Advanced Capability – 3 (PAC-3) Missile Segment Enhancement (MSE)."<sup>44</sup> Expanding PAC-3 MSE production in Europe is essential because of the convergence of U.S. stockpile concerns<sup>45</sup> and the Patriot system's success in Ukraine with PAC-3 interceptors.<sup>46</sup> Another area where Polish officials have expressed interest in expanded cooperation is joint ammo production<sup>47</sup> while they invest heavily in boosting their production capacity.<sup>48</sup> This could be a valuable opportunity to fully implement 155mm interoperability between Poland and the United States as a model for greater NATO cohesion to reduce standardization gaps that have caused problems in Ukraine.<sup>49</sup>

## Energy Security Partnership

Over the past decade, Poland has transformed its energy security with a far-sighted commitment to leaving Russian energy dependence behind, moving from sourcing 84 percent of energy imports from Russia to a complete abandonment of Russian coal, oil, and gas.<sup>50</sup> As a leading proponent of reducing European Union nations' purchases of Russian energy, Poland led the way on coal imports from Russia: On March 29, 2022, the Polish government blocked imports of coal from Russia, previously 13 percent of

the annual coal stock, and began to penalize Russian coal importers past that date.<sup>51</sup> Despite limited smuggling accusations, Russian coal seems to have stopped flowing into Poland since then.<sup>52</sup>

Following a three-week liquified natural gas (LNG) import shutdown in 2009 by Russia's Gazprom, Poland began the process of building the Świnoujście LNG import terminal as Polish energy companies decisively turned to sourcing LNG from American and other Western sources.<sup>53</sup> Russian malfeasance has since confirmed Poland's fears as Gazprom cut off gas supplies to Poland in April 2022 following Russia's invasion of Ukraine when Poland refused to pay in rubles.<sup>54</sup>

Over time, Poland's GAZ-SYSTEM, which operates the LNG terminal, has twice expanded operations from an initial capacity of 5 billion cubic meters (bcm) per year in 2015 to 6.2 bcm per year in 2022 and finally to 8.3 bcm per year in January 2025.<sup>55</sup> These operational expansions allowed Poland to establish full independence from Russian natural gas imports by 2023.<sup>56</sup> During this same period, American LNG exports to Poland expanded from 3,440 million cubic feet in 2017 to 132,567 million cubic feet in 2024, with 2025 LNG deliveries already tracking well ahead of 2024.<sup>57</sup> Polish energy companies have pursued natural gas production as well to augment their energy security. An illustrative example: Poland's largest energy company, the Orlen Group, announced record-high natural gas production from Polish reserves in 2024 with a production level of 8.6 bcm in a 20 percent increase from 2023 across all global operations.<sup>58</sup> This included 3.3 bcm from Polish natural gas fields coupled with 4.5 bcm from operations on the Norwegian Continental Shelf with smaller additions from other operations.<sup>59</sup> This energy independence from adversaries could expand if newly found Baltic Sea reserves of oil and gas are tapped pursuant to a July 2025 discovery by Central European Petroleum at the Wolin East 1 well estimated to be the largest single reserve ever found in Polish territory.<sup>60</sup>

With respect to oil, Russia's Tatneft violated contacts with Orlen to supply oil via the Druzhba pipeline until contract expiration in 2024, setting off a legal battle.<sup>61</sup> That case remains ongoing, but Orlen recently faced an adverse judgment for insufficient payment for Russian gas supplies. Though Orlen cited sanctions payment limitations, the arbitration panel ruled in favor of the prior contract with Gazprom, so Orlen may face \$300 million in settlement costs.<sup>62</sup> Regardless, imports of Russian liquified petroleum gas (LPG) are set to plunge in 2025 as the Polish LPG Association expects Russian LPG imports to fall to 20,000 metric tons per month, a substantial reduction from the 100,000-ton-a-month levels of 2024.<sup>63</sup>



Concerning nuclear energy, Poland has spearheaded efforts to rely on Western companies rather than on Russian or Chinese companies in building out a modern backbone of nuclear plants. This emphasis is reflected in the Polish Nuclear Power Programme's prioritization of energy security through diversification of supply from NATO allies and other friendly countries.<sup>64</sup> American companies are key to realizing Poland's goals as Energy Secretary Chris Wright oversaw the signing of the first nuclear power plant contract in Warsaw in April wherein a Westinghouse/Bechtel consortium agreed to partner with Poland's electricity company to build three AP1000 nuclear power units<sup>65</sup> in the village of Choczewo in Pomeranian Voivodeship, a province in northwestern Poland.<sup>66</sup> An excellent first step, Washington and Warsaw should continue to communicate closely both to facilitate connections to private American companies for construction and life-cycle management as well as to learn policy lessons to further America's effort to realize a nuclear revolution at home.<sup>67</sup>

Another Polish contribution to eastern flank stability is how its energy security measures naturally reinforce regional energy security through the 1,000-megawatt high-voltage power-transmission link completed in February 2025, enabling its Baltic neighbors to sever their electricity connection to Russia.<sup>68</sup>

## Telecoms Security and Economic Opportunities

From the start of the first Trump Administration, European allies' telecommunications security has been an American priority. Unfortunately, with reference to Poland, Chinese investment and influence have even older roots, with Huawei constructing and operating Polish telecommunications networks as far back as 2G in 2006,<sup>69</sup> with nearly 60 percent of the country's 4G networks reliant on Huawei technology.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, despite the U.S.–Poland Joint Declaration on 5G's insistence that “only trusted and reliable suppliers participate in our networks to protect them from unauthorized access and interference,”<sup>71</sup> Poland has repeatedly declined to ban or restrict Chinese telecommunications firms' access to its market.

Reviewing the history of Washington's past failed attempts to warn European allies, and Poland, in particular, against Chinese telecommunications providers is useful here to demonstrate the validity of Washington's concern. In 2019, American attempts to convince allies of the security concerns inherent in relying on Chinese telecommunications equipment were in full swing with Chinese security laws requiring their companies to provide access to data at state request.<sup>72</sup> At the same time, authorities in Warsaw

were dealing with the fallout of arresting a Huawei executive on charges of espionage.<sup>73</sup> Following up on these concerns and European Commission pressure later that year, Poland proposed tightening 5G security standards to limit telecommunications market access to only trusted suppliers and diversify Polish networks.<sup>74</sup> However, Polish authorities did not seriously pursue these legislative solutions in the following years, allowing Huawei to launch the first large-scale use of its Long-Reach E-band across Poland in 2023.<sup>75</sup> A promising announcement arrived in October 2024, when Poland's Ministry of Digital Affairs announced that it had completed work on a draft act to amend its Act on the National Cybersecurity System,<sup>76</sup> but hopes were dashed in March 2025 when the ministry publicly rejected any effort to ban or limit Huawei's telecommunications influence in Poland.<sup>77</sup>

Aside from their response to telecommunications security concerns, however, Polish leaders have stepped up to drive strategic investment on other valuable projects. Poland brought together 13 participating nations located between the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas as well as their strategic partners at the 10th annual Three Seas Summit in Warsaw from April 28 to 29 this year.<sup>78</sup> Courtesy of their heritage on the far side of the Iron Curtain, Three Seas Initiative (3SI) member states launched the effort to build north-south strategic connectivity, which was lacking due to the USSR's focus on linkages east to Moscow.<sup>79</sup> America realized the potential of the effort to improve economic prospects, military mobility, and transatlantic connections early on as shown by President Trump's attendance at the 2017 3SI Summit.<sup>80</sup> However, Congress has raised questions about the practical follow-through of American support for the initiative over the years, which is primarily a responsibility of the United States International Development Finance Corporation (DFC).<sup>81</sup>

President Trump's return to office, however, heralds an opportunity for energetic re-engagement. In the June 2025 nomination hearing for Benjamin Black as the new CEO of the DFC, Black noted: "Implicitly and explicitly Congress has challenged the DFC to make a greater impact, and to serve as a substantive economic counterweight to China and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and other global strategic competitors."<sup>82</sup> This mission naturally ties in with the 3SI whose 143 named projects are 90 percent focused on transport and energy projects of the kind BRI targets.<sup>83</sup> Additionally, the DFC is clearly among the relevant agencies that Congress charged with supporting European efforts to increase energy security in Title XX of the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020, which became law.<sup>84</sup> Now is the time to advance these priorities through careful engagement with Poland and other leading 3SI stakeholders as a successor

Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund is under construction.<sup>85</sup> Intersections with NATO and other allied strategic priorities would be worthwhile to examine to realize the benefits of scale and resilience in the energy and transport sectors.

## Four Recommendations for the United States and Poland

During Polish President Karol Nawrocki's official visit to Washington in early September, and in future bilateral engagements, the U.S. and Poland should:

1. **Highlight Polish Defense Leadership in Europe.** Poland has the highest defense spending as a percentage of GDP and the third-largest military in terms of personnel within NATO. Polish military modernization is extremely impressive, and Poland stands as a model for other NATO members to emulate. If every European NATO member took its defense as seriously as Poland does, there would be little threat from Russian aggression in Europe.
2. **Redouble Cooperation on Energy and Arms.** Poland's commitment to Western military and energy alignment is impressive, and the United States should continue to connect American companies that have expertise in areas of present relevance, from deepwater drilling to ammunition production to nuclear plant construction and operation, with potential Polish partners. To maintain this momentum, the U.S. Senate should prioritize approving President Trump's nominee Thomas Rose as U.S. Ambassador to Poland after returning from recess.
3. **Seize Strategic Opportunities Through Trade and Investment.** Polish and American partnership through the Three Seas Initiative is a major opportunity to move toward a private-sector-enabled development model, which avoids state incompetence, meets allied capability gaps, and provides benefits both locally and regionally. Warsaw and Washington should cooperate with other Three Seas Initiative nations, such as Croatia, to prepare targeted investments in energy security and cross-border mobility projects ahead of the next Three Seas Initiative meeting in Dubrovnik in April 2026.
4. **Stress the Importance of Poland's Role in Baltic Security.** Like in any sovereign state, the primary role of the Polish military is to

defend the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Poland. Because of its impressive investments in military capacity over the past decade, Poland now has the potential to act as a major force in regional security and as a net provider of security to other NATO allies. Taking a larger role in Baltic Sea security, increasing security cooperation and joint training and planning with neighbors, and making major commitments, such as to the air defense of Lithuania, are all examples of how Poland could demonstrate its new role as a leader in European collective security.

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