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US security policy in the first months of the Trump administration and transatlantic relations – tectonic shift or "just a few bumps"

Polityka bezpieczeństwa pierwszych miesięcy administracji Donalda Trumpa a relacje transatlantyckie – dryf płyt tektonicznych czy tylko „lekkie tąpnięcie”?

ABSTRACT:

The article discusses the main changes in US security policy after the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 47th President of the USA and their impact on transatlantic relations. It offers the answers (tentatively) to three interlinked research questions: what are the main characteristics of current US security policy? How will the recent changes impact the US position internationally and its transatlantic leadership? What consequences will it generate for NATO's European allies, and Poland in particular? These answers are based on an analysis of recent official statements and the actual actions of President Donald Trump, as well as key members of his administration, supplemented by the critical review of opinions on the matter presented in academic journals or think-tank reports and the press. The article also offers some recommendations on the Polish response to the changes introduced by Trump.

KEYWORDS:

Donald Trump, US security policy, Poland, NATO, power politics

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STRESZCZENIE:

Artykuł omawia zmiany w polityce bezpieczeństwa Stanów Zjednoczonych po objęciu władzy przez prezydenta Donalda Trumpa w styczniu 2025 r. i ich wpływ na relacje transatlantyckie. Ma charakter analityczny z elementami prognostycznymi i rekomendacyjnymi. Służy odpowiedzi na trzy powiązane ze sobą pytania: na czym polega specyfika zmian w polityce bezpieczeństwa administracji Trumpa, zwłaszcza w kontekście europejskim? Jaki będzie ich wpływ na pozycję międzynarodową USA i ich rolę lidera w relacjach transatlantyckich? Jakie będzie miało to konsekwencje dla europejskich członków NATO, zwłaszcza dla Polski? Odpowiedzi oparto na analizie najważniejszych deklaracji i działań administracji Donalda Trumpa w pierwszych miesiącach urzędowania, wspartej krytycznym przeglądem stanowisk i opinii prezentowanych przez ekspertów w artykułach naukowych, publikacjach ośrodków analitycznych oraz prasie. Artykuł zawiera także rekomendacje odnośnie do reakcji Polski na te zmiany.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:

Donald Trump, polityka bezpieczeństwa USA, Polska, NATO, polityka siły

Introduction

With the memories of the somewhat adventurous and sceptical policy style towards multilateralism of the first Donald Trump administration and the experience of the highly confrontational, also on international issues, presidential campaign of 2024, it was rational to expect some serious changes in direction, priorities, and style of the Washington approach to the main security challenges and issues after his victory. However, the scope and depth of actual changes that have happened since Trump's second inauguration, definitely not limited only to rhetoric, was a surprise for almost everyone, equally among US foes or rivals, as well as – maybe even more so – their allies. In the first months after the return to the White House, President Trump not only withdrew the US from the Paris agreement on climate change (doing it for a second time, after the reversal of his decision from 2017 by President Joe Biden) but also from the World Health Organisation, which was rather predictable taking into consideration his long criticism of both arrangements. However, Trump has gone further, actually declaring an intention to seize Greenland from Denmark (NATO ally) and to incorporate Canada (NATO ally) as the 51st American state; demanding restitution of the US control over the Panama Channel due to the alleged threat of Chinese influence there;

suggesting that the US could take over the Gaza Strip after the expulsion of some two million Palestinians; as well as pushing Ukraine to agree on giving up its occupied territories to Russia in exchange for a cease-fire¹. In addition, Vice President James D. Vance shocked the European allies during the Munich Security Conference in February by claiming that current security tensions in Europe are largely their own fault and the main challenge for the stability of their societies is not external threats posed by Russia or other actors, but internal problems and weaknesses caused by their “backsliding on freedom of speech and democracy”². Meanwhile, Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth, on his first European trip during the same month, suggested a substantial reduction of the US military presence on the continent and excluded Ukrainian membership in NATO³. Hence, it is hard not to think about recent changes in the US foreign policy in general, but particularly in its security dimension, as both deep and with profound consequences, most probably with long-term implications.

The purpose of this essay is not to offer a detailed explanation of the roots and reasons for these changes. It will rather search for the answers – tentative by definition, taking into account the recent high dynamics of changes in the US approach to security matters – to three interlinked research questions: what is the nature, scope, and alleged goals of changes in US security policy, particularly in the context of Europe? How will they impact the US international position and the transatlantic leadership? What kind of consequences will it generate for NATO’s European allies, and Poland in particular? These answers will be researched primarily through analysis of recent official statements and actual decisions made by President Donald Trump and key members of his administration, supplemented by a critical review of opinions on the matter presented in academic journals or think-tank and

¹ O.A. Hathaway, S.J. Shapiro, *Might Unmakes Right*, “Foreign Affairs” 2025, vol. 104, no. 4, pp. 80–81. Formulating such maximalist goals can – and rather should – be seen as evidently rhetorical and, therefore, not suggesting real plans for achieving them. The very fact of presenting them, however, has to create some confusion concerning the US (or their leader’s) intentions, particularly among close partners like Denmark, Canada, and other NATO allies, and, therefore, cannot be ignored.

² J.D. Vance, *President J.D. Vance’s remarks at the Munich Security Conference* [transcript], 15 February 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/02/18/vance-speech-munich-full-text-read-transcript-europe/> [5.10.2025].

³ E. Schmitt, J. Ismay, *Bruising 72-Hour Debut Overseas*, New York Times, 15 February 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/15/us/politics/hegseth-ukraine-russia.html> [5.10.2025].

press reports. Hence, the paper will have primarily analytical characteristics but also offer the author's opinions and recommendations on possible Polish responses to ongoing changes in US security policy, with the intention of stimulating, if possible, a policy-oriented discussion on the issue.

1. Trump's "big beautiful revolution" in US Security Policy

Symptomatically, at the beginning of Trump's second term, it is difficult to say that any comprehensive strategy of security policy was presented officially by the administration or even that it could be easily reconstructed from the actions undertaken under the new leader. It goes, however, perfectly with the Trump style of governing which is based on creating permanent state of uncertainty and "testing" political decisions, sometimes with potentially serious, long term consequences, by presenting them publicly, looking at other governments' and public reaction and then elaborating them further, modifying or reversing, or even denying the very fact of their presentation, depending on the initial response⁴. Secondly, during his first term, Trump did not formulate a truly comprehensive and consistent plan for the security policy, reducing it to rather general principles of avoiding new wars, especially in the form of expeditionary engagements; decreasing involvement in multilateral security arrangements, including alliances like NATO, primarily with the aim of limiting the economic burdens associated with that membership for America; and shifting the attention (but not necessarily actual assets and military capabilities) towards the Pacific due to the necessity to confront China – on many levels, not purely economic – as an emerging power that could challenge US global leadership or hegemony. Moreover, he did not act very consistently, being able – as in the case of nuclear capable North Korea – to go from threatening the obliteration of Pyongyang's military potential to an almost friendly attitude toward Kim Jong Un at their personal meeting in Hanoi (Feb. 2019) and forgetting tacitly about the case when the chances (actual or imagined) to find a solution ceased. Thirdly,

⁴ This explanation of the Trump decision-making process – i.e., presenting an initial idea to spur a response, then assessing the latter and, on that basis, pursuing the idea further, modifying it, or leaving (or even denying its very appearance) – was given by Stephen Biegun, former Deputy Secretary in the Trump administration, at the panel at PISM Strategic Arc in Warsaw, 22 May 2025.

in the presidential campaign of 2024, Trump did not concentrate on international issues extensively, exposing rather the inability of Biden's "crooked" administration to deal with problems in the economy (particularly the inflation). Trump's promises of ending several major armed conflicts in the world within days after becoming the president were not supported by a detailed plan for the reorganisation of US security policy or a diplomatic offensive that would make it possible. Moreover, initiatives like the Heritage Foundation Project 2025, seen by many as some form of "ideological and strategic playbook" for Trump's second administration, did not offer any comprehensive plan for international and security policy either, merely relatively vague (and unverified) guidelines⁵. Hence, what we have now on the US side is a security policy formulated around some general principles, rooted more in the ideological fundamentals of the MAGA movement than in the country's foreign policy traditions. However, that does not mean that implementing them won't cause revolutionary change in that policy and will not lead to serious consequences, particularly for the US allies.

Nevertheless, three of the most frequently cited characteristics of current Trump security (and foreign) policy are: the highly transactional nature⁶; the strong focus on China⁷ as a threat; and the rehabilitation of power politics⁸. There is no reason to question this common view. However, some reservations have to be made, since Trump's second administration (or Trump himself) seems to interpret and implement all these main tenets in a somewhat peculiar way. And understanding that specificity helps to work on the response.

⁵ Comp.: A. Velez-Green, R. Peters, *The Prioritization Imperative. A Strategy to Defend America's Interests in a More Dangerous World*, The Heritage Foundation Special Report, no. 288, 1 August 2024.

⁶ E. Chausovsky, *Trump's Foreign Policy: Purely Transactional*, The National Interest, 2 March 2025, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/trumps-foreign-policy-purely-transactional> [5.10.2025]; R. Agrawal, *Trump Is Ushering In a More Transactional World*, Foreign Policy, 7 January 2025, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/01/07/trump-transactional-global-system-us-allies-markets-tariffs/> [5.10.2025].

⁷ M. Beckley et al., *Trump's Second Term: Charting a New Path in Asia*, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/01/trumps-second-term-charting-a-new-path-in-asia/> [5.10.2025]. This is also the main thesis of the book by the current Deputy Secretary of Defense, E. Colby, often seen as one of the chief strategic planners of the second Trump administration: *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2021.

⁸ M. Kimmage, *The World Trump Wants*, "Foreign Affairs" 2025, vol. 104, no. 4. pp. 8–21.

Most evident is the recent dominance of the logic of power politics in American security policy, something that should locate Trump's policy within the offensive realism tradition, which – in a nutshell – stresses the importance of the maximisation of the country's power in relation to other states to build its security and its ability to implement goals in its foreign policies⁹. On the one hand, for the leader of the most powerful country in the world, both militarily and economically, whose political motto is *Make America Great Again* and who promotes the idea of “peace through strength”, thinking in power politics categories can be tempting and a somewhat natural choice. Such an approach was not alien to many of his predecessors; not only the Republicans like Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush, but also the Democrats like Bill Clinton (with the Balkans) or Barack Obama (fight against terrorism), even if many of them have tried to make the US in this way rather a bold champion and the guardian of rule-based order as well as a promoter of international peaceful cooperation, and not the country that questions these liberal achievements. However, the recent reincarnation of power politics in US security policy is somewhat extreme, with evident acceptance of logic of spheres of influence, prioritisation of contacts with big powers (or at least countries seen that way in Washington) and ignoring the interests of smaller states and values, as well as norms and institutions that protect them, which was manifested best (at least in the first half of 2025) by Washington's attitude towards Russia and its military involvement in Ukraine. In addition, Trump seems to rely overly on hard power constituted by military and economic means, while not only disregarding, but actually undermining – still quite substantial – US soft power, and its cultural and axiological attractiveness. While that can bring clearly measurable profits in the short term, in the longer perspective, it could be devastating for the US position internationally¹⁰. All this also gives Trump's policy a more anti-liberal than purely realist shape, because it suggests more concentration on abolishing elements of a liberal approach in foreign and security policy (i.e.,

⁹ Cf. J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Big Power Politics*, W. W. Norton & Company, 2001. Trump's security policy during his first term was also sometimes described as a manifestation of offensive realism, which could suggest some continuity in his approach to security issues (or at least in his perception of it). I. Popescu, *American Grand Strategy and the Rise of Offensive Realism*, “Political Science Quarterly” 2019, vol. 134, no. 3, pp. 375–405.

¹⁰ R.O. Keohane, J. Nye, *The End of the Long American Century*, “Foreign Affairs” 2025, vol. 104, no. 4, pp. 72–73.

a disregard for international organisation and protectionism) than pragmatic focus on maximising US power understood as an ability to influence others effectively (especially since the participation in international organisations, specifically in those where the USA has a pivotal or central role – like the WTO or various UN institutions and agencies, could be an important asset even according to realist views)¹¹.

However, the most peculiar characteristic of Trump's current model of power politics is its use as a tool of pressure on other actors, besides assets like economic interdependencies or military might; it is the instruments usually associated with the weaker actors – disinformation and manipulation. Striking examples of this were Trump's meetings with Ukrainian president Zelensky, including the infamous quarrel in the White House (instigated by Vice-president Vance) on 28 February, but equally illustrative were the Trump talks with South African president Cyril Ramaphosa in Washington on 21 May 2025, during which he confronted the interlocutor with evidently baseless claims of mass killing of white farmers, showing as proof the videos (already confirmed as fake) with alleged mass graves¹². It seems that Trump neatly adapts practices and techniques of power politics to the reality of overwhelming social media.

Strongly interlinked with the dominance of power politics in US foreign and security policy is its transactional nature. However, Trump's understanding of such an approach in international politics seems to be slightly different than standard practice, i.e., not to see relations with partners just as a form of bargain, a *quid pro quo* in which both sides tries to find "fair" (i.e., acceptable for both) exchange of benefits and burdens, instead, the current US administration is evidently focused on "winning" the deal, maximising US benefits and gains with a given partner, with little regard for their interests and needs as well as any long-term consequences of such relations. Therefore, weakening the position of the "contractor" (no matter foe or ally) before negotiating a final agreement seems to be fully justified, something even NATO countries has experienced before the Hague summit in June 2025 in the form of threats of withdrawal of some US troops from Europe and hints

¹¹ R. Snyder, *Realist or Just Anti-Liberal? Trump's Foreign Policy in Retrospect*, "International Journal" 2024, vol. 79, no. 1, pp. 79–95.

¹² G. Imray, A. Madhani, *Trump confronts South African leader with baseless claims of the systematic killing of white farmers*, 21 May 2025, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/trump-ramaphosa-meeting-south-africa-1.7540184> [5.10.2025].

at possible conditionality of the Washington Treaty Art. 5 pledge on the US side. Additionally, particularly in multilateral negotiations, pressurising the actor who is not necessarily the most dangerous, influential, responsible, or instrumental for the solution, but is most susceptible to the pressure, is the preferable option. With that logic, when the “weakest link” found itself in a situation with no alternatives but to agree on given conditions, the chances for reaching the expected agreement seem to be the highest. That was to some degree exercised on Kiev – although ultimately not successfully – in Spring 2025, when Trump started his peace mediations with surprisingly tough demands for concessions from the Ukrainians (interestingly, not only to Russia, but also to the US – in the form of signing an agreement on access to Ukrainian natural resources and potential revenues from their extraction) and simultaneously adopted an empathetic attitude towards Moscow, avoiding any serious criticism of Putin’s actions and position. Nevertheless, such an “art of the deal” is, so to speak, neither particularly fair nor – as for the time being – indisputably efficient.

However, what is less frequently noticed in this form of transactional approach but seems to be an important element of Trump’s model of security policy is its pursuit of the “bilateralization” of US external relations. Seemingly, it serves the goal of defining every relation with the outside world within a bilateral logic of US vs. another country (or entity), with the intention of exploiting the rather predictable asymmetry of such an arrangement in Washington’s favour, to pressure a partner into accepting American demands and conditions. That is manifested – besides the practice of abrupt introductions of the customs on bilateral trade with other countries – in efforts to discuss security matters common to the whole group (i.e., the transatlantic community or US partners in Asia-Pacific), rather in bilateral formats, directly with selected capitals, and avoidance of multilateral meetings.

Probably the most puzzling is the third alleged tenet of US security policy, one declared long ago by President Barack Obama and seen by many as a strategic necessity, but as for now never fully completed: a Pacific pivot and shift towards China as the most challenging competitor. Definitely, the rhetoric used by the new administration in the context of China is more radical and in declaratory terms the focus on the “China threat” has already happened. However, it is true mainly for economic relations and manifested primarily in the introduction of extremely tough tariffs on several Chinese

products¹³. In military terms, however, that change is in fact not materialising substantially, and it cannot be explained solely by the short timespan since Trump's inauguration. Definitely, the review of US military posture and global presence is still ongoing in the Pentagon, and the results could mean a sharp increase in the US military presence in East Asia and the Pacific, as well as the enhancement of alliances with regional partners. Recent reconciliation with the Philippines may herald such changes¹⁴; nevertheless, for now, in the context of the region as a whole, it is still more a prediction than reality. Moreover, the main regional US allies, including Japan, South Korea, and Australia, are currently struggling to maintain the US military presence at existing levels, being also – like their European fellows – put under pressure to spend more not only on their own defence but on US bases as well¹⁵. This could suggest two things. One is a primacy in current US thinking on security policy of the transactional approach and maximising (short-term) benefits or gains, measured rather in economic than geostrategic terms, over a more strategic perspective. The second is that maybe the threat posed by China is not perceived in Washington as so imminent and inevitable as officially stated, which allows a focus rather on rebalancing security relations with the Pacific allies (and economic relations with China) more than on strengthening joint capabilities to contain the Chinese dragon. From the

¹³ Judging by the selection of those goods with the most elevated rates and those excepted, as well as by the way of tariffs' imposition, this act was primarily a form of "assertive negotiations" on the US side, intended to open discussion on reducing the imbalance in trade with China and remodelling of economic relations with them. Importantly, the Chinese response in the form of a willingness to find an agreement – and the fact that it was reached very quickly, as early as mid-May 2025 – seems to confirm this. *Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Secures a Historic Trade Win for the United States*, "The White House Fact Sheet", 12 May 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/05/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-secures-a-historic-trade-win-for-the-united-states/> [5.10.2025]; P. Wiseman, *US, China announce a trade agreement – again. Here's what it means*, 28 June 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-china-trade-tariffs-rare-earth-minerals-cbd2482bd2b3a7ce8d47030c4ff1c3d4> [5.10.2025].

¹⁴ In February 2025, Washington restored 400M USD in military assistance to the Philippines (frozen, however, actually by Trump's decision to stop several foreign assistance programs), later also expanding joint military exercises and promising further deepening of military cooperation. S.-L. Wee, *As Alliances Fray Under Trump, This Nation Is Confident of U.S. Ties*, New York Times, 5 March 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/05/world/asia/us-trump-philippines-china.html> [5.10.2025].

¹⁵ K. Kanodia, *US Indo-Pacific allies are unhappy about Trump's defence demands. But they have to comply*, 14 July 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/07/us-indo-pacific-allies-are-unhappy-about-trumps-defence-demands-they-have-comply> [5.10.2025].

European perspective, however, it is less important how serious the Americans are when they talk about a looming confrontation with China in the Pacific as long as that argument will be used to justify actual cuts in US military presence in Europe and growing indifference in Washington over European security affairs, as suggested by some influential analysts in the US¹⁶.

In the short term, all these changes will not impact negatively on the US global position, and there is even a possibility that such an assertive approach would bring profits, since some countries could decide to be “more cooperative” when pressurised by the US¹⁷. However, in the long term, it could also result in an actual decrease in America’s ability to effectively influence other countries and the alienation of many states eager to cooperate, also generating a rise in the costs of this policy based on “pure” hard power.

2. Impact on Polish security policy – glass half-empty or half-full?

Changes in US policy, particularly in Washington’s approach to its European partners, have a profound impact on the Polish geostrategic position and security. That impact has its “collective” (i.e., on Poland as a part of European structures, or NATO and the EU as particular organisations) and “individual” dimension (i.e., Poland as a partner of the US in bilateral relations and in the context of its position and role within the Alliance, the EU, or in other multilateral security arrangements in Europe). In “collective” terms, the reduced credibility of the US as an ally is critical, being a result not only of a change in Washington’s rhetoric towards the Europeans. It is also a consequence of actions actually undertaken both in “hard security” or defense dimension (some kind of “constant conditionality”, introduced in intra-NATO relations with repeated hints of limiting engagement in the organisation in case of an insufficient scale of European defence spending) as well as in other fields (i.e., the US policy on tariffs). All of this undermines NATO, no matter to what degree the reduction is a question of perception

¹⁶ Comp.: E. Colby, op. cit.

¹⁷ Taiwan’s recent pledge to invest 100 bn. USD in chip production in the US serves as an example. *Taiwan pledges more investment in the US, removal of trade barriers after Trump tariffs*, The Straits Times, 6 April 2025, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/taiwan-pledges-more-investment-in-us-removal-of-trade-barriers-after-trump-tariffs> [5.10.2025].

or imagination in European capitals, rather than reality. Unfortunately, the Hague NATO summit in June 2025, although completed with the promise from allies to match the standard of 5% of GDP spent on defence within the decade (split between 3.5% on “exact” defence and 1.5% on defence-related issues such as critical infrastructure etc.), definitely did not end the tensions within the organisation, also because its final one-page declaration consisted of little more than a defence pledge, omitting a lot of issues crucial for allied cooperation¹⁸. Hence, by actually weakening the institution central to the Europeans’ ability to defend and deter from any aggression, US policy negatively affects the security of all NATO members on that side of the Atlantic, irrespective of how close their bilateral ties with the US are, or how high their current level of defence spending is. Poland, as an Eastern Flank country that borders Russia, is even more exposed to the consequences of such a change. Simultaneously, European states, having to navigate between a range of American demands and expectations (in essence, rather justified, but somewhat misguided in the haste attached to the need for their fulfilment) and the scale of Russian aggressiveness, seem to be truly determined to “be serious” about their own security. Hence, they hope for stimulating the necessary investments and reforms, including in defence and defence-related industries, by increased cooperation within the EU, in formats much more inclusive than in the past, also for the relevant non-EU partners (i.e., the US, Canada, Norway, Turkey, or the UK from NATO, and non-NATO states like Ukraine).

In this context, the most general recommendation for Poland concerning its security policy is quite obvious and based on common sense – to engage as fully as possible in the “European defence revival” while keeping the ties with the US as well as Washington’s willingness and interest in Europe’s affairs as strong as possible. Such a recommendation is, so to speak, valid not only for Poland, but generally for all NATO and EU states. Poland, however, with its geostrategic location, relatively significant military and financial resources (at least in the Eastern Flank), but also with a traditionally strong preference for close bilateral links with the US and being viewed currently by Washington as a “model ally” (primarily due to the level of defence

¹⁸ *The Hague Summit Declaration issued by the NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in The Hague*, 25 June 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236705.htm [5.10.2025].

spending being close to 5% of GDP)¹⁹, seems to be particularly interested and equipped to implement that guideline in practice. Importantly, that would be beneficial not only for Poland itself but also – if implemented successfully and consistently – for the whole of the EU and NATO. Hence – and here the “individual” dimension of the issue is manifesting – the current evolution of transatlantic security relations creates for Poland not only challenges or risks but also opportunities to expand its role in the region and institutions like NATO and the EU.

The main problem, however, with “let’s jump on the European train while keeping the US engine attached”, is that it is simply easier said than done.

The first obstacle is external to Poland and related to the somewhat ambivalent US attitude toward European military buildup²⁰. On the one hand, Washington urges the allies to spend more – and faster – than in the past on defence. On the other hand, however, it is not particularly enthusiastic over a comprehensive development of truly “indigenous” European military capabilities, particularly in areas currently dominated by the US, like strategic enablers (ISR, communication, strategic transport, etc.). In the long term, this will mean growing the strategic autonomy of the once strongly dependent European allies and their ability to act independently, without US critical involvement. Pressure for a rapid increase in defence spending under the threat of the immediate reduction of US involvement in the continent’s security can also, to some degree, be aimed at forcing purchases of already available, “off the shelf” American products and solutions instead of developing Europe’s own projects²¹. That will allow the US to keep some level of military – and consequently industrial and technological – dependency of European partners, being profitable also for American producers (and manifesting, therefore, the significance of the economic dimension in

¹⁹ P. Hegseth, *Remarks by Secretary of Defense at the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore*, 31 May 2025, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4202494/remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-at-the-2025-shangri-la-dialogue-in/> [5.10.2025].

²⁰ However, it is definitely not specific for the current US administration, since also in the past America was generally reluctant to have greater European autonomy on defence, which was manifested by recurring demands of avoiding “duplication, decoupling and discrimination” (3 D’s). Comp.: K.L. Grieco, *Albright’s 3Ds: Dependency, Dependency, Dependency*, 2 July 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/albrights-3ds-dependency-dependency-dependency/> [5.10.2025].

²¹ *Europe’s Dependence on US Arms Rose in Last Five Years: Report*, 10 March 2025, <https://thedefensepost.com/2025/03/10/europe-dependence-us-arms/> [5.10.2025].

Washington's security relations with its allies), while the general improvement of their defence capabilities will happen anyway²². Otherwise, the US could feel threatened by losing some elements of its "inevitability" in European affairs and no longer being "indispensable"²³.

The second hurdle is a specific "path-dependency" of Polish defence policy, particularly in defence procurements, but also in such aspects as preferences in military-to-military cooperation, training and education, and models of force structure. For many years, actually since the very beginning of Poland's fully democratic statehood, Warsaw has been inclined to prioritise cooperation in military and defence matters with the US²⁴. It was perceived both as an investment in bilateral relations with the most powerful country in the world and a way of deepening integration and interoperability with NATO, as a US-led organisation. That preference for Americans as "the partner of first choice" in and outside of NATO has manifested in many forms, in Polish defence procurement policies (i.e., the purchase of 48 F-16 aircraft in 2003), but also in the model for the organisation of forces (i.e., copying US schemes for special forces) or involvement in expeditionary operations (i.e., when deployed in Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, or Afghanistan, Polish forces were usually subordinated to US commanders, sometimes even being integrated into the structures of wider American units)²⁵. However, the most important matter in this context is more

²² H. Badawi, M. Zreik, *Counting allies' coins: Trump's NATO strategy and its implications for transatlantic relations*, "Journal of Transatlantic Studies", 25 March 2025, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s42738-025-00135-9> [5.10.2025].

²³ K. Shake, *Dispensable Nation*, "Foreign Affairs" 2025, vol. 102, no. 4, pp. 8–22.

²⁴ M. Pietraś, *Poland's Participation in NATO Operations*, [in:] J.H. Matlary, M. Peterson (eds.), *NATO European Allies. Military Capability and Political Will*, Basingstoke–New York 2013, pp. 215–229.

²⁵ Comp. M. Madej, *The Polish perspective on NATO*, [in:] T.P. Baranyi, P. Stepper (eds.), *NATO in the 21st Century. A Central European Perspective*, Budapest 2019, pp. 198–205. These experiences were among the reasons why, after the establishment of Enhanced Forward Presence by NATO in 2016, it was the US that took the role of framework nation for the NATO battlegroup deployed in Poland, as well as securing the majority of troops for it. With additional US deployments made on a bilateral basis, this has led, however, to a situation where the NATO presence in Poland is primarily an American one, with low participation from other countries, including Western European allies. Despite the undisputed military efficiency of such an arrangement, it deepens the Polish dependency on US political decisions concerning their military presence in Europe. M. Madej, *Polityka bezpieczeństwa Polski czasów ministra Skubiszewskiego a nasza teraźniejszość*, [in:] A. Bieńczyk-Missala, R. Kuźniar (eds.), *Dziedzictwo Krzysztofa Skubiszewskiego w polityce zagranicznej RP*, Warsaw 2023, pp. 104–106.

recent – from the last decade – the purchase of US weapons and equipment. Some of them, like buying 32 F-35s fighters in 2020 or Patriot air defence batteries (several contracts from 2018 and 2022 – 8 batteries in total), could be seen as an element of the broader trend in European defence procurement, since the same option was chosen by many NATO allies. However, other Polish acquisitions – including 96 Apache attack helicopters (contract concluded in August 2024) or Abrams major battle tanks (250 new and 116 used bought in the years 2022–2023) – are rather exceptional, also due to the substantial volumes contracted (and, therefore, the truly high cost of them)²⁶. Definitely, if fully implemented, these purchases will make the Polish armed forces one of the most powerful in Europe (particularly on land). Nevertheless, it also means dependency for decades on US deliveries, also due to the inevitable future buying of additional ammunition or other military technologies and equipment that would enhance the performance of the weaponry already acquired. Moreover, at least until 2023, that preference to “choose American” was accompanied by some form of reluctance – at least to some degree politically motivated – to buy from European partners²⁷, making it difficult for the Polish approach to defence industry cooperation to be more geographically balanced, especially in the short term²⁸. To make matters worse, the Polish defence industry’s technological underdevelopment – irrespective of some very complex reasons for it – could also be a serious obstacle for effective cooperation simultaneously with partners from both sides of the Atlantic.

Conclusion

The processes and changes described above make Poland particularly susceptible to any consequences of possible transatlantic tensions, although

²⁶ Cost of Apache helicopters is c/a 10 bn. USD, of F-35s c/a 5.6 bn. USD, of Abrams MBT’s c/a 6 bn. of USD (4.75 bn. for new and 1.2 bn. for used), Patriot batteries c/a 9.6 bn. USD.

²⁷ Cancellation of the purchase of 50 Caracal helicopters from France in 2016 was the most publicised but not the only manifestation of that trend. M. Madej, *Polityka bezpieczeństwa Polski...*, p. 107.

²⁸ In addition, recent contracts on substantial deliveries from South Korea (including training aircraft, howitzers, MBTs, and rocket artillery systems), makes the shift (especially quick) towards European suppliers even more problematic (irrespective of their military and economic value). O. Pietrewicz, *Poland-South Korea Strategic Partnership Rises to the Next Level*, “PISM Bulletin” 2023, no. 98(2217).

it could also help – in theory – to serve as a mediator in these disputes. However, the actual Polish ability to influence the US position due to these circumstances – taking merely the size or international position of Poland into account – is rather limited, no matter the value of contracts signed and the richness of past experiences shared. So, it should not be overestimated, particularly in Warsaw. It will most probably grant Poland some credibility from a US perspective as a faithful ally, eager to fulfil Washington's expectations and remain close to its position on how the relations with European partners should be organised. Nevertheless, that kind of "power of affiliation" will not automatically transform into more tangible assets when needed, since by its very nature, it actually offers more limited opportunities to influence the partner in case of any serious discrepancies.

Despite this, however, in the near future, Poland actually does not have many options other than trying to match the growing involvement in European cooperation in defence and security matters, mainly through the EU cooperative frameworks, while maintaining as close ties with the US as possible, even if it means substantial costs (in financial and political terms) and requires significant diplomatic skills. There is simply no alternative structure, especially of regional character, that could substitute NATO and the EU. It will require patience and tolerance both for "moody" Washington and often reluctant and hesitant European partners, as well as a readiness to carry – when need be – disproportionately large burdens of enhancing European defence and deterrence capabilities. But such turbulent times do not offer too many other choices for NATO and EU frontline countries like us.

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