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## **From integration to autonomy: Poland's strategic dilemmas in the emerging European Defence Union**

### **Od integracji do autonomii: strategiczne dylematy Polski w odniesieniu do inicjatywy Europejskiej Unii Obrony**

#### **ABSTRACT:**

The article examines Poland's strategic engagement with the emerging European Defence Union against the backdrop of significant geopolitical transformations in Europe, particularly following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the re-election of Donald Trump in 2024. The central aim of the study is to assess whether and how Poland reconciles its enduring commitment to NATO and transatlanticism with its growing involvement in EU-level defence initiatives. Methodologically, the article employs a qualitative analysis grounded in primary and secondary sources, including official EU and Polish strategic documents, expert commentaries, and historical parallels such as the failed European Defence Community, to trace the evolution of Poland's defence posture within the EU framework. The findings demonstrate that Poland adopts a dual-track approach characterised by conditional support: it pragmatically engages with EU mechanisms, such as PESCO, the EDF, and the SAFE Regulation, when these align with its national interests, particularly in terms of defence industrial development, infrastructure, and resilience. Simultaneously, Poland remains institutionally and ideologically cautious, resisting initiatives perceived as duplicating NATO's role, undermining US strategic guarantees, or favouring Western European defence industries. The article concludes that Poland's approach to the EDU is neither passive nor obstructive, but constitutive, shaping the trajectory of European defence integration from a position grounded in strategic pragmatism and regional security imperatives.

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**KEYWORDS:**

*European Defence Union (EDU), strategic autonomy, the EU defence initiatives, transatlantic security architecture, Polish strategic culture*

**STRESZCZENIE:**

Artykuł analizuje strategiczne zaangażowanie Polski w kształtującą się Europejską Unię Obrony na tle istotnych przemian geopolitycznych w Europie, zwłaszcza po pełnoskalowej inwazji Rosji na Ukrainę w 2022 r. oraz ponownym wyborze Donalda Trumpa na prezydenta Stanów Zjednoczonych w 2024 r. Głównym celem badania jest ocena, czy i w jaki sposób Polska godzi swoje trwałe zaangażowanie na rzecz NATO i transatlantyckiego bezpieczeństwa z rosnącym udziałem w inicjatywach obronnych Unii Europejskiej. Pod względem metodologicznym artykuł opiera się na jakościowej analizie źródeł pierwotnych i wtórnych, obejmujących oficjalne dokumenty strategiczne UE i Polski, komentarze eksperckie oraz historyczne analogie – w tym porażkę Europejskiej Wspólnoty Obronnej – co ma na celu prześledzenie ewolucji polskiej postawy w dziedzinie obronności w ramach struktur unijnych. Wyniki badania wskazują, że Polska przyjmuje dwutorowe podejście oparte na warunkowym poparciu: w sposób pragmatyczny angażuje się w mechanizmy UE, takie jak PESCO, Europejski Fundusz Obronny czy rozporządzenie SAFE, o ile są one zgodne z jej interesem narodowym, zwłaszcza w zakresie rozwoju przemysłu obronnego, infrastruktury i odporności. Równocześnie Polska pozostaje instytucjonalnie i ideologicznie ostrożna, sprzeciwiając się inicjatywom postrzeganym jako dublowanie roli NATO, podważanie gwarancji strategicznych USA lub faworyzowanie zachodnioeuropejskich przemysłów obronnych. Artykuł konkluduje, że podejście Polski do Europejskiej Unii Obrony nie jest ani bierne, ani obstrukcyjne, lecz konstytutywne – Polska kształtuje trajektorię europejskiej integracji obronnej z pozycji strategicznego pragmatyzmu i regionalnych imperatywów bezpieczeństwa.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:**

*Europejska Unia Obronna, strategiczna autonomia, unijne inicjatywy na rzecz obronności, architektura bezpieczeństwa transatlantyckiego, polska kultura strategiczna*

**Introduction**

Europe stands at a critical juncture in its post-war security trajectory. The geopolitical shock of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has irrevocably altered the strategic environment on the continent. In response, the European Union has initiated a sweeping transformation of its security and defence policy, which has culminated in ambitious proposals such as the White Paper on the Future of European Defence (2025),

the Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030, and the SAFE Regulation (Security Action for Europe). These initiatives aim to deepen the EU's capacity to cooperate, both militarily and industrially, thereby accelerating the long-discussed but largely incomplete project for a European Defence Union (EDU). For the first time, the EU has embraced the logic of preparedness, deterrence, and industrial rearmament on a scale reminiscent of NATO's Cold War posture.

This transformation occurs against the backdrop of a fragmenting transatlantic order. The return of Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2024 has revived long-standing concerns about America's commitment to European security. Trump's transactional view of NATO, his critical stance toward the EU, and his emphasis on strategic retrenchment, especially regarding the Indo-Pacific, have deeply shaken European confidence in the reliability of US extended deterrence<sup>1</sup>. This situation has led to a growing chorus in Brussels and in key capitals, notably Paris and Berlin, calling for the EU to take on greater responsibility for its defence and to build strategic autonomy in political, operational, and industrial terms.

Poland is at a crossroads in its strategic landscape. Traditionally, it has been a strong Atlanticist nation within the EU, relying on the US for security since NATO's 1999 and the EU's 2004 accession. This dependence stems from historical vulnerabilities and threats from the East. Meanwhile, Poland has grown more assertive in European security, acting as NATO's eastern pillar and a proactive EU member in defence, supporting Ukraine, border protection, and infrastructure resilience. The development of the EDU presents both opportunities, such as joint defence procurement and industrial funding, and strategic challenges. Poland aims to benefit from initiatives like SAFE without undermining NATO, the US, or European strategic autonomy led by France.

Scholarly debates on European security consistently emphasise the relevance of neorealism for explaining the behaviour of medium powers, such as Poland. Waltz's structural realism emphasises how states modify their policies in response to the distribution of capabilities within the international

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<sup>1</sup> M. Banks, *The US Election: What Keeps Europeans Up at Night*, [intpolicydigest.org](https://intpolicydigest.org), 2 November 2024, <https://intpolicydigest.org/the-u-s-election-what-keeps-europeans-up-at-night/> [26.05.2025].

system, with survival being their primary objective<sup>2</sup>. Poland's reliance on US guarantees reflects this systemic logic: as Mearsheimer notes, in an anarchic world, smaller states will seek protection from dominant powers to counterbalance proximate threats<sup>3</sup>. Classical realist insights further illuminate the role of historical experience and threat perception in shaping strategic culture. As Snyder argues, the memory of past vulnerability often gives rise to persistent patterns of alliance behaviour<sup>4</sup>. More recent scholarship has applied these frameworks directly to Poland, observing that Warsaw's Atlanticism is not merely ideological but rooted in rational calculations about deterrence credibility and relative capabilities<sup>5</sup>. Taken together, these works demonstrate that Poland's dual engagement, with NATO as its security anchor and with EU initiatives as supplementary instruments, follows a realist logic of hedging under conditions of uncertainty, great power rivalry, and systemic volatility.

From a neorealist perspective, Poland's approach to defence and security can be understood primarily as a response to the structural conditions of the international system, namely, uncertainty, anarchy, and great power rivalry. Classical realism highlights the persistent insecurity that arises from the absence of a supranational authority. At the same time, neorealism emphasises the distribution of power within the system as the principal driver of state behaviour. Poland's strategic culture, deeply rooted in historical experience, illustrates how a state situated at the intersection of rival empires adapts to the enduring logic of self-help and external balancing. Poland's alignment with the United States reflects both structural imperatives and historical memory. From a neorealist standpoint, Warsaw perceives the US as the only power with the military, nuclear, and economic capacity to deter Russia and stabilise the European balance. This calculation

<sup>2</sup> See K.N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Boston 1979.

<sup>3</sup> See J.J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York 2001.

<sup>4</sup> See J. Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*, Cornell University Press, New York 1991.

<sup>5</sup> See P.M. Jiménez Lendoiro, *Poland, an «Atlanticist» power in a European framework*, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 2024, [https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2024/DIEEO54\\_2024\\_PAUJIM\\_Polonia\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2024/DIEEO54_2024_PAUJIM_Polonia_ENG.pdf) [8.06.2025]; S. Rio, *European Strategic Autonomy: How Realism Best Explains Why It Remains a Failure*, E-International Relations, 3 December 2024, <https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/106830> [27.05.2025].

is reinforced by Poland's awareness of its relative weakness. Despite rapid military modernisation, Poland lacks the strategic depth and independent deterrent capabilities of larger states such as France or the United Kingdom. In realist terms, its reliance on US extended deterrence is a rational strategy of bandwagoning with the system's dominant power to offset threats from its immediate neighbourhood.

Historical legacies further entrench this orientation. Poland's experiences of partition, occupation, and subjugation to Soviet hegemony have generated a strategic culture that views national survival as contingent upon reliable external guarantees. The United States is interpreted not only as a military protector but also as the guarantor of Poland's independence, prosperity, and integration into the Western order. In this sense, the transatlantic link is perceived less as a choice than as a structural necessity – a cornerstone of Poland's security identity.

At the same time, Poland's cautious engagement with EU defence initiatives illustrates a realist logic of hedging. By participating selectively in mechanisms such as PESCO or SAFE, Warsaw seeks material benefits, financial support, industrial modernisation, and infrastructural resilience, while resisting moves that could undermine NATO cohesion or dilute US commitments. This dual-track strategy corresponds to the realist notion of balancing: Poland maximises its security options within the EU without compromising its vital dependence on the United States. In theoretical terms, Poland exemplifies how a medium power, situated in a geopolitically exposed region, adapts to systemic pressures by combining balancing and bandwagoning strategies. Its scepticism toward autonomous EU defence structures stems less from ideological rigidity than from structural rationality: in a world of intensifying great power rivalry, the guarantee of the strongest actor remains indispensable. Thus, the Polish case underscores a broader realist insight – that small and medium-sized states on the periphery of power centres prioritise survival and deterrence over institutional innovation, anchoring their security in the most credible external patron available.

The paper examines these strategic dilemmas by analysing how Poland conceptualises, responds to, and attempts to shape the emerging EDU. The central argument is that while Poland is willing to support EU defence integration in certain areas – particularly those aligned with its national interests – it maintains clear red lines regarding institutional duplication and strategic decoupling from NATO. Poland's balancing act between integration

and autonomy reflects both pragmatic concerns and a historically conditioned strategic worldview.

This study aims to assess whether and how Poland can reconcile its commitment to NATO and transatlanticism with its increasing participation in EU-level defence mechanisms, and whether Poland can become not just a contributor but also a shaper of the EDU. In doing so, the paper draws on EU policy documents, Polish strategic papers, expert commentaries, and historical analogies, including the legacy of the European Defence Community (EDC) that failed in the 1950s.

To guide the inquiry, the study addresses the following three research questions:

- How does Poland perceive the European Defence Union in terms of strategic value, political risks, and compatibility with NATO?
- To what extent can Poland influence the institutional and operational design of EU-level defence initiatives, such as SAFE and the Joint White Paper for European Defence Readiness 2030?
- How does Poland reconcile its support for stronger EU defence instruments with its persistent emphasis on US military presence and NATO centrality?

By addressing these questions, the paper contributes to the broader debate on the future of European security governance, particularly at the intersection of national sovereignty, supranational integration, and alliance-based deterrence. It also presents a case study of how a frontline state can navigate the complex interplay between internal vulnerabilities, external threats, and shifting institutional loyalties. The structure of the paper is organised as follows: Chapter 2 provides a conceptual and historical overview of the EDU; Chapter 3 analyses Poland's strategic culture and defence approach; Chapter 4 investigates Poland's positioning in recent EU defence initiatives; and Chapter 5 explores future scenarios and strategic choices. The conclusion synthesises the findings and offers policy recommendations.

## **1. The concept of the European Defence Union – strategic autonomy and institutional evolution**

The concept of the EDU has emerged as both a political necessity and a structural evolution within the European Union's strategic framework. It is not

a single institution or treaty-bound body, but rather a composite architecture consisting of political declarations, regulatory instruments, financial mechanisms, and operational initiatives designed to foster a more coherent, autonomous, and capable defence posture for the EU and its member states. The EDU represents a significant conceptual leap from earlier iterations of European security cooperation, motivated by systemic external shocks and internal political recalibration. At its core, it seeks to answer the enduring question of whether Europe can ensure its security in a world where the American security guarantee is no longer assured<sup>6</sup>.

Historically, Europe's defence efforts have been marked by ambitions and setbacks. The 1954 failure of the European Defence Community<sup>7</sup> cast doubt on future initiatives, leading to more cautious, intergovernmental approaches, such as the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)<sup>8</sup>. These allowed civilian missions and limited military actions, but didn't foster autonomous strategic capabilities. The 2016 EU Global Strategy popularised the concept of "strategic autonomy", although it remained contested and varied in meaning, ranging from political independence to military and industrial resilience<sup>9</sup>. France saw it as a path to a sovereign European global actor, while Poland and the Baltic states emphasised its NATO compatibility, rejecting decoupling from the transatlantic alliance.

Recent years have seen significant changes in the EDU context. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine shattered the illusion of a cooperative post-Cold War security system and renewed the need for collective defence. Meanwhile, US political volatility, with Trump's 2024 re-election, raised fears among European leaders that Washington's NATO commitment might become

<sup>6</sup> Ł. Maślanka, *The White Paper: the EU's new initiatives for European defence*, OSW, 27 March 2025, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2025-03-27/white-paper-eus-new-initiatives-european-defence> [27.05.2025].

<sup>7</sup> *The failure of the European Defence Community (EDC) – From the Messina Conference to the Rome Treaties (EEC and EAEC)*, CVCE.EU, <https://www.cvce.eu/en/education/unit-content/-/unit/1c8aa583-8ec5-41c4-9ad8-73674ea7f4a7/bd191c42-of53-4eco-a60a-c53c72c747c2> [27.05.2025].

<sup>8</sup> See K. Zajączkowski, *The war in Ukraine and the (Non-)Development of the EU Common Security and Defence Policy*, "Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej" 2024, vol. 22, no. 2, DOI: 10.36874/RIESW.2024.2.1.

<sup>9</sup> European External Action Service, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy*, 12 June 2016, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs\\_review\\_web\\_o.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_o.pdf) [27.05.2025].

conditional or reversible<sup>10</sup>. These events have driven defence integration, heightened by threats from the East and uncertainties from the West. The European Commission, supported by France and increasingly by Germany, now leads as an enabler and coordinator of the European Defence Union. Key publications, such as the White Paper on the Future of European Defence, the Joint White Paper for Defence Readiness 2030, and the SAFE Regulation (Security Action for Europe)<sup>11</sup>, mark the EU's most assertive move into defence planning.

The current push for defence integration differs from past efforts through operational urgency and institutional innovation. The EDU now involves mechanisms like the European Defence Fund, the SAFE loan proposal, and the ReArm Europe Plan to eliminate fiscal barriers<sup>12</sup>. It also includes regulatory tools to harmonise procurement and promote joint development. Programs like EDIP and PESCO aim to unify national efforts into multilateral frameworks. Despite institutional fragmentation, these measures reflect a shift towards Europe's independent capacity to produce, mobilise, and project power, even while relying on NATO for deterrence.

The EDU develops amid contradictions and political divides. A key issue is the fragmented European defence industry, organised by nations with limited interoperability and scale. While EU initiatives aim for joint procurement and industrial synergy, political and economic factors, especially the balance between Western and Eastern Europe, hinder integration<sup>13</sup>. Some countries resist giving the European Commission more powers in areas they consider sovereign, with scepticism being most substantial in Central and Eastern Europe, where fears are that it could strain US relations and weaken NATO.

<sup>10</sup> M. Bergmann, *The Transatlantic Alliance in the Age of Trump: The Coming Collisions*, Center for Strategic & International Studies, 14 February 2025, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/transatlantic-alliance-age-trump-coming-collisions> [27.05.2025].

<sup>11</sup> European Commission, *Council Regulation establishing the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) through the reinforcement of European defence industry Instrument*, 19 March 2025, [https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/document/download/6d6f889c-e58d-4caa-8f3b-8b93154fe206\\_en?filename=SAFE%20Regulation.pdf](https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/document/download/6d6f889c-e58d-4caa-8f3b-8b93154fe206_en?filename=SAFE%20Regulation.pdf) [27.05.2025].

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> S. Wisotzki, *Europe's Defence Dilemma: Rising Militarization Amidst Industrial Fragmentation and Weak Export Controls*, PRIF BLOG, 2 April 2025, <https://blog.prif.org/2025/04/02/europes-defence-dilemma-rising-militarization-amidst-industrial-fragmentation-and-weak-export-controls/> [27.05.2025].



A key tension arises from the ambiguity of the EDU. Scholars like Simon Rio note that “strategic autonomy” has become a vague term, covering goals from an EU army to crisis response<sup>14</sup>. This lack of clarity stems from Europe’s diverse strategic cultures. France views the EDU as a step toward global power and nuclear independence, while Germany sees it as a means of internal balancing and alliance hedging. Poland considers EU defence tools as supplements, especially in the areas of industry and resilience, but opposes replacing NATO with a Brussels-based command. As the PRIF blog highlights, these differences influence investments, export controls, and legal systems, limiting operational unity<sup>15</sup>.

Despite these differences, public support for increased EU defence co-operation has grown. Eurobarometer surveys consistently report high levels of approval for initiatives that enhance European capabilities, particularly when framed in terms of resilience, crisis response, or technological innovation<sup>16</sup>. The legitimacy of the EDU is thus anchored not only in elite consensus but also in popular sentiment. However, as the EPRS report warns, the EU continues to lose billions annually through uncoordinated national spending – a cost that only a genuine defence union could begin to reverse<sup>17</sup>.

## **2. Poland's strategic culture and defence approach**

Poland’s approach to the EDU is profoundly influenced by its strategic culture, shaped by a unique historical experience, a clearly defined threat perception, and a normative commitment to maintaining national sovereignty within multilateral frameworks. Understanding this strategic culture is crucial for grasping Poland’s ambivalent attitude toward EU-led defence integration. Rather than being the result of short-term political decisions, Poland’s security posture reflects long-term historical legacies, institutional preferences,

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<sup>14</sup> S. Rio, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> S. Wisotzki, op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> European Parliament, *Defence: how the EU is boosting its security*, 27 March 2025, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20190612STO54310/defence-how-the-eu-is-boosting-its-security> [27.05.2025].

<sup>17</sup> M. Centrone, M. Fernandes, *Improving the quality of European defence spending. Cost of non-Europe*, European Parliamentary Research Service, 2024, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/762855/EPRS\\_STU\(2024\)762855\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/762855/EPRS_STU(2024)762855_EN.pdf) [27.05.2025].

and strategic priorities that consistently favour transatlantic cooperation and deterrence-based defence<sup>18</sup>.

The defining feature of Poland's strategic culture is its acute sense of geopolitical vulnerability. Situated between Germany and Russia – two historical revisionist powers – Poland has been the target of partition, invasion, and foreign domination for much of its modern history. The partitions of the 18th century, the brutal occupation during the World War II, and the subsequent subjugation under the Soviet sphere during the Cold War have fostered a pervasive distrust of grand geopolitical designs that sideline national agency. Consequently, Poland's post-1989 strategic reorientation has been characterised by a determined pursuit of NATO and EU membership, not merely as symbolic acts of “returning to Europe”, but as essential security anchors.

Poland's reliance on NATO for security is both rhetorical and doctrinal, embedded in its defence approach. Since joining in 1999, Poland has pushed for alliance expansion, greater presence, and stronger Article 5 guarantees. The 2014 annexation of Crimea confirmed concerns about the fragility of European security. Poland responded with the NATO Readiness Action Plan, Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroups, and US and allied troop deployments, underscoring the importance of transatlantic deterrence<sup>19</sup>.

Since the onset of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022, Poland has initiated a comprehensive military modernisation and expansion program. The 2022 Homeland Defence Act increased defence spending to over 3% of GDP, with projections exceeding 5% by 2025. Poland has committed to acquiring over 1,000 K2 tanks and hundreds of K9 howitzers from South Korea, as well as F-35 fighters and Patriot missile systems from the United States. These procurements not only aim to enhance military capability but also carry political significance: they reflect Warsaw's preference for strategic alignment with Washington and Seoul, rather than the more

<sup>18</sup> M. Góra, *Devoted Atlanticists in Warsaw, Irrespective of Circumstances?*, [in:] M. Kaeding, J. Pollak, P. Schmidt (eds.), *The United States and the Future of Europe*, Cham 2025, p. 95.

<sup>19</sup> M. Philaire, *Poland and the Defence of Europe Against Russia*, 11 April 2025, <https://rasnsa.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Philaire-ENG.pdf> [27.05.2025].

integrationist procurement approach promoted by the EDF and the proposed SAFE mechanism<sup>20</sup>.

Poland's cautious approach to the EU's strategic autonomy agenda stems from these preferences. While Polish officials endorse EU efforts to enhance resilience, logistics, and crisis response capabilities, they consistently criticise initiatives viewed as duplicating NATO's structures or sidelining the United States' role. For instance, when President Emmanuel Macron called for a "true European army" and advocated for the idea of strategic autonomy as an objective independent of the transatlantic alliance, Polish leaders publicly rejected the concept, insisting on the primacy of NATO and warning against undermining the alliance's unity<sup>21</sup>. From Warsaw's perspective, European defence should be "NATO-compatible", not "NATO-alternative".

Nevertheless, Poland has demonstrated a selective engagement with EU defence instruments, particularly when they align with national priorities or offer financial incentives. Poland has participated in several PESCO projects, particularly those focused on military mobility, cybersecurity, and logistics coordination. These projects align with Poland's emphasis on enhancing infrastructure and readiness on the eastern flank. Similarly, the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and the EDF are viewed pragmatically as tools to access co-financing and promote industrial growth<sup>22</sup>. However, the Polish defence industry remains relatively underdeveloped compared to its Western European counterparts, creating a structural asymmetry in EU industrial cooperation that fuels further scepticism in Warsaw<sup>23</sup>.

The proposal for the SAFE Regulation, providing up to 150 billion EUR in EU loans to enhance joint procurement and production capacity, has been cautiously welcomed by Poland. The potential for using SAFE to finance air and missile defence systems, drone capabilities, and infrastructure modernisation is of clear interest to Polish planners. However, concerns persist regarding the distribution of benefits, the conditionality of funding, and the

<sup>20</sup> R. Schmitz, G. Dixon, *Poland prepares for war*, NPR, 14 May 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/05/12/1250811327/poland-prepares-for-war> [29.05.2025].

<sup>21</sup> Reuters, *European countries will not create one united army, says Poland's Sikorski*, 16 February 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/european-countries-will-not-create-one-united-army-says-polands-sikorski-2025-02-16/> [29.05.2025].

<sup>22</sup> S. Rodrigues, *Financing European Defence: The End of Budgetary Taboos*, "European Papers – A Journal on Law and Integration" 2024, vol. 8, no. 3, DOI: 10.15166/2499-8249/709.

<sup>23</sup> E. Kaca, A. Koziół, *Poland and the Common Foreign and Security Policy*, [in:] P. Biskup (ed.), *20 Years of Poland in the European Union*, Warsaw 2024, p. 43.

potential for bureaucratic overreach by the European Commission. Polish experts have also warned that if SAFE favours Western defence firms or restricts cooperation with non-EU suppliers, such as South Korea or the United States, it may limit Poland's manoeuvrability and its preferred procurement partnerships<sup>24</sup>.

Sovereignty remains a crucial factor in shaping Polish attitudes toward European Union defence. Unlike France or Italy, Poland does not view the EU as a platform for pooling core strategic decisions. Instead, it sees defence sovereignty as something to be preserved while engaging in flexible cooperation. This principle is reflected in Poland's insistence on maintaining national command over its armed forces, retaining the right to veto common missions, and shaping operational mandates to reflect national interests. It also informs Poland's opposition to any EU-level attempt to create a unified command structure or a supranational army – proposals often discussed in political discourse but consistently rejected by Warsaw.

Importantly, Poland's role in the EU security debate is becoming more influential. The war in Ukraine has raised the strategic profile of Eastern Europe and shown the importance of frontline states in shaping the EU's defence priorities. Poland, along with the Baltic states and the Czech Republic, has been a key advocate for increased support to Ukraine, tougher sanctions against Russia, and the accelerated enlargement of NATO and the EU. This growing influence presents Warsaw with both an opportunity and a challenge: it can steer EU defence policy in a direction that aligns with its interests, but it must also navigate tensions with more integrationist member states and the European Commission's expanding defence ambitions<sup>25</sup>.

Finally, Poland's dual role – anchored in NATO while active within the EU – enables it to serve as both a strategic buffer and a political bridge. It can mediate between Euro-Atlantic and Europeanist visions of security, provided it articulates a coherent position that integrates its deterrence needs with broader EU priorities. Therefore, the task for Polish diplomacy is not

<sup>24</sup> The Chancellery of the Prime Minister, *Poland's Security Strategy: A Stronger Europe and Transatlantic Unity*, The Chancellery of the Prime Minister, 4 March 2025, <https://www.gov.pl/web/primeminister/polands-security-strategy-a-stronger-europe-and-transatlantic-unity> [29.05.2025].

<sup>25</sup> J. Gotkowska, Ł. Maślanka, *A Strategy for Europe from National Perspectives: Poland*, German Council on Foreign Relations, 11 March 2025, [https://dgap.org/system/files/article\\_pdfs/23-memo-strategy-for-europe-pl\\_o.pdf](https://dgap.org/system/files/article_pdfs/23-memo-strategy-for-europe-pl_o.pdf) [29.05.2025].

to obstruct EU defence integration, but to shape it from within, ensuring that it strengthens, rather than replaces, the transatlantic security order<sup>26</sup>.

### **3. Poland and the emerging European Defence Union – between opportunity and ambivalence**

Poland's engagement with the EDU reflects a nuanced interplay of strategic interests, ideological reservations, and institutional calculations. While Warsaw has become more visibly involved in shaping the European Union's emerging defence agenda, particularly since 2022, it continues to approach the EDU through a dual lens: on the one hand, as a pragmatic platform for enhancing resilience and industrial capabilities, and on the other, as a potential source of strategic dilution, institutional redundancy, and alliance fragmentation. Poland's supportive engagement with the EDU relies on several material and political foundations.

First, Warsaw acknowledges the growing significance of the EU as a security actor, particularly in areas such as defence procurement, infrastructure modernisation, and industrial base consolidation. EU instruments such as EDF, PESCO, and CARD provide a multilateral framework through which Poland can co-finance projects that address its capability gaps. For example, the Military Mobility initiative, supported by EU infrastructure funding, has directly benefited Poland's efforts to upgrade railways, bridges, and transport corridors crucial for the rapid deployment of NATO forces on the eastern flank<sup>27</sup>.

Second, the EU's emphasis on defence industrial sovereignty aligned closely with Poland's efforts to modernise its underdeveloped defence sector. Through the 2025 SAFE Regulation and the White Paper on the Future of European Defence, Brussels introduced EU-wide coordination of procurement and production, opening access to 150 billion EUR in loans and incentives.

<sup>26</sup> A. van Rij, M. Parzonka, *Poland could be Europe's rising star on defence and security*, 19 July 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/07/poland-could-be-europes-rising-star-defence-and-security> [29.05.2025].

<sup>27</sup> European Court of Auditors, *EU military mobility – Full speed not reached due to design weaknesses and obstacles en route*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2025, [https://www.eca.europa.eu/ECAPublications/SR-2025-04/SR-2025-04\\_EN.pdf](https://www.eca.europa.eu/ECAPublications/SR-2025-04/SR-2025-04_EN.pdf) [29.05.2025].

Poland successfully leveraged these resources, integrating its defence industry into cross-border supply chains and stimulating innovation through EU grants. The ReArm Europe plan, exempting defence spending from fiscal constraints, further expanded Poland's budgetary space. As a result, Warsaw pragmatically leveraged this "war economy" model, raising defence investment to nearly 5% of GDP and securing a stronger strategic position.

Third, Poland has taken advantage of the post-2022 reconfiguration of European threat perceptions. The war in Ukraine confirmed Polish assessments of the Russian threat and repositioned Warsaw as a key player in the EU's strategic debate. Poland has leveraged this momentum to advocate for stricter EU sanctions on Russia<sup>28</sup>, more sustained military support for Ukraine, and accelerated NATO enlargement. In this context, participation in EDU mechanisms enables Warsaw to amplify its voice within the EU, align its national agenda with broader European priorities, and assert leadership among Central and Eastern European states<sup>29</sup>.

Yet, these arguments in favour of EDU participation coexist with deep-seated reservations and opposing perspectives within Polish strategic discourse. A core concern is that the EDU, particularly under the banner of "strategic autonomy", could undermine NATO cohesion and encourage decoupling from the United States. French-led initiatives, such as calls for a "European army" or a "nuclear deterrent under EU command"<sup>30</sup>, have long raised alarms in Warsaw, which views them as ideological projects aimed at marginalising the transatlantic alliance. The re-election of Donald Trump has intensified these anxieties, but it has not fundamentally altered Poland's belief that NATO remains the only credible guarantor of its security<sup>31</sup>. Even as Poland supports EU defence initiatives, it continues to prioritise bilateral ties with Washington, exemplified by hosting the US V Corps Forward

<sup>28</sup> *EU plans fresh Russia sanctions, Polish PM says*, polskieradio.pl, 22 May 2025, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/9766/artykul/3527419,eu-plans-fresh-russia-sanctions-polish-pm-says> [29.05.2025].

<sup>29</sup> P. Buras, M. Matlak, *A new leader for Europe? Shifting paradigms in Poland's EU policy*, European University Institute, 2025, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/server/api/core/bitstreams/5a9db-b5c-8d3b-5f7d-8b25-0796d4f52759/content> [29.05.2025].

<sup>30</sup> A.K. Bollfrass, *A new European nuclear deterrent would not be a quick fix*, IISS, 2 May 2025, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2025/05/a-new-european-nuclear-deterrent-would-not-be-a-quick-fix/> [3.06.2025].

<sup>31</sup> I.M. Ciolan, J.C. Moyer, *Navigating uncertainty: Where are EU-US relations headed?*, "European View" 2025, vol. 24, issue 1, DOI: 10.1177/17816858251339297.

Command in Poznań and extensive purchases of US military hardware, including HIMARS, Abrams tanks, and F-35s.

A second concern is institutional control and regulatory overreach. Poland is concerned about the European Commission gaining more authority in defence procurement and planning, areas traditionally managed by national governments. The creation of a Defence and Space Commissioner and the proposal for a “Defence Single Market” heighten fears of supranational intrusion into sovereign defence decisions<sup>32</sup>. Warsaw also opposes restrictions on cooperation with non-EU suppliers, such as the US, South Korea, or Israel, which currently dominate Polish procurement. These restrictions are seen as strategic and economic constraints, given Poland’s diversified supplier strategy.

Additionally, the EU defence industry favours large Western companies. Poland’s defence industry, led by PGZ, remains fragmented and underfunded, with limited technology. EU funding benefits tend to go mainly to firms in France, Germany, and Italy. This imbalance reinforces Polish perceptions of disadvantage and suspicion that the EDU might cement industrial dominance rather than promote partnership.

Domestically, the debate surrounding EU defence is further shaped by Poland’s internal political divisions. Pro-European forces, particularly within centrist and liberal parties, advocate for deeper engagement with EU defence initiatives, viewing them as a means of modernising the military, boosting the economy, and enhancing Poland’s diplomatic influence<sup>33</sup>. Conversely, nationalist and sovereigntist elements caution against conceding authority to Brussels and portray EU defence as a tool for Franco-German dominance<sup>34</sup>. This polarisation is evident in public narratives emphasising the risks of “Europeanising” security. Thus, Poland’s position within the EDU is not fixed but contested, susceptible to shifts in electoral politics, coalition dynamics, and elite perceptions of threat and opportunity. Despite these tensions, Poland is not a passive actor in the EDU’s evolution. It has proposed

<sup>32</sup> European Defence Agency, *New EDA Head Kallas calls for EU Single Market for defence*, 22 January 2025, <https://eda.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/2025/01/22/new-eda-head-kallas-calls-for-eu-single-market-for-defence> [3.06.2025].

<sup>33</sup> N. Koenig, L. Schütte, *A Perfect Polar Storm*, [in:] T. Bunde, L. Schütte, S. Eisentraut (eds.), *Munich Security Report 2025: Multipolarization*, Munich 2025, p. 71.

<sup>34</sup> L. Scazzieri, *Towards an EU “defence union”?*, Centre for European Reform, 2025, [https://www.cer.eu/sites/default/files/pb\\_LS\\_defence\\_union\\_29.1.25.pdf](https://www.cer.eu/sites/default/files/pb_LS_defence_union_29.1.25.pdf) [3.06.2025].

specific reforms to ensure that EU defence mechanisms serve the needs of all member states, including smaller and less industrialised ones<sup>35</sup>. Warsaw has pushed for more flexible procurement rules, increased transparency in project selection, and enhanced support for dual-use infrastructure in Eastern Europe. It has also advocated for a more inclusive governance model, where frontline states play a proportionate role in capability planning and operational scenarios. In this sense, Poland is striving to shape the EDU from within, not to sabotage it, but to align it more closely with its national security doctrine and regional realities.

#### **4. Reconciling strategic autonomy with transatlanticism: Scenarios and policy options**

As the European Union pursues the construction of the EDU, one of the most pressing questions facing both EU institutions and national capitals, particularly Warsaw, is whether strategic autonomy can be reconciled with transatlanticism. While the two concepts are often presented as dichotomous, they do not need to be mutually exclusive. Strategic autonomy, when viewed as an enhanced capacity for European action, can coexist with a strong and functioning NATO<sup>36</sup>. However, the depth of this compatibility depends on how autonomy is defined, institutionalised, and exercised. Poland, with its historically Atlanticist orientation and increasing involvement in EU defence initiatives, stands at the heart of this tension.

The first scenario envisions the EU as a complement to NATO, focusing on burden-sharing, resilience, and capability building, without seeking autonomy. EU measures, such as the SAFE Regulation and the European Defence Industrial Strategy, aim to fill capability gaps, streamline spending, and enhance deterrence. Poland acts as a “dual anchor”, a loyal NATO member

<sup>35</sup> Chancellery of the Prime Minister [of the] Republic of Poland, *European Directions for Development in Defense and Security*, 4 February 2025, <https://www.gov.pl/web/primeminister/european-directions-for-development-in-defense-and-security> [7.06.2025].

<sup>36</sup> S. Anghel, M.G.H. Damen, *The future European security architecture: Dilemmas for EU strategic autonomy*, 12 March 2025, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2025/765785/EPRS\\_STU\(2025\)765785\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2025/765785/EPRS_STU(2025)765785_EN.pdf) [27.05.2025].



that shapes EU defence policy<sup>37</sup>. Proponents argue that this maintains a viable transatlantic relationship, citing the US troop presence and joint exercises as signs of cooperation. Poland benefits from EU funding and collaboration while staying aligned with Washington. Critics warn that even a nominally complementary EDU could become redundant or divisive due to diverging NATO and EU priorities, leading to institutional overlap. For Poland, adapting to dual standards may be costly and impair operational coherence, and EU regulatory preferences might disadvantage non-European suppliers and weaken US interoperability<sup>38</sup>.

The second scenario sees the EDU emerging as a more independent and strategic structure within NATO, primarily influenced by French and German thinking. It aims for the EU to develop its command and operational doctrine and possibly establish a common force. Strategic autonomy here means closing capacity gaps and creating a self-standing European global actor. Supporters argue that the EU must be prepared for US disengagement, making sovereignty a crucial factor in a multipolar world. They emphasise Europe's need for crisis management in the Mediterranean, Sahel, or Indo-Pacific regions, where US interests diverge. Autonomy symbolises Europe's role as a normative power, reducing reliance on external guarantees and fostering a unified identity through joint procurement, threat assessments, and central decisions.

Poland dismisses this model as ideologically motivated and risky, fearing it would weaken NATO and national security. Poland views the US presence as essential for deterrence and Western unity, and is concerned that decoupling would harm Eastern Europe, which lacks nuclear and strategic depth. There are concerns that the autonomous EDU might focus on southern threats and ignore eastern vulnerabilities<sup>39</sup>.

Yet, a counterargument must be acknowledged. If the US strategic focus shifts decisively toward the Indo-Pacific, as many analysts predict, and if a future US administration adopts a posture of isolationism or transactional disengagement, Poland may have to reevaluate its security dependencies. In such a scenario, the EU's ability to act independently – even imperfectly – may

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<sup>37</sup> J. George, T. Sandler, *A spatial analysis of NATO burden sharing at the operational levels*, "Kyklos" 2024, vol. 77, no. 4, DOI: 10.1111/kykl.12401.

<sup>38</sup> S. Besch, T. Varma, *Alliance of Revisionists: A New Era for the Transatlantic Relationship*, "Survival" 2025, vol. 67, no. 2, DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2025.2481768.

<sup>39</sup> P.M. Jiménez Lendoiro, op. cit.

become less of a luxury and more of a necessity<sup>40</sup>. Poland's aversion to EU autonomy may then come at the expense of its strategic redundancy.

The third scenario proposes a division of labour in which NATO handles deterrence and high-intensity warfare, particularly in the context of Article 5 commitments. At the same time, the EU focuses on hybrid threats, cyber resilience, infrastructure, and defence industrial policy<sup>41</sup>. The EDU is a support force, not a competitor. Poland supports this, aligning with EU initiatives like the Strategic Compass and ReArm Europe, and actively contributes to civilian missions. However, scepticism exists, as fears persist that institutional inertia and divided responsibilities could create security gaps. There is concern that focusing on "soft security" might lead to underinvestment in traditional deterrence, and that industrial priorities could distract from building warfighting capabilities. Poland faces a strategic choice: resist, reshape, or fully adopt the EDU, each with risks and benefits. Likely, Poland will pursue a mixed approach, engaging where interests align, resisting conflicts, and trying to influence its development.

The final question is whether the EU itself can accommodate such differentiated engagement. If the EDU becomes too centralised or exclusionary, Poland may retreat into Atlanticist minimalism. But if it remains flexible, transparent, and complementary to NATO, Poland could emerge as one of its principal architects. In this regard, Warsaw's role is not merely reactive. It is a shaping force whose preferences, investments, and diplomatic posture will influence the EDU's evolution in the years to come.

## Conclusion

Over the past decade, European security policy has shifted toward a more autonomous EU with stronger tools, driven by the collapse of security architecture, eroded transatlantic ties, and rising great power rivalry. Poland, as a frontline NATO state, plays a strategic role, engaging in EU defence initiatives such as PESCO, EDF, the Strategic Compass, and SAFE, to align with

<sup>40</sup> P. Buras, *Trump May Unite Europe, But He Divides Polish Society*, *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 2025, <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/trump-may-unite-europe-he-divides-polish-society> [8.06.2025].

<sup>41</sup> K. Hartley, *European Defence Policy: Prospects and Challenges*, "Defence and Peace Economics" 2024, vol. 35, no. 4, DOI: 10.1080/10242694.2023.2185425.

its national interests amid Russia's war in Ukraine. Participation enhances Poland's influence and enables it to shape security perceptions in Brussels and among its neighbouring states. However, Poland's objections to the EDU remain strong, rooted in its belief that NATO, with US military and nuclear guarantees, is essential to security, and it worries that EU proposals might duplicate institutions, weaken US interoperability, or favour Western European dominance. While supporting specific EU defence measures, Poland resists changes that could sever Europe's ties to its Atlantic connections. Its growing defence reliance on South Korea may conflict with the EU's "Buy European" initiatives, and increased EU security involvement might push Poland toward leadership beyond its comfort zone.

The scenarios explored in this study, ranging from EDU complementarity with NATO to functional division of labour for strategic bifurcation, highlight the fluidity of the current moment. None of these trajectories is preordained. Instead, the future of the EDU will be shaped by political will, institutional flexibility, and the capacity of actors like Poland to engage constructively without compromising core security commitments. In this context, Poland's contribution is not merely reactive but constitutive. It has the potential to shape a vision of European defence that is both autonomous in capacity and transatlantic in orientation.

Three broader conclusions emerge from this analysis. First, the EDU will succeed only if it is designed as a complement to NATO, not as an alternative to it. This requires more than declaratory alignment; it demands institutional coordination, shared planning, and political coherence. Second, EU defence instruments must avoid reproducing existing industrial and geographical inequalities. A truly inclusive defence union must support the full integration of Eastern European capabilities and address structural asymmetries within the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base. Third, Poland and countries that share its strategic outlook must move from passive caution to active shaping. By engaging with EU processes, proposing reforms, and building coalitions, Poland can ensure that the EDU evolves in a direction that reinforces, rather than replaces, the transatlantic alliance.

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