



July–August 2005

Defense Reform in Europe: The Case of Poland

By Radek Sikorski

With the insurgency in Iraq persisting and U.S. troops stretched thin, greater assistance from allies would be more than welcome. While Europe has in general been slow in upgrading its capabilities and continues to be critical of U.S. policy in Iraq, NATO's new members have performed with credit. With the right incentives, countries such as Ukraine, Romania, and Poland could field substantial forces in Iraq and Afghanistan that could relieve American troops at tolerable expense. Moreover, it makes sense for U.S. military assistance to flow to countries that are actually being helpful in the war on terror. U.S. experts can also help in restructuring the military budgets of these allies so that they can improve their capabilities from internal resources. An examination of Poland's circumstances illustrates the case.

The Iraqi insurgency seems in no mood to do the decent thing and go home in time for next year's midterm U.S. congressional election. Nor are recruits signing up for the U.S. Army in sufficient numbers even though goals¹ and standards² have been lowered. Hopefully, the Iraqis themselves will furnish the forces to start bringing order to their long-suffering country. But what if they continue to be unequal to the job?

European Allies in Iraq

Given how hostile some of America's old European allies have been toward the Iraqi operation, it might seem redundant to ask whether the gaps could be filled by allies. Even New Europe (geopolitically understood, i.e., countries with a transatlantic agenda) has scaled down its presence. Hungary, the Netherlands, and Spain have already withdrawn their troops, while Ukraine and Poland have signaled major reductions to come. Italy's commitment may not survive its parliamentary election next year.

Radek Sikorski is a resident fellow at AEI and the executive director of its New Atlantic Initiative. He is a former deputy minister of foreign affairs and former deputy minister of defense of Poland.

There is also the question of the allies' usefulness when they do get deployed. European deficiencies in equipment, transport, and communications are well-known. National caveats restricting the manner in which troops from various countries may be used are also every commander's nightmare. In Iraq, some national contingents serve on the condition that they must never leave their bases. In Kosovo, NATO troops are forbidden to use weapons in defense of the people they are supposed to be protecting. In Afghanistan, some national components may patrol outside their bases provided they return for the night.

Yet, to dismiss allies altogether would be to miss important opportunities. If American leaders and diplomats are willing to make the effort, allies can be drawn to share some of the country's burden. The United States had misinterpreted why most European states sent their troops to Iraq—they were motivated by wishing to maintain good U.S. relations, rather than by a shared perception of a threat from Saddam. So today, the United States may misinterpret why they are leaving. Anti-Americanism, appeasement, even cowardice, have been cited—all of them erroneously. Countries end their commitments for a variety of reasons, mostly domestic. What is most interesting,

however, is that a number of countries would like to continue to serve side by side with the United States, but are prevented from doing so by shortsighted U.S. attitudes and policies.

Take Poland, a country whose commandos took part in the invasion of Iraq. While administering its occupation sector in Iraq, Polish troops battled the insurgency by the radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, and yet the sector has suffered the lowest proportion of Iraqi civilian deaths. Poland's public is unenthusiastic about the war. Opinion was divided equally for and against Polish participation in Iraq until January 2004, when opposition jumped to 70 percent in the first half of 2005.³ Opposition to Polish participation has now reached 90 percent of the public.⁴ However, this has not fed into anti-Americanism but rather reflects disappointment with perceived lack of U.S. reciprocity. The United States and Poland share important foreign policy goals in spreading democracy to Belarus and strengthening it in Ukraine. The Polish military, unlike the public, is upbeat about its service in Iraq, recognizing that the mission has done wonders for the army's preparedness. And yet, the outgoing Polish government has announced that the current echelon of Polish troops will be its last and that in the new year the country's role in Iraq will be reduced to training Iraqi security forces within the NATO mission.

What has happened is not any change in attitudes toward the United States, nor even war fatigue, but the fact that—political and financial incentives being what they are—Poland finds it impossible to sustain its commitment. And the difficulties have deepened partly because of the institutional environment created by United States.

Transforming the Polish Military

Quite rightly, the United States has demanded that entrants into NATO reform their former Warsaw Pact militaries and create democratically controlled, inter-operational armies. While the first was rapidly achieved, the latter has dragged on. Just like old NATO members, new ones have mostly failed to keep up with the NATO-recommended defense budget of 2 percent of

GDP (Poland is close at 1.89 percent; Romania is the star, at 2.3 percent). They have been particularly burdened by the challenge of rapidly downsizing militaries: when you reduce your standing force from 400,000 to 135,000—as Poland has—it takes time to get rid of surplus facilities, which in the meantime have to be maintained. Reducing personnel strength may produce

budgetary savings in the long run, but in the medium term superannuated officers merely draw pensions in place of salaries.

The 1990s were probably the most demoralizing period in the recent history of the Polish army. Politicians kept promising funds to start putting the armed forces on a more modern footing, but the only result was more reductions. Only at the very end of the decade, with NATO accession, did modernization funds increase.

Poland decided to purchase forty-eight Lockheed Martin F-16s at the cost of \$3.5 billion as well as antitank missiles from Israel's Elbit Systems, Spanish transport planes, Finnish infantry transport vehicles, and a couple of frigates from the United States. (Night vision equipment and

unmanned aerial vehicles are next on the shopping list.)

Then came the war in Iraq. The United States covered the costs of transporting Polish troops and donated items such as computer laptops for the divisional staff and flak jackets for troops. However, combat pay as well as regular salaries have been paid from the Polish exchequer. New equipment for the mission, as well as the rapid depreciation of patrol vehicles, trucks, armored personnel carriers, and helicopters, has been on Poland's tab, the total amounting to the equivalent of about \$300 million per annum, or \$600 million thus far. This may sound like peanuts by comparison with the Pentagon's budget of \$500 billion, or even the billions in supplemental appropriations to finance the U.S. operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Within Poland's annual defense budget of \$6 billion, however, it is a substantial hole, amounting to an entire annual procurement and investment budget. In other words, a solid ally like Poland faces two incompatible demands from the United States: the long-term requirement to upgrade capabilities and the short-term request to help in the war on terror. Poland has gone along for as long as it could, but even cannibalization has limits.

A solid ally like
Poland faces two
incompatible demands
from the United States:
the long-term
requirement to
upgrade capabilities
and the short-term
request to help in the
war on terror.

If the United States finds that foreign troop contributions would be helpful, there are two ways of addressing the resources gap. One would be to reorient U.S. military assistance toward countries that are actually being helpful. Is Egypt, for example, making the contribution that justifies its military subsidy of \$1.8 billion per annum, or would a Central European division in Iraq be preferable?

Within the supplemental appropriations for Afghanistan and Iraq, does it always make sense to hire private contractors, with all their legal and political baggage, when you could have real soldiers for less money? Shouldn't NATO move to financing its out-of-area operations from a common fund, assessed on the basis of member countries' GDP?

Another way to narrow the resources gap would be to help the allies improve their teeth-to-tail ratios. For example, under its Strategic Defense Review, Poland is looking at the following ideas:

Integrating the largely civilian ministry of defense and the army proper, both organizationally and physically. Various Ministry of Defense (MOD) institutions are housed in over fifty different sites around Warsaw.

Some sit on prime downtown property, others in dilapidated Communist-era office blocks. Their very number makes it hard to create a sense of team spirit. The cost of transporting documents between the buildings is prodigious, not to mention the risks to security. Building a twenty-first century MOD headquarters that would combine a modern design with the latest security features would do wonders for both efficiency and morale. Given that the ministry has plenty of empty land on which to build and the fact that its existing properties could produce a sizeable stream of income, the move should be self-financing.

Reducing the number of commands. A military of 135,000, with a land component of 85,000, does not need a general staff, commands of armed services, commands of military districts, corps commands, as well as special operations command and an overseas operations command.

Private-public partnerships. Building an MOD headquarters is perhaps the most ambitious project that could use streams of private financing, but there are others.

Energy efficiency and ecological improvements are notoriously difficult to implement within administrative structures that are geared to accounting for their expenditures on an annual basis. However, if the private sector can make the capital investment in return for a stream of income from the savings that accrue, more such projects become feasible. There would be huge savings if

new NATO members used private contractors for managing bases and training on anything like the scale of the United States. Continental European armies in general are not yet comfortable with the idea that everything that does not involve the use of lethal force can be subcontracted to the private sector. But as such projects come on stream and former officers learn that people like themselves will mostly administer them, a supportive constituency will arise.

Specialization. Every military in the world aspires to have a well-rounded force, but not even the richest can do everything. Inevitably, militaries must prioritize according to the order of threats that they expect to face. A medium-size country like Poland has to have an air force and a

navy, but their costs could be kept down if allied assistance in these fields were credible. NATO will hardly notice the absence of a Polish frigate on the high seas. The United States has more fighter aircraft, with more coming in the pipeline, than it knows how to employ. In terms of opportunity cost of the marginal zloty spent, it would make sense for the allies to reinforce Poland's command of its seas and airspace, and for Poland to spend its money on those components, where she could make her presence felt.

Budgetary reform. The United States and the United Kingdom finance their major overseas operations through special allocations, separate from the regular budget. On the European continent, including in Poland, wars have long been financed through total mobilization of national resources. This nineteenth-century model did not work well even in the twentieth century and is completely anachronistic for dealing with today's more limited engagements. It is inadequate for governments to take the political decisions to commit troops abroad but be unwilling to spend the political capital in parliaments to

It is inadequate for governments to take the political decisions to commit troops abroad but be unwilling to spend the political capital in parliaments to vote appropriations that give soldiers the tools to do the job.

vote appropriations that give soldiers the tools to do the job. When the armed forces repeatedly find that the politicians grandstand and then tell them to “find resources” within existing inadequate budgets, they become allergic to expeditions.

With the right equipment, the Polish army should be able to field both a territorial force to secure it from a residual threat of instability to its east and an expeditionary force of at least a brigade or two. If the country fulfilled the generally accepted NATO goal of 8 percent of troops available for foreign deployment, it should be able to send over 10,000 men and women overseas, a division. Poland could further draw on its border guards, police, secret service, and customs to help with institution-building in conflict zones. Similar numbers could become available from comparably populous countries in the region such as Ukraine and Romania, potentially amounting to a combined contribution that would well exceed in numbers the entire U.S. presence in Afghanistan. It would cost about \$500 million per annum to equip and dispatch each such Central

European brigade of 2,500 troops—a bargain. These would not be high-tech ninjas fighting transformational warfare, but they would be boots on the ground. If critics of the Iraqi operation are right and a certain level of troop saturation per head of native population is necessary for an occupation to be successful, their contribution could be vital. The United States needs to act soon if the troops are to arrive on the battlefield in time.

Notes

1. Eric Schmitt, “After Lowering Goal, Army Falls Short on May Recruits,” *New York Times*, June 8, 2005.

2. Damien Cave, “Pentagon May Consider Older Recruits,” *New York Times*, July 22, 2005.

3. Center for the Study of Public Opinion, “Co dalej z obecnością Polских żołnierzy w Iraku?” [What next with the presence of Polish soldiers in Iraq?] May 2005, http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2005/K_096_05.PDF.

4. Virtual Poland News, “Polacy w Iraku?—w zadnym razie” [Poles in Iraq?—under no circumstance], available through <http://wiadomosci.wp.pl/kat,8131,wid,7719724,wiadomosc.htm>.