



## Poland's Superpower Dreams resurface after centuries

In the eyes of too many Western Europeans, Poland was until recently dismissed as a poor country with little influence. But in the war against Russia, Poland was bound to take a leading role.

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### Preliminary remark

When a group of allegedly Russian drones violated Polish airspace a few weeks ago in September, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk declared it the most dangerous moment since World War II. The remark may have sounded like a dramatic exaggeration, but it reflected the permanent state of emergency in which Poland has been living in recent years. Whether or not the official version of the incident is

credible, one cannot ignore the underlying reality: in the conflict between Russia and the West, Poland has become a frontline state. The war in Ukraine has shifted Europe's geopolitical center of gravity eastward, and few countries have been as profoundly transformed by this shift as Poland.

## NATO expansion

This development did not begin in 2022. Since NATO's expansion in 1999 and 2004, Poland has seen itself as an outpost of the West on the border with a potentially hostile East. The expansion of the alliance brought formal security guarantees, but also made the region a direct participant in the strategic competition between Washington and Moscow. The [Western obsession with integrating Ukraine into NATO](#) — whether formally or informally — has long been seen in Warsaw as an inevitable step toward “completing” Europe. But what was supposed to guarantee Ukraine's security provoked Russia — a classic example of the [security dilemma](#). The Polish leadership, however, interpreted the war not as a failure of deterrence, but as proof of their old warnings: Russia, they argued, had never changed, and only force could hold it back. Others may see it differently: [recent comments by former German Chancellor Angela Merkel](#) suggested that Poland and the Baltic states were partly to blame for the war in Ukraine because of their aggressive and uncompromising stance. The reaction in Poland was predictably sharp: it is difficult to describe Merkel as a friend of Russia, but [in Poland they did just that](#).

## “You have forgotten Poland”

Poland's role in the Ukrainian conflict has therefore been crucial. Poland has become the largest logistical hub for the delivery of Western weapons to Ukraine, with a steady stream of increasingly sophisticated weapons flowing eastward through Polish territory. Russian strategists now see themselves fighting not only against Ukraine, but against NATO as a whole, with Poland serving as a physical and symbolic bridgehead. “If we look at cyberspace, Poland is now at war with Russia,” said National Security Bureau chief Sławomir Cenckiewicz [in an interview with the Financial Times](#). “It is no longer a state of threat.”

Until recently dismissed by Western Europeans as a poor, post-communist periphery, Poland is now one of the most ambitious power centers on the continent. There is a hint of “imperial complex” in its new stance — a sense of historical justification coupled with missionary zeal. Unlike Germany or France,

Poland's past is not burdened by colonial guilt or war crimes. The historical narrative is one of victimhood and resistance, of a nation that fought for freedom and is now its defender. Throughout history, Poland has often seen itself as the “Christ of nations,” and even today, history is far from being a shadow from which one wants to flee: it is a moral resource that is used as a weapon.

Poland's fate has always been shaped by geography. Located on the North German Plain, with no mountains or seas to protect it from enemies from the east or west, Poland was at the mercy of its stronger neighbors for centuries. Its borders shifted, disappeared, and reappeared, but its strategic vulnerability never disappeared. “Geography is destiny,” as the saying goes.

The present moment reflects older traditions of Polish strategic thinking. Concepts such as “Intermarium” and “Prometheism” are reappearing in new forms. Few people in Western Europe are familiar with these fundamental ideas, which have shaped Polish foreign policy in the past and continue to inspire it today.

## **Poland is not yet lost**

For many in Western Europe and America, history seems like a distant memory, a largely forgotten past that has little relevance to our current “post-historical” moment. In contrast, history in Poland (as in many parts of Central and Eastern Europe) is not just background: it is carefully cultivated and mythologized as a central instrument for shaping national identity. Poland disappeared from the map of Europe for 123 years (1795–1918) as a result of the three partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth by Russia, Prussia, and Austria, and the forty years of communism until 1989 are a period that is now regarded in Poland as “Soviet occupation” and a loss of sovereignty. Having barely recovered from this trauma, Poland is therefore particularly sensitive to the dangers of history.

The figure who most impressively symbolizes the restoration of Polish statehood after World War I is Józef Piłsudski, who is revered in Poland as a true national hero. Born in 1867 in the part of Poland under Russian rule, he was deeply involved in Polish nationalist and socialist movements. With Poland's rebirth in 1918, Piłsudski assumed leading roles: he became head of state (“Naczelnik Państwa”) and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. In 1920, he was appointed Marszałek Polski (Marshal of Poland), a title that reflected both his military leadership and his central role in securing Poland's independence.

Shortly after independence, in 1919, the Polish-Soviet War broke out over disputed territories. In Eastern Europe, the borders were not defined in the Treaty of Versailles of May 1919. The Soviet Union had been created only sixteen months earlier and was in the midst of a civil war, while Poland wanted to secure its new eastern borders. Much of the fighting took place in Ukraine, which Poland claimed despite having lost it three hundred years earlier. Piłsudski played a major role in the Polish-Soviet War, particularly in the decisive Battle of Warsaw (1920), sometimes called the “Miracle on the Vistula,” when Polish troops repelled the Soviet counterattack.

In May 1926, Piłsudski carried out a coup d'état (the May Coup), in which his supporters overthrew the civilian government. He did not assume the title of president, but exercised authoritarian control over the Second Polish Republic and directed policy through a regime known as “Sanacja” until his death in 1935.

## Prometheus between the seas

The concept of Międzymorze ([Latin Intermarium](#), “[between the seas](#)”) emerged after World War I as a grand geopolitical vision of Józef Piłsudski and his circle. It proposed a federation or at least close cooperation between the Central and Eastern European states stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and potentially to the Adriatic Sea — a modern revival of the spirit of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The strategic logic was clear: sandwiched between the resurgent powers of Germany and Russia, a network of allied states would provide mutual security, political influence, and a regional counterweight to the ambitions of the great powers.

However, the Międzymorze project never achieved full institutional implementation in the interwar period. Strong opposition from several actors—including the Soviet Union, skeptical Western powers, and local national movements that feared Polish dominance—undermined any viable alliance. Lithuania declined to participate for fear of Polish hegemony, while Ukraine and Belarus were ambivalent or hostile, seeking full independence rather than subordination to a Polish-led bloc. Internally, the region's heterogeneity — differences in political systems, economic development, foreign policy alliances, and ongoing border disputes — proved too great to overcome. As Germany and the Soviet Union consolidated their power in the 1930s, the proposed federation lost its feasibility and ultimately succumbed to the constraints and divisions of the era.

[Prometheism](#) was the second central pillar of Piłsudski's foreign policy in the interwar period. The aim was to weaken Russia by supporting the national independence movements of the non-Russian peoples under its rule. This project had several dimensions: political, cultural, intelligence, and military. Poland supported governments in exile (for Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, parts of the Caucasus and Turkestan, etc.), financed secret or semi-secret organizations, and in some cases helped to form paramilitary forces that could intervene if the central authority in Moscow failed. This included the so-called [Volhynia experiment](#), in which Polish policy sought to promote loyalty among Ukrainian minorities in Poland through tolerance of language and religion in order to support the Promethean goal of undermining Soviet control.

The Treaty of Warsaw, signed in April 1920 between Poland and the Ukrainian People's Republic under Symon Petliura, is a concrete expression of Prometheism in action: Poland recognized Ukrainian independence and provided military aid, all in the service of creating a friendly eastern buffer state rather than allowing the Soviet Union to reestablish its dominance directly on Poland's border. Piłsudski viewed Ukrainian sovereignty not as a moral issue, but as a vital factor in Poland's interests. He is credited with saying, “There can be no independent Poland without an independent Ukraine.”

The Intermarium and Prometheism projects were developed in the interwar years, and although they were too ambitious for their time, the logic remains. Today, this is evident in the cooperation of the “[Three Seas Initiative](#),” an infrastructure and energy project connecting Central and Eastern Europe, as well as in Warsaw's close relations with the Baltic states, Romania, and, of course, Ukraine itself.

Echoes of Prometheism can be seen in Poland's foreign policy toward Ukraine, Belarus, and Georgia. Poland has strongly supported the new anti-Russian Ukraine since the Euromaidan revolution in 2014, and even more so since the beginning of the latest phase of the Ukraine war in 2022. In the case of Belarus, Poland has supported opposition movements that oppose the current government under President Alexander Lukashenko. Poland's relations with Georgia have also included cooperation and expressions of support for its “independence” and Euro-Atlantic integration. These actions are not altruistically motivated, but rather strategic calculations: Poland's security is linked to the survival of independent, anti-Russian states to its east. By supporting them, Poland helps maintain a buffer against Russia.



The memory of the “Kresy” — the eastern borderlands of the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth — continues to resonate in Polish politics. These territories, now part of Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania, were once considered the heart of Poland's civilizing mission, the vanguard of Latin Christianity against Orthodoxy and the steppes. They were the scene of tragedies, deportations, and bloody conflicts. While today's Poland does not seek territorial revisions, its cultural and historical ties to the Kresy shape its sensitivity toward the East.

With relations between Poland and Russia now seemingly irreparable and likely to remain so for a long time, Poland's strategic goal appears to be to establish a new Iron Curtain further east, cutting off its neighbors from Russia in order to completely isolate Russia from Europe. Poland, for example, was one of the strongest opponents of the Nord Stream pipeline, which was intended to deliver gas directly from Russia to Germany, bypassing Poland.

## **Poland and the West**

Polish-German relations also illustrate the paradox of geography. Poland cannot escape Germany's economic influence. Its exports flow westward, while its security concerns are directed eastward. The Polish economy has flourished in the European single market, but Polish security policy has often clashed with Berlin's more cautious, economically oriented approach. Germany used to view Russia as a problem, but also as a potential energy partner; Poland, on the other hand, has always seen Russia as an existential threat. This divergence is structural and explains why Poland is pushing NATO and the US for deeper engagement on its eastern flank.

For Poland, the Three Seas Initiative serves as a geopolitical framework for its aspirations to assume a leading role in the region. Warsaw presents it as a project of European cohesion, but it also serves as a platform to demonstrate independence from Berlin and Brussels. The close partnership with the US is crucial: Washington strongly supports it in order to consolidate US influence in Central Eastern Europe while undermining French-German dominance in EU politics. Poland thus acts as a link that brings American power to the heart of the continent – a role that strengthens both its self-image and its dependence on US support.

This “special relationship” between Poland and the United States is now one of the defining facts of European geopolitics. It transcends party politics in both countries. US soldiers are permanently stationed on Polish soil; US weapons permeate the Polish army; cooperation on intelligence and cybersecurity is closer than ever before. The modernization of Polish defense is essentially a program

designed by the US and financed by Polish taxpayers. The alliance is not only strategic but also ideological. Poland sees the US as the embodiment of freedom and strength, while many Americans see Poland as Europe's most loyal ally, untainted by the decadence and ambiguity of the old West.

For Washington, this partnership offers a reliable alternative to the hesitant major powers of Western Europe. While Berlin debates and Paris theorizes, Warsaw acts. Poland's willingness to confront Russia directly — politically, militarily, and rhetorically — is in line with the US containment strategy. During Trump's first presidency, this relationship took on an almost personal warmth: on his first foreign trip in 2017, Trump visited Warsaw to deliver one of his most ideological speeches, praising Polish patriotism and Christian civilization as a model of Western resilience. Under Biden, the biggest test came: every important Western decision regarding Ukraine goes through Warsaw; every major arms delivery passes through its territory.

But this closeness also has its price. By assuming the role of America's “unsinkable aircraft carrier,” Poland has lost its autonomy in foreign policy. Previous conflicts with the EU — over judicial reforms, migration, and the rule of law — weakened its influence in Europe, even as it grew stronger militarily. The paradox is striking: Poland wants to lead Europe, but distrusts the European project. The more it integrates with the US, the less it fits into Brussels' logic. The Polish government often accuses Germany of moral cowardice and strategic naivety, but Poland's own strategy depends on an external power.

## Make Poland Great Again

Poland's defense burden has risen to a level unprecedented in peacetime Europe. In 2024, Poland's military spending rose to approximately **\$38 billion** (~4.2% of GDP), and the government planned further increases, with official targets and public statements of ~4.7% of GDP in 2025 and **political discussion of 5% by 2026**. This makes Poland one of the NATO members with the highest defense share of GDP and supports an exceptionally large and rapid procurement and force buildup program.

Troop strength and personnel are being expanded massively. Official and independent counts put active personnel at around 200,000–206,000, with the goal of expanding the professional army and reserves to significantly increase the total available strength (plans ultimately call for mobilization of around 300,000 once full reserves and volunteer systems are established). To manage this expansion,

Warsaw has announced an ambitious citizen training program—starting in 2027, 100,000 volunteers are to receive military training each year, and thousands have already signed up for voluntary training in 2025.

Poland has procured and received large modern units of tank and artillery systems. Warsaw acquired 116 modernized M1A1 “FEP” Abrams tanks from the US (delivered in 2024) and has placed a large order for 250 new M1A2 SEPv3 Abrams tanks ([delivered in 2025](#)), meaning that Poland will operate around 366 Abrams tanks once the program is complete. At the same time, South Korean systems are being delivered under a separate package — [K2 “Black Panther” MBTs](#) (part of a 180-tank deal) and large quantities of K9 155-mm self-propelled guns and associated missile systems. These purchases are transforming Poland into one of the most heavily armored and modernly armed countries in Europe.

The modernization of the air force is another pillar. The Husarz program provides for 32 F-35A aircraft (signed in 2020), with domestic delivery starting in 2026; pilot training is already underway. At the same time, the Polish Air Force is modernizing existing fleets (major F-16 upgrade programs) to bridge capabilities until the F-35s are deployed. These steps give Warsaw a credible path to deploying limited stealth aircraft and networked air superiority in the coming years, complementing Western long-range weapons and sensors.

Air and missile defense is being aggressively layered. Poland has long invested in Patriot batteries (national production and launcher units are contractually secured), integrated allied Patriot deployments and other air defense systems, and acquired several complementary systems. NATO partners have also provided Patriot/Ground-Based Air Defense and deployed allied batteries.

This massive rearmament is more than just a reaction to the war in Ukraine. The lessons of 1939 — when Western guarantees failed to prevent catastrophe — are deeply ingrained in the national consciousness. Poland's military transformation has immediate geopolitical consequences.

Poland does not see itself merely as a buffer. It is actively shaping strategies, pushing for more support for Ukraine, calling for tougher measures against Russia, and warning against Western fatigue. But Poland's armament program is expensive and politically risky — spending 4–5% of GDP on defense for years requires either continuous growth or painful fiscal decisions.

What sets Poland apart today is that it does not just want to defend itself; it wants to help shape European strategy. It is urging its allies to maintain “strategic patience” until Russia is completely defeated. The tone is moral and militant, driven



by the conviction that history is once again testing Europe's will.

This historical awareness distinguishes Poland from Western Europe, where war has long been considered an anachronism. In Warsaw, history is not a burden to be escaped, but a source of legitimacy. The memory of partitions, uprisings, and decades of Soviet rule has created a collective ethos of vigilance. The Polish national anthem begins with the words “Poland has not yet perished” — a line that expresses both fear and defiance. National survival is not taken for granted; it must be continually affirmed through strength.

At the same time, the romantic nationalism that once inspired resistance now fuels a kind of geopolitical messianism. Poland sees itself not only as a victim, but as the savior of Europe—a nation destined to protect others from their illusions. In this vision, Germany is weak, France is decadent, the EU is bureaucratic, and only Poland understands the moral clarity of the moment. This self-perception lends foreign policy a tone of righteousness, but also impatience. Merkel's remarks contained a deeper truth: Poland's new power does not result from consensus, but from confrontation.

If Churchill once mocked interwar Poland as the “hyena of Europe,” accusing it of opportunism and expansionism, modern Poland aspires to be Europe's lion — courageous, disciplined, and indispensable. But the line between heroism and hubris is thin. Poland's insistence on permanent escalation in Ukraine risks exhausting Western populations and provoking divisions within NATO.

Yet the logic of Poland's current course is irrefutable. Its leaders believe that Europe's security is guaranteed by deterrence through strength and that weakness invites disaster. The country's massive rearmament, its ideological zeal, and its alliance with the US are all expressions of a historical conviction: only power guarantees survival. It may not be the wisest strategy.

#### ARTICLE TAGS:

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