

The Time of Poland

Poland has become a pillar of security on the Alliance's eastern flank thanks to the country's tremendous economic development, which has helped fund the rapid modernisation and expansion of the national armed forces.

Germany and the United States have recently made headlines by deciding to send tanks to Ukraine. However, the unsung hero behind this landmark decision was actually Poland. Polish leaders were instrumental in efforts to persuade Berlin in particular of the need to provide Ukraine with modern tanks. This was the latest example of Polish leadership over the past year as Europe has found itself confronted by the continent's largest armed conflict since World War II.

Poland's leading role in the European response to Putin's invasion reflects the country's extensive experience of Russian imperialism in both its Czarist and Soviet forms. Ever since Poland joined the European Union in 2004, politicians in Warsaw have been warning Europe of the growing threat posed by a resurgent and revisionist Russia.

The Poles have been particularly alarmed by indications of deepening ties between Berlin and Moscow, and were vocal opponents of German partnership in Russia's Nord Stream II gas pipeline. Polish politicians saw this strategic energy infrastructure project as a modern-day successor to the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which sparked the outbreak of World War II and the invasion of Poland by the Nazi and Soviet regimes. They warned that the pipeline allowed Putin to bypass Ukraine's gas transit system and would expose the country to a full-scale invasion, while leaving the whole of Europe vulnerable to Russian energy blackmail. Germany chose to ignore these warnings until the eve of Russia's February 2022 attack.

Today's prominent Polish role in European security policy is not entirely new. Since joining NATO in 1999, Poland has emerged as a security linchpin on the alliance's eastern flank. This has been possible thanks to Poland's strategic location and remarkable economic growth, which has helped fund the rapid modernization and expansion of the country's armed forces. The Polish army is currently ranked as the world's twentieth most powerful military.

Poland has in many ways set the standard for Europe's humanitarian response to the Russian attack on Ukraine. Since the invasion began, Poland has welcomed more Ukrainian refugees than any other European country, while also providing a range of benefits such as access to healthcare and education along with employment possibilities. During the past year, the Polish authorities have registered more than 1.5 million Ukrainian refugees.

Poland is also a leading contributor of military aid to Ukraine. In per capita terms, Poland has actually sent more military aid to Ukraine than virtually any country other than the Baltic states. This aid has included hundreds of tanks and other crucial weaponry. Poland plays a vital role in the logistical efforts to deliver international military aid to Ukraine, enabling a global coalition of countries to supply the Ukrainian army with the weapons, equipment, and ammunition it needs.

Diplomatically, Poland has been at the forefront of calls for tougher sanctions against Russia. Most recently, Polish leaders pressed Berlin to deliver German-made Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine and allow others to do so. When German Chancellor Olaf Scholz hesitated, Poland threatened to export dozens of German-made Leopard tanks in defiance of German re-export

restrictions. “We will not just watch Ukraine bleed,” commented Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki. “It now depends on Germany whether they want to join the mission and stop Russian barbarism, or whether they choose to silently observe and go down in history as those who were on the wrong side.”

Germany eventually relented but the incident, along with the Nord Stream 2 saga, has diminished Berlin’s stature. Germany’s apparent ambivalence toward a predatory Russia and Berlin’s ties to the Kremlin have allowed Poland to assume a position of moral leadership on issues of European security. This has included criticism of Austria and Hungary for allegedly pandering to Putin. Poland has also called out Germany for foot-dragging over sanctions. In April 2022, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki accused Germany of “standing in the way” of harder sanctions against Russia. “Anyone who reads the notes of EU meetings knows that Germany is the biggest impediment when it comes to more decisive sanctions,” he told journalists in Warsaw.

Polish leadership is helping to fill a geopolitical vacuum created by the declining influence of Europe’s traditionally dominant foreign policy forces. Britain voted to leave the European Union in 2016, greatly reducing the UK’s ability to shape Europe’s response to the Russian threat. Meanwhile, throughout his reign, Putin has demonstrated an ability to co-opt French and German politicians and businessmen with trade deals, pipelines, and other incentives. It is no coincidence that the Russian dictator handpicked Germany and France in 2014 to participate in the Normandy Format talks to end the war sparked by Russia in eastern Ukraine. This approach resulted in the failed Minsk Agreements and set the stage for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Poland is now attempting to warn the wider world about the danger posed by Putin’s Russia. “This is not just a regional conflict. Russia’s war against Ukraine is a potential source of global conflagration. This war will affect our countries as well as yours, if it hasn’t already,” Polish President Andrzej Duda told the United Nations General Assembly in September 2022.

Polish leadership of the European response to Putin’s invasion is forging unprecedented bonds between the Polish and Ukrainian people. These two nations have had their share of fights and historical disagreements in the past. However, they now find themselves united by the existential threat coming from today’s Russia. Ukrainian opinion polls regularly identify Poland as the country’s closest partner.

While the Kremlin cynically cloaks its genocidal invasion of Ukraine in the language of Slavic brotherhood, it is Ukraine’s fellow Slavic neighbors in Poland who have demonstrated truly brotherly support. This will shape the future geopolitical landscape of the region. Once Russia is defeated, Ukraine will likely deepen its partnership with Poland to form a powerful bloc within European politics. Together, the two nations will have an authoritative voice in the wider democratic world. Europe’s geopolitical center of gravity is shifting eastward, and Poland is leading the way.

The text is simultaneously published in the Polish monthly "Wszystko Co Najważniejsze" as part of a project carried out with the Institute of National Remembrance and the Polish National Foundation.

Diane Francis