OSW Commentary

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25 years of Poland in NATO: personal reflections on the Polish path to the Alliance, including lessons for today

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On 12 March 1999, after years of active diplomatic lobbying, Poland joined the ranks of NATO, the transatlantic club renowned for its unique collective defence guarantees. This process yielded success relatively quickly, even though the outcome was not a foregone conclusion, given the variety of internal and external challenges that Poland faced at that time.

The foundation of that success was bipartisan support for membership, which was reflected in the programmes of successive governments, as well as the consistent and effective effort of diplomats, military personnel and experts. Poland undertook considerable work to align with Alliance standards, fully leveraging the opportunities presented by the new partnership frameworks. The constructive approach to regional cooperation and active participation in international forums were also of significant importance. These efforts helped Poland to provide appropriate responses to the evolving views of the allied member states, especially regarding the perception of Russia, Germany's stance on enlargement, and the consequences of the Balkan wars.

Examining how Poland joined the Alliance can offer insights into the country's current strategy and its role within NATO. Additionally, many of Poland's experiences from that time remain relevant, and could serve as an inspiration for other countries aspiring to join the Alliance today.

A consistent course amidst a changing environment

After 1989, after regaining full sovereignty, the new Polish government and the whole of Polish society faced the challenging yet long-awaited task of reshaping the nation's economic and social framework and redefining its foreign and security policies.

When reflecting on the chronology and logic of Poland's integration with NATO, it is essential to consider the conditions under which Polish policymakers operated. From the outset, the goal was to ensure the fullest possible security for Poland, a guarantee only NATO membership could provide. However, the journey from publicly declaring these aims to realising them was far from straightforward.

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In the early 1990s, various alternative solutions to NATO membership (such as 'NATO-bis', neutrality, or security assurances through the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe) were voiced in public. However, they did not alter Poland's strategic orientation. These deliberations were more tactical (when openly talking about joining NATO was not possible) or speculative (in a sense that everything could be theoretically considered) in nature –but they were never formally transformed into foreign policy objectives.

Governments in Poland changed, but the aspiration for NATO membership remained constant. Moreover, the necessary reorganisation and reform of the defence system became an integral part of the process of integration with international structures. The key conditions of Poland's security policy transformation included its economic situation, its overall internal reforms, threats to national security, and the evolution of the attitudes of major international actors. A realistic assessment of Poland's own potential, including human resources, also played a significant role in implementing these plans.

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From a march to a trot, then a sprint

The different stages of the NATO integration process had their own specific characteristics. To illustrate this, one might compare the security policy declarations included in successive Polish Prime Ministers' inaugural addresses.[1]

In his first speech on 24 August 1989, Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki focused almost entirely on political and systemic issues. Even mentioning NATO was not an option due to the international context at the time: Poland was still part of international structures dominated by the USSR. The presence of Soviet troops on Polish soil and the uncertainty of Moscow's reaction to the political changes in Warsaw could not be ignored. Thus, it was deemed necessary for the newly appointed Prime Minister to declare adherence to the obligations of the Warsaw Pact.[2] However, even under these conditions, Mazowiecki ventured to express Poland's aspirations more openly in a formal address to the Sejm a few weeks later, announcing Poland's hope to move away from externally imposed military blocs.[3]

In the following months, Warsaw actively prepared the ground for a more definitive articulation of its security policy goals. By March 1990, Minister Krzysztof Skubiszewski had already visited NATO Headquarters, and in September, the NATO Secretary-General made his first visit to Poland. In January 1991, Prime Minister Jan Krzysztof Bielecki spoke of taking "matters into our own hands".[4] In July 1991, the Warsaw Pact was formally dissolved. On 20 December of the same year, NATO opened itself to engagement with former Pact members by offering them participation in the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC). The next day, the USSR ceased to exist.

These new circumstances allowed Prime Minister Jan Olszewski on to present a clearer vision of the country's expectations on 21 December 1991, when he mentioned not only NATO but also the benefits of the US military presence in Europe.[5] In March 1992, NATO Secretary Manfred Wörner visited Poland

[1] J. Marszałek-Kawa, P. Siemiątkowski (eds.), *Exposé Prezesów Rady Ministrów 1989–2019*, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń 2021, marszalek.com.pl.

[2] *Ibidem*, p. 12.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 32.

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 39.

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 63.

and spoke of the Alliance's "open doors".[6] A strategically significant breakthrough was achieved in May 1992 through the conclusion of a bilateral agreement with Russia on the withdrawal of Russian troops from Poland.

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In this context, Prime Minister Waldemar Pawlak spoke on 1 July 1992 about Poland's full membership in European and Euro-Atlantic structures.[7] Prime Minister Hanna Suchocka continued the theme of changes in security policy in her address on 10 July 1992, emphasising the need for reforms to the country's defence system.[8] The political consensus regarding NATO membership culminated in a formal letter sent by President Wałęsa to the NATO Secretary-General on 1 September 1993, officially declaring that membership was a priority for Poland. This letter followed the notable August discussions in Warsaw with President Yeltsin, during which he made his famous declaration seen as endorsing Poland's accession to the Alliance, despite subsequent efforts by the Kremlin to retract this stance.

The political significance of Poland's approach was underscored by Prime Minister Józef Oleksy, who led a government formed by parties rooted in the previous era, with his confirmation on 3 March 1995 of a new direction in security policy.[9] This ultimately affirmed the continuity of Poland's policy regarding NATO integration. The level of national enthusiasm and internal political consolidation in Poland around the accession impressed other capitals: nor could it have been overlooked by the countries that were to decide on Poland's admission. For example, the Allied member states gave a very positive reception to the fact that – despite the radically different biographies of Presidents Aleksander Kwaśniewski and Lech Wałęsa – their messages regarding the pursuit of NATO membership were identical.

Before the Polish government publicly applied for NATO membership, it conducted an analysis of the potential options. The conclusions were obvious. With significant defence spending and a favourable international situation, it was theoretically possible to envision Poland remaining outside of NATO. However:

- the associated financial costs would have been enormous, as it would have been necessary to develop practically every element of the defence system and infrastructure. Given the immense needs of a state that had only just begun to catch up economically with its neighbours and competitors, this would have represented a colossal effort;
- remaining outside the structures of the Western world would have relegated Poland to second-tier status, without the possibility of influencing the shape of key political or security arrangements;
- considering Poland's international location and historical experience, remaining in the so-called grey zone and becoming an object of struggles for influence among larger players would have been an obvious threat ensuing of non-NATO status;
- if the forecast of a resurgence of great-power and neo-imperial Russia (the kind of Russia we are dealing with today) materialised, Poland would have immediately faced an existential threat.

Therefore, the cost-benefit analysis conclusions were very clear, and remain so to this day.

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[6] 'Poland's 20th anniversary as a NATO member. Proud of our past, confident in our future', Wojsko Polskie, p. 6, wojsko-polskie.pl.

[7] J. Marszałek-Kawa, P. Siemiątkowski (eds.), *Exposé Prezesów Rady Ministrów 1989–2019*, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 100.

[9] *Ibidem*, p. 143.

Three pillars of security policy

At the dawn of the 1990s, as the foundations of Poland's security policy were being formulated, it was anchored upon three main pillars. These comprised the nation's own military capabilities, its collaboration with its partners (particularly within the region, but also extending to European and transatlantic forums), and shaping an international environment conducive to the security of medium-sized states and our region as a whole. Each of these components played a crucial role in the trajectory towards NATO membership.

Poland's defence capabilities were pivotal to deterring a potential adversary (implicitly assumed to be Russia), but over time, they also demonstrated on the international stage that Poland could not only benefit from the support of partners but also contribute to solving international problems. This is why there was such a strong emphasis on promoting Polish experience in peacekeeping operations under the auspices of the United Nations.

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When NATO established the somewhat nebulous NACC in December 1991, Poland prioritised active participation in the so-called Ad Hoc Working Group on Peacekeeping Operations. Similar goals guided the significant efforts to participate in stabilisation operations in Bosnia. As Poland moved closer to NATO (and even during the first years of full membership), engaging in peacekeeping operations and in such operations as in Afghanistan allowed for learning NATO procedures and enhancing interoperability. Therefore, from the beginning of the 'road to NATO', Warsaw focused on maximally aligning structures, selecting personnel for the tasks associated with NATO, and developing operating methods that would align with the Alliance's *modus operandi*.

The desire to ensure the key standard of democratic control over the armed forces, a norm in NATO countries, was reflected in the inclusion of Article 26 in the new constitution in 1997. This states:[10]

1. *The Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland serve to protect the independence of the state and the integrity of its territory and to ensure the security and inviolability of its borders.*

2. *The Armed Forces maintain neutrality in political matters and are subject to civilian and democratic control.*

This addressed public controversies around the role of the military in the political process in Poland as significant enough to include the issue of democratic control over the armed forces in the nation's highest legal act.

Achieving multi-layered interoperability (understood much more broadly than purely militarily, but also institutionally, legally, and even mentally) required a lot of basic work, first in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and then in other key ministries and structures. Convincing others that developing relations and then integrating with NATO could not be done by replicating the habits and experiences of the Warsaw Pact was initially challenging. Much time was spent simply translating various agreements, contracts, and standards expected from NATO candidates. Naturally, the technocratic challenge in this regard was incomparably smaller than integrating Poland into the European Economic Communities (later the European Union).

[10] Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 2 kwietnia 1997 r., Sejm RP, sejm.gov.pl.

One of the prevalent myths about that period is the belief that Poland's most persuasive argument for its NATO candidacy lay in its military capabilities. However, the reality was somewhat different. The armed forces were undergoing intensive reforms, and the military personnel were indeed convinced of the benefits of NATO membership. Yet the undeniable truth was that the Polish defence system had been deformed by years of membership in the Warsaw Pact. The first international operations involving Polish military personnel alongside NATO forces required planners to engage in a form of structural cannibalism: composing a deployed unit necessitated gathering equipment, logistics elements, and often personnel, from units dispersed across Poland. Proficiency in English was critically low (in 1993, of over a hundred generals in the Polish Armed Forces, only a few could communicate in the alliance's operational language – and, in fact, most of those could be found in the military intelligence services).

In other words, although Poland's future military potential was a significant argument, it was understood from the outset of the bid for NATO membership that considerable time would be needed before it reached a credible level. Consequently, there was a necessity to focus on emphasising political, historical, and even geographical aspects.

The power of persuasion and dynamic narration

Poland, a nation harshly treated by history, and in reality, by great-power politics, would undoubtedly have been one of the founding members of NATO in 1949 if not for the lack of full sovereignty and Moscow's dominance in the region. The end of the Cold War and Poland's role in this process endowed it with a strong hand in demanding historical justice.

" Russia has never managed to secure a formal declaration from its Western partners (not to mention NATO itself) on limiting NATO's territorial expansion.

The argument regarding the test that NATO's expansion posed for the fundamental principles of equality of rights and opportunities available to all states – both small and large – participating in the Helsinki process held considerable weight. Opponents of expansion would have to publicly acknowledge that Article 10 of the Washington Treaty (stating that the parties may invite "any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area")[11] and the provisions of the Paris Charter[12] about the right of every country to freely choose its alliances did not apply to states of the former Warsaw Pact. The impossibility of codifying such a form of discrimination prevented Russia from ever securing a formal declaration from its Western partners (not to mention NATO itself) on limiting NATO's territorial expansion. Unfortunately, this myth remains potent even today.

Effective cooperation with partners

Every nation must independently define its objectives regarding the Alliance. Should it opt for membership, the degree to which it meets the expectations of the current members will always be assessed on an individual basis. Nonetheless, it is always significantly more effective to pursue such a goal in coordination and collaboration with other candidates.

For Poland in the 1990s, this principle was fully applied in the path to NATO that we travelled together with the Czech Republic, Hungary (and Slovakia until 1997). This cooperation was largely natural. Warsaw, Budapest, and Prague (the three capitals that first celebrated the invitation to accession talks

[11] The North Atlantic Treaty, NATO, 4 April 1949, nato.int.

[12] For the text of the Paris Charter adopted at the OSCE summit on 21 November 1990, see Charter of Paris for a New Europe, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, osce.org.

in 1997, while Bratislava lost its first chance due to Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar's policies) were linked by similar levels of reforms, a shared view on international affairs, and positive experiences of cooperation within the Visegrád Group (later the V4).

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At the CSCE (later OSCE) forum, Poland endeavoured to coordinate the efforts for full border openness in Europe with its partners, as well as promoting principles of transparency and voluntary choice in the security domain. The goal was generally to bridge the differences in the treatment of (respectively) Eastern and Western Europe, and in particular to prevent preferential treatment of the USSR, and later Russia, compared to the states of the former Soviet bloc.

Building (or rebuilding) good-neighbourly relations in the region was crucial for Poland's security. This included the final regulation of borders (especially with Germany, but also with Russia as the USSR's successor) and straightening out complex issues such as the status of national minorities, economic, and political relations.

Poland's significant role in forging positive and integrative initiatives in the region facilitated its perception in NATO and EU countries. It is worth mentioning that the Study on NATO Enlargement (a 1995 Alliance document outlining the principles of this process and expectations towards potential candidates)[13] emphasised the credible potential to resolve any neighbourly conflicts. Simply put, NATO, with its considerable (though challenging) experience in dealing with discordant members (such as Greece and Turkey), did not wish to import new problems through its open-door policy.

International engagement

From the outset of its endeavours for NATO membership, Poland has placed significant emphasis on active participation in international fora. These have served as valuable platforms, not only for showcasing the nation's achievements, including the success of its economic and social reforms, but also for advertising its steadfast Western orientation.

By engaging in proactive cooperation policies, introducing various initiatives, and advocating for principles and regulations beneficial to Poland, we contributed to favourable conditions for enlargement. This approach utilised the significant role still played by the CSCE/OSCE in the 1990s, with Poland specialising in contributions to peace operations, arms control, and confidence-building measures. Efforts were made to ensure that the agreements did not compromise national freedom for security policy, while also portraying Poland as a country which is willing to share responsibility for addressing international issues.

In the antechamber of NATO

The primary venues for Poland's NATO membership efforts, beyond the key allied capitals, were the dialogue and cooperation forums offered by the Alliance itself. The NACC, for instance, provided an initial opening into NATO's antechamber. It justified the establishment of a Liaison Office at NATO (initially located at the Polish Embassy in Brussels), where a small civil-military team could monitor NATO policy evolution and familiarise themselves with the workings of NATO's institutions and commands.

The opportunity for involvement significantly increased with the invitation to participate in the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme. Due to high hopes in Warsaw, in January 1994, during the V4 summit

[13] Study on NATO Enlargement, NATO, 3 September 1995, nato.int.

with President Clinton in Prague, President Wałęsa reminded allies of their excessive caution regarding NATO expansion. The entourage of then-Prime Minister Pawlak began promoting the unrealistic idea of a Partnership 'for Prosperity' instead of 'for Peace', almost leading to a small munity among Polish diplomats. However, on 2 February, Prime Minister Pawlak signed the PfP Framework Document.

This decision initiated a period of vigorous effort, leveraging the PfP mechanisms and programmes to elevate the relevant political, legal, institutional, and military standards. With determination, Poland sought to build up its military interoperability, and it secured the right to host the first military exercise within PfP in September 1994 in Biedrusko, attended by forces from 13 NATO and partner countries. The success of this exercise, despite the short time available for preparation, earned Poland high marks within the NATO community, both civilian and military.

Poland was also the first country to prepare an Individual Partnership Program (adopted in July 1994)[14] reflecting its urgent and specific integration needs, such as language training for military personnel, standardisation, and familiarisation with NATO's basic structures and mechanisms.

Participation in PfP expanded the circle of experts familiar with the procedures, requirements, and institutional demands associated with membership. PfP facilitated invaluable advice, both formal and informal, from NATO civilian and military representatives, which was free from national biases. This, coupled with bilateral cooperation (internships, expertise, joint projects, etc.), significantly accelerated Poland's progress in defence reform.

The Institutionalisation of PfP dialogue at various levels (ministerial, ambassadorial, chiefs of staff, working and technical groups) provided numerous opportunities to argue Poland's case for advanced status among PfP participants. Despite NATO's emphasis on equal access for all interested states, the daily interactions and a clear understanding of different goals associated with partnership necessitated a more individualised approach, especially for countries openly aspiring to membership. This process was amplified by experiences in the Western Balkans, where some partners (including Poland) demonstrated their alignment with NATO's readiness to play a stabilising role (including military involvement) in the region.

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By mid-1995, the Alliance had to acknowledge and respond to the clear membership aspirations of individual countries. This coincided with the publication of the above-mentioned Study on NATO Enlargement and the US Congress initiatives concerning the admission of three leading candidates from Central and Eastern Europe. For Poland, PfP was merely a preparatory step towards accession, while for others (especially countries still aligning their security interests with Russia), it was an end in itself. NATO's response in 1996 was the Individual Dialogue, which more discussed the potential milestones from partnership to membership in more concrete terms. This process culminated in an invitation for accession talks for Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary issued by the Alliance at the Madrid summit in July 1997.

[14] See R. Kupiecki, *Od Londynu do Waszyngtonu. NATO w latach dziewięćdziesiątych*, Wydawnictwo Askon, Warszawa 1998, pp. 231–232.

The evolution of the Allies' views on Russia

The evolution of attitudes towards the policy of NATO enlargement has been thoroughly described in numerous studies.[15] It is well-known that the stance of the US administration was crucial due to its leadership role in NATO and the credibility of American security guarantees. However, it is pertinent to mention three significant determinants of this process, as they can better explain the chronology and motives behind support for the integration process in various capitals. These include the impact of the Russian factor on the attitudes of NATO's then-members, the radical shift in Germany's approach to enlargement, and the implications of the Balkan wars on NATO's open-door policy.

Without the aggressive policies of the USSR in 1949, NATO would not have been established. Similarly, without the uncertainties surrounding Moscow's policy post-1990, there would not have been such pressure from the former Warsaw Pact members to join NATO. After the Cold War, most of the Alliance's countries were determined to reduce defence spending, aiming to reap the so-called 'peace dividend'. There was a hope that the new Russia would be a cooperative partner rather than a threat to peace in Europe. This belief persisted, with varying intensity, in many capitals until 2014.

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In the process of advocating for Poland's candidacy, it was necessary to address the allies' concerns that NATO expansion could jeopardise the policy of partnership with Russia. By the mid-1990s, even those most sceptical of NATO's enlargement had reconciled with the necessity of granting the countries in the region the right to realise their aspirations. But this was linked to the expectation that they would unequivocally accept the juncture: 'yes' to enlargement, but in parallel with codifying NATO's partnership with Russia. This was already progress compared to the early 1990s when the 'Russia first' policy was at its peak. A dose of realism was injected by the failed August 1991 coup led by Yanayev, later followed by bloody clashes in the Russian parliament in October 1993 and the war in Chechnya.

Polish diplomacy took pains to emphasise these disturbing events, showing Western partners the need for a more realistic view of Russia. Nevertheless, in the political reality of that period, it was only possible to temper certain pro-Russian sentiments and combat those limitations that clearly violated national interests. For instance, the OSCE forum was used to oppose overly restrictive limitations on national defensive potential during the negotiations on the CFE Treaty on conventional forces in Europe, promoting measures for building trust and transparency that aligned with Poland's preferences.

However, it was not possible to prevent the agreements reached in December 1996, when the allies acceded to Russian demands and declared they had no intention, plans, or reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territories of the new member states.[16] Nevertheless, Poland worked intensely to prevent even more radical restrictions on collective defence. In March 1997, NATO announced that "in the current and foreseeable security environment, the Alliance will carry out its missions by developing necessary interoperability and force projection capabilities rather than by stationing sub-

[15] There are many publications covering in depth the evolution of the debate on NATO enlargement. At the very least should be mentioned the following: R. Asmus, *NATO. Otwarcie drzwi*, Warszawa 2002; G.B. Solomon, *The NATO Enlargement Debate, 1990–1997 Blessings of Liberty*, Bloomsbury Academic, 1998; D.S. Hamilton, K. Spohr (eds.), *Open door. NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After The Cold War*, John Hopkins University, SAIS 2019; J. Simon, *NATO Enlargement and Central Europe. A Study in Civil-Military Relations*, National Defense University, 1996; A. Krzeczunowicz, *Krok po kroku. Polska droga do NATO*, Znak, Kraków 1999; J. Goldgeiger, *Not Whether but When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO*, Brookings Institution Press 1999.

[16] See 'Final Communiqué, Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Defence Ministers Session, Brussels, 18 December 1996', NATO, par. 29, nato.int.

stantial combat forces".[17] This version, later reiterated in the NATO-Russia Founding Act of May 1997,[18] represented an improvement over original drafts – largely thanks to Polish efforts. It left an opening for the presence of allied troops on the territory of the new members, with any limits not applying in the event of conflict.

Simultaneously, the situation necessitated actions to convince the allies that Poland – despite its justified scepticism towards the permanence of Russian transformations – would strive to participate in constructive efforts to integrate Russia into the security architecture, without treating Russia as either an adversary or a potential threat. This was considered a worthwhile price to pay in Warsaw (as well as in Prague and Budapest), also because at the time there was some hope of the expectations towards Russia being fulfilled.

Germany: from opponent to promoter

Germany exhibited two distinct approaches as the aspirants followed the path to NATO. Initially (up until early 1993), the German government was absolutely against the enlargement of NATO to include Central and Eastern European countries. In 1991, foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher even articulated this stance in saying: "Yes, they have the right to membership, but we must ensure they do not avail themselves of it".[19] In 1990, the German position could at least be understood in light of their immediate interests: the situation was fluid, with a significant presence of Soviet troops on East German territory, and the paramount goal was German reunification, which required *de facto* consent from the Soviet Union. At that time, some German politicians were even willing to promise Moscow a freeze on Article 10 of the Washington Treaty for the countries of the former Warsaw Pact. This never formally happened, though the issue remains a primary source of the Russian myth about an alleged promise not to expand NATO which the allies purportedly broke.

But thwarting Polish aspirations in 1991–92 was a selfish approach, and did not align with the spirit of the Treaty of Good Neighbourhood and Friendly Cooperation between the Republic of Poland and the Federal Republic of Germany signed on 17 June 1991,[20] nor with the concept of the Weimar Triangle established in August that same year. That was a continuation of *Ostpolitik*, where prioritising good relations with the USSR/Russia came at the expense of relations with other countries in the region.

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Subsequently, however, a significant shift occurred. Initially Germany remained cautious, waiting for initiatives (or the lack thereof) from Washington. Yet, when the stance of the US administration and internal NATO discussions indicated that the enlargement process could not be halted, Berlin began to show support for Polish aspirations. The withdrawal of Russian troops from Germany and Poland in 1993 and the smooth integration of former East German territory into NATO were pivotal. German calculations recognised that including Poland in NATO as a new frontline state (such as West Germany had been until 1990) would be beneficial for the security of a unified Germany. Consequently, Berlin engaged more constructively in the enlargement process from 1994. Polish policy patiently softened initial German resistance, gradually developed military cooperation, and used the Weimar

[17] See 'Statement by the North Atlantic Council. Press Release (97)27', NATO, 14 March 1997, nato.int.

[18] Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation signed in Paris, France, NATO, 27 May 1997, nato.int.

[19] K. Wiegrefe, 'Newly Released Documents Shed Fresh Light on NATO's Eastward Expansion', Spiegel International, 3 May 2022, spiegel.de.

[20] See Traktat między Rzecząpospolitą Polską a Republiką Federalną Niemiec o dobrym sąsiedztwie i przyjaznej współpracy z 17 czerwca 1991 r., *Dziennik Ustaw Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej* of 1992, no. 14, pos. 56: isap.sejm.gov.pl.

Triangle to promote the advantages of integration. It also aimed to reduce scepticism in Poland towards developing military relations with Germany.

The Balkan wars as a catalyst for transformation in NATO

The dramatic events in the Western Balkans were not directly connected to NATO's expansion, but they solidified NATO's reputation as an indispensable security structure on the continent. The Alliance proved not only effective, especially in the context of the bloody conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also demonstrated that collaboration with former Warsaw Pact countries could yield tangible benefits.

> **"The Balkan conflict eased acceptance of the idea that NATO's expansion could bring more benefits than potential risks to its current members.**

For Poland and the other aspirants, the stabilisation mission in Bosnia (involving a Polish contingent and a police mission under NATO command supporting European Union-assigned tasks) offered a unique opportunity to showcase their limited but significant operational capabilities for the benefit of the entire Alliance, and to prove their ability to transform their declarations of solidarity with the Alliance into concrete cooperation. It was also a valuable logistical and standardisation opportunity, which facilitated the identification of paths for reform for the armed forces in line with the Alliance's military expectations.

Over time, the Balkan conflict demonstrated the importance of NATO enlargement to many NATO capitals (including Washington) – not just as a means to fulfil the candidates' justified ambitions, but as a formula ensuring peace, predictability, and stability in Europe. It eased acceptance of the idea that NATO's expansion could bring more benefits than potential risks to its current members.

The shock caused by the bloody clashes in the Balkans also discredited the then-popular idea of the so-called 'royal road' to expansion – first the European Union, then NATO. Security emerged as a priority, while European integration required more time due to the volume of work necessary for the candidates to meet the various economic, legal, and technical criteria.

The historic fax, and the entry ticket into the debating chamber

Following the invitation to accession talks and their smooth progress (the Accession Protocols for Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary were signed on 16 December 1997), only ratification remained. This process concluded in early 1999, as the NATO Secretary General's Private Office informed the Polish Representation at NATO Headquarters by facsimile on 29 January 1999.

A significant consequence of signing the protocols was the admission of Polish representatives (without voting rights but with the right to speak) to almost all NATO committee meetings (the first Ambassadorial Council meeting with Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary as observers took place on 28 December 1997).

From the very beginning, Poland embraced the approach of not being merely a passive listener during these meetings. Sharing insights, analyses, and advocating for certain decisions – even before they could actually participate in voting – was a learning experience in NATO's decision-making process, and demonstrated Poland's potential as an active and responsible member. This indirectly influenced the Alliance's policies in the Western Balkans, towards Russia, and strongly supported the decision for further expansion (especially when advocating for the Baltic states, Slovakia, and Romania).

Lessons from the past for today

The process of defining and subsequently achieving the goal of NATO membership must be unequivocally regarded as successful. Despite the challenging international situation, Poland accomplished

this objective within a decade. What lessons can be drawn from this process which are applicable to the realities of 2024? It appears there are at least six.

Lesson 1: NATO beyond divisions

The most solid and crucial foundation for Poland's accession efforts was national unity. Unlike in some other countries, there was no need for a referendum on NATO membership in Poland. This was a goal that transcended political divisions, uniting all political factions. It would not be an exaggeration to speak of a kind of universal civic mobilisation in Poland – and even beyond its borders, considering the active lobbying by the Polish diaspora and those of Polish descent (for example, in the US, where Jan Nowak-Jeziorański played a historical role). This was a significant asset that was utilised to the fullest possible extent. Today, as one of the main candidates for the presidency of the US openly questions the credibility of Article 5 and the threat of a new war in Europe is no longer considered hypothetical, the cohesion of Polish elites and society in actions to strengthen NATO is as crucial for Poland's security now as the consolidation for membership was in the 1990s. The potential support from the Polish diaspora in this matter cannot be underestimated.

Lesson 2: NATO continues to be the best security guarantee

Poland's path to NATO membership was wisely chosen and well-paced. Membership in the European Union has had (and continues to have) immense significance in terms of economic and civilisational development. However, the level of security NATO provides is the foundation for that prosperity, and significantly aids in maintaining investor confidence. Despite the growing role of the European Union in the broad field of security policy, it is hard to imagine that the current level of hard security guarantees for Europe can be maintained without the United States (as well as the United Kingdom, Canada, Norway, or Turkey for that matter). Any alternatives – such as the development of autonomous European structures and capabilities outside NATO – would be far weaker than what the Alliance offers today, and their (even hypothetical) construction would take many years. Can one imagine a secure Poland today without the presence of thousands of NATO troops on the territory of Poland and the eastern flank without defence plans, the nuclear umbrella, and the other benefits of NATO membership? especially when it is difficult to predict the end of the brutal war being waged against Ukraine right on Poland's border.

Lesson 3: Developing one's own capabilities

NATO membership does not exempt member states from making their own investments, efforts, and sacrifices. This lesson was already being learned by the candidate countries in the 1990s. As it entered the Alliance, Poland hoped for a positive evolution of the international environment, but this did not happen. Ukraine is still not a member of NATO, while Belarus remains allied with Russia. This means an elevated level of threat for every NATO member on the eastern flank. However, fulfilling the necessary tasks during the membership bid has helped Warsaw make strategic decisions, such as reaching the highest level of defence spending in NATO (nearly 4% of GDP). Without it, it would be difficult to push for increased expenditures among other European countries. Along with the necessary investments, they have laid the foundation for the development of the Polish armed forces and system of defence; these, combined with the capabilities of the allies, constitute a significant and credible deterrent force against potential aggressors.

Lesson 4: Cooperation enhances capabilities and builds coalitions

These experiences are paying off today, and the value of cooperation is not diminishing but increasing. The structures and relationships built in the 1990s – the Visegrád Group, the Weimar Triangle, good relations with Germany and the Baltic states – still have great potential. Supported by new formats (e.g. the B9), not to mention the new dimension of EU security policy (which did not exist

25 years ago), they provide a valuable complement to our own capabilities and those available through NATO. Bilateral or multilateral cooperation is not limited by a mandate requiring consensus within the Alliance, for example, in the domains of defence industry cooperation or energy security. Joint projects and initiatives also strengthen Poland's voice, allowing for the necessary coalitions to be formed. Without such cooperation, it would be difficult to envisage the effective promotion of a faster path for Ukraine to NATO, or indeed any of Poland's other political and defence priorities.

Lesson 5: Being inside matters, but so does being active

One of the reasons for seeking NATO membership was the need for equal treatment, including levelling the playing field to allow Poland to co-decide the shape of the region's security architecture. Being inside the Alliance offers incomparably greater opportunities to realise the principle of 'nothing about us without us'. However, this is not an absolute guarantee. The division between the central and peripheral members of the Alliance has not disappeared. Paternalism and a certain disregard of the views of new members had a negative impact on NATO's policy towards Russia before 2022. It is still not possible to speak of a fair distribution of command structures or logistical infrastructure; for example, there is a relative lack of NATO pipeline networks[21] in Central and Eastern Europe compared to Western Europe. The visible reluctance to consider a candidate from an eastern-flank country for the position of Secretary-General,[22] as well as the region's persistent underrepresentation at key positions in the NATO international structures, confirm the existence of this problem. Here too, the positive lessons of more active and determined lobbying, the coordination of efforts, and maintaining them in the long term have lost none of their relevance.

Lesson 6: Sharing knowledge and experience – the case of Ukraine

Lessons from the past can be very useful for those countries that are currently seeking NATO membership. Ukraine is the most obvious candidate that could benefit from Polish experience, provided that Kyiv remains interested. For many months, the Ukrainian government seems to have placed its main hopes in promoting their accession bid in the capitals of the largest Alliance states. At the same time, Kyiv can only gain from emphasising closer regional cooperation, as did the countries that became members many years earlier. Moreover, particularly the Polish experiences related to achieving various NATO standards, institutional and technical interoperability, as well as knowledge of the decision-making mechanisms within the Alliance, could potentially be very helpful on Ukraine's path to NATO. The new NATO-Ukraine Council format, as well as the decision to establish a Joint NATO-Ukraine Analysis, Training, and Education Centre,[23] may provide a favourable framework for such an exchange of experiences.

From 1990 to 1999 the author was a Polish diplomat directly involved in Poland's lobbying efforts for membership in NATO (initially at the MFA in Warsaw, and from 1993 in Brussels). He was active in the Polish Liaison Mission and later the Permanent Mission of Poland to NATO. In 1997 he was a member of the Polish accession talks team. He was the first person from a former Warsaw Pact country to join the International Staff of NATO's HQ in 1999. Until 2019 he worked in different capacities in the Press Service and other parts of the Public Diplomacy Division. Between 2010 and 2015 he served as Director of the NATO Information Office in Moscow.

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[22] R. Pszczel, 'The Search for NATO's New Secretary General – Time for a Candidate from Central Eastern Europe?', Casimir Pulaski Foundation, 13 December 2023, pulaski.pl.

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