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## THE ROLE OF GERMANY AND POLAND IN EUROPEAN DEFENCE

### TENSIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

*In the wake of Russia's war of aggression, Germany and Poland are reforming and expanding their armed forces, with both aiming to develop the strongest land forces in Europe. It is not entirely clear how realistic the ambitious plans are and what the implementation timeframe will look like.*

European security is undergoing a comprehensive overhaul as NATO is drawing up large-scale defence plans for the first time since the end of the Cold War. Germany and Poland, for their part, are currently ramping up their military power: Germany's downscaled armed forces received a €100 billion special fund last year and Poland's defence spending is set to rise to 4% of GDP. The two countries are key security contributors on NATO's eastern flank, with whom Finland – and Sweden, once its accession is finalized – will cooperate closely to defend the Baltic states and region.

Germany also responded to the Russian war of aggression by reinforcing its NATO enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) troops in Lithuania. In June 2023, the German government announced that

it would establish a permanent brigade of 4,000 soldiers in Lithuania. In addition, Germany has pledged 30,000 troops to NATO's New Force Model from 2025 onwards. The feasibility of delivering on the promises will depend in part on recruitment ability and the availability of equipment. The armed forces face considerable recruitment problems because of their poor reputation and the general scepticism of the German public towards the military as an institution. Therefore, Germany's force goal is kept realistic: up from the current 183,000 to 200,000 by 2030 – but even maintaining the current troop size will be a challenge.

The materiel situation of the German armed forces was already dire due to a decade of budget cuts and has further deteriorated as

a result of the weapon deliveries to Ukraine. The government has been slow to fill the gaps with replacement orders from industry. Furthermore, inflation and high interest rates threaten to eat into the €100 billion special fund. The share of interest is currently estimated at around 8%. The original procurement plan from 2022 has already been cut due to increased costs, especially on the navy's part.

The key issue for Germany is the sustainability of political will and long-term financing. Germany will reach NATO's 2% defence spending target at least in 2024 and possibly until 2026, while the special fund lasts. After that, either a new extra-budgetary special fund will be needed – or a substantial increase in the regular defence budget, which is not possible under the current

budget rules. There is currently a gap between Germany's stated ambition to take on a greater role in European security and the lack of long-term funding.

Poland is also investing heavily in its armed forces and is building the same capabilities that Finland has already acquired in recent decades, such as a large land force and artillery, long-range fires, and a well-equipped air force – but on a much larger scale. The geographical proximity of Ukraine and the historically strong threat perception of Russia have led the Polish government to double its defence spending in a year. The aim is also to double the size of the land forces from the current 150,000 to 300,000 by 2035.

While Germany has been slow to proceed from words to deeds, Poland has already signed several procurement deals with the United States worth tens of billions of dollars. However, the most significant purchases in the past year were from South Korea: by 2030, Poland will receive around 1,000 tanks, hundreds of armoured howitzers and rocket launchers, and light fighter jets. The government is financing the recent purchases from

extra-budgetary funds that lack transparency, which increases uncertainty about future funding.

In Poland's case, the compatibility of the many different weapons systems and interoperability with NATO remain open questions. Recent procurement decisions in particular seem to lack long-term planning and analysis, in part because of the perceived urgency to build mass as fast as possible. Poland has the potential to significantly raise its profile on NATO's eastern flank, but a lack of foresight could prove a challenge and lead to suboptimal results. The war in Ukraine has shown that equipment is being used at a high rate. Hence, procurement is important, but it should be guided by a thorough analysis of developments in the security environment to ensure that it meets future needs.

Poland and Germany may end up competing for the role of NATO's Central European power and priority partner for the United States. This competition could be beneficial for Germany in sustaining the motivation to reform its armed forces. But Poland's defence spending could also lead to the familiar

temptation for Germany to reduce its own investment if someone else in Europe is already shouldering the military responsibility, which makes Germans uncomfortable for historical reasons.

Ideally, Poland and Germany would join forces in the interest of European security. However, the strained relations between the countries, and especially the Polish government's sometimes excessively anti-German stance, stand in the way of smooth cooperation. For example, the establishment of a joint repair facility in Poland for Leopard tanks sent to Ukraine stalled because the two governments could not agree on the terms. Moreover, the countries do not coordinate their arms procurement with each other or with NATO, which makes joint planning a challenge.

How well Poland and Germany manage their respective capability-building is crucial for NATO's overall credibility. Finland, with the strongest military in Northern Europe, should make an effort to coordinate closely with both countries and help reduce bilateral Polish-German tensions. /