



## CREDIBILITY OF AMERICAN SECURITY GUARANTEES TOWARDS POLAND IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

WIARYGODNOŚĆ AMERYKAŃSKICH GWARANCJI  
BEZPIECZEŃSTWA WOBEC POLSKI W KONTEKŚCIE  
WOJNY W UKRAINIE

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### — ABSTRACT —

The aim of the paper is to analyze and assess the credibility of American military security guarantees for Poland in the context of the war in Ukraine. This applies to the actions taken by the United States to increase Poland's security after the aggressions in 2014 and 2022, as well as the reality of using the US Armed Forces to defend Poland in the event of a possible attack by Russia. As part of the research, interviews were conducted with scientists and experts from research centers in Washington, D.C. and New York. Although the United States has not met all of Poland's security expectations, it has so far fulfilled its allied commitments. Besides, the American authorities unequivocally ensure that they will defend every inch of NATO territory, including Poland, which is in line with the strategic interests of the USA and the belief of the vast majority of American researchers.

**Keywords:** Poland; the United States; NATO; security guarantees; war in Ukraine

### — ABSTRAKT —

Celem artykułu jest analiza i ocena wiarygodności amerykańskich gwarancji bezpieczeństwa militarnego dla Polski w kontekście wojny w Ukrainie. Dotyczy to działań podjętych przez Stany Zjednoczone na rzecz zwiększenia bezpieczeństwa Polski po agresji Rosji w 2014 i 2022 roku, jak również realiów użycia Sił Zbrojnych USA do obrony Polski w sytuacji ewentualnego zaatakowania jej przez Rosję. W ramach badań przeprowadzono wywiady z naukowcami i ekspertami z ośrodków badawczych z Waszyngtonu i Nowego Jorku. Mimo że Stany Zjednoczone nie spełniły wszystkich oczekiwań Polski w zakresie bezpieczeństwa, to jak dotąd wywiązują się z zobowiązań sojuszniczych. Ponadto amerykańskie władze jednoznacznie zapewniają, że będą bronić każdego cala terytorium NATO, w tym Polski, co jest zgodne ze strategicznymi interesami USA i z przeświadczeniem zdecydowanej większości amerykańskich badaczy.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Polska; Stany Zjednoczone; NATO; gwarancje bezpieczeństwa; wojna w Ukrainie

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## INTRODUCTION

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the global international system changed from bipolar to unipolar. Despite certain internal differences in the perception of the international role of the USA, individual American administrations sought to maintain the country's hegemonic position, which required a flexible response to emerging challenges (Cameron, 2005). These include, among others, the revisionism of authoritarian powers, mainly Russia and China, but also other threats, including international terrorism or the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. For the response to these threats to be effective, the US must maintain its leadership role in the West. Obtaining the support of allies and partners is not always possible, also due to emerging differences of opinion with Western European powers (Orzelska-Stączek, 2011). The leadership role of the US has been supported by the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which mostly positively accepted the American-led order and became part of the Western world (Hansen, 2011). In order to maintain its position as the leader of the West, the United States must above all be a credible guarantor of the security of NATO countries, including the eastern flank of the Alliance (Toje, 2008).

By joining NATO in March 1999, Poland was formally covered by guarantees of collective defense under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. Given the military potential, US conventional and nuclear defense and deterrence capabilities are of greatest importance. Already during the presidency of George W. Bush, Poland sought additional, bilateral security guarantees from the US, the main manifestation of which was its involvement in US-led military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The foundations of strategic bilateral cooperation in the field of security were created in the *Declaration on Strategic Cooperation between the United States of America and the Republic of Poland* of August 2008 (U.S. Department of State, 2008). As part of strategic cooperation, "the United States is committed to the security of Poland and of any U.S. facilities located on the territory of the Republic of Poland". In the following years, the Polish authorities sought to increase the number of American soldiers stationed in the country, who were to guarantee common defense in the case of Russian aggression. The American military contingent in Poland has been increasing along with the escalation of Russian military operations in Ukraine.

The aim of the paper is to analyze and assess the credibility of American guarantees of military security towards Poland in the context of the war in

Ukraine. Particular attention is paid to the response to Russia's full-scale aggression in 2022. The main research problem is contained in the following questions: Has the United States so far fulfilled its allied obligations towards Poland in the context of the destabilization of the situation at its borders caused by the war in Ukraine? Will the United States Armed Forces defend the ally in the event of a Russian attack on Poland? The credibility of American allied guarantees towards Poland will be assessed on the basis of such criteria as: the significance of the guarantees of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty in the US international security strategy and policy; the official position of the American authorities on this issue; US practical efforts to enhance defense and deterrence in Central and Eastern Europe and Poland in the context of the war in Ukraine; and the conviction of American researchers of the US's readiness to defend its NATO allies. During the research, scientists and experts from research institutions in Washington, D.C. and New York were interviewed. In addition, the method of analyzing the content of text sources was used.

#### FULFILLMENT BY THE US OF SECURITY GUARANTEES TOWARDS POLAND AFTER THE RUSSIAN AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE IN 2014

The "reset" in relations with Russia initiated in 2009 by the administration of President Barack Obama was to rebuild relations seriously damaged by the Russian-Georgian war of 2008. The United States noticed the strengthening of Russia's position on the international arena and wanted to develop a partnership with it, but as long as Moscow respected international norms, including sovereignty of its neighbors. *The 2010 US National Security Strategy (NSS)* stated: "We seek to build a stable, substantive, multidimensional relationship with Russia, based on mutual interests. The United States has an interest in a strong, peaceful, and prosperous Russia that respects international norms" (The White House, 2010, p. 44). This was to enable joint solving of international problems, and thus strengthening security in Europe and in the world. American-Russian reset raised concerns in Poland, whose president Lech Kaczyński (2008) had warned at a rally in Tbilisi a year earlier: "Today is time for Georgia, tomorrow it may be time for Ukraine, then for the Baltic States, and later, perhaps, for my own country, Poland!". Concerns were expressed in a letter to President Obama

by former prominent politicians from Poland and CEE<sup>1</sup>. Most of all, they feared the limitation of the US military presence in the region and the settlement of matters concerning the region by the “Concert of Powers” (European Dialogue, 2009). The construction of an American anti-missile system base in Poland had also become uncertain (Madajczyk, 2014). This resulted from both international factors, such as the reset with Russia and an attempt to end Iran’s nuclear program, but also internal ones in the US, including making the missile defense project cost-effective (Warren, 2014). The normalization of relations between Washington and Moscow was intended to enable the US to focus on limiting the development of China as a strategic rival of the US, as part of the “Pivot to Asia” concept initiated in 2011 (Wang, 2015).

Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbass in 2014 led to the failure of the reset policy (David, 2017) and the limitation of the US strategic turn towards the Indo-Pacific. The administration of President Obama decided to build an anti-missile base in Poland as part of a wider NATO project, which also involves the defense of European territory, including Poland (Steff, 2013). What is particularly important, the US confirmed and fulfilled its allied obligations towards Poland as a result of the increased threat from Russia. The *2015 US NSS* stated: “Our Article 5 commitment to the collective defense of all NATO Members is ironclad” (The White House, 2015, p. 25), and the *2017 US NSS*, signed by President Donald Trump, stated: “The NATO alliance of free and sovereign states is one of our great advantages over our competitors, and the United States remains committed to Article V of the Washington Treaty” (The White House, 2015, p. 48). As part of bilateral and multilateral cooperation, the US has taken a number of actions to increase defense and deterrence in CEE, including sending the U.S. Armored Brigade Combat Team and NATO battalion battle group (Larsen, 2017). These military units appeared in Poland at the beginning of 2017. While between 2012 and 2016 the presence of American soldiers in Europe decreased from around 80,000 to about 62,000 troops, in 2017 this number increased to around 70,000, mainly due to the rotational stationing in NATO’s eastern flank countries, primarily in Poland (Kacprzyk, 2020).

In June 2014, the USA initiated the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI), which since 2017 has been operating as the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI).

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<sup>1</sup> Among the 22 authors of the letter were former presidents: Lech Wałęsa (Poland), Aleksander Kwaśniewski (Poland), Vaclav Havel (Czech Republic), Valdas Adamkus (Lithuania), Michal Kovac (Slovakia), Emil Constantinescu (Romania), and Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga (Latvia).

The ERI/EDI budget gradually increased from \$1 billion in Fiscal Year 2015 to \$6.5 billion in FY 2019. Due to the finalization of major investments, including in purchasing and modernizing equipment and repositioning it in Europe, it was reduced in subsequent years (Kacprzyk, 2020). Meanwhile, concern in Europe was caused by President Donald Trump's questioning of the legitimacy of NATO, which he regarded as an "obsolete" organization. As stated by Pierre Morcos (2022), during the Trump presidency, there were serious concerns about the credibility of the US commitment to Article 5 and collective defense of NATO. According to him, Trump wanted to weaken and divide NATO as a collective organization in order to introduce a purely transactional approach towards its individual members. He favored a bilateral relationship with allies ready to pay for US presence and security guarantees. According to James H. Lebovic (2022), President Trump's transactional approach and mercantilist philosophy, and limited knowledge of history and politics, threatened the unity and security of the West. Trump questioned the legitimacy of the existence of NATO, because he perceived it through the prism of the huge amount of resources that the US devoted to defense, and did not bring it a tangible financial profit. Trump failed to see that only a small proportion of US military spending was directed towards the defense of Europe. In addition, he did not pay attention to the fact that Europe was implementing a number of activities around the world that were conducive to the global position of the US. Cynthia Roberts (2022) rightly notes, however, that the United States fulfilled its allied obligations during the administration of President Trump. According to her, European leaders focused too much on the president's rhetoric, who was outspoken. However, rhetoric is different from real policy in the form of deliverables, which was implemented as part of the EDI.

During this period, the Law and Justice government and President Andrzej Duda focused diplomatic efforts on establishing a permanent base of the US Armed Forces in Poland in the size of a division, as part of the "Fort Trump" concept (Ministry of National Defence, 2018). In the opinion of the Polish authorities, the permanent stationing of American troops in Poland in such large numbers was to be the surest guarantee of state security. Ultimately, the project was not implemented, among others due to US concerns about Russia's retaliatory actions. The Americans also recognized that the rotational stationing would be more effective for the implementation of defense and deterrence goals on NATO's eastern flank, which is why they decided to increase the contingent in Poland to 6,500 military personnel on the basis of the so-called permanent rotation (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

There were also speculations about the possibility of transferring American nuclear weapons to Poland, which would be an important element of nuclear deterrence. This issue was raised by the US Ambassador to Poland, Georgette Mosbacher. In the context of the public debate in Germany regarding the legitimacy of stationing American nuclear weapons in that country, she proposed to transfer them to Poland. Steven Pifer (2022) believes that such a statement was the result of very incorrect information that was provided to her on the subject. According to him, such actions would make the weapons much more vulnerable. In Poland, they would be within the range of Russian anti-missile systems located in Kaliningrad. Moreover, it would be very expensive and extremely provocative towards Russia. Also Charles Glaser (2022) expects that tactical weapons would not be shipped to CEE. If NATO decided to use tactical nuclear weapons, it could be launched from where it is currently located. Richard K. Betts (2022) also doubts that there will be support in the US for moving tactical nuclear weapons eastward. The military does not like having to manage nuclear weapons, especially if it could aggravate Russian suspicions.

At the turn of 2021 and 2022, Russia was gathering forces on the border with Ukraine. On February 10, 2022, Russia and Belarus launched ten-day-long joint military drills with the participation of 30,000 Russian troops stationed in Belarus bordering Ukraine. As this increased the risk of war, the American administration decided to deploy 1,700 and a few days later an additional 3,000 soldiers in Poland (Soysal, 2022). Ben Hodges (2022), former commanding general of the United States Army Europe, argued that the West should build an “offramp” for Putin, but it could not do so by betraying Ukraine, NATO allies, or common Western values. The attempt to seek an agreement with Russia was thwarted by the full-scale aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

#### US SECURITY GUARANTEES TO POLAND AFTER RUSSIAN AGGRESSION IN UKRAINE IN 2022

Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022 is a challenge to the West and the leadership of the United States. For the US, as a global promoter of freedom and democracy, it has been crucial to unite the West in supporting Ukraine. Opposing Russia's aggressive policy is also a warning to others, mainly China, not to undermine the existing rules-based international order (The White House, 2022d). The US and NATO had to quickly prepare for military competition,

including increasing the deterrent potential on the eastern flank and improving their capability to defend against Russia (Cordesman, 2022a). On February 25, 2022, a day after Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, President Joe Biden said at a virtual NATO summit: "Our commitment to Article 5 is ironclad" (The White House, 2022a). In the statement ending the extraordinary NATO summit in Brussels on March 24, 2022, Russia's actions were recognized as an unprecedented threat to NATO allies that should be tackled as a priority (NATO, 2022a). In *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept* adopted at the Madrid Summit on June 29–30, 2022, NATO confirmed its readiness to "defend every inch of Allied territory, preserve the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all Allies and prevail against any aggressor" (NATO, 2022b, p. 6). President Biden repeatedly, including on March 26, 2022 in the Royal Castle in Warsaw, assured about the firm defense of every piece of NATO territory: "we have a sacred obligation under Article 5 to defend each and every inch of NATO territory with the full force of our collective power" (The White House, 2022b). The same position was presented by other members of the US administration, including Vice President Kamala Harris, who during her visit to Poland said: "The United States commitment to Article 5 is ironclad. The United States is prepared to defend every inch of NATO territory. The United States takes seriously that an attack against one is an attack against all" (The White House, 2022c). This confirmation was included in the *US National Security Strategy* of October 2022: "the United States will defend every inch of NATO territory and will continue to build and deepen a coalition with allies and partners to prevent Russia from causing further harm to European security, democracy, and institutions" (The White House, 2022d, p. 26). This is facilitated by a high degree of political consensus in the US around NATO commitments (U.S. Department of State, 2021), as well as the favorable attitude of the majority of Americans towards the Alliance, including 67% in a study from June 2022 by the Pew Research Center (2022).

Poland plays a key role in the US-led policy of Western support for Ukraine. Several million Ukrainian refugees have found their way to Poland, it is the most important transit country for the supply of Western military equipment for the Ukrainian army and the second largest donor of this equipment after the USA. Despite Western support for the Ukrainian army, various scenarios for the evolution of the war are still possible, including its extension to NATO countries. For example, the Center for European Policy Analysis, in one of seven scenarios, assumes that the conflict may turn into a "wider European war". The war could escalate from low-level skirmishes in and around NATO front-line members to

a major European or even transcontinental war involving both conventional and nuclear weapons (Polyakova et al., 2022). Poland and other countries on NATO's eastern flank would potentially be most at risk. With the defeats of the Russian army on the Ukrainian front, a successful conventional offensive against Poland or any other country in the region is now very unlikely. Equally unlikely is the use of nuclear weapons, but one cannot underestimate the fact that Russia has short-range nuclear weapons located in Kaliningrad, which directly threatens Poland and Lithuania. The significant support of these countries for Ukraine causes President Vladimir Putin's irritation, which turns into, among other things, nuclear blackmail (Djatkoviča, 2022).

Thierry Tardy believes that a deliberate Russian attack against a NATO ally would be possible if Russia believed it would be able to seize parts of a NATO state's territory. It could even be a very small territory like a tiny island. Russia would hope that this would happen without a strong NATO response, with the main goal of dividing the allies or even dissolving NATO (Tardy, 2022). According to S. Pifer (2022), given the poor performance of the Russian military in Ukraine and how much it is tied up in Ukraine, the idea of Russia now taking on NATO seems kind of silly. He also believes that Putin's threatening NATO countries with nuclear weapons is a bluff. Putin has threatened the West with nuclear weapons many times, including when he seized Crimea in March 2014. He throws around the term pretty loosely, but apart from increasing the number of troops in some commands, there was no real activity of nuclear forces that could confirm the reality of a nuclear alert.

As a consequence of Poland's strong support for Ukraine, Russia has intensified its disinformation campaign in Poland. It tries to evoke a sense of fear and panic in Polish society. One of its elements is undermining the credibility of Western allies' commitments to Poland, including using World War II-related themes (Bryjka, 2022). Edward Luttwak believes that the Polish authorities live in an "incredible illusion" that NATO membership gives them 100 percent protection. He thinks that after a possible Russian invasion of Poland, the American contingent stationed in the country would not necessarily have to be reinforced, on the contrary, it could be evacuated. According to him, Poland, experienced by history, and especially by the events of 1939, cannot blindly believe in Western security guarantees. For this reason, he believes that Poland must be ready to defend itself, so it must significantly increase the number of soldiers and introduce general military training for civilians (Tavberidze, 2022).



However, the position of E. Luttwak is in the minority, as most American researchers confirm the credibility of the US security guarantees towards Poland. After the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022, the Americans almost doubled the military contingent stationed in Poland to about 10,000 soldiers. According to S. Pifer (2022), it was “to basically make sure that the Kremlin understands that the United States and NATO will not fight directly for Ukraine, but they will fight for NATO territory”. Stephen Biddle (2022) claims that the strengthening of the American military presence in Poland and other countries of NATO’s eastern flank is a sign of the US’s readiness to defend its allies. He says: “When dealing with an aggressive actor like Putin, the last thing you could do is to give him an opportunity to push harder”. J.H. Lebovic (2022) believes that for the United States under Biden, Article 5 is extremely important and that if Russia attacked any NATO country, the US would respond by sending troops to defend them: “it’s not an ironclad guarantee, but it’s almost reflexive that the United States would do this. It’s indicated as much by reinforcing its units in that area. I mean, I have no doubt”. He has also no doubt that if the Republicans came to power in the US, they would do the same, pointing out that the isolationist forces are in the minority. He recalls that the US guarantees also cover nuclear capability: “the United States has committed to its allies that if necessary it would use nuclear weapons to thwart the Russian advance, despite the fact that the Russians used to claim there can’t be a limited nuclear war”. Also R.K. Betts (2022) is consistent with the statement that the US Armed Forces will defend the territory of each of the countries of NATO’s eastern flank by sending their own troops if there is an attack by Russia. James Goldgeier (2022) after 2014 was not sure how the United States and NATO would react, if Russia decided to take any kind of hostile action against any of the eastern flank states. Currently, considering the scale of assistance provided to Ukraine, which is not a NATO member, he would be shocked if the US did not directly intervene on behalf of NATO members. According to him, President Putin also knows that Article 5 of the Washington Treaty is a very serious obligation, so he will be very careful not to get involved in a direct war against NATO. As Kimberly Morgan (2022) notes, the common sense of threat from Russia and solidarity around helping Ukraine led to the revitalization of NATO, which in recent years seemed to be in disrepair. As she claims: “Now there’s a kind of renewed commitment to making NATO a vibrant organization”.

It is worth noting that the Law and Justice government does not believe in security guarantees of Western European countries, including Germany and

France, which dominate the European Union. According to P. Morcos (2022), there is no question about the French commitment to Article 5 of NATO, which the French government has repeatedly asserted. In addition, France actively supports defense and deterrence against Russia, including being part of battalion battlegroups in Estonia and Romania. Besides, France's nuclear forces play an important role in nuclear deterrence. Germany is also working to strengthen NATO's eastern flank, including as a framework nation in NATO battle group in Lithuania. On the other hand, the support of these countries for the Ukrainian army is small, which irritates Poland and the USA. The guarantees of European allies are important because, as C. Roberts (2022) notes, the United States has so far not done enough to prevent China from developing its position in Asia, and sooner or later it will have to focus on the Indo-Pacific. For this to happen, Europe needs to take much more responsibility for its own security. However, as long as there is no serious escalation of tension in the Pacific, the countries of NATO's eastern flank can count on decisive US assistance.

Poland is now NATO's first line of defense and a key power in defending the Central Region, that is why the United States and NATO are intensively cooperating with it to strengthen its capabilities (Cordesman, 2022b). It should be emphasized that Poland fully meets its defense commitments by spending more than the 2 percent of GDP required by NATO. In addition, it purchases significant amounts of modern armament, mainly from the USA, like Abrams tanks, F-35 aircraft, and Aegis, Patriot, and HIMARS systems, which, according to the US Ambassador to Poland, Zbigniew Brzeziński, is appreciated in Washington (PAP, 2022). Since February to the end of June 2022, the United States deployed or extended over 20,000 additional forces to Europe in response to the Ukraine crisis, adding additional air, land, maritime, cyber, and space capabilities, bringing total to more than 100,000 service members across Europe. As mentioned earlier, a large part of these soldiers ended up in Poland. For keeping forces in Europe under the EDI, the U.S. Department of Defense allocated \$3.8 billion in FY 2022, and requested \$4.2 billion for FY 2023 (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). The soldiers stationed in Poland and other countries of NATO's eastern flank are intended to discourage Russia from transferring military operations to the territory of the Alliance countries. These soldiers are backed up by tanks, air defense, and intelligence and surveillance units. They are combat-ready, but mainly act as a trip wire, triggering reinforcements in the event of a Russian assault (Big-Alabo & MacAlex-Achinulo, 2022). According to J. Goldgeier (2022), while after the Russian limited aggression against Ukraine in 2014 there was a commitment

in NATO to the NATO-Russia founding act about not establishing permanent infrastructure in the states that came in after 1999, after the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022, the founding act is dead. He would be surprised if there was not an effort to put more permanent infrastructure of NATO, including American, in Poland. However, there is a question whether the issue of Poland's departure from the principles of liberal democracy and the rule of law, which the administration of President Biden criticized before the war, will not stand in the way. Michael Miller (2022) believes that the issue of democratic regression in Poland will not affect Polish-American cooperation in the area of security, as Poland fulfills its commitments within NATO and implements security policy consistent with American ones. Therefore, the issue of the quality of democracy will not affect American security guarantees towards Poland, including the possibility of increasing the American military contingent in the country.

In March 2022, the US Army in Europe temporarily moved two Patriot batteries from Germany to Poland, placing them at the Rzeszów-Jasionka airport. They are to protect the territory of Poland bordering with Ukraine, American soldiers stationed there, Polish citizens and arms transports to Ukraine. On November 15, a rocket fell in the village of Przewodów in Lubelskie Voivodeship, killing two Polish citizens. In order not to escalate tensions, the US administration abstained from speculation and announced that it would take appropriate action after an investigation (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Contrary to the claims of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, it turned out that the rocket was launched by the Ukrainian army, not the Russian one, as part of defense against Russian missile attack. If there is an accidental or deliberate Russian missile attack on Poland in the future, it will be another challenge for American security guarantees.

## CONCLUSION

The US leadership role in the West largely depends on the credibility of American security guarantees within NATO. For this reason, this issue is of strategic importance in US foreign and security policy. In official documents and communiqués, Washington invariably asserts its ironclad commitment to the allied guarantees under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. The American authorities firmly assure that the US Armed Forces will defend every inch of NATO territory, including Poland, if it is attacked by Russia. In the circumstances of the subsequent stages of the war in Ukraine, the United States has been fulfilling its allied

obligations towards Poland, which gives credibility to American guarantees in practical terms. It began to significantly increase its rotational military presence in Poland and CEE after the outbreak of the war in Donbass in 2014, which was significantly accelerated after Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022. Increased rotational stationing has so far been an effective factor in deterring Russia from attacking a NATO member, but after 2022, the chance for a permanent base in Poland with a larger grouping of troops increased. In recent years, permanent commands of the US Army have appeared in Poland, including corps and division level, and the construction of the US anti-missile base will soon be completed. The US reaction to the war in Ukraine reinforces the conviction of the vast majority of American researchers that American soldiers will definitely defend European allies, including Poland.

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