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Polish Defence Policy under the New Government: The First 100 Days

Aleksandra Krakiewicz

When the new Polish government under Prime Minister Donald Tusk took office in November 2007, it announced ambitious reform proposals in the area of foreign and defence policy. Not only were Poland's European credentials to be strengthened and a more assertive stance adopted in relations with the US, the modernisation of the Polish armed forces was to be significantly accelerated. A clear change in foreign policy style was evident in the first 100 days of Tusk's government. While this does not imply a shift in Poland's strategic interests, European governments should use the opportunity to intensify the foreign policy dialogue with Warsaw. With regard to military modernisation, the planned transition from a conscription army to a fully professional force will be a crucial step. Yet, a range of carefully designed measures is needed in order to recruit and retain skilled and highly-motivated volunteers. In view of Poland's ambitions to be a key ally and contributor to international crisis management operations, the Tusk government should not rush the professionalisation of the army because of public opinion pressure.

On 24 February the government of Prime Minister Tusk completed its first 100 days in office. The occasion was used to take stock of some first achievements and lay out the path for further reforms. Prime Minister Tusk came to power with an ambitious foreign policy agenda. His declared aim was to make Poland a reliable, predictable partner in Europe and to rectify the confrontational course of his predecessor Jaroslaw Kaczynski.

In his inaugural address on 23 November 2007, Prime Minister Tusk also announced two major priorities for the Polish military.

First, Polish troops are to be withdrawn from Iraq before the end of 2008. Secondly, the suspension of the draft is to be moved forward to 2009 in order to allow for a transition to an all-volunteer force (AVF) by 2010. With the controversial US Missile Defence Shield grabbing the headlines, these two issues have received considerably less attention in the international press. Yet, their success is crucial if Poland is to continue its active engagement in both NATO and the ESDP.

New tone, old interests?

Poland has had a military presence in Iraq since the 2003 invasion. Prime Minister Tusk announced the withdrawal of all Polish troops by the end of 2008 as one of his government priorities.

Plans for the withdrawal have been discussed and co-ordinated with the US and there is now a clear timetable in place. The hand over to Iraqi authorities is scheduled for June 2008 and all Polish troops should be withdrawn from Iraqi territory by 30 October 2008.

In turn, Poland has announced the reinforcement of its contribution to ISAF in Afghanistan. The current contingent of 1,200 soldiers is going to be increased to 1,600. There are also plans for Poland to take over command in the Paktika province.

While undoubtedly a staunch supporter of the US and NATO, it should not be overlooked, however, that Poland has also made significant contributions to ESDP missions. Polish soldiers have been deployed in the DR Congo and with EUFOR-ALTHEA in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Tusk government has equally pledged to contribute about 350 soldiers to the most recent ESDP operation in Chad. Furthermore, Poland is supposed to participate in several EU Battle Groups. From 2010, it is due to act as framework nation in a Battle Group with Germany, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia. A second Battle Group in co-operation with Germany and France is scheduled to become operational in 2013. Finally, there are plans for a Visegrad Battle Group with Czech, Slovak, Hungarian and Ukrainian participation in 2015.

Over the last ten years, Poland has sought to advance its status and influence in international affairs through active engagement in crisis management and peacekeeping operations. Prime Minister Tusk is continuing this course. Striking the right balance between transatlantic solidarity and European commitments will be the key challenge for his government. What we have seen so far has been a

marked change in tone and foreign policy style. The Tusk government has sought to re-negotiate the terms of the partnership with the US. While Poland's pledge to send additional troops to Afghanistan is important in view of the reluctance of other NATO allies to increase their commitments, the announced concentration of Polish troops in the Paktika province serves above all to raise the visibility of Poland's contribution. Moreover, on the issue of the Missile Defence Shield, Warsaw has been making far-reaching demands for US military assistance. These are said to include Patriot and THAAD air defence systems as well as \$20 billion for the modernisation of the Polish military. The Americans have not made their final offer yet, but have shown a general willingness to consider some of Poland's conditions. It is thus clear that Poland is determined to finally reap the benefits of its unstinting support for the US and be treated as a serious partner. It will be crucial for Tusk to present the outcome of the negotiations with the US as a success to the Polish public which is increasingly less willing to accept unconditional support for US policies. The US, however, is unlikely to meet all of the substantial Polish demands. For Tusk, therefore, the stakes are high.

Within the EU, dialogue with the Poles has become far more open and constructive. The recent move towards lifting the veto on EU-Russia partnership talks has been an important signal. Likewise, the contribution to EUFOR Chad/RAC enhances Poland's European credentials. The shift in foreign policy style, however, should not distract from the fact that Poland's fundamental interests have not changed. Poland is striving to have its voice heard both in Washington and Brussels. The impetus will thus be on other European governments to seize the opportunity of having a more open partner in Warsaw and engage Poland more closely in European initiatives. This window of opportunity may even widen if Poland's current negotiations with the US do not lead to the desired outcome.

Pressure to modernise the armed forces

The pressure of an increasing range of crisis management operations abroad has led Poland, like most of its European partners before it, to believe that a professional army is better suited to meet the new military requirements. The rule has been that the more European countries are engaged in missions abroad, the more they are inclined to reduce the percentage of conscript-personnel in their armed forces and to enlarge the share of volunteers. Peacekeeping and peace-enforcement missions require that military forces can be deployed for extended periods of time away from national territory, often in complex and ambiguous operational environments. This in turn tends to require flexibility and high skill levels from military personnel, reinforcing the shift from conscript-based force structures to professional volunteer units.

In the new strategic environment following the end of the Cold War, more than a dozen European countries have abolished conscription in favour of AVFs. Beyond the functional imperatives of international crisis management and expeditionary warfare, public opinion has often been another crucial factor in the decisions to suspend conscription. This has also been the case in Poland where a large majority of the public is in favour of ending conscription. As a consequence, the Kaczynski government had already announced plans to phase out the draft by 2012.

Yet, many of the European countries who have abolished conscription in recent years are now facing serious difficulties in recruiting sufficiently qualified personnel. As a consequence, some of them have had to lower entry requirements. This has had a detrimental effect on the quality of their volunteers and is at odds with the rising skill-levels required in complex international stabilisation missions.

On the occasion of completing the first 100 days in office, Defence Minister Bogdan Klich reported on the progress of military reform. He confirmed the aim to have estab-

lished a fully professional army by January 2010. He admitted, however, that this would entail a previously unforeseen reduction in overall force numbers from currently 150,000 to 120,000.

Military officials have voiced their concern over the issue of recruitment and advised the government to provide adequate financial incentives to make the military profession more attractive. Their concerns are justified. There are already 17,000 vacant posts in the Polish armed forces today. Opinion polls show the low appeal the military enjoys among the younger generations. A survey commissioned by the Defence Ministry in January 2008 reveals that among 17–25 year old Poles, only 5 per cent are ‘very interested’ and 11 per cent ‘interested’ in a military career.

In addition, the reform is scheduled to coincide with the lifting of restrictions on the free movement of labour to Germany and Austria. The defence ministry must therefore take into account that competition for young, skilled personnel is now not only national, but that the military will be competing with civilian employers in neighbouring EU countries.

The types of operations the Polish armed forces are engaged in today require skilled, highly-motivated personnel. The military needs to avoid becoming the last resort for unqualified labour from the social margins. Moreover, a successful transition to an AVF does not only hinge on the question of recruitment but also on the ability to retain personnel.

Boosting military pay, therefore, will not be sufficient. A wide range of measures must be put in place to ensure the competitiveness of the military on the labour market. Such measures include improving recruitment efforts through, for example, advertising and professional recruitment teams. Seeking recruits from non-traditional or underrepresented backgrounds (such as ethnic minorities and women) may also be important in order to expand the pool of prospective volunteers.

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In addition, career paths within the armed forces have to be improved. Last year about 5,000 professional soldiers left the Polish military prematurely. There are shortages of privates and lower- and middle-ranking officers. Thus plans need to be developed for a merit-based, more transparent promotion system. This could prove a crucial measure to retain those already in service.

Other incentives that have been contemplated by the Defence Ministry include special allowances for food and a housing scheme. Another issue that should be addressed is post-service employment and the mutual recognition of military and civilian qualifications. While the Defence Ministry has started to explore some of these issues, no coherent reform proposal has been put forward as yet.

It also remains to be seen how the professionalisation of the army is going to be financed. While AVFs can prove the more cost-efficient option in the long-term, the initial transition is costly. In the 2007 defence budget of approximately 20,200 million zloty, personnel costs made up roughly one quarter (5,422 million zloty). It should also be remembered that the Polish military is currently going through a significant modernisation process of its technical equipment, which requires substantial financial resources. While Poland is receiving financial assistance from NATO and the US government, it is hard to see where the funds for a sound professionalisation process, including the aforementioned set of measures, are going to come from.

The need for incentives and a comprehensive approach

Poland would be well-advised to learn from the experiences of other European countries and make sure it puts into place an attractive package of recruitment incentives and personnel policies. It is going to be difficult to design and implement such a comprehensive package within the tight

schedule the Tusk government has set itself for the transition to an AVF. The failure to do so could result in serious difficulties for the Polish armed forces and, in the worst case scenario, limit their ability to contribute to international crisis management. This would not be in Poland's national interest since its willingness to participate in international missions has been an important way to boost Poland's status and alliance credentials. Reform failure would also be a blow to Poland's European partners. It could compromise future Polish troop contributions to ESDP missions and put plans for three new Battle Groups (scheduled for 2010, 2013 and 2015) into disarray.