

Fabian Kobalczyk-Gruda

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University of the National Education Commission, Krakow

ORCID: 0009-0001-5750-7086

Between Symbolism and Real Defence: Poland's Security Policy in Response to Russian Aggression, 2014–2022

Abstract: The article examines Poland's security policy towards the Russian Federation in 2014–2022 in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donbas. It employs a qualitative research approach based, among other things, on the analysis of strategic documents and official positions of the Republic of Poland, NATO, the European Union, and the United Nations, supplemented by selected data on defence expenditure, military presence, and military exercises. The article advances the hypothesis that Poland's response was adaptive rather than revolutionary: politically consistent and active, yet constrained in its strategic effectiveness. The analysis indicates that Poland's real impact was mainly expressed in supporting NATO's adaptation on the eastern flank, from reassurance measures to territorial deterrence. At the same time, its broader effectiveness remained limited by divergent interests within the European Union and by the structural constraints of the United Nations Security Council. Overall, Poland played a politically significant role in diagnosing threats and shaping debate, but remained dependent on allied decisions and capabilities.

Keywords: deterrence, international politics, UN, NATO, international security

Introduction

Since 2014, the European security system has entered a phase of sustained confrontation with the Russian Federation, in which the categories of power and deterrence have once again become central.

The aim of this article is to determine to what extent Poland's security policy towards the Russian Federation in 2014–2022 was “real” as opposed to “symbolic”, and to what degree the measures undertaken



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by Warsaw within NATO, the European Union, and the United Nations contributed to a tangible strengthening of the security of the state and the region. The “real” dimension of action is understood primarily as instruments that led to measurable changes in the configuration of capabilities and security procedures, whereas the “symbolic” dimension refers to actions that perform a normative, image-related, and mobilising function, which did not directly translate into changes in Russia’s behaviour.

Although Poland was unable to substantially constrain the Russian Federation’s pursuit of its strategic objectives *vis-à-vis* Ukraine, the real dimension of Polish policy was primarily expressed through its contribution to accelerating NATO’s shift on the eastern flank from reassurance measures to territorial deterrence. Consequently, Warsaw’s policy was more effective as a factor strengthening deterrence against potential aggression against NATO member states than as an instrument for restraining Russia’s expansion in the “grey zone”¹ of security, encompassing states remaining outside NATO structures.

The article employs a qualitative research approach, based, among other things, on the analysis of strategic documents and official positions of the authorities of the Republic of Poland, NATO, the European Union, and the United Nations, supplemented by a comparative analysis of selected data on defence expenditure, military presence, and military exercises. The selected research material enables the capture of both the declaratory and operational dimensions of Poland’s security policy towards the Russian Federation. The research problem is therefore reduced to the question of the extent to which the measures undertaken by Poland after 2014 were effective and translated into a real strengthening of the state’s security and NATO’s eastern flank.

The article is based on an analysis of Poland’s actions across three interdependent dimensions. First, it presents Warsaw’s response to the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donbas, highlighting the tension between the principled nature of its position and constraints on its agency. Second, it assesses the significance of military cooperation within NATO and with the United States for deterrence on the eastern flank. Third, it

¹ The “grey zone” refers to a spectrum of hostile activities conducted below the threshold of open armed conflict, designed to achieve strategic effects while avoiding a clear *casus belli* and complicating a collective defence response. It encompasses, *inter alia*, information and cyber operations, sabotage, economic and energy coercion, the instrumentalisation of migration, proxy activities, and deliberately ambiguous incidents intended to obscure attribution and legal qualification.

analyses diplomatic and sanctions-related instruments within the EU and the determinants of action at the UN forum, including the consequences of the Security Council veto mechanism.

Poland's response to the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donbas: between principle and constraints

Russia's annexation of Crimea and the Donbas conflict began a new West-Moscow confrontation, restoring classical ideas of power, deterrence, and sovereignty (Major, 2015). For Poland, these events required a new security policy. The country shifted from dialogue with Russia to strengthening defence and ties with NATO and the US. However, economic interdependence, especially in energy, continued. From 2014–2022, Poland combined a normative commitment to international law and solidarity with a strategic focus on deterrence via alliances.

Russia's 2014 aggression exposed the limits of international instruments in the EU and the UN. EU unity was weak, particularly due to Germany's energy policy and the Nord Stream projects, which made a common strategy difficult. Despite limited resources, Poland sought to lead allied actions in the EU and globally.

NATO's actions after Russian aggression were gradual and adaptive. The Alliance increased its military presence on the eastern flank, developed rapid-response structures, and strengthened interoperability among armed forces. These measures focused on deterrence rather than offence. Poland viewed Russia as the main threat. It advocated for more allied troops, expanded NATO infrastructure, and stronger U.S. cooperation.

To assess whether Poland's response was primarily symbolic or strategically consequential, it is also necessary to refer to the official strategic documents that defined the state's perception of threats and preferred instruments of action.

An important point of reference for assessing Poland's security policy during the analysed period is the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland of 2014 and 2020. These documents are significant not only because they define the official hierarchy of threats and strategic priorities, but also because they reveal how the Polish state understood the relationship between national capabilities, allied commitments, and the evolving security environment in Europe. For this reason, they should not

be treated merely as background documents but as an important source for evaluating the degree of continuity and change in Poland's response to Russian aggression.

The 2014 National Security Strategy was adopted in the immediate aftermath of the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in eastern Ukraine. Although its language remained more restrained than that of the 2020 document, it already reflected a clear deterioration of Poland's security environment. The strategy stressed that membership in Euro-Atlantic and European structures reinforced Polish security and explicitly stated that "NATO constitutes the most important form of political and military cooperation" between Poland and its allies (SBN RP, 2014, p. 9). At the same time, it identified the conflict with Ukraine, including the annexation of Crimea, as a development with negative consequences for regional security, and pointed to Russian political, military, and economic pressure in the EU's eastern neighbourhood. In this sense, the 2014 strategy did not yet fully develop a threat narrative centred exclusively on Russia. Still, it clearly showed that Polish strategic thinking had already shifted away from earlier assumptions about the relative stability of the regional order toward a more security-driven reading of developments in Eastern Europe (SBN RP, 2014).

The 2020 National Security Strategy marked a further step in this evolution. In contrast to the more cautious wording of the 2014 document, the new strategy explicitly identified Russia as the primary source of danger, stating that the "most serious threat is the neo-imperial policy of the authorities of the Russian Federation" (SBN RP, 2020, p. 6). This diagnosis was linked directly to the aggression against Georgia, the illegal annexation of Crimea, and Russia's activities in eastern Ukraine, all of which were presented as violations of international law and as factors undermining the foundations of the European security order. The 2020 strategy also placed much stronger emphasis on deterrence, the presence of allied forces on Polish territory, strategic cooperation with the United States, and the strengthening of NATO's deterrence and defence posture. Equally important, it gave resilience, including civic defence, preparedness for hybrid threats, and the broader capacity of the state and society to withstand both military and non-military pressure, a far more prominent place (SBN RP, 2020).

Therefore, a comparison of the two strategies suggests continuity rather than rupture in Poland's security policy. The core orientation remained the same: a strong reliance on NATO, the transatlantic bond, support for

the sovereignty of states in the eastern neighbourhood, and a preference for embedding Polish security policy within wider allied and European frameworks. What changed was the degree of explicitness and strategic intensity. The 2020 document did not inaugurate a wholly new direction, but rather deepened and sharpened an earlier diagnosis that had already been visible in 2014. This confirms that Poland's response to Russian aggression was adaptive rather than revolutionary: the state did not abandon its previous strategic foundations, but increasingly reinterpreted them in light of a more openly revisionist and militarised Russian policy. From this perspective, the evolution between the two strategies illustrates not a paradigmatic break. Still, a transition from a more cautious recognition of instability to a more direct and fully articulated threat assessment focused on deterrence, resilience, and allied cohesion.

Against this strategic background, Poland's practical response to the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donbas can be examined more precisely in terms of both its political consistency and its limited operational effectiveness.

Poland's policy towards Russia since the early twenty-first century has had varied approaches to international relations. Experts distinguish two main variants. The first, a realist policy, saw Russia as an unavoidable neighbour with a fixed nature. From this perspective, relations with Moscow should be grounded in state interests, dialogue, and pragmatic instruments. This was Poland's approach from 2007 to 2014. Critics, however, saw this as pro-Russian and harmful to Polish national interests. They noted the risks of overaccommodating Russia and of weakening Poland's international role (Legucka, 2019).

Regional changes, such as the Euromaidan protests, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and a change in Poland's government, led to a new foreign policy. The Piłsudski-inspired Intermarium vision placed Poland between Russia and Germany. It was sceptical of long-term constructive relations with Russia (Waingartner, 2022, pp. 49–51). After Russia's 2014 aggression in Ukraine, Poland became a strong critic of Moscow. At the same time, it strengthened its regional position and helped the states on its eastern flank. Poland supported Ukraine and developed tools to create a regional security buffer.

The instruments of Poland's policy towards Russia included primarily:

- Encouraging EU member states to impose economic and energy sanctions to limit Russia's influence in the EU and reduce dependence on Russian energy (Mubarok, Susanto, 2021, pp. 120–135).

- Political and diplomatic efforts via the EU and UN warned against Russia's further ambitions.
- Domestic policy instruments include shaping public opinion and preparing state structures for potential threats.
- Military actions enhanced defence capabilities and improved cooperation with NATO and allies through increased exercises and greater interoperability.

Cooperation with NATO and the United States: more presence, but real deterrence?

Deterrence theory encompasses a range of concepts that can be used to analyse NATO policy in 2014–2022. In the context of NATO's eastern flank in Central Europe, one may ask which type of deterrence prevailed during this period. The literature most often adopts a mixed variant:

- Deterrence by punishment: deterrence through the threat of punishment, for example, sanctions of various kinds or retaliatory strikes in the event of aggression. A classic illustration is Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which assumes a collective response by NATO member states in the event of an attack against any member (Ellis, 2003, pp. 337–351).
- Deterrence by denial: deterrence by creating capabilities that prevent an adversary from achieving its operational objectives. On the eastern flank, this meant, *inter alia*, increasing the forward military presence, strengthening resilience-related infrastructure and military enablers, and developing rapid response capabilities (Gallagher, 2019, pp. 31–45).

From 2014–2022, NATO undertook a range of measures that can be interpreted as elements of mixed deterrence:

- I. Increased military presence on the eastern flank: Rotational battalion-sized battlegroups were deployed in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, with troop numbers ranging from several hundred to over 1,000 at each location, depending on the period and exercise cycle (Trojanowska, 2023, pp. 189–203).
- II. Military exercises: Key manoeuvres included Noble Jump, Steadfast Defender 2021, Defender Europe 2021, Steadfast Pyramid 2021, and Steadfast Pinnacle 2021, which increased interoperability, mobilisation capacity, and Alliance readiness (Tarociński, 2023).

Table 1. Approximate number of military personnel participating in selected NATO exercises

Noble Jump	2015	approx. 2,100+ (SHAPE Public Affairs Office, 2015)	first deployment of the VJTF (“spearhead”) and field forces
Steadfast Defender	2021	approx. 9,000+ (SHAPE, 2021)	land/sea/air components; 20+ countries
Defender-Europe	2021	approx. 28,000 (U.S. Army Europe and Africa)	U.S. Army-led exercise with Allies and partners; multinational
Steadfast Pyramid	2021	approx. 50 (Kubiczek, 2021)	command-post exercise; not a large-scale field manoeuvre

Source: author compilation based on the sources cited in the table.

The comparison indicates that, after 2014, exercises became an important instrument of Alliance adaptation, combining training and procedural functions with signalling towards Russia. This may strengthen deterrence credibility by improving readiness and interoperability, though the scale and nature of some activities (especially command-post exercises) limit their value as indicators of “hard” combat capability.

III. Increased defence spending: NATO member states gradually increased defence budgets to strengthen combat capabilities and to modernise equipment (Płaczek, 2021, pp. 79–92).

Table 2. Approximate defence expenditure as a share of GDP in selected NATO states (% , 2013–2022)

Estonia	1,9	1,93	2,03	2,07	2,01	2,01	2,04	2,30	2,03	2,16
France	1,86	1,82	1,78	1,79	1,78	1,81	1,81	2,00	1,91	1,88
Germany	1,23	1,19	1,19	1,20	1,23	1,25	1,35	1,51	1,45	1,51
Latvia	0,92	0,94	1,03	1,44	1,59	2,06	2,02	2,16	2,09	2,09
Lithuania	0,76	0,88	1,14	1,48	1,71	1,97	1,99	2,07	1,96	2,45
Poland	1,73	1,88	2,23	2,00	1,89	2,02	1,99	2,23	2,22	2,23
United Kingdom	2,24	2,14	2,03	2,09	2,08	2,10	2,08	2,35	2,29	2,29
United States	4,03	3,71	3,51	3,50	3,28	3,26	3,47	3,58	3,53	3,31

Source: author compilation based on: (NATO, 2024; NATO, 2021; SIPRI, n.d.; World Bank, n.d.).

Defence-spending data illustrate a trend of capability strengthening within NATO; however, an increase in the percentage indicator does not automatically translate into a real improvement in deterrence. Its effect depends on the spending structure (modernisation, readiness,

stockpiles, infrastructure) and the speed with which resources are converted into operational capabilities. In this sense, Poland's effectiveness did not lie in autonomous military agency, but rather in its ability to reinforce and politically accelerate the Alliance's adaptation to the threat on the eastern flank.

IV. Development of operational readiness and flexible structures: Within the NATO Response Force (NRF), the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF), and the NATO Force Integration Units (NFIU), rapid reaction and logistical coordination mechanisms were introduced in 2014–2015 to enable crisis response (Solloch, Pietrzak, 2016, pp. 13–28).

It is also necessary to present Russian actions during the same period. In the case of the Russian Federation, efforts were oriented towards rebuilding and developing its combat potential and preparing for a possible large-scale conventional offensive, which materialised in 2022. Following the Serdyukov reforms (2008–2012), which initially reduced force numbers, in 2013–2014 the number of active personnel increased from approximately 770,000 to over 900,000 (it should be noted that these forces were not concentrated in the Western Military District), providing a starting point for further militarisation after 2015 (Wiśniewski, 2018). Key measures included:

Table 3. Approximate number of Russian military personnel (including Russia's allies) in selected exercises

Zapad	2017	12,700 (Sutyagin, 2017)	Studies cite substantially higher estimates for the broader undertaking (e.g., 230,000–240,000, according to Ukrainian sources cited in analyses).
Vostok	2018	approx. 300,000 (Stoicescu, 2018)	Although the accuracy of the officially reported figure has been questioned in the literature, the estimate of 300,000 personnel remained the most widely cited in international reporting.
Kavkaz	2020	approx. 80,000 (TASS, 2020)	Generally consistent with official communications (also includes support elements, air defence, naval component, and special formations).
Zapad	2021	up to approx. 200,000 (Wilk, Żochowski, 2021)	Figure widely repeated in analyses; emphasis is placed on the multi-domain scale and a long preparation period.

Source: author compilation based on the sources cited in the table.

- A. Technical modernisation: development of new weapons systems, combat vehicles, aircraft, and missile units (Dyner, 2021).
- B. Military exercises: including Zapad 2017, Vostok 2018, Kavkaz 2020, and Zapad 2021, which improved mobilisation capacity and coordination in large operations (Topolski, 2019, pp. 185–201).
- C. Militarisation of border territories: especially in the Kaliningrad Oblast and Crimea, increasing strategic readiness in the region (Topolski, 2022).
- D. Increasing force size and mobility: development of rapid response capabilities and raising unit combat readiness.

Russian strategic culture, its approach to diplomacy, and its conduct of international politics are, to a significant extent, grounded in the factor of force (for example, the use of the nuclear arsenal in international affairs). Historical experience and geopolitical traditions support the inference that Russia primarily respects states capable of demonstrating real military power; at the same time, it consistently demonstrates its own strength and places particular emphasis, within its strategic culture, on developing military potential (Kłaczyński, 2012, pp. 22–29). In this context, NATO remains an actor capable of influencing Russia through deterrence mechanisms, with both conventional and nuclear instruments.

Assessing the effectiveness of these instruments, however, requires accounting for structural and procedural barriers that affect decision-making speed and the ability to reinforce the eastern flank rapidly, thereby limiting deterrence in practice:

1. Concentration of power-projection capacity in the United States: from 2014–2022, the United States held the Alliance's greatest power-projection capacity, stemming from technological advantage and a global basing network. An exception to autonomous deterrence was France, which possesses an independent nuclear capability and a strategic doctrine grounded in sovereign decision-making (Olech, 2022, pp. 21–40). The United Kingdom maintains its own nuclear arsenal, yet bases deterrence on the Trident D5 system linked to the U.S. technical and logistical backbone, including U.S. Navy infrastructure at Kings Bay, implying a degree of dependence on the transatlantic partner. Western European states, especially Germany, for years benefited from a "peace dividend", limiting defence investment under the assumption of durable U.S. security guarantees. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia modernised their armed forces earlier, but the effects were more

- visible only after 2018; their potential, however, remained structurally constrained by economic scale, population size, and the recruitment base (NATO, 2024). U.S. predominance is also reflected in NATO command structures, where the position of Supreme Allied Commander Europe is traditionally held by an American general (NATO, 2023).
2. Bureaucratisation of Alliance structures: NATO decision-making processes and procedural systems require extensive formalities when moving forces among member states, and in Germany, even between federal states. The nuclear sharing programme involves numerous protocols that limit the practical decision-making autonomy of the states covered by the mechanism; in practice, decisions remain largely dependent on the United States (Kacprzyk, 2023).
 3. Defensive character of the Alliance: In the period under discussion, NATO remained a strictly defensive alliance focused on protecting members' territory (NATO, 2025). Pre-emptive or offensive scenarios were treated with caution. According to assumptions of defence planning, selected elements of which were made public by Mariusz Błaszczak (September 2023), delaying and defensive operations were envisaged with the possibility of withdrawal to the Vistula line. Although detailed operational tasks were not disclosed, the structure of this concept may suggest that, during its validity, Poland had limited capacity to repel the initial phase of aggression independently, without allied support (Polska Agencja Prasowa, 2023).
 4. Divergent interests among member states: despite theoretical interest cohesion, in practice, Allies pursued different priorities. The United States, as the state with the greatest decision-making capacity, adopted an "Asia First" strategy during the period under analysis, focusing on the Pacific, thereby constraining engagement in Central and Eastern Europe (Araszkiewicz, 2024). States geographically farther from NATO's eastern flank, such as Spain or Portugal, would likely show limited enthusiasm for committing significant forces to a potential conflict in this region, as they regard it as less salient to their strategic interests.

Having identified key NATO constraints, it is worth examining the strategic and operational elements on Russia's side. Analysing these factors helps to clarify the challenges the Alliance faced in terms of deterrence on the eastern flank:

1. Rapid mobilisation capacity and large force size: Russia possesses substantial numbers of active-duty personnel and reservists, enabling a rapid increase of military presence during a crisis. Exercises such as Zapad 2017 and Vostok 2018, although revealing certain organisational and logistical limitations, confirmed the Russian Federation's ability to coordinate the movement of large groupings within a short timeframe (Dyner, 2017). This could constitute a significant pressure factor for NATO in its mobilisation planning and in the timely reinforcement of forces in the region. The absence of decision-making constraints inherent to collective alliances is also relevant: within the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organisation), Russia, as the dominant state, is not meaningfully constrained by collective co-decision mechanisms, while command integration and operational commitments are weaker and less binding. In NATO, by contrast, force employment and response tempo depend more on political consensus, planning procedures, and interoperability arrangements among many states, which lengthens the decision and organisational cycle.
2. Strategic position and militarisation of border territories: Russia uses border territories such as Kaliningrad and Crimea to increase power-projection capability and control over key lines of communication (Bukowski, 2019, pp. 105–121). A substantial permanent presence in these areas enables rapid response to threats and increases operational flexibility in the region.
3. Operational experience and strategic culture: Russia has experience conducting military operations under conditions of political tension, both in the post-Soviet space and in local conflicts such as the 2008 Georgia conflict and Chechnya in the 1990s and 2000s (Kowalczyk, 2017, pp. 169–182). The practice of *fait accompli*, rapid action in disputed or seized territories, allows Russia to establish realities on the ground before an opponent can react, increasing the effectiveness and impact of its actions.

When set against NATO's constraints, Russia's capabilities suggest that the Alliance's enhanced forward presence did not consistently translate into effective deterrence beyond its borders. Moscow could pursue offensive and coercive objectives in NATO's vicinity by exploiting the gap between regional deterrence and broader strategic guarantees. At the strategic level, deterrence likely worked insofar as Russia refrained from attacking NATO members, but it did not prevent operations in the "grey

zone of security” against non-NATO states. Overall, NATO deterrence in 2014–2022 was limited in constraining Russian expansion in the neighbourhood, yet may have helped contain escalation and prevent the conflict from spreading onto Allied territory.

This suggests that the central weakness of NATO deterrence in the analysed period was not its complete absence, but its uneven effectiveness: strong in defending Allied territory, yet far less capable of constraining Russian coercive action beyond NATO’s formal borders.

Diplomacy and sanctions: an active player or a lonely “hawk”?

From 2014 to 2022, EU member states, with Poland as an active advocate, mostly used economic tools to influence Russia. Yet, the Union could not wage a consistent “economic war”, especially in energy, because many depended on Russian supplies. This limited the effectiveness of diplomatic condemnations, and sanctions became a gradual pressure mechanism. Their most significant effects did not fully appear during this period. Two main factors explain this result.

First, the lack of unity within the EU in 2014–2022 substantially limited both the scale and coherence of the Union’s actions towards Russia, enabling Moscow to continue an assertive foreign policy despite the restrictions imposed. A particularly salient example of this divergence was Germany’s policy: notwithstanding formal support for EU sanctions, Berlin pursued a strategy grounded in economic pragmatism and energy interdependence with Russia. The construction of the Nord Stream and Nord Stream 2 pipelines, framed as strictly economic projects, in practice reinforced the EU’s dependence on Russian energy supplies, thereby undermining the logic of a restrictive policy towards Moscow. Some member states, guided by domestic economic interests, sought to maintain dialogue and cooperation with Russia, a stance that conflicted with the principles of energy solidarity and common security. Poland consistently criticised both Nord Stream projects, viewing these investments as a threat to the region’s energy security and as a tool of Russian political pressure on Central and Eastern Europe (Paszkowski, 2023, pp. 135–156). The divergence between Warsaw’s position and the policies of some EU partners thus constituted one of the factors that weakened the EU’s ability to develop a unified and effective strategy towards Russia

during the analysed period. Poland's role within the European Union was therefore significant primarily in threat assessment and political pressure, but much less so in shaping a coherent and durable common strategy towards Russia.

Second, Moscow partially offset the negative effects of Western sanctions by redirecting parts of its economic policy to markets outside the sanctions regime, particularly in Asia. After 2014, Russia gradually increased its trade with Asian countries, using them as alternative destinations for energy exports and as outlets for other goods. In 2014–2021, Russian exports to China increased from approximately USD 37.5 billion to USD 68 billion, making China a key economic partner of Russia (World Bank, 2014, 2021). At the same time, relations with India in 2014–2022 remained relatively stable, while diversification beyond Asia was selective and sectoral, involving, *inter alia*, selected states that did not participate in the sanctions regime (OEC, 2025; Perekhozhuk, 2024, pp. 11–19). As a result, Russia's expanded economic activity outside Europe did not fully offset the loss of parts of Western markets. Still, it did help mitigate the effects of sanctions by sustaining export revenues and diversifying channels of cooperation. As a result, sanctions in 2014–2022 functioned more as an instrument of political signalling and gradual constraint than as a genuinely coercive tool capable of altering Russia's strategic behaviour.

It should be emphasised, however, that the “loss” of the European market in 2014–2022 was segment-specific, as the sanctions regime remained selective and key strategic goods were not subject to comprehensive restrictions for a long time. Consequently, economic pressure was inconsistent: some EU states, including Poland, despite its pro-sanctions narrative, maintained during the analysed period imports of selected strategic goods from Russia (including oil, and until 2022 also coal and certain categories of fertilisers), which reduced the leverage of sanctions and made it easier for Moscow to sustain export revenues (OEC, 2025).

The United Nations remains the largest and most comprehensive structure bringing together the world's states. The United Nations Security Council became a venue for political and economic competition, particularly during the restructuring of the international order in 2014–2022. In this period, the traditional Western camp (the United States, the United Kingdom, and France) faced a growing convergence of interests between China and Russia, which weakened the UN's effectiveness and undermined its role as a forum for dispute resolution (Chesterman, 2026).

The effectiveness of the UN Security Council in 2014–2022 was substantially constrained by the veto mechanism and by rising tensions among the major powers. In this context, Poland's activities as a non-permanent member of the Security Council in 2018–2019 should be situated. Warsaw focused on promoting international law and on calls to limit the veto right in cases of mass violations of international humanitarian law; however, these efforts could not overcome the UN's structural constraints (Grzebyk, 2020). The veto evolved into an instrument for blocking actions undertaken in the name of common security, with the result that the organisation increasingly served as an arena for legitimising national positions rather than as a real mechanism for enforcing the principles of international order.

Conclusions

Despite intensive political and diplomatic activity, Poland's response after the onset of the armed phase of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 was largely political and normative in character. Warsaw unequivocally condemned the actions of the Russian Federation and consistently supported the introduction of economic sanctions, strengthening international pressure and Poland's position as one of the leading advocates of solidarity with Ukraine within the EU and NATO.

Poland's security policy in 2014–2022 was adaptive rather than revolutionary. In response to the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, Warsaw carried out a strategic correction, but did not create a new security paradigm. The response was politically salient and diplomatically consistent, yet limited in operational effectiveness. Poland performed an "early warning" function, alerting partners to the Russian threat and reinforcing awareness, but its instruments were primarily coordinative rather than executive. Its main limitation stemmed not from an incorrect diagnosis of the Russian threat, but from the gap between the accuracy of that diagnosis and Poland's limited ability to independently translate it into a change in the regional balance of power.

In this sense, Poland's security policy practice in 2014–2022 remained broadly consistent with the direction set out in the National Security Strategies of 2014 and 2020, even though structural and allied limitations constrained its effectiveness.

Poland's role within the international system was therefore supportive: politically significant but constrained in its agency. Warsaw influenced

debate within the EU and NATO and shaped the narrative surrounding the Russian threat. Yet, key strategic decisions remained the domain of larger actors, especially the United States and Germany. Poland contributed an important moral and political dimension by emphasising the primacy of international law and solidarity with Ukraine, but lacked the resources to deter independently.

An analysis of NATO's actions indicates that deterrence in 2014–2022 was limited. The Alliance reinforced the eastern flank through increased military presence, intensified exercises, and the development of rapid-reaction structures (including the VJTF and NRF), thereby improving defensive readiness and interoperability. At the same time, Russia modernised its potential and maintained advantages in mobilisation and operational decision-making, preparing for offensive action in 2022. As a result, deterrence likely worked at the strategic level, protecting member states. Still, it did not prevent “grey zone” actions against non-NATO states, where Moscow exploited decision-making delays and divergent interests within the Alliance.

The West, including Poland, did not develop a coherent strategy toward Russia during the period under analysis. Divergent positions within the EU, particularly in the energy domain (including the Nord Stream projects), weakened the effectiveness of sanctions and the common front. Poland remained among the most consistent critics of energy dependence, though this narrative did not always align with practice, as significant elements of energy dependence persisted on the Polish side. As a result, Warsaw more often initiated debate and signalled risks than it substantially co-shaped the policy of the entire community.

Russia adapted to sanctions pressure by partially reorienting trade away from Europe, primarily towards Asia (with China playing a key role), and selectively towards markets not participating in the restrictive regime (including Turkey) and selected Global South states in specific categories of goods. Consequently, in 2014–2022, sanctions operated more as an instrument of political pressure and normative signalling than as a genuinely deterrent tool, a fact that became fully apparent with the aggression launched on February 24, 2022.

The veto mechanism in the UN Security Council blocked effective action against the Russian Federation, while the convergence of Moscow's and Beijing's interests entrenched paralysis in decision-making. The UN retained symbolic significance, but the organisation's capacity to enforce the principles of international law remained limited. Poland's activity as

a non-permanent member of the Council in 2018–2019 confirmed the continuity of a normative policy, but did not produce durable institutional effects.

The entire analysed period revealed a persistent asymmetry between Russia's strategy of force and Europe's strategy of law. Russia, following a logic of military pressure and *fait accompli*, exploited gaps in Western decision-making processes. Poland and its partners, acting through multilateral structures, based their responses on political and legal norms that proved insufficient against a strategy grounded in force and speed.

Consequently, Poland's security policy in 2014–2022 was coherent in its assumptions and politically active, yet constrained in effectiveness by structural and institutional factors. The symbolic dimension strengthened Western solidarity and legitimised collective action against Russia; in practice, however, Poland remained dependent on allied decisions and capabilities. Poland accurately diagnosed the threat and consistently articulated the need to strengthen the eastern flank, but lacked the instruments to shape the strategic reality independently.

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Między symboliką a realną obroną: polska polityka bezpieczeństwa wobec rosyjskiej agresji 2014–2022

Streszczenie: Artykuł analizuje politykę bezpieczeństwa Polski wobec Federacji Rosyjskiej w latach 2014–2022 w następstwie aneksji Krymu i konfliktu w Donbasie. Zastosowano w nim jakościowe podejście badawcze, oparte między innymi na analizie dokumentów strategicznych i oficjalnych stanowisk Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, NATO, Unii Europejskiej i Organizacji Narodów Zjednoczonych, uzupełnionych wybranymi danymi dotyczącymi wydatków na obronę, obecności wojskowej i ćwiczeń wojskowych. W artykule postawiono hipotezę, że reakcja Polski miała charakter adaptacyjny, a nie rewolucyjny: była spójna politycznie i aktywna, lecz ograniczona pod względem skuteczności strategicznej. Analiza wskazuje, że rzeczywisty wpływ Polski wyrażał się głównie we wspieraniu adaptacji NATO na wschodniej flance, od działań wzmacniających poczucie bezpieczeństwa po odstraszenie terytorialne. Jed-

nocześniej jej szersza skuteczność pozostawała ograniczona przez rozbieżne interesy w Unii Europejskiej oraz strukturalne ograniczenia Rady Bezpieczeństwa ONZ. Ogólnie rzecz biorąc, Polska odegrała znaczącą rolę polityczną w diagnozowaniu zagrożeń i kształtowaniu debaty, ale pozostawała zależna od decyzji i możliwości sojuszniczych.

Słowa kluczowe: odstraszenie; polityka międzynarodowa; ONZ; NATO; bezpieczeństwo międzynarodowe

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Konceptualizacja (Conceptualization): Fabian Kobalczyk-Gruda

Analiza formalna (Formal analysis): Fabian Kobalczyk-Gruda

Metodologia (Methodology): Fabian Kobalczyk-Gruda

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