

POLAND IN THE CONCEPT OF EXTENDED DETERRENCE: FROM THE SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT TO THE UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

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Abstract: This paper examines Poland's experience with extended deterrence across two pivotal historical junctures: the Solidarity Movement crisis (1980 - 1981) and the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict (2022 - present). The analysis applies a comparative historical method supported by primary sources including declassified CIA documents and Politburo transcripts, alongside secondary academic literature and quantitative defense data. Poland's geopolitical position, shaped by centuries of partition, Soviet domination, and the trauma of the Molotov - Ribbentrop Pact, has produced a security culture defined by acute vulnerability and deep-seated reliance on external guarantors. During the Solidarity crisis, the Carter and Reagan administrations pursued a proactive deterrence strategy through explicit threats of sanctions, material support for the opposition, coordination with NATO allies, and exploitation of the Sino-Soviet rivalry. While the strategy successfully prevented direct Soviet military intervention, it failed to prevent the imposition of martial law in December 1981. Nevertheless, Solidarity's underground survival, sustained by continued Western support, ultimately contributed to Poland's democratic transition and the broader collapse of the Eastern Bloc. In the context of the Ukrainian conflict, Poland has evolved from a passive object of geopolitical competition into an assertive security actor, dramatically increasing its defense budget to over 3% of GDP, providing substantial military assistance to Ukraine, deepening U.S. military presence on its territory, and actively pursuing NATO nuclear sharing arrangements. The paper identifies strong strategic continuity in Poland's transatlantic orientation across both periods, while also identifying key limitations: excessive dependence on an external guarantor creates moral hazard, and intensified militarization risks deepening the security dilemma with Russia.

Keywords: *extended deterrence, Russo-Polish relations, USA, Solidarity, NATO, Russia, Ukrainian conflict, security dilemma*

Field: Humanities

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of deterrence represents one of the longest-studied phenomena in international relations theory. From Thucydides' analysis to contemporary debates on nuclear strategy, deterrence is a key analytical category for understanding how states attempt to prevent undesirable actions through the threat of unacceptable costs (Schelling, 1960; Jervis, 1979; Morgan, 2003). In the post - Cold War period, particularly following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the concept of extended deterrence has regained prominence (Lanoszka, 2018). Extended deterrence refers to a situation in which one state (the guarantor) provides security guarantees to another state (the client) against a third party, raising additional questions of credibility.

Poland represents a paradigmatic case for studying the dynamics of extended deterrence. Its geopolitical position between Germany and Russia, the trauma of four partitions, and half a century of Soviet domination have shaped a security culture deeply marked by a perception of vulnerability (Kupiecki, 2022).

To what extent has Poland's foreign policy strategy, based on its alliance with the United States, contributed to the effective deterrence of external threats, and what are the long-term implications of this approach?

From this central research question, the following hypotheses are derived:

H1: Poland's deterrence strategy demonstrates continuity in its reliance on the transatlantic alliance from the 1980s to the present day.

H2: The effectiveness of deterrence varies due to different contextual factors (bipolar vs. multipolar system).

H3: Excessive reliance on an external guarantor creates moral hazard and the risk of a security dilemma.

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2. METHODS

2.1. Research Design

The research employs a qualitative comparative historical method with a focus on two case studies: the Solidarity Movement (1980 - 81) and the Ukrainian conflict (2022 - present). The analysis draws on primary sources including declassified CIA documents, Politburo of the CPSU transcripts, and strategic documents, complemented by secondary academic literature and quantitative defense data. The process tracing method is used to identify causal mechanisms across the two cases (Beach & Pedersen, 2013).

The comparative case study design was selected because it enables systematic identification of similarities and differences across two temporally distinct but structurally related episodes of extended deterrence involving the same guarantor (the United States) and the same regional context (Central - Eastern Europe). Process tracing further allows reconstruction of the causal pathways through which deterrence signals influenced the decisions of Soviet and Russian leadership respectively.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

Deterrence is grounded in the assumption that rational actors make decisions based on cost-benefit calculations. Thomas Schelling (1960) defined deterrence as a strategy in which one actor attempts to influence the behavior of another through the threat of unacceptable consequences. The key elements are: (1) capability - the possession of means; (2) credibility - the convincingness that the threat will be carried out; (3) communication - the clear conveyance of intentions. Robert Jervis (1979) introduced the distinction between deterrence by punishment and deterrence by denial. The former is based on the threat of retaliation following aggression, while the latter rests on the ability to prevent the aggressor from achieving its objectives. Extended deterrence arises when state A (the guarantor) provides security guarantees to state B (the client) against state C (the challenger). This concept became central to NATO doctrine during the Cold War (Knopf, 2012; Lanoszka, 2018). Extended deterrence poses a specific credibility problem: is the guarantor's threat sufficiently convincing when its implementation could jeopardize the guarantor's own security? Patrick Morgan (2003) identified mechanisms for reinforcing credibility: forward deployment of military forces, formalization of commitments, public declarations, and demonstration of capabilities through exercises. Glenn Snyder (1984) identified the alliance dilemma: the risk of abandonment versus the risk of entrapment. The client fears that the guarantor will not protect it, while the guarantor fears that the ally will draw it into an unwanted conflict. The concept of the security dilemma (Herz, 1950; Jervis, 1978) further complicates the analysis. When a state strengthens its own security through increased military budgets, alliances, or armaments, other states may perceive this as a threat, resulting in a spiral of mutual mistrust. In the context of extended deterrence, the strengthening of the military alliance between the guarantor and the client can convince the challenger to become more aggressive through preventive logic, while the challenger's reaction in turn convinces the client of the necessity of an even stronger alliance.

2.3. Geopolitical Background: Poland's Historical Position

An understanding of the case studies requires contextualizing Poland's long-term geopolitical position. Poland's location at the crossroads of eastern and western influences has crucially shaped Polish statehood. The three partitions of Poland (1772, 1793, 1795) among Russia, Prussia, and the Habsburgs resulted in the disappearance of the state for 123 years, a trauma deeply rooted in the collective consciousness (Davies, 2005; Biskupski, 2018). The Molotov - Ribbentrop Pact (1939) and the simultaneous invasion by Germany and the USSR marked a "fourth partition," while the Katyn Massacre (1940)-in which the NKVD executed approximately 22,000 Polish officers - engraved a deep institutional mistrust that Soviet denial of responsibility until 1990 only deepened (Sanford, 2005). The postwar realignment pushed Poland into the Soviet sphere until the late 1980s. Formally independent, Poland had extremely limited sovereignty. The Brezhnev Doctrine and interventions in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968) clearly demonstrated the limits of permitted autonomy (Prazmowska, 2010). Workers' uprisings (1956, 1970, 1976) culminated in the emergence of the Solidarity Movement in 1980. The end of the Cold War created the most favorable conditions in Polish history, and accession to NATO (1999) and the EU (2004) marked a "return to the West." However, Polish security culture remained marked by a perception of vulnerability, a perception that became more pronounced following Crimea (2014) and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022).

3. RESULTS

3.1. Case Study 1: Solidarity and American Deterrence (1980 - 1981)

3.1.1. The Emergence of Solidarity and Soviet Pressure

By the late 1970s, the economic situation in Poland had deteriorated dramatically. The strikes of July 1980 surpassed all previous protests, with strikers occupying factories and forming committees (Paczkowski & Byrne, 2007). In September 1980, the Independent Trade Union "Solidarity" was formed under the leadership of Lech Wałęsa, rapidly transforming into a mass movement with approximately 10 million members – nearly one third of the population. The general strike of March 27, 1981 demonstrated the movement's strength, constituting the largest collective action in the Eastern Bloc. Declassified documents reveal that the Soviet Politburo repeatedly considered military intervention in 1980–81 (MacEachin, 2002). The Warsaw Pact organized a series of military exercises on Polish borders, including "Zapad-81" - the largest peacetime concentration of Soviet troops. However, Soviet planning faced significant obstacles: intelligence assessments indicated the likelihood of serious armed resistance, unlike Czechoslovakia in 1968 (Domber, 2014). Beyond the military costs, intervention would have marked the end of détente, jeopardized SALT II, and led to economic sanctions.

3.1.2. USA Deterrence Strategy and Its Mechanisms

The Carter and Reagan administrations adopted a proactive deterrence strategy, with Zbigniew Brzezinski as chief architect, viewing the crisis as an opportunity to destabilize the Soviet bloc (Brzezinski, 2001). The strategy operated through five mechanisms: (1) explicit threats - in December 1980, Brzezinski directly warned the USSR via the "hotline" of "serious consequences," representing a dramatic departure from 1968; (2) concrete sanction preparation - including suspension of technology transfers, termination of grain agreements, suspension of credits, and an Olympic boycott, all communicated to the Soviets; (3) allied coordination - Carter sent letters to British, French, and German leaders, signaling Western unity despite a more reserved European response; (4) exploitation of the Chinese factor - Brzezinski hinted at American-Chinese military cooperation to amplify Soviet fears of encirclement (Vaughan, 2020); and (5) material support for Solidarity - the CIA provided printing presses, communications equipment, and financial assistance (Domber, 2014).

3.1.3. Martial Law and Its Long-Term Consequences

In the night of December 12/13, 1981, General Jaruzelski declared martial law, resulting in the arrest of approximately 6,000 activists, the suspension of organizations, and the militarization of the economy. The operation was carried out with Soviet planning but without direct Soviet troop participation (MacEachin, 2002).

Despite the initial setback, Solidarity survived as an underground movement. Continued Western support sustained the opposition through the mid-1980s. With Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika, the circumstances shifted. The semi-free elections of June 4, 1989 marked a turning point: the Citizens' Committee won 99 out of 100 Senate seats, representing a decisive defeat for the communists. Crucially, Gorbachev's position that the USSR would not intervene proved decisive (Kemp-Welch, 2008). The Polish events triggered a domino effect: the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Velvet Revolution, and the dissolution of the USSR.

3.2. Case Study 2: Poland and the Ukrainian Conflict (2022–Present)

3.2.1. From Crimea to Full-Scale Invasion

Russia's annexation of Crimea (2014) and its support for separatists marked a turning point. For Poland, this confirmed long-standing warnings about Russian revisionism that had been frequently dismissed as "Russophobia" (Bouzarovski & Konieczny, 2010). Following the full-scale invasion of February 24, 2022, Polish assessments proved more accurate than the optimistic approach of Germany and France (Sikorski, 2022). The conflict directly activated Poland's deep-seated fears: Russian forces on the border via Belarus, a refugee exodus exceeding 3 million, and the possibility of strategic encirclement.

3.2.2. Polish Multilayered Deterrence Strategy

Poland responded with a multilayered deterrence strategy across four dimensions. First, in terms of humanitarian and geopolitical signaling, Poland became the primary transit point for military aid and received the largest number of refugees, providing temporary status, access to education, and healthcare – a policy serving the geopolitical function of demonstrating solidarity (Dyduch & Góra, 2024). Second, regarding military support for Ukraine, Poland was among the first states to provide significant military assistance - T-72 and PT-91 tanks, howitzers, rocket launchers, and air defense systems - amounting to over 3 billion dollars in the first year, one of the largest contributions relative to economic size. This support strengthened Ukrainian resistance (deterrence by denial) while signaling Polish resolve (deterrence by punishment). Third, Poland dramatically increased its defense spending, with the budget exceeding 3%

of GDP (approximately 16 billion dollars) in 2023, with plans for further increases to 4% (Geopolitical Futures, 2024). The funds supported an ambitious program: 980 tanks (500 South Korean K2, 250 American M1A2, 230 PT-91), 672 howitzers, 48 F-35A aircraft, missile defense systems, and an increase of active personnel to 300,000 - the largest army in the EU. Fourth, on nuclear deterrence, approximately 10,000 American soldiers were stationed in Poland - the largest concentration in Eastern Europe. Prime Minister Morawiecki expressed readiness in June 2023 for NATO nuclear sharing, in response to Russian deployment announcements in Belarus (Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023). Participation would entail hosting B61 bombs, F-35A certification, pilot training, and participation in the Nuclear Planning Group. Public support for this option grew from approximately 25% in 2016 to over 50% in 2022.

3.2.3. Geopolitical Objectives and Risks

Poland's strategy pursued four objectives: (1) preservation of a sovereign and pro-Western Ukraine as a security buffer; (2) strengthening its own military power to the level of credible deterrence even in a scenario of reduced American engagement; (3) consolidation of American presence and prevention of a strategic "pivot" toward Asia; and (4) blocking normalization of EU-Russia relations, particularly in the energy sector. However, the strategy carried corresponding risks: excessive militarization could deepen the security dilemma, nuclear sharing would make Poland a priority target, and dependence on the United States left a vulnerability to shifts in Washington, as illustrated by Trump's victory in 2024.

3.3. Comparative Analysis

3.3.1. Similarities Across Cases

Four structural similarities emerge across the two cases. First, in both cases Poland relied primarily on the United States, with European allies playing a more reserved role - a pattern that confirmed persistent Polish skepticism toward European security alternatives. Second, credibility was reinforced in both periods through explicit declarations, preparation of concrete measures, and physical presence. Third, economic measures were a key element in both cases: threatened sanctions in 1980 - 81 and massive sanctions from 2022 onward. Fourth, Western support in both cases extended beyond material assistance to include strengthening the legitimacy of oppositional actors - Solidarity and Ukrainian resistance respectively.

3.3.2. Differences Across Cases

Five important differences distinguish the two cases. First, Solidarity unfolded within a bipolar system with clearly defined spheres of influence, whereas the Ukrainian conflict takes place in a more fluid multipolar system. Second, during the Cold War, strategic nuclear parity created a "balance of terror"; in the present, the asymmetry in conventional capabilities and escalation perceptions is more complex. Third, in 1980 - 81, Poland was not a formal ally and deterrence was ad hoc; from 2022 onward, Poland is integrated into NATO with Article 5 protections. Fourth, during Solidarity, Poland was a passive object of deterrence dynamics; in the Ukrainian conflict, it is an active actor shaping Western strategy. Fifth, in 1980 - 81 the crisis was on Polish territory itself, whereas in 2022 the immediate conflict is in Ukraine.

3.3.3. Effectiveness Assessment

Solidarity (1980 - 81): Deterrence was partially successful. Direct Soviet intervention was prevented - a success of deterrence in the narrow sense, with Soviet sources suggesting that American threats significantly influenced the decision (Kramer, 1999). However, martial law represented a partial failure, as the objective had been the preservation of Solidarity and democratic opening. In the long term, the survival of the movement and its 1989 triumph were made possible.

Ukrainian conflict (2022 - present): The assessment is more complex as the conflict is ongoing. Deterrence has been successful in preventing a direct attack on NATO territory - the primary objective. The attack on Ukraine itself was not prevented, indicating the limitations of extended deterrence when the client state is outside the formal alliance. Long - term effectiveness will depend on the outcome of the war.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Hypothesis Verification

H1 (Continuity of strategy): CONFIRMED. The analysis demonstrates strong continuity in reliance on the transatlantic alliance across both periods. The United States remained the primary guarantor in both cases, with European allies in a secondary role.

H2 (Influence of context): CONFIRMED. Effectiveness is significantly conditioned by systemic context. The bipolar system of the Cold War provided a clearer structure of mutual deterrence, while the contemporary multipolar system introduces greater ambiguity and a more complex escalation landscape.

H3 (Risk of dependence): PARTIALLY CONFIRMED. There are indications of moral hazard - aggressive Polish rhetoric premised on the assumption of NATO intervention. However, Poland's dramatic strengthening of its own capabilities reduces absolute dependence, and the security dilemma dynamic is

demonstrably present in the current period.

4.2. Main Theoretical Contributions

First, the analysis confirms that historical experience profoundly shapes security culture in ways that transcend rational-actor models. The traumas of partition, occupation, and Soviet domination created a long-term perception of vulnerability that Kupiecki (2022) terms a “culture of danger,” rendering Poland more inclined toward maximalist deterrence strategies than structural conditions alone would predict.

Second, the cases confirm Morgan’s (2003) proposition that extended deterrence functions most effectively when supported by multiple reinforcing mechanisms simultaneously: military presence, economic measures, diplomacy, and institutional commitments. In both cases, the effectiveness of American deterrence was directly proportional to the comprehensiveness of the signaling package deployed.

Third, the analysis extends Snyder’s (1984) alliance dilemma framework by demonstrating its evolution across time: whereas Poland occupied the position of the dependent client in the 1980 - 81 case, it has partially transformed into a co-producer of deterrence in the contemporary period. This evolution suggests that extended deterrence relationships are not static but develop through iterative strategic interaction.

Fourth, the comparison highlights an underappreciated distinction between formal and informal extended deterrence. The absence of formal NATO membership in 1980 - 81 meant that American deterrence commitments were inherently less credible and more contingent, whereas Article 5 membership in the contemporary case provides a qualitatively different institutional foundation - one that is nonetheless not immune to political contestation, as Trump’s statements during the 2024 campaign demonstrated.

4.3. Policy Implications

The findings carry several implications for policymakers. First, diversification of security strategy is advisable. Although the alliance with the United States remains crucial, Poland should develop complementary mechanisms including European defense cooperation, regional initiatives such as the Three Seas Initiative, and diplomatic channels - reducing the structural vulnerability created by dependence on a single guarantor whose strategic priorities may shift.

Second, management of the security dilemma requires attention. Militarization should be combined with confidence-building measures: transparency of activities, reciprocal limitations, and crisis communication channels. Escalation management must be built into deterrence strategy, not treated as an afterthought.

Third, nuclear sharing decisions require careful deliberation. Participation may strengthen deterrence capabilities but simultaneously increases risk of becoming a priority target, represents a departure from the NATO-Russia Founding Act (1997), and may accelerate the very security dilemma dynamic it seeks to counteract.

Fourth, Poland should develop a coherent long-term vision for the post-war European security architecture, moving beyond reactive deterrence postures toward a sustainable regional order.

4.4. Limitations

The research has several limitations. The absence of comprehensive Russian primary sources constrains the analysis of decision-making on the other side of the deterrence relationship. The Ukrainian conflict remains ongoing, making definitive effectiveness assessments premature. The study’s qualitative focus on two cases limits generalizability, and the analysis would benefit from formal game-theoretic modeling of deterrence interactions.

Future research could broaden the comparative analysis to other Eastern European states, analyze the perceptions of Russian leadership through available primary materials, employ formal game-theoretic models, and examine public opinion dynamics in greater depth.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper examined Poland’s experience with extended deterrence across two pivotal historical junctures, applying a comparative historical method to identify structural continuities and contextual variations in deterrence dynamics. The analysis confirmed all three research hypotheses: continuity of transatlantic orientation (H1), context-dependent variation in effectiveness (H2), and structural vulnerabilities inherent in asymmetric alliance dependence (H3).

The Polish experience illustrates how history, geography, and identity shape security policy in ways that persist across radically different systemic environments. From Solidarity to Ukraine, Poland has consistently sought security through its alliance with the United States, perceiving this as the most effective strategy for deterring Russia. This strategy has yielded tangible successes: the prevention of

Soviet military intervention in 1980 - 81, the enabling conditions for democratic transition, and effective deterrence of direct attacks on NATO territory. However, it also generates structural risks: dependence on the volatile politics of Washington, moral hazard in alliance relationships, and the potential for self-fulfilling escalation through the security dilemma.

The key theoretical and policy question remains open: can long-term European security rest exclusively on deterrence, or does sustainable stability require a complementary strategy that includes dialogue, confidence-building, and institutional engagement with potential adversaries? The answer will determine not only the future trajectory of Polish security policy but the broader character of the European security order in the twenty-first century.

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