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Poland's East Shield

A comprehensive approach to secure NATO's Eastern Flank

By Shaheen Gaszewski

- Poland's East Shield is the largest defence infrastructure project on NATO's Eastern Flank since the Cold War, aiming to deter and delay conventional attacks from Russia and Belarus.
- The project spans over 700 km along Poland's eastern and northern borders, integrating bunkers, anti-tank obstacles, surveillance systems, and dual-use infrastructure.
- The East Shield is one part of a growing regional deterrence architecture, aligned with the Baltic Defence Line and Finland's deep-strike capabilities.
- The initiative reflects Poland's effort to take more responsibility for European security as the U.S. pivots to the Indo-Pacific.
- Complementing its military element, the project promotes civil-military cooperation by training civilian medical personnel in combat medicine and developing dual-use infrastructure, reflecting Poland's total defence approach.
- Poland should complement its national and transatlantic approach by involving key Western EU partners — especially Germany — to strengthen defence-industrial cooperation and promote European interoperability.
- European support for the East Shield — financial, political, or operational — would help Poland deter Russian aggression and contribute to Europe's collective security.

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Introduction

The ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine and Belarus' role as an enabler have significantly increased insecurity in the North-East of NATO and the EU. At the same time, Moscow and Minsk have escalated their hybrid warfare campaign against Europe, most notably in Poland, where both the deliberate use of migration flows through Belarus and acts of sabotage have been employed. The recent confirmation that two arson attacks on Polish warehouses in spring 2024 were carried out on the order of Russian intelligence[1] exemplifies a growing trend of hostile operations targeting critical infrastructure and aiming to sow insecurity, public unrest and polarization. Against this deteriorating security backdrop, stronger military presence has become a strategic imperative across NATO's Eastern Flank.

As the largest EU and NATO member in Central-Eastern Europe and bordering both Belarus and Russia's Kaliningrad exclave, Poland has responded with a historic increase in defence spending, raising its military budget to nearly 5 percent of GDP, currently the highest in the Alliance. In parallel, the Polish government has launched a series of ambitious modernization and preparedness programs aimed at strengthening both national resilience and collective defence. Among them is the *East Shield National Deterrence and Defence Program*, the largest defence infrastructure project undertaken on NATO's Eastern Flank since the Alliance's creation.

Unveiled in May 2024 by Prime Minister Donald Tusk and Defence Minister Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, the East Shield represents a comprehensive response to the threat of a conventional conflict with Russia. Stretching across a 700 to 800 kilometre strip along Poland's eastern and northeastern borders, the East Shield aims to deter potential aggression, delay enemy advances,

and enhance the safety of troops and civilians. In material terms, it combines hardened military infrastructure such as bunkers, trenches, and anti-tank obstacles with advanced surveillance systems, dual-use mobility infrastructure, and civil protection elements.

The East Shield should not be viewed as an isolated national endeavour. It is integrated into the Baltic Defence Line and Finland's efforts to expand its deep strike capabilities. Together, these efforts will form a continuous deterrence architecture spanning from the Gulf of Finland to the Carpathians, anchored in both natural and engineered barriers and increasingly coordinated through shared command structures, common procurement, and joint logistics.

This regional convergence comes at a time when a significant decrease of the U.S. military presence in Europe is likely. Regardless of who occupies the White House in the future, Washington will continue shifting its focus to the Indo-Pacific and expect Europe to shoulder its own defence. The East Shield is part of Poland's response to this shift: a forward-leaning, European-led enterprise that operationalizes the principle of European strategic autonomy while reinforcing the protection of NATO's eastern frontlines.

While Poland has already secured financial assistance for the project through various EU instruments, further support, particularly from Western member states such as Germany, is essential. Securing NATO's and the EU's external borders is a shared responsibility, and investing in deterrence by denial is usually cheaper than defence in depth.

Overview

During the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Monte Cassino on May 18th, 2024 – a symbolic victory for Polish forces in World War II and a cornerstone of Polish remembrance culture – Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk announced the launch of the *East Shield National Deterrence and Defence Program*. In addition to stating that it would be both Poland's and NATO's largest effort to fortify its Eastern borders since World War II, Tusk announced that the government had planned to invest 10 billion Polish Złoty (PLN) – about 2.3 billion Euros – in the project, mainly financed through the defence budget, with plans to seek additional funding through EU and NATO frameworks.

The undertaking was officially presented to the public at a press conference later that month by Defence Minister Kosiniak-Kamysz and Chief of the Polish General Staff Kukuła, who outlined the key aims of the project:

1. To enhance Poland's Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities
2. To hinder enemy movement in case of attack (counter-mobility)
3. To enhance the mobility of Polish and Allied troops
4. To enhance the security of soldiers and civilians in the Eastern border areas

Crucially, the East Shield project should not be conflated with the erection and fortification of the barrier at the Polish-Belarusian border, initiated by the government after the migration crisis of 2021. The East Shield does not entail plans to build border walls or fences, as the aim is not to curb irregular migration but to deter and hinder conventional military attacks. In concrete terms, the project is about securing Poland's Eastern borders, especially those with Belarus and Russia's Kaliningrad Oblast, through the installation of military infrastructure, the construction of natural and artificial barriers and roads, and the provision of shelters for civilians. The venture spans 700-

800 kilometres along the borders in the voivodeships of Pomerania, Warmia-Masuria, Podlaskie, Lubelskie and Subcarpathia,[2] with fortifications planned along a strip reaching up to 50 kilometres inland from the border.

Visual 1. The East Shield's geographical scope

Polish Press Agency. https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/czym-jest-tarcza-wschod-wicepremier-minister-obrony-narodowej-wyjasnia.

Organizationally, the East Shield project is overseen by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) but is managed by an inter-ministerial team made up of officials from the MoD, the Ministry of State Assets, the Ministry of Climate (now the Ministry of Energy), and the Infrastructure Ministry. Construction of the infrastructure began in November 2024, with Prime Minister Tusk and Defence Minister Kosiniak-Kamysz publicly inspecting the first completed section – a 2.3-kilometre-long stretch at

the border to Kaliningrad Oblast in Warmia-Masuria – on November 30, 2024. By July 2025, the section – primarily made up of modular concrete anti-tank obstacles – was extended to 20 kilometres, with work reportedly being carried out year-round, seven days a week. The project cycle is scheduled from 2024 to 2028, although this deadline is likely to be extended; By mid-2025, the government has not yet begun the process of expropriating private land located in the border areas. As the erection of the anti-migration barrier at the border to Belarus has shown, expropriation is likely to lead to lengthy legal procedures, which might significantly delay the completion of the East Shield's construction phase. So far, all constructions have taken place on public land.

The Four Strategic Aims

Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance

The Polish Defence Ministry divides Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) into five altitude-related categories in the context of the East Shield:

Space-based ISR

Space-based ISR assets serve to persistently monitor wide areas and are used on the (inter)national rather than regional or local level, designating them as strategic assets. In concrete terms, these are small-to-medium-sized satellites equipped with either optical lenses or radar sensors.

Until 2023, the Polish Armed Forces relied on satellite imagery from Italy's Cosmo Sky-Med System under a 2014 agreement.[3] In December 2022, the Polish Armaments Agency signed a contract with Airbus Defence and Space to purchase two Pléiades Neo satellites, to be delivered by 2027, along with a ground station for image processing. Capable of capturing 30 cm resolution colour images, these satellites will significantly boost Polish ISR capabilities. Importantly, the contract with Airbus Defence and Space grants Poland access to images from French satellites starting in 2023, bridging the gap until the deployment of Poland's own satellites.

Poland has also initiated two national satellite programs based primarily on domestic manufacturing: MikroGlob and MikroSAR. Under MikroGlob, the Armaments Agency contracted the Polish firm Creotech Instruments S.A. in December 2024 to deliver four micro-class optoelectronic satellites by 2027. MikroSAR, in turn, covers the 2025 purchase of three synthetic aperture radar (SAR) satellites offering up to 25 cm resolution from the Polish-Finnish company ICEYE.[4] Unlike optical satellites, SAR satellites emit and receive microwaves, enabling 24/7 imaging regardless of light and weather. Though SAR imagery is monochrome and harder for humans and AI to interpret, combining SAR and opto-electronic systems across these programs provides Polish forces with resilient and complementary space-based ISR capabilities.

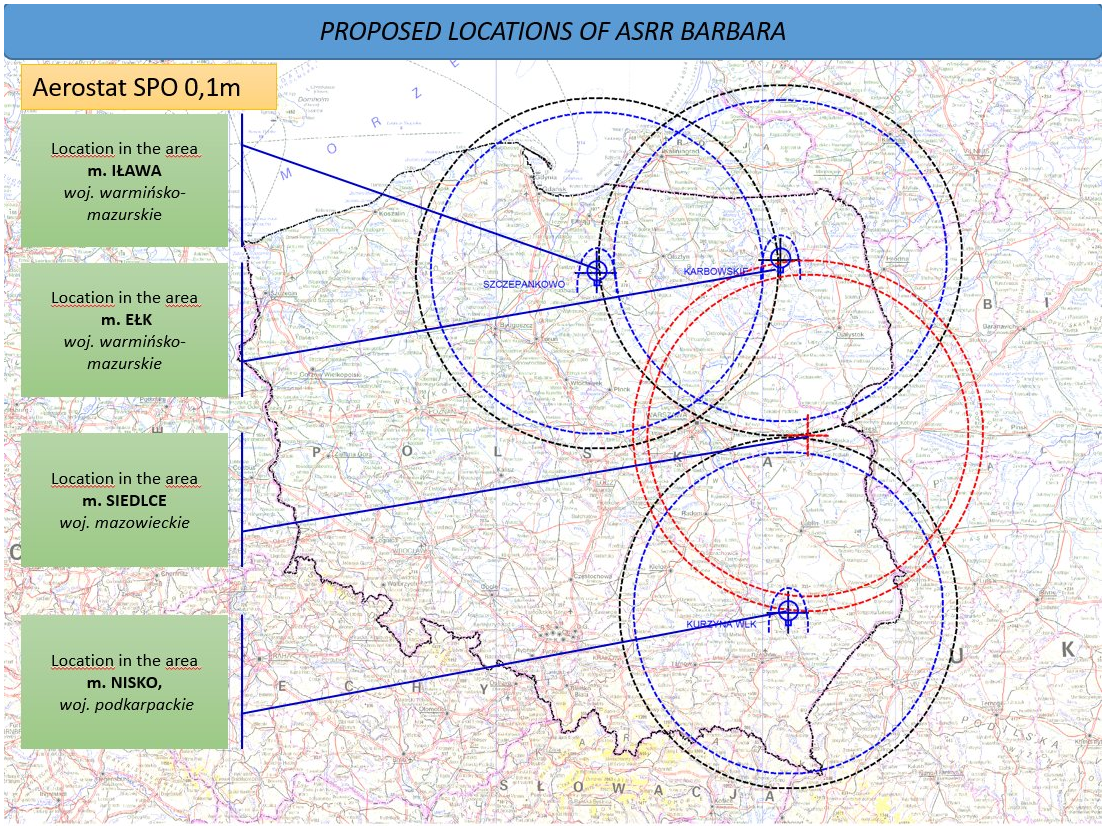
High-altitude airborne ISR

Regarding the second layer of Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance, the Polish Armed Forces are investing in two key technologies: Aerostats and Aerial Early Warning & Control Systems (AEW&C).

Aerostats are essentially zeppelin-shaped hot air balloons that are equipped with radar sensors that monitor wide airspace from a static position between 1.000 and 5.000 metres in the air. Unlike airships, they remain stationary and are tethered to the ground through reinforced power and data cables and can remain in the air for multiple weeks at time. While more vulnerable to

enemy attacks than other airborne ISR assets such as fighter jets and drones, aerostats present an effective way of surveilling large border areas at comparatively low cost. In May 2024, the Polish government signed a contract with several US contractors to purchase four Aerostats under its Barbara ISR program, with a value of approximately USD 960 million. Categorized as Airspace and Surface Radar Reconnaissance (ASSR) systems, these aerostats will be stationed at four strategic locations along Poland's northern, eastern and southeastern borders at an altitude of about 4.000 meters.[5] The Barbara aerostats have a radial sensor range of up to 300 km and can detect not only aircraft, missiles and mid-sized drones in the air domain, but also mid-sized objects in the naval and land domains, such as ships or columns of ground vehicles.

Visual 2. Proposed locations of Barbara aerostats in Poland



Based on information from the US Department of Defense. Via https://www.polon.pl/technologia/gdzie-stana-polskie-aerostaty-mon-wskazuje-lokalizacje-ekspert-decyzja-na-plus/

Another high-altitude airborne ISR technology that Poland is investing in as part of the East Shield is Aerial Early Warning and Control systems (AEW&C). AEW&C systems are manned aircraft, often converted civilian planes, fitted with radar technology. They are used to flexibly scan the airspace and provide both general intelligence and battlefield management in coordination with friendly fighter jets. The Polish Armaments Agency signed a deal with the Swedish aerospace and defence company Saab in July 2023 to purchase two second-hand Saab 340 AEW&C systems, valued at approximately €53 million.[6] Both units were delivered to Poland by June 2024 and will be jointly operated by the Polish Air Force and Navy.[7] Equipped with AESA radars capable of detecting fast-moving enemy aircraft such as fighter jets, cruise missiles, and even jet skis over an area of

500.000 square kilometres,[8] the Saab340 AEW&C systems offer a robust airborne ISR asset, complemented by the static but more continuous surveillance provided by the Barbara aerostats.

Medium-altitude airborne ISR

The official presentation of the East Shield by the Polish General Staff designates fighter jets as primary medium-altitude ISR assets. This may seem surprising since fighter jets typically patrol at 6.000 to 12.000 metres and are mainly used for enemy engagement and battlefield reconnaissance. However, fighter jets can serve as tactical ISR platforms through medium-altitude, pinpoint surveillance, complementing strategic intelligence from higher-altitude and space-based assets. The recent agreement between the Polish Defence Ministry and the U.S. State Department in July 2025 for a USD 4 billion loan to finance Poland's defence modernisation could be a boost for Poland in this regard, as official statements indicate the funds will be used to upgrade Poland's F-16 fleet.[9] The 48 fighter jets are to be upgraded from F-16C/D Block 54+ to the new F-16 Viper model. This is relevant in the context of ISR as the Viper is equipped with AESA radars[10] – similar to those on the Saab 340 AEW&C. That said, fighter jets are more likely to be used for battlefield reconnaissance once an enemy invasion is already underway rather than border ISR, as entry into foreign airspace by combat aircraft violates international law.

As such, for medium-altitude ISR in the border areas, Poland is investing primarily into Medium Altitude Long Endurance (MALE) drones of American and Turkish origin. The backbone here are 24 Turkish Bayraktar MALE drones, which Poland purchased in 2021, with delivery finalised by 2024.[11] The Bayraktar, a large drone with a 12 metre wingspan and an empty weight of 60 kilogrammes, is primarily known as a combat drone due to its proven success in targeted strikes against armoured vehicles, such as against Russian tanks by Ukrainian forces at the start of the invasion or by Azerbaijan during its 2023 capture of Nagorno-Karabakh. That said, the Bayraktar is equipped with opto-electronic and infrared lenses, as well as an SAR radar, and is widely applied as an ISR aircraft due to its flight endurance of about 24 hours.[12]

In addition to the Bayraktar, the MoD is expanding its stock of American-made MQ-9 drones. The Armaments Agency signed a contract with the US firm General Atomics for an undisclosed number of MQ-9B SkyGuardian drones[13] to replace a predecessor model, the MQ-9A Reaper, which Poland had been leasing since 2022.[14] The SkyGuardian is a large MALE drone with a wingspan of 24 metres and a flight endurance of over 40 hours.[15] Equipped with SAR sensors capable of detecting small targets such as boats and ground vehicles, the SkyGuardian fulfils an intermediary role between the strategic AEW&Cs, which primarily monitor the airspace, and the tactical-level ISR delivered by mini-drones. Unlike the Bayraktar, the SkyGuardian is certified for use in aggregated airspace – meaning airspace filled with both military and manned civilian aircraft – making it particularly useful for reconnaissance missions in border areas.

Low-altitude airborne ISR

Low-altitude airborne ISR mainly uses tactical mini-drones operating at 50 to 3.000 metres. Unlike operational-level MALE drones, where Poland relies on American and Turkish UAVs, the government is heavily investing in domestic production and procurement for tactical low-altitude drones. Since early 2025, the Defence Ministry has been collecting proposals from local enterprises for technological innovations to support the East Shield. By July, it received 455 proposals, including 100 related to UAVs, from which 41 were shortlisted.[16] In the same month, the Ministry

announced a budget allocation of PLN200 million for training drones, with initial tests scheduled for September.[17] Additionally, the defence minister introduced a legislative act allowing individual military units to acquire tested small drones directly, bypassing the centralised Armaments Agency.[18] Strategy and training coordination for UAV use across all armed forces will be managed by the newly created Inspector for the Unmanned Aerial Systems Forces, established by the MoD in early 2025.[19]

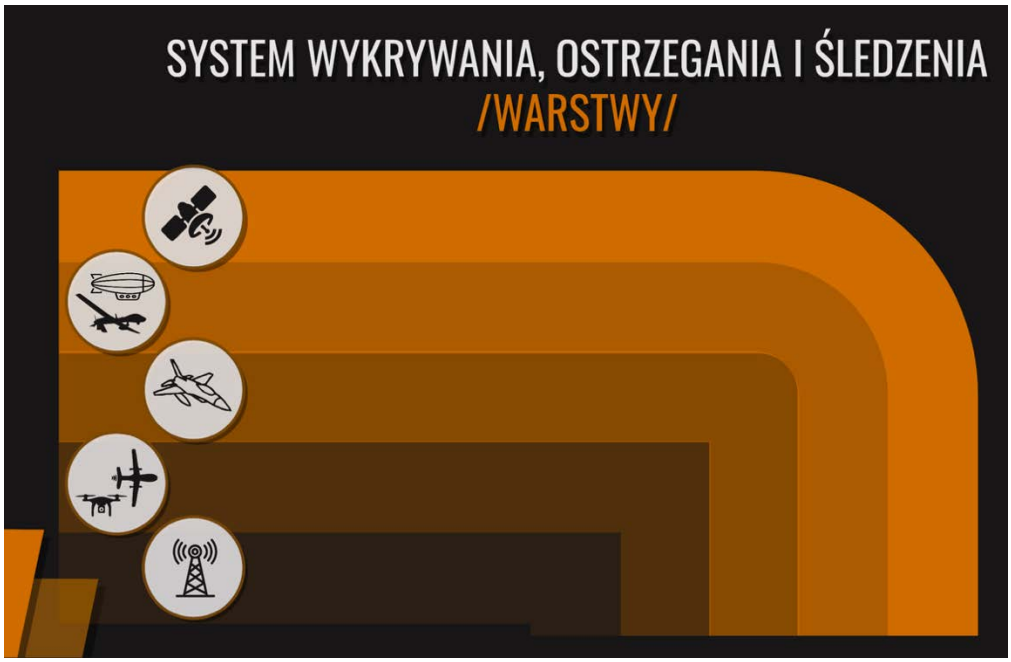
Regarding the specific drones to be used in the context of low-altitude ISR in the border areas, the Armed Forces currently rely on two domestically produced systems: the Wizjer and Flyeye mini-drones. The Armaments Agency signed a contract in 2021 with a public-private consortium of Polish companies and research institutes for the procurement of 100 drones of the Wizjer type, including associated platforms and equipment. These are small drones with a wingspan of 3 metres and an operational radius of 30 kilometres at 100 to 1.000 metres altitude, equipped with both an opto-electronic and a thermal lens for day-and-night reconnaissance.[20] The delivery began in May 2025 and proceeds on a rolling basis.[21] A mini drone used by Polish Forces in even greater numbers is the Flyeye drone from the Polish WB Group. A hand-launched mini-drone, it is also equipped with opto-electronic and thermal cameras and was first used by the Polish Nil Special Forces. The Armaments Agency signed a framework agreement with WB Group in 2023 for the delivery of nearly 1.700 Flyeye drones.[22]

The MoD is also investing in a third model of drones, as it signed a contract with a consortium of Polish manufacturers for 40 tactical reconnaissance drones developed under the name Orlik. At a wingspan of 7 metres and maximum weight of 150 kilogrammes, the Orlik is a robust model, placing it somewhere between mini and MALE drones. However, the certification and delivery of the Orlik drones have been delayed multiple times since 2021, with no drones delivered as of July 2025.[23]

Ground-based ISR

At the ground level, the East Shield project entails the erection of a network of masts along the borders equipped with IMINT, SIGINT and ECHO sensors, meaning they will be able to capture images, electronic signals and sounds. The masts are to be connected through a 'Tactical Base Access System', where the data collected from the various ISR assets across all domains is to be collected and processed through AI-powered software. The masts are also to be equipped with electronic signal jammers to disrupt enemy drone activities. This could potentially drive the number of required masts along the 700 kilometre border with Russia and Belarus up to 140, as such devices typically have a range of only 5 kilometres.[24] A possible solution could be the utilisation of the 'electronic barrier' already erected at both borders in recent years by the Ministry of the Interior for the Border Guard. This 'barrier' consists of a network of about 2.500 camera poles and a line of power, data transmission and movement detection cables.[25] One of the two Polish companies involved in the project, TELBUD SA, has signalled readiness to adapt the masts for the needs of the Armed Forces,[26] while other domestic producers offer mobile masts as an alternative solution.[27]

Visual 3. The ISR layers of the East Shield program



General Staff of the Polish Armed Forces. https://tarczawschod.wp.mil.pl/u/59/0f/590f9be9-9609-4a9a-ab5d-fb5371503b5a/tarcza_wschod_prezentacja_sgwp_27052024.pdf

Counter-Mobility

To slow down and channel enemy troops in the case of an invasion, the MoD plans to construct various types of engineered obstacles along the borders. A 5-kilometre section at the border to Kaliningrad, which was finished in July 2025, may serve as an example of what the defensive lines will look like by the end of the project cycle.[28] The fortifications consist of three defensive lines:

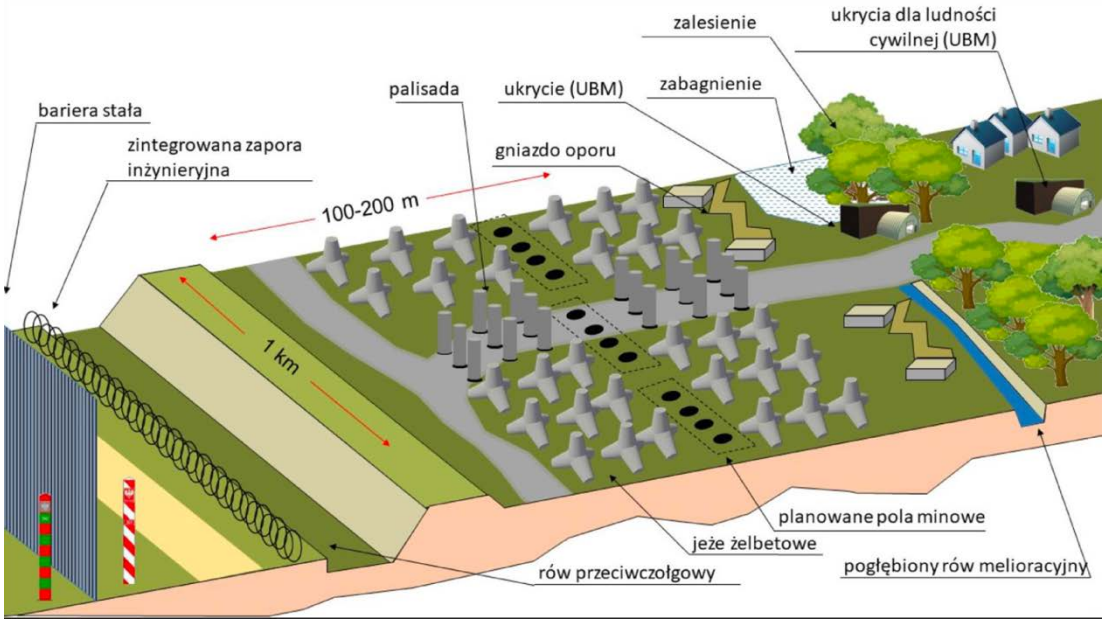
- 1st line: Anti-tank ditches with a depth of 4 metres
- 2nd line: 6 rows of star-shaped concrete anti-tank obstacles, nicknamed ‘hedgehogs’
- 3rd line: Camouflaged bunkers for defence under cover, with space for armoured vehicles

According to the spokesman of the 16th Mechanized Division responsible for the construction, the space between the rows of hedgehogs could be used to lay out mines. Together with the Baltic countries and Finland, Poland withdrew from the Ottawa Convention banning the use of anti-personnel mines in July 2025, which will come into effect beginning in 2026.[29] Like its partners, the Polish government justified the decision with the need to use all means at its disposal to defend itself in case of aggression, while simultaneously stressing that such mines would only be used in case of an imminent enemy invasion. To be able to deploy minefields quickly and safely, the MoD signed a contract with two domestic arms consortiums, PGZ and Belma SA, for the purchase of 24 Baobab-K mine-scattering systems, to be delivered between 2026 and 2028.[30] Mounted on a truck chassis, these systems can launch mines at a distance of up to 90 metres, enabling them to lay out 600 mines in less than 20 minutes. The Baobak-Ks are to replace the 6 Kroton legacy systems,

which the Armed Forces acquired in 2004. Although all orders by the Armaments Agency so far have been for anti-tank mines, a future acquisition of anti-personnel mines by the Armed Forces should not be ruled out, as maintaining strategic ambiguity towards Russia is a key component of Poland's strategic posture.

While the construction of man-made obstacles is the most visible manifestation of the East Shield so far, the undertaking also intends to leverage natural obstacles such as wetlands and forests to slow down enemy movement. As natural obstacles proved very effective in slowing down Russian advances in the first days of the invasion of Ukraine, Poland is fortunate to have the Biebrza Marshes in the north-east, close to the Suwałki Gap.

Visual 4. Model of counter-mobility and security measures



General Staff of the Polish Armed Forces. https://tarczawschod.wp.mil.pl/u/59/0f/590f9be9-9609-4a9a-ab5d-fb5371503b5a/tarcza_wschod_prezentacja_sgwp_27052024.pdf

Enhancing troop mobility

The Ministry of Infrastructure, in coordination with the MoD, plans to improve the logistical readiness of Poland's road network by expanding a system of dual-use parking areas along highways and expressways for potential military use in times of crisis. Selected service areas are to be adapted to serve as temporary staging grounds for military convoys. In addition to these dual-use adaptations, the General Staff intends to develop rapid river-crossing capabilities by stockpiling modular bridge components near major water obstacles and preparing bridgeheads and access roads at selected locations. Planned measures also include reinforcing riverbanks and strengthening approach routes to ensure that key crossing points can support the movement of heavy military equipment when needed.[31] The MoD also announced plans to acquire 150 additional armoured vehicles for the Armed Forces.[32]

Security of soldiers and civilians

Besides building obstacles and defensive positions, the security of soldiers and civilians in border areas is to be improved by constructing shelters and bunkers behind the frontline. To do this effectively, the MoD purchased an Ultimate Building Machine (UBM) from the US company M.I.C. Industries in March 2025. Essentially a large mobile 3-D printer, the UBM allows for the rapid construction of shelters, depots, and similar structures up to 930m^2 in size within 10-12 hours, while requiring a team of only 12 workers.[33]

Another notable initiative is the 'Hospitals Friendly to the Military' program (*Szpitale Przyjazne Wojsku*), launched by the MoD and Health Ministry in March 2025. This program serves two functions. First, it ensures that soldiers and their families receive priority access to healthcare at participating hospitals, both in peacetime and in times of crisis. Second, it prepares these hospitals – primarily located in Poland's north and east – for wartime service by providing training in battlefield medicine and related crisis response capabilities through collaboration with military medical units. Currently, 25 civilian hospitals are involved, but the program remains open to additional medical facilities.[34] The program exemplifies the East Shield's total defence philosophy: it enhances societal resilience and operational readiness through targeted civil-military cooperation and by reinforcing medical preparedness in regions likely to be at the forefront of any future crisis.

Regional and European integration

Cooperation with Finland and the Baltics

Rather than a purely national project, the East Shield should be understood as one element of a broader effort to strengthen NATO's and the EU's Eastern Flank in a time of threat by Russia.

Particularly important is the coordination between Poland and the Baltic countries, which pursue a similar project with the Baltic Defence Line. As the two defence initiatives meet at the Suwałki Gap, NATO's most exposed land corridor, alignment between Poland and Lithuania in particular is paramount. Plans for joint logistics centres for HIMARS ammunition[35] and the recent Polish suggestion to involve Lithuania in the development of the Piorun air-defence missile[36] are examples where such a synergy is being sought.

Intensified cooperation with Finland, which has likewise been preparing its defences, is also being considered. However, due to its abundance of natural obstacles and lower population density, Finland is pursuing a strategy of defence in depth rather than deterrence by denial.[37] This means that it would engage enemy troops deeper inside its territory from strategically advantageous positions instead of trying to prevent them from crossing its borders at all costs, which would be very costly given that Finland's border with Russia stretches over 1.300 kilometres. Finland's approach has proven itself both historically during the Soviet Union's incursion into Finland that started the 1939 Winter War, as well as more recently during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, when the large distances in Ukraine's East and challenging terrains gave the Ukrainian Forces time to attack Russian military convoys from advantageous positions. Poland, and the Baltic countries in particular, could not afford a defence-in-depth approach, as the countries are too small and the population too dense, risking significant human losses if the borders were to be breached.

While Finland is thus an outlier concerning its defensive approach, it has aligned itself well with its Baltic neighbours and Poland regarding deep-strike capabilities. The Baltic states and Poland are investing heavily in procuring High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) capable of targeted strikes at a distance of up to 400 kilometres.[38] In Poland's case, an agreement has been reached with the manufacturer of HIMARS, Lockheed Martin, to assemble the systems in Poland and mount them on the domestic Jelcz truck chassis – the same one which carries the Baobab-K mine-layer – forming the Polish HIMARS-variant Homar-A.[39] While not procuring HIMARS, Finland has opted to upgrade its M270 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems (MLRS), allowing them to fire the same ammunition as the Baltic states and Poland, creating "a continuous, multi-tiered long-range fire network that spans from Finland to Poland."[40]

A Flag Ship EU Project

From the outset of the East Shield endeavour, the Polish government announced that it would seek international funding, particularly through EU channels. After the European Parliament passed a resolution in March 2025 designating both the East Shield and Baltic Defence Line as flagship EU projects, and the European Commission's White Paper for Defence soon afterwards included a reference to an "Eastern Border Shield," the Polish government reached a preliminary agreement for a €1 billion loan from the European Investment Bank for the East Shield infrastructure. This loan is meant to particularly cover expenses from investments into satellite communication, electronic intelligence, and military mobility measures. The Polish government is also seeking up to €45 billion through the EU's *Security Action for Europe (SAFE)* instrument,[41] and plans to submit its funding bid jointly with the Baltic countries.[42]

One of the successes of Poland's EU Council Presidency in the first half of 2025 was securing the provision in the SAFE instrument that loans could be granted for ongoing projects and that up to 35% of procured equipment can originate from outside the EU.[43] Both provisions are relevant for the East Shield, which started prior to the creation of the SAFE instrument and, as discussed above, foresees the purchase of a substantial amount of American equipment, even if the focus is on the domestic and EU industry. The planned cooperation with Lithuania and its northern neighbours may also serve to fulfil the SAFE instrument's requirement that the defence investments to be funded must be joint procurement programs with other EU countries (another success of the Polish Presidency was the provision that this condition be suspended for the first year of the SAFE program).[44]

Poland could also consider initiating similar defence cooperation with its Western European neighbours. Collaboration with Germany would be particularly beneficial as it has one of the strongest defence industries in Europe and is already a close economic partner. One potential idea could be a joint venture with companies like Rheinmetall to produce arms in Poland under German license, or developing a combined system, similar to the cooperation with Lockheed Martin for the Homar-A. This could also improve Polish-German relations at a time when they are strained due to the mutual border checks.

Another notable diplomatic achievement of the Polish government in the EU is the reallocation of funds from the *National Recovery Plan* for defence and security infrastructure. Originally an EU tool designed to help member states recover from the economic impact of the Covid pandemic through a mix of grants and loans, the funds – initially frozen for Poland due to rule-of-law concerns under the previous government – were intended to be used for measures supporting green and digital transformations. By June 2025, Poland secured approval from the European

Commission and EU Council to reallocate approximately €6 billion, about 10% of Poland's total National Recovery funds, toward defence investments.[45] As Article 41(2) of the Treaty on the European Union prohibits the use of EU funds for arms production or other military uses, the funds will be used to erect civilian shelters, boost defence research and development, and build dual-use mobility infrastructure such as roads and airports.[46] Poland is so far the first EU member state to reallocate funds from the *Recovery and Resilience Facility* to defence investments.

Conclusion

Poland's East Shield is a response to one of the most pressing security challenges in contemporary Europe: the threat of Russian military aggression. While its forces continue to gain ground in Ukraine, Moscow is simultaneously expanding its war economy and deepening international partnerships, whether by producing Iranian Shahed drones, recruiting North Korean troops, or expanding its influence via the BRICS format. Meanwhile, the United States is gradually shifting its strategic focus from Europe to the Indo-Pacific. In the event of a conflict over Taiwan, a rapid redeployment of U.S. forces would not only leave Europe more vulnerable but could also present Moscow with an opportunity to test NATO's Article 5 commitment – most likely through limited territorial incursions, such as a move to close the Suwałki Gap.

Such a scenario would not only threaten Poland. Germany, as part of its increased commitment to collective defence, plans to permanently station 5.000 troops and their families in Lithuania – forces that risk being isolated from Western reinforcements if the Suwałki corridor were compromised. In this light, deterrence must become a shared European endeavour. The East Shield, though a national initiative, is embedded in a growing regional defence architecture and provides a model for how European states can reinforce deterrence together.

Yet effective deterrence requires more than coordination in deployment and planning – it also calls for greater coherence in procurement and defence-industrial policy. While the East Shield reflects Poland's commitment to European security, its largely domestic and transatlantic orientation raises questions about broader cooperation within NATO's European pillar and the EU. Poland's emphasis on building up its own arms industry, particularly in the drone sector, is economically understandable and strategically beneficial. However, a more balanced approach that includes collaboration with Western European partners could support the long-term goal of harmonising Europe's fragmented defence industry landscape. Germany, with one of the continent's strongest defence sectors, would be a natural partner.

Deepening such cooperation could not only foster industrial interoperability but also help improve strained Polish-German relations at a time when unity is essential. This would also incentivise Western support for the East Shield. After all, this support – whether politically, operationally, or financially– is a strategic imperative. Poland may be the one building hedgehogs and bunkers today, but the aggression those defences aim to deter is a threat to the entire region.

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