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**Presidential Discourse on
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Aleksander Kwaśniewski,
Lech Kaczyński,
and Bronisław Komorowski**

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Abstract

The article presents the results of a qualitative analysis of presidential statements concerning the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland in the context of the country's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The study focuses on the public statements of three presidents:

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Aleksander Kwaśniewski, Lech Kaczyński, and Bronisław Komorowski. Adopting an interpretive perspective, the authors reconstruct the ways in which national security, the role of the military, and allied commitments are problematized. The analysis of the source material identified four main axes of meaning: the assessment of Poland's own military potential through the lens of Alliance standards; the relationship between Euro-Atlantic integration and national defense autonomy; the conditionality of security guarantees; and the rationale for expeditionary military engagement. The study reveals an evolution in presidential statements – from uncritical enthusiasm and the normative imperative of post-accession military adaptation toward pragmatic realism, budgetary rationalization, and a revision of defense priorities. The argument concludes with a diagnosis of the “paradox of credibility,” according to which treaty-based guarantees of collective defense do not release the state from the need to invest in its own armed forces. On the contrary, they structurally compel the state to continuously and costly demonstrate its military agency and operational credibility in order not to become merely a passive consumer of security within the Alliance.

Keywords

Polish Armed Forces, NATO, presidential discourse, national security

Introduction

Poland's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, since March 12, 1999, has been one of the fundamental points of reference in debates on state security and the role of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland.¹ In the context of Poland's embeddedness in the Euro-Atlantic security system, it is important to examine not only which institutional and modernization measures are being implemented, but also how security is understood, described, and justified in the public sphere. One of the key sites in which such meanings are produced and organized is presidential discourse, given the president's constitutional role as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and his particular position within the symbolic architecture of the state.

1. R. Kupiecki, *Poland's Security Policy after the Cold War*, “Siyasal: Journal of Political Sciences”, 2022, Vol. 31, pp. 27–43, DOI: [10.26650/siyasal.2022.31.945221](https://doi.org/10.26650/siyasal.2022.31.945221); R. Kupiecki, *NATO w polskiej perspektywie 1989–2019*, Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych 2019; M. Cieniuch, *Piętnaście lat w NATO*, “Bezpieczeństwo Narodowe”, 2014, No. 29, I, pp. 99–116; S. Koziej, *Pierwsza dekada funkcjonowania w strukturach bezpieczeństwa NATO i UE – strategiczne doświadczenia Polski*, “Bezpieczeństwo Narodowe”, 2012, No. 22, II, pp. 19–45.

The President of the Republic of Poland, regardless of the extent of his direct decision-making agency, participates in shaping the language of security through public statements that legitimize specific priorities, reinforce selected interpretations of threats, and situate the role of the military within the framework of allied commitments. He may therefore be regarded as an important actor from the perspective of securitization processes. The discourse he produces is particularly interesting from a research perspective, as it reveals a broad spectrum of ways of conceptualizing Poland's relationship with NATO: from viewing membership in the Alliance as a framework for modernization, military adaptation, and the credibility of security guarantees, to problematizing the commitments and costs resulting from such engagement. In this sense, presidential statements become material that makes it possible to capture enduring elements of Polish thinking about security and Poland's membership in NATO.

The purpose of this article is to examine presidential discourse concerning the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland in the context of Poland's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The research material consists of statements by Aleksander Kwaśniewski (1995–2005), Lech Kaczyński (2005–2010), and Bronisław Komorowski (2010–2015). As the constitutional Commanders-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, the presidents are treated in this study as symbolic actors who co-shape the understanding of state security in the public sphere. The subject of the study is the recurring ways in which they frame issues related to the Polish Armed Forces, allied commitments, and the state's responsibility for its own security. To further specify this aim, it should be noted that the article does not seek to assess the effectiveness of the defense policies of individual presidents, but rather to reconstruct the patterns of meaning present in the analyzed statements.

This article adopts a discursive perspective, which means moving away from an institutional and decision-making analysis toward an examination of how meanings are produced in the language of public actors.² In this approach, security is not treated solely as a condition measurable by indicators, but as a category constructed through the interpretive frames, narratives, and concepts assigned to it by a given actor. Understood in this way, the research approach makes it possible to reconstruct the interpretive logics present in presidential statements, without seeking to make assessments focused on their accuracy in political or military terms. This article consists of two parts. The first is devoted to the theoretical assumptions and research methodology. The second, entitled "Presidential Discourse on the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland in the Context of Poland's NATO Membership," presents an analysis of four axes of problematization identified in the research material.

2. V.A. Schmidt, *Discursive Institutionalism: The Explanatory Power of Ideas and Discourse*, "Annual Review of Political Science", 2008, Vol. 11, pp. 303–326, DOI: [10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060606.135342](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.060606.135342); F. Fischer, *Reframing Public Policy: Discursive Politics and Deliberative Practices*, Oxford University Press 2003.

As for existing research on presidential discourse concerning national security, with particular emphasis on the role of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland and the significance of Poland's NATO membership, it has developed at the intersection of security studies and political science. In the first strand, the dominant works are those devoted to the strategic consequences of Poland's accession to Euro-Atlantic structures, the modernization of the defense system, and the evolution of Polish security policy after 1989. Of particular importance here are Stanisław Koziej's analyses of Poland's experience during its first decade of functioning within NATO and the European Union,³ as well as studies by Roman Kuźniar and Roman Kupiecki, which present membership in the Alliance as one of the main pillars of the state's strategic position and as a factor redefining the Polish national interest.⁴ In this area of research, the emphasis is placed primarily on strategic decisions, the role of state institutions, and state policy, while less attention is given to the linguistic and symbolic ways in which security is constructed by central political actors.

The second strand of research includes analyses of the institution of the presidency itself in the Third Republic of Poland and of the styles in which successive presidents have exercised the office. The literature emphasizes that the President of the Republic of Poland, despite limited executive agency, retains considerable importance as an actor who influences the direction of public debate, legitimizes state priorities, and confers symbolic significance on security issues. The foundations of the Polish model of the presidency and the conditions shaping presidential activity have already been examined in detail with reference to Aleksander Kwaśniewski.⁵ More recent historical and political analyses, which also include Lech Kaczyński and Bronisław Komorowski, draw attention to the development of distinct styles of exercising the office in later years: from a politically active and identity-oriented presidency to a more conciliatory and restrained model.⁶ These studies, however, focus primarily on constitutional relations, foreign policy, or electoral strategies, and less frequently undertake a systematic analysis of statements concerning the military and defense policy. Despite the significant development of these research strands, an important research gap remains visible. There is a lack of comparative studies reconstructing how the three Presidents of the Republic of Poland – Aleksander Kwaśniewski, Lech Kaczyński, and Bronisław Komorowski – problematized the role of the Polish Armed Forces in the context of Poland's NATO membership, what meanings they assigned to the relationship between national security and allied commitments, and how they understood the state's responsibility for its own defense. This article is situated precisely within this gap, combining the perspective of security studies with a qualitative analysis of presidential discourse.

3. S. Koziej, *Pierwsza dekada funkcjonowania...*, op. cit., pp. 19–45.

4. R. Kupiecki, *NATO w polskiej...*, op. cit.; R. Kuźniar, *Polityka zagraniczna III Rzeczypospolitej*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar 2012.

5. T. Słomka, *Prezydent Rzeczypospolitej po 1989 roku. Ujęcie porównawcze*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Aspra-JR 2005.

6. A. Dudek, *Historia polityczna Polski 1989–2015*, Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak 2016.

Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

This chapter presents the theoretical assumptions and methodological approaches adopted in the study. First, the theoretical framework and the conceptualization of the research field are discussed; subsequently, the methodology adopted, as well as the characteristics of the research material and the analytical procedure, are presented.

Theoretical Framework and Conceptualization of the Research Field

The research perspective adopted in this article is situated within interpretive approaches to security studies, in which security is not treated solely as an objective state of affairs or as a direct result of political decisions, but as a discursively constructed category. In this approach, the concept of “discourse” is understood as a relatively coherent set of narratives, concepts, and interpretive frames through which political actors assign meaning to phenomena related to state security.

Within the research perspective adopted here, state security is understood as a relational and processual category. This means that its meaning is shaped in relation to specific actors, structures, and contexts, and changes along with transformations in the international environment. Poland's membership in NATO, as an institutional fact, has its own discursive framework within which concepts such as sovereignty, state responsibility, military capabilities, and security guarantees are defined. For this reason, an important term used in the analysis is “the problematization of security.” It refers to the way in which certain issues are presented as problems requiring attention, action, or justification. The problematization of security also involves defining the nature of threats, their sources, and the ways of responding to them. In presidential security discourse, this problematization concerns both the condition of the Polish Armed Forces and relations with NATO, the scope of allied commitments, and the rationale for international engagement.

In analyzing presidential discourse on security and the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland, the distinction between decision-making agency and discursive agency is of key importance. Regardless of the extent of his direct influence over operational or budgetary decisions, the President of the Republic of Poland plays a particular role in constructing meanings related to state security, the military, and allied commitments.⁷ The president's constitutional function as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces gives his statements, among other things, particular symbolic weight. Even if the

7. D. Wicherek, M. Skóra, *Competences of the President of the Republic of Poland in the area of national security*, “Polityka i Społeczeństwo”, 2021, No. 4(19), pp. 159–168, DOI: [10.15584/polispol.2021.4.12](https://doi.org/10.15584/polispol.2021.4.12).

powers associated with this command are largely indirect and formal, their very existence places the president at the center of public reflection on security.⁸ Presidential statements are received both as part of ongoing political debate and as messages coming from an institution associated with the continuity of the state and its strategic interests. In this sense, the president can be viewed primarily as a bearer of narratives concerning security, rather than merely as a participant in political dialogue.

The President of the Republic of Poland also operates at the intersection of domestic and international orders. His activity encompasses both the sphere of internal debate on the condition and role of the Armed Forces and communication with allied partners, including within NATO. Presidential statements often situate Poland's security within a broader Euro-Atlantic context, linking national issues with a narrative of allied commitments, standards, and guarantees. It is precisely this capacity to operate simultaneously at both levels that makes the president a particularly important actor in security discourse. Through his statements, the president may strengthen or weaken particular narratives, emphasize selected threats, priorities, and solutions, and assign them the status of issues of strategic importance. It is also important to note that the President of the Republic of Poland is not a uniform actor.⁹ Each presidency functions within a different international, institutional, and normative context, which is reflected in the ways in which security is problematized. The context, especially the international one, also affects the frequency of references to military issues. The strength of the role of the President of the Republic of Poland derives to a significant extent from his mandate, which comes from universal and direct elections. For this reason, presidential discourse constitutes a legitimate and valuable object of qualitative analysis, making it possible to reconstruct the ways in which state security, the role of the military, and the significance of Poland's NATO membership are problematized.

Methodology and Research Data

In the article, we conducted a qualitative discourse analysis of public statements by Presidents of the Republic of Poland concerning the Polish Armed Forces in the context of Poland's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. We adopted an interpretive-reconstructive perspective, situated within a strand of security studies that emphasizes the semantic and discursive character of security as a category.¹⁰ The purpose of the analysis was to reconstruct the ways in which state security, the role of the military, and the significance of Poland's NATO membership are problema-

8. C. Smuniewski, *National Security of Poland in the Axiological Perspective. President Lech Wałęsa*, Wydawnictwo Akademii Humanistycznej im. A. Gieysztor, Institute of Political Science Publishers 2019, pp. 27–106.

9. E. Szkudlarek-Śmiechowicz, *Komunikowanie polityczne*, in: *Komunikowanie publiczne. Zagadnienia wybrane*, eds. B. Kudra, E. Olejniczak, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego 2014, pp. 25–48; B. Sieradzka-Baziur, *Język polityki – dotychczasowe prace oraz perspektywy badawcze*, "Horyzonty Polityki", 2011, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 89–110; K. Ożóg, *O języku współczesnej polityki*, "Polityka i Społeczeństwo", 2007, No. 4, pp. 103–111; J. Bralczyk, *O języku propagandy i polityki*, Wydawnictwo Trio 2007.

10. T. Balzacq, *Enquiries into methods: A new framework for securitization analysis*, in: *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve*, ed. T. Balzacq, 1st ed., Routledge 2010, pp. 31–53; B. Buzan, O. Wæver, J. de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Lynne Rienner Publishers 1998.

tized in presidential security discourse. In this sense, we drew on approaches in discourse analysis that treat the statements of public actors as privileged sites for the production and stabilization of interpretive frames.¹¹

The research material consisted of public statements by three Presidents of the Republic of Poland: Aleksander Kwaśniewski, Lech Kaczyński, and Bronisław Komorowski. This selection followed from the adopted time frame, which covered the period associated with Poland's accession to NATO, and made it possible to capture the diverse strategic contexts in which successive presidencies operated. We did not include statements by President Andrzej Duda, who was still in office while we were preparing this text. As for the source corpus used in our research, it included public addresses, official messages, ceremonial speeches, interviews, and official comments published in authorized collections of presidential statements. The selection of material was purposive and problem-oriented.¹² The source unit was the entire statement by a given president, while the unit of analysis was a passage containing a significant formulation, concept, or judgment relating to security, the military, or allied commitments. We regarded as particularly important those linguistic elements that organized the meaning of the statement and served as discursive indicators of the conceptualization of state security and Poland's place in NATO.

The analytical procedure was multi-stage. In the first stage, we compiled a corpus of statements that met the adopted selection criteria. We then conducted a comprehensive reading of the material, identifying passages relevant to the issues of security and Poland's relationship with NATO. In the next stage, we applied preliminary inductive coding of the textual material,¹³ assigning codes to these passages that described the dominant meanings of the statements, such as modernization, interoperability, the state's responsibility for its own defense, allied credibility, the conditionality of guarantees, allied presence, deterrence, foreign missions, and the costs of engagement. These codes were then compared and organized into broader categories of meaning. On this basis, we reconstructed the dominant axes of problematization, understood as relatively stable fields of meaning that organize presidential discourse on security and the Polish Armed Forces in the context of NATO. In the final stage, we reread the material in order to verify the adequacy of the identified analytical axes. Ultimately, we identified four analytical axes: (1) the assessment of the Polish Armed Forces within NATO; (2) the relationship between NATO membership and the state's defense autonomy; (3) security guarantees and the risk of incomplete integration into the NATO system; and (4) the involvement of the Polish Armed Forces in allied operations beyond the state's territory. These axes are

11. N. Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, Longman 1995.

12. U. Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 7th ed., Sage Publishing 2023.

13. J.M. Corbin, A.L. Strauss, *Basics of qualitative research: techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*, Sage Publications 2008.

the result of reconstructing the dominant patterns of meaning present in the analyzed material. The analysis was interpretive and contextual in character, and its findings constitute a reconstruction of the meanings present in the material, rather than their only possible interpretation.

It should be emphasized, however, that the research methods adopted have certain limitations. First, the analysis covers only selected public statements by presidents, rather than the entirety of presidential communication or security policy decision-making processes. Second, the interpretive perspective adopted here is not intended to test cause-and-effect relationships, but rather to reconstruct meanings and ways of framing security issues.

The qualitative analysis of presidential discourse concerning the Armed Forces of the Republic of Poland in the context of NATO membership is organized around four axes that emerge from the analyzed source material as dominant problem areas. These axes do not correspond to successive presidencies or to a chronological order, but instead reconstruct the ways in which the relationship among the military, the state, and the North Atlantic Alliance is conceptualized in the public statements of Polish presidents. In these statements, NATO functions as the basic point of reference against which assessments of the capabilities of the Polish Armed Forces, the scope of the state's responsibility for its own defense, the conditions under which security guarantees become effective, and the rationale for allied engagement beyond the country's territory are presented. It should be noted, however, that the individual subsections do not always refer to statements by all three presidents considered in this study. This analytical structure follows directly from our adopted qualitative research methodology and from the diversity of strategic contexts in which successive presidencies operated. Our aim was not to assign, in an artificial or symmetrical manner, the position of each political actor to every identified axis. Rather, we sought to reconstruct the dominant patterns of meaning as faithfully as possible. For this reason, in each of the four sections we highlight those narratives that relate most clearly to a given aspect of security. This means that the absence of a reference to a statement by one of the presidents within a given analytical axis does not imply that this president made no reference at all to the issue in question. Instead, it indicates the lower intensity or lesser symbolic significance of that theme in the public discourse he produced, compared with the narratives of the other Commanders-in-Chief of the Armed Forces.

The President's Remarks on the Polish Armed Forces in the Context of Poland's NATO Mem- bership

V.12

Assessment of the Polish Armed Forces within NATO

In the analyzed presidential statements, the Polish Armed Forces are presented and assessed through the lens of the standards and expectations associated with NATO membership, which serves as the overarching comparative framework. This pattern is particularly evident in the statements of President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, in which the condition of the Polish military is problematized through direct reference to the NATO level. The president's assessment is critical and concerns both equipment and the results of reforms carried out to date. President Kwaśniewski states: "The equipment we possess is inadequate to our needs, not to say that it is at the 'tail end of NATO,' not even at an average level,"¹⁴ and then supplements this diagnosis by noting that "despite many reform efforts undertaken, they have not produced a satisfactory result."¹⁵ In these statements, NATO functions as an external criterion against which the distance separating the Polish Armed Forces from the desired operational capabilities is revealed. From this diagnosis, President Kwaśniewski derives the demand for modernization, presented as a necessary condition for genuine participation in the Alliance. In this discourse, NATO membership is linked to the intensification of changes in both personnel and equipment, as expressed in the statement: "We have found ourselves in NATO, and the next five years must be a period of clear modernization of the military, both in terms of personnel and equipment. The role of the president as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces will be to press for an increase in budgetary funds for this purpose."¹⁶ An important element of this narrative is also the problem of interoperability, understood as the practical ability to cooperate within allied structures. Referring to the activity of the Multinational Corps Northeast, President Kwaśniewski emphasizes that it is "not only an excellent opportunity to improve NATO procedures and the English language in practice. It is, above all, a major challenge, a practical test of preparedness for joint operations."¹⁷ In this context, he also formulates the demand to achieve full operational readiness: "We must achieve full capability for operational cooperation with the other armies of the Pact as quickly as possible."¹⁸ The assessment of the condition of the Polish Armed Forces is further reinforced by a normative justification for the need to bear the costs of security. President Kwaśniewski reminds his audience: "I want to recall, as President of the Republic, that one cannot save money on security!"¹⁹ In this formulation, security is presented as an area requiring sustained state commitment, regardless of formal allied guarantees.

In President Bronisław Komorowski's statements, the same evaluative framework is maintained, but its articulation becomes more structured through a selective hierarchy of capabilities. The president does not formulate a general criticism of the condition of the military, but instead identi-

14. A. Kwaśniewski, *Wywiad dla „Polski Zbrojnej”*, in: *Przemówienia. Listy. Wywiady, 2001, wybór*, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2002, p. 159.

15. A. Kwaśniewski, *Pozycja Polski w Europie i świecie – wystąpienie programowe na konferencji w Gdańsku*, in: *Przemówienia. Listy. Wywiady, 2000, wybór*, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2001, p. 389.

16. A. Kwaśniewski, *Chcę być prezydentem – wywiad dla „Polityki”*, in: *Przemówienia. Listy. Wywiady, 2000, wybór*, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2001, p. 95.

17. A. Kwaśniewski, *Wystąpienie podczas uroczystej inauguracji Wielonarodowego Korpusu Północno – Wschodniego*, in: *Przemówienia. Listy. Wywiady, 1999, wybór*, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2000, p. 348.

18. A. Kwaśniewski, *Wystąpienie w czasie uroczystości związanych z Dniem Wojska Polskiego*, in: *Przemówienia. Listy. Wywiady, 1999, wybór*, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2000, p. 297.

19. Ibidem.

fies “three key areas for the development of the Armed Forces: air defense systems, including missile defense; information, reconnaissance, and command systems; and the mobility of land forces, especially helicopter mobility.”²⁰ At the same time, he emphasizes the need to reconcile security requirements with the financial realities of the state, stating that “the defense system must participate in the difficult process of spending reductions (...). These limitations, however, should take into account and respect priorities, the most important modernization programs implemented from a long-term perspective.”²¹

To summarize the analysis of the first problem axis, NATO structures function in presidential discourse as an overarching normative mechanism of evaluation against which the deficits of Poland's own armed forces are diagnosed. At the same time, an important discursive tension emerges here, resulting from the clash between allied ambitions and the material limitations of the state. On the one hand, Aleksander Kwaśniewski's narrative is dominated by a logic that may be described as “catching up”: a radical and uncompromising critique of the army's post-Soviet condition – its being at the “tail end of NATO” – serves as a tool for legitimizing unconditional modernization and the imperative of interoperability, while excluding budgetary savings in the sphere of defense. On the other hand, in Bronisław Komorowski's statements, this universalist drive for modernization, shaped by the accession-related shock of asymmetry, is problematized through budgetary realism. General criticism is replaced by a selective hierarchy of operational capabilities, such as air defense and mobility. This demonstrates the evolution of presidential discourse: from the pursuit of comprehensive adaptation of the entire defense system, presented as almost cost-free in political terms, toward the pragmatic management of scarcity and the definition of Polish priorities within the broader Euro-Atlantic architecture.

NATO Membership and a Country's Defense Autonomy

In the analyzed corpus of statements, the relationship between NATO membership and the state's defense autonomy is presented as one of interdependence rather than substitution. Defense autonomy is not constructed here as an alternative to the Alliance, but as a condition for its meaningful and credible functioning. This pattern is most clearly visible in the statements of President Lech Kaczyński, who consistently problematizes the risk of equating state security solely with formal allied guarantees. President Kaczyński states: “Poland wants to be a loyal member of this alliance, it

20. B. Komorowski, *Wystąpienie na rozprawie rozliczeniowo-koordynacyjnej kadry kierowniczej Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej i Sił Zbrojnych RP*, in: *Wystąpienia. Listy. Wywiady, 2013, wybór*, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2014, p. 37.

21. B. Komorowski, *Wystąpienie z okazji Święta Wojska Polskiego*, in: *Wystąpienia. Listy. Wywiady, 2013, wybór*, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2014, p. 108.

wants to fulfill its obligations, but it must also rely on its own forces. (...) Regardless of its allies, Poland should be ready to defend itself also with its own forces. This is the basic message of my presidency.”²² In this statement, defense autonomy is clearly presented as a condition of responsible participation in NATO, rather than as an expression of skepticism toward the Alliance. This logic is reinforced through an explicit rejection of the belief that NATO membership justifies the weakening of Poland's own military potential. President Kaczyński emphasizes: “We will not play a serious role in NATO, nor will we genuinely ensure our security, without strong Polish Armed Forces. The claim that the military can be weakened and brought to disintegration with impunity ‘because we are in NATO’ is false and harmful.”²³ Here, defense autonomy is inscribed into the logic of allied credibility: a strong nation-state is a condition for seriousness and agency within NATO.

President Aleksander Kwaśniewski's statements construct the relationship between autonomy and the Alliance in a less normative but more functional way. In his discourse, defense autonomy is not articulated directly as a political category, but emerges through an emphasis on practical capabilities for cooperation and on overcoming historical limitations. Referring to the activities of the Multinational Corps Northeast, President Kwaśniewski emphasizes its symbolic and structural significance, stating that it “is an example of the successful bridging of historical divisions between former adversaries.”²⁴ From this perspective, the state's defense autonomy does not consist in isolation, but in the ability to function within a new security order that requires overcoming earlier mental and organizational barriers. At the same time, Kwaśniewski emphasizes the practical dimension of this process, noting that the corps is “not only an excellent opportunity to improve NATO procedures and the English language in practice. It is, above all, a major challenge, a practical test of preparedness for joint operations.”²⁵ Defense autonomy is therefore inscribed here into the logic of competence and effectiveness: the state is autonomous to the extent that it is capable of genuine cooperation and of assuming responsibility within allied structures.

In President Bronisław Komorowski's statements, the relationship between NATO and the state's defense autonomy is additionally situated within the changing nature of security threats. Autonomy is not understood here solely in terms of classical military capabilities, but as the capacity to adapt to new security domains. President Komorowski points to “the urgent need to organize, wisely and without delay, preparations for the task of building and developing capabilities in cyberspace.”²⁶ Defense autonomy is thus linked to the state's responsibility for its own security in areas that are not automatically covered by traditional allied mechanisms. This logic is further reinforced by reference

22. L. Kaczyński, *Przemówienie podczas uroczystego wręczenia orderów oraz nominacji generalskich oficerom Wojska Polskiego i Agencji Wywiadu*, in: *Wystąpienia. Listy. Wywiady, 2006, wybór*, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2007, p. 85.

23. L. Kaczyński, *Państwo polskie musi stać się jeszcze silniejsze – wywiad dla dziennika „Polska”*, in: *Wystąpienia. Listy. Wywiady, 2009-2010, wybór*, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2010, p. 422.

24. A. Kwaśniewski, *Wystąpienie podczas uroczystości odprawy wart przy grobie Nieznanego Żołnierza*, in: *Przemówienia. Listy. Wywiady, 2000, wybór*, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2001, p. 290.

25. A. Kwaśniewski, *Wystąpienie podczas uroczystej...*, op. cit., p. 348.

26. B. Komorowski, *Wystąpienie na rozprawie...*, op. cit., p. 38.

to a classical strategic maxim: "The Latin maxim *Si vis pacem, para bellum* must be recalled anew."²⁷ In this context, NATO does not abolish the obligation to prepare for defense; rather, it strengthens and updates it. At the same time, President Komorowski problematizes defense autonomy in the context of changes in the international security environment, noting that "before our very eyes, the nature of threats and challenges to the security of the Euro-Atlantic area has fundamentally changed. The threat of an armed conflict between two military blocs has been replaced by the danger of an explosion of nationalisms, chauvinisms, and regional armed conflicts."²⁸ Here, the state's defense autonomy is linked to the ability to respond to threats below the threshold of classical war, shifting the emphasis from purely military strength to the capacity for strategic restraint and credibility. This is also expressed in his position on strengthening NATO's presence in Poland, when the president notes that this could be "perceived as a kind of provocation and rather as adding fuel to the fire," while "even without saber-rattling, Poland is perceived as a credible country."²⁹ From this perspective, defense autonomy also means the ability to independently shape the style of one's presence in the Alliance in a way that strengthens security without escalating tensions.

In synthesizing the second analytical axis, it should be noted that, in presidential discourse, the category of defense autonomy is not conceptualized in opposition to allied integration. Rather, it functions in relation to it through a complex, multidimensional feedback mechanism. The main problematization of this area centers on the tension between the risk of reducing the state to the role of a passive beneficiary of treaty guarantees and the requirement to maintain its own sovereign deterrence potential. The analyzed statements reveal a clear evolution in the definition of the very essence of this autonomy: from a strictly functional dimension oriented toward operational and organizational interoperability, as in the case of Aleksander Kwaśniewski; through a hard realism that treats a strong national army as a safeguard against marginalization within the Alliance, as in the case of Lech Kaczyński; to strategic adaptability and the capacity to respond independently in new security domains, framed by doctrinal restraint, as in the case of Bronisław Komorowski. As a result, NATO membership does not eliminate the obligation of independent defense. In a certain sense, it paradoxically forces its continuous redefinition. From this perspective, autonomy becomes an indispensable instrument for making the state credible within Euro-Atlantic structures, conditioning its transition from the position of merely a consumer of security to that of an active creator of collective security. At this point, we are dealing with a certain paradox. It consists in the clash between common intuitions and the hard logic of geostrategy. It might seem that entering under the "protective umbrella" of a powerful military alliance would allow a state to breathe more easily, reduce its own army, and

27. B. Komorowski, *Przemówienie z okazji Święta Wojska Polskiego*, in: *Wystąpienia. Listy. Wywiady, 2014, wybór*, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2015, p. 124.

28. B. Komorowski, *Wystąpienie na IV Forum Bezpieczeństwa Euroatlantyckiego*, in: *Wystąpienia. Listy. Wywiady, 2010-11, wybór*, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2013, p. 100.

29. B. Komorowski, *Niepodległa Ukraina leży w interesie Polski i Europy*, in: *Wystąpienia. Listy. Wywiady, 2013, wybór*, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2014, p. 332.

shift the burden of its defense onto stronger partners. In reality, however, the opposite occurs. In order to maintain its political position within NATO, to be treated seriously, and, most importantly, to realistically ensure that assistance will arrive in the event of a crisis, the state must invest significantly more resources and effort in its own armed forces than before accession. In other words, the guarantee of collective security does not release the state from the obligation to arm itself. Paradoxically, it intensifies that obligation. It forces the continuous expansion of defense autonomy in order to prove to allies that the state is a valuable partner ready to fight, and therefore worth defending, rather than a defenseless "free rider."

Security Guarantees and the Risk of Incomplete Integration into the NATO System

In the analyzed presidential statements, the security guarantees resulting from NATO membership are presented as requiring specific material and organizational conditions, understood primarily as the presence of appropriate capabilities and arrangements that strengthen readiness and the credibility of deterrence. A particular role is played here by the figure of the "gray zone of security," which serves to describe the risk of incomplete integration into the allied system. In President Lech Kaczyński's statements, the issue of missile defense occupies a central place. The missile shield is consistently presented as a defensive instrument: "The shield (...), which is not an offensive weapon, is intended to protect us and our allies against missile attacks. As an exclusively defensive installation, the shield is not directed against anyone."³⁰ Its significance is linked to the elimination of the risk of security peripheralization: "It would provide (...) a guarantee that no 'gray zone of security' would emerge between NATO member states in Central and Western Europe and the region located east of Poland's borders."³¹ This logic is also reinforced by another framing of the American presence in the region, in which President Kaczyński emphasizes that "the presence of American troops and military installations would strengthen not only Poland, but also other countries of the Central European region. It would also strengthen NATO's power and have a stabilizing effect on states whose authorities do not share our ideas and our system of values, where there is still a deficit of freedom and democracy, and where the use of force is not merely a doctrine."³²

In President Bronisław Komorowski's statements, the risk of a "gray zone" is linked not to the absence of allied installations, but to the insufficiency of the state's own capabilities. The president

30. L. Kaczyński, *Orędzie telewizyjne dotyczące instalacji elementów tarczy antyrakietowej w Polsce*, in: *Wystąpienia. Listy. Wywiady, 2008, wybór*, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2009, p. 88.

31. L. Kaczyński, *Decyzję Waszyngtonu przyjąłem z niepokojem—wywiad dla „Faktu”*, in: *Wystąpienia. Listy. Wywiady, 2009-2010, wybór*, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2010, p. 412.

32. Ibidem.

states: "By entering the allied system without our own missile defense assets, we will remain (...) in a gray zone of missile security."³³ In this framing, NATO guarantees are presented as insufficient without an adequate national contribution. This is complemented by a reference to initiatives strengthening the Alliance's response capacity, described as "an undertaking of considerable importance to us, namely the creation of the so-called spearhead, that is, very high readiness task forces."³⁴

Synthesizing the discussion within the third analytical axis, it should be stated that NATO security guarantees do not appear in the analyzed presidential statements as a static or automatic phenomenon, but rather as a promise requiring continuous material and political anchoring – an effort on the part of the political community. An important motif in this area is the figure of the "gray zone of security," understood as the specter of the state's structural and operational peripheralization within the Alliance. Here, however, a fundamental shift emerges in the way the sources of this threat are diagnosed. In Lech Kaczyński's narrative, the security vector is directed outward: the ultimate guarantee of Poland's full inclusion in NATO's core and of overcoming the status of a buffer state is the direct, physical presence of American military infrastructure, namely the missile defense shield. In Bronisław Komorowski's perspective, by contrast, the risk of the "gray zone" becomes, in a sense, internalized: marginalization within the allied system results not so much from the absence of foreign installations as from a deficit of Poland's own highly specialized capabilities, such as a national missile defense system. In this way, presidential discourse reveals the tension inherent in the nature of treaty-based credibility. Signs of evolution can be observed: from the pursuit of indisputable, hard guarantees from a hegemonic power toward the conviction that it is the state's endogenous technological potential that conditions the real strength of Article 5.

The Polish Armed Forces' Participation in Allied Operations Outside the Country's Territory

The engagement of the Polish Armed Forces in allied operations beyond the state's borders is presented in the analyzed statements as an important element of participation in NATO, but also as an area requiring reflection on the rationale and costs of such engagement. In President Lech Kaczyński's discourse, foreign missions are clearly affirmed as confirmation of operational capability and allied responsibility. The president states that "the participation of detached forces of the Polish Navy in NATO operations has proved that we are capable of carrying out the most difficult

33. B. Komorowski, *Wystąpienie na odprawie rozliczeniowo-koordynacyjnej kadry kierowniczej Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej i Sił Zbrojnych RP*, in: *Wystąpienia. Listy. Wywiady*, 2012, wybór, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2013, pp. 57–58.

34. B. Komorowski, *Wystąpienie na odprawie kadry kierowniczej Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej i Sił Zbrojnych RP*, in: *Wystąpienia. Listy. Wywiady*, 2015, wybór, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2015, p. 33.

missions.”³⁵ With regard to Afghanistan, he emphasizes both the significance of the mission and its grounding in NATO's defensive character: “The mission in Afghanistan is extremely important. (...) But please remember that the North Atlantic Pact must remain a defensive pact, and that Article 5 of the Washington Treaty was, is, and will remain valid.”³⁶ At the same time, he clearly defines this engagement as an allied obligation: “the engagement will be continued and strengthened. I regard it as my duty resulting from our membership in the North Atlantic Pact.”³⁷

In President Bronisław Komorowski's statements, the presentation of foreign missions becomes more nuanced. On the one hand, allied solidarity is emphasized, as expressed in the statement that “out of concern for our own and collective security, we should engage our forces in allied tasks.”³⁸ On the other hand, a critical reflection emerges on the scale and concept of expeditionary policy, when the president notes that “savings should include, among other things, the money we spend as a result of the unnecessarily adopted concept of Polish expeditionary policy.”³⁹ This axis therefore reveals a shift in the way foreign missions are presented: from clear affirmation toward a selective problematization of their rationale and costs within a broader reflection on security priorities.

Concluding the discussion of the fourth analytical axis, it should be stated that the expeditionary engagement of the Polish Armed Forces reveals, in presidential statements, a tension at the intersection of allied loyalty and national pragmatism. The axis of problematization here is the status of foreign operations as a kind of currency that lends credibility to the state within NATO structures. In Lech Kaczyński's statements, an affirmative approach predominates, in which military missions beyond the country's territory function as an unconditional treaty obligation and as the ultimate test of operational effectiveness. They thus become an absolute investment in the political capital of allied guarantees. In Bronisław Komorowski's statements, by contrast, this expeditionary enthusiasm is subjected to critical revision from the standpoint of budgetary and strategic realism. The discursive demand to rationalize costs and reduce the unnecessarily adopted concept of Polish expeditionary policy signals a clear rupture in previous thinking about the army's priorities. This reveals an important doctrinal evolution. It consists in a shift from the uncritical treatment of presence in distant theaters of operation as an indispensable proof of belonging to the Western security community, toward a skeptical calculation in which excessive projection of force abroad creates the risk of draining resources necessary for the basic defense functions of the state on its own territory.

35. L. Kaczyński, *List do Pana Wice-admirała Andrzeja Karwety, Dowódcy Marynarki Wojennej RP, z okazji święta Marynarki Wojennej RP*, in: *Wystąpienia. Listy. Wywiady, 2009-2010, wybór*, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2010, p. 258.

36. L. Kaczyński, *Wystąpienie podczas noworocznego spotkania z Korpusem Dyplomatycznym*, in: *Wystąpienia. Listy. Wywiady, 2009-2010, wybór*, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2010, p. 166.

37. L. Kaczyński, *Przemówienie podczas noworocznego spotkania z Korpusem Dyplomatycznym*, in: *Wystąpienia. Listy. Wywiady, 2008, wybór*, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2009, p. 27.

38. B. Komorowski, *Orędzie po złożeniu przysięgi przed Zgromadzeniem Narodowym i objęciu urzędu Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, in: *Wystąpienia. Listy. Wywiady, 2010-2011, wybór*, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2013, p. 24.

39. B. Komorowski, *Inni za nas tego nie zrobią*, in: *Wystąpienia. Listy. Wywiady, 2013, wybór*, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2014, p. 316.

Conclusion

The analysis of presidential discourse on the Polish Armed Forces in light of NATO membership makes it possible to observe that Euro-Atlantic integration did not constitute, in Polish strategic thought, an endpoint that eliminated the dilemmas of state security. Rather, it became a new framework generating significant structural tensions. The four reconstructed axes reveal a specific evolution in the perception of allied commitments. This evolution consists in a shift from an initial, strongly normative imperative of unconditional adaptation and operational enthusiasm, characteristic of the period of “catching up,” toward a position of highly pragmatic strategic realism and a critical revision of the expeditionary paradigm. The central node of this discourse is the diagnosed paradox of credibility: the growing conviction, over time, that the umbrella of treaty-based collective defense guarantees does not release the state from the need to develop its own sovereign deterrence potential. On the contrary, it requires the state to continuously and costly prove its own agency and military usefulness. Thus, the statements of Aleksander Kwaśniewski, Lech Kaczyński, and Bronisław Komorowski, despite clear differences in constitutional emphases and geopolitical contexts, document the maturation of the Polish defense narrative. In this narrative, the state gradually rejects the role of a passive consumer of security, seeking to permanently eliminate the specter of the “gray zone” through endogenous modernization of the armed forces and the national anchoring of collective mechanisms.

The analysis also makes it possible to capture the legitimizing dimension of the presidential language of security. Statements by the head of state not only describe the military, NATO, and threats, but also organize the way in which the state's responsibility for defense is understood and assign strategic importance to specific issues. In this sense, President Lech Kaczyński's formulation is significant: “I will make every effort to give our state's defense policy the appropriate rank and significance.”⁴⁰

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40. L. Kaczyński, *Orędzie noworoczne*, in: *Wystąpienia. Listy. Wywiady*, 2006, wybór, Kancelaria Prezydenta RP 2007, p. 29.

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