
PERSPECTIVES

Maintaining a Base: Trouble in Poland's Defense Industry

By
Reuben F. Johnson
Journalist for *The Weekly Standard*

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One of the more capable of the new North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) nations and one that possesses a rather robust defense industrial sector is Poland. During Soviet times, the Warsaw Pact state had a reputation for doing some of the better work on maintaining and sometimes even producing military hardware. Poland was one of the few Warsaw Pact nations outside of the USSR that designed and manufactured a complete weapons platform, in this case the helicopters that were built at the Polskie Zaklady Lotnicze Polish Aviation Works (PZL).

Poland's armed forces now show all the signs and have taken all of the steps that one would expect a nation to initiate in order to integrate itself into the NATO alliance. It has taken on a number of western weapons platforms into its military so that the country is not completely dependent on Russia for support of its Soviet-era platforms. In the last decade Poland has acquired Leopard tanks from Germany and 48 new Lockheed Martin F-16 fighter aircraft from the United States, the last of which will be delivered in December [2007] of this year.

The Central European state has also acquired much of its new hardware at minimal cost. The Leopard II tanks were used models that the German Bundeswehr had in mothballs, so they were acquired at a bargain price. The Polish Air Force also acquired most of the East German MiG-29s that the Luftwaffe of the re-united Germany was flying until the delivery of its first Eurofighters. At some expense these MiGs had been modernized by the German force to be completely NATO-compatible and had been brought up to operational standards consistent with the alliance's requirements, but were "sold" to the Poles at a symbolic price of one Euro.

But, the best deal may end up having come from the United States. The money to procure the F-16s was loaned to the Poles, and although there have been no official statements made on the matter, no one seems in any rush to collect the debt.

Now Poland is about to go back and ask the United States for another batch of weapons. Last week the recently-elected government in Warsaw announced that Poland would no longer consent to be a site for ten of the U.S. ballistic missile defense system interceptors unless Washington agreed at the same time to provide them with a number of short- and medium-range air defense systems, such as the Raytheon Patriot PAC-3 and Lockheed Martin Terminal High-Altitude Air Defense (THAAD). Polish officials say the interceptor sites make their country a bigger, high-value target and they want their air defenses bolstered accordingly.

“The presence of a U.S. military installation in Poland undoubtedly makes Polish airspace more vulnerable,” said the Polish Defence Minister Bogdan Klich when interviewed by Reuters. “I speak about this in categorical terms because this is an essential part of Polish air space security.”

Part of the motivation for demanding that the U.S. gift these advanced air defense systems to Poland is political. Placing the U.S. missile defense system on Polish soil has become widely unpopular in this country according to a number of opinion polls. (Those are opinion polls, as opposed to opinionated Poles.) The only way the government can justify taking this step to its population and cover itself politically is to show that they gave the U.S. what it wanted, but only after extracting a pound of flesh in return for the concession.

But, the other half of the equation is a combined desire to try and get as much out of the United States as possible. “One of the problems with this agreement in which they appear to ultimately be receiving these F-16s for free,” said a U.S. aerospace industry official, “is that now this has become the standard that is now expected. Everyone – and not just the Poles, but other former Soviet bloc states and sometimes including some of our own U.S. armed forces – wants this ‘Polish F-16 deal’ where you can get something for nothing.”

The casualties in all this may be Poland’s rather capable defense industrial sector in the short-term and, in the long-term, the overall reputation and image of U.S.-made military hardware.

Air defense is a technology that Polish industry is well-versed in. Specifically, its major enterprises have shown a talent for upgrading their old, Soviet-era platforms by replacing all of the old-generation analogue components and traveling wave-guide tubes with solid-state digital technology. At the same time they have also integrated U.S. weapon systems onto these Russian platforms, creating what is a current-generation air defense unit at a fraction of the cost of a new one. The *Wojskowe Zakłady Uzbrojenia Nr 2* (Military Armament Works Nr 2 or WZU Nr2), has been one of the leaders in this area. This factory is the only facility outside of the former USSR that retains the fully-licensed authority from the original equipment manufacturer (OEM) in Russia to make any modifications they deem fit to any Russian-made model from the SA-1 to the SA-8 series. The factory has used this license to create new-age versions of these Russian SAMs by replacing the older-technology Russian missiles with surface-launched air defense variants of either the Raytheon AIM-120 Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missile (AMRAAM), that has an active-homing seeker or the AIM-7 Sea Sparrow with a semi-active seeker.

Either solution provides the user of this system with a capability far beyond that of the original Soviet design. The only problem is that so far the Polish armed forces have not bought off on this idea, preferring instead to try and get new air defense systems from the U.S. for free.

The effect is that Polish industry has not received the support of its government at a time when that same government is complaining about the need for a better air defense network. Without orders to keep its lines open and people employed, that industry may not survive to support the Polish armed forces.

But maintenance and servicing of these new western systems is not something that the Polish military appears to want to think too much about. The logical place to start building up equipment and personnel now to support these new F-16s is at the *Wojskowe Zakłady Lotnicze Nr 2* (Military Aircraft Works Nr 2 or WZL Nr 2), located in Bydgoszcz. This facility is one of the world’s most experienced MiG-29 overhaul depots and making it the maintenance center for the F-16 fleet would make the most sense as the Poles transition from their Russian fighter aircraft to the U.S. model.

But the U.S. aerospace officials reveal that the Polish military are not taking any action to prepare to service these airplanes on their own. What the Poles are instead relying on are the terms of their

contract with Lockheed Martin, which makes the American manufacturer responsible for all service warranty issues for the first three years of operation. After this 3-year term the Poles will be on their own, but at the moment there is no evidence they've thought that far into the future.

A few years down the road it is easy to see that there will be plenty of stories about F-16s in Poland having poor availability rates, and that Polish industry has been irreparably damaged by U.S. "giveaways" that took jobs away from Poles working at WZU Nr 2 and elsewhere. It will be a failure of long-term planning in the Polish military, but no one is likely to have the corporate memory to remind anyone of "how we got where we are today." This will take place at a time when a number of new U.S. programs that include large cast of international partners, such as the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, will be coming online—adverse publicity of this kind probably will not be very helpful in holding the projects together.

A country cannot maintain its defense industrial base, which it in turn needs in order to support the operations of its armed forces, if it receives a lot of high-tech welfare in the form of free weapons. The result will be a type of dependency in Poland not unlike what transpired in the developing world after years of foreign aid, and with similarly deleterious effects on domestic industry. And soon the U.S. will end up with a NATO partner crippled by the opportunistic impulses upon which both countries have acted.

About the Author

Reuben F. Johnson is a regular contributor to both *The Daily Standard* and *The Worldwide Standard*.