

BATTLE READY?

STORY BY REMI ADEKOYA

Against the backdrop of Poland's tragic military history, the government plans expenditures of PLN 131 billion over the next decade. But is the modernization plan realistic?



On June 6, 1794, Polish forces waged a battle in Szczekociny against a combined Russian and Prussian army. Legendary Polish freedom fighter Tadeusz Kościuszko, back in Poland after lending a hand to the American revolutionaries, commanded an outnumbered Polish force in a futile effort that ended after a few hours.

While the lack of manpower was a contributing factor in the defeat, the Poles took only 33 cannons into battle, while the Russians and Prussians faced off behind 134.

The defeat ultimately led to a final partitioning in 1795 by the Russians, Prussians and Austrians, as Poland disappeared from the map for the next 123 years – perhaps the most bitter of many bitter experiences in the history of Poland’s security.

Small wonder, then, that modern, independent Poland takes defense matters seriously.

In contrast to the general trend in Europe, Poland’s military spending has increased by roughly 50 percent over the last decade, according to figures from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. One of the reasons is that the Polish constitution stipulates the country spend no less than 1.95 percent of its GDP on the military, and thus, as the economy has grown over the years, so has the defense budget.

Along with the budget increases comes a shift in strategy, as outlined by President Bronislaw Komorowski in August of last year.

“[We want to] end an overzealous, reckless . . . expeditionary policy of sending our troops to the other side of the world,” Komorowski said – no oblique reference to Poland’s having sent troops into operations like those in Iraq and Afghanistan during the past decade. Instead, Poland’s military will concentrate on national security, pursuing a defense policy that will “not exceed Polish capacities, Polish interests and Polish needs.”

In 2014, the Polish defense ministry will have a budget of PLN 32 billion and has announced it will spend over PLN 8 billion of this money on



a general modernization of the army, the highest amount in the last two decades.

Meanwhile, Defense Minister Tomasz Siemoniak announced that PLN 131 billion has been earmarked for the next decade to replace outdated weaponry, much of which dates back to the communist era. Planned purchases include tanks, a missile-defense system, ships for the navy, military training aircraft, helicopters, unmanned aerial vehicles and modern equipment for ground troops.

Do the figures add up?

So what do industry experts think of the modernization program?

“This is only a plan, not an obligation. The ministry exploits the fact that the public doesn’t really know how its budget is structured to pull the wool over their eyes,” said Maksymilian Dura, a former naval officer and now a journalist for the military online portal Defence24.pl.

“The ministry’s budget is divided into two parts: operational expenditure and capital expenditure, so when the ministry says that PLN 8.1 billion will be spent on modernization and new equipment in 2014, that is misleading. In actual effect, just over PLN 3 billion has been guaranteed this year for that purpose,” said Dura. “To realize the announced program, the ministry should be spending at least PLN 9 billion a year on modernization,” he added.

However, Krzysztof Krystowski, former head of Polish Defence Holding, the biggest producer and supplier of arms in Poland, is more upbeat on the army’s financial capacity to carry out the program. “I think the feasibility of the program depends on many elements, but is realistic. However, it is based on the assumption that the 1.95 percent of GDP rule will be adhered to and that GDP grows in line with forecasts, in which case the funds could be available,” he said.

A second assumption is that the share

POLAND’S FIGHTING FORCE

Calling all able men

Many things about the Polish Army have changed over the years, but the one thing that never changes is the need for constant recruitment. Between 1918 and 1921, just after Poland regained its independence, there were six different armed conflicts on Polish territory, including one with Bolshevik Russia. That’s why, back then, the army needed every volunteer who could carry a gun (or a sword). Nowadays with the army being fully professional, candidates must pass a series of exams and evaluations, and the army’s biggest selling point is that it can provide a stable income.



1920s



2000s

Polish army troop count



Source: Ministry of Defense

of the defense ministry’s budget currently earmarked for personnel costs will shrink while the share of the budget destined for modernization will increase, Krystowski added.

“My biggest concern is the defense ministry’s capacity to spend that money. The administrative efficiency of the people in charge of tenders and negotiations has not been up to par for many years now,” said Krystowski.

Meanwhile, the defense ministry confirmed to *WBJ Observer* that in the upcoming years at least 20 percent of its annual budget is going to be devoted to capital investments, including the “technical modernization of the Polish armed forces and the development of military infrastructure.”

It also pointed out that the PLN 8.1 billion it will be spending on capital investments

this year represents 26 percent of its total budget, although it did admit that the amount which would actually be spent on “new” equipment in 2014 would amount to “just” PLN 3.5 billion.

Who’ll get the money?

The ministry, however, has not had the best track record in recent years when it comes to efficiency in spending the money it has, Krystowski said. At the end of 2012, it had to return funds allocated at the beginning of the year to state coffers because it was unable to spend them. The same happened in 2011, and in 2010.

And so, if the officials at Poland’s defense ministry don’t get their act together, irrespective of whether the money is available or not, the modernization push will remain largely on paper.

THE HIGH-TECH SOLDIER

The army's program to equip ground forces with the latest technological advances will feature the most up-to-date personal military gear. Polish Defence Holding is currently developing the system.

Switch, and fire! Adjustable assault rifle. Easy to use, safe, light; Can be assembled in multiple ways according to soldier's needs. Sight, adapter, grenade launcher, bayonet and other similar devices can be mounted on it.



Live from the battlefield.

Helmet-mounted camera will stream live video to headquarters. A wide arrange of sights and scopes including night vision, collimator sight, laser rangefinder and a system that helps distinguish enemy targets from friendly ones. Thermal imaging sight SCT Rubin allows soldiers to keep an eye on their target without having to lean from behind a wall.

All-terrain armor.

Light durable armor for maneuverability in varying terrains while keeping soldiers safe and supporting integration of a wide range of equipment. Monitors vital signs from heart rate to blood-sugar levels. In extreme situations has capability to remotely inject medicine into soldier's body to save his life. The equipment includes comfortable and ergonomic helmets, bulletproof vests and gas masks. Weight: 20 kilograms

So what are the criteria for selecting who gets to win the juicy military tenders that are already – or soon will be – up for grabs? Many European countries now practice the concept of Best Value, which is a procurement system that looks at factors other than just price, such as quality and expertise, when selecting vendors or contractors.

“Poland doesn't always go for best value, it goes for the cheapest price. The procurement law is written in a way that favors the cheapest bidder,” said Adam Kapitan Bergmann, the COO of IN2KNO and former Director of the Polish office of Lockheed Martin for Poland's F-16 program. “There is a lot of concern about corruption, and determining Best Value is generally considered too difficult to quantify. This is not unique to Poland” he added.

Asked whether politics is a factor in

determining who wins major contracts, Bergmann said, “in defense procurements in every country, and specifically Poland, politics is involved because we are talking about a national security issue with geo-political implications.”

There are skeptics

According to Krystowski, while Polish defense companies stand a chance to benefit from the planned military shopping spree, some of the key acquisitions such as a missile-defense system “cannot be handled by Polish firms alone, but they must forge partnerships with foreign partners.”

Dura remains skeptical about the feasibility

of much of the spending. Though the ministry is likely to realize the programs that are “easy,” such as the acquisition of used Leopard tanks from the German army, “there will be a problem with the helicopters and submarines, because there is conflict in the ministry on what kind exactly to buy,” he said.

Krystowski echoed this opinion, saying the disagreement is “not only over who supplies the helicopters, but also over what kind of product is needed.”

Currently, three companies are still in the running for the tender to supply 70 helicopters: the American Sikorsky Aircraft Corporation with its S-70i Black Hawks; British-Italian AugustaWestland with its AW149; and Eurocopter of France, which makes the EC 725.

The tender requires that the winning

supplier “cooperate” with Poland’s defense industry, meaning the entire aircraft or its parts must be manufactured in Poland. Regarding the planned missile defense system, Dura said this will “definitely” be realized “because there will be pressure to do that from politicians and the media.”

“But the Russians will be watching closely as they do not want the status quo to change, so this will be both a technical and political challenge,” he added.

Don’t expect Robocop

Then there is the program meant to create a new generation of battle uniforms and tactical equipment. It also aims to develop new electronics and optics technologies and new communication systems, along with modernizing existing equipment and conducting research on new-generation ballistic shields.

The sum of PLN 40 million has been set aside for research on the equipment program this year, with the development phase expected to wrap up in 2016. The army will spend some PLN 600 million on modern equipment for soldiers between 2016 and 2018.

Dura is optimistic about this particular program, saying “its elements can be built in Poland by domestic firms so there will be plenty of pressure from the ministry to realize the program, but we are not about to produce a Robocop, as some might think.”

“The program will be realized in stages,” Dura added.

US President Barack Obama has cited the need for Europe to transform itself into a “security provider” rather than just continue being a “security consumer.” Today, most of Western, and increasingly Eastern Europe (with the notable exception of Poland) are fully dependent on the NATO alliance for their security.

But NATO is an example of European freeloading at the expense of the American taxpayer. Without US firepower, the alliance would be the archetypical toothless tiger. But with the US government and ordinary Americans increasingly focused on America reducing its own debt burdens, the status quo seems politically untenable in the long-term.



SHOPPING SPREE

Planned purchases by the Polish military

TANKS Poland will buy more used Leopard tanks from German Bundeswehr, with plans to spend over PLN 1 billion this year on 119 tanks to add to a current fleet of 128. The army also plans to buy some 300 Rosomak Armored Modular Vehicles (built in Poland under license from Finland-based Patria). The Army is also developing its Artillery Battalion of self-propelled howitzers (“Regina”) which are made by Huta Stalowa Wola. It plans to have five full divisions by 2025.



JET TRAINERS

The army plans to spend PLN 250 million on eight Advanced Jet Trainers in 2014. Italian maker Finmeccanica-Alenia Aermacchi with its M-346 training planes is the frontrunner to get this deal. Also in the budget after 2014: about 100 multipurpose drones.



NAVAL VESSELS

This sector of the Polish military needs the most upgrades. New patrol ships, coastal defense vessels, mine destroyers and three new submarines are on the shopping list. The military plans to spend more than PLN 800 million on building, modernizing and refurbishing its ships this year. By 2015 it plans to refurbish one of the Oliver Hazard Perry-class frigates it received from the US Army back in 2002-03. In 2016 it also plans to finish building a patrol ship “Ślązak,” which has been in construction since 2001.



HELICOPTERS The army will buy 70 new multipurpose utility aircraft. There are only three companies still in the running: US-based Sikorsky with its S-70i Black Hawks; British-Italian Agusta Westland with its AW149; and Eurocopter of France, which makes the EC 725. The tender requires that the winning supplier “cooperate” with Poland’s defense industry, meaning the entire aircraft or the vast majority its parts must be manufactured here. The army is also looking to find a replacement for its Mi-24 attack helicopters.



MISSILES Poland’s army plans to upgrade its missile defenses with a number of short- and medium-range weapons, and hopes to acquire AGM-158 JASSM (Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles) for its F16 fighters, but such a deal would need approval from the US Congress. The army also wants to have its own Multiple Launch Rocket System, and is working on a new system (codename “Homar”). The launchers are likely to be built in Poland in Huta Stalowa Wola, while the missiles will be ordered from an international partner. It’s also looking for a short-range rocket system (“Narew”) and mid-range (“Wista”), however these programs are in the early development stages, although they will most likely be ordered abroad.

Images: Shutterstock, Finmeccanica-Alenia Aermacchi, Wikimedia