

# POLAND'S ROLE IN SECURING NATO'S EASTERN FLANK

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## Military Mobility and the Central Transportation Hub



Chelsea Michta  
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# POLAND'S ROLE IN SECURING NATO'S EASTERN FLANK

## *Military Mobility and the Central Transportation Hub*

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**Chelsea Michta**

**2019 Title VIII CEE Area Studies Fellow  
September 2019**



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# The Issue

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***From the Editor:*** *In the wake of Russia’s annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine, the NATO Alliance has had to meet the Kremlin’s challenge to European security by making up for years of underinvestment in defense. Although building a network of permanent bases along the Eastern Flank would be the most effective way to ensure credible deterrence against Russian aggression, that solution faces insuperable political and resource constraints. Investing in enhanced military mobility is a more realistic alternative. In this paper, CEPA Title VIII Fellow Chelsea Michta analyzes the impact the Polish government’s decision in 2018 to build the so-called Central Transportation Hub (CPK), a national dual-use transportation center intended to bolster NATO’s military logistics and overall defense posture in the region.*

**H**ow should Europe’s NATO Allies respond to years of underinvestment in defense, and particularly in NATO military logistics? Some countermeasures, such as permanent basing, provide effective solutions but are not necessarily implementable in the short term. Rather, NATO can strengthen its Eastern Flank deterrent posture vis-à-vis Russia by enhancing military mobility, a politically feasible solution that provides immediate dividends. To this end, NATO—and by extension the United States—should support Poland and its so-called Central Transportation Hub, which will provide immediate benefits for managing Europe’s current security and economic challenges.

## INTRODUCTION: THE CHALLENGE OF MILITARY LOGISTICS

Three decades after the end of the Cold War, European NATO Allies are faced with the urgent task of making up for years of underinvestment in defense. Nowhere is this problem more pronounced than in the realm of NATO's military logistics – i.e., its ability to move personnel and equipment rapidly into and across Europe. Over the years, large portions of NATO's Cold War-era infrastructure have been dismantled or simply allowed to atrophy as the “peace dividend” and perceived benign security environment in Europe following the end of the Soviet Union led politicians to believe that hard power and inter-state competition had been effectively eclipsed by a new rules-based international order.<sup>1</sup>

Today, in the wake of Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014 and the continued war in eastern Ukraine, the United States and its Allies are confronted with the urgent task of strengthening deterrence in a deteriorating European security environment. In Europe, internal political stresses following the 2008 global financial crisis and the mass migration wave of 2015-16 have made reaching a consensus on defense spending problematic, notwithstanding NATO's declared goal of allocating 2 percent of GDP to defense, as reaffirmed at several summits. While building a network of permanent bases along the Eastern Flank would arguably be the most immediate and effective way to ensure the region's security, such a solution at present commands neither the requisite resources nor a political consensus.<sup>2</sup> Hence, NATO needs alternatives that (1) enjoy sustainable political support

so as to be implementable long-term and (2) ensure credible deterrence against Russian aggression.

Investing in enhanced military mobility constitutes an alternative—and politically achievable—solution to permanent basing that would play a significant role in strengthening the Alliance's deterrent posture vis-à-vis Russia. In this context, spending

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money on military mobility is of particular importance in Poland, a country which serves as an essential cog in NATO’s contingency planning to defend the Baltics and the Eastern Flank overall. Bottom line: the United States and its NATO Allies need to be able to rely on sufficient transport infrastructure in Poland so that in the event of a crisis, troops and equipment can move quickly into and across the country to reach the frontline. For the Alliance to respond quickly in a crisis, NATO needs credible—i.e., exercised—capabilities to demonstrate to Russia that it can reinforce the Eastern Flank in a crisis.

Hence, deficiencies in military mobility present the biggest challenge to the credibility of NATO’s current defense posture. The best way forward for the Alliance is therefore to focus on large-scale, dual-use—i.e., having both civilian and military application—strategic infrastructure investment projects, which, in contrast to defense spending, are likely to enjoy broad political support in Europe. Dual-use transportation infrastructure projects are

also safer politically, as they are less likely to generate a direct response from Russia. At the same time, the increased capacity they offer would enable the Alliance to more rapidly reinforce the Eastern Flank in a crisis by deploying large numbers of U.S. and Allied troops and equipment into Poland and the Baltics.

A major development in this process was the Polish government’s decision in 2017 (signed into law in 2018) to build a national dual-use transportation hub west of the Vistula River. This so-called Central Transportation Hub (*Centralny Port Komunikacyjny* or CPK) aims to address the weakness in NATO’s regional logistics capabilities as well as to accelerate economic development in Central and Eastern Europe.

The purpose of this brief is to analyze the potential impact of the CPK on Poland’s and NATO’s defense posture along the Eastern Flank. It aims to provide the first detailed discussion in English to-date of the project,

which has yet to be assessed in-depth by Western defense and security specialists. It argues that the Polish Army's plans to rely on a civilian transportation network to enhance military mobility offer a promising path forward to provide for the defense of the Eastern Flank from the Baltic to the Black Sea.<sup>3</sup> In addition to its direct military utility, the CPK would knit Poland more closely to Europe's larger transportation and communications network, with an attendant boost to the region's economy.

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Drawing predominantly on a range of Polish-language sources and discussions with Polish analysts, this brief assesses: (1) the current condition of rail, air, and road infrastructure in Poland to shed light on the deficiencies which the CPK would need to address; (2) the military

dimension of the CPK, especially its projected transformative impact on logistics and, by extension, Polish, U.S., and NATO military contingency planning; and (3) the economic impact of the CPK on the development of common infrastructure between the Baltic and the Black Seas in the context of the Three Seas Initiative.

This brief concludes that Poland, and by extension the United States and NATO, needs the CPK to be completed as soon as possible to ensure access to transport and logistics that match the shifting global power distribution and the ongoing economic and security changes across Europe and Eurasia. It also offers a number of recommendations for U.S. and Polish decision-makers on a possible course of action to accelerate this goal.

## LEGACY INFRASTRUCTURE

### *The Rail Network*

The existing rail network in Poland remains heavily skewed toward the western and southwestern regions of the country, reflecting the imperial powers' priorities during the Era of the Partitions, a period in Polish history from 1795 to 1918 when the country was divided up between Prussia, Russia, and Austria and disappeared from the map of Europe.<sup>4</sup> While Prussia prioritized investment in the upper and lower Silesian mining regions, imperial Russia remained focused primarily on building a direct transit route across what was then called the “Vistula Kray.” As a result of underinvestment during the Russian and Soviet occupations, Poland's eastern voivodeships have a relatively sparse railroad network today, especially in the northeastern

region where the Suwałki Corridor is located. The western and southwestern regions of the country have on average twice the modern railroad network density compared to eastern and southeastern Poland. This imbalance also reflects communist-era government priorities. For example, the Warsaw Pact's strategy for waging an offensive war against NATO by pushing across the Fulda Gap into Western Europe led the Soviet General Staff to rely heavily on forces stationed in East Germany and

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in western Poland around the city of Legnica. Hence, Soviet military planning did not require significant investment in the rail network in eastern Poland, in effect preserving imperial era transportation flows. Consequently, with regard to rail transport in eastern Poland

today, NATO is at a disadvantage vis-à-vis Russia because of the existing deficiencies in infrastructure. Such residual deficiencies when it comes to legacy transportation networks can be seen along the entire Eastern Flank—from Tallinn, Estonia in the north down to Constanța, Romania in the south—where deficiencies similar to those in Poland also impact air and road transport.

### *Principal Airports*

Currently in Poland, access to air transportation services is 77 percent lower than the average among the “old EU” members—i.e., Western Europe—and 27 percent lower than the average in Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, Polish airports are at capacity, unable to service the growing demand for commercial travel and lacking a sufficient number of available runways to fully address military transport needs. Current projections indicate that Chopin International Airport in Warsaw, Poland's principal airport, will reach capacity for the number of flights it can operate within the year. From the perspective of military mobility, Poland and NATO need modern airports with landing strips capable of receiving the largest transport aircraft, including the C-5 Galaxy and C-17 Globemaster, which are used by the United States Air Force and others and require long runways currently unavailable in the country.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, attempts thus far to develop alternatives to Chopin International Airport—such as the Modlin and Radom airport projects—have failed, in large part because of continued problems with road and rail connectivity. Today, Modlin Airport services only one discount airline, Ryanair, while the main terminal at the Radom Airport is



“Rail Loading Armor during Combined Resolve III” by 7th Army Training Command under CC BY 2.0.

currently being dismantled only four years after completion due to its failure to turn a profit, an unsurprising outcome given its provincial location and lack of accompanying rail and road connectors.<sup>7,8</sup> In effect, these two regional airport development projects, which consumed significant capital resources but lacked the requisite integration within a larger transport and communication networks, were likely doomed to fail from the start.

The Polish government appears to have learned its lesson from the Modlin and Radom projects as it has since approached airport development within a comprehensive air-rail-road infrastructure plan. Indeed, Modlin and Radom have been a key reason why Polish planners consider the CPK to be the only viable solution to the country’s airline operations bottleneck; the construction of an airport that does not address the deficiencies in the country’s road and rail network is bound to repeat the Modlin/Radom story.

## Roads

Post-communist Poland inherited a highway infrastructure that was both limited in its reach and poorly designed and maintained. In 1989, no other component of the country’s infrastructure was in as much disrepair and in need of maintenance as was Poland’s highway system.<sup>9</sup> Warsaw recognized early on that the country’s roads were a drag on economic development, for not only did they inhibit domestic transport but they were also a brake on potential foreign investment.<sup>10</sup> Poland continues to play catch-up when it comes to road density, especially *autostrady* (a U.S. interstate system equivalent) and *drogi szybkiego ruchu* (“fast routes”) — mostly divided highways and beltways necessary to bypass major cities to avoid heavy truck traffic traversing urban areas. At the same time it has also sought to put in place a network of roads that would connect the northeast (Via Baltica) with the southeast (Via Carpathia) across

Central and Eastern Europe – two critically important north-south interconnectors.

In 2019, the government plans to complete an additional 500 km of new roads – the fastest pace of road construction in Poland since 2012. The current program stipulates that between 2013 and 2023, the General Administration for Roads and Autostradas (GDDKiA) will complete over 2,260 km of new roads and divided highways, prioritizing the S19 primary road between Rzeszów and Lublin (part of Via Carpathia) to be completed in 2021-22 and the S61 primary road (part of Via Baltica) linking the Polish-Lithuanian border with the European highway network. In April 2019, the GDDKiA completed the Suwałki bypass (a key project for military mobility on the North-South

axis), with plans to complete the remaining connectors for the S61 primary road by 2021-22.<sup>11</sup>

## THE CPK

On May 10, 2018, the Polish government issued a decree to develop plans to build the CPK, Poland's largest infrastructure project since 1989, with completion expected in 2027.<sup>12,13,14</sup> On June 2, 2018, President Andrzej Duda signed the decree into law. The CPK's stated goal is two-fold: (1) to increase transport capacity; and (2) to improve military logistics, as Poland currently lacks sufficient infrastructure to rapidly move troops and materiel to its eastern and southeastern regions, as well



“Exercise Trident Juncture 2018” by NATO under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

as the ability to accommodate large scale reinforcements in the event of an all-out crisis along NATO's Eastern Flank. A unique project blending military and commercial requirements, the CPK has the potential to impact the military and civilian domains, not just in Poland but in Central and Eastern Europe as a whole

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along the North-South axis, from the Baltic to the Black Sea and the Adriatic. As such, it would serve as a key node for the so-called “Three Seas Initiative” aimed at developing new infrastructure linking Central and Eastern Europe's north and south.

The CPK is envisioned as a hub-and-spoke project, with ten “spokes” reaching into Poland's key regions. As part of the project, Poland plans to build 700 km of new high-speed rail that is expected to be rated at NATO STANAG (Standardization Agreement) specifications for moving military equipment which ensure the commonality of processes and procedures between member countries, while the second phase of the project will see the construction of a dual-rail system augmented by a single-rail track rated at 200-250 km/hour. In total, the planners envision that Poland will lay 1,600 km of new rail, linking the 120 largest Polish cities to the CPK, with anticipated travel time to and from the Hub not exceeding 2.5 hours from any direction in the country.<sup>15</sup> This rail network will accelerate military and commercial transport across the country while the CPK's placement west of the Vistula River promises to offer the most secure location as Poland's major waterway provides a natural defensive obstacle in the event of a Russian invasion.<sup>16</sup>

However, the centerpiece of the CPK will be its airport – the largest Poland has ever built. Plans call for two runways to be built during the project's rollout phase, which will be increased to four once the airport is fully operational. The new airport's initial capacity is projected to reach 40 million passengers per year, with a target of 100 million once the project is completed. The new rail links should make the airport reachable from the downtown Central Train Station in Warsaw in 15 minutes or less.

### *The CPK's Military Dimension*

NATO's decision to deploy multinational battalions in the Baltic states and a U.S. Brigade Combat Team in Poland constitute the

essential first steps toward building a credible deterrent posture along the Alliance’s Eastern Flank. However, as a 2018 RAND study has argued, NATO needs to take additional steps to deter Russian aggression.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, NATO cannot assume that in a crisis it would control the airspace in the Baltic region or that it would have sufficient long-range fires in place to stop a potential Russian advance.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, planners at the Polish Ministry of Defense have focused on the critical issue of military mobility for some time now, having worked with civilian ministries even before the Russian seizure of Crimea. Since 2013, the Ministry of Transport’s Construction and Maritime Development has pursued the “2020/2023 Strategy for Transport Development” which is aimed at upgrading roads, rail, and maritime transport linking the Baltic coastline with the rest of the country.<sup>19</sup> The centrality of the use of civilian infrastructure

for military mobility is reflected in a number of Polish studies, including a 2018 report by the Warsaw Polytechnic University.<sup>20</sup>

The CPK also aligns with the NATO Readiness Initiative, adopted at the 2018 Brussels Summit, which stipulates that by 2020 the Alliance will be able to deploy 30 mechanized battalions, 30 air squadrons, and 30 warships in 30 days. Once built, the CPK would go a long way toward making the “Four-Times-Thirty” initiative a reality, allowing NATO to exercise this concept in real time. Furthermore, the Polish government’s decision to locate the CPK on the western bank of the Vistula, near the A2 Autostrada and the existing (and planned) Polish State Railroads (Polskie Koleje Państwowe or PKP) network, offers one critical advantage from the point of view of military mobility: this intersection of the air/rail/road networks would ensure that troops and equipment, once off-loaded from planes



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and put on rail or truck transport, could then be quickly dispatched to critical areas along NATO's North- and Southeastern Flanks. Polish planners argue that this would dramatically improve military transport into and across Poland, making the CPK a key entry point for U.S. and NATO military forces, comparable to Germany's Bremerhaven or Ramstein. Polish planners have also claimed that the CPK would give NATO the kind of military mobility Russia currently enjoys in its Western Military District.

### *The Economic Dimension*

In addition to its critical function of facilitating military transport into and across Poland, the CPK carries with it the ancillary benefit of serving as a driver of economic development. The imperative to improve Poland's air, rail, and road network is critical to the country's continued economic growth, and by extension to the development of Central and Eastern Europe as a whole. Poland has paid particular attention to the impact of EU-funded infrastructure projects on attracting foreign direct investment in the region, especially in the north-south corridor.<sup>21</sup> In this respect, the CPK should have a significant multiplier effect on investments already in place, making Poland's prioritization of the Three Seas Initiative (where Warsaw has already committed the equivalent of over 500 million euros) a potential game-changer for Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>22</sup>

The Three Seas region urgently needs to build connectivity, especially in and along the north-south axis, and to rebalance transport links within the European Union. As such, roads connecting to the CPK would complement Via Baltica, which links Tallinn to Warsaw, and Via Carpathia, which links Klaipeda in Lithuania to Thessaloniki in Greece. The CPK also promises to serve as an integral element of the EU's larger "Connecting Europe and Asia" program,

an initiative aimed at strengthening EU-China commercial connectivity, because it has the capacity to link up Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to the Trans-European Transport Network as outlined in the so-called "Juncker Plan."<sup>23,24</sup> In this respect, the CPK may constitute a risk to U.S. security interests in Europe were

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“ Since the CPK is a dual-purpose initiative, *intended to impact both the country's defenses and its economic development, China as a rising near-peer competitor to the United States should not be allowed to participate in the financing of any aspects of its construction.* ”

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“The President of Poland visits NATO” by NATO under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

it to become a BRI hub endpoint, potentially allowing China to leverage its own commercial and military interests the CPK’s connectivity to Europe – an outcome the United States should oppose as it would undermine the key security dimension of the project. Hence, any future offers of external funding for the CPK ought to be carefully considered and discussed among the Allies.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The United States should vigorously support the CPK by: (1) raising it at the NATO ministerial level as an infrastructure project that is of value

for the entire Alliance; (2) lobbying EU countries to extend additional support from structural/cohesion funds to build the CPK (currently the Polish government expects to finance the rail component of the CPK with Polish and EU funding, while the airport component will seek some private equity funding); (3) working with the U.S. private sector and the Polish government to encourage direct U.S. investment in the project (in exchange for equity and possibly future operating partnerships) to ensure that the United States has a stake in the CPK’s development; and (4) insisting that no Chinese funding be used in the construction of the CPK given the likelihood that Beijing may use it as an endpoint terminal in Central and

Eastern Europe for its Belt and Road Initiative, with potential military applications down the line.<sup>25</sup> Since the CPK is a dual-purpose initiative intended to impact both the country's defenses and its economic development, China as a rising near-peer competitor to the United States should not be allowed to participate in the financing of any aspects of its construction. Washington should communicate this concern

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**“NATO needs to make investing in Polish air, rail, and road infrastructure one of its key objectives and put it on the agenda of the upcoming London Summit.”**

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to the Polish government unequivocally (currently the Polish government is not seeking Chinese funding for the project).<sup>26</sup>

The United States has a unique opportunity to make the CPK a critical project for NATO and Polish-U.S. relations. During the 2010 discussions surrounding NATO's New Strategic Concept, the Allies failed to seriously

consider the requirements for defending the Baltic States and the Eastern Flank overall. Now is the time to look at the threat that Russia poses to the West and take the necessary steps to defend the Alliance. Since NATO provides the overarching military security architecture on the continent for both Europe and the United States, addressing the practical aspects of Allied defense in the East is an essential mandate for the Alliance. In addition, Warsaw should make every effort to ensure that the CPK project is firmly on the EU agenda as the discussion gathers speed on where and how EU structural cohesion funds should be allocated.

Furthermore, Washington should consider extending direct grants to the Polish government to ensure that there are adequate funds to implement this project. Most importantly, Polish investment should be seen as a means to drive others—both governments and private investment—to take a close look at the project, especially its long-term economic development potential. Engagement by U.S. and European governments has the potential to exponentially increase private investment in the CPK as such official support for the project will likely be seen by investors as an indicator that their money will not be wasted.

NATO Allies should also highlight an important political dimension to the CPK and to investing in infrastructure across Central and Eastern Europe more broadly. Simply put, Europe needs to complete the process of “growing together,” whereby the monikers “Western,” “Central,” and “Eastern” eventually cease to carry their disparate civilizational and developmental connotations, serving instead as simple geographic designations. Today, Europe is free but still not “whole” given the

lack of genuine, multitiered infrastructure integration. Investing in Europe-wide transport and communication projects like the CPK would make the continent—east to west—a truly integrated market and community. Defining the CPK as not only a Polish project, but also as a priority project for both the EU and NATO, would be an important first step to making Europe “whole,” with the attendant economic and military security benefits.

NATO needs to make investing in Polish air, rail, and road infrastructure one of its key objectives and put it on the agenda of the upcoming London Summit. While Germany remains the principal entry point for U.S. forces into Europe, Poland is now a frontline state where NATO’s forces must train and be able to deploy in case of an emergency.

Just as reinforcing U.S. and NATO forces in Germany was critical to maintaining a credible deterrent posture vis-à-vis the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War (*vide* the annual Exercise REFORGER), NATO’s planning for the defense of Europe against Russia today hinges on its ability to leverage an efficient air, road, and rail transportation network to move troops and equipment into the fight quickly. NATO needs to ensure that it can deter potential Russian aggression and, should there be a war, prevail. Hence, Poland’s ability to replicate at least some of the infrastructure capacity of Germany during the Cold War is the *sine qua non* of NATO’s credible deterrent posture along the Eastern Flank. This military dimension should be the principal driver of the ongoing Polish effort to upgrade the country’s transport legacy infrastructure.

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Analysis