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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

EXPANSIONISM IN POLAND'S STRATEGIC CULTURE: HISTORICAL RETROSPECTIVE AND VARIATIONS

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This article deals with the problem of assessing and interpreting expansionist elements in Poland's international political behaviour. The problem is approached using the concept of the strategic culture of states, which covers beliefs, perceptions, and the language states use to describe their own and other countries' actions. The study examines what expansionist types of strategic culture have developed in Poland, how relevant they are in the current political landscape, and describes their differences and similarities. To this end, the intellectual origins of foreign policy ideas prevalent in Poland (Rzeczpospolita) are traced, and the challenges of the external environment are correlated with the way they have been perceived in the course of Poland's historical development. Two historically contingent expansionist types of strategic culture were identified. Firstly, as a medium-sized state that has faced military defeats, the Polish state has hardly embraced ideas bearing on the 'besieged fortress' concept. Secondly, the very culture of limited power politics has assumed some unique characteristics in the country: greater readiness to take risks and fascination with power actions. This state of affairs is largely a result of the contours of the regional project having been drawn for the neighbouring states mostly based on the negative type of consolidation (against the Muslims and later the Bolsheviks) and therefore never reaching a sufficient level of detail.

Keywords:

Poland, Rzeczpospolita, strategic culture, culture of a "besieged fortress", culture of limited power politics

Introduction

Russian academic literature has paid much attention to Poland's ambition to play a special role in Europe, set an example to its neighbours and preserve and enhance its asset of Latin Christian values [1; 2]. A popular view holds that official Warsaw strives to become not only the leader in Central and Eastern Europe but also a mediator between the West and post-Soviet states. Most of these com-

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mentaries emphasise Poland's attempts to exacerbate the disagreement between Russia and other former Soviet republics, extend its influence over the latter and foist its view of the world on the region [3; 4]. Poland has obviously espoused some degree of strategic expansionism, and the question, as often is the case, is in the detail.

It is generally advisable to employ the concept of strategic culture in one's analysis when measuring the degree of expansionism. From the 1970s, strategic culture was understood as a certain degree of subjectivity in reacting to external factors. In most cases, this concerned military-political issues: the problems, risks and threats a state sees as imminent; the existing security beliefs and discussions; the terms and categories deemed adequate to describe the external environment [5, p. 7–9]. Strategic culture in a narrow sense was believed to have three components — political goals and justification of power actions, basic rules of conduct towards the opponent (annihilation, attrition, safeguarding of achievements) and operational preferences (the way resources are used to attain goals) [6, p. 7–12] — all three being a product of military experience, the advances in political thought concerning war and peace, and the religious and ethical attitudes prevalent in society [7].

Today's science offers a broader interpretation of strategic culture, one that is dynamic and generally non-essentialist [8, p. 4–11]. This new approach emphasises the inhomogeneous and fluid nature of international actors' identities. Although, in analytical terms, it transpires that one blurred concept becomes instrumental in revealing the content of some other, often just as blurred, phenomena, the focus of research shifts, and strategic culture itself turns into an independent variable [9; 10]. Nevertheless, when examining strategic culture, one can identify several complexes serving as a means to construct and assess the environment and a state's place within it. Thus, investigating the influence of strategic culture is closely connected with the transition between 'ideal types', their displacement and complementation accompanied by the internal transformation of each type of strategic culture (subculture) [11; 12].

Building on the works of Alastair Johnston and my earlier research, I propose a classification of the ideal types of strategic cultures. I consider strategic preferences as the decisive criterion, which includes both permanent preferences (such as the choice between coercion or cooperation) and preferences that may change in response to the volatile environment. These preferences reflect the desire to either maintain or alter the status quo. Another major factor is the ability to act upon these preferences, i. e. whether the goals are attained in full, in part or to a limited extent [14; 15, p. 55–57, 112–117]. Different configurations of these factors yield nine ideal types of strategic factors differing in the extent of formalisation, the degree of variety and military/diplomatic orientation (Table 1). An actor (in most cases, a state) will not necessarily exhibit all the following types [15, p. 147–152].

Table 1

Ideal types of strategic cultures (based on Johnston's commentary)

Strategic Preferences		Significance of external limitations (~inability to destroy the enemy)		
		High (all actions have been formalised)	Medium (tran- sition to less formal actions)	Low (transition to unilateral ostentatious actions)
Preference for cooperation	Status quo main- tained (accom- modation)	Unlimited inter- nationalisation (idealpolitik)	Limited interna- tionalisation	Normative unification (international community)
	Status quo altered (defence)	Neutrality	Isolationism	Political fortifi- cation: 'fortifica- tion gigantism'/ outpost
Preference for coercion	Status quo altered = status quo maintained (expansion)	Besieged fortress culture	Limited power politics (realpo- litik)	Unlimited power policy (hardpoli- tik)

To further analyze the situation in Poland, let us specify the ideal types of expansionist strategic culture:

— besieged fortress culture is rooted in the actor's negative judgment of the external environment, the ambition to restrict unwanted processes and phenomena by increasing the cost of aggression and minor preventive operations (sorties, diversions, espionage) for any opponent, as well as in the aspiration to disorganise international relations as much as possible;

— limited power politics culture presupposes the actor's negative judgement of the external environment, the aspiration to restrict negative processes and phenomena by identifying the main threat and the most dangerous actor, the ability to benefit from flexible occasional alliances and the awareness of one's resources for pursuing a global or regional political project;

— unlimited power politics resolves itself into the actor's negative judgement of the external environment, the aspiration to transform the latter as much as possible so that it suits the actor's interests and the exploitation of one's resources in pursuing a global or regional political project.

An exploration of all the possible types of Poland's strategic culture would require a much lengthier contribution. Thus, this article limits itself to describing the historical and ideational context of the expansionist types of Poland's strategic culture and does not cover the period between the two world wars when defensive strategies seemed to prevail in the country. Poland's size precludes it

from embracing the ideal types of strategic culture, which stem from the actual capacity to destroy a potential enemy and, in doing so, lift any external limitations on politics. The two other types, firstly, may not be seen as equally desirable; secondly, they may reflect a different image of the external environment as perceived by Poland and communicate different representations of the 'ideal self' in international relations.

The outlines of Polish expansionism

Although the borders of Poland¹ have changed over time, initially, the state was a middle-sized country.² Almost at any moment of its history, it has bordered on a larger power: the Holy Roman Empire and Prussia/Germany in the West, the Ottoman Empire in the south; Kievan Rus and later the Muscovite/Russian state in the east. As soon as it emerged on the political map of the world, Poland vied for territory with the Czech Duchy in Silesia, the German Empire in Pomerania and the Kievan state in Galicia. Many of Poland's neighbouring states would at some point become its military adversaries, be it the smaller countries (Hungary, the Crimean Khanate, the Principality of Moldavia, Denmark) or great regional powers (the Ottoman Empire, the Russian state, Sweden, the Teutonic Order/Prussia).

These conflicts did not always end in victory. Throughout its history, Poland has twice lost its statehood (in the 12th-13th centuries³ and 1795–1918), thrice been occupied (during the Swedish Deluge of 1555–1560, the Treaty of Altranstädt of 1706–1709 and the German General Government of 1939–1944) and four times descended into full-scale civil war, all of them under external influence (1038–1039, 1382–1385, 1704–1706, 1764) [16, p. 7–12, 20–32, 64–81, 85–90]. As a result, Polish politicians could not commit to the maximum transformation of the external environment. Moreover, the geographical position of Rzeczpospolita made it difficult for the country to lay claims to effective leadership in the Baltic, Black Sea or Eastern European region. From the early stages of its history, Poland could avail itself only of those expansionist ideas that were linked to the strategic cultures of a 'besieged fortress' or limited power politics.

In such conditions, some states would opt for a subordinate position or strive to forge a military-political alliance with more powerful players, i.e. employ a bandwagoning strategy, as today's neorealists put it. Yet, Poland had strong expansionist incentives: over the 11 centuries of its history, the Polish state has used power politics as a tool to alter the mid-term state of affairs. This conclusion is

¹ Here and below 'Poland' and 'Rzeczpospolita' will be used interchangeably despite the obvious differences.

² Rzeczpospolita covered the largest area in 1634–1667: 990,000 km², compared to 312,000 km² today.

³ Naturally, during feudal fragmentation, decentralisation was inevitable.

supported by the following data: in 960–1795, Poland took part in 247 international conflicts, i. e. it was at war with other states during one out of three years. Throughout a significant part of the 19th–21st centuries, the country was either not a sovereign state or part of military-political alliances (177 out of 222 years), which placed serious limitations on power politics. Yet, in this condition, Poland went through two world wars and the cold war. In the interwar period (1918–1939), it participated in at least seven armed conflicts within its borders, thus maintaining the earlier observed warfare frequency, i. e. fighting during one out of three years. Overall, the quantity of conflicts did not turn into quality since, at the critical historical moment, which fell on the 16th–17th centuries, Poland failed to build a centrally controlled military force and pool sufficient resources to modernise it [17, p. 144–147].

A precarious international situation and the difficulty of giving an adequate response to impending challenges pushed Poland towards constant manoeuvring and search for ways to boost its standing in the region. It would form political unions with the Czech state, Hungary and Saxony, and lay claims to the Principality of Moldavia and the Russian state. This inconsistent behaviour was informed, nevertheless, by a clear understanding of national goals. The instruments used to attain them, however, lacked structure, and the effect of this incongruence reverberates to this day. Bolesław Balcerowicz, a divisional general and professor at the University of Warsaw, has emphasised that security politics and political culture retain, despite the changes of the recent decades, the traces of pernicious and historically widespread non-strategic behaviour [18, p. 406].

Poland's strategic culture did not originally have a clear hierarchy of potential adversaries. For example, the first Polish chronicler Gallus Anonymus wrote in the early 12th century: 'in spite of being surrounded by all the many aforementioned peoples, Christian and pagan alike, and frequently attacked by all and sundry, it has never been completely subjugated by anyone' [19, p. 15]. Probably, at the time, all the neighbours were considered to pose an equal threat, which is obliquely evidenced by the descriptions of neighbouring peoples and countries found in Polish chronicles. For instance, Gallus Anonymus vividly depicts the Prussians as living 'without king and without law, and hav[ing] not abandoned their ancient faithlessness and ferocity', writes that 'the faith of the Czechs goes up and down like a wheel'; names 'simplicity' the characteristic trait of the Russians and proneness to 'perjury' that of the Germans [19, p. 41, 195, 235, 253].¹

Before the partitions, Poland's political practice did not resolve itself into the search for enemies amongst neighbours: conflicts and claims would often be replaced by political rapprochement. The change became fairly evident after

¹ The translation has been verified in accordance with the following source: Bak, J. M., Borkowska, U., Constable, G., Jaritz, G., Klaniczay, G. (eds.). *Gesta Principum Polonorum: The Deeds of the Princes of the Poles*. Central European University Press, 2003.

the introduction of the royal election institution. On more than one occasion, Russian tsars and their children had a strong chance to accede to the throne of Rzeczpospolita: in 1573, 1576, 1587, 1656 (*vivente rege*), 1668 and 1673 [20; 21]. There were many cases as well in which the Habsburgs, the almost uninterrupted rulers of the Holy Roman Empire in the 15th–18th centuries, had similarly high chances of being enthroned in Poland. And once a Habsburg did wear the crown of Poland, albeit for a very short period between 1306 and 1307. The other kings of Poland came from the royal families of the Czech state, Tyrol (Duchy of Carinthia), Sweden, Transylvania, France and Saxony. Only three neighbours of Poland — the Ottoman Empire, the Duchy/Kingdom of Prussia (a vassal of the Polish crown in 1525–1657) and Denmark — had never put forward a royal candidate.

A prime example of flexibility was the foreign policy pursued by King John III Sobieski, dubbed *the last knight* of Christendom (1674–1696). His election was supported by the pro-French party in the Sejm, which incited its candidates to oppose the Habsburgs and their occasional allies, such as Russia. In his first years on the throne, John Sobieski formulated his ‘Baltic goals’, whilst actively preparing for war with Brandenburg/Prussia and striving to keep peace with Russia, the Habsburgs and Turkey. Soon after that, in 1678–1679, Poland proposed a union of Christian nations against the Ottoman Empire. Later, it became one of the founders of the Holy League, which was in effect a coalition with the Habsburgs. Over several years, Poland changed both its foreign and military policy priorities, shifting them from the South to the North, and its pool of allies (the Habsburgs, the large duchies of the Holy Russian Empire and Russia substituted for France, Sweden and Turkey’s Danube vassals) [22; 23]. John Sobieski, however, looked askance at his new allies: he used to liken the Germans to horses as, he insisted, neither knew their real power [24, s. 39].

From the ideological perspective, Poland positioned itself as the region’s most Catholic country and, when devising its project, relied on the logic of converting neighbours to a ‘truer’ religion. Yet, in the 16th–17th centuries, this doctrine lost its popularity amid the turbulence of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. To a degree, this development was very much in line with the general European trend towards secularisation. According to Kalevi Holsti’s calculations, in 1648–1713, states tended to abstain from religious justifications for their territorial claims, using them in only 14% of cases as pretexts for war: instead, they either made unvarnished territorial demands (55%) or cited commercial grievances (36%) [25, p. 49]. The religious logic of strife provoked a series of conflicts between Poland on the one hand and Protestant Sweden, Orthodox Russia and Muslim Turkey on the other. As a result, Poland had to cede the territories that today are part of Ukraine and the Baltic States. Following the same religious logic, Warsaw often sought alliances with the actors that, by definition, could not be

committed to the cause, such as the Republic of Venice or Spain. Finally, as the historian Jerzy Topolski puts it, religious wars gradually turned into self-destructive conflicts [26, p. 412–424].

One of the first thinkers to assert that religion had exhausted its military-political power was the Polish Humanist Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski (1503–1572). In his *Commentaries on the Improvement of Commonwealth*, he called upon Polish kings to change their strategic culture (if we put it in contemporary terms), abandoning the practices of religious wars and flexible unions. Frycz Modrzewski formulated an idea that sounded rather radical in Poland of the time: treaties could indeed be concluded with peoples following a different religion [27, p. 96]. He chided wars waged to expand territories, bring glory to the ruler or undermine the long-established rules of international conduct. What Frycz Modrzewski proposed back in his time is reminiscent of the besieged fortress culture: monitoring the diplomatic activity of potential adversaries, taking advantage of barriers to trade in military goods and making use of the natural terrain to build fortifications. Within this logic, Poland had to be ready to repel an attack whilst remaining morally pure and giving no reason for hostile actions [28, p. 330–334; 29].

Such an abrupt abandonment of religion and opportunities to acquire the spoils of war was impossible since the most privileged stratum, the *szlachta*, strived to expand its economic influence over new territories and their residents [26, s. 491–492, 511–512]. Most of the politicians and thinkers of the Polish Renaissance and Enlightenment embraced the inevitability of expansion, such as efforts to reclaim the lost lands. The intellectuals, in their turn, entertained the idea of a new mechanism for legitimising expansion rather than that of a new type of political culture. This choice, however, was never real. As Andrzej Novak writes, Rzeczpospolita kept oscillating between justifying its actions by the superiority of domestic governance (republicanism) and by the need to follow best practices of the time (modernising patriotism) [30, p. 13–21]. Whilst the former was widely accepted across Europe, appealing, due to its ancient origin, to the educated class,¹ the latter was a product of the obvious weakness of Poland's domestic governance and the necessity to draw pragmatically on international experience [31]. Apparently, both mechanisms for foreign policy legitimisation functioned in parallel, now cyclically alternating, now united through synthesis (particularly, in the 19th century during the age of Polish Romanticism).

Paradoxical as it may sound, powerful impetus was given to the culture of expansionism by the three partitions of Poland. The emergence of nationalism, understood in its contemporary sense, confronted many European states with the

¹ The legitimisation of foreign policy behaviour through the uniqueness and superiority of domestic governance probably originates from 'Pericles' Funeral Oration' as recounted in Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

dilemma between territorial integrity and self-determination. In the middle of the fluctuating struggle for the restoration of statehood, Polish intellectuals came up with two curious innovations in military and foreign policy strategy. Firstly, as Emanuel Rostworowski formulated it, there appeared a cult of hopeless uprisings. This ideational construct suggested that military actions were to be taken in the Polish territory not at the most opportune moment, i. e., when the beneficiaries of the partitions were in a fragile state or a powerful international coalition had formed against them but whenever possible [32, s. 193–194]. It was critical not to wait for a favourable opportunity but to press on with raising the Polish question and bringing it back onto the international agenda. Secondly, the theory of two enemies gradually emerged in the works of thinkers and political writers. This theory marked Prussia/Germany and Russia/the USSR as Poland's principal adversaries.¹ Since it was impossible to defeat these enemies, the struggle against them and for the restoration of the country's pre-partition territory was to be carried out with external assistance [33, p. 22–25]. Thus, it was deemed possible to forge long-standing alliances with third countries, such as France and, to a lesser degree, the UK in order to deter the main military threats.

A brief analysis of Rzeczpospolita's foreign policy behaviour and political thought of the 10th–19th centuries has identified several important features of expansionism as it manifests itself in Polish strategic culture. Firstly, despite its medium size and repeated military defeats, the Polish state did not embrace a complex of ideas that can be categorised under besieged fortress culture. Secondly, for a long time, Poland estimated the key military threats quite unsystematically, largely relying on diplomatic manoeuvres and flexible alliances. The theory of two enemies promoted to his day by the Polish right emerged only in the 19th century, during the period of statelessness. Thirdly, the legitimization of Rzeczpospolita's external expansion grew more diverse and less congruous: on the one hand, the domestic governance mechanism was seen as a cause of the state's decline; on the other, it was declared imperative to extend this political and administrative experience to other territories. Fourthly, 'self-destructive' conflicts and the 'cult of hopeless uprisings' made Polish strategic culture strongly predisposed to risk-taking and ostentatious power displays. Finally, at the core of the regional project that the country proposed to its neighbouring was the negative type of consolidation (at first, against the Muslims and, then, the Bolsheviks), rendering it impossible to achieve a substantial level of detail.

Conclusions for modern Poland

The literature tends to offer a two-tier classification of Poland's foreign political behaviour, based on the geographically and socioculturally contingent division into the Piast and Jagiellonian traditions. My foreign policy analysis goes

¹ Remarkably, the third participant in the partitions, Austria-Hungary disappeared from the least as early as in the 19th century.

beyond the framework of geographical priorities (Western in the case of the Piast dynasty and Eastern in the case of the Jagiellons) and focuses on the thematic and functional aspects of the corresponding practices.

As previously stated, the identified types of strategic culture (strategic sub-cultures) are ideal variations, which hardly existed in reality. Rather, they interwove, competed and semantically enriched each other as vigorous debates raged on. Yet, even in this configuration, some of them spread more easily than others (Table 2). The medieval ethos of valour and honour gave a powerful impetus for Rzeczpospolita's limited power politics, and the partitions of Poland provided a clear understanding of which neighbouring actors posed the greatest threat. In the end, besieged fortress culture, which placed emphasis on ethical norms, had a tenuous influence on Poland's foreign policy behaviour.

Table 2

A comparison of the two types of Poland's expansionist strategic culture

Type	Besieged fortress culture	Limited power politics (realpolitik)
Purported founder	Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski	Gallus Anonymus
Popularity	Low	High
Risks and threats as seen by the state	Incautiousness of leaders; moral aspects of conflicts	'Two enemies'; the risk of one-on-one confrontation with a stronger opponent
Beliefs and debates on various security aspects	Development vs security	Regional leadership vs vassalage
Assessment of environment	Dangerous	Very dangerous
Poland as seen by other countries	Reasonable power	Epitome of valour
What Poland has to inspire in its neighbours	Anything but fear	Respect for the country's power
What Poland's behaviour towards other countries is based on	Borrowing best practices in governance and technology	Securing its rightful place in the region
Attitude to military and political alliances	Positive if they do not encumber the country	Positive if they facilitate the attainment of short- and medium-term goals

In the 20th century, there was an anomalous period in Poland's history (1919–1939) when the ideas of risks and threats, as well as the characteristics of the external environment, became grossly distorted. Poland's foreign policy was particularly aggressive at the time, evidenced by not only the annexation of Lithua-

nian territories in 1920–1923 but also numerous attempts to acquire colonies on other continents, particularly through the efforts of the Maritime and Colonial League. For the most part, these political practices did not go beyond the boundaries of the main principles of limited power politics subculture.

Of course, emphasis on the uniqueness of the country's historical experience and its 'self' is part of Polish strategic culture. Yet, the inclination to see relations with other actors as useful and necessary is also visible in the identified types of strategic culture. First of all, this concerns best practices, which can be borrowed from neighbour states, and regional leadership structures potentially beneficial for all the participants. To a degree, such cooperation is interpreted as a struggle for a higher standing in the world, which is very much in agreement with Iver Nuemann's observation that Central European states' attempts at collaboration are always closely linked to protests and criticism against those who exclude these countries from important calculations [34, p. 208–212].

Since Poland is a member of NATO and the EU, it is worth noting that Polish strategic culture is based on a negative judgment of the external environment and a utilitarian attitude towards unions and coalitions. Warsaw has often viewed its membership in associations aimed at integration or military and political cooperation as a means to relieve anxiety about the external environment and reach the country's short- and medium-term goals. When accessing the EU and NATO, Poland's major political forces tried to reduce the cost of entry and alleviate some of the pressures of political and economic integration [35, p. 35–39]. Consequently, Polish strategic culture and some of its types remain committed to strongly positioning the state within the Euro-Atlantic project instead of letting it fade into the background of common spaces. This trend, visible in Polish conceptual documents since 2017, will be reinforced in the context of the current Ukraine events [36].

Overall, our preliminary work aimed at describing the semantic content of the expansionist types of Poland's strategic culture does not rule out other interpretations. Yet, it provides a comprehensive picture of the historical aspects of Polish discussion on foreign policy and security, its sources of inspiration and denial, as well as possible combinations of preferences and assessments of the external environment.

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