

To where does the Navy sail?

Throughout nearly a century of Poland's sovereign existence, the central government has always underscored just how important free access to the Baltic Sea is. At the same time the Polish Navy, a guardian of this "window to the world" is perpetually underfunded, and unable to finance its needs. It would appear, however, that insufficient funding is not the only ailment that the Polish Navy suffers from. The state it is in is a result of neglect going beyond the post-communist period – the communist era was marked by the same shortcomings. In the Warsaw Pact days, naval forces were primed to tasks different than those imposed upon it in the aftermath of the geopolitical realignments of the last decade of the twentieth century. It would appear, that over 25 years after the dissolution of the Warsaw pact, and 18 years of NATO membership would be enough to implement the necessary changes. The state Polish Navy finds itself in proves, that the core problems that this particular branch of the Armed Forces is facing remain unsolved.

In the years long debacle surrounding the future of the Navy, a clear voice of the Navy itself is missing. While the civilian oversight over the army is one of the cornerstones of a democratic state, the needs of the Navy should be voiced by experts. Said experts should voice their opinion without a fear for the future of their career, especially if their beliefs are not in line with the official policy.

Not just about the money

After its commissioning on November 28th 2017, the ORP Kormoran became the first newly build ship to enter service in 16 years. This fact becomes ever more consequential since, for example the Swedish military considers the Visby corvette, which was developed in line with the early 90's doctrine, as not really modern, while the A-17S submarines, which were introduced in 1989, and then underwent modernisation, are considered obsolete.

The unfortunate reality is, that as a result of years of neglect, the Navy has to effectively be rebuilt from the ground up. The facts and statistics about the Polish naval warship fleet are, simply speaking, frightening. The average age of ships is 47 years. Both of the Oliver Hazard Perry frigates are now approaching 40, while the newest minesweeper (not counting the "Kormoran") has entered service 23 years ago, while the oldest has served for more than 50 years. Three of the fast attack craft are now armed with the modern RBS-15 Mk. 3 missiles, but the vessels themselves are powered by raddled legacy Soviet engines, and are at a constant risk of being immobilised in a port. Throughout the entire existence of the post-Soviet Poland, the only ships acquired were yachts and survey motorboats. The minelayers and minesweepers are the most numerous type of craft in the entire fleet. Five Lublin class ships can, in a relatively short period of time, lay a formidable number of sea mines, while the two minesweeper divisions stationed in Gdynia and Świnoujście have proven their mine detection capabilities over the years.

As far as naval aviation is concerned, patrol and reconnaissance aircraft, as well as rescue helicopters are relatively modern – but firepower available at their disposal is negligible. Even though the helicopters are equipped with MU-90 torpedoes, the sonar capabilities are sub-par. The land based air defences are based on modernized 1950's anti-aircraft artillery systems, and MANPAD's. The most modern equipment at the disposal of the Navy is stationed onshore, in the Naval Missile Unit. Norwegian made NSM missiles are capable of engaging targets on land and on sea up to 200 kilometres. Unfortunately, the radar suite, and reconnaissance systems do not allow for fully utilising the capabilities offered by these missiles. The radar is only capable of tracking targets up to the horizon line, and other means of data transmission are unavailable at the present.

The above listed state of technological and technical collapse is a result of decades of neglect – numerous modernisation plans were drawn out, but none of them have materialised. This, in turn, begs for a question: how come. The most obvious answer to this question is lack of funds. Indeed, in recent years, the Armed Forces budget has been insufficient in relations to the needs. This inadequacy is particularly acute when it comes to naval warships, which are by far the most expensive and complicated to design and procure. It should nevertheless be noted, that other branches of Armed Forces have acquired modern and expensive equipment, including the Rosomak APC, Spike missiles, F16 and C295 aircraft.

This is because, that apart from financing, what is also needed is a clearly defined naval policy of the entire state, and though out not only in accordance with the needs of a single Ministry, but requirements of all other aspects of economic activity.

A single state, many ideas

The reality is, that the plans of the Navy strategic development have been in a permanent state of flux – which would be understandable, if caused exclusively by budgetary constraints. The sad reality is, however, that in charting the direction for the future state of the Navy, there were numerous „U-turns“ in the strategy, at times fundamentally changing its strategic role and tasks, and thus the priorities in acquisition of new equipment. The first such change was ushered in by the Polish plans to join NATO. When in 1997 a new, 15 yearlong modernisation plan was being prepared, the underlying assumption was that Poland will take over the responsibility for defending the Baltic Seas from the Germany.

This in turn has resulted in drawing up plans for building new ships, designed for operations in this specific environment. Meanwhile, almost exactly a year after Poland joined NATO, it received its first frigate, courtesy of the US Navy. Simultaneously procurement programme was launched for a future corvette, and the Northern shipyard in Gdansk begun building a logistical support ship. Both the ex-US Navy frigates, the corvette, and the logistical support ship were designed to be used global operations. For the next decade, the core mission of the Navy was to transport men and equipment over large distances. Frigates, submarines, minelayers, minesweepers and the above mentioned logistical support ship (over time transformed into a command ship) were all sent on missions beyond the Baltic Sea.

The years 2002-2012 were a period of the Navy's deepest technical crisis. Apart from preparing single ships for overseas expeditions, and retiring obsolete equipment, only very limited steps were taken. Three fast attack craft were modernised, and equipped with the Swedish made RBS-15 Mk 3 missile system, and the decision was made to establish an Onshore/Beachfront Missile Division, equipped with the Norwegian NSM missiles.

The never-ending story of building the „Gawron“ corvette is a case study in failures of the Polish state in modernising its Navy. Initially, the envisaged number of warships was seven, after a while this was reduced to two, and finally to a single vessel. Almost immediately

after the keel was laid, the construction was halted due to financial crisis in Poland. While the construction was restarted in 2005, but soon stalled again due to inability to reach a decision regarding armaments and electronic equipment. In the second half of 2009, an interim ship building program was introduced by the then Minister of National Defence Bogdan Klich. The program assumed refurbishing and extending the service life of both two frigates and acquiring three new submarines, and three minesweepers. Furthermore, the decision to retire three 1241RE fast attack craft was reversed. In 2010, an idea was thrown around to increase the MoD budget to 2% (from 1,95%), with the additional 0.05% going to shipbuilding programmes. This idea was rejected by the then President Bronisław Komorowski, who believed air defence modernisation to be a more pressing issue. Finally, the decision Prime Minister Donald Tusk made in 2011, regarding annulling the "Gawron" program (which Donald Tusk has referred to as "the world's most effective motorboat") has effectively buried any chances of procuring modern warships in the coming decades.

Yet another U-turn happened in March 2012, when a new program of "rebuilding the Navy" was unveiled. After minor modifications, the entirety of this program became a part of the Technical Modernisation Plan for the years 2013 – 2022. This ambitious program assumed completion of the "Gawron", but as a patrol vessel. Plans were drawn for constructing new submarines (the "Orka" program), coastal defence vessel („Miecznik" program), and minesweepers, with three units of each type to be produced. In addition to this, new ASW and SAR helicopters, and a number of smaller support craft were to be procured.

To showcase a far reaching optimism of these presumptions, one only needs to take a closer look at the submarine procurement timetable. The plan was to complete the procurement procedure, and sign an agreement by the end of 2013, while the first vessel was to enter into service by 2018. When the program was announced in 2012, authorities reassured the public that the financing of the project is not threatened. Over 800 million PLN per year was to be allocated for the Navy. The only tangible result of these plans is the nearly completed "Kormoran" minesweeper.

The Miecznik, Czaplą and Orka programs have never left the planning stage (and there is a lot of evidence that, except for the lattermost, they never will). Instead, the General Staff of the Armed Forces opted to purchase further NSM missiles – therefore, as of now the Naval Missile Unit appears to be the only actual structure in the Navy that is capable of warfighting.

Wheeled Navy

This state of affairs may likely continue for many years to come. Such conclusion is justified by reading of the defensive assumptions laid out in the Strategic Defence Review, which was published in May 2017, and declarations of the current MoD decision makers. “We cannot hope to rule over the full seas, but we can turn it into a kill zone, and block any attempts at launching an enemy amphibious assault, and establishing control over the Baltic Sea” – said the MoD’s Undersecretary of State, Tomasz Szatkowski during his May 23rd 2017 press conference, which is the essence of what politicians think the place of the Navy should be within the security architecture.

This is not limited just to the current government – suffice it to say, that the former MoD Undersecretary of the State, Waldemar Skrzypczak, who was responsible for modernisation programmes, held similar views on preventing amphibious assault and mine warfare. According to the Defence Concept of the Republic of Poland, modernisation of the Navy is to be based on four pillars: near shore NSM missile divisions, mine laying assets, naval aviation and submarines. There are no provisions concerning protection of the maritime routes, especially in the light of intensifying efforts aimed at diversification of LNG and oil supplies.

With the exception of submarines, and perhaps the “Kormoran” minesweepers, there is little hope for procurement plans of other warships. As far as details of modernization are concerned, one will have to wait until the Technical Modernisation Program 2017-2026 is released, which is supposed to take account of the conclusions provided in the Strategic Defence Review. This approach is a cause for an open discontent coming from the authors of the Strategic Naval Security Concept of the Republic of Poland, developed by the National Security Bureau. The Strategic Naval Security Concept calls for an increased involvement in the collective defence efforts, and thus fulfilling the commitments to the EU and NATO. Without new warships – preferably frigates – those commitments cannot be fulfilled.

The National Security Bureau representatives argue, that a new multi-role platform, capable of performing electronic warfare, and equipped in a diverse weapons suite is necessary to enhance the national air defence system, or conduct and coordinate special operations away from the Baltic Sea. It would appear, that if an appropriate state strategy was developed for the Navy, those ambitious plans could materialise. One of the ideas is to

adopt a special legislation, based on the one that allowed for acquisition of the F-16C/D fighters, which are now guarding the sky over Poland.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. The current difference of opinion between the National Security Bureau, and the Ministry of Defence is a great visualisation of a three decade long inability to define a development plan for the Navy. On the one hand, there is a recommendation to abandon procurement plans for warships, on the other, there is an argument indicating the necessity of fielding frigates. Furthermore, the MoD paper underscores that the efforts should be limited to defending the shore, while the National Security Bureau underlines the need for a presence on the seas and oceans away from the Baltic Sea.

2. In the years long debacle surrounding the future of the Navy, a clear voice of the Navy itself is missing. While the civilian oversight over the army is one of the cornerstones of a democratic state, the needs of the Navy should be voiced by experts. Said experts should voice their opinion without a fear for the future of their career, especially if their beliefs are not in line with the official policy.

3. The Navy is in a dire need of a separate procurement and construction plan, which should be agreed upon beyond political divisions, and only with the needs of the entire maritime economy of Poland in mind. The legislation, preferably supported by all the political parties could assure implementation of the program regardless of the current political make up.

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