

Tensions rise between Poland and France after failed arms deal

By Clara Weiss
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Relations between France and Poland have worsened substantially after the Polish government pulled out of an arms deal with European company Airbus that had been planned for years. Poland had originally intended to buy 50 helicopters from Airbus at a cost of over €3 billion as part of its rearming programme. The Polish government now intends to buy the helicopters from an American arms concern instead.

Airbus is a German-French-Spanish company with its headquarters in Toulouse. The French government owns an 11 percent share in the firm.

The negotiations over the major arms deal were initiated by the Citizens Platform (PO) government in 2015. The government responded to the Ukraine crisis with a massive programme of military rearmament directed at Russia. Unlike the current governing Law and Justice Party (PiS), it based itself on closer collaboration with Brussels and the leading European powers, France and Germany.

The PiS had declared its opposition to the talks at the time. When the PiS assumed power last autumn, negotiations became increasingly tense. In February, it was announced that the Polish government was considering breaking off talks with Airbus and purchasing the helicopters from a US firm.

The Polish defence ministry then announced a halt to the talks on October 5, with the explanation that the proposed deal did not correspond to Poland's national interests. The main concern was to protect jobs in the Polish arms industry. Defence Minister Antoni Macierewicz accused France of being responsible for the breakdown in talks. A few days later it was revealed that Poland would buy Black Hawk helicopters from the US firm Lockheed Martin.

The French government and Airbus both expressed deep frustration at the collapse of the deal. Airbus

published an open letter to the Polish government. In it, Airbus pointed out that the Polish government was responsible for breaking off talks: "We feel as though we have been led around by the nose by the current Polish government for months." The firm concluded with the warning, "Of course we will adopt appropriate measures." A company spokesman angrily declared, "We have never been treated like this by a government as customer."

The French government, which gave its backing to the concern from the outset, joined in the blame game. French President François Hollande cancelled a planned visit to Warsaw on October 13. An October 10 planned visit by French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian was also cancelled. Alain Juppe, the potential presidential candidate for the right-wing Republicans, stated that Poland was not yet "mature" enough for the European Union.

France also cancelled the invitation of the Polish delegation to the next Euronaval Congress. The congress is the largest meeting of leading European concerns in the area of naval arms and is organised by the French defence ministry. The Reuters news agency reported, based on government sources, that Poland's actions would have wide-ranging consequences for the relations of both countries.

Reuters cited a French source close to the matter as stating, "The Franco-Polish bilateral relationship will undeniably be extremely affected by this decision."

"The contract's cancellation will force us to review all the defence cooperation that we have with Poland and see what can be maintained and sadly what can't in the current context," according to the source. Cooperation in the arms sector is an important component of French-Polish economic relations, which were substantially expanded under the PO government

from 2010 to 2014.

Diplomatic tensions escalated further on Wednesday when Polish deputy defence minister Bartosz Kownacki declared on television in a chauvinist outburst, “The French side invited us a long time ago and are now showing us the door. And yet these are the people who we taught to eat with a fork a couple of centuries ago, which may explain their behaviour today.” A spokesman for the governing party, Beata Mazurek, desperately sought to distance herself from Kownacki’s comments, describing them as “unfortunate” and “not very diplomatic.”

The failed deal will be a heavy economic blow for Airbus, which faces financial difficulties, and could be used as a pretext to cut thousands of jobs in France.

But behind the rapidly deteriorating relations between France and Poland are the deepening national conflicts in the wake of the Brexit vote and sharpening tensions between leading European powers, above all France and Germany, and the US.

This background was clear from an angry statement by Hollande. In an explicit reference to Poland and the Baltic states on 6 October, he said, “There are European states that think the US will always be there to protect them and go as far as only buying weapons from the United States and not from Europeans.”

French Prime Minister Manuel Valls stated that the main thing concerning him about the failed deal was the consequences “for the concept of European defence.” He said, “It is a bad decision which underscores the political contradictions in Poland.”

The right-wing PiS government has declared itself against a union represented by Berlin and Paris, and rejects the founding of a European army. The PiS speaks on behalf of a section of the Polish bourgeoisie that fears the predominance of France and especially Germany within the EU and is therefore orienting towards a stronger alliance with the US.

This fear was increased by Brexit. Within the EU, Britain blocked German and French attempts to form a European army and, as a close supporter of the US, it backed the military build-up against Russia. The Polish government considers the European army to be an effort by France and Germany to create an army in competition with NATO that is not under the control of the US government.

This fear is shared by significant sections of the US

ruling elite. As a report from the US Atlantic Council think tank from last summer, authored by a leading British NATO general and the former representative of the Polish defence ministry responsible for arms purchases, said, “Poland should undertake firm opposition to any EU plans (such as may be

contemplated in the new Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy) envisaging an EU military force. Any weakening of NATO cannot be countenanced, especially at this political juncture, and particularly with a putative British exit from the EU weakening the Union’s collective military posture outside of NATO.”

However, there are deep divisions within the Polish bourgeoisie about its foreign policy orientation. A report in the opposition-aligned *Gazeta Wyborcza* on the helicopter deal warned that Poland could not afford to irritate important partners like France under conditions of Brexit and talks over reorganising the EU.

The newspaper cited Maksymilian Dura from the Defence24.pl portal, who said, “The moment chosen to break of the talks was fatal, directly prior to the planned visit of President François Hollande on October 13. The world will get the impression that we are not reliable.”

Former defence minister in the previous PO government, Tomasz Siemoniak, criticised the PiS for the failed deal as “amateurs” who had completely underestimated the consequences of the decision for Polish-French relations.

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