

U.S. Army Joins Polish Military Defense Exercises Near Warsaw

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U.S. Army and Polish soldiers unload M1 Abrams tanks in Drawsko Pomorskie, Jankowo Pomorskie, northwestern Poland March 18, 2015.

The U.S. Army Europe has deployed a Patriot missile defense battery near Warsaw as part of joint exercises with Poland aimed at reassuring the NATO member in light of the conflict in neighboring Ukraine.

Poland, in NATO since 1999, does not have its own system to protect against ballistic missiles and is to take a decision regarding the supplier for its medium-range missile defense system within weeks.

"We have always been friends and we have been allies for the last 16 years," Polish Defense Minister Tomasz Siemoniak told a joint press briefing with the U.S. ambassador on Saturday.

"During this time we have always been by the side of the United States. When we are in need, the United States have firmly stood by our side," Siemoniak said.

U.S. Army Europe said earlier this week that the aim of the weeklong exercise was to "reassure allies, demonstrate freedom of movement and deter regional aggression on the eastern flank of NATO."

The Patriot missile battery, which is manufactured by U.S. firm Raytheon, arrived in Poland accompanied by 100 U.S. soldiers and approximately 30 vehicles.

The ground-to-air missile defense system was deployed at a military base in Sochaczew, a city roughly 50 kilometers from Warsaw.

Siemoniak said it was natural for Poland to train with allies on defending the city.

"We are here to show our Polish allies that U.S. security guarantees for Poland as part of NATO mean something more than only words on paper," the U.S. ambassador to Poland, Stephen Mull, said.

The deployment follows unofficial Russian media reports that Russia deployed Iskander ballistic missiles in its Kaliningrad exclave neighboring Poland as part of exercises earlier this week.

Poland plans to choose the supplier for its medium-range missile defense system within the next few weeks. Warsaw short-listed Raytheon and a consortium of France's Thales and European group MBDA in the tender last year.

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