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THE STATE AT THE EDGE: COMPARATIVE GEOPOLITICS OF POLAND AND THE WORLD'S CIVILIZATIONAL BORDERLANDS

PAŃSTWO NA KRAWĘDZI: GEOPOLITYKA PORÓWNAWCZA POLSKI I PAŃSTW - ŚWIATOWYCH POGRANICZY CYWILIZACYJNYCH

Abstract

Contemporary conflict rarely erupts in the settled cores of civilizations but clusters along the seams – the ancient fault lines where tectonic plates of culture and power collide. This research reconceptualizes the Civilizational Borderland not as a passive buffer zone, but as a distinct geopolitical actor driven by a structural imperative of survival. Through a comparative analysis of Poland against a control group of functional peers – Turkey, Israel, and South Korea – this study identifies a recurring geopolitical phenotype characterized by existential anxiety, hyper-militarization, and executive centralization. It argues that Poland is currently abandoning its post-Cold War script of passive institutional integration in favor of an industrial garrison model, partially mimicking the strategic autonomy of the Asian and Middle Eastern periphery. By mapping this transition, the research demonstrates that for the borderland state, economic efficiency is subordinate to the sovereignty premium, and that the stability of the Western Core is increasingly dependent on the agency of its fortified edge.

Keywords: Civilizational borderland, geopolitics of Poland, structural liminality, crush zone, ontological security, asymmetric alliances, garrison state.

Introduction

If one were to mark the world's most volatile flashpoints on a map today – from the trenches of the Donbas to the Gaza Strip, from the Southern Caucasus to the Taiwan Strait – a distinct pattern would emerge. Contemporary conflict rarely erupts within the settled cores of major civilizations; Paris, Beijing, and Washington remain relatively secure in their geopolitical gravity. Instead, instability clusters along the seams, the ancient and enduring fault lines where major cultural tectonic

plates collide. These locations are not accidental. They represent a specific geopolitical category: the civilizational borderland.

Existing at the edge is qualitatively different from existing at the center. While core states operate to maximize influence and economic growth, borderland states operate under a permanent shadow of existential anxiety. Geopolitics is a struggle for survival rather than a game of interests for a state in a crush zone. However, these actors are frequently misrepresented by conventional international relations theory, which may view them as helpless buffer zones or tragic pawns in the struggle for dominance. This viewpoint overlooks an important fact: borderland states actively participate. They do not merely suffer their geography but manipulate and leverage their liminality to extract security guarantees and define their sovereignty.

Poland stands as the archetype of this condition. Historically partitioned and geographically vulnerable, Poland has spent centuries defining itself against the East to validate its belonging to the West. But Poland has effectively navigated its return to the core through membership in the European Union and NATO, in contrast to many of its historical peers. This poses an important question: has Poland managed to overcome the logic of the borderland through successful institutional integration, or has it just discovered a different approach? To answer this, one cannot study Poland in isolation, because such exceptionalism may obscure the structural realities shared by other states facing similar constraints. This research posits that the behavior of states at the edge is not random but structural. Therefore, my central hypothesis is that civilizational borderland states display certain recurring geopolitical patterns, and that Poland's position within this set reveals both shared characteristics and distinct features that can only be understood through systematic comparison.

In this paper I test the hypothesis through the lens of comparative geopolitics. It begins by establishing a theoretical and conceptual framework that defines the borderland condition through the synthesis of cultural geography and economic history. The analysis then moves to a deep case study of Poland, examining how its historical trauma and contemporary scripting shape its foreign policy. Crucially, the research then broadens the aperture to include comparative case studies of other borderland states – Turkey, Israel, and South Korea. These states serve as a geopolitical control group, allowing us to distinguish between behaviors that are structurally determined by the edge and those that are unique to Poland's strategic choices. Finally, the comparative

analysis and discussion synthesizes these findings to map the recurring patterns of the periphery and reveals the limits of agency imposed by borderland geopolitics.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

To operationalize the concept of the civilizational borderland, it is necessary to synthesize cultural geography with economic history to establish the baseline constraints of the state. Samuel Huntington (1996) provides the foundational geometry, conceptualizing the borderland as a volatile fault line where friction between distinct cultural zones creates a permanent potential for conflict, rather than a simple administrative boundary. However, a purely cultural definition remains insufficient without understanding material realities. Fernand Braudel (1984) layers this with an economic dimension, defining the borderland as a periphery structurally condemned to serve a dominant core.

Extending on the aforementioned definition, while classical geopolitics often treats borderland states as passive victims of geography, this research turns to sociological and critical perspectives to identify sources of agency. The assumption that modernization requires identical imitation of the West is rejected here. S.N. Eisenstadt's (2000) theory of Multiple Modernities suggests that non-core states actively crystallize distinct versions of modernity by filtering Western institutions through indigenous cultural codes, instead of simply copying external models. Geographer Gearóid Ó Tuathail (1996) expands on this capacity for active interpretation through the concept of geopolitical scripting. He argues that states actively write their own spatial narratives– casting themselves as bulwarks or bridges– to manipulate great power behavior, distinct from simply existing within fixed geographic coordinates.

However, the capacity to script one's reality encounters a severe test in the material determinism of Eastern Europe. To contextualize Poland's specific gravity, I would narrow the lens to the existential anxieties of the region. James Fairgrieve (1915) provides the hard security definition of this space as the Crush Zone– a buffer belt between the Euro-Atlantic rimland and the Eurasian heartland destined to absorb the shock of great power conflict. This structural vulnerability creates a cultural imperative best described by Milan Kundera's (1984) concept of the Kidnapped West. Kundera views the region as a displaced piece of the West fighting to restore its natural order, differing significantly from an East in transition. Consequently, Poland's institutional integration

functions as a mechanism to escape the Crush Zone and validate its Western identity, distinguishing its geopolitical pattern from borderlands that lack this specific historical trauma.

Thus, synthesizing these perspectives, the civilizational borderland is defined here as a condition of structural liminality. It is a permanent duality where the state functions as a geopolitical membrane, selectively managing the flow of security and capital from the Core while repelling threats from the external Other. This condition creates a double-pressure environment: the state faces external demands for institutional conformity (mimicry) while managing internal demands for national distinctiveness. Therefore, the geopolitical pattern analyzed here is essentially the strategic rhythm by which a state navigates this friction, attempting to convert its peripheral vulnerability into institutional stability.

To distinguish whether Poland's behavior results from this general condition or its own strategic choices, this study adopts Charles Tilly's (1984) variation-finding comparative method. Comparing Poland to Western Core states like Germany is methodologically flawed because such an approach ignores the power dynamic of asymmetric integration. Instead, Poland must be compared to a control group of other borderland states that share similar existential anxieties. To ensure validity, I govern the selection of this comparative set by four criteria derived from the theoretical framework: the state must be situated at the intersection of distinct civilizations (Huntington, 1996); it must be economically integrated with but subservient to a larger hegemon (Braudel, 1984); it must have enough weight to act as a regional agent (Tuathail, 1996); and the set must include states with varying degrees of integration to serve as the variable explaining the divergence in geopolitical patterns.

Poland as a Civilizational Borderland

View from History

To understand Poland's contemporary geopolitical behavior, one must first deconstruct the historical mechanisms that transformed a geographic location into a civilizational imperative. The genesis of Poland's borderlandness is defined by a fundamental dissonance between internal self-perception and external categorization– a friction that corresponds to the Huntingtonian Fault Line parameter of this study. According to Norman Davies (2005), the Baptism of Poland in 966 was the first strategic decision that established a lasting cultural

separation from the Slavic East and anchored the state to the Latin West. According to Davies, this marks the beginning of the Antemurale Christianitatis (Bulwark of Christendom) mythology, which gives Poland significance as the valiant guardian of Western ideals. However, applying Larry Wolff's (1994) critical lens reveals that this Westernness was rarely reciprocated. Wolff argues that during the Enlightenment, Western intellectuals invented Eastern Europe, intellectually demoting Poland from a Northern equal to an Eastern semi-civilized zone. I argue that this clash– between Davies' internal narrative of the Bulwark and Wolff's external gaze of Backwardness– created the primary geopolitical pattern of the Polish borderland: a permanent struggle for validation, where foreign policy becomes a performative act to prove the state's Western credentials against a skeptical Core.

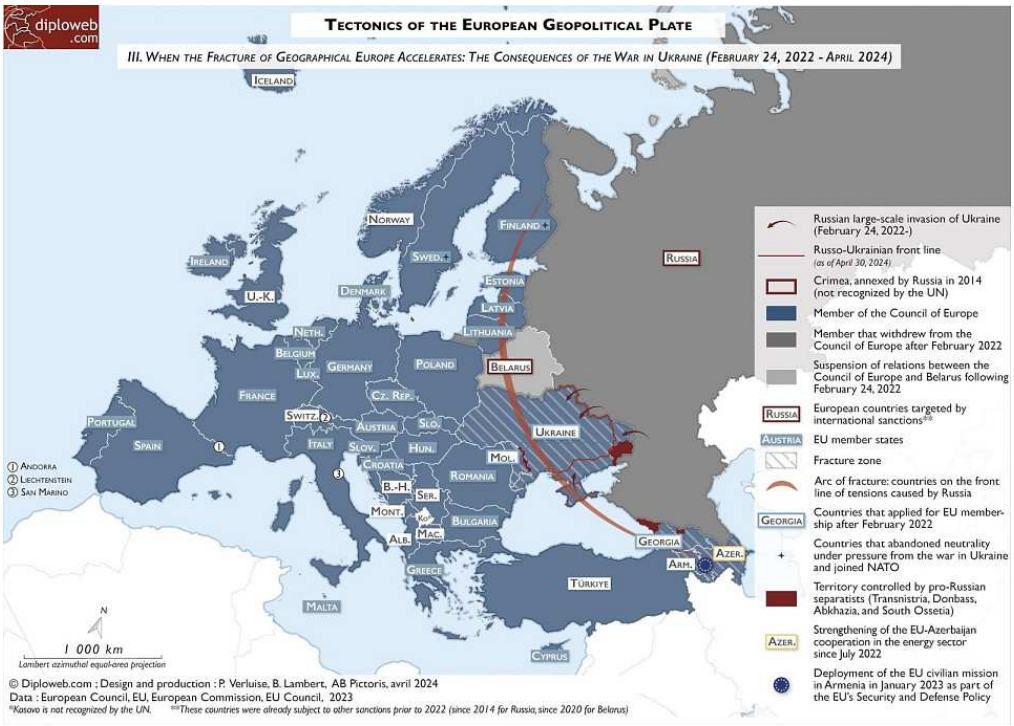
This cultural anxiety was historically exacerbated by the material reality of the Wallersteinian semi-periphery (Wallerstein, 1974), which is a structurally intermediate position within the European world-economy characterized by partial integration into core markets, chronic capital dependence, and limited capacity to translate institutional Westernization into sustained material power. However, the transition from historical victimhood to contemporary Pivot State agency, as Sir Halford Mackinder (1904) would name it, was not accidental, but the result of a profound strategic reconstruction. Timothy Snyder (2003) describes how Polish elites in the 20th century, especially the Kultura group under Jerzy Giedroyc, destroyed the imperial Jagiellonian concept that had previously caused Poland to clash with the East. Poland changed from a multiethnic empire to a unified nation-state by acknowledging the loss of the Eastern Borderlands (Kresy) and endorsing the independence of Belarus, Lithuania, and Ukraine. This validates the strategic choice variable of the research hypothesis. Snyder's analysis demonstrates that Poland managed to escape the crush zone trap not by fighting geography, but by rewriting its geopolitical script– abandoning the role of the imperial civilizer to become the institutional gateway.

Contemporary Civilizational Borderlandness

To analyze Poland's contemporary geopolitical condition is to observe a state whose post–Cold War expectations of permanent stability, commonly associated with the End of History thesis (Fukuyama, 1992), have been displaced by the re-emergence of structural insecurity characteristic of the Eastern European crush zone, a space historically defined by recurrent great-power confrontation (Fairgrieve, 1915; Snyder, 2010). While the post-1989 era offered

Poland the seductive narrative of becoming a Bridge between East and West, Justyna Zając (2016) and Rafał Lisiakiewicz (2018) argue that this role was structurally impossible. Lisiakiewicz posits that Poland's soft balancing against Russia precluded any genuine bridging role, as Moscow viewed Poland's export of Western norms not as mediation, but as offensive expansion. Zając complements this by noting that the structural reality of Russian revisionism– culminating in 2014 and 2022 in Ukraine– forced Poland to abandon the Bridge script entirely and revert to its historical posture: the Antemurale, or Bulwark.

Fig. 1: Poland's Geopolitical Position within Europe's Contemporary Strategic Fracture Zones



Source: https://www.diploweb.com/Map-3-3-Tectonics-of-the-European-Geopolitical-Plate-When-the-Fracture-of-Geographical-Europe.html

This theoretical shift is starkly visualized in Figure 1, which maps the re-materialization of the Fault Line. The red Arc of Fracture running from the Baltics to the Black Sea creates a hard barrier that renders the concept of a diplomatic gradient obsolete. As the map illustrates, Poland is not a transit zone but the primary logistical hub holding the Euro-Atlantic Blue against the Eurasian Red. This validates Andrew Michta's

(2006) contention that Poland is no longer a buffer (a passive neutral space) but a frontier state (an active garrison). The distinct feature of this frontier status, as Wojciech Lorenz (2025) argues, is the shift from crisis management to forward defense. He documents how Poland leveraged its vindicated alarmism– having warned of Russian aggression for decades– to force NATO to abandon its expeditionary mindset in favor of territorial defense.

However, a critical analysis of the quantitative data reveals a profound strategic desynchronization between Poland and its European allies. While Poland has successfully integrated into Western institutions, I dare to claim that it clearly does not trust Western European capabilities. Michta's critique of the "Hollow Alliance" is empirically illustrated by NATO defence-spending data, which show Poland allocating approximately 4.12% of GDP to defence in 2024 – starkly divergent from the German or French average of around 2%. I argue that this spending gap quantifies the existential anxiety of the borderland; for the Core (Western Europe), defense is a budget line item, but for the Frontier, it is a survival imperative.

Furthermore, the clientelism pattern identified by Zając – where Poland relies on a distant hegemon rather than local partners– is partially visible in heavy strategic procurement data. However, it is vital to acknowledge that Poland possesses a capable domestic defense industry, manufacturing world-class combat vehicles (Borsuk IFV, Rosomak), artillery (Krab), and infantry systems (Grot rifles, Piorun MANPADS).[1] Nevertheless, to fill immediate critical gaps in heavy armor and aviation, Poland's massive arms deals with South Korea ($9 billion in 2023 for K2 tanks and K9 howitzers) and the United States ($3.5 billion) effectively partially decouple some elements of its security architecture from the European industrial base[2]. This validates my hypothesis regarding distinct patterns: Poland utilizes the EU more for economic modernization (Braudel's integration) but less for hard security. However, it is important to note that this trajectory is heavily mediated by domestic politics. For instance, while the Civic Platform government prior to 2015 pursued European defense integration by planning to purchase French Caracal helicopters, the subsequent Law & Justice government halted this in favor of U.S. and Korean bilateralism. Today,

[1] https://www.gov.pl/web/primeminister/security-made-in-poland-government-boosts-national-defense-industry

[2] https://pism.pl/publications/poland-and-south-korea-should-further-develop-security-cooperation

renewed plans to link Poland with Europe through the SAFE programme demonstrate that while the structural borderland anxiety remains constant, the choice of allies oscillates depending on the ruling political option.

Ultimately, Lisiakiewicz's concept of Two Enemies (Germany and Russia) has evolved into a strategy of asymmetric trust. Public opinion data reveals that Poles trust the Army (≈80–94%) and NATO (≈75–76%) far more than the European Union (≈50–53%).[3] This confirms that the Civilizational Borderland is a mental map as much as a physical one. Poland has institutionalized its trauma, creating a geopolitical pattern where it acts as the West's nervous system– sensing threats earlier and reacting more violently than the Core, thereby proving that while it has joined the West institutionally, it remains distinct in its security-first ethos.

Practical Effects on Internal and External Policy

The theoretical condition of structural liminality is not merely an abstract geopolitical categorization, because it also functions as the operating system of the Polish state. By analyzing specific policy decisions from 2015 to 2024, I argue that Poland's internal and external behaviors are not standard European political maneuvers but distinct reflexes driven by a Frontier logic, which means attempts to convert peripheral vulnerability into institutional agency.

This logic is most visible in the radical shift in security policy, which represents a deliberate rejection of the Western European peace dividend model. The passage of the Homeland Defence Act in 2022[4] and the subsequent elevation of defense spending to over 4% of GDP should be analyzed not as alliance compliance, but as institutionalized anxiety. This over-compliance signals that Warsaw views Article 5 as a mechanism of last resort; the primary strategy for Poland has shifted from collective defense to self-reliance. Furthermore, the relentless lobbying for a permanent US presence validates a strategy of entrapment: Poland actively seeks to place American troops in the line of fire to deny the hegemon the ability to de-escalate, effectively binding the US commitment to the eastern flank.

Also, Poland exhibits a persistent conflict between its material limitations and its strategic aspirations in its Eastern policy. Since 2022,

[3] https://notesfrompoland.com/2025/09/17/poles-trust-in-army-reaches-record-high-while-trust-in-church-falls-to-record-low/
[4] https://dziennikustaw.gov.pl/DU/2022/655

Poland has provided Ukraine with unconditional military and diplomatic support. And this externalization of Poland's security frontier essentially turns Ukraine into a strategic buffer that pushes the crush zone eastward. However, this agency's limitations are exposed by the unilateral 2023 ban on Ukrainian grain. I contend that this choice highlights the trap of the economic periphery: Poland's economy is nonetheless semi-peripheral in terms of agriculture, despite its military involvement in the great power competition. When the material survival of its agrarian base clashed with its strategic geopolitical script, the structural economic constraint prevailed, proving that borderland solidarity ends where peripheral economic vulnerability begins.

And these external security anxieties drive a spatial revisionism in infrastructure and energy policy. The construction of the Baltic Pipe and the selection of U.S. technology for nuclear energy represent a willingness to pay a sovereignty premium – accepting higher costs to achieve energy decoupling from the East and strategic independence from German transit routes. Similarly, the Central Communication Port project is an effort to attain logistical sovereignty.[5] By avoiding Berlin and maintaining national control over reinforcement routes, it seeks to turn Poland from a transit corridor into the logistical hub of the NATO eastern flank.

In sum, the Polish case reveals a distinct geopolitical phenotype which I would name an integrated frontier. Namely, while Poland has successfully embedded itself within the Western Core's institutional architecture, its behavioral reflexes remain governed by the logic of the Crush Zone – prioritizing hard security over economic efficiency, executive coherence over liberal norms, and bilateral clientelism over multilateral autonomy. This analysis confirms that for Poland, institutional integration was a means to fortify the Fault Line. However, to determine whether this garrison state syndrome is a unique product of specific Polish historical trauma or a universal structural imperative of the civilizational edge, the analysis must expand its aperture. To validate the hypothesis of recurring geopolitical patterns, the following section tests these findings against a global control group – Turkey, Israel and South Korea– to distinguish between national peculiarities and the immutable laws of structural liminality.

[5] https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/premier-mateusz-morawiecki-podczas-otwarcia-baltic-pipe-dzis-rozpoczynamy-epoke-suwerennosci-energetycznej

Comparative Case Studies of Other Civilizational Borderlands

Turkey

Turkey exemplifies the civilizational borderland by satisfying all four selection criteria of this study in their most volatile form. First, it is situated precisely at the Huntingtonian fault line between Western and Islamic civilizations, functioning as a critical demographic and military buffer for NATO. Second, while deeply integrated into European trade flows, it remains structurally subordinate to the Core, relying on foreign capital and technology (Deichmann, 2021). Third, with a GDP of approximately $1.1 trillion and a population of 85 million[6], Turkey possesses the requisite strategic weight to act as a regional agent, scripting itself not as a passive buffer but as an autonomous Eurasian pivot. Finally, and most critically for this comparative analysis, Turkey represents the variable of stalled institutional integration. However, Ankara's current strategic posture should be understood not solely as an inherent preference, but particularly as a reactive adaptation. The European Communities have kept Turkey behind closed doors for over 60 years, and this protracted gatekeeping has profoundly shaped Turkish geopolitics. While Turkey has always possessed the geographic weight to act as a regional power, it was the realization of its permanent exclusion from the EU political core that catalyzed its contemporary pivot toward independent decision-making and multi-vector agency.[7] Nevertheless, as a state anchored in NATO but excluded from the EU political core, it manages the existential anxiety of its Crush Zone – quantified by the presence of over 4 million refugees[8] and proximity to active conflicts in Syria and Iraq – through a strategy of Neo-Ottoman autonomy rather than the institutional embedding observed in Poland.

While Poland and Turkey both militarize in response to borderland anxiety, their strategies of procurement and projection diverge significantly. Turkey maintains a robust military apparatus with approximately 355,000 active personnel and defense spending at roughly 2.2% of GDP.[9] Unlike Poland, which partially relies on a strategy of clientelism – procuring off-the-shelf solutions from the United States and South Korea to bind allies to its defense, though covering certain categories by own production – Turkey pursues indigenous strategic autonomy. Ankara has developed a domestic defense industry capable of

[6] https://tgmstatbox.com/topics/turkey/
[7] https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41311-024-00638-w
[8] https://www.turkishminute.com/2025/04/28/
[9] https://www.turkishminute.com/2025/04/25/

generating $7 billion in annual export revenue.[10] Furthermore, Turkey's forward defense posture is interventionist; it engages in buffer expansion by projecting power directly into northern Syria, Iraq, and Libya. This contrasts with Poland's garrison mindset, which focuses on containment and territorial defense within its borders. While Poland's higher spending (~4% of GDP) reflects an acute reliance on external guarantees, Turkey's moderate spending reflects a strategy of balancing multiple partnerships to achieve self-sufficiency.

Also, both states exhibit a willingness to pay a sovereignty premium– incurring higher economic or political costs to reduce dependency on the Core. However, the direction of this autonomy differs. Poland's energy strategy is intended to dissociate from the East and strictly align with the Euro-Atlantic sphere, as demonstrated by the Baltic Pipe and U.S. nuclear cooperation.[11] In contrast, Turkey adopts a multi-vector energy strategy that serves more as a geopolitical valve than as a defensive barrier.

Fig. 2: Turkey's Energy Infrastructure as a Multi-Vector Hub

Source: author's adapted version of the map from . https://i0.wp.com/www.climatescorecard.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/.

[10] https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2025/02/04/

[11] https://www.energy.gov/articles/united-states-signs-agreement-advance-american-civil-nuclear-deal-poland

For example, Figure 2 illustrates how Turkey physically unites competing interests by housing oil flows from Iraq, the Western-backed Southern Gas Corridor (TANAP) from Azerbaijan, and Russian arteries (TurkStream, Blue Stream). Turkey seeks autonomy from strict alignment rather than autonomy within it, striking a balance between dependence on Moscow and indispensability to Brussels by incorporating these varied sources rather than rejecting them. Then, the borderland condition fosters executive decisionism in both capitals, where security imperatives frequently override liberal norms. Turkey's shift toward a centralized presidential system since 2017 mirrors the logic of Poland's post-2015 judicial reforms, where the consolidation of power is justified by external threats.[12] However, the depth of this consolidation varies due to institutional constraints. Poland remains checked by European Union membership, resulting in a "Free" rating from Freedom House, whereas Turkey is rated "Partly Free".[13] This suggests that while the borderland impulse toward a strong executive is universal, the absence of external institutional constraints allows it to evolve into a more authoritarian form in Ankara than in Warsaw.

Lastly, both states are driven by historical trauma regarding territorial erasure. Poland's strategic culture is haunted by the partitions and Soviet occupation, leading to a script of the integrated frontier that seeks safety in numbers. In turn, Turkey is driven by the "Sèvres Syndrome", which is the fear of partition originating from the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres. Crucially, while Turkey historically sought safety in Western integration much like Poland, the reality of a 60-year European blockade reinforced this trauma. Recognizing that full institutional integration would likely remain out of reach, Turkey increasingly positioned itself as a regional balancer, emphasizing strategic autonomy and the protection of national sovereignty in response to both prolonged EU accession stagnation and broader tensions with Western partners. Thus, historical trauma drives both states toward anxiety, but while it leads Poland to cling to its institutional savior, it pushed Turkey – facing a perpetually closed European door – to double down on self-reliance.

Overall, Turkey exemplifies a proactive, multi-vector borderland state that employs both defensive and interventionist strategies to manage its Crush Zone. The comparison with Poland highlights that while structural constraints drive militarization and executive

[12] https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/20190111
[13] https://freedomhouse.org/

decisionism in both cases, institutional integration determines their distinct geopolitical trajectories.

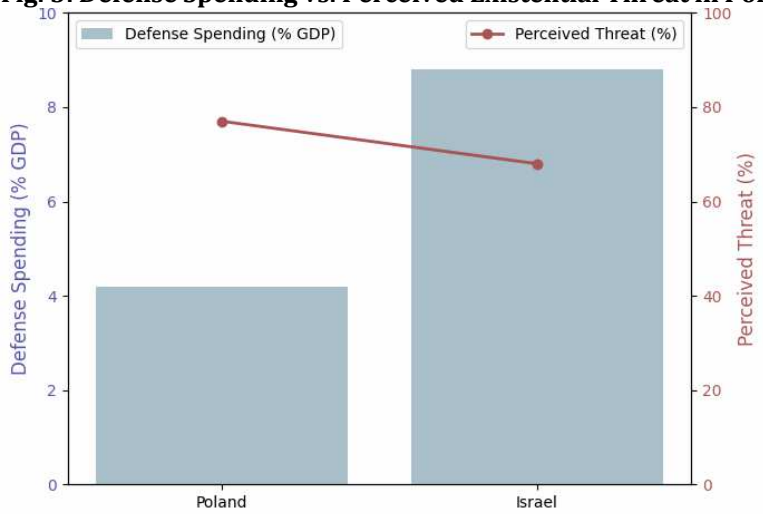
Israel

Israel exemplifies the civilizational borderland by satisfying all four selection criteria of this study in their most acute form. First, it is situated at the Huntingtonian fault line between Western and Islamic civilizations, functioning as both a strategic and cultural bridge in a highly volatile region. Second, while fully integrated into global finance, high-tech markets, and U.S.-led military-industrial networks, Israel remains structurally subordinate to the Core, relying heavily on American military aid (~$3.8 billion annually) and strategic guarantees.[14] Third, with a GDP of approximately $570 billion and a population of 9.7 million, Israel possesses sufficient regional weight to act as an autonomous agent, projecting influence in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and beyond.[15] Finally, and most critically for this comparative analysis, Israel represents the variable of concentrated existential exposure. Surrounded by persistent threats from hostile neighbors, ongoing asymmetric conflicts, regional instability, etc., it manages its "Crush Zone" through technological supremacy and proactive forward defense rather than the territorial buffering and institutional embedding observed in Poland.

Moreover, Israel maintains a forward-defense military posture characterized by compulsory service, ~170,000 active personnel, and ~465,000 reserves, supplemented by high-tech systems such as Iron Dome and Arrow missiles. However, as demonstrated by the multinational coalition required to intercept Iran's unprecedented missile attacks in 2024, these indigenous systems are not entirely self-sufficient; Israel's defense remains structurally tethered to the unconditional strategic and operational support of the United States. Its proactive operations in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria reflect a forward-projection strategy, contrasting with Poland's defensive "Integrated Frontier" approach that partially relies on NATO and U.S./South Korean procurement. Both states demonstrate a mix of alliance reliance and strategic autonomy; Poland depends on foreign procurement for hard defense, while Israel maximizes indigenous technological capabilities while leveraging U.S. aid.

[14] https://www.inss.org.il/publication/policy-2025/
[15] https://www.statista.com/topics/8573/israel/

Fig. 3: Defense Spending vs. Perceived Existential Threat in Poland and Israel



Source: author's own elaboration, chart based on data from https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex

Also, the relationship between defense investment and perceived threat, which is visualized in Figure 3, illustrates how existential anxiety drives behavior in borderland states. For Israel, high public perception of threat (~68 %) justifies substantial defense expenditures (8.8 % of GDP), reflecting a policy logic where survival imperatives dominate both domestic and foreign decision-making. Central to this is the periphery doctrine, whereby Israel historically sought alliances with non-Arab peripheral actors, such as Turkey, Ethiopia, and Azerbaijan, to offset hostility from its immediate neighbors (Kıllıoğlu, 2024). This approach persists in contemporary initiatives like the Abraham Accords, which expand Israel's diplomatic and security networks beyond the core Middle Eastern arena. Complementing this strategy is a forward-defense and pre-emption posture: assessments such as Project Daniel emphasize anticipatory self-defense and the retention of options for pre-emptive strikes against potential coalition threats, notably Iran's nuclear ambitions, which in turn reflects a borderland imperative that survival cannot await aggression. Furthermore, proactive defense planning and deterrent strategies are informed by Israel's existential threat perception, which is based on historical animosity from both state and non-state actors. Last but not least, its regional realignment and normalization initiatives show a calculated endeavor to lessen isolation while establishing common security objectives with Gulf and North African states. In contrast, Poland operationalizes its borderland

vulnerability through territorial defense, NATO integration, and bilateral purchase from allies like the United States and South Korea. Despite allocating a lesser portion of GDP to defense (4.2%), Poland feels an even greater threat (~77% of the population). Poland prioritizes alliance-based collective security and territorial resilience, while Israel converts existential dread into forward-deployed, technologically autonomous, and preemptive policies.

One more interesting aspect is that Israel makes significant investments to preserve its strategic autonomy through sophisticated missile and cyber-defense systems, nuclear ambiguity, and partial energy independence from Mediterranean gas fields (Tira, 2016). By eliminating dependency on Eastern or Western middlemen through infrastructure projects like the Baltic Pipe and Central Communication Port, Poland also acknowledges a sovereignty premium. Hence, these states provide as examples of how borderland states frequently have to pay more to become operationally independent and reduce their susceptibility to outside shocks.

Additionally, Israel's energy and security infrastructure, which includes the Leviathan and Tamar gas fields, cyber capabilities, and missile defense systems like Iron Dome and Arrow, provides significant tactical autonomy and quick reaction times. Nevertheless, this 'operational independence' has clear limits; facing existential saturation attacks, Israel ultimately relies on the active military intervention and resupply capabilities of the U.S. as an indispensable security guarantor. In contrast, Poland's infrastructure facilitates collective security and NATO reinforcement. These choices reflect distinct frontier logics: Israel prioritizes immediate survival and forward defense, whereas Poland strengthens institutionalized territorial defense and alliance integration.
Overall, Israel exemplifies a civilizational borderland state by combining structural exposure with strategic agency. Situated at the intersection of Western and Islamic civilizations, it balances deep economic integration and dependence on U.S. military support with substantial regional influence. Its proactive security operations, technical independence, and forward-defense military posture demonstrate a purposeful handling of existential threats, which is similar to Poland's strategy but differs in method: Poland depends on territorial defense and alliance entrenchment, whereas Israel prioritizes forward projection and indigenous capabilities.

South Korea

South Korea exemplifies a civilizational borderland by satisfying the selection criteria in a compressed and militarized form. It sits on a Huntingtonian fault line between competing ideological and civilizational orders within East Asia. Culturally rooted in Confucian social structures, South Korea is institutionally embedded in Western liberal capitalism and security architecture, directly confronting the revolutionary, militarized order of North Korea (Górska-Szymczak & Machowski, 2022; Manyin et al., 2022). This produces a uniquely immediate fault line in which civilizational antagonism is physical rather than symbolic. Also, South Korea is fundamentally dependent in terms of security, depending on U.S. extended deterrence and troop presence, despite being economically integrated into supply chains in semiconductors, electronics, and shipbuilding that are centered on the United States and China. Then, with a population of more than 50 million and a GDP of around $1.7 trillion, it has enough clout to function as a regional agency.[16] Lastly, it represents a unique integration variable: a state that lives under a permanent armistice instead of a stable peace and is rooted in a bilateral alliance rather than a global institutional embedding. As a result, South Korea is considered a hyper-integrated borderland state that is constantly vulnerable.

While borderlandness translates into various geopolitical grammars, it causes similar fears in South Korea and Poland. Although both states are on the front lines of opposing blocs – Poland against a revisionist Russia, South Korea against a nuclearized North Korea – the threat levels are very different. North Korean artillery puts Seoul within minutes of destruction, putting South Korea under perpetual kinetic exposure and enforcing a philosophy of continuous readiness rather than crisis-based deterrence. This is reflected in a standing force of roughly 500,000 active personnel and defense spending stabilized around 2.8–3.0% of GDP.[17] Poland's threat environment, while severe, is more distal. Its higher defense spending serves not immediate survival but deterrence through capacity accumulation.

Alliance architecture further differentiates borderland behavior. Poland operates within dense multilateral institutions, deliberately seeking hegemonic entrapment by hosting U.S. forces, aligning procurement with NATO standards, and embedding itself within EU

[16] https://www.worldometers.info/gdp/south-korea-gdp/
[17] https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/about/archives/2023/countries/korea-south/

political structures. At the expense of autonomy, this lowers the danger of abandonment. In contrast, South Korea and the United States continue to have an unequal bilateral alliance. It has historically relinquished wartime operational control despite housing some 28,500 U.S. troops[18], exposing a borderland status characterized more by dependency than by institutional restraint. As a result, South Korean strategic anxiety encompasses not only external aggression but also alliance volatility within broader U.S.–China competition.

Where South Korea most clearly diverges from Poland is in its response to these constraints through industrial sovereignty. Seoul has been forced to turn vulnerability into productive capability because to ongoing exposure and a lack of institutional shelter. A strategy of autonomy through manufacture is shown in indigenous defense systems like the K2 tank, K9 howitzer, and KF-21 fighter program. Poland, by contrast, prioritizes speed and alliance integration to complement its domestic production, importing these same systems to accelerate deterrence. The asymmetry is structural: while Poland successfully produces and even exports niche systems like the Piorun to Ukraine, it has historically lacked the autarkic capacity to rapidly mass-produce Main Battle Tanks or advanced fighter jets. South Korea exports strategic-level arms to gain leverage; Poland imports them to bind allies closer while buying time to scale up its own manufacturing base. This logic is reinforced spatially, as illustrated by Figure 4. The map illustrates a borderland strategy of spatial growth rather than only infrastructural improvements. Restricted by the DMZ, South Korea looks for strategic depth through connectedness rather than territory: energy pipelines, sea routes, Eurasian rail corridors, and the New Southern Policy reaching toward Southeast Asia. By integrating South Korea into transcontinental flows, these projects are an attempt to avoid spatial compression. Poland's strategy moves in the opposite direction. Rather than stretching space, it thickens borders– investing in logistics hubs, military infrastructure, and NATO reinforcement corridors to fix the frontier permanently on its eastern edge. Borderland pressure thus produces opposing spatial responses: Korea stretches outward, Poland fortifies inward.

[18] https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/south-koreas-president-vows-to-regain-wartime-operational-control-from-us/3703830

Figure 4: South Korea's Infrastructure Vision

Source: author's adapted version of map from https://reconasia.csis.org/south-koreas-infrastructure-vision/

Lastly, domestic governance reflects similar securitization under different constraints. In South Korea, permanent armistice has normalized executive authority within a democratic framework, historically legitimizing instruments such as the National Security Law. Whereas Poland must negotiate sovereignty claims within a supranational order, South Korea's governance is largely insulated from external enforcement, allowing greater latitude in securitizing policy responses.

In sum, both states exhibit the core traits of civilizational borderlands– existential anxiety, alliance dependence, and securitized governance– but express them differently. Poland channels vulnerability into institutional entrenchment and hegemonic binding. South Korea converts permanent exposure into industrial autonomy, spatial expansion, and continuous military readiness. Borderland geopolitics here thus generates recurring pressures, but their expression is mediated by immediacy of threat and alliance structure.

Comparative Analysis and Discussion

The central hypothesis of this study posited that civilizational borderland states display recurring geopolitical patterns driven by structural liminality, and that Poland's behavior is not merely a national idiosyncrasy but a manifestation of a broader systemic condition. And the comparative analysis of Poland against the control group – Turkey, Israel, and South Korea– validates this hypothesis, but, importantly, they introduce another critical variable: strategic agency. Also, while all four states exhibit the baseline symptoms of the borderland condition – existential anxiety, securitized governance, and a rejection of the End of History narrative– they diverge significantly in how they metabolize these pressures. Therefore, the data suggests that the behavior of the borderland state is not random, but follows a distinct geopolitical phenotype governed by universal laws regarding the valuation of sovereignty, the management of space, and the temporal rhythms of alliance politics, which is discussed in this part.

The Sovereignty Premium: Survival over Efficiency

A defining characteristic of the civilizational borderland, evident across all case studies, is the rejection of the neoliberal premise that economic efficiency dictates state behavior. In the Western European Core, economic interdependence is viewed through the lens of Liberal Peace Theory (Kant, 1991) – as a mechanism that raises the cost of conflict and ensures stability. In the borderland, however, interdependence is viewed as a vector of vulnerability, or weaponized interdependence. Consequently, the analyzed states demonstrate a willingness to pay a sovereignty premium– incurring significant economic costs to purchase security margins.

Poland exemplifies this logic through its approach to infrastructure and energy. The construction of the Baltic Pipe and the projected Central Communication Port are, from a purely market-driven perspective, economically suboptimal compared to utilizing existing German logistical networks or cheaper Russian energy supplies. However, Poland accepts this premium to avoid the coercion potential of the East and the transit dependency on the West. This mirrors the logic observed in Turkey, where the state has historically sacrificed currency stability and foreign direct investment to pursue an independent foreign policy, most notably in its procurement of Russian S-400 systems despite the economic fallout of U.S. sanctions. Similarly, Israel and South Korea manifest this premium through the militarization of their economies. Israel's defense allocation of nearly 9% of GDP and South Korea's

maintenance of a massive conscript army within a high-tech economy represent a deliberate diversion of capital from civilian consumption to survival insurance. The comparative evidence confirms that the borderland state operates on a hierarchy of needs where ontological security – the survival of the state self– permanently outranks economic optimization.

Spatial Paradoxes: The Fortress, The Projector, and The Bridge

While the existential anxiety regarding a lack of strategic depth is universal among these nations, the spatial management of the Crush Zone reveals the most significant divergence between Poland and the control group. My analysis identifies three distinct spatial strategies employed to manage the fault line. Poland's primary strategy can be classified as the static fortress. Lacking natural geographic barriers on the North European Plain, Poland responds to its vulnerability by thickening the border. It lacks the independent capacity to expand outward, so it focuses on deterrence by denial– fortifying the frontier with NATO troops, American garrisons, and physical barriers. Poland seeks to freeze the map, converting the border into a hard, impermeable wall. This stands in stark contrast to the offensive projector strategy employed by Israel and Turkey. Both of these states reject the static border; viewing their lack of depth as a liability, they engage in buffer expansion. Israel's operations in Syria and Lebanon, and Turkey's incursions into Northern Syria, represent a refusal to fight on the zero-line. Instead, they create virtual depth by pushing the security frontier into the adversary's territory.

South Korea offers a third model: the virtual bridge. Constrained by the impenetrable hard power barrier of the DMZ, South Korea creates depth through global connectivity. By embedding itself into the global supply chain– dominating sectors like semiconductors and shipping– it raises the cost of war for the entire world, effectively making its survival a global interest. Here, Poland displays a strategic vulnerability compared to the control group. Israel, Turkey, and Korea have all successfully generated indigenous strategic depth, whether military or industrial. Poland, conversely, relies on borrowed depth provided by NATO Article 5. Yet, the comparative illusion of absolute autonomy must be cautioned: even Israel's formidable indigenous depth ultimately requires the 'borrowed depth' of the U.S. military apparatus during moments of acute regional escalation.

The Alliance Dilemma and the Periphery Axis

The most novel pattern emerging from the data is the synchronization of the flanks, or the rise of a periphery axis. The analysis of procurement data reveals a shifting center of gravity in alliance structures. Poland's decision to bypass the European Core (France and Germany) in favor of the United States and South Korea for critical armaments– such as the K2 tanks and HIMARS artillery – is a temporal alignment.

Borderland states operate on frontier time, a perception of immediate, kinetic threat where history has not ended but accelerated. The Core, by contrast, operates on bureaucratic time, a slow, process-oriented rhythm conditioned by decades of peace. Poland aligns with South Korea because both states exist in the frontier time of the permanent armistice. A German defense manufacturer, operating on peace-time logic, cannot match the delivery speed or industrial surge capacity of a South Korean manufacturer conditioned by the threat from Pyongyang. This validates the existence of a Borderland-to-Borderland alliance structure. Poland utilizes the European Union for economic modernization – following Braudel's model of integration – but, particularly under conservative governments, builds its hard security architecture with other frontier states. Even though pro-European administrations periodically attempt to re-anchor Polish defense procurement within the EU, the recurring impulse to bypass Europe for rapid, distant suppliers highlights a persistent underlying skepticism toward the Core's bureaucratic timeline.

Domestic Isomorphism: The Garrison State Reflex

Finally, the comparative analysis confirms that external pressure necessitates internal centralization. The Borderland Condition tends to corrode the nuances of liberal parliamentarianism, favoring executive decisionism. This pattern is visible across the dataset. South Korea and Israel have normalized the state of exception through conscription, censorship mechanisms regarding national security, and powerful security cabinets that often bypass legislative oversight. Turkey represents the extreme end of this spectrum, having transitioned to a hyper-presidential system explicitly justified by the need for rapid response to encirclement and terror.

Poland's domestic trajectory since 2015, characterized by judicial and media reforms, follows this exact structural logic. And I think that what the European Commission diagnoses as democratic backsliding is, in the geopolitical context, a garrison state reflex. Although, in contrast, one may argue that attributing these democratic deficits to external

security needs is highly questionable, given that such reforms primarily served to consolidate domestic political power. Nevertheless, understanding this phenomenon as a psychological reflex explains why executive centralization resonates so deeply with the public. In the borderland calculus, the unity of the state is the prerequisite for liberty. Without the hard shell of the state, the soft interior of democracy cannot survive. Thus, illiberalism in the borderland is often not a rejection of Western values, but an attempt to secure the vessel that holds them.

The Polish Anomaly

Systematizing these findings reveals the specific anomaly of the Polish case. While Poland shares the psychology of Israel and Turkey– defined by anxiety, historical trauma, and heroic narratives– it lacks their material autonomy. Israel and South Korea have converted their existential anxiety into industrial innovation, becoming producers of security. Poland, conversely, has historically attempted to convert its anxiety into institutional capital, trading its location as the shield of the West in exchange for security guarantees.

However, the borderland condition in this research is defined by the inherent unreliability of external guarantees. Therefore, the current Polish trend of massive military procurement represents a deliberate strategic shift from the integrated frontier model to the industrial garrison model seen in South Korea.

Crucially, this is not merely a shopping spree, but an industrial strategy of scaling up existing domestic capacities through partnership. Unlike the distinct autarky of Turkey (which builds indigenous systems like the Bayraktar drone from scratch), Poland pursues a strategy of licensed sovereignty to bridge the gap between its current manufacturing capabilities—such as the indigenous Borsuk IFV—and the demands of a high-intensity conflict. Namely, by securing technology transfer deals – such as the localization of K2 tank production and the expansion of domestic manufacturing of the Krab howitzer – Poland is attempting to sprint through the heavy industrialization phase that South Korea took decades to master.

In conclusion, the hypothesis holds: the civilizational borderland is a coherent geopolitical category. However, the Polish case reveals that integration is a ladder. While Poland currently relies on the IP and supply chains of its allies (US and Korea) for its strategic backbone, its trajectory suggests a refusal to remain a passive consumer. The transition to true agency, as demonstrated by Turkey and Korea, requires the production of security. Poland's massive investments in

"polonized" production lines indicate that it has understood this lesson: to secure the border, one must own the forge.

Conclusion

As the tectonic plates of the twenty-first-century global order grind against one another, the comfortable illusion of a borderless, post-historical world has shattered. This research began with the premise that the instability visible from the Donbas to the Gaza Strip is not accidental, but structural– concentrated along the ancient fault lines where civilizations collide. By rejecting the narrative of Polish exceptionalism, this study aimed to define a universal geopolitical category: the civilizational borderland. Through a comparative analysis of Poland against the control group of Turkey, Israel, and South Korea, they demonstrated that existence at the edge is not merely a geographic coordinate, but a distinct operating system of the state.

The findings confirm that the Borderland Condition forces a radical departure from the normative behavior of the Western Core. While the settled centers of civilizations – Paris, Berlin, or Washington – prioritize economic efficiency and liberal process, the borderland state prioritizes ontological security. This research identified a recurring geopolitical phenotype characterized by three dominant traits: the willingness to pay a sovereignty premium to avoid dependence on hostile neighbors; the spatial scripting of the nation as an indispensable bulwark; and the garrison state reflex, where domestic institutions are centralized to withstand external pressure. Crucially, the comparison revealed that Poland is currently undergoing a structural metamorphosis. It is attempting to transition from an integrated frontier – dependent on Western security guarantees– to an industrial garrison partially modeled on South Korea. The emergence of the periphery axis, typified by Warsaw's alignment with Seoul and Washington over Berlin, signals that Poland is no longer content to be a passive consumer of security, but seeks to become an active producer of deterrence. Although the exact balance between European multilateralism and global bilateralism remains heavily contested across Poland's internal political pendulum, the overarching state impulse seeks to become an active producer of deterrence

However, having such outcomes, the long-term viability of this garrison state model inside the EU's normative framework must be examined by future research, with a focus on whether democratic securitization is a viable hybrid or an unavoidable shift toward

authoritarianism. Furthermore, I believe that a deep economic modeling is needed to evaluate the sustainability of this sovereignty premium in an era of possible American retrenchment, raising concerns about whether the integrated frontier can endure if the hegemon withdraws.

Ultimately, this study posits that the center of geopolitical gravity is shifting away from the settled cores toward these volatile edges. The states of the civilizational borderland are no longer tragic pawns or passive buffers; they are the seismographs of the new world order. For decades, the West believed it could export its stability to the periphery. The lesson of the Polish borderland is that the reverse is now true: the periphery is importing its reality to the center.

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Streszczenie

Współczesne konflikty rzadko wybuchają w ustabilizowanych centrach cywilizacji, lecz skupiają się wzdłuż ich granic, gdzie zderzają się płyty tektoniczne kultury i władzy. Niniejsze badanie przedstawia nową koncepcję cywilizacyjnego pogranicza nie jako biernej strefy buforowej, lecz jako odrębnego podmiotu geopolitycznego kierującego się strukturalną koniecznością przetrwania. Poprzez analizę porównawczą Polski z grupą kontrolną funkcjonalnych odpowiedników – Turcją, Izraelem i Koreą Południową – zidentyfikowano powtarzający się fenotyp geopolityczny charakteryzujący się lękiem egzystencjalnym, hipermilitaryzacją i centralizacją władzy wykonawczej. Zgodnie z tą koncepcją Polska porzuca obecnie powojenny scenariusz biernej integracji instytucjonalnej na rzecz modelu przemysłowego garnizonu, częściowo naśladując strategiczną autonomię peryferii azjatyckich i bliskowschodnich. Badanie wykazało, że dla państwa pogranicznego efektywność ekonomiczna jest podporządkowana premii suwerennościowej, a stabilność zachodniego centrum w coraz większym stopniu zależy od sprawczości jego ufortyfikowanych obrzeży.

Słowa kluczowe: pogranicze cywilizacyjne, geopolityka Polski, liminalność strukturalna, strefa zderzenia, bezpieczeństwo ontologiczne, sojusze asymetryczne, państwo garnizonowe.