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# FOREIGN POLICY OF THE EU COUNTRIES

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## NON-EXPANSIONIST VARIANTS OF POLAND'S STRATEGIC CULTURE: A RETROSPECTIVE OF IDEAS AND CURRENT IMPLICATIONS

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Received 03.12.2021  
doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2022-2-5  
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*This article examines how non-expansionist types of strategic culture emerged and gradually developed in Poland. The study aims to identify the features of non-expansionist types of Polish strategic culture for a more objective analysis of the country's modern foreign and security policy. The article begins by describing the emergence and use of the concept of strategic culture, offering a typology of strategic cultures based on the work of the 'cultural realist' Alastair Johnston. Then it employs a qualitative method of process tracing to outline the sequence of events and the ideological constructs that led to the emergence or degradation of the corresponding types of strategic culture. The strategic culture of neutrality, exposed to external influences and revised republicanism ideas, is shown to have laid the foundation for a strategic culture of political fortification (or an outpost) in Poland. This strategic culture has its origins in the idea of the ethical superiority of the Polish state, although the details of this superiority may differ dramatically in specific situations. At the same time, none of the types of the accommodation culture has yet emerged in Poland, albeit accommodation seems to be a promising lead for the further development of the country's strategic culture.*

### **Keywords:**

strategic culture, Poland, culture of neutrality, political fortification culture

### **Introduction**

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The term 'strategic culture' emerged in research in the 1970s. The Cold War demonstrated that attributing rational models of behaviour to opponents and partners leads to inaccuracies in the analysis of international interactions.

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**To cite this article:** Loshkariov, I. D., Parenkov, D. A. 2022, Non-expansionist variants of Poland's strategic culture: a retrospective of ideas and current implications, *Balt. Reg.*, Vol. 14, no 2, p. 69–82.  
doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2022-2-5.

As Jack L. Snyder, who coined the term, noted, rationalistic interpretations of the behaviour of states produced two scientific problems: validity and ambiguity. The former concerns the relationship between rationalistic models and the inaccessibility of vast arrays of data: since the military sphere was and traditionally remains closed to most researchers and laypersons, models had to be built on a limited or even insufficient amount of information. Even when obtaining or extrapolating adequate data was possible, facts had to be ranked according to significance to establish multi-level and multi-temporal causal relationships, and this resulted in the latter problem. Therefore, it became necessary to place facts and decisions made by actors in a political, historical and organisational context, so that this context would somehow streamline available interpretations and data. Accordingly, strategic culture served as an intermediate variable helping explain the reaction of countries to certain actions of their counterparts. This variable included necessary indicators, the concepts and notions used to describe the present and the past, and the main nodes of the discussion on national security issues. It also prompted some characteristics of reality to be recognised as problematic [1, p. 7–9].

Beliefs, ideas and language for describing own actions and those of other states come from different sources and are based on the experience of different historical periods; this makes the description of the strategic culture itself an extremely subjective exercise. As Colin Gray writes, one should not forget that, in strategic culture, '[t]here is vastly more to strategy and strategic behaviour than culture alone', although it is difficult to establish the specific ratio [2, p. 130].

Therefore, sources for collective ideas about the past and present are the experience of participation in armed conflicts, fundamental political and philosophical works on issues of war and peace, as well as the mystical, religious and ethical attitudes prevalent in society [3]. The obvious impossibility of presenting a narrow positivist or neo-positivist interpretation of strategic culture led to a new turn in research [4].

An expanded interpretation of strategic culture has emerged as a result, which places emphasis on the mobility and processuality of social phenomena. But this comes at a cost since strategic culture itself has to be recognised as an independent variable rather than specific events and trends triggering a response from actors [5]. The main consequence of this change is the acknowledgement that a strategic culture may contain different complexes or sets of ideas about the available and preferred behaviour and response options [6].

From a methodological point of view, the extended interpretation renders strategic culture the very context of foreign policy and military-political activity rather than an element (level) of that context. This cuts off unequivocally the possibility of a complete solution to the problem of statement validity, for achieving which, amongst other things, the concept in question was coined. Despite the potential threat of introducing a term for the sake of a term, this situation gives researchers access to more complex and nuanced models describing the relation-

ship between material and ideological factors [7]. Crucial to these models is a focus on the mobility, complexity and interdependence of strategic cultures and their elements [8; 9].

For a long time, the study of strategic cultures and their 'ideal types' focused on large states, where it is relatively easy to examine past conflicts and track debates between politicians, thinkers, military strategists and diplomats about possible and acceptable ways to solve the previously untackled foreign policy problems. Only in recent decades, the emphasis has gradually shifted to medium-sized states, including regional leaders and countries functionally specialising in modern international relations [10; 11]. Considering that, the interest in Poland's strategic culture seems logical. This topic is of great research significance since the country is one of the leaders in today's Eastern Europe today and has a wide historical experience of armed conflicts and shifts in political development paradigms [12; 13]. Although Poland is a member of the EU and NATO, the discussion in the country on the current global and regional challenges is not the same as in other Euro-Atlantic states. Nor are Warsaw's ways of overcoming the difficulties. Even a preliminary and approximate identification of the main types of strategic culture will provide a fuller historical, cultural and ideological context for Polish foreign policy and shed new light on its most likely trajectories and swings in the future.

Further clarification is due here. The few works on Poland's foreign policy and its international identity underscore the country's assertiveness and even expansionist intentions rooted in the historical imperial experience [15–17]. Although it is difficult to disprove such conclusions, the past of this country included dynastic unions with other states, projects of broad international coalitions (against the Ottoman Empire, for example), and the reception of the political philosophy of the Antiquity and Renaissance. This article proposes to look at the layers and dimensions of Polish strategic culture associated with not so much the expansion and leadership ambitions of Poland as the attempts to protect and strengthen what has already been achieved.

The works of Alastair Johnson, a representative of 'third generation' strategic culture studies, have laid the groundwork for a detailed classification of the ideal types of strategic cultures. If we examine only non-expansionist types of strategic cultures, possible mainstream preferences will be reduced to the desire to cooperate intensively (accommodation) or become isolated in one form or another. At the same time, external restrictions and the ability to overcome them (especially by force) will also play a significant role here. And these two groups of factors help single out the following types of non-expansionist strategic cultures (Table 1):

— the culture of unlimited internationalisation, which implies a positive vision of the external environment (or its significant part) by the actor, a desire to control negative processes and phenomena by collective effort and a focus on the most constructive relations with other actors cemented by detailed agreements and contracts;

- a culture of limited internationalisation, which involves a positive vision of the external environment (or a significant part of it), a desire to contain negative processes and phenomena through informal and personal agreements, and a focus on balanced (partly equidistant) relations with other actors;
- the culture of normative unification, which includes the actor's positive vision of the external environment (or its essential part), awareness of own potential to bring about a transformation of the external environment and pursue its own global or regional political project;
- the culture of neutrality, within which the actor has a negative vision of the external environment (or a significant part of it), a desire to contain negative processes and phenomena with the help of internal resources and a focus on transferring relations with other actors to non-military spheres, including through statutory expression and political agreements;
- the culture of isolationism, which comprises the actor's negative vision of the external environment (or its significant part), a desire to contain negative processes and phenomena with the help of internal resources, a focus on reducing relations with the outside world and equidistant relations with other actors;
- the culture of political fortification (depending on the size of the country, it can take the form of fortification 'gigantism'<sup>1</sup> or the outpost mindset), which embraces the actor's negative vision of the external environment (or a significant part of it), a desire to restrain negative processes and phenomena by maximising the costs of any opposition during an attack and awareness of self-sufficiency in international relations.

Table 1

**Non-expansionist types of strategic culture (according to Johnson)**

Type	Significance of external restrictions (~ inability to destroy the enemy)		
	High (formalisation of all actions)	Medium (transition to less formal interactions)	Low (transition to unilateral and demon- stration actions)
Maintaining the status quo (ac- commodation)	Unlimited internation- alisation (idealpolitik)	Limited internatio- nalisation	Normative unification ('in- ternational society')
Changing the status quo (defence)	Neutrality	Isolationism	Political fortification: fortification 'gigantism' / outpost mindset

<sup>1</sup> The cited monograph by Johnson painstakingly analyses the set of ideas and beliefs leading to the construction of large-scale fortifications, such as the Great Wall of China. Yet, small and medium-sized states tend to perceive their entire territory as a defence space: hence the concept of 'outpost'.

None of the selected ideal types of strategic culture has to be present in any state at any time. The formation of each type is a long and historically contingent process. A country's historical experience involving a range of armed conflicts with an unsatisfactory outcome or severe domestic political consequences renders unlikely the formation and dominance of strategic culture types associated with expansion and demonstration actions (punitive campaigns, sanctions, imposition of indemnities). Below we will discuss strategies of waiting and preparing for an attack, as well as the ideas associated with such strategies [18, p. 147–152].

An important reservation to make is that third-generation strategic culture studies consider the phenomenon in question in isolation from current events and other processes constituting and challenging collective identity. This means, among other things, the rejection of theses put forward by the other generations of researchers who emphasised the link between strategic culture and political-military variables: the level of technological development, military planning, biases towards certain branches and types of troops [2].

Which type of strategic culture could be in demand in Poland? As Robert Frost notes, the constant threat coming from the south (from the Ottoman Empire and the Crimean Khanate) was a scourge afflicting the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth<sup>2</sup>. Thus, the state was forced to create permanent armed units at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Polish: *obrona potoczna*). In addition, the geographical distribution of the population deprived Eastern European countries of any opportunity to maintain large contingents of troops over a long time: medium-sized dispersed settlements could not feed thousands of infantry and cavalry units during military campaigns [19, p. 48–62]. These factors were crucial for forging Poland's international identity. In 960–1795, Poland was involved in 247 armed conflicts, approximately one per three years. During the Second Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, this pattern persisted (seven conflicts in 1918–1939). Along with the constant threats from the south and, apparently, the east and west, there were short-term menaces relating to territorial, dynastic, religious and commercial conflicts. These factors made the formation of full-fledged strategic cultures of accommodation impossible (a focus on long-term coalitions with adaptation to the interests of partners and certain interstate altruism).

This article is devoted to non-expansionist types of strategic culture in Poland, mainly defensive cultures. It also assesses the prospects of the formation of accommodation cultures since, after 1945, Poland has not been directly involved in conflicts. This circumstance adjusts the long-term trajectories along which the country's ideas about its place in the world and the external environment of interactions develop.

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<sup>2</sup> The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Poland are used here as synonyms, albeit the first Commonwealth was an asymmetric association of several polities, including the vassal duchies of Prussia (until 1657) and Courland (until 1795).

## **Outlines of the evolution of non-expansionist ideas in Poland**

One of the key features of Polish social and international political thought in the 16<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> centuries was looking for ways to prevent the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from losing its territories and influence. Ideas about the election of rulers and the restoration of justice even by extreme means were widely popular at the time, and it was quite logical to turn to the *Chronicles of the Kings and Princes of Poland* by Bishop Wincenty Kadłubek (written in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century). Perhaps, that work was the first to formulate the idea of Poland as an ethical (not ethnic and religious) community was clearly formulated. Kadłubek almost literally transplanted Cicero's ideas about the virtues of citizens and their self-organisation to the Polish realities of his time. This led to the uncritical borrowing of ideas about moral actions as acts of self-preservation and calls for some types of self-restraint. The conclusion was made that Poland needed to limit itself in terms of territory to avoid blurring its identity and reduce external threats by improving the country's internal structure, that is, relations between the 'citizens' of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth [20, p. 311–313]. The following excerpt from Kadłubek's *Chronicles* is very indicative in this sense (it offers a seemingly laudatory account of the reign of King Bolesław the Brave and points out a reason for indignation at the lower strata): 'while the king spent a long time either with the Russians or at the borders of the Zapolovtsian regions, the slaves persuaded the wives and daughters of their masters to [satisfy] their desires' [21, p. 100].

In medieval and early modern Poland, of course, not all the country's inhabitants, but only the gentry, were considered participants in the ethical republican community. In the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, however, priest Stanisław Zaborowski, who was close to the royal court, raised the question of establishing institutions for representing the interests of all population segments. Yet, Zaborowski deemed representation necessary for the sake of uninterrupted financing of troops and protection of borders rather than social equality [22].

The international situation at that time was characterised by the strengthening of the Habsburgs, who were striving to obtain and secure the Czech and Hungarian thrones. At the same time, the threat from the Ottoman Empire was rising, spreading towards the territories beyond the Danube. Although the Jagiellonian dynasty also had a claim to the crowns of Bohemia and Poland, the then Polish king Sigismund I, perhaps for the first time in Polish history, refrained from directly participating in a power conflict in those countries. Whilst the Habsburgs prevailed in Bohemia (1527), the Hungarians put up an alternative candidate, who enjoyed the support of Turkey. Sigismund I remained neutral, offering mediation to the conflicting parties. In the future, the neutrality of Poland on the Hungarian question allowed to avoid direct conflict with the Ottoman Empire for almost 100 years and slow down the Habsburgs' expansion into Central and Eastern Europe. In Polish historiography, this unusual line of foreign policy be-

behaviour is usually attributed to the advisers of Sigismund I: Primate Jan Łaski and Krakow Bishop Piotr Tomicki, both well acquainted with ancient Roman works and their late medieval interpretations [23, p. 204–206].

Subsequently, the legacy of Kadłubek and the ideas of republicanism were extensively used to justify the gentry's liberties and limit the power of the king. This powerful strand of thought, however, sometimes tended to revisit ancient primary sources, invoking the early Roman values of restraint and self-control. It is quite natural that thoughts about improving the state system and the ethics of past ideals transformed in Poland, just like they did in Rome, into an ethical activism doctrine: moral and political superiority was no longer so much a status as something needed to be constantly confirmed and proved in fact [24; 25]. In most cases, ethical activism defended the republican system and 'old liberties' [26].

As early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, ex-Crown Chancellor Stanisław Jan Jabłonowski and talented priest-teacher and publicist Stanisław Konarski advanced arguments about self-sufficiency, everyday viability and, ultimately, independence of the state as the ultimate goals of domestic and foreign policy. In his *Letters to Friends written during the Interregnum* (Latin: *Epistolae Familiares sub tempus Interregni*) (1733), Konarski wrote that the country's internal structure should be so superior that foreigners would admire it more than locals did. This positive attitude from neighbouring states and their residents could form the basis for independence and sovereignty. But this applied only to those states that had created necessary conditions within. Konarski was perhaps the first Polish thinker to produce the idea of striking a balance in foreign policy decisions: on the one hand, the negative characteristics of the external environment can be transformed by force or diplomacy; on the other, they can be ignored altogether should more fundamental domestic tasks emerge [20, p. 346–349]. To put it simply, republicans, such as Jabłonowski and Konarski, called for ethically motivated strategic patience and a focus on long-term priorities.

As the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth declined, republican thought took a dramatic turn in the works of publicist and educator Stanisław Staszic. Without going into details, he can be credited with changing the basic equation of Polish political philosophy. Before Staszic, the republican structure and its preservation were considered the highest priority: the interests of individuals and the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth as a state could be easily sacrificed for its sake. But Staszic, somehow anticipating the spread of nationalist ideologies in Europe, reasoned differently: if there is no Polish state per se, even the best political system will become of no consequence. Staszic believed that the community of citizens of the republic could and should, if necessary, reduce their needs and surrender their rights in the name of collective necessity ('the true good of each is no different from the whole society'). Although these arguments were only one step away from summoning a political strongman, they by no means rejected the idea of an ethical republican community: the republic was now perceived not as a regime, but as an interest of its citizens [27, p. 39–46; 28, p. 239–243; 29].



The latter thesis drew on not only the philosophical heritage of antiquity but also the internal alignments in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth: similar (albeit less clearly formulated) thoughts were expressed in his pamphlets by one of the leaders of the pro-French party and the exiled king Stanisław Leszczyński [30, p. 164—169].

The description of Poland as an ethical community, which had not had time to complete its mission, permeated Polish romanticism. Joachim Lelewel, a leader of the November Uprising (1830), and poet Adam Mickiewicz after him compared their country with an anthill: ‘everyone seemed to act aimlessly, but in fact, they were working towards one goal: together they rebuilt their destroyed dwelling, together they threw themselves at the enemy’ [31, p. 409]. Since the domestic resources were not enough to restore Poland after its three partitions, discussions would break out within insurgent organisations about the need for a strongman (a dictator, at least, in the initial period of the struggle for sovereignty) and the absence of alternative assistance from without (primarily from France and Great Britain, but could vary). Late Polish romanticism put forward the idea that Polish political organisations had to support the many oppressed peoples of Eastern Europe and, if possible, launch a movement opposing the states that participated in the partitions [32, p. 353—361].

Józef Piłsudski, the leader of the revived Second Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, perceived the legacy of Wincenty Kadłubek in the vein described above. Piłsudski was very sympathetic to the ideas of the strongman (which had a romantic revolutionary halo), the supra-ethnic nature of the state and relying on the support of other peoples in difficult situations. As Andrzej Nowak notes, the concept of ethical activism and the teleology of a long path to the perfect order were convenient political constructs employed in different eras centuries after Kadłubek [20, p. 311—314]. In line with Piłsudski’s interpretation, one might say that the above ideas led to the vision of a strategic buffer between Russia/the RSFSR/the USSR and Poland. This buffer was supposed to include territories with a non-Polish population annexed by Warsaw and the states of ‘non-historical peoples’ (in Piłsudski’s terminology) (Lithuanians, Latvians and so on). The events, however, were unfolding rapidly, and the above ideas were, more often than not, mere convictions of the Polish leadership rather than practical steps. Piłsudski himself, in a letter to Ignacy Paderewski written in May 1919, claimed that he had tried to evade answering the questions about the future structure of the country since this led to ‘arguing cases’ [33, p. 23—24, 39—40, 52—54, 63; 34, p. 68—73]. One way or another, Staszic and Polish Romantics laid the intellectual groundwork for the transition from a culture of neutrality, somewhat overloaded with ethics, to a culture of political fortification (outpost). But only Piłsudski was lucky enough to put this transition into practice, albeit with hesitation and miscalculations.

This brief review of the long transformation of antique works and Kadłubek’s legacy in the first and second Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealths makes it possible to draw several conclusions. Firstly, the principal advocates of the strate-



gic culture of neutrality throughout Poland's history were the intellectual class, which was not numerous under the later Jagiellons. Secondly, the debate on the optimal structure of the state gradually led the supporters of this type of strategic culture to think about the need for accelerated development, political and economic (Szymon Konarski). Thirdly, the way the external environment changed at the time prompted Kadłubek's intellectual followers to abandon his fundamental ideas little by little. This was due to the partial and later complete loss of statehood (sovereignty) by Poland. Internal self-improvement, which was almost impossible in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was at the core of Kadłubek's reflection. New ideas, flowing logically from this circumstance, became woven into the general fabric of ideas about Poland as an ethical community. Fourthly, the sum of these events and factors formed a new type of strategic culture — a culture of political fortification (outpost). This type, in many ways, embodies a break with the Polish republican tradition since it implies a benevolent attitude towards the authoritarian rule of a 'strongman', reliance on external assistance and the search for potential allies at any level, including amongst non-state actors. Finally, these types of strategic culture, just like the expansionist types of culture in Poland, never came to full fruition as there was often a gap between the ethical ideal and political practice.

### **Conclusions for modern Poland (Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth)**

Modern Poland's foreign and security policy is at least partly guided by historical experience imperatives. A good example here is the generally accepted ways of conceptualising and responding to threats and risks. Traditionally, this historical experience has been distilled into the 'Jagiellonian' and 'Piast' traditions. And our preliminary analysis reveals at least two distinct ways to evaluate and construct the international 'self' and the external environment for Poland.

Undoubtedly, the identified non-expansionist varieties (subcultures) of strategic culture are 'ideal types'. The political reality partially meets the parameters of such subcultures, being comprised of their interweavings and intersections. Almost every educated member of the gentry in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth considered it his duty to propound his views before the Diet on the social structure and the ways to reproduce and reinforce achievements. This held especially true in the case of electoral Diets. Accordingly, the ideas underlying certain types of strategic cultures constantly clashed with opposing viewpoints. Today, social communication has become even more intense, contributing to the competition and interfusion of different perspectives on the nature of the external environment, and the risks and threats faced by Polish society.

The types (subcultures) of Poland's strategic culture remain relevant due to two circumstances. Firstly, in socialist Poland, publications analysing state interests and strategies were not allowed for a long time since they could stir criticism of the country's close relations with the USSR. Only after 1981, the ruling

party made attempts to encourage discussion along these lines; the debate proceeded strictly according to the wishes of the party [35, p. 261 — 266]. Secondly, since 1990, the Polish literature and political thought have largely rejected the historical experience of socialism. Socialist Poland is traditionally called ‘no Republic’, situated chronologically between the Second and Third Republics. In search of inspiration, Polish strategic thought leaps over socialism to more distant periods.

On the whole, contrary to the popular opinion about Poland’s expansionism, the identified non-expansionist types of strategic culture are also conspicuous in the country’s experience of armed conflicts, as well as in fundamental political and philosophical works on war and peace (Table 2). Moreover, the culture of political fortification (outpost mindset) turned out to be in great demand by virtue of Piłsudski’s authority and a more modern vision of the world. On the contrary, those who had emphasised the ethical norms of the ‘beleaguered fortress’ and neutrality cultures remained on the sidelines, having a less far-reaching impact on Poland’s foreign policy behaviour.

*Table 2*

**The main non-expansionist types (subcultures)  
of Poland’s strategic culture**

<b>Strategic culture types</b>	<b>Culture of neutrality</b>	<b>Outpost culture</b>
Nominal founder(s)	Wincenty Kadłubek	Stanisław Staszic, Józef Piłsudski
Prevalence	Medium, but closer to low	High
Of what risks and threats is the state apprehensive?	Internal weakness leading to failures beyond the state’s borders	Loss of independence/sovereignty
What are the beliefs and discussions relating to various security aspects?	Politics vs economy	Sovereignty vs internal structure
How is the external environment assessed?	Depends on the case	Very dangerous
How does Poland compare to other countries?	Poland as an ethical model	Poland as an outpost (often that of Catholicism)
What should Poland inspire in its neighbours?	Admiration for its republican system	Reasonable fear
The basis of Poland’s behaviour towards other countries	Mediation, building bridges between conflicting parties	Active reconnaissance, proactive play
Relationship to military and political alliances	Neutral	Positive when it comes to upholding supreme values

Depending on the time of their formation, different types of Polish strategic culture have differently reflected the vision of the principal risks and threats to the state. Sometimes they mixed foreign and domestic policies, abstract ethical ideals and harsh political practices. The early receptions of Kadłubek's ideas did not interpret the external environment as dangerous and in need of constant monitoring and adjustment. This is an important consideration since Polish social and historical thought is characterised by the perception of Poland as a victim of external forces, whilst external risks and threats are routinely exaggerated [16; 36].

An important conclusion is that the gradual change in external conditions led to the formation in Poland of a strategic culture (subculture) of political fortification (outpost mindset). However, external restrictions were reduced not because of the strengthening of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, but because of the complete dismantling of its statehood and a delayed reset of political institutions. In other words, several generations of the Polish intellectual elite had laboratory conditions where a whole range of possibilities could be analysed for a state that was absent at the time. Remarkably, when reinterpreting the achievements of the strategic culture of neutrality, Polish political thought effectively ignored the ideas of isolationism, such as equidistance in relations with neighbours. Probably, this factor had a role in the discussion on NATO expansion to Poland in the early 1990s.

The analysed types of strategic cultures point to both the high self-esteem of Poland/the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the awareness of the possibility and necessity of close relations with other states. The strategic culture (subculture) of neutrality continues to be in demand in Poland as it legitimises Warsaw's intermediary services. Hence, numerous initiatives for negotiating platforms with neighbouring and large states (the Eastern Partnership, the Geneva format of negotiations on the situation in Ukraine and the Weimar Triangle). In turn, the outpost culture (subculture) provides logical and historical-cultural grounds for intensifying cooperation within NATO and the countries of the Visegrad Group. This consideration is important because, with the long-term use of these ideological constructs, the negative assessment of Poland's external environment can be smoothed out, launching the formation of strategic cultures of accommodation — primarily, that of limited internationalisation.

In general, the rich intellectual history of Poland leaves room for other interpretations and classifications of the national strategic culture, as well as for the emergence of any new 'hybrid' phenomena. Yet, the strategic culture of the third republic has a layer of ideas that do not imply neither military and political expansion, nor the restoration of the imperial past.

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