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Dr. Marcin Zaborowski

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CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

ul. Emilii Plater 25, 00-688 Warszawa
TEL.: (22) 646 52 67, FAX: (22) 646 52 58
www.csm.org.pl, info@csm.org.pl

Between Power and Weakness: Poland – A New Actor in Transatlantic Security

Dr. Marcin Zaborowski

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Since the early 1990s Poland has emerged as one of the US's closest ally, arguably its protégé, in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). After Washington became dedicated to pursuing the eastern enlargement of NATO, America became the security guarantor that the Poles had craved since the late 18th century. For America, Poland represents a middle-sized power, whose successes with building democracy and market reforms after 1990 mark it out from its regional peers and especially with the situation eastwards of the Polish borders. The US also sees eye to eye with the Poles on a whole range of foreign policy issues, which was illustrated when Warsaw readily contributed troops to Kosovo, Afghanistan and more recently Iraq. As a result, especially since 11th of September 2001, Poland appears to be closer to the US than many of the latter's long-standing West European allies. Poland has been praised and branded in the US as a 'new European,' as opposed to the 'old Europeans'; France and Germany who opposed the US's policy on Iraq. This feeling is clearly reciprocated in Poland where President George W. Bush is the 'most liked' foreign politician.¹ Consequently, whilst American leadership post-September 11 prompted the departure of Paris and Berlin from the inner circle of America's associates, Poland has filled this gap and aspires to become one of the US's closest allies.

Poland's significance as an actor in transatlantic security is of growing importance. It was always easy to see that Poland, by virtue of its large population and geographical location, was destined to be a key player in NATO and once accession was secured in the EU too, however, recent developments in relations between Europe and the United States suggest that Poland's role as a regional power will be of even greater consequence. Divergences over the US stance on Iraq served to expose the weakness of the French and German vision of Europe's role in the world, as seen in their relative isolation. In turn, it is possible to hypothesise that Poland, as one of the most vociferous and consistent supporters of American foreign policy and of solidarity between the US and Europe, is likely to be among the group of states shaping the new Europe and its foreign policy.

Poland's Weakness and America's Power

The reasons behind this intimacy in Polish-American relations are grounded predominantly in strategic considerations. For Poland, the US presence in Europe provides reassurance against its powerful neighbours, whilst for the US, Poland is a friendly state

¹ According to the polls conducted in July 2002 73% had a positive and only 8% negative view of George Bush, which put him at the top of the most liked foreign politicians in Poland. See: 'Stosunek Polaków do wybranych postaci ze świata polityki zagranicznej' in Komunikat z badań BS/112/2002, Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej – www.cbos.pl

located at the strategic boundary between Eastern and Western Europe. These strategic considerations are bolstered if not underpinned by cultural and historical factors shared by both US and Polish elites. Summing this up, the American Ambassador to Poland, Christopher R. Hill argued that ‘the Poles and Americans have similar attitudes towards security and foreign policy in general, which is a consequence of our particular historical experiences.’¹ Certainly, recent policy developments demonstrate the affinity of perspectives between Washington and Warsaw on key security policy issues. Polish elites, like their US counterparts are sceptical towards multilateralism and are not afraid to use armed force (or at least threaten to use it). Consequently, although both states subscribe to the rule of UN law, they held similar views with regards to Iraq, arguing that a second UN resolution was not necessarily needed to go to war. However, the sources of this concord are quite different for each of these two states. In the case of America they result from its *power* and in the case of Poland they are rooted in its relative *weakness*. This assertion will be explained using the prism of Robert Kagan's notions of Power and Weakness and Transatlantic disputes between the US and Europe.²

Kagan's argument is that whilst Europe needs multilateral institutions to compensate for its relative weakness, America, given its far greater power, sees multilateral organisations as restraining rather than empowering. Whilst it is not intended to disprove this thesis at length here, it is posited that the case of Poland, and many other countries in Europe, does not fit with Kagan's position. Kagan has not understood that there is a diversity of perspectives in Europe, instead what he takes as ‘Europe’ is a description of current French and German policies³. Whilst it is true that Franco-German views *vis a vis* the US position on Iraq are shared by some other European states, such views are far from universal both within and outside of the European Union. An obvious consequence of this, again not seen in Kagan's argument, is that the current Franco-German outlook is not an accurate nor legitimate account of current European foreign policy. A more unified position emanating from European capital cities, East and West, was that expressed in the letter signed by eight European Prime Ministers (UK, Denmark, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary) who signalled their support for the US's Iraqi policy and, by implication, their opposition to the Franco-German position.

It is no surprise that Poland, as well as all other three ex-communist states (Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia) supported the pro-American initiative. The reasons why these states have pursued this line are partially the same as for states like Britain and Italy, namely

¹ Interview with Christopher Hill in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 22.12.2002

² Robert Kagan (2002) *Power and Weakness Policy Review*, June 2002

³ For an illuminating critique of Kagan's argument see an article by Timothy Garton Ash ‘The Great Divide’, *Prospect*, March 2003

that they do not share the Franco-German view of the world. But they are also specific to the region and need further elaboration here. Kagan's dichotomy of America's power and Europe's (France's and Germany's) weakness is in fact quite useful here in as much as it is clear that the Atlanticism of Poland and other ex-communist states is largely a result of their 'weakness' being even greater than those states in Western Europe. The region's weakness derives from its geopolitical vulnerability, its recent history of being part of the Soviet sphere as well as the fact that the states of Central and Eastern Europe remain outside the European Union and have yet to become influential members of NATO. Consequently, unlike Western European states, Poland does not seek to constrain American hegemony, in fact, Warsaw sees it as its interest that the US maintains and pursues its power. The Poles, as well as many other Central European nations, are reconciled with the notion that they are unable to provide for their own security, consequently, they accept a hegemonic international system, so long as the hegemon is not a nearby state. Whilst for western Europe an omnipotent America may also be preferred to say a powerful Germany or Russia, it is clear that American power is living proof of western Europe's lack of effectiveness as a collective body in security matters, or as Kagan argues its actual decline. Contrary to this, for the Poles to become America's protégé is an improvement both for its security and its status.

Poland's Strategic Culture

To understand this difference it is necessary to understand Poland's strategic culture as rooted in its geopolitical history. Poland's position between Germany and Russia/the Soviet Union was in the past a source of threat to the Polish state and a major reason for its collapse in the late 18th century and again in 1939. This turbulent history marked by inherent insecurity and vulnerability to external aggression, coupled with its current position as a state bordering the former Soviet Union, means that Poland's security policies remain concerned with the issue of territorial defence. Consequently, Warsaw decided to apply for NATO membership as early as 1992 - a policy which quickly became underpinned by a broad political consensus, including the former communists¹.¹ Unsurprisingly, there remains a strong preference in Poland for an American-led NATO, which is able to execute Article 5.

Warsaw's eastern policies are also shaped by Polish strategic culture and on occasion appear quite distinct from those policies of its West European partners. In particular, Poland's policy towards the east is characterised by strong support for the newly

¹ See: St. Croft et al *The Enlargement of NATO in The Enlargement of Europe* (MUP: Manchester and New York, 1999).

independent states between itself and Russia. Poland has been the major advocate of efforts to anchor Ukraine and Lithuania in the West; it supported the pro-independence movement in Belarus and promoted NATO's enlargement beyond its eastern borders. On all of these issues Poland got support from Washington. A further defining tenet of Polish strategic culture, which meets current American security thinking, is a disposition towards favouring pro-active engagement when confronted with the threat of regional instability. This derives from an enduring facet of Polish identity as being victims of West European pacifism - in the French and British appeasement policy towards Hitler and the subsequent failure of France and Britain to actively defend Poland in September 1939. This disposition directly influences current Polish policy and public opinion which unambiguously supported NATO's engagement in Kosovo and the US's operation in Afghanistan². The Polish view on military action in Iraq is admittedly more split (as is opinion in the US), though as noted earlier, elite support in Poland for Washington's policy on the issue remains strong.

A third characteristic of Polish strategic culture already mentioned earlier is an ambivalent position towards multilateral security institutions (with the notable exception of NATO), which are perceived in Poland with an amount of utilitarianism, not dissimilar to the US perspective. Institutions such as the interwar League of Nations and the present United Nations are often charged with being ineffective in preventing conflicts and serving as a smoke-screen for states enticing conflict and hiding behind the formula of international law. A particularly critical assessment is directed against the League of Nations, which, in the Polish view, proved unable to prevent the outbreak of the Second World War and effectively strengthened German revisionism in Central Europe. The UN is perceived in more favourable terms but is charged with being unable to prevent the emergence of the Cold War, which left Poland on the wrong side of the iron curtain. This Polish scepticism towards the primacy of international law and the UN was clearly demonstrated during the NATO operation in Kosovo. Unlike in Germany or France a debate about the illegality of NATO action - which did not have a UN mandate - did not seriously emerge in Poland. It was simply assumed in Warsaw that though it would be better to act with a UN mandate, international law was less important than preventing the spread of instability in the Balkans³.

Since Poland joined NATO in 1999 these strategic cultural tendencies; a preference for a strong US-led Alliance; a commitment to reforms in Ukraine and Belarus and in turn a further eastwards enlargement of NATO; a lack of faith in multilateral security institutions, save for NATO and a proclivity to use force pro-actively have rendered Warsaw a firm

² Who Speaks for Europe' *The Economist* February 8-14 2003

³ Ibid.

member of the Atlanticist wing of the alliance and a keen adherent of the US position on almost all recent foreign policy issues.

Poland – America’s Protégé in the East

The US’s leadership in the western world was extended eastwards after 1990 and through the events of September 11th a normative aspect was added to its mission. A consequence of this is that American leadership has become a hegemony in which the lines of amity and enmity are based on states being either ‘with’ or ‘against’ the US. The effects of this upon the transatlantic relationship have been uneven and quite unexpected. Whereas, despite their differences over Iraq, Russia and the US became allies in the war on terror, with Moscow and Washington holding common positions on a range of issues, the radicalisation of America’s foreign policy has led to a great diversification of responses and a growing sense of unease on the part of some European states, most notably France and Germany. In short, the transatlantic security community has become larger but also more internally divided. Such divisions do not, however, necessarily fall along the lines so forcefully argued by Paul Kagan, that it is the US on the one hand and Europe on the other, rather divisions run through Europe itself, with a new rupture between what the US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld called the ‘old’ Europe and the ‘new’ Europe.

It is clear that Poland belongs to Rumsfeld’s ‘new Europe’, a fact seemingly confirmed by Warsaw’s participation in the letter of eight European Prime Ministers in support of the US’s policy and its subsequent military involvement in Iraq. Arguably and considering Poland’s history no other policy stance was likely to emerge from Warsaw. Whilst Britain, Spain and other west Europeans could have been guided primarily in their support for the US by a genuine concern about the danger posed by Iraq, this factor was arguably only a secondary matter shaping Poland’s strategy. Warsaw’s policy on the Iraq issue, as well as Poland’s ambivalent attitude towards the EU’s Security and Defence Policy and its unequivocal support for the US Missile Defence programme have all been consistent with the key underlying dogma of Polish foreign policy - the continuation of the US’s involvement in Europe. This being the case, Poland will undoubtedly continue to aspire to be included in the ‘inner circle’ of America’s closest allies and will openly support US hegemony.

A question arising here relates to the likely effects of Poland’s EU membership in 2004. Clearly, once in the EU, Poland’s, as well as other Central and East Europeans’, status will change with one of the major rationales for Poland’s atlanticism - its exclusion from west European decision-making bodies disappearing. Only time will tell as to whether EU membership will lessen Poland’s pro-American foreign policy, but there are at least three

reasons that suggest a contrary development. Firstly, Poland's eastern frontier will remain the ultimate border of the EU for the foreseeable future, consequently Warsaw's specific security concerns relating to territorial defence will persist, a fact, which will ensure that NATO remains the most valuable institution for Poland. The experience of the late 1990s and of the early 21st century shows that the EU is not so interested in developing an active policy towards the European parts of the former Soviet Union, whilst the US has by far been more involved in the region and indeed often acted in co-operation with Poland. Secondly, the EU itself remains grossly divided over foreign and security policy issues. In this case, it is extremely unlikely that Poland would join forces with those states that seek to build a truly independent ESDP, not only because the Franco-German alliance in the EU continues to be exclusive, but also because Poland sees the French policy of turning the EU into a counterweight for NATO as unwelcome. Finally, the role the US played in bringing about the end of the Cold War and nurturing Poland's transition to democracy in the 1990s instilled into Polish elites a great sense of gratitude and loyalty, which would not be instantaneously swept aside once Poland becomes an EU member.

A further factor casting doubt upon any diminishing of Poland's Atlanticism is that the EU is itself changing. One of the key arguments outlined at the start of this paper was that the Franco-German core has, certainly in the field of foreign policy, been challenged by a contending European foreign policy towards the US and Iraq, shared by a far larger grouping of both EU and Non-EU states. The notion of 'who speaks for Europe' is subsequently no longer the domain of the Paris-Berlin axis¹. The likely outcome for European foreign policy of the EU's enlargement is not difficult to forecast considering these recent developments. The realities of EU enlargement are likely to bring about a far more Atlanticist flavour to any future EU foreign and security policy, which will guard against its development into an entity based on current French and German designs.

So, whilst EU membership is unlikely to undermine Poland's atlanticism, what could challenge Poland's role as the US's protégé in the East would be a failure on behalf of Warsaw to effectively exercise its regional role. If Warsaw fails to become a meaningful actor in this part of the world, its value would sooner or later be questioned by the US and may lead to a reassessment of America's involvement in the region. A second source of weakness that may undercut Poland's position vis a vis the US would be if Warsaw failed to enact the necessary defence sector reforms to modernise the armed forces and make the switch to a 'security' rationale in its grand strategy. The expectation placed upon Poland to deliver promptly in these two spheres is heightened by the forthcoming second round of NATO enlargement, which will have the effect of removing Poland's current 'newcomer'

status. Once the second wave of enlargement takes place, Poland will be judged on an equal footing with older members and will thus be assessed on issues of defence spending and deployability of its armed forces more severely.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Poland is fast emerging as the US's key ally and its protégé in the East. The 'instinctive' atlanticism inherent in Polish strategic culture has meant that Poland's foreign policies have always been in close proximity to those of the US over the past decade. Developments since September 11th have only enhanced this intimacy between Warsaw and Washington as in a Europe much divided, Poland has showed itself as a hawk². Furthermore, in the unfolding context of contending perspectives on the war with Iraq, a close fit has emerged between American and Polish standpoints. The endurance of this affinity and the success of Poland's graduation to the status of regional power remain, however, still undetermined and cannot be taken as a given.

A protégé is dependent, devoted and reliant upon a leader or 'tutor', whilst a tutor seeks to mould its protégé according to its own ideals and values. This typifies well, the relationship that has transpired between the US and Poland over the course of the past decade. Unconditionality as the substance that cements relations between Poland as the protégé and the US as the tutor, cannot however, be assured in the complex post-September 11th security environment. The ties that bind Poland to the US are based upon the American security guarantee to Europe maintained via NATO, whilst for the United States, it is Warsaw's loyalty and support for US foreign policy goals, twinned with its willingness to become a 'provider of security' that encouraged Washington to invest in its Polish protégé. If these factors change then the fabric of the Polish-US relationship may alter.

¹ Who Speaks for Europe' *The Economist* February 8-14 2003

² European Leaders Divide Between Hawks and Doves *The New York Times* January 31 2003

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The founder and president of the Center for International Relations is Mr. Janusz Reiter.

Our address:

UL. EMILII PLATER 25, 00-688 WARSZAWA
tel. (0048-22) 646 52 67, 646 52 68, 629 38 98, 629 48 69
Fax. (0048-22) 646 52 58
E-mail: info@csm.org.pl

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