



Centrum Stosunków Międzynarodowych
Center for International Relations

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Is a new commonality of interests arising?

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Poland has to decide whether its strategic partner in Europe will be Germany or the United Kingdom.

In the '90s, Poland's European policy was guided by two aims: gaining membership of the EU and rapprochement in Polish-German relations. The building of a stable partnership with Berlin - both on the official level and through many non-governmental initiatives - laid the foundation for the historic Polish-German reconciliation. This seemed to be a natural result of the end of the Cold War: Berlin became an advocate of EU expansion, German business was eager to invest in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, while other EU members, particularly France and Spain, recognized that the states of Central and Eastern Europe would become part of the pro-German bloc within the EU. A forgotten term, "Mitteleuropa", made its way back into European debate as an indicator of the new situation in the region.

Berlin's pro-Eastern orientation, however, became clearly weakened after the red-and-green coalition came to power in 1998, which, guided by the doctrine of so-called new realism, in essence slowed down the EU's process of opening up to the east. Chancellor Schroeder won re-election in 2002, and the issues of European integration and Franco-German relations became his priorities, and his personal

contacts with President Chirac became downright "cosy". When the war in Iraq divided Europe, Poland and Germany ended up in opposing camps. A closer alliance with Paris became the central point of Schroeder's European policy, and good relations with Poland and other countries of the region were sacrificed at the altar of "fraternal cooperation" with France. Although Mitteleuropa had always been just a myth, after 1989 it furthermore became an again-forgotten myth.

Great Britain as a new partner

In many respects, the regression in relations with Germany could prove to be a useful experience for Polish diplomacy, kind of lesson to bring Warsaw down to earth. The union of 25 states will not function on the principle of a directorate formed by selected countries doing favours for each other. The Franco-German axis, of falling significance, remains the exception rather than the rule within the EU system. The member states are more likely going to be forging short-term alliances that reflect coincidental confluences of interest. The Polish-Spanish alliance, formed with the aim of defending the Nice system, was a case in point. It was clear from the outset that Warsaw's understanding with Madrid would not last long - the interests of the two countries were simply convergent on a single important issue, while on many other issues, such as budgetary affairs, the states were, are, and will remain in conflict.

A cold analysis of Poland's interests shows that on many issues, Warsaw is essentially more in line with London than with Berlin or Madrid. Above all, Poland shares with United Kingdom a similar attitude towards European security, characterized by a recognition of the priority of NATO and trans-Atlantic ties. Warsaw and London are the United States' closest allies in Iraq, and remain the only countries in Europe where an above-party-lines consensus on the issue of the Iraqi war has prevailed. This generally pro-American orientation in Poland and the United Kingdom does not mean, however, that London and Warsaw do not see the need to bolster the EU's defence capabilities.

The Poles and the British also share a similar attitude towards sovereignty and the primacy of national states. In conflicts between the Council of Ministers, representing the member states, and the supra-national European Commission or European Parliament, Great Britain consistently backs the role of the former. Poland has so far

sent out varying signals on this issue: on the one hand, Warsaw has clearly backed Tony Blair's inter-governmental vision, presented in Warsaw in 2001, but during the dispute over the Nice system of voting, Poland acted as the leader of smaller countries, meaning those that advocate a stronger Commission and Parliament. There is much to indicate, however, that this was a tactical move, and Poland's attachments to supra-national institutions (the Commission and Parliament) will soon turn out to be just as long-lasting as the Polish-Spanish alliance.

In the realm of EU economic policy, too, there is a Polish-British confluence of prospects and interests. The main political forces in both countries object to the harmonization of taxes on the EU level. The Polish political elites, with the exception of Self-Defence and to lesser extent the PSL [Polish Peasants Party], prefer a more Anglo-Saxon model of economic relations than the German model of a social market economy.

Different perspectives

This confluence of interest on defence and economic issues is exceptionally important, but it does not suffice for Poland and Great Britain to build a strategic partnership after the Franco-German model. Nevertheless, there surely are possibilities for cooperation between Warsaw and London to become more dynamic. Polish-British relations are currently very good. Blair's policy with respect to the new member states is evidently concentrating on Warsaw, as was evidenced by London's support for Poland's stance in the dispute over Nice. Despite the vast objection of the opposition, Tony Blair kept his word, opening up the British labour market to Poles - unlike 12 of the 15 old EU members. As a result, one can hear it said in Poland that the Germans talk about openness, but close their borders, while the British behave in exactly the reverse way - despite their sceptical attitude towards the EU, they open their borders to the new member states. Also worth noting is the sociological aspect: more and more young Poles are studying and working in the United Kingdom, learning English, and becoming familiar with British culture.

The two governments should take advantage of the opportunity that is presenting itself, and intensify cooperation on such issues as the Lisbon strategy of EU economic reform and the issues of European defence. Nevertheless, let's not let our

imagination run wild, forgetting about important differences in Polish-British relations. Poland and Great Britain are on opposite sides of the debate about the EU's next "financial perspective" for the years 2007-2013. Great Britain intends to cut payments to the EU budget, while Poland is demanding that aid funds be maintained and that the principle of solidarity be bolstered within the EU. Just like other EU members, Poland does not have any desire to sponsor the British abatement, which continues to be staunchly defended by London.

Paradoxically, Euro-scepticism into two countries is also fundamentally different. Just like to British, the Poles also feel sceptical concerning the intentions of other member states, but they do so for different reasons. While the rhetoric of British Euro-scepticism concentrates on Brussels' "federalist conspiracy," Poles fear that the EU serves the interests of the largest countries, who do not reckon with Poland's interests. Polish Euro-scepticism is very anti-German, while the British version is more anti-Brussels. The British Euro-scepticism is also associated with a dislike for EU expansion and a fear of immigration from new member states. The Eurosceptic Conservative Party, for example, speaks out in the same breath against the constitution treaty and in favour of closing the labour market for inhabitants of the new member states.

The new architecture of alliances

Neither should we forget about the need to renew cooperation with Germany and Paris. An obvious means of achieving greater influence over the Berlin-Paris axis is to revitalize the Weimar Triangle. In essence, the best scenario would be to expand to include the United Kingdom - something that Polish and German politicians are talking about, although Paris is for the time being against such a solution, and London is remaining silent. A renewed and perhaps expanded Weimar Triangle/Square could serve as a forum for discussing such important matters as the future of EU foreign and defence policy, eastern policy, or the principle of solidarity.

There is no need to make a choice. Warsaw should take care to maintain good relations with Germany and Great Britain, bearing its own interests in mind, and forging tactical alliances. But above all, Polish politicians should take care to make society more familiar with the particular way in which the EU functions. Polish voters should understand that the EU is based on compromise, and that it will be better for Poland if the EU remains an organization in which member states try to meet each other halfway. Otherwise, Poland will adopt an uncompromising stance, because its politicians will be afraid of the reaction by the opposition - as took place in the dispute over Nice. The most pessimistic scenario is a situation in which Poland becomes as stubborn as Spain on budgetary issues and as France on agricultural policy - while at the same time being as Eurosceptic as Denmark and the United Kingdom. In such a situation, Poland's influence over the development of the EU would be just as ineffective as it has frequently been for the United Kingdom, or even smaller, because the potential of Warsaw and London is not, ultimately, entirely comparable.

Center for International Relations

WHO WE ARE?

The Center for International Relations (CIR) is an independent, non-governmental establishment dedicated to the study of Polish foreign policy as well as those international political issues, which are of crucial importance to Poland. The Center's primary objective is to offer political counselling, to describe Poland's current international situation, and to continuously monitor the government's foreign policy moves. The CIR prepares reports and analyses, holds conferences and seminars, publishes books and articles, carries out research projects and supports working groups. Over the last few years, we have succeeded in attracting a number of experts, who today cooperate with the CIR on a regular basis. Also, we have built up a forum for foreign policy debate for politicians, MPs, civil servants, local government officials, journalists, academics, students and representatives of other NGOs. The CIR is strongly convinced that, given the foreign policy challenges Poland is facing today, it ought to support public debates on international issues in Poland.

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

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