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Poland, US bases and geopolitical games

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Introduction

Recent Polish proposal for financing permanent US military presence in Poland isn't motivated only to counter current Russian aggressive posture. This offer is a part of a wider Poland strategy for achieving long term security. In pursuing this strategy, Warsaw risks not only to undermine NATO cohesion, but also to deepen growing East-West divide inside the EU.

Polish proposal and NATO

On 28th May Polish Defense Minister Mariusz Blaszczak confirmed ongoing negotiations with the United States for setting up permanent US military presence in Poland. In a published proposal Warsaw offered significant financial and material support (between 1,5 and 2 billion USD) for building a joint infrastructure for permanent

deployment of a US armored division. Warsaw also offered to insure more flexible movement of US forces on its territory. In Polish view, a permanent American military presence in Poland would significantly reduce security vulnerabilities in the region, particularly regarding so called Suwalki Gap.

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What are the reasons for current Polish offer? It is an expression of a long-term goal, started after Poland's accession to NATO in 1999, to build closer security relations with the US and to get a permanent American military presence in Poland. This goal received additional urgency after Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula in 2014 and Russian aggressive posture toward NATO. Warsaw is worried because of the US strategic pivot towards Asia-Pacific, started after the end of the Cold War. Together with divisions in NATO regarding posture towards Russia, and the weakness of the European Union regarding security, Warsaw is trying through development of bilateral security relationship with Washington to become an indispensable US ally and with it to complement the security guarantees resulting from its membership in NATO. This is the reason why the current proposal was sent to Washington without informing other members of NATO.

There are few probable consequences of Poland's move in NATO. First, which is emphasized in almost every analysis of the Polish offer, is the future of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, a 1997 agreement intended to ease tensions and to develop cooperation among the former Cold War adversaries. It is not only the issue of an expected negative Russian reaction. Validity of the Act is constantly under scrutiny after Russian annexation of Crimea. The Polish view, that Moscow has created a new geopolitical status quo that is no longer consistent with the security environment at the end of 90s, is supported by many Central and Eastern European members of NATO and the EU.

On the other hand, Western European countries like Germany, France and Italy are focused on the 'internal security issues' (illegal migrations, terrorism). Those countries also want to improve relations with Moscow, and the Polish initiative will not be appreciated. The result will be the following - additional tensions and further deepening of divisions between NATO (and the EU) member states regarding their diverging security interests. Poland's proposal has exposed the split between Eastern European and the Baltic's members that perceive the Russian threat most acutely, and those Western European members who do not feel directly threaten by a prospect of a Russian aggression.

At the moment inside NATO member states there are no open debates about Polish proposal. But some members have expressed concerns about violation of the NATO-Russia Foundation Act, and future coherence of the policy towards Russia.

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Finally, if the current US administration accepts Polish proposal and cuts bilateral military agreement, this will threaten

foundation on which NATO is built – a multilateral framework for resolving security issues and challenges - and open doors for further development of NATO as a multi-tiered alliance. The fact is, NATO is today a two-tiered alliance, with smaller number of states capable for the full spectrum of military missions, and the rest focused primarily on the different aspects of the peace support operations. Another problem is that, on many issues, NATO members are divided (for example, on the issue of future strategic posture towards Russia), which disrupts the NATO strategic agility. Different perceptions and interests of member states are complicating efforts to attain strategic consensus in resolving current and future security threats and challenges. In such circumstances, it is quite possible that in the period to come Washington will start to consider bilateral defense agreements with a small number of NATO members, instead of trying to achieve consensus for action inside the alliance. For European members, the final result of such trends would be a question of future relevance of NATO, and a possibility that Europe ends up with no effective security organization in place.

Poland's geopolitical strategy

The issue of possible permanent US military presence in Poland is also a part of wider Polish geopolitical strategy. The key goals of Poland's geopolitical strategy are preservation

of its territorial integrity, sovereignty and national identity. Those goals are a result of the geography and historical events that had shaped the development of Poland.

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Poland is situated in the North European Plain and forms a major gateway between East and West. Because of that, during its history Poland has been vulnerable to invasions by other European and Asian powers.

Second influential factor has been the decline of Poland's power and influence during the last five centuries. Poland has been a major European power until the 17th century. Its sharp decline started in the 17th and 18th century. Partitioned between great powers, Poland disappeared from Europe's map in 1795 for 123 years. Created again in 1918, after a short interwar existence, Poland was again destroyed in 1939. Resurrected again in 1945, until the end of the Cold War, Poland was a part of the Soviet sphere of influence. The described events created lasting emphasis on achieving security and national independence among the Polish population and political elites, and also a permanent mistrust towards Germany and Russia.

To prevent similar fate in the future and to achieve its key geopolitical goals, Poland is implementing two strategies.

First strategy is a reliance on the outside power as a guarantor of Polish security. In that

regard, bilateral relations with the United States occupy a special place in Polish security policy. Poland sees the United States as its ultimate protector against possible Russian aggression, and wants to assure permanent US commitment to protecting Poland and other Central and Eastern Europe states. Every Polish strategic document acknowledges the strategic nature of this relationship, and the need to develop it further. They are complemented with Poland's membership in NATO as the key transatlantic security organization.

But reliance on the outside power is not enough. Hesitation of France and Britain to help Poland in the fall of 1939 left Warsaw vulnerable to the German attack. This means that Warsaw needs to complement the reliance on the outside power with a policy of active influence on its neighborhood. This also includes Warsaw's capacity to influence the EU and NATO decision-making process - Poland has been using enlargements of the EU and NATO towards the East to spread its political and economic influence, and to deter renewal of the Russian influence in Eastern Europe.

In short, Poland wants to become a regional power, capable of influencing its neighborhood. This means that Warsaw considers to be the leading voice of Eastern Europe, simultaneously distancing itself on some issues (policy towards Russia, migrations) from NATO and EU's Western European members which have different strategic priorities.

Poland is trying to achieve these goals by using

geopolitical concept of Intermarium (*Międzymorze*) developed in the interwar period. The roots of Intermarium concept can be traced to the 19th century and a proposal made by count A.J. Czartorysky, who proposed a plan for a federal union of the Central European nations aimed against Russia, which would enable resurgence of Poland as a regional power. The first attempt of implementing Intermarium concept was made in the interwar period by the Polish statesman Josef Piłsudski. He proposed the positioning of Poland as the regional power between the Baltic and Black Sea, capable of influencing the events in Central and Eastern Europe. This attempt was unsuccessful - interwar Poland did not have the political and economic potential for achieving the role of a regional power.

The Intermarium concept has been revived after the end of the Cold War, and its current form is the Three Seas Initiative, started in 2016. Part of resurrected Intermarium concept is Poland's active foreign policy towards the East, through promotion of the expansion of the EU (Poland's active role in the Eastern Partnership policy) and NATO to Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and South Caucasus area.

Finally, Poland tries to enhance both strategies by developing bilateral and multilateral cooperation with selected partners in Central and Eastern Europe, the Adriatic and the Black Sea. Those initiatives cover a broad range of issues, from trade and defense to the transport infrastructure and energy.

Confrontation with the European Commission and Germany

A problem with Poland's strategy is in the fact that its implementation is creating collision with the European Commission and Germany. Poland sees itself as the natural leader in Central Europe, with Baltic republics and Ukraine in its sphere of influence. For Warsaw this is the only way to preserve its independence and Polish national identity. This creates limits of Poland's willingness for political and economic integration inside the EU. With the EU and NATO membership, Poland has gained economic benefits and removed Germany as a security threat.

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After the 2008 and the Greek debt crisis the economic benefits of the membership have declined, but not in such measure that Poland would leave the EU. At the same time, the economic crisis has enabled the rise of Germany's influence in the Union. As a state with the largest economy in the EU, Germany forced the rest of the EU to implement austerity measures in the Eurozone. Germany is also trying to use its influence in other matters, from immigration policy to the push for further

political and economic integration of the member states. Berlin also expects that the member states comply with the demands from Brussels.

Poland doesn't share German vision of the EU's future, and it especially wants to limit capability of the European Commission to intervene in the domestic affairs of the member states. Poland's answer is an attempt to stop the further process of European integration and to take back at least a part of national prerogatives that were transferred to Brussels.

Warsaw's refusal to implement certain EU directives created a reaction from the European Commission, which launched the rule of law procedure, trying to push Poland to obey EU legislation. Relations between Warsaw and Brussels are in decline since late 2015, after the election victory of the conservative Law and Justice party. The new Polish government does not support initiatives that would further transfer national sovereignty to Brussels, such as a plan to distribute asylum seekers across the bloc.

Another challenge in relations with the European Commission and Germany is Poland's aspiration to become one of the key member states in the EU. As a relatively new member of the EU, Poland doesn't have adequate resources and political influence to catch up with the more established, larger member states. But, if Poland achieves status of a regional power in Central and Eastern Europe, Warsaw expects that the EU heavyweights like France and Germany will be forced to treat Poland as an

equal partner. In that case, Poland will be capable to push back against Germany's attempts to define EU rules, and consequently to prevent Berlin's takeover of the EU.

If this is impossible to achieve (The European Commission and Germany are seeking to increase the EU's authority), Warsaw hopes that, as a regional power, it could pursue a more flexible relationship with Brussels, keeping the economic benefits of the EU membership while leaving space to pursue independent foreign policy consistent with its national interests.

Conclusion

To preserve its key geopolitical goals, Poland is taking a risky strategy with an uncertain outcome. Warsaw wants to retain its EU membership, but it sees more and more the EU as an association of sovereign nations linked by combination of common and changeable interests, rather than the unified federal Europe. In that regard, Poland will cooperate with Brussels when it serves its needs, but simultaneously it will look for alternatives trying to keep its foreign and security policies as independent as possible. This means that Warsaw will continue to oppose EU policies that go against Poland's interests, especially in the area of relations between the EU and Russia.

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So, in the future, or at least during the current Polish conservative government, we can expect the continuation of latent conflict between Poland and the EU - further challenges to German proposed solutions to the EU problems, resistance to Brussels' demands for ceding sovereignty, and demands for a larger and permanent NATO/US military presence in Eastern Europe. The latest moves of the European Commission against Poland (the Article 7 proceedings, caused by controversial judicial reforms; backing of the French and German proposal of introducing the political conditionality in disbursement of EU cohesion funds in the next financial framework) supported by Germany, are an indicator of the conflict continuation.

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The greatest weakness of Warsaw's strategy is its limitation of resistance capacity due to Polish dependence on EU funding and trade and Poland's economic dependence on Germany. In 2016, around a quarter of Poland's imports and exports came from and went to Germany and 24% of foreign direct investment in Poland came from Germany. This fact severely limits Warsaw's capacity to confront the EU and Germany. Warsaw is forced to stop short of making any moves that would jeopardize its

membership in the EU. However, the wider long-term negative consequence of the described standoff will be the deepening of the division between the new EU member states in the East and the old ones in the West.

DISCLAIMER: The views presented in this paper are solely of the author and do not represent an official position of the Institute for Development and International Relations or of the Hanns Seidel Foundation.

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