



Where from, where to? New and old configurations in Poland's foreign and security policy priorities



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ABSTRACT

The past 20 years have seen profound shifts in Polish foreign and security policy. Like other states in Central Europe Poland became part of the Euro-Atlantic sphere upon gaining first NATO and then EU membership. Despite such broad similarities, Poland's trajectory since 1989 has been marked by some specific and defining features. Poland has become the most significant player in Central Europe and tends to be viewed in the region as a leader, twinned with this, due to its size and relative strength, Poland is taken seriously at the EU table. At the same time, there has been a palpable shift in Polish Atlanticism and a more skeptical view of the US has emerged. This article explores the sources of these reconfigurations and considers their potential implications.

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The patterns of reconfiguration that are taking place in the foreign and security policies of many Central and East European states are abundantly present in the case of Poland. Certainly the most vivid and fundamental changes took place in the wake of 1989, however, the seeds of that foreign policy reconfiguration were sown way before the end of communism and fall of the Berlin Wall. The Solidarity movement which gathered apace in the early 1980s provided a profound impetus for the end of communism across Central Europe and ultimately the adoption of westwards leaning strategic orientations. Moreover, it is worth noting that Poland was quite unique amongst its Central European counterparts by virtue of having a fairly coherent national opposition grouping during the Cold War pioneering an alternative foreign policy, which was led by the émigré communities elsewhere in Western Europe, together with the Catholic Church. This alliance never shied away from criticizing the Communist regime and continued to actively support both rapprochement with the Federal Republic of Germany and the West in general. Subsequently, soon after the collapse of the communist regime and the Round Table Talks the country became set on a westwards course. In this new context three strategic priorities persisted – integration with the West or the “return to Europe”, rapprochement with Germany and the development of a new Eastern policy for the EU, focused principally on Ukraine.

Warsaw is now a regional hub for commerce as well as international politics. Poland has become in a sense a regional power, able to sustain a foreign policy profile beyond its immediate regional milieu (Spero, 2004). Such a role was probably inevitable given the country's size, its geopolitical location and also the substantial Polish diaspora living elsewhere in Europe and the United States. It also remains the case that Poland has the largest armed force in the Central European region and is the biggest spender in both real and proportional terms on defence. Moreover, it was Poland that occupied the world's thoughts in the dreary days of Martial Law in the early 1980s and it was Warsaw, rather than Budapest or Prague that successive American Presidents visited during the Cold War period.

Within twenty years of throwing off the Soviet yoke Poland has become a full and participating member of European and international organisations. Furthermore, the Polish economy has weathered the global economic crisis of recent years, ensuring a relatively high degree of economic stability (Follath and Puhl, 2012). Steadiness is also now evident in the political system. In contrast to the 1990s when an extraordinary number of political parties resided in the *Sejm* with governments

changing at lightning speed, the Polish party system appears to have evolved away from its former fragmented state of affairs. In 2011 Tusk and his Civic Platform party won the Parliamentary elections to the *Sejm* and the Senate, signifying for the first time in the country's post-1990 history that a ruling government has returned to power. This particular fact has helped underpin a maturation of Polish foreign policy which, it is argued here, has seen more consistency than was the case prior to 2007.

At the same time, history continues to play a palpable role in the official foreign policy discourse in Poland, where historical memory is frequently mobilized and emotions run high. Popular sentiment attached to Polish identity remains based on historical configurations, dating as far back as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with references to Poland's complex national history, notions of betrayal, invasion, victimhood, partition and an empire lost often looming large. In this context, Poland's historical relations with its two biggest neighbours, Russia and Germany, continue to provide potent reference points in contemporary debate. For example, former Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski, twin brother of Lech Kaczynski killed in the Smolensk air tragedy in 2010, has been evoking anti-Russian sentiment in Poland, claiming that Russian authorities – and the Polish government – were culpable in the disaster and in the subsequent reports and analysis surrounding the crash. His position still garners some support in a country which still bears the emotional scars of the Katyn Woods assassinations.¹ Similarly, and as will be discussed later, after Radek Sikorski's speech in Berlin in November 2011 backing a call for more German leadership in the EU to rescue the Eurozone, Kaczynski and counterparts lambasted his apparent pro-Germanism and branded the Foreign Minister a traitor to the Polish nation (Adekoya, 2011).

It is indeed a fact that Polish foreign and security policy has been fundamentally shaped by the perennial dilemma of being sandwiched between two large imperial powers, namely Germany and Russia/the Soviet Union. But it has also been palpably moulded by a second set of factors to do with the Second World War and its aftermath. In this context three particular historical developments came to shape Polish perceptions of international relations after 1989. First, the crushing defeat of the Polish forces in September 1939 and the collapse of the Warsaw uprising in August 1944 led to a pessimistic assessment of Poland's ability to defend itself. Second, the cataclysmic results of Western Europe's appeasement policy towards Nazi Germany gave rise to a very skeptical view of Western Europe and, specifically, of its ability to guarantee security and stability on the Continent. Third, the West's agreement to the permanent annexation of eastern Poland and the *de facto* consent of the United Kingdom and the United States at Yalta to accept the extension of the Soviet sphere of influence to Central and Eastern Europe illustrated the degree to which the 'great powers' could exclude Poland from crucial decisions affecting its sovereignty. One of the basic arguments pursued in this article is that whilst such factors are being overcome and are ebbing away from mainstream debate, they are potent ideas in some quarters and prone to periodic politicisation and popularisation.

The aim of this article is to consider the notion of 'reconfigurations' in Central and Eastern Europe through the prism of Polish Foreign and Security policy. The article is based on the premise that to some degrees Polish policy remains shaped by the conclusions and lessons drawn from Poland's specific national history in the twentieth century and before, as described briefly above, but at the same time new and less historically determined orientations and priorities have emerged, especially over the past five years. This is resulting in a reorientation of Poland's foreign policy compass across a number of key domains. Reorientation has to do with the passage of time; Poland's embeddedness into the EU; the presence of new leaders in office in Warsaw, as well as the changes in the US's policies towards Central and Eastern Europe that have occurred over the last eight years or so. Amongst other factors, this has seen Poland become less of an 'instinctive Atlanticist' and more of a mainstream European state with a proven ability to play a constructive role in key EU policy areas. Indeed, the article will consider that Poland's approach to the US has lost much of the 'raw emotion' and sentimentality which characterized the last twenty years in the relationship. At the same time, from a current vantage point Polish–German relations have arguably never been better with a close proximity between leaders in Warsaw and Berlin and with the Polish Government standing close to Germany on most EU issues.

With these ideas in mind this article offers *bilan* of Polish foreign and security policy. The article is made up of two elements, the first part debates the historical underpinnings of Polish policy and the second tends to more recent events and issues with a focus upon 2007 and thereafter.

1. Post-1989 foreign policy orientations built on historical antecedents

As already noted, a number of historical incidents strongly influenced the orientation of the Third Republic's foreign and security policies in the period after 1989. The first related to perceptions of and the lessons drawn from the Second World War, whilst the second stemmed from the processes of integration that had occurred on the other side of the iron curtain in Western Europe since the end of the war. The experience of the Second World War had led to a lack of confidence in Poland's ability to defend itself, the syndromes of 'abandonment' and 'betrayal' as well as a critical view of West European pacifism and appeasement certainly led to this. Although these syndromes prevailed in society after 1945, they only had a marginal influence on the policies of the communist government, which of course fell in line with the dictates of Soviet Russia. Following the return of sovereignty after the end of the Cold War, the foreign policy of the Third Republic became heavily influenced by memories of the Second World War.

¹ In 1940 more than 21,000 Polish officers and soldiers were massacred in the woods near to Smolensk, but it was not until 50 years later that Moscow finally admitted that it had been the Soviet government that had indeed ordered the killings.

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