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**OBAMA, MEDVEDEV, AND THE BALLISTIC
MISSILE DEFENSE**

A POLISH VIEW

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Introduction

Poles tend to be sensitive to the relationship between Washington and Moscow, because of the Polish geopolitical situation, its historical experience, and the consideration of Polish goals. This is particularly the case when US-Russian relations involve Polish interests. The issue of installing a missile defense system in Europe is, indeed, of such a nature. The US has traditionally occupied a unique place in the Polish collective consciousness. Over the years it was the model of a better, almost dreamlike world - especially during the Cold War. After 1989, when Poland became a fully sovereign country in the international arena, a paradigm of the 'new' foreign policy involved close cooperation with the United States, particularly in the field of security. Consistently, over the past twenty years Warsaw sought to create, maintain, and develop a special relationship with Washington. This is hardly surprising. The world after 1989 was characterized by the Pax Americana and the US had a crucial role to play in solving the major problems of post-Cold War period.

The relationship between the free and sovereign Polish Republic and Russia was shaped by completely different conditions. Its historical experience and its concern for its own security made Warsaw closely watch the actions of Russia. Warsaw observed the close relations between Moscow and Washington with distrust. Russia's strong opposition to NATO enlargement confirmed Warsaw's belief that Russia acted to the detriment of Polish interests. Moscow's opposition to Polish NATO membership affected initially also the attitude of Washington. The Clinton administration, trying to make Russia a 'strategic partner', postponed the decision to open NATO to the East. In Washington's calculations, Russia was a more vital partner. It could not ignore Russia's nuclear potential, nor could it predict the future, which – eventually - could be negatively affected by the greater proximity of NATO to the borders of Russia.

Poland in Search of a 'Special Relationship' with Washington

It was difficult for Poland to overcome the reluctance of the United States. However, in 1996 America crossed the Rubicon, recognizing that it was in its interest to offer Poland alliance guarantees. This decision was of vital importance for opening up the Alliance to the East. As a result, despite a prior reluctance, the image of the US in Poland remained positive. Against Moscow's resistance the US opened the door to NATO, helping Poland to achieve its objective, considered so important for Poland's security. For Polish foreign policy, this meant that Poland felt loyal to the big ally across the Atlantic, hoping to establish a special relationship with it. When Poland's security policy was discussed in the framework of the European Union, Poland belonged to the proponents of a consistently dominant role of NATO and of the necessity of maintaining strong transatlantic ties. In response, Poland heard voices, especially from France, that Poland was a 'Trojan horse' of America in Europe. Also in Moscow Poland gained a reputation for being an agent of American interests on the continent. This factor became increasingly crucial in the relations of Poland with its Eastern neighbor.

Given its understandable and justified concern for good relations with the US, Warsaw's reaction to September 11 was obvious. It became an inseparable part of a collective front of solidarity and sympathy with America. However, when Bush started Iraq War, he faced a strong opposition of some prominent allies, especially France and Germany. In this dispute Poland stood firmly by President Bush's side. By doing so Poland came not only in conflict with the two most important countries of the EU, which Poland had just joined, but it also made the relationship with Russia more complex. To make things worse, the authorities in Warsaw decided to buy American F-16 planes instead of European Gripens... The Polish position met with disapproval, and even irritation, in Berlin and Paris. It looked like Warsaw was going to pay a bitter price in Europe for its loyalty to the US. Meanwhile, Poland lacked tangible benefits from its involvement in the Iraq War. Politically, Poland was satisfied with being a faithful and loyal ally of the US. It deceived itself that Washington would consider Poland as a strategic partner. However, Poland was merely included by US Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld in the 'new', pro-American Europe, as opposed to 'old' Europe, which was reluctant to follow America. Warsaw had also plans to become a bridge between

Washington on the one hand and Berlin and Paris on the other. These Polish ambitions only irritated Germany and France. Moreover, these countries soon improved their relations with Washington, especially after changes in their respective governments. The reconciliation within the alliance reduced the high Polish expectations and Poland returned to its previous position in its relations with the United States, which was a far cry from the role of a strategic partner.

The Ballistic Missile Defense: A Chance for Poland?

The issue of the ballistic missile defense project should be placed in this context. It was here that a real chance appeared to bring the Polish relation with America to a higher level. Accepting the installation of elements of the missile shield in Poland was part of the traditional line of Polish behavior towards the US superpower. Poland wanted this system to be installed on its territory, because the idea was really attractive: opening a BMD base in Poland would strongly link Poland to the US and the US would be particularly careful about the security of a country in which it had based military installations. It would also improve Poland's position in its relationship with Russia. When in 2005 the brothers Kaczynski came to power, it seemed that Poland would install a shield on its territory without any preconditions. However, a new element in Polish-US relations was introduced by Sikorski, the Polish Minister of National Defense. His point of view can be summarized as follows: Poland will put 300 hectares at the disposal of the US for the construction of the base on a place that is convenient for the US. It is therefore necessary for Poland to negotiate firmly, given the fact that Poland does not need to have the base. This tactic was adopted by the government of Prime Minister Tusk, who came to power in the autumn of 2007. In this government Sikorski became Minister of Foreign Affairs. Prime Minister Tusk was himself not convinced about the necessity of installing elements of the missile defense system in Poland, and certainly not unconditionally. The new government redefined Poland's place in the international arena, particularly in relation to the EU and its neighbors, but also to America. For the Polish government keeping close ties with the US was balanced by a concern for reciprocity, even when this caused irritation with the Polish President for whom a strategy of a 'shield at all costs' was still valid.

The US-Polish Agreement of August 2008 and Its Undoing

The declaration on strategic cooperation, signed by Poland and the US in August 2008, accompanying the agreement on the installation of elements of the ballistic missile defense on Polish soil, was a confirmation of the new quality of the Polish-American relationship. However, nothing was certain, because one of the signatories, the Bush administration, was about to quit in a few months. Nevertheless Poland - at least on paper - had gained 'something for something'. It should be added that all this happened in the tense atmosphere caused by the Georgian conflict, which resulted in an increased sense of a Russian threat to Poland. In this situation, the promise of the US to send a Patriot battery to Poland with a garrison of US troops, and to offer military and technological cooperation, seemed to be a valuable benefit.

When Obama entered the White House, the future of the missile shield project became unknown. The new president expressed his skepticism about the missile defense system from the beginning. However, the Poles believed that Obama would not undo the agreements signed by his predecessor. They believed that certain rules would be followed in dealing with America's most important allies. However, on September 17, 2009, Poland was officially informed of a change of plans: the Obama administration had decided not to install the missile base in Poland. The date was for the Poles almost symbolic: it was the anniversary of Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939... The decision of President Obama was part of the 'reset' of American relations with Russia. This 'reset' was not just a slogan. A certain intimacy in the relationship between Obama and Medvedev was observed by Warsaw. In the view of the Obama administration, Russia had become an indispensable state the support of which was necessary for solving important international issues, such as Iran's nuclear program, the success of the mission in Afghanistan, and the Middle East conflict. The US also needed an agreement with Russia on strategic arms limitation. In order to prepare for negotiations with Russia, the Obama administration planned to step back from missile defense, a subject that evoked strong opposition from Moscow. The Poles felt that nothing would please Moscow more than to know that in Poland there were no US missile bases, and no radar in the Czech Republic which would be able to monitor Russian airspace. Not surprisingly, Warsaw was disappointed with Washington's decision.

An Alternative BMD Project Without Poland?

There were voices in Poland which emphasized the technical aspects of the problem. They argued that the Americans acted pragmatically by adopting a program that might guarantee in a better way the security of the US and its allies. Although it meant abandoning the plans to install the shield in Poland, Obama's administration, they claimed, could not be denied the right to do so. It was difficult to assume that Washington would be ready to reject such reasonable arguments merely because Warsaw might feel disappointed. Although - admittedly - Obama's decision was not only influenced by technical, but also by *political* factors, Poland had to recognize the complexity of the case and accept it.

In any case Poland found itself in a new situation in its relations with the United States. The turmoil resulted in debunking the myth of a US-Polish 'special relationship'. On the other hand, Poles had now more sober expectations concerning America, as well as the place of Poland in American politics. Poland did no longer overestimate its strength in its relationship with the American superpower. Although Poland was not going to be a strategic partner of the US, Poles believed that they could not be treated worse than other US partners and allies, because Poland had been able to show its loyalty in times of trial. Hence, especially Poland had a right to expect a certain behavior on the part of America. Without going into details about the work on the implementation of the 'new' NATO missile defense, let us add that there are current arrangements to install the battery launcher Aegis on Polish territory in 2018. This means that Poland is going to host about a hundred American soldiers as a support base (apart from that, there were on Polish territory already training missile launchers for the Patriot, but without missiles). These solutions were welcomed by Poland, although without complete satisfaction. Nevertheless, Poland had gained something.

Obama and Medvedev: A Secret Understanding?

However, the experience with the missile shield meant that Poland began to observe with more attention what happened in the relationship Obama - Medvedev. No one denies the US the right to cooperate with Russia. It is also crucial for European security that Washington obtains, if not Moscow's support, then at least its acceptance of the missile defense.

America's role in this process is most important and is also not disputed in Poland. The more Moscow's behavior is threatening, as in the case of the installation of Iskander missiles in the region of Kaliningrad, the greater is the importance of such negotiations. With regard to missile defense, it cannot be denied that the Obama administration has put much effort in trying to convince Russian leaders that it is not aimed against Russia. A transparency of the missile defense system which is being created involves the need of gaining Russian acceptance. Warsaw understands and supports this tactic.

However, even assuming that Obama's determination to implement plans for a missile defense shield in Europe is true, it is difficult to abstract from certain facts. Big cuts in the US defense budget in the coming years can make the plan to install an anti-missile shield questionable. Although this is a hypothetical situation, it is difficult to exclude it, and at least it has to be taken into consideration. This would even have an impact on the transatlantic system. It would mean that in times of crisis the US no longer wants to support the defense of Europe to so great extent. Certainly, Russia takes this factor into account in its calculations, assuming that pressure from their side, together with US budgetary problems, may disrupt the plan to build a missile defense shield.

In this context, Obama's confidential conversation with Medvedev at the end of March 2012, in which the US President was reported to have said - in an undertone - that after winning reelection, he will have "more room for maneuver" as concerns the missile shield, was alarming for the Poles. The credibility of Obama, who purportedly hides his real intentions before the allies and reveals them to Russia, was put into question. The overheard fragment of both leaders' talk suggested that after reelection President Obama will resolve a contentious issue. "In terms all of these issues, especially the missile defense shield, I can say that they can be solved, but it is important that he [Putin] has given me some time," said Obama. It is hard not to get the impression that these solutions will be convenient, first of all, to Moscow, and not the European allies, including Poland.

But another factor had to be also considered. Would the disclosure of the words, uttered by the US President, not prove beneficial in the end? After all, Obama's speech met with sharp reactions of the Republican Party. It was suggested that the President is ready for

unspecified concessions to Russia. Not only was an explanation from Obama demanded, but also it was announced that Congress will block any attempt to 'bargain away' the missile defense system with Russia. The reaction of the administration could only be to ensure that it is determined to implement the program of the antimissile shield, and Russia will be consulted only to enable a "better understanding of our [U.S.] positions." Regardless of whether the explanations of Obama are credible, it is certain that the President came under the watchful supervision of the opposition, the media and some European allies, which will limit in some way his room for maneuver with regard to missile defense. From the Polish perspective, it is also important to consider the future of US-Russian relations. Even more so, because after Putin's return in the Kremlin, he will have more possibilities for action than Medvedev, for whom Putin was an omnipotent shadow. Undoubtedly, in their mutual relations there will remain problems between the US and Russia, but there are also incentives for cooperation. It is also in the interest of Warsaw that American diplomacy will succeed to persuade Russia to cooperate in the international arena on a number of key issues.

Warsaw hopes also that the US administration, regardless it will be headed by Obama or not, will effectively implement the plan to build a missile defense system. That means that it will continue to try to persuade Russia that the shield is an element of European security in the face of a potential threat from Iran or Korea, not from Russia. The transparency of the system is an argument for obtaining Moscow's approval, but that does not mean that this aim will be achieved. It is difficult to exclude the possibility that Russia will continue to use the construction of missile defense as a bargaining chip in order to obtain something in a completely different field. Let us hope that the concessions will be discussed and negotiated with the US allies, or at least will not be made at their expense. That is what Poland expects.

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