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**The Evolution of US-Polish Relations
Beyond 2024**

Michał Baranowski

The Evolution of US-Polish Relations Beyond 2024

By Michał Baranowski | March 28, 2024

Polish-American relations are undergoing an evolution, especially when it comes to the expectation of the United States' long-term commitment to European security. But no matter who wins the White House in November, Warsaw is determined to rebuild its relationships in Europe and build up alliances and capabilities that over time can deal more effectively with European security.

At a recent public conversation, Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski was asked about the future of the Polish-US relations in light of a possible Trump presidency. He responded with a smile, saying "Poland will have strong relations with the United States whoever is in power in the White House."

Poland has maintained close relations with the United States since it regained its independence in 1989. In fact, Poland has just celebrated 25 years of membership in NATO, a period that solidified Poland's return to the West and cemented strategic relations with the United States. Even when transatlantic relations were deeply strained, as during the Iraq war or Donald Trump's presidency, Polish-American ties remained a priority for Warsaw. Poland also stood out among European nations for maintaining robust ties with the United States during the Trump administration, primarily through the Law and Justice (PiS) party's prioritization of bilateral relations with Trump, often at the expense of relations with other European allies.

However, perspectives in Warsaw are poised to shift because, with aid blocked in the House of Representatives, the United States appears to be unable to continue military support for Ukraine. Recently, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk even appealed directly to Speaker Mike Johnson in a tweet: "Look at Odessa, Speaker Johnson! How many more arguments do you need to take a decision?" Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski pointed out that when the commander-in-chief is unable to exercise his power and meet commitments to a partner because of opposition in Congress, the credibility of the United States suffers among its allies. Given Trump's control over the Republican Party, it is clear to Warsaw that US policy regarding European security is constrained even before the American public chooses its next president. The worries would only grow should Donald Trump secure reelection. These concerns are shared across the political spectrum in Poland. renewed Trump administration. A Trump White House might well use Hunt Forward operations as part of its broader defense diplomacy with receptive European partners such as the United Kingdom even as it would seek to cut fundamental US programs directly supporting European defense.

Scenario 1: Trump 2.0

Concerns in Warsaw stem mainly from two key pillars of Trump's announced policies. First, his reluctance to support Ukraine against renewed Russian aggression raises apprehension, given that Poland and neighboring states perceive this as an existential threat. The fear is that failure to support Ukraine could embolden Russia to pose a direct threat to NATO countries, including Poland. Second, Trump's critical stance on NATO raises alarms. Some in Warsaw think that Poland, having committed 4% of its GDP to defense, would be exempt from Trump's criticisms, or even that Trump would finally spur Western Europeans to spend more. However, this line of argument is outweighed by the concern for NATO's cohesion and the need to avoid potential fissures that Russia could then exploit.

The potential ramifications of a Trump presidency extend beyond the question of military aid to Ukraine. Trump's record of unpredictable behavior casts doubt on the United States' reliability as a NATO leader, prompting concerns about its credibility and its ability to confront adversaries. The recent obstructionism in the US House of Representatives on aid to Ukraine further underscores these concerns, eliciting sharp responses such as Prime Minister Donald Tusk's condemnation of Republican senators in a tweet not long before his visit to Washington on March 12: "Dear Republican Senators of America. Ronald Reagan, who helped millions of us to win back our freedom and independence, must be turning in his grave today. Shame on you."

Scenario 2: Biden 2.0

Much less discussed is the scenario of a second term for President Biden. On the surface, the general assumption is that the transatlantic alliance, and Polish-American relations, will largely continue on their current path. The recent election in Poland of a pro-democratic, pro-European coalition would make US-Polish relations even smoother than before, as there would be no tensions around values such as the rule of law, human rights, or relations with other important US allies in Europe such as Germany. But that picture obscures challenges that are likely to emerge in the transatlantic alliance even if Joe Biden wins this November.

First, the United States is likely to have divided government under the Biden 2.0 scenario, with the Senate at least coming under Republican control. The experience of the last few months shows how effective a Republican-controlled chamber can be in frustrating the Biden administration's priorities on Ukraine, European security, and foreign policy more broadly.

Second, it is clear that the Indo-Pacific—especially the People's Republic of China (PRC)—has become the predominant focus of US grand strategy. As the PRC builds up its capabilities, increasingly challenging the United States militarily—even in the nuclear domain—the Biden 2.0 administration would continue to move its strategic focus there, and away from Europe. US officials sometimes like to say that the United States "can walk and chew gum at the same time". But as global confrontations proliferate, often in an unexpected way—as with the war in Gaza—even the most pro-atlanticist administration will be unable to focus mainly on Europe. These two dynamics—America's divided government and the strategic focus on Asia—mean that at best, the shift in America's strategic focus will continue to drift toward the Indo-Pacific. At worst, a divided US government would mean a paralyzed US government. Both trends leave Poland and other European allies more exposed geopolitically.

The European Answer

For the reasons outlined above, Poland is increasingly looking to Europe to build up defense capabilities and a strategic culture that can take greater responsibility for European security in the years to come. The idea is not to replace the United States as a European power, or NATO as a primary organization for European security, but to create what Foreign Minister Sikorski has described as "European Harmony". In this situation, NATO, the EU, and member states would work more closely together on guarding European security, but without excluding the United States. In a conversation with GMF, former President of Poland Bronisław Komorowski described this thinking best: „It is not in Poland's interest to choose between the US and the European Union. It is in our interest that we never have to answer such a question.“

The format that should spur this greater European strategic cooperation, according to new thinking in Warsaw, is the Weimar Triangle. Poland is finally able to step up here, thanks to the new government's pro-European credentials, and also because of the leadership vacuum resulting from the

troubled German-French relationship. The logic is that in the short term, Weimar and European initiatives would fill the gap in support for Ukraine that has been created by Congressional inaction. Over the medium and long term, the ambition would be for Weimar and the EU as a whole to step up responsibility for European security and defense. As former President Komorowski remarked, “Poland has an opportunity to become a key part of the engine of the European Union—and this at a time when the transatlantic community may be going through a difficult period.” How much time Europe would have to build up its capabilities and strategic culture depends on whether Biden or Trump wins in November. But even the most pro-European voices in Warsaw do not claim that Europe will be able to do this alone. The role that the United States plays in Europe when it comes to leadership, conventional capabilities, and the all-important nuclear umbrella is just too great to be replaced quickly—no matter who occupies the White House next year.

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About the Author

Michał Baranowski is a managing director of GMF East. He was previously a senior fellow and the director of GMF's Warsaw office.

Baranowski provides overall strategic direction and leadership for the organization's work in Poland, the Baltic states, and the V4 countries. He writes and speaks extensively on NATO, transatlantic relations, and US foreign policy, and is frequently quoted in outlets such as Associated Press, Financial Times, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Die Welt, Rzeczpospolita, Reuters, Axios, Le Soir, The Washington Post, and Foreign Affairs. He publishes in Polish, American, and European media and policy journals.

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