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The future of the Polish-American 'special relationship'

With Duda's electoral victory, Polish-American relations will continue to be very close — at least until the US elections

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Once the narrow victory of the incumbent Polish President Andrzej Duda was announced on 12 July, messages of congratulations quickly followed from Washington. Through Twitter, his medium of choice, US President Donald Trump congratulated his 'friend' on his 'historic re-election'. Given Trump's tendency to savagely demean decades-long diplomatic relationships – particularly with Germany and the EU – this closeness to Polish President Duda appears surprising. Indeed, the Polish relationship to the United States is closer today than in recent memory, even closer than it was at Donald Trump's entrance into the White House.

Since 1989 the United States has played a key role in Polish foreign policy and the strategic relationship to the US has formed, according to Kai-Olaf Lang, 'the backbone of Polish security policy.' From the Polish perspective, positive and close relations with the US, including through its own active membership in NATO, are essential for Polish security. Poland had always endeavored to comply with American expectations for alliance partners, whether those expectations were supporting the controversial Iraq invasion in 2003 or the fulfillment of the two per cent spending goal, wherein defense contributions to NATO should equal two per cent of state GDP.

This unique security role of the United States is not entirely without justification: not only is Poland located on the geopolitical edge of the European Union with a direct land border to the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, but Poland is haunted by its own history and experiences with Russia (and the Soviet Union) in the role of occupying power or regional hegemon posing an existential threat to a sovereign Polish state. The most recent Russian territorial aggressions in 2008 in Georgia and

since 2014 in Ukraine have reinforced the Polish perception of Russia as a security threat, and of the US as the only reliable and competent ally.

The Polish Government and the Trump Administration

In contrast to many other countries, the inauguration of Donald Trump in January 2017 did not lead to tensions in the Polish-American relationship. On the contrary: both sides quickly developed deep sympathy for each other. The Polish government celebrated Trump like no other politician, providing the US President with a place of honor in Polish foreign policy and inviting him to Warsaw ahead of the 2017 G20 summit in Hamburg. Trump's speech at the Warsaw Uprising Monument was given in front of excited crowds. Unlike his predecessor Barack Obama, who admonished Duda to maintain respect for the rule of law in his 2016 meeting in Warsaw, Poland needed not have such fears about Donald Trump. He praised Polish 'efforts to uphold the rule of law' during Duda's short-notice trip to Washington at the end of June this year.

The closeness of the two countries is deeply influenced by tangible political interests. Because the Trump Administration sees Poland as an anchor in a deeply Trump-critical Europe, the Polish government is attempting to use multiple disagreements between the US President and countless European governments – including Germany – for its own advantage. Poland therefore considers itself as an arbiter between the United States on the one hand, and the European Union and its member states on the other. That Poland should pursue such a strategy – as a member state of the European Union but one that is profoundly isolated in the Union – is deeply questionable.

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In addition to attempting to utilise positive relations with the US in Europe for its own profit, the Polish government may be trying to use the previously discussed security functions of the United States as the decisive driving force for their own actions. The political goal of Warsaw, which critics have already accused of being an American trojan horse in Europe, is the stationing of additional US military contingents on Polish territory. Ideally, this would mean a permanent US military base in Poland, a 'Fort Trump' to entice the President.

Troops from Germany to Poland

Last weekend, the Polish government celebrated a small victory. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Polish Defence Minister Mariusz Błaszczak signed an Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement that provides for the redeployment of 1,000 troops from Germany to Poland. This will raise the number of US soldiers on Polish soil to about 5,500. For the Polish government, the deal is both domestically prestigious and relevant as a security guarantee, given Poland's unstable eastern neighbourhood. But there is a price to pay. The cost of the reinforcement, up to €120 million per year, is to be covered by the Polish taxpayers.

This essentially asymmetrical relationship is marked by big concessions on the Polish side, which is willing to accommodate the United States in many ways. For example, Poland had little previously expressed interest in the Middle East but hosted a conference in Warsaw on the Middle East together with the United States in 2019. Critics derided the event from the onset as directed at Iran and thus a concession to Trump, who has visibly tightened American policy against Tehran.

Poland and the United States are also important strategic partners in the area of energy policy, sharing mutual interests. Both states are opposed to the Nord Stream II Pipeline project, which will transport Russian gas under the Baltic Sea to Germany. While Poland already objected to the project under the previous government headed by Donald Tusk, objection in the United States has intensified since the inauguration of Donald Trump. Nord Stream II is seen as a strategic attempt by Russian President Vladimir Putin to gain political influence inside the EU by means of energy policy.

To hinder the completion of the project, the United States has laid sanctions on the firms participating in the construction of the gas pipeline. And as an alternative energy supply, the US has proposed sales of its own liquified natural gas (LNG). The Polish state energy company PGNiG signed an agreement to take delivery of American LNG for twenty years. From the Polish perspective, acquiring gas from the US is part of an independent energy security strategy. The extant contract with Gazprom, the Russian state energy company, expires in 2022, and Poland would like to make itself independent from Russian gas delivery. There is also an effort to build a new pipeline to deliver Norwegian gas via Denmark to Poland.

How Poles perceive the US and Trump

The meaning of the United States in Polish foreign affairs is also reflected in the public opinion assessment of the country in Poland. A look at the 2019 Global Attitudes Survey of the Pew Research Center, published in February 2020, is instructive here. According to the survey, the US is more popular in Poland than almost any other country. A full 79 per cent of Poles have a positive opinion of the United States. President Trump, whose election put bilateral relations of many states with the US to a hard test, also enjoys widespread popularity in Poland.

On the question of whether they trust Trump to do the right thing in world politics, 51 per cent of surveyed Poles responded 'yes'. Poland is the only European country where a majority trusts the current US President. In comparison, in Germany, the European country which trusts Trump the least, only 13 per cent of those surveyed trusted the US President.

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Among Poles, trust in Trump is significantly greater than in heads of government of other European states. 36 per cent of Poles trust French President Emmanuel Macron and only 46 per cent trust German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Polish trust in Trump has continuously increased in the past three years, from 23 per cent in 2017 to 35 per cent in 2018 and over 51 per cent in 2019. Trump enjoys the greatest trust – unsurprisingly – among supporters of the governing Polish national-conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party, who trust Trump at a rate of 61 per cent. But even among the supporters of the left (48 per cent) and the political middle (45 per cent), Poles trust the current American president.

Handshake in the White House

Generally, state visits from high-ranking politicians during an election campaign are a well-founded taboo. It is often difficult to predict who will ultimately win the race, and since one has to cooperate politically with one candidate or the other, it is better for a foreign head of state to keep out of an election campaign. Alas, this hindered neither Andrzej Duda from making a visit to Washington at short notice, nor Donald Trump from welcoming his Polish colleague in the White House for free publicity.

The Polish president met President Trump on 24 June, four days before the first round of presidential elections in Poland. Duda's campaign team hoped the visit would provide a boost to the ongoing campaign and stoked domestic expectations accordingly. Trump's image in Poland is much better than (for example) in Germany, and a good photo just before the election could feasibly add a few percentage points to poll results. This was especially the case for Polish expatriates in America, over 50 per cent of whom voted for the incumbent Duda in the first round. In the end, the visit to Washington was another piece in the mosaic that brought the Polish president to a narrow re-election victory.

With Duda's electoral victory, a continuation of close Polish-American relations seems to have no obstacle in its way. The Polish government is dependent on the United States as a partner in every respect – on the one hand because of well-considered strategic calculations, but also because of its largely self-inflicted isolation within the EU It may be possible that Poland will succeed in capitalising on its envisaged role as mediator between the US and Europe. However, all such considerations are subject to the condition that Trump is re-elected in the upcoming American presidential elections in November of this year.

There is no doubt that another Trump victory would be good news for Warsaw. The situation will likely be different if the Democrat Joe Biden were to succeed: Biden is probably far more critical than Donald Trump of the ongoing restructuring of the Polish judicial system, and a Biden administration would soon endeavor to tie in with old partnerships, especially improving the currently tense relations between the US and states such as Germany and France. In such a scenario, Poland would appear to be more dispensable as a strategic partner of the US in Europe. By November at the latest, this should reveal whether Poland's risky foreign policy calculations have worked out, or whether they have ultimately been miscalculated.



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