

## A case for a U.S.-Poland security and economic partnership.

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President of the United States Donald Trump at a bilateral meeting in Warsaw with Polish President Andrzej Duda, July 2017 (Photo: Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

*By Raphael Benaroya*

“Poland has not yet perished, so long as we still live.” Those are the opening words of Poland’s defiant and aspirational national anthem. They were written in 1797, just as Russia, Prussia, and Austria partitioned the ancient Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, erasing it from the map of Europe for 123 years. The anthem carries great relevance to raw memories of the recent past, marked by the Nazi German invasion

and the atrocities Poles suffered in World War II, followed by 50 years of Soviet occupation. Both experiences are deeply and indelibly etched in Poland's national consciousness.

It is no wonder, then, that the Poles view with great concern Russia's open aggression against nations to its East – the 2008 attack on Georgia, the 2014 seizure of Crimea, and the continued war of attrition Russia has been waging in Ukraine.

To its West, Germany is another source of concern for Poland, for two reasons. One is Germany's drive to source Russian gas directly, so as to bypass Ukraine as a hub for Russian energy exports to Western Europe. The other is Berlin's drive, directly or through proxies in Brussels, to impose social values on E.U. member states. In particular, Poland and other Eastern European states view Germany's "welcome" policy toward migrants as a threat to their national identity and sovereignty.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Poles emerged a free people once more, members of NATO and part of a new geostrategic reality essential to American interests in post-Cold War Europe and beyond. But the world is being transformed once again. Power centers have shifted, new threats have arisen and new alliances formed. China, Russia, and Germany are playing their own disruptive roles. The East-West divide has clearly shifted eastward, with Poland at the forefront.

A free, secure and prosperous Poland is in the strategic interest of the U.S. It is time for the U.S. to clearly communicate its commitment to Poland and develop a special security and economic partnership with it in the context of the North Atlantic Alliance.

Here is why:

First, the policy of "strategic patience" carried out by the last administration was interpreted as passiveness by our adversaries, Russia in particular. Russia's aggression in Eastern Europe has heated up NATO's eastern flank and placed Poland and other allies on edge. The U.S. and NATO should help alleviate the threat by shoring up Poland's security and economy and strengthening its deterrence posture – along with our own.

Second, since joining NATO in 1999, Poland has become an essential pillar of European security and a strong and willing partner to the U.S. It is one of the few alliance members to honor a commitment to spend 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense. As a strong partner, Poland actively participated in multinational Forces in conflict areas including Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kosovo and contributed to the defeat of ISIS. Helping Poland defend itself is in the direct interest of the U.S.

Third, Poland has worked to make its defense systems compatible with those of the U.S. Warsaw's military modernization program includes plans to buy more American military platforms, including missile defenses, helicopters, and jet fighters.

Fourth, recognizing Poland's earnestness about an American security partnership as well as the new European defense realities, the U. S. has begun rotating military units through Poland. Polish leaders make a strong case for turning this intermittent presence into a permanent one. They have openly called for the U.S. to build a permanent military base on Polish soil, moving some American defense assets east from Germany. Maintaining U.S. units will be significantly cheaper in Poland. U.S. forces will avoid the problems with regulations, protests, and complicated interest group politics that they currently face in Germany. Poland is, after all, among the E.U.'s most pro-American nations.

Fifth, Poles recognize that enhancing the U.S. troop presence in Poland will require an investment in supporting infrastructure. Over and over during my recent visit to Poland, I heard government officials say they are prepared to facilitate these projects in a meaningful way, including with billions of dollars in financial contributions.

Sixth, given the realities of recent and not-so-recent history, it is no surprise that the emerging energy alliance between Germany and Russia fills Poles with apprehension. Nord Stream 2, a new gas pipeline running from Russia to Germany across the Baltic Sea, is a particularly sensitive topic. Bluntly put, Poles fear that pipelines are replacing tanks as instruments of foreign domination. They see a German-Russian alliance as a marriage of German technology and Russian natural resources to monopolize the European energy market and achieve energy dominance in the E.U. President Trump has expressed concerns about Europe's over-reliance on gas supply from Russia on several occasions.

Seventh, just as the Poles are working to become NATO's forward military hub, they are intent on becoming Central Europe's energy hub. They are a leader in shedding dependency on Russian gas, rightly considering Russia as both an economic competitor and security adversary. They have already built the Baltic's only land-based liquefied natural gas terminal to import gas from the U. S. and other non-European sources. They are also developing an undersea pipeline to import gas from Norway. In the process, they are diversifying the E.U.'s energy sources and helping support U.S. energy export capacity. It was clear from my talks in Poland that, for trans-Atlantic relations, energy is emerging as a new opening for strategic cooperation.

Eighth, I returned from Poland shortly before FTSE Russell Index reclassified it as a "developed market" – the first nation of the old Soviet Empire to be so ranked and the first in the world to achieve this status in nearly a decade. Poland's fast growing, free market economy has benefited from sensible regulation, a reliable banking system, a stable currency, and investment in infrastructure. All those things plus incentives for foreign direct investment, effective tax collection, and a serious tackling of corruption have produced one of the world's most vigorous economies. Poland's "open for business" attitude helped deliver uninterrupted GDP growth for over 20 years: Poland was the only E.U. member to avoid the 2008 recession. Accordingly, Poland offers great opportunity for U.S. business.

So here is my takeaway from a week immersed in the Polish scene. The geopolitical security center of Europe has shifted eastward, to Poland. While allowing for its other interests, the U.S. should form a special strategic relationship with Poland in the context of trans-Atlantic cooperation. The U.S. should consider permanently placing U.S. troops in Poland and strengthen Poland's defense. It should also encourage its energy independence from Russia, and promote trade and investment in its healthy economy. We must recognize that Poland is NATO's new eastern flank and a great ally, and we should support her defense and economy. It is in our own interest as well as Poland's and Europe's.

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