

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**POLAND AND THE UNITED STATES:
A BRIDGE BETWEEN WEST AND EAST**

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THE GEOSTRATEGIC CONTEXT

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Any analysis of Poland's importance to the United States should rest on the tenet that Poland serves a critical role in Europe as a bridge between East and West, occupying a strategic geopolitical position in central Europe. In fact, Poland dominates the sub region of Central Europe with a population of some 40 million.^[1] If Poland and its neighbors in Central Europe are successful in their transition to liberal market democracies, the chances of Eastern (Ukraine, Belarus, Russia) and southern (Balkan) Europe to do the same are enhanced. These developments would all serve the larger, vital U.S. interest in a prosperous and stable Europe. The Poles themselves are clearly eager to play a useful role in supporting these interests within the region. As one analyst has observed: Polish leaders have consistently presented their country as a bridge to Ukraine, Belarus and Russia, and Warsaw has pursued a very active bilateral political engagement with these countries...Policy statements [by top Polish officials] reflect

a consensus about the importance of stabilizing the states emerging from the former

Soviet Union as a key foreign policy goal.^[2]

Poland's transition to a mature democracy and a free market economy is thus key to the larger U.S. goal of "a Europe that is truly integrated, democratic, prosperous and at peace."^[3] As such, it is important that the United States pursue a carefully nuanced policy toward Poland that will solidify the latter's progress within Europe. The United States wisely used its influence to ensure Polish acceptance into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and it now supports Poland's bid to enter the European Union (EU). However, while it is understandable that the U.S. would like to see a faster pace of defense modernization and economic reform within Poland, the U.S. must also exercise caution so as not to engender political, economic, or social instability in Poland. In other words, the United States must be careful not to demonstrate what is an often-regrettable American impatience for objectives to be achieved quickly. As detailed below, there are reasons why the Polish transition must be allowed to mature at a pace appropriate to Poland in order to best serve both Polish and U.S. interests in the long term.

In the remainder of this paper I shall briefly consider the Polish view of their national interests, and then assess whether this conflicts with the totality of U.S.

interests in Poland and Europe. I will then analyze current developments in the political-security, economic, and social-cultural areas. What issues represent challenges, or conversely, opportunities, for the Poles? On which issues might there be disagreements with the United States? What policies should the U.S. follow vis-à-vis Poland? As the analysis below indicates, I believe that any disagreements between the U.S. and Poland will ultimately be short-term, and will probably occur over differing viewpoints about specific policies or the timetable for achieving key objectives.

Polish National Interests and the United States

It is not surprising that Polish national interests would derive so fundamentally from their geographic location. While the Poles understand the advantages of their pivotal position in Central Europe (as noted above), they also remember a long history of dismemberment and invasion by European neighbors, particularly Germany and Russia. Thus, Poland's best hope of security is seen to lie in a multilateral, institutional framework. As a group of very senior Polish officials from the ministries of foreign affairs and national defense concluded just prior to Poland's accession into NATO: "Poland's independence can be effectively safeguarded only within a coalition framework. Hence the basic task of Polish policy is to prevent marginalization or isolation of the country in either the European and North Atlantic dimension, or in regional relations."^[4] Regardless

[5]

of the political party in power,— Polish policy from 1989-90 has therefore been to pursue a European and Euro-Atlantic policy, “to lock Poland into the West and its institutions.”^[6] For the Poles, membership in NATO represents the major first step in achieving security and successful integration into Europe. The country is now free to concentrate on its goal of accession into the European Union, which should cement Poland’s place within the Western institutional framework. The key objectives of political security and stability, and economic prosperity and stability, seem within reach.

Polish and U.S. national interests clearly coincide in these objectives. Certainly the United States has viewed the 1999 accession of Poland into NATO and other European security institutions as very much in the U.S. national interest. As acknowledged in the official U.S. national security strategy for 1999, “NATO enlargement has been a crucial element of the U.S. and Allied strategy to build an undivided, peaceful Europe...[The entry of Poland] will make the Alliance stronger while helping to enlarge Europe’s zone of democratic stability.”^[7] In a similar vein, the United States strongly supports Poland’s entry into the EU as part of its larger interest in supporting the process of European enlargement, integration, and prosperity.^[8] For their part the Poles have continued to perceive that a close relationship with the United States is a necessary element to achieving success in all these endeavors.

Political-Military Challenges and Opportunities

Considering the nexus of interests between Poland and the U.S., where might conflict occur? I see several potential areas of disagreement. Perhaps the most important concerns the larger question of the role of NATO in the future. As William Wallace has pointed out, the accession of Poland and two other former Warsaw Pact states represents an important stage in the transformation of NATO from a Cold War alliance—but a transformation to what? Is NATO to be an organization for collective security, building mutual confidence among all European states across the region, and conceivably including Russia? Or is to be an organization for collective defense against post-imperial Russia?^[9] If the former purpose were the U.S. intent, then this would be much more in accord with Polish desires. In its role as a “bridge,” the Polish government is concerned about overcoming mistrust and grievances with its neighbors in the East, especially the Ukraine and Russia. The Polish inclination would be to incorporate these two Eastern neighbors into Europe rather than isolate them. The Polish relationship with Russia has additional significance because of the presence of the Russians’ Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad, isolated from Russia between Poland and Lithuania. The Poles are concerned about the economic and political viability of this poor neighbor of one million inhabitants due to the repercussions for Poland, but they are equally concerned about Russian

perceptions of foreign policies aimed at Kaliningrad. While it would be in the Polish interest to have the area demilitarized, this does not seem likely while Russia remains so suspicious of U.S. and European intentions. The Kaliningrad situation has been further enflamed recently by reports that Moscow has deployed tactical nuclear weapons there, a charge which Russia has denied.^[10] Thus, Kaliningrad has the potential to become a major concern for Poland, while for the U.S. Kaliningrad is only a small factor in its overall strategic relationship with Russia. Kaliningrad aptly demonstrates the type of dilemma the Poles may face in the future, particularly if the United States decides to push NATO toward a more hostile policy of collective defense against Russia. While this would probably be viewed as harmful to Polish national interests, Poland would probably see no other option but to support NATO policy publicly (and perhaps attempt to quietly influence policy behind the scenes).^[11] In any case I believe that U.S. policy makers need to be sensitive to Polish concerns regarding Russia and related issues.

On a more pragmatic level, Poland and the U.S. have some differences about the pace of military modernization within Poland. Within the past two months, both the secretary-general of NATO (George Robertson) and the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (General Joseph Ralston) have criticized Poland's delay in modernizing its Soviet-era military equipment to NATO standards, to ensure

interoperability. The Poles reportedly spend less on their defense needs than any other NATO country.^[12] In fact, the Polish Defense Ministry and Polish Parliament have had numerous debates on this issue, with the government ultimately approving a six-year modernization plan on January 30th, 2001. With this new plan and budget, Poland should increase its current level of spending 1.9 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on national defense to 2.1 percent. Yet even with this increase, the plan projects that only one-third of the Polish army will meet NATO standards by 2006, and it will be difficult for Poland to afford to upgrade to a badly-needed, modern, multi-role combat aircraft. In my opinion U.S. policy in this area should be carefully considered. It would not be in the U.S. interest to pressure the Polish government unduly toward increasing the defense budget and military modernization when the country has competing, legitimate concerns about economic and social progress. This is particularly true as Poland attempts to make the necessarily painful reforms to meet EU accession standards. It is also important that the United States not create undue divisions within political parties and factions within Poland. The Poles need a strong and unified government that can maintain popular support as it makes the difficult decisions necessary to restructure the Polish economy and related institutions.

Economic Challenges and Opportunities

Now that Poland has joined NATO, its major goal is accession into the European Union. As Rupnik convincingly argues, not only are there obvious economic motives for membership, but integration into the EU is seen by Central European states as “an indicator of the success and irreversibility of their democratic transitions.” [\[13\]](#) Rupnik makes a good case for the fact that, in spite of changing governments in Poland and Hungary over the last decade, it is the prospect of EU accession that has helped leaders in these countries to adhere to “reform-oriented economic policy and Western-oriented foreign policy.” [\[14\]](#) Clearly these trends are in the U.S. national interest, and form part of the American rationale for support of Poland’s accession into the European Union. In addition, the United States would be wise to support this accession based upon a democratic peace-type rationale offered by Rupnik. In his view, Poland and its neighbors also view the EU as “creat[ing] such a web of interdependence among member states as to make conflict unthinkable.” [\[15\]](#)

Along with other Central European neighbors, Poland formally opened negotiations with the EU in March 1998. While initially both the EU and the new applicants had reason to believe that membership negotiations could be concluded in 2001, with full membership beginning at the end of 2002, it now seems more likely that there will be a delay of one to two years. Official Polish statements still emphasize that Poland is sticking to its target of joining the EU in 2003, but

realistically 2004 seems to be more feasible. It is considered important that the first wave of new members join early enough in 2004 in order to participate in the elections for the European Parliament that are scheduled for that year.

Significantly, Poland has already essentially met the political, or “civic” requirements for membership defined in the 1993 “Copenhagen criteria,” which include the following stipulations: “the candidate country has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities...”^[16] There seems little doubt that Poland will eventually meet the economic requirements, too; but the debate is over the exact time frame. As the largest applicant for EU membership, Poland has the advantage of possessing a large potential market of consumers, but its very size also makes Poland harder to digest, with negotiations more complex and protracted. Poland would be the sixth biggest country in an enlarged EU of 27 members.^[17]

At the start of February of this year Poland had completed 14 of 29 chapters necessary for the EU membership negotiation process, and the government planned to complete five more by this summer.^[18] This involves difficult and potentially sensitive issues like the environment and the free movement of capital and people. As might be expected, having developed its industrial base under the

old Soviet heavy industry model, Poland has a number of environmental areas to clean-up. In addition, as a leading coal producer for many years—and dependent upon coal itself for the majority of energy needs—Poland has its work cut out to transform its economy into dependence on oil and gas.^[19] However, Poland's neighbors in the EU are probably most concerned about Poland's large and inefficient farm sector, and about the prospect of a large influx of Polish workers into the more developed economies once accession is completed. In response, the Poles claim with some justification that there will be little migration of their low-skilled workers into countries like Germany, especially as the Polish economy continues to experience steady growth and foreign direct investment. Grabbe points out that a more likely scenario is that countries like Poland would lose their highly skilled workers to Western Europe (the proverbial “brain drain”) rather than unskilled workers.^[20] Not surprisingly, the Polish government propounds this view, and has claimed that more Poles have actually returned to Poland in the past few years than had initially left.

There are many other significant issues regarding Poland and the EU that are worth considering, such as the rise in Polish unemployment due to the restructuring of Polish industry required for EU membership, and how that growing unemployment might weaken public support for further structural reforms necessary for Poland's successful integration into the EU.^[21]

However, the objective of this analysis is to explore the nexus between U.S. and Polish interests. Thus, I will consider it as a given that Poland will enter the EU within the next several years. What challenges and opportunities would derive from that development?

A challenge for both Poland and the United States pertains to how Polish membership in the EU will transform its useful role of “integrating eastern markets and constructive engagement with their political leaders [which] are Poland’s major contribution to European security, providing both NATO and the EU with a stable link in a troubled region.”^[22] A major concern is that Poland will have to tighten its external border controls with Ukraine, Belarus and Kaliningrad to meet EU “Schengen Agreement” requirements which are aimed at stemming migratory flows. These requirements have the potential to worsen diplomatic relations while further isolating and impoverishing Ukraine, Kaliningrad, and Belarus. In fact, as Poland began to tighten cross-border movements beginning in 1997-98, Russia lodged major protests and Belarus withdrew its ambassador temporarily.^[23] Not only does the tightening of border controls adversely affect the economies of these Polish neighbors, but it also reduces the very important political and civic interactions with Ukraine, Belarus, and Kaliningrad.^[24] These developments are not in the interest of either Poland or the United States, for the relationships that are being shaped now “will have

long-term effects on the EU's [and by extension, Poland's] ability to act as a stabilizing force in its neighborhood."^[25] Thus, it seems clear that it would be in the best interest of both the U.S. and Poland for the U.S. to support Polish efforts to influence the EU to mitigate the negative consequences of EU border policies on key nations like Ukraine.^[26] If necessary, the United States should pursue political and economic assistance policies on its own initiative to assist Ukraine (and Belarus) as Poland becomes a member of the European Union. This would ultimately be in Poland's national interest, and it is in accord with long-standing U.S. initiatives to assist Ukrainian development along a progressive path, such as the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program.

Social-Cultural Opportunities and Challenges

It is extremely difficult for any nation to go through the major transformation of polity, economy, and society that Poland has been engaged upon, without sustained popular support. In this regard Poland has been fortunate. I agree with Timothy Garton Ash's judgment of 1999 that Poland (along with Hungary, East Germany, and the Czech Republic) has "clearly, beyond any reasonable doubt, already made the transition to something approaching the Western normality of freedom, market economy, democracy, and the rule of law."^[27] As with the other Central European states, Poland was lucky enough to undergo a nonviolent

revolution due in large part to the slow development of a civic society which was able to use peaceful mass civil disobedience, skillfully channeled by a committed opposition elite. In turn, that civic society owed its roots to the strong nationalistic tradition of Roman Catholicism, an element that was also essential to the origins of the Solidarity labor movement and its wider civic incarnation.

Bideleux and Jeffries are surely correct in underscoring that Catholicism has played a key role as “as the major legally permitted alternative set of beliefs and values which could compete with official Marxism-Leninism and atheism.”[\[28\]](#)

Because of this background the Poles have found it easier to initially embrace “Western” values.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the process is either simple or quick to implement. Bideleux and Jeffries present an excellent historical analysis of why building a new order and entirely new mindset among Central and East Europeans is such a complex undertaking, much more difficult than establishing the formal governmental and legal institutions of a democracy.[\[29\]](#) Again, while the Poles might be more fortunate than most in having a few institutions to help assist with the transformation process, it takes time to develop the many social networks and groupings that under gird democracy (and the market) and makes it work. Democratic and civic values and cultures grow very slowly, and at the same time are accompanied by phenomena such as crime (including drug

trafficking) and corruption, and impatience, frustration, disorientation, alienation and even extremism. Obviously this is only enhanced by the difficult economic and other structural reforms demanded by a functioning democracy and market economy; reforms which lead to unemployment and disadvantage many, at least in the short run.

The fact that Poland is experiencing all these trends is not unexpected, and should be viewed with an understanding eye by outsiders such as the United States. To push changes too quickly and too vigorously on countries like Poland might very well be counter-productive. At the same time, Eastern Europeans themselves want dedicated, strong Western support for their efforts, and are asking for “strong leadership, clearly articulated priorities and decisive action by those with the resources and the moral responsibility to prevent the backsliding of Eastern Europe.”^[30] In my view the United States needs to be very vocal about its support for Polish efforts to consolidate democracy and a free market system, while understanding that this process takes time, and that it must be done in a manner that acknowledges unique aspects of Polish history and culture. This would imply, for instance, that the U.S. would realize the critical role played by Polish institutions such as trade unions (Solidarity) and the Catholic Church, and would not be unduly critical of their influence within Polish society as it progresses. Not all countries can mirror the American model—nor should they.

Summing Up: The United States and Poland

As my analysis above has attempted to demonstrate, Poland has played a very useful role as a bridge between Western and Eastern Europe. This is particularly true with regard to relations with Russia (including Kaliningrad), Ukraine, and Belarus, among others. It is in the interest of both the U.S. and Poland that the Poles continue to play that role, and that they serve as the stable linchpin of Central Europe. But they will only be able to sustain those roles, and to continue to integrate successfully into NATO and ultimately the European Union, if given some leeway and support by both the United States and Europe. The U.S. must always consider Poland's geostrategic position when evaluating Polish policies toward its neighbors. Further, the U.S. should exercise moderation regarding its expectations of progress in Poland. Two generations of enforced communism cannot be erased overnight, or even within five to ten years. If those factors are kept in mind, then there should be few instances where Polish and American interests will seriously collide. Rather, differences of specific policies or nuances would be the norm, as is the case with all friendly nations. While this might seem to be a rather innocuous point upon which to conclude, the fact that the United States has "normal relations" with a state viewed as part and parcel of the totalitarian enemy until just over a decade ago is a momentous development.

KEY QUESTIONS ON POLISH ISSUES

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Political:

1. How will Poland balance its desire to maintain its rediscovered national sovereignty with the ongoing push toward European integration?
2. How can Poland continue to serve an effective role as a bridge between Western and Eastern Europe now that it is a member of NATO, and will eventually become a member of the European Union?
3. How much emphasis such Poland place upon the concept of Central European cooperation (as symbolized by the Visegrad group) versus wider European cooperation? Will membership in the EU obviate the rationale for any Central European cooperation?
4. How can Poland deal effectively with the Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad as both an autonomous neighboring entity, and as an integral part of Russia?
5. How will Poland pursue continuing close relations with the United States while also pursuing the wider goal of greater European integration?
6. Should Poland attempt to pursue any modifications to Polish borders, especially with reference to Germany?

Military:

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7. How can Poland continue to meet NATO goals for modernization of its armed forces and not put its economic transition at risk, especially the key objective of EU membership?
 8. Once Poland becomes a member of the European Union, how will it balance its role in NATO with a possibly contradictory role in the European Security

Defense Program?

9. How can Poland reconcile the formerly respected role of its military as the symbol of Polish nationalism with the more recent military role as the enforcer of martial law and Soviet oppression?

10. What policy should Poland espouse with reference to (U.S.) national missile defense and theater missile defense plans? How might this affect Polish relations with Russia?

11. What policy should Poland support regarding further enlargement of NATO? Should Poland support integration of the Baltic republics even if that antagonizes Russia?

Economic:

12. How can Poland continue its role of serving as an economic bridge between struggling countries like the Ukraine, Belarus and Kaliningrad when its accession into the European Union requires it to tighten its border controls with those countries (as called for in the Schengen Agreement)?

13. Considering that Poland still derives much of its natural gas from Russia, what implications does this have for Polish economic security? What are the alternatives, particularly if Poland's abundant natural resources of coal cannot be effectively employed due to environmental considerations?

14. What should be Poland's role in the wider European Union, and in the international economic system?

15. How can Poland reconcile the important historic role of trade unions such as Solidarity with the necessity of restructuring and other changes demanded by the transition to a market economy (which often disadvantage trade unions)?

16. How can Poland protect its tradition of small farm agriculture as it enters the

EU—or is this even a tradition worth saving?

Social-Cultural:

17. How can the Poles continue to respect and rely upon the Catholic Church as an important symbol of nationalism and self-pride in this difficult transition time, while reducing the influence of the Church in governmental policies to a reasonable balance?

18. How can Poland continue to provide its people with what are perceived to be the positive gains of a socialist legacy (health care and other benefits) while effectively transitioning to a private property and market-based system?

19. How can Poland inculcate the values of public service and other civic practices so as to overcome the legacies of corruption and selfishness?

20. How can the Polish government continue to keep the trust and support of the majority of the people—especially the young—when there are still many difficult transition points ahead and rewards are slow in coming?

[1] As Timothy Garton Ash has so eloquently argued, the concept of “Central Europe” is much more than a geographical one: “to be ‘Central European’ in contemporary political usage means to be civilized, democratic, cooperative—and therefore to have a better chance of joining NATO and the EU. In fact, the argument threatens to become circular: NATO and the EU welcome ‘Central Europeans’ so ‘Central Europeans’ are those whom NATO and the EU welcome.” In “The Puzzle of Central Europe,” *The New York Review of Books*, March 18, 1999, 18.

[2] Heather Grabbe, “The Sharp Edges of Europe: Extending Schengen Eastwards,” *International Affairs* 76, 3 (July 2000), 529-530.

[3] The White House, *A National Security Strategy for a New Century* (Washington, D.C., December 1999), 29. While the past Clinton Administration produced this document, there is no reason to believe that the long-standing, bipartisan consensus on the vital importance of European stability to the United States will change.

[4] Andrzej Ananicz et al., “Poland-NATO Report” (Warsaw: Institute for Public Affairs, 1995), at <http://www.cdfc.cz/Nato/Enlarg/natopo1.htm#AIMS>. This was a comprehensive study sponsored by the Euro-Atlantic Association and the Stefan Batory Foundation, conducted by the

most senior-level Polish officials.

[5] While there are some differences in emphasis and specific policies between the major Polish political parties and coalitions—particularly on economic aspects—in this paper I address what I perceive to be the fundamental and overarching Polish interests and objectives. Just as Republicans and Democrats in the U.S. profess a general consensus for supporting free market, liberal democratic systems in the world, so essentially do all Polish sectors support certain interests and objectives.

[6] Ananicz et al.

[7] The White House, 29.

[8] Ibid., 33. Again, while the Clinton Administration produced this strategy, there is strong bipartisan agreement on the importance of EU enlargement and integration for prosperity within Europe.

[9] William Wallace, “From the Atlantic to the Bug, from the Arctic to the Tigris? The Transformation of the EU,” *International Affairs* 76, 3 (2000), 475-493.

[10] “Russia Ridicules Fresh Baltic Enclave Arms Report,” Reuters, February 15, 2001, at Poland@InsideWorld.com.

[11] I believe that the Poles view the issue of national missile defense (NMD) in similar terms. While they tend to view U.S. insistence on developing NMD as counterproductive to U.S.-Russian relations (and their own relationship with Russia), they obviously do not wish to jeopardize their important relationship with the U.S. by public criticism.

[12] For example, see “NATO Chief Urges New Members to Reform Further,” Reuters, February 23, 2001, at Poland@InsideWorld.com; and “Cash Flow Problems for the Armed Forces,” Reuters, February 1, 2001, at Poland@InsideWorld.com.

[13] Jacques Rupnik, “Eastern Europe: The International Context,” *Journal of Democracy* 11, 2 (April 2000), 123.

[14] Ibid., 125.

[15] Ibid., 123-124. In a nutshell, the “democratic peace” thesis holds that democracies (which also tend to trade with one another) do not fight one another. The Central European states of Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia demonstrated their faith in this thesis from an early date as they formed the Visegrad group in 1990 for regional cooperation purposes, to be joined by the economic, cooperative Central European Free Trade Agreement in 1993.

[16] Wallace, 485. Note that the first condition for EU membership under the Copenhagen criteria concerns democracy and human rights; the economic qualifications are listed second!

[17] “EU Commissioner Sees Poland Joining in First Wave,” Reuters, February 5, 2001, at Poland@InsideWorld.com.

[18] “Poland Fears Weak EU Support for Enlargement,” Reuters, February 5, 2001, at

Poland@InsideWorld.com.

[19] The Economist Intelligence Unit, "Poland: Country Profile 2000" (December 2000), contains a wealth of statistics and analysis of Polish historical political, infrastructural and economic trends. At http://db.eiu.com/reports.asp?titl...oland&valname=CRAPLC&doc_id=670688.

[20] Grabbe, 522. She also points out that previous EU enlargements produced only limited migration from the poorer Mediterranean states into the richer northern European states.

[21] "Government Vows to Halt Growing Unemployment," Reuters, January 29, 2001, at Poland@InsideWorld.com.

[22] Grabbe, 530.

[23] Ibid., 532.

[24] Ibid., 531.

[25] Ibid., 536.

[26] Ibid., 534.

[27] Timothy Garton Ash, "Ten Years After," *The New York Review of Books*, November 18, 1999, 19.

[28] Robert Bideleux and Ian Jeffries, *A History of Eastern Europe: Crisis and Change* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 546.

[29] Ibid., 590-607.

[30] Ibid., 604. Hungary's Foreign Minister Geza Jeszenszky made this statement in 1993.