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Poland, NATO, and the Bear

In December 1993, Foreign Minister of Poland, Andrzej Olechowski, told an audience at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, "... at the forthcoming NATO summit President Clinton will articulate his vision of trans-Atlantic security and prosperity, and a strong and unbreakable link between the United States and Europe. And we must insist that Poland ... be included in such a Europe." At a later point in his speech he added that Poland "has to be anchored in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization."¹ This paper will address reasons for Poland's request, what NATO offered in reply, possible ramifications of NATO's actions, and policy options open to the United States in this arena.

Poland does not stand alone in its search for security under the NATO umbrella. Several ex-Warsaw Pact countries have made the same request. This paper will focus on Poland because it has led the nations of East-Central Europe in the transition from communism to a free market system and will probably act as the forerunner in that region's national security dealings. For that reason, even though we will be looking primarily at Poland, the issues discussed here will also pertain to the majority of East-Central Europe.

In 1980, Lech Walesa, an electrician, was the unlikely leader of the strongest movement against communist oppression in an Iron Curtain state. To the west he saw stable economic growth fostered by the freedom inherent in liberal democratic societies. In his own country, Poland, and to the east he saw sluggish economies couched in rigid, centrally-controlled bureaucracies which promoted inefficiency and resulted in chronic shortages of consumer goods. Walesa and a large percentage of his countrymen wanted to pull Poland out of the grip of communism and join the democratic states of the west, but Poland was caught in the vise of the forty-year-old Cold War between the East and West.

The USSR would not let Poland out of its grasp because of Poland's wealth of manpower and

¹Andrzej Olechowski, address, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, 14 Dec 1993: Legislate (Transcript ID: 1021260).

natural resources, and because it served as a buffer between the West and the Soviet borders. Western Europe and the United States would not intervene on Poland's behalf for fear that such action would make the great Russian Bear angry and possibly open the closet door behind which lurks nuclear holocaust and other unspeakable horrors. For Walesa and millions of other East-Central Europeans, the future held little promise of change.

Today, Polish President Walesa is looking at a much different picture. The Cold War is over. Freedom and democracy won out over oppression and communism. The Polish economy is the fastest growing of all the ex-communist states and the government is being run by representatives elected by the populace. But President Walesa is far from comfortable in this new setting. A closer look at Poland's history and present situation reveals the reasons for his uneasiness.

During the last fifty years, Poland has been dominated by outside forces. Without the advantage of ally-provided help, it was overwhelmed by the German blitzkrieg at the beginning of World War II and held under Nazi rule until the Russians expelled the Germans in 1945. Since that time the Poles have endured a stifling and sometimes harsh communist rule imposed by the Soviets. Throughout the years the Poles demonstrated their discontent with oppressive government, but their efforts were largely ineffective until Walesa headed a massive workers' unions "Solidarity" movement in 1980. Understandably, when communism in East-Central Europe collapsed in 1989, Walesa and his supporters sought to put as much distance as possible between Poland and its former Soviet oppressors.

In January 1990, Walesa implemented a "shock therapy" plan to hasten the country's transition to a free market economy.² The stated objectives of the plan were: macroeconomic stabilization; economic liberalization; privatization; construction of a "social safety net"; and aggressive pursuit of international financial support.³ Four years later the comparative success of that plan is evidenced by the country's economic indicators for 1993. GDP rose by more than 4 percent, and industrial production was 7.6 percent higher in the first six months than in the same period of the

²"Fact Sheet: Poland," US Department of State Dispatch 3 May 1993: 317.

³Timothy A. Byrnes, "One Leap Forward, One Step Back," rev. of Poland's Jump to the Market Economy, by Jeffrey Sachs, Commonwealth 19 Nov 1993: 29.

year before. Although unemployment was about 15 percent, private sector employment accounted for 60 percent of the work force, and private sector jobs compensated for the 500,000 jobs that vanished in the state sector.⁴ Inflation, though still high, has recently been dropping, and the stock exchange index nearly doubled during the second quarter of the year.⁵

Poland did not achieve such success without significant pain though, and now much of the populace is seeking a more moderate form of change. Since 1990, Poland has had five prime ministers, four governments, three national elections, and two parliaments.⁶ Such political activity is indicative of a system infused with energy yet plagued with uncertainty. Part of the uncertainty is a result of asking a people who have experienced tyranny and foreign occupation for two centuries to trust their leaders to take them into the future.⁷ Another sticky cog in the machine that is driving the transition is the persistent perception - a legacy of communism - that new wealth and rich businesses are inherently corrupt.

That is not the only holdover from the centrally-controlled governments of the past. Recent polls showed that more than 70 percent of East-Central Europeans feel that the state should provide a place to work, national health service, housing, education, and other services. With these mindsets at work it is easy to see why the Polish Parliament was captured by a coalition of "post-Communist" parties in its most recent elections. This does not mean the end for democratic and free market reforms in that region, for in Poland and other East-Central European states, post-Communist Communists have evolved as pro-market, pro-competition, and pro-reform socialists, not unlike left-wing parties in Western Europe.⁸ What this latest turn in Polish politics reflects is public uneasiness about the future and a desire to slow the rate of transition. Certainly the results of the last election point to continuing instability in Polish society.

What is happening to the east is critical to Poland's future. Russia is reeling from its own form of shock therapy. Following a violent power struggle, President Yeltsin dissolved the Russian

⁴George Zarycky, "And Now the Hard Part," *Freedom Review* Jan-Feb 1994: 43.

⁵"Europe's Tiger," *The Economist* 28 Aug 1993: 48.

⁶Zarycky 42.

⁷Byrnes 30.

⁸Zarycky 42.

Parliament last October and called for new elections to be held the following December. The Russian electorate had been voicing discontent with the harsh conditions they had been forced to endure during their country's transition from a centrally-controlled economy to a free market economy, so it was of little surprise when they elected several anti-reform Communists to parliament, including Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, an ultra-brash ultra nationalist.

Though Zhirinovskiy's remarks about reclaiming Alaska for Mother Russia were considered almost comical, he obviously struck a chord with his countrymen who would like to see Russia regain its previous international status. Even antics which resulted in him being kicked out of Bulgaria, barred from Germany, and declared persona non grata in Romania, raised little more than a few political lampoons at home.⁹ Such disinterest leaves the West to wonder if grandstanding for Russia at the expense of other nations reflects the real desires of the Russian people. In any case, Zhirinovskiy's suggestion that Germany and Russia should carve up Poland undoubtedly caught the attention of Walesa and his countrymen.

Should Poland and other East-Central European nations be concerned about such remarks? Is Russia powerful enough to overrun them again? The answer to both questions is an unqualified yes. Even though Russia is no longer in control of the massive Soviet military machine, it still maintains one of the world's largest militaries, and no one disputes its ability to still push its weight around.

Poland's Security Dilemma

Building and maintaining a strong national security position for Poland will not be an easy feat for Walesa. But the internal instability which his country is experiencing and the looming presence of a disgruntled Bear to the east makes the necessity for national security all that more pressing.

Poland's options to fill its security needs are fairly straightforward. Any attempts to build domestic forces capable of withstanding a unilateral confrontation with Russia would be futile.

⁹Kevin Fedarko, "Hello, I Must Be Going," Time 10 Jan 1994: 34-35.

Russia's might is simply too great for Poland, its East-Central European neighbors, or a coalition of all of them. A multilateral alliance with West European states would be stronger but still no match for Russia's nuclear arsenal. US conventional and nuclear forces provide a large portion of West Europe's security umbrella through NATO, so Walesa and his East-Central European counterparts concluded that the most effective and efficient course of action would be to join NATO, rather than attempt to erect separate, cumbersome umbrellas.

In September 1993, even before Zhirinovsky's meteoric rise to fame, Walesa broached the subject of Polish membership in NATO with Yeltsin and NATO Secretary General Manfred Woerner. Yeltsin gave an apparent green light to the venture in a joint communiqué following his summit with Walesa, but later recanted his approval under pressure from Russian military and political leaders. Mr. Woerner encouraged the expansion of NATO, but it was clear that, although Alliance policy was often driven by Europeans, the issue could not be resolved until President Clinton became engaged.¹⁰

The Partnership for Peace

NATO essentially had three alternatives to consider in the face of Poland's request: offer immediate entry into the Alliance; deny any possibility of entry; or offer a limited partnership with an option for full membership at a later date. Before the NATO leaders met to determine their response several other East-Central European nations added their requests to that of Poland.

Immediate acceptance into the Alliance was opposed by some US officials who feared diluting NATO by adding members that could confuse its mission or drag it into agreements to defend countries that are still economically and politically unstable.¹¹ Such a move would also place an extra burden on the Alliance (especially the US) since the joining states would have severely weakened defense forces and incompatible weapons to add to NATO's forces. By far the most compelling argument against offering the hopeful applicants immediate membership was the risk

¹⁰Frederick Kemp, "NATO Head Urges Alliance To Expand Membership to Ex-Warsaw Pact Nations," The Wall Street Journal 13 Sep 1993: A11J.

¹¹Kemp A11J.

of angering Russia and forcing it into a corner where it must lash out at the offenders or back down and suffer great international embarrassment.

Denying Poland's request was also unacceptable because of the vulnerable position in which it would leave that country. Clearly such action would lead to further instability in the region which is in direct contradiction to the purpose and mission of the Alliance.

Against this background and considerable behind the scenes maneuvering orchestrated by the US, NATO, at its January 1994 Heads of States meeting, agreed to offer Poland and other ex-Warsaw Pact nations limited interaction with the Alliance through a NATO adjunct, Partnership for Peace (PFP), created expressly for them. PFP was envisioned as a holding tank for NATO applicants in which they could participate in NATO exercises while working to fulfill as yet unspecified requirements for entry into the Alliance. Unstated, but clearly understood by all, was that PFP bought time for Russia to get accustomed to the idea of its ex-allies joining the ranks of its ex-nemesis, and for the entire region to achieve greater progress and stability. The applicants reluctantly accepted the PFP concept as the consolation prize.¹²

The Real Issue

Poland is seeking a sturdy house in which to find shelter if a hungry Bear comes out of the woods. NATO, the owner of the house, has essentially given Poland and its neighbors permission to play in the yard, but has made no indication as to whether or not the front door will open if the Bear shows up looking for an easy meal. PFP gives no guarantees. It lets the children play nervously in the yard while everyone hopes the Bear finds enough to satisfy its huge appetite within the confines of its forest.

Poland's motive for requesting entry into NATO is clear; it wants protection from possible Russian attempts at reoccupation. NATO's response is equally ambiguous; it may or may not provide the needed protection.

¹²Paul Lewis, "U.S. Offers Joint Military Games As Step to Poland's NATO Ties," The New York Times 8 Jan 1994: 1.

The Ramifications

Though PFP is an ambitious sounding program, the noncommittal policy upon which it is founded renders it a small step in a very large arena. Some will proclaim its prudence, while others view it as a lost opportunity to show the strength and convictions of the world's lone remaining superpower. The members of the PFP are not the only ones left to question the support of NATO; Russia is also left guessing. Certainly any rational Russian leader would realize that even the risk of NATO intervention far outweighs any gains which could be achieved by reoccupying Poland or any of its East-Central European neighbors.

PFP's real value can be determined by looking at the gains of its members measured against their objectives. Poland was seeking a formal security commitment from NATO; it did not receive it. In addition, it did not obtain any substantial guidance on what it will take to join NATO, such as a timetable or list of prerequisites. Perhaps that is because its membership in the Alliance is more dependent on the disposition of Russia's leaders than on Poland's qualifications. The bottom line is that Walesa did not achieve the goal he has set for Poland's national security.

This is not to say that Poland is going away empty-handed. PFP undeniably offers an initial step toward full membership in NATO - a step which no serious leader could turn down. But much of the real worth of PFP is dependent on the next move of NATO, which continues to look to the US for guidance.

The Strategic Alternatives

The US can follow one of three courses in its next step to promote PFP. The first option is the adoption of a wait-and-see attitude. This would entail involving Poland and the other PFP members in NATO exercises and monitoring the reaction of Russia's leaders. We could then find a level of involvement which Russia approves of and steadily increase the level of involvement in small increments. This desensitization approach would take an indefinite amount of time, and it relies heavily on Russian politics, which in turn could be affected by responses to unrelated factors.

The second option is to implement a policy of intervention in any attacks on PFP members. Such a policy would discount Russian moods and reactions, which would undoubtedly raise the fur on the Bear's back. It would also impel NATO into any PFP border or regional disputes, including intra-PFP conflicts. The seemingly endless conflict in the Balkans belies the hazards of following this policy option.

In the final alternative, NATO defines a timetable and list of prerequisites for PFP members to gain entry into the Alliance. In addition, NATO formally reserves the right to intervene in any hostilities carried out against PFP members. This policy does not extend the NATO umbrella over the PFP members, but it gives them something concrete to work toward. It also issues a firm warning to any aspiring aggressors while allowing the Alliance to avoid entanglement in inappropriate situations. This option, though not perfect, holds obvious advantages over the other alternatives.

Conclusion

The US has spent the last fifty years committed to the growth of democracy, European unity, and the curtailment of oppressive communism. We now stand at the threshold of tremendous growth of the principals we have pursued. One could argue, if we base our actions on fear of the possible reactions from Russia, then the Cold War is still alive. Though we should not back Russia into a corner, we also should not shrink in the face of its banter about its former allies.

A firm policy which promotes a strong PFP with a structured evolution into NATO membership will provide Poland and others a guardrail along their path to full sovereignty in a free market system. Such a policy would lead to a more stable East-Central Europe by calming some of the trepidation of the countries in that region. In addition, by clearly stating our intentions to Russia it will have time to accept the eventual admission of its former satellite states into NATO. National security policy has consistently achieved its greatest results when it has been firm, open, and direct. The situation in Poland is prime for that approach today.