

Forbes

Poland Wants U.S. Troops As Part Of EU Deal With Britain: America The Big Loser

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January 9, 2016

Immigration is a hot issue in Europe. But it really doesn't concern the U.S. Whether British citizens should have to provide welfare benefits for Polish visitors isn't something most Americans think about.

Yet that question might determine whether U.S. troops end up stationed in Poland to face down the Russian menace, as conceived by Warsaw. The new Polish government has refused to back London's request for immigration controls. Unless, maybe, Britain supports permanent NATO bases in Poland. And we all know which country would be expected to furnish the necessary garrisons.

It's easy to sympathize with Poland. The old Mexican saying was poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States. For Poland it should be poor Poland, however close to or far from God, stuck between Germany (including Prussia and Austria) and Russia. That once was a fate not to be wished on anyone.

The end of the Cold War seemed to offer a welcome respite. Reunified Germany had become more European than almost anyone else in Europe, seemingly unwilling to use its capable military for anything. And Russia was a shadow of the Soviet Union, lacking both ability and will to threaten its neighbors. The specter of foreign invasion finally seemed to have been banished from Poland.

Still, nationalist Poles didn't particularly like their neighbors, east or west. And after President Lech Kaczynski died in a 2010 airplane accident in Russia, his twin brother, former Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski, dismissed the obvious cause of bad weather and presumed a malign Russian conspiracy. He then was in opposition, so his dubious imaginings mattered little. But as chairman he dominates the Law and Justice Party, which won last October's election and since has ruthlessly consolidated power with little regard for law. His paranoia inflames fears already high after Moscow's annexation of Crimea and support for Ukrainian separatists.

While it has been said that even paranoids have enemies, in the case of Poland that might not be true. Despite all the fevered emotion there appears to be no practical threat from Russia against its now worried neighbor.

Vladimir Putin isn't cute and cuddly. He doesn't let the niceties of international law get in the way of what he believes to be necessary to advance Russia's interests. Hence backing the separation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia, acquiring Crimea, and supporting ethnic Russian separatists in Ukraine.

But he's no Hitler. The forgoing isn't much of an imperial domain after 16 years in power. And Putin's objectives have been carefully limited: protect Moscow's influence in border territories once part of the Soviet Union, especially if inhabited by ethnic Russians. Indeed, despite all of his maneuvering, he's made no effort to swallow Georgia or Ukraine, which would be a disastrous overreach.

There's even less for Russia in Poland. It was not part of the Soviet Union and is not filled with fellow Russians. Moreover, Moscow cut out its pound of flesh at the close of World War II, essentially moving both countries westward. All Russia could take today would be indigestible Polish territory inhabited by angry patriotic Poles. Putin is many things, but not a fool, which he would have to be to inaugurate war against Warsaw for such a counterproductive purpose.

Which means despite all its fussing and worrying, Poland faces no greater threat today than it did in 1989. No one's going to invade. Ironically, establishing NATO bases is more likely to cause Russia to view Warsaw as a threat. Even that wouldn't spark a violent military response, but it would intensify Moscow's paranoia.

Of course, Poles still may be worried. If so, they should do more themselves. Only last year did Warsaw bother to meet the two percent of GDP military spending expected of alliance members. Poland's armed forces remain but number eight in size within NATO. That's not nearly enough if the country really believes itself to be a Putin target. Warsaw should develop a tough territorial defense which would make invasion by anyone far too expensive to be worth a try. If Poland's defense is only worth two cents on the dollar for Poles, why should everyone else in NATO contribute?

But the current government expects them to do so. When Polish President Andrzej Duda took office last year, he announced: "We need more guarantees from NATO, not only we as Poland but the whole of Central and Eastern Europe, in the current difficult geopolitical situation." Because of Russia "We need a greater NATO presence in this part of Europe." He added, "We do not want to be the buffer zone. We want to be the real eastern flank of the alliance."

At the last NATO Summit in September, 2014 members agreed to establish a rapid reaction force. However, the unit's personnel remain in their home countries.

Since then Warsaw has been pushing for a permanent base with a couple of heavy combat brigades comprising 3000-5000 men. Opposition has been strong since it would violate a 1997

treaty signed with Russia that limits the NATO presence in former Warsaw Pact states. The Poles want to discard the agreement, while other alliance members, such as Germany, oppose creating another point of contention with Moscow.

Duda's election intensified Poland's demands. Now the new government, under fire for its authoritarian tendencies, is hoping to score an international victory at the July NATO Summit, hosted by Warsaw. Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski complained: "there aren't, aside from a token presence, any significant allied forces or defense installations, which gives the Russians an excuse to play this region."

However, there's been no rush to embrace Warsaw's plan to conscript other NATO members to create a tripwire on its territory. So the Polish government is getting creative.

Great Britain's David Cameron has been wandering the continent seeking support for renegotiating EU policies. With Britain the destination of many Eastern European nations—almost 700,000 migrants alone from Poland—one of his objectives has been to limit social benefits for foreign citizens. Until recently Warsaw was unsympathetic. In November Waszczykowski complained that such a proposal was "against the free movement of labor and the treaty."

But earlier this month Poland's foreign minister had an idea: "Britain could support our expectations related to an allied military presence in Polish territory." Rarely do politicians speak so openly of a possible "back-room" deal, but he went on to say: "It would be very difficult to accept any discrimination, unless the United Kingdom would very clearly help in the realization of Polish ambitions during the NATO Summit in Warsaw." At this meeting, the Polish government had previously announced, national leaders would be gathering to "more effectively fight against threats" led by an "assertive Russia."

Under pressure Waszczykowski later seemed to back track, claiming the interview had not been reported in full. But his focus on getting a NATO, meaning American, garrison was clear: "We still consider ourselves a second-class NATO member, because in Central Europe there aren't, aside from a token presence, any significant allied forces or defense installations, which gives the Russians an excuse to play this region."

The new government has an interesting sense of entitlement. It's not enough that other countries agree to defend Poland. They must finance new installations and supply accompanying garrisons. While Warsaw spends only a couple pennies on the dollar on its own defense to deter the supposedly overwhelming threat from the east.

NATO long has stood for North America and The Others. All that really matters is Washington. Britain and France have capable but shrinking forces. Germany has a quality military that essentially is never used. And then there's everybody else, down to Luxembourg, with 900 men under arms.

But cheap- if not exactly free-riding long has been standard NATO procedure. For years U.S. officials and NATO personnel alike begged members to meet the alliance's goal of two percent of GDP. The result: nada. National leaders have nodded sympathetically and gone home to electorates which had other priorities. Last year NATO-Europe collectively devoted roughly 1.5 percent of GDP to arms. Only Britain (barely, after planning to fall below), Estonia (next to Russia), Greece (more fearful of Turkey than Moscow), and Poland (after lagging for years while boasting of its economic growth).

Particularly striking is who falls short. France, with the continent's second most capable force. Germany, which could provide the core of a genuine European military. Italy and Spain, important and large European states.

Also Latvia and Lithuania, Russian neighbors which, along with Estonia, incessantly worry about potential aggression by Moscow. And Turkey, today NATO's most truculent member—constantly threatening fellow NATO member Greece, meddling in the civil war in next door Syria, and shooting down a Russian plane active in Syria during its brief overflight of Turkish territory. Indeed, the latter action could not be justified on security grounds; instead, it appeared to be a calculated provocation, after which Ankara naturally wanted alliance, meaning American, support.

There's not the slightest chance that the upcoming summit will change anything. European dependence on America has been steadily worsening since the end of the Cold War. Most Europeans don't perceive any military threats, and thus don't see much reason to spend money on their defense. Other than having a few guys duded up in some ancient uniforms to act as an honor guard for foreign visitors, why should Belgium or Austria or Denmark or Portugal even have a military? And you can understand why larger European nations, such as Hungary, Spain, and Italy might feel the same way.

In fact, it isn't clear what the Bundeswehr is for. Germany deployed troops to Afghanistan, but surrounded them with so many caveats to limit their combat exposure that British tabloids were running stories on how German soldiers supposedly battling the Taliban were getting fat on beer and sausages. We know there won't be German soldiers stationed at any base in Poland. Berlin appears to maintain a military out of historic obligation, not because the force has any practical purpose.

And if Britain and France hadn't been colonial powers, they wouldn't need militaries either. Paris continues to muck around in Francophone Africa. There's no obvious benefit from doing so, but it does keep the French armed forces busy. Britain likes to pretend to remain a *weltmacht* with a global presence. But its last solo war was almost 34 years ago *over the Falklands near Argentina*. That's not much reason to maintain an expensive, globe-spanning, first class military. Thus, French and British outlays almost certainly will resume their long decline.

The biggest problem, however, is that the Europeans assume that whatever must be done will be done by Washington. American officials will whine, whimper, chide, sob, complain, threaten, rage, and whine some more, but in the end they will spend more on the military to defend Europe. And when the Europeans want to fight a war somewhere else, like Libya, they can count

on manipulating the U.S. into joining. If having done so they run out of missiles to fight their war, as European nations did in Libya, America can be counted on to provide more. It's a great deal if you can get it. All you have to do is appear helpless and assure Washington officials that their support is indispensable.

The upcoming NATO Summit can be expected to reinforce the status quo. But it is time for Washington to learn the word "no."

If European nations want to trade off NATO obligations for EU requirements, that is their prerogative. But Washington should insist that it isn't going along. Britain is free to station as many troops as it wants along Poland's border with Russia. Prime Minister David Cameron should feel free to take up residence himself if he'd like. But Americans shouldn't have to cover the cost of a British pay-off to win Polish support for European immigration controls.

In the short-term the U.S. should cap its contribution to the alliance. If countries like Poland feel threatened by Russia, they should do more militarily. And they should try to convince their neighbors, who would be most affected by any conflict, to do more. After all, Europe has around eight times the economic strength and three times the population of Russia. The fact that the continent remains dependent on America militarily is frankly scandalous. If there really is a threat from the east, so far not in evidence, the European members of NATO should act.

Over the longer-term NATO needs to be transformed into a European defense alliance. Maybe the U.S. should shift to playing a supportive role as an associate member. Maybe America should quit while forging a separate cooperative agreement covering intelligence, training, and more. Maybe the Europeans should turn the NATO infrastructure into an alliance under the European Union. Maybe there's another alternative.

Europe's revival after World War II is complete. There's no longer any need for Washington to keep the continent on its military dole. There's certainly no reason for American security to be held hostage to European deals over EU policy. The next NATO Summit should be the start of a serious debate about restructuring an outdated alliance for a new century.

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