

The United States' Poland Problem

In a fraught geopolitical situation, America's most hawkish European ally is itching for conflict with Russia.

ADRIEL KASONTA & DOUG BANDOW

FEBRUARY 23, 2022

The U.S. sees itself as in charge of Europe's defense, and some European governments want to drag Washington into a permanent confrontation with Russia that is in neither America's nor Europe's interest. That the current situation involves two nuclear powers and rising tensions should encourage pragmatism and realism all around. Geopolitical competitors should tread carefully given the enormous costs of any mistake.

This applies to a certain degree with respect to Ukraine, which is at the center of the current controversy. In between visits from European politicians, Kiev is playing down Washington's apocalyptic predictions of an immediate Russian invasion. The Biden administration has continued its fear-mongering even as it is contradicted by the Ukrainian government and after the week of February 14 passed peacefully. The same cannot be said of Poland, perhaps the most hawkish member of the European Union. Warsaw has taken a dramatically different approach than Kiev, attempting to apply the Machiavellian maxim to "never let a good crisis go to waste," as applied in the U.S. by former Chicago mayor and Democratic luminary Rahm Emanuel. Poland has hyped the already-dangerous situation in Ukraine and hopes to expand its influence at the expense of its neighbors' security, European stability, and—most importantly—America's strategic objectives.

In Poland's major conservative newspaper, "Return to the premier league," "The threat of war in the East opens doors to the European salons for Poland," and "Putin gives us first-class membership in NATO" are a few emblematic headlines. The country's confused political psyche reflects its chronic inability to think out of the box and see the bigger picture. As it assesses Russia's intentions, Warsaw mixes a touch of megalomania, a generous helping of moral arrogance, and a tendency to ignore the other side's legitimate security concerns—all seasoned by an aggressive Russophobia. Obviously, history hangs heavy over the relationship. Professor Stanisław Bieleń, however, argues in his new book *Turbulence in the Post-Cold War Era* that "Polish politicians see Poland's active role only in terms of worsening relations with Russia. No one is suggesting positive scenarios or looking for opportunities for agreement. It

is simply taken as an axiom that one cannot make a deal with Russia and that normalization is impossible.”

Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau exhibited this attitude in his recent trip to the U.S., during which he primarily focused on the standoff between the West and Russia over Ukraine. In his intense three-day visit to Washington, D.C., Rau met with U.S. Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, Senators James Risch (R, Idaho) and Ted Cruz (R, Texas), current chairman of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (or U.S. Helsinki Commission) Sen. Ben Cardin (D, Maryland), and two members of the U.S. Congress Poland Caucus, Representatives Marcy Kaptur (D, Ohio) and Michael McCaul (R, Texas). Rau also held talks with former CIA chief and secretary of state Mike Pompeo, a notorious hawk with likely presidential ambitions. Finally, Rau appeared before the U.S. Helsinki Commission in his capacity as Chairperson-in-Office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Rau used his visit to press Warsaw’s longstanding desire for a permanent U.S. garrison. During the Trump administration, Polish officials proposed creating a “Fort Trump.” The Ukraine crisis gave impetus to the proposal. During a press conference in the U.S., Poland’s top diplomat asserted that “the awareness that the eastern flank of NATO currently needs strengthening, primarily in terms of what we in NATO call deterrence, dominates today.” He continued: “Nobody needs persuading that a symmetry must be maintained, in relation to developments around Ukraine, but also in relation...to Russia’s obviously increased military presence in Belarus.” Nothing if not ambitious, he concluded that “this is a dominant view now,” that he hadn’t “heard anyone say that this one deployment of troops, including to Poland, would be enough.” No doubt encouraged by the Polish foreign minister’s lobbying on Capitol Hill, President Joe Biden approved the deployment of 1,700 additional U.S. troops, who arrived in Poland on February 13th. Another 3,000 servicemen will be on their way soon, adding to the roughly 4,500 American soldiers already stationed in the country on a rotating basis. On February 14, eight F-15s arrived in Poland, adding to a contingent that flew in the previous week. On his recent visit to the country, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin confirmed plans to supply Warsaw with 250 Abrams tanks.

The Polish people welcome these additions. According to a recent survey published by Rzeczpospolita daily, 49 percent of Poles believed that the increased U.S. deployment strengthened Poland’s security, while only 8.3 percent of respondents thought otherwise. One-fifth of those surveyed said the increased deployment had no impact and 21.8 percent had no opinion.

On the other hand, the American people are not so enthused about the prospect of confronting Russia. Although only seven percent of Americans surveyed last month believed that Russia was a partner, half viewed Moscow as more of a competitor than an enemy—a view that stands in stark contrast to the attitude of the hawks in Warsaw.

While acting as Europe's defender, Washington should remember to protect its own interests first. None of its allies will do so, as Poland has helpfully reminded the American people.

***Adriel Kasonta** is a London-based political risk consultant and lawyer. He is an expert at the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) in Moscow, former editorial board member at the peer-reviewed Central European Journal of International and Security Studies in Prague and chairman of the International Affairs Committee at the oldest conservative think tank in the UK, Bow Group. Kasonta is a graduate of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), as well as the Faculty of Law and Administration at the University of Lodz (Poland), where his master thesis was supervised by the current Polish Foreign Minister, Prof. Zbigniew Rau.*

***Doug Bandow** is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute and former Visiting Fellow at the Heritage Foundation. He served as a Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan and has written several books, including Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire and The Politics of Envy: Statism as Theology. He is a graduate of Stanford Law School and a member of the California and Washington, D.C. bars.*