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Poland: Foreign Policy Trends

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Summary

More than most countries, Poland's relations today with the rest of the world are influenced by its past. The victim of historical forces and powerful neighbors, Poland was partitioned in the 18th century, and once again in the 20th. This loss of sovereignty may partly explain its assertive foreign policy. Poland has carved out a unique, sometimes maverick role for itself in Europe. A NATO member since 1999, and an EU member since 2004, Poland has forcefully pursued its national interests and has not been reluctant to assert itself with major powers — for example, with Germany, its leading trading partner; with the European Union; and with the United States.

Poland has been a staunch U.S. ally, not only in the global war on terrorism, but also in the U.S.-led campaign in Iraq. However, several factors — including the revelations of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib prison and the March 2004 Madrid bombings — have caused Poland to weigh the costs and benefits of its participation in Iraq and reassess its partnership with the United States. Many Poles are also disappointed that their cooperation in the Iraq mission has yet to yield tangible benefits. In particular, the Poles had hoped for help in three areas: military assistance, Iraq reconstruction contracts, and U.S. visa policy.

Poland has been an active member of the European Union (EU), and has not always sided with the majority; many of its positions within the EU — and toward its eastern neighbors — have been in accord with U.S. policy preferences that have at times been at odds with EU members. However, some analysts believe that, for economic and social reasons, Poland likely will draw closer to its fellow EU countries over the long term, and may eventually play a leadership role on the continent.

This report analyzes Polish foreign policy motivations and trends, and implications for U.S.-Polish relations and U.S. interests in Europe. It will be updated after the 2005 Polish elections. For additional information, see CRS Report RL32966, *Poland: Background and Current Issues*, by (name redacted).

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Poland: Foreign Policy Trends

Background

More than most countries, Poland's relations today with the rest of the world are influenced by its past. At the end of the 18th century, it was partitioned among Russia, Prussia and Austria, and for more than a century, Poland as a state did not exist. It was re-established after the First World War with U.S. backing, only to be divided again between the Nazis and the Soviets in 1939, and then dominated by Moscow after 1945.¹

Poland has long been viewed as a crucible for change in Central and Eastern Europe and, ultimately, the Soviet Union. Historians are likely to attribute that in large part to the rise of two remarkable men. In 1978, the Archbishop of Krakow, Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, was elected Pope John Paul II. The following year, he returned from Rome to visit his homeland and said mass before more than one million celebrants, urging Poles, "Do not be afraid."² John Paul served as an inspiration for Poles to confront their own government, and, by extension, the USSR. In 1980, after the government raised food prices, electrician Lech Walesa led his fellow shipyard workers in Gdansk in a strike. The confrontation led to the formation of Solidarity, an independent trade union; over the ensuing decade, it evolved into a political party that was instrumental in ending communist rule. In 1983, Solidarity leader Walesa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1989 and 1990, Solidarity candidates won Poland's first democratically-contested parliamentary and presidential elections.

In the 1990s, successive post-communist governments moved swiftly to consolidate democracy and establish a market economy. Their efforts were capped in 1999 by NATO membership, and in 2004 by entry into the European Union (EU). Poland has conducted a proactive foreign policy over the past 15 years. It has aggressively pursued its national interests, and has not been reluctant to assert itself with major powers — for example, with Germany, its leading trading partner; with the European Union; and with the United States.

Warsaw has cooperated with its neighboring states to the north and south in such regional formations as the Baltic Cooperation Council and the Visegrád group.

¹ For additional background, see U.S. Library of Congress. Federal Research Division. *Poland: A Country Study*. Glenn E. Curtis. October, 1992. Poland. *Europa Yearbook*. 2004. How We Lost Poland. Radek Sikorski. *Foreign Affairs*. September/October, 1996.

² Poland's Lech Walesa Remembers Pope's Importance In Ending Communism. *AP*. April 3, 2005. A Counterbalance to Communists. By Judy Dempsey. *International Herald Tribune*. April 2, 2005.

But Poland's main foreign policy initiatives in Europe have been directed to the east and west. It has actively promoted the development of democracy in the two countries to its immediate east: Belarus and Ukraine. To its west, Poland has had a somewhat contentious experience integrating into the EU.

In terms of transatlantic relations, Poland is perhaps the most emblematic of the countries tied to both the United States and the EU; it does not wish to have to choose between the two, but occasionally has had to take sides. This was particularly true of the Iraq conflict, in which Poland chose to support U.S. policy both diplomatically and militarily. However, several factors, including the March 11, 2004 Madrid terrorist bombings and revelations of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, caused Polish public opinion to turn resolutely against continued involvement in Iraq. The government has responded with a phased withdrawal of its troops. In addition, many Poles believe that the United States has failed to show sufficient gratitude for Poland's support.

Poland will be holding parliamentary elections in September 2005. Many observers believe that the current ruling party, the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), is likely to suffer defeat at the hands of the center-right Civic Platform (PO) party. If that does transpire, most observers believe that Poland's foreign policy would not likely undergo abrupt and dramatic changes. Under the next government — whichever party leads it — Warsaw may become somewhat less reflexively pro-American. Although the Poles may have lined up beside the United States on Iraq, they also know that their future economic prosperity depends on continued cooperation and integration with the EU.

Poland and Europe — East and West

As noted above, part or all of Poland was under Russian domination throughout the nineteenth century and most of the 20th. For Poles, history is never far from the surface. In looking eastward, Poland has therefore sought to encourage democratization of Belarus and Ukraine not only on principle, but also for the practical reason that doing so would improve Poland's security by establishing a buffer zone between itself and Russia. Poland's policies toward its two immediate neighbors have been largely consistent with those of the United States — somewhat confrontational toward the more repressive Belarus, but seeking engagement with Ukraine. Many have argued that helping the two countries eventually acquire EU and NATO membership should be a foreign policy priority for Poland.

Poland's involvement in Ukraine's fall 2004 political crisis was particularly noteworthy. President Kwasniewski joined with EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana and Lithuanian President Vldas Adamkus in helping negotiate a settlement over the disputed presidential vote. Poland's new status as a member of the EU is believed to have lent weight to its role in mediating the Ukraine political crisis. Poland pushed within the Union to get Brussels more actively involved in helping solve the crisis in Kiev. Finally, Poland subsequently joined with several of its neighboring countries in endorsing Ukraine's eventual EU membership. A U.S. commentator noted that "[t]he Ukraine experience ... showed that the European

Union has grown more hospitable to democratic evangelists: Polish President Alexander Kwasniewski ... provided Europe's backbone in Ukraine along with ... Javier Solana." Some observers believe that, flush with its success in Ukraine, Poland might now set its sights on encouraging reforms in Moldova.³

Perhaps the most important factor in Poland's eastward perspective is its relationship to Russia. One Polish academic has asserted that his countrymen "fear Russia and exaggerate the threat it poses," and cautioned against allowing a "phobia" about Russia to hamper the effectiveness of Poland's foreign policy. Noting that the United States is a main source of Poland's security, he pointed out that "for the US, Russia is not a threat but an important, though difficult, partner in the war against Islamic terrorism."⁴ He argued that, to more effectively promote democracy in Belarus and Ukraine, Poland must improve its relations with Moscow.

In May 2004, Poland fulfilled a long-term foreign policy goal when it joined nine other countries in becoming a member of the European Union (Poland achieved NATO membership earlier, in 1999.) EU membership had been a contentious issue, particularly for Poles living in rural areas who feared that they would be overwhelmed economically by more efficient, western European agricultural producers. However, those fears have thus far been groundless, as Poland began to experience economic gains — agricultural subsidies and a surge in farm exports — almost immediately after it joined.

Poland was not reluctant to assert itself before joining the EU and will likely be even less hesitant to do so now that it is a member. On several issues, Poland staked out positions intended to advance its interests and values; these stances have sometimes been opposed by major players within the EU, such as France and Germany. For example, during the development of the EU constitution, Poland, joined by several other mostly Roman Catholic countries, called for the preamble to include language referring to Europe's Christian heritage; the measure was not adopted, but Pope John Paul II lauded Poland for its efforts. Warsaw also has argued strongly that Turkey is a democratic Islamic state, and deserves to be admitted into the EU. Poland has argued for its right to maintain relatively low corporate taxes, a practice criticized by some other countries as an unfair subsidy meant to attract foreign investment. Finally, Poland has supported the development of an EU military capability, but has stressed that this not be done at the cost of weakening NATO.

Polish-U.S. Relations: Iraq and Related Issues

Poland supported the United States in Iraq both politically and militarily. It was one of a small number of countries to provide troops in the combat phase of the conflict, and then deployed a large (2,500-strong) contingent of peacekeeping troops.

³ 'A New Wind' Out of Washington. Fred Kempe. *Wall Street Journal*. January 26, 2005. President Sees Bigger Role After Success in Ukraine, Looks to Reunite Moldova. By Marc Champion. *Wall Street Journal Europe*. February 17, 2004.

⁴ If Poland Wants to Co-create the EU's Eastern Policy, It Has to Avoid Being Labeled as Russophobic. Antoni Podolski, quoted in *Polish News Bulletin*. December 2, 2004.

Poland took command of a multinational division providing stability in the center of Iraq. But several factors — chiefly the March 11, 2004 terrorist attacks in Madrid and the revelations of prisoner abuses at Abu Ghraib — contributed to increased public pressure against continued military engagement in Iraq. In December 2004, the Polish government declared that it would be withdrawing about one-third of its forces after the Iraqi elections; further announcements on a phased withdrawal followed.

Given the many daunting challenges and political risks, some question why Poland joined with the United States in the Iraq conflict in the first place. Observers attribute Poland's participation to a variety of factors. Some stress that the Poles were at least in part motivated by a sense of gratitude for past U.S. support, including U.S. assistance during the Cold War and the lead role played by the United States in expanding NATO to include Poland, among other states. Poland may also have joined the Iraq effort because it subscribes to the Bush Administration's belief in the need to thwart tyranny and spread democracy. Poles cite their role as a mediator in Ukraine's political crisis as another example of this conviction in action. According to former Polish Foreign Minister Cimoszewicz, Poland did *not* join the coalition because it believed that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, but rather because Poland believed it was in its own security interests to support the United States and thereby maintain a strong transatlantic security linkage.⁵

There were practical benefits of joining the Iraq operation. Polish defense officials speak of the invaluable experience and information that the Iraq operation has provided the military, chiefly through having command of a large, international expeditionary force. Another benefit was psychological: at the outset of the conflict, the Bush administration treated the Poles as important partners in the international scene. According to one analyst "Bush gave Poles and the Polish political class the feeling that they belong to the countries that really matter in the world."⁶

However, Poland has experienced difficulties both at home and abroad as a result of its participation. Along with other factors, the Iraq deployment is listed as a reason for the SLD government's sharp decline in popularity. In addition, some analysts believe that Poland's partnership with the United States may have contributed to strained relations with other EU states — particularly France and Germany, which opposed the Iraq invasion; in May 2003, a German newspaper referred to Poland as America's "Trojan donkey." Some Poles have faulted the partnership for being unconditional; a former Polish Defense Minister has argued, for example, that the SLD government erred in not bargaining with the Americans for military assistance before committing troops to Iraq.⁷

⁵ Poland Toughens Stance Over Backing US With Plans To Complete Its Mission. *Financial Times [FT]*. October 14, 2004.

⁶ Backing For Man Who Made the Country Feel It Counted. *FT*. September 9, 2004.

⁷ *Polish News Bulletin*. November 4, 2004. Is Poland America's Donkey or Could It Become NATO's Horse? *Economist*. May 10, 2003.

Some Poles also maintain that their country has begun to see itself as paying for U.S. mistakes in Iraq, and that this might have an impact on bilateral relations. In the past year, in fact, the Poles have become less reluctant to criticize the United States openly. For example, in a September 2004 interview, President Kwasniewski urged the United States to be “flexible, open, and gracious.” In a later press appearance, he recalled that “from the beginning I warned President Bush against a policy of American dominance in Iraq and in the whole world.” And more pointedly, former President and Solidarity leader Lech Walesa remarked that “America failed its exam as a superpower. ... [it is] a military and economic superpower but not morally or politically anymore. This is a tragedy for us.”⁸

Poles also have begun to ask themselves what they have received in return for their loyalty to the United States; in particular, Poles had hoped for help in three areas: military assistance, Iraq reconstruction contracts, and U.S. visa policy. In recent months, some Iraq reconstruction business has begun to flow toward Polish firms, and President Bush pledged to seek \$100 million in military assistance for Poland. It is the visa waiver issue, however, that seems to resonate the most among Poles, perhaps because it could be “fixed” without financial cost to the United States. Warsaw has hoped to join 27 other countries which have been granted a waiver of the U.S. government requirement to obtain a visa for short-term travel to the United States. According to one report, “[t]he political class were outraged at the US decision to treat Poland differently from the EU-15 by imposing visa regulations on Polish nationals, as part of a general tightening of immigration controls in the wake of [9/11.]” In a radio interview that touched upon this issue, Lech Walesa maintained that Americans “are making fun of us.”⁹ U.S. analysts, however, argue that there are some factors militating against waiving visas for Poles. First of all, Poland’s continued high unemployment rate (close to 20% in April) might act as an incentive for Poles to seek work outside of the country and overstay their visas. Secondly, if the United States were to make an exception for Poland, even though it does not meet the objective requirements, many other countries would also seek to make their case for being exempted. One observer has pointed out that, given continuing concerns over the threat of terrorism, there is not much sentiment in Congress to make it easier for people to enter the United States.

Finally, Poland is said to be lobbying to be a future location for a U.S. military base amid U.S. consideration of a global re-basing scheme. Poles claim that such a move would represent good payback for their participation in Iraq; U.S. military bases would benefit local economies, as well as Poland’s desire for American investment. Lastly, having the U.S. military present on its soil, they argue, would increase Poland’s sense of security.

⁸ US Ally Poland Criticizes Washington’s Foreign Policy. *AFP*. September 12, 2004. Polish President Appeals For a More ‘Open and Gracious’ U.S. *International Herald Tribune*. September 4, 2004. Continent’s Drift: At Expense of U.S., Nations of Europe are Drawing Closer. *Wall Street Journal*. December 23, 2004.

⁹ Between Iraq and a Hard Place. *EIU Country Briefing*. October 14, 2004. Walesa Lashes Out At US Over Visa Requirements for Poles. *AFP*. August 10, 2004.

Assessment

More than many countries, Poland has a habit of asserting its independence; one unwavering constant in Poland's foreign policy has been its efforts to protect its perceived national interests in a region that more than once has devoured it as a state. Poland has been a close ally of the United States; as a new member of the EU, it is now attempting to balance its transatlantic interests.

Because it views the United States as the main guarantor of its security, Poland will likely continue to support the United States within NATO. Poland wants to modernize its armed forces, ensure alliance interoperability, and improve its own defense capabilities. However, the Poles point out that their resources have been severely strained by the Iraq mission, forcing them to sideline their plans to update their military.

Poles were more supportive than most Europeans of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the subsequent military occupation. Nevertheless, some observers maintain that participation in the Iraq operation was the most controversial foreign policy decision made by a Polish government since the fall of Communism. Many Poles agreed with the government's decision to deploy troops with the coalition, and were proud that Poland was given a command role; some asserted that Iraq demonstrated that Poland's security interests are now global, no longer just regional.

Several factors eventually increased Polish public opposition to the war, and Poland has become less reluctant to criticize the United States openly, in part, some argue, because it has begun to see itself as paying for U.S. mistakes.¹⁰ Some Poles assert that, in siding with the Americans, they erred by putting all their security eggs in one basket, damaging their relations with other allies. They suggest that Poland repair its intra-EU relations; and believe that, given its size and growing influence, Poland might eventually become a leading force within a larger, stronger EU.

Many of Poland's actions within the EU have been consistent with policies preferred by the United States: Poland and the Bush administration both support the notion of taxing consumption, rather than investment. On EU security policy, Poland stresses the importance of maintaining the transatlantic link. Like Washington, Warsaw supports the accession of Turkey. Poland's sponsorship of a reference to Europe's Christian heritage in the EU constitution shows that Poles are not reluctant to mix religion with governance, compared to many other European societies.

Poland has demonstrated that it can be an independent actor within Europe, often taking positions in line with U.S. policy or interests. For example, the decision to buy Lockheed Martin F-16s rather than European-built fighter aircraft, regardless of technical rationale, might have had political repercussions — Poland was still queued up to join the EU at the time. Polish officials stress that their government did not expect a *quid pro quo* for its decisions to join the Iraq coalition and to purchase

¹⁰ The disillusionment with Iraq did not spill over into a disapproval of the Bush Administration; polls showed that, during the fall 2004 U.S. presidential campaign, Poland was the only country in Europe to prefer Bush to his Democratic opponent, Sen. John Kerry.

U.S. fighters. Nevertheless, there is a sense that the U.S. inaction on several issues of intense interest to Poles indicates an absence of gratitude; it resulted in a “disappointment that support for [the] USA didn’t bring Poland measurable benefits.”¹¹

Poland’s foreign policy outside the EU has also generally been in harmony with U.S. international goals. For example, Poland was instrumental in advancing the practice of democracy in Ukraine; Warsaw played a lead role in resolving the fall 2004 election crisis. President Bush stated that President Kwasniewski had “showed remarkable leadership and the people of the Ukraine are better for it and the world appreciates it and I appreciate it.”¹² During the current decade, Polish leaders have at times spoken of acting as a bridge between Russia and the West. Through maintaining active ties with Russia, Poland also hopes to discourage non-democratic tendencies.

In answer to the question of where Poland sees its future and interests, some observers see a division: the United States may be important to its security, but Poland has a natural affinity toward fellow EU countries in cultural and economic matters. Many believe it is inevitable that Poland will draw closer to Europe.¹³ But what kind of EU member it will eventually become — from the U.S. standpoint — remains to be seen. Some believe that Poland as an EU member will likely wind up being more like the United Kingdom, a staunch U.S. ally, than like Belgium, which has at times taken positions contrary to U.S. policy.

Some have speculated that Poland, given its size, will be looked to as leader of the Central and Eastern European region. However, officials from neighboring countries say that, although they may respect and admire Poland, they hope that it does not come to regard itself as the chief spokesperson for Central Europe.

Some observers believe that Polish politics is undergoing a transition period, featuring the fading of the old Solidarity generation. They assert that, although Poland has traditionally had closer ties to the United States than many other European countries have, members of the new generation entering politics are perhaps not so firmly rooted in the transatlantic relationship. Analysts therefore caution that U.S. policymakers should not take Polish friendship for granted. In addition, for the past ten years the United States has had a close friend in Poland in Aleksander Kwasniewski, but his time as president is coming to an end. In one view,

[i]t is unlikely that any Polish leader in the next few years ... will be as strongly pro-US as Mr. Kwasniewski. ... It is important not to exaggerate the extent to which Poland will move away from the US in the next few years, but Warsaw will be less willing to set itself at odds with Berlin and Paris in order to

¹¹ *Polish Participation in the Armed Intervention and Stabilization Mission in Iraq*. By Maria Wagrowska. Center for International Relations. Warsaw. August 2004. p. 4.

¹² Military Aid, Visas Top Agenda For Presidents Bush, Kwasniewski. *US Fed News*. February 10, 2005.

¹³ See, for example: *From America’s Protégé to Constructive European*. Marcin Zaborowski. Institute for Security Studies. December, 2004.

accommodate Washington — especially as it believes its loyalty has been poorly rewarded.¹⁴

Poland's fall 2005 parliamentary elections, according to many observers, may well result in a center-right coalition. The parties that would likely form the new government might not qualify as "Euroskeptics," but some of their members have admitted to feelings of ambivalence about the EU.¹⁵ Some analysts also argue that communist successor parties, such as the SLD, and politicians, such as Kwasniewski, may have been overly cooperative toward the United States and Western Europe in an effort to compensate for their past allegiances. Polish foreign policy since 1989 does not appear to have been significantly affected by whichever party is in power, but analysts suggest that a non-socialist-led government at this point could be expected to push Poland's national interests more aggressively in its bilateral relations with the United States.

¹⁴ *EIU Country Briefing*. October 14, 2004.

¹⁵ A Hedgehog Lies In Wait. Jan Cieski. *Financial Times*. October 26, 2004.

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