

His Excellency
Janusz Reiter

Ambassador of Poland to the
United States

Poland in the Euro-Atlantic Community

I'm going to offer you some remarks on Poland and its foreign policies, and on its relations with the U.S., including Poland's position on the situation in the European Union. If foreign policies are determined largely by history and by geography, and I'm convinced that it is the case, then one could say that Poland and the U.S. are very distant partners. We don't share a border and our history is so different. However, there are millions of Polish-Americans living in this country, building bridges between the U.S. and Poland, and this Polish-American community has played a significant part in recent years. Their voice was heard in the debate on NATO enlargement, and they contributed to this success story, which the NATO enlargement certainly was.

**The historical
experiences of
Poland say that
freedom can never
be taken for granted**

No less important, the U.S. has shared for decades European history. What makes the U.S. so unique for Europe is that it has shared European history for decades without sharing its historical obsessions. That played such a significant role, particularly in 1989 and 1990, and that's why the United States was so instrumental and played such a vital role in the process of both German reunification and European reunification. We needed the U.S. in Europe as a country that, as I said, shared our history but without sharing our historical obsessions. Therefore, the U.S. is rightly considered a European power.

I believe that the U.S. presence in Europe after 1945 has significantly helped to change Europe, to make Europe a better, safer place. Until 1989 there was only one part of Europe that benefited from this change. From 1989 Central and Eastern Europe—Poland is part of this—has also participated in these fundamental changes. Today, the enlarged European Union can be proud of having achieved unprecedented peace, security and prosperity, and the European Union is clearly a success story. We can be proud of it, but it should not be forgotten that the U.S. has contributed enormously to this success story. Actually, this success story would be impossible without the U.S. The U.S. is part of the success story and can also share our pride. This is uncontroversial as far as it relates to the past.

How about the future? There is no serious opposition among European leaders, among European policy makers, against a strong U.S. presence. Most people understand that the U.S. is an indispensable partner. It has, after all, maintained a certain equilibrium in Europe and maintained trust between the European nations and trust is, even after 50 years of the European success story, very fragile, and we should be very cautious in dealing with trust. We, in Poland, believe that it is in our

national, and also in our European interests to encourage the United States, To remain committed to Europe and to stay in Europe and to maintain a strong political, military and, of course, economic presence in Europe.

Now, I would like to say a few words about the specific Polish interests in a strong U.S. presence in Europe. Our foreign policy, more than in Western Europe is determined by our history, by our perception of history, and by our geography. The historical experiences of Poland say that freedom can never be taken for granted and it also says that security matters and that security cannot be taken for granted either. This reflects the Polish experience of the partitions; the last of them took place in 1939. This was not so long ago. It also reflects the experience of the war that devastated the country.

Let me tell you a story that a friend of mine told me. At the end of the 1980s, he spoke to a man who was then a chief of a Polish institute in New York. This institute was very proud of having very important archives with a lot of important documents of recent Polish history, and my friend asked this man, "When do you believe the archives will be transferred to Poland?" The answer was a prompt "Never. Even if Poland becomes free. As a historian," he said, "I know too well that Europe is too vulnerable to leave such important documents there. It is much better to have them safe in New York. Nothing can happen to them in New York." That was the first thing for me to think about after September 11 be-

cause that gave me the sense that even the U.S. has now become vulnerable. We, unfortunately, are sharing a vulnerability. This is something new for you, but the feeling of vulnerability is not new for us.



His Excellency Janusz Reiter
Ambassador of Poland
to the United States

Poland itself has never been as secure, as safe, as it is now, after joining NATO, and joining the European Union just two years ago. However, our experience from history is strong enough to create a specific need for security, and even after joining NATO and the European Union people feel that security matters.

The other defining or driving force of Polish foreign policy, something we share with some other neighbors in Central and Eastern Europe, is our geography. Poland is a kind of frontier country in both NATO and the European Union. We have neighbors who are part of NATO and the EU: Germany, the Czech Republic,

Slovakia and Lithuania, but there are some countries in the EU that are, so to speak, interment countries of NATO and the European Union, surrounded only by other EU or NATO partners. Look at Belgium; look at Germany after Poland's accession and even the Czech Republic, which is surrounded only by EU partners. Poland is in a different geopolitical situation. We are kind of a frontier country. We have neighbors who share membership in the EU and NATO but we also have other neighbors on the east. One of them is Ukraine, where the Orange Revolution initiated a promising but difficult transformation, something we only hope will succeed and we have to do everything we can to make it work because Ukraine has the potential to change Europe, Ukraine has the potential to influence Russia. This is why the success of Ukraine is a truly European question. We cannot just watch it – we have to do everything we can to make the country successful.

Another neighbor we have in the east is Belarus, often called the last dictatorship in Europe, and rightly so. It is openly hostile towards Poland because Poland is, for the Belarus dictatorship, an ideal enemy. It is both an internal and external enemy—an internal enemy because there is a strong Polish minority in Belarus and it makes them an ideal enemy of the regime and it is an external enemy as a neighbor. That makes us feel uneasy about this neighborhood.

The last neighbor in the east is Russia—a great power, but one that poses many questions about its future. The worst thing that you can say about a neighbor that is a great power is that you don't know where this neighbor is heading and what this neighbor really wants, what its intentions are, and that is exactly the problem. The problem is not an

aggressive one, the problem is the uncertainty in Russia, and this uncertainty has a lot of influence on the whole region.

It is precisely history and geography that makes people in Poland think more about security than some of our partners and neighbors in Europe do. We believe that a major international crisis in Europe is unlikely, but we believe that it cannot be totally ruled out. We believe that if such an unlikely crisis occurs, we need strong leadership, and we believe that there is just one power that can provide strong leadership in the unlikely case of international crisis, and that is the United States. So this is why we believe that we need a strong U.S. commitment to Europe. This is, after all, one of the reasons why we have joined the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq, because we wanted to encourage the U.S. to remain committed to Europe. This is why we are in Iraq, not because there was a direct link between the situation in Iraq and the Polish situation. That has been our contribution to strengthening the transatlantic bridge.

This specific Polish experience that I've tried to portray also affects the Polish attitude towards the State of Israel. There is a sense of shared history and a moral duty towards Israel and there is a good understanding of Israel's need for security. This is what Poland is bringing into the European Union and this is what Poland is going to share with its partners in the European Union. I know that Israel wants Poland to advocate its interests in the European Union, and I'm absolutely sure we will not hesitate to do so and we will not disappoint our Israeli friends. I'm convinced and I believe that developing cooperation between Poland and Israel also opens new opportunities for Polish-Jewish dialogue. The political and psychological conditions for this dialogue have never been as good as they are now, and there are many very promising signals. I am very encouraged

by what I see both in Poland and Israel, and also in the dialogue between Polish people and representatives of the Jewish Diaspora in the U.S. After all, it is an important part of the definition of our identity as a country, a nation now integrated with the European Union. Jewish history is an important part of our history and without understanding it we cannot understand our own history.

Let me now return again to Poland in the European Union. You may wonder whether Poland, with its pro-American and pro-Israeli orientation, is on a collision course with its neighbors and partners in the European Union. My answer is that's not the case. Certainly the decision made three years ago to send troops to Iraq—one of the defining moments in Poland's foreign policy—was accompanied by heavy controversy in the European Union. That time is over. The attempt to challenge the U.S., and consequently to form a new European identity based on anti-American resentments, has clearly failed. I think that's realized by everybody in Europe today. This was more an intellectual game, an intellectual exercise, than a political plan. There are no serious politicians who shared this plan to challenge the U.S.—there were some intellectuals who shared in this intellectual exercise, but even the theory of Europe as a counterweight to the U.S. has failed. This theory, and the attempt to create a strong politically united Europe as a counterweight to the U.S., divided Europe instead of integrating it, and this is recognized by everybody in today's Europe.

Europeans have become more realistic in measuring their influence and their power, but maybe the U.S. also has learned to better understand the European sensitivities and to deal with its partners in the European Union. As a matter of fact, the cooperation between the U.S. and the European Union has never been as good as it is now. The

governments cooperate closely in many areas; they cooperate closely in such regions and crises as the Middle East, particularly in Iran or in North Korea. They promote freedom and democracy in countries on many continents. Take, for example, Belarus or Kosovo in Europe. That's the good news; however, there is bad news. Public opinion in many European countries is very critical and

Thousands of young people every year go to universities in other EU countries without needing a visa. This is a formative experience, and the question is how will the U.S. respond?

very skeptical of this close cooperation between the governments and this is why some governments feel that they have to hide their cooperation with the U.S. Close cooperation with the U.S., is not considered very sexy by parts of the public opinion and of the media.

Poland fortunately belongs to the other group of countries. The pro-America cause in Poland is not only bipartisan—and the change of government last year didn't affect our relations with the U.S. it is also backed up by an overwhelming majority of our public, of Polish society. Will that change as a result of the growing integration with the European Union? I don't think so. The U.S. needs successful and not failed partners in the European Union. So it is in U.S. interest to have permanent and other Central European partners as successful members of the European Union. However, let me say that the pro-American orientation in Poland and in the other countries of Central Europe should not, and cannot, be taken for granted.

I have to mention maybe the only problem we are having in our bilateral relations—the visa problem. It's perceived more and more as a symbol of asymmetry in our relations. In 1991 when this asymmetrical model was introduced people accepted it because Poland was a new member of the Western community; it was very modernist, it didn't demand anything. We were just happy to be there, free of communism. Today's situation is a lot different. Poland and our neighbors in Central Europe are successful members of the European Union. People can travel in Europe without even a passport—just with a simple ID. Thousands of young people every year receive fellowships and go to universities in other EU countries without needing a visa or paying fees in most cases. This is a formative experience, and the question is how will the U.S. respond? We have to offer more opportunities for young people from Central Europe to come to the U.S. Let me say very clearly there is little understanding now of the asymmetry that we are having in the visa regulations between Poland and the U.S. We don't want to lose the strong basis for our friendship, but we have to address this issue.

Let me come to the conclusions. First, Europe may no longer be the center of the universe—it is not. New powers are emerging in Asia. They have the ambition to shape the world. So is the U.S.-European cooperation becoming irrelevant? Not at all. We remain—Europe and the U.S.—the closest allies in international politics.

Second, the European Union is still searching, for its political identity. Europe is not declining. Europe is very successful and the latest enlargements in the E.U. very clearly show that the E.U. is a very vital organization; however, the European Union has lost its sense of direction and there will be no new grand

design for the European Union because it is so difficult to develop a grand design in a community of 27 countries.

What does this mean for the future of the European Union? The European Union is very likely to develop more case by case or step by step, not by grand design. This is not necessarily bad news. The new members, with Poland the biggest among them, will play an important part in this process. Our instincts are both European and Atlantic, and I think this is good news for the United States.

Third point: we have to address specific bilateral issues, and I mentioned one of them: the visa issue may be the most pressing issue. I hope very much that one day when I finish my mission as Polish Ambassador in the U.S., I will be able to leave this country knowing that if I want to come back, if I want to return, with a normal, not a diplomatic passport—I need no visa in my passport. When I told that to a senator in Washington, he asked me how long I'm going to stay in the U.S. I said, "Well, I'm going to stay to have a really good time here, but not too long, not too long."

This is not for my personal needs. It is the shared need of many people to know that this country is open to its friends, and I'm proud to say that Poland is among these friends.

Thank you very much.

*Speeches to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council are edited for readability, not content.
The Council is a non-partisan organization. The views expressed herein are solely those of the individual authors.
The Council is a non-profit organization that pays neither honoraria nor expenses to its speakers.*