Poland external relations briefing:
Poland 2021 Outlook on Foreign Policy
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When analyzing the calendar of the Polish President, Prime Minister and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it is difficult to find specific international agenda for 2021. Indeed, politicians from Warsaw indicate that in recent months foreign policy has been relegated to the background, giving way to domestic issues, and above all to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the state as such will, after all, practice foreign policy. It is therefore worth considering which directions will be significant in the coming months, and which of them will be treated marginally.

Relations with the United States

Relations with Washington have been the most important direction of Polish foreign policy for past five years. Thus, the changing US administration and the assumption of power by Joe Biden, who was clearly not a favourite for the Polish ruling camp, will be a serious challenge for Warsaw. On the other hand, the concerns that are visible in the Law and Justice Party’s reaction to the US election result may turn out to be exaggerated and premature. In fact, in areas such as policy towards the post-Soviet space, Poland has more in common with Biden’s White House than with predecessor’s administration.

Whether the good condition of Polish-American relations will continue in 2021, will depend primarily on Poland’s ability to adapt to new circumstances. Yet, the perspective of Polish-American relations during Biden’s presidency should be considered on two levels: on the level of values, and on the level of interests and politics.

1. On an ideological level, it is expected that Warsaw’s relations with Washington will become less cordial and possibly even tense. Biden perceives the transatlantic relations in terms of a community of values from which, in his opinion, countries such as Poland break away (during the campaign, Biden described Poland, Belarus and Hungary as totalitarian states). Warsaw can therefore expect criticism for breaking the rule of law, and for its approach to issues such as freedom of speech and the rights of LGBT community.

2. However, depending on how Poland plays its cards, this discrepancy may not translate into the level of political interests. In material terms, Biden administration’s policy towards
Warsaw is likely to be a continuation of Donald Trump’s policy, particularly in the areas of security and defense, as well as energy and regional cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe.

Yet, there may be some accent shifts here. When it comes to security and defense, for Warsaw there are two aspects of fundamental importance - first, the continuation of the US presence in Poland as part of the European Initiative of Deterrence and Enhanced Forward Presence; second, the continued purchase of US military equipment. Since Biden was in fact the architect of the US military presence in Poland and the strengthening of NATO on the eastern flank of the alliance during the Barack Obama administration, there is no reason to believe that Polish-US military cooperation will suffer.

If the Polish side wants to maintain this community of interests, Biden will certainly not object. A springtime NATO summit is likely to be a good time to discuss these issues. If a face to face meeting is possible despite pandemic restrictions, NATO summit would indeed bring the first opportunity for both Presidents to talk. The Chancellery of President Duda already today expresses hopes that the meeting will take place in this formula. The alliance’s summit is therefore intended to be crucial stimulus for talks - here it will turn out whether the Polish-American goals in foreign policy are still common, or whether they are starting to diverge.

**Relations with Germany**

Relations between Poland and Germany, although marked by a difficult history, and sometimes even mutual misunderstanding, are today relatively correct and will remain on highest level of importance, just as transatlantic relations. Good personal contacts of Polish and German politicians and excellent economic relations are a big plus - Germany is Poland’s most important trade partner.

However, it should be remembered that there is a fairly wide catalogue of challenges to be overcome in mutual relations in coming months, such as:

- future role of Germany and Poland in the EU,
- construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline,
- mutual attitude to Russia,
- issues of Polish minority in Germany.
Poland’s undisguised skepticism for German federalist ideas for Europe in recent years may cause frequent tensions between Berlin and Warsaw. There may be basically two problems in the near future:

1. The awaiting position of Poland in the EU and the fact that Poland will not be a supporter of German interests at all costs. It can be assumed that the attitude of Warsaw to Berlin will become more and more assertive as the political and economic strength of Poland increases. Both countries, along with the successive strengthening of Poland’s position in Central and Eastern Europe, will become more and more competitors.

2. Poland’s active foreign policy in the area of the Three Seas Initiative, and raising German interest in this project, despite previous passive attitude. Berlin’s support for the Three Seas Initiative undoubtedly makes it more valuable. However, the reasons for such an attitude are still unclear, but may include: involvement of the US in this project and the related desire to “overtake” Washington; excessive, from the point of view of Germany, strengthening of Poland’s position in the region, which today appears to be the natural leader of the Three Seas Initiative; fear of losing German influence in the region and fear of weakening the EU on its eastern flank.

Nevertheless, the climate for bilateral cooperation is good. The jubilee of the 30th anniversary of the Polish-German Treaty on Good Neighbourhood and Friendly Cooperation will provide an opportunity for in-depth discussions on the future of bilateral relations. Its celebrations, scheduled for June, will bring an intensification of contacts on many levels and a chance to find back common values.

**Relations with the countries of the Visegrad Group and Three Seas Initiative**

2021 also marks the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the Visegrad Group and Poland is to continue its presidency of the V4. The Visegrad Group in Polish foreign policy is perceived in terms of a significant identification element and an example of honestly practiced diplomacy. In the coming months, the development dynamics of the V4 group and its impact on the structure of the EU (inclusiveness, inhibition of the process of the formation of various small groups) will continue. From the perspective of Warsaw, this integration of Eastern European countries, and thus the V4 group, is a perfect example of an effective EU convergence policy.
Undoubtedly, Poland will animate the organization of V4 coordination meetings before the summits of the European Council. Poland and other members of the V4, as “defenders of the cohesion policy”, are popular among representatives of other small Member States, which has a direct impact on building Poland’s position in the EU.

Three Seas Initiative will be crucial as well. It is to be continued and developed, since its measurable effects are already visible due to creation of the Three Seas Fund. Poland plays an important role in the development of the Three Seas Initiative, but cooperation with external actors such as the United States will be essential. Due to the significant socio-cultural diversity of the Initiative countries, it is almost impossible to maintain a permanent policy. Therefore, the development of transport infrastructure (the so-called “north-south corridor”) is of key importance, as all Member States will benefit from it, regardless of the current political turmoil of individual countries. Therefore, Polish diplomacy should lobby the thesis that the main goal of the Initiative are infrastructure and economic benefits, without a broader geopolitical aspect and without expressing pro-Western or pro-Russian inclinations. In the perspective of Warsaw, the development of infrastructure would make CEE independent, thus increasing the energy and national security of the countries of the region, and as a consequence the security of Poland itself.

**Great absentees in foreign policy agenda**

The agenda for this year, however, does not give the answers regarding the strategy towards several other key actors in the international arena. The European Union, of which Poland should be an important member, remains a great absentee in political plans. In recent years there have been no initiatives on the part of Warsaw that would be considered by other European capitals or Brussels. Undoubtedly, Poland could play the role of a vital player, animating relations between East and West Member States of the Community, but for years there has been no idea, means and patience to fulfill this task.

Undoubtedly, Polish foreign policy also keeps the eyes almost closed to the events in the Russian Federation and Belarus. Neither the Chancellery of the President, the Prime Minister nor the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are currently working on a plan that foresees possible scenarios for the development of the situation. Even if the current authorities consider Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenka to be authoritarian rulers, they should also set the path for the development of relations with these politicians. To follow the proverb that “friends should be kept close, but enemies even closer”, it would seem crucial to define the strategy of Polish
foreign policy towards neighbouring states in the East, envisaging many possible scenarios for the expansion of the situation there. This would allow Poland to prepare for a possible political change and would make it possible to emphasize the importance of the region for Polish diplomacy. In fact, being a keystone between East and West is the declared goal of Warsaw.