



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on November 7, 2009

Poland Requests U.S. Military Presence

Poland's recent appeal to Washington reads like something printed on the front pages of newspaper from 20 years ago: Poland Fears Russian Invasion – Asks U.S. for Soldiers.



Radek Sikorski, Poland's foreign minister, made the request for an American military presence after becoming "alarmed" by Russia's recent military exercises conducted in Belarus, a former Soviet satellite that borders Poland. Sikorski minced no words in his entreaty: "We would like to see US troops stationed in Poland to serve as a shield against Russian aggression. If you can afford it, we need some strategic reassurance." The appeal comes about a month after Vice President Joe Biden proclaimed America's determination to continue providing support to Poland. It seems Mr. Sikorski is ready to put Biden's sincerity to the test.

There are more than just distant Russian military maneuvers prompting Poland to make such a plea. Many in the Polish government feel that America's resolve to aid its Central European ally is idle talk in light of what it sees as a pro-Russian bent in recent foreign policy decisions. Chiefly, the cancellation of the missile defense shield that was to be based in Poland has many of that nation's leaders concerned that when it comes to conflicts of any sort with Moscow, the United States will leave Poland to its own devices.

As evidence of America's disregard for Poland's safety, Mr. Sikorski noted that there are only six American soldiers currently on duty in Poland. "If you had on the one hand 900 tanks, and on the other six troops, would you be convinced?" he asked, referencing the Russian training drills.

For their part, the Russians find the request ludicrous and something out of the pages of the Cold War playbook. In fact, when asked for a comment, a Russian foreign ministry spokesman chided, "Cold War reflexes are still alive in Warsaw." In a statement made to the Moscow-based business journal *Kommersant*, an anonymous Russian government source suggested that perhaps Mr. Sikorski should run these ideas past a mental health professional before making them in public.

It isn't crazy, however, to see how Mr. Sikorski would believe that such a request might be granted, given American proclivity for deploying its armed forces as a worldwide police force. Unfortunately for Poland, however, they got the timing wrong. These days there is very little chance that President Obama would do anything to upset the apple cart with regard to American relations with Moscow. In light of the Iran situation and President Obama's contortionist diplomatic display aimed at winning Russian support for sanctions against Tehran, there is little doubt that when weighed in the balance against these weightier considerations that Polish security will be found wanting.



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Apart from cheeky insults and jabs at Polish leaders' sanity, Russian officials have noted that were the United States to acquiesce to such a preposterous request it would be in violation of a pledge made in 1990 by the leaders of NATO to Mikhail Gorbachev that in exchange for his endorsement of the reunification of Germany, no American armed forces would ever be stationed in former Warsaw Pact nations. When questioned about this so-called "pledge," however, U.S. policymakers who played key roles in the German reunification negotiations (including President George H.W. Bush and then Secretary of State James Baker) adamantly deny that any such concession was ever made or even on the table.

Whether such a deal was ever struck is unclear. But what is clear is that the enmity between Russia and Poland is deeply rooted and is unlikely to be deracinated by American intervention. In the wake of post-World War II Soviet invasion of Eastern Europe, Poland spent the next 40 years as a communist nation under the control of Moscow. Those days of political prisons and forced labor camps populated by "liberal dissidents" are still very vivid in the memory of many Poles and fosters unwavering distrust of Russia and reflexive fear of any Russian encroachment.

In fairness, Russia's resentment of Poland goes back even further in time. As a matter of fact, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin created a Russian national holiday to commemorate the day troops from a combined Polish-Lithuanian occupation force were run out of Moscow — nearly four hundred years ago!

The actual purpose of the Russian war games is unknown and the Kremlin is predictably unconcerned with allaying Polish fears and so isn't saying much. No matter what the true impetus was for the Russian maneuvers may turn out to be, however, it is clear that the alarm they elicited was intensified by decades of political oppression on one side and a centuries-old ax that is still being ground on the other.

Photo of Radek Sikorski: AP Images



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