

# WebMemo



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## The Smolensk Air Disaster: United States Must Stand United with Poland

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The Smolensk plane crash—which tragically took the lives of Poland’s President, First Lady, and 94 other political, military, and financial leaders—has dealt a devastating blow to the Polish people. As well as President Lech Kaczynski and First Lady Maria Kaczynska, Poland lost several ministers, parliamentarians, the heads of all the armed forces, and the chief of the national bank.

Prime Minister Donald Tusk has declared a week of national mourning as the Polish people stoically grieve another national tragedy. There has been an outpouring of international solidarity, and Warsaw has been inundated with messages of sympathy from the world over. Significantly, President Obama will represent the United States at President Kaczynski’s state funeral this Sunday.

Although Obama’s first presidential visit to Warsaw takes place under tragic circumstances, his attendance at the President and First Lady’s funeral will be enormously welcomed by the Polish people. President Kaczynski was well-known for his strong support of the transatlantic alliance, and he worked to solidify the Polish–American relationship. Although there have been significant strains in relations between Washington and Warsaw in recent months, President Obama will demonstrate America’s enduring commitment to Poland when he visits this weekend.

**A Committed Transatlanticist.** President Kaczynski was a passionate and committed transatlanticist, dedicated to pursuing a strong strategic partnership between Poland and the U.S. From his

early days in the legendary Solidarity movement, Lech Kaczynski fought for the sovereignty and self-determination of his nation—two philosophies that Kaczynski firmly believed were best underpinned by Poland’s membership of NATO and its bilateral relationship with the U.S.

Few worked harder than Kaczynski to advance Polish–American cooperation in areas including missile defense, the war in Afghanistan, NATO reform, and Poland’s prospective entry into the Visa Waiver Program.

**Poland’s Young and Strong Democracy.** As a member of the European Union and NATO, Poland is a nation whose development as a modern-day success story has been remarkable. Although Poland’s governmental institutions have only truly embodied democratic values since 1989, there is currently no danger to the continuity of state authority in the wake of the Smolensk crash. Acting heads have already been appointed for the military services and the central bank. The 1997 Constitution of the Republic of Poland also clearly lays out the procedure for the President’s replacement. The Speaker of Parliament, Bronislaw Komorowski, has already taken his position as acting President at the chancel-

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lery and is obliged to call elections within two weeks to be held within 60 days of that announcement. Presidential elections were already planned for early October and will therefore take place merely months ahead of schedule.

The atmosphere in which these elections will now take place, however, has significantly changed, as have the political dynamics surrounding the candidates. Two declared presidential candidates perished aboard the flight: Law and Justice's President Kaczynski, and Democratic Left Alliance's Jerzy Szmajdzinski. It remains to be seen whether the former Prime Minister and twin brother of President Lech Kaczynski, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, will take on the mantle of being Law and Justice's official candidate.

Equally, Komorowski finds himself in the delicate position of acting President, having declared some time ago his candidacy for the presidency on behalf of the Civic Platform party. In the interests of national unity, Komorowski could find himself giving way to another Civic Platform candidate so that he is not seen as attempting to advance his political position during his time as acting President.

**Foreign Policy Implications.** Although Prime Minister Tusk and Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski are primarily responsible for Polish foreign policy, the Smolensk air disaster has foreign policy implications nonetheless.

Both Deputy Foreign Minister Andrzej Kremer and Undersecretary of State of Defence Stanislaw Komorowski perished in the crash. Kremer worked on Polish–Russian relations under Sikorski and had been described as a rising star on the European stage.<sup>1</sup> Komorowski worked closely on U.S.–NATO–Polish issues under Defense Minister Bogdan Klich and was directly involved in implementing the U.S.–Polish Status of Forces Agree-

ment, which President Kaczynski ratified in February. Under the agreement, 100 U.S. troops are set to deploy to Morag in northern Poland later this month to maintain a U.S. Patriot air-defense system.

The death of Poland's Chief of the General Staff, Franciszek Gagor, represents another significant loss to the Polish–American alliance. A veteran of Operation Desert Storm, Gagor was a senior military officer and one of the driving forces behind Poland's 1999 entry to NATO. Gagor served as Poland's military representative to the NATO and EU Military Committees in Brussels, and his passing represents a considerable loss of institutional knowledge for Poland's senior military command.

**What the U.S. Can Do.** The U.S. Department of Defense has already reaffirmed its solidarity with Poland's defense establishment, a hugely welcomed development considering that the entire command of Poland's armed forces perished in the air crash. As commander-in-chief, President Obama should lengthen his official visit to Warsaw; an extended visit would allow him time to meet privately with the Polish government and publicly thank the people of Poland for their continued commitment to the U.S.-led mission in Afghanistan, where Poland has 2,140 troops as well as mentoring and training teams. President Obama should also make it clear that America's strategic alliance with Poland, including Poland's eventual inclusion in the Visa Waiver Program, remains a priority for his Administration.<sup>2</sup>

**A Deep and Heartfelt Commitment.** Prime Minister Tusk has described the Smolensk air disaster as "the worst tragedy to befall the nation since the end of the Second World War."<sup>3</sup> In addition to being deeply appreciated by the Polish people, President Obama's support for Poland at this time demonstrates America's enduring commitment to U.S.–Polish relations.

1. Roger Boyles, "Nation Falls Silent as Grieving Poles Mark Passing of Lech Kaczynski," *The Times*, April 12, 2010, at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article7094775.ece> (April 14, 2010).
2. See Sally McNamara, "The Polish-American Relationship: Deepening and Strengthening the Alliance," Heritage Foundation *Background* No.2010, February 27, 2007, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2007/02/The-Polish-American-Relationship-Deepening-and-Strengthening-the-Alliance>.
3. Matthew Day, "Polish Plane Crash: Investigators Rule out Technical Fault," *The Sunday Telegraph*, April 11, 2010, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/poland/7579076/Polish-plane-crash-investigators-rule-out-technical-fault.html> (April 14, 2010).

One of President Kaczynski's greatest legacies will be the enormous strides he took to solidify the bilateral relationship between America and Poland and the advancement of the transatlantic security alliance. President Obama should reciprocate President Kaczynski's lifelong efforts and honor his legacy by showing the Polish people, once again,

that America's commitment to Poland remains deep and heartfelt.

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