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President Obama Should Advance the Polish–American Relationship

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President Obama will conclude his eighth visit to Europe this week in Poland, where he will attend a summit of leaders of Central and Eastern Europe including the new President of Kosovo, Atifete Jahjaga. This visit will be particularly significant as the Administration attempts to correct a series of missteps it has made in the region since taking office. The President's resetting of relations with Russia was perceived as coming at the expense of America's traditional allies in Central and Eastern Europe, not least of all Poland. Faced with a number of public diplomacy disasters of his own making, President Obama now has an opportunity to advance key policy initiatives and to reassure the region that it is still important to the United States.

Policy Missteps. In April 2009, *The New York Times* revealed that President Obama secretly offered Moscow a grand bargain: The U.S. would sacrifice the "third site" missile defense deal,¹ which was agreed with Poland and the Czech Republic in the final months of the Bush Administration, in exchange for Moscow's help on Iran.² In September 2009—on the 70th anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Poland—President Obama formally announced the cancellation of the program, with little notice given to either European capital. Both Warsaw and Prague had spent considerable political and diplomatic capital on the third-site deal, and the perception was that the Kremlin had achieved a significant strategic victory.

In November 2009, it was reported that Moscow had simulated a war game in which Russian armed forces invaded Poland and nuclear missiles were fired.³ The deafening silence in Washington once again left Warsaw with the impression that the resetting of relations with Moscow was a greater priority for the U.S. than its traditional alliances, particularly NATO.

A long-standing issue that has further strained the U.S.–Polish relationship is Poland's continued exclusion from the U.S. Visa Waiver Program (VWP). Poland is the only country in Europe's Schengen area to remain outside the privileged travel program through which citizens of member countries do not need a visa to enter the United States. As 2,500 Polish troops continue to fight shoulder-to-shoulder with U.S. troops in Afghanistan, it remains incongruous that Poles are still excluded from the VWP.

Public Diplomacy Missteps. In April 2010, Poland experienced deep tragedy when President Lech Kaczynski, the First Lady, and 94 senior officials perished in the Smolensk air disaster. President Obama was unable to fly to Warsaw for the funeral because of the Icelandic ash cloud that had suspended all international flights to Europe. How-

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ever, Obama was pictured playing golf on the day of the funeral.

This is not the first public diplomacy gaffe that the Obama Administration has made in the region. While European heads of state and government—including Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin—lined up to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Nazi invasion of Poland in September 2009, the White House failed even to respond formally to the invitation. National Security Adviser General Jim Jones was hastily dispatched at the last minute, which online *U.S.–Polish News* described as a “slap in the face.”⁴

Playing Catch-Up. In July 2009, 22 Central and Eastern European intellectuals and former policy-makers, including former Czech President Vaclav Havel and former Polish President Lech Walesa, published an open letter to the U.S. Administration in the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* stating that “Central and Eastern European countries are no longer at the heart of American foreign policy.”⁵ Since then, the Administration has slowly sought to repair relations with these nations.

President Obama took up an initiative begun under the Bush Administration to extend NATO’s Article 5 contingency planning to the Baltic States and Poland. Formal plans to defend these countries were agreed in January 2010, and during his upcoming visit, President Obama may announce the stationing of some of America’s European-based NATO assets in Poland.

The stationing of NATO and U.S. assets in Poland has been a long-term goal of successive Pol-

ish administrations as a tangible demonstration of the U.S.–Polish defense relationship. Poland has agreed to host a land-based SM-3 missile defense site, which is planned under the U.S. Administration’s Phased Adaptive Approach to European Missile Defense. However, this site is not envisioned until 2018, and much stress has therefore been placed on the potential stationing of 16 F-16 fighter jets in Central Poland, relocated from their current base in Aviano, Italy.

The President’s Opportunity. When President Obama goes to Warsaw, he should make it clear that the United States is committed to a strong and lasting partnership with Poland and with Central and Eastern Europe more broadly. He should:

- Restate the U.S.’s commitment to the security of Central and Eastern European allies;
- Highlight the U.S.’s commitment to NATO and reaffirm the alliance’s primacy in Europe’s security architecture;
- Extend missile defense cooperation with Europe beyond the currently planned hosting arrangements, including the joint development of missile defense systems, establishing command-and-control systems, and preparing operational plans; and
- Bring Poland into the Visa Waiver Program.

An Important Ally. The Polish–American relationship is based on shared values and common interests. Warsaw was one of the four leading countries in the coalition present in Iraq from the outset of Operation Iraqi Freedom. More than 2,500 Polish soldiers continue to stand alongside the U.S.

1. Nile Gardiner and Sally McNamara, “President Obama Must Not Surrender to Russia on Missile Defense,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2603, September 3, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2009/09/president-obama-must-not-surrender-to-russia-on-missile-defense>.
2. Peter Baker, “Obama Offered Deal to Russia in Secret Letter,” *The New York Times*, March 2, 2009, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/03/washington/03prexy.html> (May 24, 2011).
3. Matthew Day, “Russia ‘Simulates’ Nuclear Attack on Poland,” *The Daily Telegraph*, November 1, 2009, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/poland/6480227/Russia-simulates-nuclear-attack-on-Poland.html> (May 24, 2011).
4. “Poles May Re-Think Relations with US,” PL-News.us, August 26, 2009, at <http://www.pl-news.us/2009/08/poles-may-re-think-relations-with-us.html> (May 24, 2011).
5. Radio Free Europe, “An Open Letter to the Obama Administration from Central and Eastern Europe,” July 16, 2009, at http://www.rferl.org/content/An_Open_Letter_To_The_Obama_Administration_From_Central_And_Eastern_Europe/1778449.html (May 24, 2011).

and other coalition forces in Afghanistan—significantly, with no national caveats imposed by Warsaw.

Although the early part of his Administration saw a series of missteps in the region, President Obama has an opportunity to revive relations with Warsaw and reaffirm that Poland is one of America's closest allies. During his visit, he must not only strike the right tone, but also advance policy initiatives to

demonstrate the enduring value of the U.S.–Polish relationship.

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