

President Biden's Trip to Warsaw: Key Issues

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

President Biden's trip to Poland comes at a critical moment in the Russian war against Ukraine and on the heels of continued Chinese provocations against the U.S.

Poland's commitments to Ukraine and decisive leadership in facing Russia have been critical. However, the Russia threat cannot be disassociated from China.

Biden should reiterate commitment to NATO, support for Ukraine's sovereignty, embrace U.S. energy production, and strengthen European resolve to counter China.

President Biden will travel to Poland February 20–22. The visit, just two days prior to the first anniversary of Russia's second invasion of Ukraine, is an important opportunity. While in Poland, President Biden will meet with Polish leaders as well as members of the Bucharest Nine (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia). The Administration should embrace the emerging European security paradigm in which allies in Eastern Europe, most especially Poland, have taken the lead regarding aid for Ukraine and strengthening NATO deterrence. The President should reiterate U.S. commitment to NATO, support for Ukraine's sovereignty, and strengthened economic and political ties to Eastern Europe while also encouraging allies to better calibrate their policies with the scale of the mounting challenge from China.

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A Leader in the Emerging European Security Landscape

Poland's clear-eyed assessment of the threat from Russia has led to a strong commitment to defense spending. This year, Poland is on track to attain both of NATO's spending benchmarks. According to NATO, Poland will spend 2.42 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defense, as well as 20.4 percent of its defense budget on new equipment in 2023.¹ This will surely increase: At the end of January, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki announced his intentions to raise Polish defense spending to 4 percent of GDP this year.² If that plan comes to fruition, Poland will spend more on defense (as a percentage of GDP) than anyone in the NATO alliance, including the United States. Poland is at the forefront of bolstering NATO collective defense through this commitment to defense spending as well as through the acquisition of capabilities that add additional muscle to alliance deterrence. In recent years, Poland has inked agreements to acquire U.S.-made systems including Patriot missile batteries,³ high-mobility artillery rocket systems, Javelin anti-tank missiles, M1A2 Abrams tanks, F-35 fighter jets,⁴ and MQ-9A Reaper drones (leased).⁵

Washington for its part maintains a growing footprint in Poland with approximately 10,000 American servicemembers stationed there,⁶ some as part of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence Battle Group in Orzysz, Poland, near the Suwalki Gap, where the United States serves as the framework nation. In November 2020, the United States and Poland signed an enhanced defense cooperation agreement that increased the number of U.S. forces stationed there, a presence enlarged further following Russia's second invasion of Ukraine. Last June, the United States announced that the permanent headquarters for V Corps would be established in Poland. The United States also flies reaper drones from Poland, and the nation hosts an Aegis Ashore site in Redzikowo, part of NATO's ballistic missile defense, which is anticipated to become operational this year.⁷

In October, Poland reportedly approached the United States about the possibility of taking part in U.S. nuclear sharing.⁸ Washington currently has nuclear-sharing agreements with Belgium, Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands that allow for delivery of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons by allied aircraft.⁹ While the United States has not yet pursued this possibility, the interest of Poland further underscores the degree to which Warsaw perceives an existential threat from Russia, as well as its continued interest in advancing to the top tier of U.S. transatlantic partners alongside the likes of the United Kingdom.

Poland remains one of the strongest supporters of Ukraine, hosting over 1.5 million refugees—more than any other Western nation. Poland is the logistics keystone for aid—both humanitarian and military—flowing across the border into Ukraine. As a result of this position, the Polish town of Rzeszow has been transformed, with the city of 200,000 swelling by an additional 30,000 people. Its crucial airport (guarded by U.S. Patriot missile batteries) receives around 10 cargo jets with aid and material bound for Ukraine per day.¹⁰ Poland also operates a major factory to repair Ukrainian tanks and artillery systems.¹¹ Poland is also one of the largest national donors to Ukraine: the fifth largest in total amount of aid and the third largest as a percentage of GDP.¹²

The China Challenge

American allies in Eastern Europe view Russia as an acute existential threat that can at times be difficult for Americans to fully appreciate. Poland's commitment and decisiveness in facing the challenge from Russia is laudable and critically important. However, it is crucial for President Biden to also underscore the challenge of China to the transatlantic community. Russia and China currently have a largely symbiotic relationship. Russia desperately needs access to China's market, and components made in China or routed through China are critical to Putin's war effort. One cannot disassociate the two challenges; they are clearly linked.

While Poland is clear-eyed about the Russia challenge, it has been somewhat less willing to tackle the threat posed by China. In 2016, China and Poland signed a declaration on strategic partnership "in which they reiterated that Poland and China viewed each other as long-term and stable strategic partners."¹³ Poland remains an active member of China's shrinking 14+1 format,¹⁴ even continuing to send high-level representation to summits after most remaining participants have downgraded theirs. Just prior to Russia's second invasion of Ukraine, Polish President Andrzej Duda was one of the few foreign leaders to attend the opening of the Beijing Olympics.

These continued diplomatic ties can be explained by Warsaw's desire to retain a strong trading relationship with China. For instance, China is a growing market for Poland's important agricultural sector.¹⁵ By 2020, Chinese investments in Poland have expanded to eight times what they were in 2013.¹⁶ While Chinese investments in Eastern Europe are only a small portion of overall Chinese investments in Europe (4 percent in 2021¹⁷), Poland and Hungary remain the top destinations in the region. Polish ports and rail lines are key logistics nodes for Chinese goods being

distributed throughout Europe. Last year it was reported that “the logistic hub in Malszewice located on the Polish-Belarusian border is responsible for servicing 90 percent of railway cargo exports from China to the EU.”¹⁸ Last summer, a Chinese report of a call between Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau included a stated goal to continue to develop Poland as China’s key regional hub.¹⁹

On the issue of Chinese involvement in 5G rollouts, Poland has taken a more strident approach than other countries in Eastern Europe, such as Hungary. In September 2019, the United States and Poland signed an agreement to better secure next generation 5G networks. The agreement stated a goal of “[p]rotecting these next generation communications networks from disruption or manipulation and ensuring the privacy and individual liberties of the citizens of the United States, Poland, and other countries.”²⁰ Since that time, Poland has taken a more assertive stance against using Chinese equipment, yet China still maintains a foothold in the nation’s 5G infrastructure. At the end of last year, Chinese equipment accounted for 38 percent of equipment used in 5G rollouts in the nation,²¹ albeit a lower percentage than in many European nations. Chinese vendors such as Huawei continue activities inside the country, including a partnership with Lodz University following the signing of a three-year agreement in 2021.²²

There remains a tendency in Eastern Europe to compartmentalize the threats from China and Russia. Most if not all U.S. allies in the region are aware of the challenge and threat posed by China, yet they remain unwilling to align more closely with the United States in regard to China policy due to a desire to prioritize the Russia challenge while also benefiting from China’s economic power. The Biden Administration must also showcase consistent resolve in the face of the challenge from China. Embarrassments such as the Chinese dressing down Secretary Antony Blinken on American soil in 2021,²³ and the consistent and brazen spate of Chinese surveillance overflights of sensitive U.S. sites undermine U.S. efforts to move Europe towards a more robust approach.

An Opportunity to Send Clear Messages

Russia’s war against Ukraine is transforming Europe in ways that are only beginning to be understood. In part, it has hastened and built upon pre-existing trends such as greater economic and political influence flowing to Eastern Europe. While some nations in Europe have appeared flatfooted since Vladimir Putin’s second invasion of Ukraine, Poland has not hesitated to act decisively in support of Ukraine as well as NATO.

The timing and location of the President's trip raises its stakes. President Biden can advance U.S. national interests while in Poland by:

Encouraging Regional Allies to View China Clearly. While meeting with Polish leaders and the leaders of the remaining Bucharest Nine, President Biden should clearly link the threats posed by China and Russia and encourage allies to reconsider their deepened ties with Beijing. The President should begin by encouraging European allies to reconsider participation in the 14+1 format (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania having withdrawn); encouraging swift removal of Chinese telecommunications equipment and providers from regional 5G networks; and urging the establishment and use of robust national investment screening mechanisms to ensure that China does not gain control over infrastructure, critical emerging technologies, or other sensitive sectors that would undermine transatlantic security.

Announcing a Persistent and Continuing Presence in Eastern European Member States. Congress should ensure that the U.S. has an adequate persistent presence of ground forces in Central and Eastern Europe to help deter Russian armed aggression. Decisions about this presence should be informed by the expectation of enhanced contributions by NATO allies and the temporary denuding of Russian military capability from its aggressive war against Ukraine. However, a U.S. component of NATO's forward-deployed deterrence remains critical. U.S. forward-deployed contributions in Central Europe can be rotational forces or permanently deployed,²⁴ but the presence, the footprint, must be persistent. U.S. presence should include the continued forward-deployed corps headquarters that provide the capacity to mobilize a larger conventional force, if needed. At home, the U.S. must also retain total Active, Reserve, and National Guard land-force capability sufficient to meet the needs of theater commanders.

Continuing U.S. Support for Ukraine. The United States and Poland (alongside the U.K.) have been some of the most invaluable partner nations in support of Ukraine. Ensuring that Ukraine has the military aid it needs in a timely manner for maximum impact on the battlefield should remain a U.S. and NATO commitment. Furthermore, Washington and its allies should consider the geopolitical landscape of Europe after fighting has ended, keeping the door open to the future possibility of Ukrainian NATO membership and exploring ways in which Ukraine can become an economic and physical link between the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) and countries such as Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Expanding U.S. Commitments to the Three Seas Initiative. The 3SI is a valuable project for strengthening trade, infrastructure, energy, and

political cooperation among countries bordering the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Seas. The 3SI aims to strengthen transatlantic bonds and provide powerful pushback against Chinese investments in the region. The Trump Administration strongly supported the 3SI, but the Biden Administration has yet to fully embrace it.²⁵ In 2022, the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation and the Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund agreed to a term sheet for investing \$300 million, which the United States had previously pledged.²⁶ While in Warsaw, President Biden should build upon this long-overdue step by announcing a more significant investment, which would pay economic and geopolitical dividends for the United States.

Embracing U.S. Energy Production for Transatlantic Security.

Europe's clear and consistent turn away from Russian energy will be one of the most consequential and important developments resulting from Putin's decision to expand his war against Ukraine. U.S. exports of liquified natural gas (LNG) in 2022 supplied "more than half of Europe's imported LNG and helping the region weather a more than 54% plunge in piped shipments from Russia."²⁷ The vital role Washington plays in providing a reliable alternative to Russian energy strengthens transatlantic security. Rather than stifling U.S. energy production, the Administration should embrace U.S. energy abundance as a key component of U.S. policy overseas and seek to grow U.S. energy ties to Europe, including in the nuclear arena.

Conclusion

President Biden's trip to Poland comes at a critical moment in the Russian war against Ukraine and on the heels of continued Chinese provocations against the United States. As such, friend and foe alike will be watching carefully. The President should remain committed to transatlantic security and grow important ties with Eastern Europe, a dynamic region that is emerging as a strengthened force within Europe, a trend that is almost certain to be underscored in the decade ahead. President Biden should work to strengthen European resolve to tackle the threat from China in the same way it is addressing the long-term strategic threat from Russia.

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