



Growing German-Polish Rivalry. Yet Another Fissure Within Western Alliance

Description

There is a German-Polish feud going on at the very heart of Europe, even while Poland hosts the most significant German military presence since World War II as part of NATO's operations in its eastern flank, and correspondent Laura Pitel has recently written about it. Warsaw, meanwhile, has launched a legal campaign against Berlin for wartime reparations. Nasty rhetoric about the latter's prominent role in the EU (described as a "Fourth Reich") are part of this feud. The friction is about historic disagreements but also has profound geopolitical implications.

Much has been written about Poland being now a "rising power". One could see, already in 2020, during the "Defender Europe 2020" military exercises for instance, how much Warsaw dreamed about becoming the main stronghold of the US military presence in Eastern Europe. Today's conflict next door in Ukraine obviously suits such aspirations quite well. Moreover, as I wrote in September 2022, Washington seems to be glad to promote Warsaw's ambitions pertaining to regional hegemony as mostly a means to counter Berlin.

Another evidence of such aspirations are the Ukrainian-Polish concrete advancements towards a confederation – they involve draft bills to parliament in both Poland and Ukraine mutually giving special status to citizens of the neighboring nation. Such ambitious Polish plans are to face enormous challenges, though, including Ukraine's own anti-Polish far-right.

In any case, the emerging Polish-Ukrainian alliance could mean a shift to the East for the European bloc's geopolitical center of gravity, currently based in France and Germany. This in turn would be a blow to European strategic autonomy, however. It is impossible to talk about the crisis in Eastern Europe today without addressing the geopolitical issue of NATO's expansion (part of Washington's dangerous policy of dual containment) plus the matter of American geoeconomic interests pertaining to energy.

As I recently wrote, "non-alignmentism" has now made its appearance in European discourse and politics, led by no less than France and potentially also Germany – the former being the only nuclear power in post-Brexit Europe and the latter being the largest economy in the continent.

One would do well to remember that as recently as 2021, the (now on standstill) Nord Stream 2 pipelines project was being completed. The whole Nord Stream network project, which, for the first time, bypassed Poland and Ukraine to deliver Russian gas directly to Western Europe, was opposed from the very start by the US, as is widely known – and also by Poland and Ukraine. And yet Berlin resisted American pressures all the way to almost completion – and then pipelines got blown up.

The point is that Germany and the main European powers never wanted to antagonize Russia too much among other things because Russian-European cooperation on energy was always a strategic matter. The (now conspicuously exploded) Nord Stream pipelines were the most visible materialization of that will.

In June 2021, the Foreign Ministers of Poland Zbigniew Rau and Ukraine Dmytro Kuleba were coordinating their positions on the matter of Nord Stream 2, opposed by them. They both described it as a “threat” to European energy security when in fact the tremendous energy price rises that have been impacting Europe since 2021 could have been avoided if the now gone Nord Stream 2 project had only been put into operation. From the very start, the European energy crisis has served American interests well.

The aforementioned energy issue plus US President Joe Biden’s subsidy war against Europe might have been a wake up call to many European leaders and thus have contributed to rebooting the now much discussed concept of “strategic autonomy”. Polish leaders however seem to see things in a different way.

Poland, having no gas distribution center of its own, has big plans for the Baltic Pipeline connecting its coast with Norway thus becoming a key European gas hub. On May 4, Poland approved draft legislation that would boost military protection of the Baltic energy infrastructure, by allowing its military to sink any enemy ship targeting the Baltic pipe. Having been cut off from Russian gas supplies, the country now relies on imports from Norway. The aforementioned pipeline, possessing in fact five times less capacity than Nord Stream 2, is not really an ideal alternative, in any case.

Political scientist and University of Chicago professor and political scientist John Mearsheimer, who is perhaps the most influential proponent of the “realist” school of thought in international relations, has talked and written a number of times on how the political elites of the main European powers were in fact not really willing to pursue Washington’s agenda of encircling and containing Moscow, as exemplified by former French President Nicolas Sarkozy and former German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s statements and actions. Mearsheimer has been making the case that the current conflict in Ukraine was mostly caused by NATO enlargement, and by the US “strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia’s orbit and integrate it into the West.”

While giving a lecture in June 2022, Mearsheimer, who is an American, was asked why the Europeans did not have their way then (if such was really the case), to which he famously replied that “the Europeans dance to our tune. We run NATO. This is a matter of power” and even ridiculed the notion of “joint decision-making” within the Atlantic organization, his reasoning being that Europe depends too much on the US for security to be able to have a voice – a situation that has only gotten worse since February 2022. European talks on rearmament are about addressing this inconvenient reality too. Warsaw’s quest for regional hegemony, however, relies heavily on American military presence and power.

A local actor such as Poland in fact can indeed make itself available to be used as an American proxy, while also increasing tensions in the continent. It remains to be seen what it may gain out of it. In any case, the US-led political West today is a house divided.

by Uriel Araujo

Featured image from AdobeStock

Category

1. Main
2. Opinion-Comments
3. Politics-Geopolitics-Gov.-Events

Date Created

05/07/2023