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Witold Waszczykowski: "May we get another chance"

An article written by Mr Witold Waszczykowski, deputy Head of National Security Bureau, for Rzeczpospolita, 6th October 2009.

President's Obama decision to withdraw from building anti-missile base in Poland and radar in Czech Republic gave rise to animated and emotional debate on how useful for Poland's security this initiative would be. For strategic thinking the debate is understandable and positive phenomena. It is puzzling though, why so many opponents of anti-missile shield keep referring to untrue information and arguments.



Witold Waszczykowski

The system should defend Poland

Since the beginning of this decade, when the proposal of American plans emerged, an avalanche of debates have swept through Poland. Not only interested state institutions such as Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defence or National Security Bureau, but also most of the think tanks and media centres organised seminars, conferences, published numerous reports, expertises and analyses both scientific and journalistic. Those works are available in the libraries and on the websites. Those websites publish also agreements signed with the USA in 2008. For several years Americans, also in Poland, spread information concerning their initiative. In Czech Republic, the institution assigned for that target conducted broad information policy.

Therefore, persistent use of information that departs from the truth is puzzling. Is it nonchalance, reluctance to give up a barbecue party in order to familiarise with the facts or intentional actions undertaken by pro-Russian party or some anti-American league? The simplest lie bandied around for several days was consistently making the community to believe that the Czechs have ratified the agreement with the US and yet they ended up in the same situation as Poland. In fact, Czechs did not ratify any agreement. Because of the political and parliamentary crisis, ratification procedure was passed through Senate only, and it did not reach the lower parliament house. Moreover, Czech intentions were to wait for the Poland's decision. It was not a secret that they perceived the whole US initiative as one package. If Poland withdraws from it, they would not be able to cope with the political consequences of that initiative in the region.

Generally, an accusation was raised that American initiative serves only US defence. That was just at the beginning. Yet the first condition that we made during the negotiations was a request that the system defends USA, Europe and Poland. Americans agreed to that condition. As a result of the negotiations we have signed an obligation which committed Americans legally to ensure Poland security and to defend Poland against ballistic missile attack using anti-missile defence system (article IX of the agreement).

We have not joined a virtual project, as many may say. It is worth reminding that the Americans have two fully

operational anti-missile bases and a system of working radars, including radar already built, which was supposed to be moved to the Czech territory.

Further, it is imputed that the American initiative divided NATO and Europe. And again it is not true. Americans have addressed their proposal to several NATO members. Great Britain and Denmark already have participated in it. Poland and Czech Republic was to join that group. Americans made a lot of effort to consult the proposal with the Europeans, both bilaterally and multilaterally through NATO. As a result, North Atlantic Alliance accepted the proposal during the summit in Bucharest in 2008 and then during the jubilee summit in 2009.

The Alliance acknowledged that the American initiative supplements NATO efforts to build a shield against short and medium range missiles. And, Americans committed themselves to add to their initiative anti-missile installations, which would protect Southern Europe. In the context of the above-mentioned issues, usually there are appeals to support future NATO system perceived as the one accepted by all the players. It is not mentioned though that such a system would cost horrendous money and all NATO members would have to agree to purchase American anti-missiles. And we are far from such solution.

Reaction to Russia's Policy

It is often claimed that the American initiative was anti-Russian. It is complete absurd usually endorsed by persons biased against the USA, suspecting Americans of inclinations to blackmail the whole world militarily. Anti-missile system was not offensive and included neither rockets armed with war heads, nor nuclear ones. The Russians were allowed to conduct verifications as often as they needed in order to convince them that its purpose has not been altered.

The Russians used the anti-missile shield as a pretext and justification of their aggressive policy aimed at restoring their influence/interest zone, policy that has begun right after president Putin came to power. Poland and other European countries had to put up with Russian retaliation after we had supported democratic transformations in Georgia and Ukraine, which is, before any negotiations concerning European element of anti-missile defence started.

So it wasn't Poland who intentionally deteriorated relations with Russia. Poland tried to react to new reality - Russia's growing assertiveness. To Russian attempts to revise the history of the 20th century, endeavours to build new architecture of European security based on the agreement concluded by the leading powers which excluded us.

It is worth emphasising that we have undertaken our own efforts to consult the initiative on the international arena. The problem of a threat posed by development of ballistic missiles programs in the Middle East was discussed during the visits paid to Poland by heads of the following countries: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan, Palestine, and Israel. Ministry and expert delegations consulted with the neighbours and leading European countries, particularly those that host American bases.

We also have not forgotten about direct relations with Iran and North Korea in order to investigate their determination in the field of developing nuclear and missile programs. Therefore, the decision to start negotiations with the US was preceded with a detailed diagnosis of a problem, both the threat and the implications to the regional and international position of Poland. And what is important, the preparations to take up American initiative started few years before PiS (Law and Justice) government was formed. In 2004-2005, the government lead by Marek Belka was intensively preparing Poland to the negotiations. Numerous expertises and opinions, positive ones (!), were released. Initial documentation was prepared and proper negotiation structures formed.

None of the Polish governments was attempting to accept the American initiative "at all costs", "with any provisions", and moreover to pay extra for the contract. Negotiations were long, because we cared for Polish interest, security guarantees, and American obligation to defend the base and support modernisation of the Polish Armed Forces. The base would be an American investment on the Polish territory, and we did not provide

for any extraterritorial status. Today we are put aside with political declaration of cooperation which refers to part of our demands only. Execution of its obligations will be courteous gesture made by the US, but it will not be legal obligation anymore.

Clear conscience

Could we have done it differently (Was it possible to do it other way)? Did President Obama intend to withdraw from the initiative anyway? We could have strived. The Polish government could and should have demonstrated more determination, instead of pondering for half a year after elections if to continue negotiations. After two years of intense negotiations Poland achieved, legally binding, American obligation to provide us with security guarantee.

Yet, the Prime Minister Tusk's government rejected those guarantees stopping the ratification process. Stopping the ratification of the agreement on the American base near Redzikowo, lack of agreement on the legal status of the American troops and as a result lack of numerous executive agreements meant that previous American administration could not initiate any investments. And Government Accountability Office, as revealed in the August report, could not present any final costs for building a base in Poland.

Until spring 2009 the problem of anti-missile shield in Poland did not seem to be negative foregone conclusion. Still in February Secretary of the Defence Robert Gates appealed in Krakow, during the meeting of NATO Ministries of Defence, for the agreement to be ratified by Poland and Czech Republic. At that time GAO calculated that Polish and Czech variant is still the cheapest. Of course, ratification did not guarantee the agreement would be continued by the new American administration. Yet, the formal process of dismissing would take two years. Taking that into account and unfavourable international repercussions of such dismissing, we should anticipate that Americans would take more time to think about it and would be obliged to find the way for mutually favourable solution of the ensuing situation.

One may sneer that we lost paper guarantees and virtual investment. One can laugh that those were illusions and call on to be more realistic. One can, if one has a clear conscience and belief that "we fulfilled our task, Poland". One can if one demonstrated initiative instead of waiting for a year for "US independent decision". Efforts to receive permanent and reliable guarantees for a country are continuous process and require constant efforts. Last year the Polish government blocked that process in the relations with America. Let's hope we do not waste another chance. Or maybe first we should say let's hope we get another chance!

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