

Minister Radoslaw Sikorski on Polish perspectives – an interview for San Francisco Chronicle – August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009

### A Polish Perspective



Urbane and polished, Radoslaw Sikorski would easily meet a casting director's call to play a European diplomat -- a good thing, since he is currently [playing that role for the Republic of Poland](#).

It is only the latest chapter in [a remarkable life](#) that has had Sikorski play the role of dissident, refugee, and journalist before moving up the political chain as Poland's deputy defense minister and under-secretary of state before reaching his current position, Minister of Foreign Affairs.

A past resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington and Executive Director of the New Atlantic Initiative, Sikorski is frequently asked to comment on matters relating to the U.S. relationship with the [European Union](#) and [NATO](#) -- he was at one point [rumored to be in the running](#) as secretary general of the alliance.

Sikorski sat down with me Wednesday afternoon shortly before giving [an address to the World Affairs Council in San Francisco](#) to discuss Nato's role in Afghanistan, President Obama's role in Europe, and the controversial missile defense shield proposal that has rattled relations between Russia and the United States

An edited version of our conversation appears after the jump.



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Minister of Foreign Affairs Radoslaw Sikorski

*You gave [a speech for the 60th anniversary of NATO](#) and talked about the role of NATO in the modern world. Can you sum up what you said?*

Poland is a true believer in the transatlantic community of interests, and we believe NATO has two roles: its [core role of defending its members' territory](#), and the [new role of anticipating threats where they emerge](#), which has resulted from [NATO invoking article five for the first time in response to an attack on the United States](#). And it's in that spirit that [Poland has 2,000 troops in Afghanistan](#) and we are providing security for [1.1 million Afghans in the Ghazni province](#). It is of course a historical irony -- NATO was launched to give the legal basis and military capability for the United States to defend Europe; what actually happened was that Europe rallied around the United States after you were attacked. But that is the meaning of an alliance: that you prepare for what is not predictable and that you help one another in need.

*What impact has the [recent events in Georgia vis a vis Russia](#) had on the strength of that alliance and its relationship with the US?*

Well, [Georgia is not of course a member](#), but she is perceived as a friend of the United States and therefore we watch quite closely what the United States does to help sustain Georgia's independence and integrity. In the crisis last year, [it was the EU under the French presidency](#) that sprang to action and negotiated a truce, which unfortunately has not been fulfilled by the Russian side.

*If you look at the reaction to [Vice President Biden's recent comments](#) there is obviously still some sensitivity.*

As regards President Biden's comment, by the way, I have formulated the Sikorski law of politics, which says that you cause the most controversy not by what you do, but by what you say, particularly if it's true. And what Vice President Biden said about [Russia's demographic problems is self evidently true](#), and Russian authorities are saying that they are addressing the crisis.

*What role do you see Poland playing as the [US seeks to reset its relationship with Russia](#)?*

We are advocates of [the best possible relationship between Russia and the west](#). Of course it takes two to tango. But for example, [nuclear disarmament is in our interest](#), since we are not a nuclear power. But we believe it should cover not just intercontinental but also [tactical missiles](#). As a border country of both NATO and the EU, we have the most to lose by any worsening of relations with Russia. So we are in favor, providing it is not the expense of the security interests of Russia's neighbors, because we don't subscribe to [19th century notions of spheres of influence](#).

*There has been some criticism of this administration by [Europeans urging the administration to reengage with the European community](#). Do you feel this administration's relationship with Europe is all it could be?*

These are early days yet. We were certainly delighted by President Obama's meeting with us, both in the NATO context and in the EU context. We believe that the US needs all the friends it can get these days, and you have particularly tried and tested friends in central Europe -- but also friends who can now contribute, not just in Afghanistan, but in the post Soviet space. Poland is the co-author of a program called [Eastern Partnership](#), which is an EU policy to create a free trade zone and a visa free travel zone with six countries that were formerly parts of the Soviet Union. That, I believe, is also a US interest. Poland has also launched an organization called the [Community of Democracies](#), and there I think the new administration could find a smarter way of promoting democracy around the world. And, by the way, this is something that we think we are experts at. Poland is a country that has carried out a successful transformation both in terms of politics and in terms of the economy. We want to be used to transmit that experience to others, not just in Europe, but in other parts of the world.

*There is a perception, right or wrong, in the US that its [European allies are not doing all they could in Iraq and Afghanistan](#). Is that a legitimate criticism?*

As regards Iraq, it's somewhat unfair, because Iraq was not a NATO mission. It was a coalition of the willing, and some were simply not willing, because they were not convinced. And they were not convinced because the case was not convincing -- because the weapons of mass destruction, for example, were not found. So I believe that what Europeans did in Iraq -- and some did a great deal, [we've put 18,000 troops through Iraq](#), we were in command of the 26-nation international division for five years, and others did to -- I think that was a bonus, rather than reason for complaint. Afghanistan is different because [it is a NATO mission](#) -- we have jointly taken a decision to do it. And there I think Europe, NATO, should do more. Even [when I was defense minister I coined the phrase](#) that who gives without caveats -- meaning troops to NATO missions -- gives double. We should devise better mechanisms of burden sharing and we should simply provide more troops; Poland has already increased its contribution and is considering increasing it even more, because we believe [NATO's credibility is at stake in Afghanistan](#). But Europe is also contributing to the other part of the job, namely developmental assistance. The latest figure I have seen is [we are providing 900 million Euros this year](#), which is something. I was initiator of a group of Friends of Afghanistan inside the EU that advocates greater EU commitment to Afghanistan. I believe that we can prevail in Afghanistan if EU and NATO act together, both on the military and on the developmental front.

*Is it accurate to say that -- for whatever reason -- the [previous administration left a difficult diplomatic relationship](#) between the US and many of its EU partners?*

I don't think it's up to me to criticize and US administrations. Family discussions are as old as the family itself, and will probably always be with us.

*Has the way this administration has handled itself to far created any new opportunities or created any challenges for the US's relationships?*

Well, as I said, it's early days. But Europeans are looking to how effective America will be in fostering the Middle East peace process, but also I think the US is right in calling our bluff. We were [mostly very fulsome in welcoming President Obama to office](#), so yes, I believe we should do as much as we can to help him fulfill the jointly agreed agenda in places like Afghanistan.

*What would you see as the top issues you'd like to see Poland, the EU or NATO address with the US?*

In times of global economic crisis, we really should get serious about [the Doha round of trade negotiations](#), and we should overcome selfishness on both sides of the Atlantic in [agricultural policies](#), which is what's blocking the success of the new round. I think it is very important to send a signal that protectionism must not return. And that would give new stimulus to global trade, which we greatly need. By the way, Poland is the only major country in Europe which is still likely to grow this year. So we feel we must be doing something right economically.

*Missile defense.*

I knew you would come to that.

*Where do we go [from here](#)?*

It's up to the US. But [I hope that the decision gets taken on legitimate technical grounds of efficiency and cost](#). I signed the agreement with Condi Rice, who I am seeing tomorrow. And we did it because we jointly agreed that it was the best solution, giving the most protection to both the United States and Europe for the least money. If you believe [successive Congressional reports](#), that still is the best available solution. But [we don't question the new administration's right](#) to examine the issue afresh.

*There is also a broad perspective among many Americans that the technical benefits are questionable and the diplomatic impacts with Russia at a sensitive moment are severe. Is that a fair perception for the situation?*

When we engaged in considering the US request to put the THAAD site in Poland, we were assured that the United States would deal with Russia and with Russia's sensitivities. But the sensitivities have to be based on reality rather than on propaganda.

*Bottom line, do you want those missiles there?*

Bottom line, we have signed the deal and we are ready to honor it. But it is up to the US to make up its mind.

*What priorities would you tell the President to emphasize?*

I would say the more you talk to Russia, the more you should talk to Russia's neighbors, so that it is a win-win situation for all. One of the best things for the world the United States can do is fixing America's own finances, which is something that the US government and US Congress control, and preserve the transatlantic bargain in NATO, namely the balance between expeditionary activities and territorial defense. For us, as a border country, that's

particularly important. And as you look to nuclear disarmament, pay as much attention to the short range as to the long range means of delivery.

*President Obama's critics will say he's [talking too much](#) and doing too little. As a diplomat yourself, what do you think?*

I think President Obama's election has restored America's moral stature in the world; has given the US a new start and a fresh opportunity to lead the free world. And of course that moment of anticipation and of hope will not last forever, but it's still with us, and therefore strengthening the relationship with Europe, fixing the Middle East, facing up to Iran and to the remnants of the Taliban are the things that America's friends in the world expect President Obama to achieve.

*Americans don't always pay a lot of attention to European affairs, in our media or in the general public. Is that a problem?*

Most Europeans don't pay that much attention to internal American affairs either. We are an ocean apart. But we are the two greatest economies on Earth. We are 18 trillion dollars of GDP and 500 million people, you are, I think, 14 trillion and 400 million people [*Actually about 300 million*]. If we act together, we set the global agenda. And therefore, I think we should.

*Weigh in: What's your perspective on the Polish perspective?*

Posted By: [Matthew B. Stannard](#) ([Email](#)) | August 06 2009 at 07:30 PM

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