

The election campaign in the United States is slowly getting started. There is still a lot of time until the November elections. However, discussions are already underway about scenarios for the development of international politics after possible changes in the White House. Fears are growing in Europe about Donald Trump's return to power. We need to look at what potential changes mean for Poland and our region.

The campaign in America continues

The main Democratic candidate for president remains the incumbent Joseph Biden, and Donald Trump and Nikki Haley are competing for the Republican nomination. After the primaries in Iowa and New Hampshire, Ron DeSantis and Vivek Ramaswamy withdrew from the race. The primaries were won by Trump, who leads Haley by an average of 55 to 45 and has a chance of being nominated. The argument from Haley's supporters is that she has the ability to attract undecided voters and win over Democrats. However, if she is nominated, this advantage will become a weakness, as Democratic voters will rather prefer Biden. As a result, in polls Biden has more support among Democrats than Trump among Republicans. Trump also suffers from the fact that he faces over 90 charges in several cases, which may negatively affect the course of his campaign. The former president's legal troubles seem to be a major opportunity for Haley.

Let's assume that Trump wins the Republican nomination, and Haley becomes the vice presidential candidate (unless Trump has already promised this position to another rival candidate). The reason for this assumption is the fact that Trump has long been the poll favorite and, as a former president, he has the support of some of the elites associated with his previous presidency. It was some of these elites gathered in the "Project 2025" team that developed a report of over 900 pages entitled *Mandate for Leadership. The Conservative Promise*. It was published in April 2023 by the conservative Heritage Foundation. A large part of this report concerns the prospects for the United States' international strategy after Trump's possible success. What is the conclusion?

Republican foreign strategy

Trump often promises to continue the transactional way of practicing diplomacy. During his presidency, he often demanded that European NATO members should increase defense spending. It should be also noted that in 2014, at the NATO summit in Newport, member states accepted an increase in defense spending to at

least 2% of GDP. After ten years, in 2024, not even half of NATO countries have achieved the declared level of defense spending. This topic has been causing disappointment among Republicans for years and will certainly strengthen the US reluctance to get involved in European defense. It will also weaken support for Ukraine, as seen in the recent actions of Republican congressmen. The Heritage Foundation report points to three republican scenarios regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war. To put it simply, the idea is to (1) maintain support for Ukraine to defeat Russia, (2) disengage, or (3) support Ukraine as long as it benefits the US. The first or third variant would be the most advantageous for Poland.

Trump likes to present himself as an effective businessman who concludes favorable agreements. During his presidency, the United States did not engage in new wars, but the number of economic, trade and technological conflicts with European countries and China began to increase. It is worth noting that the Heritage Foundation's proposals also include: records of more offensive use of intelligence and cyberspace. Trump's supporters point to the need to: (1) maintain non-military conflicts, (2) expand sanctions against enemies and (3) develop new formats of cooperation. This means that Republicans not only consider alliances necessary, but also plan to create new ones if it serves US interests. Let us add that the said document refers to China, Venezuela, Iran, Russia and North Korea as countries hostile to America.

What does this mean for NATO? In the above context, NATO seems to be an expensive but useful tool for America, which serves to control the situation in Europe and allows us to weaken Russia, one of the main American rivals in Eurasia. The United States is involved in helping Ukraine not so much out of sympathy for the victims of the conflict, but primarily because these actions both weaken Russia and maintain the vision of the dominant position of the United States in the Western world. Thanks to their involvement in supporting Ukraine, Americans gain authority and support from other countries, and American arms companies gain numerous orders for the purchase of new weapons (from October 2022 to September 2023, arms purchases in the US increased by 55%, under the FMS procedure). Moreover, through its military presence in Europe, the United States has acquired numerous instruments to influence its allies on non-European issues. Therefore, announcements of resignation from NATO do not seem realistic, since many of NATO's solutions about cooperation are copied by the Americans in other regions.

Challenges for the USA

The United States continues to dominate the world militarily, financially, technologically, and culturally. The main currency in the world remains the US dollar. The best universities and technology companies are still located in the USA. The U.S. land forces today remain numerically the smallest army it has been since 1940, but its striking capabilities remain beyond the reach of its rivals. Washington's allies include almost all of the world's richest countries. Global corporations continue to support American soft power: cinema, ideals and lifestyle. The social and economic crises in the US are rarely commented on, even in Europe.

The main challenge for the US today is the dilemma: how to respond to the growing bloc of authoritarian states under the aegis of China? Would ceding Russia's field in Europe and focusing on Asia be a sign of realism or a costly mistake? The US offer to Russia was rejected long ago. Moscow has decided that the geopolitical concept of a "multipolar world" is more attractive than the risk of "dependence on Western colonialism." The break with the West accelerated the Kremlin's decisions on an aggressive policy in Eastern Europe. Europe is not prepared for a large war. None of the European armies is larger than 200,000 soldiers. Despite spending more than USD 330 billion in total on defense (four times more than Russia), European NATO countries have dispersed military and logistics potential. Moreover, joint defense planning has begun to be reformed only after Russia had invaded Ukraine. From the Kremlin's perspective, it is enough to use the "salami tactic".

Donald Trump has already announced several times that he will end the war in Europe within one day. This would require convening a peace conference with the participation of the leaders of Russia and Ukraine. In Europe, this would probably be received with relief, but the demon of appeasement policy would appear once again. Neville Chamberlain also believed that accepting Hitler's superpower demands was consistent with the principle of balance of power. Chamberlain believed that peaceful border changes would strengthen Central Europe against the risk of Soviet invasion. Ultimately, the concessions strengthened the aggressor and led to several wars. The aggressor attacked all the weaker neighbors one by one. The "salami tactic" was used. This is why discussions about accepting Putin's demands raise so much concern in Eastern Europe. If Russia is able to expand its army by the end of this decade, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict may spread to other countries. Putin is getting old and has less and less to lose. For the Kremlin, the embarrassment of the US and the collapse of NATO's credibility would be a historic achievement. From Russia's perspective, Putin would achieve more in a

confrontation with NATO than Stalin, Khrushchev or Brezhnev. This situation could set a dangerous precedent and cause a very dangerous “domino effect”, which would constitute a global threat to US leadership.

Can Europe defend itself? What should Poland do?

Europe has enough strength to resist Russia. Its main problem is the dispersion of potential and the weak political position of its leaders. Europeans want to stay calm and feel good. No one wants to be a “warmonger.” Just like Chamberlain once did. As a result, there is a lack of political will to (1) increase defense spending, (2) expand armies, (3) develop civil protection systems, and (4) increase presence in Eastern Europe. European elites do not want to worry voters and do not seem to assume a scenario that Russia will absorb Belarus or cause an uprising in, for example, Estonia, even though the Russians have already done similar things in the past. We do not have a crystal ball, but we should assume all possible scenarios a decade ahead: from Russia’s defeat, through isolation, to further wars.

Europe needs both realism and a return to the thought of Zbigniew Brzezinski. In the famous “Great Chessboard”, Brzezinski believed that the “security arc” of Europe would be an alliance of France, Germany, Poland and Ukraine. Together with Great Britain, these countries have over 300 million people, which is twice as many as Russia. Poland should work to strengthen military cooperation with large European countries. This is about real military cooperation, i.e.: (1) permanent deployment of troops of large NATO countries in Eastern Europe, (2) joint production of ammunition, (3) joint purchases of military equipment to reduce its price, (4) development of joint projects of the arms industry and (5) increasing NATO’s presence in the Baltic Sea (especially since the Polish Navy has lost most of its combat capabilities). Many of these initiatives are already underway, but they lack a concrete masterplan. The EU’s idea of “strategic autonomy” should also be based on specific steps agreed, for example, within the enlarged Weimar Triangle or as part of the enhanced cooperation procedure in the EU.

Poland had good relations with both the Trump administration and currently has good relations with the Biden administration. We have written about this many times. The “reclaiming of Eastern Europe” for the West and the success of the democratic transition was also a symbol of the strength of the United States. This also means that the loss of this region can be considered the historic collapse of US hegemony. For Poland, cooperation with the USA has proven to be beneficial and is worth maintaining, because in the coming decades there will be no other hegemon

in the West than the USA.

Summary

In 2023 alone, Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic were to purchase weapons from the US worth almost USD 50 billion. Tens of thousands of American soldiers are stationed in these countries. It would take several years to phase them out. Poland is grateful for the opportunity to “return to the West” and remains a loyal ally. Regardless of who sits in the White House, the authorities in Warsaw will support both deepening bilateral cooperation with the US and will strive for cooperation in NATO. This will mean further militarization of the so-called NATO's Eastern frontier. Breaking the bonds of European-Russian interdependence means an increase in the risk of all types of conflicts. Even a politically isolated and militarily weakened Russia will not become a partner of the West. NATO countries are aware of this, as evidenced by the provisions in the new strategic concept of the Alliance.

For Poland, adopting military specialization within the EU seems to be a good strategy, because as its military capabilities increase, Warsaw's political importance in Europe will also strengthen. The military and diplomacy are traditionally indispensable tools of external security policy, so the development of these tools should remain a Polish priority. The second urgent issue – in the field of internal security – is the reconstruction of the professional civil defense system, which I have already written about elsewhere.

For Ukraine, possible changes in US strategy mean uncertainty. The situation on the front is stalemate. Maintaining defensive positions will become increasingly difficult because the Ukrainians have fewer soldiers, equipment and ammunition. Reclaiming occupied territories is becoming less and less realistic. Ukrainians must convince Western elites that capitulation to Russia will resemble appeasement. Donald Trump may not necessarily understand this, but Europeans should remember where such policy ends. Poland in particular should not forget about this.