Interview - Wojciech Lorenz

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Wojciech Lorenz is a Senior Analyst on the International Security Programme at The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM). His areas of research include NATO, Polish security and defense policy, international conflicts and deterrence. In 2013-2014 he served as a civilian specialist for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. Also, prior to joining PISM in 2012 he covered international affairs as an editor in the Polish Section of the BBC World Service (2001-2006) and as a reporter for the daily newspaper Rzeczpospolita. Wojciech graduated from the University of Wroclaw and completed post-graduate studies in International Relations and Diplomacy at Collegium Civitas in Warsaw. Currently he is preparing his doctoral thesis at Warsaw University.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

From my perspective, the most exciting research focuses on Russia-NATO relations. Are NATO and the U.S. able to deter Russia from enforcing change in the European security architecture? How ready are NATO members, especially the U.S., to recreate the deterrence mechanisms, which would increase the risk of their entanglement in the conflict? Should Russia try to use force, for example in the defense of Russian minority rights, in one of the Baltic States? If there is a debate it is limited, usually, to the military aspect of deterrence but it seems to lack the broader perspective. How should we complement deterrence with dialogue and what do we want to achieve through that dialogue? What will future Russia-West relations look like and what consequences will they have for the future of Europe? How should Poland build its position in Europe and balance policies of deterrence, dialogue and incentives? Which of these approaches could be offered to Russia to ensure its satisfaction with the status quo?

The problem is that we may not have much time for figuring those things out. Today, Russia has a bigger interest in resorting to military force in order to change the status quo, than it had during the Cold War. At that time, the USSR was more interested in strengthening the status quo than derailing it. They wanted to secure international recognition of new borders and their sphere of influence, with a divided Germany at the forefront. Even though they had conventional superiority over NATO and their military doctrine was offensive, they were more interested in deterring the West from its attempts to push them back from Central and Eastern Europe.

After the collapse of the USSR, Russia has been trying to rebuild its sphere of influence. It simply needed to do that if it wanted to regain its status as a world power. And, as Zbigniew Brzezinski had warned in the early 1990s, Russia would not be able to do so without having control over Ukraine and Belarus. Belarus has already been reintegrated, at least in a military sense, and constitutes one defensive area with Russia. The offensive against Georgia in 2008 was consistent with Russian military doctrine, which, since 1993, has indicated that Russia is ready to use military force to defend Russian minorities outside of its borders. For many countries in the region the excessive use of force by Russia during the conflict, was also taken as a message that Russia is determined to maintain the post-Soviet space as its sphere of influence, even if some countries do not want to reintegrate. The annexation of Crimea was another signal that Russia is not interested in maintaining the security architecture, based on the Helsinki Final Act from 1975. This Act confirmed the inviolability of frontiers in Europe and the sovereign right of states to choose their alliances. Russia changed borders with the use of force and by fueling the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. It aimed to enforce changes to Ukraine's constitution to make sure that the Russian minority could block the strategic choices of the country. So it will be interesting to see what the future security architecture in Europe will look like.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

After the Polish "round table" negotiations and partial democratization in June 1989, which led to the fall of the Berlin Wall a couple of months later, I was confident that democracy is the only credible system and sooner or later it will become the basic model for states, which will shape the international system into a less adversarial, more cooperative model. So, in a way, I instinctively followed the reasoning of Francis Fukuyama. Even though post-communists returned to power in Poland relatively quickly, they tried to anchor Poland in the democratic West. However, working as a journalist for the Polish Section of the BBC World Service, I started to understand that Russia and China will not let that happen. This encouraged me to learn more about how states define their interests and what consequences that may have on the relations among them and broader international systems.

Today, I look at the world as a structure, based on the balance of power. One power centre consists of the U.S and other democratic states, which benefit from the world order they created after World War Two and promoted after the end of the Cold War. Another center is formed by China and Russia. They benefit from globalization but perceive the rules, promoted by Western democracies, as a threat to their vital interests. Even if both countries are historic rivals and China has looked with disdain at Russia since the Sino-Soviet split some 60 years ago, they have a very strong common interest in forming a tactical alliance to stop the expansion of liberal democracies and to limit U.S. power and influence. Such an alliance might work for decades. It seems that to counter the pressure from the Sino-Russian alliance, the West will try to return to a policy based on values, just like during the Cold War. That however, does not need to happen. During the Cold War the expansionist nature of the communist ideology and the risk of a military conflict in Europe, which could escalate to a nuclear Armageddon, created an existential threat for the U.S. and a number of other states. Hence, there was a very strong incentive for Western democracies to coordinate their defense policies, which strengthened the credibility of deterrence. But even then, they were successful mainly in Europe. They could not agree on a common strategy in the Middle East, for example. Whether the West will be able to adjust to a new strategic situation after the Cold War remains an open question.

What effect did the Warsaw NATO Summit in 2016 have on NATO and Poland in particular? Was there a reaction from the Russian Federation?

Let's start with the Wales Summit in 2014. After the annexation of Crimea NATO decided to reassure its allies on the Eastern flank – it increased its presence, in the newer member-states, bordering Russia, in a very limited way to avoid provocation. For example, if there were four NATO aircraft patrolling the Baltic States' airspace, the number was increased to twelve and then lowered to eight. There were also some units, exercising in the region even if they were not combat ready. Their role was simply to demonstrate presence and reassure the allied states. The Alliance also decided to strengthen its ability to deploy its multinational unit to a threatened region. NATO has been trying to build a rapid reaction force team, the so-called NATO Response Force or NRF, for some time but the allies were unable to meet the assumed goals. As a result, the NRF was smaller than it should have been – it had less than one land brigade and with other services it had around 14,000 troops altogether.

So NATO decided to strengthen the NRF. Today, it should be able to deploy a very high readiness brigade within days, another one within a month, and a third one within 45 days. Such a force helps demonstrate NATO's resolve and contributes to deterrence. If there were a risk of a bigger conflict, NATO would have to start the process of force generation, which takes time. At the same time, Russia transformed its military into a Permanent Readiness Force, it has been developing new divisions, organising unannounced exercises close to NATO borders and has tried to dismantle security and confidence-building measures, which have helped maintain stability in Europe for more than two decades.

Hence, during the Warsaw Summit in 2016, NATO decided to move from reassurance mode to defense and deterrence. It agreed to deploy battalion combat units in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. These are about 1,000-strong troop battle groups, which do not change Russia's overall military superiority in the region, but send a clear signal that, in the case of aggression – hybrid or conventional, there will be a higher probability of a unified NATO response. This is what deterrence is about, influencing the calculations of the potential aggressor. There have

been a number of other measures but this one is the most significant. Such deployment, of units, rotating every six months, does not violate the declaration from 1997 that NATO will refrain from placing significant combat units on the territory of the new members. The Alliance demonstrates that it could change its posture if Russia changed its aggressive policy.

How would you evaluate the present security situation in Poland? What are the greatest threats that the country faces and how does it plan to tackle them?

Polish security is affected by Russia's consistent policy of reintegration of the former Soviet republics and maintaining the territory of the former Warsaw Pact members as the buffer zone. Obviously, Russia does not have the potential to occupy the territory of even smaller states, let alone Poland. But it is clear that the post-Cold War status quo, as the West interprets it, is not in its interest. Moscow tried to promote a new Treaty on European security, which would give the Kremlin the right to veto the sovereign decisions of its neighbors. Nobody agreed to it so Russia tried to enforce such change, de facto, by dismantling elements of the security system. It tried to raise costs for the EU, NATO and the U.S. by escalating tensions and taking a more aggressive military force posture. By resorting to brinkmanship, it demonstrates that it could provoke an accidental confrontation or could find a pretext to undermine the territorial integrity of one or more NATO border-states. If it did so, NATO would be faced with a serious dilemma.

The alliance could try to reclaim back the lost territory by force, risking an escalation up to the nuclear level or it could go for negotiations. In the latter case, the negotiations would probably lead to regaining the territorial status quo ante but at a price of a new European Security Treaty or some other agreement, which would mean a new Iron Curtain in Europe. Of course, if you analyse how the scenario could unfold, if Russia used force to undermine NATO's territorial integrity and NATO decided to respond, there could be a number of threats for Poland. That is why Poland needs to treat its own potential seriously, as well as the credibility of NATO's overall deterrence. But it should also contribute to the discussion of future relations between the West and Russia.

How does Poland cooperate on security with its neighbours, particularly the Baltic States or those in the Black Sea Region?

Poland has been sending its aircraft to the Baltic Air Policing missions on a regular basis. The Baltic States do not have their own aircrafts and rely on the Alliance in securing their airspace. When the decision about forming the battalion combat groups on the Eastern flank was made, Poland contributed a tank company to the multinational unit in Latvia. It contributes one company for exercises in the Baltic States in the format of the Visegrad Countries (Slovakia, Czech Republic and Hungary). It also offered its aircraft to support air policing over Romania and Bulgaria and sent 250 soldiers to Romania to support NATO's tailored deterrence in the Black Sea region. Poland also used its political clout to push forward the agenda of NATO adaptation to a potential threat from Russia and helped build a regional coalition to further this case.

In 2016 the Declaration on NATO-EU co-operation was announced, yet just a few weeks ago 23 member states signed the PESCO Agreement. Are these two events mutually exclusive or are they a part of a consistent European foreign policy? What do they mean for the future of NATO and the EU?

First, we need to understand that stronger European defense is a must. For the last three decades, Europe was faced with the prospect of diminishing U.S. contributions to European security. An American presence on the continent has been limited to only two combat land brigades, one airborne and one armored cavalry. With the changed security environment, the U.S. has reintroduced one heavy brigade to Europe, which will be here on a rotational basis. This does not change the fact that Russia is not the USSR anymore and the U.S.' threat perception and security interests in Europe are different than they were during the Cold War. The same goes for a number of NATO member-states. Germany, which used to have the biggest military in Western Europe, does not feel as threatened as they used to when their state was divided and Soviet units were just over the border. You also have Sweden and Finland, which are not members of NATO but are offered security guarantees through the Lisbon Treaty. On paper, those assurances are even stronger than Article Five of the Washington Treaty. To make sure that

we have the necessary forces and equipment in Europe to perform all sorts of missions, from crisis management to collective defense, we will need to use cooperation both in the European Union format and in NATO.

There has always been the question whether this leads to duplication and a waste of resources and this discussion is still valid. To avoid it, we need to coordinate both pillars and there are already the necessary mechanisms in place. The bigger problem is that France, during the period when de Gaulle was in power and French politicians who perceive themselves as his successors, preferred to sustain the EU pillar as something independent from NATO – something which should replace NATO, not complement it, something which would help diminish the U.S.' influence in the sphere of European security. This would be dangerous, at least for Poland and the states bordering Russia. With Russian potential in mind, the EU's ability to deter, wouldn't be too great. French nuclear capability has always been a national matter. So, it would be hard to argue that France could support the deterrence of Russia in the EU format.

Obviously, we need NATO as a major pillar but it needs to be supported by the European pillar. If managed properly, it could lead to some division of labor, which was contemplated even during the 1980's. NATO would focus on deterrence in Europe and the EU could support crisis management missions. But there is one fundamental rule, which needs to be maintained. We should have one set of forces and they need to be ready to perform both types of missions. This is how I look at PESCO. Since it is supported by some financial incentives, it can help stimulate the development of some capabilities. At the same time, we have to make sure that the capabilities can support both kinds of mission, collective defense and crisis management.

How has the election of Donald Trump affected NATO? Can we expect a restructuring or a change in the way it projects stability in the Eastern part of Europe?

For an analyst who deals with deterrence, the messages sent by the U.S. president about NATO's irrelevance were worrying. They were to exert pressure on Europeans to spend more on defense but could also lead to miscalculations of Putin. At the same time, you could see that the Department of Defense and Congress are sending the right signals, which contribute to deterrence. Increased funding for the American presence in Europe, deployment of the Armored Brigade Combat Team, decisions to strengthen nuclear deterrence – it all indicates that the U.S. is not going to succumb to Russian pressure. Whether it will be long-term, I do not know. It brings us back to the question of the European security architecture. How does the U.S. define its long-term interests regarding Georgia and Ukraine? Will we leave those countries in the Russian sphere of influence or will we be able to support them at a cost of tensions with Russia and more adversarial than cooperative relations?

How have the events in Turkey in the past year changed the dynamic within NATO and the security situation in Europe?

To say that relations between Turkey and a number of NATO members are tense would probably be an understatement. Unfortunately, it can have a negative effect on the functioning of the Alliance in some areas. The example of the withdrawal of Turkish personnel from NATO exercises clearly shows this. There are different sensitivities, and one could take offence to the use of Turkish President Erdogan and Mustafa Kemal Ataturk as an example of NATO's enemies. However, as I understand it, it was used by fake news organizations to stir tensions within the Alliance. It seems that it worked very well for the potential adversary. Turkey also has some old grievances. In 2003 some member-states, including France and Germany, did not want to agree on the deployment of missiles defense systems to Turkey prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

After the annexation of Crimea by Russia, Turkey decided to contribute to the new strengthened NATO Reaction Force as a framework nation but only after some visible delay. I take it as a signal that in some areas relations with Russia might be more important than contributing to NATO's deterrence. The decision to buy Russian air and missile defense systems is another example. It could undermine the credibility of deterrence in the Black Sea region.

What is your stance on further NATO enlargement?

The open door policy is a pillar of post-Cold War NATO strategy. The idea was to transform the Alliance so there was a possibility to enlarge NATO and develop cooperation with Russia at the same time. The enlargement process took into account a number of Russian interests. It was gradual so as to not influence internal Russian politics in a negative way. New member-states were allowed to buy Russian equipment, NATO offered not to deploy large military units on the territory of the new member-states as long as there wasn't a drastic change in the security situation. Russia was even offered mechanisms of cooperation, which allowed it to have some influence on the decisions of NATO. But it still chose to treat NATO as its main adversary and demonstrated it was ready to use force to stop NATO enlargement.

There was no consensus on offering Georgia and Ukraine a Membership Action Plan in 2008, which could have embolden Russia to intervene in Georgia a couple of months later. Now, this opportunity is lost. There will not be a consensus on the enlargement towards the post-Soviet space because the probability of military confrontation has increased. However, the situation with Finland and Sweden is different. It is important for both countries to keep the option of membership open. To give it up, would be like creating a new Iron Curtain in Europe and leaving not only Georgia and Ukraine but also Finland and Sweden behind it. So it is crucial that NATO maintains its open door policy, even if there is no consensus on the membership of some countries.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

To get some practical experience in the military, diplomacy, administration or even in business. It is important to see how people, organisations and states define their interests, how they calculate costs, when they are ready to use different sorts of power to exert pressure and when they think it is better to cooperate. Scholars with such experience will be able to confront reality with theory and will be better positioned to make their own contribution to political science.

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This interview was conducted by Alex Tanchev. Alex Tanchev is an Associate Features Editor at E-International Relations.