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UK-Poland summit reveals growing national antagonisms in Europe

By Clara Weiss

14 December 2016

On November 28, the UK government of Prime Minister Theresa May hosted a summit between Britain and Poland aimed at fostering a strategic political and military alliance between the two countries. Amid a profound crisis of the European Union (EU) and the breakdown of the postwar order, the summit was another indicator of the return of open antagonisms and the defense of national geopolitical and economic interests by the various European ruling elites.

A press release issued by the British government termed the summit “historic”, stressing that a similar line-up of high-ranking officials in a bilateral meeting had never occurred before. Participants in the summit included, among others, the prime ministers of the two countries, the foreign and defence secretaries, as well as the Polish ministers of the interior and labor.

The summit was organised by May’s government, which finds itself besieged both domestically and internationally thanks to the fall-out from the Brexit referendum, the threatened breakup of the EU and an anticipated dramatic shift in US foreign policy under Donald Trump. London is now desperately trying to strike alliances in Europe to protect the interests of British capitalism. Poland is not only an important economic partner, but, under the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) government, also shares key positions with Britain about the organization of the EU and foreign policy.

On the eve of the bilateral summit, Prime Minister May declared she was “determined that Brexit will not weaken our relationship with Poland, rather it will serve as a catalyst to strengthen it”. The summit, in her words, marked “the start of a new chapter in our relations ... We share a clear commitment to take our co-operation to the next level and to firmly establish the UK and Poland as resolute and strategic allies in Europe”.

May also announced that her government was working toward a first-ever bilateral defense treaty between Poland and Britain.

The UK and Poland, along with Estonia and Greece, are the only European NATO member states to fulfill the organisation’s requirement that countries spend two percent of GDP on defense. In relation to Russia, both London and Warsaw have stood at the forefront of the European military build-up and provocations. As a symbolic act underlining its commitment to increased military cooperation, the UK government—in the wake of the summit—confirmed its commitment to sending 150 troops from the Light Dragoons to the border between Poland and the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad.

The Polish ruling elite has been troubled by the Brexit referendum and the EU’s growing problems. May’s Polish counterpart, Prime Minister Beata Szydło, published a commentary in the *Telegraph* prior to the summit, headlined “Poland stands ready to help its old friend Britain reach the best possible Brexit deal”. The Polish prime minister observed: “Poland was saddened, probably more than any other country, with the result of the British referendum. For us, Brexit means that supporters of reforming the EU into a more economically pragmatic organisation will soon lose an important strategic partner”.

Szydło went on to reassure the British government that “Warsaw will certainly be one of the capitals which will participate in Brexit negotiations in a constructive and down-to-earth manner. In our understanding, the United Kingdom is leaving the EU, but it is not leaving Europe. Regardless of Brexit, our political fates as well as our security and economic interests are intertwined”.

At the summit, the Polish and British government representatives discussed a range of policy issues, including energy and the NATO build-up against Russia. Of particular significance were the discussions about the common labor market and guarantees for some two million Polish workers currently employed in the UK.

Since the Brexit referendum, the issue of Polish workers and the attacks on them by right-wingers encouraged by the fomenting of racism during the Brexit campaign has been exploited by both the Polish and British elites to further their bilateral discussions about economic cooperation. (See also: Polish and British governments exploit attacks on Polish immigrants) At the summit, the Polish side again stressed the need for a quick settlement of the question, apparently pushing for a solution even before Brexit negotiations had started.

The summit was an obvious political provocation directed toward Berlin and Brussels. Both the British and Polish governments disagree with Germany not only over the conditions for Brexit,

but also about foreign policy. They oppose the creation of an EU army, which would inevitably be dominated by Germany and France, and would undermine NATO.

While the German press remained conspicuously silent on the summit, Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble, one of the most powerful figures in Chancellor Angela Merkel's coalition cabinet, reaffirmed the German government's position on Brexit the very next day at the Foreign Policy Forum held at Berlin's Körber Foundation. He insisted the main pillars of the EU had to be retained in the Brexit negotiations, arguing: "European unity is not a menu from which you can pick and choose what you want".

Shortly before the Polish-British summit, May held talks with ultra-right Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban in London. The discussions prompted Hungarian newspaper *Magyar Nemzet* to wonder whether a "London-Warsaw-Budapest troika" was now being forged, as all three governments "prefer a European Union based on free trade with decisions taken by the member states". The return of this kind of language is testimony to the extent of the crisis of European capitalism and the EU. National antagonisms are reemerging in Europe, and the ghosts of the 20th century's catastrophic world wars are once again haunting the continent.

The possible revival of a Polish-British strategic alliance in particular is fraught with ominous historical resonance. The attempt to undermine the considerable influence of British and French imperialism in Central and Eastern Europe was an important motivating factor in the Nazi attempt to militarily subjugate the region in World War II. When the German military invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, both Paris and London, in accordance with their treaties with Warsaw, declared war on Nazi Germany, marking the beginning of World War II. The various reactions in the Polish press about an emerging partnership with London indicated considerable nervousness. Conservative newspapers generally favorable to PiS government policies voiced concerns that such an alliance could lead to Poland's isolation in Europe. The right-wing *Rzeczpospolita*, for example, warned that, while a military alliance with the UK was essentially inevitable, too great an orientation toward Britain could endanger Polish national interests. Another commentator for the same newspaper urged: "I hope we don't sell the European Union just so the British can live well after Brexit".

The *Dziennik Polski* argued that the strategic lining up with Britain could not "even out the bad relations with France and the uncertain future of relations with Germany". Given that Great Britain would be out of the EU within three years, the newspaper reasoned, the alliance would be short-lived and only make for a "tactic, rather than a strategy". It warned that an alliance with London would isolate Poland in Europe, commenting that "nobody will agree to easy Brexit terms that might tomorrow run the risk of encouraging Austria, the Netherlands, and France to leave the EU".

Poland's most important liberal newspaper, the *Gazeta Wyborcza*, acknowledged the "strategic interest" of working closely with Britain in the framework of NATO after Brexit, but warned that Poland was "walking a tightrope" when lining up behind Britain's aim of "upsetting European unity on Brexit and playing member states off against each other".