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Changing the Importance of Poland in the Security Policy of the United States in the Context of the war in Ukraine

Abstract: The aim of the paper is to analyze and evaluate the changes in the importance of Poland in the security policy of the United States after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022. The paper consists of two parts. The first one covers the importance of Poland in the US security policy after the Cold War, and the second the change of this importance after the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine. The main research problem is the question of whether Poland's importance in the US security policy has increased in connection with the Russian aggression on Ukraine? The thesis assumes that the war in Ukraine increased the importance of Poland in American security policy. This is due to three basic premises: Poland has become the main hub for American weapons supplied to Ukraine; Poland plays a key role in humanitarian support for Ukrainian refugees; and the dynamic development of the Polish army increases its importance in the defense of NATO's eastern flank. Paradoxically, in the context of Polish-American relations, the outbreak of the war turned out to be beneficial for Poland, as earlier it was in danger of cooling down its relations with the USA in connection with the problems with adhering to the principles of the democratic state of law. Currently, this issue is overshadowed by the intensified US-Polish cooperation to help Ukraine and secure NATO's eastern flank. The research involved interviews with scientists and analysts from scientific centers in Washington and New York.

Key words: United States, Poland, security policy, war in Ukraine

Introduction

The American authorities often refer to the symbolism of the joint fight with Poland for the independence of the United States and the support of the US for the rebirth of the Polish state. These events, however, are not widely known to American society. Average Americans are more familiar with the tragic experiences of Poland during the Second World War, including the Holocaust. The transformations in Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the 20th century, in which Poland played an important role, are also embedded in the consciousness of the American political elites and to some extent society. Poles' uprisings for independence against the communist government meant that the Polish nation was perceived in the US as "America's heroic friend" (Sylvan, Majeski, 2009, p. 69). During martial law in Poland, the US imposed sanctions on the communist regimes in Poland and the Soviet Union in order to punish and weaken them (Cameron, 2005, p. 162). According to James Goldgeier, Poland then played an extremely important role in the US security policy. This mainly concerned the emergence of the Solidarity movement in the early 1980s, which significantly contributed to the overthrow of the communist regime in Poland and Central and Eastern Europe (Goldgeier, 2022). The American authorities saw in the Solidarity revolution in Poland a serious rupture in the Eastern Bloc, which was to be the beginning of the road to its collapse (Nau, 2013,

p. 143). As Julie George states: “Poland was the first mover in Central and Eastern Europe going away from Soviet kind of umbrella and pushing against great in moments of turmoil, moments of uncertainty and moments of potential repression” (George, 2022). The legendary leader of Solidarity – Lech Wałęsa – to this day enjoys more respect among the American political elite than among the Polish elite. After the overthrow of the Soviet Union – the strategic enemy of the US – Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland, began to lose their importance in the US security policy. This changed with Russia’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022.

The aim of the paper is to analyze and evaluate changing the importance of Poland in the American security policy after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The main research problem is whether the importance of Poland in the US security policy increased due to the outbreak of the war in Ukraine? The thesis assumes that the war in Ukraine increased the importance of Poland in American security policy. The main factors that influenced it are: Poland has become the main hub for American weapons sent to Ukraine; Poland plays a key role in humanitarian support for Ukrainian refugees; and the dynamic development of the Polish army increases its importance in securing the NATO front line. After the administration of Joe Biden took over power in the US, there was a risk of cooling down relations with Poland due to failure to comply with the principles of a democratic state of law. It was especially dangerous due to the existence of serious tensions between Poland and the European Union and it threatened to isolate Poland on the international arena. Currently, this issue is overshadowed by the intensified US-Polish cooperation to help Ukraine and secure NATO’s eastern flank. The research involved interviews with scientists and experts from scientific centers in New York and Washington, mainly Columbia University and the George Washington University. These researchers are also analysts of governmental and non-governmental expert bodies, thus having an impact on the formulation of the US foreign and security policy.

Poland in the security policy of the United States after the Cold War

After the defeat of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, Poland’s strategic location was gradually losing its importance for the United States. Moreover, Poland did not have any attributes that would attract the attention of the superpower in any particular way. Its armed forces were obsolete, economic potential was small compared to Western European countries, and the raw material resources played almost no role. For these reasons, the importance of Poland in the security policy of the US was diminishing (Kiwerska, 2014, p. 61). Nevertheless, the stability of CEE was still important for the US, which is why they supported the process of democratic transformation of Poland and other countries in the region, allocating quite significant funds for this purpose. The American authorities were impressed by the speed of political and economic transformations in Poland in the 90s of the twentieth century, thanks to which it gradually began to be perceived as a potential leader of the region (Bouchet, 2015, p. 38). A similar view of international security and the unequivocally pro-American attitude of Polish authorities on the international forum made Poland become an “America’s New Model Ally” (Dunn, 2002, p. 63). According to Stephen Biddle Poland had been seen in the United

States as an important partner because partly of a geographic position and partly its population and growing GDP. For the American authorities important was the engage of Poland in maintaining international security in cooperation with NATO, including during the war in Yugoslavia (Biddle, 2022). According to Sharon Wolchik, Poland is important in the politics of the United States because it is the largest country in Central Europe, has a tradition of friendly relations with the US and a large diaspora in the country (Wolchik, 2022). J. Goldgeier argues that much of the post Cold War thinking about Central and Eastern Europe is centered around Poland, because of its size, its history, and its relations with other powers (Goldgeier, 2022).

In the United States, the inclusion of Poland and other CEE countries into NATO was ambivalent. As part of a compromise in the administration of President Bill Clinton between the supportive Department of State and the skeptical Department of Defense, in 1994 the concept of “Partnership for Peace” was announced (Dumbrell, 2009, p. 126). The number of supporters of NATO enlargement grew with the increasingly obvious failure of the US policy to transform Russia into democracy (van Apeldoorn, 2016, p. 128). The acceleration of this process was positively influenced by the attitude of the dominant Republicans in the US Congress, including the presidential candidate – Bob Dole (Toje, 2008, p. 100). The tightening of relations between Poland and the US was fostered by the coherence of the goals of the foreign and security policy. Poland’s accession to NATO in 1999 and Poland’s zealous support for US activities in the international arena made the country one of the closest allies of the superpower in CEE. J. Goldgeier says that after joining NATO, Poland began to be perceived as “one of America’s most important allies in Europe. A strategic ally, a country that shares a lot of the same visions that the United States has for Europe, today and going forward, and a key country for United States policy in Europe” (Goldgeier, 2022). However, according to James H. Lebovic, Poland is a valuable ally to the United States, but we can find countries in Europe whose importance is much greater, such as Great Britain or Germany. For example, with Great Britain, the US has a special relationship due to the political and military support that it can offer. In addition, countries share a common language, culture and heritage (Lebovic, 2022). Richard K. Betts argues that Central and Eastern Europe can’t become an equally important partner for the US as Western Europe, including in terms of security. He says: “All countries can be important partners but some are inevitably more important than others. Germany, France, and the UK are the most important European members of NATO in a relative sense, although all others are certainly important in an absolute sense” (Betts, 2022). According to Cynthia Roberts: “Poland is special to the United States, but it’s not going to be unique in that. It’s special because it has the strategic location, it’s in the forefront and Poland is committed to collective defense and it’s not so small. Poland is a serious country with a serious military committed to collective defense and therefore a very valued partner for the US” (Roberts, 2022). There is also some significance in the fact that American politicians are seeking the support of the nearly ten-million-strong community of Polish origin living in the United States, including the states of the central and eastern part of the country, where electoral preferences are not clear. However, it should be remembered that in the US there are more representative European national groups, including Germans, Irish, English and Italians, which may even more influence the formulation of US security policy. All of this means that in the

first two decades of the 21st century, Poland was important in the US security policy, but in a relative sense. Compared to global or even European powers, its significance was not so important.

In the first two decades of the 21st century, the region itself was losing importance in the US global security policy, and so was Poland. Besides, the American authorities used the asymmetric alliance with Poland instrumentally. This was particularly evident in the security policy of the George W. Bush administration. Poland served as an example of a state that was supposed to embody courage and readiness to face global problems in the world, including international terrorism. It was used to drive a wedge between pro-American Central and Eastern Europe and Western Europe, much more skeptical of American leadership. During the debate in the US Congress before the war in Iraq, abstinence towards Saddam Hussein was compared to the policy of appeasement towards Adolf Hitler, the consequence of which was the aggression against Poland in 1939 (Miles, 2013, p. 122). The symbolic participation of a 200-person contingent from Poland in the 2003 Iraq war was used in American pro-war propaganda. This happened despite the fact that citing the support of a relatively weak ally several times caused embarrassment among President Bush's political opponents. To a greater extent, Poland supported the stabilization process carried out by the US in post-war Iraq and Afghanistan. However, the tightening Polish-American alliance did not go beyond military issues and was mainly limited to the symbolic sphere. President Bush did not spare Poland praise for involvement in the anti-terrorist coalition and emphasized the importance of the "unity of values" between Poland and America (Moens, 2016, p. 116). The most tangible manifestation of the tightening of cooperation was the decision to locate an element of the American anti-missile defense system in Poland, the construction of which was particularly important for the security of the US. The American administration did not meet the practical expectations of the Polish authorities resulting from the strong support of its international security policy. Nevertheless, J. Goldgeier believes that it is very important for decision-makers in the United States that Poland was so eager to be a strong ally and to support US and NATO in their efforts to jointly counter security threats in distant countries. Even though the war in Iraq was a very controversial undertaking, he thinks that Poland's willingness to join with the United States in these efforts is greatly appreciated (Goldgeier, 2022). J. H. Lebovic believes that Poland alone may not be able to offer the US military support that would be of particular importance. However, when looking at this support in the broader Allied context within NATO, the support offered by individual Alliance members matters (Lebovic, 2022). S. Biddle claims that a lot of countries made investments there that have not particularly paid off for them politically. For example in 2008, the Georgians had sent extensive troop contributions to Afghanistan and then got left high and dry when the Russians invaded the country the same year (Biddle, 2022). This means that Poland was treated like other asymmetric allies who did not have an effective leverage in relations with the United States.

As a result of the strategic shift in the security policy of President Barack Obama's administration towards Asia, the US interest in Europe had further diminished. The limited importance of Central European countries, including Poland, was also shown by the "reset" of relations with Russia. The attempt to improve relations with Russia, as well as the successes of the disarmament talks with Iran, even questioned the con-

struction of elements of the anti-missile system in the region (Warren, 2014, p. 26). CEE politicians sent demands to Washington to revise the policy towards the region, including strengthening security guarantees, deepening the transatlantic bond, resisting Russia and continuing the anti-missile program (Adamkus et al., 2009). The issue of installing the anti-missile shield intensified the need for US-Russian dialogue on strategic stability (Zwack, Pierre, 2019, p. 11). Ultimately, the Obama administration introduced the European Phased Adaptive Approach, which aims to protect Europe to a greater extent (Tabor, 2012, p. 162–163). The annexation of Crimea and Russian military operations in the Donbas in 2014 significantly raised security concerns in Poland and CEE. The United States responded to the expectations of Poland and other countries of NATO's eastern flank to strengthen their security. They supported the demands made by Poland, Romania and the Baltic states at the NATO summits in Newport in 2014 and Warsaw in 2016. The Americans took a number of actions, both multilateral and bilateral, to strengthen defense and deterrence capabilities in the region (Larsen, 2017, p. 12). Russia's military actions both increased the importance of CEE in the US security policy and made the superpower meet allied obligations towards the countries of the region, including Poland.

During Donald Trump's presidency, the US continued its efforts to strengthen the security of NATO's eastern flank. This was done mainly as part of the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI), for which the expenditure was systematically increased. During this period, the Polish government of Law and Justice made a strong effort to strengthen the alliance with the US. There were favorable circumstances for this, as the President Trump administration and the Polish government distanced themselves from Western European elites, mainly the German and French dominant in the European Union (Goh, Sahashi, 2020, p. 379). Moreover, they were united by conservative-nationalist values and questioning the principles of liberal democracy (Appel, 2019, p. 262–263). Poland tried to strengthen its leadership position in CEE by initiating projects aimed to intensify cooperation in the region, so that it would be able to counter the interests of both Russia and Western Europe. For this to succeed, however, it needed the support of the United States, which was granted to some extent as these initiatives were in the interest of the American administration. The US supported the Three Seas Initiative, a regional infrastructure and energy project with geopolitical ambitions, initiated by Poland and Croatia in 2015 (Kowal, Orzelska-Stączek, 2019, p. 61–62). As part of the project, Poland wants to become a regional hub for American LNG, and the US may increase LNG exports and the region's energy security (Jančoškova, 2017, p. 235). The US also supported the cooperation of defense ministers of the region's countries initiated by Poland and Romania in 2015 under the so-called Bucharest Nine (B9) forum. The most important for Poland was the concept of building a permanent US base, called "Fort Trump" (Ministry of National Defense, 2018). The American administration did not decide to do so, but used the Poles' proposal to force the countries where American soldiers were stationed to significantly increase their participation in costs, as part of the "cost plus 50" concept (Wadhams, Jacobs, 2019). The Americans decided to increase the number of the contingent in Poland by 2,000 soldiers, on the basis of the so-called permanent rotation, which did not meet the expectations of the Polish government. Washington also used Poland to organize in Warsaw in 2019 the contro-

versial US-led Middle East conference, with an unequivocally anti-Iranian character. During this period, the importance of Poland as an importer of American arms and military equipment also increased. Huge contracts were signed, including the purchase of an F-35 aircraft and Patriot PAC-3 anti-missile system.

It was risky that Poland tried to increase its position in US security policy in opposition to the European Union. After Joe Biden took over the presidency in the United States, there was a risk of loneliness or even some isolation of Poland in the international arena. Such concerns were raised by the intensified criticism of the American administration against the Polish authorities for undermining the principles of the democratic state of law. According to J. Goldgeier, Poland is particularly important for the US in a cohesive, united West. Trying to split Europe into competing camps is a mistake, whether it is undertaken by the United States, Germany, France, Poland, or any other country. It is in the interest of the United States for Western unity and the development of common approaches. France and Germany are too important for the United States, therefore Poland's attempt to search for some kind of anti-German and anti-French strategy is a serious mistake. According to him, Poland can increase its importance for Washington by taking actions to strengthen the ties between the EU and the US as well as between NATO and the US (Goldgeier, 2022). At the beginning of President Biden's term of office, there was a serious risk that Poland's position in the US security policy would be significantly weakened. However, the situation changed dramatically with the Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine in February 2022.

Poland in the security policy of the United States after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022

American authorities have access to the expert knowledge of specialists in Central and Eastern Europe and Poland. As for the average American, his knowledge of Poland is negligible. He has no idea what is happening in Poland, as in most countries in the world, especially not to the level of granularity needed to understand Poland (Miller, 2022). This changes when there is war or a major crisis that affects the United States as well (Doyle, 2022). Such a change took place with Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, because Poland is of great importance in this conflict not only for Ukraine, but also for the United States. Currently, due to the war in Ukraine, Poland's support for Ukraine, including under NATO, is covered by American media, which to some extent goes to average Americans. Poland is now presented in a positive light, as a reliable ally of the US and NATO in Ukraine (Miller, 2022). This interest stems from the fact that the American authorities are taking the conflict in Ukraine very seriously. The US leads a bloc of states supporting Ukraine militarily and humanely and financially punishing Russia for aggression, and plays a major role in strengthening the security of NATO's eastern flank. According to Sharon Wolchik, after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the importance of Poland for the United States significantly increased as a front line NATO state. Poland is valued also for its aid to Ukrainian refugees and for being a transit point of military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine (Wolchik, 2022).

As Michael Doyle notes, after Joe Biden took power, there was a cooling in American-Polish relations and the new administration was not enthusiastic about the earlier closeness of the Trump administration and the Law and Justice government. If the war in Ukraine had not broken out, US skepticism towards Poland would have lingered and bilateral relations would have been under the burden of difficult matters to work through. Currently, however, Poland has a “green pass token” because of the role it’s playing in hosting Ukrainian refugees and providing military aid to Ukraine (Doyle, 2022). In turn, according to S. Biddle, the central driver in the American security policy is objective perception of threat and capability, not whether someone was nice to a previous American presidential administration. If interests are perceived as aligned, which they are now given Putin’s invasion and which they are likely to remain as long as this war is going on and for some time after it, Poland has the opportunity, if it meets expectations, to have a strong relationship with the United States. He believes that Poland is benefiting enormously right now by being willing to step up and allow transshipment of arms to Ukraine. That is perceived by most Americans as a heroic acceptance of risk on behalf of the defense of nonaggression norms and democracy (Biddle, 2022). The acceptance by Poland of such a large number of refugees from Ukraine who are in need is also met with great enthusiasm and praise for humanitarianism on the part of the American government and society (Kumar, 2022). Poland can also play a role in increasing global food security. In mid-June, President Biden announced the construction of grain silos along the Ukraine border, including in Poland. The aim of this action is to increase the possibilities of grain exports from Ukraine, and thus avoid a global food crisis (Holmes, 2022).

R. K. Betts claims that the war in Ukraine significantly increased the importance of Poland and Central and Eastern Europe in the US security policy. He says: “There is now clearly a higher priority on shoring up the credibility of military defense near Russia’s borders. This is most the case in regard to Poland, a large country, and the Baltic states, small but unusually vulnerable members of NATO” (Betts, 2022). What makes Poland particularly valuable in the US security policy is its role within the NATO alliance as a NATO flank state. It is particularly important that Poland’s defense spending significantly exceeds NATO’s requirement 2% of GDP. It wants to reach 3% of GDP in 2023, while its ultimate target is 5%. Reaching this threshold is unlikely, but the gradual increase in defense spending may cause Poland to overtake even the US, which spends around 3.5% of GDP on this purpose (Krzysztozek, 2022). J. H. Lebovic emphasizes the importance of Polish defense spending, at the same time stating that Poland cannot engage in unnecessarily provocative behavior towards Russia (Lebovic, 2022). The geographical location and combat abilities of Poland make it a key power in defending the Central Region. The Polish army is making significant progress in some areas, as well as significantly increasing its ability to accommodate US troops in the event of a crisis (Cordesman, 2022). In addition, it buys most of the weapons and military equipment in the US, which favors allied closeness between countries. Because of the war in Ukraine, the United States has been gradually increasing its military contingent in Poland, and has also decided to establish a permanent headquarters for the V Corps in Poland (Graham, 2022). As Kimberly J. Morgan noted, in the context of the war in Ukraine, Poland’s actions play

an important role in the process of revitalizing NATO, which in recent years seemed to be in disrepair (Morgan, 2022). This is a positive sign, because during the presidency of Donald Trump, many accusations against Poland were made of breaking the allied unity of the West. However, it should be noted that they were most often formulated by representatives of Western European countries and opposition groups in Poland and the US.

According to Steven Pifer, the Three Seas Initiative, co-initiated by Poland, may also be of significant importance for the US in the context of the war in Ukraine. This is due to the focus of this initiative on the infrastructure and energy area. Due to the need to give up Russian natural gas and replace it with gas from other sources, including American LNG, it is becoming an important form of cooperation to increase the level of Europe's energy security (Pifer, 2022). Thanks to the expansion of the LNG Terminal in Świnoujście and the construction of gas interconnectors, including with Lithuania, Poland is becoming an increasingly important hub for American LNG in the region (Andžāns, 2022). TSI is a sensible undertaking for the energy integration of the European Union members from Central and Eastern Europe. Prospectively, it may also become important in an attempt to connect countries outside the EU, including Ukraine, to European energy networks (Pifer, 2022).

Another crucial issue is whether the growing importance of Poland in the US security policy will continue in the long run, including after the change of power in the US and the end of the war in Ukraine. S. Biddle believes that if Donald Trump returns to office there will be a radically less forceful American response to Russia and that will change the nature of the US relationship with Poland, which will become transactional again. If the Democrat wins the elections, the policy towards the region will be similar to the one currently pursued, and Poland will be an important ally of the US as a NATO member (Biddle, 2022). However, the Polish authorities' approach to the issues of rule of law and democracy may again become a significant problem in relations with the US. While it is difficult to disagree with the argument about Donald Trump's transactional approach to international politics, it is debatable whether Poland plays a more important role in US security policy in the periods when the US is ruled by Republicans or Democrats. Rather, a greater pull towards Poland and Central and Eastern Europe took place during the Republican administrations. Another issue, however, is to what extent Poland and the region were used instrumentally by the US, especially in the period of disputes with Western Europe, and whether Poland was reaping tangible benefits from the increased interest in the US. The answers to these questions seem pessimistic for Poland.

Conclusions

Poland played a very important role in the security policy of the United States in the declining period of the Cold War. At that time, it was the leader of the independence uprising in Central and Eastern Europe, directed against the Soviet enslavement. Also in the first years after the Cold War, Poland's successes in the political and economic transformation meant that it gradually grew in the eyes of American

decision-makers to the role of the region's leader. However, CEE region systematically lost its importance in the US security policy, and thus also Poland. This was related to the US focus, first on the broad Middle East, and then on Asia-Pacific. In the 21st century, Poland was used instrumentally by the US Republican administrations in political games with Western European powers dominating in the European Union. The periodic increase in the importance of Poland in the US security policy was mainly symbolic and did not translate into practice, including benefits for Poland. Polish-American relations were clearly asymmetric in nature, as the Polish authorities did not have sufficient assets at their disposal to convince the American authorities to treat Poland as partners.

A clear change in the place and importance of Poland, and more broadly CEE, in the US security policy came with Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2022. To confirm its dominant position in the Western bloc, the US must actively lead European countries and contribute to their security. Poland has become the main hub for the transfer of US arms and military equipment to Ukraine. At the same time, it bears the greatest burden of humanitarian aid for Ukrainian refugees. The Polish authorities are dynamically increasing defense spending, which translates into an increase in its importance as a defender of NATO's eastern flank. This is accompanied by a clearly pro-American attitude and convergence of security interests with the American ones. Moreover, the amount of US military equipment ordered by the Polish army is gradually increasing. The importance of the import of American LNG to Poland is also growing in the context of the necessity to increase the energy security of Europe, broken by the consequences of the war. All this significantly increases the importance of Poland in the US security policy. It is largely up to the Polish authorities whether they will be able to use it to the advantage of Poland.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization (Konceptualizacja): Łukasz Jureńczyk

Data curation (Zestawienie danych): Łukasz Jureńczyk

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Zmiana znaczenia Polski w polityce bezpieczeństwa Stanów Zjednoczonych w kontekście wojny w Ukrainie

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest analiza i ocena zmiany znaczenia Polski w polityce bezpieczeństwa Stanów Zjednoczonych po wybuchu wojny w Ukrainie w 2022 roku. Artykuł składa się z dwóch części. Pierwsza obejmuje znaczenie Polski w polityce bezpieczeństwa USA po zimnej wojnie, a druga zmianę tego znaczenia po wybuchu pełnoskalowej wojny na Ukrainie. Główny problem badawczy zawiera się w pytaniu, czy w związku z rosyjską agresją na Ukrainę wzrosło znaczenie Polski w polityce bezpieczeństwa USA? Teza zakłada, że wojna w Ukrainie spowodowała wzrost znaczenia Polski w amerykańskiej polityce bezpieczeństwa. Wynika to z trzech podstawowych przesłanek: Polska stała się głównym hubem dla amerykańskiego uzbrojenia dostarczanego na Ukrainę; Polska odgrywa kluczową rolę we wsparciu humanitarnym ukraińskich uchodźców; oraz dynamiczny rozwój polskiej armii zwiększa jej znaczenie w obronie wschodniej flanki NATO. Paradoksalnie w kontekście stosunków polsko-amerykańskich wybuch wojny okazał się być korzystny dla Polski, gdyż wcześniej groziło jej schłodzenie

stosunków z USA w związku z problemami z przestrzeganiem zasad demokratycznego państwa prawa. Obecnie kwestia ta jest przyćmiona przez zintensyfikowaną współpracę amerykańsko-polską na rzecz pomocy Ukrainie i zabezpieczenia wschodniej flanki NATO. W ramach badań przeprowadzono wywiady z badaczami i ekspertami z ośrodków naukowych z Waszyngtonu i Nowego Jorku.

Słowa kluczowe: Stany Zjednoczone, Polska, polityka bezpieczeństwa, wojna w Ukrainie