

The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

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Remarks by President Obama and President Komorowski of Poland after Bilateral Meeting

Oval Office

11:45 A.M. EST

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Good morning, everybody. I want to extend the warmest possible greetings to President Komorowski and his delegation. Poland is one of our strongest and closest allies in the world and is a leader in Europe. And so it is fitting that my first visitor from Central and Eastern Europe is, in fact, the Polish President.

Before I mention the substance of our meeting, let me just say something very quickly to the American news crews about something that's on everybody's minds -- and that is the current debate about the tax agreement that we've come up with.

We announced this agreement, and over the last couple of days economists throughout the country have looked at what would be the results of getting this agreement through Congress. And I think it's worth noting that the majority of economists have upwardly revised their forecasts for economic growth and noted that as a consequence of this agreement we could expect to see more job growth in 2011 and 2012 than they originally anticipated.

And I just think it's very important for Congress to examine the agreement, look at the facts, have a thorough debate, but get this done. The American people are watching and they're expecting action on our parts.

I don't think you need to translate that.

Now, having said that, I just want to say that I first spoke to President Komorowski in the wake of a tragedy that broke the hearts not only of the Polish people but caused the entire world to grieve. The loss of President Kaczynski, the First Lady, the entire planeload full of extraordinary Polish leaders caused extraordinary shock. But I have been so impressed with the steady hand and the leadership that President Komorowski has shown as he stepped in to guide the Polish people forward.

Something that the Polish people and the American people have long shared is not only a love of freedom but also a deep faith and resilience in the face of hardship. And President Komorowski exhibited all those traits as the leader of Poland during this difficult period.

So, given these strong bonds between our two peoples -- bonds that I feel very personally given that I'm from Chicago, which has the largest Polish population outside of Poland -- this has been a very productive meeting and we discussed a wide range of issues.

We started with the issue that is at the heart of our relationship, and that is our status as allies in NATO. And coming out of the Lisbon summit, we once again reaffirmed the centrality of Article 5 as the central tenet of the NATO Alliance. And I reiterated my determination and the American people's determination to always stand by Poland in its defense and its security needs.

And that commitment is exemplified by the joint adoption at Lisbon by NATO of a NATO-wide missile defense capacity. It's exemplified by the air force detachment that will be placed in Poland as part of our ongoing relationship in the training process. It is indicated by the SM-3s and the interceptors that are going to be located in Poland as part of our phased adoptive approach to missile defense. And most importantly, it's affirmed by the fact that not only are we NATO allies but strong bilateral allies and that bond between our two countries is unbreakable.

I know that was a mouthful, I'm sorry. (Laughter.)

(Pause for translation.)

We also discussed the tremendous sacrifices that the Polish military are making as part of the ISAF alliance in Afghanistan, and reaffirmed what all of us agreed to in Lisbon, that next year will be a year in which transition begins so that we can start giving Afghans more responsibility for their security and, over time, make sure that our emphasis is more on training rather than direct combat in that nation.

I also thanked the President for the very strong support that the Polish government, as well as the governments

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throughout Eastern Europe and Central Europe have shown towards the New START treaty. As we embark on a debate of that treaty in the United States Senate, I indicated to him how important it was for U.S. senators to hear from those who are Russia's neighbors that they feel it is very important to make sure that the New START treaty is ratified so that we can continue the verification process that is so important in reducing risks throughout that region.

And finally, because our relationship is not restricted to security, we discussed a range of economic issues, as well, including Polish leadership on energy independence issues in Central and Eastern Europe. And we also discussed Poland's leadership as a key democracy and how it can help its neighbors to continue down a path of greater freedom and greater openness and transparency.

This year we mark the 30th anniversary of Solidarity. And all those around the world remember how inspired we were by the brave Poles who sought their freedom, including a young -- or younger -- President Komorowski, who, himself, was imprisoned. And we continue to draw inspiration from the tremendous strides that Poland has made. We continue to deeply appreciate the strong friendship between our two countries.

And I'm so grateful to President Komorowski for having come here today because it is one more reaffirmation that our alliance is strong and will continue to be strong for decades to come.

PRESIDENT KOMOROWSKI: (As translated.) Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to express the absolute same perspective on what happened in Lisbon. This goes both for the full acceptance of the arrangements by NATO as to the future of Afghan operation. And first and above all, this is about the reaffirmation of the significance of Article 5 Washington treaty.

And we agreed that what happened in Lisbon was the renewal and the reaffirmation of the internal cohesion of the Alliance and also the sense of the existence of NATO as the Alliance as going to defend the territorial integrity of its member states.

And this is also connected with the reaffirmation of the necessity to implement the language from the contingency plans in the forms of exercises, also NATO infrastructure in the territory of the member states. And an element of this is also the American activity and presence in the form of the military participation both in Europe and in Poland.

NATO now plays new roles, but it does not reject its old role, which continues as fundamental for its future. I allowed myself to illustrate this to President Obama in a very illustrative way, a very picturesque way. I simply said that if we are to go hunting very far away from our house, we have to be absolutely sure that our house, our women and our children are well guarded. And then you hunt better.

And I also wanted to say that this is needed to renew and reaffirm good Polish-American relations. And the fundament of these relations is both American and Polish love for freedom. And we want also to make sure that this reaffirmation is a visible sign that these relations, instead of some difficulties underway, are getting stronger and not weaker.

And thirdly, I wanted to say also that we talked about something that is very important for creating very good texture for the cooperation between the United States and Poland. Poland is economically successful. We are the only country that has kept positive GDP growth in Europe. We want to see the greatest interest and the activity of the American capital in Poland.

However, on the principles of healthy competition, because I am absolutely convinced that as in other areas of our life, in economy, it also stands true good competition is always good.

And the last thing but is also very important is the Polish attitude to the current issues, which are very important from the perspective of the security of our world. Poland supports and fully accepts the aspiration for the ratification of the New START because we believe that this is the investment in a better and safer future. And this is also the investment in the real control over the current situation.

If you live just next door with somebody for 1,000 years, it is not possible to reset all the past relations using just one push of the reset button. We are not able to fully reset and delete 1,000 years of uneasy history with Russians. But we do not want to be an obstacle; we want to be a help in the process of resetting the relations between the Western world with Russia. We want to invest in relations with Russia.

Two days ago in Poland we had a visit of President of the Russian Federation Medvedev. And it is our very open will, our greatest conviction and open heart with which we want to invest in better relations with Russia.

But we also are absolutely sure of this old Russian proverb, "You have to have the confidence but you also have to verify," because then, perhaps at the end of the process we will also push the reset button after 1,000 years of our history. And this is what we would like to have very much.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Thank you so much.

So we've got time for two questions. I think on the American side I'm going to call on Bill Plante.

Q Mr. President, now that you've negotiated with the Republicans, are you willing to negotiate with the Democrats who think they've -- that you've betrayed them on the tax package?

And when you talked to the Republicans, did they give you any assurances that they would take up START and "don't ask" in the lame duck?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Well, first of all, Bill, I think it is inaccurate to characterize Democrats writ large as feeling "betrayed." I think Democrats are looking at this bill, and you've already had a whole bunch of them who said this makes sense. And I think the more they look at it, the more of them are going to say this makes sense.

As I've indicated, you've just had economists over the last 24, 48 hours examine this and say this is going to boost the economy, it is going to grow the economy, it is going to increase the likelihood that we can drive down the unemployment rate. And it's going to make sure that 2 million people who stand to lose unemployment insurance at the end of this month get it; that folks who count on college tax credits or child tax credits or the Earned Income Tax Credit, that they're getting relief; and that tens of millions of Americans are not going to see their paychecks shrink come January 1st.

So this is the right thing to do. I expect everybody to examine it carefully. When they do, I think they're going to feel confident that, in fact, this is the right course -- while understanding that for the next two years we're going to have a big debate about taxes and we're going to have a big debate about the budget and we're going to have a big debate about deficits. And Republicans are going to have to explain to the American people over the next two years how making those tax cuts for the high end permanent squares with their stated desire to start reducing deficits and debt.

I don't think that formula works. But they'll have the opportunity to make the case. I'll have the opportunity to make the case that we've got to have tax reform; that we've got to simplify the system; that we do have to cut spending where it makes sense. But we're also going to have to make sure that we've got a tax code that is fair and that looks after the interest of middle-class Americans and continues to grow the economy.

With respect to START, I feel confident that when you've got previous secretaries of state, defense, basically the entire national security apparatus of previous Democratic and Republican administrations, our closest allies who are most impacted by relations with Russia, and as President Komorowski indicated, have a thousand years of uneasy relations with Russia, saying that the New START treaty is important, that we are going to be able to get it through the Senate.

That's not linked to taxes. That's something that on its own merits is close to get done -- needs to get done. And I have discussed it with Senate Republican leader McConnell. I am confident that we are going to be able to get the START treaty on the floor, debated and completed before we break for the holidays.

Q This is a question for both Presidents. Have you at all discussed the inclusion of Poland into the visa waiver program? And if so, Mr. President, what has your administration done in order to include Poland into this program?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I will -- why don't I answer that just very quickly. First of all, I want all Poles and Polish Americans to know that President Komorowski raised this issue very robustly with me. I am well aware that this is a source of irritation between two great friends and allies, and we should resolve it.

The challenge I have right now is, is that there is a congressional law that prevents my administration from taking unilateral executive action. So we're going to have to work with Congress to make some modifications potentially on the law.

In the meantime, what I indicated to President Komorowski is that I am going to make this a priority. And I want to solve this issue before very long. My expectation is, is that this problem will be solved during my presidency.

Q So it has not been your priority in the past two years?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I'm sorry, what I said was that it has been a priority and we've been continuing to work on it, but it hasn't gotten solved yet.

PRESIDENT KOMOROWSKI: (As translated.) It's nice for me to hear President Obama reaffirm that we have talked about it. I take these declarations with good faith. I feel simply committed to say that Polish public opinion completely does not understand why all the neighbors of Poland, the neighborhood of Poland, can use that visa waiver program and we can't.

So Poles somehow cope, because we are a member of the European Union and we can travel and we can work in all the member states of the European Union. So I just want to say that I know that it would be quite logical for us to be able also to travel without visas to the United States.

But from the perspective of Poland, we have said everything about it. And we also -- I'm completely sure that this issue will be reconsidered and revisited by the American party, also from the perspective of the relations between the citizens of Poland and the United States.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Well, Mr. President, thank you so much for the wonderful visit. And I just want to make -- as the press leaves, you might want to note that I got this beautiful Christmas tree ornament from the President and it's already on my tree. We hung it up. And it's the prettiest one on the tree, so you may want to take a look at it.

PRESIDENT KOMOROWSKI: I also want to say that I'm absolutely convinced that your numerous neighbors from Chicago make exactly the same decorations. (Laughter.) And I also have a decoration from the White House, a Christmas tree decoration, and I'm going to put it on my Christmas tree in Warsaw.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Merry Christmas. Thank you.

Thank you, everybody.

END
12:16 P.M. EST

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