



CEC Weekly Political Update **14th February 2019**

US VP Pence & Middle East Conference

Poland and the United States are jointly organizing a Middle-East Conference in Warsaw which started yesterday and continues throughout today. The event has been formally named the "**Ministerial to Promote a Future of Peace and Security in the Middle East**". For this occasion, US Vice-President Mike Pence arrived in Poland on Wednesday and is expected to stay for 3 days. VP Pence and President Andrzej Duda have already met on Wednesday and held a press conference, during which they spoke of strong bilateral bonds and reiterated the will for further cooperation. Vice-President Pence is also expected to visit the German Nazi death camp Auschwitz, where he will meet with Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is also attending the conference.

First impressions indicate that top-level talks did not bring US declarations that Warsaw was hoping for. Still, the benefits in terms of perception are especially important for PiS in the upcoming election season. Furthermore, working-level contacts between Warsaw and Washington will likely increase as a result of the meetings and conference.

The conference was announced on 11 January by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who stated that it will kick off a new initiative dubbed the Middle East Strategic Alliance and that the situation in Iran will be one of the main topics. Representatives of over 70 countries have arrived in Warsaw to participate in the conference. However, EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini and foreign ministers of key states including Russia, have decided not to appear.

Poland's Foreign Ministry informed that Iran was not invited to the conference given the state of relations with the US. News of the event opened an avenue of conflict between Warsaw and Tehran. The Iranian government, which views the conference as a hostile act, warned there will be consequences for Poland. Statements from the Ambassador of Iran in Poland, as well as officials from Tehran, have underlined that diplomatic and trade relations will suffer.

While Polish diplomats have emphasised that the conference was not meant to have an anti-Iran context, it remains to be seen how the discussions will develop. The US and Polish governments declared that the conference will deal with terrorism, extremism, missile technology, maritime trade, and energy security.

Last week, Polish FM Jacek Czaputowicz said, that Poland agreed to host the conference because it wants to "show the world that we are active in ensuring peace and stability". Warsaw seeks to achieve a few things through hosting the event. Firstly, it seeks to show that it remains actively engaged in global affairs and is not simply a passive observer. Secondly, and more importantly, it is a way for the ruling PiS party to demonstrate its close ties with Washington – "I hope this will translate into an increase in trust between our countries, as well as a stronger involvement of the United States in Poland" said Czaputowicz. This is

also part of Poland's campaign to increase US military presence in the country. The most publicized aspect of this campaign is the bid for the establishment of a permanent US military base that has been dubbed "Fort Trump".

Commentators have noted that Warsaw is striving to position itself as a mediator between the US and the EU. Though Poland supports the EU in the Iran deal, which the US has backed out from, it hopes that cooperation between the Union and America could provide for stability in the Middle East. The Trump Administration would especially benefit from a harsher EU stance towards Iran. In May 2018, Washington withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal. While many EU states agree that Iran is a destabilizing force in the Middle East, the bloc has stood behind the agreement from which the US withdrew unilaterally. Experts note that any EU-US thaw in the matter, which may potentially come as a result of the conference, would be a success for Warsaw.

CEC Government Relations is the leading political communications consultancy in Central Europe, providing strategic political and media intelligence, monitoring and analysis for Western multinationals in the region. Key expertise includes the defence, energy, environment, IT, financial and extractive industry sectors. CEC also has experience in media management, local government, and third-party mobilisation as an integral part of its communications activities. The Warsaw office works closely with other CEC offices in Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, as well as its partner agencies in other European Union countries.