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Józef Piłsudski and the Polish-French Alliance (1926–1935)

Zarys treści: W artykule koncentruję się przede wszystkim na stosunku Piłsudskiego do Francji, jego wizji sojuszu polsko-francuskiego. Omawiam to w kontekście polskiej polityki zagranicznej. Sygnalizuję także postawy Francuzów wobec marszałka. W mniejszym stopniu omawiam funkcjonowanie sojuszu polsko-francuskiego, chociaż poruszam te problemy.

Content outline: In the present article I focus primarily on Józef Piłsudski's attitude towards France and his vision of the Polish-French alliance. I discuss this subject in the context of the Polish foreign policy. I also highlight the attitudes of the French side towards the Polish marshal. I address the functioning of the Polish-French alliance itself to a lesser extent, although I do touch upon these issues too.

Słowa kluczowe: Józef Piłsudski, sojusz polsko-francuski 1926-1935, polska polityka zagraniczna w okresie międzywojennym, Polska, Francja

Keywords: Józef Piłsudski, Polish-French alliance 1926–1935, Polish foreign policy in the inter-war period, Poland, France

The subject indicated in the title of the article is present in scholarly literature. The research by specialists in Polish-French relations and international relations provides an extensive pool of knowledge and interpretations.¹ However, due to

¹ H. Bułhak, "Józef Piłsudski wobec sojuszu polsko-francuskiego (szkic do tematu)," in: *Józef Piłsudski i jego współpracownicy*, ed. A. Suchoński, Opole, 1999, pp. 53–71; id., *Polska-Francja. Z dziejów sojuszu 1922–1939*, part 1: 1922–1932, Warszawa, 1993; id., *Polska-Francja. Z dziejów sojuszu 1933–1936*, Warszawa, 2000; J. Kukułka, *Francja a Polska po traktacie wersalskim (1919–1922)*, Warszawa, 1970; A. M. Brzeziński, *Warszawa-Paryż-Genewa. Sojusz polsko-francuski a problem rozbrojenia w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym (1919–1937)*, Łódź, 1996; J. Ciałowicz, *Polsko-francuski sojusz wojskowy 1921–1939*, Warszawa, 1970; P. S. Wandycz, *The Twilight of French Eastern Alliances 1926–1936. French-Czechoslovak-Polish Relations from Locarno to the Remilitarization of the Rhineland*, Princeton, 1988; T. Komarnicki, *Józef Piłsudski a polityka wielkich mocarstw*

the scarcity of sources that could illustrate Piłsudski's position on the alliance, the subject is still marked by a research deficit and the associated risk of erroneous assumptions. I am aware of this state of affairs and of the necessity to refer to already published research.

In the article I will focus primarily on Józef Piłsudski's attitude towards France and his vision of the Polish-French alliance as part of the foreign policy of the Second Polish Republic; I will also highlight the attitudes of the French side towards the Polish marshal, and I will address the functioning of the Polish-French alliance itself to a lesser extent, although I will provide more detail on several facts.

To win France over

Before I move on to the proper subject, i.e. the post-May Coup period, I will reflect on several events from the previous years. Piłsudski most likely saw France as an important power that could support the independence aspirations of Poles from the very beginning of his mature conspiratorial work. Many researchers emphasise, based on his articles from the end of the 19th century published in the periodical *Robotnik*, how he was "fascinated by Napoleon." Piłsudski admired the French emperor's military skills, he analysed the tactics employed by Napoleon on the battlefield, and later made use of some of these concepts during Poland's struggle for independence. Włodzimierz Suleja, Piłsudski's biographer, notes that in Piłsudski's opinion, France and Poland had always tended towards each other "naturally, without any effort, through sympathy and for rational reasons alike."² Piłsudski was, above all, a seasoned politician and strategist, thus he knew that France was simply an important political and military power whose opinion needed to be taken into account in his efforts to regain independence. His conviction was apparent at the beginning of the First World War, when in autumn 1914, he sent his friend Stanisław Patek, a lawyer famous in Tsarist times, to Paris and

zachodnich, Londyn, 1952; S. Sierpowski, "Polityka zagraniczna Józefa Piłsudskiego," in: *Józef Piłsudski i jego legenda*, ed. A. Czubiński, Warszawa, 1988; W. Suleja, *Józef Piłsudski*, Wrocław, 1995; W. Iędrzejewicz, *Józef Piłsudski 1867–1935. Życiorys*, Londyn, 1986; T. Schramm, "Czy Polsce w okresie międzywojennym potrzebna była Francja?," in: *Ład wersalsko-ryski w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej 1921–1939*, ed. M. Kornat, Warszawa, 2013, pp. 93–107; M. Kornat, *Polityka równowagi 1934–1939. Polska między Wschodem a Zachodem*, Kraków, 2007; M. Wołos, *Alfred Chłapowski (1874–1940). Biografia ambasadora Polski we Francji*, Toruń, 1999; id., *Generał dywizji Bolesław Wieniawa-Długoszowski: biografia wojskowa*, Toruń, 2000; M. K. Kamiński, M. J. Zacharias, *Polityka zagraniczna Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej 1918–1939*, Warszawa, 1998; G.-H. Soutou, "L'alliance franco-polonaise (1925–1933) ou comment s'en débarrasser?," in: *Revue d'Histoire diplomatique*, Paris, 1981, pp. 295–348; P. Le Goyet, *France-Pologne 1919–1939*, Paris, 1991; F. Dessberg, *Le triangle impossible. Les relations franco-soviétiques et le facteur polonais dans les questions de sécurité en Europe (1924–1935)*, Bruxelles, 2009.

² W. Suleja, op. cit.,

London.³ Piłsudski, who was then a proponent of cooperation with the Central Powers—although he also allowed for the possibility that the Entente states would eventually prevail in the final phase of the war—decided to notify the Western politicians via Patek that the Poles were fighting against Russia, not France and Great Britain, so as to prepare grounds for their support for the Polish cause. It should be noted that Piłsudski treated this scenario as merely one of the possible courses of events. However, he was considering supporting the Entente as early as 1914 should it occur.⁴ He pursued this plan after returning from Magdeburg in the autumn of 1918. At that time, however, the situation was unfavourable for Piłsudski and his supporters from an international point of view. Indeed, the Polish National Committee was active in Paris, and it was the National Democracy camp that attracted the attention of French politicians. Piłsudski had to do his utmost to convince Paris of the shift of his orientation and, above all, to prove that the official structures of the independent Polish state were being formed in Warsaw, and not in Paris. In December 1918, he spoke to his colleagues as follows: “We are dependent on the Allies. They now control the situation as victors. Poland’s borders depend solely on them. We must not only reckon with them, but, if not flatter, we should bear in mind their prestige, especially the prestige of France.”⁵ The opening of the Peace Conference in Paris was also approaching and the presence of Poles and, above all, the unity of their actions were a priority. This is why Piłsudski explained: “We cannot have two delegations to the Peace Congress, we cannot provide the spectacle of a double representation.”⁶ However, the position of Piłsudski and his camp among the French authorities was weak; the French side would gladly cooperate, but with Roman Dmowski and Erazm Piltz. In order to overcome their reluctance towards him and the government in Warsaw, but also to reach an agreement with the Polish National Committee, Piłsudski dispatched his delegates to Paris. First Stanisław Hempel,⁷ then Kazimierz Dłuski, Michał Sokolnicki, Antoni Sujkowski, Stanisław Thugutt, Leon Wasilewski, Stanisław Patek, and Władysław Baranowski.⁸ Most of them took part in the Peace Conference as his delegates. These are, of course, important matters, but for the purpose of this article it should be stressed that both during this period and later [discussed below], Piłsudski would often send his representatives as delegates to speak with

³ M. Gmurczyk-Wrońska, *Stanisław Patek w dyplomacji i polityce (1914–1939)*, Warszawa, 2013, pp. 15–19.

⁴ More on Piłsudski’s ideas at that time: T. Wolsza, “W sprawie prognoz Józefa Piłsudskiego dotyczących przebiegu wojny,” *Dzieje Najnowsze*, 3–4, 1985, pp. 159–166; W. Suleja, op. cit., pp. 107–109.

⁵ W. Baranowski, *Rozmowy z Piłsudskim 1916–1931*, Warszawa, 1990, p. 49.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ More on his mission: P. Libera, “Paryska misja Stanisława Hempla (1918–1919),” *Zeszyty Historyczne* 2009, no. 170, pp. 137–183. Also included are references to further literature.

⁸ M. Gmurczyk-Wrońska, op. cit., p. 28.

the French on his behalf. These were often informal missions, meant as reconnaissance for the preparation of grounds for future talks; some also served for propaganda purposes. Undoubtedly, this was a quite clever and effective move. It allowed Piłsudski to overcome the prejudices among French decision-makers and press about his cooperation with the Central Powers. Unfortunately, we only have access to but a few reports from his envoys.

In the first period after Poland regained its independence, Piłsudski's contacts with diplomats and French military officers were not always satisfactory for both sides. Wishing to avoid jeopardising Polish-French relations, yet to strongly emphasise Poland's right to independence, Piłsudski sometimes allowed himself to respond quite harshly to his French interlocutors. The Marshal was nonetheless well aware of France's importance in international relations and of its support for Poland during the 1919 Peace Conference in Paris.

It is difficult to indicate precisely the moment when Piłsudski began to consider entering an alliance with France. The autumn of 1920, suggested by Jerzy Kukułka and Henryk Bułhak, seems very probable.⁹ Let us add that the French diplomat Jules Laroche, serving as French ambassador to Poland since 1926, saw Piłsudski as the principal initiator of the Polish-French alliance.¹⁰

Piłsudski travelled to Paris as Chief of State in early February 1921, shortly before the signing of the Polish-French alliance. Before his departure, he spoke to Władysław Baranowski, then head of the foreign propaganda office under the Presidium of the Council of Ministers: "The matter is ultimately settled and I am indeed glad that our relationship with France will be, as we might expect, ultimately reflected in some defined forms in every possible aspect."¹¹ As in the past, now too, before this important event in the rank of a state visit, Piłsudski first sent Baranowski, as well as his aide-de-camp, Lieutenant Colonel Bolesław Wieniawa-Długoszowski, to Paris "to create a suitable atmosphere in the press and political milieu."¹²

Piłsudski and the ruling camp managed to win France over. The political and military alliance signed on 19 and 21 February 1921 fulfilled, at least until the mid-1920s, its assigned protective role—mainly against the German threat, but also, to some extent, against the Soviet one.¹³ However, its condition began to change under the influence of the shift in French foreign policy related primarily to the concept of collective security.

⁹ J. Kukułka, *op. cit.*, p. 249; H. Bułhak, "Józef Piłsudski...", p. 55.

¹⁰ J. Laroche, *Polska lat 1926–1935*, Warszawa, 1966, p. 13.

¹¹ W. Baranowski, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹³ Without going into the details of the alliance, let us only note that France would support Poland in the form of war supplies and railroad materials.

International situation of Poland after 1925. Maintaining the alliance with France

During the Locarno Conference in October 1925, the Polish Foreign Minister Aleksander Skrzyński signed the guarantee treaty proposed by the French. Under its provisions, the Polish-French alliance lost its automatic character in the case of aggression from Germany, and its implementation was dependent on the procedure of the League of Nations. The Locarno Conference and its arrangements between the countries of Western Europe and Germany not only led to the emergence of disparities in terms of security between Eastern and Western Europe, but also weakened Poland's international position. Aside from the fact that Poland was not invited to participate fully in the conference, but only to sign the aforementioned guarantee treaty, its position as an ally of France suffered a blow. Another worrying event was the signing of the Soviet-German treaty on non-aggression and neutrality on 24 April 1926. As a reaffirmation of the Treaty of Rapallo, it constituted an ominous signal for Europe, whose security relied on the League of Nations. Another worrying factor for Polish diplomacy was brought by analyses of the Soviet foreign policy, which gave rise to the assumption that the conclusion of bilateral agreements by the Soviet Union was aimed at creating a new international system competitive to the League of Nations.¹⁴

Thus, even before the May Coup and Piłsudski's return to power, signs of the deterioration of Poland's international position were becoming increasingly clear. In addition, the Polish-French alliance, instead of bringing both sides closer together in the face of rising threats in Europe, began to lose its character conferred in 1921. The obvious question that comes to mind is how Piłsudski himself assessed this situation. And this is where we actually encounter a major issue, since we do not possess any documents that could directly confirm the Marshal's position on the matter. However, there exist several studies on the Polish foreign policy of that period, notably analyses concerning the introduction, alongside the existing alliances with France and Romania, of the strategy known in historiography as the "policy of equilibrium" between Soviet Russia and Germany.¹⁵

Although after May 1926 Józef Piłsudski took over the duties of Minister of Military Affairs, from 2 October 1926 to 27 June 1928 he was Prime Minister (while still retaining power over the army); and even in the years 1926–1932, when the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs was held by August Zaleski, Piłsudski still shaped the Polish foreign policy. While the Marshal appreciated the role of the League of Nations, he did not believe in the effectiveness of its procedures which were to ensure Poland's security. However, he was determined to preserve the

¹⁴ M. Kornat, "Stanisław Patek i początki jego misji w Moskwie w r. 1927 (w świetle nowych dokumentów)," in: *Zeszyty Historyczne*, z. 160, 2007, pp. 146-155.

¹⁵ More broadly on the subject: M. Kornat, *Polityka...*

alliance with France. One might argue that after 1926 Piłsudski sought to strengthen this alliance. This turned out to be extremely difficult, as France actively sought to weaken it. It should be added, however, that an exchange of French diplomatic and military representatives in Poland occurred in 1926. Ambassador de Panafieu, with whom Piłsudski maintained good relations, was replaced by the aforementioned Jules Laroche, while the head of the French Military Mission, General Dupont, who was in conflict with the Marshal, was replaced by General Charles Charpy. Piłsudski was keen to establish good relations with them, and this was exactly how they began to evolve.

In 1953, the memoirs of the French Ambassador to Poland from 1926 to 1935, Jules Laroche, were published in Paris under the telling title *La Pologne de Piłsudski*.¹⁶ Laroche wrote of Piłsudski's popularity and his great authority among Poles, pointing to his impeccable manners and intellect during conversations.¹⁷ Laroche noted that France played an important role in Piłsudski's policy, although he admitted that the Marshal was critical of many of his ally's moves. Laroche also mentioned Piłsudski's critical stance on the Locarno arrangements. The ambassador admitted, however, that his mission in Poland was largely devoted to convincing the Polish side to accept alterations in the military convention. He also noted that Piłsudski feared a Franco-German rapprochement after Locarno at the expense of the Polish-French alliance and, unwilling to "blindly follow an ally whose western policies were difficult for him to comprehend," he decided to turn to Germany, which occurred in January 1934.¹⁸ The ambassador admits that Piłsudski's foreign policy after 1926, i.e. the signing of the non-aggression pact with the USSR in 1932 and the declaration of non-violence with Germany in 1934, were dictated by the Marshal's concern for the wellbeing of Poland, yet he remained cold about the rapprochement with Germany.

In fact, the French had already started probing the Polish side about the changes in the military convention after Locarno. France's objective was to harmonise the secret military convention with the Polish-French guarantee treaty signed in Locarno. In January 1927, Ambassador Laroche presented a proposal to amend the 1921 military convention. He also returned to this idea in 1928. Piłsudski not only rejected the idea of weakening the convention, but was also a vocal supporter of its strengthening. Piłsudski's position resulted to a large extent from the revisions in the wartime planning strategy carried out in the Ministry of Military Affairs under his direction.¹⁹ The situation was becoming even more complicated and threatening as rumours regarding the termination of the occupation of the Rhineland and the withdrawal of the French army from that area started to surface.

¹⁶ J. Laroche, *La Pologne de Piłsudski. Souvenirs d'une Ambassade, 1926-1935*, Paris, 1953; translated into Polish by Stanisław Zabiełło as *Polska lat 1926-1935*, Warszawa, 1966.

¹⁷ J. Laroche, *Polska lat 1926-1935*, p. 32.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

¹⁹ More on this subject: H. Bułhak, *Polska-Francja. Z dziejów sojuszu 1922-1939*, pp. 237-241.

In the event of France withdrawing its troops before the set deadline [i.e. before 1935], Poland demanded guarantees of security, similar to those obtained by France in Locarno, i.e. the recognition by Germany of the inviolability of the border with Poland [eastern Locarno].

In 1927, Marshal Franchet d'Esperay travelled to Warsaw. Officially, the reason for this visit was to present Piłsudski with the *Médaille Militaire*, a high merit military decoration of the French Republic; unofficially, the Marshal of France was attempting to ease relations with Poland, and stressed that this alliance still remained important for France.²⁰ The intensification of diplomatic and military Polish-French talks at that time was accompanied by successive missions of Piłsudski's envoys and Minister Zaleski to France. Anatol Mühlstein, Mirosław Arciszewski, Colonel Józef Beck and General Tadeusz Kutrzeba were all dispatched there. On behalf of Piłsudski, General Kutrzeba (28 June–4 July 1928) proposed a modification of the convention in the spirit of strengthening the alliance, proposing to omit the opinion of the League of Nations in case of aggression. Although during Kutrzeba's visit both sides drew up a note according to which France agreed to send war materials to Poland, no concrete details were established.²¹

Throughout 1929, Polish-French talks were focused on finding a formula to protect Poland from Germany in the event of the evacuation of French troops from the Rhineland. At that time, Poland began to place great emphasis on the so-called D Model, developed by the Committee on Arbitration and Security of the League of Nations. This model allowed individual members of the League to reach agreements on exclusion of war, peaceful settlement of disputes and mutual assistance. The possibility of applying the D model to France, Germany and Poland was considered. This agreement could provide Poland with the necessary guarantees from Germany and would also act as a Polish-French-German regional pact. Piłsudski supported this idea as it had a tactical significance for him, but it was mostly a matter of tightening military cooperation with France.

Piłsudski could fear, as Waclaw Jędrzejewicz notes, that France's unstable policy of seeking support before a weakening League of Nations might fail Poland at a time of international conflict. However, as Henryk Bułhak points out, Piłsudski predicted the outbreak of war within at least the following five years and did not seek to conduct joint strategic plans with the French in the late 1920s.²² He was more interested in preventive and deterrent measures. He did nonetheless expect Poland to be included in the talks related to the evacuation of troops from the Rhineland. The Marshal did not attach much importance to finding a diplomatic and legal formula which the French constantly pressed for, and which would ensure

²⁰ W. Jędrzejewicz, J. Cisek, *Kalendarium życia Józefa Piłsudskiego*, vol. 3, Warszawa, 1998, pp. 115–116.

²¹ More on this subject: H. Bułhak, "Józef Piłsudski...", pp. 64–65; G.-H. Soutou, "L'alliance...", pp. 327–328.

²² H. Bułhak, *Polska-Francja. Z dziejów sojuszu 1922–1939*, p. 271.

Poland's place among the powers deciding on the evacuation of the Rhineland. All these talks and projects yielded no results. In June 1930, French troops were evacuated from the Rhineland. Poland remained merely an observer of these events. It appears that the year 1930 marks the end of rather intensive efforts on the part of the Polish side to strengthen the Polish-French alliance, which was undoubtedly a failure of Piłsudski and Polish diplomacy.

Polish and French foreign policies – main objectives

Piłsudski's failure in his attempts to strengthen the Polish-French alliance resulted primarily from alterations in the French foreign policy, which consisted in abandoning the concept of bilateral agreements in favour of multilateral agreements within the framework of the collective security policy. It should be added that both Piłsudski and Józef Beck, who had been acting as Foreign Minister since 1932, treated these concepts in the French foreign policy with scepticism. French researcher Georges-Henri Soutou wrote extensively about this idea, implemented by the head of French diplomacy Aristide Briand (1925–1932). He recalled a well-known theory that Briand was seeking an alliance with Great Britain, but the UK was afraid of getting entangled in French alliances in Central and Eastern Europe, and emphasised the politician's aspirations for rapprochement with Germany and the USSR. According to the researcher, the policy of collective security played only a supportive role in French diplomacy in the years 1924–1930, one that did not compromise the French alliances, and resembled the classic French diplomacy from inter-war periods; after 1930 the notion of collective security became a dogma and an obsession among French politicians and in their diplomacy. Sotou perceives the plans of Louis Barthou (Foreign Minister in years 1932–1934) in the same vein, describing his aspirations for an "eastern Locarno" as a collective security pact that would unite Germany and its eastern neighbours and be guaranteed by France and the USSR.²³

The lack of success in the plans of strengthening the Polish-French alliance or positive prospects for the stability of the international system, as well as the obvious need to ensure Poland's security, resulted in the modification of the Polish foreign policy. In historiography, it is known as the "policy of equilibrium." According to Marek Kornat, an expert on this subject, Piłsudski was convinced that the signing of the non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union in July 1932 and of the declaration of non-violence with Germany in January 1934 represented a success, providing Poland with a "moment of rest."²⁴ According to Piłsudski's concept, the alliance with France, similarly to that with Romania, was still of great

²³ G.-H. Soutou, "Le deuil de la puissance (1914–1958)", in: *Histoire de la diplomatie française*, Paris, 2005, pp. 745–775.

²⁴ M. Kornat, *Polityka...*, p. 469.

importance, but in a way complementary to the “policy of equilibrium.” Let us therefore examine how relations with France looked like in the light of Piłsudski’s concepts and activities in the years 1931–1935.

Period of crisis in Polish-French relations and attempts at maintaining the alliance

Piłsudski would not conceal his doubts from the French regarding France’s ability to fulfil its obligations as an ally in the event of war. Such doubts were nothing new, but from the moment that French foreign policies began to shift in favour of increasing concessions towards Germany, while the international system shaped after the First World War was taking on more and more tragic forms, the collective security policy promoted by France became in practice a negligible form of politics in the Marshal’s eyes. Polish and French foreign policies at the beginning of the 1930s began to differ radically in their concepts and methods of implementation. France’s reception of the Polish-Soviet non-aggression pact signed in Moscow was negative. As a bilateral agreement, it certainly stood in contradiction to their plans, which also included negotiating a similar agreement with the Soviets, and so they wanted the Polish-Soviet agreement to be included in this framework.

The French had always been critical of the principle of self-reliance and of the right of Poland to make independent decisions pursued by the Marshal and his collaborators. The deal with the Soviets reached by Piłsudski’s envoy in Moscow, Stanisław Patek, led to a rather serious row in Polish-French relations. It seems, however, that Piłsudski saw Germany as a much more important issue in his relations with France. France’s policy of rapprochement with Germany had long been a concern for the Polish side. In the context of German revisionism and constant Polish-German troubles in Gdańsk, Piłsudski decided in mid-1932 to take a rather bold step towards demonstrating Poland’s rights to Gdańsk to Germany and the international community. As three British destroyers were to arrive in Gdańsk in June 1932, he ordered the Polish destroyer “Wicher” to act as their host. In the autumn of 1932, the French military attaché, General Charles d’Arbonneau, was received by Piłsudski. The meeting was marked by a rather cold tone. Piłsudski told his French interlocutor that France would certainly betray Poland and abandon it.²⁵

In December 1932, a disarmament conference was held in Geneva during which France, Great Britain, Italy, the United States and Germany decided to grant Germany equal rights in the matter of armaments. Poland did not take part in this event and criticised this decision. Disquieted by this turn of events, Piłsudski dispatched Gen. Wieniawa-Długoszowski to Paris, followed by Senator Jerzy Potocki in March. Regrettably, we do not have access to any materials from

²⁵ W. Jędrzejewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

these meetings.²⁶ Official talks were held with the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Paul-Boncour by Ambassador Alfred Chłapowski.²⁷ The turn of 1932 and 1933 was a very unfortunate time in Polish-French relations, and Piłsudski was fully aware of this. In view of the crumbling anti-German Polish-French alliance and the existing threat from Germany, the Polish Marshal decided to engage in negotiations with Germany—but also with France, perhaps hoping to improve relations with the ally. One element of the game was the aforementioned “Wicher” incident, but also the temporary expansion of the Polish garrison in Westerplatte in March 1933²⁸ and the probing of France on the preventive war against Germany.²⁹

As in the case of the missions of Piłsudski’s envoys to France, we do not possess archival documentation from the spring of 1933 that could illustrate the course of Polish-French talks on Piłsudski’s proposed preventive war. In French literature, this subject is mentioned only sporadically, whereas in Polish literature it is often presented as highly controversial, ranging from theories pointing to active measures on the Polish side to assumptions negating this fact. Generally speaking, however, the prevailing opinion is that Piłsudski did make such a proposal to the French via his envoys, but it was merely a probative suggestion. We can only assume that if the French side had “undertaken” the subject, more detailed and probably official talks would have taken place. Obviously, this raises the hypothetical question of whether—should France have taken this matter seriously and thus changed its policy towards Germany—there was a genuine possibility of return to the spirit of the 1921 alliance. It seems that it was rather unlikely, and Piłsudski was probably well aware of this. Hypothetically, we can speculate that Piłsudski treated this probing of the French side as a safeguard in relation to the intended plans concerning Germany. According to his concept, the shift towards Germany was a consequence of the weakness of the Polish-French alliance, and he did handle it skilfully. Both the “Wicher” incident and Westerplatte were closely monitored by Germany. We do not know whether any leaks of information about preventive war had reached Berlin. Let us add that during the probing of France’s opinions

²⁶ This issue is signalled by Mariusz Wołos, who also failed to trace the documents from Wieniawa’s talks with the French side, see: *General...*, p. 126; see also: W. Jędrzejewicz, J. Cisek, op. cit., p. 331; H. Bułhak, *Polska-Francja. Z dziejów sojuszu 1933–1936*, Warszawa, 2000, p. 11; P. S. Wandycz, “Jeszcze o misji Jerzego Potockiego z 1933 roku,” *Zeszyty Historyczne*, 1970, Paryż, fasc. 18.

²⁷ More on this subject: M. Wołos, *Alfred...*, pp. 195–196.

²⁸ The issue was connected with the dissolution of the port police by the Port Council in February 1932, which also included a number of Poles. After the reinforcement of the garrison at Westerplatte, the conflict was brought before the League of Nations. Ultimately, Poland withdrew its soldiers and the port police was reinstated.

²⁹ H. Bułhak, M. Gmurczyk-Wrońska, “Juliusz Łukasiewicz, ambasador RP w Paryżu o ‘wojnie prewencyjnej’ przeciwko Niemcom w 1933 r.,” in: *Mazowieckie Studia Humanistyczne*, 2002, no. 2, pp. 257–266. Also contains an overview of the literature; H. Bułhak, *Polska-Francja. Z dziejów sojuszu 1933–1936*, pp. 18–27.

on preventive war, a project of the so-called Pact of Four, promoted by France, Great Britain, Italy and Germany, saw the light of day, involving the possibility of territorial changes in Europe. Although this project was a failure, Germany left the disarmament conference in October 1933, while also demonstrating the desire to secede from the League of Nations. Under these circumstances, Piłsudski requested the Polish services to provide detailed information on German armaments and ordered Beck to call upon Ludwik Morstin, a former liaison officer of the Polish High Command to the French General Staff, poet and writer who knew Marshal Foch and General Weygand personally and maintained extensive ties in Paris. Morstin was instructed to investigate the position of France in the event of Poland being attacked by Germany.³⁰ Piłsudski's emissary learned that France could only provide Poland with personnel and material assistance, without engaging actively in a possible conflict with Germany. On 20 November 1933, Piłsudski spoke again with General d'Arbonne, but this conversation focused on Germany rather than Polish-French relations. Morstin had already provided Piłsudski with information on the position of France, so what could the Marshal really expect? A few days later, Piłsudski received German Ambassador Hans von Moltke, who presented him with a draft declaration of non-aggression.

The final years: 1934–1935

After signing the declaration of non-violence with Germany on 26 January 1934 and being already bound by a pact of non-aggression with the Soviets, Piłsudski thus concluded the creation of a foundation for his “policy of equilibrium.” The alliances with France and Romania remained key elements of Polish foreign policy, but as the Marshal put it himself, they began to act as a “counterbalance” to the agreements with Germany and the Soviets. Piłsudski referred to them as such on 7 March 1934, during a meeting with the highest dignitaries of the Republic of Poland. As noted by the Marshal of the Sejm, Piłsudski allegedly said: “The treaty with France provided insufficient strength. A lot of sacrifice had to be made here [...] Russia agreed to arrange peace relations [...]. The attitude of the Germans was hostile, and aggressive in details and in minor matters. The Commandant exploited the moment of Germany's withdrawal from the League of Nations and put the matter as follows: Since Germany is not currently withheld by guarantees from the League of Nations, it must give Poland some guarantee of security. Otherwise, the Commandant will be forced to employ in his military tasks a defensive system clearly directed against the Germans [...]. Old alliances should be maintained for counterbalance, but at present Poland should not make sacrifices to maintain them. [...] The Commandant has recently been working hard to provide Poland with

³⁰ W. Jędrzejewicz, *J. Cisek*, op. cit., p. 357.

security through diplomatic channels. In doing so, he followed the following rules [...] Bow to no one, i.e. preserve one's dignity [...]. Poland's objectives are in the East, as this is where Poland may reach for the possibility of becoming an influential player. We should neither interfere nor try to influence relations between Western countries. In order to achieve this aim of Poland's influence in the East, important sacrifices may have to be made with regard to Poland's relations with Western countries."³¹ Let us also add the following quote from Minister Beck's letter to the Ambassador in Rome dated 10 May 1939: "The Commandant had predicted the troubles that would arise from unhealthy rapports with Germany, but he believed that we would not reach a reasonable agreement with the countries of Western Europe without developing our own Polish-German policy, at least for some time."³²

Given the "policy of equilibrium," the alliance with France did not lose its former significance. In reaching an agreement with Soviet Russia and Germany, Piłsudski applied the principle of independence in relations with France and ensured Poland's freedom of manoeuvre in international relations. The Marshal perfectly understood the priorities of the French foreign policy, especially the significance of Germany. By reaching an agreement with Germany, he secured greater leeway in relations with France. Since the anti-German Polish-French alliance had been deprived of the principle of immediate intervention after the Treaty of Locarno, it was necessary to ensure Poland's security on the part of Germany. Besides, the Marshal was aware of the temporary nature of this solution. During the aforementioned meeting on 7 March 1934, he did state that "good relations between Poland and Germany may last maybe four more years."³³

It seems that France's negative reception of the declaration of non-violence signed with Germany was no surprise to Piłsudski. Although Poland was suspected of having an additional secret agreement with Hitler and thus of betraying its French ally, the French had always been concerned about the relaxation of tension in Polish-German relations.

In April 1934 the Minister of Foreign Affairs Louis Barthou travelled to Warsaw. In 1921, as Minister of War, he had signed the Polish-French alliance document. On 27 April 1934 Barthou met with Piłsudski. The French minister tried to warm Poland to the idea of the Eastern pact and obviously also raised the issue of the revision of the military convention. Piłsudski refused, but first he introduced the French minister to the priorities of the Polish foreign policy. He named relations with Germany and Russia as the most important, followed by alliances with France

³¹ *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne* [hereinafter: *PDD*], 1934, ed. S. Żerko, Warszawa, 2014, doc. 86, pp. 201–202, 7 III 1934, note by the Marshal of the Sejm from meeting with Piłsudski concerning Polish foreign policy; see also: K. Świtalski, *Diariusz 1919–1935*, entry of 7 III 1934, pp. 659–662.

³² *PDD*, 1939, ed. S. Żerko, Warszawa, 2005, doc. 275, p. 454.

³³ *PDD*, 1934, doc. 86, p. 202.

and Romania, and finally those with other countries. In regard to the League of Nations, Piłsudski said: “If the League’s working methods do not change, it will be bound to die of anaemia.” When Barthou tried to reassure Piłsudski about a firm strategy towards Germany, the latter replied: “You will cave in, dear sirs, as you would not be yourselves otherwise. Maybe you yourself will not want to, but then you will either resign or be taken down at the Parliament.”³⁴

Piłsudski wished to build an alliance with a partner that would be friendly, dynamic, brave and rational in their foreign policy. This vision was already strained by the attitude of the French, especially during the Spa conference in 1920, but Poland had formed an alliance with a power that sought to weaken Germany. Piłsudski had always examined the position of France, probed and deployed his diplomats as part of official or unofficial missions. One can say without exaggeration that he cared about maintaining the alliance with France. Researchers have long admitted that Poland could not replace the alliance with France with any other combination, and that Piłsudski probably aspired to make this alliance an effective instrument for keeping Germany in check. When this became impossible through France’s fault, he resorted to improving relations with Berlin. Piłsudski attached more importance to military talks than to political talks with the French, as he probably hoped that the military milieu would look more seriously at the German threat.

The French researchers Georges-Henri Soutou and Frédéric Dessberg are of course correct in emphasising Piłsudski’s attachment to including the Soviet Union in the military convention as a possible aggressor.³⁵ Dessberg goes even further by stating that for French decision-makers, Piłsudski’s vision of the alliance consisted in distributing tasks; Paris was to ensure security on the part of Germany and Poland was to serve as a rampart against the danger of Soviet Russia.³⁶ It should be added, however, that at least some of the newer French publications are already quite balanced in their evaluation of Marshal Piłsudski. Without delving into discussing this broad literature, let us mention for instance the opinion of Pierre Renouvin, who presented Piłsudski’s actions and figure very critically in his *Histoire des relations internationales* published in 1957–1958. This researcher noted Piłsudski’s “limited trust” in the Polish-French alliance and his attempts to oppose French concepts of foreign affairs based on the notion of collective security.³⁷

Piłsudski placed great importance on the alliance with France, even in its weakened form. In 1933, he declared that Poland was always ready to fulfil

³⁴ PDD, 1934, doc. 134, pp. 323–324.

³⁵ G.-H. Soutou, “L’alliance...” pp. 317–318; F. Dessberg, op. cit., p. 164.

³⁶ F. Dessberg, op. cit., p. 164.

³⁷ P. Renouvin, *Histoire des relations internationales*, vol. 7, Paris, 1957, p. 220; vol. 8, Paris, 1958, p. 69.

its obligations towards France as its ally, and defined the alliance with France as a foundation of Poland's "national policy."³⁸ Perhaps Piłsudski still hoped for the restitution of France's position, but as a realist he did not anticipate optimistic scenarios for the ally. After the disarmament conference, the Pact of Four or the proposal for the Eastern pact, Piłsudski doubted whether France would be able to defend its *raison d'état*. In 1934, he allegedly stated in a conversation with attorney Franciszek Paschalski: "I fear for the fate of France in war against Germany. France will not win this war."³⁹ I believe that Piłsudski's diagnosis of French political condition was excellent.

I propose a strongly arbitrary division of the 1926–1935 period illustrating Piłsudski's position on the Polish-French alliance: 1/ 1926–1930: measures aimed at strengthening the Polish-French alliance, even based on the League of Nations; 2/ 1930–1932: stagnation in Polish-French relations, search for a solution and first steps towards a change in priorities in foreign policy; 3/ 1932 [December]: deep crisis in Polish-French relations; 4/ 1933: search for possibilities for manoeuvre, testing the ally [preventive war, "Wicher," Westerplatte]; 5/ 1932–1934: Poland retains its room for manoeuvre in its relations with France; 6/ 1934–1935: alleviation of tensions in Polish-French relations and of the situation already established by Piłsudski.

Abstract

Piłsudski saw France as an important power that could support the independence aspirations of Poles. Piłsudski travelled to Paris as Chief of State in early February 1921, shortly before the signing of the Polish-French alliance. The political and military alliance signed on 19 and 21 February 1921 fulfilled, at least until the mid-1920s, its assigned protective role—mainly against the German threat, but also, to some extent, against the Soviet one. However, its condition and role began to change under the influence of the shift in French foreign policy related primarily to the concept of collective security, as well as the shift in Polish foreign policy. In 1933, however, Piłsudski declared that Poland was always ready to fulfil its obligations towards France as its ally, and defined the alliance with France as a foundation of Poland's "national policy." While the Marshal appreciated the role of the League of Nations, he did not believe in the effectiveness of its procedures which were to ensure Poland's security. However, he was determined to preserve the alliance with France. One might argue that after 1926 Piłsudski sought to strengthen this alliance. This turned out to be extremely difficult, as France actively sought to weaken it. The lack of success in the plans of strengthening the Polish-French alliance or positive prospects for the stability of the international system, as well as the need to ensure Poland's security, resulted in the modification of the Polish foreign policy. In historiography, it is called the "policy of equilibrium" and involves the signing of the 1932 non-aggression pact with Soviet Russia and the 1934 declaration on non-violence with Germany. According to Piłsudski's strategy, the alliance with France, as with Romania, continued to play a major role, but was complementary to the pacts with Moscow and Berlin.

³⁸ W. Jędrzejewicz, J. Cisek, op. cit., p. 253.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 400.

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