

Thirteen armies hold maneuvers in Poland

by Dean Andromidas and Michael Liebig

Between Sept 12 and 17, a significant event took place in Poznan, Poland: a joint military exercise involving soldiers from Poland, the U.S.A., Germany, Italy, Great Britain, Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Denmark, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria, and Ukraine. The significance of the exercise lay not in the narrowly military but, rather, in the political domain.

It must be admitted at once, that the jointly conducted training for "United Nations units" in the Biedrusko military region (20 km north of Poznan) is highly questionable from the military, political, and moral standpoint. The fundamental problem of the U.N. troops' shameful show of "impartiality" toward aggressor and victim alike in former Yugoslavia was by no means unnoticed by many of the 1,100 troops who took part.

Many officers as well as enlisted men in Biedrusko know the situation in the Balkans from firsthand experience. But even among the many journalists present, otherwise distinguished by the typical cynicism of their calling, the effects of a "Yugoslavia shock" were often marked.

Reflects new U.S. policy

For all that, the "Cooperative Bridge" maneuver must be seen as politically positive. In it, the fact that the Clinton administration is supporting a "Paris-Bonn/Berlin-Warsaw stability strip" in security policy found expression. In this sense, the Poznan maneuver is an aspect of the shift in foreign policy line toward Europe which Clinton had put forward during his visits to France, Italy, Poland, and Germany this past June and July.

It is obvious that the United States emphatically wants to advance the stability of Poland and the further consolidation of German-Polish cooperation. Great Britain played only a marginal role in Poznan. The United States, Poland, and Germany wanted to negate any anti-Russian alignment; therefore, one week earlier, joint American-Russian maneuvers took place east of Moscow.

Polish-America role

The planning of the exercises and their realization within two months lay essentially in the hands of the United States, Poland and Gen. Helge Hansen (a German general who is NATO commander in Central Europe). Originally, only a

smaller bilateral American-Polish maneuver had been envisaged. The "staging" of the maneuvers undoubtedly depended on the many American soldiers of Polish origin who still are fluent in Polish.

The visible presence of German Bundeswehr troops and their equipment in Poznan and in the Biedrusko military region can probably only be compared with the Bundeswehr's first exercise in France in the early 1960s. It is already impressive when the soldiers of the different nations exchange their AK-47s, M-16s, or G-3 assault weapons and then hold shooting exercises. With regard to the similarity of camouflage uniforms and helmets, a striking closeness is visible between eastern and western Europe.

The atmosphere between the soldiers participating in the exercises was indeed one of comradeship. The main problem in the effort is the language barrier, especially among the common soldiers, which was marked in the course of the exercises in the five partially mixed companies. In personal conversations with Polish and German soldiers it became clear that they got along in a truly comradely, open, and unrigid fashion, and even resolved their language problems by "improvising" over their evening beer.

'Partnership for Peace' is still fuzzy

The Polish exercises took place in the framework of the "Partnership for Peace" between NATO and the 22 states of the former communist sphere. Neither the exercises themselves, nor the statements of the many participating military and political leaders, contributed toward a clarification of the content of the fuzzy construct of the PFP. The main outlines of PFP seem to be that no one can say exactly what it actually means, and so everyone can interpret it according to his own fashion.

The Polish side, starting with Prime Minister Waldemar Pawlak, made it directly and unmistakably clear that the fastest possible entry into NATO is an overriding goal of Polish foreign policy and that the PFP is viewed as a superfluous and at best short-term transitional phenomenon. Polish Defense Minister Piotr Kolodziejczak expressed appreciation for German support for this Polish position, for, unlike the other western powers, in Germany's case, there was no gap between word and deed.

After his visit to Biedrusko, German Defense Minister Volker Rühle flew to Neubrandenburg, where the partnership of the 12th Division of the Bundeswehr with the 13th Polish Division from Szczecin was established. Beyond the problem of the PFP, the stability of Europe depends in any case decisively on the further consolidation of a Paris-Bonn/Berlin-Warsaw "strip" and its reinforcement by the United States.

This is not just a security policy but, above all, a question of economics and infrastructure. As a further development, so to speak, of the Poznan maneuvers in October in southern France, there will be a joint maneuver of the German-French Brigade with Polish soldiers.