



CHAPTER 8

In Rethinking the Belt and Road Initiative. An (Ir)replaceable Polish Factor

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most famous Polish drama, *The Wedding* (1901) by Stanisław Wyspiański, begins with a short conversation between two participants of a wedding party: Czepiec and Dziennikarz (Journalist):

Czepiec

Any news in politics, Sir?
The Chinese hold on strong?

Dziennikarz

Oh, my beloved landlord,
I'm fed up with the Chinese all the time. (Wyspiański, 1973)

It is hard to resist the suggestive, even prophetic power of Czepiec's question. Thanks to it, Wyspiański achieved the honorable status of a poetic prophet who predicted the future greatness of the Chinese. Nowadays, not only the peasants from Polish Bronowice near Kraków,

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103

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where *The Wedding* action takes place, but everyone is asking themselves this symbolic question, treating the Chinese as a contender for the leadership position in the new interdependent world.

China sees the need for a “new” globalization and has great ambitions in this regard as the leader of the world economy. At the heart of its vision is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) announced by President Xi Jinping in 2013 in Astana as a project to reactivate the historical Silk Road—the most famous trade route linking the ends of the Eurasian continent for over 17 centuries. The route is to consist of a land section from the ancient Chinese capital Xi’an to Venice and a sea section from Quanzhou on the Taiwan Strait to the Greek port of Piraeus. Ultimately, the sea and land routes, reinforced with a railway line, are to connect to form a loop. There are many indications that this initiative will be the cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy for decades to come. The question is whether *Pax Sinica*, with all its anticipated consequences, could establish an acceptable order for the rest of the world.

The aim of this chapter is to develop a framework for discussing the role that Poland could play in the BRI project, considering the broader context of vague Sino-Polish relations and the requirements of the international environment. The central issue is to answer the question of whether Poland is a replaceable or irreplaceable factor in the New Silk Road project.

Analyses to unravel this issue consist of three parts. The first one is a short presentation of the general assumptions of the BRI project against the background of remarks on China’s great-power aspirations. The goal of the second part is to confront theory with practice of operation on the example of 16+1 agreement. The point is to show “to what extent” China is willing to cooperate with its partners on the basis of equality and reciprocity. Finally, the third part has been devoted to an assessment of Sino-Polish relations and a real contribution Poland could make to the BRI project.

Arguments presented in this chapter are based on two types of sources. The first one includes books and articles that have been published on China and the BRI initiative. The second source, no less important, are press articles and radio podcasts, which provide valuable insight into matters related to projects currently being carried out in Poland.

CHINA AND A “NEW” GLOBALIZATION

In December 2021, exactly 43 years have passed since Deng Xiaoping introduced groundbreaking reforms for China. They resulted in a significant increase in the potential of the Chinese economy and a rise in its share in the world economy. Workforce, natural resources, skillful use of the mechanisms of traditional globalization, and new technologies have allowed China to become a global investor and exporter of innovative technological solutions (Hübner, 2017). Today, the country not only follows the path of development, but also determines the directions of the world economy.

Along with the economic changes, China is going ahead with its ambitious political plans and, equally important, promoting its own mentality (Kołodko, 2018). The world does not seem to prevent this, gradually departing from the Eurocentric or Western-centric vision of the development of our civilization, where the West is the main heir to the culture of ancient Greece, Persia, and Rome (Beckwith, 2009; Ferguson, 2013). In this context, the BRI mega-project appears as a culmination of Chinese aspirations and an excellent tool for actively shaping globalization processes, based on cultural patterns and the Chinese way of understanding things—with Chinese characteristics (as the Chinese used to say) (Hübner, 2020). It enables the construction of commercial and transport infrastructure and creates circumstances for cooperation in other areas (involving intercultural and scientific exchange). In this manner, Beijing forms a new model of integration, different from the Western ones, as well as a new type of leadership involving key players in creating joint solutions.

As President Xi Jinping said during the UN 75th anniversary summit (Beijing, September 21, 2020): “Mutual respect and equality among all countries, regardless of their size, are essential to development these days. There is no country in the world that is empowered to deal with all international affairs, to decide the fate of other countries and to have exclusive rights to the benefits of development” (Xi Jinping, 2020). The BRI has become a skillful means for China to demonstrate its peaceful rhetoric. It is being presented as a “common good” and a response to international needs—open and flexible, without strictly defined targets, tools, or official detailed maps. Joining the initiative is voluntary, available to every country that is interested in peaceful cooperation. The main idea, at least declaratively, is to provide benefits to all participants of the project in line with a win-win philosophy.

During the entire program, China plans to invest up to \$4 trillion in participating countries. For the financial service of the project three international institutions have been established: the Silk Road Fund, the New Development Bank, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank of which Poland became a founding member (Szczudlik-Tatar, 2016). It's worth mentioning that the establishment of these institutions has met with some opposition in the West, given that they provide an alternative to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Asian Development Bank. In addition, Beijing launched dozens of think tank platforms aiming at strengthening communication between China and the world (Hübner, 2017).

On the other hand, the BRI as an ambiguous and heterogenous project is raising doubts. They are related to fundamental issues such as the chances of the project's success, its security, the problem of China's credibility, as well as the question of consequences of remodeling the global order. The Poles share these concerns, but at the same time believe that cannot afford to give up the possible benefits of the Sino-Polish alliance. They are afraid of the marginalization or isolation in the world, which the country had painfully experienced under communist rule, "behind the iron curtain". Mainly for this reason, both Polish society and the currently ruling Law and Justice Party are trying to find a place for Poland in the BRI project.

As far back as 2016, Presidents of Poland and China, Andrzej Duda and Xi Jinping signed in Warsaw a declaration on strategic partnership in which they reiterated that "Poland and China see each other as long-term and stable strategic partners and their development as a significant opportunity for mutually beneficial cooperation" (The official website of the President of the Republic of Poland, 2016). Both countries declared their willingness to raise the level of bilateral relations to promote investment in many areas, such as economy and trade, finances, transport and logistics, infrastructure, civil aviation, energy, agriculture and commerce, technology, and environmental protection. Over time, however, this initial enthusiasm began to fade away.

The first disturbing signals of problems in Chinese-Polish relations emerged in 2017 when Poland's Military Property Agency refused to sell land to Chinese investors who wanted to build a transshipment terminal as part of the corridor to the China railways (Frąk, 2018).

Recently, the Polish government has provided China with another reason that may contribute to cooling mutual relations. It is possible that

Poland will adopt a law on the national cybersecurity system that may prevent some Chinese companies from investing in telecommunications infrastructure in Poland. China is threatening to impose “reciprocal measures”.

Chinese investors more and more often encounter signs of reluctance in Poland. The offers of Chinese companies regarding the development of road infrastructure, which could be part of the BRI, have recently been treated with a certain distance by the Polish side. Jan Styliński, Chief Executive Officer of the Polish Association of Construction Employers, stated that Chinese companies haven’t brought new value to the road construction market so far (Klimkowski, 2020). The Polish society remembers the Chinese company COVEC, which in 2011 unexpectedly withdrew from the construction of the A2 motorway, exposing Poland to serious financial losses (Informacyjna Agencja Radiowa, 2011).

All this makes it difficult to unequivocally assess Poland’s chances of playing a significant role in the BRI. Poland’s aspirations to be a necessary and irreplaceable factor in the project, something more than just a transit state, are in conflict with a growing tension and distrust in mutual relations. It seems that there is no comprehensive and stable Polish strategy toward the Chinese initiative. In order to define such a strategy, it is necessary to establish a framework for cooperation as well as mutual expectations of both sides.

CEEC VERSUS THE BRI

The effectiveness of the 16+1 cooperation platform between China and Central and Eastern Europe (CEEC) seems to be a reliable test of whether the BRI project is something more than just wishful thinking. Both initiatives are related to each other in the sense that some projects are seen as part of the 16+1 and the BRI at the same time.

The CEEC platform was launched in Warsaw in 2012 on the initiative of the former Chinese President Hu Jintao, as a forum for the implementation of common goals. Initially, the format brought together 11 EU countries (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Czech, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria), 5 Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro) and China—the center for decision-making processes. In 2019 Greece joined the format as its 17th member (which seems significant due to the Greek port of Piraeus, where the Chinese shipping company COSCO has made

significant investments). However, after a short period of strengthening the group, in May 2021 Lithuania decided to withdraw from the agreement.

According to the primordial assumptions, cooperation is to cover five areas: trade and investment, production and energy, transport connections, financial cooperation, and people-to-people relation (Przychodniak, 2017). Although, in practice, there are serious obstacles in achieving these goals. The problem is, above all, an enormous diversity of the region which makes it impossible to apply one unified policy. There are also cultural and political differences that prevent the group from being a strategic force (Kaczmarek, 2015).

Briefly, the platform creates a heterogeneous entity linking countries that have little in common, except for the communist past. As a result, the 16+1 split into two parts: the Balkan states that are the greatest beneficiaries of the cooperation (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia) and the rest where little is happening (outside of Hungary), especially in the area of investments (Warsaw Institute, 2019).

It does not change the fact that trade between China and the CEEC countries is systematically growing. According to the data from China's Ministry of Commerce, China's total trade volume with the CEE countries ticked up 8.4% in 2020 to topple \$103.45 billion, dwarfing the \$100 billion threshold for the first time. In the first quarter of 2021 China imported \$8.17 billion worth of goods from CEEC, an increase of 44.7% year-on-year. For the future (2021–2025), Beijing intends to increase the volume of imports of goods from these countries to \$170 billion (Xinhua Silk Road Information Service, 2021).

When it comes to Poland, cooperation with China looks good at first glance. As reported by the Polish Economic Institute (PEI), citing the data of the National Bank of Poland, by 2019 the accumulated value of Chinese direct investments in Poland amounted to US\$1.2 billion. In 2020, Poland was one of the main recipients of Chinese investments in the European Union. Their total value could reach approximately US\$1 billion. Larger funds have been invested only in Germany (US\$2 billion) and France (US\$1 billion) (Dziennik Gazeta Prawna, 2021). The slightly worse news is that a record result was achieved thanks to one huge transaction. The Singapore-based GLP company, operating in the logistics real estate sector, has entered the European market, mainly Polish (Frączyk, 2021). It is not the investment that Poland could particularly care about.

The problem is that what China needs from Poland is not necessarily the same as what Poland needs from China (Pendrakowska, 2018). Looking from the Polish perspective, expectations toward Beijing relate mainly to the development of infrastructure and an increase in export. So far, the Polish export structure to China has been determined by one company alone—KGHM Polska Miedź—one of the largest Polish state-owned companies and a leading producer of refined copper and silver in the world. Poland is still striving to attract potential Chinese recipients to products such as dairy, pork, apples, furniture, and rubber goods. However, little comes of it.

The results of cooperation within the China–CEEC should therefore be considered unfavorable:

In 2013 the first rail transport link between China and Poland was launched. Currently, the journey from Chengdu to Łódź (via Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus) takes 15 days.

In 2015, two institutions were founded: a new Consulate General in Chengdu as well as a post of Representative of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development at the Polish Embassy in Beijing.

Since 2017, Polish-Asian Chamber of Commerce together with its partner Sino-Polish Chamber of Commerce has been implementing the Center Poland-China Project.

In 2018 the Polish Port Gdańsk opened its office in Shanghai.

There is little evidence that Polish hopes of being a strategic location on the BRI map will come true. Beijing has always promised a lot, though no significant project for Poland has been launched under the banner of the BRI. Such a disappointment is not only the share of Warsaw. The European Commission aims to form a united front in the EU's policy vis-à-vis China, perceiving the 16+1 initiative as a threat in the face of China's expansive investment policy. It is not an easy task considering economic reasons and divisions within the European Union.

More and more countries have been withdrawing from cooperation with Beijing. The government in Romania wants to exclude Chinese companies from participating in public tenders. Lithuania is considering similar steps. Earlier, tenders were canceled in Slovenia, Croatia, and the Czech Republic. In Greece, there is a discussion on whether to allow the Chinese shipowner to increase shares in the port of Piraeus (gsz, 2021). It seems, however, that it is too late for such gestures and discussions. China has

been building its position in Europe for many years, so breaking ties with it would not be easy. For many countries, including Poland, China serves as the largest producer and supplier of various types of goods. In order to break free from such dependence, some alternative must be created. It's here where the space for an assertive policy toward China has been opening up.

Relatively little space in the Chinese debate has been sacrificed to the future of the 16+1 format. Arguments have been raised about the need to revise the current view of the region and use the experience of the last few years. Despite the low effectiveness of the agreement, China wants to continue it. This is used by Beijing to improve long-term bilateral relations with selected countries in the region and create in this way the foundations for a political and economic presence in Central and Eastern Europe (Kaczmarek, 2015).

POLAND'S COMPETITIVENESS IN THE BALTIC SEA

Poland is the country with the largest container transshipments in the ports of the Baltic Sea. It seems, therefore, that a real chance for Poland to participate effectively in the BRI project would be the development of the infrastructure necessary for the implementation of intermodal transport (using more than one means of transport, i.e., swap body, container, or semi-trailer, on the basis of one loading unit along the entire route).

The development of intermodal transport has been fostered by the implementation of the European Union's transport policy in the field of the development of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), the priorities of which were set in 2013/2014. The main target of the initiative is to create the core network, including the development of nine transport corridors and the most important nodes (including seaports, inland water ports, and rail terminals). Two core network corridors run through Poland: the Baltic Sea–Adriatic Sea and the North Sea–Baltic Sea. Their strategic nodes are four seaports: Gdańsk, Gdynia, Szczecin, and Świnoujście (Raben, 2016).

Particularly noteworthy is DCT Gdańsk—the largest container terminal in the Baltic Sea, connecting Asia and the European Union with the emerging markets of Central and Eastern Europe. The terminal is located at the port of Gdańsk. It delivers containers to the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Sweden, Russia, and Finland. At DCT Gdańsk, containers are reloaded at a deep-water quay, the depth of which reaches 17 meters.

Thanks to such navigation parameters, DCT regularly serves the largest container ships in the world, becoming more and more competitive for the ports of Hamburg and Rotterdam.

In mid-2022, DCT Gdańsk will start the construction of a new terminal—Baltic Hub 3. According to Łukasz Greinke—the former Chief Executive Officer of DCT Gdańsk—it is a great chance for Poland: “We want to open a window to the world and give a chance to all entities that start to think globally. We want to be the port of first choice also for our southern neighbors. We want to reverse this stream of loads that has flowed from west to east so far” (Pietrzak, 2021).

A third deep-water quay will be built in the port area (717 m long, 18 m deep, and a 36-ha square), thus increasing the handling capacity of DCT Gdańsk by 1.5 million TEU to a total of 4.5 million TEU per year. The launch of the terminal is scheduled for mid-2022 (Derewienko, 2021). Thanks to this investment, DCT Gdańsk will be able to service not only the Polish market, but also the entire Baltic Sea region and Poland’s inland neighbors. Policymakers in Warsaw see it as one of the potentially strategic points on the BRI—a maritime gateway to the markets of Central and Eastern Europe for Asia and at the same time the only Baltic port that supports direct container connections with China. On the other hand, however, Poland’s role in the project will be adequate to the importance of the entire region on the map of the New Silk Road.

MAŁASZEWICZE ON THE NEW SILK ROAD

Among the investments currently underway in Poland, Beijing’s greatest attention is drawn to a dry logistic hub in Małaszewicze on the Polish-Belarusian border, where containers are transshipped from broad-gauge rolling stock (1520 mm) to standard-gauge rolling stock (1435 mm). Małaszewicze is attractive mainly due to its geostrategic location—on the shortest transit route connecting the EU and Russia. Ninety percent of the freight trains from Asia to the EU pass through here (from China through Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, and Poland, ultimately to other European countries).

In November 2019, the hub was enlarged with a new terminal, providing regular intermodal connections from Xi’an via Małaszewicze to DTC Gdańsk, and from there by sea to Great Britain and Scandinavia. It is worth adding that the current travel time from the main ports in China to the terminal in Małaszewicze takes 12 days, and from Xi’an to Małaszewicz

only 8 days. This is of great importance considering that Poles would like to export food to China.

At present, just 2 years after the opening of the terminal, it has almost reached its maximum capacity. Only in 2020 it handled 11,000 trains—twice as many as in 2019, becoming the most efficient container terminal in this part of the New Silk Road. On August 29, 2021, the highest capacity result was achieved—18 trains on the exit and 15 trains at the entrance passed through the broad-gauge infrastructure for the first time (Janowski, 2021).

In response to the growing demand for the services of the Małaszewicze hub, PKP Cargo company is planning a large investment aimed at maximizing reloading. The plans assume that the expanded hub will reach the capacity allowing it to handle up to 55 pairs of trains a day. In addition, the project includes the modernization of the existing six stations (Chotyłów, Bór, Małaszewicze Centralne and Rozrządowa, Kobyłany and Zaborze), as well as the construction of three new ones (Kobyłany Zachodnie, Osypisko and Karaczewo). This is another step toward the further strengthening of Poland in the areas constituting the external border of the EU. On September 30, 2021, the governor of Lublin issued a permit for the extension of the logistics hub in Małaszewicze. The commencement of construction works is planned for the beginning of 2023 and their completion in 2027/2028 (Majowicz, 2021).

According to Andrzej Sokolewicz, Chief Executive Officer of the railway company Cargotor: “There is no better moment for the Chinese concept of the new Silk Road to turn into a genuine benefit for Poland” (Burda, 2021). Indeed, the development of the hub in Małaszewicze creates the possibility of trade exchange on an unprecedented scale, at a reasonable price, and quickly (within 8–14 days, while the maritime transport takes about 40 days on the same route). Małaszewicze is, therefore, the strongest Polish accent on the map of the New Silk Road. It doesn’t seem, however, that the success of intermodal transport could significantly affect Poland’s position in the context of the entire BRI initiative.

CONCLUSIONS

Poland joined the BRI with great expectations, treating the initiative as an opportunity to attract investments, expand export, and take part in infrastructural projects. For several years, there has been an endless national discussion about the privileged position of Poland on the New Silk Route

as well as the expected benefits of participating in the project. However, no significant project has yet been realized under the BRI banner. The reasons are on both sides, Polish and Chinese. Poland, somewhat contrary to its courageous rhetoric, behaves reservedly in relations with China. Optimistic visions and hopes are intertwined with fears, relating to China's increasingly confrontational attitude toward the West and its aggressive promotion of export. Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary-General, believes that NATO allies should be prepared for a possible threat from China, which hegemony means "a fundamental shift in the balance of power in the world" (Reuters, DPA/stas, 2020). Anthony Saich from Harvard University says something similar: "Domestic policy plans should not fuel global tensions, but it is clear that Xi wants China to become the dominant player in the global arenas, and this will lead to increased tensions" (PAP, 2021).

In such circumstances, there is little indication that Poland could become the main gateway to Europe or an irreducible factor in the BRI project. Undoubtedly, Poland should carefully analyze Chinese promises, reduce its expectations toward Beijing, and at the same time place greater emphasis on cooperation with the EU and NATO.

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