Poland’s perspective on the Belt and Road Initiative
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ABSTRACT
The idea of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) became a central project for Chinese foreign policy and a crucial tool shaping China’s global external policies. Since president Xi Jinping announced this initiative in autumn 2013 in Astana, BRI has gained international attention and remarkably influenced the international discourse on China’s policy. In Poland, this Chinese-born initiative was predominantly interpreted as an economic and political program based on infrastructural projects that mostly include new railway connections and maritime routes. Secondly, it was perceived as an initiative dealing with production surplus of China, as well as Beijing’s plan to open its doors wider toward the world. Thirdly, it was regarded as a geopolitical concept aiming at changing the global order. There is no clear answer to the question regarding how Poland perceives the BRI and what the state government plans to achieve with participating in the project. Part of the political scene regards BRI as a threat, the other part as an opportunity. Optimism has reached peak during president’s Xi Jinping visit to Poland in June 2016 and turned into skepticism in January 2017, when previous Polish Minister of National Defense Antoni Macierewicz decided to block the sale of a parcel for a logistic hub that meant to be part of BRI. In the end, it seems that Poland is guided by a strategy of wait-and-see, especially when presenting BRI as a global challenge, rather than elaborating a comprehensive participatory program in the initiative.

KEYWORDS
Poland; China; Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); 16+1; cooperation; connectivity

1 Introduction
Central hypothesis of this article refers to the observation that Polish perspective on Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is primarily concentrated on potential economic and politic benefits that could arise for the country from participating in the project. Currently, the Sino-Polish relations are marked by expectation gap related to investment and trade deficit, and conceptual indistinctness emerging around potential attribution to different realms of cooperation, i.e., BRI, 16 + 1 or bilateral level. Diagnosing Polish perspective on BRI implies a closer analysis of the 16 + 1 Cooperation Platform, as these two regional projects are significantly intertwined. Poland’s interest in the BRI as a global initiative seems to be marginalized by the local perspective focusing on possible benefits for Poland. Public opinion gives far less...
attention to BRI’s influences in Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Africa. Poland wishes to be seen as a strategic location on the BRI map. Optimism in Sino-Polish relations has reached peak during president’s Xi Jinping visit to Poland in the end of June 2016 and turned into skepticism in January 2017, right after previous Polish Minister of National Defense Antoni Macierewicz decided to block the sale of a parcel for a logistic hub that meant to be part of BRI.

Experts from various institutional backgrounds would certainly agree that BRI is an ambiguous heterogeneous project, and at the same time a very broad term, which contains multiple ideas on development of infrastructure, trade, economic, and political cooperation as well as people-to-people exchange. This idea is shared by Polish, European and Chinese scholars. Moreover, the project is marked by different perspectives on values and culture, which are represented by countries from all around the world. With continued diplomatic efforts, evolution of BRI and elaborating a new set of global values China is aiming at building a community of shared future for mankind. As a matter of fact, BRI can be compared to an umbrella under which various concepts can be put together under one name. Such conditions offer a possibility to assign certain projects arbitrarily to BRI without legal procedures or acknowledged program. The central actor of this initiative is China, integrating both knowledge, as well as funds, in order to advance this development vision.

Actually, lack of appointed procedures, as well as the ambiguity of the project, tends to evoke multiple optimistic, skeptical, and pessimistic scenarios around the world, and Poland is not an exception. Chinese president Xi Jinping announced the New Silk Road during his visit to Astana in 2013 and the message given to the world became very influential. As a consequence, the narration about China changed in an irreversible manner. Many countries in Central Asia, Africa, as well as Central Eastern Europe, saw this new initiative as a possible chance for development, and as a potential capital injection source that could boost regional and sub-regional infrastructure investments. Policymakers in Warsaw saw Poland as one of the potentially strategic parts of BRI, as in their opinion the railway routes from China to Western Europe are the most convenient, when they cross through North European Plain. The previous Minister of Finance and current Prime Minister of Poland Mateusz Morawiecki in relation to railway connectivity that the geographical position of Poland enhances Polish position in the BRI. Krzysztof Senger, a member of board at Polish Investment and Trade Agency, stated that China perceives Poland as part of one of the biggest infrastructural and strategic geopolitical projects in the 21st century.

However, many more countries perceive themselves as the irreplaceable and most necessary part of the BRI (i.e., Turkey), and as a crucial bridge between Europe and Asia. Beijing launched not only special funds related to financing infrastructural programs, but also created dozens of think tank platforms that aim at strengthening

1 Kaczmarski, “Nowy Jedwabny Szlak,” 6.
2 Mayer, Rethinking the Silk Road, 7.
3 Liu, Europe and the Belt, 44.
4 Szczudlik, “Trzy lata Jedwabnego Szlaku,” 1–2.
5 Zhao, “In Pursuit of a Community of Shared Future,” 24–32.
6 See note 4 above.
7 Forsal.Pl, “Bajeczne perspektywy przed Polską?”.
8 Polskie Radio, “Chińscy Inwestorzy omijają Polskę.”
the communication of policies, and the development of strategies between China and the world. Beijing is sensu stricto the organizational cohesive force and the center for decision-making processes, however, it is not always transparent on which level Chinese government strives to develop relations with partner countries: bilateral, regional, or multilateral. There are no explicit divisions, primary because, as mentioned above, BRI is a dynamic and debatable project.

Arguments and conclusions presented in this article are based on various sources. The most important source is personal experiences, which could be in ethnometric term described as participating observation. These observations were carried out in various seminars and conferences organized in Kazakhstan, CEEC, and China. The other source is analysis of articles, reports, radio podcasts, as well as television interviews, which offer a valuable insight into the discourse. The third source constitutes of books, articles, and policy recommendations that have been published relating to BRI, 16 + 1 and Polish perspective on these initiatives.

2 Sino-Polish relations: conceptual ambiguities

One could appoint four main levels on which relations between Beijing and Warsaw are shaped: (i) bilateral level, (ii) ties developed in the realm of 16 + 1 cooperation mechanism, (iii) connection established between China and Poland as a member of the European Union, and (iv) relations developed through the BRI format. All four levels are not equal in significance, but they seem to overlap each other:

“As already mentioned above, since the inauguration of the BRI, the discourse on the project has somehow blended with the discourse on the 16 + 1 and the general Sino-CEE cooperation per se. Conceptual fuzziness of the BRI enables the Chinese actors. Both politicians and investors, to present any type of Chinese engagement in the region as a part of the BRI success stories.”

It is fully disputable which one is most meaningful and decisive for Warsaw and which one for Beijing. Moreover, we could add another level, namely (v) Polish membership in the Visegrad Group, which in brief words can be described as a cultural and political alliance of four Central European Countries: Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland. It is worth mentioning that Japan is working toward strengthening Japan-V4 cooperation and emphasizing the importance of a united Europe.

Third party countries are predominantly not addressing Warsaw through 16 + 1, but following traditional communication channels, i.e., EU or V4.

Taking into consideration that Poland signed a joint statement on the establishment of a comprehensive, strategic partnership with China in June 2016, one can claim that bilateral level is the most influential type of relation between Warsaw and Beijing. In

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9The author participated in the following conferences/symposia: 1) “European and Asian Perspectives on China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” 24–26 April 2018, Nazarbayev University, Astana Kazakhstan, 2) „16 + 1 Cooperation and China-EU Relations,” 11 July, 2018, China-CEE Institute in Budapest, Hungary, and 3) the Fourth High-Level Think Tanks Symposium of China and Central Eastern European Countries “China-CEEC Cooperation: Prospects for the Next Five Years,” 18–19 December, 2018, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing.

10Bachulska, “China, Poland, and the Belt and Road Initiative.”

11Relations between Japan and V4 were presented and analyzed during a meeting held at the Japanese Culture and Information Centre by Mr. Toshihide Ando, Deputy Director-General for Press and Public Diplomacy from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, during the visit of Minister Taro Kono to Warsaw on the 6th of July 2018.
recent years, Polish government actively participated in Chinese forums and summits, also focusing attention on state-level visits. A new Consulate General in Chengdu was founded in 2015 and a new post of Representative of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development was established at the Polish Embassy in Beijing at roughly the same time. Moreover, in the beginning of November 2018 Polish harbor “Port Gdańsk” decided to open its office in Shanghai. Generally speaking, the Sino-Polish relations are at their highest point since the fall of communism in Poland.

Another sphere of building connections is the 16 + 1 Cooperation Framework, which in fact is a sub-regional cooperation mechanism. It was proposed by former Chinese president Hu Jintao in Warsaw and includes 11 EU members (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria), as well as 5 non-EU countries (Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Macedonia, Serbia) and its mastermind – China. The 16 CEECs have a different history, tradition, religion, language and interests, and it does not seem convincing why they were placed into one basket. One of the proposed answers is the common communist history: “The decades-long shared communist past and the subsequent divergence left a deep imprint on both China’s and CEE’s trajectories, but also on their mutual relationship.”

This particular platform of cooperation was unexpected and problematic also from another perspective, namely, bringing together EU and non-EU countries is a challenge because of substantial institutional differences. The EU regulations do not allow certain kind of actions when it comes to tax and investment regulations, and in the future 16 + 1 cooperation could cause tensions between the old and new EU member states, as well as the aspiring five. Moreover, some projects are simultaneously attributed to 16 + 1 and BRI, which brings along consternation for CEEC policymakers.

When it comes to Poland as part of BRI, it can probably be described as the weakest level of relations from the political standpoint, however very likely to be turned into a media headline story:

“When it comes to Poland, the media hype surrounding Sino-Polish cooperation has created a false perception of the extent and nature of the existing relations between the two states. Yet again, despite numerous high-level meetings and arrangements signed, the real impact on political cooperation between Warsaw and Beijing has a minimal effect on the Polish economy.”

Although former Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydło was very active in building relations with China and joined Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in May 2017, it seems that Warsaw mainly speculates on Chinese intentions and plans. Poland looks for projects that could potentially be implemented and conducted within the realm of BRI. In fact, Poland is quite interested in reviving the so-called Three Seas Initiative (3SI), which could potentially comply with Chinese regional BRI plans for development. The Three Seas Initiatives connects 12 member states (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia)

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12 Szczudlik-Tatar, “Poland – China Strategic Partnership,” 1.
13 Vangeli, “Global China and Symbolic Power,” 10.
14 See note 10 above.
and it is also known as the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Sea Initiative (BABS). However, this idea has also found its amateurs not only in Beijing, but also in Washington:

“The interest in cooperation with the 3SI countries was expressed by the representative of China present at the forum, Assistant Foreign Minister Liu Haixing, who talked about the interconnectedness of the initiative with the New Silk Road. Presence to the forum of Minister Haixing, as well as representatives of two other important global economic and political actors – US (represented by former US National Security Advisor, General James L. Jones, Jr.) and Turkey (represented by Deputy Foreign Minister, Ambassador Ahmet Yıldız), gave the meeting in Dubrovnik supra-regional and even global character.”

The conceptual ambiguity implies that certain projects are simultaneously perceived as part of 16 + 1 and BRI. The terminological obscurity has not been overlooked by Chinese scholars. During a think tank conference “16 + 1 Cooperation and China-EU relationship” organized by China-CEE Institute in Budapest (on the 11th July 2018), its director Chen Xin made several important points, which should not be ignored as Chen is a high ranked professor in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing. The following points were noted during Chen’s closing remarks speech in Budapest:

(i) He highlighted that the 16 + 1 Cooperation Framework is not an institutionalized organization, meaning that it does not have ambitions to build a union, which would be smaller but functionally similar to European Union.

(ii) Moreover, he added that the framework should not be perceived as an aid institution or a new kind of International Monetary Fund – afterwards, in his speech he strengthened the point by saying that 16 + 1 is not pretending to “play a role of Santa Claus, who is giving presents for free”.

(iii) His third significant statement referred to some experts’ assumptions16 that 16 + 1 could be perceived as a geopolitical project or an initiative that strives at building competition in the region. On the contrary, 16 + 1 is basically a platform which is, first above all, organized around countries with common interests, where top ranked officials and heads of state can meet and exchange their viewpoints and experiences. It would be impossible for Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang to meet each year with heads of CEEC one by one, hence the multilateral platform was necessary.

(iv) Chen added that the platform is designed mostly for people-to-people exchange, and far less about investment and trade. Moreover, he added that presumably, it can be treated as a complementary format to BRI.

3 Institutional frameworks and visions of cooperation

Poland participates in new Chinese institutions founded in connection to the new diplomacy shaped by Beijing. As a matter of fact, Poland became a founding member of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), although up to date there are no infrastructural, energy or development projects conducted with the engagement of Polish companies. Currently, the organizations within sub-regional format of 16 + 1 can potentially be complementary with the further development of the macro-initiative BRI, which will be elaborated on in the following parts of the article. Actually, both BRI

15New Strategy Center and OSW, “The Emergence of a European Project.”

16See, for example, Brown, “China’s Geopolitical Aims.”
and 16 + 1 Cooperation Platform could possibly be interpreted as politically symbolic, but less influential when it comes to practical aspects.¹⁷

However, contrary to Chen Xin words, the 16 + 1 initiative aimed at constructing new institutions in the past. Moreover, it can be assumed that China had serious organizational ambitions toward the regional development of CEEC, also through synchronizing it with the BRI. At present the existing organizations belonging to 16 + 1 are scattered across CEE and their working patterns, as well as decision making processes are not very plausible for think tank expertise. For example, the 16 + 1 Union of Governors is located in the Czech Republic, the 16 + 1 Agency for the Promotion of Tourism and Association of Enterprises is situated in Hungary, the 16 + 1 Contact Mechanism for Promotion of Investment is in Poland, and the 16 + 1 Logistics Coordination Centre is in Latvia.¹⁸ The names standing behind these organizations are also quite ambiguous, some of them are named secretariats, others offices or agencies. Chinese think tanks have been researching possible synergy mechanisms between these two initiatives by inviting CEEC scholars to participate in workshops and seminars. The outcome of a seminar “International Conference on Developing the Synergy Between the Belt and Road Initiative and 16 + 1 Cooperation” fetched by Shanghai Institutes for International Studies on the 15th September 2016 was fully dedicated to this synchronization challenge. In the end participants named a couple of mutual projects: Pan-X Corridor from Greek Pireus to northern Europe, transcontinental railway routes from Beijing through Russia, Belarus to Poland, etc. On a sub-regional level, CEEC could build necessary infrastructure for successful future e-commerce.

At first, there was a lively concept in the Polish experts’ milieu, that Poland as the biggest player in CEEC could presumably lead the other 15 countries in their contacts with China, also when it comes to the engagement in the BRI. However, this plan was somehow left behind, what can be explained in several ways. The first hypothesis states that Polish policymakers felt that Poland was a country of sufficient size and importance to shape relations with Beijing bilaterally. This idea is shared among others by Mao Yinhui and Liu Zuokui:

“Both Liu and Mao believe these factors may lead Poland to forge closer relations with China. Both experts outline the motivations behind Poland’s active policy towards China. They argue that Poland as a big country seeks closer cooperation with another big country – China. Better relations with China may upgrade Poland’s position in the EU and globally.”¹⁹

The second idea mentioned that US decision-makers were not content with the growing Chinese influences in the region. This hypothesis is also appearing in the article of Justyna Szczudlik, who is referring to Liu Zuokui’s observations:

“Although relations are flourishing, Chinese experts raise several challenges. Liu Zuokui lists three of them. The first includes barriers erected by the US and the domestic opposition. He calls this approach Poland’s ‘twofold policy towards China’ (波兰对华政策存在两面性, bolan duihua zhengce cunzai liangmianxing). This means that the Polish government on the one hand strives for close relations with China but at the same time needs to deal with constraints from the US and domestic opposition to closer ties with China”.²⁰

¹⁷Vangeli, “Global China and Symbolic Power”.
¹⁸Huang and Liu, The Cooperation between China and Central & Eastern European Countries, 4–5.
¹⁹Szczudlik, “When the Silk Road Meets the EU,” 11.
²⁰Ibid., 11.
The third story was built around the presumption that all 16 countries are competing so hard for Chinese favors and money, that they could not organize themselves around strategic regional projects:

“To start with, the 16 + 1 forum was solely Chinese idea from the beginning. 16 + 1 is very comfortable for Beijing, since the Chinese PM is able to meet simultaneously with his sixteen CEE counterparts from relatively small countries, which compete for Chinese money and favour much needed in times of deep crisis back in 2012”.21

It would be highly unlikely to avoid bias and subjectivity, which would prioritize interests of the initiatives in a manner that benefits biggest players, thereby hampering projects welcomed in the smaller member states. As a matter of fact, as long as Poland and neighboring countries will not create a common standpoint toward Beijing, the benefits of cooperation for Poland may be hardly achievable.

The enthusiasm toward China’s rapid and successful development is often crushed by lack of definite and concrete plans from the Chinese side, what arouses an expectations-fulfillment gap in the CEE region. Declarations should result in their successful implementation. Although common guidelines for cooperation between these 17 states are published each year during heads of state visits, there is still lack of concrete successes of teamwork. The spiritus movens of the initiative is China. In fact, CEE countries lack common perspective and plans, what results in lack of effective projects between states. Another problem is that there are not so many products from CEE countries that can be competitive on the Chinese market. The influence of global transnational companies makes it very difficult for Polish small and middle-size enterprises (SMEs) to compete on the international level.

The eyes of 15 countries are directed toward Western Balkans, where China is more active, mainly because of easier regulations for investments and loan screening mechanisms. Plamen Tonchev writing for European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) gave couple of examples:

“In other cases, Chinese-funded infrastructure projects have become marred by controversy. For instance, there is wide-spread suspicion that Sinohydro, the Chinese infrastructure giant, was awarded the contract to construct two highways in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia through a tender which violated standard bidding procedures and allegedly granted the company certain (legally dubious) privileges.”22

Moreover, Brussels tends to emphasize that the 16 + 1 platform undermines the EU unity by rule and divide tactics, mainly by combing together EU and non-EU states into one group.23 Secondly, it is argued that Chinese investments projects fail to meet EU environmental and social standards, as well as they are not in compliance with EU procurement law. Another issue most important from the Polish perspective is the fact that Germany is particularly suspicious of 16 + 1.24

In terms of legal regulations polish policymakers are obliged to follow European Union’s directives. However, it seems that the currently ruling Law and Justice party is

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21Tuszyński, “Polish Perspective on CEE-China Cooperation,” 198.
22Tonchev, “China’s Road,” 4.
23“See note 21 above.
24Germany is an important trading partner to Poland, as it accounts roughly ¼ of both Polish imports and exports. Also, strict integration of value chains makes both economies complementary.
not acting in compliance with European values and standards. One of the main bones of contention is the affair around Polish Supreme Court, as well as around Constitutional Court. As a matter of fact, it seems that the current government is not concerned about acting on the limit, or even crossing the boundaries of EU law. Disagreeing with migrant and refugee policy, as well as views on abortion and homosexual marriages, Warsaw, as well as in some cases Budapest, stay more independent and rebellious toward Brussel. However, in the end Poland is still a part of the European Union and Brussel’s influence is significant. What hinders efficient and consensual policy establishment between EU countries is the impossibility to build a common foreign policy toward Beijing. Inability to formulate common goals, in which CEEC would not feel marginalized, certainly weakens European Union’s position. Not to mention Budapest opposition toward joint EU countries statement in the South China Sea. In the end, Warsaw shapes its policy towards Beijing as a member of the European Union, often following Western countries’ policy recommendations. On the other hand, Poland is not blind toward internal problems and inequalities within EU, as well as Germany’s regional supremacy and very successful economic diplomacy in China, in which many European countries do not participate. Since a large fraction of Polish public opinion and medially exposed experts perceives Poland as a supplier of basic products to German economy which takes a lion’s share of benefits from the above situation, this setting is often considered unfair in Warsaw.

In conclusion, countries are competing among themselves for Chinese attention and Chinese investments, and Poland is not an exception from that rule. However, if we look at recent years, the biggest beneficiaries of Chinese investments were Western European countries like Great Britain, Germany, and Italy, with CEEC still playing a minor role as a receiver of Chinese direct investment. Shaping policy toward BRI by Polish policymakers seems to fall mostly under the umbrella of bilateral relations or 16 + 1.

4 Poland’s perspective on BRI: an attempt of discourse analysis

Firstly, it is important to highlight that there is no commonly shared perspective in Poland on BRI, neither in the Polish government nor in the Polish society. For example, there is no clear standpoint on BRI by the left-wing, right-wing or central parties on the political scene. Some political groups in Poland understand BRI as a soft-power tool, as it easily relates itself to prosperous historical episode in ancient times and the middle ages. As it can be observed during international forums and summits, this historical connotation is becoming a popularly used idea giving room for international cooperation and promising win-win business relationships between China (other Asian countries are also included), Africa, and Europe.

Generally, it seems that the currently ruling Law and Justice Party (since 2015) is trying to find a place for Poland in the Chinese initiative:

“These concerns were assuaged by the new Polish government’s first year in office, which saw intensive political dialogue in the form of President Andrzej Duda’s visit to China in November 2015, President Xi Jinping’s visit to Poland the following June, and the

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25 Jóźwik, “Rola Chin w polityce zagranicznej Węgier,” 1.
26 Popławski, “The Role of Central Europe in the German Economy,” 49.
elevation of ties to the level of ‘comprehensive strategic partnership’. Both Liu and Mao argue that the Polish government has pursued a more active policy towards China (对中国的态度显得更为积极, dui zhongguo de taidu xiande geng wei jiji) and that Sino-Polish relations have entered into a new era (中波关系步入了新的时代, zhongbo guanxi rujinle xinde shidai) or level of cooperation (中波合作迈向新的台阶, zhongbo hezuo maixiang xinde tajie). This positive assessment relates not only to Poland’s China policy as such.

Experts argue that ongoing changes in Poland’s diplomatic agenda as well as crises in the European Union and the neighbourhood mean there is potential for China to take a bigger role in its bilateral relations with Poland.27

As a matter of fact, Poland joined Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank as the first country from Central Eastern Europe (is a founding member of the institution) and Polish prime minister Beata Szydło visited BRI Forum in May 2017. Polish president as well as prime minister regularly take part in 16 + 1 summits. However, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki did not personally attend the summit in Sofia (2018), and Deputy Prime Minister Jarosław Gowin was delegated to meet Li Keqiang.

On the other hand, former Minister of National Defense Mr. Antoni Macierewicz publicly announced his views on potential danger that BRI might cause. He stated that BRI could influence the safety of independent Poland. The opinion of Mr. Macierewicz was strongly criticized by many groups in Poland and in effect blocked the sale of ground in Łódź, where a logistic center was to be built.28

However, to many sides of the conflict and to the public opinion this story is not transparent, as it was reported in the beginning of 2017 by the internet edition of the Polish newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza, which represents the left-wing viewpoint and generally criticizes Law and Justice Party.29 It should also be mentioned that Gazeta Wyborcza is regarded by the ruling Law and Justice party as a political opposition. The effects of this article were quite visible as Chinese parties felt disappointed with possible development of Łódź as a logistic center for Chinese products.30 Moreover, some groups of right-wing Poles, who strongly supported Mr. Macierewicz, also started perceiving BRI and China as a potential danger. On the other hand, a couple of months later, namely in May 2017 the former prime minister of Poland Ms. Beata Szydło traveled to Beijing to take part in the Belt and Road forum. Ms. Szydło also actively took part in the 16 + 1 summit in Riga in 2016, as well as in Budapest in November 2017. These events clearly proved that even within ruling party statements and opinions on BRI and can be very different.

Within last year’s BRI became a common topic to be discussed in media, at the universities and on the governmental level. Frequently, discussions contain one main question: should we perceive the Belt and Road Initiative as a danger or opportunity? Various panels on BRI were organized at University of Warsaw,31 Polish Institute of International Affairs and in the framework of European Economic Congress in Katowice,32 just to name a few examples. Most of them included this important

27 Szczudlik, “When the Silk Road Meets the EU,” 10.
28 Jakóbik, “Macierewicz wpisuje Polskę z Nowego Jedwabnego Szlaku.”
29 Frąk, „Drugi „sukces” Macierewicza. Chińczycy odchodzą z Łodzi.”
30 Piwowarczyk, “Macierewicz blokuje Jedwabny Szlak w Polsce.”
31 A workshop titled “The Role of Poland in the Belt and Road Initiative” was held at Warsaw University on February 27, 2018.
32 Session titled “The New Silk Road – Today and Tomorrow” at X European Economic Congress, May 14–16, 2018.
question, which proves that security concerns regarding the impact of Chinese economic and policy influences are very lively. Most of these concerns are just on a speculative level and are connected to wider reflections on current geopolitical situation. There are couple of images associated to China regarding BRI in the society.

The first image is connected to the vision of China as a Santa Claus that is going to give presents to countries engaged in the Belt and Road (same concept was demystified by Chen Xin during the conference in Budapest regarding 16 + 1 cooperation). This opinion is strongly rooted, and connected with once popularized view that Poland is the key element for BRI, as the country is located in the center of Europe and it is the shortest way from China to Germany (one could add: shortest does not mean the easiest). According to this assumption Poland is necessary and irreplaceable, and Warsaw should bargain for best conditions of trade with Beijing. Łódź was also unofficially depicted as a center of trade between China and Western Europe (e.g., on an economic portal WNP: wnp.pl, September 21, 2017).

On a margin, it should be highlighted that there are dozens of maps on the internet showing different land and sea routes. Actually, the map depends on the country. For Poland, the most popular maps of BRI circulating in the internet were ones indicating Łódź, as if it was the most important part of the Chinese initiative (see Map 1).

![Map 1](source: Witkowski, Nowy Jedwabny Szlak, 344. and Kaczmarski, Nowy Jedwabny Szlak: uniwersalne, 9).

Clearly, Polish right-wing milieu perceived it as a chance for the economy, as well as for improving Polish geopolitical situation.

The second image is connected to a quite pessimistic outlook. Some experts argued that China will only try to offer loans to countries participating in BRI, and by using money from the loans will bring Chinese companies to construct transport and energetic infrastructure. Moreover, in this pessimistic perspective it was argued that China aims at building its sphere of influence not only on the economic level, but also on the political level. Although widely speaking Beijing does not support policy of interrupting in domestic affairs of other states, in the future it could influence certain decisions through well-established lobby groups.
Other arguments are related to the difficulties in accessing Chinese markets, which are quite closed to many sectors coming from the West. Polish companies, as well as most enterprises coming from Central Eastern Europe, are SMEs, which makes it very difficult for them to be competitive on the Chinese market. As a matter of fact, many experts claim that the relations between China and Poland are too asymmetrical. Since years Polish government and institutions supporting Polish businesses are carrying out campaigns addressed to entrepreneurs in Poland. The aim is to increase exports to China. Despite all the efforts within last years, bridging the gap in the trade balance seems to be impossible.

Actually, nearly the whole world (maybe apart from Zimbabwe) is facing huge deficit in trade with China. Within recent years the imports-exports imbalance remained extreme – Polish exports to China were equal to as little as around 10% of Chinese exports to Poland. Although programs like “Go China” (gochina.gov.pl) are being established and hundreds of Chinese delegations were hosted by Poland, the trade deficit is only growing. This particular phenomenon is regarded by many parties as an obstacle in developing relations further, as it may seem that the biggest beneficiary of the new project with Eurasia will be Beijing.
The third image might be the most accurate as it is related to balanced perspective on relations with China. It is a way of thinking connected to a view that contemporary China is a challenge for the whole world, as Beijing is in a phase of opening up and giving a proposal to the global community. Therefore, both China and BRI can be seen as a challenge, because they require an adequate reaction as well as an establishment of certain attitude and opinion. The third image means that:

(i) Poland needs to find a place in this new situation, meaning that policymakers must address decreasing influence of US in many places around the world, i.e., in the Pacific region.
(ii) Poland should not neglect the opportunities that can be found on the Chinese market. In this quite complex view Poland sees China as a potential source of capital. Policymakers strive to attract greenfield investments, but at the same time they are critical about acquisitions of national companies.
(iii) Possibility of gaining access to Chinese market seems an important bargaining card, however no barriers for Polish products were effectively lifted since the announcement of BRI.

One of the most important challenges is the phenomenon that what China needs from Poland is not necessarily the same as what Poland expects from China (greenfield investments):

“For Beijing, more important than increasing Chinese FDI in Poland is winning public tenders in infrastructure projects. The Polish authorities express hope for Chinese investments in greenfield projects that would create new jobs and require technology transfer. But, on the other hand, Polish government agencies organize cooperation forums inviting Chinese construction companies, infrastructure developers and equipment suppliers interested in operating as contractors rather than direct investors. Chinese companies were also officially invited by Polish leaders to cooperate in infrastructural projects.”

With the announcement of BRI enthusiasm steadily rose and promises of boosting economy through Chinese investment appeared. In fact, what Polish government sees as an attractive product to be exported to China, does not seem to be that attractive for Beijing. During president Xi Jinping’s visit to Warsaw in 2016 the media message was related to Poland exporting apples to China. Polish and Chinese president ate polish apples posing to pictures. In the 21st century offering Chinese officials apples as a key plan to minimize trade deficit seems to be inadequate, however symbolically a nice gesture.

The Polish issue is that there is no comprehensive strategy toward what products could be really attractive on the Chinese market. Farm products could potentially be a great idea if transported in huge amounts, but Polish producers cannot unite to build one proposal to Chinese counterparts. Moreover, Chinese market is not opened enough for products coming from CEE and the barriers to entry are very high. As a matter of fact, Poland still exports to China mostly copper, as well as machines and chemical products.

Sarek, „Chinese FDI in Poland: Still just wishful thinking.”

Ministry of Economy in Poland https://www.gochina.gov.pl/index/?id=b53b3a3d6ab90ce0268229151c9bde11.
5 Challenges and asymmetries

A closer look dedicated to comparing the level of declarations and facts reveal certain paradoxes. Firstly, one of the flagship projects in Sino-Polish relations is the railway connection between polish city Łódź and the capital of the Sichuan province – Chengdu. However, there are also other smaller, but still important centers – like intermodal terminals close to Poznań (i.e., CLIP or Gdańsk), where among others ZIH Corp containers arrive, and are later transported further to Western Europe. It is crucial to introduce the issue of interconnectivity, meaning railway connections, to this article, as in Poland the development of BRI is mostly associated with new trade routes from China to Europe.

The biggest challenge with building the narration around the railway connections is that in Poland it is shown as the key element of Belt and Road. As a report by Polish think tank The Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) reveals, train transport still predominantly relies on financial help from China. It is debatable if the trains leave Poland toward China empty or half-empty. The problem is the trade deficit gap, as well as uneasy access to the Chinese market for Polish business. Moreover, railway is still much more expensive than maritime transport. Sea transport seems to be much more lucrative, as a single ship can be loaded with dozens of train-containers. The obvious advantage of railway is of course the transportation time – it is much faster to send cargo by rail than on the ship. Some experts claim that one day, railway connections might be more profitable, because of the development of e-commerce. For individual clients buying clothes or other gifts from AliExpress, time might be the key factor. In this scenario transporting by railway might be much more successful. On the other side, it must work both ways, so Chinese clients would also need to find European products attractive and less tax toward luxurious items could support exports to China.

Although Chinese idea of BRI seems to be founded on equal premises and China seeks for a balance and harmonic development connected to win-win relations, for many experts it is clear that certain asymmetries and imbalances cannot be omitted. There is an asymmetry of unequal competencies, which refers to the political system of both countries as the government in China has much more competencies at its disposal compared to the Polish government. For the Polish side, it might be difficult to agree upon long-term strategies, as the government is deeply dependent on elections that can bring to power parties with different ideas. This asymmetry is directly related to the asymmetry of time. In China, actions are planned for at least a decade, whereas in Poland they are often planned to the next election – main activities of the parties are concentrated on maintaining power. The main concern is not only that China thinks and plans decades ahead and Poland thinks mostly months ahead but that these two standpoints are brought together and need to build a common strategy.

Another important phenomenon is the asymmetry of expectancies that could be overcome by developing communication platforms between scientists, artists, academicians, and journalists. This is very crucial in terms of avoiding misunderstandings.

35This information is based on interviews carried by the author with representatives from logistics terminal in Gdańsk.
36Jakóbkowski et al., “Kolejowy Jedwabny Szlak,” 1–100.
37Jakóbkowski et al., “Kolejowy Jedwabny Szlak,” 97.
38Pendrakowska, „A Balancing Act: the 16 + 1 Cooperation Framework“.
and building a coherent image of Poland and China’s expectations. Polish policymakers tend to concentrate on short-term goals, whereas Chinese political system allows more time to achieve a bigger success.

The asymmetry of political culture includes the way China and Poland relate to the media. In other words, it relates to the knowledge and style of communications. For China, it is crucial to send press releases representing official standpoint. The media culture in Poland is different and pluralism of opinion in the media is crucial. Trade asymmetry was mentioned in this article earlier. However, the consequences of imbalance in import and export between the two countries should be deeply researched and further analyzed. The only way this disparity can be resolved is that Poland will concentrate on developing strategic technologies and producing innovative devices. Unfortunately, sending dairy products, fruits vegetables and meat along the BRI will not be able to influence trade imbalance in any significant way.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, Poland’s perspective on BRI is not one-sided and there are couple of features shaping this vision. First, Poland wishes to be seen as a strategic location on the BRI map. Warsaw perceives this initiative as a possible chance for development. Moreover, China is seen as a potential capital injection source that could boost regional and sub-regional infrastructure investments. The impending decrease in EU funds encourages Warsaw to gain new economic partners in Asia. As a matter of fact, Poland observes the Far East more closely looking not only for new export opportunities other than European markets, but also searching for potential sources of capital for further infrastructural development.

It is possible to extract three main episodes within past 5 years. First episode would start with announcement of BRI and the rising interest toward this initiative. The second episode would begin with the signing of the strategic comprehensive partnership in June 2016 that symbolically brought Sino-Polish relations to a higher level. That is when the most enthusiastic attitudes toward BRI were developed, also in connection with the Polish participation in AIIB. Another important benchmark is the ambiguous story connected to the decision of the former Minister of National Defense to block the sale of the parcel that would later be used for the development of logistic terminal. Since then the atmosphere is quite skeptical. Optimistic interpretations and pessimistic visions of the so-called China threat are intertwining.

Nevertheless, intensive bilateral high-level visits in recent years are a proof of Polish policymakers becoming more cautious about China’s development. Poland, having comprehensive strategic partnership with China, is politically participating in the initiatives led by Beijing. During past years the expectation fulfillment gap appeared, as Poland and other Central Eastern European countries economic ambitions were not fulfilled. Lack of appointed procedures, as well as the ambiguity of the project, evoked another wave of optimistic, skeptical, and pessimistic scenarios. For example, the dream of becoming an international logistic hub for BRI is suppressed by the fact that the current railway routes still need to be heavily subsidized by Chinese counterparts.39

39 Jakókowski et al., “Kolejowy Jedwabny Szlak,” 100.
Many trains crossing Poland are fully packed when they come to Europe, but half-empty or empty when they go back to China.\textsuperscript{40}

To sum up, the discussion on Chinese initiatives and plans is quite diversified on the Polish scene. One of the most positive comments that appeared up to date is the article mentioning insights of Marcin Jaskuła: "Poland, as the largest country in the region, needs to do everything in its power to be at the center of the BRI to utilize its excellent geostrategic location as well as economical potential".\textsuperscript{41} Other researchers such as Jakub Jakóbowski from Centre of Eastern Studies (OSW) or Justyna Szczudlik from Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) present a rather more balanced view on Chinese initiatives. To conclude, as BRI is not an institutionalized initiative, it is difficult to assess what implications for the region it might bring in the longer perspective. As a result, it is relatively difficult to elaborate a common strategy on a national level toward a project, which is not fully developed yet. Lack of information on many issues related to BRI leave the floor to various scenarios and visions.

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