



## Strategic Compass for Poland and the EU: How to Manage the Complexity of Sino-American Rivalry and Russian Aggression Against Ukraine

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**S**ince the end of the Cold War, Poland has made conscious efforts to tie its political future, military security, and economic prosperity to Western institutions—primarily the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). These strategic choices paid off handsomely as the post-communist Poland gained both the security umbrella of the United States and NATO but also progressed economically with its membership in the EU.

With the downfall of the former Soviet Union, Poland has increasingly become a crucial partner for NATO and the EU. This alliance has increasingly been a momentous strategic

value to all these partners in dealing with Moscow. Indeed, Poland is at the forefront of this geopolitical calculus, especially when Russia moves its military assets near the Ukraine border for possible invasion. Russia also complicates the Polish-Belarus border issue with the immigrant crisis as Moscow supports Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko's regime as a proxy to threaten Poland and the EU. Furthermore, Russian President Vladimir Putin also undercuts the stability of Baltic States. The centrality of Poland has now become even more important in the context of emerging China-Russia cooperation, particularly when Beijing has economically been engaged with Warsaw.

Additionally, when Beijing seeks greater cooperation with Moscow in the context of the increased Sino-American geopolitical and geo-economic rivalry, the importance of Poland to the United States cannot simply be overlooked. It is true that Poland has its geostrategic proximity to Russia and growing geo-economic linkages with China; however, the evolved geopolitical alliance between Washington and Warsaw is thriving despite its challenges. Yet, Poland has historically been either underestimated or forgotten. In the first US presidential debate in 2004, for example, then President George W. Bush famously said, "you forgot Poland," when he responded to his opponent John Kerry, who questioned about the president's ability to assemble more partners for the American-led Iraq War.

For the Polish people, however, President Bush's expression became a popular but unfortunate catchphrase to ridicule the importance of Poland to the United States and its war efforts in the Middle East. With the Russian aggressive policy towards Central and Eastern Europe, the time has come to think seriously about Poland as the potential regional powerbroker in the evolving Sino-American competition that has also been affecting the entire European security.

## **Poland at a Crossroads**

Within the broader context of continuing democratic challenges facing the Warsaw government and the shifting regional and global geopolitical dynamics, it is abundantly clear that Poland finds itself again at a more complex crossroads. Poland must immediately deal with several fronts simultaneously: *First*, Warsaw continues to dispute with the EU over Poland's rule of law and democratic backsliding. *Second*, the migrant

crisis on the Polish–Belarussian border adds to the growing complexity of regional security environment. *Third*, the disruptive behavior of President Putin on the NATO’s eastern flank is seemingly encouraged by the lack of US direct military commitment to prevent an imminent Russian invasion.

Moreover, Warsaw was not obviously happy about the recent Biden–Putin virtual summit, especially when the US president failed to mention Poland or any other NATO eastern flank states. Instead, after the summit, the Biden White House offered a meeting with Russia and select NATO members to hear Moscow’s concerns. Although the White House later consulted with the Bucharest 9 Initiative—a group of the eastern flank NATO allies—to underscore the US commitment to transatlantic security, Poland is still concerned that the key discussions about the region’s security architecture happened without the direct involvement of Central and Eastern European states. This goes back to the sentiment of forgotten or undervalued Poland, which is naturally a cause for historic concern among the Polish people and policymakers.

As the “you forgot Poland” catchphrase remains in the minds of Polish electorate, one may wonder whether Warsaw will maintain its pro-Western foreign policy. The European powers are still deliberating on their positions in the context of the US-China rivalry. In the meantime, the Russia challenge to European security and the US credibility must find solutions through Poland. The history of World War I and World War II reminds us that Poland had been an indispensable nation in the calculus of war and peace. Polish and Western policymakers are now faced with yet another defining moment for their political legitimacy and regional stability for the decades to come. In all this how could China’s rise affect European security and American credibility?

This is a genuinely important question, which goes beyond the American logic of great power competition. The related strategic issues have thus far not even been seriously debated by the European powers. Surely in Central Europe, there has been little discussion about the nature of Chinese power—including the threats and opportunities associated with Beijing’s increasing economic interests in Europe—through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Paradoxically, however, China has shown a greater interest in Poland as one of the first countries to sign up with the BRI in 2015. Bordering seven countries—including the Czech Republic, Germany, Lithuania, and Russia—Poland is a strategic portal linking EU markets in air, land, and maritime transportation. After Germany, Poland's second largest importer is China. Along with the telecom giant Huawei, the Bank of China, and the Industrial and Commercial Bank, over 800 companies with Chinese capital operate in Poland.

This striking discrepancy in Chinese economic power and its potential in Poland is often overlooked by European and American policymakers.

## The American Eclipse

As the United States gradually began to shift its strategic interests toward the Asia-Pacific region, Europe has become a secondary theater in American grand strategy. Policymakers in Washington assumed that "Europe's key powers and institutions support US interests when it comes to competition with Beijing." Since the Trump administration, the United States has solidified its views of key international challenges through the prism of "strategic competition" with China, especially in the fields of trade, investment, and technology. Thus, Washington has since maintained that the available choices for its transatlantic allies are nothing but to take side with the United States to keep the balance of power. Instead, the European allies have increasingly been engaged with China to benefit both in economic and technological domains. In retrospect, not only Poland but also other European states have gradually realized that their choices would soon have challenges for transatlantic relations with the United States. In return, the US provided a security umbrella and supported Poland's transition into a free market economy and Western-style liberal democracy. In the process, the asymmetric American-Polish partnership has encountered a number of challenges. Most recently, Poland's ruling Law and Justice (PiS) Party tried unsuccessfully to ban the popular US-owned, anti-government TVN24 news channel as part of severely controlling the media, limiting free speech, and sidelining government critics.

The PiS and its coalition government's inability to manage the economy and the ever

increasing Covid-19 pandemic—along with unpopular abortion restrictions and tight social policies—put the Polish electorate in an uncertain future domestically. In foreign policy, Warsaw’s ruling government is at odds with the EU and to a lesser degree with the US. Yet, it would be most difficult to find a closer security-partner-in-need than Poland.

## China’s 17+1 Forum and Taiwan

In the meantime, China’s global economic strategy through the BRI has reached the Central and Eastern European region. To advance the growing 5G and artificial intelligence technology-led economic endeavors, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs institutionalized a Forum of China and 17+1 (by formally including Greece in 2019) to promote business and investment between China and the sixteen countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

With a number of ongoing BRI infrastructure projects placed in these Forum 17+1 countries, China has now moved ahead with accessing European markets and exporting its excess capital and labor to become the continental power. In line with President Xi Jinping’s “rejuvenation of Chinese nation,” Beijing’s ultimate desire has always been “to venture westward in Eurasia [that] was [inspired] by the evolution of the centuries-old terrestrial Silk Road.” Moreover, this CEE region located at the crossroads between Eurasia and Western Europe, Poland could play a significantly important role in China’s strategic economic plans. In addition, Poland’s economic, trade, and investment relations with China

would gradually lead to solidify its political and diplomatic foundation with Beijing when it comes to the Taiwan issue and the “one China” policy.

Of course, Poland may find it increasingly difficult to avoid US pressure, especially when the EU’s policy towards China remains conflicted. The negotiations of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) with Beijing are on hold while the European Parliament has begun to negotiate an EU-Taiwan Bilateral Investment Agreement (BIA) with Taipei, highlighting the importance of trade and economic relations between the EU and the self-governing Republic of China (Taiwan). The BIA includes fair trade, multilateralism, and the World Trade Organization as well as 5G technology, public health, and critical supplies like semiconductors. In all this, Poland role in partnering with

China remains seriously limited.

In the right circumstances, however, Poland could play a greater regional role, provided Warsaw is able to unite other neighboring states under a single agenda. So far, it has been easier said than done given Poland's domestic politics. Yet, Poland presents itself as a regional leader even though it does not have the legitimacy to speak for the whole Central and Eastern Europe. The states in this region—from the Baltic to Hungary and Serbia—often have conflicting stances toward China's growing presence in Europe. These differences in approach to China have recently been illustrated by Lithuania's decision to accept a Taiwan Representative Office, which sent serious aftershocks not only in the region, but also in Europe, the United States, China, and beyond. Definitely, by utilizing the name "Taiwan," Vilnius angered Beijing, bringing a reflective discussion about Taiwan into the heart of EU politics.

Moreover, from the Polish perspective, there are certain limitations to both the 17+1 Forum and the BRI given Poland's firm stance within the transatlantic alliance and Warsaw's strong support for the Three Sea Initiative (3SI) in Central and Eastern Europe. Poland and Croatia started the 3SI in 2015, and it now brings together twelve EU states of Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe. With the US and EU states' commitment, the 3SI could potentially develop into a significant tool to counterbalance the Chinese and Russian influence in the region.

## **No More Zero-Sum Game**

Poland's role in the US-China rivalry cannot easily be treated in zero-sum terms. It is hardly either the United States or China, but a combination of both. At the strategic level, the defense and economic choices might become limited to certain domains. For example, Warsaw is most likely to benefit from China's trade and investment while security needs are fulfilled through military cooperation with its Western allies.

Just as the growing Sino-American trade is mutually beneficial to each other's economies, there still exists room for Polish-Chinese cooperation that would not trigger Washington's negative reactions. In fact, such trade relations already exist through the New Eurasia Economic Corridor and other links of BRI. For example, the railway connection from Lodz in

Poland to Chengdu in China was the second of its kind linking China with Europe, amounting to 90 percent of cargo containers entering the EU by rail that passed through the Polish-Belarusian border in 2018. Malaszewicze, one of the largest cargo transshipment points for freight trains entering the EU, is Poland's most well-known city in China after Warsaw due to the rapid development of the China Railway Express. In January 2021, Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Zbigniew Rau characterized Poland's policy as one "interested in developing the best possible, stable relations for mutually beneficial economic and trade cooperation between the European Union and China."

On the US side, Poland could also bring additional challenges to the transatlantic partnership. Even though Polish-American relations have traditionally been sound, the current conservative coalition government in Warsaw has favored in cooperating with the conservative Republican administration of Donald Trump. Considering the Biden White House's Initiative for Democratic Renewal, this might add extra frictions for Polish-American relations in the context of Warsaw's disagreements with the EU over the Polish constitutional court ruling and noticeable democratic backsliding in Poland.

## **Universal Values or National Interest?**

The prevailing challenge for Poland lies in the defining of a long-term strategic goal. The fundamental question Warsaw faces is whether Poland prefers to pursue its national interests based on the liberal world order, or in a neutral yet completely unknown global order. Thus far, the American-led international order has been proven beneficial for Poland's economic progress and national security. It is highly unlikely that a Chinese-led order with no emphasis on universal values would turn out better for Poland.

In her book review of *Shields of the Republic*, Kori Schake recently pointed out that "while all great powers attempt to shape the international order in their image, the image the United States purports is more than its power. The sphere of influence America seeks is values-based and therefore supports, rather than squelches, the aspirations of others." In other words, the US that supported—for both security and ideological reasons—the democratic and economic transition of Poland and Central Europe does not have a similar approach to global affairs as China, which has recently demonstrated with its global

influence industry and the mastery of ancient "wolf warrior" diplomacy.

And, Poland has a more daunting challenge than China in its geographic proximity: the resurgent Russia with its policy of bullying neighbors and anti-West campaigns. Indeed, the more aggressive that Russian policy in the region becomes, the fewer choices Poland has in pursuing more ambitious foreign policy goals. In the case of another Russian aggression against Ukraine—as President Putin has deployed 100,000 troops (and planned to add 75,000 more by January 2022) along the Ukrainian border—Poland would inevitably reinforce its strategic ties with Western allies, including the US, the NATO, and the EU.

From Warsaw's perspective, China does not really have leverage that would match what the US and EU allies have to offer—namely, defensive military guarantees and direct assistance in case of serious emergency arise, like military standoff with its stronger neighbor. Therefore, any serious discussion about Poland's strategic choices in the rising competition between the US and China should remain realistic and cautious. In the end, the degree of Poland's liberty to drastically change its course of foreign policy and rapidly advance its closer ties with China but independent path is still quite risky, if not a limited, pursuit.

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