

Working Paper No. 19
September 2016

PRC's co-operation with Central and Eastern European countries in the context of the One Belt One Road initiative. The case of 2016 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the PRC and Poland.

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This paper can be downloaded from the [Social Sciences Research Network at Abstract No. 2837546](#).

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Abstract:

The idea of China's co-operation with the Central and Eastern European countries in the sixteen-plus-one format (16+1 Group) rather than bilaterally (including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia) first came forth in December 2011 when China and Poland signed a declaration on strategic-partnership relations. This idea was formalised in April 2012 by China's unilateral declaration on Twelve Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries. Despite a few summits held and a few plurilateral declarations within the framework of the 16+1 Group signed, the project did not materialise until 2016 when China first entered into strategic partnership (along with a set of concrete agreements) with Czechia in March, and in June entered into comprehensive strategic partnership with Poland as the largest country of the 16+1 Group.

One should not be mistaken to think, however, that Poland and China move into unknown territory by signing a few agreements potentially opening doors to intensified economic, infrastructural, and transportation-related co-operation (which will be essential for the One Belt One Road Initiative). In retrospect of the last one hundred fifty years, just the opposite is true. Only last thirty years saw some retardation of Sino-Polish relations after Poland had found itself in the Western sphere of influence. Since 1880s, Poles played a key role in the then Russian Empire's endeavour to bring about the Russian vision of the New Silk from about century ago, resulting in that a large Polish community lived in Harbin between the 1900s and the 1940s. In the *interbellum* period, independent Poland concluded trade treaty with the Beiyang government in 1928, replaced by the trade treaty with Kuomintang's government concluded in 1929, and since 1930s Poland also had to deal with Manchukuo's government because of Polish community still living in Harbin.

After WW2, within the block of communist countries, Sino-Polish relations were very intense. Between 1940s and the 1970s Poland's and China's economies were complementary and the volume of trade between two countries grew multi-fold in the 1950s. In 1951 two countries established still-existing Shipping Joint Stock Company which was the first joint-venture in the history of post-war China. In 1956, thanks to Chinese leaders' veto, Soviet Union's leaders did not dare to military intervene in Poland which, as a result, regained full sovereignty as to its internal socio-economic policies. During the hardship of the 1980s, Chinese government lend Poles harassed by Reagan administration's economic sanctions a hand by extending a trade credit to Polish government and by supplying food. Finally the backbone of Sino-Polish economic relations was set up yet in late 1980s when two countries concluded agreements on (i) civil aviation, (ii) avoidance of double taxation and the prevention of fiscal evasion, and (iii) protection of foreign investment.

Now, thanks to its geographical situation, Poland is a key to the realisations of Halford Mackinder's 1904's vision of the creation of Eurasia (heartland) which would reverse the results of (i) the Age of Discovery in the global scale, likely leading to the economic marginalisation of North America, and (ii) economic dualism in Europe split by the river of Elbe, likely leading to income-equalisation between Western Europe and Eastern Europe which has not been the case since the 16th century. Poland is predestined to be the new Silk Road's hub bridging railway routes coming to Europe from the East (via China, Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus) and from the South (via Balkans, Hungary, Slovakia).

However, current Poland's government's stance on the new Silk Road project is rather disappointing. Poland's membership in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as the only country's from the Central and Eastern Europe region was inherited from the previous cabinet and, apart from that, efforts to facilitate the development of the new Silk

Road on the Polish territory have so far been very mediocre. The conclusion of a rather symbolic comprehensive strategic partnership was accompanied with three agreements resolving only minor issues, including (i) mutual recognition of academic degrees and diplomas in higher education, yet the signed agreement was very general and neither set up any mechanism of automatic recognition nor covered professional qualifications, (ii) plans of cultural co-operation until 2019, and (iii) the exemption of international air transportation services from value added tax. Altogether, for the time being, the prospects for the development of the new Silk Road's hub in Poland look rather dim. Poland's current government's allegiance to the idea of Trans-Pacific alliance remains strong, and policy-makers remain to look Westwards only. They seem to be incapable of scenario-thinking and, at least at present, seem to reject the hand reached out by China.