The Impact of the Changing World Order on the Situation of Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract

This article presents the impact of the changing world order on the situation of Central and Eastern Europe, paying particular attention to Poland. It looks at the geopolitical and economic conditions during the regional superpower rivalry between the United States, China, Russia, and the European Union within the emerging multipolar order, which is manifested in the 17 + 1 format and the Three Seas Initiative. Poland, trying to get out of the peripheral status resulting from the neoliberal shock doctrine, is currently losing its ability to balance between China and the United States, is antagonizing Russia in the process, and weakening ties within the European Union. Changing its peripheral dependence requires a reevaluation of its stance toward Eurasian integration and its openness to China.

Keywords: Central and Eastern Europe, China, Poland, Russia, social quality, United States, world order, geopolitics

In the globalized world, it is difficult to consider the quality of societal life without taking into account the influence of international processes on the state. The fundamental task of the perspective of the geopolitics of critical realism is to identify factors determining the functioning of centers of power, to characterize their interactions, and to present the effects on the global, regional, and local level. Accordingly, these considerations should begin at the level of the international order that exists objectively and historically and that, as such, arises, grows, and collapses in the end. This level should be considered as a factor influencing the possibilities of developing societal quality within the state. It contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the application of the five normative factors of the social quality approach: social justice, solidarity, equal value, human dignity, and eco-equilibrium (Van der Maesen 2019).

The contemporary international order has plunged into a structural crisis. This crisis has influenced the economic, political, and cultural spheres, and thus the entirety of global societal existence. The year 2008 was found to be its catalyst, when the great crisis of globalization resulted in the erosion of monopoly that the West has held since the sixteenth century in the military, political (democracy), economic (free
market), scientific (technology), and ideological (modernism) dimensions. The period since then can be said to be one of bifurcation in international relations (Wallerstein 2007) understood as the twilight of the unipolar order and as ushering in a new way to reorganize the global order.

The subject of this article is the impact of the changing world order on the situation of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). After the end of the Yalta-Potsdam order in 1989, the hitherto notion of Eastern Europe was replaced with the categories of Central Europe and Central-Eastern Europe, although the specificity of this part of the continent is not obvious to many today (Zarycki 2016a). In the geopolitical dimension, the influence of the spatial arrangement between Russia and Germany is emphasized, while the civilization dimension indicates that in the East the border goes in line with religions dividing Europe into Catholic-Protestant and Orthodox-Muslim. On the other hand, the western border, which basically follows the course of the Elbe and Lithuanian Rivers, is defined on the basis of the criterion of the socioeconomic order. Sometimes the bridging role of a region is emphasized as a cross-border area lying on the eastern and western side of the great civilization border.

An important attribute is the historical economic backwardness resulting from the so-called “economic dualism” on the River Elbe (Brzechczyn 1998). In the scholarly literature, we often find the Eurocentric view that Central Europeanness is an “escape from the East” represented by two anti-European “great wedges”: the Tatar-Moscow-Soviet and Turkish. This is why “Sovietization,” on the one hand, and “Balkanization,” on the other, have been used as expressions for civilizational poverty, barbarism, and immaturity (Zenderowski 2004). Nowadays, it is often believed that the concept of Central and Eastern Europe is a synthesis of geographic (physical centrality) and political (Eastern) elements. Thus, it includes European states with common cultural and historical roots as well as a common past as socialist buffers subordinate to the Soviet Union or as parts the latter’s republics. Sometimes, the concept is limited to countries belonging to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (Orzelska 2013).

On a conceptual note, I am drawing on the perspective of the geopolitics of critical realism (Cimek 2017). It is linked to Roy Bhaskar’s ([1974] 1997) advocacy of a stratified ontology and the idea of constitutive interdependence (Beck et al. 2011), and comprises critical realism at the level of research philosophy, assuming that the world consists not only of events, experiences, impressions, and discourses, but also of structures, forces, and tendencies that exist regardless of whether we detect them and how we do so (through experience and/or discourse). First, the basic level of reality may include forces and tendencies that are not always manifested or realized in experience. Therefore, in cognition, it is necessary to distinguish between what is real and what is apparent (Patomäki and Wight 2000). Second, critical theories emphasize competing interests in power relations between groups and individuals that identify winners and losers, and the rejection of instrumental rationality in favor of humanistic reflection on the goal of action based on the impossibility of separating facts and
values (Kincheloe and McLaren 2010). And third, world-systems theory shows how economic and geopolitical processes combine to shape the relationship between the center and the periphery (Wallerstein 2007).

The aim of this article is to provide a wider context for how the situation of the CEE region is influenced by the changing world order. It is to provide a different, externally oriented perspective, one that is contrasting with but also complementary to the other studies in this special issue and to outline a greater picture on the international level, which through a myriad of (material and ideational) interactions, has a strong impact on the development of societal quality on the domestic level. The movement from a unipolar world toward one with several poles of attraction bears undeniable connotations in terms of normative pressures and aspirations. Being restricted by the article length limitations, I will be unable to look at the level of domestic developments here in any detail.

The article is divided into four parts. The first section discusses Poland in the post-1989 unipolar world order both in the geo-economical and geopolitical spheres. The second section describes most important tendencies in the changing world order, which are essential factors at the level of the international structure influencing the processes at the regional and national levels. The third—and most important—section will analyze how superpowers compete in the Central and Eastern European space on the example of the Three Seas Initiative and the 17+1 format. It will describe the differentiation of geopolitical codes between different actors in the region, which indicates the weakening position of the United States, the growing power of China, and the uncertain power of both Russia and the European Union. Finally, a summary of considerations can be found in the fourth section.

Poland in the Post-1989 Unipolar World Order

For Poland, 1989 has become a symbol of their abandonment of real socialism and their alliance with the Soviet Union (although the Soviet troops only left in 1993). The name of the state was changed, but at the same time the territory remained unchanged and most structures and state organizations were taken from the previous system.

Geopolitical Aspect

In 1989, the Poland bordered on three states: the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and the German Democratic Republic. All its neighbors changed over the course of four years. Currently, Poland has seven new neighboring countries, of which only Germany existed in the form of a state before 1990. This means that Poland’s geopolitical situation has changed significantly; it is an exceptional situation in Europe. From the point of view of the civilization dimension, Poland and most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe became participants in the integration processes within Western
civilization, the core of which is formed by one geopolitical bloc (Kuźniar 2011) under the hegemonic guidance of the United States, which has been the guardian of the unipolar order (Krauthammer 2003). The ideologies of neoconservatism and neoliberalism served as its justification for so doing. Under these geopolitical conditions, the world society’s structures entered in twenty-first century while undergoing the process of globalization. In fact, the latter is another kind of capitalist system that seeks to embrace the world with a single ideological and economic framework. It manifests itself in the domination of the economy by transnational corporations and in the promotion of universalist democracy, all of which is justified by the idea of freedom (Dowbor 2012).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Poland’s attempt to obtain the status of a regional leader under new formats such as the Central European Initiative, the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), and the Visegrád Group was not successful (Chojan 2019). The development of the European Union and NATO proves that the United States and Western Europe ensured control over this key area of geopolitics (Mazzucelli et al. 2017). Zbigniew Brzeziński described how the United States maintained the status of the only superpower in the unipolar order. In order to maintain this position—and here he was channeling the work of geographer and politician Halford Mackinder—he argued that one needed to control Central and Eastern Europe because it is the key to controlling Eurasia, which Mackinder referred to as the “World’s Heartland.” And Brzeziński stated that “Poland is too weak to become a geostrategic player and has only one option: to integrate with the West” (1999: 44), and that its task was to include Ukraine in the European security structure based on the partnership between Germany and France, which have been granted special spheres of influence in Central and Eastern Europe. The United States left the European powers, and above all Germany, with a geo-economic space. The country on the Vistula River, however, was only tasked with one job, namely to implement strategic American goals in the region (Jean 2003).

This dependence on the United States was fully revealed after 2003, when Poland and other countries of the CEE region supported the American intervention in Iraq against the objections of, inter alia, Germany and France. As a result of this new situation, the Americans constructed the category of “New Europe” for these countries. On the other hand, in the Russian view, the region was interpreted as an element of the cordon sanitaire organized by the United States for Russia’s surroundings. An attempt by Poland to achieve real and then only simulated subject status was its reference to the Intermarium concept, which was popular in the interwar period and gave Warsaw an important place among the countries lying between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea.
Geoeconomical Aspect

There is an ongoing debate in Polish literature on the effects of Poland’s integration with the institutional structures of the West. Modernization advocates have announced that it was a success (Gomułka 2014; Orłowski 2010). In addition, there are economists who reject the neoliberal paradigm but see positive features in the transformation (Kołodko 2009; Piątkowski 2019). On the other hand, many critical scholars point out that the transformation based on the neoliberal “shock doctrine” shows features of neocolonialism (Ancyparowicz 2015; Kieżun 2013; Tittenbrun 2007). Poland and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe assumed the functions of the semi-periphery of the world-system in its European dimension (Berend 1996; Błasiak 2013; Zarycki 2016b).

According to the assumption of critical realism, a narrative may hide the reality created by political and economic structures. The cultural discourse in Poland has become such an obscuring narrative. In order to identify the causes of peripherality, many see it in a cultural lapse resulting from centuries of backwardness in relation to Western Europe (Sowa 2011). At the end of the 1990s, the philosopher Marek Siemek pointed out that the essence of modernization “is the demolition of the East, which is a part of us” (2002: 325), and the liberal priest Józef Tischner (2018) pointed out the problem of Homo sovieticus. A literature researcher, Przemysław Czapliński, in turn, writes about the void in the middle of the continent, which “makes people realize that currently Central Europe can only be a semi-periphery of the West” (2016: 312–313).

The errors contained in this narrative were exposed by Andrzej Walicki (2013), a well-known historian of ideas, who emphasized the weakness of Polish intellectual elites who uncritically accept the neoliberal utopia. Paradoxically, this adoption of the narrative about the necessity of catching up with Europe by means of its eastern-central part means that attempts to reduce the gap actually lead to reproduction. The condition for a real change in the material and cultural sphere is the rejection of paternalism and teaching from the West. Being behind the West arises precisely as a result of this relationship, and not through breaking it (Grzymski 2016).

A specific way out of these antinomies was the discursive use of the critical perspective of the world-system to identify the situation of Poland, which resulted in the search for a change in the cultural sphere, building images of identity based on the distinction between East (Russia) and West (European Union) instead of a change in the economic substructure. It was this rationale that created the intellectual foundations for the rule of the Law and Justice Party (Krasnodębski 2005; Staniszkis 2003). It explains why Mateusz Morawiecki in 2017, holding the office of deputy prime minister, declared that Poland was a “country owned by someone from abroad,” and that the governments of Central and Eastern European countries cannot do much to limit the dominance of transnational corporations (Government of Poland 2020a), while developing the false narrative about regaining sovereignty, building the image of the enemy in the East, and distrusting EU structures.
The Changing World Order

We are witnessing a change in the international order that affects the ability of societies around the world to shape their citizen’s quality of life. The crisis of the West and the role of non-Western states in shaping the international order have been discussed at length in the literature (Kiely 2015). New researchers (Cooley and Nexon 2020; Harold 2020) now join the few who had once forecasted the end of American hegemony (Galtung 2004; Todd 2003); the class dimension is also emphasized because of the radicalization of the middle class, which has become poorer under the rule of corporations (DCD 2007).

Contemporary rivalry is characterized by two opposing tendencies: defending hegemony and undermining it. Hegemony is a form of global power consisting in the coordination of the actions of autonomous states and social forces through a decisive structural factor (i.e., US policy) aimed at maintaining the order of neoliberal globalization. It does so using both material resources and force, but also the reproduction of the dominant, collective image of the world order based on a hegemonic system of values. Thus, the counter-hegemony undermines the content of neoliberalism in economic relations, and undermines the universal claims of the hegemonic narration in shaping axionormative conditions. Contemporary geopolitical rivalry is based on the shift of the center of the global economy toward Asia (Asian Development Bank 2011), and the most important counter-hegemonic tendencies in international relations include the activity of China; the strategic Sino-Russian partnership; and the BRICS group, which in addition to these two countries also includes Brazil, India, and South Africa (Cimek 2019a, 2019b). China, however, is the main challenge to US hegemony.

Central and Eastern Europe and the Changes in International Order

Living in a multipolar world means that the CEE region has become the field of rivalry between the United States and China with participation of Russia and the European Union, creating new opportunities and threats that may affect the quality of societal life. In 2011, the United States chose a new geostrategic direction, the so-called “Pivot to Asia,” seeing a growing threat to its hegemony from China. At the same time, it deemed the European Union and Central and Eastern Europe as less significantly strategic, which in turn favored the strengthening of ties between the European Union and other political entities, including Russia and China. For the countries of CEE, the reasons for changing the geopolitical code were also the effects of the financial crisis of 2007–2008, when it was recognized that the European Union was no longer able to provide sustainable investment and adequate economic support to the region under the constrained economy of the bloc (Mazzucelli et al. 2017).
For Poland, the shift in perception of China’s role in the emerging multipolar world\(^5\) has had positive effects. Poland began to be treated by Beijing as the leader of Central and Eastern Europe, as evidenced by the first summit of the “16 + 1” group, which was held in Warsaw in 2012.\(^6\) Putting the economic rationale for this meeting aside, which was the cooperation of twelve EU member states, thirteen NATO countries\(^7\) had the potential to “break” the geopolitical unity of the EU countries. Wen Jiabao used phrases known from speeches in developing countries, such as “we are building a better world hand in hand.” This kind of rhetoric suggested that the region could be seen by China as part of the Global South (Mierzejewski and Kowalski 2019: 9–10). The word “friendliness” was used to emphasize the predominance of sympathy over pragmatism, shared values over economic benefits, partnership over competition, so that it may be distinguished from the neoliberal technocratic language of “promoting cooperation” (Andzans and Berzina-Cerenkova 2017). The meeting in Warsaw was held independently of the institutional cooperation between China and the European Union, which implied that Beijing separated its policy toward the European Union and toward the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The summit’s conclusions were not approved by the centers of the dominant states, neither by Brussels nor by Berlin and Paris, which were not particularly happy over the establishment of a Secretariat for Cooperation between China and the countries of CEE at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was the body coordinating future cooperation between Beijing and the sixteen capitals whose representatives participated in the meeting.

It would be a mistake to assume that the narrative of benefits for all accompanied by noninterference in internal affairs and the lack of hegemonic ambitions limit the project to economic matters (Kozłowski 2018), which are certainly there to be sure (Lubina 2017). Meanwhile, China has made a new, arbitrary construction of the region apart from Kosovo, for instance, as they do not recognize this state as an independent one (Andzans and Berzina-Cerenkova 2017). The identification of the 16 + 1 formula countries is also strengthened by their common communist past and the fact that they all had diplomatically recognized the newly constituted People’s Republic of China in October 1949. The Prime Minister of China, Wen Jiabao, proposed the “12 steps” program, assuming cooperation with participating countries in initiatives such as, \textit{inter alia}, creating a credit line, establishing an investment cooperation fund, and supporting academic exchanges between China and Poland (Secretariat 2015).

The regional 17 + 1 initiative turned out to be a small note in the beginning of the great Chinese symphony (Figure 1), which became the new idea of building an economic belt along the Silk Road and the Sea Silk Road XXI, now called the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI).\(^8\) It is forecasted to influence 4.4 billion people in more than sixty-five countries, and annual trade with participating countries could increase to US$2.5 trillion over the next decade (Tiezzi 2014). The BRI initiative includes
geopolitical strategic goals but is mostly about the development of global connectivity. Its goal is to make China an official superpower by 2050 (CPC 2018).

By using a historical analogy, it is easy to see the similarity to the introduction of the Marshall Plan and the creation of NATO in the late 1940s to integrate all of Western Europe under US leadership and control. The American Marshall Plan addressed to Europe after World War II would be worth US$110–140 billion in current value, while the Chinese BRI project is set to cover US$1.3 trillion and to do so for a much longer time period (Góralczyk 2018). Without reference to the economic situation of the semi-periphery, our understanding is led astray by pointing to populism as a source of change in the geopolitical code of the region’s countries (Spisak 2017). Thomas Piketty compared the average annual financial flows from the European Union to Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia with their outflow abroad. And so, in 2010–2016, Poland received funds from the European Union annually, amounting to 2.7 percent of GDP. But in the same period, net 4.7 percent of GDP was leaving the country. In all countries of the region, more money flowed out than flowed in as official EU transfers (Piketty 2020). Paweł Bukowski and Filip Novokmet (2017) claim that the inequality in Poland after the political transformation of the 1990s has not increased as much as in Russia, largely because a large part of the profits of companies operating in Poland country flow abroad.

Figure 1. European Countries Belonging to the 17 + 1 Format
As Chinese economic cooperation is often accused of being a drive for Beijing’s political interests, it is no surprise that Hungarian opposition to criticizing China’s response to the 2016 Hague Court’s judgment on the South China Sea has been interpreted as a price to pay for Chinese economic support (Graham 2016). Also, the largely Chinese-financed modernization of the Budapest–Belgrade rail line points to its geopolitical context, with both small states rejecting the dominance of Western centers (Ralev 2017). Greece and Hungary have refused to join EU statements condemning China’s human rights practices. And last but not least, Hungarian foreign minister, Peter Szijjarto, supported Chinese opposition to Taiwan regaining observer status in the World Health Organization, despite US support for France and Germany’s petition (Xu 2020). Also Romania depends heavily on the changing priorities of their political leadership toward United States–China relations (Brinză 2019).

It is also worth talking about the real differences in approach among the states in the region toward the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, which can be considered as the first confrontation of our multipolar world, a real proxy war between the United States and Russia. They adopted various strategies toward the changes in the international order: the Visegrád Group that includes Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia (V4) split in such a way that the anti-Russian stance led to the isolation of Poland. Its final act was the Slavkov Declaration, signed in January 2015 by the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Austria, criticizing the sanctions imposed on Russia by the European Union, which denied the narrative about “Russian guilt.”

Among the national leaders in the region, the Hungarian President Viktor Orbán most clearly supports recognition of the multipolar world, with China’s fundamental role as a development opportunity not only for his country, but also for the entire region (Prime Minister 2018). The number of Chinese foreign direct investments (FDI) located in Poland is lower not only than those in Western Europe, but also than those in Hungary, which is the main place of their location in the region (Lubina 2017), which suggests the dependence of geo-economic space on the implemented geopolitics. From the very beginning, from the Chinese perspective, Budapest was perceived as the most preferential partner, but the real challenge was to get closer to Poland as the largest and potentially most influential state in the region (Zuokui 2013). However the increased trade with China has also ballooned the CEE trade deficit, which totaled US$75 billion in 2018, leading many in the region to question the benefit of closer economic relations with Beijing. Announcing his decision to skip the recent 17+1 summit, Czech president Miloš Zeman snubbed China for failing to deliver promised investment (Xu 2020).

The creation of the 17 + 1 format and the BRI set the conditions for Poland to conduct a multipolar foreign policy (Bartosiewicz and Szterlik 2018). The qualitative step came with the establishment of the “Strategic Partnership of Poland and China” in 2011 (Prezydent.pl 2011). The period of “geo-economic pragmatism” continued after the government changed from the Civic Platform to the Law and Justice Party. Poland joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank as a founding member in
April 2016 (Money.pl. 2016), and finally, two months later, the President of China, Xi Jinping, returned the visit, making—as it seems—an offer of assistance in changing Poland’s position in the international division of capital and labor (Jinping 2016). Both countries have expressed their will to strengthen the link between BRI and the Plan for Responsible Development, which at the same time creates synergies with the comprehensive European Union–China strategic partnership (Prezydent.pl 2016).

**Three Seas Initiative**

In these conditions, at the 2016 meeting in Dubrovnik under the slogan of “Strengthening Europe: Building Connections between the North and the South,” the Three Seas Initiative was established with the contribution of the President of Poland, Andrzej Duda, and the President of Croatia, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. It included twelve Central European countries (only members of the European Union to emphasize that the project was not directed against the European Union) located between the Adriatic Sea, the Baltic Sea, and the Black Sea (Figure 2). The Three Seas Initiative countries account for 28 percent of the territory and 22 percent of the European Union’s population, and only produces 10 percent of the region’s GDP (including Austria), indicating that it was just the beginning of another attempt by these countries to break out of their semi-peripheral status: it was therefore not then interpreted as competing with the 16 + 1 project. A joint declaration on strengthening cooperation in the fields of energy, transport, digitization, and the economy was adopted in the presence of representatives of China, the United States, and Turkey.

The situation changed in 2017 as the United States moved to aggressively defend its hegemony in the fear of losing it to China (The White House 2017), a move that could later lead to full-scale war because of the “Thucydides Trap” (Allison 2018). Donald Trump’s visit to Warsaw in July became a symbol of the United States’s concern over its hegemony; Poland decided to strengthen its alliance with the American superpower, in fact implementing the “bandwagon” strategy, which manifested itself not only in the continuation of anti-Russian policy (Bieleń 2019), but in weakening ties within the European Union. The Three Seas Initiative has apparently added an unequivocally pro-American dimension (Chojan 2019).

Most of the countries participating in the 17 + 1 and Three Seas Initiative formats are in the crosshairs of a direct Sino-American rivalry. At the same time, two competing centers of power were forced out of it: the European Union and Russia. American geostrategist George Friedman pointed out that Poland should remain a historical bone of contention in the throat of Germany and Russia (Friedman 2012). Making Poland the leader of a new project under the protectorate of Washington is perhaps doomed to fail, because the Polish states lacks the ability to project power in the military, economic, and cultural spheres, which is essential to becoming a power in the CEE region (Sykulski 2018). Meanwhile, many countries, such as Hungary
and the Czech Republic, do not share the interpretation that there is a threat posed by Russia’s policy under Vladimir Putin. On the contrary, they are in favor of lifting EU sanctions and for closer cooperation with Russia. They are also far from pursuing a confrontational policy toward Berlin (Dahl 2019).

From the German perspective, a rapprochement within the framework of the Three Seas Initiative may be a threat to further increasing the extent of European integration, as the region is drifting toward the buffer zone between Russia and Western Europe. In the geo-economic dimension, this threatens the dominant role of German capital in the region (Dahl 2019), as does the construction of infrastructure on the North–South line (i.e., the Via Baltica and Via Carpathia).

The confirmation of the change in the Polish geopolitical stance was the Polish government’s “Exposé on Polish Foreign Policy” that it released in 2018, in which the main ally of Poland was the United States, and the role of China was limited to being Poland’s main partner on the Asian continent (Czaputowicz 2018). Also, in the National Security Strategy signed by the President of Poland in May 2020, it was clearly stated that in the strategic competition for the shape of the international order between the United States, China, and Russia, Washington was the ally of Warsaw, and Moscow was the main threat to Polish security. Its attitude toward China was left unstated (Government of Poland 2020b).
The speech of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in July of 2020 made clear to everyone that the United States was openly proclaiming the need to defeat China and change their political system (Pompeo 2020). Washington earlier brought before Poland an ultimatum to side either with China or with the United States (Defence 24 2019; Turczyn 2019). Poland has reconfirmed its transatlantic orientation in the first war of the digital age (Government of Poland 2020a; Rzeczpospolita 2019; TVP Info 2020).

For the purposes of fueling this geopolitical rivalry, apart from stirring up Russophobia and contesting European integration, the phenomenon of Sinophobia is being intensified in Poland as indicated by former deputy prime minister and well-known economist G. E. Kołodko (2020). Despite this warning, the Chinese ambassador still claims that Poland is on the right side of history, counting on another change in Poland’s geopolitical stance (Guangyuan 2020). Meanwhile, Russia and Germany are likely to benefit from this situation, as they may create the railway-based Nordstream 2, where Chinese goods will be transshipped to the port of St. Petersburg and flow through the Baltic Sea straight to Germany (Puślecki 2018).

**Looking Ahead**

In the competition to change the world order, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are not among the main actors, but, thanks to their location between the East and the West, they have a “geographical dividend” and have therefore become the subject of competition between geopolitical powers. By acting together, they could work more effectively. However, their semi-peripheral status makes it difficult to mobilize economic and cultural potential for a greater independent status. The emergence of China as an economic power created a situation in which geo-economics became the main factor of rapprochement. The 17 + 1 format appeared, with a Chinese narrative granting Poland the role of the leader of the region; then the BRI began to develop, which created opportunities for Poland to leave the periphery of the West.

The situation changed when the United States started a hegemonic war against China. The Three Seas Initiative became the United States’s regional instrument to defend its hegemonic position in Europe. Its function is to weaken European integration, weaken the position of Berlin and Moscow (Demir 2018), counteract the rapprochement between the European Union and Russia, and finally push China and its 17 + 1 and BRI projects out. There is very little likelihood that Poland will gain geo-economic benefits in the form of an influx of US investment and technology transfer. Rather, it will become a consumer of weapons, liquefied gas, and even US COVID vaccines. The possibility of Poland’s participation in a military conflict with Russia, either in the Kaliningrad District or in Ukraine, will become a major threat. Poland already supports Kiev politically and economically, but may increase its military involvement. This situation illustrates how the hitherto center instrumentalizes
the semi-peripheries and the periphery against the potential center of the new global order (Wallerstein 2007; Zarycki 2016b).

Poland has not only stood on the side of countries that oppose Eurasian integration and the construction of a multipolar world, but has increasingly clearly preferred to limit European integration. Warsaw unambiguously focuses on an alliance with the United States, which is made manifest by the presence of American troops in Poland and unconditional support for Washington’s international policy, which was made clear in the organization of a conference on the Middle East in Warsaw and which, according to Tehran, has an anti-Iranian character.

At the same time, in the CEE region various balancing tendencies are becoming more and more evident. Countries of the region want to use links with multiple foreign powers in order to limit the influence of any one of them. For example, the Czech Republic and Hungary see Beijing’s initiatives as an opportunity to increase their own effective sovereignty, which is always economically conditioned. Bulgaria is improving its relationship with Russia by revising its policy toward raw materials obtained from that country. And even the main initiator of the Three Seas Initiative, Croatia, is changing their view. The new president, Zoran Milanović, criticized it as unnecessary and potentially harmful to his country due to a possible conflict with Berlin and Moscow, adding that the real initiator was the Obama administration, which used it to force countries from the region to buy more US liquefied gas and to isolate Russia (Dragojlovic 2020). This is a good example showing how critical realism separates narrative from hidden structural goals, and reality from appearances (Kincheloe and McLaren 2010). This process is often present at the level of international competition.

In order for Poland to better its standing, it needs to shift its relationship with China from a narrowly economic one to a multidimensional one that takes up the issues of a new paradigm in international relations (a win-win situation). The condition for the new paradigm is to subordinate the economy to the goal of development. Both Confucianism and Marxism, which are present in the Chinese narrative, favor the rejection of the utilitarian-individualistic assumptions that serve as the starting points for the neoliberal worldview, and this is in line with the theses of the social quality approach (Beck et al. 2011). Such a new approach on the part of Warsaw would cause China to emphasize its desire to represent the Global South, which would create opportunities for a real change in Poland’s position based on a new center for the development of the world economy. Changing this vector will allow Poland to weaken the reaction of current decision-making centers: the United States at the global level and Germany at the regional level. This means that it will increase its effective sovereignty as the basis of a new paradigm. Its promotion by Beijing would also test the credibility of the long-term strategy in which China wants to be a leader, not a hegemon, in 2050. Such a revaluation of the geopolitical order would result in a change in relations with Moscow; there would be a development of open, mutually beneficial economic and cultural cooperation. Counteracting the level of historical resentment and preventing the possible revival of imperial ambitions on the part of
Russia would be possible thanks to the balancing of Moscow’s position by Beijing, the main economic force of the “Great Eurasian Partnership.” Due to the economic potential, the centers of Western Europe would also participate in this project, but Poland would gain greater independence not only due to new markets and alternative sources of capital in the East, but also—and primarily—due to the change in the systemic principle. Other countries in the region are faced with the same choice: to defend the pertinent hegemonic order, which has condemned them to peripherality, or to open up to new possibilities (Artner 2020), which could have an impact upon the domestic developments within the CEE region, impacting not only the normative pressures in the politico-legal domain, but also the (normative) aspirations in the socioeconomic, sociocultural, and socioenvironmental domains.

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**Notes**

1. The article pays particular attention Poland because it is the largest country in the region. It is also worth pointing out that World War I broke out in Poland in 1939 and that Poland had a significant impact on the processes leading to the end of the Yalta-Potsdam order in the 1990s.
2. The only three areas that are repeated in all definitions are Austria, the Czech Republic, and Moravia (Buchowski and Kołbon 2001). The Polish context uses the names of Baltic Europe and Międzymorze (“Inter-Sea Europe”). The area that used to belong to the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth 300–400 years ago began to be identified with Central and Eastern Europe, so apart from Poland it also includes Belarus, Ukraine, and the Baltic States.
3. The adopted methods and techniques are as follows: the analysis of the literature on the subject, press reports, specialist reports, statistical data, the historical method, the intuitive method, inference by analogy, and direct observation of reality. Due to the dynamic nature of the research problem, the press sources, due to their overt subjectivism, required critical interpretation (i.e., more so than the other sources).
4. It is worth noting that Ancyparowicz is currently a member of the Financial Policy Council in Poland.
5. It was noted there that the primacy of the United States had been called into question and that the role of the non-Western countries was growing (Government of Poland n.d.; Cf. Wiadomosci 2012).
6. Successive summits were held in Bucharest, Romania (2013); Belgrade, Serbia (2014); Suzhou, China (2015), Riga, Latvia (2016); Budapest, Hungary (2017); Sofia, Bulgaria (2018); and Dubrovnik, Croatia (2019). At the last one, the format accepted Greece as a member and transformed into the 17 + 1 format.
7. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia.
8. Co-financed by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank established by Beijing, the New Silk Road Fund, and the New Development Bank of BRICS.

9. It is worth noting that the United States ineffectively warned against accession by its allies, including Great Britain and Germany. Poland, as the only country in Central and Eastern Europe, belonged to the founding members of this bank and its shareholders.

10. During the visit, the “Joint Statement on Establishing a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between the Republic of Poland and the People’s Republic of China” was signed.

11. Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria.

12. China’s representative Liu Haixing said he saw the Three Seas Initiative as a partner for the New Silk Road (Wiślińska 2016).

13. Attempts to include Germany in the “Three Seas Initiative,” despite support from Romania, were contested by Poland (Dahl 2019), and Berlin has also failed to transform the 16 + 1 into a 16 + 2 format. The United States, as the protector of the region, supports the disintegration of the Russian–German strategic partnership (Szabo 2015). Generally speaking, we can observe the disintegration of the Western bloc, the picture of which is completed by Washington contesting NATO, by the French president announcing the death of its brain as well as calling for the construction of a European army, and the German chancellor’s words that Europe has to draw on its own resources.

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