

ANALYSIS

Following Global Trends: Polish Political Parties' Changing Views on China

Joanna Nawrotkiewicz



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Analysis

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Author – Joanna Nawrotkiewicz

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ASSOCIATION FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS (AMO)

Žitná 27/608
CZ 110 00 Praha 1
Tel.: +420 224 813 460
info@amo.cz
www.amo.cz

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Summary

- This study analyzes the perspectives of Poland's five prominent political groups – the United Right, the Civic Coalition, the Third Way, the Confederation, and the Left – on selected China-related matters. These issues include Sino-Russian relations post the Ukraine invasion, economic collaboration and dependencies, human rights violations, Chinese engagement in critical infrastructure and technology, as well as Poland's political alliances within the EU and with the US. The study predominantly covers the 2019-2023 parliamentary term.
- Over the past four years, Poland's relations with China have undergone multiple phases, starting with tensions caused by the Huawei employee arrest in Warsaw, followed by legislative actions on critical infrastructure and the Polish government's criticism towards the conclusion of negotiations on the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI). Around 2021, Poland's attitude towards China shifted to a more positive stance seeking economic cooperation. Yet, the outbreak of the Ukraine war in 2022 and China's alignment with Russia disrupted this trajectory and led to rising skepticism over China in Poland, negatively impacting the bilateral relationship.
- Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been strongly condemned by the whole political spectrum in Poland, although the Confederation's stance contains some nuances – some of its members criticized the form of sanctions imposed on Russia, and a few individuals even openly voiced their support for Russia's actions. Given the resolute sentiments in Poland, the ambiguous Chinese position on the war has generally resulted in a recalibration of the parties' views on Poland's foreign policy towards Beijing. China is no longer seen merely as an economic partner; it is also recognized as a growing systemic rival.
- Beijing's economic importance is still acknowledged across the spectrum, with parties recognizing its potential as a trade partner and an investment source. However, there are growing concerns about over-dependence on Chinese goods and technology. The COVID-19 pandemic also highlighted Polish vulnerabilities in supply chains, prompting discussions about reducing reliance and fostering domestic industries. Therefore, parties across the spectrum advocate for adopting a strategy focused on economic disengagement from China in crucial sectors.
- Human rights violations in China is a subject not frequently discussed in the Polish public debate, but all political parties recognize the presence of the

issue. Polish political parties largely believe that achieving economic independence in critical areas is necessary for the EU to take action on this issue. The Confederation stands out in this regard, as its representatives oppose interference on human rights, and advocate for maintaining a strictly business-oriented approach towards China.

- The ruling United Right coalition advocates for a unified stance from the West towards China. However, their approach leans towards prioritizing the US in the shaping of strategic goals, aligning with its positions on geopolitical matters such as Huawei, 5G, and Taiwan. While the coalition is not opposed to collaborating with the EU to counterbalance China, their Euroskeptic orientation and ongoing disagreements with the EU may influence the level of cooperation achievable.
- Opposition groups positioned in the center and on the left of the political spectrum, including the Civic Coalition, the Third Way, and the Left, consider the EU their primary geopolitical platform. They believe that by building strong ties within Europe, Poland can enhance its influence and effectively navigate the dynamics between the US and China in the global arena. Therefore, Poland should strive to improve its position within the EU. However, cooperation with the US remains crucial from their perspective as well. Similarly to the United Right, these groups advocate for a unified Western strategy against China, framing the conflict in Ukraine as a broader struggle between democracy and autocracy.
- The right-wing opposition group, the Confederation, follows a distinct approach towards China, prioritizing pragmatic foreign relations centered around economic partnerships and maintaining conflict-free ties with all nations. However, due to certain members displaying a Euroskeptic stance, the Confederation exhibits reluctance towards strengthening ties within the EU.
- The recognition of potential risks posed by China, prompted first by the COVID-19 pandemic and later by the Ukrainian conflict is expected to guide Poland's strategic adjustments on the background of the evolving geopolitical dynamics.

Introduction and Research Design

Since the 2019 parliamentary elections, Poland has experienced a turbulent period, and the country has confronted a series of challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the migrant crisis along the Belarusian border, and the consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The situation has been equally unsettled in terms of domestic political dynamics. Poland has seen the extremely polarized 2020 presidential election results, the discovery of spying on opposition politicians by means of Pegasus spyware and the introduction of controversial legislation by the government believed to be aimed at eliminating political rivals, such as Donald Tusk, the leader of the main opposition party. Poland's domestic situation and the ruling coalition United Right's Euroscepticism has strained relations with the EU and isolated Poland in the European political arena. In its pursuit to gain political and economic clout, Poland sought support from other nations, forging alliances with Hungary and the US during President Donald Trump's administration. Simultaneously, Poland engaged with China to explore possibilities of economic development.

Over the course of Sino-Polish cooperation since 2008, diplomatic relations have undergone various transformations. As analyzed by Alicja Bachulska within the MapinfluenCE project, the initial 'honeymoon phase' observed between the two nations from 2011 to 2017 eventually transitioned into a cooling of relations.¹ In 2019, relations seemed to be undergoing the most difficult period. This was mostly due to the arrest of a Huawei employee on espionage charges in Warsaw in January 2019, and Poland's development of legislation unfavorable to China's role in the construction of critical infrastructure such as 5G networks a few months later. By the final months of 2020, tensions arose around Poland's negative view on the rapid conclusion of the negotiations on the CAI, regarding its provisions but chiefly the lack of coordination with the US on the issue and the 'steamrolling' of the deal by Germany and France.

Between 2017 and 2020, almost half of the Polish respondents to a public opinion survey underwent a transformation in their perception of China, with a majority of these shifts being towards a negative view.² In 2020, 41.5 percent of Poles assessed Beijing negatively, positioning China as one of the most negatively-perceived countries.³ This trend remained relatively consistent across various political groups, except for the Left voters, who displayed considerable polarization in their assessment.⁴

Nevertheless, these changing attitudes did not translate into a more cautious stance from the Polish government. Quite the opposite – starting from 2021, a shift in relations became apparent as the Polish government renewed its pursuit of economic opportunities with China.⁵ Considerable optimism was attached to the prospect of Chinese investments, as the government had high hopes for the advantages of Poland's geographic location, aiming to establish the country as a "gateway to Europe" by the expansion of, among other things, the cargo hub in Małaszewicze, a village located by Polish eastern border. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and China's ambiguous stance cast a shadow over these plans. Since the outbreak of the war,

Poland has unceasingly expressed support for Ukraine. Therefore, Beijing's uncertain position in this conflict has contributed to an evolving perception of China as a strategic threat by the Polish government under Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki.

This skeptical stance does not apply to another important figure responsible for Polish foreign policy, President Andrzej Duda (in office since 2015), who has remained enthusiastic towards China. Duda's optimistic outlook is most evident through his active engagement with Chinese representatives, e.g. at the 17+1 summit in 2021 (despite six Central and Eastern European countries being represented by foreign ministers) or during the Winter Olympics in 2022, where he appeared as a lone democratic leader.⁶ In the aftermath of the outbreak of the Ukrainian war, Duda's office also released details of a phone conversation with Xi, centered on the urgent need for conflict resolution.⁷

Nonetheless, the topic of China remains a relatively rare subject of discussion in Poland. The limited attention given to this matter in public discourse is reflected in the infrequent references to the country during parliamentary sessions. In the upper house, known as the Senate, the term "China" was raised in 31 out of 65 sessions (47 percent). However, it was mentioned only up to five times in a session in 80 percent of cases. Similarly, in the lower house, or Sejm, the term "China" was brought up in 60 out of 80 sessions, constituting two thirds of sessions. Yet, much like in the Senate, the term was frequently mentioned only up to five times within a single session (80 percent of the time). References to China often remained brief, lacking in-depth exploration of crucial aspects pertaining to bilateral affairs.

The growing awareness of global geopolitical dynamics, through a change in EU policy on China, creates an urgent need to formulate a comprehensive Polish strategy towards this country. Therefore, the October 2023 parliamentary elections will be crucial for Poland's international standing as the Polish parliament occupies a central role in shaping the future government and, by extension, Poland's external policies.

This paper delves into the views on China of Poland's five most popular political groups in an effort to determine the changing views within the Polish political environment on the PRC. Based on recent polls, the United Right, the Civic Coalition, the Third Way, the Confederation and the Left were selected.⁸ The focus of the analysis was placed on the following issues regarding China: Sino-Russian relations after the Ukraine invasion, economic cooperation and economic dependences, human rights violations, participation in critical infrastructure and technology, and allying with the EU and the US.

The paper traced the opinions of prominent politicians and the parties through the parliamentary sessions and parliamentary committee meetings transcripts, as well as media statements and content published on Twitter. At the time of completing the report, the parties had not released their election programs for the October 2023 elections, with the exception of the Confederation, so theirs is the only document analyzed in this context. The time frame of the analysis includes the period from October 13, 2019, to August 20, 2023, linking it to the 2019-2023 parliamentary term; however, earlier events and sources are referenced for context, if necessary.

United Right: Juggling Hope, Skepticism and Caution

For nearly two decades, Poland's political landscape has been shaped by the dominance of two prominent groups: PiS and the Civic Platform (PO). Since 2005, these parties have consistently held the top positions in parliamentary elections. While both initially emerged as center-right groups with subtle distinctions, allowing them to even negotiate a possible coalition at one point in time, in subsequent years, PO has gravitated towards a more liberal and left-leaning orientation, while PiS embraced a more populist and Euroskeptic stance.

In 2015, the United Right coalition, a union of PiS and minor parties, secured victory in both presidential and parliamentary elections, and they have upheld their position since then. Thereby they are responsible for the government's evolving approach to China – initially highly involved in economic cooperation under Beata Szydło, and later hesitant and doubtful under Mateusz Morawiecki. Interestingly, President Andrzej Duda, who maintains a close association with PiS, stands out as a notable advocate for positive relations with China in Poland. This creates a clear duality within PiS rule, however, as the government primarily oversees foreign policy, Duda's influence on the direction pursued by PiS is limited.

The transformation of PiS's stance on China since 2015 underscores its changing and context-dependent nature, which reflects domestic political imperatives at a given moment. The events surrounding the invasion of Ukraine by Russia further underscore PiS's contradictory motivations – challenging EU values juxtaposes a call for Western cohesion, and a desire for bilateral cooperation with China contrasts with a rising emphasis on self-reliance.

EYES ON THE US

The majority of PiS members adopt a measured approach towards China, which has slowly shifted towards skepticism. This progression is palpable in PiS's shift from a historically economically-focused approach towards expressing pronounced concerns about the construction of critical infrastructure by Chinese companies, interest in Taiwan's safety, or distrust of Beijing's role in the Ukrainian conflict. This last issue has definitely had the most impact on PiS's negative feelings towards China. As stated by Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau, this topic featured prominently in the 2022 political dialogue with China.⁹ Tense relations with Russia and China are perceived as a security concern, which leads PiS to call for Western unity, acknowledging Poland's limited global political influence.¹⁰ However, due to Poland's own ongoing conflict with the EU, and ambiguous attitude towards President Joe Biden's US, it is unclear how this concept will be executed.

Despite current hesitation, PiS's past stance on China has been undeniably influenced by the US. During the Trump presidency from 2017 to 2021, PiS even faced criticism by opposition politicians for its notably favorable stance towards the US. The arrest of a Huawei employee in 2019 was widely interpreted as a political gesture in support of the US, at that time cutting ties with the Chinese company, which was a move that stood out unmatched by any other European country. This sentiment was later echoed in the rapid signing of the US-Poland Joint Declaration on 5G, in Central and Eastern Europe second only to Romania, and in the eagerness at attempts at the legal implementation of the EU toolbox for 5G with the goal of avoiding dependence on "high-risk suppliers".¹¹ Morawiecki emphasized the significance of the alliance with the US, and argued this partnership must also extend to a shared view on 5G infrastructure initiatives.¹²

Presently, PiS demonstrates its solidarity with the US by endorsing Taiwan's sovereignty, while refraining from advocating full independence. This stance has notably strengthened in the aftermath of the Ukraine conflict, with numerous PiS politicians drawing parallels between the Russia-Ukraine and China-Taiwan dynamics. During Morawiecki's official visit to the US, he emphasized the vital connection between supporting Ukraine and ensuring Taiwan's autonomy.¹³ The most resounding affirmation of support for Taiwan was formulated during the parliamentary session by MP Waldemar Anzel, the leader of the Polish-Taiwanese parliamentary group. He affirmed that "democratic Taiwan holds a promising and illustrious future, as long as it enjoys the backing of foreign allies. Poland has been, continues to be, and will remain a strong friend of Taiwan."¹⁴ This steadfast support for the US is why PiS members, including MEP and former Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski, expressed their dissatisfaction with French president Emmanuel Macron's view advocating EU political autonomy in conflicts unrelated to its direct interests, which for some alluded to the Taiwan issue.¹⁵ PM Mateusz Morawiecki labeled this stance as jeopardizing US relations for short-term economic gains, while also deepening European reliance on China.¹⁶

As mentioned above, while advocating for Western unity, PiS does not offer any ideas for its execution. Some members contend that EU-China relations can only evolve positively if China exerts pressure on Russia to withdraw from Ukraine.¹⁷ In this regard, Waszczykowski suggests EU sanctions are effective and are one of the reasons China has refrained from direct military assistance to Russia due to their own fears of sanctions. He advocates for introducing similar sanctions on Belarus, dissuading China from supplying arms to Russia through this country.¹⁸ Despite acknowledging China's influential role, as declared by Morawiecki in an interview, PiS members remain skeptical about China's potential as a mediator due to its perceived pro-Russia and anti-free world stance.¹⁹

In PiS, the lone highly negative voice towards China is that of its vice president and former National Security Minister Antoni Macierewicz. He has expressed his belief that China, second only to Russia, poses a significant threat to global security. Consequently, he contends that Poland should avoid becoming a platform for the expansion of Chinese influence across Europe.²⁰ He is also seemingly against cooperation with the EU on China-related issues, and in 2022 stated that Germany "is open" to cooperation with Russia and China to "destroy Poland and Ukraine."²¹ As

a longtime member, Macierewicz is an important figure in PiS, however, it does not seem he has any significant influence on PiS's stance on China.

RAISING BARRIERS

As mentioned before, until recently, PiS had optimistic ambitions for forging stronger connections with China, seeing it as a way to enhance its economic strength and amplify Poland's significance within the EU. In 2021, this positive stance was evident in the endorsement of the 17+1 format by prominent PiS members.²² However, a growing sense of skepticism towards China has gradually emerged, leading to a more nuanced approach, as demonstrated by former Minister of Agriculture Jan Krzysztof Ardanowski. Once leaning towards enhancing ties with the country, in 2019 Ardanowski warned against an uncritical view of what he terms the "mythical China that everyone is so hopeful about," highlighting the unfavorable cooperation terms imposed by Beijing.²³

This individual stance was soon adopted by the majority of PiS members. In the midst of escalating geopolitical tensions, PiS's perspective on Chinese influence within Poland's economy has shifted towards a more pragmatic stance guided by careful consideration of risk.²⁴ While the pursuit of economic prospects remains a priority, there are now voiced concerns about potential complications arising from initiatives like BRI and other high-scale infrastructure projects. Consequently, PiS members argue for stimulating entrepreneurship, introducing legislative adjustments to safeguard markets from unfair competition, and the diversification of supply chains, particularly in critical sectors.²⁵ Morawiecki recognized the EU overcoming its dependencies as "another great challenge for the coming years."²⁶ Some PiS members believe the attainment of this goal of economic self-sufficiency could empower EU nations to more assertively address human rights violations in China and impose constraints on companies implicated in forced labor practices.²⁷

Civic Coalition: European Perspective

The primary opposition force to the United Right, Civic Coalition (KO), constitutes a wide-ranging alliance of liberal political parties in Poland seeking to challenge and counter the ruling PiS's authority. The coalition's foundation is rooted in PO, the largest party in the alliance, which held power in Poland from 2007 to 2015. During this period, under PO's leadership, the Polish government forged stronger diplomatic ties with China and actively participated in various economic endeavors. Notably, this engagement led to the creation of the 16+1 format with its first meeting in Warsaw in 2012. However, much like in the present, the government often grappled with a lack of comprehensive strategy and well-defined goals.

Over time, KO has adopted a more cautious approach in its interactions with China. While maintaining a commitment to economic collaboration, KO has become increasingly attentive to potential risks and divergences in political values. Aligned strongly with the EU, KO champions a robust and cohesive policy approach towards China. Nonetheless, it also exercises discretion when it comes to disputatious issues, revealing a measured posture allowing for potential diplomatic engagement. This standpoint underscores KO's endeavors to harmonize economic interests, political values, and regional partnerships within the broader context of its foreign policy strategy.

FOCUS ON EUROPEAN UNITY

KO rarely addresses China's involvement in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, but its prominent figures share a consensus in acknowledging Beijing's negative impact on the Ukraine war. Senate Speaker Tomasz Grodzki labeled China's role in the conflict as that of a "quiet player." During his meeting with the Chinese ambassador to Poland, Sun Linjiang, Grodzki called for a direct condemnation of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, asserting that it disrupts multiple sectors such as the economy and energy security.²⁸ A similar sentiment has been echoed by MEP and former Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski, known within European circles for authoring the EPP Group Position Paper on China.²⁹ In his address at the PO Congress, Sikorski underscored Beijing's potential role in the conflict, leveraging the country's capabilities and position. However, Sikorski refrains from advocating for China to mediate the conflict and, instead, discourages it from providing military support to Russia.³⁰

KO members are resolute on the need to forge alliances with Western nations, particularly the EU, to approach China. Current KO leader and former Prime Minister Donald Tusk, has shown a strong commitment to the EU, linked with his role of the president of the European Council in 2014–2019. Even before the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, he strongly emphasized the need for unity, stressing that only through a cohesive EU policy can member states exert substantial influence in

international affairs, alongside the US and China.³¹ Consequently, KO has frequently criticized PiS for its Euroskeptic stance and entanglements in conflicts with the EU, which, they argue, erode Poland's standing on the international stage.

In 2020, MEP and former EU Commissioner for Regional Policy Danuta Hübner advocated for the EU not to align exclusively with either China or the US, even though she acknowledged the challenges arising from two powers' mutual antipathy that place the EU in an inconvenient position.³² Similarly, KO politicians advise caution, but also the need to initiate domestic discussions concerning e.g. Taiwan's global position, especially given Poland's close relationship with the US and the substantial impact of the Ukrainian conflict on this issue. Nonetheless, KO politicians generally prefer to maintain the current status of the island while also appealing for the protection of Taiwan in the event of a potential invasion or advocating for its representation in international institutions.³³

ADVOCATING FOR STRATEGIC INDEPENDENCE

KO's stance on economic collaboration with China reveals a perspective which evaluates both the potential advantages but also the risks associated with forging closer ties with the nation. On the aim of decreasing reliance on Russian raw materials and growing renewable energy sources, the coalition's politicians express concerns regarding potential hazards, particularly the possibility of shifting dependency from one nation to another. There is an apprehension that Poland's pursuit of a green transformation could inadvertently deepen its reliance on China. To illustrate, MEP Janusz Lewandowski points to electric vehicles, which require rare-earth materials like lithium and graphite, resources dominated by China.³⁴ MEP and former Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek ties this concern also to the advancement of renewable energy sources, including photovoltaic panels, heat pumps, and batteries.³⁵ Moreover, he stresses the importance of raising public awareness and potentially tolerating higher prices for products to create independence not only in green energy but also in pharmaceuticals and chip manufacturing.³⁶

Nonetheless, despite these reservations, KO recognizes the significance of economic engagement with Beijing. As in political matters, the coalition argues for a united European front, asserting that only through collective effort can the EU stand as an equitable partner to China.³⁷ Despite that, they had some doubts towards the shaping of the CAI, noticing unsolved issues such as the need to introduce altered cooperation terms with China, and obliging China to adhere to WTO principles or the liberalization of rules for accessing the Chinese market.³⁸ Nevertheless, before the EU's decision to suspend ratification of the document, Sikorski called the CAI "a step in the right direction."³⁹

In KO members' opinions, safeguarding the Polish economy, particularly concerning vital infrastructure development like the 5G network, should be a priority, and Poland must be prepared for potential adverse outcomes that might arise as a result.⁴⁰ Therefore KO advocates for cultivating economic independence in areas that could be disrupted, including particularly the pharmaceutical sector, whose dependency on China was brought to light by the pandemic.⁴¹ It is especially important to KO,

as numerous politicians acknowledge a range of human rights concerns with China, and this issue could gain heightened political prominence in the future, especially if the EU adopts a more assertive stance in addressing human rights violations, a stance that the coalition supports.⁴²

Third Way: Opposing China

In early 2023, the collaborative efforts of Poland 2050, the Polish People's Party (PSL) and minor parties led to the formation of the Third Way coalition. Positioned at the political center, this group champions Christian democratic principles and directs its focus mostly towards pressing domestic issues. Both Third Way parties share historical affiliations with KO – PSL was previously in a coalition with PO (2007-2015), and some members of Poland 2050 are former KO affiliates. As a result, while discussions on China within the coalition may be limited, the Third Way coalition draws from past experience and shares many of KO's perspectives.

For the Third Way, a key focus is strengthening Poland's global influence primarily through a solid partnership with the EU. However, Third Way places emphasis also on the EU coordinating a united approach with the US to address authoritative powers like China and Russia. The coalition's commitment to confronting authoritarian influences aligns with internal discussions on human rights, democratic values, and responsible international involvement.

NAVIGATING THE CLASH OF TWO SYSTEMS

Third Way members view the Russia-Ukraine conflict primarily as part of a broader struggle between autocratic regimes and the democratic world, symbolizing a battle for principles like the rule of law, democracy, and free speech.⁴³ This outlook draws parallels with Poland's own concerns about the rule of law, prompting the coalition to underscore democratic values. Third Way appreciates them not only for their moral aspect but also as the substance upon which strategic alliances with Western counterparts can be built.⁴⁴ This perspective is illustrated through MEP Paweł Zalewski's critique of President Olaf Scholz's endorsement of the Chinese state-owned company COSCO's acquisition of substantial shares in the Hamburg port. The deal, which grants COSCO access to European critical infrastructure, stirred controversy both domestically and internationally in late 2022. Zalewski believes this move contradicts the assertive stance that the West should uphold to counter China's influence.⁴⁵

Furthermore, the coalition seeks collaboration with the US, particularly now under Biden's leadership, whilst acknowledging American pragmatic motivations such as to weaken Russia, a key ally of China, in anticipation of future geopolitical conflict.⁴⁶ General Mirośław Róžański, former commander-in-chief of the armed forces and a Poland 2050 politician, also suggested that the US support for Ukraine could become stronger should Taiwan be threatened, implying a pragmatic US approach.⁴⁷

The Third Way coalition recognizes China as a crucial player in resolving the war, with MP Piotr Zgorzelski going so far as to suggest that China is the sole nation Russia respects.⁴⁸ According to their perspective, while China economically aids Russia, it is China that wields dominance in the relationship, prioritizing its own

interests.⁴⁹ For this reason, China's motivation to end the conflict will arguably be activated only when it threatens Chinese interests. Therefore, Third Way members call for unwavering Western policies compelling China to reconsider its support for Russia's aggressive actions.

BALANCING STRATEGIC INTERESTS

When examining Poland's economic engagements with China, the Third Way coalition places a paramount emphasis on national security. This emphasis became especially pronounced when scrutinizing Poland's reliance on Chinese goods during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in sectors such as pharmaceuticals and semi-finished products. In recognition of the significance of this concern, the coalition actively advocates for comprehensive discussions at the EU level.⁵⁰ This approach seeks to proactively address and mitigate potential vulnerabilities stemming from such dependence.

Additionally, Third Way's members express unease over Poland's dependence on rare-earth elements from China, which, in their opinion, is difficult to diversify.⁵¹ However, beyond pragmatic considerations, they also draw attention to the association of rare-earth elements with human rights violations in China, including alarming practices like child labor and other criminal activities. This ethical concern, they argue, highlights the contrast between European companies' obligations to uphold transparency and ethical standards, and the less encumbered, and therefore less challenging environment within which their Chinese competitors operate.⁵²

In the broader context of global competition, Third Way articulates significant apprehensions concerning Poland's economic trajectory within the ongoing rivalry between China and the US. The coalition remains attuned to the potential ramifications of adopting Chinese technology, thereby underscoring the importance of careful decision-making to uphold Poland's national interests and preserve its relationship with the US.⁵³ Zalewski further questions the future of the Solidarity Transport Hub, considering warnings from the US against China's potential use of investments as political leverage within EU and NATO countries.⁵⁴

Confederation: Polish Interests Above All

The Confederation is a party encompassing a diverse range of political factions. It was founded by MEP Janusz Korwin-Mikke's then KORWiN party and National Movement in 2018 and subsequently joined by other parties. Groups united in this political project are focused on a shared commitment to conservatism, nationalism, and an unregulated free market. This ideological combination drives the Confederation towards a calculated approach to international affairs aimed at obtaining observable advantages for Poland. At its core, the party embraces a doctrine of "multi-vectoral politics," meaning strategically engaging a spectrum of partners to safeguard Poland's interests and not become overly dependent on any single alliance. Within this framework, the Confederation recognizes China as a pivotal economic partner for Poland and advocates for diplomatic engagement characterized by courtesy and pragmatism. However, it is not the group's focus, as their 2023 election program mentions "China" only once – as an example of a country that continues coal mining, contrasting with Europe's commitment to energy transformation and the EU's potential weakening in the face of such competition.⁵⁵

BUSINESS AS USUAL

The invasion of Ukraine triggered a significant internal rift within the Confederation, centered around the conflicting stances of two prominent party figures, Korwin-Mikke and MP Grzegorz Braun, who expressed support for the Putin regime.⁵⁶ This resulted in a decline in the group's public support, and soon pro-Russia stances were criticized by fellow party members, who condemned the war and stood in solidarity with Ukraine's territorial integrity.⁵⁷ However, only a few months later, some Confederation representatives criticized the shape of sanctions on Russia. In 2022, some of its politicians discussed the potential consequences of such restrictions on energy prices and possible shortages within Poland, evoking reservations about enduring "suffering in the name of the West denouncing Russia."⁵⁸ Braun and Korwin-Mikke advocated for a return to "business as usual" and the lifting of sanctions, as they have proven harmful for Poland and advantageous for Russia.⁵⁹ However, more party members noticed their benefits for China, and therefore argued for careful choices so as not to strengthen this country.⁶⁰ Even prior to the conflict, the Confederation's members harbored apprehensions about Russia's growing economic reliance on China.⁶¹ Party politicians address this topic with bold language, characterizing the situation of economic inequalities between the two countries as potentially turning Russia into a "vassal," a "de facto colony," or even undergoing a form of "Africanization."⁶² MP Krystian Kamiński predicted a narrowing scope for

Russia's maneuverability vis-à-vis China, foreseeing an increase in the disparities of forces and resources between the two nations.⁶³

Broadly speaking, the Confederation views the Ukrainian conflict as an element of a wider tug-of-war between the US and China. Therefore, the majority of the group advocates for Poland to navigate these changing dynamics carefully, seeking opportunities for cooperation while avoiding political involvement.⁶⁴ This approach, however, is subject to varied interpretations among party representatives. MP Krzysztof Bosak calls for EU unity, whereas MP Robert Winnicki criticizes Morawiecki's pro-EU and pro-US stance, highlighting the need for Poland to "transcend mere NATO or EU membership" and actively safeguard its interests on the global stage.⁶⁵ "Only a blind man does not see the clash between the US and China's imperial vehicles," Winnicki stated on Twitter in 2018. "Only a madman sets his country up as a bumper..."⁶⁶ Confederation members display a cautious sentiment and would prefer to avoid creating any tensions. Therefore, the visit of Nancy Pelosi, at the time Speaker of the House of Representatives, to Taiwan, was negatively assessed, and perceived by some members as potentially exacerbating hostilities and further deteriorating global relations.⁶⁷ On the other hand, during a parliamentary session concerning legal cooperation with Taiwan in criminal cases, MP Artur Sośnierz went so far as to advocate for the recognition of Taiwan's independence. Sośnierz contends that the current "acrobatics" of diplomatic interactions without official recognition of Taiwanese independence inadvertently validate the "delusions" of the CCP.⁶⁸

As the core of the Confederation's political creed is to protect individual freedoms, affiliated politicians disapprove of the Chinese government's extreme control over "the individual, who is like a drop in the ocean" and restriction in areas of religious beliefs or freedom of speech.⁶⁹ Some of the party members also evoke human rights issues in China to express their negative stance towards the EU. In 2020, one of the Confederation leaders and President of the New Hope party (known earlier as KORWiN) Sławomir Mentzen expressed the belief that China had achieved both cultural and political victories by effectively propagating Chinese concepts globally, i.e. introducing lockdowns or tracking people using cell phones.⁷⁰ A similar sentiment was echoed by Korwin-Mikke, who shared analogous views regarding the Prüm II system, which facilitates the exchange of police data, including mugshots, to be compared with recently acquired images, such as those from CCTV cameras. Korwin-Mikke argued that while China's introduction of face scanning was criticized as "horrible communist China," when the EU undertakes similar measures, they are often justified on security grounds.⁷¹

PRAGMATIC NEUTRALITY

The Confederation acknowledges the potential for fruitful economic engagement with China, but at the same time advises safeguarding the interests of the Polish economy. A notable advocate for China within the Confederation is Grzegorz Braun, who in the past argued for the construction of the "Fort Xi" against "Fort Trump".⁷² Braun contends that Chinese projects in Poland frequently become targets of political manipulation and interference from foreign powers. On many occasions, he cited the

failure to construct the Silesian Channel in 2016 as an example. The project was canceled after it was discovered, subsequent to the signing of a cooperation agreement, that the contracted constructor, China Harbour Engineering Company, is blacklisted by the World Bank.⁷³ However, Braun asserts that the deal's demise was influenced by the intervention of the US ambassador in Poland.⁷⁴ Braun, and other enthusiasts of closer ties with China highlight Poland's strategic geographical location and support the idea of the Solidarity Transport Hub under the BRI.⁷⁵ They argue that thoughtful and proper legislation, e.g. preferable fiscal conditions, should be adopted to attract Chinese investors. In July 2022, Winnicki attributed Poland's challenges in this realm to the government's anti-Chinese policies, which, he argues, have driven businesses away toward other nations like Hungary and Germany.⁷⁶

Despite their encouraging stance, the Confederation underscores the importance of cultivating self-reliance and protecting the Polish market from over-dependence on Chinese products. In early 2020, during the parliamentary session, Winnicki drew attention to the lack of substantial discussions surrounding the potential impact of China's lockdown on the Polish economy and entrepreneurs.⁷⁷ Addressing this situation, Confederation members advocate for initiatives to establish independence in sectors such as pharmaceuticals, raw materials, and semi-finished goods.⁷⁸

The Left: Initiative Within the EU

Founded in 2019, the Left party in Poland unites a wide range of left-leaning parties, placing a strong emphasis on a people-centric approach to politics. Currently, the left-wing parties in Poland are not leading in the polls. But in the past, one of the Left's factions, the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), held power in two separate periods: 1993-1997 and 2001-2005. During the SLD's time in government, Poland initiated NATO integration and successfully became a member of the European Union in 2004. The Polish Left still holds a strong desire for European integration and wants to deepen it by closer coordination in foreign and security policy (including in the military arena).⁷⁹ Additionally, the Left advocates for the establishment of a European counterintelligence service, with the goal of bolstering Europe's autonomy and reducing reliance on the US.

While the Left does not frequently engage in discussions about China, first the COVID-19 pandemic and then the Russia-Ukraine war sparked discussion about this country inside the party. Despite a negative assessment of China's role in the war, the Left seems to remain receptive to the idea of economic collaboration with China. However, party representatives underscore the importance of diplomatic efforts to renegotiate and reshape the terms of such cooperation. At the same time, the Left accentuates the critical task of addressing and mitigating dependencies across various sectors, aiming for a well-balanced and equitable partnership with China.

APPEAL FOR TIGHTENING EUROPEAN TIES

Much like other political factions, the Left members also regard the Russia-China alliance as a potential danger to the Western sphere and, by extension, Poland's security.⁸⁰ They see China as a conspicuous partner of Russia, sharing a common inclination for expansion into foreign territories through "imperial politics."⁸¹ Notably, the Left members highlight how Chinese enterprises indirectly fund Russia's military efforts by continuing operations in Russia despite the ongoing conflict. To address this, former Deputy Minister of Finance and MP Andrzej Szejna has proposed the introduction of additional taxes for Chinese enterprises engaged in business activities in Russia.⁸²

The Left's perspective emphasizes the crucial need to foster unity among European nations, extending beyond just containing Russia and China. The party also stresses the urgency of reinforcing Poland's ties within the EU, particularly in response to what they perceive as the undermining of Poland's standing due to the policies of PiS. European unity is also required to achieve more self-reliance and reduce the need for support from the US. The Left expresses concerns regarding the US's potential geopolitical recalibration, shifting focus from Russia to China as its primary contender. Consequently, there is a concern within the party that Poland could find itself lacking stable US assistance in the region. Moreover, the Left believes that being self-suffi-

cient is important for dealing with unexpected situations influenced by US internal politics, as seen with the weakening of transatlantic relations under Trump.⁸³ Despite these worries, the party welcomes the presence of the US military forces in Poland.⁸⁴

However, within the context of a strong and united Europe, the Left representatives occasionally express reservations about certain EU activities. When discussing CAI, MP Maciej Konieczny highlighted a lack of mechanisms to exert influence over China's conduct in human rights in the agreement.⁸⁵ Furthermore, the Left party expresses apprehensions about the "business" approach adopted by France and Germany toward China, viewing it as damaging to the broader interests of Europe.⁸⁶

BETWEEN ENTHUSIASM AND DOUBTS

Participation in discussions about economic cooperation with China is infrequent among members of the Left party. The notable voice in this regard is that of Andrzej Szejna, whose positive statements were shared in Chinese media, where he lauded the CCP on the 100th anniversary of its founding and indicated shared values with his party.⁸⁷ Prior to the outbreak of the Ukrainian war, Szejna maintained an optimistic view on economic collaboration with China, asserting that prioritizing economic ties with China should be a top governmental agenda item. Like other political groups, he underscored Poland's strategic geographic position as a gateway to Europe, advocating for an expanded transportation network under the BRI, especially railways.⁸⁸ Szejna saw potential collaboration also in other domains, encompassing raw food exports, infrastructure advancement, technological modernization, and green energy.

The lack of initiative in these areas led Szejna to consistently express disappointment with the strategies of the government. He criticized the lack of support for local entrepreneurs seeking to enter the Chinese market in 2021 and the planned adaptation of legislation designed to indirectly exclude China from participating in 5G construction in 2019.⁸⁹ From his perspective, such initiatives, driven by political pressures from the US, are likely to have negative implications for bilateral relations. However, his support for China was not uncritical. In a 2021 interview, he emphasized the importance of a thoughtful approach, taking into account geopolitical complexities, China's unique market dynamics, and concerns surrounding intellectual property and China's protectionist policies.⁹⁰

Other members of the Left party share concerns about China's influence and emphasize the urgency of domestic initiatives, each concentrating on different aspects. For example, MP Adrian Zandberg views technological dependency as a security concern and advocates for the domestic production of microchips and processors.⁹¹ MP Dariusz Wiczorek draws attention to the issue of individuals importing electronics from China without paying VAT or customs duties, which affects Polish import businesses.⁹² Wiczorek also expressed reservations concerning the collaboration between Polish company ElectroMobility Poland and Chinese partner Geely in producing electric cars announced in November 2022, citing geopolitical tensions as risks to the success of the venture.⁹³ Moreover, the Left members underscore the concern of pharmaceutical dependency on China, a matter brought to light by the COVID-19 pandemic, exposing vulnerabilities in supply chains and shortages of es-

sentinal medications. As a result, discussions have arisen regarding the significance of reducing reliance on China and stimulating the domestic production of vital medical supplies, even calling it a matter of “military security.”⁹⁴ These measures are deemed crucial in light of China’s unpredictable nature.

Conclusion

The landscape of Polish politics is witnessing an emergence of shared trends among parties across the political spectrum as regards their foreign policy approaches. The Ukraine invasion served as a turning point for all parties, sparking discussions about China and the ideological split in the global arena. As the global geopolitical stage evolves and the West broadly shifts into Sino-skepticism, this recalibration is also apparent within Poland.

Almost every analyzed political party emphasizes the importance of strengthening alliances with both the EU and the US to challenge China. However, their varying perspectives showcase some differences. Historically, PiS, ruling as the United Right, has preferred the US as a main ally to secure Poland's security, and therefore in recent years, the coalition supported the US in conflicts with China such as the Huawei controversy and Taiwan's status. At the same time, while the PiS also advocates for a united EU policy, Poland's conflicts with the EU have eroded its credibility and standing within the European context. This conflicted stance towards Poland's main allies sets PiS apart from the center and left opposition parties, which are actively seeking to restore robust EU ties, identifying it as an essential alliance and Poland's natural geopolitical choice.

Among the opposition parties, only the Confederation departed from this trajectory, with some members adopting a Euroskeptic stance while maintaining a pragmatic foreign policy approach. This difference in perspectives extends to the party's ambiguous stance on Russia. Condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine has prompted all parties to approach China with caution due to its alignment with its northern neighbor. However, the Confederation's position towards Moscow remains somewhat undefined, as it questions sanctions and showcases internal diversity of voices regarding the stance on the war. Consequently, the group's position on China in the context of the war is less prominent. Unlike other parties, the Confederation seems inclined to maintain business as usual. Therefore, their stance on the potential future course of economic cooperation is quite clear.

Despite some doubts, none of the political forces are advocating for a disruption of economic ties with Beijing. However, all parties express a collective desire to drive changes in the dynamics of cooperation with China, with the goal of reducing Poland's trade deficit in this relationship and establishing mechanisms to ensure equitable trade. They also advocate for establishing autonomy in critical sectors such as pharmaceuticals. Polish parties also recognize that economic independence is needed if Poland or its allies want to address human rights violations in China, which could result in the weakening of bilateral relations or even lead to sanctions. The Confederation, in contrast, appears less inclined to delve into these issues, treating them as domestic concerns where undue interference could adversely impact business. However, this does not mean they do not recognize the human rights violations in

China, and even use specific examples to draw parallels between the EU and China when criticizing the former.

Discussions about cybersecurity have received relatively less attention from the political parties. While debates peaked around 2019-2020 after the Huawei employee's arrest, subsequent discourse on the topic has been limited. Notably, concerns about TikTok and associated cybersecurity threats are practically non-existent. A significant development in this context was the March 2023 resolution of the Council for Digitization, an advisory body for the Ministry of Digitization, recommending officials and government employees remove the platform from official devices.⁹⁵ However, this document remains non-binding, and the government has not taken additional steps in adopting further laws, possibly influenced by the popularity of TikTok among politicians for building public support. The Confederation stands out in this regard, having created the first and currently most popular political TikTok profile, after their Facebook fan page was blocked by administrators.⁹⁶

Going forward, the main dividing line in the political camps on the issue of approaching China is likely to be the issue of the 'Europeanization' of such an approach. Nonetheless, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukrainian conflict have instilled a sense of caution towards China that is likely to persist regardless of the composition of the government. This new perspective could encourage Poland to thoughtfully deliberate on its strategic approach concerning China, encompassing both political and economic aspects. Such considerations will become essential, as Poland may soon find it necessary to craft a strategic framework for its engagement with China, taking into consideration the evolving and increasingly assertive stances of its allies, the US and the EU, along with the lessons learned from its own engagement with the country over the past decade and beyond.

Author



Joanna Nawrotkiewicz is a China analyst at Asia Research Center, War Studies University in Warsaw, Poland and recipient of the Ministry of Education's Diamond Grant. She graduated from sinology and law at the MISH College of the University of Warsaw.

✉ nawrotkiewiczj@gmail.com [@nawrotkiewiczj](https://twitter.com/nawrotkiewiczj)

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The publication was published within the MapInfluenCE (previously known as ChinfluenCE) project, which maps China and Russia's influence in Central Europe, specifically Czechia, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia.

The internationally acclaimed project has utilized various tools, such as media analysis to uncover who shapes China discourse in the Visegrád countries and why, the mapping of agenda-setters to reveal links between pro-China businessmen and local political elites, an analysis of changes in political parties' positions on China in the Czech and Hungarian Parliaments during the past 30 years, etc.

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