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The New Silk Road and its Geopolitical Consequences for Poland

The New Silk Road has recently become the most famous worldwide Chinese political initiative. Although far from being complete, or even secured, The New Silk Road – providing its success – would present unique opportunities for Poland. It would not only benefit from the short-term economic benefits but could even reverse the effects of its inconvenient geopolitical position.

The New Silk Road: An Introduction

The New Silk Road, or, to be correct, Silk Road Economic Belt/Corridor (later: One Belt One Road) Initiative¹ was announced by the Chinese President Xi Jinping in Astana, in September 2013. During his speech at Nazarbayev university² on September 7th 2013, Xi presented five most important policy recommendations: to strengthen policy communication, to improve road connectivity, to promote trade facilitation, to enhance monetary circulation and to strengthen people-to-people exchanges (*President Xi Jinping Delivers...*). The most important part of his speech came when he urged to “improve traffic connectivity, so as to open the strategic regional thoroughfare from the Pacific Ocean to the Baltic Sea,

¹ There is also another name, The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road; however, the One Belt, One Road, *Yidai yilu*, remains the most popular name, alongside The New Silk Road.

² The venue of this speech has a value itself. Kazakhstan remains China’s most important regional partner (“strategic partner”) and the announcement of New Silk Road in a speech at the University named in honor of Nazarbayev may be understood as Chinese way of “giving face” to Kazakhstan’s leader.

and gradually move toward the set-up of a network of transportation that connects Eastern, Western and Southern Asia”; also, among other things, he urged the relevant countries to “enhance communication and green-light regional economic integration in terms of both policy and law” and to “promote local-currency settlement” (*Xi suggests China...*).

Xi’s Astana initiative was soon followed by another step. On the 4th of October 2013, while visiting Indonesia and speaking in the parliament, he proposed a parallel initiative: “building a new maritime silk road”, saying that China and ASEAN countries “share a destiny” and would both benefit from this new idea (*Xi in call...*). The content of Xi’s Indonesia speech was similar to the viewpoint presented in Astana (though of course it differed on details): emphasis on a stronger economic cooperation, including financial aspects, very close cooperation on the joint infrastructure projects (e.g., building roads and railways), the enhancement of security cooperation, and the idea of a “21st century maritime Silk Road” through strengthened “maritime economy, environment technical and scientific cooperation (Szcudlik-Tatar, 2013). Since then, Central Asian and Southeast Asian components of New Silk Road became known in both Chinese media and within the expert circles under one slogan: “One Belt and One Road” (the belt being the maritime route whereas the road being the Central Asian one). There are slight differences in the official goals of these two routes (in Southeast Asia the emphasis is on trade security, in Central Asia on the trade itself (Ibid.), but they should be considered combined. In this article, both routes would be understood as one concept: the New Silk Road.

First serious comments after Xi’s Astana visit underlined the possible regional consequences for the newly created concept of the “New Silk Road”. That is the enhanced Chinese economic domination over the region: “it is a prelude to the closer integration of the region in the fields of infrastructure, trade & finance and energy” which, combined with “the rapid development of economic cooperation and China’s *de facto* sponsorship of Central Asia’s weaker states” is “inevitably leading to a situation where the Central Asian states are, to varying degrees, falling into political dependence on China, which in some cases is even taking on a neo-colonial character” (Jarosiewicz, 2013). This, of course, in the long term means some kind of a political confrontation with Russia, the previous political patron and geopolitical controller of Central Asia. New Silk Road in the regional context may be understood as China’s response to the rival integration project promoted by Russia the Eurasian Economic Union (Wiśniewska, 2013). And, if successful, New Silk Road would give China a political advantage over Russia in the region, with the help of Beijing’s economic instruments. So far, however, both sides were able to

restrain and avoid any confrontation with each other. This was possible thanks to the very nature of the New Silk Road initiative: “the Chinese concept, which is based on different principles than the Russian idea, makes it possible for Beijing to protect its economic interests in Central Asia without the need to openly compete with Russia”; Beijing was able to win Moscow over: “by treating Russia as an essential element of the New Silk Road” the Chinese “were able to “reduce Russia’s dislike of the project” and created an “impression that this is a positive-sum game, and thus Russia may be convinced that it is not worth opposing Chinese projects in Central Asia” (Kaczmarek, 2015). China avoided confrontation with Russia for a single reason. It is not Moscow that is Beijing’s main global competitor (and a partner at the same time) but Washington (see below). Taking into account the geopolitical implications of the special US-China relations, Beijing cannot aggregate Moscow. It must maintain at least a neutral relationship, at all costs.

The disputes in the South China Sea (incidents, frozen dialogue, unfriendly statements) between China on one side, and Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines and Taiwan on the other, overshadowed the comments after the announcement of the Maritime Silk Road. That is why, the New Silk Road policy seemed to be considered as a tool to defuse tensions. This new approach, based on a soft language, lucrative economic offer and security aspects was supposed to be “China’s olive branch to the ASEAN states” (Szcudlik-Tatar, 2013). This olive branch, however, was soon replaced by China’s firmer stand on the disputed islands, which means that the Maritime Silk Road project and the disputed islands should not necessarily be combined. What China wants here, is to dominate the South China Sea and to impose her vision of regional (and global) development, without giving many concessions in return.

With time, the concept of the New Silk Road grew in importance. It became not only a plan for creating a network of infrastructural connections (mainly transport corridors, both on land and at sea, between China and its most important economic partner – Europe), but, “throughout 2014, the concept gradually came to be the pivotal issue in China’s foreign policy and, to a lesser extent, in its domestic policy” (Kaczmarek, 2015). In November 2014, China announced establishing the Silk Road Fund worth \$40 billion to “set up a Silk Road infrastructure fund to boost connectivity across Asia” (*China to establish...*). A month earlier, on the 24th of October 2014, China, together with 20 other Asian countries, founded the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, an additional source of money for the New Silk Road (*21 Asian countries...*). Moreover, in January 2015, China launched the Energy Development Fund worth \$20 billion to “finance China’s ‘One Belt, One Road’ initiatives”, or in other words, the New Silk Road (*New fund...*).

All this is meant to provide sources for creation of a network of transport corridors, that will connect China with her trade partner nr 1: the European Union. It also means building or modernizing the transport infrastructure (railways, including high-speed railways, and road infrastructure, airports, inland and maritime ports) as well as creating the oil and gas pipelines and telecommunication infrastructure. All this makes the New Silk Road “a conglomerate of routes, and envisages more than ten variants of transport connections between China and Europe” (Kaczmarek, 2015). Laying down of such an elaborate and enormously expensive network of high-speed, high-volume railroads as well as oil and natural gas pipelines across the vast breadth of Eurasia is “a breathtaking project to put in place an infrastructure for the continent’s economic integration” (McCoy, 2015).

Since 2014, the New Silk Road has also become, as Marcin Kaczmarek put it, “a versatile instrument of Chinese policy”, in both the regional and global dimensions. According to him, this concept is becoming “a key element of China’s public diplomacy and soft power” (it’s being presented in information and propaganda setting, covering cultural events, expert meetings and tourist routes, and promoted as a “Chinese version of the Marshall Plan”). The concept is “a kind of ‘packaging’ for China’s economic expansion, lending it an attractive form”. China may present her expansion as beneficial for all (“win-win formula”), it is imagined as an “illustration of the Chinese philosophy of international relations where all the countries engaged are winners”. Its aim is to promote (or enhance) the image of China as a ‘benign’ power. Moreover, it is a “flexible formula of dialogue”: China can ‘sell’ this concept to the individual countries and regions, because the concept of the New Silk Road is an open political project, without clearly defined boundaries (Kaczmarek, 2015).

The openness of this project raises questions of how concrete it is. Its main objectives are not clearly defined, and its nature is imprecise. The Chinese analyst like to say that this project is planned for generations and for decades (*The 2nd Academic Conference...*) which raises questions, whether it is at all real. It may turn out to be a simple propaganda effort, without any real effects on China’s foreign policy. Moreover, there are objective problems that may become crucial obstacles to the development of the existing railway connections between China and Europe (the core of the New Silk Road’s land section concept), such as **customs procedures, differences in railway systems, the** lack of goods that could be exported to China and the fact that it’s still cheaper to send containers by sea.

Nevertheless, while understanding all this reservations, this article considers the New Silk Road as a real possibility. It’s China’s geopolitical response to the US pivot towards Asia, a chance to break away from the USA’s new containment policy. And what a response it may be!

The Geopolitics of New Silk Road

The New Silk Road is a plain, though pretentious allusion to the famous Silk Road, that connected Europe with Asia. Here one may see a characteristic style of Chinese policy making. The Chinese like to hark back to history while pursuing their present policy. However, this is not only a pretentious way; it reveals yet another feature of the Chinese-style policy: in-depth understanding of history and its mechanisms.

“In these circumstances – wrote George Kennan in his famous Foreign Policy article – it is clear that the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies”(“X”, or George Kennan, 1947). Outdated? Not quite. Just remove the names “Soviet Union” and “Russian” and replace them with “China” and “Chinese”.

The USSR collapsed in 1991, and the USA won the cold war. But – contrary to some optimistic claims (Fukuyama, 1992) – history did not end. On the opposite: it returned (Kagan, 2008), or rather, it has always been here. Since the 2000s, China became the new US global competitor. Beijing was beginning to develop its sea power and strategic interests beyond its border. China has also been astute in utilizing its financial and cultural power in order to win friends and gain influence around the world, particularly in Asia-Pacific. This was a possible threat to the US: if the US was to be pushed out of the Asia-Pacific region and to lose its control over maritime routes in Southeast Asia, then U.S. global hegemony would end (Bartosiak, 2015).

Faced by China’s rise and its geopolitical consequences, Washington’s answer was logical. Obama’s terms saw reorientation of the US foreign policy away from the Middle East and back to Asia-Pacific. Negligence and political idealism were replaced by Kissinger-like realism. The containment policy was recycled from the dustbin of history. Thus, in 2011 with “US pivot/rebalance to Asia” or, in “plain language, the US’s China containment policy” (Lintner, 2013) was born. Washington started TPP negotiations and strengthened cooperation with the Southeast Asian countries, particularly in the scope of security (Singapore, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Brunei). The most significant (and successful) American move was making a deal with Burmese generals. Before 2011, Myanmar was one of most important political vassals of China – Beijing’s “icing on the cake” in Asia. Thanks to “US pivot to Asia” the Americans turned it almost completely upside down: the Sino-Burmese relations today are as bad as they had not been since 1980s, and the Burmese post-generals are conducting joint military drills with US army. From Washington’s point of view, it was a huge success. For China, all this

meant stopping the natural way of development in Southeast Asia. If the US was to succeed further (e.g. with TPP project) in the region, Washington would be able to block China's rise in Asia-Pacific for good.

Faced by this serious challenge, China had to find a way to break away from this policy of containment. Chinese leaders followed Sun Zi's advice: if you are faced by a stronger opponent, do not fight with him openly, but instead, try to get around and manoeuvre yourself to a better place (Chong Pin-lin, personal 2015). They simply looked at the map and saw the obvious. If the road to the East and Southeast Asia is blocked, then they must move to the West, to Europe. This was nothing new. They just dust off the century-old idea of the Silk Road. The scale as well as the possible global consequences was new. To understand them, one must go back to the very idea of geopolitics.

When Sir Halford MacKinder, the founder of this new modern science known as geopolitics, wrote at the beginning of 20th century his article "The Geographical Pivot of History", he simply redrew the map of the world. His new map showed Europe, Asia, and Africa as a one continent: "the world island". Beyond it, there was its broad, deep "heartland": a territory stretching some 4,000 miles from Volga to Yangtze. So enormous, that it could only be controlled from its "rimlands" in Eastern Europe (its maritime "marginal" in the surrounding seas) (Mackinder, 1903).

When Mackinder proclaimed his ideas, the world had been witnessing the peak of the British power, born out of the sea-dominance. This dominance, in turn, was then the result of more than 300 years of Western sea-powers global supremacy (Panikkar, 1953). In the sixteenth century, "the "discovery of the Cape road to the Indies (...) the revolution commenced by the great mariners of the Colombian generation", Mackinder wrote, "endowed Christendom with the widest possible mobility of power (...) wrapping her influence round the Euro-Asiatic land-power which had hitherto threatened her very existence". This greater mobility gave Europe's seamen "superiority for some four centuries over the landmen of Africa and Asia." (Mackinder, 1903, p. 432). Since Henry the Navigator, the sea powers has been dominating the world for 400 years (first Portugal, then the Netherlands, then Britain and finally the USA) (Bartosiak, personal conversation 2015). They competed to control the globe via the surrounding sea lanes with their instruments: ships (first men-o'-war ships, then battleships, submarines, and finally, the aircraft carriers). Thanks to this, they'd been controlling of whole coasts and continents: "at the peak of its imperial power circa 1900, Great Britain ruled the waves with a fleet of 300 capital ships and 30 naval bastions, bases that ringed the world island from the North Atlantic at Scapa Flow through the Mediterranean at Malta and Suez

to Bombay, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Just as the Roman Empire enclosed the Mediterranean, making it *Mare Nostrum* ('Our Sea'), British power would make the Indian Ocean its own 'closed sea,' securing its flanks with army forces on India's Northwest Frontier and barring both Persians and Ottomans from building naval bases on the Persian Gulf" (McCoy, 2015).

For Mackinder, however, sea dominance was not enough. He argued that the future of global power lays not in controlling the global sea lanes, but in controlling a vast land mass, the "Euro-Asia" (Mackinder, 1903, p. 429). He simply turned the globe away from America, and placed Central Asia in the global centre. For him, the Heartland was the key region worldwide. As he put it later: "who rules the Heartland, commands the World-Island, who rules the World-Island commands the world" (Mackinder, 1962, p. 150). He was not the only one. Zbigniew Brzezinski clearly followed this way of thinking when he wrote "a power that dominates 'Eurasia' would control two of the world's three most advanced and economically productive regions... rendering the Western Hemisphere and Oceania geopolitically peripheral to the world's central continent." (Brzezinski, 1997, p. 31). This rationale was that any power that controls the World-Island, would control well over 50% of the world's resources. And the Heartland's size and central position made it the key to controlling the World-Island. Therefore, the vital question was how to secure control for the Heartland. Or, just how to prevent any strong continental power to emerge, maintain the control over the Heartland and make full use of its vast resources.

According to his concept, maritime powers' geopolitical nightmare was that if any strong state were allowed to control the vast resources of Heartland, it would be able to control the world. He believed that the introduction of the railroad had removed the Heartland's invulnerability to land invasion and enabled faster transportation of goods. As Eurasia began to be covered by an extensive network of railroads, there was an excellent chance, that a powerful continental nation could extend its political control over Eurasian landmass. In his words, Russia or Germany might expand "over the marginal lands of Euro-Asia," allowing "the use of vast continental resources for fleet-building, and the empire of the world would be in sight" (Mackinder, 1903, p. 436).

Moscow was the first capital to become a continental rival for the seapowers. In the 19th century Russia challenged British supremacy. Their Great Game in Central Asia was a strategic rivalry of sea power versus land power or – to use Mackinder language – "the World-Island and the Heartland." Although the Great Game ended with a "strategic draw" (Russia and Britain settled their zones of influence), this enabled lasting

of a status quo favourable for the British. Then came the two World Wars fought over his “rimlands” (from Eastern Europe through the Middle East to East Asia). The First World War was “a straight duel between a land-power (Germany) and a sea-power (Great Britain).” (Mackinder, 1962, pp. 78–79). The Second World War was “a strategic overtime”, where the sea-powers (Great Britain and the USA) fought to prevent Germany from taking the Soviet-controlled Heartland and to create Hitler’s “Living Space”. *Following Allied victory, the USA took the global lead from Britain, but continued to follow the British global policy to contain China and Russia inside that Eurasian heartland. They built an arc of military bases “that followed Britain’s maritime template and were visibly meant to encircle the world island”;* they contained the Soviet land power by the U.S. Navy; they created layers of encircling military alliances, and finally, added a global network of 450 military bases. As Alfred McCoy summarized, “stripped of its ideological foliage, Washington’s grand strategy of Cold War-era anti-Communist “containment” was little more than a process of imperial succession” (McCoy, 2015).

U.S. ultimate success after 1991 seemed to indicate the continuum of sea-power dominance. This is, however, not so obvious. Russia’s and Germany’s failure proved that Mackinder was wrong when he identified them as potential mortal challengers to the sea-powers’ dominance. This, however, does not mean his theory was falsified.³ Today we have a new global competitor, who may make full use of Heartland’s vast resources. It is China, with her New Silk Road.

Beijing does not try to build a strong navy (like the British) or a global aerospace dominance (like the USA). Instead, China moves deep towards the World Island. By doing so, China is trying to – as McCoy coined it – “thoroughly reshape the geopolitical fundamentals of global power: build a transcontinental infrastructure for the economic integration of the world island from within and at the same time mobilize military forces to surgically slice through Washington’s encircling containment” (McCoy, 2015). In other words, China wants to overturn the global dominance of the sea-powers in favour of continental (Heartland) power. Even the very down-to-earth analysts notice that the New Silk Road concept “in the long term is becoming an element of the construction of the Chinese international order, which is alternative to the one dominated by the United States” (Kaczmarek, 2015).

The New Silk Road is the tool to reverse the global geopolitics. Construction of enormously expensive network of high-speed, high-volume railroads as well as oil and natural gas pipelines across the vast

³ The theory itself has never been falsified nor verified.

breadth of Eurasia means fulfilling Mackinder vision: “for the first time in history, the rapid transcontinental movement of critical cargo – oil, minerals, and manufactured goods – will be possible on a massive scale, thereby potentially unifying that vast landmass into a single economic zone stretching 6,500 miles from Shanghai to Madrid”. In this way, “the leadership in Beijing hopes to shift the locus of geopolitical power away from the maritime periphery and deep into the continent’s heartland” (McCoy, 2015).

China started from integrating her own territory. Here, infrastructure was the key: road, railways (including high-speed railways), and pipelines, entwined the whole country, with highways cutting the remote mountain ranges and new investments seen everywhere (McCoy, 2015). This all-out development was a prelude to another step: “zou chu qu”, or the “going out policy” (Stargardt, 2002). In Central Asia that meant (besides planned transportation routes), constructing a comprehensive network of trans-continental gas and oil pipelines to import fuels from the whole Heartland: from Russia in the north, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan in the centre (), Pakistan in the south and in the south-east from Myanmar. And now, Beijing proclaims the New Silk Road: a project that combines and unites all the previous initiatives with the newly planned ones.

If successful, the New Silk Road would change the global geopolitics. It would turn the centre of global power away from the maritime powers and back to the land powers. It is easily forgotten that until the 15th century, the global centre of power was Asia, in the Heartland. This is where the most dynamic global empires existed and it was the contact with Asia, that gave Europe her power and dominance. It ended with the great geographic discoveries and the colonial period that followed them. It resulted in Asia’s decline and subordination by the Western powers and, consequently, with the dominance of sea-power of Great Britain and the USA (Panikkar, 1953).

Nothing, however, is granted forever. The history may reverse again. And the hypothetical success of the New Silk Road may even make China the first sea and land superpower (Bartosiak, personal conversation, 2015). Of course, this vision is only a future possibility, and by no means a necessary scenario (given the fact that the U.S. would do anything to prevent it from happening). Furthermore, the result of this struggle will be visible in the next decades only. Nevertheless, it is intellectually interesting to speculate about possible consequences for Poland, should the New Silk Road succeed.

New Silk Road's Implications for Poland

The implications of the hypothetical New Silk Road's success for Poland may be divided into two categories. First: short and mid-term economic (and regional) chances, opportunities and consequences. And second, much vaguer, long-term, strategic, geopolitical ones.

The short-term opportunities are mainly economic and regional ones. Poland, as the key country in Central Eastern Europe plays an essential role as a transit area and a place of entry to the Western European markets. Although China's trade with Central Eastern Europe is only about 10% of Beijing's total trade with the UE, the region will not be the main beneficiary of the influx of Chinese goods. It may, however, become a key transit point, a "gateway" to the Western Europe via inland and maritime ports. Regional infrastructure is the main challenge here, particularly the lack of standards; incomplete double tracks railway lines and the lack electrification. Here, China may help with modernization and electrification of railways (Szczudlik-Tatar, 2013).

On the wider scale, being the transit point is nothing to be ashamed of. From Beijing's point of view, this is one of the region's main advantages, if not the only one. One can notice this perception in creating the (quite bizarre from European perspective), 16+1 group.⁴ In this respect, Poland is quite privileged by geography: Chinese products going via Poland need to cross only two borders (*Seminar Chinese New Silk Road...*). Furthermore, China considers Central Eastern Europe as a "testing ground" for Chinese products, before they fully enter the Western European market. Beijing believes that the absence of history of conflicts will help to decrease social resistance to Chinese initiatives and win the ideological war over hearts and minds of Eastern Europeans. China has one trump card here: the hopes for Chinese funding: grants, loans and investments (Szczudlik-Tatar, 2013). For Poland this may be the way to escape from "middle income trap".

The New Silk Road's land route has a particular significance for Poland – its shortest variant leads to Germany via Poland. Furthermore, Poland may hope to become the main hub on the western end of the future supply line of Chinese goods going via the New Silk Road, providing that Beijing would not consider Hungary a better place for such an investment (*The 2nd Academic Conference...*).

The most important economic consequence of the New Silk Road project for Poland may be connecting Poland with Western China. Although most of the Polish investments are concentrated in the coastal part of East-

⁴ 1+16 means China plus Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary.

ern and Southern China, the real chance for success lies in Western China. Regions and provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Ningxia and Xinjiang (most notably, with Lanzhou New Area, the economic hub of Western China) present more economic opportunities than the cooperation with the entire country or only with the eastern provinces, where the “Chinese cake” has already been eaten by a (too) strong competition from Western companies. This regionalisation of efforts, an element previously non-existent in Poland’s strategy, could become the hallmark of the Polish economic presence in China. Opportunities are open for Polish companies in industries and sectors such as mining, petrochemical, environmental protection, biomedical, pharmaceutical, green technologies, agriculture processing, chemicals. Moreover, there are prospects for boosting trade, most notably the Chengdu-Łódź direct cargo rail link. This link may become Poland’s trump card due to the basic facts: the “rival” link Chongqing-Xinjiang-Duisburg takes 16 days, whereas Chengdu-Łódź 12 days. Furthermore, Chengdu-Łódź is much faster than the sea passage (40–50 days) and is much cheaper than air cargo (*Seminar Chinese New Silk Road...*).

Providing that Poland finds a way to fill the trains to China with goods (so far the trains return almost empty to Chengdu due to the lack of desirable goods for Chinese markets), and to establish a handling center for goods moving in both directions and/or link the container terminal in Małaszewicze near the Belarusian border with the project; then the New Silk Road may become one of Poland’s main economic assets (Szcudlik-Tatar, 2013). It may even be a successful way of reinvigorating the entire region of Łódź, which fell behind the other Polish provinces in the country’s development after 1989 (the same can be said about the Eastern provinces of Poland).

So, the economic opportunities for Poland are there. The question is whether we would be able to make use of them, whether the Polish elites would be competent enough to bargain a good position vis a vis China, and whether the external factors, most notably the American influence, would not hamper, or even topple the whole New Silk Road project. The answers to these questions remain to be seen.

Much more fascinating or perhaps even fantastic, are the long-term, geopolitical consequences for Poland, should China be able to reverse the global geopolitics. Again, before presenting this point of view, we must present the historical context here.

The geographical discoveries and colonialism that followed them, created what Immanuel Wallerstein called the “world-system”. He characterized the “world system” as a set of mechanisms of inter-regional and transnational division of labour which redistributes surplus value from the periphery (poor, underdeveloped part of the world, usually raw-ma-

terials exporters) and semi-periphery to the core (industrialized part of the world) by the means of the tool called market. Core countries have a high-skill, capital-intensive, technologically advanced production, whereas the peripheral and semi-peripheral countries focus on a low-skill, labour-intensive production and the extraction of raw materials (Wallerstein, 1974, pp. 347-57).

The system constantly reinforces the dominance of the core countries, but it also has dynamic characteristics (technological revolutions, new transport means etc.) – individual states can gain or lose their core/semi-periphery/periphery status over time. Some, like the Netherlands, Great Britain or the USA, become hegemons (*ibid.*). All of them were sea-powers in the past, but not continental ones, and indeed, the creation of the world-system shifted (to use Mackinder's terminology), the power status from the Heartland to the World Island.

Wallerstein's world-system emerged from the "long" sixteenth century 1450-1550 and then geographically expanded across the entire planet by around 1900. The West used its advantages to gain control over most of the world economy, which resulted in industrialization and creation of capitalist economy – this in turn led to unequal development. Thus a tripartite division of labour emerged, with core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral zones. The developed, core countries dominate the other, less developed "semi-periphery" states; which, at the same time dominate over the others in the "periphery". The core nations dominate by owning and controlling the major means of production in the world and perform the higher-level production tasks (productivity, financial and trade dominance). The periphery nations own very little of the world's means of production and provide less-skilled labour. The semi-peripheral countries fall somewhere in-between, in a midway (*ibid.*).

Using these categories, one may say that China is a country that transformed from being peripheral to semi-peripheral and is now on the way to overthrow the entire system and to become the core of the new system (providing it ever happens). Poland, similarly, though on a less scale: at the formation of the world-system it was a peripheral country, and it developed into being semi-peripheral country only in the 20th century. Now it is a classic case of a semi-peripheral country. It fits well with the basic semi-peripheral countries' characteristics: it must keep itself from falling to the category of peripheral nations and, at the same time, strive to join the category of the core nations; it is relatively developed and has diversified economy, but is not dominant in international trade and tends to export more to peripheral nations and import more from core nations in trade; and it acts as buffer between cores and peripheries (*ibid.*).

Finally, one more comment is needed here: from Janet Abu Lughod that argued with Wallerstein by arguing that before the emergence of world-system there was a pre-modern world system extensive across Eurasia existed in the 13th Century. The Mongol Empire stitch together the Chinese, Indian, Muslim and European regions in the 13th century, before the rise of the modern world system (Abu-Lughod, 1991). In other words, Abu Lughod shows that global epicenter of powers in the Eurasian Heartland existed already before the emergence of sea-powers “world-system”. Only later, after geographical discoveries and colonialism, the global epicenter shifted in favor of sea-powers.

By agreeing with Janet Abu Lughod in this point, we may conclude one thing: the formation of Wallerstein’s world-system, or the shifting the global epicentre of power from the continental Heartland to the maritime World Island, pushed Poland towards the margins of Europe and consequently, to the margins of the global world. The geographical discoveries, colonialism and reshaping of the world economy that followed afterwards,, all this adversely affected the Kingdom of Poland. It fell to the peripheral category – an exporter of raw-material to the West, which in the long term resulted in a political subordination and the loss of independence (Bartosiak, personal conversation, 2015).

So now, if China is able to overthrow the world-system again, in favour of the continental Heartland and back to dominance of Eurasia, then Poland would be positively affected. In other words, the geopolitical consequence of successful implementation of New Silk Road means a reversal of the negative consequences of geographical discoveries and colonialism (the dominance of the sea powers). Thus, this constitutes a great chance for Poland’s development. For now it may look vague or even unbelievable, but we must remember that the opportunity is there: “we may notice it, even within the life our generation” (ibid.).

Conclusions

The New Silk Road is far from secured or even certain. This impressive political project may reverse the global geopolitics and shift the epicentre of world power back from the maritime powers to a continental one – China. Whether China would fulfil this dare dream is yet to be seen. However, if it should happen; Poland, assuming it pursues a wise policy, would not only benefit from the short-term economic benefits but also escape from the middle income trap or even reverse the effects of its inconvenient geopolitical location. It’s a dream worth dreaming – even if it looks an incredible dream.

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