

# WORKING PAPER

## **Foreign policy for a new era?**

### **The case of 16+1 as an evolving platform of Chinese regional cooperation and diplomacy**

Alicja Bachulska

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping



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#### **Abstract**

*As China moves forward on its domestic development path, Beijing's international interests and goals also evolve. This way, the establishment of the 16+1 platform could be seen as one of the many events marking the changing Chinese international strategy towards regional (or region-based) cooperation and diplomacy. This paper examines the way in which the 16+1 format has been perceived locally, against the backdrop of China's evolving international aspirations and needs. Firstly, it introduces the concept of Chinese regional diplomacy and cooperation. Secondly, it discusses the diverging perceptions of the initiative as an evolving tool of the above-mentioned type of cooperation. Both Western European as well as Central and Eastern European perspectives are introduced. The topic is contextualized through an analysis of the Polish perceptions towards the issue. Three different dimensions are examined, namely: 1) the official stance of the Polish government; 2) the opinions of experts and academics; 3) the popular discourse disseminated through the media.*

**Keywords** *Chinese foreign policy; Chinese regional cooperation; diplomacy; 16+1; Poland; China; Belt and Road Initiative*

#### **Introduction**

The nature of Chinese international behaviour has changed significantly since 2012, when Xi Jinping started his first term as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The on-going development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the deepening of bilateral and multilateral ties on the international arena (e.g. through the 16+1 framework) or the establishment of new international financial institutions (like the New Development Bank (NDB) or the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank – AIIB) are just a few examples of Chinese deepened engagement on the global scene. Some observers have been alarmed by this new trend, while others have perceived it as an opportunity for international development. In this context, it is important to examine how the new forms of Chinese political and economic engagement have been understood regionally.

#### **1. Methodology**

The 16+1 framework is a good example of what has been called by some Chinese experts on Central and Eastern Europe (most notably Liu Zuokui) “a new model of regional

cooperation” (区域合作模式, *quyu hezuo moshi*).<sup>1</sup> The format was established in April 2012 when the Chinese premier Wen Jiabao visited Warsaw. Since then, it has served as a multilateral platform linking 16 Central and Eastern European nations with China. 11 of the 16 states belong to the European Union (EU), while the remaining 5 do not (e.g. Serbia, Macedonia). Since its establishment, numerous high-level meetings between representatives of the countries involved took place under the 16+1 umbrella. In this paper, the author argues that the platform has evolved as a framework for cooperation in a way that reflects the Chinese changing international position and the country’s evolving needs (both domestically and internationally). Simultaneously, this very development partially reflects the way in which China responds to the controversies surrounding its international behaviour. In other words, the 16+1 could be compared to a “battlefield” of Chinese evolving strategy towards regional diplomacy in Central and Eastern Europe. Because of differences in perceptions (Chinese, Central and Eastern European, and Western European), the project has evolved from a relatively unimportant one, to a platform that for Brussels and Berlin represents a threat for the unity of the EU. This paper addresses the very question of the diverging perceptions of the 16+1 within the region (with a special focus on Poland), while contrasting it with the Chinese rhetoric and some of the Western European views on the initiative. Moreover, the paper situates the 16+1 framework within the broader context of the changing Chinese international behaviour, resulting in new forms of international cooperation. Different perspectives and narratives are highlighted through the analysis of a number of Polish sources, such as official government statements, media coverage, think-tank publications, and academic articles. The differences between these perspectives are analysed and contextualised by using a number of specific examples related to Sino-Polish relations. Finally, the paper ends with some recommendations regarding the future of Sino-CEE cooperation, both within and outside of the 16+1 framework.

## **2. Broader picture – the changing nature of Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping**

Institutionalised forms of cooperation with specific regions, which are not located in China’s close vicinity, could be regarded as the second level of Chinese regional diplomacy. In this context, Beijing-initiated formats of diplomatic and economic cooperation in distant regions are usually multilateral and aim at complementing existing bilateral ties. As Kratz (2016, p. 9) has pointed out, from Beijing’s perspective, the 16+1 format as a regional model of cooperation “complements and reinforces China-EU cooperation and relations, while providing a consultation mechanism for China’s economic projects for the region”.<sup>2</sup> The establishment of the 16+1 should be analysed against the backdrop of China’s proactive shift in international behaviour. If one considers April 2012 as the official inauguration of the format, it simultaneously places the event right before Xi Jinping started his first term as General Secretary of the CCP in November 2012. Yet, the functioning of the platform

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<sup>1</sup> The words of Liu Zuokui as quoted in: Kratz, Agatha (2016), “The best of both worlds? CEE’s place in China-Europe economic relations”. In Angela Stanzel (Ed.), *China’s Investment in Influence: The Future of 16+1 Cooperation*. (pp. 6-9). European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR).

<sup>2</sup> Kratz, Agatha. (2016). The best of both worlds? CEE’s place in China-Europe economic relations. In Angela Stanzel (Ed.), *China’s Investment in Influence: The Future of 16+1 Cooperation*. (pp. 6-9). European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR).

accelerated significantly after Xi Jinping took power. The establishment of the 16+1 was part of a larger process in which China started to behave more assertively and proactively, which happened over time and did not originate solely from the choice of Xi Jinping as China's new leader. Thus, the establishment of 16+1 should be regarded as a part of a bigger process of political and economic change, which originated in China and gradually started affecting the outside world. Since 2012, numerous 16+1 meetings have been organised, both in China and in the CEE region. Some of the events included the annual summits, e.g. in Riga in November 2016 and in Budapest in November 2017. According to the Chinese official sources, the main areas of 16+1 cooperation include establishing policy communication, enhancing connectivity, promoting economic cooperation and trade, as well as strengthening cultural and people-to-people bonds.<sup>3</sup> What follows is a discussion of the European perceptions of the format, seen from the perspective of Western Europe as well as from the local perspectives, namely from Poland.

### **3. The issue of misperceptions – hindering dialogue on all sides**

Seen from the point of view of Chinese diplomatic and strategic priorities, the CEE region is indeed a faraway land. Cultural distance, lack of strong historical ties, and different geopolitical settings make it difficult to compare the region's situation with China's close neighbours' situation when it comes to their respective positioning within Chinese regional (or region-based) diplomacy. Yet, all the differences put aside, these two types of regional cooperation do matter for Beijing in the long run. As means to an ultimate end of the "great renaissance of the Chinese nation", they are both aimed at achieving China's strategic long-term goals. However, their successful implementation will largely depend on the Chinese ability to detect and respond to the fears and (mis)perceptions surrounding Beijing's role and intentions on the international arena.

#### **3.1 Western European perceptions**

Some observers from Western Europe perceive the 16+1 as China's attempt to develop its own "group cooperation diplomacy" for reasons of efficiency and power balance (Ekman, 2016, p. 1).<sup>4</sup> In this way, many "old" EU member states (e.g. Germany and France) see Chinese involvement in the region as having a deeply destabilising potential, which could be used to gradually weaken the EU unity from within. Moreover, it has been regarded as a platform facilitating non-transparent conclusion of business deals between Chinese politicians, businessmen, and their counterparts in the CEE region. From this perspective, what is often referred to in the West as the "Chinese model" of regional economic cooperation can be seen as incompatible with the EU environment and norms that prioritise transparency of business deals and their de-politicisation. For many Western European observers, China exploits the openness of the EU in order to achieve its long-term strategic gains by creating its own sphere of influence in the CEE region, which is often perceived as more prone to outside influence.

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<sup>3</sup> Five-year outcome list of cooperation Between China and CEE Countries, The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 28 November, 2017, Available at: [http://english.gov.cn/news/top\\_news/2017/11/28/content\\_281475957504762.htm](http://english.gov.cn/news/top_news/2017/11/28/content_281475957504762.htm) (Accessed on April 21, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Ekman, Alice. (2016). *China's regional forum diplomacy*. European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS).

As a report by the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the Global Public Policy Institute suggests, “China commands a comprehensive and flexible influencing toolset, ranging from the overt to the covert, primarily deployed across three arenas: political and economic elites, media and public opinion, and civil society and academia”.<sup>5</sup> The critics of the 16+1 see it as precisely this kind of platform, combining all of the above-mentioned areas of influence under one institutional umbrella. It is important to note that the 16+1 format has been also perceived as a mechanism that overlaps with the BRI or as a tool of implementing its goals locally in the CEE region. It is mostly related to the BRI’s conceptual blurriness. China perceives it as an advantage, while for the West it seems to present a threat. In this way, Western European criticism of the 16+1 format often merges with the general criticism of the BRI as a whole. The most recent news about an alleged report by 27 out of 28 EU national ambassadors in Beijing, in which they warn against the BRI as a non-transparent project furthering Chinese national interests and helping the country’s companies to gain an advantageous position on markets of countries along the so-called New Silk Road.<sup>6</sup> Hungarian ambassador was the only person who refused to support the claims made in the report. That was not the first occasion that reveals the growing tensions between the EU and China when it comes to Beijing’s international initiatives.

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that the Western European perceptions of the 16+1 and the responsibility of the 11 EU member states involved in the format in interacting with China in accordance with the EU norms seems to be changing. For quite a long time, the CEE states that intensified their relations with China were seen as the only actors responsible for deteriorating the EU unity vis-à-vis Beijing. Most recently, according to some newly published reports, Western Europe should stop “complaining about the 16+1 format China uses to interact with smaller EU members in Central and Eastern Europe while engaging in 1+1 formats with Beijing will not help to come up with a collective EU response on issues where Chinese actions fails to resonate with shared European interests”.<sup>7</sup> Larger EU member states seem to have realised that their privileged position vis-à-vis smaller states could be used to leverage the collective weight of EU member states.<sup>8</sup> In this context, the upcoming China-EU summit might be a turning point when it comes to the dynamics of Sino-European cooperation. At the same time, the rumours that in the coming years the 16+1 summits could take place every two years, instead of on annual basis, might indicate that Beijing is willing to respond to certain Western objections regarding China’s regional cooperation mechanisms implemented in Europe.<sup>9</sup> Simultaneously, given the lack of any verifiable data regarding the decision, the rumours might also indicate that Beijing realised that the 16+1 format has not

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<sup>5</sup> Benner, Thorsten, Jan Gaspers, Mareike Ohlberg, Lucrezia Poggetti, Kristin Shi-Kupfer. (2018). *Authoritarian Advance. Responding to China’s Growing Political Influence in Europe*. Report by the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the Global Public Policy Institute.

<sup>6</sup> EU ambassadors band together against Silk Road. *Handelsblatt Global*. April 17, 2018. Available at: <https://global.handelsblatt.com/politics/eu-ambassadors-beijing-china-silk-road-912258#> (Accessed on April 19, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Benner, Thorsten, Jan Gaspers, Mareike Ohlberg, Lucrezia Poggetti, Kristin Shi-Kupfer. (2018). *Authoritarian Advance. Responding to China’s Growing Political Influence in Europe*. Report by the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the Global Public Policy Institute.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Barkin, Noah, Robin Emmott, Tsvetelia Tsoleva. Exclusive: China may pare back 'divisive' eastern Europe summits. *Reuters*. March 12, 2018. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-easteurope-exclusive/exclusive-china-may-pare-back-divisive-eastern-europe-summits-idUSKCN1GO1PI> (Accessed on April 21, 2018).

been that successful. From this perspective, the new dynamics might suggest a future redefinition of Beijing's goals in the CEE region and a potential adjustment of the means to achieve them.

### **3.2 Local perceptions of the 16+1 – the case of Poland**

#### **a) The official stance of the Polish government**

When the 16+1 platform was established in 2012, Poland was ruled by the coalition of the Civic Platform (*Platforma Obywatelska – PO*) and the Polish People's Party (*Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe - PSL*). It was the time of a new opening towards cooperation with China. Before the 2008 global financial crisis, Poland was not really inclined towards intensifying official contacts with the PRC. Yet, together with the economic slow-down in Europe, Poland partially shifted its focus towards developing a new relationship with China, which started to be perceived as a potential economic partner that could help Poland diversify its international trade ties. In 2011, the then President of Poland Bronisław Komorowski visited China and elevated the bilateral relations between Warsaw and Beijing to the level of strategic partnership.<sup>10</sup>

When the right-wing Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – PiS*) won both presidential and general elections in 2015, Beijing anticipated a potential deterioration of bilateral ties. It was mostly connected to the history of “China threat” narrative popular within certain conservative circles as well as the new ruling party's vocal anti-communist approach.<sup>11</sup> Yet, the situation developed in the opposite direction. Political exchange intensified with a number of high-level diplomatic meetings. Polish President Andrzej Duda's visit to Beijing in November 2015 was followed by Xi Jinping's journey to Warsaw in June 2016. This way, the intensification of political contacts created high expectations towards the future outcomes of the Sino-Polish cooperation. In May 2017, Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydło went to Beijing for the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. The Polish delegation was small and did not manage to secure any important deals. The same applies to Polish officials' participation in the 16+1 summits. Given its location in the centre of the CEE region, its access to the Baltic Sea, and its relatively stable economic situation Warsaw wants to be perceived as an informal leader of the 16+1 format. As Tuszynski (2015, p. 189) has pointed out, in the years directly following the establishment of the 16+1 platform, Poland saw it as a potentially useful format that could enable Warsaw to position itself as a “natural” and “real” leader in the region.<sup>12</sup> The creation of Coordinating Secretariat for Maritime Affairs 16+1, which operates under Polish Ministry of Maritime Economy and Inland Navigation, was a symbolic gain for Warsaw.

Despite many efforts to intensify Sino-Polish contacts both bilaterally and multilaterally, the results of the cooperation have been limited. After the 16+1 summit held in Budapest in November 2017, the then Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydło remarked that “China is a big

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<sup>10</sup> China, Poland establish strategic partnership. Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Poland. Available at: <http://pl.china-embassy.org/pol/zt/zfvisit/t888992.htm> (Accessed on 20 April, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Szczudlik, Justyna. (2016). When the Silk Road meets the EU: towards a new era of Poland-China Relations? In Angela Stanzel (Ed.), *China's Investment in Influence: The Future of 16+1 Cooperation*. (pp. 10-12). European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR).

<sup>12</sup> Tuszynski, Rafał. (2015). Polish Perspectives on CEE-China 16+1 Cooperation: The Unexpected Ukrainian Factor. *EUROPOLITY*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2015, pp. 189-220.

and demanding partner”, which suggests a certain dose of scepticism towards the current state of affairs.<sup>13</sup> Gradually, the Polish government’s enthusiasm towards Sino-Polish cooperation has decreased. The current Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki’s speech delivered during a conference on Sino-Polish cooperation in November 2017 might serve as a case in point. Morawiecki pointed out that China is a “difficult market” and that securing reciprocity in trade relations should be a prerequisite for achieving a genuinely win-win type of cooperation.<sup>14</sup> He highlighted the ever-growing Polish trade deficit with China as an example of the unbalanced trade relations that Beijing exploits not only with Poland but also with the majority of countries in the region. Moreover, he suggested that Poland is still willing to accept the situation for some time, but not indefinitely. The comment might remind one of Donald Trump’s trade war rhetoric and practice, which have been shaping the nature of Sino-American relations since the newly elected president of the US assumed his office in January 2017. This by no means suggests that Poland would undertake the same type of measures against China, but it does highlight a new stage of Sino-Polish relations, marked by Warsaw’s increasingly sceptical attitude.

#### **b) The perspective of experts**

China studies and China-focused expertise in Poland is a relatively small and underdeveloped field. The most renowned state-funded think tanks that have been working on assessing Chinese politics and international cooperation from Poland’s perspective are: 1) the Polish Institute of International Affairs (*Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych - PISM*); 2) the Centre for Eastern Studies (*Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich – OSW*). In both cases, China represents just a marginal (yet well-researched) part of these institutions’ scope of work. The main areas of their China-related expertise are Sino-Polish economic and trade relations as well as Chinese foreign policy and its implications in the CEE region. When it comes to their perspective on the 16+1 format, China experts in Poland usually display quite a lot of scepticism towards the initiative. For some, it “serves as a tool to support Chinese interests in bilateral relations with separate CEE countries, rather than as a forum to accomplish common goals and projects”.<sup>15</sup> What is more, it is seen as platform encouraging the 16 nations to compete, rather than cooperate, for Chinese investments and funds.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, some analysts also suggest that “the financing model proposed by China, based on loans and favouritism towards Chinese companies, has proved to be unsuitable to local conditions”.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, China is seen as exporting some of its experiences and models of cooperation with developing countries to the CEE region, where this kind of debt-based model for

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<sup>13</sup> Szczyt Chiny - Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia (16+1) w Budapeszcie. Ambasada Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w Budapeszcie. 27 November, 2017. Available at: [http://budapeszt.msz.gov.pl/pl/aktualnosci/szczyt\\_chiny\\_\\_\\_europa\\_srodkowo\\_wschodnia\\_\\_16\\_1\\_\\_w\\_budapeszcie](http://budapeszt.msz.gov.pl/pl/aktualnosci/szczyt_chiny___europa_srodkowo_wschodnia__16_1__w_budapeszcie) (Accessed on 21 April, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Morawiecki: chcemy wykorzystać potencjał Bałtyku w handlu z Chinami. *Polska Agencja Prasowa*. 23 November, 2017. Available at: <http://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news,1179440,morawiecki-chcemy-wykorzystac-potencjal-baltyku-w-handlu-z-chinami.html> (Accessed on 21 April, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Przychodniak, Marcin. (2017). The 16+1 Initiative and Challenges for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries. *Bulletin of the Polish Institute of International Affairs*, No. 121 (1061).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Jakóbowski Jakub, Marcin Kaczmarski. (2017). Beijing’s mistaken offer: the “16+1” and China’s policy towards the European Union. *Centre for Eastern Studies Commentary*, No. 250., pp. 1-7.

infrastructure development does not seem attractive vis-à-vis existing EU-funding models.<sup>18</sup> While they might be attractive for the non-EU states within the 16+1 framework, in the Polish context they do not present any serious alternative to EU funds. Some other major obstacles for the 16+1 format and its development include “the immense diversification of the region, barriers related to EU law, insufficient expertise on the part of Chinese companies, the asymmetry of economic needs of both side, and no willingness within the region to develop cooperation”.<sup>19</sup>

Despite all the criticism, it is important to point of that the Polish China experts’ perception of the 16+1 platform is still rather pragmatic. They do not suggest any kind of withdrawal from the initiative but they call for a more realistic and facts-based approach to the Sino-Polish cooperation *per se*. Reciprocity in terms of economic relations seems to be advocated by all experts working within Polish state-funded think tanks. Moreover, the 16+1 format is also seen as a proof of the region’s ability to “pursue an active policy towards non-European great powers”.<sup>20</sup> The improvements of the lower level communication (e.g. between local authorities) and people-to-people ties have also been noted as result of the 16+1 activities.<sup>21</sup> Despite these two think tanks’ efforts to generate important insights into the state of Sino-Polish relations, their analysis has a limited reach. In the Polish academic world, the interest towards the 16+1 platform has also been rather limited. In October 2016, 13 institutions from the CEE region coupled with one Chinese institution (Central Compilation & Translation Bureau – CCTB) and established the 16+1 High Level Academic Platform.<sup>22</sup> The research network is supposed to help the institutions involved to carry joint projects in areas such as economics, management, construction, biology, chemistry, and architecture, just to name a few. Nevertheless, Polish involvement in the platform’s work has been limited.

### **c) The perspective of the Polish media**

The quality of the media discourse on the Sino-Polish cooperation in the context of the 16+1 format is rather low. The issue seems underreported and marginal in the Polish discourse related to China. Although some of the Polish think tank and academic experts do share their insights in the mainstream media, their views do not seem to influence the overall character of China-related reporting. When the Polish media write on China, they tend to focus on sensational content, based on a very limited number of sources. One-dimensional coverage (e.g. related purely to economy or to normative issues, such as human rights abuses) seems to be the norm. For example, although not directly related to the coverage of the 16+1 format, the news about blocking a piece of land belonging to the Military Property Agency, which was supposed to be used by a Chinese company developing a logistic centre and a part

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Kaczmarek, Marcin, Jakub Jakóbowski. (2015). China on Central-Eastern Europe: “16+1” as seen from Beijing”, *Centre for Eastern Studies Commentary*, No. 166, pp. 1-8.

<sup>20</sup> Szczudlik, Justyna. (2016). Prospects for China-CEE Relations in the 16+1 Format, *Bulletin of the Polish Institute of International Affairs*, No. 76 (926).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Establishment of the first scientific research network of Eastern and Central European countries and China. Science in Poland (website related to the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education). 26 October, 2017. Available at: <http://scienceinpoland.pap.pl/en/news/news%2C411766%2Cestablishment-of-the-first-scientific-research-network-of-eastern-and-central-european-countries.html> (Accessed on 21 April, 2018).



of the BRI, was widely reported as a Polish move against the initiative.<sup>23</sup> The decision was reported as being related to the anti-BRI attitude of the then Polish Minister of Defence Antoni Macierewicz. As a matter of fact, there is no verifiable data supporting this claim. Overall, the reporting on the 16+1 platform in the mainstream media is almost non-existent. General media discourse is largely stereotyped and there are almost no journalists specialising in China only. Tomasz Sajewicz, working for the Polish Public Radio, is probably the only media figure who somehow specialises in China and is based in Beijing.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The 16+1 format can be seen as a tool of the changing Chinese regional diplomacy, reflecting the country's new role on the international arena. It is related to the grand scheme of the BRI, which simultaneously tries to solve some of China's domestic issues, while at the same time expanding its international reach when it comes to trade and investment. If one assumes that political power follows economic power, the 16+1 (as an integral part of the BRI) can be also perceived as a politicised platform for regional cooperation with a potentially destabilising effect on the EU as a whole. As a result of the dichotomous interpretations of the Chinese international initiatives, a highly polarised public debate has been predominant in the region. Media representatives, business groups as well as public and government figures often do not possess enough expertise to engage in a fruitful and balanced discussion. The public perception of the 16+1 platform and more broadly the BRI as a whole has been dominated by these oftentimes emotional and unbalanced views. Simultaneously, it is important to point out that both the perception of the 16+1 as a platform for a truly win-win cooperation and the opposing view that sees it as a politicised project, are somehow inflated in the popular discourse (both in the CEE region as well as in Western Europe). While Chinese growing influence on the international arena (including the CEE region) should be closely monitored, the current dualistic perception of the Sino-CEE cooperation, embodied by the 16+1 platform, does not help to create a balanced and facts-based view of China and its role in the region. This way, the public debate on the topic within the CEE region should be more professionalised and less focused on sensational news and "myth-making", which results solely in reinforcement of the existing stereotypes about China.

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### **About the author**

Alicja Bachulska, PhD candidate, Polish Academy of Sciences; Chinese politics analyst, Asia Research Centre, War Studies University