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Poland as a strategic logistics hub on the New Silk Road

Polska jako strategiczny węzeł logistyczny na Nowym Jedwabnym Szlaku

Abstract. The aim of the study is to identify contemporary challenges and prospects of transport and logistics between China and Poland, with particular emphasis on oversize transport and Poland's role as a key link on the New Silk Road. The article focuses on Poland, which, thanks to its geographical location, is gaining importance as a key logistics hub within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Situated between the East and the West, it acts as an important bridge connecting Asia with Europe, which is conducive to the development of transport and logistics. Poland is a central point for many transport corridors, and its role in international trade, especially with China, is growing significantly. The article discusses the development of transport infrastructure, including rail and sea connections, and plans for the development of logistics centers in Poland. Challenges related to customs procedures and international cooperation aimed at simplifying formalities and improving logistics efficiency are also discussed. The future of Poland as a key node in the global supply chain depends on further investments in infrastructure, the development of intermodal transport, and the improvement of customs and administrative processes.

Keywords: New Silk Road, Poland, China, logistics

Synopsis. Celem opracowania jest rozpoznanie współczesnych wyzwań i perspektyw transportu i logistyki pomiędzy Chinami a Polską, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem przewozów ponadnormatywnych i roli Polski jako kluczowego ogniwa Nowego Jedwabnego Szlaku. Artykuł koncentruje się na Polsce, która dzięki swojemu położeniu geograficznemu zyskuje na znaczeniu jako kluczowy węzeł logistyczny w ramach Inicjatywy Pasa i Szlaku (BRI). Usytuowana pomiędzy Wschodem a Zachodem, pełni funkcję ważnego mostu łączącego Azję z Europą, co sprzyja rozwojowi transportu i logistyki. Polska stanowi centralny punkt wielu korytarzy transportowych, a jej rola w handlu międzynarodowym, szczególnie z Chinami, znacząco rośnie. W artykule opisano dotychczasowy rozwój infrastruktury transportowej, w tym połączeń kolejowych i morskich, oraz plany rozwoju

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centrów logistycznych w Polsce. Uwzględniono również wyzwania związane z procedurami celnymi oraz współpracą międzynarodową mającą na celu uproszczenie formalności i poprawę efektywności logistycznej. Przyszłość Polski jako kluczowego ogniwa w globalnym łańcuchu dostaw zależy od dalszych inwestycji w infrastrukturę, rozwoju transportu intermodalnego oraz usprawnienia procesów celnych i administracyjnych.

Słowa kluczowe: Nowy Jedwabny Szlak, Polska, Chiny, logistyka

Kody JEL: F15, L91, O18, R42, F10

Introduction

China is a growing economic and manufacturing power that is trying to find attractive markets for its products, including in Europe. As part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), numerous infrastructure projects are being developed to improve connections between Asia and Europe, and one of their important elements is the so-called New Silk Road. Poland, due to its purchasing power, is not a prominent target market for China, but in terms of logistics, it is attractively located on the way to richer and more developed European economies such as Germany or France [Kalinowska 2011]. Thanks to the development of transport and logistics, Poland can use its location, not only in developing trade relations with China, but also in becoming a significant hub on a European scale. Poland has a strategic location in the center of continental Europe, neighboring Russia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Germany. Poland is a transit country for the main transport corridors between Asia and Europe [Doński-Lesiuk 2022]. Economic relations between China and Poland have been revived since President Bronisław Komorowski signed a strategic partnership agreement with China in 2011. Transport and logistics between China and Poland are more than just infrastructure. They are also advanced technologies, supply chain optimization, and international cooperation that support the economic development of both countries. The dynamic development of these areas is a foundation for further trade expansion, contributing to the growth of Poland as a key logistics partner of China in Europe [Bachulska 2017].

Oversize transport, also known as out-of-gauge or heavy haulage, involves the transportation of cargo that exceeds standard dimensions and/or weight limits. Its importance is growing in China–Poland logistics, especially for goods such as wind power plant components, large construction machinery, or industrial infrastructure modules [Klepacki 2021]. Oversize transport requires detailed planning – from permits and pilot escorts to the coordination of various transport modes (rail, road, sometimes inland waterways). Polish terminals, especially in Małaszewicze, are increasingly handling this type of cargo, and the development of infrastructure dedicated to oversize transport has become one of the investment priorities [Jakubowski 2020].

It is also important to note the obstacles facing oversize transport, including infrastructural limitations (bridge clearance, condition of local roads), complex administrative procedures, and the need for coordination at borders. Both on the Chinese and Polish sides, logistics operators and local authorities are working to simplify these procedures and adapt routes and terminals for oversize cargo handling.

Research aim and methodology

The aim of the study is to assess Poland's role in the transport system connecting China and the European Union, with particular emphasis on the conditions and development prospects of oversize (out-of-gauge) transport. The article also seeks to identify the key factors determining Poland's competitiveness as a logistics hub within the Eurasian supply chain network.

The research is based on a review of academic literature, strategic policy documents, and statistical data on rail, sea, and road transport between China and Poland. A comparative assessment of selected efficiency and cost indicators was also conducted, enabling the formulation of both theoretical and practical conclusions.

Analysis results

Poland and China are working to strengthen their logistics links, primarily through the development of transport infrastructure and trade agreements. Poland is investing in transport infrastructure, including road and rail networks, to increase connectivity with China. The development of efficient transport links is crucial to facilitating the flow of goods between the two countries.

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Poland has expressed interest in participating in China's BRI, a global infrastructure development strategy. The initiative aims to improve trade connectivity between China and various countries, including Europe. The Belt and Road Initiative [Chen & Li 2021], also known as the New Silk Road, is a global infrastructure and economic project launched by China in 2013 by President Xi Jinping. The initiative aims to strengthen trade, investment, and infrastructure links between China and the rest of the world, building on the historic Silk Road that connected China with Europe and the Middle East [Jakimowicz 2017].

This initiative focuses on two main aspects: the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The first of these aims to connect China with Central Asia, the Middle East, Russia and Europe. For this purpose, land connections such as rail and road networks are being created. The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road focuses, as the name suggests, on the development of sea routes. It focuses on ports and infrastructure in Southeast Asia, East Africa, and Europe.

The main goals of this initiative are [Szymańska & Wielechowski 2019]:

1. Infrastructure development,
2. Facilitating international trade,
3. Strengthening cooperation with participating countries in many fields,
4. Diversification of routes.

The initiative has been joined by 150 countries and international organizations from Asia, Europe, Africa, and Latin America. The participants include both developing and developed countries. Poland has also joined the initiative and, as a country located at the crossroads of important trade routes, it plays an important role in the BRI. The rail terminal in Małaszewicze is one of the key points in the transport of goods between

China and Europe. Poland plays a strategic role in the BRI, mainly due to its geographical location as a gateway to Central and Western Europe. It is an important point on the transport map connecting Asia with Europe, which has a positive impact on the development of the economy, infrastructure, and international relations.

Trade relations

Trade relations between Poland and China have been developing dynamically since the 1990s, and after Poland joined the European Union in 2004, they gained even greater importance. Currently, China is one of Poland's most important economic partners in Asia, and Poland plays a key role in China's relations with the entire Central and Eastern Europe. Poland and China are working to expand their trade relations. They are developing dynamically, offering both great opportunities and challenges [Kolodko 2017]. This includes not only the exchange of goods, but also cooperation in various sectors, such as technology and innovation. Currently, Poland cooperates with China not only within the previously mentioned BRI, but also within the 16+1 format. This initiative is a cooperation of 16 European countries with China, which supports the development of infrastructure projects, cooperation in trade and investment, as well as political and cultural dialogue [Andrzejczak 2023].

Table 1. Oversize transports on the China–Poland Route in 2023
Tabela 1. Przewozy ponadgabarytowe na trasie Chiny–Polska w 2023 r.

Type of cargo	Number of shipments	Average weight [tons]	Mode of transport	Main routes
Industrial machinery	112	45	rail-road	Xi'an – Małaszewicze – Łódź
Wind turbine parts	48	32	road	Shanghai – Gdańsk – Poznań
Construction modules	67	28	intermodal	Chongqing – Gdańsk – Wrocław

Source: own study
Źródło: badania własne

Ensuring smooth logistics connections also includes addressing customs and regulatory issues. Both countries can work on simplifying and harmonizing procedures to facilitate trade. In order to fully exploit the potential of trade cooperation between Poland and China, it is necessary to simplify customs and administrative procedures. Complex formalities, as well as differences in regulations and lengthy customs clearance processes, can lead to delays and increased logistics costs, thus reducing trade profits. Streamlining customs and other regulations would allow for faster flow of goods, reducing bureaucracy and improving the efficiency of the entire supply chain. Introducing uniform standards and digitalizing customs processes, along with mutual recognition of certificates and trade documents, could significantly increase the competitiveness of Polish and Chinese companies on international markets. The simplification of procedures would also support increased investment and the creation of new business opportunities for companies operating in the transport and logistics sector [Antonowicz 2023].

An important thread of this study is the analysis of oversize transport (out-of-gauge or heavy haulage) between China and Poland. Despite the growing importance of this segment, it is often marginalized in the literature, even though oversize transport presents significant infrastructural and procedural challenges. It requires special approaches in route planning, customs clearance, and international cooperation.

Important means of transport

Freight train connections between China and Poland have developed dynamically in recent years. In December 2012, the Chengdu–Łódź rail link was inaugurated, making Łódź an important hub that connects China with various European destinations. The expansion continued in October 2013, when another rail connection between the two countries was launched. After a journey of 14 days, the first freight train from China reached Warsaw, operating under the name SU-MENG-EU. On November 21, 2019, DCT Gdańsk introduced the first regular Euro China Train service, which now runs from Xi'an in China, passing through the Adampol Małaszewicze land terminal and arriving at the DCT container terminal in the Port of Gdańsk. Rail container transport from China to Poland has proven to be cost-competitive, a result of flexible and well-adapted logistics planning. Furthermore, rail transport is perceived as a reliable and safe mode of shipping, unaffected by current geopolitical conflicts, thus ensuring stable supply chains [Gan 2022].

Sea transport also plays a crucial role in the movement of cargo between China and Poland. Goods shipped from the eastern coast of China to Western Europe typically spend about 35 to 40 days at sea. The coastal city of Gdańsk is increasingly recognized for its potential to become a major logistics hub, as evidenced by the growing volume of container shipments handled at its port. Over recent years, the Port of Gdańsk has experienced a significant increase in transshipment, underlining its expanding role in European logistics. Notably, in 2021, the port achieved a record throughput of 53.2 million tons of cargo, marking an 11% increase compared to the previous year and the highest figure in its history.

Road transport is another vital component of Poland's logistics network with China. In November 2018, the first TIR truck shipment from China to Europe successfully completed its 7,000-kilometer journey, entering Kazakhstan at the Khorgos border and traveling through Russia and Belarus to reach Poland in just 13 days. The efficiency of this mode, both in terms of travel time and cost, makes it a strong competitor to air and rail transport. The increasing emphasis on expanding e-commerce across Europe has drawn Chinese companies to invest in Polish logistics connections, and further Chinese investment in logistics services in Poland is expected to grow in the coming years.

Logistics centers in Central and Eastern Europe

Countries such as Poland, due to their central location in Europe, serve as important logistics centers. Cities such as Warsaw, Wrocław, and Łódź have well-developed transport infrastructure and logistics facilities that facilitate the flow of goods. There is another logistics center of great importance for the trade connection between China and Poland.

On every Chinese logistics map of Eurasia, Małaszewicze is placed as one of the most important nodes [Bartosiewicz and Szterlik 2020]. The international situation after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine did not discourage Chinese companies from launching container trains to Europe via Małaszewicze. Małaszewicze is the most important route for the Chinese, and it is necessary to prepare the infrastructure to improve transshipment and adapt it to modern technologies. Both countries are examining the possibility of establishing logistics centers to improve the flow of goods. These centers can serve as strategic points for storing, processing, and distributing products. Bartosz Zakrzewski writes about their potential development:

Despite trade difficulties of a political nature, transshipment at the border railway station reached 7 million tons of cargo per year. The excellent geographical location of Małaszewicze, unfortunately reinforced by the limitation of international transport with Ukraine via the Żurawica-Medyka station in the zone of communication corridor no. 4, currently results in increased interest of large logistics companies in the border infrastructure of this area. A terminal capable of handling 100 thousand containers (TEU) per year, belonging to a Czech operator, was built. PKP Cargo purchased a 30 ha plot of land in the Free Customs Zone WOC Małaszewicze-Terespol in order to create a comprehensive infrastructure supporting transport in relations with the Far East. Talks with Chinese partners allow us to hope that Małaszewicze will become an important element of the so-called Silk Road – a large, strategic Euro-Asian project supported by the Chinese authorities [Zakrzewski 2016].

As the author of the text predicts, Polish logistics centers have their future in cooperation with China. The current situation, despite certain difficulties, offers many promising projects. Zakrzewski notes that the key to potential development is to raise the standards of road infrastructure in the eastern part of Poland. The creation of new logistics centers alone will not be sufficient to use the full potential of this region.

The economic analysis of freight transport between China and Poland must take into account the specific cost structures and efficiency indicators characteristic of rail, sea, and road transport, as these modes constitute the main arteries of the Sino-Polish logistics corridor.

Costs and efficiency assessment

Rail transport stands out for its balanced ratio of operational cost to delivery speed. The primary cost components include infrastructure access fees, locomotive and wagon leasing or depreciation, fuel (or electricity), labor, terminal handling charges, and border crossing fees. According to recent operational practices, the rail transport of containers from China to Poland, particularly via the Chengdu–Łódź and Xi'an–Gdańsk routes, is competitive largely due to flexible route planning and high cargo consolidation, which optimize train utilization. Cost per container decreases with increased train load and frequency. Additional expenses are related to transshipment at border terminals (e.g., gauge change at Małaszewicze), as well as customs clearance procedures. While geopolitical tensions may affect route selection, they do not significantly increase direct costs, as rail remains less exposed to sudden price fluctuations than road or sea transport [McCaleb 2021].

Sea transport is generally the most cost-effective option in terms of unit price per ton-kilometer, especially for bulk and high-volume shipments. Key cost components include bunker fuel, port charges, vessel operation and maintenance, insurance, and handling fees at ports of origin and destination. The Port of Gdańsk has registered an 11% year-on-year increase in cargo throughput, indicating growing economies of scale and improving cost efficiency. However, sea transport is associated with longer delivery times (35–40 days from China to Europe), which may result in higher inventory holding costs for shippers [Pendrakowska 2018].

Road transport, while offering the greatest flexibility, is typically the most expensive per ton-kilometer for long-distance trans-Eurasian shipments. Its cost structure is dominated by fuel, driver wages, tolls, vehicle maintenance, insurance, and administrative permits, especially for oversize cargo. The recent success of TIR truck shipments covering 7,000 kilometers in just 13 days demonstrates the speed advantage, but the economic feasibility is highly dependent on full vehicle utilization, regulatory restrictions, and infrastructure conditions across transit countries.

For each mode, efficiency can be assessed using key performance indicators such as average transit time, cost per container, capacity utilization, and punctuality rate. Rail transport currently achieves average transit times of 14 days from China to Poland, with high reliability and stable supply chains, making it attractive for time-sensitive goods. Sea transport, despite lower costs, offers less predictability due to possible port congestion and weather-related delays. Road transport achieves the shortest transit times but is less scalable and more susceptible to delays at borders [Pugacewicz 2022].

Comparing the three main modes, rail is often the preferred solution for balanced shipments that prioritize both time and cost. Sea transport remains unrivaled for large-scale, low-value cargo where cost minimization is the overriding goal. Road transport, including for oversize shipments, is justified when delivery speed or last-mile flexibility is critical, or when cargo characteristics (e.g., out-of-gauge dimensions) preclude the use of standard intermodal units.

Development opportunities

Poland can enhance its transportation and logistics capabilities, making the flow of goods between China and Poland more efficient and smoother, in particular, through the following measures:

1. Investing in infrastructure.
   Poland should continue to invest in and modernize its transport infrastructure, including roads, railways, and ports. It is particularly important to support the development of infrastructure in eastern Poland to facilitate transport to and from the borders with Belarus and Ukraine, which are key transit points in trade with China. Modern intermodal terminals, i.e., platforms enabling transshipment, connected to TEN-T transport corridors, can raise the standard and speed of handling goods [Brona & Kruk 2012].
2. Promoting intermodal transport.
   Intermodal transport is one that combines rail, road, and sea transport, allowing for more efficient management of the flow of goods. Poland should develop a network of intermodal terminals, as well as deal with logistics projects that facilitate

fast transshipment between different means of transport. These actions may include the introduction of uniform operational standards, raising the standard of warehouse infrastructure, and digitalization of logistics processes, which will reduce downtime and costs [Choroś-Mrozowska 2019].

3. Making e-commerce logistics easier.
   The focus should be on developing efficient logistics solutions to support cross-border e-commerce between Poland and China. The dynamic development of e-commerce between Poland and China requires efficient logistics solutions. Investing in the development of distribution centers and warehouses supporting e-commerce will ensure fast order processing and delivery. It is also important to streamline customs procedures through automation and digitalization, which will shorten the clearance time of goods and reduce operating costs for companies [Wiewiór 2021].
4. Promoting technology integration.
   Adopt and invest in logistics technologies such as IoT, blockchain, and data analytics to increase visibility, traceability, and overall efficiency in the supply chain. These technologies support real-time monitoring of shipments, giving the possibility of better logistics control and reducing the risk of delays. Investments in the digitalization of logistics processes and warehouse automation contribute to increasing the efficiency and competitiveness of Poland as a logistics hub [Wołek 2018].
5. Cooperation within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)
   Engaging in regular dialogues between countries, along with Poland's active participation in the BRI, can bring benefits in the form of access to new markets and increase the country's importance as a major transport hub in Europe. Regular dialogues with China and other countries participating in the BRI will improve transport and logistics policies, supporting the development of integrated transport corridors and facilitating trade.

In the highly specialized market of oversize transport, competition is driven by several key factors that go beyond the basic provision of transport services. One of the most important ways companies compete is through investment in modern, specialized equipment capable of handling heavy and non-standard cargo. This includes extendable trailers, modular platforms, cranes, and escort vehicles, all of which are essential for the safe and efficient movement of oversize loads. The ability to offer tailored transport solutions – such as designing optimal routes, arranging for special permits, and managing pilot car escorts – provides companies with a significant competitive advantage.

Poland's role in oversize logistics

Another crucial aspect is the development of strong relationships with local authorities and border agencies. Navigating the complex regulatory environment for oversize shipments requires not only deep expertise but also established connections that can help expedite permits and border crossings. Companies that are able to streamline administrative processes and minimize delays are better positioned to attract clients with time-sensitive cargo.

Moreover, technology and digitalization play an increasing role in market competition. Leading operators utilize advanced route planning software, real-time cargo monitoring systems, and digital document management platforms to enhance transparency, safety,

and reliability. Providing customers with the ability to track their shipments and access documentation online builds trust and adds value to the service.

Finally, many companies compete by offering comprehensive, door-to-door logistics solutions that include not just transportation, but also warehousing, customs clearance, and value-added services such as cargo insurance and risk assessment. In such a demanding market, flexibility, reliability, and the capacity to manage highly complex projects are the hallmarks of the most competitive players.

A comprehensive analysis of China–Poland freight transport from the Polish perspective reveals a set of unique opportunities and challenges that are often underrepresented in broader, internationally focused studies. Poland's geographical position as a gateway to the European Union gives it a strategic advantage, enabling the country to play a pivotal role in the New Silk Road and the Belt and Road Initiative. The development and modernization of key border terminals – such as Małaszewicze – not only facilitate efficient transit of Chinese goods into the EU but also have substantial local and national economic impacts, including job creation, regional development, and increased tax revenues.

From the Polish point of view, logistical investments are not solely about accommodating growing East-West trade volumes. They also serve as a catalyst for domestic innovation and capacity building within the logistics sector. Polish transport and logistics companies face the dual challenge of meeting international service standards while simultaneously navigating national administrative and regulatory frameworks. The Polish government's efforts to streamline customs procedures, invest in intermodal infrastructure, and foster the digitalization of logistics processes demonstrate a commitment to strengthening Poland's role as a regional logistics leader.

However, the Polish perspective also highlights certain vulnerabilities, such as dependence on geopolitical stability in Eastern Europe and the need for continuous infrastructure modernization. Moreover, there is a strategic imperative to balance the benefits of transit trade with the development of value-added services and domestic supply chains.

Summary

Transport and logistics cooperation between Poland and China plays an important role in the global supply chain, and in particular, the developing Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) should be noted, which aims to deepen trade relations between Asia and Europe. Poland, due to its geographical location, connects the East with the West. This means that Poland is playing an increasingly important role as a transit hub, facilitating the flow of goods on a large scale.

This is associated with numerous development opportunities that can contribute to strengthening its position as one of the important logistics centers in Europe. However, this potential requires consistent actions, including further investments in transport infrastructure, such as modernization of the rail network, development of intermodal terminals, and smoothing of customs processes. Openness to international dialogue should also not be forgotten, which serves to build lasting trade relations and allows for effective adaptation to the changing reality. By combining investment in infrastructure with active diplomatic and economic cooperation, Poland will be able to fully develop and become one of the most important elements of the global supply network.

Oversize transport is currently one of the most important segments in the expanding logistics exchange between China and Poland. The growing number of infrastructure investments (e.g., wind farms, factories) necessitates the intensification of oversize shipments. Proper modernization of infrastructure, digitalization of procedures, and effective cooperation between border and logistics authorities are key factors for the further development of this sector. Thanks to its geographical location, Poland has the chance not only to be a transit country but also to become a center for oversize transport services for the entire Central and Eastern Europe.

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