

The geopolitical situation of Poland in relation to the foreign policy of the Russian Federation

The turn of the first and second decades of the 21st century is characterized by the high dynamics of the emergence of such events and decisions that indicate intensive preparations for the transition to a new geopolitical system. This applies in particular to the world-wide Eurasia, where the forces questioning the role of the United States of America (USA) as the main decision-maker and constructor of the present international order became apparent. In addition to the main contender to take over the current status of the US – People's Republic of China (PRC), to a greater or lesser extent also: India, Turkey, Israel, Iran, the Franco-German alliance (Fra-Ger), and the Russian Federation (FR), are becoming more and more assertive in creating an independent regional policy. In such an environment and situational context, countries with a less powerful influence are forced to choose strategic allies who, in their opinion, offer the best chances for survival and further development. For the Republic of Poland (RP), after the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2015, the USA and Israel became such an ally, loosening the previous, strongly pro-Western-European interdependencies. The choice of the variant of tightening the alliance with the currently greatest political and military power in the world changed the existing balance of power in the Central European region. This translated into the adaptation of foreign policy, which is crucial in this part of the world – the Russian Federation, to the new situation. This paper discusses the current situation of the Republic of Poland in the context of this change.

At the outset, it is worth specifying in which stream such a picture of the current (type of view) of „geopolitics” is presented in this paper. Such a need arises from the constant evolution of this concept, from the first use of this phrase at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries by the Swedish political scientist Johan Rudolf Kjellén. Of course, it can be said that despite the fact that the terminological workshop of contemporary geopolitics is quite rich, the essence of this concept is still the same, namely: the way reality is shaped by the leadership elite of societies, related to the resources of their territories. It can also be stated that the logic

of international relations constantly dictates that political actors should adapt the appropriate strategy to the geopolitical situation. This is done in order to secure your own development (raw materials, communication routes). Without such actions, other entities can take over these resources, thus gaining an advantage over them. One can refer to many outstanding representatives, such as: Friedrich Ratzel, Alfred Mahan, Karl Haushofer, or Carl Schmitt, to try to describe the geopolitical reality in very different ways. Of course, each of them had their own theory and views on the methodology of deliberations, but they touched upon problems in a specific way.

This work attempts to refer mainly to the achievements of the British geographer Halford John Mackinder. He preferred to look at Eurasia as a “world island” where the most important events in the history of the world take place, and the critical region is the central area located in its central-northern part. To quote him: “Whoever rules over Eastern Europe rules over the Central Area; who controls the Central Area controls the World Island; whoever rules the World Island rules the world” (Mackinder 1942). Observing the activity of all the world's strongest powers in this region, it can be concluded that the above formulation is still valid. All key players know that both communication and the transport of goods across the Central European lowland are still cheaper and more effective than through the Alps or the Carpathians. Still the fastest logistics for large armies with heavy equipment will be on flat and relatively dry ground, not in mountains or wetlands. Food is also easiest to produce in the temperate lowlands. For centuries, all these features have invariably aroused interest in the territories of Poland, Belarus and Ukraine as the key geopolitical forces in the region and in the world - in particular, the closest neighbors.

Looking from the perspective of the Russian Federation, a country neighboring the Republic of Poland through the Kaliningrad Oblast, which has the largest area in the world and is one of the world's largest military powers (Ayupova, Kussainov et al. 2020), the issue of Central and Eastern Europe is currently not the only difficult challenge in building an international position. Perhaps the most difficult thing to do is to take the right stance on the two largest political and economic forces: the US and the PRC. As the main heir of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which shows open ambitions to return to its previous status, it is not possible to remain neutral. The problem with choice, however, is that both the US and the PRC on the long-term basis seek some form of control over Russia, or even its breakup. The US and its allies almost succeeded (from the political perspective) during the presidency of pro-Western Boris Yeltsin, when the country was on the verge of economic collapse (Buchs, 1999). China, on the other hand, preferring a policy of small steps (Wang

2020), chooses actions counted in decades. For example, the Chinese authorities facilitate the settlement of their citizens in Siberia, which, given the current demographic problems of the Russian Federation, may lead to the loss of control over the eastern territory in an almost „peaceful” manner (Bordachev, 2018).

It can therefore be suspected that, having the opportunity to play in time, the Russian leaders preferred to choose a temporary alliance with the PRC (Sidorova 2019). This choice was also favored by the rapid development of China, which turned out to be an ideal outlet for Russian energy resources, and for advanced military technology. The two important export goods of the Russian Federation (Apokin, Belousov et al. 2015). The economic aspect is also linked in this case by the fact that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also called as the New Silk Road, invented and pushed by the PRC, but economically beneficial for both parties, has lines that run through the territory of the Russian Federation (Sevastianov, 2016).

Figure 1. Planned and implemented lines of the Belt and Road Initiative, creating a communication alternative for transport between distant Asia and Europe



Source: <http://www.scandinavian.com.pl>

For Russia, on the one hand, this poses a certain threat, related to its far-reaching dependence on Chinese products and, as a consequence, the collapse of some Russian producers. On the other hand, it is also an opportunity to modernize weak light industry compared to the Western and distant Asian countries. It will also enable Russia to some extent to control the movement of goods between Asia and Europe (Mladenovic and Ponomareva, 2018).

The US position towards BRI is obviously skeptical or even hostile. It strikes at their strategic interests, which are largely based on the control of trade via sea communication routes (Bartosiak 2019). The US has the resources to do so. They currently have the strongest navy and military bases located in key communication hubs on the world's oceans (Bartosiak, 2019). The second key aspect which results in the US's hostile position towards the BRI is preventing the emergence of such a system of economic and political alliances in Eurasia that could end the world domination of the United States of America (Brzeziński, 1998).

Bearing this in mind and analyzing Figure 1, it can be concluded that in the countries where the lines of the BRI are planned and going to be established, a very large activity of American troops and intelligence is observed. This applies primarily to the Middle East (Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey), the Balkan countries with the leading position of Romania, and the Central European countries, especially Poland as a potential economic and military leader in the region. This type of activity manifests itself, for example, in the decisions of local politicians sympathetic to the American option, by slowing down the implementation of the Chinese project. An example is the decision of November 2016, on the basis of which the sale of the former military unit near Łódź, where it was planned to build an intermodal terminal for trains to and from Chengdu in China (Czubiński 2017), was suspended. The dominant ideology for the development strategy of the Polish state is an alternative vision of joining a group of countries in the region into a federation between the Baltic, Black and Mediterranean Seas. Such a concept is called in the literature the Intermarium or the Three Seas Initiative (Cieplucha, 2014).

Figure 2. The system of Central European countries interested in creating an alliance under the name of Intermarium - Międzymorze with the leading role of Poland and Romania, and an external guarantor of security – the USA



Source: <https://geopoliticalfutures.com>

Such a construct would potentially create enough power to be able to control transport between Europe and Asia. However, from the point of view of Poland and other smaller countries in the region, the main goal of the effort to create such a system does not currently seem to be the control of flows. Rather, this goal is related to US plans. The primary objective of the present strategists seems to be rather the pursuit of a political existence, possibly independent of the major regional forces: Germany, France and the Russian Federation. This is where the common interests of Poland and the US intersect against many Russian-German economic initiatives. They are associated in particular in terms of trade in energy resources, for example, „Nord Stream 2” (Gotz 2019) and the pursuit of a military-political alliance, the aim of which is to drive out US influence from the old continent. This has some chance of success. At the moment, the alliance of Central European states with the American-Israeli tandem does not seem to be a very stable structure. In the assessment of smaller countries, after the rapid withdrawal of the US from Syria in 2019 and support for the Kurdish community fighting for their state (Mouritzen 2020), the assessment of America as a reliable ally decreased significantly. Moreover, in recent years, intense negotiations between Central and Eastern European countries and the PRC have been taking place under the „17 +1” variant (<http://beltandroadcenter.org>), which may lead to the reversal of alliances.

The position of the Russian Federation is, for obvious reasons, in contraposition to the Intermarium project. Not only would it potentially block free trade within the BRI and the transport of raw materials from the Russian Federation to Western Europe, but it would also deprive Russians of some of their influence over a number of small Central European states, whose societies are largely anti-Russian. Such a state of affairs would mean that the defense strategy of the Russian Federation based on surrounding itself with a cordon of dependent countries, which constitute the so-called „Crumple zone” (Brzeziński, 1998), could be disturbed on the western border.

Poland was founded over 1000 years ago in a special place on the European continent, between the Baltic Sea and the Carpathians. Due to this special location, related to the transport route in the Central European lowland, the history of Poland is associated with a series of stormy events, ups, downs, divisions, mergers, invasions and wars.

Much of these events concern relations between Poland and Russia, which have a long historical tradition. Originally, despite the common Slavic roots, both countries developed in completely different civilization aspects. Poland chose the European-Western type of state organization along with the Christian Catholic religion, and Russia adopted the Eastern model of the organizational system along with the Orthodox religion.

As a result, from the end of the fourteenth century, when Poland joined the Union with Lithuania, the competition began between this Union and Russia for the influence in Eastern Europe. The 16th and 17th centuries were marked by repeated wars over striving to seize the territory of Ukraine.

Later, mainly as a result of devastating warfare and a series of internal errors related to the misunderstood „freedom of the nobility”, the Polish-Lithuanian Union began to decline. As a result of these events, in 1795, the Union disappeared from the map of the world for 123 years and at that time its territory was carved up and established under the control of Austria, Prussia and the Russian Empire.

Several national uprisings in the 19th century ended in failure each time. A convenient situation for regaining independence occurred during World War I, when the invaders of Poland were significantly weakened by fighting among themselves. It was then that the German and Austro-Hungarian authorities promised the establishment of an „independent” Polish state on November 5, 1916. Although the proposal itself did not give the Poles a certain and specific vision of a future independent Poland, it caused such a wide response in the world that its announcement was a key factor in Polish efforts to regain independence. It also indirectly forced Russia to display the Poles a competitive offer under its partitions. Ultimately, after

many hardships related to the establishment of the new statehood of Poland and many different visions of how it was formed, on November 11, 1918, the Regency Council of the Kingdom of Poland handed over the superior military authority and the supreme command of the Polish Army to Józef Piłsudski. This date is now celebrated in Poland as a symbolic date of independence. These events did not end efforts to maintain statehood. At the same time, Russia was transforming under the internal pressure of the Bolshevik revolution, which, in the mind of the then communist ideologists, and in particular Vladimir Lenin, was to spread all over the world. Taking advantage of the still unformed Polish statehood, the Bolshevik army started military operations against Poland at the turn of 1918/1919, secretly cooperating with Germany at the beginning of its operations. As a result of military operations that were decided in favor of Poland, the borders of the Republic of Poland were established until the Second World War. One of the battles during the war with the Bolsheviks, called the „miracle on the Vistula” (Bartnicki, 2007), is considered one of the key battles in modern world history, as the one that stopped the expansion of the communist revolution to Western Europe (Emelyanova, 2017). Another serious clash followed the actions of World War II. Once again, two contemporary military powers: the Third German Reich and the USSR, on August 23, 1939, signed a pact on mutual non-aggression, now known as „Ribbentrop-Molotov” (Konrad, 2002). According to his secret protocol, which was an appendix to the official document of the treaty and the actual content of the pact, it decided the partition of the territories or to regulate the independence of sovereign states: Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland and Romania by the USSR and the German Third Reich. What has happened in practice? This fact is currently the focus of disputes in the historical policy of Poland and Russia, due to Russia's negation of the role of the USSR in triggering World War II and the attack on the above-mentioned independent states (Konrad 2002). The hostilities finally ended with the defeat of the Third German Reich, with the great participation of Poland, which suffered one of the largest losses in the population of all participants in the war (over 6 million victims, which constituted about 22.2% of the total population). However, such a sacrifice did not result into regaining independence. As a result of negotiations between world powers and arrangements mainly at the Yalta conference in February 1945, Poland was handed over by its allies from the USA and Great Britain under the „sovereignty” of the USSR. The Western powers then gave Stalin a *carte blanche* for the forcible destruction of the Polish armed underground - primarily the Home Army and the National Armed Forces (Parsadanowa, 2010). The President of the USA (F.D. Roosevelt) also assured the leader of the USSR (J. Stalin) that the United States would never support the temporary Polish authorities that would be hostile to his interests. As a consequence of these

decisions, after the Red Army entered Poland, special units of the NKVD, NKGB and Smiersz started arrests, deportations and terror against the Polish civilian population. Their activity consisted mainly in tracking down and deciphering the Home Army units, murdering the rural population providing aid to the Home Army, raiding manors, burning churches and liquidating the Polish intelligentsia. In relation only to the Polish Army, according to prof. Jan Żaryn, 20,000 soldiers were killed in the initial period, and over 250,000 people were imprisoned or held in labor camps (Żaryn, 2012). Fights between the USSR and the Polish resistance lasted for almost 10 years, until the mid-1950s.

After the arrangements made at the Yalta conference, Poland was under the informal occupation of the USSR until 1989. Despite the enormous amount of repression and persecution of the population that could somehow threaten the „people's power”, during this period the Polish People's Republic (PRL) rebuilt itself from the war damage, created relatively modern heavy industry, underwent agrarian reform, the process of electrification of the countryside, and there was a significant progress in primary and secondary education. This period in the consciousness of a part of Polish society, especially that related to the power apparatus, is positively remembered as a period of relative stabilization and more favorable conditions for family life than at present (Oksińska 2018). Despite smaller repressions compared to many other states of the Soviet bloc, Polish intellectual elites still could not get over with the loss of independence. Many different secret societies were organized at that time, and later also those legally operating. The largest and most recognized of them is NSZZ Solidarność (Kozłowski 2017). Until now, in the current circles of Russian power it is considered „the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century and a real drama for Russians” (Putin 2005).

From the beginning of the 21st century, Poland's eastern policy gave way to Euro-Atlantic integration (NATO, EU), and Russia, following President Vladimir Putin, faced a confrontation with Western Europe. In 2015-2020, Polish-Russian relations deteriorated due to a new political deal and Poland's gradual transition to closer relations with the USA. This situation may further further due to the consequences of the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic and the particular weakness of export-oriented economies such as the German one.

In the current geopolitical situation of Poland, there are difficulties that are not easy to overcome. Mainly due to the declining level of stability and predictability in the international sphere, and the strategic location of this country on the world map. There are many premises that the difficulties in Polish-Russian relations, resulting from historical conditions, may

continue to deepen due to strategic differences in the interests of both countries and the currently concluded alliances.

Streszczenie:

Przełom pierwszej i drugiej dekady XXI wieku charakteryzuje się dużą dynamiką pojawiania się takich wydarzeń i decyzji, które wskazują na intensywne przygotowania do przejścia w nowy układ geopolityczny. Dotyczy to w szczególności kluczowej dla całego świata Eurazji, w której uwidoczniły się siły kwestionujące rolę Stanów Zjednoczonych Ameryki (USA) jako głównego decydenta i konstruktora obecnego ładu międzynarodowego. Oprócz głównego pretendenta do przejęcia obecnego statusu USA – Chińskiej Republiki Ludowej (ChRL), w mniejszym lub większym stopniu również: Indie, Turcja, Izrael, Iran, sojusz francusko-niemiecki (Fra-Ger), oraz Federacja Rosyjska (FR), stają się coraz bardziej asertywne w kreowaniu niezależnej polityki regionalnej. W takim otoczeniu i kontekście sytuacyjnym, kraje o mniejszej sile oddziaływania, zmuszone są do wyboru strategicznych sojuszników, którzy w ich ocenie dają największe szanse na przetrwanie i dalszy rozwój. Celem niniejszego pracy jest analiza współczesnych uwarunkowań i wyzwań dla Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej (RP), która po wyborach prezydenckich i parlamentarnych w 2015 r. utrzymywała sojusznicze stosunki ze USA i Izraelem, rozluźniając poprzednie, silnie pro-zachodnio-europejskie współzależności. Wybór tego wariantu zmienił dotychczasowy układ sił w regionie środkowoeuropejskim. Przełożyło się to na dostosowanie polityki zagranicznej, kluczowej w tej części świata – Federacji Rosyjskiej, do nowej sytuacji w tym w stosunku do RP.

Słowa kluczowe:

Polska, geopolityka, polityka zagraniczna, Federacja Rosyjska

Key words:

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