Closer to a threat than an opportunity: Polish perception of China's rise and international engagement

Anna Grzywacz[1]

Abstract

Chinese initiatives of a geopolitical nature are being more and more frequently analyzed in the literature. At the same time, it is pointed out that at least since 2012 China has been pursuing an assertive and active foreign policy. Due to the importance of the Belt and Road Initiative project and also the 16 + 1 cooperation in the Central and Eastern Europe region, it is worth analyzing what the perception of China in this region is on the example of Poland. The study attempts to answer the question of how the increase in China's importance and its international engagement are perceived in Poland. The analysis of Polish papers published in 2003–2017 shows, and this is an argument, that Polish researchers more frequently present China in the categories of a threat and apply research terminology and tools within the realistic theory of international relations and this image is being reinforced, especially after 2013. The analytical framework of "China as a threat" and "China as an opportunity" occurring frequently in research is placed in this paper in theories of international relations.

Introduction

Interest in the People's Republic of China (the PRC) in every dimension, from economy, politics, and security to culture and social issues is increasing. In recent years, there have been more and more studies suggesting that the twenty-first century will be China's century. Researchers are devoting a lot of space in the literature to explain the PRC's behaviors on the international arena. The basic questions they are trying to find answers to are: (1) what strategy should be adopted in response to China's rise—competition or cooperation? (Aggarwal and Newland 2015; Christiansen and Maher 2017; Le Corre and Pollack 2017); (2) what China's status and kind of a power

✉ Anna Grzywacz
anna.y.grzywacz@gmail.com; a.grzywacz@vsitula.edu.pl

1 Institute of International Relations, Vistula University, Stokłosy 3, 02-787 Warsaw, Poland

China is? (is it a great power and a *status quo* power or rather a revisionist stakeholder; therefore, is it a threat?) (Yan 2006; Pu 2017; Choo 2009; Pillsbury 2015); and (3) how does China shape the international system, and is it a responsible stakeholder (Zhao 2018)?

The literature features a reference to China's new assertiveness and activity, in particular since 2012, the year of the rise to power of Xi Jinping who is considered a politician that has a crystallized vision of international relations and also one that is a more active player on the international scene than his predecessors (Yan 2014). One of the elements of China's new international strategy is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) proposed by Xi in 2013. This economic and geopolitical project aims at intensifying China's relations with the regions of Europe and Asia. It is not the only form of cooperation linking China with the Central and Eastern Europe region (CEE); it also takes place in China–Central and Eastern European Cooperation Framework (16 + 1)[1] which was initiated in 2012 in Warsaw. This cooperation is being successively strengthened, especially since all 16 + 1 countries backed the BRI.

China is the strongest country in this platform; therefore, there are frequent references to opportunities and threats that cooperation with the PRC brings. Among the 16 CEE countries, Poland is the strongest one, but there are concerns relating to relations with China in all states participating in the initiative. The doubts concern the issue of the arrangement of the most favorable conditions of cooperation with significant disproportions of political power. Numerous papers addressing the 16 + 1/BRI cooperation portray China as a country that benefits from this cooperation the most but also one that uses the difficult political relations in this region in order to implement its own political and economic goals (Góralczyk 2017a). As noted by Zhou and Esteban (2018), BRI is assessed as the most ambitious Chinese political initiative which influences changes of a geopolitical nature. BRI is not only an economic project which will tighten the cooperation of Eurasian economies but also a strategy that strengthens China's political position. Yu (2017) highlights that BRI is one of China's most important political plan, which testifies to China's international significance in the economic, political, and strategic dimension.

It seems that the countries of the CEE region, certainly including Poland, have been for years interested in the increase in China's importance in the international sphere. It is different in the case of China which has expressed interest in the CEE countries only in the last several years. Due to the implementation of the BRI initiative and the 16 + 1 cooperation, it is worth analyzing how China is perceived in the CEE region on the example of Poland. This study analyzes Polish scholarly literature and answers the question how the increase in China's importance and its international engagement are perceived in Poland. The aim of the paper is to verify the argument stating that Polish researchers more frequently present China in the categories of a threat and apply research terminology and tools within the realistic theory of international relations, and this image is being reinforced, especially after 2013. The paper is divided into five parts. After the introduction, comes the literature review, and a discussion of methodology. Then, the characteristics of China's image in Polish research and the subject

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[1] 16 CEE countries are: 11 EU member states and 5 Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

matter addressed therein are discussed. The section analysis scientific papers concerning China published by Polish authors in 2003–2017 in reference to the most frequent issues relating to China's rise listed in the first paragraph, that is the policy of cooperation and competition, China's status as well as China's impact on the shape of the international system. The paper closes with conclusions.

Literature review

The literature includes research on how China, and to be precise China's rise, is perceived by actors of international relations. These studies are of a generalizing nature, such as research by Zhu and Lu (2013)[2] or Zhang (2010) addressing China's image in international media, as well as a more detailed one, i.e., referring to specific regions or countries. The most space is devoted to how China is portrayed by the entities in the international system most important to it, namely the United States of America (US) and the countries of East Asia as well as the European Union (EU)/European countries.

Pan (2012) is a researcher who analyzed images of China in the US and came to a conclusion that it is portrayed in dichotomous categories as a threat or an opportunity. His study carries great research significance as it creates an analytical framework used for analysis by other researchers. Turner (2014, p. 6) convinces that in the US, the PRC is portrayed in four different ways: (1) idealized; (2) as an opportunity; (3) as uncivilized; and (4) as threatening. Doubts may be raised by investigating images and perceptions in the context of the relation between a representation and political action. Colin (2015, p. 2) points out that the way China is portrayed is part of West's intellectual tradition. The assessment of the PRC's activity is the resultant of not only what China is doing but also of what the actual feelings in the countries of the West towards its activity are.[3] The researcher stresses that China's image as a threat is being increasingly rooted in consciousness and is a basic representation of China in the twenty-first century. It is most noticeable in the US, then to a lesser degree in the rest of the countries. The threat results from concerns about both economic changes and those regarding security (Colin 2015, p. 80).

Researchers, Chu et al. (2015), analyzed how China is perceived in East Asian countries. The authors suggest that the geographical distance and the issue of culture are essential. The countries that neighbor geographically or are culturally close regard China as the most influential country in Asia and most countries have a positive outlook on China's influence on the region. A different conclusion in drawn by Lee and Hao (2018), analyzing the case of South Korea, who conclude in their work that China's image in this country is negative.

As part of a research on European countries' perception of China, one can divide the studies into those that analyze the perception of China within the framework of the EU and by the CEE countries. Liu (2017) writes that Europeans have an increasingly negative opinion about China. These views are contradictory and pessimistic (Yee and Storey 2012), while Gudrun Wacker (2010) concludes that at the end of the 1990s and

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[2] This research concerned media and included, among others, Poland.
[3] Interestingly, recent publications by Allison (2017), also Rudd (2019) or Tellis (2019) are the exemplifications of this image and changeable feelings towards China, all suggesting the end of engagement and beginning of the rivalry between the two countries.

at the beginning of the twenty-first century China was perceived rather positively, which changed in the recent years to China's disadvantage with it being more frequently portrayed in categories of a threat.

Research on the perception of China in the countries of the CEE region is new and results mostly from implementing the Belt and Road Initiative and the 16 + 1 cooperation. Pavlićević (2018) writes that two competing discourses have formed in which China is portrayed in a contradicting manner. China's activity is positive and optimistic or negative and pessimistic. It is essential for the foreign policy of the CEE countries as it is one of the elements conditioning what measures and methods are to be used in their policy towards China. Effects of political actions are essential for the development and dynamics of the relations between China and the CEE countries. As the author argues, the threat–opportunity research framework is appropriate for explaining China's image in the CEE countries, though it is expressed in different forms compared with those specified by Chengxin Pan, which results from other regional, political, and economic circumstances. The author mainly analyzes the experience of Serbia though his conclusions stretch over the CEE countries.

Another researcher, Lubina (2017), argues that the BRI subject matter is eagerly taken up and one can see interest in what China is doing and what economic and geopolitical significance it carries. The researcher analyzed most discourses concerning BRI which in his belief may be divided into two groups: (1) a geopolitical and geoeconomic opportunity (pro-BRI discourse) and (2) a security threat (anti-BRI discourse). The supporters of the first approach highlight the benefits Poland may gain thanks to cooperating with China, while the other group believes that the PRC is a threat to security and economic interests. After analyzing diverse materials, the author concludes that the "geopolitical opportunity" discourse dominated towards the end of 2015 and at the beginning of 2016, while the "security threat" discourse has occurred more frequently since autumn 2016.

The purpose of my paper is to verify and supplement these conclusions by investigating how China is perceived in Polish research. The nature of the paper is partly polemic towards research presented by the abovementioned authors. It needs to be noted that this paper is closer to Lubina's outlook as his work presents the change in the perception of China, thus the author assumes that perception is of a processual nature. Pavlićević, in turn, uses a dichotomous assumption which is partly reflected in the results of the analysis of Polish research papers. Both works, authored by Lubina and Pavlićević, use different sources, i.a., media, press, or various internet sources, which is undoubtedly their quality. The media influence public opinion by quick and easy access to content. This paper uses only works of a scientific nature, which is justified by at least a number of reasons: (1) these materials are treated as primary since research activity is carried out, which means, among others, that other methods of analysis are used than in the case of press articles; (2) journalists use information or research which should have verifiable sources and be thoroughly prepared, and results of scientific papers are one of the most important sources; (3) researchers often act as experts and influence political decision-makers; and (4) researchers employ language and methodology characteristic to international relations, which allows a theoretical discussion. In the case of this paper, it allows a classification of studies in the frameworks of the international relations theories as well as inscribing in them a research model based on the threat–opportunity dichotomy.

Methodological and analytical aspects

As part of research, papers published in the best Polish journals in 2003–2017 were gathered. In the recent years, researchers have been writing more in English but a significant majority of papers are published in Polish and only the latter were taken into account. The selection of journals was based on the journal list prepared by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education. Journals that declared political science as their main discipline were selected (Rozkosz and Kulczycki 2016).[4] The list of such journals featured sixty-nine positions, therefore it was supplemented by journals classified as dealing with international relations as well as those concerning regional studies (Asian studies). All journals were searched in terms of publications on China (by means of the following key words: China, the PRC, Chinese). I selected close to forty journals that published materials on China. By doing so, I obtained over a hundred and twenty papers. Eighty-one papers (published in twenty different journals) were used for analysis purposes. Papers that had a descriptive-only nature were rejected, and so were those that only concerned China's internal affairs.

The threat–opportunity dichotomy is an element that frequently occurs in literature, particularly since it has its grounds in the work by Chengxin Pan and other researchers. Pan (2012, p. vii) points to the fact that "what we see as 'China' cannot be detached from various discourses and representations of it." Therefore, one needs to investigate not only what the policy of China or of other entities of international relations is but also how these actors are perceived. Pan recognizes his analytical assumptions as a "bifocal lens" which is formed by these two competing images, that is, threats and opportunities. As Pan (2012, pp. 8–23) writes, "China as an opportunity" and "China as a threat" do not have geographical limitations though he himself analyzes China's perception by the US. The US is a driving force behind shaping images of the PRC but these images are present throughout the Western world. Pan emphasizes that "China threat" is one of the basic images of China that is essential in understanding the Chinese policy and in the shaping of relations with this country: "The 'China threat' (…) represents a paradigm that, as a lasting normative concern and cognitive habit, both informs and lends coherence to otherwise divergent ways of looking at China in scholarly analysis, government documents, popular culture and mass media". Not less space in the literature is devoted to presenting China as an opportunity. An opportunity is defined as and mostly concerns: (1) economic and trade issues; (2) political issues related to democratization; and (3) the international level related to international integration (Pan 2012, p. 31).

The threat–opportunity dichotomy can be inscribed in the theories of international relations (Table 1).[5] In a slightly simplified inference, one may assume that both (neo)realism and (neo)liberalism made the category of "power" as their center of interest. The theoretical assumptions may be referred to China's rise in the form of a threat or an opportunity, depending on the theoretical perspective—realistic or liberal,

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[4] Based on the report of Ewa A. Rozkosz and Emanuel Kulczycki, *Polskie czasopisma z nauk humanistycznych i nauk społecznych w liczbach* (Poznań: Scientometrics PRG, 2016), but also Arianta, a Polish database available at http://www.arianta.pl/.

[5] The table presents the simplified understanding of international relations theories. The theoretical aspects are more complex and nuanced; however, this basic classification is also a result of this paper's Polish scholarly literature analysis.

though as noted by Zheng (2010, p. xiii), neither of these perspectives wholly explains China's policy.

Realism assumes that the state is the most important entity of international relations, who strives to maximize its profits, most often at the expense of others. This entails a conflicting nature of politics, which forces states to focus on the category of power. Seizing it allows one's ensuring its security. Therefore, military power is granted priority whereas war is treated as an element of international relations. Realism is associated with such categories as: governance, stability, balance of power, competition, conflict, anarchy of the international system, or a non-zero sum game (Donnelly 2015). Liberals in turn believe that international relations may have a peaceful nature when it gets to cooperation, especially in the economic dimension. Cooperation is conducive to developing good relations thanks to which everyone may benefit. The basic categories describing the world are: countries, organizations, corporations, nations, cooperation, and democracy. Supporters of this view believe that internals conditions influence external ones, while societies— contrary to governments— prefer cooperation. Global peace-oriented governance is thus ensured by democratic societies where free market conditions prevail. Liberalism is associated with such categories as interdependence or liberal institutionalism (Burchill 2015). One should point to yet another, influential theory of international relations which devotes more space to the subject matter of perception and cultural issues. Constructivism assumes that it is ideas and identity that have essential influence over countries' behavior in international relations. The response to China's rising power therefore depends on how this rise in perceived and how the position of the entity deciding on how to conduct politics is perceived. Kang (2007) combines liberalism with constructivism in such a way as to contrast these theories with realism. As he believes, countries do happen to cooperate but their primary goal is to maintain and maximize their power. Dependencies and economic cooperation do not guarantee security. As Kang concludes, the increase in the power of a state is a greater threat to security than an economic opportunity. Despite the simplification of the international relations theories presented by Kang (and in Table 1), it reflects accurately what Polish researchers' approach towards theories are.

A threat should not be treated as a synonym of a challenge. In Polish but also international literature, China is not always dichotomously assessed as an opportunity or a threat. Moreover, instead of a threat the term challenge is also used. However, it is not clear how individual authors define and understand "a challenge" and this is why

Table 1 Theories of international relations and the threat–opportunity structure

Realism	Liberalism/constructivism
Threat	Opportunity
Challenge	
Competition	Cooperation
Revisionist stakeholder	*Status quo* power
Power transition, change of the international system, balance of power	Institutions, ideas, responsibility

Source: author's own compilation

this paper treats "a challenge" as a state preceding the transformation into a threat or an opportunity.

Polish perceptions of China

The threat–opportunity dichotomy may be referred to the theories of international relations adding to it categories specific to individual theories of international relations. With this assumption, it can be concluded that the vast majority of Polish researchers employ tools offered by the realistic school of international relations. Forty-two papers (52%) unequivocally use terminology characteristic to realism where most of them directly use realism as a theoretical and analytical framework. Nine papers (11%) refer to liberalism or uses terminology characteristic to liberalism. Eight papers unambiguously point to both elements of competition and cooperation (10%). A lot of papers are not theoretical in nature which makes classifying them into any of the theories of international relations impossible (27%).[6]

A total of 81 papers published in 2003–2017 were analyzed.[7] Figure 1 presents the number of papers in individual years. There is a pronounced increase in the interest in Chinese issues.

Among the publications, the greatest interest is raised by the subject matter of China's great power nature and global aspirations (14 papers), China's relations with the European Union (8 papers), Central Asia and Russia (8 papers) and also broadly understood East Asian issues (8 papers), China's relations with the US (7 papers), security of the Indian Ocean and relations with India (5 papers), and African issues (5 papers). Other works concern: geopolitics, geostrategy, and geoeconomy (4 papers), cultural individuality, and the influence of culture on China's politics (4 papers), EU-Russia-China relations (3 papers), and also US-Russia-China and US-China-EU relations. The remaining papers address: Chinese soft power, development assistance, China's engagement in the development of international institutions or other aspects of the PRC's economic potential.

Between competition and cooperation

Researchers analyzing relations between the US and China mainly use the categories of competition and broadening the sphere of influence. The US is an obstacle in the implementation of China's policy which wants to establish a multipolar system based on *Pax Sinica*, though it does not mean that China is striving for conflict (Jureńczyk 2017a). Another researcher notices that China increases its influence to the disadvantage of strong actors of international relations, mainly the US, and strives for a change of the international system (Skrzyp 2016). Not all researchers use the categories of a zero sum game. Another study points out that popular works in the field of the US-China relationship analysis in categories of the Thucydides' Trap are unfounded.

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[6] What is consistent with the findings of Czaputowicz and Wojciuk (2016), who concluded that Polish researchers have difficulties to conduct theoretically informed research.
[7] The analysis took into account all papers, selected on the basis of the criteria set out in the first paragraph of the "Methodological and analytical aspects" section, but not all papers are cited.
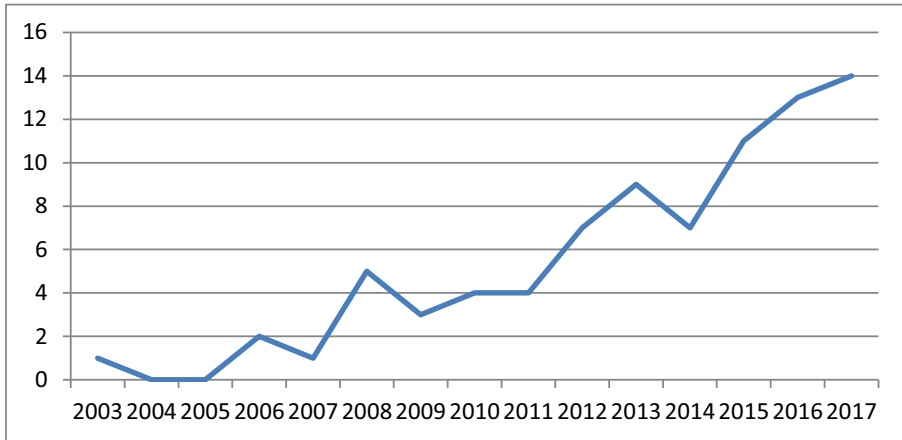
Fig. 1 The number of papers addressing China's international activity in Polish research in 2003–2017(Source: author's own compilation)

According to the author, China and the US are not in the trap, and moreover: (1) China is a *status quo* power and (2) interdependencies and institutionalization of the relationship between China and the US contribute to cooperation between these powers (Haliżak 2016). It is also pointed out in the literature that China is threatening the US and the latter should apply various response strategies to China's rise defined by engagement and containment (Kędzierska 2013).

Out of the seven papers analyzing the US-China relations, one work questions defining China in the categories of a threat. China competes not only with the US but also with other actors: East Asian countries, the Indian Ocean, Central Asian countries, and Russia and the European Union and Middle East countries, though in these cases researchers' findings are more diverse.

Realism is also a dominant theory in the analysis in reference to East Asia. Authors point to the fact that in the relations with Japan, China strives to achieve a great power and hegemonic position while the US is an obstacle therein, especially since Japan is in alliance with the US. It is highlighted that China uses friendship and cooperation tools in order to dominate this country in a long-term dimension (Mencel 2017). North Korea, which is a buffer and separates the United States and Japan from China, is an important country for the PRC. China is using this state to make it difficult for the US to strengthen its influence in the East China Sea. This sea, as well as the South China Sea, is an area of competition with the US (Jureńczyk 2017b). Competing with the US also has an internal dimension. This country's image in Chinese press is presented negatively. One of the researchers analyzes press in Chinese and draws a conclusion about pejorative portrayal of the US—"what raises greatest reluctance is American hegemony (*baquan zhuyi*) or a synonymously applied term despotism (*zhuangheng bahu*). The word *badao* (hegemony, despotism) has clearly negative connotations. The Chinese do not like America's image as a world leader since in Chinese understanding the word *lingdao* assumes the relationship of subordination to the hierarchically privileged side" (Kupińska 2006, p. 102).

If the PRC does cooperate with other countries, it is according to its own rules (Zaręba 2017). Taiwan plays an important role in the US-China relations as it is a

stabilizer in the relations between these powers. The situation is gradually changing. China is gradually taking over Taiwan and the US can do little about it as Taiwan is slowly integrating with continental China. In the case of this region, the situation is similar in the analysis concerning the relationship with the US, only one author points to peaceful engagement and building a good neighborhood by China (Michałek 2014). Researchers point out that China has a negative image in the region. Japanese-Chinese relations are such an example which results mainly from historical determinants (Mierzejewski and Żakowski 2012). Mongolia also looks at China negatively as the latter is treated as a country striving to dominate the former (Rowiński and Golik 2011).

The Indian Ocean is another region in which China engages, particularly in the field of security. The PRC's taking responsibility takes place at the expense of the US. It is another area of China's competition with the US where the former wants to question US hegemony (Gacek 2016; Zajączkowski 2015; Kłodkowski 2015; Okraska 2015; Tokarski 2007). The PRC wants to be responsible to a greater extent for transport routes as it is essential for its security. China strives to stabilize the region and to avoid conflicts as disputes are not in its interest and may negatively impact its development.

Another way in which China questions the dominant position of the US is its cooperation with Russia. The PRC tightens this cooperation not only for political reasons but also for economic ones (Bednarz 2015). The tense situation between the US and Russia is favorable for China since it makes it easier to shape China's relations with the US and China's relations with Russia, which is especially pronounced and conducive to Chinese interests in the Asian region (Czarkowska 2012). The papers also point out that China does cooperate with Russia but for pragmatic reasons. The political culture of these two countries is so different that their cooperation is of an ad hoc nature (Lubina 2013; Mickiewicz 2008). China is primarily interested in economic benefits therefore the revival of trade and investment with Central Asian countries within the BRI project is a priority, although, as one of the author adds "it is also a way to hide Chinese potential behind a façade of multilateral cooperation" (Kaczmarski 2016, p.103). Due to the fact that Russia is implementing its political project in the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union conflict between these countries is unlikely. Some authors, however, point to the fact that China competes with Russia for energy resources in Central Asia (Młynarski 2012). Nevertheless, competition with the Russian Federation does not mean that China strives for conflict. It is pointed out that it is the other way around, stable and friendly relations with the actors of international relations are conducive to the implementation of Chinese foreign policy goals (Milewski 2003). In the case of the relationship with Russia, one of the authors points not only to competition but also to cooperation, though it stems from the desire to limit US influence (Kobierecka 2017). This aspect is also pointed out by another researcher who highlights elements of China's cooperation with Russia but writes that "under this façade of cooperation still lies competition—lined by conflicting interests, unsustainable trade balance and historical wrong-doing limiting mutual confidence" (Bednarz 2015).

Analyses concerning China's relations with the European Union have a more sustainable nature. In the relationship with the EU, the element of cooperation is slightly more frequently pointed out. Cooperation with the EU allows the implementation of both China's policy and EU's policy towards the US, i.a., by limiting US dominance (Willa 2011; Zajączkowski 2009). There is no agreement as to what China's

attitude towards the EU is, and to be more precise, to what extent China treats the European Union as a priority. One of the authors states that China competes with the European Union in the Middle East region (Diawoł-Sitko 2015).

Some areas of China's interests are also pointed out, where despite its engagement China does not question the US sphere of influence. Latin America and the Middle East are such regions, including China's relations with Saudi Arabia. In the first case, the aims of China's foreign policy are pragmatic, since the PRC aims at diversifying energy supplies and not at undermining American influence in the Western Hemisphere (Oberda-Monkiewicz 2011). It is similar in the Middle East region. China does not question US presence and dominance; it wants to establish good relations with the countries of this region due to demand and energy security. The basic aim of the PRC's policy in this area is to secure and protect energy routes (Woźniak-Bobińska 2017). The Middle East is strategically important for China but it respects the political situation in the region and the fact that trade and energy routes are controlled by the US (Ulatowski 2016).

There are more and more publications in which China is presented in the categories of a realistic theory of international relations, and therefore China's image as a threat is getting stronger. Since 2011, which is before Xi's rise to power, a constant increase in the number of publications portraying China as a threat has been observed. In 2012, still there was no significant difference in the number of works analyzing China from the perspective of realism and liberalism (two works in each category). The difference starts to be pronounced from 2013 onwards, which is when Xi took the position of the President of the People's Republic of China (Fig. 2).

As mentioned earlier, Pan (2012) pointed out that China as an opportunity is presented in three ways: economic benefits, opportunity for democratization, and international integration. In Polish papers, China as an opportunity is presented in two ways: primarily economic benefits and China's influence on the international economic system and then gradual acceptance of international norms and the PRC's increasing engagement in institutionalization. The aspect of possible democratization and its impact on international relations does not occur.
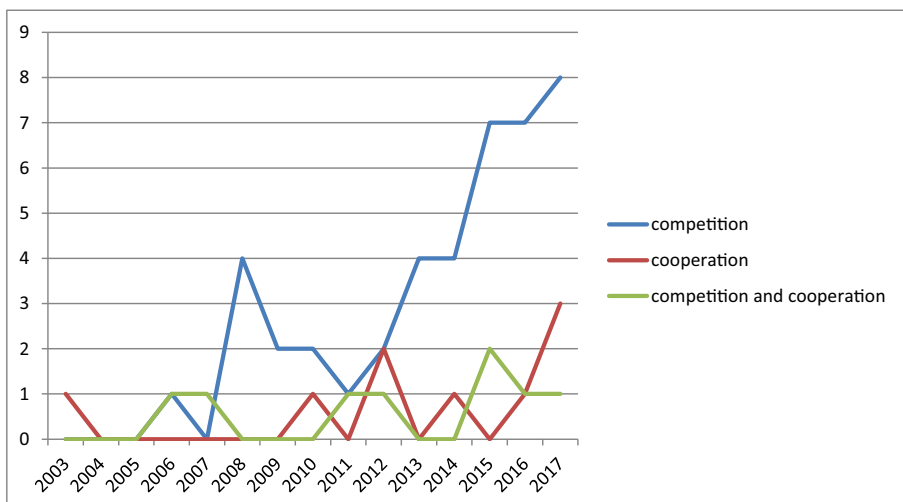

Fig. 2 Change in perceiving China as a threat and an opportunity (Source: author's own compilation)

China's rise and its great power nature

Most authors perceive changes in China's foreign policy in the form of assertiveness and activity in international relations. Researchers point out that China used to be but no longer is peacefully oriented in international relations. The turning point was Xi Jinping's taking power. It is emphasized that Xi diverted from the principles introduced and promoted by his predecessors, mainly Deng Xiaoping and his *Taoguang yanghui* (low profile) strategy. Deng is considered the father of "28 Chinese characters" which form seven principles: (1) *Lengjing guancha*—observe the situation carefully and analyze it coolly; (2) *Yousuo zuowei*—try to contribute; (3) *Wen zhu zhenjiao*—hold your ground, defend your own interests; (4) *Chenzhuo yingfu*—handle changes calmly and confidently; (5) *Shanyu shouzhuo*—be careful, keep a low profile; (6) *Juebu dang tou*—do not try to take the lead; and (7) *Taoguang yanghui*—conceal your capabilities and intentions (Góralczyk 2017b, pp. 33–34).

The PRC is trying to undermine the position of the US i.a., through the implementation of the BRI project, as it aims to build a multipolar world (Góralczyk 2017b). Another researcher believes that China hides its true intentions and expanding the economic potential serves other goals, including the expansion of its military potential (Ciecierski 2017). Most researchers define China as a rising or sectoral great power, significantly less frequently, only once, is China defined as a superpower. There is also a juxtaposition of three greatest powers, e.g., US-EU-China with the emphasis that the PRC is not the strongest in this group yet it will be in the future (Fiszer 2017).

China is considered a great power by a number of researchers and terms such as "a leading power" also occur (Fiszer 2017). Despite increasing defining China as a great power, the country is also classified as "striving to achieve the status of a regional great power" (Mencel 2017) or wanting to become "a global great power" (Szubrycht 2016; Kotas 2008; Sulmicki 2015). Another author writes that "China needs to become a reliable regional great power" in order to build international power (Michałek 2014). One can find in the literature statements saying that China is going to become the greatest power (Romiszewska 2013), that it is one of the major great powers (Bób 2013), that it is a strong regional actor (Puślecki 2012), that it already is a great power (Zamęcki 2011; Rowiński and Szafraniec 2008; Hübner 2014), that it is a regional great power (Willa 2011; Mickiewicz 2008), or that it is a rising great power (Kubiak 2008). One of the authors states that China already is a superpower (Skrzyp 2012) (see Table 2).

The vast majority of researchers believe that China is building its great power position in order to achieve a dominant status in the international system. Even if political, economic, or social indicators do not allow defining China as a great power, most researchers conclude that China wants to be the strongest country in the world—this is how its intentions and development path are assessed.

Engagement in and change of the international system

One of the tools of China's foreign policy reflecting its international engagement and desire to rebuild the international system is providing development assistances since it promotes China's economic interests and also builds the country's positive image. An additional aspect is stressing the importance and attractiveness of the PRC's development model. Development assistance is as a result a tool which helps rebuild the current

Table 2 China's status

	China	Author and year of publication
In the process of gaining a great power status	Is building a great power position, including it being a rising great power	Haliżak 2016, Ciecierski 2017, Bób 2013, Zajączkowski 2009, Rowiński and Szafraniec 2008, Kotas 2008
Contemporary status	Is a leading power/great power	Haliżak 2016, Kaczmarski 2016, Fiszer 2014, Hubner 2014, Mierzejewski and Żakowski 2012, Zamęcki 2011,
	Is a superpower	Skrzyp 2012
	Is a regional great power	Willa 2011, Mickiewicz 2008
Intentions/future status	Wants to be a regional great power	Mencel 2017
	Wants to be a superpower/a global great power	Trzcińska 2016, Hubner 2014/ Szubrycht 2016, Sulmicki 2015, Kotas 2008, Milewski 2003,
	May/will be a superpower	Cieślik 2016, Romiszewska 2013
	Will be a superpower if it builds a reliable position of a regional great power	Michałek 2014

Source: author's own compilation

system into a multipolar one (Jankowski 2016). China is both a donor and recipient of the Official Development Assistance (ODA). The PRC uses and enjoys ODA resources which raise a lot of controversy due to the level of the country's development and its power, but at the same time it helps maintain the image of a developing country. Playing the role of development assistance donor is an element of China's foreign policy, the aim of which is to achieve the status of the leader of developing countries or of the global South (Smolaga 2009).

Chinese soft power plays a similar role. China is becoming a more attractive country, both economically and politically, which uses elements of soft power and other tools related to creating an international image (Trzcińska 2016). Most researchers highlight that the PRC uses growing soft power resources in order to improve its image. China does not want to be portrayed as a threat but as a reliable and responsible country promoting the win-win strategy. Soft power is also supported by an element-assisting economic diplomacy, and it is economic relations that have a priority nature (Bakalarz 2015; Trzcińska 2016; Mencel 2013). The question of perception may have an essential influence on the intensification of economic relations, since on the one hand, China is not perceived as colonizers (contrary to European countries), and on the other hand, critical voices are appearing more and more frequently, i.a., concerning excessive use of natural resources or non-compliance with employee rights in countries in which China places its enterprises (Bakalarz 2015). This is especially important in the context of relations with African countries.

Authors point out that China's assertiveness and activity manifests itself in its engagement in the construction and reconstruction of international institutions and in creating alternative solutions or interpretation of international concepts such as Responsibility to Protect (R2P). The concept of Responsible Protection (RP) was presented by a Chinese researcher Ruan Zongze. As the author writes, the Chinese concept may be a "voice in the debate of a country which consequently vetoed the United Nations (UN)

taking military action and in practice wants to strengthen its position in the region, thus weakening the position of its main opponent—the United States" (Kaźmierczak 2014). "Responsible Protection" entails minimized significance of military interventions which should be a last resort since problems can be solved in a peaceful (by legal and economic means), not forceful manner. It is not the only alternative to the R2P concept but it is an example of the increasing contribution of the "Chinese thought" in creating institutions and principles of international cooperation.

As noted by one of the researchers analyzing the 19th Congress of the Communist Party of China, the PRC is going to focus on building and promoting "community of fate" (*renlei mingyun gongtong ti*). It is the Chinese vision of dealing with world problems such as development differences, terrorism, non-traditional security threats, or even climate change. Xi Jinping pointed out problems that one cannot solve by themselves, therefore a community needs to be built assuming principles of inclusion, respect, and mutual benefits. As emphasized by the author, "this concept in reality is the Chinese vision of globalization" (Szczudlik 2017, p. 107).

Another manifestation of China's activity is its engagement in the development of the UN, in particular in peacekeeping missions. Researchers believe that China's activity in this area results from the desire to improve its image. China wants to present itself as a responsible great power which pursues efforts to build peaceful relations. An additional aspect is weakening the image of the "Chinese threat." As the authors point out, due to its engagement China may influence the shape of institutions so as to best protect its interests but also to strengthen the UN's role and to build a multipolar system at the expense of the US which prefers unilateralism. Another aspect is the possibility to get involved in regions and countries with which China has weak contact or where Taiwan's influence is stronger but also the protection of the principle of non-interference in internal affairs of other countries (Rowiński and Szafraniec 2008).

Another global problem which appeared in the literature is climate change and China's position in the matter of international climate protection. The European Union is portrayed as a leader of shaping the system of protection, whereas China as a country blocking these initiatives. The author points out that the PRC's policy in this respect is determined by economic results; however, regardless of its development, climate changes have an impact on China, including on its security. Political conditions are equally essential as the PRC is criticized by the participants of international relations, including the European Union, which—according to the author—effectively reduces China's position as a representative of the countries of the South (Księżopolski 2013).

The vast majority of researchers point out that China is seeking to change the international order. Only a few researchers define China as a *status quo* great power (Haliżak 2016). China is most frequently portrayed as a revisionist stakeholder and one building a new international order at the expense of the US (by limiting the hegemony of the US) (Góralczyk 2017b). China is becoming more assertive; it is seeking to create institutions and cooperation but at the same time competes with the US. Over the last few years, a revival of the Chinese empire has been observed. Researchers emphasize that creating institutions and new forms of cooperation serves pragmatic and realistic goals (Szczudlik 2017). This applies not only to BRI but also to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB).

The European Union is China's partner that helps to build the multipolar order at the expense of the US (Kamieński 2006). It is similar with the cooperation with Russia.

China's relations with these actors have primarily a pragmatic dimension. China's activity related to the engagement in and the building of international institutions stems from the need to transform the current system into a multipolar one, in which the US does not have such a strong position as it does at the moment. Researchers most often point out that China wants the system to change into a multipolar one (Góralczyk 2017b; Ciecierski 2017; Jureńczyk 2017a; Jankowski 2016; Willa 2011; Rowiński and Szafraniec 2008; Kamieński 2006; Milewski 2003). A considerate group of researchers stress that China wants to be in the center of the world again (Fiszer 2017; Góralczyk 2017b; Mierzejewski and Żakowski 2012; Rowiński and Szafraniec 2008; Kubiak 2008; Kotas 2008; Bobkowski 2013; Skrzyp 2012).

Most researchers point out that China wants to build a multipolar world but there are studies which indicate that a bipolar system in a mild version emerges, that is, one including elements of cooperation (Haliżak 2015), and also a trilateral one. The three poles in the global order are China, the US, and the European Union (Sułek 2015).

Conclusion

The paper analyzed how the increase in the importance of China's international engagement is perceived in Polish research, and the purpose was to verify the argument stating that Polish researchers far more frequently present China in the categories of a threat and apply research terminology and tools in the framework of the realistic theory of international relations. The image of China as a threat has been reinforced, especially after 2013. The analysis of scientific papers from the last 15 years allowed to positively verify this argument.

Polish researchers most frequently point out that (1) China is taking over further spheres of influence of the US which is limiting or minimizing its engagement in certain regions of the world; (2) the PRC is questioning US position in East Asia and expanding its own sphere of influence to the West (through Central Asia and South Asia) and also African countries though it does not question such US spheres of influence as Latin America or the Middle East; (3) China is perceived as a threat to the US and it itself perceives the US as a threat to its own development and political influence; (4) the PRC is most often portrayed in realistic categories yet it does not want war; (5) China is implementing a policy which aims to strengthen its image as a power that does not threaten anyone and has a peaceful orientation; (6) the PRC is striving to rebuild its power and "to take its rightful place" in international relations. Much less frequently do researchers analyze China's activity in the categories of liberalism or constructivism and they also portray the PRC both as a threat and an opportunity; (7) China is a country that is trying to dominate the region of East Asia and is competing in this area with the US while it shows greater willingness to cooperate in other areas, i.a., for economic reasons and in order to counterbalance or limit the US influence.[8]

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[8] Most of the conclusions, based on the analyzed literature, are being upheld in the recently published works, however at least conclusion no. seven seems to be questionable. For example, Góralczyk (2018, chapter 8) explains how China shapes the institutions and economic relations to "allure" Asian states, but also analyzes the recent developments in the US–China relations to suggest turn to competition between the two great powers.

Many works apply threat–opportunity framework to analyze the perception of China's rise. As it was indicated in this paper, it is not only the discussion between a threat and an opportunity, but also the discussion between realism and other theories of international relations (liberalism and constructivism); however, the theoretical aspects are not sufficiently emphasized in Polish scholarly literature.

Conflict of interest   The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

Research involving human participants and/or animals   Not applicable.

Informed consent   Not applicable.

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