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### Central and Eastern Europe on the Eurasian Chessboard in the Global Century

Colette Mazzucelli<sup>abc</sup>, Paul C. Saunders<sup>d</sup>, and Zijian Ma<sup>ef</sup>

<sup>a</sup> NYU New York, <sup>b</sup>LIU Global, <sup>c</sup>Pioneer Academics

<sup>d</sup> NYU New York SPS Center for Global Affairs

<sup>e</sup> Fudan University, Shanghai, <sup>f</sup>Pioneer Academics

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Colette Mazzucelli, Paul C. Saunders, Zijian Ma

## Central and Eastern Europe on the Eurasian Chessboard in the Global Century\*

**Abstract:** This article focuses on the present shift of global power eastward and the significance of this evolution for Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in terms of an emerging multipolarity in the international relations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The analysis underlines China's geopolitical interests in the CEE region, notably, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as the resurgence of American isolationism under the administration of President Donald Trump. As two active geostrategic players, Russia and China, jockey for position, the expansion of Chinese investment westward to CEE states occurs at a time of nationalist-populist challenges to democracy from the far right of the political spectrum in the member states of the European Union (EU). The much-needed funding offered for infrastructure projects in CEE countries has a positive developmental impact, and yet in an area struggling with the legacy of Soviet communism, the spread of Chinese influence is likely to conflict with the forces of liberal democracy. The potential for an ideological clash is significant as the EU struggles to identify a 21<sup>st</sup> century narrative that captures the imagination of citizens across the continent, especially those in the younger generations without the experience or recollection of the post-World War II era.

**Keywords:** unipolar moment, realism, geo-strategy, Central and Eastern Europe, Belt and Road Initiative

### Introduction

The unification of Germany and the demise of the former Soviet Union signaled the end of the Cold War for analysts, policymakers and scholars. The “unipolar moment” referenced the United States (US)

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as “the center of world power ... the unchallenged superpower ... attended by its Western allies.”<sup>1</sup> Fifteen years ago, Krauthammer revisited his original assertion that the “gap in power between the leading nation and all the others was so unprecedented as to yield an international structure unique to modern history: unipolarity.”<sup>2</sup> The changes in the global system during the past quarter century beg the question as to why the United States did not elaborate, as Brzezinski advocated, “a geostrategy that accounted for the inevitable attrition of its power.”<sup>3</sup> Our article addresses this fundamental question in light of the present shift of global power eastward and the significance of this evolution for the CEE in terms of an emerging multipolarity in the international relations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with a particular focus on China’s interests in the CEE region as well as the resurgence of American isolationism under the Trump administration. The increased threat of war from a new source, namely, “weapons of mass destruction wielded by rogue states”<sup>4</sup> as analyzed by Krauthammer, is relevant more in the context of China’s economic investments in Europe, as well as in Central Asia and the Middle East, and particularly its “vested interests in ... stability.”<sup>5</sup>

## 1. Defining the Unipolar Moment: The Expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

In the postwar era, the Gaullist ambition of a Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals challenged the dominance of the North Atlantic Alliance. As the unipolar moment dawned, NATO’s expansion was relatively rapid as well as revelatory concerning US geostrategic objectives, which aimed, in part, to counter a French vision of leadership in Europe.<sup>6</sup> Successive enlargements to the south as well as the east sought to reinforce US control over Middle East energy supplies as its “military

1 C. Krauthammer, ‘The Unipolar Moment’, *Foreign Affairs*, 1 January 1990, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1991-02-01/unipolar-moment> [2017-07-30].

2 C. Krauthammer, ‘The Unipolar Moment Revisited’, *The National Interest*, Vol. 70, Winter 2002-03, <http://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/krauthammer.pdf> [2017-07-30].

3 Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, New York: Basic Books, 2016, pp. 217-218.

4 C. Krauthammer, ‘The Unipolar Moment Revisited’, op. cit., p. 2.

5 Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, op. cit., p. 219.

6 L.P. de Mènil, *Who Speaks for Europe? The Vision of Charles de Gaulle*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1977; S. Hoffmann, *Decline or Renewal? France Since the 1930s*, New York: The Viking Press, 1974.

and economic supremacy” held sway over a “Grand Area” incorporating as much of Eurasia as possible.<sup>7</sup> During the 1990s, Brzezinski<sup>8</sup> and Kissinger each thought that “a larger West” was critical to the survival of American power and to the future of Europe. Both men were vocal and robust proponents of the expansion of NATO for similar, yet slightly different, reasons. Brzezinski and Kissinger often disagreed about issues relating to Europe and Russia. Nonetheless, they agreed that the breakup of the Soviet Union (USSR) afforded an opportunity to repurpose as well as a necessity to expand NATO.

Kissinger’s reasons were essentially geopolitical. With the fall of the USSR, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, the so-called Visegrad countries, all of which had been occupied by the USSR, sought membership in NATO. During the Soviet period, those four countries stood between Europe and the USSR and represented a safety barrier for Germany and other NATO members. In an editorial in *The Washington Post* titled “Expand NATO Now,” Kissinger wrote that:

“if this request is rejected and the states bordering Germany are refused protection, Germany will sooner or later seek to achieve its security by national efforts, encountering on the way a Russia pursuing the same policy from its own side. A vacuum between Germany and Russia threatens not only NATO cohesion but the very existence of NATO as a meaningful institution. NATO cannot long survive if the borders it protects are not threatened while it refuses to protect the borders of adjoining countries that do feel threatened.”<sup>9</sup>

Three years later, Brzezinski told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee that “NATO expansion is central to the vitality of the American-European connection, to the scope of a democratic and secure Europe, and to the ability of America and Europe to work to-

7 N. Chomsky, ‘The Unipolar Moment and the Obama Era,’ Text of lecture given at Nezahualcōyotl Hall, National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), University City, Federal District, Mexico, 21 September 2009, <https://chomsky.info/20090921-2/> [2017-07-30].

8 On May 26, 2017, Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter’s National Security Advisor, died at the age of 89. His death prompts a review of his contribution to the expansion of NATO and a comparison of his views to those of his predecessor and former Secretary of State under presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, Dr. Henry Kissinger. Full disclosure requires that Paul C. Saunders reports that he acted as legal counsel to Dr. Kissinger in the past and considers him a friend.

9 H. Kissinger, ‘Expand NATO Now,’ *The Washington Post*, 19 December 1994.

gether in promoting international security.”<sup>10</sup> His view was that expansion was not necessary to counter a Russian threat because “it currently does not exist, though one cannot exclude its reappearance and hence some insurance against it is desirable.” Rather, it was essential to the “long-term historic and strategic relationship between America and Europe.”<sup>11</sup> Unlike Kissinger at that time, Brzezinski saw NATO expansion as increasing the chance “that Russia will emerge as a democratic state with strong ties to Europe and without geopolitical ambitions vis-à-vis portions of Europe.”<sup>12</sup> Kissinger’s view at the time was more nuanced: together with NATO expansion, there could also be a security treaty between NATO and Russia that would provide that there would be no NATO troops stationed on the territory of the new NATO members and that “could provide for consultation between NATO and Russia on matters of common interest.”<sup>13</sup>

Brzezinski also considered the long-term possibility that Russia might join NATO and that while it did not appear a realistic possibility at the moment (1995), an excluded Russia might become “more anti-European and anti-Western” and “prudence therefore dictates that the issue of Russia’s association be kept open.”<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, Kissinger believed at the time that Russian membership in NATO would represent the end of NATO as a defensive alliance and “turn into a system of general collective security similar to the United Nations. Russian membership in NATO would dissolve the Atlantic Alliance into just such a vague system without meeting the security concerns of Europe, especially Eastern Europe, or of America.”<sup>15</sup>

By 2012, Brzezinski was arguing that both Turkey and Russia should be admitted to the European Union (and perhaps even into NATO);<sup>16</sup> yet by 2015, he told Schoen and Smith that “we are already in a Cold

10 Z. Brzezinski, ‘Introductory Statement on NATO Enlargement’, *Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, October 10, 1997.

11 Ibid.

12 L. Van Metre, ‘Managing NATO Expansion’, *United States Institute of Peace*, 1 April 1997, quoting Brzezinski’s remarks at the first session of its European Security Working Group.

13 Kissinger *supra* note 6.

14 Z. Brzezinski, ‘A Plan for Europe: How to Expand NATO’, *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 1995, p. 31.

15 H. Kissinger, *supra* note 6.

16 Z. Brzezinski, *supra* note 4.

War [with Russia].”<sup>17</sup> Kissinger’s position did not change: “Russia should not be regarded as an incipient NATO country; such a goal would simply move to the Manchurian border the crises we now face on the Ukrainian one. The goal of diplomacy should be to integrate Russia into a world order which leaves scope for cooperation.”<sup>18</sup> It is to the plausibility of that diplomatic objective looking ahead to 2050 that we now turn.

## 2. CEE in the Balance after the Unipolar Moment: Revisionist Russia, Aspiring China and “Independent America”<sup>19</sup>

Changes in the strategic environment place the EU of 27 member states (EU-27), minus the United Kingdom (UK) after the Brexit vote of 23 June 2016, in a specific role. By taking what Brzezinski defines as “the lead in regards to a number of transnational non-political threats to global stability, such as climate change,”<sup>20</sup> the EU-27 is a global player fulfilling the vocation that Duchene termed “civilian power” Europe, namely, a “civilian group of countries long on economic power and relatively short on armed force.”<sup>21</sup> Within the EU-27, the geostrategic focus has been lost in current, inward-looking debates within member states largely related to the 2017 domestic elections. In this context, the position of specific CEE countries as the vanguard of what Brzezinski terms “Europe’s steadfast opposition to Russian aggression in Eastern Europe”<sup>22</sup> is critical to the continent’s future stability. The way in which this stability is defined is integral to its realization. Kissinger’s idea of “evolutionary stability” is relevant because Europe’s post-Cold War unification raises the question of whether the status quo can ever be maintained in perpetuity. If not, as Kissinger asserts, “the challenge, then, is to devise a system in which change can be accommodated

17 D. Schoen, E. Smith, *Putin’s Master Plan to Destroy Europe, Divide NATO and Restore Russian Power and Global Influence*, New York: Encounter Books, 2016, p. vii.

18 J. Goldberg, ‘World Chaos and World Order: Conversations with Henry Kissinger’, *The Atlantic*, 10 November 2016.

19 I. Bremmer, *Superpower: Three Choices for America’s Role in the World*, New York: Portfolio, 2016.

20 Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, op. cit., p. 218.

21 F. Duchene, ‘The European Community and the Uncertainties of Interdependence’, in: M. Kohnstamm, W. Hager (eds.), *A Nation Writ Large? Foreign-Policy Problems before the European Community*, London: Macmillan, 1973, p. 19.

22 Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, op. cit., p. 218.

without producing chaos.”<sup>23</sup> CEE is the geostrategic space in which this challenge is experienced most acutely on the Eurasian chessboard.

Two active geostrategic players jockey for position in the CEE space, Russia and China, as they “take careful stock of America’s power, determine the extent to which their interests overlap or collide with America, and shape their own more limited Eurasian objectives, sometimes in collusion but sometimes in conflict with America’s policies.”<sup>24</sup> Georgetown University Professor Angela Stent explains that President Trump and his closest White House advisers still believe the president can make a deal with Russian President Vladimir Putin, viewing Russia as “a natural ally against the threat from Islam.”<sup>25</sup> Given newly imposed sanctions by the United States Congress against Moscow in late July 2017, Stent underlines that “... One of Putin’s greatest goals is to ensure Russia is treated as if it was still the Soviet Union, a nuclear power that has to be respected and feared.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, as Stent notes, Russia’s relationship with China is stronger presently, which means the imperative to improve ties with the West is not the same as during the Cold War.<sup>27</sup>

China is a strategic player in the EU-27 through its BRI. China’s interest is to strengthen its connections with the EU by establishing relations with member states in the CEE region. These connections illustrate China’s larger geostrategic ambition, as Brzezinski underlines, “to reestablish the ancient Silk Roads to the West through Chinese construction and investment in Central Asian land routes.”<sup>28</sup> Of particular relevance is a point this analysis highlights, namely that “overall trade volume between China and CEE countries has grown consistently from 2013 to 2016 to become China’s most rapidly growing trading partnership.” In fact, the BRI heralds China’s aspirations to realize different concepts of partnership, which as Kissinger asserts “need to

<sup>23</sup> J. Goldberg, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, op. cit., pp. 40-41.

<sup>25</sup> B. Whitmore, ‘The Power Vertical Podcast: Déjà Vu All Over Again’, *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty*, August 04, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/podcast-deja-vu-all-over-again/28659268.html> [2017-07-30].

<sup>26</sup> D.E. Sanger, ‘Putin’s Bet on a Trump Presidency Backfires Spectacularly’, *The New York Times*, 30 July 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/30/us/politics/putins-bet-on-a-trump-presidency-backfires-spectacularly.html> [2017-07-30].

<sup>27</sup> B. Whitmore, op. cit.

<sup>28</sup> Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, op. cit., p. 219.



become, paradoxically elements of the modern balance of power, especially in Asia—an approach that, if implemented as an overarching principle, would be as unprecedented as it is important.”<sup>29</sup> As China becomes more influential in the CEE space, Russia’s primacy as a supplier of inexpensive natural gas is likely to be challenged in the longer term along with its ability to hold neighboring states hostage owing to their overwhelming resource dependence on Moscow.<sup>30</sup>

The expansion of Chinese investment westward to the CEE region occurs at a time of nationalist-populist challenges to democracy located on the far right of the political spectrum in EU-27 member states. The much-needed funding offered for infrastructure projects in CEE countries has a positive developmental impact, and yet, as Coyer explains, China’s “no strings attached” aid stands in contrast to investment from the West, which is often tied to demands that progress be made, for example, in areas like combatting the corruption endemic in the region.<sup>31</sup> In an area struggling with the legacy of Soviet communism, the spread of Chinese influence is likely to conflict with the forces of liberal democracy. The potential for an ideological clash is significant as the EU struggles to identify a 21<sup>st</sup> century narrative that captures the imagination of citizens across the continent, especially those in the younger generations without the experience or recollection of the post-World War II era.

On the one hand, the CEE countries now experience a new predicament in which Russia and China vie for influence in the region while, on the other, the United States under the Trump administration is not committed to the liberal postwar order, as Stent explains.<sup>32</sup> The lack of commitment, threatens to undermine what Brzezinski assessed as “the scope and pervasiveness of American global power” in four decisive areas: military, economic, technological and cultural.<sup>33</sup>

29 H. Kissinger, *World Order*, New York: Penguin Press, 2014, p. 233.

30 Stratfor Worldview, ‘Russia’s Competition for Natural Gas Deals with China’, *Article*, 12 September 2013, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/russias-competition-natural-gas-deals-china> [2017-07-30].

31 P. Coyer, ‘China’s Expanding Reach and Growing Influence in Central & Eastern Europe’, *Forbes*, 2 August 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paulcoyer/2015/08/02/chinas-expanding-reach-and-growing-influence-in-central-eastern-europe/2/#361ae42368c8> [2017-07-30].

32 B. Whitmore, *op. cit.*

33 Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.

The election of Trump as president is unprecedented, yet not unexpected, given the growing chorus of citizens who support a leader with a focus on an “independent America” as a choice for the country’s role in the world.<sup>34</sup> This choice reflects a status for the US identified by Michael Mandelbaum as “the frugal superpower,” owing to the economic constraints the country faced as a result of the financial crisis in 2007-08 and its entitlement programs, notably Social Security and Medicare.<sup>35</sup>

### **3. The Enduring Disorder on the Eurasian Chessboard: An Absence of Strategy in Relations with China**

Bremmer’s assertion that “... right now, China is the only country in the world with a global strategy”<sup>36</sup> poses a fundamental difficulty for the US and the EU in distinct ways regarding CEE. In its policy decisions, the Trump administration is determined to defy the idea of “the West,” questioning the relevance of postwar institutions, particularly NATO. Our assessment that NATO has a future despite the demise of the USSR and the rise of the Trump presidency forces observers of world order to critically contend with a larger reality than the relevance of the North Atlantic Alliance in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Conceptually, the realist school of thought references the post-World War II period in a particular way.<sup>37</sup> The post-1945 era is one when, according to Kissinger, America begins “to think of foreign policy as a continuous process, even in seemingly tranquil circumstances,” and, in terms of transatlantic institutions, “forged alliances as a way to put down markers as much as to design a strategy.”<sup>38</sup> In the decade after the financial crisis of 2007-08, the only global strategy that emerges is, as Bremmer notes, geoeconomic rather than geopolitical.<sup>39</sup> China’s strategic focus is on the “peaceful rise” in the much longer term looking ahead to 2050 as a benchmark in the country’s

34 G. Rose, ‘Ian Bremmer on America’s Role in the World’, *Foreign Affairs*, 25 June 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/videos/2015-06-25/ian-bremmer-americas-role-world> [2017-07-30].

35 M. Mandelbaum, *The Frugal Superpower*, New York: Public Affairs, 2011.

36 G. Rose, op. cit.

37 J. Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists*, Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1988.

38 J. Goldberg, op. cit.

39 G. Rose, op. cit.

development.<sup>40</sup> Its investment of more than a trillion dollars in a global strategy is the queen on the Eurasian chessboard. In the CEE, the strategic disposition of China's investment aims to "orient those countries more towards Chinese long-term interest, towards Chinese standards, towards Chinese currency, towards Chinese state-owned enterprises, and Chinese state capitalism."<sup>41</sup> A lack of long-term focus by the EU-27 in the four areas that determine global power—military, economic, technological, and cultural—given the revisionist ambitions of Putin in Russia and the independent actions of Trump in the US, leave the CEE in an ambiguous space reminiscent of "fragments floating in the here and now."<sup>42</sup>

In no area on the Eurasian chessboard is there a greater strategic need to contemplate how, in looking ahead, the possibility exists to address the present vacuum, namely, a lack of social responsibility, which leaves millions in the CEE region vulnerable to external dynamics with the power to shape their destiny. In this environment, global leadership is an ethical imperative that calls for the articulation of interests anchored in a vision of the future as much as an understanding of human needs. The imperative is a return to the "good society" realism of Brzezinski and Kennan, namely, "recognition that the fundamental prerequisite for the effective exercise of global leadership is America's willingness to sustain just, fair, and above all decent conditions at home."<sup>43</sup>

## 4. Geopolitical Considerations in CEE

The CEE region has been geopolitically vital throughout contemporary history because of its geographical location. Since it is situated between Western Europe and Russia, competition between the West and Russia has been the dominant theme of this region in

40 B. Zheng, 'China's Peaceful Rise to Great-Power Status', *Foreign Affairs*, September-October 2005, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2005-09-01/chinas-peaceful-rise-great-power-status> [2017-07-30].

41 G. Rose, op. cit.

42 S. Hoffmann, *The European Sisyphus: Essays on Europe, 1964-1994*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1995.

43 J. Carden, 'The Good Society Realism of Zbigniew Brzezinski', *The American Conservative*, 13 December 2013, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/the-good-society-realism-of-zbigniew-brzezinski/> [2017-07-30].

recent decades. The geopolitical climate of the CEE is shaped by the confrontation between Russia and the West, which have been vying for regional dominance. After the Cold War, the former Soviet republics and satellite countries underwent a period of political and economic transformation, democratized and liberalized under the leadership of the US and its European allies.<sup>44</sup> Subsequently, most of the CEE countries have acquired membership in the EU and NATO through their eastward expansion to contain Russian influence. The CEE countries' entrance to the Western camp created a deep sense of insecurity for Russia. The aggrandizement of the EU and NATO demonstrates the US and Western Europe's emphasis on securing control over this crucial area of geopolitics and symbolized the geostrategic victory of the West after the demise of the USSR.

Nevertheless, the geopolitical dynamics of the CEE region have shifted in recent years following America's re-evaluation of its interests in the area. Given China's rapid economic development and its increasing influence in Asia-Pacific, the Obama administration re-oriented its geopolitical focus to the region, thereby establishing its "Rebalance to Asia" as the cornerstone of its foreign policy. The US diverted its economic and military resources from the CEE region, as it considers the EU and the CEE of less strategic importance. This US foreign policy shift infuriated the pro-US countries in the CEE region.<sup>45</sup> The CEE and the EU's discontent with a US that downplays the geopolitical significance of the CEE gave rise to closer ties between the EU and other political entities, including Russia and China. The 2014 Ukraine crisis prompted the US to shift its attention back to Europe. The US has since re-established its close economic partnership with Europe by negotiating the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and weakening EU-Russia economic cooperation by imposing sanctions on Russia while increasing its military spending and deployment in the CEE space.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, the CEE is at the

44 C. Mazzucelli, 'A Separate Peace? Economic Stabilization and the New Fault Line of European Security', in: C.C. Hodge (ed.), *Redefining European Security*, New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999, pp. 73-92.

45 J. Zhang, 'New Trend in the Geopolitics of Central & Eastern Asia', *Contemporary International Relations*, No. 6, 2016, p. 36.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

center of the US strategy to contain the aggression of Russia and preserve the balance of power on the Eurasian continent.

The geographical function of the CEE region is to connect Russia and Western Europe. Its pivotal geopolitical role in EU-Russia relations embodies its geopolitical significance in world politics. Halford John Mackinder's "Heartland Theory" links control of the CEE to control over valuable industrial and agricultural resources. Today, the most influential role that CEE countries assume is in energy transport. Russia is the EU's largest natural gas exporter. The CEE region consumes natural gas from Russia as well as the more important transport of gas to Western European consumers through pipelines across their territories. Natural gas complicates the geopolitical situation of the CEE because Russia, the EU, CEE and the US all have an impact on the energy supply and demand of Europe. With regard to Russia, natural gas exports increase its political leverage over the EU member states, which depend heavily upon Russian energy exports. However, Europe has made efforts to strengthen its energy security by diversifying its energy supply, diminishing its reliance upon Russian natural gas.

In general, Russia has been successful in its "pipeline politics." One third of Western European countries' natural gas exports are from Russia. Due to the recurring Russia-Ukraine energy dispute, Russia has been promoting its landmark pipeline construction projects to supply natural gas directly to Western European, Southern European, and pro-Russia CEE consumers. Consequently, Russia can export natural gas through alternative pipeline routes that "bypass former Soviet republics and satellite states" to deprive CEE countries of political leverage and exert influence on them, removing their ability to affect the Russian energy supply to the entire EU by cutting off natural gas transport across their own territory.<sup>47</sup> The "Nord Stream" pipeline was constructed to transport natural gas directly from Russia to Germany through the Baltic Sea without crossing the territory of CEE countries, which reinforces Russia's dominance of the natural gas market.

47 S. Reed, 'A Conduit for Russian Gas, Tangled in Europe's Conflicts', *The New York Times*, 30 June 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/01/business/international/south-stream-pipeline-project-in-bulgaria-is-delayed.html?mcubz=0> [2017-06-30].

In the meantime, the EU holds political influence over Russia's energy supply to the European market. The South Stream pipeline was another attempt by Russia to consolidate its status as Europe's dominant energy supplier. It was to bypass the anti-Russia CEE countries and transport natural gas directly through the Black Sea from Russia to CEE and Southern European consumers. Its eventual failure occurred against the backdrop of Western economic sanctions against Russia following the 2014 Ukraine crisis.<sup>48</sup> The EU ruled that South Stream monopolized the European energy market in violation of the Third Energy Package.<sup>49</sup> The Bulgarian government suspended the pipeline's construction in its territory under Western pressure. Therefore, the EU proved itself capable of turning the tide in the energy fight with Russia under a favorable political climate, preventing Russia from dominating the European energy market and undermining the energy security of the EU. By and large, whether the political environment is favorable to Russia or the EU is highly dependent upon the attitude of the CEE countries. Anti-Russia governments, including Poland and a number of Baltic States, are opposed to Russia's pipeline expansion projects, which bypass the CEE region. In contrast, pro-Russia regimes, such as Hungary and Serbia, are more receptive to the pipeline expansion projects because they depend heavily upon Russian gas imports and revenue from transit fees from pipelines crossing their territories. Certain political climates, such as the 2014 Ukraine crisis, impose significant pressure on these pro-Russia governments and compel them to side with the West to confront the increasingly powerful Russian monopoly power on the energy market and geopolitical leverage.

The US is also an important stakeholder in the CEE geopolitical confrontation. As an unwavering ally of the EU, the US aims to diversify the EU's energy imports and weaken Europe's energy reliance on Russia. To this end, the US has started to export liquefied natural gas (LNG) to the European market and has engaged in building ener-

48 C. Mazzucelli, 'Germany between Russia and Ukraine: Leadership for a New Ostpolitik', in: C. Mazzucelli, R. J. Bee (eds.), *Mapping Transatlantic Futures: German-American Relations in a Global World*, Stuttgart: Robert Bosch Foundation, 2014, pp. 53-75.

49 J. Yardley, J. Becker, 'How Putin Forged a Pipeline Deal That Derailed', *The New York Times*, 30 December 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/31/world/europe/how-putin-forged-a-pipeline-deal-that-derailed-.html?mcubz=0> [2017-06-30].

gy infrastructure in several EU member states. Even though Russian natural gas remains Europe's primary energy source, the US has been able to reduce Russia's energy leverage and exert greater geopolitical influence on the EU.<sup>50</sup> Although Europe will likely remain reliant upon Russian gas exports for the foreseeable future, the US and the EU can still work more closely on Europe's energy diversification and diminishing Russia's leverage in the geopolitical arena by increasing US LNG exports to the European market, investing in energy infrastructure in the CEE region, and applying EU regulations to establish a more "integrated European gas market."<sup>51</sup>

## 5. China's Geopolitical Interests in CEE under BRI

The CEE countries have embraced a more diversified and pragmatic foreign policy.<sup>52</sup> Although they previously depended on Europe for economic development and the US for national security, CEE countries have started to pursue a more pragmatic diplomatic relationship with Russia and China for practical economic cooperation. In terms of national security, CEE countries have realized that the US is no longer concentrating its military and economic resources in Europe since its "Rebalance to Asia", while the EU is no longer able to provide sustainable investment and relevant economic support to the region because of the bloc's flagging economy since the 2008 global financial crisis. Therefore, the CEE countries have developed new diplomatic partnerships with emerging economies—most notably, China—to strengthen their domestic economy by pursuing practical economic cooperation. As BRI brings in necessary financial resources, infrastructure improvement, and transportation upgrades, the China-CEE relationship will become integral to the national interests of CEE countries. The CEE's increasing diplomatic focus on China is a major victory in China's pursuit of global leadership, and multilateral influence and will also

<sup>50</sup> J. Zhang, op. cit.

<sup>51</sup> J. Bordoff, T. Houser, 'American Gas to the Rescue? The Impact of US LNG Exports on European Security and Russian Foreign Policy', *The Center on Global Energy Policy*, Columbia University, September 2017, [http://energypolicy.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/energy/CGEP\\_American%20Gas%20to%20the%20Rescue%3F.pdf](http://energypolicy.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/energy/CGEP_American%20Gas%20to%20the%20Rescue%3F.pdf) [2017-06-30].

<sup>52</sup> J. Zhang, op. cit., p. 42.



give China a greater stake in the region's geopolitics. The CEE countries are likely to develop their domestic economies, domestic politics and foreign policy more independently of Western attitudes with the support from China. A strong economic and diplomatic tie with the world's second largest economy, China, through BRI could reduce the CEE countries' previous economic and security dependence on the US and the EU, enhance their political strength and voice in the international political arena, and reinforce their bargaining position with other major geopolitical players in the region.

Because of its geographical proximity to Western Europe, the CEE region serves as a gateway for Chinese businesses to that region and to the wider EU single market. As the majority of CEE countries are EU member states and therefore adhere to EU legal standards for goods and services, the entrance of Chinese businesses into the CEE market enables them to smoothly achieve product "Europeanization." This process allows Chinese businesses to improve the standard of their products and become familiar with EU rules and regulations in a favorable environment. The CEE market thereby provides a period of transition for Chinese businesses to successfully introduce their goods and services from China to Western Europe. In addition, economic cooperation with the CEE enables China to construct multiple railways from China to Europe. Thus, Chinese businesses can transport their products directly from China to the core of the EU market through railways that pass through the CEE region. China's closer relationship with the CEE countries can significantly impact EU-China relations. Since CEE countries constitute an integral part of the EU, China's partnership with the CEE is likely to influence the EU decision-making process in a way that legislation regarding Chinese businesses in the EU would be more favorable to China, in light of the fact that the EU has previously refused China market economy status and imposed anti-dumping duties on Chinese businesses. A potentially friendlier EU-China relationship is consistent with China's national interests and pursuit of economic globalization.

Since BRI gives China increasing influence in the CEE, it could prevent Russian aggression and the destruction of the balance of power in Europe through Russia's pipeline politics by entering the crucial



geopolitical space of the CEE region.<sup>53</sup> In order to diminish the CEE and Western Europe's dependence on Russia for natural gas, China is actively engaging in energy cooperation and investment with CEE countries. A number of energy programs in hydropower, wind power, and solar energy have been initiated by China and several CEE countries attempting to enhance their energy structure and diversify their energy sources. Last year, China established an energy partnership with the Serbian government to facilitate investment in renewable energy by utilizing financing from the Silk Fund.<sup>54</sup> China is also entering the nuclear energy market in the CEE region. It is negotiating with Poland to construct its first nuclear energy plant and help diversify its energy supply structure.<sup>55</sup> Consequently, by exploring and entering the geopolitically significant energy market of the CEE, China seeks to reduce Russia's influence on the CEE and the EU as a whole and exert geopolitical influence in the region.

## 6. Challenges in the China-CEE Partnership

With regard to trade between China and CEE countries, the significant trade imbalance could be dangerous. The remarkable deficit on the side of the CEE countries is not conducive to a sustainable and mutually beneficial trading partnership. China risks facing a more hostile CEE as the bilateral trade deficit continues to widen as China, increasingly valuing the strategic significance of the CEE region, increases exports to those countries. Additionally, although 16 countries in the CEE region have established partnerships with China, the trade volume between large CEE countries and China dramatically outweighs that of relatively smaller countries with China. The current emphasis on large CEE economies and neglect of small

53 R. Turcsányi, 'Central and Eastern Europe's courtship with China: Trojan horse within the EU?', *EU-Asia at a Glance*, Brussels: European Institute for Asian Studies, January 2014.

54 C. Shen, J. Guo, 'Premier Li Keqiang attends the Third Meeting of Heads of Government of China and Central and Eastern European Countries' (李克强出席第三次中国-中东欧国家领导人会晤), 17 December 2014, <http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2014/12-17/6883205.shtml> [2017-07-30].

55 L. Chunting, 'Poland demonstrates interest in Chinese nuclear power. Can Chinese corporations make another success in its entrance to the European market?' (波兰向中国核电抛出绣球, 中企进军欧洲能否再下一城?), 24 July 2017, <http://www.yicai.com/news/5320753.html> [2017-07-24].

economies is likely to trigger discontent and resistance from the latter countries, which could have a potentially harmful impact on the cooperation between China and the CEE. In general, finding new areas of trade cooperation and balancing the trade ties with large and small CEE economies will prove to be the most critical challenges for China and CEE leaders.

The difference in ideology and social systems between China and the CEE countries signals another challenge to the China-CEE partnership. The end of the Cold War prompted the CEE countries to embrace the Western model of capitalism and democracy. The mutual ideological recognition between China and the CEE prior to the fall of communist regimes disappeared. This significant discrepancy in core values and cultural mentalities indicates anything but a solid foundation for bilateral collaboration on a wide range of areas, including trade, investment, infrastructure and cultural exchanges.<sup>56</sup> This ideological and cultural gap between the Chinese and the CEE states will lead to misunderstanding and deadlocks in their bilateral cooperation within BRI.

Since China is establishing a strong link to the entire CEE region, which incorporates 16 countries, coordinating relations between them will be a formidable challenge for the Chinese government. These 16 countries have different economic structures and different levels of economic development. The Chinese government must recognize that each CEE country has different fundamental needs and must formulate economic strategies on a case-by-case basis. Due to the inevitable internal competition among CEE countries for trade, investment and infrastructure projects from China, Beijing must work with all 16 CEE countries fairly to prevent regional conflicts and a hostile geopolitical climate.

Additionally, there are a large number of ethnic groups in the CEE region, which throughout history has triggered outbursts of nationalist sentiments and ethnic conflicts between nations. Economic tensions between CEE countries because of unequal trade and investment from

56 J. Yu, 'The Current Situation and Improvement Approaches of the China-CEEC Cooperation Mechanism' ('中国—中东欧国家合作机制现状与完善路径'), *China International Studies*, No. 2, 2015, p. 118.

China have the potential to exacerbate ethnic conflicts, causing devastating political consequences. Within the CEE, there are existing collaborative frameworks and organizations established well before the introduction of BRI, such as the Visegrad Group and the New Central Europe Free Trade Agreement. Therefore, establishing a new bilateral mechanism based upon existing regional organizational frameworks would be challenging.<sup>57</sup>

Another factor that impacts China-CEE relations is the EU's attitude towards China and the BRI. Most CEE countries in the "16+1" mechanism are EU member states, and thus subject to the influence of EU institutions and law. The close economic ties between China and CEE countries worries Brussels because China will have increased control over CEE countries and thus more leverage on the EU's decision-making process. This concern is especially valid considering that a number of CEE countries are turning increasingly nationalistic.<sup>58</sup> CEE politicians who come into power as populists articulate policies that deviate from the path of the Western countries. This context provides China with more opportunities to develop partnerships with CEE countries seeking independence from Western influence.<sup>59</sup>

The EU has criticized China's investment in sensitive projects in the CEE region, the difficulties of European firms' entry into the Chinese market, and China's lack of adherence to EU investment rules and regulations. Under these circumstances, Brussels may retaliate against Chinese businesses in Europe and deflate China's enthusiasm for investment on the continent. While some Europeans believe China aims to deal with its domestic overcapacity through cooperation with CEE states, it is vital for the country to solve its domestic economic challenges first and then gradually open its markets to foreign businesses.

57 Ibid., p. 120.

58 M. Fletcher, 'Is Hungary the EU's first rogue state? Viktor Orban and the long march from freedom', *New Statesman*, 1 August 2017, <http://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/2017/08/hungary-eus-first-rogue-state-viktor-orban-and-long-march-freedom> [2017-08-15].

59 A. Spisak, 'EU uneasy over China's efforts to woo central and eastern European states', *Financial Times*, 8 May 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/2e98f6f4-089d-11e7-ac5a-903b21361b43> [2017-06-07].

## Conclusion

The present shift of global power eastward and the significance of this evolution for the CEE speak to an emerging multipolarity in the international relations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. China's influence in the CEE space challenges Russia's primacy as a supplier of inexpensive natural gas along with its ability to hold neighboring states hostage through resource dependence on Moscow. Chinese investment westward to the CEE region is expanding in an era of nationalist-populist challenges to democracy located on the far right of the political spectrum in the EU-27. The much-needed funding for infrastructure projects in CEE countries has a positive developmental impact. Tensions exist, nonetheless, in an area struggling with the legacy of Soviet communism. This reality in the daily lives of citizens suggests that the spread of Chinese influence is likely to conflict with the forces of liberal democracy. The potential for an ideological clash is significant in the CEE space. This clash is an integral dimension of the struggle the EU faces to identify a 21<sup>st</sup> century narrative that captures the imagination of citizens across the continent. This is especially true of those in the younger generations without the experience or recollection of the post-World War II era. This article identifies a predominant strategic need, namely, to contemplate how, in looking ahead, the possibility exists to address the present vacuum. A lack of social responsibility leaves millions in the CEE region vulnerable to external dynamics with the power to shape their destiny. Global leadership, in this context, is an ethical imperative, which calls for the articulation of interests anchored in a vision of the future as much as an understanding of human needs. The imperative is a return to the "good society" realism of Brzezinski and Kennan.

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