

Instytut Europy Środkowej
Institute of Central Europe

IEŚ

5/2022

POLICY
PAPERS



China towards Eastern Europe: between plague and war

Edited by
Michał Słowikowski and Tomasz Stępniewski

2022





Publishing series IEŚ Policy Papers

Number 5/2022

Series editors Beata Surmacz and Tomasz Stępniewski



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Lublin–Łódź 2022

Reviewer

Dr hab. Piotr Bajor, Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland

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ISBN 978-83-66413-85-6

Published and edited

Instytut Europy Środkowej | Institute of Central Europe

ul. Niecała 5

20-080 Lublin | Polska | Poland

www.ies.lublin.pl

Cover design and typesetting www.targonski.pl

Cover photo © Sergey Nivens | [shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com)

Print www.drukarniaakapit.pl



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Executive summary

The Wolf resists the Dragon: an assessment of the relationship between Lithuania and China during the COVID-19 pandemic

- Recently, the Lithuanian authorities have been sceptical about expanding their relationship with China. As a result they decided to leave the “17+1” Initiative due to Lithuania’s disappointment regarding the dynamics of trade exchange.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, China’s political regime became more visible in Lithuania and intensified its activity using wide diplomatic measures (so-called “mask diplomacy”). China’s aim was to prevent international criticism over its interior policy. It also wanted to create a positive image as a global power. By providing medical support to Lithuania, the Chinese authorities were seeking not only to restore the country’s global reputation but also to strengthen its political and economic influence in the Baltic state.

- At the same time, they applied propaganda narratives: China's strong and successful response to the coronavirus and its global engagement in fighting the pandemic, including support to the most affected countries.
- Chinese authorities continued to strengthen espionage and cyberspace activity in order to undermine democratic institutions in Lithuania as well as to increase economic, political and military pressure in the Baltic Sea region. China went to great lengths to take control of Lithuania's strategic sectors, which made Lithuania more suspicious about Chinese technological investment.
- The opening of the Taiwan office in Vilnius caused a diplomatic battle between Lithuania and China, the latter imposing unofficial economic sanctions on Lithuania, which revealed means of economic warfare with potential Chinese adversaries in the global dimension.

Iron brotherhood in the time of plague. Relationship between Belarus and China during the COVID-19 pandemic

- Belarus-China relations before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic were supposedly developing perfectly. It was expected that these relations would soon reach a new level – “iron brotherhood”, which was used to describe the particularly close relationship between China and some other countries, such as Pakistan and Serbia.
- Nevertheless, in 2020, China's relations with Belarus were to go through a serious test and reached a point of bifurcation. A number of doubts began to emerge as to whether, in the long term, the decisions taken by Alexander Lukashenko in the sphere of Belarus's domestic and

foreign policy serve China's long-term interests, first of all the Belt&Road Initiative (BRI).

- Lukashenko's approach to the problem of counteracting the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has entailed significant political consequences, which have undermined the stability of Belarus's political regime. China has provided Lukashenko's regime with political support on the international arena in the face of growing political pressure and sanctions from the West.
- Belarusian-Chinese political and humanitarian relations seemed to be excellent during the period under review. The assistance that China provided to Belarus to counteract the spread of the pandemic was significant. Minsk's gratitude must have been satisfactory for Beijing from the point of view of the implementation of China's "COVID diplomacy".
- The anti-Western turn of Belarus' authorities in the aftermath of fraudulent elections in August 2020 began to cause China many problems. Fearing secondary sanctions and the withdrawal of Western economic entities from cooperation with Belarus, the implementation of China's flagship investment (Slavkaliy Potash Mine and Processing Plant Construction Project) has been suspended. The status of Belarus as a logistics hub connecting the European Union with the post-Soviet area has also begun to be re-evaluated.

Chinese "dragon movements" around Ukraine

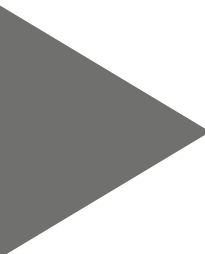
- China's so-called "mask diplomacy" or "vaccine diplomacy" has been an instrument of legitimization for Chinese leader Xi Jinping's regime and a measure by which

recognition can be built of China as a global power, the leader in preventing an international crisis caused by the coronavirus COVID-19. China's strategy emphasised the unhelpful and clumsy West, which did not rush to help Ukraine. It was also an instrument of economic expansion of Chinese companies into the Ukrainian market as well as into Central European countries under the so-called "Silk Road of Health".

- The ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war will not significantly affect China's policy towards Ukraine. China is observing the war in terms of shifts in the global balance of power and changes in the world economy (e.g., under the influence of sanctions). It is treated instrumentally as a regional conflict in the wider confrontation between China and the US (and more broadly the allies of NATO, the EU, Indo-Pacific democracies, Australia), weakening Russia. Until the coming 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (autumn 2022), no decisions negatively affecting the Sino-Russian alliance will be made; therefore, Ukraine will be in China's focus only as an element of the Central and Eastern Europe region.
- The Ukrainian authorities do not perceive China as a geopolitical threat. China's economic penetration (through low-quality Chinese goods, Chinese vaccines and medical equipment, infrastructural investments) will be continued. China's strategic goal will be to develop a joint position towards Ukraine with the US and the EU.

Russian-Chinese strategic and economic relations: friendship or vassal dependence?

- Russia and China currently describe their relationship as “strategic cooperation and comprehensive partnership”. For Moscow and Beijing, the war in Ukraine is part of a struggle to weaken American influence and secure their positions as authoritarian leaders against “Western-type democratizations”.
- But their partnership has its limits. Beijing and Moscow are increasingly competing for the same global markets. China has overtaken Russia to become the world’s second-largest arms producer.
- The key problem of the Russia-China alliance is the lack of trust on both sides and the asymmetry of relations, which cannot be resolved. And the problems between China and Russia are potentially broader and deeper, but Beijing has not yet put them on the official diplomatic agenda, while Moscow is trying not to notice growing Chinese revanchism.



Michał Słowikowski, Tomasz Stępniewski

China towards Eastern Europe: between plague and war – introduction

China's involvement in Eastern Europe has changed quite significantly over the past two years. China's position in the region has evolved, and the process has been dynamic and complex. This was influenced by both structural and processual conditions. These include, above all, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic on the one hand, and on the other hand, the growing global confrontation between the two global powers: the United States and China, as well as the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

The region itself is clearly diverse (there are small states and regional powers in this group, some of them are full democracies, others – semi-democratic or fully authoritarian) and the interests and goals of individual states are contradictory (some of them pursue revisionist policies while others strive at all costs to maintain sovereignty and territorial integrity). In some of them legitimacy of power is achieved through fair electoral procedures, in others in a violent man-

ner and contrary to human and civil rights. All that makes the whole Eastern Europe region “stably unstable”.

Each of the countries in the region (Belarus, Lithuania, Russia, Ukraine) brought their own unique baggage of problems, complicating China’s policy towards the region, injecting its decision-making process with disorientation and hesitancy.

For sure the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic opened up an opportunity for China to increase its presence in the region and strengthen its influence through medical diplomacy, but the growing tension between Russia and the West and the outbreak of war have undermined these efforts and damaged their reputations and negatively affected the realization of their political and economic interests.

This prevents China from achieving its goals in a harmonious way. China’s flagship Belt and Road Initiative has stalled in Eastern Europe as a result of an unprecedented collapse in relations between the West and Belarus/Russia over the war in Ukraine.

Lithuania, which is a member of the European Union, is guided in its foreign policy by the principle of the primacy of liberal-democratic values (value-based policy) over economic interests, which puts it on a collision course with China, which in turn makes the development of cooperation dependent on acceptance of the one-China policy, to which Vilnius does not want to submit. The opening of the Taiwan office in Vilnius caused a diplomatic battle between Lithuania and China, imposed unofficial Chinese economic sanctions on Lithuania, and revealed the means of economic warfare with potential Chinese adversaries in the global dimension. Lithuanian authorities have been sceptical about

expanding cooperation with China. As a result, they decided to leave the “17+1” Initiative due to Lithuania’s disappointment regarding the dynamics of trade exchange.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, China’s political regime has become more visible in Lithuania and intensified its activity using wide diplomatic measures (so-called “mask diplomacy”). By providing medical support to Lithuania the Chinese authorities were seeking not only to restore the country’s global reputation, but also to strengthen its political and economic influence in the Baltic state. At the same time, they applied propaganda narratives including China’s strong and successful response to the coronavirus, and China’s global engagement in fighting the pandemic, including support to the most affected countries.

Chinese authorities continued to strengthen its espionage and cyberspace activity to undermine democratic institutions in Lithuania, as well as to increase economic, political and military pressure in the Baltic Sea Region. China went to great lengths to take control over Lithuania’s strategic sectors which made Lithuania more suspicious about the Chinese technological investment.

In the case of Belarus, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the presidential elections, the result of which – in the opinion of Belarusian society – was falsified and consequently caused unprecedented protests in the political history of Belarus. Lukashenko’s approach to the problem of counteracting the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has entailed significant political consequences, undermined its legitimisation in the eyes of Belarusians considerably paving the way to the revolution outbreak.

China has provided Lukashenko's regime with political support on the international arena in the face of growing political pressure and sanctions from the West. Belarusian-Chinese political and humanitarian relations seemed to be excellent during the period under review. The assistance that China provided to Belarus to counteract the spread of the pandemic was significant. Minsk's gratitude must have been satisfactory for Beijing from the point of view of the implementation of China's "COVID diplomacy".

The anti-Western turn of Belarus' authorities in the aftermath of fraudulent elections in August 2020 began to cause China many problems. Fearing secondary sanctions and the withdrawal of Western economic entities from cooperation with Belarus, the implementation of China's flagship investment (Slavkaliy Potash Mine and Processing Plant Construction Project) has been suspended. The status of Belarus as a logistics hub connecting the European Union with the post-Soviet area has also begun to be re-evaluated.

Ukrainian-Chinese relations were dominated by both the pandemic and Russian aggression against Ukraine. However, China has not been able to fully exploit the potential of its medical diplomacy in Ukraine, that was an instrument of the economic expansion of Chinese companies into Ukrainian market under the so-called "Silk Road of Health".

The ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war will not significantly affect China's policy towards Ukraine. China is observing the war in terms of shifts in the global balance of power and changes in the world economy (e.g., under the influence of sanctions). It is treated instrumentally as a regional conflict in the confrontation between China and the US (and more broadly the allies of NATO, EU, Indo-Pacific democracies,

Australia), weakening Russia. Until the ahead 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (autumn 2022), no decisions negatively affected the Sino-Russian alliance will not be made, therefore Ukraine will be in the Chinese focus only as the element of Central and Eastern Europe region.

The Ukrainian authorities do not perceive China as a geopolitical threat. China's economic penetration (through low-quality Chinese goods, Chinese vaccines and medical equipment, infrastructural investments) will be continued.

With regard to Russian-Chinese relations, their status was evolving under the influence of local and global processes. Russia and China describe their relationship as “strategic cooperation and comprehensive partnership”. For Moscow and Beijing, the war in Ukraine is part of a struggle to weaken American influence and to make the world safe for autocrats.

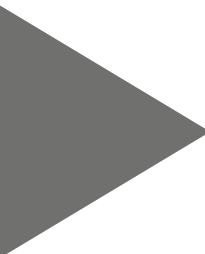
But their partnership has its limits. The key problem of the Russia-China alliance is the lack of trust on both sides and the asymmetry of relations which cannot be resolved in any way. The problems between China and Russia are potentially broader and more dangerous. Beijing just has not yet put them on the official diplomatic agenda, while Moscow is trying not to notice the growing Chinese revanchism.

Both Russia and China criticize the existing international system, which they consider to be imposed by the West. While Russia aspires to become one of the world's great powers, China is rather looking to displace the U.S. as a key global power. The crisis around Ukraine was a struggle for the future world order and the main principles of its functioning. Standing aside as Russia starts an unexpected war in Europe is an advantage for China, distracting the U.S. and

its allies from a long-delayed pivot toward China and Asia in general. So far, Russia and China's confrontation with the United States has accelerated the rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing. But in any configuration, Russia is assigned the role of a junior partner and a raw materials appendage.

This special series of IEŚ Policy Papers is the result of collaboration between the Institute of Central Europe in Lublin, and researchers from the University of Łódź and the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. We would like to thank the authors for providing their analysis on China's policy in Eastern Europe in the shadow of war and plague. We hope that this IEŚ Policy Papers will be well received by the readers and will encourage experts who study this issue to continue their research.

Michał Słowikowski, Tomasz Stępniewski
Łódź and Lublin, August 2022



Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik,
Barbara Jundo-Kaliszewska

The Wolf resists the Dragon: an assessment of the relationship between Lithuania and China during the COVID-19 pandemic

Multilateral formats

The “16+1” initiative¹ is one of the few institutionalised forms of multilateral cooperation between Central and Eastern European countries, including Lithuania, and China. It was launched in 2012 (it was renamed “17+1” after Greece joined the project in April 2019) with reference to partnership regarding economics, trade and culture. What is noteworthy is that the “17+1” initiative intensified mutual contacts, especially with regard to politics, but it did not really affect the dynamics of trade exchange as it was not a constant phenomenon in Lithuania. The Lithuanian authorities’ dis-

¹ On August, 2022, Estonia and Latvia announced that they have exited the group.

appointment stemming from the lack of promised Chinese investment projects was one of the causes of their criticism of the “17+1”². Lithuania stated that the goals for which it had decided to participate in the initiative had not been achieved. Additionally, risks from the Chinese side concerning military, information security and infrastructural aspects provoked Lithuania to leave the project. In February 2021, Lithuania, similarly to Estonia, refused to be represented at the highest level. Instead of Lithuania’s President Gitanas Nausėda, the minister of transport and communications, Marius Skuodis, took part. Finally, in May 2021, Lithuania decided to withdraw completely from the “17+1” project. This meant that even though the commercial exchange resulted in a relative increase of dynamics in the bilateral relations, the “17+1” initiative did not make Lithuania more politically sympathetic towards China.

Security and cyberthreats

The traditional military dimension of security is still relevant, but the role of non-military categories, such as espionage, cyberthreats and disinformation, is growing. While Russia is at the centre of attention of the Lithuanian security services, more and more attention is being paid to China’s presence in the region. Lithuania’s concerns have also been raised due to the convergent Russian-Chinese interests in the Baltic Sea region and the states’ authoritarian models of governance that allow Russia and China to implement

² A. Kuczyńska-Zonik, T. Stępniewski, *China and Central and Eastern Europe: The Case of the Baltic States*, in: Li Xing (ed.), *China-EU Relations in a New Era of Global Transformation*, Routledge 2021, pp. 192-208.

their policies disregarding ethics and international law. It was in 2018 when Lithuania identified Chinese espionage as a threat to national security for the first time. The National Threat Assessment 2019, prepared by the State Security Department of Lithuania, stated that “as Chinese economic and political ambitions increase in Lithuania and other NATO and EU countries, the activity of Chinese intelligence and security services is becoming more aggressive”³. In 2019 it was confirmed that China had expanded its influence around the world by consolidating support in the international arena for its global political agenda⁴.

China’s ambition is to become a high-tech superpower. Huawei Technologies, one of the world’s largest producers of telecommunications equipment, has expressed interest in building a 5G network in the Baltic states. However, the security of critical infrastructure, including cyberspace, was one of the controversial issues in China-Lithuania relations. Cyberspace threats for Lithuanian security include espionage, information operations against politicians, decision-makers and the general public as well as activities using information systems and strategic infrastructure management. In 2021, the Lithuanian National Security Centre reported that phones made by Chinese firms such as Huawei and Xiaomi posed cybersecurity and censorship risks, and it recommended not to use them. Moreover, Lithuanian

³ State Security Department of Lithuania and the Second Investigation Department under the Ministry of National Defence, *National Threat Assessment 2019*, <https://www.vsd.lt/en/threats/threats-national-security-lithuania/> [03.03.2022].

⁴ State Security Department of Lithuania and the Second Investigation Department under the Ministry of National Defence, *National Threat Assessment 2020*, <https://www.vsd.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2020-Gresmes-En.pdf> [12.02.2022].

security services have confirmed that in recent years Chinese intelligence activity in the country has been increasing and that China may use sensitive information to increase its economic, political and military influence in the region. According to the Lithuanian authorities, China is most often interested in issues related to the EU and NATO. This follows Chinese attempts to gain access to critical infrastructure and reflects China's overall objective to extend a long-term worldwide influence over strategic sectors and to establish their enterprises on the global markets. This would further enable China to advance dependency on its technology, to carry out intrusive cyber operations, including expropriation of data and know-how, and it would build its potential to undermine critical infrastructure in case of crisis.

Treatment for coronavirus

At the beginning of 2020, the global challenge of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic brought a brief warming of Chinese-Lithuanian relations. The first case of COVID-19 was recorded in Lithuania at the end of February 2020. By 20th March 2020, the Ministry of Health of the Lithuanian Republic announced its decision to purchase about 2 million respirators, 6 million face masks, and other personal protective equipment from China.

On the same day, the first humanitarian shipment marked with labels in honour of the Lithuanian-Chinese friendship was received in Lithuania. The shipment was financed, among others, by the controversial Chinese Chamber of Commerce in Lithuania.

In the first days of April 2020, a train carrying a cargo of personal protective equipment and medical equipment

from China, intended for European countries including Lithuania, arrived in Vilnius. This was in line with the state's ambitions to play the role of a potential European transit gate for Chinese products. At the same time, China's aim was to shape a positive image of itself for internal and external purposes. By shipping medical supplies to European countries, China was seeking to improve its image as a responsible global leader. This was so-called mask diplomacy. In order to improve the image and competitiveness of its international companies, China coordinated shipments of medical equipment to Lithuania. China publicly portrayed the shipments as aid from its international companies that have direct interests in Lithuanian telecommunications and energy sectors. Chinese diplomatic missions played an important role, as they supervised the supply of medical equipment and concurrently ensured that people were aware that the aid was provided by China. International Chinese corporations were also actively involved, and by donating medical supplies they sought to gain publicity along with a competitive edge in the recipient country. China undertook an ambitious mission that, however, backfired. A short wave of enthusiasm was soon followed by high-profile press reports, both questioning the quality of the delivered products and accusing exporters of bending the law (the case concerned, among others, activities of illegal certification of medical equipment). Chinese alleged humanitarian aid turned out to be an overwhelmingly commercial sale. Medical aid provided by the Huawei Technologies company was treated with suspicion as an attempt to pressure Lithuania's agreement on the Huawei 5G technology investment in the country.

The culmination of mask diplomacy in the region occurred in May 2020, on the anniversary of the establishment of China's relations with the European Union, when the Lithuanian ambassador in Beijing, in the presence of 27 ambassadors of European countries and the EU ambassador, signed a controversial letter "EU-China ties vital amid global crisis". At the same time, relations between the two countries were gradually cooling down.

Image and disinformation

The pandemic served as a good example of an intensive information campaign applied by China. While it has usually shied away from the aggressive, conspiratorial type of disinformation favoured by Russia, during the pandemic China tracked disinformation and propaganda narratives as well. Propaganda-related narratives depicted China as a global leader and promoted the achievements of China's authorities, while at the same time they highlighted the lack of solidarity among democratic states. At that time, the Chinese regime emphasised the failures of the United States and other Western democracies in managing COVID-19. China exploited the pandemic to discredit perceived adversaries or, on the contrary, to improve its own international image. It used technology and innovations as a powerful tool to expand its influence in the international arena.

China's authorities engaged in propaganda campaigns directed toward foreign audiences through various influence channels, such as diplomatic missions, news agencies, international corporations, diaspora and student organizations, as well as informal ties with politicians, journalists and scholars. The Chinese authorities aimed at strength-

ening cooperation with Lithuanian media outlets by regularly ordering sponsored articles. The topics varied from China's achievements in fighting the pandemic, humanitarian aid, and benefits of the Belt and Road Initiative to criticism towards Lithuanian politicians and activists who publicly raised concerns about China's human rights violations as well as the regime's policies regarding Hong Kong, Tibet and Taiwan. China's authorities attempted to expand their influence in Lithuania through the Chinese Embassy and other associated structures, such as the Xinhua news agency's local office, the China Chamber of Commerce in Lithuania and the Association of Chinese Diaspora.

Taiwan

Narratives about China's human rights compliance in Lithuania intensified by 2019, following espionage charges brought by the Lithuanian Security Department. One of the topics raised by the Lithuanian authorities was the problem of Taiwan. At the beginning of 2020, Taiwan supplied Lithuania with 100,000 protective masks, and in September 2021 Lithuania sent 20,000 Astra Zeneca vaccines to Taiwan as humanitarian aid.

In June 2020, the press published an article⁵ in which China was targeted by Gabrielius Landsbergis and Mantas Adomėnas, opposing conservative politicians, who called for a break with "Orwellian totalitarianism" and to follow the path of liberal democracies. In October 2020, the par-

⁵ Mantas Adomėnas, Gabrielius Landsbergis: Lietuvai ateina metas rinktis, <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/nuomones/mantas-adomenas-gabrielius-landsbergis-lietuvai-ateina-metas-rinktis-18-1326900> [12.04.2022].

liamentary elections in Lithuania were won by the Union of the Fatherland-Lithuanian Christian Democrats (lt. *Tėvynės sąjunga – Lietuvos krikščionys demokratai*), and the authors of the article took the positions, respectively, of Lithuania's minister and vice-minister of foreign affairs, which escalated the crisis in mutual relations between China and Lithuania. In early October 2020, Lithuania, despite pressure from the Chinese Embassy in Vilnius, together with other 38 countries, condemned China at the UN forum for abuses in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong.

The climax of the crisis in Sino-Lithuanian relations happened in November 2021. China's indignation was triggered by the opening of the Taiwan Office Representation in Vilnius and the use of the word "Taiwan" in its name (instead of "Taipei", as in use in most countries in the world). According to Beijing, "bad" Lithuanian precedent violated Lithuania's political obligations towards the PRC, undermining China's sovereignty and interfering in the internal affairs of the state. At the same time, Lithuania was accused of succumbing to US influence. The Lithuanian side emphasised that the opening of the office was in line with the agenda of the Lithuanian government of December 2020 and that Representation is not a diplomatic mission; therefore, its opening did not violate the "one China" principle. In response, the Chinese accused Lithuania of violating the rights of Polish and Russian national minorities⁶. As early as December 2021, diplomatic relations with Lithuania were reduced to

⁶ B. Jundo-Kaliszewska, B. Kowalski, *Otwarcie biura Tajwanu na Litwie z Chinami i USA w tle*, <https://www.osa.uni.lodz.pl/publikacje/blog-osa/szczegoly/otwarcie-biura-tajwanu-na-litwie-z-chinami-i-usa-w-tle> [12.04.2022].

the level of *chargé d'affaires*, and the dispute over Taiwan provoked the imposition of unofficial Chinese economic sanctions on Lithuania.

Economic pressure

The Lithuanian-Chinese dispute has exposed the PRC's methods of economic warfare against potential opponents. Imports from Lithuania were completely blocked, and Lithuania was removed from the list of countries of origin of goods in the Chinese customs register. This meant that merchandise could not pass through customs in any direction, and this is one of the most serious unofficial economic sanctions imposed by the PRC on another country so far. Beijing's narrative intensified, taking the form of threats used as a political tool against other countries that continued to trade with Lithuania. It is worth citing the example of German auto parts giant Continental, on which the PRC is putting pressure to stop using Lithuanian-made components.

In view of the unprecedented actions from China, Lithuania resorted to the European Commission for aid with this matter. However, the ongoing China-EU conflict (in March 2021, the EU imposed sanctions on China for human rights violations to which China responded with counter-sanctions) effectively hindered the resolution of the Lithuanian-Chinese dispute. The story continued at the China-EU summit on 1st April 2022, during which the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, announced that the PRC authorities need to stop unjustified trade-restrictive measures against Lithuania.

Lithuania's low economic dependence on China is a key aspect enabling the authorities to pursue a consistent policy

on Taiwan. In 2019, total trade between China and Lithuania increased by almost 16% and reached EUR 1.2 billion. At the same time, China only slightly advanced on the list of Lithuania's most important trading partners, in terms of total trade (from 17th to 19th place), imports (from 10th to 12th), and exports (from 20th to 25th).

The importance of China as a source of foreign investment in Lithuania has decreased, with the PRC descending to 40th place (from 37th), while Lithuanian investment in China quadrupled in 2019 (EUR 35.5 million against EUR 8.32 million in the opposite direction) – China took 12th place on the list of recipients of Lithuanian foreign investments. Additionally, in November 2020, the Lithuanian parliament adopted a resolution to withdraw the tax exemption for low-value shipments from countries outside the EU. This slowed down the dynamic growth of Chinese e-commerce platforms, especially AliExpress, in the relatively well-digitalised Lithuanian market. The situation was additionally reinforced by the EU decision of 1st July 2021, which may adversely affect Lithuania's position in this sector. Lithuania had the ambition to become a transit gate for Chinese products, which should be considered past goals under the circumstances. However, the prospect of Taiwan opening a semiconductor factory in Lithuania remains current.

Summary

Lithuania is among the most active states supporting global democratic processes. The historical heritage, experiences of transformation and moral responsibility empower Lithuania to commit more strongly to creating a new liberal global order. Lithuania demonstrates being European, open

and civic, with deep democratic traditions. As a result, support for Taiwan's independence aspirations was included in Lithuania's so-called liberal "values-based foreign policy" as a key element of the current government's agenda. In fact, it resulted from several factors. Lithuania aims to promote its European identity beyond its borders and to strengthen its prestige and international role. Secondly, it needs to ensure the security and stability of the region. Finally, it seeks to intensify transatlantic cooperation, as Lithuanian policy is in line with the US–China rivalry.

The growing role of China may confront the state with a new political order in the Baltic Sea region. From the perspective of Lithuania, Chinese activity, as well as its bilateral sectoral cooperation with Russia, will affect Lithuania's security in the future. Recently the Lithuanian authorities have been sceptical about expanding cooperation with China despite its significance in the field of Lithuania's transport, logistics, infrastructure, and energy. China had ambitions to monopolise the high-tech industry too. While China may pose threats to Lithuania's national security, it is more probable that Lithuania will continue its current policy towards China based on reasonable suspiciousness, human rights and democracy, unity within the EU and cooperation with the US and NATO as a guarantee of its security.

Lithuania found itself among the countries under the so-called image campaign of China at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, but China's actions under the mask diplomacy in Lithuania did not bring the intended effect.

Beijing's relaxed narrative towards Vilnius in early 2020 became exacerbated as early as mid-2021 and finally become a full-blown diplomatic and commercial war in

2022. In the context of the current economic presence of China in the region, the question of how long and to what level Lithuania will be able to antagonise such a powerful global player remains open.

Barbara Jundo-Kaliszewska's research for this chapter was partly supported by the University of Lodz's research grant: "The COVID-19 pandemic and the perception of China in Ukraine, Belarus and Serbia" (IDUB, no B2212001000110.07).



Michał Słowikowski

Iron brotherhood in the time of plague. Relationship between Belarus and China during the COVID-19 pandemic

China-Belarus relations prior to the COVID-19 pandemic

On 20th January 1992, Belarus and China established diplomatic relations, but only during the state visit of Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko to China in September 2016 was a joint declaration signed to build the highest level of relations: trust-based all-round strategic partnership and mutually beneficial cooperation. China has become the third-ranking trading partner of Belarus and the biggest one in Asia. The China-Belarus “Great Stone” Industrial Park was a landmark project of the BRI. It has been approved as the first regional special economic zone in Belarus. In 2021, Belarus and China agreed to upgrade the level of political cooperation, and Belarus-China relations were soon to get

the status of “iron brotherhood, exemplary all-round strategic cooperation and all-weather partnership”¹.

Belarusian-Chinese relations gained positive dynamics quite late. One of the reasons why China intensified its contacts with Belarus and gave them particular importance as part of the BRI was the increase in tension in Russian-Ukrainian relations at the turn of 2013/2014. From China’s perspective and for the unimpeded development of the BRI, Ukraine lost its strategic value. Ukraine, which was destabilized militarily and politically, could not compete with the then predictable and stable Belarus, which in the face of Russian revisionism began to re-evaluate its foreign policy, emphasizing neutrality and “strategic autonomy” in its relations with Russia, while at the same time moving closer to the European Union. Belarus has taken over the function of Ukraine as a “gateway to Europe” and was attributed the role of an infrastructural and industrial hub connecting the European, post-Soviet and Chinese markets. China has invested primarily in Belarusian transport infrastructure and logistics centres to support the achievement of the BRI objectives. Since 2016, 3 billion dollars has been invested in Belarusian railroad infrastructure, with 1.8 billion coming from China creditors².

Relations between Lukashenko and Xi Jinping have been close and intense. The public perception of China in Belarus has been extremely positive, and cooperation with China corresponded with the geopolitical expectations of

¹ *Belarus, China to upgrade political cooperation*, BelTA, <https://eng.belta.by/politics/view/belarus-china-to-upgrade-political-cooperation-142773-2021/> [29.04.2022].

² А. Кирейшин, *Когда БелЖД озолотится на китайском транзите?*, Белорусы и рынок, <https://belmarket.by/news/2021/12/12/news-48554.html> [29.04.2022].

the majority of Belarusians, which welcomed the “equal distance” from the Eastern and Western poles of geopolitical integration.

However, over time, both the Belarus authorities and public became increasingly concerned about the negative aspects of cooperation with China, which are in line with the general line of China’s conduct in the developing world. These include the hidden cost of Chinese loans the failures of a number of investment projects and their environmental impacts, the growing negative trade balance with China, the lack of technologically advanced investments, and the low added value of goods produced in the “Great Stone”, etc.

Alexander Lukashenko’s attitude to the threat of COVID-19

Alexander Lukashenko’s attitude to the threat of COVID-19 is considered to be one of the key factors that caused an increase in public discontent in Belarus and stimulated mass participation of Belarusians in political protests due to the fraudulent presidential election in August 2020. Lukashenko downplayed the problem of the spread of the virus. According to him, the first victims of the virus were to blame for their infections, and people died from comorbidities, not from COVID³.

Lukashenko’s reluctance to follow the rest of Europe – and much of the world – into lockdown was likely economic: a lockdown would have led to a drastic recession in the country and, unlike Western states, and even Russia, Bela-

³ P. Rudkouski, *70 Days without a Lockdown. Belarus’s Special Path in the Fight against COVID-19*, BISS COVID Research Analysis, pp. 6-7.

rus did not have the resources to bail out businesses and citizens. The second explanation was a psychological one: Lukashenko genuinely believed that the whole world was overreacting⁴.

Belarusian society did not share his calmness and optimism regarding the pandemic. When making the threat assessment, Lukashenko failed to take public opinion into account. It cost him the loss of the image of a “benevolent autocrat”. In the public perception, Lukashenko was thought to have let the Belarusians down by not preparing them for the approaching pandemic⁵.

In the months following the presidential election, Lukashenko changed his attitude towards the pandemic. However, he was still ambivalent. Above all, he ceased to deny the existence of the virus and the threat associated with its spread, he did not oppose prevention, i.e. vaccination, but strongly opposed measures managed from above and enforced by the authorities to prevent the spread of the virus (for example, the obligation to wear protective masks) and the implementation of a compulsory vaccination programme.

China's humanitarian aid for Belarus

Since the outbreak of the pandemic in Belarus, China has provided humanitarian aid to the country. This has taken

⁴ “We look like clowns”: Belarus carries on as rest of Europe locks down, Euronews, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/01/we-look-like-clowns-belarus-carries-on-as-rest-of-europe-locks-down> [29.04.2022].

⁵ A. Moshes, R. Nizhnikau, *The Belarusian Revolution: Sources, Interim Outcomes, and Lessons to Be Learned*, “Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization”, vol. 29, 2021, no. 2, p. 161.

a number of different forms, but the supply of vaccines was of paramount importance. By 4th April 2022, China had provided Belarus with a total of 7.5 million doses of the vaccine (produced by Sinopharm), of which 4.6 million were purchased and 2.9 million doses were donated free of charge. No other country in the Central and Eastern European region, or located in the post-Soviet area, has received such generous assistance from Beijing. The scale of aid in this dimension was comparable to that given by China to some of the countries of Southeast Asia⁶.

Chinese humanitarian aid provided to Belarus as part of so-called global health diplomacy was received with enthusiasm. Lukashenko did not spare words of gratitude to his Chinese comrades, despite his ambivalent attitude towards the threat. The state media of Belarus noted both the announcement of the fact and the very fact of providing medical assistance, as well as the vaccine itself.

A significant propaganda effect from the point of view of the promotion of Chinese anti-COVID-19 vaccines was the fact that pregnant women in Belarus were vaccinated with the Chinese-made Vero Cell vaccine. All other vaccines of Russian origin available at that time in Belarus were considered unsuitable for this particularly sensitive category of the population according to the Belarusian Ministry of Health⁷.

The Chinese vaccine was equally well perceived by the Belarusian public. In the collective consciousness, the popular idea was formed that due to the genesis of the virus

⁶ China COVID-19 Vaccine Tracker, <https://bridgebeijing.com/our-publications/our-publications-1/china-COVID-19-vaccines-tracker/> [29.04.2022].

⁷ *В Минске первая беременная привита от COVID-19*, Минск-Новости, <https://minsk-news.by/v-minske-pervaya-beremennaya-privita-ot-COVID-19/> [29.04.2022].

(Wuhan), the Chinese vaccine must have been good – the earliest work on it began in China. It was also called a “traditional” (inactivated) vaccine, i.e. based on the whole but neutralized virus.

Belarus role in China’s COVID diplomacy

Beijing’s humanitarian aid to Belarus was part of its global health diplomacy, also referred to as COVID diplomacy (consisting of the donation of masks and/or vaccines). China’s mask diplomacy “was viewed as serving external but also domestic political ends – China was seeking to boost its image as a responsible global leader (benevolent actor), but also securing regime stability in face of popular domestic anger”⁸.

China’s Ambassador to Belarus Xie Xiaoyong said in Minsk in February 2021 that “the assistance China is providing to Belarus is a step towards achieving the goal set by the President of the People’s Republic of China Xi Jinping, which was to make the vaccine a global social good”, adding that “China has decided to donate 10 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine to the World Health Organization as part of the COVAX initiative”⁹.

Belarus met Beijing’s expectations as part of its COVID diplomacy. It provided China with the opportunity to propagate its narrative regarding the fight against the pandemic and the promotion of its domestic vaccine through the Belarusian state media. At an international forum Belarus

⁸ B. Kowalski, *China’s Mask Diplomacy in Europe: Seeking Foreign Gratitude and Domestic Stability*, “Journal of Current Chinese Affairs”, vol. 50, 2021, no. 2, p. 213.

⁹ Производство китайской вакцины против коронавируса могут локализовать в Беларуси, BelTA, <https://www.belta.by/society/view/proizvodstvo-kitajskoj-vaktsiny-protiv-koronavirusa-mogut-lokalizovat-v-belarusi-429509-2021/> [29.04.2022].

supported China in achieving other constitutive goals of COVID diplomacy.

China “praised” the Belarusian authorities for their attempts to alert the international community against Washington’s actions discrediting China and for supporting China’s vision of “global cooperation for scientific justification of the origin of the virus and the joint fight against the pandemic”¹⁰.

In the commentary of the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs of 9th July 2021 on the genesis of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the work of the WHO in this area, one could find a clear criticism of the thesis of the “laboratory origin of the virus”, an affirmation of the actions of China, which “cooperates with the WHO and allows competent people, scientists, not politicians and diplomats to determine the origin and spread of the virus”¹¹.

China’s political support for Lukashenko and his gratitude

During the dynamic development of the COVID pandemic and the continuing state of social turmoil in Belarus, political and economic relations between China and Belarus were excellent, according to the representatives of both governments.

¹⁰ Се Сяюун: *Сотрудничество Китая и Беларуси – образец международных отношений нового типа*, Звезда, <https://zviazda.by/ru/news/20220119/1642580204-se-syaouun-sotrudnichestvo-kitaya-i-belarusi-obrazec-mezhdunarodnyh> [29.04.2021].

¹¹ Министерство иностранных дел Республики Беларусь, *Комментарий пресс-службы МИД Беларуси в отношении исследования происхождения вируса SARS-CoV-2 в условиях нарастающей политизации этого вопроса*, https://www.mfa.gov.by/print/press/news_mfa/b78d7f981a32b726.html [29.04.2022].

Along with Moscow, China was the most vocal defender of Lukashenko's regime, Belarus's "sovereignty", and non-interference in its internal affairs, and a critic of Western sanctions against Belarus. Beijing's concern was the stability of Lukashenko's regime, ergo the security of Chinese investments, hence the sense of the need to support Lukashenko after August 2020, when he found himself in a difficult domestic and international situation. China's position corresponded with the highly ideologized Chinese vision of the international order.

The Western sanctions imposed on Belarus became an additional driver for the two countries to harmonize their positions in the international scene and pursue further synchronization on a broad range of issues. Belarus made a number of statements in support of China's position at UN sessions focusing on matters of importance to China – the origin of COVID-19, the issues of Taiwan, Tibet and Hong Kong – and formed a closer coalition with China when voting in international organizations¹².

Dark clouds over the "iron brothers"

China's political declarations towards Belarus contrasted sharply with the actual state of modest bilateral economic cooperation, especially when compared with Belarusian trade turnover with Central and East European countries.

Even if 2021 was indeed "a record year for Belarus from the point of view of exports to China (strategic partner) of USD 0.91 billion, this result paled in comparison with the

¹² O. Kulai, *Belarus-China Relations in 2021*, "Policy Paper", 12 December 2021, no. 13, <http://minskdialogue.by/en/research/analytics-notes/belarus-china-relations-in-2021> [29.04.2022].

results of exchanges with countries hostile to Lukashenko's regime. Belarusian with Ukraine amounted to USD 5.4 billion, with Poland to USD 2 billion, and with Lithuania to USD 1.3 billion"¹³.

2021 was also a record year from the point of view of the development of transport and infrastructure cooperation between Belarus and China. In September of that year, Belarusian Railways reported that in the first 8 months of 2021, 470,000 containers were transported through the territory of Belarus (China-Europe-China) – 43% more than in the same period of 2020. There were 8 different freight trains travelling to and from China. Aleksandr Lukashenko stressed in September 2021 that: "The Republic of Belarus will continue doing its best to ensure the continuous development of this route"¹⁴. However, not everyone in China gave credence to assurances that Belarus would be able to maintain the current dynamics of transport. The deteriorating ratings of Belarus among the EU Member States and – more broadly the West – did not inspire optimism among Chinese entrepreneurs benefiting from the BRI.

Lukashenko himself has sent worrying signals to investors and clients of the BRI, repeatedly threatening the West with counter-sanctions, including closing the Belarusian border to the transport of goods from the EU to Russia and China. At a time of an unprecedented increase in tension on the Belarusian-Polish border caused by the migration cri-

¹³ Пульс Ленина-19, <https://t.me/pulslenina19/213> [29.04.2022].

¹⁴ Обращение Президента Беларуси к участникам Глобального саммита торговли услугами в Пекине, BelTA, <https://www.belta.by/president/view/obraschenie-prezidenta-belarusi-k-uchastnikam-globalnogo-sammita-torgovli-uslugami-v-pekinge-458082-2021/> [29.04.2022].

sis, worrying (but untrue) information about plans to close the railway border crossings between Polish and Belarus began to appear.

Chinese entrepreneurs began to look for alternative routes for transporting goods to and from Europe. On 1st January, China opened a new land-sea connection with Western Europe. The new China-Europe connection links Xi'an in China with Mannheim in Germany. The new train service operated by the Xi'an platform company transits via St. Petersburg in Russia and transports cargo to the German port of Mukran.

There have been several more or less convincing reasons circulating in the media for opening a new connection between China and Europe: the route via Russia was faster because trains switch between different gauges only once; skipping transit via Belarus and Poland saves the Xi'an platform company from more delays resulting from congestion at border crossings; the tension between Poland and Belarus resulting from an immigrant crisis has led to increased instability in the relations between the two countries.

Further deterioration of Belarus's relations with the EU, and the United States resulting in deepening and expanding of sectoral sanctions against Minsk have undermined projects with Chinese investments in Belarus, which are focused on Western markets and/or involve Western partners.

The implementation of an ambitious bimodal railway terminal project in the area of China-Belarus Industrial Park "Great Stone" was halted. Eurasian Railway Gateway Company was implementing the investment project of bimodal railway terminal. World's largest inland port Duisburg operating company Duisburger Hafen JSC (Germany), the

resident of the park China Merchants Group, Brest Branch of the Belarusian Railway, and leading network operator of intermodal transport in Europe Hupac Intermodal AG (Switzerland) took part in the project. The annual throughput of the terminal was estimated as high as 180,000 TEU should it reach its design capacity. Construction was scheduled to begin in 2021¹⁵. The aim of the project was to put into practice the status of the “Great Stone” Park as a key point of the “One Belt, One Road” concept since most railway trains passing through Minsk from China and to China are accepted and formed in the port of Duisburg. In September 2020, it seemed that the project was not threatened. A post on the profile of Belarusian Railways on the social media (VK) suggested that politics must give way to pragmatism and interests: “It is curious that the largest participant of the project is a German company with state capital, which was not afraid to announce cooperation against the background of the political crisis in Belarus”¹⁶. But the Duisburger Hafen ceased all business activities in Belarus. The stake in Eurasian Rail Gateway Company (of 38.9%) that planned the construction and operation of an intermodal terminal was to be divested. The representative office in Minsk was closed¹⁷.

Western sanctions have also hit another priority from the point of view of Chinese interests – the Slavkalij mining

¹⁵ Industrial Park Great Stone, *Eurasian Railway Gateway Company became a resident of “Great Stone”*, <https://en.industrialpark.by/news/2020/eurasian-railway-gateway-company-became-a-resident-of-great-stone-industrial-park/> [27.08.2022].

¹⁶ В «Великом камне» построят бимодальный железнодорожный терминал, VK, https://vk.com/wall-5473919_237247?lang=en&z=photo-5473919_457255761%62Falbum-5473919_00%62Frev [27.08.2022].

¹⁷ M. van Leijen, *Duisport pulls the plug on all business in Belarus*, RailFreight.com, <https://www.railfreight.com/railfreight/2022/03/14/duisport-pulls-the-plug-on-all-business-in-belarus/> [27.08.2022].

and processing plant project. At the beginning of September 2021, due to Western sanctions on Belarusbank, China had not paid another tranche of credit (USD 103 million) for the construction of the USD 2 billion Slavkaliy potash mining and processing plant in Lyuban, Belarus. The project had been stalled since June, and subsequently the investment was being carried out with China's active financial support. In 2015, during Xi Jinping's visit to Belarus, the Chinese Development Bank agreed to provide USD 1.4 billion credit, guaranteed by the Belarusian government. Importantly, the Slavkaliy project is owned by the Russian oligarch Mikhail Gutseriyev, who was also sanctioned due to his close business and political ties with Lukashenko; Gutseriyev provided USD 600 million for the project¹⁸.

The research for this chapter was supported by the University of Lodz's research grant: "The COVID-19 pandemic and the perception of China in Ukraine, Belarus and Serbia" (IDUB, no B2212001000110.07).

¹⁸ B. Kowalski, M. Słowikowski, *Western Sanctions on Belarus's Potash Industry Test Beijing-Minsk Partnership*, "Jamestown Foundation China Brief", vol. 21, 2021, issue 21, <https://jamestown.org/program/western-sanctions-on-belaruss-potash-industry-test-beijing-minsk-partnership/> [29.04.2022].



Marta Drabczuk

Chinese “dragon movements” around Ukraine

Politicisation of the vaccines

The COVID-19 pandemic has become a catalyst for cooperation between China and Ukraine. China has become Ukraine’s most important partner in managing the crisis caused by the pandemic. China’s “mask diplomacy” towards Ukraine, as well as towards the rest of Central Europe, was intended to exploit dependency on vaccine supplies for increased political influence. Furthermore, narratives about China as the leader in the fight against the pandemic, contrasting with the unhelpful and clumsy West, which did not rush to help Ukraine, were inevitable. “Vaccine diplomacy” has also been a driver for the economic expansion of Chinese companies into the markets of the Central European countries under the so-called “Silk Road of Health” as part of the Belt and Road Initiative.

At the end of 2020, Ukraine concluded a contract with the Chinese producer of Sinovac Biotech vaccines, which had

significantly supported the vaccination program in Ukraine (as an alternative to the Russian Sputnik V vaccines) due to the lack of agreement in negotiations with the producers of the WTO-recognised, US-German vaccines from Pfizer and vaccines from America's Moderna and Johnson & Johnson. China agreed to provide Ukraine with 1 million 913 doses of the vaccine¹. China created an image of its being the main donor of medical aid (tests, medical equipment, personal protective equipment and disinfectants, hospital equipment, protective clothing) in Ukraine's fight against the coronavirus, but there is no systematic information on the value of such aid. According to a survey by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) carried out in March 2020, 34% of Ukrainians believed that it was China that helped Ukraine most effectively (and not the EU, which in fact provided the most aid in the form of medical, humanitarian, and financial aid)². By delivering COVID-19 vaccines to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, China made profits both economically and politically. In the case of Ukraine, blackmail – with the suspension of deliveries of 500,000 doses of vaccines – resulted in the withdrawal of Ukraine's signature from the document condemning the imprisonment in Xinjiang of over a million people and the universal surveillance of Uighurs and members of other minorities, which was submitted on 22nd June at the UN Hu-

¹ *China COVID-19 Vaccine Tracker*, https://bridgebeijing.com/our-publications/our-publications-1/china-covid-19-vaccines-tracker/?fbclid=IwARoC74aipgMF7_W2-9pgP1oxRn-3Vr5D-GMP7WopT1zxSOhiWeLCC4h-GOHU#Timeline_of_Vaccines_Delivered_by_China [05.09.2022].

² *Оцінка успішності влади та реакція суспільства на події, пов'язані з епідемією коронавірусу*, Оцінки Київського Міжнародного Інституту Соціології, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=928&page=1> [05.09.2022].

man Rights Council session along with over 40 other countries. China made assurances that it had no hidden political commitments, judging that such a move by Ukraine was not meddling in “China’s internal affairs”.

Belt and (not for Ukraine) Road Initiative

In 2012, China initiated the “16+1” (renamed “17+1”) format, and a year later the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was announced, with the focus on land and sea connections. Ukraine’s participation in BRI was supposed to be an opportunity to overcome the unfavourable geopolitical position of Ukraine in the US-EU-Russia triangle due to multilateral infrastructural projects. However, Russia’s aggressive policy towards Ukraine in 2014 and the annexation of Crimea and part of Donbass resulted in China’s withdrawal from many investment projects in Ukraine. On 30th June 2021, China and Ukraine signed an agreement on strengthening cooperation in the infrastructure sector and economic ties between the two countries in road, bridge and rail transit projects, port construction, and the provision of necessary assistance and support for joint projects as part of the “the economic Silk Road” and “the sea road of the XXI century”³. However, from the initiation of the BRI to the commencement of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, no significant infrastructure project was implemented, and no transport corridor through Ukraine was created, although hypothetically Ukraine could

³ Кабінет Міністрів України, *Ukraine and China sign a cooperation agreement in infrastructure development*, <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayina-ta-kitaj-pidpisa-li-ugodu-pro-spivpracy-u-galuzi-budivnictva-infrastrukturi> [05.09.2022].

ease transit through Belarus⁴. Also, Central and Eastern European countries participating in the “17+1” (Lithuania withdrew in May 2021) format did not receive funds from the specially created SINO-CEE fund⁵. Formally, this was due to the coronavirus crisis, which had a significant impact on Chinese BRI investments. In 2020, according to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, about 20% of planned projects were “severely hit” by the pandemic⁶. With conditions as they are in war-torn Ukraine and after the war is over, the active role of the country in the BRI is also questionable.

Economic cooperation

Ukraine was in the orbit of China’s interest due to the former’s great raw material and agricultural potential as well as its transport and transit potential among Eastern European countries (the corridor between China and the EU). In 2021, 10 years had passed since Ukraine announced its strategic partnership with China. Trade between the two had become the strongest link in Sino-Ukrainian relations. In 2019, the transit of goods from China to Ukraine via Russia was restored, and the Russian embargo on food transit from the EU to China was lifted. China became Ukraine’s most important trading partner, also during the coronavirus pandemic.

⁴ *Sino-Ukrainian Relationships: the Status Quo and Future Prospects in China’s Influence and Interests in Ukraine*, International Centre for Policy Studies, Kyiv 2021, <http://www.icps.com.ua/en/our-projects/publications/> [05.09.2022].

⁵ Т. Зосименко, *Геополітичний трикутник США–Китай–ЄС. Економічні інтереси України на тлі суперечностей*, <http://prismua.org.tilda.ws/china> [05.09.2022].

⁶ At the same time, China planned a further expansion of Belarusian transport infrastructure and an increase in the number of rail services through Belarus. J. Brouwer, *Belt and Road Initiative Takes New Path as State Funding Declines*, <https://chinadigital-times.net/2020/12/belt-and-road-initiative-takes-new-path-as-state-funding-declines/> [05.09.2022].

The development of economic cooperation (and the growing position of the PRC in the world) were conducive to the revival and “new opening” of bilateral relations, but in the background this would be carried out in line with the policy of the major powers.

During the pandemic in 2020, the trade in goods between China and Ukraine increased to USD 15.5 million, i.e. by 21% compared to 2019. In 2021, turnover increased by another 22% to a value of almost USD 19 million. China is the most important market for Ukrainian exports (14.4%) and the most important import country (15.3%). However, Ukraine is not such an important export partner for China (0.28%). In addition, there are disproportions in trade goods, and the trade balance is negative for Ukraine. Ukraine supplies China mainly with raw materials (metal ores (iron), slag and ash, animal and vegetable oils, animal feed and wood), and China supplies consumer goods, processed and hi-tech (electronic and electric equipment, boilers and machines, vehicles)⁷. It is interesting that in 2020 China was Ukraine’s leading partner in arms exports.

The allocation of Chinese capital in Ukraine is low due to the dependence on the US-Ukraine-Russia relationship and negative previous investment experience (on unclear terms). The US is opposed to economic cooperation between China and Ukraine in key areas that threaten regional security in Europe. Such an example was the sale of the Motor Sich

⁷ *Trading Economics. Ukraine Exports to China*, <https://tradingeconomics.com/ukraine/exports/china> [05.09.2022]; *Trading Economics. China Exports to Ukraine*, <https://tradingeconomics.com/china/exports/ukraine> [05.09.2022].

company (it was nationalised in March 2021) to the Chinese company Skyrizon Aircraft⁸.

The main advantage for China was the Ukrainian agri-food sector (China is the largest importer of food from Ukraine). Grain plays an extremely important role in trade, including barley (China is the leader in its imports since 2019) and corn (there was a reduction from 80% in 2019 to 30% in 2021 of total corn imports). Chinese companies are also involved in projects increasing transshipment capacity (especially of agricultural products) in the Ukrainian ports of Yuzhne (north of Odessa) and Chernomorsk (south of Odessa).

China is interested in partnering with Ukraine in the military sector (in terms of supplying, among others, turboprop engines for aircraft, diesel engines for tanks and gas turbines for air-to-air missiles, obtaining Soviet technologies, de facto copying solutions, such as the aircraft carrier Liaoning based on cruiser Varyag or technical documentation covered by intellectual property rights of the Antonov aeroplane).

Most Chinese investments in Ukraine in 2018-2021 (during the COVID-19 pandemic) were in renewable energy, especially solar and wind energy infrastructure (approx. USD 1.6 million in total)⁹. In 2021, China's largest wind energy producer China Longyuan Power Group Corporation launched a large wind farm in Yuzhne. China is seeking

⁸ A. Hurska, *China's Growing Interest in Ukraine: A Window of Opportunity or a Point of Concern?*, "Eurasia Daily Monitor", vol. 16, issue 120, <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-growing-interest-in-ukraine-a-window-of-opportunity-or-a-point-of-concern/> [05.09.2022].

⁹ *China Global Investment Tracker*, <https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/> [05.09.2022].

long-term dependencies of the sector on components supplied by Chinese companies. Another attractive field is hydrogen technologies (in line with the requirements of the European Green Deal).

Chinese “dragon movements” around the war

In 2017, China announced its intention to dethrone the United States as the only global power. Even before the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24th February 2022, China expressed support for the Russian criticism of the West, but in its rhetoric, it remained neutral towards Russia’s revisionist actions in Eastern Europe. The leaders of China and Russia declared a joint view of global problems and the need to strengthen cooperation between the two countries, which in fact meant a desire to rebuild the existing international order. In a joint communiqué following Vladimir Putin’s meeting with Xi Ping on 4th February 2022, in Beijing, both countries declared their opposition to the dominance of the West and a revision of the world order established by the USA and NATO allies. During his speech given at the Munich Security Conference on 19th February 2022, Wang Yi stated that NATO was a relic of the Cold War and that NATO enlargement to the East would not be conducive to peace and security in Europe in the context of “Russia’s security concerns and legitimate national interests”. The only way to solve the crisis around Ukraine is to return to the Minsk format. This can be considered support of the Russian side since the implementation of the Minsk agreements under Russian conditions (with the authorities of the unrecognised republics – the Lugansk National Republic and the Donetsk National Republic) are a direct threat to the sovereignty and

territorial unity of Ukraine and are unacceptable to the authorities in Kiev (*de jure* recognition of the republics would mean the partition of Ukraine). At that time, China made “dragon movements” around the war; it encouraged dialogue and negotiations on both sides of the conflict and at that time blamed the crisis on the US (and widely the “collective West”), which “placed Russia in a hopeless situation”.

The Russian invasion caused a new unfavourable strategic situation for China. The protracted Russian invasion, and the ongoing defence by Ukrainian forces, surprised Russia, the West and China. Ukraine’s military support, successive sanctions packages, Europe’s severance from Russian resources, and the deepening international isolation of Russia have contributed to a change in China’s diplomatic rhetoric and a departure from the principle of non-interference in others’ conflicts. China has emphasised its pro-Russian position in domestic propaganda, and China’s leadership has diplomatically declared a “solid friendship, regardless of a treacherous international storm” and that it will jointly fight against the “political virus”¹⁰. In relation to Ukraine, China has declared willingness to play a constructive role in the resolution of the conflict and to respect its territorial integrity, without blaming Russia “pressed against the wall” by the “declining West”.

¹⁰ T. Boqun, Wang Yi: *The more turbulent the world is, the more firmly China-Russia cooperation must move forward*, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/gn/2021/03-07/9426613.shtml> [05.09.2022].

Taiwan as the “Chinese Donbas”

Russia’s revisionism in Eastern Europe in the international media is compared with Chinese revisionism in East and Southeast Asia. China’s position towards Taiwan – that it is an integral part of its territory – has been dubbed the “Chinese Donbas” in the context of a potential military invasion scenario. China’s policy towards Taiwan, which incidentally openly supports Ukraine, is supported by Russia, and criticised by the US allies in the Indo-Pacific region (Japan, South Korea). Taiwan is strategically important for Beijing for the ideological reasons of the Chinese Communist Party and because of the access to the Pacific Ocean and for building a base for naval operations of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). The annexation of Taiwan could be the first stage of China’s expansion and the beginning of an attack on the Senkaku islands (belonging to Japan). The war in Ukraine and the analogy between the resistance of the Ukrainians and the determination to defend the Taiwanese, as well as the increased activity of Japan and the US in the region, has prompted China to change its strategy towards Taiwan and step down from a forceful takeover by the PLA, but the goal remains unchanged. China’s priority will be to maintain defence alliances in the Indo-Pacific with US participation (such as the QUAD format) and oust the increasingly involved US from the region.

Chinese mask of Russian propaganda

Chinese politicians, officials, and the state and party media of the Chinese Communist Party cite and refer to Russian government sources and media. In 2015, Russia Today signed a cooperation agreement with China Media Group

(CMG included Chinese Central Television, Chinese National Radio and Chinese Radio International) in which they both partnered with state newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. In 2018, Sputnik News and CMG signed a collaboration agreement focusing on content sharing and collaborative projects, and the heads of Sputnik News and CMG co-chair the Media Council of the Russia-China Peace, Friendship and Development Committee.

In 2019, Russia and China repeated the false narrative that the West was financing the participation of the Ukrainian “neo-Nazi Azov battalion” (which successfully defended Mariupol against pro-Russian separatists in 2014) in the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement protests (demonstrations against legal changes that would allow for the extradition of suspects of crimes to China). China explains the necessity of the invasion by Russia with the rise of Nazism in Ukraine, by repeating the untruth uttered by Putin on the eve of the invasion, on 22nd February, about the justification of military actions in response to NATO countries’ support for extreme-right nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine, and that politicians and oligarchs corrupted by the West are ready to use the Ukrainians as human shields¹¹. This was in line with the image of the Ukrainian authorities created during the COVID pandemic – as being completely dependent on external support and thus also ineffective in the fight against the pandemic.

¹¹ J. Yu, *Analysis: How Ukraine has been Nazified in the Chinese information space?*, Doublethink Lab, <https://medium.com/doublethinklab/analysis-how-ukraine-has-been-nazified-in-chinese-information-space-81ce236f6a55> [05.09.2022].

The duplication of Russian information and the censorship of anti-Ukrainian crimes testify to justifying Russia and the Putin regime’s “unprovoked” war against the Ukrainian nation. The Chinese media controlled by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) confirmed the version of events circulated by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the anti-Russian collusion of the Ukrainian authorities and the images depicting Russian crimes against the Ukrainian civilian population being described as a “staged provocation” of the Kiev regime¹².

Shortly before the invasion began, Chinese media, in response to White House announcements about the potential of war on the 16th February, reported on the “information terror” from the US, echoing the narrative of Russia’s foreign minister Sergei Lavrov. The Chinese narrative reproduced the official statements of the Russian side, which didn’t call the military operations in Ukraine a “war” or “invasion”, but a “special military operation”. According to media reports, Xi Jinping, during a conversation with Vladimir Putin in December 2021, asked him not to invade Ukraine in the middle of the Beijing Olympic Games and expressed his approval of the Kremlin’s intentions, which could create tension and drag China into a diplomatic struggle.

The sanctioning of Russia’s attack on Ukraine was to be served by repeated disinformation by the Chinese authorities about the alleged dangerous US-Ukrainian biological

¹² *People’s Republic of China Efforts to Amplify the Kremlin’s Voice on Ukraine*, U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/prc-efforts-to-amplify-the-kremlins-voice-on-ukraine/> [05.09.2022].

weapons laboratories operating in Ukraine (March 2022)¹³. Russia presented these conspiracy theories as an excuse for the potential use of chemical weapons, while China has revived its own conspiracy theories about the US being responsible for the artificial creation of the virus causing COVID-19 as it was conducting research on the bat coronavirus.

Conclusions

In the Chinese multipolar world model, Ukraine is seen as a piece of the puzzle in the competition between the great powers. The Russian war with Ukraine is a rivalry between Russia and the US-led NATO, the expenses of which will also be borne by China. China doesn't expect long-lasting Western unity and never-ending support for Ukraine. It calculates the weakened Russia will be more vulnerable in helping China's resilience to outside shocks from rising prices of energy and raw materials as well as food supply. China will benefit from the protracted war and its gains will outweigh the costs.

The war in Ukraine disrupted projects around the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Freight trains from China didn't reach Ukraine. At present, as an alternative to the Chinese BRI, a much more attractive partnership initiative for Ukraine (especially in terms of political interests, national security, preparation for obtaining EU candidate status and rebuilding Ukraine from the devastation after the war) is the Three

¹³ *China urges U.S. to disclose more details about biolabs in Ukraine*, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2022-03-08/China-urges-U-S-to-disclose-details-about-biolabs-in-Ukraine-18eA7VpwQRG/index.html> [05.09.2022]; J. Yuxin, *U.S. owes the world an explanation on biolabs: China's MOD*, <http://www.ecns.cn/news/society/2022-03-25/detail-ihawu-esq7011609.shtml> [05.09.2022].

Seas initiative, supported by the USA, in which Ukraine is a participant in numerous international projects. Although both are heavily underfunded due to the pandemic crisis, and investment in international infrastructure is unlikely.

Ukraine, struggling with significant war damage, will focus on projects related to the reconstruction of internal infrastructure. It can also be assumed that China will prepare an aid proposal in the form of infrastructure projects under reconstruction plans for Ukraine (construction of bridges, roads, technological hubs) and low-interest loans with requirements favourable to Chinese enterprises to further penetrate Ukraine's economy. For China, trade relations greatly outweigh politics, and for this reason Sino-Ukrainian political relations between Beijing and Kyiv are to serve China in pursuing its own economic interests. The Russian-Ukrainian war slowed down trade cooperation (Ukrainian exports to China declined, Chinese investments in Ukraine are frozen) but will not stop it in the long term. Chinese companies (registered in European or Asian countries) will participate in the reconstruction of Ukraine's economy, which has been destabilised by the war.

Considering the Euro-integration processes in Ukraine, the Ukrainian government should be pragmatic in its assessment of Chinese investments (especially in hi-technologies, 5G, critical infrastructure facilities and government and state resource management systems) in terms of independence from external factors and China's geopolitical ambitions in competition with the US and the EU for which Ukraine can only be part of the game.

Chinese pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda will be cleverly manoeuvring as long as this narrative does not

harm China's international image. As well as the anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian Russian propaganda, this cannot be ignored, considering the ongoing information war by Russia against Ukraine (and also the EU, NATO and the US) and taking into account China's technological and cybernetic capabilities.



Oleksii Polegkyi

Russian-Chinese strategic and economic relations: friendship or vassal dependence?

Introduction

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has drawn attention not only to the Kremlin's actions but also to a country that is essentially the most important figure in current geopolitical aggravation – China. Despite the undoubted intensification of interaction between Moscow and Beijing, let's see how deep their real partnership is.

After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia declared a “pivot to the East”. Now, Moscow and Beijing describe their relationship as “strategic cooperation and comprehensive partnership”. Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping call each other best friends, and the armed forces have conducted joint exercises. Putin and Xi Jinping's meeting at the opening of the Beijing Olympics in early February demonstrated a symbolic coalition against “Western domination”. In their joint statement, Xi and Putin criticized Western countries for

pushing their vision of democracy on others, saying “such attempts at hegemony pose serious threats to global and regional peace and stability”. The two nations’ friendship “has no limits, there are no ‘forbidden’ areas of cooperation”, the document said¹. Kremlin officials from time to time refer to the term “alliance” in order to underscore the quality and value of bilateral relations. At the same time, Beijing avoids calling Russia an ally in any official documents, although it emphasizes the partnership. But is their “friendship” really so strong? Or is it a temporary coalition to solve current problems, which will lead to alienation in the future? Let’s examine the main aspects of Russia-China cooperation in three areas: foreign policy, economic and military.

Political cooperation

Both Russia and China criticize the existing international system, which they consider to be imposed by the West. Both Beijing and Moscow seek to end U.S. hegemony in international affairs. Both countries see U.S. policy, and more broadly “the West”, as a challenge to their security and existing regimes of power. They are convinced that the U.S. is looking to promote the idea of “democracy and human rights” – which means regime change in Russia and China.

For Moscow and Beijing, the war in Ukraine is part of a struggle to weaken American influence and secure their positions as authoritarian leaders against “Western-type democratization”. The crisis around Ukraine is a struggle

¹ *Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development*, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770> [04.04.2022].

for the future world order and the main principles of its functioning.

But there is a difference. Moscow is convinced that the world system is already falling apart, and the chance to secure better conditions for itself in the new era is to actively “break” the existing order. In Beijing, there is dissatisfaction with the status quo, but the Chinese leadership seeks to reform the current world system in its favour, while preserving its basic elements.

While Russia aspires to become one of the world’s great powers, China is rather looking to displace the U.S. as a key global power. China is now seeking American-style global hegemony. Chinese foreign policy is determined by a complex balance between its conflicting geopolitical and economic interests. From an economic point of view, China needs to cooperate and develop relations with the U.S. and, at the same time, to try to increase its influence in international politics, more and more challenging U.S. dominance. However, the growing pressure from Beijing evokes more and more resistance from its neighbour.

Russia and China share many strategic goals, but Moscow publicly supports Beijing far more often than vice versa. But their partnership has its limits. China has not recognized Russia’s annexation of Crimea, South Ossetia or Abkhazia and is rather cautious in supporting Russia’s actions in Ukraine. However, in many U.N. votes, China has been more likely to support Russia or to take a neutral position. Beijing’s strategy is motivated both by pragmatic geopolitics and by ideology. Standing aside as Russia starts an unexpected war in Europe is an advantage for China, distracting the U.S. and its allies from a long-delayed pivot toward China and Asia

in general. As outlined by Kofman: “The problem for any prospective military alliance between the two states is that China is revisionist in the Asia-Pacific region, where Russia is a status quo power, and the inverse is true in Europe. They do not require each other for security guarantees or extended nuclear deterrence, hence there is no basis for a military alliance”².

Economic relations

Since 2010, China has been Moscow’s largest trading partner, providing an economic lifeline amid deteriorating relations with the West. Trade between Russia and China grew by 35.8% in 2021, reaching a record USD 146.88 billion (USD 110.75 billion in 2019, down 2.9% to USD 107.76 billion in 2020). But in the structure of China’s economy, these figures are quite insignificant if compared to China’s overall foreign trade (in 2021, it grew by 30.3%, reaching a record USD 6.05 trillion). At the same time, trade between China and the United States in 2021 also grew by 28.7%, amounting to USD 755.64 billion, i.e. five times more than with Russia. Even with Australia, with which China is involved in a trade war, trade rose by 35% to USD 231 billion.

In January-March 2022, China increased trade with Russia by almost 30% to USD 38.2 billion. At the same time, Beijing has promised not to take any special steps to avoid Western sanctions against Russia, fearing secondary sanctions which could be imposed by the U.S. However, representatives of the Chinese Foreign Ministry and Xi Jinping

² M. Kofman, *Towards a Sino-Russian entente?*, Ridl, <https://ridl.io/en/towards-a-sino-russian-entente/> [15.05.2022].

personally stated that they would not impose restrictions on Russia and would continue to develop normal trade with it.

In fact, Russia has nothing to promote on the Chinese market except raw resources. Russia is the leading exporter of oil to China, second only to Saudi Arabia. Russia is also trying to increase gas exports to China, although Turkmenistan remains the absolute leader in this direction (it accounts for about 60% of gas supplies to China). Gazprom has built “the Power of Siberia”, a 2,200-kilometre-long pipeline to China. Gazprom has been given unprecedented tax breaks for the construction of “the Power of Siberia”. Even after the Chinese refused to invest in it, more than a trillion roubles of budget funds were spent on this construction, which is unlikely to be recouped³.

Russian gas is the cheapest available for the Chinese market. Moscow has kept secret the price at which it has committed to supply gas. According to China, last year the price was only USD 118.5⁴ per thousand cubic meters; that is three times lower than the gas price that was publicly announced three years ago. According to other data⁵, in 2020, the average price was near USD 150. Also, the volume of supply through “the Power of Siberia” is still infinitely far from what was planned – in 2020, only 4 billion cubic metres of gas was delivered. For comparison, 147 billion cubic meters were supplied to Europe in 2020.

³ *The ‘Manchurian President’. Vladimir Milov on how Russia became a raw-materials appendage of Beijing*, Insider, https://theins.ru/en/opinion/vladimir-milov/242596?fbclid=IwAR-1wVVwQSkstZ5K4XPWIH-pkp76k99hfsRdxCRegS6TyPKD_HMymIhcKnqw [14.04.2022].

⁴ *Tsena rossiyskogo gaza dlya Kitaya v yanvare upala nizhe \$120 za 1 t/kub*, Kommersant, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4858093> [12.03.2022].

⁵ *Sila Sibiri’ v den’gah*, Interfax, <https://www.interfax.ru/business/756994> [12.03.2022].

Since 2016, the Central Bank of Russia has increased its share of investments in the yuan from zero to 12-15%, with the yuan devaluing against the dollar by about 10% during that time. At the same time, the Russian economy is not a priority for Chinese investors, and Chinese state banks are in no hurry to violate sanctions imposed by the U.S. and the EU.

The growing bilateral economic disparity is the biggest problem for Sino-Russian rapprochement. For Moscow, the structure of bilateral trade is a source of constant discontent. In recent years, Russia has been reduced to the role of a supplier of raw materials and resources (especially energy, which accounts for more than 70% of Russian exports to China), and its role as a source of technology for the Chinese industry has been gradually declining. Beijing and Moscow are increasingly competing for the same global markets. China has overtaken Russia to become the world's second-largest arms producer.

Cooperation in the military-technical sphere

In 2016-2020⁶, Russia accounted for 20% of total global arms exports, down 22% from its peak in 2011-2015. India remained the main recipient of Russian arms in 2016-2020, accounting for 23% of the total, followed by China (18%) and Algeria (15%). However, shipments from Russia to India fell by 53% in 2016-2020, and its share of India's total arms imports fell from 70% to 49%. China's share of total Russian

⁶ P. Wezeman, A. Kuimova and S. Wezeman, *Trends in International Arms Transfers 2020*, SIPRI, Stockholm, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2021/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-in-international-arms-transfers-2020> [15.05.2022].

arms exports also fell from more than 60% in 2005 to just 14.5% in 2019 (a total value of USD 688 million). Russian arms sales to China have fallen from more than 25% of total trade value in the 1990s, peaking in the early 2000s, to a sharp decline and now account for only 3% of total bilateral trade between the countries.

China is now competing with Russia in arms markets⁷. Russia increasingly relies on Chinese technology for weapons development as long as Beijing is willing to sell it. So far, deepening technical cooperation between Russia and China allows them to circumvent U.S. sanctions and restrictions on technology exports. In general, over the past decade, defence cooperation has grown as the value of transfers has increased, while the economic importance has declined. Therefore, as noted by Kofman⁸, defence deals are not currently a driving force for mutual cooperation.

Despite Russia's help in China's military modernization, the latest Russian weapons and equipment were usually received by India, not China. This picture began to change somewhat in 2015, when China became the first foreign buyer of the Russian Su-35 multirole fighter jet, signing a contract to receive 24 aircraft by the end of 2018. China also became the first international buyer of the S-400 Triumph air defence system, signing a contract for two sets in 2014.

⁷ E. Rumer, R. Sokolsky, *Chinese-Russian Defense Cooperation Is More Flash Than Bang*, Carnegie Center, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/17/chinese-russian-defense-cooperation-is-more-flash-than-bang-pub-84787> [11.01.2022].

⁸ M. Kofman, *The Emperors League: Understanding Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation*, War on Rocks, <https://waronrocks.com/2020/08/the-emperors-league-understanding-sino-russian-defense-cooperation/> [11.01.2022].

Also in 2019, the “Russian Helicopters” company signed a contract to supply 121 helicopters to China in early 2019.

Despite cooperating in some defence-related projects, Russia and China continue to compete in this sector. After a border standoff between India and China in June 2020, India asked Russia to expedite the delivery of S-400s. In other words, despite its “alliance” with China, Russia is helping India to close the gap in its air defence capabilities.

Another point of contention for the Russo-Chinese alliance is Russia’s long-standing military relationship with Vietnam, whose claims in the South China Sea most closely resemble those of China. According to the abovementioned SIPRI database⁹, Russia was the source of more than 83% of all Vietnamese arms imports between 2005 and 2019. In 2019, Russian exports to Vietnam were estimated at USD 138 million. Russia and Vietnam also hold regular joint military exercises.

These examples of Russia’s military relations with India and Vietnam, countries involved in territorial and maritime disputes with China, show that despite optimistic assurances of partnership, Russia and China have not developed a common position on territorial issues. It is also clear that defence relations with other countries have not been sacrificed on the altar of bilateral defence relations between Russia and China. Therefore, although Russia and China have considerable incentives to deepen cooperation, some difficult defence issues are unlikely to be resolved. China will

⁹ P. Wezeman, A. Kuimova and S. Wezeman, *Trends in International Arms Transfers 2020*, SIPRI, Stockholm, <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2021/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-in-international-arms-transfers-2020> [15.05.2022].

continue to spy on Russia, try to reengineer Russian equipment and push Russia out of arms sales markets. Thus, as other experts note¹⁰, the closeness in bilateral defence relations between Russia and China seems to be based more on disagreement with the West's position than on clear agreement on any other issue. In essence, this cooperation is based primarily on temporary expediency rather than on recognition of common goals and directions.

Problems in Russia-China relations

The key problem of the Russia-China alliance is the lack of trust on both sides and the asymmetry of relations which cannot be resolved. Beijing does not trust Moscow, and there is no real reason for such trust, because in this alliance, Russia will always be a junior and subordinate partner. Russia has accepted the position of a junior partner in the partnership, but this fact hurts its ego, which can be explained by the constant attempts to give these asymmetric relations the name of an alliance, which in the popular perception has different connotations – it symbolizes the equality of partners and is presented as such in the Russian press¹¹. The Kremlin is well aware that the game playing and threats with which Russia can blackmail the West, eventually presenting it as great victories to its own population, are completely impossible with China. And if a conflict of interest with

¹⁰ R. Gupta, K. Muzyka, *A Relationship of Convenience: Russian-Chinese Defence Cooperation*, ICDS, https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/ICDS_Analysis_A_Relationship_of_Convenience_Gupta_Muzyka_November_2020.pdf [12.05.2022].

¹¹ *Shoygu posetil voyennyye ucheniya v Kitaye: manevry ledenyashchiye dushu*, Moskovskij Komsomolec, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2021/08/14/shoygu-posetil-voennyye-ucheniya-v-kitae-manevry-ledenyashhie-dushu.html> [22.05.2022].

China arises, Russia will have to quietly accept whatever Beijing demands.

There are also fears on the Chinese side that Moscow will reach some kind of agreement with Washington behind Beijing's back, or will begin to take more into account the Indian position in the region to the detriment of China's interests.

The problem of “lost territories” and mutual perceptions

The problems between China and Russia are potentially broader and at any moment might provoke serious tensions. The territorial issue between Russia and China has been under discussion for quite a long time, ever since Russia handed over Damansky Island to China in 1991. “Lost territories” is perhaps the most sensitive mythology in the mass consciousness of the Chinese nation, which is easy for Beijing to activate when necessary, or when internal tensions rise. China internally continues to promote the image of Russia as one of the colonial powers that took advantage of its neighbour's weakness and seized many indigenous Chinese territories during China's “century of humiliation”. The theme of the “annexation of Haishenwei”¹² is present in the Chinese textbooks. In 2020, Russia was fiercely condemned on Chinese social media after it held a celebration of the founding of Vladivostok – because it is on land that used to be part of China. “Hong Kong and Macau have returned to their homeland. Why not Vladivostok?” Yuan Zaiyu¹³, a popular history blogger, lamented in March 2020.

¹² Haishenwei – Chinese name of Vladivostok.

¹³ Y. Zaiyu, *Personal Blog*, <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/117662492> [11.03.2022].

Russia-China relations are saved by the complete isolation of the media space of the two countries. In September 2020, the Levada Center¹⁴ published the results of surveys that show the dual perception of China and the Chinese among Russians. On the one hand, the opinion that China is Russia's closest friend is shared by 40% of respondents. According to this indicator, China lags behind only Belarus, which scored 58%. At the same time, the indicator in relation to China depends on the state of relations between Russia and the West. Prior to 2014, no more than 24% of Russians were willing to call China Russia's ally. On a personal level, the majority of Russians are not at all ready for close relations with Chinese natives. Only 10% of Russians are ready to see the Chinese among their relatives or friends. Only 16% would be ready for Chinese becoming their neighbours or colleagues at work. More than half of Russians prefer to keep Chinese citizens as far away from them as possible, advocating restrictions or a complete ban on their entry into Russia.

Growing tensions in Central Asia

Despite all the narratives of friendship, Russia and China still have areas where the interests of the countries are contradictory. The division of interests between the two countries in Central Asia remains unclear and will be a potential source of conflict. For example, China was critical of the introduction of the Collective Security Treaty Organization forces led by Russia into Kazakhstan, voicing the traditional position

¹⁴ Levada Center, *Druz'ya' i 'vragi' Rossii*, <https://www.levada.ru/2020/09/16/23555/> [12.04.2022].

of noninterference in the internal affairs of other countries, and Russia quietly withdrew. Recently, China held its own summit with the leadership of Central Asia (CA), without Russian participation. At the same time, it promised five Central Asian countries USD 500 million in nonrefundable aid, not to mention the fact that China is supplying arms to Central Asian countries that have traditionally been completely dependent on Russia in this regard¹⁵. Chinese interests have already gone beyond economic investment and trade and have intruded into Russia's traditional sphere of military assistance and control. China is very likely to be a security provider in the region, and Russia will face the growing influence that China will gain through this. In Tajikistan, China is opening a new military base without "asking" Russia's permission. The launch of the New Silk Road initiative coincided with the delivery of Chinese air defence systems to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in the early 2010s. Since then, Beijing has delivered Y-8 aircraft to Kazakhstan, QW-2 Vanguard 2 short-range air defence systems to Turkmenistan, VP11 patrol vehicles to Tajikistan and Wing Loong-1 drones to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Growing potential competitions in the Arctic

Melting ice in the Arctic also opens up a new area of competition, where China is looking to play an increasingly prominent role. In January 2018, China published its first Arctic policy document¹⁶, arguing that while countries

¹⁵ Ibidem; R. Gupta, K. Muzyka, op. cit.

¹⁶ The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Arctic Policy*, http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm [12.01.2022].

not directly neighbouring the Arctic do not have territorial sovereignty rights, they are allowed to conduct a wide range of operations and tasks there. Given its proximity to the Far North, China calls itself an “Arctic state” and an “important stakeholder in Arctic affairs” that seeks to “participate in the governance of the Arctic”. China has proposed a “Polar Silk Road” to develop Arctic maritime routes that would complement land transit routes and thereby expand its trade and influence in the region. Beijing’s willingness to participate in the extraction of hydrocarbon resources in the Arctic is also a concern for Moscow. But here Russia’s ambitions are constrained by a lack of the necessary significant investment and technology. China has become Russia’s largest foreign partner in liquefied natural gas (LNG) projects in the Arctic. This cooperation is due to both commercial and political factors. Under Western sanctions against Russia, it was China that provided Russia with the money and technology necessary to launch resource projects in the Russian Arctic, while further increasing Russia’s dependence.

Conclusions

The fact that Russia and China are striving for closer relations, despite all the difficulties, testifies the desire to benefit from this partnership, which is based on confrontation with the “common enemy”. Although a formal alliance may never emerge, this does not detract from Beijing and Moscow’s active cooperation in their efforts to reformat the existing world order. A policy of noninterference in each other’s internal affairs and the authoritarian nature of both regimes ensure not only the absence of serious political friction,

but also set a common agenda in many issues of global regulation. But will this be enough for a long-term strategic partnership if the internal situation, or the external environment, changes? Given the fact that Russia has significantly weakened its position by getting bogged down in the war in Ukraine, Russia is becoming an increasingly “toxic” partner for China. Russia, in general, does not know or understand China, especially on the level of an ordinary citizen, and all potential contradictions between countries are simply not highlighted. One of the problems that hinders a real alliance between Russia and China is also Russia’s “Westernization”. Ironically, despite all its rhetoric and attempts to turn to Asia, Russia is a much more European country than the Kremlin would like. The Russian elite was tied to the West, live there and see its future there, not in Shanghai or Beijing. So far, Russia and China’s confrontation with the United States has accelerated the rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing. But is Russia ready to become a fully dependent vassal of China? Doesn’t Moscow run the risk of becoming a “bargaining chip” in global confrontation? Especially since in any configuration, Russia is assigned the role of a junior partner and a raw materials supplier.



Authors

Marta Drabczuk is a senior analyst at the Eastern Department at the Institute of Central Europe in Lublin (www.ies.lublin.pl), and the assistant professor at the Department of Political Movements and Ethnic Studies at the Institute of Political Science and Administration, Faculty of Political Science and Journalism, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin (Poland).

Barbara Jundo-Kaliszewska is an assistant professor and lecturer at the Faculty of International and Political Studies at the University of Łódź, Poland. Her key research areas concern: foreign and security policy of the post-Soviet states, ethnonationalism, minority rights, historical policy, and ethnic policy in the Baltic states.

Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik is the head of the Department of the Baltics at the Institute of Central Europe in Lublin (www.ies.lublin.pl). She has a PhD in political science and in humanities in the field of archeology, and is an assistant professor at the Institute of Political Science and Public Administration, Faculty of Social Sciences, The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland.

Oleksii Polegkyi is an assistant professor at the Institute of Political Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences and serves as an Academic Director at the Center for Public Diplomacy, Ukraine. He received an MA in Philosophy from the T. Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Ukraine and earned PhD in Political Sciences from the University of Wrocław, Poland and the University of Antwerp, Belgium.

Michał Słowikowski is an associate professor at the Department of Political Systems of the University of Łódź, Poland, and researcher at its International Center for East European Research. His research focuses on Russian politics and Russia's relations with former Soviet Union republics.

Tomasz Stępniewski is the deputy director at the Institute of Central Europe in Lublin (www.ies.lublin.pl), and doctor habilitatus (Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Poland), associate professor at the Institute of Political Science and Public Administration, Faculty of Social Sciences, The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland.



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China's involvement in Eastern Europe has changed quite significantly over the past two years. China's position in the region has evolved, and the process has been dynamic and complex. This was influenced by both structural and processual conditions. These include, above all, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic on the one hand, and on the other hand, the growing global confrontation between the two global powers: the United States and China, as well as the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

The region itself is clearly diverse (there are small states and regional powers in this group, some of them are full democracies, others – semi-democratic or fully authoritarian) and the interests and goals of individual states are contradictory (some of them pursue revisionist policies while others strive at all costs to maintain sovereignty and territorial integrity). In some of them legitimacy of power is achieved through fair electoral procedures, in others in a violent manner and contrary to human and civil rights. All that makes the whole Eastern Europe region “stably unstable”.

Michał Słowikowski, Tomasz Stępniewski

ISBN 978-83-66413-85-6



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