



# Slovakia and China:

## Challenges to the future of the relationship

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## Summary & recommendations

- One of the main issues of the Slovak approach towards China is the **lack of awareness** of the risks involved in cooperation with China. This can be seen in the lax approach of the Slovak government towards the issue of Chinese 5G network providers. Slovak government and businesses need to undertake **increased due diligence** when dealing with Chinese institutions while also taking into account possible linkage of Chinese companies to human rights abuses.
- The current **Slovak law already contains tools** that can be used to **protect certain industries from malign Chinese influence**. Examples include public procurement laws, public registry of beneficial ownership, banking regulations, or ban on media cross-ownership. However, these were primarily aimed at preventing the negative impact of monopolistic behavior of oligarchs and were not designed to deal with the negative impact of behavior by foreign economic actors with ties to their domestic government.
- Slovakia **needs to adopt a national FDI screening mechanism** that would provide a holistic approach to dealing with security risks posed by Chinese (and other potential foreign) investors.
- Slovakia should also strive to **keep its foreign policy and public debate free of illegitimate interference** whether from the side of parochial business interests or directly from China. It is necessary to be aware that in dealing with China, Slovakia is dealing with a one-party dictatorship which has a very **different understanding of some norms and concepts** and avoid legitimizing.
- China might seek legitimacy by earning support from states such as Slovakia, using **tactics** such as an advertorial by the Chinese Ambassador, spreading conspiracy theories about the Hong Kong protests, which was published by the Slovak business weekly Trend. In other instances, Slovak politicians have become tools of **Chinese propaganda**, such is the case of the staged visit of the Slovak parliamentary delegation to Tibet in August 2019.



- However, not all Chinese state-led activities in Slovakia should be viewed as coming with ulterior motives and automatically threatening. Assuming an understanding of the risks involved, **cooperation with China** in various sectors can be **beneficial** and **should not be discarded**.
- While staying aware of the very limited tools, not to talk of leverage, in hands of Slovakia to pressure China on **human rights**, this topic **should not be absent from the Slovak foreign policy** towards China. The main platform for human rights efforts will remain at the multilateral fora, especially the EU, where the common voice of the 28 countries can carry a certain weight.
- The **EU relations with China** provide the **most important framework** for Slovakia to achieve its interests, not the least due to the economic exposure to China being mediated by EU partners. Still, Slovakia should be a **more constructive and responsible actor in forming and adhering to EU-wide policies**. The ongoing EU process of addressing the challenges of the 5G technologies and investment screening mechanism that was initiated as a response to the wider Huawei debate is a good example. In addition, one potential area where **Slovakia could consider its input towards common EU policy regards China's activities in the Balkans, a priority region for Slovak foreign policy**.
- When it comes to the prospect of future cooperation, China sees several **potential benefits** when it comes to further investments in Slovakia. In addition to its access to the EU market, Slovakia stands in a good position given the fact that is the only one of V4 countries that uses Euro as its currency.
- The **BRI** project, which can be seen as having both economic and geostrategic implications, could to some extent benefit countries such as Slovakia. However, the fact that none of the large projects discussed in the past have materialized showcases the **need of the Slovak policy-makers to take into account the feasibility and real**



**potential of some of these investments** in order to distinguish between a successful PR story and a real beneficial cooperation.

- The one area of actual cooperation with China on BRI has been the **cooperation in the railway sector, more specifically as a transit point and intermodal hub for China-Europe freight trains**. Slovakia has remained far behind its goals of significantly increasing its share of the railway transit, largely due to external factors. It should be a **strategic priority for Slovakia, to pursue cooperation in this area**.
- Perhaps the most effective game-changer for a more active approach towards China on the Slovak side would be an **increased presence of the Slovak diplomatic representatives in China**. These steps, however, should be taken with an already defined strategy towards China in mind, avoiding the pitfalls of increasing capacities without having a clear agenda and objectives to reach in the first place.
- At home, Slovakia suffers from a lack of expertise in China and Asia-Pacific affairs. As China is becoming an ever more important actor in international affairs it will be more and more crucial for the state to have **sufficient access to domestic experts** on economic, political, security and international affairs with specific knowledge of China and other countries in the region. To this end, the **government should bolster training of experts at universities as well as support the nascent domestic community of think tanks that specialize in China** and can provide policymakers with tailored analysis.



## 1 Introduction

Over the last few years, China has become one of the most discussed topics in the international arena. Whether one is talking about its economic rise or its growing global presence, China is an increasingly relevant issue to tackle in many countries. In Europe, countries have struggled to come up with a coherent approach to China's economic and political activities. While some of the European countries have experienced intense discussions with China becoming a polarizing issue, other member states continue to perceive China as a relatively irrelevant player for their domestic considerations. However, in order to come up with a balanced and efficient China policy, countries need to boost their understanding of China and the potential benefits and risks of closer cooperation.

This publication aims to continue the ongoing discussions about China and its political and economic significance for Europe. It specifically analyzes both history and the future of the Slovak-China relations while attempting to interpret the Chinese understanding of its foreign policy towards this part of the world. The topic is particularly relevant for Slovakia that has not yet seen the level of China's engagement rise dramatically as in its neighboring countries but should use the opportunity to take the lessons from the experience of others and prepare itself for the challenges coming from cooperation in China.

Slovakia has embarked on the new phase of its engagement with China in 2007 when then Prime Minister Robert Fico visited China. Since then, the country has signed a number of international agreements regarding its economic cooperation with the country. Currently, Slovakia participates in BRI as well as the 17+1 format of relations which brings together China and 17 countries of Central and Eastern Europe (China-CEE Cooperation).

The first chapter of this publication examines the Slovak attitude towards China so far. The combination of ignorance and fascination is what has guided the Slovak approach towards China for the past three decades. Although riding the wave of global sentiment that perceived China as a relevant investment partner in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, Slovakia seemed to have realized the limitations of such economic cooperation quite early in the process. By choosing its 'down to earth' approach which has



combined relatively passive position towards China with economic hopes, Slovakia has so far avoided getting itself into politically polarized discussions about China, such as the one currently unraveling in the Czech Republic.

The second part continues to discuss the Chinese approach towards the Slovak-China relationship through the lenses of Chinese interests in the EU and the CEE region. Despite the limited Chinese economic activity in the region, there is a hidden layer of China's 'core interests' which navigate the Chinese cooperation with the CEE countries. While these countries should not be perceived solely as a 'backdoor' of Chinese influence in Europe, there are elements of both strategic and security value for China's internal politics which makes it attractive for Beijing to cultivate good ties and shape its cooperation with states that are able to influence the policy on international level. This makes it crucial for the CEE countries to increase their own agency throughout the relationship-building process in order for it not to be instrumentalized for China's strategic purposes.

Increasing its own agency, as well as a proactive approach, is the main ingredient Slovakia needs for the efficient development of its relations with China. In this regard, the last chapter discusses the main policy recommendation Slovakia should aiming for when thinking about its future approach towards China. The priority should be setting specific and achievable goals that are informed by an adequate understanding of both what Slovakia can expect from China and the level of China's willingness and ability to meet this expectation. In addition, Slovakia also needs to boost its own relevant tools and capacity to address growing Chinese presence and influence while moving away from its current 'wait and see approach'.



## 2 Slovak perspective: Slovak foreign policy approach towards China<sup>1</sup>

Slovak approach towards China can be described by the combination of *fascination* with the great power and exotic nature of China on the one hand, and relative lack of interest due to strategic focus on geographically more proximate areas on the other. Ever since its independence, Slovakia's diplomacy has respected China as a growing global power and paid lip service to the importance of developing mutual relations. At the same time, it basically ignored China in the substance of its diplomatic activity with the sober realization that it is too far to play a significant role in the 'day-to-day business' and that Slovakia is too small to achieve anything considerable there.

### 2.1 Thirty years of Slovak-Chinese relations

Although Slovakia started technically its independent diplomacy after January 1, 1993, it could draw on decades of Czechoslovakia's experience, including the tradition of the few years of democratic diplomacy in the aftermath of 1989 revolution and before the decision of dissolution of the joint state in the second half of 1992. Although the Czech attitudes towards China have influenced Slovakia, the approaches of the two countries differed. Most notably, the strong personal input of the last president of Czechoslovakia and the first president of the independent Czech Republic Vaclav Havel put a strong 'moralistic' imprint on future Czech dealings with China. Although Havel's ideas have always had followers in Slovakia, their impact has been considerably weaker than in the Czech Republic, both within political circles and among public opinion.

After the independence of Slovakia in 1993, China was not the priority of the foreign policy of the country – and it has never become one ever since. During the 'reign' of Vladimír Mečiar in 1994-1998, the country was wavering between the East and West. However, at the time, the memory of 1989 was still very much present both in China and in Slovakia and the sides simply had different priorities and issues to focus on than the development of

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this chapter were previously published in Richard Q. Turcsanyi, 'Between Fascination and Ignorance: Slovak political and economic attitudes towards China' in Tamas Matura (ed.), *China and Central Europe: Success or Failure?* (Budapest: National University of Public Service, 2019).





closer bilateral ties. Moreover, China's role in international affairs was far behind what it is today. Therefore, it was Russia that played in the 1990s the role of a Slovak 'alternative' to the West, not China.

Since the 1998 elections, the country reconfirmed its pro-Western direction and integration with the EU and NATO became the foremost priorities of the foreign policy. In the eight-year period that followed, Slovakia underwent a rather dramatic process which brought about membership in the EU and NATO and transformed Slovakia into the 'tiger economy'<sup>2</sup> thanks to economic liberalization, the attraction of foreign investments, and subsequent growth of export-led production, particularly in the car manufacturing sector.

In this period, the development of relations with China did not attract much interest in Slovakia both for economic and political reasons. Slovak development model in the 2000s was very much following the liberal market patterns such as deregulation and lowering of the tax burden, opening up for trade and foreign direct investments, or privatization. This economic recipe came hand in hand with the politically strong pro-Western democratic emphasis.

China did not fit within these processes and, in fact, it could offer little at the time, although the mutual trade was growing steadily – initially, the Chinese exports to Slovakia (as a result of liberalization of Slovak trade and China's membership in the WTO), and afterward also the Slovak exports to China (as a result of a relatively successful establishment of pro-export economy in Slovakia). Although China was becoming more important economically, these trends owed more to the structural development on both sides, rather than to any specific bilateral actions. It may be pointed out that although Slovak domestic development switched after 2006 from the pro-reform oriented towards a local version of social-democracy (with strong populist and nationalist leanings), the perception that systemic steps are more

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Reynolds, *Once a Backwater, Slovakia Surges*, *New York Times* (December 28, 2004). <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/28/business/worldbusiness/once-a-backwater-slovakia-surges.html>; *The Economist*, *Tatra tiger on the ropes*, (October 12, 2011). <https://www.economist.com/blogs/eastern-approaches/2011/10/slovakia-and-euro-crisis>.



important than ad hoc direct interventions have prevailed among many policymakers to these days.<sup>3</sup>

It was only in 2003 when during then-president Rudolf Schuster's (former-high ranking member of the Communist Party) trip to China, the new institutional framework of the bilateral relations between Slovakia and China was established after signing new agreement about bilateral relations and cooperation in various areas including economic, cultural, or project of reforestation in China.<sup>4</sup> During the 2000s, few if any of these ideas transformed into reality, yet bilateral exchanges continued in relatively high numbers.<sup>5</sup>

Incidentally, the year 2003 was also when the Taipei Representative Office in Bratislava opened.<sup>6</sup> Slovakia was the last one from among the V4 countries to open such an institution for conducting relations with Taiwan, with the office in Budapest opening in 1990, in Prague opening in 1991, and in Warsaw in 1992.<sup>7</sup> However, the Taiwan issue has never become a significant topic in the bilateral relations, which stands in contrast especially to the neighboring Czech Republic.

With the first government of Robert Fico in 2006-2010, nonetheless, certain signals about foreign policy refocusing were sent out. Fico, a former member of the Communist Party turned social democrat after 1989, wanted to distance himself from the previous government of Mikuláš Dzurinda and declared a 'pragmatic foreign policy' with the emphasis on economic diplomacy. This brought him to a number of countries that previously were not in Slovakia's focus, including China,<sup>8</sup> which he visited in 2007.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Q. Turcsány, Chinese financial presence in Slovakia and Slovak China-policy. In Szunomár, Ágnes (eds): *Chinese investments and financial engagements in Central Europe. Myth or Reality?* (Budapest: Institute of World Economics HAS, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> TASR, Schuster pricestoval z oficiálnej návštevy Číny, *SME* (January 12, 2003). <https://domov.sme.sk/c/781098/schuster-pricestoval-z-oficialnej-navstevy-ciny.html>

<sup>5</sup> Gabriela Gregušová, Slovensko-čínske vzťahy In: *Správa o stave spoločnosti* (Bratislava: Inštitút pre verejné otázky, 2003) pp. 303-306.

<sup>6</sup> Taipei Representative Office in Bratislava, About Us. [https://www.roc-taiwan.org/sk\\_en/post/4.html](https://www.roc-taiwan.org/sk_en/post/4.html).

<sup>7</sup> Czeslaw Tubilewicz, *Taiwan and Post-Communist Europe: Shopping for Allies* (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Other countries that fall in this category that Fico visited include, for instance, Libya, Cuba, Belarus or Vietnam.



During the visit to China, Fico announced he wanted to open the door for Chinese investments in Slovakia. He signed various sectoral agreements, but also called previous plans of President Schuster in forestry cooperation a 'fiction'. Fico refrained from touching upon human rights issues and when pushed by Slovak journalists, he went into offensive arguing that such a small country should not lecture China and that it would be inappropriate for a guest to do so. Fico explicitly said that the previous government had not done enough in terms of economic diplomacy, particularly with regards to China, and that his visit constituted the beginning of the new era, which would bear fruits in a few years' time. During the visit, Slovakia tried to position itself as a Chinese gateway to Europe.<sup>9</sup> It is well worth noting that the title of 'bridge' or 'gateway' and overall rhetoric of economic promises later became regular staples not only of Slovak dealings with China but even more so for the broader Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>10</sup>

Another high-profile visit, this time in another direction, happened in 2009 when Chinese president Hu Jintao visited Slovakia. The agenda of the meeting was to discuss cooperation in various areas, particularly the possibility that China might participate in infrastructure projects, especially highways – the private-public partnership (PPP) schemes were at the time favored by the government ahead of utilizing EU funds.<sup>11</sup> Eventually, China did not participate in any of the PPP projects in Slovakia, mainly due to the new Slovak government as of 2010 which brought in different priorities. Later on, the second Fico government that returned to power in 2012 did not reanimate the idea of cooperation with China on PPP projects, perhaps also due to a fiasco in a similar project in Poland where COVEC company won a

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<sup>9</sup> Stefan Hudec, Fico v Číne: Nebudem ničí pudlík [Fico in China: I am not going to be anyone's puddle]. SME (February 8, 2007). <https://www.sme.sk/c/3135941/fico-v-cine-nebudem-nici-pudlik.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Q. Turcsanyi, Is the Czech Republic China's New 'Bridge to Europe'? *The Diplomat* (September 12, 2015). <https://thediplomat.com/2015/09/is-the-czech-republic-chinas-new-bridge-to-europe/>.

<sup>11</sup> Gabriela Pleschová and Rudolf Fürst, Mobilizing Overseas Chinese to Back Up Chinese Diplomacy: The Case of President Hu Jintao's Visit to Slovakia in 2009, *Problems of Post-Communism*, Volume 62, Issue 1 (2005), pp. 55-65.



tender to construct a highway, but could not finish it and left the construction, resulting in problematic delays.<sup>12</sup>

Hu Jintao's visit to Slovakia, however, sparked some incidents when supporters of the Chinese president attacked human rights protestors in front of the Slovak President's Palace. As a result of the physical interaction between the two groups, some of the human rights activists sustained some minor injuries and eventually the police had to separate and arrest some of the protestors. Interestingly, most of the arrested people were from the human rights group, rather than the Chinese president's supporters. The incident continued to be discussed after the visit and in the process, the Slovak Minister of Interior said that the Chinese Embassy in Bratislava organized the pro-China demonstrators.<sup>13</sup> Similar incidents, only on (much) more extensive scale, happened in the Czech Republic in 2016 with President Xi Jinping.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the two visits well underscore the qualitative similarities between the two countries but also point out very different intensities – while Bratislava pro-human rights group consisted of a few dozens of protestors at most, in Prague the protestors numbered in thousands on various locations of the city.

The years 2010-2012 saw a short intermezzo with the central-right wing coalition government of Iveta Radičová and minister of foreign affairs Mikuláš Dzurinda, who made it clear that he opposed the concept of the 'pragmatic foreign policy' of the Fico government and announced his own value-oriented approach.<sup>15</sup> However, due to the early election and another shift in the government, this direction remained relatively undeveloped and since 2012 Slovakia has been ruled by social-democrats, firstly alone, and after the elections in 2016 in the coalition government.

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<sup>12</sup> *Vox Europe*, The motorway that China couldn't build (June 16, 2011).  
<http://www.voxeurop.eu/en/content/article/716731-motorway-china-couldnt-build>.

<sup>13</sup> Gabriela Pleschová and Rudolf Fürst, Mobilizing Overseas Chinese to Back Up Chinese Diplomacy.

<sup>14</sup> Shannon Tiezzi, President Xi's Visit to Czech Republic Sparks Praise, Protests, *The Diplomat* (March 30, 2016) <https://thediplomat.com/2016/03/president-xis-visit-to-czech-republic-sparks-praise-protests/>

<sup>15</sup> TASR, Dzurinda: Naša zahraničná politika bude mať iba jednu tvár, *HN* (July 30, 2010).  
<https://slovensko.hnonline.sk/380834-dzurinda-nasa-zahranicna-politika-bude-mat-iba-jednu-tvar>.



Interestingly, while in 2006-2010 Fico himself made an official visit to China and talked about economic cooperation, since 2012 Fico has changed his pro-active attitude towards China, culminating in 2015 when he abstained from the China-CEE summit of Prime Ministers in Suzhou. The official reason given was the health issues, however, it can be doubted for Fico continued his program in Bratislava, seemingly in a way which was prepared beforehand. In addition, already a year before Fico had spoken publicly that he would not go to China for a tourist trip if nothing meaningful is prepared.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, during the second Fico government, the post of Slovak Ambassador in Beijing was vacant for about a year,<sup>17</sup> also signaling the low priority the government assigned to China. Hence, the repositioning of the second and third government of Robert Fico vis-à-vis China can serve as evidence that China was not perceived as really a promising economic partner.

At the same time, Fico continued to speak in favor of developing relations with China, primarily as part of his domestic political position and as a means of criticism of the opposition, president, etc. Some politicians from the Slovak National Party (SNS) adopted a similar attitude during their tenure as a junior government party in 2016-2019. After the media reported that President Zuzana Čaputová raised the issue of human rights during her talks with the visiting Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, the party's nominee and the minister of agriculture of complained that this negatively impacts Slovak agriculture exports to China. Moreover, speaker of the parliament and head of the party Andrej Danko invited his Chinese counterpart for an official visit with an argument that he wants to improve the bilateral relations after the president's comments.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, the new Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini participated in China-CEE summits in 2018 in Sofia and 2019 in Dubrovnik and he has been sending out mixed signals. On the one hand, he did stress that China-CEE

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<sup>16</sup> TASR, Fico vycestuje do Číny. Ak budú pripravené rozumné veci, *TV Noviny* (December 16, 2014) [http://www.tvnoviny.sk/domace/1780898\\_fico-vycestuje-do-ciny.-ak-budu-pripravene-rozumne-veci](http://www.tvnoviny.sk/domace/1780898_fico-vycestuje-do-ciny.-ak-budu-pripravene-rozumne-veci).

<sup>17</sup> See the webpage of the Slovak Embassy in Beijing at [https://www.mzv.sk/web/peking/o\\_nas/byvali\\_velvyslanci](https://www.mzv.sk/web/peking/o_nas/byvali_velvyslanci).

<sup>18</sup> Katarína Filová & Eva Štenclová, Danko Chce 'Vyžehliť' Čaputovej Kritiku číny, *Pravda* (August 12, 2019) <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/522225-danko-chce-vyzehlit-caputovej-kritiku-ciny/>



relations must be conducted in accordance with the EU common approach, and he has also called upon the EU to step up its efforts in the Western Balkans to counter growing China's presence there. On the other hand, he seemed to echo many of the unrealistic ideas about the CEE and Slovakia playing the role of a 'bridge' or 'hub' for Chinese investors in Europe, and even naming China's participation in the major infrastructure projects such as highspeed or wide-gauge railways - something which has been called out by experts as having little sense and possibility of success.<sup>19</sup>

## 2.2 China as a political challenge

When it comes to domestic political treatment of China, a comparison with the fellow V4 countries reveals that Slovakia is somewhere between the Czech Republic on the one hand, and Poland and Hungary on the other – China is not such a politicized and divisive topic as in the Czech Republic, but still more so than in the other two V4 countries.<sup>20</sup>

In the aftermath of the kick-start of the China-CEEC process in 2012 and the Belt and Road Initiative announcements in 2013, Slovakia has clearly counted as a country with the least developed relations with China from among the V4 – it was the only country who has not elevated its relations with China to the level of strategic partnership and in general the only one who has not been actively sending proactive welcoming signals to China.

Having said that, Slovakia has always stated that it wanted to have good relations with China and it suggested various projects it believed could be developed mutually. However, there was little 'overwork' done to push these projects into realization – especially when compared with the very active and at times high-profile diplomacies of the remaining three Visegrad countries in China. Slovakia chose a much more 'down to earth' position, basically suggesting that if there are economically interesting projects they would materialize, irrespective of the political processes. At the same time, it seems that doubts regarding the economic rationale of the relations

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Q. Turcsányi & Matej Šímalčík, Slovak policy towards China is built on empty words. *New federalist* (October 4, 2018) <https://www.thenewfederalist.eu/slovak-policy-towards-china-is-built-on-empty-words>

<sup>20</sup> Richard Q. Turcsányi, Ivana Karaskova, Tamas Matura & Matej Šímalčík, "Followers, Challengers, or By-Standers? Central European Media Responses to Intensification of Relations with China." *Intersections, East European Journal of Society and Politics* (2019).



surfaced in Slovakia much earlier than elsewhere in the region, perhaps even before the China-CEEC and Belt and Road initiatives started in 2012-2013 – and the two initiatives changed little in this Slovak perception. It is noteworthy here that this realization took place in Slovakia during the rule of the ‘pragmatic’ Robert Fico left-wing social democratic government, who - if anything - should be expected to be ideologically inclined to developing more active relations with China.

Two particular incidents deserve our attention here – namely the decision to resettle the Uyghur prisoners from the U.S. Guantanamo Prison in 2013 and Slovak President Kiska’s meeting with the Dalai Lama in 2016. First, in 2013, in a somewhat surprising move, the second government of Robert Fico decided to accept the remaining three Uyghur prisoners from Guantanamo. The decision was naturally met with an adverse reaction from China, which claimed the Uyghur prisoners were terrorists, asserted that they would pose a security threat in a country which would accept them, and demanded they be returned to China for prosecution. The Slovak diplomacy, on the other hand, stated that the three Uyghurs were never charged with any terrorist act and took a relatively low-key position without direct commenting on Chinese appeals.<sup>21</sup> Although the Chinese public criticism was targeted more at the U.S. rather than Slovakia, the incident still negatively affected diplomatic exchanges with China at the moment when relations between China and a number of CEE countries were starting to develop rapidly as part of the China-CEEC platform.

The second incident came in 2016 when President Andrej Kiska decided to meet the Dalai Lama who was visiting the country as part of his European trip. Kiska met the Dalai Lama ostensibly in his personal capacity and outside of his office, but the move nonetheless attracted strong Chinese reaction, this time targeting Slovakia explicitly and directly. Among others, the Spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed the official stance during the regular press conference in Beijing<sup>22</sup> and China

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<sup>21</sup> Pluska, Títo sú poslední, sľubujú USA. Slovensko prijalo troch väzňov z Guantanáma (December 31, 2013). <http://www.pluska.sk/spravy/z-domova/tito-su-posledni-slubuje-usa-slovensko-prijalo-troch-ujgurov-z-guantanama.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on October 17, 2016. <http://www.chinaconsulatechicago.org/eng/fyrth/t1406504.htm>.



announced it would retaliate against Slovakia.<sup>23</sup> On the Slovak side, the Slovak government communicated via diplomatic channels that this was a personal decision of the president and not the government policy (the president is not the head of the government in Slovakia) and that the move does not affect Slovak position vis-à-vis Beijing, including the respect towards China's territorial sovereignty, integrity, 'One-China principle' etc.

After both of these incidents, there was a debate in Slovakia whether the country would be 'punished' by China. In reality, there is little in terms of economic relations which would give China a means to retaliate beyond symbolic steps. Slovak exports to China are almost entirely taken care of by the big car manufacturers and they are not a function of Slovak economic diplomacy or Slovak-China relations as such. Moreover, there are almost no Chinese investments in Slovakia and even no concrete projects under negotiations which could be used as a form of economic pressure by China. Therefore, both incidents might have made it more difficult for the Slovak diplomacy to engage China and perhaps even some business and other exchanges were canceled. Slovak diplomats have complained privately that they were ignored by their Chinese interlocutors for a year. In reality, however, the Slovak exports to China have grown after both of these incidents.<sup>24</sup>

### 2.3 Searching for a 'China strategy'

The low level of activity in the relationship between China and Slovakia notwithstanding, Slovakia became the first V4 country, and perhaps even the first in the CEE, to have its official 'China policy' approved by the government.<sup>25</sup> In April 2017, the Slovak government passed the "Strategy for the Development of Economic Relations with China 2017-2020", produced under the auspices of the Ministry of Economy. The 37-pages

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<sup>23</sup> China says to retaliate after Slovak president meets Dalai Lama, *Reuters* (October 17, 2016). <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-slovakia-dalailama-idUSKBN12H0U0>.

<sup>24</sup> See also Matej Šimalčík, Čínské omyly súdruha Blahu, *CEIAS Insights* (July 18, 2019). <https://ceias.eu/sk/cinske-omyly-sudruha-blahu/>.

<sup>25</sup> Ministry of Economy, Vláda schválila Koncepciu rozvoja hospodárskych vzťahov medzi SR a Čínou na roky 2017 až 2020 (April 11, 2017). <http://www.economy.gov.sk/press/vlada-schvalila-koncepciu-rozvoja-hospodarskych-vztahov-medzi-sr-a-cinou-na-roky-2017-az-2020>.





long strategy<sup>26</sup> suggests that Slovakia needs to utilize (but still strengthen) its relatively good political relations with China for economic purposes and then it moves on to mention various measures how to achieve that, including increasing number of diplomatic personnel in China, opening 'Slovak houses' in various parts of China to attract Chinese investors and tourists, plans to prepare schemes how to use Chinese funds to build infrastructure at home and many others.<sup>27</sup>

The strategy was to be followed by the 'Action Plan' in autumn that year, which, however, was stopped in the process due to objections within the government. Apparently, there are disputes between those who favor focusing on China (Ministry of Economy and Ministry of Finance) and those, who claim that the Chinese economic potential for Slovakia is relatively limited and that more attention should thus be paid where it has a higher chance of succeeding, especially towards the developed countries in the West (Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Hence, the importance of the 'China strategy' should not be overstated and it seems very probable that these two documents will be irrelevant for future Slovak-Chinese relations.

To sum up, China is regarded as a rising global power with which Slovakia wants to develop intense relations. Slovak government's interest in relations with China is mainly economic – both regarding trade and investments - although political and security aspects are considered as well since China is aspiring to become a leading global power and its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council gives it substantial global influence. Slovakia has been mostly 'cautious' in its approach towards China, trying to avoid taking various critical stances as, for instance, the Czech Republic has done on numerous occasions especially before 2012. With the Belt and Road initiative and the Chinese-driven China-CEEC platform for developing relations with the Central and Eastern Europe, Slovakia has been counted among the least active countries. It has tacitly supported the initiatives and even suggested some projects, but has done little overwork to push through.

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<sup>26</sup> The text is available at <http://www.rokovania.sk/Rokovanie.aspx/NezaradenyMaterialDetail?idMaterial=26400>.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Q. Turcsanyi, Slovakia's Overdue China Strategy, *The Diplomat* (November 3, 2017). <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/slovakias-overdue-china-strategy/>.



## 2.4 Assessment of the Slovak approach towards China

Despite the relative passiveness of the Slovak government, Slovakia has been moderately successful in its economic dealings with China. From the perspective of trade relations, Slovakia had been until 2013 in the best position vis-a-vis China from all the 16 Central and Eastern European countries involved in the China-CEEC platform, yet Slovak exports to China has decreased considerably in 2012-2015. From the investment perspective, the country did not attract any significant Chinese investments., however, one may argue that it does not make it much different from the neighboring countries, in which there are few if any examples of Chinese investments having decisively positive impact on the national economy. Hence, although a 'late-comer', Slovakia has not missed anything important.

Furthermore, it is disputable whether the assertive development of political relations with China on the side of remaining other Visegrad countries did not come at certain costs as regards the traditional political and economic partners and allies within the EU and NATO, which have observed the growing presence of China in Central Europe with some worries.

The specific 'approach' of Slovakia towards China within the V4 group deserves a comparative assessment. Slovakia has been the only V4 country which has not responded overly enthusiastically to the China-CEEC and Belt and Road initiatives. While stressing an interest in developing relations with China, it refrained from 'out of the way' welcoming gestures and attempts to attract China as the remaining V4 countries did occasionally. The Slovak attitude can be explained by two factors. First, the experience of the 2000s neoliberal reform process might have taught Slovak elites a lesson that it is the structural factors which are the real 'game changers', rather than looking for shortcuts, such as trying to gain economic rewards by wooing non-democratic powers with political gestures. Adopting a language which at times became popular in the country, one must do its 'homework' first and foremost.

Second, being the smallest of the V4, Slovakia might have come the fastest to the realization that making business in and with China might be too hard a nut to crack and/or might not be as productive as many would expect. This probably applies as much to the official government policies as well as



to the Slovak business, which lack much interest in China. This, in turn, means that the government lags a feedback (or outward pressure) to adopt more pro-China policies - something which again differs Slovakia from the neighboring Czech Republic.

On the other hand, not all is rosy with the Slovak policy towards China. There are some signs of politicization of the topic of China, as discussed previously, mainly by the social-democrats and nationalists, who use some allegedly negative issues of Slovak policy steps towards China as part of their criticism of the opposition in general, and the President Čaputová and President Kiska, in particular. In reality, however, we have not been able to identify considerable “punishment” by China, for instance when it comes to trade relations.

Meanwhile, while China appears as a favorite ‘exotic’ topic in public discourse, there is almost no discussion about the substantial issues which are high on the agenda of EU-China relations, such as the investment screening mechanism, 5G and Huawei, and others.<sup>28</sup> This means Slovakia might not be ready to address challenges connected to China if they appear on the radar. Chinese presence in the country remains limited, but it could have been different – and still can – with one or two single deals materializing. As an example, Chinese ownership of the major Slovak commercial TV station (Markiza), a major national employer (U.S. Steel Košice), or the capital airport could all have had some strategic implications - and Slovak agencies did not have tools how to follow the process. It can be argued therefore that the challenge for Slovakia concerning China in the near future is to build relevant tools to address Chinese presence and influence (both global and regional) – which is going to grow in the future, although perhaps not as rapidly as some think.

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<sup>28</sup> Strategic documents of the Slovak foreign policy are available at <https://www.mzv.sk/zahranicna-politika/dokumenty-k-zahranicnej-politike>.



### 3 Chinese perspective: Chinese interests in the CEE region

From the Chinese perspective, Slovakia is a marginal partner of little strategic importance. As the only country within the V4, Slovakia's relationship with China has not been elevated to the level of (comprehensive) strategic partnership, a designation used by Chinese diplomacy to rate the importance of bilateral relations. Slovakia is not widely known in China, with the main association being with the former Czechoslovakia. At the same time, there is also a relative lack of interest in exploring relations with China on part of Slovakia (as the previous chapter shows). Slovak approach has remained almost purely reactive, without any efforts to actively shape its relations with Beijing. In this respect, Slovakia lags behind all of its V4 neighbors.

Even if not important by itself, Slovakia still plays a role within the overall framework of Chinese foreign policy towards Europe. Slovakia has two main identities in China's view that have implications for understanding China's interests. The one is that of a member of the EU, which is a strategic partner for China. The other is that of one of the 17 CEE countries, grouped in the 17+1 format (16+1 before the accession of Greece in 2019) initiated by China in 2012. Coming to the V4, China has so far not expressed inclination to develop relations with the grouping on a multilateral level, but this may change in the future.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the V4 membership of Slovakia may become the third identity of Slovakia in terms of the Chinese approach to the country.

#### 3.1 Chinese 'core interests'

Chinese approach to global affairs, including relations with EU and CEE, can be explained rather well through the prism of 'core interest', a framework developed by Dai Bingguo, former Chinese State Councilor (2008 - 2013) responsible for the foreign affairs portfolio.

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<sup>29</sup> Klára Dubravčíková, Filip Šebok, Martin Šebeňa, Matej Šimalčík and Richard Turcsányi, *Prospects for Developing the V4+China Cooperation Platform* (Bratislava: Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2019). <https://ceias.eu/prospects-for-developing-the-v4-china-cooperation-platform/>.



In the 2010 essay 'Stick to the path of peaceful development', State Councilor Dai Bingguo proposed three core interests which are said to be the ultimate drivers of Chinese foreign policy. These are:

- **Survival:** preservation of China's form of government and political system and stability, namely the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CCP), the socialist system and socialism with Chinese characteristics;
- **Sovereignty:** China's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national unity;
- **Development:** basic guarantee for sustainable economic and social development of China.

In Dai's words, these three core interests "brook no violation".<sup>30</sup> Thus they also serve as redlines for both active and passive Chinese foreign policy. This means that China will neither take any steps which would be at the expense of the three core interests nor tolerate any behavior of others that would run contradictory to them.

The three core interests, especially the sovereignty interest, are flexible concepts lacking strict definitions. The malleability of the three core interests makes them prone to evolution over time to better fit the needs of Chinese policymakers. That being said, observing official and semi-official remarks, as well as Chinese media reporting provides a sufficient understanding of what each of the three interests includes.

The first of the three core interests, labeled survival here, is superior to the remaining two. In the words of Dai Bingguo, the survival core interests entail that "China's form of government and political system and stability, namely the leadership of the Communist Party of China, the socialist system and socialism with Chinese characteristics" is preserved.<sup>31</sup> To ensure the survival of the regime, CCP must enjoy a high level of legitimacy among the

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<sup>30</sup> Bingguo Dai, "Stick to the path of peaceful development." *China Daily* (December 13, 2010) [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-12/13/content\\_11689670.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-12/13/content_11689670.htm).

<sup>31</sup> Bingguo Dai, "Stick to the path of peaceful development." *China Daily* (December 13, 2010) [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-12/13/content\\_11689670.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2010-12/13/content_11689670.htm).



people. This is ensured through providing material and non-material satisfaction to the people.<sup>32</sup>

The material satisfaction of Chinese citizens means ensuring that China continues in its remarkable economic growth. In order to sustain further development, China needs to have stable and cordial relations with economic partners. This requires a stable international environment.<sup>33</sup> Material satisfaction corresponds with the third core interest of Dai Bingguo.

Regarding the non-material satisfaction, this is strongly related to the second core interest of preserving sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national unity. Several sovereignty-related issues were labeled a core interest by the CCP in the past. Chiefly among them feature Taiwan, Tibet, South China Sea, Yellow Sea, Hong Kong, Macao, or Xinjiang.<sup>34</sup> The sovereignty core interests relate not only to sovereignty and territorial integrity in a material sense but also in a symbolic sense. Thus, the sovereignty core interest can be also redubbed as the popular nationalist demand for power and prestige of China in the international system.<sup>35</sup>

Including symbolic sovereignty into the scope of core interests can help in explaining Chinese reactions to events such as a private meeting between Slovak President Kiska and Dalai Lama. More broadly, denouncing the separate listings of Hong Kong, Macao, or Taiwan on websites of airlines and hotel groups also falls under the issue of symbolic sovereignty.<sup>36</sup> Symbolic sovereignty is important due to the need to satisfy the nationalistic demands of segments of Chinese society. The symbolic value of many of the above mentioned sovereignty-related core interests was confirmed by opinion polling among Chinese people. Issues regarding

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<sup>32</sup> Matej Šimalčík, *Confucianism in Chinese foreign policy: A strategic-cultural analysis of the South China Sea dispute* (MA Thesis, Groningen: University of Groningen, 2017).

<sup>33</sup> Richard Q Turcsányi, "Contradiction of Strategic Goals as a Major Constraint of Chinese Power in the South China Sea." In *Power Politics in Asia's Contested Waters*, by Enrico Fels and Truong-Minh Huy Vu, 173-196. Cham: Springer, 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Da, 2010; Xinhua, 2018; Swaine, 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Fei-ling Wang, "Preservation, Prosperity and Power: what motivates." *Journal of Contemporary China* 14, no. 45 (2007): 669-694.

<sup>36</sup> See e.g. Emily Feng & Edward White, "China reprimands companies calling Tibet and Taiwan independent" *Financial Times* (January 15, 2018)

<https://www.ft.com/content/3f88cbba-f9b5-11e7-9b32-d7d59aace167>



reunification with Taiwan or island disputes in the South China Sea and East China Sea were labeled as top pressing issues China is facing nowadays.<sup>37</sup>

As was mentioned, of the three core interests, survival (regime security) is superior to the remaining two. Thus, both development and sovereignty core interests support the ultimate interest of securing the position of CCP and ensuring the survival of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

However, the two subordinate core interests can at times be contradictory to each other. Thus, pursuing policies that contribute to upholding the sovereignty core interest can be at times detrimental to pursuing goals related to economic development. To reconcile the two interests, China may often take steps which in the short term will satisfy the demands of the nationalist segments of Chinese society, while at the same time pursue long term policies that ensure international and regional stability that leads to further growth of Chinese economy.<sup>38</sup>

The core interests analysis framework can be applied to both the Chinese approach to the EU and to the CEE (Slovakia included). The following sections showcase how China's approach here serves to realize its core interests.

### 3.2 The EU factor

The EU membership is the most important characteristic of Slovakia for China that also determines its foreign policy approach. The EU has been China's strategic partner since 2003 and the two sides have developed comprehensive multidimensional and multilevel ties. The EU is of great geopolitical importance for China as one of the poles in the multipolar world envisaged by Beijing. China sees the EU as an important partner in upholding (while significantly reforming) the current multilateral trade system that has served China very well since its accession to the WTO in 2001. In the developing great power competition between China and the US, China wants to prevent the EU from taking the side of the US. While outright geopolitical alliance is not likely, China at least hopes for diminishing the

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<sup>37</sup> Andrew Chubb, *Exploring China's "Maritime Consciousness": Public Opinion on the South and East China Sea Disputes* (Perth: US Asia Center, 2014).

<sup>38</sup> Matej Šimalčík, *Confucianism in Chinese foreign policy: A strategic-cultural analysis of the South China Sea dispute* (MA Thesis, Groningen: University of Groningen, 2017).



strength of the transatlantic relationship. Co-opting the EU through economic and political ties is an instrument for reaching this goal. Due to this, China is by-and-large a supporter of EU stability and integrity and has, for example, openly expressed opposition to Brexit. China wants the EU that its own voice in international affairs independent of the US. In this respect, the election of Trump and the ensuing cracks in the US-EU partnership have created a unique historic opportunity for China.

The EU as a bloc is a chief economic partner for China, taking up the position of its number one trade partner. EU presents the largest unified consumer market in the world and is thus a coveted prize for Chinese companies. The EU businesses (especially from the Western EU members) possess the top-level technology, well-known brands, advanced know-how, and managerial experience that is in high demand both by the individual Chinese companies and the Chinese policymakers in the context of the national industry policies such as Made in China 2025, designed to upgrade Chinese industrial base and move up the value chain.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, China is highly interested in dual-use technologies that can be utilized in military modernization efforts, since the direct sale of military equipment to China from the EU has been banned under a post-Tiananmen embargo.<sup>40</sup> For the same reason, the EU has been a crucial partner for China in terms of scientific cooperation. When not possible to acquire foreign technology and knowhow by legal means, China has often not shied away from industrial espionage.<sup>41</sup>

Chinese takeovers of advanced technology businesses such as the German robotics company Kuka in 2016 have alerted the EU countries to the threat of China getting access to sensitive technology<sup>42</sup>. In reaction, investment

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<sup>39</sup> Max J. Zenglein and Anna Holzmann, *Evolving Made in China 2025*, *MERICs* (July 2, 2019). <https://www.merics.org/en/papers-on-china/evolving-made-in-china-2025>.

<sup>40</sup> François Godement and Abigaël Vasselier, *China at the gates: A new power audit of EU-China relations* (Brussels: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2017) pp. 42-47.

<sup>41</sup> Zak Doffman, *China's Spies Accused Of Stealing EU Tech Secrets, Just As China And EU Agree Stronger Ties*, *Forbes* (April 11, 2019).

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/zakdoffman/2019/04/11/chinese-spies-accused-of-major-european-ip-theft-just-as-china-and-europe-agree-stronger-ties/>.

<sup>42</sup> Matej Šimalčík, *When Investments are not in State Interest*, *Central European Institute of Asian Studies* (December 18, 2018). [https://ceias.eu/when-investments-are-not-in-state-interest/?fbclid=IwAR0tOjNoG43pCxUZ9w8feqcSE3c-reiWmxrAgbctla8ZlxER5wPx2Wp\\_KHw](https://ceias.eu/when-investments-are-not-in-state-interest/?fbclid=IwAR0tOjNoG43pCxUZ9w8feqcSE3c-reiWmxrAgbctla8ZlxER5wPx2Wp_KHw).





screening mechanisms have been set up on the EU level and also on the level of the individual countries.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, after ebbing in 2016, Chinese investment in Europe has been falling down in recent years due to strict capital controls and tightening of liquidity in China.<sup>44</sup> Coupled with the increased scrutiny, the “golden era” of Chinese investment may have passed.

China has been seeking to gain the favor of individual EU members as a means to influence the EU-level policy on issues of critical importance to China, as they relate to ‘core interests’ introduced above. In the economic agenda, it is first and foremost the question of the market economy status of China and issues such as the current negotiations over the bilateral investment treaty.<sup>45</sup> In politics, China has been hoping to muffle criticism of human rights issues and gain support for Chinese core interests of national sovereignty – Tibet, Taiwan, Xinjiang, and the South China Sea. It is on these issues that China and the EU have encountered the most salient conflicts. More broadly, China wants the EU, an actor with significant global normative influence, to lend support and legitimacy to China’s designs and norms related to BRI and other Beijing’s foreign policy concepts.

With the EU assuming a more watchful stance towards China and the security and political risks coming from engagement with Beijing in recent years, epitomized by calling China a “systemic rival”<sup>46</sup>, the number of EU policy areas where China’s interests could be directly affected is constantly rising. Concurrently, China has become much more self-confident and assertive in following its interests vis-a-vis the EU, especially on the sensitive “core interest” issues of sovereignty. The unusually strong

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<sup>43</sup> For information on the investment screening mechanism, see <https://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/press/index.cfm?id=2006>.

<sup>44</sup> Thilo Hanemann, Mikko Huotari and Agatha Kratz, *Chinese FDI in Europe: 2018 Trends and Impact of New Screening Policies* (Berlin: MERICS and Rhodium Group, 2019). [https://www.merics.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/190311\\_MERICS-Rhodium%20Group\\_COFDI-Update\\_2019.pdf](https://www.merics.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/190311_MERICS-Rhodium%20Group_COFDI-Update_2019.pdf).

<sup>45</sup> For information on the China-EU Bilateral Investment Treaty, see <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-a-balanced-and-progressive-trade-policy-to-harness-globalisation/file-eu-china-investment-agreement>.

<sup>46</sup> European Commission, European Commission and HR/VP contribution to the European Council EU-China – A strategic outlook, 2019. <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>.



reactions of Chinese diplomats around Europe to proclamations and moves on Hong Kong protests are a good example.

Owing to the nature of foreign policy decision making in the EU Council, the support of any EU member can be important for China. Therefore, even small states like Slovakia can play an outsized role in the Chinese perspective. The role of Portugal, Greece or Hungary in blocking past EU resolution on sensitive issues for China is a case in point.<sup>47</sup> However, for China, rather than merely applying negative veto, states that are able to shape the agenda positively and build coalitions within the EU are of greater importance. Due to its size but also relative reactivity in terms of EU issues, where it mostly follows Germany's lead, Slovakia does not rate among such member states. In this respect, it is worth noting that the ability of the V4 to develop coalition-building and positive agenda-setting capabilities in the post-Brexit EU may lead China to give more prominence to the bloc.<sup>48</sup>

### 3.3 What does China seek in CEE?

China has grouped the CEE states into a so-called 17+1 format in 2012, heralding Beijing's growing interest towards the region. While the platform has been often seen (mostly in Brussels and the "old member states") as China's tool of dividing Europe, the initiative has actually represented a different form of outreach towards the EU by Beijing. Such a reading is supported by the fact that Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus, which are not currently candidates for EU membership, have been left out of the platform and that the membership has grown to include Greece, an "old member state", in 2019<sup>49</sup>. While Chinese economic and political relations with the EU old member states had been extensive, ties with the CEE countries remained relatively underdeveloped. Therefore, the 17+1 was designed to bring more balance to the China-EU relationship, with a hope that ties with

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<sup>47</sup> Philippe le Corre, A Divided Europe's China Challenge, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* (November 26, 2019). <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/11/26/divided-europe-s-china-challenge-pub-80437>.

<sup>48</sup> Klára Dubravčíková, Filip Šebok, Martin Šebeňa, Matej Šimalčík and Richard Turcsányi, *Prospects for Developing the V4+China Cooperation Platform* (Bratislava: Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2019). <https://ceias.eu/prospects-for-developing-the-v4-china-cooperation-platform/>.

<sup>49</sup> A desire not to encroach upon Russia's backyard may have played a role as well.



the CEE countries would serve to counteract some of the 'negative trends' in the Western Europe emerging at the time.<sup>50</sup> Earning favor of the CEE countries can, by extension, help China reach its interests within the EU. This is also the case for the aspirant membership countries, where China has been particularly active. Once they become members of the EU, these countries can prove to be valuable allies for China within the bloc.

Yet, in their effects, China's activities in the region have deepened the rifts with the EU. The biggest questions are raised by China's dealings with the Balkans. China has tapped into its experience of loan-fueled projects from Africa or Latin America, taking advantage of the lack of competition, lax regulatory environment and the political elites hungry for quick economic gains to establish a foothold in the Western Balkans countries.<sup>51</sup> Chinese business practices have aroused suspicion about China undermining governance, fostering corruption or even luring nations into "debt traps". The most cited example in Europe is the case of Montenegro, where the Chinese loan for two sections of highway increased national debt by almost 20 percent of GDP<sup>52</sup>. Land in the country was allegedly offered up as collateral against the repayment of the debt, raising warnings about China's possible takeover, as has happened previously in the case of Sri Lanka's Hambantota.<sup>53</sup> Yet, recent research dealing with cases of Chinese debt renegotiations shows that asset seizures are very rare and China actually does not possess strong leverage in negotiations that often result in conditions favorable to the debtor.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, even though not necessarily by design, some of the Chinese business practices are indeed undermining Western Balkan's countries' convergence with the EU. This

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<sup>50</sup> 步少华 [Bu Shaohua]. 中欧“次区域合作”：动力与未来方向[China-Europe Subregional Cooperation: Motivations and Future Directions]. 国际问题研究[China International Studies], Issue 2 (2016).

<sup>51</sup> Heather A. Conley and Jonathan E. Hillman, *The Western Balkans with Chinese Characteristics*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (July 30, 2019). <https://www.csis.org/analysis/western-balkans-chinese-characteristics>.

<sup>52</sup> Valerie Hopkins and James Kynge, Montenegro fears China-backed highway will put it on road to ruin, *Financial Times* (April 10, 2019). <https://www.ft.com/content/d3d56d20-5a8d-11e9-9dde-7aedca0a081a>.

<sup>53</sup> Umesh Moramudali, Is Sri Lanka Really a Victim of China's 'Debt Trap'?, *The Diplomat* (May 14, 2019). <https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/is-sri-lanka-really-a-victim-of-chinas-debt-trap/>.

<sup>54</sup> Agatha Kratz, Allen Feng and Logan Wright, New Data on the "Debt Trap" Question, *Rhodium Group* (April 29, 2019). <https://rhg.com/research/new-data-on-the-debt-trap-question/>.



should not be ignored in Slovakia, as the EU integration of the Western Balkans countries has been one of its key foreign policy goals.

After arousing a lot of criticism for ignoring the EU factor at the beginning of the cooperation<sup>55</sup>, China has made the utmost effort to frame the relationship with the CEE as in accordance with the EU staying the dominant actor in the area. For example, the EU representatives have been present as observers at the annual summits since 2014. The Guidelines approved by the participating countries at the summits have regularly included statements explicitly expressing adherence to the EU rules. At the same time, the messaging from China has been sometimes mixed, seeing the EU as an external partner to the 17+1 cooperation rather than being an integral part of it by virtue of 12 participating countries being members of the EU.<sup>56</sup>

However, in general, it is apparent that good relations with the EU have been valued much more by China than any potential benefits from inciting open friction between the CEE countries and Brussels. For example, as noted by a prominent Chinese author dealing with CEE, China has been wary of stressing the relationship with Hungary too much, as Orbán's conflicting attitude towards Brussels in recent years makes it unstable and unreliable partner and endangers overall Chinese policy towards the EU.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, while it is true that some CEE countries have been using the China card as a bargaining tool towards Brussels, it should not be automatically viewed as China's design. On the contrary, sometimes it may even act against China's interest because it is bringing negativity publicity.

It is also misguided to see the CEE countries as somehow being the primary "backdoor" for China's influence in the EU. China has robust relationships with the "old members" of the EU that are built on real economic interdependence, which is not the case with CEE. Germany, for example, despite having a stronger position within the EU than any of the CEE countries, seems to be willing to allow Chinese telecommunication

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<sup>55</sup> Any reference to the EU was conspicuously absent from Wen Jiabao's 12 Measures for China-CEE cooperation announced in 2012 in Warsaw.

<sup>56</sup> Richard Turcsányi, Growing Tensions Between China and the EU Over 16+1 Platform, *The Diplomat* (November 29, 2017). <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/growing-tensions-between-china-and-the-eu-over-161-platform/>.

<sup>57</sup> 刘作奎 [Liu Zuokui]. 中国与中东欧合作：问题与对策 [China-CEE Cooperation: Issues and Countermeasures], 国际问题研究 [China International Studies], Issue 3 (2013).



companies into its critical 5G infrastructure.<sup>58</sup> This approach is to a significant extent motivated by the fear of China's economic retaliation. In this case, we can observe real Chinese leverage on an issue of EU-wide importance. This stands in contrast to a limited number of cases where the CEE countries have actually supported China, largely on symbolic issues. Moreover, such moves are more a function of the own objectives of the respective countries vis-a-vis the EU, rather than a direct result of China's influence.

The economic interest of China in the CEE countries should be viewed through the prism of approach towards the EU as well. The CEE countries are seen as an economic intermediary or a stepping stone for China's increased economic engagement in Europe at large. In terms of the Chinese BRI project, the CEE is a natural bridgehead connecting China and Europe. It thus follows that projects in infrastructure and general trade connectivity are of crucial importance for China in the region. This includes the east-west land route of which the China-Europe Express freight railway links are the most visible example, as well as south-north axis from the Greek port of Piraeus and the Balkans, including the Chinese funded project of the Budapest-Belgrade railway. These projects are designed to help establish new transport corridors that will connect China and the crucial European markets, allowing for the unimpeded flow of Chinese goods.<sup>59</sup>

The CEE countries are also said to be an important playground for the "going out" of Chinese companies, which has reached its second phase under the BRI.<sup>60</sup> By investing and operating in the CEE EU member states, the Chinese companies have the opportunity to get familiar with the relevant EU regulations, gain advanced technology and managerial experience, and establish a stepping stone to the Western European markets.<sup>61</sup> The CEE EU

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<sup>58</sup> Guy Chazan, Merkel under pressure over Huawei's role in German 5G rollout, *Financial Times* (December 13, 2019). <https://www.ft.com/content/372c1da6-1d98-11ea-97df-cc63de1d73f4>.

<sup>59</sup> Anges Szunomár One Belt, One Road: Connecting China with Central and Eastern Europe? In Yu Cheng, Lilei Song and Lihe Huang (eds), *The Belt & Road Initiative in the Global Arena: Chinese and European Perspectives* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 71-87.

<sup>60</sup> 朱晓中 [Zhu Xiaozhong]. 中国和中东欧国家关系的发展 [The Development of China-CEE Relations], 领导科学论坛 [The Forum for Leadership Science], Issue 8 (2016).

<sup>61</sup> 张永安, 尚宇红 [Zhang Yong'an and Shang Yuhong]. "一带一路"框架下中国—中东欧合作的希望与挑战 [The Hopes and Challenges of China-CEE Cooperation under the Framework of the Belt and Road Initiative], 国际商务研究 [International Business Research], Issue 4 (2016).



member countries generally have a skilled and relatively cheap labor force, which gives them a competitive advantage and raises their attractiveness for Chinese companies. Expanding production into the European periphery can also help China avoid tariffs and access the European market directly, e.g. exporting overproduction and avoiding dumping duties for commodities such as steel. This appears to have been one of the motives of the Chinese acquisition of the steel mill in Smederovo in Serbia and also of the past interest of acquiring the U.S. Steel Košice company. If based in the EU, the Chinese companies can also gain easier access to external markets with which the EU has free trade agreements in place.

Nevertheless, there are important caveats to be noted regarding the economic role to be played by the CEE countries. First of all, Chinese companies have already established a presence in the Western European markets. Within the overall picture of China-Europe relations, trade and investment with the “old members” have remained dominant, the establishment of China-CEE relations notwithstanding.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, while CEE has seen a large number of Chinese-financed infrastructure projects, they have overwhelmingly been concentrated in the non-EU countries of the Balkans, where the stringent EU competition, transparency, and environment rules do not apply. In Slovakia, that largely lacks top-level technology and well-established brands that China has been interested in Western Europe, and does not allow for the kind of infrastructure projects pursued by China in the Balkans, the space for Chinese economic involvement remains relatively narrow and has so far been mostly limited to mergers and acquisitions of foreign-owned business.<sup>63</sup> The one potential strategic asset of Slovakia is its potential role as a transport hub for railway and intermodal transport in the East-West trade. However, Slovakia is disadvantaged by the situation in Ukraine as well as the strong competition by Poland and other actors.

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<sup>62</sup> Tamás Matura, The Misguided Discourse on Chinese Influence in Central Europe, *The New Federalist* (October 4, 2018). <https://www.thenewfederalist.eu/the-misguided-discourse-on-chinese-influence-in-central-europe>.

<sup>63</sup> Matej Šimalčík, Wishful Thinking: Slovakia’s Chinese Dream, In: Zack Kraimer (ed) *Comparative Analysis of the Approach Towards China: V4+ and One Belt One Road* (Prague: Prague Security Studies Institute, 2019). [http://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/681\\_final-report.pdf](http://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/681_final-report.pdf).



Looking at the low economic complementarity of China and CEE countries and the underperformance in economic relations, it can be argued that China has seen the cooperation with 17+1 largely through the prism of political symbolism from the beginning and economy has been only of secondary importance.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, the 17+1 has to a large part been designed as a showcase of the new era of active Chinese diplomacy. China has gradually moved from a passive, low-profile foreign policy when it was wary of taking global commitments. This shift has been completed by the Xi Jinping leadership since 2012, which has taken a decidedly more proactive role in international affairs. By actively shaping the cooperation with the CEE countries, China is improving its image as an actor that can set the international agenda, with a great number of states subscribing to its leadership. In a Chinese parlance, this helps Beijing enlarge its “group of friends”. This is important for China in terms of building up its legitimacy not only abroad, but, perhaps even more importantly, in front of the domestic audience. At the same time, the 17+1 also serves to promote Chinese foreign policy concepts and norms that China hopes will gain global prominence.

China’s being motivated by political symbolism also explains its approach to promoting BRI in the region. China got the regional countries including Slovakia on board regardless of the practical potential of cooperation. Rather than expecting concrete economic results, China’s interests were served already by the symbolic act of Slovakia and other countries supporting the foreign policy initiative originating in Beijing. Therefore, rather than taking China’s promises of economic benefits at face value, Slovakia and other regional states should be aware that these are often only a by-product of China’s foreign policy PR campaign. If no practical cooperation potential exists, China will not automatically extend economic benefits to other countries, no matter their inclination towards Beijing.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Richard T. Turcsányi, China is raising its flag in Central and Eastern Europe, *East Asia Forum* (August 31, 2018). <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/08/31/china-is-raising-its-flag-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>.

<sup>65</sup> Filip Šebok, No Belt No Road- Slovakia on the margins of China’s BRI initiative, *Central European Institute of Asian Studies* (April 3, 2019). <https://ceias.eu/no-belt-no-road-slovakia-on-the-margins-of-chinas-bri-initiative/>.



A brief look at the actual activities undertaken under the 17+1 format so far shows that China has put a great emphasis on cultural image-polishing and contact-building activities under the cooperation. This shows that China seeks to improve its perception in the CEE countries and gain soft power in the region. Such an effort is in a long term supposed to make the CEE countries more inclined towards China politically. In this respect, it should be noted that China has recently expanded its outreach towards the political elites, academia, and media in the region, which may carry certain security risks. A central role is taken by the United Front work, CCP activities designed to co-opt elites and social forces.<sup>66</sup> While these have been originally designed as a way to co-opt non-communist elements within China, they have expanded abroad where they target local Chinese communities but increasingly also forces in wider society.

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<sup>66</sup> Martin Hála and Jichang Lulu, Lost in translation: 'Economic diplomacy' with Chinese characteristics, *Sinopsis* (March 11, 2019). <https://sinopsis.cz/en/lost-in-translation-economic-diplomacy-with-chinese-characteristics/>.





## 4 Future outlook: Slovak interests and policy recommendations

Looking at the Slovak approach towards China so far one can easily observe that the country has been largely perceived as a 'neutral' one. Comparing to the other regional countries such as the discourse surrounding China in the Czech Republic, the topic is less polarizing but at the same time, the climate is not overly positive such as in Hungary. This, in theory, provides Slovakia with a good position to think about its engagement with China from a pragmatic perspective taking into account all the considerations and avoiding overly-politicized discussion used in an instrumental manner, while staying true to principles.

There seems to be apparent ambivalence towards China when it comes to the political leaders in Slovakia. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, the Slovak approach towards China has been so far characterized by rhetorical ambitions while lacking in substance. Since the 2007 visit by then Slovak PM to China, some politicians might have grown more skeptical of the economic prospects China was once believed to bring into the country. Except for few exceptions, Slovak politicians seem not to be engaged in China-related topics and overall, some of the issues that are currently discussed on the European level seem to have gained less attention among the Slovak public as well. In regards to the BRI itself, Slovak politicians might find some of the Chinese financial funds not attractive enough as Slovakia still has access to the other possibilities of the EU funding. This means that financial cooperation with China would have first and foremost a symbolic character and could be used for diversification of its financial portfolios.<sup>67</sup>

The Slovak government, businesses, institutions, and the general public should become aware of the risks involved in cooperation with China. The current awareness of security and compliance risks is very low, which is best evidenced by the lax approach of the Slovak government towards the issue of Chinese 5G network providers. This is, to some part, the result of the very low profile relationship between Slovakia and China and the fact

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<sup>67</sup> Lucia Husenicová, Kristína Kironská, Filip Šebok, Matej Šimalčík & Richard Q. Turcsányi, *Potenciál Novej hodvábnej cesty pre Slovensko*, (Bratislava: inštitút Ázijských Štúdií, 2019). [https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/20190102\\_BRI\\_PP\\_FINAL.pdf](https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/20190102_BRI_PP_FINAL.pdf).



that, as argued in this publication, Slovakia is of marginal importance for China. However, experiences from (the very near) abroad should serve for Slovakia as a warning sign.

It is necessary to undertake due diligence when dealing with Chinese companies and institutions so as to preempt economic and/or political fallout such as was the case of the CEFC company in the Czech Republic (and in Slovakia to some extent), whose investment bonanza broke down within two years after its financial problems were revealed and its chairman disappeared in a Chinese corruption probe.<sup>68</sup> The due diligence process should also take into account the possible linkage of Chinese companies to various human rights abuses.<sup>69</sup> While not all Chinese investors are of course problematic, great care should be taken to reveal the soundness of their financial situation, the possibility of political links, sources of labor and other production inputs, and the nature of ownership structures.

The current Slovak law already contains tools that can be used to protect certain industries from malign Chinese influence. Examples include public procurement laws, public registry of beneficial ownership, banking regulations, or ban on media cross-ownership. However, these tools are primarily aimed at preventing the negative impact of monopolistic behavior of oligarchs and were not designed to deal with the negative impact of behavior by foreign economic actors with ties to their domestic government. Thus, while these tools provide some protection, they are not perfect and can be easily circumvented. Due to this, Slovakia urgently needs to pass a domestic investment screening mechanism that will provide a holistic approach to security risks of foreign investments and other economic activities.<sup>70</sup>

Slovakia should also strive to keep its foreign policy and public debate free of interference whether from the side of parochial business interests or directly from China. The Czech case, once again, warns us about the

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<sup>68</sup> Ivana Karásková, The curious case of the Czech President's Missing Advisor, *EU Observer* (March 9, 2018). <https://euobserver.com/opinion/141251>.

<sup>69</sup> A notable example is the usage of forced labor in the Uyghur internment camps in Xinjiang. See e.g. Ana Nicolai da Costa, Xinjiang cotton sparks concern over 'forced labour' claims, *BBC* (November 13, 2019). <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-50312010>.

<sup>70</sup> Matej Šimalčík, "Keď investície nie sú v štátnom záujme" *CEIAS* (20 November 2018) <https://ceias.eu/sk/ked-investicie-nie-su-v-statnom-zaujme/>



possibility of powerful business-politics networks hijacking the country's diplomacy and influencing the public debate to serve their own interests. It was also the Czech Republic where the Chinese Embassy secretly funded activities of an academic center at the Charles University, on top of financing a course on China's BRI designed to spread Chinese narratives.<sup>71</sup> Transparency should be promoted in all of the contacts with Chinese institutions, whether its government institutions, universities or other public actors and where it does not suffice, journalists and public activists should come forward.

It is also necessary to be aware that in dealing with China, Slovakia is dealing with a one-party dictatorship that has a very different understanding of some norms and concepts. Moreover, it seeks to win legitimacy for them by earning support from states such as Slovakia, for which it may seem innocent. The case in point is the meeting of vice-minister of Justice Edita Pfundtner with Chinese delegation from Shanghai, sharing the experiences of anti-corruption efforts.<sup>72</sup> The issue here, of course, lies in putting the democratic and autocratic systems on a level ground, notwithstanding the extra-legality of much of the anti-corruption policies in China (tellingly known as a "campaign"). In other cases, Slovak politicians have become tools of Chinese propaganda quite willingly- this is the case of the carefully staged visit of the Slovak parliamentary delegation to Tibet in August 2019 led by the Smer MP Ľuboš Blaha.<sup>73</sup> Slovak media have also proved to be unable to face issues stemming from the nature of the Chinese regime when the Slovak business weekly Trend published an advertorial by the Chinese Ambassador, spreading conspiracy theories about the Hong Kong protests.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Alžběta Bajerová, The Czech-Chinese Centre of Influence: How Chinese Embassy in Prague Secretly Funded Activities at the Top Czech University, *China Observers* (November 7, 2019). <https://chinaobservers.eu/the-czech-chinese-centre-of-influence-how-chinese-embassy-in-prague-secretly-funded-activities-at-the-top-czech-university/>.

<sup>72</sup> Edita Pfundtner, *Facebook* (November 26, 2019). <https://www.facebook.com/pfundtner.edit/photos/a.1001189489990303/2475672842541953/?type=1&theater>.

<sup>73</sup> Filip Šebok, The Curious Case of the China-loving Slovak parliamentarian Ľuboš Blaha, *China Observers* (August 26, 2019). <https://chinaobservers.eu/the-curious-case-of-the-china-loving-slovak-parliamentarian-lubos-blaha/>.

<sup>74</sup> Matej Šimalčík, Ako slovenské médiá uverejnili čínsku propagandu, *SME* (August 27, 2019). <https://komentare.sme.sk/c/22199398/ako-slovenske-media-uverejnili-cinsku-propagandu.html>.



While staying aware of the very limited tools, not to talk of leverage, in hands of Slovakia to pressure China on human rights, this topic should not be absent from the Slovak foreign policy approach towards China. The main platform for human rights efforts will remain at the multilateral fora, especially the EU, where the common voice of the 28 countries can carry a certain weight (and where more should be done to make human rights one of the pillars of the bilateral relations, rather than an afterthought). At the same time, human rights issues should be regularly brought up by Slovakia at the appropriate political level also in bilateral relations, including at the 17+1 fora. The actions of the Chinese government against the Uyghur minority in the Xinjiang Autonomous Regions constitute a human rights violation on an unprecedented scale that requires the whole global community to express condemnation and pressure Beijing to revoke its policies. Finally, as supported by the experience of other European countries, silence on human rights does not automatically bring economic results and vice versa. As Slovakia has a low economic dependency on China, it is in a good position to become a moral champion in the 17+1 platform by promoting the EU position on human rights, financial sustainability or environmental protection.

At the same time, not all the Chinese state-led activities in Slovakia should be viewed as coming with ulterior motives and automatically threatening. Assuming an understanding of the risks involved, cooperation with China in various sectors can be beneficial and should not be discarded. There are, for example, no inclinations so far that China is trying to significantly affect public opinion in the region save for certain critical issues related to China's 'core interests', which makes China mostly reactive. As distinguished from Russia, China is not trying to actively sow discord within European societies and undermine their democratic underpinnings.<sup>75</sup> China currently does not have the motivation nor the means to do so.

The EU relations with China provide the most important framework for Slovakia to achieve its interests, not the least due to the economic exposure

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<sup>75</sup> Patrik Szicherle, Grigorij Mesežnikov, Jonáš Syrovátka, Jakub Merc and Péter Krekó, *Doors Wide Shut: Russian, Chinese and Turkish authoritarian influence in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia* (Budapest: Political Capital, 2019).  
[https://politicalcapital.hu/hireink.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=2477](https://politicalcapital.hu/hireink.php?article_read=1&article_id=2477).



to China being mediated by the EU partners, chief among them Germany.<sup>76</sup> Forming a common EU policy is naturally a very complicated endeavor, owing to the different objectives and strategies of the individual member states whose political weight differs widely. Slovakia does not belong to the “troublemakers” in this respect, as it has never undermined common EU policy by specific moves as is the case with Hungary or Greece. Nor has it, quite logically, tried to go its way on account of its power as has been the case of Germany, Great Britain or France. The potential benefits from an EU-wide approach was illustrated, for example, by the 2019 EU-China deal on geographical indications, which included also protection for Slovak Tokaj wine<sup>77</sup>. One potential area where Slovakia could consider its input towards common EU policy regards China’s activities in the Balkans, a priority region for Slovak foreign policy.

Still, Slovakia should be a more constructive and responsible actor in forming and adhering to EU-wide policies. The ongoing EU process of addressing the challenges of the 5G technologies that was initiated as a response to the wider Huawei debate is a good example. Despite participating in the EU-wide (non-binding) risk assessment report on the 5G networks,<sup>78</sup> Slovak government pronouncements have directly contradicted them. Prime Minister Pellegrini said (before the report came out) that Slovakia is not going to block Chinese 5G companies from its network infrastructure because it does not want to get entangled in the US-China trade war.<sup>79</sup> The statement ignored the fact that the US is actually not a direct competitor in the 5G technology and the discussed providers are EU and Chinese companies. Moreover, it skimmed over that the security issues have resulted in an autonomous reaction by EU countries such as the Czech Republic without the need for US backing. In another problematic statement, Vice PM Raši welcomed cooperation with the Chinese 5G companies,

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<sup>76</sup> Klára Dubravčíková, Filip Šebok, Martin Šebeňa, Matej Šimalčík and Richard Turcsányi, *Prospects for Developing the V4+China Cooperation Platform* (Bratislava: Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2019). <https://ceias.eu/prospects-for-developing-the-v4-china-cooperation-platform/>.

<sup>77</sup> European Commission, 100 European geographical indications set to be protected in China (November 6, 2019). [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_19\\_6200](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_6200).

<sup>78</sup> European Commission, EU coordinated risk assessment of the cybersecurity of 5G networks (October 9, 2019). [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_19\\_6049](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_6049).

<sup>79</sup> SME, Pellegrini nechce obchodn[ vojnu s Čínou pre Huawei (April 11, 2019). <https://ekonomika.sme.sk/c/22097537/pellegrini-nechce-obchodnu-vojnu-s-cinou-pre-huawei.html>.



saying that the only issues are that of data protection and privacy, neglecting the issue of links of the companies to the Chinese authoritarian state, as brought up in the EU common risk assessment.<sup>80</sup>

Coming to the bilateral economic dimension of the Slovak approach towards China, a more proactive policy should be developed while avoiding unrealistic expectations. Since the 2017 Strategy for the Development of Economic Relations with China 2017-2020, Slovakia has begun to think about its economic relations with China in a much more defined manner, at least in theory. This is important as the relatively limited Chinese presence in the country could easily change what could have possible strategic implications, as discussed in the second chapter. In fact, Slovak Republic stands in a good position given the fact that is the only one of V4 country that uses Euro as its currency. Also, its access to the EU market is yet another bonus point in the eyes of China. Despite Slovakia being low on the Chinese foreign policy agenda, this fact could be changed by generating a more active approach from the Slovak side.

The BRI project, which can be seen as having both economic and geostrategic implications could to a limited extent benefit countries such as Slovakia. However, in order to positively materialize on this opportunity, Slovakia has to approach these projects with clear expectations and achievable goals. This point has been demonstrated by various projects that were in the past discussed as a potential cooperation with China regarding the BRI but so far not implemented. The fact that none of the large projects discussed in the past have materialized showcases the need of the Slovak policy-makers to take into account the feasibility and real potential of some of these investments in order to distinguish between a successful PR story and real beneficial cooperation.

The one area of actual cooperation with China on BRI has been the cooperation in the railway sector, more specifically as a transit point and intermodal hub for China-Europe freight trains. As discussed in the first chapter, Slovakia has remained far behind its goals of significantly

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<sup>80</sup> Cybersec.sk, Raši v Číne: Slovensko bude otvorené spolupráci na 5G (November 8, 2019). <https://cybersec.sk/spravy/z-domova/rasi-v-cine-slovensko-bude-otvorene-spolupraci-na-5g/>.



increasing its share of the railway transit, largely due to external factors. It should be a strategic priority for Slovakia, to pursue cooperation in this area.

However, Slovakia should be wary of related infrastructure projects, including the possibility of involvement of China's capital. The two specific projects discussed are the intermodal logistics center near Košice and the megaproject of the extension of a wide gauge railway throughout Slovakia to Vienna. As the economic sustainability of such projects is largely dependent on the development of the situation in neighboring Ukraine and the future development of the China-Energy railway freight transport in general (it is heavily subsidized now, creating distortions), Slovakia should assume an extremely cautious approach.

Perhaps the most effective game-changer for a more active approach towards China on the Slovak side would be an increased presence of the Slovak diplomatic representatives in China. Slovakia could also consider updating its consular maps and open new consulates in various parts of China in order to increase its profile which could lead to increased flows of tourists.<sup>81</sup> These steps, however, should be taken with an already defined strategy towards China in mind, avoiding the pitfalls of increasing capacities without having a clear agenda and objectives to reach in the first place. This process could also include better coordination and sharing and pooling of resources with other countries of the Visegrad 4 for a more effective utilization of diplomatic efforts.

The Slovak strategy towards China should be set within a wider Asia-Pacific strategy taking into account regional dynamics. As China is becoming a more important player both globally but mainly in the wider Asian region, it is important to think about the complex dynamic this phenomenon is bringing into international diplomacy. While China has not yet become a polarizing issue in Slovakia, it is becoming more divisive in other countries of the region. It is thus important to keep these issues in mind when forming wider strategies of engagement in order to avoid falling into a trap of over-focusing on one state while leaving out the region as a whole. After all, Slovakia has solid economic relations with Japan, South Korea or Taiwan,

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<sup>81</sup> Klára Dubravčíková, Filip Šebok, Martin Šebeňa, Matej Šimalčík & Richard Q. Turcsányi, Prospects for Developing the V4+China Cooperation Platform, *CEIAS* (October 17, 2019) <https://ceias.eu/prospects-for-developing-the-v4-china-cooperation-platform/>.



in case of which there are real job-bringing investments as opposed to pipe dreams.

Last but not least, Slovakia suffers from a lack of expertise in China and Asia-Pacific affairs. As China is becoming an ever more important actor in the international affairs and the center of gravity of the global affairs is increasingly shifting from the Transatlantic to the Indo-Pacific theater, it will be more and more crucial for the state to have sufficient access to domestic experts on economic, security and international affairs with specific knowledge of China and other countries in the region. To this end, the government should bolster training of experts at universities as well as support the nascent domestic community of think tanks that specialize in China and can provide policymakers with tailored analysis.





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