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Walking the tightrope: Slovakia's balancing act in the Taiwan Strait

Cross-Strait relations between China and Taiwan were one of the most volatile hotspots of global tensions. Beijing's increasingly hostile rhetoric and military posturing toward Taipei, including repeated violations of Taiwan's air defense identification zone, exacerbated the tensions, which became one of the defining points of the power competition between the US and China.

At the same time, Taiwan managed to improve its international standing by fostering relations with several partners in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), including Slovakia. CEE thus became an area over which Taiwan and China competed for international recognition.

However, even though CEE became an area of stiff competition between China and Taiwan, that does not mean that Slovakia lacks agency nor that it does not pursue its own interests vis-à-vis various East Asian countries.

As this competition was unfolding, Slovakia's attempts to balance the two sets of relations and maximize the associated benefits, while minimizing the potential economic and diplomatic costs, became a defining feature of Slovakia's foreign policy, not just toward the two countries but toward East Asia as such.

Interactions with the rest of the region remained rather limited due to the ongoing negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, lack of material and financial resources, and the overall lack of strategy toward the region. As a result, even though economic relations with South Korea and Japan are far more beneficial than those with Taiwan and China,¹ relations with these

¹ M. Šimalčík, "Slovakia in East Asia: no longer naive, still not committed," in P. Brezáni, ed., *Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy 2020*. Bratislava: Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, 2021, pp. 172–188.

two East Asian democracies remained rather static throughout 2021. This is all the more striking given the continuing shift of the global geopolitical and geo-economic centers of gravity toward the Indo-Pacific region.²

Thus, this chapter focuses on Slovak-Taiwanese and Slovak-Chinese relations as these were the most dynamic relations with East Asian states in 2021.

■ Trajectories of change

As was observed in the previous edition of the *Yearbook*, changes in domestic perceptions of East Asian countries, coupled with the domestic political transition that occurred in Slovakia in 2020, were the key drivers of Slovakia's relations with East Asian countries and ongoing policy shifts.³

These two trends had the greatest impact on Slovakia's policies toward China and, in extension, Taiwan as well, given that perceptions of the two countries are closely tied to domestic political and ideological cleavages, as well as the geopolitical anxiety regarding Russia.⁴

In terms of public opinion, these cleavages can easily be observed when we compare perceptions of China and Taiwan among Slovaks identifying with the global West and East (Figure 1 & Figure 2). Those that identify with the West have a significantly more negative view of China than those that identify with the East. Conversely, they have a more positive view of Taiwan.⁵

Figure 1. Public perception of China by respondent identification with global West or East⁶

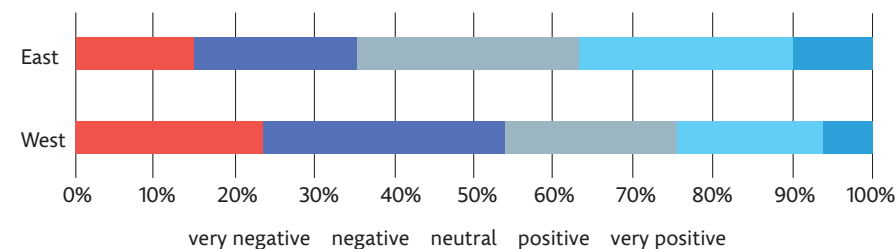
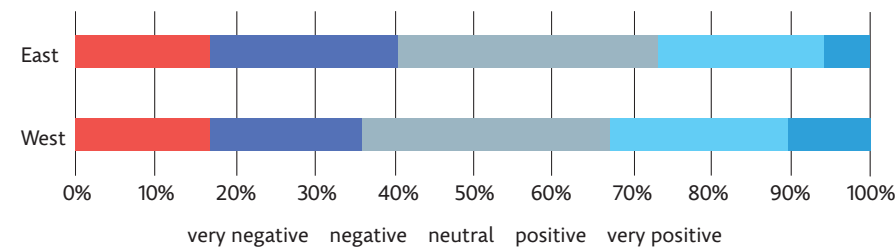


Figure 2. Public perception of Taiwan by respondent identification with global West or East⁷



This polarization of views of China and Taiwan is evident among the political class as well. Politicians' views on China can be classified into three distinct groups. Based on their overall views of China and the determinants of these views, we can talk about pragmatic supporters, ideological supporters, and ideological opponents.⁸ In terms of China policy, the 2020 political transition resulted in pragmatic supporters (accentuating economic cooperation) being replaced by ideological opponents (who recognize the necessity of addressing security concerns as well as broader concerns over democracy and human rights). While the policy ramifications of this change could be seen in 2020, they became fully visible during 2021.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

⁸ M. Šimalčík, "Image of China in Slovakia: ambivalence, adoration, and fake news," op. cit.

² Although in the short term this process may be affected by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, which started in February 2022, in the long term, it seems improbable that the continuing shift of the global geopolitical and geo-economic centers of gravity towards the Indo-Pacific region will be reversed.

³ M. Šimalčík, "Slovakia in East Asia: no longer naive, still not committed," op. cit.

⁴ P. Gries, R. Turcsányi, "The East is red...Again! How the specters of communism and Russia shape Central and Eastern European views of China," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* Vol. 55, No. 1, 2022, pp. 1-23; M. Šimalčík, "Image of China in Slovakia: ambivalence, adoration, and fake news," *Asia-Europe Journal*, 19, 2021, pp. 245-58.

⁵ R. Turcsányi et al., "Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey," [dataset] Palacký University Olomouc, 2020.

■ Taiwan: A new beginning in mutual relations

Throughout 2021, Slovakia continued to display an interest in developing relations with Taiwan, following its initial overtures in 2020. Hence we can conclude that in 2021 the biggest breakthroughs in mutual relations were made since 2003, when the Taipei Representative Office in Bratislava and Slovak Economic and Cultural Office in Taipei were opened.⁹ Slovakia thus joined the European avant-garde of CEE states, alongside Czechia and Lithuania, that took a pro-active approach to relations with Taiwan.

The highlight of the renewed interest in mutual relations was the mutual high-level visits that occurred toward the end of the year.

In October, Bratislava was unofficially visited by Joseph Wu, the Foreign Minister of Taiwan, who was on a tour of European countries with whom relations had become particularly cordial in the past few years. Just a few days before Wu's arrival, Bratislava hosted a trade delegation of Taiwanese businesses co-led by Minister of National Development Kung Ming-hsin and Minister of Science and Technology Wu Tsung-tsong.¹⁰

After months of planning, this was reciprocated by a delegation of Slovak businesses, scientists, and public officials led by Karol Galek, State Secretary at the Ministry of Economy. The delegation was the largest and highest-ranking visit from Slovakia to the self-ruling island.¹¹

During the two visits, cooperation was initiated in several areas. Numerous memoranda of understanding on cooperation were signed by the two sides.

⁹ E. Rejtová, "Slovensko–taiwanské vzťahy: Prečo Slovensko tak dlho váhalo?" [Slovakia–Taiwan relations: Why did Slovakia hesitate for so long?] in K. Kironská, E. Rejtová, eds, *Ázijský šampión: Všetko čo potrebujete vedieť o súčasnom Taiwane*. [Asian Champion: all you need to know about contemporary Taiwan] Bratislava: HADART Publishing, 2021, pp. 175–95.

¹⁰ "Pocítite následky, vyhráža sa Čína Slovensku aj Česku," [There will be consequences, China threatens Slovakia and the Czech Republic] *Sme*, October 29, 2021. Available online: <https://svet.sme.sk/c/22773820/pocitite-nasledky-taiwanska-navsteva-na-slovensku-a-v-cesku-nahnevala-cinu.html> (accessed on March 15, 2022).

¹¹ "Slovakia delegation's Taiwan visit welcomed by MOFA," *Taiwan Today*, December 6, 2021. Available online: <https://taiwantoday.tw/news.php?unit=2&post=211610> (accessed on March 15, 2022).

These included areas like semiconductors, smart cities, high-tech industries, supply chain resilience, research and development, trade, investment, and tourism.¹²

Throughout 2021, semiconductor supply chain disruptions continued to affect the Slovak automotive industry. Several automakers located in Slovakia announced production disruptions due to the shortage of semiconductors caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.¹³

In efforts to overcome this problem, cooperation in semiconductors and attempts to attract relevant Taiwanese investment was particularly high on the Slovak agenda. However, given Slovakia's size, lack of qualified labor, and the costs of establishing a semiconductor supply chain in Europe, some reality checks are in order. There is intra-EU competition over attracting Taiwanese (or other) investment in the semiconductor industry. Given the existing competition, potential investors will be considering state aid offers, among other things, which will put pressure on public finances. This may be somewhat remedied by the recently adopted European Chips Act, which aims to stimulate €43 billion in private and public investment in the semiconductor supply chain.¹⁴

Nevertheless, localizing an entire semiconductor supply chain seems unlikely. A more realistic expectation would be the emergence of a decentralized supply chain within the EU, where different countries would play different roles in the production process. This possibility was already hinted at by Taiwanese representatives. At the same time, it needs to be recognized that such an approach would be in line with Taiwanese interests to make semiconductor-related investments in all countries that have adopted particularly pro-Taiwanese policies in the past year, thus solidifying the partnership.¹⁵

¹² "Taiwan and Slovakia ink 7 MOUs, pave way for closer ties," *Focus Taiwan*, October 23, 2021. Available online: <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202110230004> (accessed on March 15, 2022).

¹³ See e.g. "Trnavská automobilka zastaví výrobu, dôvodom sú najmä polovodiče," [Trnava automobile factory stops production, the main reason is semiconductors] *Trend*, June 5, 2021. Available online: <https://www.trend.sk/spravy/trnavska-automobilka-zastavi-vyrodu-dovodom-su-najma-polovodice> (accessed on March 15, 2022).

¹⁴ "Digital sovereignty: Commission proposes Chips Act to confront semiconductor shortages and strengthen Europe's technological leadership," European Commission, February 8, 2022. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_729 (accessed on March 15, 2022).

¹⁵ "Taiwan uvažuje pri výrobe čipov o spolupráci so Slovenskom," [Taiwan considers cooperation with Slovakia in chip production] *Trend*, November 25, 2021. Available online: <https://www.trend.sk/spravy/it-taiwan-uvazuje-pri-vyrobe-cipov-spolupraci-aj-slovenskom> (accessed on March 15, 2022).

Beyond economic cooperation, Slovakia and Taiwan also made progress in political relations, signing the Arrangement on Judicial Cooperation in Criminal Matters, which provides for reciprocity in extradition and preliminary detentions of sentenced and indicted persons. From the Taiwanese perspective, the agreement presents an important milestone as it shields Taiwanese nationals from the risk of being extradited to China,¹⁶ a problem that has repeatedly occurred around the world.¹⁷ From the Slovak perspective, this was a rare example of a formalized agreement with Taiwan that does not directly deal with the economic agenda, signifying a maturing relationship with Taiwan.

With regards to the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare sector cooperation became an important aspect of the relationship. During the summer of 2021, when COVID-19 transmissions were peaking in Taiwan, it faced a serious shortage of vaccines caused by delays in production, China's pressure on vaccine producers, and domestic political conflicts.¹⁸ Against this backdrop, Slovakia pledged a donation of 10,000 vaccine doses in July and an additional 150,000 doses in September.¹⁹

The donation turned out to be an important example of Slovakia's use of soft power in Taiwan. Following the announcement of the donation, the Taiwanese repeatedly expressed their gratitude, such as by lighting up the Taipei 101 skyscraper in the Slovak colors, as well as greater media coverage of Slovakia in Taiwanese media. This provides new opportunities for advancing Slovakia's interests in Taiwan, especially in promoting exports.

Given the quasi-diplomatic relations with Taiwan, under which Slovakia does not officially recognize the country under its One-China Policy, the development of alternative approaches to building relations may be an asset. To this

¹⁶ "Extradition treaties shield Taiwanese," *Taipei Times*, August 7, 2021. Available online: <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2021/08/07/2003762162> (accessed on March 15, 2022).

¹⁷ "China's hunt for Taiwanese overseas: The PRC's use of extradition and deportation to undermine Taiwanese sovereignty," *Safeguard Defenders*, November 30, 2021. Available online: <https://safeguarddefenders.com/en/blog/new-investigation-exposes-prc-hunting-taiwanese-overseas> (accessed on March 15, 2022).

¹⁸ R. Shemakov, "Taiwan confronts a serious vaccine shortage," Council on Foreign Relations, June 30, 2021. Available online: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/taiwan-confronts-serious-vaccine-shortage#:~:text=While%20Taiwan%20has%20pre%2Dordered,the%20population%20by%20year's%20end> (accessed on March 15, 2022).

¹⁹ "Slovakia to ship COVID vaccine donation to Taiwan; doses increased," *Focus Taiwan*, September 24, 2021. Available online: <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202109240017> (accessed on March 15, 2022).

end, a Slovakia–Taiwan 1.5 Track Dialogue was launched in 2021, a collaborative effort between the Central European Institute of Asian Studies and the Slovak Foreign Policy Association aimed at promoting policy-focused debates among Slovak and Taiwanese policymakers and experts. The pilot meeting of the 1.5 Track Dialogue included discussions on the disruption and resilience of global supply chains and the spread of disinformation and other hybrid threats.²⁰

■ China: One step forward, two steps back?

Slovakia's approach to China has traditionally rested on a combination of bilateral relations and promotion of interests via multilateral fora and regional cooperation platforms, such as the 16+1 platform or the EU–China dialogue.²¹

In 2021, Slovakia's relations with China were impacted by two main events – the decline of the 16+1 platform and China's asymmetric sanctions against European leaders, including Slovak ones. Naturally, the strengthening in relations with Taiwan affected the relations, although China's reaction remained largely rhetorical, beyond the economic repercussions (unlike in Lithuania's case).

The annual 16+1 summit was held in February 2021. The summit, the first since the start of the pandemic (the 2020 summit that was to be hosted in Beijing was postponed indefinitely), came at a crucial time for Beijing, when China's relations with the EU and USA, along with EU–USA relations, were undergoing significant changes following Joe Biden's inauguration as the US President. The increasingly negative perception of China and growing calls for EU–USA coordination to deal with the challenges posed by China meant the latter had to swiftly show the region and the world that it was maintaining

²⁰ "Slovak–Taiwan 1.5 Track Dialogue (event summary & recommendations)," Central European Institute of Asian Studies, Slovak Foreign Policy Association, March 19, 2021. Available online: <https://ceias.eu/slovak-taiwan-1-5-track-dialogue-event-summary-recommendations/> (accessed on March 15, 2022).

²¹ M. Šimalčík, "Vzťahy medzi Čínou a Slovenskom: Je Čína vytúžená alternatíva alebo hrozba pre demokraciu?" [China–Slovakia relations: Is China a desirable alternative or a threat to democracy?] in K. Kironská, R. Turcsányi, eds, *Supervelmoc? Všetko čo potrebujete vedieť o súčasnej Číne*. [Superpower: All you need to know about China today] Bratislava: HADART Publishing, 2020.

its presence despite the pandemic. As a result, the platform was boosted from the Chinese end, with President Xi Jinping presiding over the summit, rather than Prime Minister Li Keqiang. However, of the participating states, only five CEE countries were represented by their president. Six countries (including Slovakia) maintained the status quo and sent their prime ministers. The remaining six countries (all EU members) downgraded their participation and sent ministers only. Countries that downgraded their participation faced last-minute pressure from Beijing to send representatives “at an appropriate level” or pre-record videos by the leadership.

Slovakia was represented at the summit by then Prime Minister Igor Matovič, even though he had originally hinted that he would not attend and would prefer to deal with China through the EU-wide 27+1 format. After Slovakia signed the Slovakia–China protocol on lamb and goat meat exports, Matovič changed his mind and attended the meeting. This reflected the “sticks and carrots” strategy that China deploys toward Slovakia and other V4 countries.²² Nevertheless, the Slovak government’s official communique later clarified that it saw the 17+1 format as “supplemental” to the EU–China dialogue.²³

Past summits have always ended with the adoption of the Guidelines, a document summing up the activities of the past year and proposing areas of cooperation for the coming period. After the 2021 online summit, only the “Beijing Action Plan” was adopted. Compared to the draft Guidelines that were circulated by Beijing, the Action Plan is a much-abridged version. Numerous activities proposed by Beijing did not make the final cut of the document. The Action Plan focuses primarily on the non-EU states of the Western Balkans, while downgrading the importance of the V4 (with Slovakia barely getting a mention) and neglecting the Baltic states entirely.

In the past a crucial point of the guidelines was that they announced the next venue for the summit. No such item was included in the Action Plan, and no

²² I. Karásková, A. Bachulska, B. Kelemen, T. Matura, F. Šebok, M. Šimalčík, “China’s sticks and carrots in Central Europe: The logic and power of Chinese influence,” Association for International Affairs, 2020. Available online: https://mapinfluence.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Chinas-Sticks-and-Carrots-in-Central-Europe_policy-paper_A4_-interaktivni_03-1.pdf (accessed on March 15, 2022)

²³ “Predseda vlády I. Matovič o vzťahoch s Čínou: Napriek rozdielom, len otvorená myseľ a spolupráca naše vzťahy posunie dopredu,” [Prime Minister I. Matovič on relations with China: Despite the differences, only an open mind and cooperation will advance our relations] Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, February 9, 2021. Available online: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk//predseda-vlady-i-matovic-o-vztahoch-s-cinou-napriek-rozdielom-len-otvorena-mysel-a-spolupraca-nase-vztahy-posunie-dopredu/> (accessed on March 15, 2022)

venue had been announced for the next summit by the end of the year. As a result, the 16+1 platform appears to have entered a phase of dormancy. Given that the platform was designed primarily to serve Chinese interests, its potential future renewal will most likely depend on what approach China decides to take when interacting with CEE countries.²⁴

Slovakia’s relations with China were also affected by the reciprocal sanctions put in place by the EU and China in April 2021. The EU adopted sanctions against four Chinese officials and one entity over alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang against Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities. This was the first time the EU had deployed sanctions against Chinese officials since the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. In response, China adopted an asymmetric response, both in the volume and breadth of the adopted countermeasures. China sanctioned ten individuals and four entities. Unlike the EU sanctions, China’s targeted European civil society and academia. The Chinese sanctions targeted five MEPs (including Slovak MEP Miriam Lexmann) and three MPs from the Netherlands, Belgium, and Lithuania. The sanctions apply to the entire Subcommittee on Human Rights of the European Parliament (DROI) and the Political and Security Committee of the Council of the European Union (PSC), two individual researchers, and two think tanks.

This resulted in a political freeze of the negotiations on the EU–China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, though the technical dialogue is ongoing.

Despite these developments, there was some progress in economic relations over the year. Promoting agricultural exports has been a mainstay in Slovak economic diplomacy toward China. As already mentioned, Slovakia and China signed a protocol on lamb exports in 2021. This followed the sign of the protocol on milk exports during the 2019 summit of 16+1 in Dubrovnik. A similar protocol on pork exports did not come to fruition due to Slovakia’s inability to suppress the spread of the African Swine Flu on its territory.

Nevertheless, it remains doubtful as to what kind of economic benefits can be reaped from the agricultural exports to China. First, agriculture represents only a minor part of Slovakia’s economy, both in terms of GDP share

²⁴ “CEEasia Briefing special issue: The 17+1 online summit: A debacle for Beijing?” Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2021. Available online: <https://mailchi.mp/2e90dbf33357/ceea-sia-17plus1> (accessed on March 15, 2022).

and employment.²⁵ Second, exports are subject to a rigorous certification process. Third, agricultural exports are low-value products compared to other Slovak exports to China (especially cars, which are the dominant export).²⁶

For Slovakia, economic interaction with China has been closely linked to the development of train links. From a regional perspective, Slovakia has played a marginal role compared to Poland or Hungary, being mostly a transit country rather than a final destination. This began to change somewhat in 2020 when a new transport route between Xian and Dunajská Streda was launched (following the failed Dalian–Bratislava route). In 2021, a train transporting bottled mineral water produced in Slovakia was launched from Dunajská Streda. However, it illustrates the above-mentioned problem of the low value of agricultural products – it was estimated that a full load of bottled mineral water equaled the cost of exporting three to five cars from Slovakia to China.²⁷

To further promote the development of rail transport via Slovakia, the Ministry of Transport planned to launch a state aid scheme to reduce transportation costs and make Slovakia more competitive compared to its neighbors.²⁸ One can question whether this is a suitable response. First, it would be better to negotiate with neighbors to secure market conditions without having to provide anti-competitive state aid. The risk is that in providing state aid for rail freight Slovakia would be using public funds to finance the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative and China's associated geopolitical ambitions.

Furthermore, train connections to China via Slovakia are always subject to the volatile situation on the Russian–Ukrainian border. In the past, transport almost came to a complete halt due to tensions between Russia and Ukraine,

²⁵ M. Šimalčík, "Na čom stojí Pellegriniho čínsky sen," [What is the basis of Pellegrini's Chinese dream] Central European Institute of Asian Studies, November 28, 2018. Available online: <https://ceias.eu/sk/na-com-stoji-pellegriniho-cinsky-sen/> (accessed on March 15, 2022).

²⁶ R. Turcsányi, M. Šebeňa, A. Kalivoda, M. Šimalčík. *Budúcnosť hospodárskych vzťahov Slovenska a Číny: Priame a nepriame vplyvy Číny na slovenskú ekonomiku*. [The future of economic relations between Slovakia and China: the direct and indirect impacts China has on the Slovak economy] Bratislava: Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2021. Available online: <https://ceias.eu/sk/medzi-bri-a-cai-buducnost-hospodarskych-vztahov-slovenska-a-ciny/> (accessed on March 15, 2022).

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ "Ministerstvo dopravy chce prilákať nákladné vlaky s tovarmi z Číny dotačnou schémou," [Ministry of Transport wants to attract freight trains with goods from China through a subsidy scheme] *Trend*, September 28, 2021. Available online: <https://www.trend.sk/spravy/ministerstvo-dopravy-chce-prilakat-nakladne-vlaky-tovarmi-ciny-dotacnou-schemou> (accessed on March 15, 2022).

with businesses preferring the safer route via Poland and Belarus.²⁹ While this was later resolved and transport via Ukraine became feasible again (Xian–Dunajská Streda being the case in point), the events of 2022 highlight this problem and the potential impact on the future development of rail freight transport to China. Following the Russian aggression against Ukraine, all the railway links between Russia and Ukraine have been destroyed, making train transport from Slovakia to China impossible.³⁰

Besides the limited economic engagement with China, further steps were taken to safeguard Slovakia against potential security risks. This reflects the policy shift on China described above that came about following the 2020 general elections. China receives repeated mention in the revamped Security Strategy and intelligence service reports³¹ and China-related risks feature in the draft Action Plan for the Coordination of the Fight against Hybrid Threats by the Ministry of Defense.³² The Action Plan (pending governmental approval) includes specific measures targeting corrosive capital and influence over the media or academic sector. This is illustrative of the emerging recognition in the Slovak security apparatus that China uses a whole-of-society approach to promote its interests abroad, which the Slovak Intelligence Service warned against in its 2020 Annual Report.³³

²⁹ "Z Číny prišli aj prázdne vlaky len kvôli dotáciám, hovorí bývalý šéf prekladiska na východe," [Empty trains came from China just because of the subsidies, says former head of the transshipment yard in the east] *Denník E*, February 13, 2020. Available online: <https://e.dennikn.sk/1739150/z-ciny-prisli-aj-prazdne-vlaky-len-kvoli-dotaciam-hovori-byvaly-sef-prekladiska-na-vychode/> (accessed on March 15, 2022).

³⁰ "Railway between Ukraine and Russia completely destroyed," *RailFreight.com*, February 26, 2022. Available online: <https://www.railfreight.com/beltandroad/2022/02/26/railway-between-ukraine-and-russia-completely-destroyed/?gdpr=accept> (accessed on March 15, 2022).

³¹ For a summary of the official discourse on the security aspects of relations with China see M. Šimalčík, "Slovakia: changing approach to China driven by domestic political change," *China's Engagement in Central and Eastern European Countries*, Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy, 2021. Available online: <https://www.aies.at/publikationen/2021/china-engagement-europe.php> (accessed on March 15, 2022).

³² See "LP/2021/720 Akčný plán koordinácie boja proti hybridným hrozbám na roky 2022 až 2024," [LP/2021/720 Action Plan on hybrid threats coordination] *Slov-Lex*, December 8, 2021. Available online: <https://www.slov-lex.sk/legislativne-procesy/SK/LP/2021/720> (accessed on March 15, 2022).

³³ "Správa o činnosti SIS za rok 2020," [Report on the activities of the Slovak Information Service in 2020] Slovak Intelligence Service, December 2021. Available online: <https://www.sis.gov.sk/pre-vas/sprava-o-cinnosti.html> (accessed on March 15, 2022).

■ Balancing relations with Beijing and Taipei

Developments in Slovakia's relations with both Taiwan and China in 2021 were part of the broader trends that can be observed throughout the CEE. On the one hand, there is growing skepticism and recognition of security risks vis-à-vis China, coupled with the need to react to ongoing human rights abuses in China. On the other hand, there is a desire for deeper economic engagement with Taiwan.

While these two trends hold for many of the CEE countries (especially Slovakia, Lithuania, Czechia, Poland, and Slovenia), significant differences remain at the tactical level. Slovakia took a largely pragmatic approach to its relationship with Taiwan in an attempt to balance it against conflicting interests toward China.

Thus, the cooperation with Taiwan was primarily tactical, rather than consisting of grand gestures. It seems to have successfully mollified China, whose responses were mostly limited to rhetorical warnings, without grave economic consequences.³⁴

Slovakia's experience stands in stark contrast to Lithuania's. After Lithuania announced its exit from the 16+1 platform and started engaging with Taiwan, even allowing the "Taiwan Representative Office" to be set up in Vilnius (a notable development since under the status quo it would have been called the Taipei Representative Office), Beijing issued a robust response aimed not only at the limited bilateral economic exchanges, but also Lithuania's position within global value chains, by pressurizing multinational corporations into cutting ties with Lithuania if they wish to preserve their position on the Chinese market.³⁵

³⁴ E. Rejtová, "Chinese Media Watch: By visiting Taiwan, Slovakia is taking the Lithuanian road," Central European Institute of Asian Studies, December 22, 2021. Available online: <https://ceias.eu/chinese-media-watch-slovakia-delegation-taiwan/> (accessed on March 15, 2022); E. Rejtová, "Chinese Media Watch: Joseph Wu's visit to Europe advocates secessionist ideas," Central European Institute of Asian Studies, November 17, 2021. Available online: <https://ceias.eu/chinese-media-watch-joseph-wu-visit-to-europe/> (accessed on March 15, 2022)

³⁵ "China pressures Germany's Continental to cut out Lithuania – sources," *Reuters*, December 17, 2021. Available online: <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/exclusive-china-asks-germanys-continental-cut-out-lithuania-sources-2021-12-17/> (accessed on March 15, 2022)

The difference in the Chinese response can be best explained by the extent to which the countries focus on practical aspects of cooperation with Taiwan or engage in symbolic activities that China interprets as violations of its imagined sovereignty and core interests.³⁶

It remains to be seen whether Slovakia will manage to maintain the China-Taiwan balancing act. As I finalize this chapter in March 2022, China is supporting Russia in its war against Ukraine, claiming that Russia had legitimate security concerns and blaming the West for the war. This puts China at great odds with Slovakia and other CEE countries that see Russian aggression as the most prominent security threat they are facing. Should China's behavior persist, it will further damage the remnants of its goodwill left in the CEE (however small they might be) and reinforce the view that China is a revisionist power that is helping erode the rules-based world order on which small state security has been based since the end of Cold War.

■ Next steps for Slovak policy on East Asia

Despite the dynamic developments in Slovak relations with China and Taiwan, it would be a mistake to say that East Asia occupies a position of great importance in Slovak foreign policy. Overall the approach toward East Asia continues to be plagued by a plethora of problems which were outlined in more detail in previous issues of the *Yearbook*.³⁷

To resolve these problems and ensure relations with East Asia develop in a steady and sustainable manner, Slovakia ought to observe the following recommendations:

- Slovakia should formulate a regional strategy for the development of relations with East Asian countries. As a follow-up, measurable goals

³⁶ For a discussion of Chinese core interests see M. Šimalčík, "Čína vo svete: Nová hodvábná cesta k svetovej dominancii?" [China in the world: A new silk road to world dominance] in K. Kironská, R. Turcsányi, eds, op. cit.

³⁷ M. Šimalčík, "Slovakia in East Asia: no longer naive, still not committed," op. cit.; M. Šimalčík, "Slovak relations with East Asia: A lost decade?," in P. Brezáni, ed., *Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy 2019*, Bratislava: Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, 2020, pp. 109–21.

and key performance indicators should be defined to ensure relations develop at a steady pace.

- While relations with East Asian states have mostly been focused on the economic side, political relations have tended to be neglected. Developing political relations should be a crucial part of the Slovak strategy toward the region, especially with democratic states.
- As China is increasingly seen as a security risk and actor that is engaging in hybrid warfare, Slovakia should tap into the regional experience of like-minded partners to see how they respond to the various challenges posed by China. This would allow Slovakia to promote a better-tailored security policy, one that is well-equipped to handle the specific nature of China's hybrid warfare.
- In recognition of the challenges posed by the lack of material and personnel, which harms its ability to sustainably develop relations with China, Slovakia should embrace non-traditional diplomatic tools to improve its standing with East Asian partners. An example of such an approach would be to establish and foster 1.5 track dialogues with like-minded democratic partners in East Asia (as an independent civil society is a prerequisite).

