

WORKING PAPER

16+1 and the re-emergence of the China Threat Theory in Europe

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Introduction

*China is dividing and conquering Europe.*¹ *China is rebuilding the Eastern bloc.*² *China is buying the fragile post-socialist democracies of Europe “on the cheap.”*³ These are some of the tropes that are often repeated in the mainstream discourses in Europe and beyond, when it comes to the cooperation between China and the sixteen countries of Central, East and Southeast Europe (CESEE – in the official Chinese discourse known as “Central and Eastern European countries” abbreviated as CEEC). The new reality of the public debate on 16+1, now taking place well beyond the CESEE region (anecdotal evidence has shown interest by media outlets all over the globe), is significantly different compared to the one of only a few years ago: until recently, even in Europe, China-CESEE relations were unknown for many, and insufficiently interesting for those who were familiar with them. Around the time of its foundation (2012), the 16+1 mechanism was a greatly overlooked topic and very few scholars outside the China-CESEE community were aware of its existence. Those who knew it, called the platform obscure and esoteric,⁴ and largely ceremonial.

The public way of the expression of criticism and objections towards 16+1 is another important new development. Until recently, the criticism towards the platform was voiced only in confidential circumstances, often anonymously, without any spillover in the public sphere. Insiders and 16+1 researchers knew of many of the points of contention, but had little visible evidence to back their claims that skepticism exists. However, today, the criticism is voiced publicly by the European “power elite,”⁵ think tanks and the media – which in turn, makes it easier for authors to write about it. Taking the publicly expressed skeptical sentiments towards 16+1 as an invitation for a scholarly inquiry, this paper tries to provide the particular context and the reasons that shape such discourse in Europe.

The paper starts by briefly overviewing the general developments of Sino-European relations in the past decade. It then turns to situating the new “China Threat” approach in the context of the many possible (and existing) approaches to China. It then turns to analyzing the skeptical and negative takes on 16+1 in the context of the emerging “China Threat” paradigm in Europe. It shows how the changing European discourse on China is now using 16+1 as one

¹ Stefanie Bolzen and Johnny Erling, “Divide, Conquer, Aim East: China Has A Sharp New European Trade Strategy,” Worldcrunch, 2012, <http://www.worldcrunch.com/world-affairs/divide-conquer-aim-east-china-has-a-sharp-new-european-trade-strategy/eastern-europe-beijing-foreign-commerce/c1s10100/>.

² Martin Hala, “Forging a New ‘Eastern Bloc,’” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (April 10, 2018): 83–89, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0028>.

³ Salvatore Babones, “China’s Bid To Buy Eastern Europe On The Cheap: The ‘16+1’ Group,” *Forbes*, November 27, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/salvatorebabones/2017/11/27/chinas-bid-to-buy-eastern-europe-on-the-cheap-the-161-group/>.

⁴ Kerry Brown, “Is China’s Money Enough to Unite Central and Eastern Europe?,” *The Diplomat*, October 14, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/10/is-chinas-money-enough-to-unite-central-and-eastern-europe/>.

⁵ C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

of the cases to both fuel the debate, but also as one of the cases where it sees a potential to contain China.

Changes in the China-Europe Relationship

The mounting skepticism towards 16+1 in Europe is a reflection of the structural and discursive changes in the contemporary China-Europe relationship, which itself develops against the background of an evolving global order. After a series of crises – the global financial crisis, the solidarity crisis in the wake of the refugee flows to Europe, the inability to act on the Ukraine issue, and finally, the rise of nationalism, isolationism and xenophobia that culminated with the British referendum on leaving the European Union, Europe is weakest it has been in the post-War era. One of the cumulative effects of the multiple crises has been the weakening of Europe’s position and prestige on the global stage, and the loss of confidence among Europeans themselves.

China itself also faces a number of challenges, and many of them are critical for its further advancement: i.e. a shift from labor-intense towards service economy, middle-income trap, and rising demands from its population, which has led the Communist Party to formulate a new principal contradiction.⁶ Yet, China had emerged relatively stable after the global financial crisis, becoming an engine of the world economy, and the sole big power that now offers a global vision, which also benefited from the US revisionist turn under Donald Trump; and regardless of its internal challenges, China surges ahead as a global trend-maker. In Xi Jinping, China has its strongest leader in decades, who exemplifies the newfound confidence of the Communist Party to move beyond the low profile approach, towards one of striving for achievements on the global stage.⁷ In the process, China has managed to convert its economic, political and symbolic clout into a global call for action (through the Belt and Road Initiative), and has started establishing new, Sino-centric international institutions. It has extended and deepened relations with partner countries in all parts of the world, including Europe and the European neighborhood. Hence, China has emerged not only as an economic, but also as a normative power,⁸ offering its wisdom⁹ and solutions, while encouraging others to pursue their own national paths of development at a time when the Western liberal-democratic model has become ever more questioned.

China is thus now the pro-active side in the Sino-European relationship – Chinese policymakers are the one who have a vision and take steps towards fulfilling it – while European policymakers are the one who craft the responses. Yet, in responding to China’s rise, not all European voices are critical, and those who are critical are not critical in the same way.

⁶ The new principal contradiction is “between unbalanced and inadequate development and the people’s ever-growing needs for a better life.” The previous principal contradiction (1978-2018) was “the ever-growing material and cultural needs of the people versus backward social production.” Yamei, “China Embraces New ‘Principal Contradiction’ When Embarking on New Journey,” *Xinhua*, October 20, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/20/c_136694592.htm.

⁷ Xuetong Yan, “From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no. 2 (June 1, 2014): 153–84, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pou027>.

⁸ Brantly Womack, “China as a Normative Foreign Policy Actor,” CEPS Working Documents (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2008), <http://aei.pitt.edu/11662/1/1607.pdf>; Emilian Kavalski, “The Struggle for Recognition of Normative Powers: Normative Power Europe and Normative Power China in Context,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 48, no. 2 (June 1, 2013): 247–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836713485386>.

⁹ Yi Yang, “Xi’s ‘World View’ Offers Chinese Wisdom to Global Governance,” *Xinhua*, December 9, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/09/c_136813057.htm.

For example, a number of national governments in the EU (and among the non-EU countries), have assumed a cooperation-oriented position towards China. Two of the most sensitive policy issues, the recognition of China as a market economy in the World Trade Organization,¹⁰ and the introduction of investment screening mechanism,¹¹ for instance, have been issues where a number of Europeans have supported China. The general assumption has been that the supporters of China are motivated by economic interests; however, at least in the debates on investment screening, there has been also a discussion on principles – as in fact, investment screening is a retreat from the openness that has been one of the core values of the EU.

The pluralism of opinions on China in Europe is even more visible if one goes below the level of national politics. Regional and local governments, for instance, can be much friendlier to China. Local governments are in fact some of the major actors in China's new global endeavors, as the Belt&Road Initiative (BRI) foresees the creation of hubs and nodes across the regions involved. Hence, for example, Duisburg (a city that hosts the largest inland port in Europe and is closely linked with China, greatly benefiting from the BRI)¹² and the government of Northern Rhine-Westphalia as political entities are much more welcoming to China than the federal government of Germany. In addition to regional and local governments, one can take the case of business actors. For instance, while some voices in Western Europe have developed a critical attitude towards the Belt&Road Initiative, it is worthwhile to remember that at least when it comes to its focus on overland infrastructure, part of the inspiration came by European transportation and logistics enterprises (such as Deutsche Bahn Schenker). At the same time, parallel to development of confrontational political discourse, large European companies are seeking ways to adjust and ultimately benefit from the BRI (for instance, Siemens has recently opened a specialized Belt&Road office).¹³ Glancing into the debates among the expert and the broader public, one may also find an uncritical and unrealistic, positive image of China as a potential savior of Europe. This is part of the reality of the so called "bifocal lenses."¹⁴ However, the multiple approaches to the question of China in Europe do not unfold parallel to each other. They are part of a wider dialogue, and interact with each other. The China Threat approach, due to its confrontational characteristics, capitalizes on this existing pluralism of discourses in Europe: those who want cooperation or even dialogue with China can be easily seen as enticed, mesmerized or co-opted by China.

¹⁰ Eszter Zlatan, "[Focus] Divided EU Debates China Market Economy Status," *EUObserver*, January 13, 2016, <https://euobserver.com/eu-china/131801>.

¹¹ "Countries like Sweden, Netherlands, and Denmark were wary of a measure that went against their free-trade traditions. Others like Greece, Portugal, and Hungary are dependent on foreign investment to develop their economies." Eric Maurice, "EU Preparing to Screen Chinese Investments," *EUObserver*, September 14, 2017, <https://euobserver.com/economic/139015>.

¹² Joshua Posaner, "How China Put German Rust-Belt City on the Map," *POLITICO*, January 3, 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/duisburg-looms-large-in-chinas-silk-road-vision/>.

¹³ Janne Suokas, "Siemens Sets up Belt and Road Office in Beijing," *GBTIMES*, March 23, 2018, <https://gbtimes.com/germanys-siemens-sets-up-belt-and-road-office-in-beijing>.

¹⁴ Chengxin Pan, *Knowledge, Desire and Power in Global Politics: Western Representations of China's Rise* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2012); Dragan Pavličević, "'China Threat' and 'China Opportunity': Politics of Dreams and Fears in China-Central and Eastern European Relations," *Journal of Contemporary China* 0, no. 0 (May 3, 2018): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1458057>.

Usually, when a China Threat discourse prevails, not only China, but also non-complying voices are seen as threat as well.¹⁵

Elements of the new China Threat theory in Europe

The term “China Threat theory” refers to fatalistic narratives and contemplations about the future of the world inspired by the anxiety, uncertainty and the fear from China’s rise. The China Threat theory is based on the premise that China cannot and will not rise peacefully, that it has the interest in and actively works on subverting the West and the current global order, and that the West needs to contain China’s rise in order to avoid serious consequences of planetary scope. It is informed by realist, and in the first place neorealist thinking on International Relations, and is usually framed through a language of securitization.¹⁶ Central element in the China Threat theory is mistrust in China’s intentions (i.e. what Chinese policymakers is thought to be a smoke screen for a different, sinister agenda). Originating in the US, its proponents have considered China an ideological threat (due to the fact that it is governed by a Communist Party, but also due to the emerging debates on “Asian values”), an economic threat (due to its four decades of rapid economic growth and the potential to take over the US as a leading global economy), and a military threat (due to the China’s military modernization and its new status of a military power in the Pacific).¹⁷

The European China Threat theory has its similarities and differences to the American one, owing to the similarities and differences between the US and Europe as cultures and actors in global politics. Europeans have just like Americans seen China as an ideological – or rather normative threat, as well as an economic threat, but not a military threat. The peculiarity of the European view is best seen however in the framing of the ideological and normative threat of China. Europe has profiled itself as a normative actor, attaching great importance to what it perceives as universal international norms, values and standards – which China has not obeyed in full, and moreover has challenged. When it comes to the economy, China is seen as a threat in several different ways, as elaborated throughout the paper. Europeans however, do not see China as a military threat, at least not for Europe (though they do share the fears about China’s role as a military power in the Asia Pacific).

Yet, until not so long ago, Europeans downplayed their fears – and they did not frame China necessarily as a threat, but rather as a challenge; they did pursue strategy of confrontation, but rather one of engagement and dialogue.¹⁸ To understand why Europeans started to feel threatened by China in recent years, we need to put it in the context of the predisposition of fear, which is not directly caused by China, but rather by the above

¹⁵ Emma V. Broomfield, “Perceptions of Danger: The China Threat Theory,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 12, no. 35 (May 2003): 265–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1067056022000054605>.

¹⁶ Khalid R. Al-Rodhan, “A CRITIQUE OF THE CHINA THREAT THEORY: A SYSTEMATIC ANALYSIS,” *Asian Perspective* 31, no. 3 (2007): 41–66, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42704598>; Weiqing Song, “Securitization of the ‘China Threat’ Discourse: A Poststructuralist Account,” *China Review* 15, no. 1 (2015): 145–69, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24291932>.

¹⁷ Broomfield, “Perceptions of Danger.”

¹⁸ On the history of China-Europe relations see: David Shambaugh, Eberhard Sandschneider, and Hong Zhou, *China-Europe Relations. Perceptions, Policies and Prospects*. (New York: Routledge, 2007); Jing Men, “EU-China Relations: From Engagement to Marriage?,” 7/2008, EU Diplomacy Papers (College of Europe. Department of EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies, 2008), http://aei.pitt.edu/9602/1/EDP_7_2008.Men.pdf.

discussed changing global geopolitical and geo-economic constellation (and by extension, the Sino-European relationship). Europe today is a continent of insecure political actors, which are at the same time distrustful, anxious and increasingly inward-looking; Europeans are increasingly reactive followers rather than pro-active shapers of global politics, and are shaping a “defensive” discourse centered on saving Europe or restoring Europe’s lost status (or in the national context, the lost national status and prosperity); and European divisions are ever more visible – its political and policy processes are marked by a conflict between national and European interests; conflict between the elites and the masses; and a general lack of optimism, enthusiasm and belief in their own institutions. At the same time, the European power elite is yet to develop a feasible strategy for its own way forward, which would also help it shape a global vision. In lieu of that, often times the response to the challenges (and perceived challenges) is framed based on the assumption of moral superiority, the exceptionalism of “European values” and Europe’s modern achievements. As one CESEE researcher has put it during a conversation: European power elites, even when it is obvious, will never doubt their own ways of doing things; their system is infallible – it cannot “not work” – if there are problems then they must be a result of external infiltration.

This is how the European position (or lack thereof) when it comes to its relationship with China. The new European approach on China revolves around the idea of Chinese infiltration and subversion, or as it is often called, “Chinese influence” in Europe.¹⁹ It also coincides with the development of similar debates in Australia, New Zealand and the US,²⁰ as well as discussion of the concept of “sharp power.”²¹ The central claim in the reports that deal with China’s influence in the EU is that “all areas of Europe’s interaction with China have strong political undertones,”²² i.e. all of China’s moves in its relationship with Europe have a particular manipulative agenda that needs to be countered. This thinking is founded on several central arguments:

1) ***China combines overt diplomatic with covert espionage activities*** (“influencing efforts disguised as soft power that hinge on manipulation and covert activity”²³); in the process all Chinese actors and individuals engaged in relations with Europe share the same objectives; and these objectives are assumed to be sinister in nature, and in the grey zone – even if they are legal, they may be immoral.

¹⁹ Philippe Le Corre and Alain Sepulchre, *China’s Offensive in Europe*, 1st Edition edition (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2016); Thorsten Benner et al., “Authoritarian Advance: Responding to China’s Growing Political Influence in Europe” (Global Public Policy Institute and the Mercator Institute for China Studies, 2018),

<http://www.gppi.net/publications/rising-powers/article/authoritarian-advance-responding-to-chinas-growing-political-influence-in-europe/>; François Godement and Abigail Vasselier, *China at the Gates: A New Power Audit of EU-China Relations* (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2017),

http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/china_eu_power_audit7242; Laura Daniels, “Macron Addressing China’s Sharp Power Efforts in Europe,” American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, April 24, 2018,

https://www.aicgs.org/2018/04/macron-addressing-chinas-sharp-power-efforts-in-europe/?utm_source=Silk+Road+headlines&utm_campaign=7aba7d69fc-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_05_02&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_70119be3b7-7aba7d69fc-79842929.

²⁰ Grieger Gisela, “China’s Foreign Influence Operations in Western Liberal Democracies: An Emerging Debate,” At a Glance (European Parliament Think Tank, 2018),

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2018/621875/EPRS_ATA\(2018\)621875_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2018/621875/EPRS_ATA(2018)621875_EN.pdf).

²¹ “What to Do about China’s ‘Sharp Power,’” *The Economist*, December 14, 2017,

<https://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21732524-china-manipulating-decision-makers-western-democracies-best-defence>.

²² Benner et al., “Authoritarian Advance,” 3.

²³ Daniels, “Macron Addressing China’s Sharp Power Efforts in Europe.”

2) Economics and security issues overlap, or rather *economic issues now resemble security issues* – in the first place, the “Made in China 2025” program is seen as an attempt to outpace Europe, and Chinese investments in corresponding sectors seen as a particular danger.²⁴ There is a new “arms race” with the stakes being 5g internet, robotics, artificial intelligence, etc.

3) China has a *“divide-and-conquer” strategy* of playing Europeans against each other, and pursuing particularly close relations with those who break EU unity; China creates and exploits intra-European divisions; regional formats such as 16+1, and the potential Nordic and Mediterranean groupings are particularly dangerous.

4) Some of the proposed transportation corridors and routes China has put forward through the BRI *challenge the current political and economic geography of Europe*, i.e. by acquiring particular ports and developing particular railway routes, new, Chinese-promoted hubs can overtake the already established ones.²⁵

5) *Cultural diplomacy, people-to-people exchanges and collaboration in research and education are areas of particular Chinese influence* in Europe; they compromise the European debates and civil society attitudes towards China, i.e. a number of European individuals and organizations become (willingly or not) Chinese informants and agents; sometimes this entails security breaches.²⁶

Having outlined the key elements of the new China Threat theory in Europe today, we now turn to the case of 16+1 and the reasons why European power elites see it as a threat.

16+1 as a Threat

The fear of China comes as a European response to the reversal of the dynamics of the Sino-European relationship. 16+1 has been a great example of that, as no one in Europe, including CESEE (or for that matter, among the informed public in China as well), only six years ago could even imagine that China’s relationship with CESEE and the mechanism 16+1, predominantly a Chinese creation, would become such an important development for Europe-China relations. Suddenly being in a position of the reactive side (in addition to all other structural factors), the EU and Western European countries have given in the temptation to object and take many Chinese ventures in Europe, including 16+1 as a threat. Below, I discuss four main manifestations of the China Threat theory in the context of the reception of 16+1: its rootedness in the “mirror of insecurities” inherent to EU-China relations; the role of economic interests; and the role of politicking.

16+1 and the “Mirror of Insecurities”

Historically, the major obstacle for greater commitment and improvement on Sino-European relations has been what I have elsewhere discussed as “mirroring insecurities:”

²⁴ Nils Zimmermann, “China Emerging as Germany’s Main Economic Rival,” *Deutsche Welle*, August 18, 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/china-emerging-as-germanys-main-economic-rival/a-40153468>.

²⁵ Georgi Gotev, “‘Chinese Balkan Corridor’ Pits EU North against South,” EURACTIV.com, May 31, 2017, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/transport/news/chinese-balkan-corridor-pits-eu-north-against-south/>.

²⁶ Benner et al., “Authoritarian Advance.”

one’s strengths and priorities mirror the other’s weak spots, and vice versa.²⁷ Let’s take the example on each other’s perception as normative actors (as demonstrated in Table 1). At the height of its power, the EU, driven by its self-perception as a global promoter of liberal democracy and normative as well as transformative power, has stood up for its particular vision of human and minority rights, thereby bringing up issues that are ultimately expose China’s vulnerabilities (e.g. Tibet). However, what for EU has been a commitment to its own values and enacting of its own foreign policy priorities, for China has often been an interference in its sovereignty, thereby leading to frictions and preventing the deepening of cooperation. Today, the dynamics is different – at least in terms of the role of EU as a mirror of China’s insecurities. The EU has no capacity to maintain significant pressure on China on normative issues,²⁸ while China has managed to advance further on regardless of EU’s pressures (for example, the EU has upheld the arms embargo of China, but China has nevertheless managed to develop advanced military technology, rendering the embargo obsolete). More even so, China’s economic might and the potential for offering an alternative model of development, tackles some of the core European insecurities: “cash-strapped deal-seeking”²⁹ and the quest for new, non-Western ideas, thereby flipping the mirror of insecurities (i.e. it is now China that mirrors EU’s insecurities);³⁰ and more even so, turning into a “magnifying mirror” – when exposed, the insecurities become even worse.³¹

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>China’s attitude</i>	<i>EU’s attitude</i>
<i>Towards EU as a normative actor</i>	EU interferes in Chinese domestic affairs and negatively affects China’s image abroad	EU needs to promote/protect EU’s core values
<i>Towards China as a normative actor</i>	China needs to maintain its sovereignty, stability as well a favourable image abroad	China as a one-party state lacks proper institutions that protect/promote EU’s core values

Table 1. Normative “mirror of insecurities”³²

16+1 is perhaps the best illustration of this (magnifying) mirror of insecurities in both normative and strategic sense: China sees 16+1 as a highlight of its relationship with Europe (a strength), and the CESEE countries as partners with which it has a particular momentum

²⁷ Anastas Vangeli, “Chapter One: On the Obstacles to Greater Commitment in Sino-European Relations: A European View,” in *China and Europe in 21st Century Global Politics: Partnership, Competition or Co-Evolution?*, ed. Frauke Austermann, Anastas Vangeli, and Xiaoguang Wang (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 20–42.

²⁸ Wenwen Shen, “The Diffusion of EU Norms to China: The Case of Tibet,” in *Importing EU Norms*, United Nations University Series on Regionalism (Springer, Cham, 2015), 231–46, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-13740-7_14.

²⁹ François Godement, Jonas Parello-Plesner, and Alice Richard, “The Scramble for Europe,” Policy Brief (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, July 2011), http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR37_Scramble_For_Europe_AW_v4.pdf.

³⁰ Anastas Vangeli, “Global China and Symbolic Power: The Case of 16+1 Cooperation,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 27 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1458056>.

³¹ I am thankful to professor Shen Wei for this observation.

³² Vangeli, “Chapter One: On the Obstacles to Greater Commitment in Sino-European Relations: A European View.”

for its creative foreign policy (i.e. they are committed to the Belt&Road), while Europe sees the CESEE region as a soft underbelly (essentially, a weakness), and by extension, the 16+1 as a maneuver exploiting such weakness.

In the eyes of the European power elite, both “the sixteen” and “the one” are a source of concern. As a project that is a product of CCP’s strategic culture and foreign policy practice, 16+1 inevitably bears the hallmarks of a Chinese-led venture: it is Sino-centric (as opposed to Euro-centrism), based on socialization and cultural relationships (rather than on clear-cut rules and technocracy), it is developed incrementally and inductively (rather than deductively), it is fuzzy, open-ended and experimental in nature (rather than having a solidified structure), and most importantly, rests on the idea of state-led economics (as opposed to Western-style neoliberalism). Hence, Westerners are poised to intuitively find 16+1 at least awkward, if not a rather unpleasant idea. After all, Europeans take pride in the way they do things, and find other approaches to be inadequate, and even suspicious.

Yet, the real source of concern in 16+1 is not the nature of the project, but rather the sixteen European countries involved in it. The EU itself has invested significant amount of resources in the “Europeanization” of CESEE countries in the aftermath of the systemic changes following 1989; as such the region has mattered greatly as a showcase of the capacity of the EU – itself a representative case of the liberal governance institutions – with the mission to (re)shape societies, economies and polities. However, this process has not been without shortcomings long before China arrived to the region. The CESEE countries – regardless of past successes – have continuously lagged behind Western Europe in terms of their level of wealth, development, connectivity and their status on the global stage; but most importantly they are still perceived (and often they have internalized the perception) as a European periphery. As a consequence, they have started developing discourses that challenge the EU mainstream, and clashed with Brussels on key issues, such as migration. Today, the European power elite considers many of the CESEE countries as politically problematic (primarily Hungary and Poland, but also the Czech Republic), and their leaders “bad guys” who harm not only European unity, but also core European values.

Through 16+1, China essentially *sympathizes* with CESEE as a subaltern region in Europe. It starts from the premise of asymmetry in Europe, arguing that CESEE needs more development, connectivity and bigger role in global politics, while defending the right of CESEE governments to pursue their idiosyncratic mode of development. However, by openly addressing such issues, China exposes the shortcomings (and potentially the limits) of the European project itself – a reality that is often concealed under the discourse of “One Europe.” Yet, the discourse on 16+1 in CESEE, or at least among CESEE ruling elites, is predominantly positive. In fact, many of the CESEE leaders not only see China as a partner, but also as an inspiration.³³ The core issue of why 16+1 is seen as a threat, thus, is not that China is really “dividing” Europe as many say; but rather that it is exposing Europe’s existing divisions, and that China’s discourse resonates with CESEE elites. As I have argued elsewhere:

³³ Vangeli, “Global China and Symbolic Power: The Case of 16+1 Cooperation.”

“CESEE voices have referred to the Chinese experience as a contrast to their own experience of the post-socialist transition (‘look at where we were then, look at where are now’). In the Balkans, even officials argue that China is now doing some of the unfinished work of the EU in terms of developing infrastructure and stimulating economic development.³⁴ All in all, while China does not aim nor has the capacity to become a competitor, let alone to replace the EU as a main economic actor in CESEE, it becomes an inspiration for a discourse that provides a reality check on the effects of EU policies in CESEE.”

Equally, if not more significant is the imagination of CESEE in the Western European minds. This touches upon Europe’s own legacy of divisions, which have greatly shaped the way Europeans see themselves and the world.³⁵ These mental maps and the principle of division still shape much of the public debates in Europe, paradoxically preventing Europeans from achieving the reality of “One Europe” themselves. In this discourse, there is also a particular emphasis on external actors who have a divisive agenda – during the Cold War, it was the Soviet Union; at the turn of the centuries, the United States was seen as dividing the continent by enlisting “New Europe” in its interventions in the Middle East while Western Europeans opposed it;³⁶ today, it is Putin’s Russia, and increasingly China that are seen as subverting European unity. China is particular said to be restoring the Berlin Wall, and rebuilding the Eastern Bloc – meaning that this is the framework in which 16+1 can be discussed.

This does not only have a symbolic dimension. Going back to the political developments in which some of the CESEE governments have confronted Brussels, 16+1 can easily become portrayed as a convention of China and some of EU’s “bad guys.” In practice, the EU tries to exercise more pressure on some of the CESEE countries (be it due to migration disagreements, rule of law, or other reasons), but China may be complicating the situation. The normative and transformative components of EU’s power rely on instruments of soft coercion and conditionality (in practice, “sticks and carrots”). In the process of enlargement, the EU has coupled financial assistance and other economic instruments with the obligations to adhere to normative criteria and implement a number of reforms. Even when governments were not convinced or ideologically supportive of the EU, they followed the directions by Brussels driven by the lucrative promise. With the emergence of alternative providers of funding, however, there is a fear that EU will lose much of its leverage in a region that seems to be getting outside of its control.³⁷ While today this is still only a distant possibility (given the

³⁴ Peter Foster, “EU Failure in Balkans ‘a Call to China and Russia’ Says Macedonia President,” *The Telegraph*, November 4, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/11/04/eu-failure-balkans-call-china-russia-says-macedonia-president/>.

³⁵ The legacy of divisions in Europe date back to the division of the Roman Empire (3rd century AD) and the split in the Christian church; in the modern day, divisions occurred along the lines of the imperial borders (with the Ottoman and Russian Empires and their territories being considered particularly non-European). In the 20th century, the ideological division between the capitalist West and the communist East has shaped politics well beyond the nominal fall of the Iron Curtain, as the whole process of transition in CESEE was based on the premise of the “Easternness” (as synonymous with backwardness) of the region.

³⁶ Mark Baker, “U.S.: Rumsfeld’s ‘Old’ And ‘New’ Europe Touches On Uneasy Divide,” RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, January 24, 2003, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1102012.html>.

³⁷ An illustrative example of EU’s stance towards China in times of fear of losing control is the one of Greece, where EU diplomats have used their authority to prevent the deepening of Sino-Greek ties in order not to lessen the pressure exerted on the Greek government during the process of “negotiation.” See Yanis Varoufakis, “On China as a Patient Investor,” *Yanis*

fact that China in absolute terms has only a miniscule role in CESEE compared to the West), potential scenarios for the future arouse the fears of the European power elites. Soon, the EU will reduce the funding to CESEE for a variety of reasons (i.e. reductions of the EU budget; changing the criteria of eligibility for structural funds after many of the CESEE are considered to have already caught up; and coupling the funding with political criteria which some CESEE countries will not meet); this may significantly change the constellation in the region and the balance of power – thereby allowing China much more leverage than initially thought.

16+1 and Economic Interests

For all the political concerns, the roots of the new China Threat theory are at least as equally to be found in the shift of economic fortunes and the uncomfortable feelings it breeds in Europe. The sentiment of dissatisfaction and disappointment has helped in the (re)birth of economic nationalism throughout the continent. Primarily, Europeans turn to each other and blame each other (along the axes East-West and South-North) for the situation in which the continent is facing bleak prospects for recovery and restorations of high levels of growth. However, they also turn to other actors – including China. While Europeans on one hand see China's economic rise as a miraculous one, and while they have greatly benefited for it – they also increasingly see it as having come at the expense of the developed Western economies. Having contributed to China's rise themselves, they now see a potential boomerang effect. Thus, regardless of whether there are grounds for that, one of the hallmarks of the skepticism towards China exhibited by Europeans is the feeling of being involved in an unfair economic game.

Historically, in response to the perception of unfair play, Europeans have often raised issues in the WTO when it comes to China's (perceived) unfair trade practices; they have also been insisting on the principle of reciprocity in terms of market access, but also in achieving a more balanced trade. Yet, aside from these legalistic practices, today the European power elite are mobilizing other instruments to confront China. One particular novel development in the last few years, however, has been the introduction of the investment screening mechanism, as a response to the new reality in which China is a net investor in Europe. The reason, however, for introducing such measures lies in the fear that China is gaining a technological edge over the advanced European economies. This goes back to the point that the "Made in China 2025" program is seen as a major threat, which makes the interest of Chinese companies in acquiring advanced technology in Europe seem as acts of economic warfare, or at least arms race. Importantly, this is one of the issues where Europeans are divided, as not all governments share the political will to introduce an investment screening mechanisms – many actually have an interest in unimpeded investment relationship with China. However, those who have the power to shape EU's policies have put a lot of effort in realizing such mechanism.

By giving in the fears of rising China, the European power elite seem to be departing its liberalist positions. The new policies are aimed at raising the barriers and protecting the

Varoufakis (blog), October 26, 2017, <https://www.yanisvaroufakis.eu/2017/10/27/on-china-as-a-patient-investor-project-syndicate-video/>.

European strategic sectors, which is a rather mercantilist turn. This is why for instance, Europeans meet all Chinese initiatives with skepticism. The 16+1 mechanism is founded on the premise of streamlining China's and CESEE policies and facilitating their economic relations; in practice, it would imply lower barriers for China in Europe (and lower barriers for CESEE in China). At the moment, such ideas run counter to the mainstream and are doomed to be received negatively.

This is of course linked not only to Europe-China relations, but also to intra-European constellations as well – not only to perceptions, but also actual economic power relations. Today, Western Europeans own a number of strategic assets in CESEE countries that were privatized during the transition from socialist to free market economy. Western Europeans have also made the most significant investments in CESEE, moving a number of production capacities across the border. With the inclusion of CESEE in the common market, Western Europeans have also developed significant trade relations, and trade surplus, with CESEE. Moreover, by integrating in the EU, CESEE has become increasingly reliant on EU funding (which on the other hand is predominantly provided by Western Europeans), which however further solidified its position as a periphery, and moreover, solidified the (self)perception of Western Europe as an economic patron of CESEE. As Piketty reminds us, even though the region had a lot of inflows, it has faced even higher outflows of capital:

“Between 2010 and 2016, the annual outflow of profits and incomes from property (net of the corresponding inflows) thus represented on average 4.7% of the gross domestic product in Poland, 7.2% in Hungary, 7.6% in the Czech Republic and 4.2% in Slovakia, reducing commensurately the national income of these countries. By comparison, over the same period, the annual net transfers from the European Union, that is, the difference between the totality of expenditure received and the contributions paid to the EU budget, were appreciably lower: 2.7% of the GDP in Poland, 4.0% in Hungary, 1.9% in the Czech Republic and 2.2% in Slovakia (as a reminder, France, Germany and the United Kingdom are net contributors to the EU budget of an amount equivalent to 0.3% – 0.4% of their GDP.”³⁸

In the popular discourse in Western Europe CESEE is referred to as an economic “backyard” – which in turn makes China an economic trespasser. In this sense, Chinese companies are competitors to European ones, but at the same time, they are seeing as potentially “intercepting” the supply chains of advanced European economies,³⁹ which is perceived as a threat inasmuch it is related to the “Made in China 2025” program. In addition to trade and investment issues, 16+1 is problematic because of its focus on transportation and infrastructure. Even though CESEE really lacks connectivity, this is seen as competing with the existing architecture – successful New Silk Road routes are feared to take away business from established logistics hubs in the North and the West. In that sense, one can argue that many of the manifestations of the new China Threat theory in Europe with regards to 16+1 are in fact rooted in a palpable – or at least perceived – economic competition.

³⁸ Thomas Piketty, “2018, the year of Europe,” *Le Monde*, January 16, 2018, <http://piketty.blog.lemonde.fr/2018/01/16/2018-the-year-of-europe/>.

³⁹ Jacopo Maria Pepe, “Continental Drift. Germany and China's Inroads in the ‘German Central Eastern European Manufacturing Core:’ Geopolitical Chances and Risks for Europe” (ISA International Conference, Hong Kong, 2017), <http://web.isanet.org/Web/Conferences/HKU2017-s/Archive/397b4475-f2b4-4731-bccc-c5aa13241a44.pdf>.

16+1, Politicking and Lack of Knowledge

There is an important distinction to be made between the actual fear of China, and its representation in the public debates in Europe. From a pragmatic political perspective, it is conceivable that Western Europeans have the interest to exaggerate their concerns of 16+1 in the context of the ongoing frictions between China and the West. Any politically controversial issue can serve as a valuable negotiation chip in the hands of experienced deal-makers. China has managed to create a hallmark platform with great symbolic meaning for its foreign policy out of thin air, creating a competition of narratives: whoever manages to promote their framework better, can use it to their advantage.

The assumption among the European power elite is that 16+1 matters to China, and that China is ready to go at great lengths to save the project, and to save its face. As I have argued elsewhere:

“For many Europeans [...] 16+1 provides a strategic opportunity to turn the tables by objecting to it, and keep China in check, and win concessions from China – regarding 16+1, but also outside it – in return for their approval of 16+1. They can directly or indirectly use 16+1 to get certain tradeoffs from China – be it on normative issues, or issues of economic interest. They can also use 16+1 as a pretext in other issues when it comes to the relations with China – ranging from trade disputes, to cooperation in global issues and security affairs. As such, framing 16+1 as a contentious issue gives the EU additional fuel in the perpetual tug-of-war with China over a number of challenges. At the bottom of such logic lies the fact that for China, having a functioning relationship with the European power elite is far more important in economic and political terms than advancing 16+1 by any means, and this perhaps creates an opening for the Europeans to be more assertive on 16+1.”⁴⁰

Yet, the interest in escalating tensions with China, or at least for sharpening the rhetoric on China, does not really have to do with China itself. For one, tough talk on China can bring points in political debates at home. European politicians can mobilize their constituency at times of election by using China as a rhetorical point. The most illustrative example is one of the German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel who deployed the “One Europe” narrative during the electoral campaign for the German Federal Elections 2017.⁴¹ While we can never be sure of his motivations, it is plausible to assume that the particular statement has been at least partially driven by the particular situation and domestic political interests. Similar dilemmas are to be considered when analyzing other elements of the public debates, i.e. what are the circumstances and drivers for actors such as think tanks, researchers, media and other actors to push a particular narrative on 16+1?

Ultimately, however, politicking can have diverse outcomes. As the 16+1 platform has advanced, it has become susceptible to politicization. One of them is the possibility for all the pressure against 16+1 to backfire; in fact, European power elites may have contributed to

⁴⁰ Anastas Vangeli, “Why Are European Power Elites so Critical of 16+1?” (4th China-CEEC High Level Think Tanks Symposium, Beijing, 2018).

⁴¹ Lucrezia Poggetti, “One China – One Europe? German Foreign Minister’s Remarks Irk Beijing,” *The Diplomat*, September 9, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/09/one-china-one-europe-german-foreign-ministers-remarks-irk-beijing/>.

many of their pessimistic scenarios becoming self-fulfilling prophecies. Only six years ago, the relations between China and CESEE were non-existent, and thereby a non-subject in China-EU affairs. 16+1 would not have managed to bring them to the fore without the reactions, and the ultimately, the politicking, by other Europeans. Perhaps, the scolding of CESEE countries, and cutting their funding may as well push them closer to China in the future.

This process then may not have been necessarily driven by rational policymaking in Europe. In analyzing foreign policy behavior, we must always leave space for unflattering assumptions: such as that policymakers often times do not fully grasp the sensitivities of what they are dealing with due to a variety of reasons; or simply, when it comes to issues of interaction, that there is a gap in understanding. As argued elsewhere:

“The discourse on China in Europe is [...] often plagued by insufficient internal communication on China. Different actors [...] have often different takes on China in different policy fields. This is especially reflected and even amplified in 16+1, given that here China traverses new policy fields, thereby getting into the radar on new actors that never had to deal with it before in such capacity. Prior to 16+1, China was important for the EU in the fields of global relations, trade and investment, and climate change. With 16+1 [...] China is now also entering the field of transportation and infrastructure [...] as well as neighborhood and enlargement.”⁴²

The assumption is that many of these actors did not have the opportunity to talk to each other before the arrival of China in CESEE, if at all. To add in the mix the national governments of member states and candidate countries and their lack of coordination on China, one can easily conclude that a lot of the politicization of 16+1 occurs in a context of cacophony of attitudes. If not the direct cause of the politicization of China and the promotion of the threat theory, this fragmentation of the debate certainly amplifies it. At the same time, however, the lack of knowledge is not exclusive to Europe. One can also argue that Chinese elites may have not fully comprehended the scope of what they were getting itself into as well. After all, China has had limited knowledge and experience of CESEE, and embarked on an experimental, trial-and-learning approach, with public diplomacy resembling the core of 16+1 cooperation. While such approach makes sense in China, it became controversial in Europe. There is a good chance that this was not exactly what Chinese policymakers desired or planned for by establishing 16+1, even though they have so far managed the situation relatively successfully.

Conclusion

As a result of the changing global circumstances, Europeans are ever more anxious and uncertain about the meaning and consequences of China's rise. This has facilitated the (re)emergence of the China Threat theory as one of the mainstream approaches in dealing with China. A hallmark of this thinking is that China has become a malicious actor inside Europe. The 16+1 mechanism, in that sense, has served as one of the examples to back the

⁴² Vangeli, “Why Are European Power Elites so Critical of 16+1?”

China Threat theory, but also has been one of the “fronts” in which Europeans have confronted China.

What are the implications of this new reality for the advancement of Sino-European relations, and in particular China-CESEE cooperation? For one, there is a clear divergence in perceptions. What is perceived as a positive and successful development by China (and in general the CESEE) – such as the advancement of 16+1 – is perceived as an alien, threatening development by a number of actors in Western Europe, and in particular, among the European power elites. In the best case scenario, even if they do not work towards a failure of 16+1, they clearly – for now – cannot see the merit, let alone the benefits of China-CESEE cooperation. Paradoxically, in the case of 16+1 flourishing and meeting the expectations of both China and the CESEE governments for more substantial relations, this will be considered a particularly negative development by other actors in Europe.

If China and CESEE want to further deepen and broaden their cooperation, and focus on increasing the number and significance of outcomes, the China Threat theory is a particular obstacle to be overcome. The obvious solution is getting Western Europeans more involved and pursuing joint projects so as to create more stakeholders in the success of 16+1, while helping bring together the different visions for CESEE. At the same time this is easy to say and extremely difficult to do, and there is no guarantee that even a greater involvement in 16+1 will help taming the threat narrative. The major obstacle for further advancement is that 16+1 is inseparable from the broader context of China-Europe relations, the intra-European relations, and the critical juncture of time in which it develops.

How can China adjust its behavior? To begin with, by starting from the new reality of Europe-China relations: China does in fact exert certain influence in Europe; the mere existence of the debate over its impact is already a proof that China, with its discursive, and only afterwards material presence, already drives changes in Europe, or rather, its presence helps facilitate ongoing changes, with 16+1 being one of the tools for that. China, thus, as it advances 16+1, will need to get used to this, recognize its potential to steer debates (but also inspire material changes), and develop a particular sensitivity. While often times its influence in fact may not be intentional, China will have to face and manage the consequences either way.

The largest potential for helping produce a more cooperative mainstream discourse in Europe, however, lies in the CESEE countries themselves, and their ability to re-conceptualize their agency in international affairs. A pro-active diplomacy in which they will also voice their vision is prerequisite. After all, even though the CESEE countries have provided meaningful feedback, 16+1 remains a primarily China-led undertaking. Not only should CESEE countries be more pro-active in 16+1, but also in terms of creating a new vision for CESEE, in which the European integration of the region, and the increased cooperation with China will be considered as complementary processes. After all, the ultimate weakness of the China Threat theory with regards to 16+1 is that it has seen CESEE only as a venue, or as a subordinate group of actors – and the effects have been analyzed primarily to the prism of interests of the West (with the exception of some CESEE actors who have developed their own China Threat theory themselves). The CESEE governments are the ones

to tell their own story. As CESEE – and in particular, the poorer countries in the region, such as the Balkan ones – have yet to catch up with the EU average, the key question is not whether they need 16+1, but rather, whether they could do it without working together with China? In the process, they have a strong argument: even today, the vast majority of the China-Europe cooperation, and in particular, the economic cooperation, happens between Western Europe and China. Western Europeans themselves have played a role in China's reform and opening up, and greatly benefited from it. If China is the new center of the global economy, than catching up with Western Europe in terms of economic development, would also mean catching up in cooperation with China.

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