



# Weekly Briefing

**Macedonia external relations briefing:**  
**Relations Between Macedonia, Greece and China After the Prespa**  
**Agreement**  
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# **Relations Between Macedonia, Greece and China After the Prespa Agreement**

## **Introduction**

*The Prespa Agreement by which the former Republic of Macedonia obliged to change its constitutional name to the Republic of North Macedonia (hereinafter Macedonia) had brought the infamous Macedonian-Greek naming dispute to an end, at least for the time being. The political will to come to an agreement was not (only) a result of the cosmopolitan outlook of the elites in Skopje and Athens, but rather, a product of careful pragmatic calculus about the respective countries' international position. For Macedonia, a solution of the name dispute is expected to unlock and accelerate its accession to NATO, and facilitate its accession to the EU. For Greece, aside from opening new opportunities to re-emerge as a constructive stakeholder in the region of the Balkans, it was also an option to portray itself as a constructive actor in the Euro-Atlantic community. The Agreement itself was thus considered to be of utmost importance to the EU, NATO, and the governments of Western European countries and the US; and the way in which Macedonia (and Greece) aligned their strategic interests with the West. However, by changing the dynamics of the region and adjusting the positions of Greece and Macedonia, the Prespa Agreement has also potential to affect the two countries' relations with other, non-Western actors as well. China, as an emerging stakeholder in the region is one of the actors whose agenda is impacted in particular by the solution of the infamous name dispute. This paper therefore discusses the Macedonia-China bilateral relations, and the Macedonia-Greece-China triangular relations in the aftermath of the Prespa Agreement. The first section provides the background and the relations until the Prespa Agreement was reached, whereas the second part focuses on the analysis of what is to be expected in the future.*

## **Background**

China was never an actor in the long-standing name dispute between Greece and Macedonia, but nevertheless its stance towards the naming practices and symbolic politics mattered, not the least because of its status as a permanent member of the Security Council of the United Nations (UN). China's attitude in the period 1991-2019 can be considered as being friendly both towards the positions of Skopje and Athens, while sticking to the principles of

non-interference, leaving the two sides to sort their own differences on their own. China had recognized the Republic of Macedonia under its constitutional name from the onset of their bilateral relations in 1993, and had never used the references “former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia” or the acronym FYROM. China was also sympathetic towards ethnic Macedonian claims of ancient nationhood, even long before the dispute with Greece started. For instance, when Hua Guofeng visited Skopje in 1978, he addressed the Macedonian people as heirs of ancient Macedonia, and expressed admiration for their historical heritage. In the 1991-2019 period, ancient Macedonian symbols and narratives were featured in some of the public diplomatic events between the two countries (especially during the period when the Macedonian government pursued the policy of antiquization). Macedonian political actors who have favored the idea that Macedonia should seek the international recognition of its constitutional name, have frequently cited the position of China, who along with the United States and Russia were three out of the five UN Security Council permanent members that had recognized Macedonia as such. China, thus was considered a potential ally in the struggle for the international recognition of the country's constitutional name; and it was this characteristic that really defined Macedonian-China relations in the eyes of many Macedonian political actors (especially in the days before China became a globally pro-active economic actor).

At the same time, China had embraced Greece's identity as an ancient civilization (that in the Greek official version, also includes the ancient Macedonian past). Cultural politics based on the narratives of ancient origins and continuity was a particularly significant instrument in the construction and fortification contemporary Greco-Chinese relations in the post-crisis era. Greece was one of the nine countries invited to be the co-founders of the Forum of Ancient Civilizations alongside China. The cultural politics based on the narratives of the ancient past were also helpful in the construction of people-to-people relations.

The positive attitude of Beijing towards both the position of Skopje and the one of Athens helped China build up the respective relationships with the two countries. Yet, while contributing to the building of two parallel harmonious relationships, accepting both positions, and in particular, accepting the Macedonian position was a potential source of friction in multilateral settings. This reality was empowering for Macedonia, and frustrating for Greece. This was not a problem in the period before 2010, when China was still not a pro-active actor in Southeast Europe, and did not convene multilateral events, becoming responsible for securing a cooperative atmosphere among the participant countries. However, once China established the 16+1 platform, and later the Belt&Road Initiative, there were a number of occasions where Macedonian and Greek representatives would have to sit down in the same

room, in a China-led context. Over time, these meetings became more visible, and considered high-profile. Since China recognized Macedonia under its constitutional name, the country was featured as “Republic of Macedonia” in the China-led endeavors. As a general practice, Greek representatives had often objected to the use of the name “Republic of Macedonia,” and sometimes outright rejected to take part in events where the name “Macedonia” was being used. While there have been no official instances of Greek diplomats boycotting any China-led event due to the name issue, there have been various rumors that this was something that bothered them. At the same time, there has been no evidence of Macedonian actors taking advantage of the Chinese venues to advance their quest for the recognition of the (former) constitutional name.

In practice, China has been an actor favoring a position of non-interference and Chinese diplomats never openly got involved in any discussion, and let alone policy process on the Macedonian name issue. They have stayed on the sidelines and observed the developments, adapting to the reality on the ground. Yet, the more have China-led endeavors involving both Macedonia and Greece have advanced, the higher it has been in China's to see the issue solved. Macedonia, and in particular Greece, over time became partners of China in the BRI (of course, they have not been equally interested in the BRI - while both the governments in Skopje and Athens have signed MoUs, Greece developed much deeper relationship with China). They are also both parts of the “China-Europe Land-Sea Express” (CELSE) corridor linking Budapest and Athens, a project that is considered to be one of the landmarks of the BRI in Europe. The CELSE aimed to promote cross-border cooperation without touching upon the name issue, which has so far had very little success (compared to the traditional high-level and public diplomacy that took place in 2018 and 2019).

Nevertheless, while not openly addressing the name issue, some sources have cited growing Chinese interest and action behind the scenes towards reaching an agreement in 2018 and 2019. At the same time, once the Prespa Agreement was reached, China did not object to it (as for example Russia did; and contrary to some reports that argued that China will follow suite) and eventually embraced the new name of “North Macedonia.” This was considered as a positive development by both the governments in Skopje and Athens, especially since Beijing's move demonstrated complementarity between the Chinese and the Western interests in the region. For some critical voices, however, the fact that China now welcomed and was ready to take advantage of the new reality in the post-Prespa context was another sign that China has benefited from Western-led efforts in the region, while staying on the sidelines.

## **Prospects**

One of the first direct implications of the Prespa Agreement on the Macedonia-Greece-China triangle was the open desire of Greece to join the 16+1 format. Allegedly, Greece had been interested in joining 16+1 for a long time, but the fact that Macedonia was represented in the format as “Republic of Macedonia” was considered a major obstacle for Athens. With the name issue solved (at least for the time being), Greek scholars and experts started openly talking about the enlargement of the platform and its rebranding as 17+1. Voices in Greece also started talking about growing cooperation between Athens and Skopje on the Belt&Road. This was admittedly a perspective primarily developed in Greece; the debates on cooperation with China in Macedonia have so far been limited. Nevertheless, with the Greek impulse, the relations with China and in particular the membership in 16+1/17+1 and BRI get a new meaning in Macedonia, as now they are not only about cooperation with China, but also advancing regional cooperation, and in particular following up on the good momentum in the relations with Greece.

Of course, there are a number of others indirect implications for the Macedonian-Chinese relationship stemming from the Prespa Agreement. In practice, Macedonian policymakers now have finally the time and resources to pursue anything else than solving the name issue. As the name issue has dominated the political and policy agenda in Macedonia (in terms of both domestic and external affairs) for almost a year and a half, many other issues – including the relationship with China – had been put on hold. As policymaking returns to normal, it is to be expected that Macedonian policymakers will re-open some of those issues.

On the long term, the Prespa Agreement for one, means facilitation for Macedonia's EU accession. This process, if successful will substantially change Macedonia as an actor in the international arena (for that matter, a failure will also change it, but that is a topic for another paper). The more it becomes integrated with the EU, the more Macedonia will adjust its policy towards China. In principle, China has stated that it supports Macedonia's accession, and in fact there are a lot of grounds to assume that with its membership in the EU, Macedonia can have an even more fruitful relationship with China; and in the recent past, Macedonian Prime Minister Zaev has often claimed that the European integration of the country and the cooperation with China are complementary developments. Yet, when discussing the “Europeanization” of Macedonia, one must not disregard the changing environment in the EU and the changing discourse on relations with China. Already, EU officials as well as officials from Western European governments have expressed critical attitudes towards growing China-Balkans relations, which would surely further impact the attitude of Macedonian policymakers towards China. Similar changes would stem from the NATO-accession of the country, which

is perhaps the most direct outcome of the Prespa Agreement. Macedonia may join NATO as early as the end of 2019 or during 2020. Macedonia has already had rather deep and developed relations with the US, but in the process of NATO accession, the ties with the US are likely to become ever deeper and lead to closer coordination on global political issues, including relations with third countries that the US considers rivals, such as China. Therefore, it is likely that post-Prespa Macedonia will be even more cautious about its relationship with China that will be shaped by conducive national and regional context, and a constraining European and global context.