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The new Sino-Albanian relations in the Post-pandemic era

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Vincenzo Maria Di Mino, Marco Siragusa¹

Abstract

The recent cataclysms, provoked by the Russia-Ukraine war, have made it necessary to rethink new forms of alliances and cooperation, beyond the binary logic of bloc division.

In this context, it is interesting to analyze the cooperation spaces that open up in the Balkans between China and countries such as Albania. In this country, in the wake of the large investments linked to the European hubs of the BRI, trade exchanges between the two countries have multiplied. The new forms of cooperation are mainly based on elements such as commercial cooperation, linked to the opening of new market segments between the two countries, energy cooperation, in the context of the recent European crisis and cultural cooperation, linked to openness and exchange between different cultures and traditions, such as to also strengthen the tourism sector and, in a specular way, the logistic infrastructures for mobility and urban infrastructures for the reception and attractiveness of Albanian metropolises and cultural spaces. The analysis of the new Sino-Albanian relationship is of particular importance especially in light of the continuing close relations of Tirana with the United States, a competitor of Beijing, NATO, and the European Union, which only a few months ago started free at the start of negotiations for the accession of the Balkan country to the EU. Albania therefore runs the risk of becoming a meeting and confrontation ground between US-led Western hegemony and Beijing's plans for economic and diplomatic expansion in Europe.

Keywords: *Albania, China, European Union, USA, NATO*

Introduction

The war being fought inside Europe today is the central element in rethinking international dynamics, especially regarding concrete diplomatic activities aimed at conflict resolution. The Russian-Ukrainian war, with its brutalities and humanitarian costs for civilian

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populations, has brought to the boil the different unresolved knots of international politics of the last three decades by centralizing, in a 'central' geographic space such as Europe, the load of violence resulting from the failed promises of neoliberal globalization and the fierce revanchism of those who want to build their own specular global order. In this sense, if war is always the telltale sign of the failure of diplomatic policies, today's conflict marks the end of some Western illusions and represents an insuperable stumbling block for the ambitions of a political actor that has missed its starring role to the end, namely the European Union. In recent years, the EU has underestimated the building of alternative projects and alliances to liberal ones with specific aims at an antagonistic power role, as in the Russian case, or with a project of global connectedness to be achieved through infrastructure investment and economic cooperation, as in the Chinese case. Let us make one last general observation about this context: globalization under the NATO umbrella has created pockets of resentment in those countries with a global power history and aspirations.

Let us now inspect the effects of the crisis. With the concept of a 'combined system of crises' we intend to focus on the close connection between the different phenomena of criticality that characterize the global scenario. This situation can be defined through the Gramscian concept of the 'interregnum,' that is, by the set of crises that affect the system as a whole without bringing to complete the transition to a new model. It is, in essence, the crisis of legitimacy of the old actors and competitors in global governance and the lack of recognition of the new emerging forces that want to assert themselves in that same scenario. It is precisely on this point that the "Albanian case" appears emblematic. Albania is a country that after the long communist period, inaugurated in 1948 and concluded with the first multi-party elections in 1991, has openly and vehemently declared itself Atlantism. A path that began as early as 1992 with membership in the North Atlantic Cooperation Council and concluded in 2009 with full membership in NATO. Particularly complicated, however, is the relationship with the European Union. Also initiated in the end's aftermath of communism, the country received the green light for accession negotiations only in July 2022, eight years after obtaining "candidate country" status and a full 13 years after applying for membership. Over the past decade, however, after a long period of coolness in diplomatic and economic relations, Tirana has opened the door to broader cooperation with China. The Balkan country is part of two Chinese initiatives: one global, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the other regional with Central and Eastern Europe, the 17+1 Initiative (now actually 14+1, after the exit of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia between 2021 and 2022).

Albanian participation in these international formats has certainly fostered greater cooperation in the economic field and a re-established political relationship between Beijing and Tirana. A change of direction from the recent past that has opened up new challenges for Albania but, to date, has not dented the country's Euro-Atlantic perspective and membership in the slightest.

Sino-Albanian relations during the Cold War

The victorious Albanian partisan resistance against the Nazi-fascist occupier during World War II ended with the final liberation of the country on November 28, 1944. The Secretary of the Party of Labor of Albania Enver Hoxha was appointed to head the provisional government and held power for a full forty years until his death in 1985. In his long career as the country's undisputed leader, Hoxha changed his point of reference within the communist bloc several times. After trying unsuccessfully to make Albania the seventh Yugoslav republic, with Yugoslavia's exclusion from the Cominform in 1948 the country entered the Soviet orbit. Hoxha immediately proved to be the most loyal ally of Stalin and his foreign policy. In the 1960s, however, after the death of the Soviet leader, subsequent destalinization and deepening division with China, Tirana came into conflict with the Kremlin by turning its attentions to the People's Republic of China led by Mao Zedong. In return for support, Beijing supported Albania economically and militarily, even sending thousands of advisers to the country. Chinese support, in terms of investment and aid, represented the most important economic resource for the Balkan country for almost two decades. Sino-Albanian cooperation focused mainly on the defense sector, with the supply of large quantities of weapons and military equipment, and on trade in goods, leaving out almost entirely investments useful for the country's infrastructural modernization. Politically, the Party of Labor of Albania openly supported Mao's Cultural Revolution helping to strengthen the friendship between the two countries. A friendship that achieved an important success in 1971 at the United Nations. At that historical stage, China was still ousted from the United Nations Assembly. Its seat was in fact occupied by Taiwan under the name Republic of China, which claimed to be the only legitimate government. On July 15, 1971, Albania, along with 17 other U.N. member states, requested that the topic of "Restoration of the legitimate rights of the People's Republic of China within the U.N." be included on the agenda, with which they called for the replacement of Taiwan's seat. For their part, the United States protested for a recognition of the "two Chinas."

On October 25, 1971, Resolution 2758 proposed by Albania was finally passed, recognizing the People's Republic of China as "the sole legitimate representative of China" and removing "representatives of Chiang Kai-shek" (Republic of China) from the United Nations.

Despite the political effort to achieve this important result, the Sino-Albanian alliance was soon challenged by the new course taken by the Chinese Communist Party in relations with the United States. A sudden opening that even led to a visit by U.S. President Richard Nixon to China in 1972. An event completely silenced by the Albanian media, in line with the country's almost total isolation with the rest of the world. Exactly as had already happened with the Soviet Union after the death of Stalin, the passing of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the overcoming of the Cultural Revolution created the conditions for the end of Sino-Albanian relations. The final break came in 1978 when China decided to permanently discontinue its aid programs to Albania. By the early 1980s, Albanian leader Hoxha was debilitated and decided to step away from public and political life. At that time, a young leader, Ramiz Alia, began to make his mark, to whom Hoxha began to entrust numerous government posts: in 1981 he was appointed secretary of the "Central Committee for Propaganda and Ideology," and as early as the following year he became chairman of the Praesidium of the Socialist People's Republic of Albania. Enver Hoxha's death on April 11, 1985, signaled the official handover between the two leaders and the end of a highly isolationist regime that left Albania in deep economic and diplomatic trouble.

Cooperation in the new millennium

Despite Hoxha's death and the subsequent opening to a multi-party system in the early 1990s, relations between Albania and China did not change. In fact, for more than two decades the two countries continued to maintain minimal relations, both diplomatically and commercially and more generally in terms of economic cooperation. In the 1990s, part of Albania's transformed political landscape even began stable relations with Taiwan through the Taiwan-Albania Friendship Association, led by Neritan Ceka, former founder of the Democratic Party of Albania and later the Democratic Alliance Party and Minister of the Interior between 1997 and 1998. According to some reconstructions, later denied, in 1999 some Taiwanese diplomats promised economic aid to Albania of \$1 billion in exchange for withdrawing recognition of the People's Republic of China².

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A few months later, however, a joint communiqué made public after Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan's official visit to Albania in December 2000 cleared the air of any doubts by stating that "the Albanian side reiterated that there is only one China, that the government of the People's Republic of China is the only legal government of China, and Taiwan is an inalienable part of Chinese territory and the Republic of Albania will not establish official ties or conduct official contacts with Taiwan in any form"³. Despite the rapprochement in the early 2000s between Beijing and Tirana, after decades of almost complete indifference, Sino-Albanian relations began to take a new, more concrete course only in 2012. That year, in fact, Albania joined the so-called 17+1 (now 14+1) group of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote trade and investment relations between China and 14 Central and Eastern European countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia). The main beneficiary has been economic cooperation between the two countries. This is evidenced by data from the Albanian National Institute of Statistics, according to which Albanian exports to China reached Lek 7.9 billion (EUR 68 million) in January-September 2022 compared to Lek 6.3 billion (EUR 53 million) in the same period last year, an increase of 25.5 percent. Less marked is the increase in imports (+15 percent) from 47.6 billion lek in 2021 to 54.8 billion lek in 2022. Also regarding imports, China represents the third largest trading partner, after Italy and Turkey⁴. To understand the increase in trade between China and Albania, one can relate these figures to those of 2012. Ten years ago, in the same January-September period, Albanian imports amounted to 24.1 billion lek, less than half of today, while exports amounted to 3.4 billion lek (down 57 percent from 2022)⁵. It is evident from these early figures that the Albanian economy increasingly depends on China, at least in terms of imports.

<https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/local/archives/1999/12/13/0000014715>

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https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/200012/t20001207_679022.html

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<http://www.instat.gov.al/media/10597/foreign-trade-september-2022.pdf>

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<http://www.instat.gov.al/media/1945/c-users-insalsp-desktop-tregtia-e-jashtme-web-i-ri-2012-tregtia-e-jashtme-shtator-2012.pdf>

While on the trade side trade has reached important levels, the same cannot be said of direct investment. According to a report published in 2021 by the Central and Eastern European Center for Asian Studies (CEECAS), Chinese investments in Albania reached a value of 300 million euros. A far cry from Serbia's 9.9 billion or Bosnia and Herzegovina's 1.9 billion⁶. Among the first major Chinese investments is that of May 2014, with the purchase of 50 percent of the Turkish mining company Nesko Metal by China's largest copper producer, Jiangxi Copper Corporation. A further breakthrough and acceleration in Sino-Albanian cooperation took place starting in 2015 with the adoption of the Medium-Term Agenda for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, which included the intensification of "cooperation in infrastructure development, including roads, railways, ports, airports, telecommunications and oil and gas pipeline networks [...] and in areas related to civil aviation"⁷. Objectives actually pursued by China in Albania as early as 2016, with a significant increase in Chinese investment in the European country.

The sectors most affected were precisely the oil and infrastructure sectors. China's Geo-Jade Petroleum purchased Albania's largest oil company, Bankers Petroleum, in 2016 for over 384 million euros. The company now operates the Patos-Marinza oil field, the biggest on-shore oil field in Europe, and the Kucova oil field, the second largest in the country. As far as infrastructure investments are concerned, the most important was the one, recorded a month after the purchase of Bankers Petroleum, which involved the purchase by China Everbright Limited of 100 percent of the shares for the operation of Tirana International Airport (82 million euros), at the time still the only airport in the country. Since 2005, the development, operation, and management of the airport involved the participation as shareholders of Germany's AviAlliance GmbH and Deutsche Investitions- und Entwicklungsgesellschaft mbH (DEG) and the Albanian-American Enterprise Fund (AAEF). The acquisition was the first time that a Chinese enterprise has achieved a wholly-owned holding of a national gateway airport in the Central and Eastern Europe region⁸.

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https://www.china-cee-investment.org/files/ugd/72d38a_373928ea28c44c7f9c875ead7fc49c44.pdf

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http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/zywj/ldrhhcgwj/202112/t20211222_10474158.htm

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Beyond the economic plan, a sound strategy of cooperation and broadening of political-economic relations cannot be separated from deep "cultural" work aimed at building and spreading a positive narrative of the partner country in public opinion. In the case of Sino-Albanian relations, this aspect has assumed a central role. To counter those totally negative views toward China, still quite widespread in Europe and the Western world, Beijing has adopted a real "cultural strategy," both through constant contact with political and institutional figures and regarding Albanian civil society.

To get an initial sense of the concrete scope of this strategy, it would suffice to do a quick search on the website of the Chinese Embassy in Albania. In the past ten months there have been about thirty news items posted on the site regarding Chinese Ambassador Zhou Ding's participation in cultural events or institutional meetings with Albanian political representatives. These include two meetings, one on August 4 and the other on October 8, 2022, with newly elected President Bajram Begaj.

But it is on the purely cultural level that the Chinese presence has become increasingly evident and penetrating in recent years. One of the privileged channels for the dissemination of a deeper knowledge of Chinese culture has undoubtedly been the Confucius Institute opened in 2013 at the University of Tirana. Since then, the Institute has registered an almost constant increase in student enrollment from 185 in 2015-2016 to 950 in 2017-2018 and then to 460 in 2021-2022⁹. The institute each year guarantees scholarships for Albanian students interested in learning the Chinese language, who are also recognized with an award in an official ceremony. Also in the university sphere, a memorandum of understanding on cooperation between Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics and Albanian University of Tirana was signed on March 31, 2022, while another agreement is already in place with Epoka University.

Among the most significant cultural events related to Chinese culture held in Albania each year is the Chinese Culture Week, which this year took place from September 26 to October 3. The event was organized by the Chinese Embassy in Albania in cooperation with the Municipality of Tirana and the Albanian Ministry of Culture and was opened with a photo exhibition on Sino-Albanian friendship between the 1960s and 1970s. Numerous events were

<https://www.everbright.com/en/news/china-everbright-limited-successfully-sold-100-equity-tirana-international-airport>

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https://china-cee.eu/2022/03/07/albania-social-briefing-confucius-institute-in-albania-sharing-human-experiences-through-education/#_ftnref4

organized throughout the week, from Chinese martial arts demonstrations to dance performances, ending with a large and very well attended event on Chinese cuisine held in Tirana's main square, Skanderberg Square. Just the Albanian capital since 2008 is twinned with Beijing with which in October 2019 it worked to hold the fourth China-CEEC Capital Mayor's Forum in Tirana. But the one between the two capitals is not the only city twinning, in fact there are two others: the one between Vlora and Yangzhou, signed in 2015, and the one between Fier and Lanzhou, signed in 2011.

Also benefiting from this was Albanian tourism, which saw a growth in the still rather low but huge potential number of tourist arrivals from China, estimated at around 15,000 in 2018 alone (Embassy of China). The increase was also helped by the visa waiver that allowed Chinese tourists to visit Albania for up to 90 days. Just five years earlier, in 2013, there were just under 4 thousand arrivals. These are low numbers compared to other countries, especially Europe. However, a closer relationship and investment in tourism trade and the opening of new air routes could encourage a further increase in arrivals from China thus helping to strengthen cultural ties between the two countries.

The most important piece of Chinese soft power in Albania, however, was the agreement reached in 2019 between Albanian Radio and Television and China's National Broadcasting Administration on the broadcasting of Chinese television programs and in particular the documentary "China: Time of Xi." More broadly, the agreement included extensive cooperation on the exchange of TV productions, documentaries and cartoons, as well as staff training. At the signing, Chinese Ambassador Zhou Ding had expressed hope that "the documentary on Chinese governance will open a new window for Albanians to learn about China".

Pandemic Cooperation

During the pandemic, China played a leading role in the Balkans, especially strong from its close ties with President Aleksander Vucic's Serbia. In contrast, close cooperation with the government in Belgrade and those of other countries in the region has not found fertile ground in Tirana. This is not so much because of the lack of political-economic relations with China, which, as we have seen, are there, but because of the desire not to detach itself too much from the Western camp in an issue, such as pandemic management, that has further widened the distance with Beijing. It was Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama himself who made this clear when he declared on March 18, 2020 that "Albania has only one door, the Euro-Atlantic

door"¹⁰. Despite the closure to a massive intervention by China, as happened for example in Serbia, and the loyalty shown to Europe and the United States by PM Rama, there has been no lack of solidarity episodes between Beijing and Tirana in the midst of the pandemic. On March 31, 2020, the Chinese government, with the coordination of the Chinese Embassy in Albania, sent a batch of COVID-19 swabs to Tirana, donated by the Mammoth Foundation, a Chinese charitable foundation. A little less than a month later, on April 25, a Chinese plane delivered another batch of medical supplies donated by the government and welcomed in an official ceremony at Tirana airport. The supply included five thousand pads, protective clothing, masks, goggles and gloves for a total of five tons of medical supplies.

Quite different what happened, however, in the second phase of the pandemic, the one related to the initiation of vaccinations among the population. On March 25, 2021, Albania received 192,000 doses of the Chinese Sinovac vaccine, purchased, however, not directly from Beijing but through an agreement with Turkey. In June, the country obtained an additional 340,000 doses of Sinovac for a total of more than 500,000 doses in four months.

Two years after the launch of the Europe-wide vaccine campaign, the policy adopted by the European Union toward non-member states was considered by Albanian Prime Minister Rama "a shameful mistake." During an August 2022 European summit in Bled, Slovenia, Rama was quite critical of EU member states because they "have only thought about how to distribute vaccines among themselves," even going so far as to claim that "when we are in trouble, we are on our own." A harsh criticism from one who has always blindly and faithfully declared himself pro-European and Atlanticist¹¹.

The difficult challenge to Western hegemonism

As Francesco Strazzari suggests, it is possible to deconstruct the assumptions of geopolitics by approaching it through the experiences and positioning of peripheral and newly decolonized countries. In this sense, through this kind of theoretical operations, it is possible to measure the gap between the will to power of hegemonic actors and the resistance put up by

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<https://kohajone.com/rama-del-kunder-vucic-ka-tre-porta-be-nuk-do-na-lere-vetem/>

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https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/albanian-pm-eus-vaccine-policy-shameful-mistake/

actors who want to emerge in the global framework, and to approach international issues with a fresh, positioned and minor point of view (Strazzari, 2022).

China's constant presence in global scenarios, amplified further during the pandemic crisis, clearly indicates how it is, at present, the power trying to contest and erode the lost certainties of Western hegemony. From the neoliberal turn of Deng Xiaoping to the freshly confirmed leadership of Xi Jinping, the country has established itself first as a world factory and then as a real economic force, capable of establishing autonomous relations and creating its own spaces of interest. The challenges posed to the old order, thus include a proposal for multipolarity, not merely ideological, but concrete, a different form of civilization, which responds to different themes and ideas than the Western one, and a challenge to the technical and military leadership of the West, through enhanced research in key strategic areas, namely technology, information technology and the metaverse related to the dissemination of enhanced forms of reality through virtual devices and the infrastructure of Internet networks. China's global movement can be seen as diagonal and lateral, careful not to create friction and ready to make its voice heard in the contexts of governance and seemingly borrowed from go, a traditional Chinese strategic board game. A strategy based on soft power, an integral part of the major strategic work that goes by the name of One Belt One Road Initiative, spanning three continents and projecting Chinese power directly into the productive and logistical heart of Europe.

On this level, China can base its strength on a diplomacy that has a millennia-old genealogy. Indeed, historian Peter Frankopan has analyzed how the Silk Road represents a historical form of alternative to Western civilization, which, when threatened, attempts to adopt strategies of a reactive and defensive nature (Frankopan, 2015). Continuing his own investigation of contemporary dynamics, Frankopan also emphasizes the value of the exchanges and partnership that underlie the BRI as an opening of the East to the center and the South. While moving on a terrain undermined by wars, mistrust, and to regional closures, Frankopan optimistically observes how the Chinese project can provide prosperity and balance to both the Asian and Western regions affected by this project (Frankopan, 2019).

What is being called into question are precisely the promises of "globalist developmentalism," unfulfilled promises that have seen the substantial divarication between liberal democracy and the market, understood in this sense as a mechanism for polarizing wealth toward specific political elites (Parsi, 2022).

The perceived divorce between democracy and capitalism showed the weakness of U.S. projects of hegemony and also challenged the European governmental structure. In this sense,

the crisis in the containment capacity of global institutions has been followed by the U.S. hegemonic project, with the *longa manus* of NATO, and the political subalternity of other actor-allies reduced to the rank of extras. In a political sense, the cracks in democracy have reactivated the monopoly of decision-making by the hegemonic actor (Colombo, 2014).

Looking at the conflicts between different global actors and competitors, the case of Albania can serve as a privileged vantage point. First analytical element is the rapid transition from socialist to liberal democratic regime. While the transition between the regime's isolationism and the immediate opening of borders and markets was a jolt of vitality for an asphyxiated society yearning for freedom, it also opened the door wide for other inequalities. This element brings us to the second point of observation, namely the failure of the integral transition to democracy. The steps that punctuated the formalization of democratic institutions saw the polarization of wealth, the emergence of political elites and economic lobbies capable of acquiring and monopolizing consensus and, at least formally, political turnover. The role of the Western bloc, with the U.S. as the hegemonic power, was to legitimize these obvious deficits in the democratization process in order to stabilize economic markets and build the loyalty of both domestic and foreign investors. The steps that punctuated the formalization of democratic institutions saw the polarization of wealth, the emergence of political elites and economic lobbies capable of acquiring and monopolizing consensus and, at least formally, political turnover. The role of the Western bloc, with the U.S. as the hegemonic power, was to legitimize these obvious deficits in the democratization process in order to stabilize economic markets and build the loyalty of both domestic and foreign investors. The leap into the void of neoliberal globalization brought Albania inside a very serious economic crisis that lasted from the mid-1990s to the threshold of the second decade of the 2000s and one step away from civil war, fueling mass migration and increased wealth accumulation by organized crime. The subsequent stabilization of political institutions and the economy, which brought Albania into the global fold, at the same time brought it closer to China as an emerging power and one capable of proposing an alternative to the Western hegemonic monopoly through the BRI and cooperation with several countries in the Southeastern European area.

But the US monopolistic hegemony has been further attacked on several fronts: by the spread of global terrorism and the prominence of China, as well as by Russian imperial policies. The crisis that publicly challenged the model of financial capitalism has seen the partial emergence of other models, still rooted in the capitalist system, but disengaged from the need for war to impose its will. But, certainly one can agree in principle with Branko

Milanovic's assertion that the crisis has, for the first time, benefited the populations of emerging and peripheral countries and new powers such as India and China, at the expense of the Western middle classes. Indeed, at stake are not simply infrastructure investments, but also cross-cutting alliances in the Asian and European heartlands, as well as in Africa. Not to mention Chinese investments, economic, in financial centers and in the heart of the American continent.

Another challenge posed by China manifests itself on the technological and military level. In this sense, the main antagonist of Chinese power is both the United States and NATO, understood in this sense as a military extension of the still hegemonic power. If we look in detail at technological investments, China and the United States are chasing each other in developing satellite weapons and enhancing infrastructure related to networks and the virtual dimension, including cryptocurrency issues. As Alessandro Aresu analyzes, digital is the test case for China's challenge to the West, including militarily (Aresu, 2022).

Looking at the volume of funds Beijing allocates to military spending, one can easily come to the conclusion that China organizes its defenses against the possibility of direct and indirect NATO attacks, but puts its military expertise at the service of infrastructure diplomacy. This form of imperial diplomacy without the use of force marks a clear and obvious discontinuity with NATO's wartime policies: in the face of stubborn internal security, achieved through the multiplication of individual and collective control devices, and the maintenance of leadership in the Far East area through the threat of wartime deterrence, China seeks to maintain its neutrality on the global stage, without ceasing to make criticisms of NATO's militarism. It is for all these reasons that both the EU and the United States, and consequently NATO, continue to regard China as a "strategic competitor" and a rival power.

Returning to the focus of our paper, in the Albanian case Beijing has tried to exploit, both economically and politically, the uncertainties and missteps of the articulated and often contradictory European Union accession process. Not so much to block Albania's inclusion in the Union, a political prospect that China does not necessarily oppose, but to carve out a margin of action in an area considered very important for access to Europe and the Mediterranean. In fact, for the Union the real problem is not so much the Euroskepticism of Albanian citizens, which is still rather marginal, or openings to partners such as China, but the Albanian-skepticism of some of the member states that have repeatedly blocked or postponed the start of negotiations as done in 2019 by French President Emmanuel Macron. A decision that had provoked harsh reactions even within the EU and was later overcome by the start of

negotiations in July 2022. Despite numerous European disappointments, Chinese prominence in Albania has had to contend with a strongly pro-European and Atlantist attitude of Prime Minister Edi Rama, in government since 2013. An attitude that has certainly frozen some of the challenges posed to Western hegemonism globally. Rather than outright closure, in the Albanian case it would be more appropriate to speak of obstacles or levees placed on the Chinese advance. Restrictions that do not completely prevent cooperation and trade but limit their scope only to certain areas and within limits considered "acceptable" by the allies. Emblematic examples of these obstacles are those placed by the Albanian government on investment in 5G networks. In fact, as a result of U.S. pressure, the Chinese company Huawei was essentially squeezed out of the implementation of national networks. Here again it is useful to echo Prime Minister Rama's words spoken in June 2021 during a meeting with the then U.S. Secretary of State during the Trump presidency, Antony Blinken, "when it comes to our most sensitive technologies and networks, we work with trusted partners [...] so as not to allow them to be compromised by third-party actors who are sometimes malicious actors"¹².

Even deeper is the adherence to the principles and policy of NATO, of which Albania is a member. In August 2018 the Albanian government had announced the construction of the first NATO air base in the Western Balkans, near Kuçovë just a short distance from the oil field operated by Bankers Petroleum. This was followed by a further Albanian concession to build a NATO naval base at Pashaliman in Vlora Bay.

Conclusions

"The crisis consists in the fact that the old dies and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum the most varied morbid phenomena occur," observed Antonio Gramsci in a note written in prison in 1930. As we have tried to explain in this paper, the current phase of questioning of the old Euro-Atlantic-led order takes on all the characteristics of the crisis hypothesized by Gramsci. A phase in which the old slowly dies but in which the new has not yet been born. In other words, we live in the historical period of an "unfinished transition" or, to use Gramsci's words again, an "interregnum." It is precisely in this phase that "the most varied morbid phenomena" occur, from the war unleashed by Russia in Ukraine to the cultural,

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<https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-albanian-prime-minister-edi-rama-at-a-signing-of-a-memorandum-of-understanding-between-the-government-of-the-united-states-of-america-and-the-council-of-ministers-of/>

economic and values clash against the rise of China. A clash that does not take on the characteristics of open conflict, as evidenced by the increasing economic interdependence with the Asian giant, as much as that of a strenuous resistance on the part of a West incapable of imagining a new space and a new role in a truly multipolar context. In this paper we have considered the relationship between China and Albania. A country certainly not central in the international chessboard nor in the European one, but nonetheless interesting for the dynamics that have come about in the last decade. On the one hand a reopening of the channels of political communication and economic exchanges between Tirana and Beijing after the silence of the last decades, on the other hand the still extremely strong anchorage to the Euro-Atlantic world. Indeed, Albania represents the country in the Balkan region most aligned with Europe and especially the United States. However, this element has not been able to influence the policies of the other Western Balkan countries, whose European perspective continues to experience seesaw moments.

It is precisely the enormous pressure exerted by the United States and, paradoxically, to a lesser extent by the European Union that has prevented the building of an even stronger political-economic alliance with China, along the lines of what countries like Serbia or Montenegro have done instead. Two main hypotheses for Sino-Albanian relations lie ahead.

The first, the most likely, sees a continuation of trade and tourism exchanges between the two countries without this representing a total opening of the Albanian economy to Chinese investors, especially in strategic sectors such as infrastructure and technology development. In this scenario, the Chinese challenge would not challenge the political hegemony of the Euro-Atlantic bloc with Albania continuing to be firmly embedded within Western alliances. A positioning, however, that would not preclude a possible increase in Chinese infrastructure investment, which, on the contrary, could serve as an important instrument of cooperation between the European Union and China in a strategic sector in which both would stand to gain.

The second scenario, equally likely but strongly influenced by the European mood, instead assumes a closure of trade channels as a result of a further and more pronounced narrowing of cooperation between China and the European Union. This second scenario presupposes a worsening of the trade and economic war between the EU and China and thus the closing of many channels of exchange, both political and economic. Greater hostility between the two worlds could only have negative, if not problematic, repercussions for

countries, such as Albania, to which Chinese capital could return more than useful for infrastructural and industrial modernization.

Indeed, the latter requires accession countries to fully share in EU foreign policy. Should Europe continue to view China as a "strategic competitor" and adapt its foreign policy to this view, then Albania would be forced to adapt by closing the doors to any further deepening of relations with Beijing.

The game, then, is not only played in Tirana. Instead, the future of Sino-Albanian relations seems at the mercy of events and decisions made in Washington and Brussels.

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