

WORKING PAPER

Czech-Chinese Strategic Partnership Amid the Second Cold War

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Abstract

The study inquires into Czech-Chinese relations from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives. The analysis is conducted against the background of the ongoing process of transformation of the international order towards a multipolar/polycentric model, the collapse of neoliberal globalisation and the concurrent emergence of regions-based globalisation (glocalisation), and last but not least the transition of liberal democracies to liberal authoritarianism for which a concept of postliberalism is used in this article. China and Russia are identified as the main engines of the advancement of post-Western international order while the pandemic and the most recent phase of the conflict in the Ukraine are considered to be game-changers and catalysts of the rise of a new era in international relations. The article summarises the main points and tendencies of the development of Czech-Chinese relations in the 21st century and addresses the fundamental issues that are present in the Czech political discourse, i.e. Taiwan, China-CEEC cooperation mechanism (14+1), Indo-Pacific, Xinjiang and Tibet. Attention is paid to the actors involved in the agenda-setting and also to the current socioeconomic conditions that can significantly affect the future of the Czech Republic's policy towards China.

Keywords

China, the Czech Republic, Russia, Taiwan, Central and Eastern Europe, hegemonism, liberal authoritarianism, strategic partnership, polycentrism, postliberalism.

Introduction

When the cooperation mechanism between China and the Central and Eastern European countries was established on April 26, 2012, the situation worldwide as well as in the CEE region and the Czech Republic was completely different. At present we are experiencing strong turbulences and frictions accompanying the overall transformation of the international order from that under the US-led hegemony towards a multipolar, more democratic and more

inclusive model. A model that would overcome flaws, systemic imbalances, inequalities and injustices produced by neoliberalism, the practices related to the so-called Washington consensus and the Western mode of globalisation (Stiglitz, 2019). Similarly, liberal democracies are experiencing a fundamental transformation towards liberal authoritarianism (Zemánek, 2022a). This last stage of the evolution of liberal ideology as well as the liberal democratic model is called *postliberalism*.

These processes together with the conceptual framework of the Second Cold War (Sakva, 2022) are chosen as a background against which the revision of the Czech foreign policy and Czech-Chinese relations are analysed. The subject matter is inquired into by means of the constructivism-based discourse analysis (Jørgensen & Philips, 2002). The analysis of both the general (post)pandemic global and regional context on one hand and the bilateral strategic partnership on the other are influenced by the paradigm of recognition that was developed within the tradition of critical theory (Hrubec, 2011). The latter also enables the identification of positive and regressive elements of the existing reality and the subsequent formulation of normative visions that can be used for practical purposes.

(Post)pandemic era: Global and regional context

The model based upon the Western hegemony and sometimes called the liberal international order has become obsolete (Bordachev, 2020), being challenged and undermined by alternative visions and paradigms such as the *Beijing consensus*, *Shanghai Spirit*, *a community of a shared future for mankind*, *a new type of international relations*, *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI), *Global Development Initiative* (GDI), *Global Security Initiative* (GSI) but also Russia-proposed *Greater Eurasian Partnership* (GEP) and *a multipolar world*. The new, emerging global paradigm embodies the aspirations and ambitions of the Global South as well as Russia, hence of the overwhelming majority of mankind. This universal paradigm—not suppressing but reaffirming particularism, diversity, and cultural and political pluralism—can be, nevertheless, accepted and embraced by nations of the collective West too. The paradigm contests Euro-Atlanticism and the idea of a transatlantic community, thereby supporting the building of the EU's strategic autonomy and the establishment of the EU as an independent pole of the multipolar global order.

The universal nature of the new paradigm is based on the principles and rules defined by the UN Charter, which is the core of international law, not by dominant Western actors who

arbitrarily and quite often haphazardly set their own rules which are subsequently imposed upon others. Nevertheless, the UN principles also contain inner contradictions and discrepancies as demonstrated by the ongoing conflict in the Ukraine which can be—from this point of view—interpreted in terms of a clash between the three fundamental principles: (1) territorial integrity and inviolability of borders; (2) the right to self-determination; and (3) the inadmissibility of building security to the detriment of another state. This predominantly local perspective should be, at the same time, supplemented with a global one. The conflict materialises the intensification and radicalisation of a clash between Western hegemonism (Chomsky & Herman, 2015) and Russia's sovereigntism and her ambitions to establish a regionalised, multipolar international order. The recent phase of the conflict between Russia and the collective West, which was opened on February 24, 2022, has accelerated longer-term tendencies, bringing about the large-scale transition to postliberalism in the West and the concurrent decline of the neoliberal globalisation which has been in serious crisis since the outbreak of the global pandemic in 2020.

The pandemic and the Ukrainian crises have played the role of game-changers. The world will never be the same again. The ethos and rules of the old globalisation with its imperative of free trade, economic pragmatism and global movement of people, capital, goods and services are over which *inter alia* poses a great challenge to China that succeeded in benefiting from the Western-dominated system. However, it is only neoliberal globalisation which is falling apart whereas new forms of globalisation are coming into existence. *Globalisation 2.0* will likely be typical of partial decoupling dictated by the interests and strategic considerations of the leading regional actors who will mobilise and develop their domestic resources while deepening cooperation and integration with their close partners. These increasingly autonomous poles of the international order will be based on regional structures and institutions, developing interregional, supraregional and global exchanges wherever desirable and possible.

Manifestations of this general tendency can be found in different countries and regions all around the world. *Strategic autonomy* in the EU, Donald Trump's *America First* policy in the US, *dual circulation* in China and what I call *comprehensive sovereignty* in Russia are illustrative examples. This shift entails the risk of excessive deglobalisation, particularism and conflicts but, given the existing long-term trajectories, the scenario of *glocalisation* and pragmatic, win-win cooperation seems to prevail eventually (Zemánek, 2022b). Such an international order can be called *global polycentrism* if one uses and reformulates the concept coined by Palmiro Togliatti, a long-term chairman of the Italian Communist Party, in the 1950s.

Of course, the transition is full of contradictions and conflicts. Similarly, the move towards the polycentric order is not and will not be free of partial, however deep regresses.

The regresses are interconnected and coincide with the internal dynamics of the Western liberal democratic model. Liberal democracies are increasingly less liberal and more authoritarian both internally and externally. The postliberal stage of liberalism and postliberal Western paradigm as such have replaced neoliberalism and its adoration of free-market capitalism which was creating fertile ground for the rise and expansion of the transnational capitalist class, hegemonism, neocolonial practices and other forms of imperialism (Robinson, 2004). With an obvious allusion to Lenin's well-known book *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Ghanaian political theorist and practitioner Kwame Nkrumah (1965) described *neocolonialism* as the last stage of imperialism. From this perspective, both China's rise and Russia's fundamental opposition to Western expansionism eastward (Cohen, 2011) have been gravediggers of neocolonialism and hegemonism, even though the paths that both major powers have taken are different. Western response to its own gradual decline on a global scale lies in the internal authoritarian transformation along the lines of what I herein refer to as *postliberalism*. Following Lenin and Nkrumah's argumentation, one can conceptualise postliberalism as the *last stage* of both neocolonialism and liberalism.

In internal terms, the postliberal turn of liberal democracies is typical of enforcement of ideological consensus based on a dogmatic, restrictive interpretation of "liberal values", weakening of the democratic principle, the partial restriction of fundamental rights and freedoms, and last but not least comprehensive securitisation, politicisation and ideologisation of different spheres of social life (Zemanek, 2022). It has already had concrete impacts on cooperation with China in many countries including the Czech Republic. Postliberalism has, nevertheless, its positive features as well. Emphasis on local resources, rehabilitation of the existence of national interests, autonomy and particularities, investment in domestic industry, military capabilities, research and development may serve as examples. Under certain conditions, postliberalism might lead to the strengthening of the actorness of at least some countries of the collective West or the EU as a whole. Yet, it requires an overall autonomisation and overcoming of one-sided dependency on the US. It would give a strong impetus to the revival of Sino-European ties as well as the normalisation of relations with Russia.

Dynamic of bilateral relations in the 21st century

Since the beginning of this century, the Czech political representation was gradually overcoming simplistic anti-Communist clichés and the one-sided narrative depicting China as a totalitarian and oppressive regime. The strongest political parties—the left-wing Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) and right-wing Civic Democratic Party (ODS)—started to prefer pragmatic cooperation with a focus on economic diplomacy which was supported both by President Václav Klaus and his successor Miloš Zeman. This trend culminated with President Xi Jinping's visit to the Czech Republic in 2016 and the conclusion of the strategic partnership that laid solid foundations for further development including the Belt and Road Initiative or China-CEEC cooperation mechanism. Even though this positive dynamic was not free of problems and controversies, the official policy was clear. It was demonstrated by the 2016 joint declaration of the four highest constitutional representatives—President, Chairman of the Senate, Chairman of the Chamber of Deputies, and Prime Minister—who denounced political actions undermining the strategic partnership that included some voices supportive of Tibetan separatism (Ovčáček, 2016).

If the year 2016 was the highlight of the bilateral relations, the year 2018 marked the beginning of a long-term offensive aimed against the partnership with Beijing. It started with statements made by the intelligence and security bodies which warned against Chinese influence operations, infiltration into strategic infrastructure and espionage. These actions aimed against such companies as Huawei and ZTE followed the US confrontational policy and were appreciated in Washington. At the same time, the anti-Chinese campaign was adopted and developed by some media and NGOs. In 2019, they succeeded in the dissolution of the Czech-Chinese Centre at the leading Czech university which was accompanied by media defamation and the dismissal of several academicians. This affair was followed by a campaign against the rector's office and the PPF company, founded and headed by the richest Czech businessman Petr Kellner. The company should have become a partner of Charles University but given Petr Kellner's connections and business in China, the freedom of research on China was allegedly put in danger at the university. The campaign was successful for no partnership was concluded. Moreover, the PPF company was accused of manipulating Czech public opinion through the dissemination of allegedly pro-Chinese narratives.

The year 2020 was affected by the pandemic but despite that, the offensive continued, especially at the political level, both regional and national. Liberal-oriented Senate, the upper

chamber of Parliament, organised a visit to Taipei. The last year created favourable conditions for the strengthening of the anti-Chinese agenda. Petr Kellner who had a strong influence on Czech politics and supported pragmatic relations with other countries tragically died in Alaska. President Miloš Zeman's position weakened significantly due to his state of health. And the five liberal political parties united against Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and managed to win the parliamentary election. In other words, the year 2021 was a miracle for the Czech liberals. And they have made use of the new and unprecedented constellation when they dominate all decisive state bodies—the government, the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, as well as the security and intelligence agencies. Moreover, their position can strengthen in 2023 when the tenure of the incumbent President will end. Whereas the highest chances were attributed to former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš for a long time, it seems that the situation in the second half of 2022 has been gradually changing. Even though the information value of the public opinion pools is problematic, many of them have started to indicate that the presidential office could be assumed by Petr Pavel, a former Chief of the General Staff of the Czech Army as well as Chairman of the NATO Military Committee (Mahdalová, 2022). His election victory would pour oil on the flames for it would reaffirm the advantageous position of the liberal democrats and their controversial agenda.

Looking back on 2021, the anti-Chinese efforts intensified. The China General Nuclear Power Group (CGN) was excluded from the strategic tender for the expansion of the nuclear power plant in Dukovany. Several days after the parliamentary election, held on October 08–09, a media campaign targetting the cooperation between the Czech Academy of Sciences and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences was launched. The result is that several research programmes focused on China and Russia were cancelled, academicians dismissed and academic exchanges and research with Chinese counterparts have become undesirable and considerably restricted. Over the year, other experts and academicians from different Czech institutes were defamed including Chinese nationals. The first Czech Confucius Institute which was set up at Olomouc University in 2007 will probably be closed next year (Schloszmann, 2022), and the PPF company has announced that they will terminate their business in China putting greater emphasis on the European market (iDNES.cz, 2022a). All these actions are stimulated by government policies aimed at the overall revision of relations with China and Russia.

Strategic partnership and its enemies

Since the new cabinet took over power in December 2021, the political discussion about the Czech-Chinese strategic partnership, Taiwan, Tibet and the Indo-Pacific region as a whole has intensified and further ideologised.

Taiwan

Senate chairman Miloš Vystrčil's visit to Taiwan in 2020 marked the beginning of high-level *political* exchanges between Prague and Taipei. In 2021, a delegation led by Foreign Minister Joseph Wu arrived in the Czech Republic. The courtship intensified in July 2022 when the chairman of the Taiwanese parliament You Si-kun visited Prague shortly before Nancy Pelosi's trip to Taipei. Domestic supporters of political relations with Taipei, headed by Miloš Vystrčil, chair of the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Security Pavel Fischer and chair of the Committee on Education, Science, Culture, Human Rights and Petitions Jiří Drahoš, made use of the official visit to move their agenda further. At a meeting held on July 19, the Foreign Committee passed a resolution asserting that Taiwan was a "subject of international law" and that the Czech Republic had its own One China policy (Senát, 2022c). These formulations create conditions for recognising Taiwan as an independent, sovereign state. Not by coincidence, Pavel Fischer explicitly stated that Taiwan was as sovereign country as the Czech Republic (Fischer, 2022). You Si-kun's visit to Prague was repaid by the Senate in September when a delegation led by Jiří Drahoš spent a week in Taiwan. The frequent political visits, official statements as well as the concrete deals corroborate that the relations with Taipei are on the upswing, being accompanied by non-friendly actions towards Beijing.

Back on May 04, 2022, the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Security discussed the Taiwan question thoroughly. Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Lipavský emphasised there that the ties with Taipei are more important than those with Beijing. The Senate Committee declared Taiwan "one of the key partners in the Indo-Pacific". Senators criticised China for alleged obstructing the development of Taiwan and influencing the interests of Taiwan's people. Even though the Senate resolution remains cautious, it calls upon the Government to make an effort to include Taiwan in the World Health Organisation (WHO), United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) as well as International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol). The members of the Senate Committee discuss the issue of the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Prague which serves as the representative office in the Czech Republic (Senát, 2022a).

In terms of Czech law, the institution does not enjoy diplomatic status, being only an NGO. Under the current circumstances, however, the Committee will probably support the change of its legal status in order to promote the Taipei Office to the level of the official diplomatic mission.

China-CEEC cooperation mechanism

Similar agenda is pushed through the Chamber of Deputies which is different from the last years when deputies mitigated the long-term foreign policy radicalism of senators. But given the fact that both chambers are dominated by liberal democratic forces, the Chamber of Deputies follows the path beaten by the upper chamber. On May 19 the Committee on Foreign Affairs passed the same resolution regarding Taiwan's inclusion in international organisations as did Senate several days before. Moreover, deputies addressed the Czech Republic's membership in the 16+1 mechanism. Deputy Foreign Minister Jiří Kozák, who is responsible for the revision of the relations with China and Russia at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, declared that the participation in the initiative would be reassessed because the economic diplomacy and pragmatic foreign policy pursued by the former cabinet headed by Andrej Babiš with strong support from President Miloš Zeman allegedly failed. Deputy Foreign Minister highlighted that the 16+1 mechanism had become a security threat for the European countries (Senát, 2022b).

The Committee on Foreign Affairs passed a resolution, in which the Government was called on to consider the possibility of withdrawal from the initiative. The session of the Committee shows the absence of real discussion, passivity of most members and the concurrent activism of the anti-Chinese deputies and invited experts who presented one-sided and misleading information in order to gain broad political support. Both the resolution on Taiwan and the withdrawal from the 16+1 were approved unanimously. It follows that the Czech politicians and decision-makers should be provided with appropriate information about the bilateral relations and China's policies to oppose, weaken and reverse the hegemonic discourse based on the narrative of the need for containment of China.

Indo-Pacific

The Czech Government puts an increasingly strong emphasis on the Indo-Pacific region. It is connected with the objective rise of the region, the active US engagement, which has been reflected by the EU authorities and the corresponding EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific together with the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy and Global Gateway, and last but not

least with the present Czech Presidency in the Council of the EU. On June 13–14, the Czech Foreign Ministry organised the High-Level Dialogue on the Indo-Pacific as the first foreign-policy event within the Czech Presidency. The Czech Foreign Minister declared that the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security is indivisible and must be protected. Although he did not provide any greater details, it indicates that the Czech side might support the military engagement of NATO in the region irrespective of the concerns and interests of the Chinese side (MFA, 2022).

On September 26, the Government approved a new Indo-Pacific Strategy put forward by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The document correctly identifies the potential of the region so the attention paid to the countries with nearly 60 per cent of the world population and generating up to 42 per cent of global GDP is positive. The problem is the geopolitical framing of the strategy since it reproduces the US discourse with its concept of the *Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, division of countries between “like-minded partners”/“democracies” and “autocracies”, and the enforcement of the rules-based order (MZV, 2022). The very terminology based on the notion of Indo-Pacific refers to the US foreign policy paradigm for it substitutes the concept of Asia-Pacific, thus reviving the Rimland theory formulated by the US geopolitics-oriented political scientist Nicholas Spykman in the 20th century and provoking confrontation through exclusive groupings such as AUKUS, I2U2, Partners in the Blue Pacific or QUAD.

Xinjiang and Tibet

As far as China within the conception of the Indo-Pacific is concerned, the Czech political representatives conduct a controversial policy not only in relation to Taiwan but also to Xinjiang and Tibet. On November 12–14, 2021, the General Assembly of the World Uyghur Congress was held in Prague. This self-proclaimed, separatist entity, which considers itself a legitimate government, was hosted by Prague Mayor Zdeněk Hřib and the event was actively supported by Pavel Fischer, the chair of the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Security. The assembly was accompanied by a wide array of PR events including conferences and public discussions with support from the US.

In August 2022, the upper chamber of the Czech Parliament invited Tibetan separatist leader Penpa Tsering to discuss the support for “occupied Tibet” including the establishment of the office of the EU representative for Tibet as well as the preparation of a conference on Tibet within the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU (Černá, 2022). Tsering held talks

with the head of the Chamber of Deputies Markéta Pekarová Adamová who stressed the importance of the ongoing revision of the Czech foreign policy which entailed the global enforcement of Western human rights and liberal democracy. It is Pekarová Adamová who in September called upon the EU and its member states to establish a “global democratic alliance” against those who undermine the West-defined rules-based order (iDNES.cz, 2022b).

Background of the revision of the strategic partnership

Looking at this development in hindsight, one would notice that whereas the support for closer cooperation with China and the strategic partnership came especially from politicians and businessmen, the anti-Chinese agenda has been set primarily by a small group of NGOs, mainstream media and—to a lesser degree—intelligence services. The agenda aimed against the strategic partnership has been adopted by political representatives only later. It shows the enormous influence of NGOs and media on the political elites. In the course of the last months, these strengthened their criticism of the Czech participation in the China-CEEC cooperation mechanism while supporting the pivot to Taiwan. All these organisations deliver their expertise to politicians. Connections between representatives of these think tanks and politicians from the ruling cabinet are well-known. The experts have been invited to events and sessions in Parliament where they have immediate opportunities to spread the anti-Chinese agenda. But they have also direct connections with journalists who assist them to defame and discredit their opponents. The concrete examples are documented during the last years (Drulák, 2021).

The media monopoly on Chinese issues is in hands of experts from Sinopsis and the Association for International Affairs (Vojta, 2020). The financial flows reveal whose interests these actors pursue. Among the leading sponsors are foreign subjects, especially from the US. It is particularly the National Endowment for Democracy, the US Department of State, the US Embassy in Prague, the NATO Public Diplomacy Division, Open Society Foundations headed by George Soros and subjects from Taiwan such as Taiwan Foundation for Democracy or Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Prague. It is not surprising then that one of the think tanks established its office in Taipei with the support of the President and the Foreign Ministry of Taiwan. The financial background and connections reveal the prominent position that the Czech anti-Chinese network has in the Czech Republic.

Solid foundations and socioeconomic instability

Unlike the present day, the second decade of the century was typical of optimism, great expectations and the building of mutual trust and understanding between the two countries. Home Credit, a company found and led by the Czech businessman Petr Kellner, became the first foreign company that received a license to offer retail loans in China. A wide array of Czech enterprises participated in the China International Import Expo and their products and know-how met the demand in China. There are many examples of successful bilateral cooperation including sport, culture, education, research or medicine. Before the pandemic, tourists from China were the fourth-largest group to visit the Czech Republic. More than 600,000 out of nearly 10.9 million tourists came from China in 2019 (ČSÚ, 2020) whereas the figure was only 163,000 in 2013 (ČSÚ, 2014). Trade exchange was also deepening. Ten years ago, the total turnover amounted to 291,780,000,000 CZK (less than 12 billion EUR). In 2021 the turnover reached 526,346,000,000 CZK (more than 21 billion EUR) so it nearly doubled (ČSÚ, 2022). Last year, trade volume with China was similar to that with the adjacent Slovakia or Poland, accounting for one-half of trade with Asia, and being much higher than that with the Americas including the US. These data show the concrete achievements and a positive trajectory which have been repeatedly marginalised or denied by opponents of the Czech-Chinese strategic partnership.

Very illustrative of the change of atmosphere in relation to China is a comparison between today's magazines and newspapers, and those printed in 2016. The contrast in discourse is striking. High-level politicians including ministers praised the Belt and Road Initiative, President Miloš Zeman was speaking about a massive inflow of Chinese investment to the Czech Republic and a great future of the Czech business in China, and rectors of the leading universities highlighted the need for mutual exchange and joint research. Many of these voices are silent or have been silenced since then because the political and public discourse has changed substantially. The problem is that many Western leaders have started to see the relations with China through the prism of pure geopolitics and confrontation, and rational arguments and facts become unimportant and irrelevant.

The world has arrived at a paradoxical point when China has become more liberal externally than liberal democracies themselves. The revisionism of the Czech government damages the image and undermines the position of the country even though it can bring some short-term gains from the US. It is not without interest that the ruling cabinet's policies violate the valid, official Concept of the Czech Republic's Foreign Policy (MFA, 2015) that highlights

the political dialogue with Beijing and the importance of the bilateral strategic partnership concluded in 2016, and that is—last but not least—supportive of the *Comprehensive Agreement on Investment* between the EU and China. Non-friendly actions made by government politicians and the domestic anti-Chinese circles do harm bilateral relations but they should not destroy a vision of future cooperation. The crucial point is that the inner heterogeneity of our societies is high. Repressive practices together with the worsening socioeconomic situation in liberal democracies can result in a wave of upheavals and even radical changes. In August, the Czech Minister of Justice Pavel Blažek warned against a threat of revolution in the Czech Republic (ČTK, 2022) which confirms that the self-confidence of liberal democratic elites is being shaken.

European societies are increasingly polarised and the scenario of further social radicalisation is increasingly real. In the Czech Republic, this possibility is all the more relevant because of the results and consequences of the parliamentary election held in October 2021 which led to the domination of radically pro-Western liberal democratic forces despite the highly ambiguous election results. A record number of citizens voted for alternative, protest, illiberal parties but, because of the election quora, such parties did not succeed. So the political dominance and power distribution do not correspond with the preferences of and real moods among the population. This imbalance has provoked growing social tension as demonstrated by two mass anti-government manifestations for neutrality, sovereignty and social dignity in Prague on September 03 and 28 that alarmed the Czech liberal democrats as well as some influential foreign media. It is also reflected by recent opinion surveys which reaffirm the leading position of the ANO movement of the former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, the considerable weakening of the five government parties and the strengthening of the populist, Eurosceptic and sovereignist Freedom and Direct Democracy movement (Zadražilová & Soukup, 2022). The next cabinet can, therefore, be completely different, especially in the case of some kind of cooperation between ANO and populists. It is beyond any doubt that it would have immediate effects on the Czech Republic's China policy and the bilateral relationship.

Conclusion

Owing to the Czech revision of relations with China and Russia, it is hardly possible to build trust and a spirit of cooperation between the Chinese side and the current Czech government. At the same time, however, it is possible to develop ties with pragmatic-oriented,

open-minded actors regardless of political affiliation. The cause of mutual cooperation should be remembered for China needs a self-confident, autonomous Europe as one of the poles of the polycentric world, and Europe needs a strong, prospering, pioneering China. Prospects of Sino-European cooperation might seem dark at this moment but they are not. Cooperation between China and the CEE countries will perhaps be less institutionalised in the following years. Perhaps some other countries will withdraw from the 14+1 mechanism following Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia (Tiezzi, 2022).

It need not be, however, a fatal failure or proof of the systemic impossibility of cooperation between China and the CEE region. It can be an opportunity for developing new ways of mutual interaction and a time of preparations for the future revitalisation of the partnership between China and European countries. Both some CEE countries and China have experience with developing relations and building trust under external pressure during the First Cold War. After the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s, maintaining relations between China and socialist countries from the Soviet camp was extremely difficult because of the hostile Soviet policy. And yet, pragmatic economic cooperation was developing with Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia or Bulgaria (Liu & Mastny, 2004). From such examples can lessons be drawn for the conditions of the ongoing Second Cold War.

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