

BRIEF

CHINA IN EUROPE AND
TRANSATLANTIC
SECURITY

| ANDREW A. MICHTA |

The US has re-evaluated its relationship with the People's Republic of China. It sees it less as a “responsible stakeholder” and more as an economic and security problem. America’s long-standing allies and partners in Europe are reluctant to treat China as anything but an economic challenge. The US, meanwhile, has every right to be worried about China’s penetration into Europe and the dependences it creates, which have a negative impact on NATO and transatlantic security in general.

THE IMPACT ON NATO

Since the establishment of the 16+1 PRC–Central and East European cooperation initiative in 2012 (now the 17+1), Washington’s stance vis-à-vis the project has morphed from benign neglect, occasioned by its limited scope and relative ineffectiveness, to the current growing concern that Beijing will use the framework to push aggressively its 5G networks into the region, with the objective of making Huawei the principal supplier of next-generation connectivity. From the start, an ancillary concern for the US has been the potential surge in Chinese control of infrastructure networks in the region, especially ports and railways that could be facilitated by 17+1 projects and would impact the ability of NATO forces to exercise and operate on the territory of its allies in the region. Washington treated 17+1 as essentially a subset of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), irrespective of the mixed record of the project’s various infrastructure initiatives thus far and the apparent growing disenchantment among China’s partners about the gap between Beijing’s promises and what it has actually delivered – the Budapest–Belgrade high-

speed rail project that is yet to get off the ground and the failed Cernavodă nuclear power plant project in Romania are only the most glaring examples of the current state of affairs in this area.¹ However, in 2019, as the 5G question began to overshadow all other concerns, China’s intention to build a sphere of privileged economic interest in the region assumed a different flavour, awakening Washington to its potentially damaging impact on NATO and transatlantic security. In effect, the 17+1 project is seen today as part and parcel of the larger strategy pursued by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to penetrate Europe, reduce American influence on the continent and, most importantly, penetrate digital networks vital to the military and economic future of the NATO alliance.

DEPENDENCIES THAT DIVIDE

The US approach to the 17+1 has to be seen in the wider context of the ongoing dramatic reorientation of its strategy vis-à-vis the PRC, with Beijing no longer considered a future “responsible stakeholder” in the globalised international system but as its principal strategic competitor, intent not only on revising the global power distribution but

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also on replacing the liberal international order with one built around its own values, institutions and priorities. The larger question the 17+1 raises for the

US has been its alliance-wide impact, i.e. whether in effect China is pursuing a “regionalisation” project for CEE that is built around its priorities rather than those of the EU as a whole and, on yet another level, how damaging Beijing’s actions in Central and Eastern Europe will prove to the cohesion of the

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transatlantic community.² From that vantage point, the 17+1 is seen as potentially risky for the Alliance, not because the initiative portends the regionalisation of CEE in its relations with China (increasingly unlikely in my view), but rather by virtue of the bilateral relationships that Beijing has sought to build with each individual capital. In effect, from the start, notwithstanding the seeming randomness of the group’s format, the initiative—or, rather, series of initiatives—pursued by the PRC reflected a “hub-and-spoke” approach to building not so much a multilateral framework as a series of dependences whereby Beijing assumed the role of the central position in the system and dictated the terms under which it operates. The larger geostrategic impact of the 17+1 is to reduce allied solidarity in Europe and to undermine the region’s relationship with the US, thereby weakening NATO. Seen in terms of the resurgent great-power competition, the 17+1 is for Washington an important variable when considering Chinese-European relations in the US national security perspective. Since the new National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy framed US-China relations in terms of great-power competition, any current and future projects undertaken within the China-CEE framework will inevitably generate concerns over their impact on NATO and, by extension, on transatlantic cohesion and the mutuality of security obligations.³

THE BRI IN EUROPE

While information on the 17+1 has been fragmented and much less coherent than the data available on the BRI, the 17+1 should have been understood from the start as part of a larger strategy pursued by China to build a supply-and-market

network across Eurasia and into Europe. The goal is to make the 17+1 in effect a subset of the BRI, with the latter aimed at bringing about a radical reversal of the centuries-old relationship between the land and maritime domains that has favoured the West in general and the US in particular. Among the original 16 which met with the Chinese prime minister in 2012 for the 16+1 summit in Warsaw were 11 EU members, thereby posing for Washington an additional problem, i.e. the larger aspect of the PRC’s relations with the European Union, with the 16+1 seen as a Chinese effort to gain additional access to Europe as a whole.

The event that deepened US unease about the China-CEE initiative was the addition of Greece to the group at the Dubrovnik summit in 2019, raising concerns that, by adding this particular “old EU” member to the mix, China sought to chip away at EU cohesion in Southern Europe. An examination of the nature of the projects the PRC was pursuing there only strengthened this perception. The focus was on larger infrastructure investments, with Beijing also engaging in debt-for-equity lending and increasing each partner-country’s level of indebtedness. The latter has been especially significant when it comes to smaller non-EU countries in the Balkans such as Serbia, negatively impacting the region’s economy and its democratic institutions.

US policy analysts increasingly see the 17+1 project in the wider context of the PRC’s overall relationship with Europe. Washington has become wary of communist China becoming a “power in Europe”,

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and of the attendant exploitation of those countries that are in urgent need of FDI. Over the past three years a particular area of US concern has been China’s entry into European 5G networks and its access to digital infrastructure across the continent, with the strategic imperative of excluding Huawei from Europe’s emerging 5G infrastructure seen as a top priority for the United States.

WASHINGTON'S POSITION ON 5G

The overarching US view of Chinese penetration into Europe, including the 17+1 initiative, was expressed in no uncertain terms by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during his visit to Prague in August 2020, when he spoke of the critical need for all US allies and partners in Europe to embrace the Clean Network initiative, launched a month earlier and intended as the “Trump Administration’s comprehensive approach to guarding our citizens’ privacy and our companies’ most sensitive information from aggressive intrusions by malign actors, such as the CCP”.⁴ The Clean Network programme follows on the heels of the Clean Path initiative, announced by Pompeo in April 2020, aimed at ensuring secure 5G access for US facilities around the world, implemented under the provisions of the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act. In a nutshell, the question of digital security for the next-generation networks has of late been the principal lens through which the United States has viewed the 17+1 framework, communicating in no uncertain terms to its allies in Europe that allowing Huawei and ZTE to build or participate in their 5G networks runs counter to the US national interest and that of the NATO alliance as a whole.

The Clean Network focuses on five lines of effort: clean carrier, clean store, clean apps, clean cloud and clean cable—all of which are aimed at walling off the PRC from networks used by the United States

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and its allies, thereby making it critical for the future of US-European relations that the members of the 17+1 do not sign on to Huawei’s 5G. Decisions by individual countries whether or not to join the Clean Network initiative will have a lasting impact on their ability to access American networks, and thereby will inevitably impact on their long-term relationship with the US. This growing concern on Washington’s part was not only articulated by Pompeo during his recent visit to Central Europe, but has also been

reflected in analyses by US think-tanks. Indeed, the consensus on the future of Sino-American relations—which only a few years back aligned with the wider belief in the PRC’s “peaceful rise” and eventual integration in the liberal international order—has shifted to one which underscores cross-domain competition, including the growing risk of a US-China military confrontation in the Indo-Pacific.⁵

A LACK OF SHARED THREAT PERCEPTION

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sees China as both a military and an economic problem set, with the Trump administration moving decisively to ensure freedom of navigation, limit Beijing’s access to American R&D and impose badly needed reciprocity in trade and market access. On the other hand, Europe—while it recognises the nefarious impact of China and looks at it increasingly as a strategic competitor—nonetheless still sees the country as principally an economic challenge, and is seemingly intent on avoiding being drawn into the military dimension of the US-China great-power competition. Here all European-Chinese projects and interactions will inevitably attract renewed attention from Washington, including the future of the 17+1 framework, for national security and defence priorities are sure to dominate US priorities vis-à-vis China going forward.

Last but not least, the majority of European partners in the 17+1 initiative have thus far eschewed to an extent the values aspect of their relations with China. As the ideological dimension of great-power competition becomes increasingly pronounced going forward, it will become more difficult for countries in Central and Eastern Europe to disregard the human rights record of the Chinese communist regime. As the US takes a more direct approach to confronting China’s practices at home and its

geostrategic assertiveness abroad, CEE governments will need to weigh the benefit to them of continued economic engagement with China, especially in the area of 5G, and the impact such a policy will inevitably have on the overall tenor of their relations with Washington.

It is too early to say that the 17+1 China-CEE framework has already run its course, but it appears that, when considered against the backdrop of the national security priorities of the transatlantic community writ large, the grand expectations that accompanied it at its inception are unlikely to

become reality. Today, as Europe and the US grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic, the larger question of their economic and political relationship with the PRC has been less pronounced. However, once the worst has passed, the question of working with China and the extent to which the CCP regime can be trusted will become key topics of conversation within the transatlantic alliance, and it is unlikely that some of the allies will opt to go back to business as usual when it comes to the PRC.

ENDNOTES

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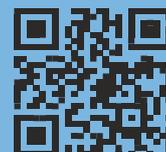
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