



China's Road to the Balkans: The Belt and Road Initiative and the Reconfiguration of Regional Relations

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Abstract. The rise of China as a political and economic actor in the Balkans marks a new stage in the region's international relations. Through bilateral initiatives with Balkan states, the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and participation in the China–Central and Eastern European Countries (China–CEEC) cooperation framework (formerly the "17+1" platform), Beijing has gained a visible degree of influence – primarily through infrastructure loans, direct investments, and instruments of cultural diplomacy. Considering that less than two decades ago China's involvement in the region was virtually non-existent, this transformation is significant.

Yet, after an initially ambitious phase, China's influence has evolved unevenly across the Balkans. This divergence reflects shifting attitudes within the United States, NATO, and the European Union toward China. The steady deterioration of U.S.–China relations – and, to a lesser extent, EU–China relations – has constrained Chinese investments, loans, and acquisitions in the region. The article examines China's completed and ongoing projects, the causes of suspended or abandoned initiatives, and the evolving policies of Balkan governments toward Beijing.

Grounded in structural realism, the study argues that the global balance of power directly shapes regional dynamics in the Balkans. Within an anarchic international system, where power is concentrated among major states, smaller countries possess limited agency and must adapt to systemic constraints. Thus, despite evident economic incentives for cooperation with China, many Balkan states avoid deeper engagement, as the potential political costs – particularly the risk of straining relations with the United States and the European Union – outweigh the anticipated economic gains.

Keywords: China, Balkans, Belt and Road Initiative, China–CEEC cooperation, regional relations, USA, EU, NATO

Balance of Power in International Relations and Regional Security of the Balkans

All Balkan countries are institutionally linked to the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Some are full members of both organizations – Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia – while others, such as Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, belong only to NATO. Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina remain outside NATO but hold candidate status for EU membership. Overall, the influence of Western actors on the regional security architecture of the Balkans has not been questioned during the past three decades; on the contrary, it has been decisive in shaping political outcomes across a range of issues. Western involvement proved crucial in organizing the peace processes on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, in guiding post-communist reforms across the Balkan states, and in promoting the integration of the region into broader European and transatlantic structures.

Geographically, the Balkans form an integral part of Europe. The term *South-eastern Europe* is often used to describe this area, encompassing a somewhat broader space. Yet debates persist over the precise boundaries of the Balkans and which countries should be included in the region. In the post-bipolar era, the Balkans have also become part of Europe in the political sense, as the influence of the EU and NATO expanded southeastward and regional actors gradually integrated into Western institutions and alliances. However, despite these strong and long-standing connections, new challenges appear to be emerging for both the EU and NATO in the region.

This study focuses on China's growing presence in the Balkans and examines the political and economic consequences of its engagement. The paper is structured into four parts. The introductory section outlines the theoretical and methodological framework and provides a concise overview of regional security in the Balkans. The second section traces the emergence of Chinese influence at the beginning of the twenty-first century and its subsequent expansion. The third section compares the trajectories of individual Balkan states in their cooperation with China and analyzes differences in their respective approaches. The final section presents the concluding observations and evaluates the validity of the proposed hypothesis.

The subject of this research is China's economic and political engagement in the Balkans – specifically, its investment projects, infrastructure loans, and related diplomatic initiatives – and how these are perceived both by regional actors and by the political West, represented primarily by the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The central research question asks: *Why and to what extent has China become a political, security, and economic challenge for the EU and NATO in the Balkan region?*

The study tests the hypothesis that China has already emerged as an external regional security actor whose projects and continuous engagement exert a significant influence on domestic political processes and the overall configuration of regional

relations. Consequently, the Balkans' attachment to the EU and NATO is gradually weakening, creating a strategic challenge for the political West.

This research employs discourse analysis, comparative methods, and a case study approach focused on the Balkan region. The selected case is particularly relevant, as it allows the hypothesis to be tested through the example of a region that has been almost fully integrated into the institutional structures of the European Union and NATO, yet remains exposed to the growing influence of an external actor such as China.

The deterioration of U.S.–China relations, visible since the second decade of the twenty-first century, along with the growing complexity of EU–China relations in the post-pandemic era – particularly after February 2022 and the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine – has led Washington and Brussels to view the expansion of Chinese influence in Southeast Europe with increasing concern. As a result, several Balkan states have begun to reduce the intensity and scope of their cooperation with Beijing, despite having benefited, to varying degrees, from Chinese investment and infrastructure initiatives.

According to the current official positions of the EU and NATO, it is still premature to describe China as a direct “threat” in the Balkans. Nonetheless, the trend of securitizing Chinese engagement in the region suggests that such a characterization may emerge in the near future.

It is now possible to speak quite confidently about a “Chinese challenge” to Euro-Atlantic interests. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg addressed this issue openly in his lecture at the Heritage Foundation in January 2024:

“China is clearly the biggest challenge we face. China is getting closer to us. We see them in Africa, we see them in the Arctic, we see them trying to control our critical infrastructure. The idea that we should focus on Russia while ignoring China – or vice versa – is senseless”¹.

Stoltenberg also drew a direct parallel between the current war in Ukraine and a potential future escalation around Taiwan. From NATO’s perspective, China’s behavior appears increasingly assertive, as it expands the geographical scope of its global presence and influence. The Balkans are no exception to this trend.

As early as 2018, Johannes Hahn, then European Commissioner for Enlargement, warned about China’s growing role in the Western Balkans and the risk that Beijing could turn regional states into “Trojan horses” within the European Union². Similarly, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel urged EU member states to pursue a unified foreign policy toward China, stressing that if Europe

¹ Speech by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the Heritage Foundation followed by audience Q&A. NATO. URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_222258.htm (accessed 20.10.2025).

² Heath R. & Gray A. 2018. Beware Chinese Trojan Horses in the Balkans, EU Warns. *Politico*. URL: <https://www.politico.eu/article/johannes-hahn-beware-chinese-trojan-horses-in-the-balkans-eu-warns-enlargement-politico-podcast/> (accessed 20.10.2025)

failed to develop a common strategy, Beijing would succeed in dividing it. In recent years, the European Union has increasingly begun to perceive China less as a partner and more as a systemic rival or even a potential threat.

Two main factors explain this shift. First, Western European economies fear growing Chinese competition in Central and Eastern Europe (CEEC). When China's involvement in the region was limited to low-cost goods such as textiles and small-scale retail ventures, it posed little concern. Today, however, China exports sophisticated industrial products to CEEC markets – often at lower prices than their Western European equivalents – creating direct competition. Furthermore, joint ventures between Chinese investors and CEEC governments have produced companies capable of competing in Western European markets, further amplifying anxiety in the EU's core economies.

Second, the deepening of political ties between China and CEEC countries has altered the region's perception of Beijing. While the EU continues to emphasize political conditionality – linking relations with China to human rights, media freedom, and democratic governance – CEEC governments generally avoid such contentious issues or downplay them in their bilateral dialogue. This divergence undermines the coherence of the Common Foreign and Security Policy³, as it weakens the EU's ability to maintain a unified stance toward China and exposes internal divisions within Europe itself.

The dynamics of China's growing influence in the Balkans, the mechanisms through which its presence has become entrenched, and the potential consequences of this process have already been widely examined in academic literature. Ana Krstинovska notes that while "China has been using economic pressure to make countries around the world refrain from stepping over some of its 'red lines', the Western Balkan region serves as an example of a rather opposite trend. Serbia's experience showcases that those countries that are willing to align closely with China's (geo-) political interests are likely to be rewarded with economic benefits"⁴.

Similarly, Branislav Staniček and Simona Tarpová observe that "China has endeavoured to portray itself as a strategic investor who does not intervene in internal political affairs and is willing to close its eyes to some aspects such as state aid, corruption, or labour laws. An early focus on transport infrastructure (through Piraeus and Belgrade to reach Duisburg) has expanded to industry, energy, and communications/IT. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) serves as the main framework for expanding China's economic presence in the region and enables it to access key land and maritime routes" (Staniček and Tarpová 2022: 1).

³ Proroković D. 2017. China – CEE Relations Need New Strategies. *China Daily*. 27.11. P. 9.

⁴ Krstинovska A. 2024. Western Balkans' Economic Cooperation with China: Between 'Positive' Conditionality and Economic Coercion. *China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe*. URL: <https://chinaobservers.eu/western-balkans-economic-cooperation-with-china-between-positive-conditionality-and-economic-coercion/> (accessed 20.10. 2025).

Dimitrios Stroikos recalls Chinese President Xi Jinping's description of China's investment in the port of Piraeus as the "dragon's head" (*longtou*) of the Mediterranean (Stroikos 2022: 603–604). In a similar vein, Vladimir Shopov emphasizes that "China has expanded its presence in the region subtly but at an impressive speed. While it may not have an explicit strategy on the Western Balkans, China has developed a consistent approach to engaging with countries there. This strategic intent does not yield uniform outcomes—owing to historical, geographic, and elite-level differences—but it reveals a clear direction of travel. In all, China's presence in the Western Balkans is no longer a novelty but a source of real influence"⁵.

Researchers at the Clingendael Institute conclude that "China's increased engagement with the non-EU countries of the Western Balkans affects the EU's ability to shape both the policy context (that is, the parameters of choices available to another country) and the conduct (that is, concrete actions or decisions) of governments in the region"⁶.

According to Valbona Zeneli, "while China's increased footprint in the region may not mount a fundamental challenge to the European integration process and regional stability, its 'state-capitalism' model could nevertheless undermine the EU's normative power. China's growing influence may threaten European business interests and reinforce practices that distort the EU's efforts to promote Western norms, democratic standards, and anti-corruption reforms"⁷.

Vessela Tcherneva warns that this trend "poses a severe security risk to the EU. Governments in the Western Balkans are more likely to seek loans or investments from partners who do not attach conditions related to democratic performance. Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro have already sought alternative partnerships with countries such as Russia, Turkey, and China, whose authoritarian influence is likely to further weaken their democracies and shift their geopolitical allegiances away from the EU"⁸.

Finally, Staniček and Tarpová also interpret China's deepening engagement as a direct challenge to the European Union: "For countries in the region, the lack of conditionality for Chinese investments makes them more attractive. This, however, undermines EU conditionality by reducing the effectiveness of proposed reforms and

⁵ Shopov V. 2021. A Decade of Patience: How China Became a Power in the Western Balkans. ECFR. P. 26. URL: <https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/Decade-of-patience-How-China-became-a-power-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf> (accessed 20.10.2025).

⁶ Zweers W., Shopov V., Van der Putten F., Petkova M. and Lemstra M. 2020. China and the EU in the Western Balkans. A zero-sum game? *The Clingendael Institute*.

⁷ Zeneli V. 2023. Chinese Influence in the Western Balkans and Its Impact on the Region's European Union Integration Process. *Vienna: Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen*. URL: <https://www.iwm.at/blog/chinese-influence-in-the-western-balkans-and-its-impact-on-the-regions-european-union> (accessed 20.10.2025).

⁸ Tcherneva V. 2023. Before It's Too Late: How the EU Should Support the Western Balkans' EU Accession. ECFR. URL: <https://ecfr.eu/article/growing-pains-how-the-eu-should-support-the-western-balkans-eu-accession/> (accessed 20.10.2025).

standards, particularly regarding social rights, sustainability, and environmental protection. Other aspects of Beijing's activities in the region could also hinder the Balkan countries' prospects of joining the bloc”⁹.

Similar arguments are advanced by scholars who view the growing Chinese presence in Europe as a challenge to U.S. strategic interests. As Brattberg et al. (2021: 5) note,

“China’s rapid global rise has created new challenges for the United States, the European Union (EU), and individual European governments. Beijing provides an alternative to the West and offers ready-made solutions to countries seeking economic development. Yet China also takes advantage of local vulnerabilities and weaknesses—such as fragile state institutions, elite capture, and weak civil society—to exert its own economic, political, and soft power influence. One region where Beijing has made significant inroads is Southeastern, Central, and Eastern Europe. For China, this region is particularly interesting as an entry point into the rest of Europe for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with growth opportunities for Chinese companies and with more favorable regulatory and economic conditions than in Western Europe.”

In a similar vein, analysts at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) caution U.S. policymakers that

“China’s economic activities in the Western Balkans have helped solidify external support for its foreign policy objectives, including recognition of its One China policy and defense of its human rights abuses, international legal violations, and predatory economic behaviors. They have also provided a launch pad and showcase for Chinese companies in key industries, increasing their access to the European Union and providing a platform to shape technology and standards adoption” (Conley et al. 2021: 2).

Likewise, Ivan Lidarev observes that “the Balkans have once again become an arena of great power competition, this time between China and the United States. For Washington, Beijing’s inroads in Southeast Europe have become part of the broader U.S.–China rivalry, which, after years of intensifying competition, escalated into full-blown strategic confrontation in 2017—what some analysts have described as a ‘new Cold War’”¹⁰.

The present study therefore draws upon the theoretical framework of structural realism, which interprets international politics as a system shaped by the distribution of power among major states. When the first wave of Chinese investment reached the Balkans in the early 2000s – accompanied by frequent visits from Chinese state and party officials – neither NATO nor the EU viewed these developments as a geopolitical concern. On the contrary, Beijing’s initiatives were largely welcomed by Balkan governments seeking new sources of investment and diversification of external partnerships.

⁹ Stanicek B. and Tarpova S. 2022. China’s Strategic Interests in the Western Balkans. Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service. P. 5. URL: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI\(2022\)733558_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733558/EPRS_BRI(2022)733558_EN.pdf) (accessed 20.10.2025).

¹⁰ Lidarev I. 2023. China–US Competition in the Balkans: Impact, Regional Responses, and Larger Implications. LSE. URL: <https://lseideas.medium.com/china-us-competition-in-the-balkans-impact-regional-responses-and-larger-implications-dcab70837933> (accessed 20.10. 2025).

However, by the mid-2010s this perception had changed dramatically. Within a decade, China's expanding economic and political footprint began to be interpreted as a systemic challenge to the existing balance of power. In realist terms, China has gradually moved from the role of an economic partner to that of a broader systemic actor influencing the regional balance of power. This transformation mirrors broader shifts in the global structure of power and explains why, from the mid-2010s onward, Beijing's growing involvement in Southeast Europe increasingly triggered alarm in both Washington and Brussels.

In the unipolar structure of the international system during the first decade of the twenty-first century, the United States, together with its strategic partners – foremost among them the European Union – effectively shaped global politics and exercised decisive influence over international security. Within this context, the growing involvement of non-Western actors, such as China in the Balkans, was not perceived as a challenge. Chinese engagement at the time was largely interpreted as the pursuit of legitimate economic interests, while official visits by Chinese state and party representatives were welcomed as assurances that these economic projects would be realized.

However, perceptions of China began to shift for two main reasons. First, since the second decade of the 21st century, the structure of the international system has become increasingly multipolar, and the unchallenged dominance of the United States has gradually eroded. A new balance of power has been taking shape, with China playing an active role in this process. Second, developments following February 2022 deepened Western concerns. China's refusal to impose sanctions on Russia and its consistent abstentions on UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Moscow's actions in Ukraine have underscored its unwillingness to align with the Western position. Although Beijing continues to emphasize the principle of territorial integrity for all UN member states, its stance on Ukraine demonstrates a pragmatic adjustment of this principle in line with broader strategic interests.

From this, it can be inferred that China's strategic partnership with Russia remains intact and is viewed by Beijing as a key element in preserving the global balance of power vis-à-vis the political West. In structural realist terms, the maintenance of systemic equilibrium – achieved through strategic cooperation with Moscow – appears to take precedence over the rigid application of China's long-standing foreign policy principles, originally formulated in the context of the Taiwan issue.

Equally noteworthy are the initial instances of joint Chinese–Russian diplomatic action on political matters in the Balkans. For the past quarter-century, both countries have consistently defended Serbia's position on Kosovo, aligning this stance with their shared insistence on the inviolability of the borders of UN member states since 1999. Yet, a significant turning point came in July 2021, when China and Russia jointly addressed the UN Security Council on the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina – marking the first time in history that China had proposed a Security Council resolution concerning a European state. The draft resolution called for the closure of the Office of the High Representative (OHR) by 2022. Although the proposal was rejected due

to opposition from Western members, including the three permanent representatives of the Security Council, the initiative itself carried symbolic weight, signaling a clear Sino-Russian convergence on Balkan political issues.

Further coordination was observed in November 2021, when China and Russia again acted jointly to block Christian Schmidt, the newly appointed High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, from addressing the Security Council, arguing that his appointment—made without Council approval—lacked legitimacy. In the subsequent Security Council resolution renewing the annual mandate of the European Union Force (EUFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for the first time in years, the High Representative was not mentioned at all. This omission, while procedural on the surface, effectively reflected Beijing and Moscow's growing ability to shape the agenda and discourse surrounding post-conflict governance in the Balkans.

Of course, it is premature to speak of any harmonization of Chinese and Russian strategic interests in the Balkans, and time will reveal whether such alignment is even possible. Nevertheless, their joint diplomatic initiatives in the region are highly indicative of a broader trend. Unlike China, which has become a significant investor across multiple sectors, Russia's presence in the Balkans – with the notable exception of the energy domain (including the Turkish Stream pipeline and the privatization of refineries in Bulgaria, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina) – has not been accompanied by substantial strategic investments. Moscow's influence has instead relied on political initiatives (particularly concerning the Kosovo question and engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina) and traditional cultural and religious ties with Balkan societies such as those in Montenegro, Bulgaria, and North Macedonia, and, to a lesser extent, Croatia and Slovenia.

From an economic standpoint, most Balkan states therefore risked little by imposing sanctions on Russia after February 2022. Faced with a choice between demonstrating loyalty to the EU and NATO or preserving symbolic cultural ties with Russia, they opted overwhelmingly for the former. The only notable exception is Serbia, whose political alignment with Moscow is closely tied to its stance on Kosovo and to the status of the Republika Srpska entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

China and Russia have thus pursued distinct approaches to projecting their presence in the Balkans. Beijing's strategy has centered on economic engagement and infrastructure diplomacy, while Moscow's has relied on political influence and identity-based networks. Consequently, it remains highly uncertain whether the long-term relationship between the two powers in the region will evolve toward strategic cooperation or diverge into strategic competition.

In the short term, however, and from the perspective of structural realism, there is little reason to expect open competition between China and Russia in the Balkans as long as both continue to prioritize the establishment of a global balance of power vis-à-vis the political West. Over the past two decades, neither Beijing nor Moscow has issued any official statement criticizing the other regarding regional security in the Balkans. Even at the rhetorical level, there are no indications of tension or rivalry in their respective Balkan policies.

That said, from the standpoint of China's economic interests, the deterioration of bilateral relations between most Balkan states and Russia poses a degree of political risk for Beijing. Any joint political initiative with Moscow could now be interpreted as undermining China's carefully cultivated image as a pragmatic and economically driven actor. The Bosnia and Herzegovina case of 2021, while illustrative of limited Sino-Russian coordination, remains an isolated precedent – and one that occurred before February 2022.

The expansion of Chinese influence in the Balkans has entered an exponential phase. Since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2012, the number of Chinese investors, the scale of investments, and the frequency of high-level visits by state and party officials have steadily increased. In its efforts to establish a balance of power vis-à-vis the political West, China relies primarily on economic instruments, and to a lesser extent, on political tools, to consolidate its presence in the region. Beijing's strategy in the Balkans represents a consistent application of the principle of self-help, aimed at strengthening its international position and contributing to a broader global rebalancing of power relative to the United States and its allies.

Certainly, the Balkans do not constitute the central arena of China's strategic competition with Western actors, nor are they the most significant region in terms of shaping the global balance of power. Yet, the processes described above are clearly observable in this regional context, offering a revealing microcosm of China's global behavior.

Examining this phenomenon through the lens of the present hypothesis confirms the theoretical postulates of Kenneth Waltz, and thereby contributes to the empirical validation of structural realism. The study also demonstrates how changes in the global distribution of power affect regional security dynamics, primarily through the transformation of perceptions among both regional and external actors.

Research on regional security requires a multi-vector analytical approach, encompassing the perceptions and strategic calculations of all actors involved and modeling security dynamics accordingly. A single-vector approach, based solely on the assumption that the Balkans will "remain in the firm embrace" of NATO and the EU, merely because they are currently aligned with the political West, risks producing a distorted and self-congratulatory narrative. Such analytical simplification obscures the evolving complexity of regional alignments and leads to erroneous forecasts.

It is evident that China – acting, once again, in strategic partnership with Russia – has grown dissatisfied with its previous position within the Western-centric international order and with the subordinate role assigned to non-Western powers. By applying the principle of self-help, China has undertaken economic and political initiatives designed to reshape the existing order and to lay the foundations of a new, multipolar system. As Janković and Mitić (2024: 124) observe:

"The U.S. and the EU are two great powers seeking to preserve the leading roles they have enjoyed for decades, with the U.S. emerging as the clear leader of this camp. Russia and China are challengers who, together, have eroded and continue to erode the previ-

ous structure of the world order, which is becoming multipolar. Beyond challenging, in the current phase of transition, China and Russia are also establishing the bases for multipolar regional orders with different hierarchies. They both support the sovereign, Westphalian arrangement in international politics, while the U.S., followed by the EU, seeks to contain these changes. Both Western actors criticize sovereignty and aim to halt the transformation toward multipolarity, viewing it as something negative”.

This global dynamic inevitably shapes regional security in the Balkans. In this context, regional actors satisfied with the existing Western-dominated order seek to remain firmly integrated within it. They perceive themselves as part of the political West and have thus reduced the scope and intensity of cooperation with China, even when such cooperation could provide tangible economic benefits. Conversely, regional actors dissatisfied with the existing order continue to deepen their engagement with China, anticipating new advantages from the emerging balance of power.

Table 1. New world order and great powers

Great power	Posture related to challenged world order	Preferred world order	Key strategic positioning
US	Defensive	Western-led RBO	Defend the RBO, contain challengers
EU	Defensive	Western-led RBO	Resilience, transatlantic reliance, geopolitical soul-search
Russia	Offensive	Multipolar	Multipolarity and sovereignty
China	Offensive	Multipolar	New global initiatives for the “community of shared future for mankind”

Source: Janković and Mitić 2024: 124.

The Arrival of China in the Balkans and the Expansion of Chinese Influence

China's involvement in the Balkans is not entirely without precedent. Between 1958 and 1978, Beijing established a special strategic partnership with Albania, which represented one of the most unusual alliances of the Cold War era. During this period, Albania acted as a vocal advocate of Chinese positions at the United Nations, while China provided substantial assistance for Albania's industrialization. However, the normalization of relations between China and the United States in the early 1970s led to a gradual cooling of Sino-Albanian ties.

Albanian leader Enver Hoxha sharply criticized Beijing's foreign policy realignment, writing:

“When China took its pro-American and anti-Soviet stance, this policy was manifested in all its relations with the foreign world. Imperialist America, the fascists Pinochet and Franco, Tito and Ceausescu, renegades and adventurers, German revanchists and Italian fascists are its friends” (Hoxha 1979: 166–167).

This shift marked the beginning of the end of the Albanian–Chinese partnership.

Three decades later, China returned to the Balkans – but with a fundamentally different approach and goals. Beijing was no longer interested in cultivating a privileged relationship with a single country; instead, it sought to engage the entire region through

diversified economic, infrastructural, and political initiatives. The emergence of China as a regional actor represents a qualitatively new phenomenon in Balkan international relations.

Historically, since the nineteenth century, the main non-regional powers active in the Balkans had been Austria-Hungary, Germany (Prussia), France, Russia (and later the Soviet Union), Great Britain, and the United States – while Turkey, though geographically adjacent, occupies an ambiguous position, often regarded as both a Balkan and a non-Balkan power. Apart from the earlier episode of cooperation between communist Albania and China, the other Balkan states had only limited and superficial contact with Beijing. Thus, just as China was largely unfamiliar to the Balkans, so too did the region remain *terra incognita* to Chinese policymakers.

This began to change after 2012, with the launch of the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative. Contacts between China and the Balkan states intensified rapidly, followed by what some authors have described as an eruption of activity (Dimitrijević and Ping 2017). As Đorđević and Lađevac (2016: 61) explain:

“The One Belt, One Road strategy represents a plan that consists of land and maritime routes starting in Central and Eastern China and ending in Venice, passing through Asia, Africa, and Europe, and traversing all the seas and an ocean along the way. Beyond China’s borders, the entire Silk Road spans three continents—Asia, Europe, and Africa.”

Table 2. Land and Maritime routes – Belt and Road Initiative

Land routes	Countries (directly) involved
New Eurasian Land Bridge (NELB)	Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Poland, Germany, The Netherlands
China–Mongolia–Russia Corridor (CMR)	China, Mongolia, Russia
China – Central Asia – West Asia Corridor (CAWA)	China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Turkey
China–Indochina Peninsula Corridor (ICP)	China to Singapore
Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM)	Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar
China – Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)	China, Pakistan
Maritime routes	Countries (directly) involved
China – Southeast Asia Route	China, Vietnam, Singapore, Myanmar, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia
China – South Asia Route	China, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Oman
China – Middle East & East Africa Route	China, Malaysia, Singapore, UAE, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, Maldives, Eritrea, Sudan, Tanzania, Kenya
Europe Route	China, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Saudi Arabia, Greece, Italy, Spain
Arctic Route (Northern Sea Route)	China, North Korea, Russia

Source: Author according to: *Working Paper Series*, No. 172. Bangkok: Asia – Pacific Research and Training Network on Trade – UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific¹¹.

¹¹ Ramasamy B., Yeung M., Utoktham C., Duval Y. 2017. Trade and Trade Facilitation along the Belt and Road Initiative Corridors. *Working Paper Series*. №172. Bangkok: Asia – Pacific Research and Training Network on Trade – UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

he Balkan Peninsula forms an integral segment of the European (Maritime) Route within China's Belt and Road Initiative. During his visit to Greece, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang described the port of Piraeus as "a pearl in the Mediterranean Sea" and emphasized that it could become "one of the most competitive ports in the world... a gateway for China to Europe."¹² The region's strategic location is reinforced by its connectivity to Western Turkey through the China–Asia–West Asia (CAWA) route and to Central Europe through the New Eurasian Land Bridge (NELB) corridor. A direct railway connection between Jinan (Shandong Province) and Belgrade (Serbia) was established in September 2019, symbolizing the deepening infrastructural integration between China and Southeast Europe¹³.

Despite limited historical interaction, the Balkan countries soon became active participants in China's expanding Eurasian framework. At Beijing's initiative, they joined the China–Central and Eastern European Countries (China–CEEC) cooperation format – initially known as "16+1" and later "17+1" following Greece's inclusion – and became part of the BRI network.

Over the past fifteen years, a substantial body of research has been devoted to analyzing this cooperation. Until the late 2010s – roughly before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic – the dominant academic narrative emphasized the advantages and qualitative progress brought about by engagement with China. Why was this cooperation initially perceived in such a positive light? Despite their strong institutional ties with NATO and the European Union and the frequent rhetoric of having "no alternative to Euro-Atlantic integration," the Balkan states have remained on the periphery of the Western world, facing persistent developmental challenges.

The long-standing "irreversible journey" toward the West has yielded mixed results. Scholarly literature on the European integration of the Balkans – virtually a separate academic discipline grounded in liberal internationalism (Dimitrijević and Lađevac 2009) – is vast, with thousands of studies extolling the benefits of integration. Undeniably, the economic performance of the Balkan states has improved since 1990. According to data from the IMF and U.S. government institutions, nominal GDP increased fourfold in Albania, 3.5 times in Romania and Greece, and almost doubled in aggregate for the successor states of Yugoslavia (including Slovenia and the Kosovo entity). In Bulgaria, GDP per capita measured by purchasing power parity (PPP) rose by approximately 2.5 times (Proroković 2021: 7).

At first glance, these figures suggest that living standards in the Balkans have improved substantially compared to the pre-1990 period. Yet, the region is simultaneously characterized by intense depopulation and mass emigration. The population de-

¹² Maltezou R. 2014. Greece Seeks Role as China's Gateway to Europe. *Reuters*. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/greece-china-assets/update-1-greece-seeks-role-as-chinas-gateway-to-europe-idUSL6N0P14DW20140620> (accessed 20.10.2025).

¹³ Cvetković L. 2019. Prvi teretni voz iz Kine putuje ka Srbiji. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*. URL: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-kina-teretni-voz/30193560.html> (accessed 20.10.2025).

cline is driven not only by low birth rates but primarily by accelerating migration flows toward Western Europe (Proroković 2021: 8). The cases of Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia are particularly paradoxical: despite being full members of both the EU and NATO, these countries continue to experience significant population outflows. Did they join the Euro-Atlantic community only to witness further demographic decline? If economic indicators show growth, why are so many citizens leaving?

The answer lies not in absolute measures—such as GDP growth, investment volume, or average income—but in relative performance. When compared to other economies, the region's progress appears modest. During the same period, nominal GDP grew approximately 3.5 times in the United Kingdom, 4 times in the United States, and 4.5 times in Austria. Thus, Western economies have expanded faster than those of the Balkans, widening the developmental gap that already existed during the Cold War. At the same time, new actors – primarily in Asia – have surpassed the Balkan states, further diminishing their relevance in the global economy.

Balkan societies aspired to become part of the collective West, and their political elites actively pursued membership in EU and NATO structures. Yet, despite achieving these objectives, the region has largely remained the periphery of the Western world—economically dependent, demographically shrinking, and politically constrained. In this context, China's arrival has been interpreted by many as an opportunity for economic diversification and as a potential alternative source of modernization, even if that alternative challenges established Western hierarchies.

Announcements of large, often ambitious infrastructure projects and discussions about China's strategic investments have been widely perceived in the Balkans as a means to narrow the developmental and technological gap with the West (Penza and Oechler-Sincai 2015; Nurdun 2023). Cooperation with China appeared to open opportunities that had previously been unavailable, which explains the prevailing optimism and, at times, excessive enthusiasm with which local policymakers and analysts described the potential benefits of engagement—including prospects for joint ventures in third markets, such as in Africa (Ivanov 2021). As Kandilarov (2015: 48) noted, “the inclusion of the ‘16+1’ cooperation framework into the concept of the New Silk Road (One Belt, One Road) is the most important and promising element for the CEEC. The region is predestined to be the Road’s ‘hub’ and can be used during its construction, all the more so because the individual states and cities of the region have been aware of the opportunities connected to it”.

In the early stages of the BRI's implementation, China was often perceived as a “benevolent actor”, bringing capital, technology, and solutions without political conditions or ideological demands. For this reason, some scholars argued that cooperation with China was not, and did not have to be, incompatible with strong institutional and security ties to NATO and the European Union. This view was also reflected among regional decision-makers, who initially saw no contradiction between their Euro-Atlantic commitments and pragmatic cooperation with Beijing (Hoxha 2018). The logic of such a position was straightforward: during that same period, China was expanding

cooperation not only with the EU but also with the United States. Hence, the question was frequently raised: *why should engagement with China be considered harmful or inappropriate for the Balkan states if it is not for Germany or the United States?*

As a result, Chinese influence grew rapidly – first and most visibly in the economic sphere, and later, though more gradually, in the political domain. Numerous infrastructure projects were launched with the support of Chinese loans and contractors, shaping what appeared to be a new development dynamic in the region.

However, from the late 2010s – and especially after the COVID-19 pandemic and the events of February 2022 – the narrative of the “benevolent China” began to shift. The growth of Chinese influence in the Balkans increasingly became the subject of critical reassessment (Kokoromytis and Chryssogelos 2022). This change was influenced by the region’s deep institutional attachment to NATO and the EU, as well as by new U.S.-led initiatives. As Habova (2022: 26) observes, “no synergy is possible between the Chinese and the U.S.-backed Three Seas initiatives as they have different approaches and visions for the region. The 16+1 Riga declaration proclaims that the aim of the initiative is to contribute to closer EU–China relations. The aim of the U.S.-backed format is to build walls against China and Russia.”

The altered international environment has demonstrated that strong alignment with the Euro-Atlantic community also carries strategic costs. Parallel to the earlier optimism, more cautious and pessimistic assessments have emerged, warning of the potential risks associated with deepening dependence on Chinese capital and political influence. As a result, policy-makers in several Balkan countries have begun to distance themselves from Beijing, adopting a more reserved and selective approach to cooperation.

Relations between China and the Balkan states: From big announcements to moderate results

The deterioration of U.S.–China relations has significantly contributed to the emergence of a new discourse in the Balkans. Within just a decade, Chinese influence has expanded and partially taken root, making China an established actor in regional security. The Balkans have thus become one of the arenas through which the global balance of power is being negotiated and expressed.

This shift in discourse has also entailed a more assertive U.S. approach aimed at curbing or displacing Chinese influence, leveraging the strong institutional and security ties of the Balkan states with NATO and the European Union. While China initially used the multilateral China–Central and Eastern European Countries (China–CEEC) format—formerly known as the 17+1 – as a coordinating framework or “roof structure,” it pursued most of its initiatives through bilateral arrangements, tailoring programs and projects to individual national contexts. As a result, Chinese influence has manifested differently across the Balkan states, though it initially concentrated on infrastructure and energy-sector investments or investment announcements.

In Albania, the two most significant Chinese investments were associated with the development of the Patos-Marinza oil field – the largest onshore oil field in continental Europe – and the ten-year concession for the management of Tirana International Airport, granted to China Everbright Limited and Friedmann Pacific Asset Management. The concession, however, lasted only from 2016 to 2020, ending after a dispute between the Albanian government and the Chinese consortium, which subsequently sold its shares to the Albanian Kastrati Group¹⁴. According to public statements by the Shanghai-listed Geo-Jade Petroleum in 2016, more than USD 3.5 billion was spent on purchasing and developing Albania's oil sector (Musabelliu 2022: 4).

Nevertheless, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, reflecting on the tenth anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative, described its economic impact as “equal to zero.”¹⁵ The paradox of this statement – where USD 3.5 billion effectively “equals zero” – is rooted in Albania's hesitation since 2016 to deepen cooperation with China, particularly after the deterioration of U.S.–China relations during the Trump administration. As Cela (2020: 11) notes, “there is a visible hesitation on the side of Albanian authorities to go deeper in the cooperation with China.” This shift became evident when Albania joined the U.S.-led Clean Network initiative, banning Chinese companies from participating in its digital infrastructure projects, including 5G network development (U.S. Embassy in Albania 2020).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Chinese financial institutions provided loans for the construction of the Banja Luka – Prijedor highway and the Stanari thermal power plant. Yet the most ambitious endeavor – a “decade-long deal” valued at over USD 1 billion for the construction of a new unit at the Tuzla thermal power plant – was halted. Although the national legislature approved the loan agreement with Chinese banks in 2019, the project was first postponed during the pandemic and subsequently abandoned in the post-pandemic period. Officially, the decision was justified by environmental concerns that needed to be addressed before implementation.

It is particularly notable that Chinese-funded projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been concentrated in the Republika Srpska, the Serbian entity, whereas no comparable projects have been realized in the Bosniak-Croat Federation, despite the existence of ratified bilateral agreements. This asymmetry underscores the political selectivity of China's engagement and highlights the intersection between economic diplomacy and intra-state political divisions within Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The government of North Macedonia – at that time still officially named the Republic of Macedonia – began engaging ambitiously with Chinese partners under Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski in 2013. This cooperation resulted in loans amounting to

¹⁴ CAPA. 2021. Albanian Company Takes on the Concession for Tirana Rinas Airport. *Center for Aviation*. URL: <https://centre-foraviation.com/analysis/reports/albanian-company-takes-on-the-concession-for-tirana-rinas-airport-548563> (accessed 20.10.2025).

¹⁵ Taylo A. 2023. Albanian PM: No Economic Benefits from Chinese Cooperation. *Euractiv*. URL: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/albanian-pm-no-economic-benefits-from-chinese-cooperation/> (accessed 20.10.2025).

approximately USD 900 million for the construction of two major highways: the Mladinovci–Štip and Kičevo–Ohrid routes¹⁶. For Skopje, these projects were of strategic importance, aimed at improving transport infrastructure and enhancing the tourism potential of Lake Ohrid, one of the country's key economic assets.

From China's perspective, North Macedonia occupies an important position in the envisioned railway corridor stretching from Athens to Budapest, passing through Skopje and Belgrade. In 2014, the governments of China, Serbia, Hungary, and Macedonia signed an agreement on the modernization of regional rail traffic, with the intention of extending the Budapest–Belgrade railway southward toward Macedonia and Greece, creating a continuous north–south transport axis. This corridor was expected to connect the port of Piraeus with major transport hubs in Central Europe, forming part of the New Eurasian Land Bridge (NELB) within the Belt and Road Initiative. As Stanzel (2016: 1) observed, the Central and Eastern European region "is attractive to China thanks to its strategic geographical position for the New Silk Road project, its high-skilled yet cheap labor, and its open trade and investment environment."¹⁷

However, the change of government in Skopje in 2017 led to the suspension of many Chinese projects. The new ruling coalition under Zoran Zaev prioritized NATO membership and closer alignment with the European Union, effectively relegating relations with China to a secondary position.

China's interest in developing the aforementioned strategic corridor is understandable in light of its existing investments in Greece, Serbia, and Hungary. Since 2016, the China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) has been the majority owner of the port of Piraeus. Given the port's size and strategic location, Chinese influence in Greece has extended beyond the economic and commercial domains to encompass political and security dimensions as well (Bo, Karpathiotaki, and Changzheng 2018). At a time when Greece was struggling with the Eurozone crisis and widespread anti-EU sentiment, Chinese investors presented themselves as providers of "rescue solutions." However, these investments were accompanied by political implications, which have become increasingly visible and subject to critical debate in recent years (Stroikos 2024).

Together with Hungary and Serbia, Chinese partners have been working since 2014 on the modernization of the Belgrade–Budapest railway corridor. Although the project has experienced delays – particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic – it is expected to be completed by the end of 2025. Serbia has long been open and receptive to cooperation with China – virtually since 2009 – and the partnership extends well beyond the infrastructure and energy sectors. The Chinese mining company Zijin and

¹⁶ Petrushevska D. 2024. Despite Delay and Scandal, Chinese Firm Wins More Work in North Macedonia. *Balkan Insight*. URL: <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/06/11/despite-delay-and-scandal-chinese-firm-wins-more-work-in-north-macedonia/> (accessed 20.10.2025).

¹⁷ Stanzel A. 2016. China's Investment in INFLUENCE: the future of 16 + 1 Cooperation. *China Analysis*. Brussels: European Council on Foreign relations. URL: https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/China_Analysis_Sixteen_Plus_One.pdf (accessed 20.10.2025).

steel producer Hesteel are now among Serbia's largest exporters, alongside numerous other Chinese enterprises, including MeiTa, Linglong, and Minth, which together generate a substantial share of Serbia's GDP.

Overall, Serbia's cooperation with China is both deep and multifaceted. During Xi Jinping's visit to Belgrade in May 2024, the two sides signed a Joint Statement that elevated their relationship from a strategic partnership to what Beijing termed a "Community of Shared Future for Mankind." As Jean-Pierre Cabestan notes, this concept represents "a kind of comprehensive and difficult-to-dispute, yet ultimately ambiguous formula whose main purpose is to gauge the willingness of partners to align with China. It is a symbol of diplomatic conformity that matters greatly to Beijing but less to its partners. Many fall into the trap of overlooking that it is a tool for promoting China's influence and reinforcing its symbolic and rhetorical power. It also serves as a strategy to legitimize the Chinese political system and blur the ideological distinctions between China's authoritarian regime and democratic systems."¹⁸

While the practical implications of this Joint Statement remain unclear, its symbolic significance is undeniable. It demonstrates the depth of Serbia's political alignment with China, positioning Belgrade as Beijing's most reliable partner in the Balkans and underscoring the growing intertwining of economic cooperation and political symbolism in China's regional strategy.

This interpretation is reinforced by the statement of Chinese President Xi Jinping:

*"We jointly announced that we will build a community between China and Serbia with a shared future in a new era, which will open a new chapter in the history of Sino-Serbian relations. Serbia is the first European country where we will build a community with a shared future."*¹⁹

As Lalić and Filipović (2024: 127) note, within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), bilateral projects between China and Serbia have focused on infrastructure and energy, as well as on industrial cooperation—notably in steel production, highway construction, mining, railways, the automotive industry, and urban water and sewage systems. Major undertakings include the Hungary–Serbia railway, the Smederevo Iron and Steel Plant, the Danube Corridor motorway, the Belgrade wastewater treatment system, and the exploitation of copper and gold deposits in the Bor mine.

In economic terms, China has become Serbia's second-largest trading partner. Bilateral trade reached USD 3.55 billion in 2022, marking a 10.1% increase compared to the previous year. This total included USD 2.18 billion in imports from China and USD 1.37 billion in exports to China. In 2023, the two countries signed a historic Free Trade Agreement (FTA), further institutionalizing their economic relationship (Lalić and Filipović 2024: 127–128).

¹⁸ Andđelković N. 2024. Šta je kineska zajednička budućnost, na koju se Srbija obavezala. BBC. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-68984751> (accessed 20.10.2025).

¹⁹ China, Serbia Sign 28 Cooperation Documents. 2024. Haberler. URL: <https://en.haberler.com/china-serbia-sign-28-cooperation-documents-1948545/> (accessed 20.10.2025).

Between 2010 and 2022, Chinese investments in Serbia amounted to approximately USD 17.3 billion, with an additional USD 1.37 billion recorded in 2023 – a cumulative total exceeding USD 18.5 billion. Meanwhile, as of 2023, Serbia's total debt to Chinese banks stood at EUR 3.7 billion, the largest portion – EUR 2.43 billion – owed to the Export – Import Bank of China. An additional EUR 1.44 billion in borrowing was planned for 2024²⁰.

In contrast, Chinese investors have shown less interest in Bulgaria following the consolidation of cooperation with Greece, Serbia, and Hungary. The persistent emphasis of successive Bulgarian governments, led by Boyko Borisov, on the country's Euro-Atlantic identity during the 2010s was not conducive to deepening engagement with Beijing. Nonetheless, this period was accompanied by ambitious announcements regarding bilateral cooperation (Liu 2022).

As Shopov (2022) observes, "Beijing has also utilised various state-to-state mechanisms to cultivate relations with the party. For instance, in 2018, the Bulgarian Development Bank and the China Development Bank signed a €1.5 billion framework lending agreement under the BRI. In December 2018, the China Development Bank transferred €300 million to the Bulgarian bank. This sum was gradually disbursed without any public disclosure of the list of beneficiaries. The funds were channelled into general facility lending lines with no clear, structured bilateral project framework."²¹

Although the political environment in Bulgaria has been less favorable for the expansion of Chinese influence, Beijing has not abandoned its interest in cooperation. Instead, it appears to be laying the groundwork for potential future acquisitions and investment opportunities, demonstrating its long-term and adaptive approach to engagement in the Balkans.

Despite numerous optimistic announcements regarding the mutually beneficial scope of bilateral cooperation, no comparable activity has materialized in Romania (Nicolae 2021). Both Bulgaria and Romania were among the first countries to recognize the People's Republic of China in 1949, which Beijing historically regarded as a symbolic advantage for strengthening cooperation—an argument once extended to Albania as well (Popescu and Brinza 2018). Yet such historical references have limited relevance today. As the early stages of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) revealed, the Balkans were initially as unfamiliar to China as China was to the region. The political elites of Sofia, Bucharest, and Tirana have little connection to the diplomatic experiences of 1949.

²⁰ Beta. 2024. Brnabić: Kina najveći investitor u Srbiji, krediti su im povoljni. *N1info*. URL: <https://n1info.rs/biznis/brnabic-kina-najveci-investitor-u-srbiji-krediti-su-im-povoljni/> (accessed 20.10.2025).

Nenadović A. 2024. Raste udio deviza u ukupnim obavezama, za četiri godine dug Kini veći za milijardu. *Nova ekonomija*. 18.03. URL: <https://novaekonomija.rs/vesti-iz-zemlje/raste-udio-deviza-u-ukupnim-obavezama-za-cetiri-godine-dug-kini-veci-za-milijardu> (accessed 20.10.2025).

²¹ Shopov V. 2022. Let a Thousand Contacts Bloom: How China Competes for Influence in Bulgaria. *European Council on Foreign Relations*. URL: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/let-a-thousand-contacts-bloom-how-china-competes-for-influence-in-bulgaria/> (accessed 20.10.2025).

China's attempts to expand cooperation with Romania in the nuclear-energy sector, notably through the Cernavodă Nuclear Power Plant, triggered alarm in the political West even before the deterioration of U.S.–China relations. At the time, analysts already described the project as a potential “nightmare scenario” (Davidescu 2024). The historical legacy of 1949 could not mitigate these concerns, as international circumstances had changed profoundly (Carstens 2020). Contemporary Romania pursues entirely different priorities, and it remains unclear how Romanian society today perceives events that occurred more than seventy years ago.

In contrast, China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) has successfully completed two major infrastructure projects elsewhere in the region—one in Croatia and another in Montenegro. The Pelješac Bridge, of strategic importance for Croatia, was first conceived in 2007, yet the project only gained real momentum after a Chinese contractor entered in 2018, and it was completed in 2021. The same company built part of a highway in Montenegro, financed by a loan of approximately USD 800 million from the Export-Import Bank of China, connecting the northern and southern regions of the country. The project – long described as a “century-old dream” – was technically demanding due to the mountainous terrain.

Despite the successful completion of these strategic projects, which Western institutions had previously been unable to support, no major follow-up initiatives have been undertaken with Chinese partners in either Croatia or Montenegro. In Croatia, criticism of Chinese contractors intensified as construction neared completion; in Montenegro, opposition began even earlier, framed largely around the narrative of a “debt trap.”

Excluding therefore Serbia and the Serb entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and to some extent Greece, China's presence across the remaining Balkan states has become increasingly problematic. The intensity of bilateral relations is either stagnating or declining. To understand this phenomenon in a broader context, it is important to note that the 17+1 cooperation format effectively no longer exists. Following the official withdrawal of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, the framework has been reduced to 14+1, though even this designation is largely nominal. Since 2012, annual summits had been held regularly across European capitals, but this practice ceased after the 2019 Dubrovnik summit. Without such continuity, the format has lost coherence, and the perception of China has changed markedly.

In many Balkan countries – Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania – China is no longer viewed as the “good Buddha” bringing development and opportunity, but increasingly as a “cunning Buddha” motivated exclusively by its own interests. Does this imply that Chinese influence will soon disappear from the region? To answer this question, three key considerations must be emphasized.

First, Chinese investors are already firmly embedded in the Balkans. The billions of dollars invested – in assets such as the port of Piraeus, oil fields, copper mines, steel plants, and energy resources – represent long-term strategic commitments, not short-term ventures. These investments cannot simply be removed, even if efforts are made to limit their operations.

Second, with China's support, many large-scale infrastructure projects have been completed – or are nearing completion – that the Balkan states had long been unable to realize despite extensive engagement with Western institutions. Highways in Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, the Belgrade–Budapest high-speed railway, and bypasses around Belgrade and Skopje all stand as visible symbols of this cooperation. Regardless of growing public skepticism, the tangible results of these projects remain a lasting reminder of the benefits that collaboration with Beijing can bring.

Third, while the initial wave of optimism surrounding China's arrival has subsided, a segment of the Balkan elite – political, academic, and journalistic – continues to view cooperation with China as a means of de-peripheralizing their countries and accelerating development. Although this viewpoint now represents a minority position, its advocates remain active and influential, and it is highly likely that China will continue to support them, seeing this as the most effective way to preserve its existing influence.

Even though the grand announcements of 2012 produced only moderate results – with several promised projects left unfulfilled and political attitudes shifting in many capitals – China remains present in the Balkans. Whether this presence is expanding or contracting, deepening or weakening, it is undeniable that China has become an external factor in regional security and must be analyzed as such.

Conclusion: The Balkans between China and the West

The Balkans occupy an important position in the realization of China's Belt and Road Initiative. In many respects, the region functions as a gateway for Chinese influence into Europe. Although this influence initially appeared to expand primarily through economic instruments – loans, infrastructure investments, and trade agreements – it has gradually become evident that the Chinese approach also carries a geopolitical dimension. The implementation of the BRI contributes to the reconfiguration of the global balance of power, promoting a transformation of the international system from a unipolar to a multipolar structure. Consequently, both NATO and the EU increasingly perceive China as a strategic challenge.

The United States, in particular, views China's presence in the Balkans through the lens of security competition. Yet, despite growing Western skepticism, the scope and embeddedness of Chinese activities in the region make it unlikely that Beijing's influence can be effectively eliminated. Given that China's engagement in the Balkans is not only economic but also geostrategic – linked to its broader pursuit of systemic balance in international relations – Beijing has no incentive, nor the possibility, to withdraw. While some BRI projects remain unfulfilled, especially in Bulgaria and Romania, and the 17+1 format has effectively collapsed, the overall progress achieved over the past decade remains substantial. Compared with China's near absence from the region twenty years ago, its current position represents an impressive expansion of presence and influence.

Through an assertive yet adaptive approach, China has, within a single decade, challenged the once-unquestioned attachment of the Balkan states to NATO and the EU. In this context, the U.S. counter-reaction, though increasingly visible, appears belated and limited in its impact. Thus far, it has mainly resulted in a reduction of the intensity and scope of engagement between certain Balkan governments and China. Nevertheless, the global rebalancing of power continues to reverberate in regional politics: bilateral relations between some Balkan states and China have stagnated or cooled, even as those same states have benefited from cooperation with Beijing.

Despite this partial decline, Chinese influence endures – anchored in existing investments, the successful completion of major infrastructure projects, and the residual optimism among segments of the political and intellectual elites of Balkan societies. China has succeeded in cultivating an image of itself as an important external actor and a provider of alternatives, both economic and political. In the case of Serbia, this partnership is reinforced by Belgrade's complex historical relationship with the political West. For Serbia, China represents not part of the problem but part of the solution, both economically and politically. This alignment has implications for the established Euro-Atlantic regional order, particularly considering that the Western Balkans Six framework formally includes the self-declared Republic of Kosovo, which Serbia still considers a province.

In this sense, China's presence poses a distinct challenge for NATO and the EU, especially in light of its strategic partnership with Russia, further strengthened after February 2022. The ongoing restructuring of the global balance of power manifests itself in the Balkans through the interaction of external actors seeking to extend their geopolitical influence. Although the Balkan states remain institutionally tied to NATO and the EU, those bonds have become less rigid. The reason is clear: China presents itself as an alternative model of engagement. Even if this is not the dominant discourse, and even if Chinese influence is increasingly problematized, it remains a persistent feature of regional politics, shaping – albeit to a lesser extent than Western actors – the political processes and evolving regional order in the Balkans.

As international relations continue to evolve, the confrontation between the United States and its Western European allies on the one hand and China on the other will inevitably affect regional dynamics worldwide. This includes both transformations in interstate relations and the reconfiguration of regional orders, as well as divisions within national political elites holding divergent views on foreign alignment and development strategies. The findings of this study demonstrate how the global balance of power is reflected in the Balkans – a geographical space that, until recently, was almost unequivocally linked to NATO and the EU. The region's evolving ties with China illustrate the penetration of multipolarity into Europe's periphery, revealing how systemic shifts at the global level reshape regional security and political configurations in tangible and lasting ways.

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Conflict of interest:

The author declares the absence of conflict of interests.

УДК: 327.7:327(4-12:510)"2000/2025"
Поступила в редакцию: 24.07.2025
Принята к публикации: 01.10.2025

Путь Китая на Балканы: роль инициативы «Пояс и путь» в формировании региональных отношений: взгляд из региона

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[DOI 10.24833/2071-8160-2025-5-104-7-30](https://doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2025-5-104-7-30)

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Возрастание роли Китая как политического и экономического актора на Балканах знаменует новый этап в развитии международных отношений в регионе. Через двусторонние проекты с балканскими государствами, реализацию инициативы «Пояс и путь», а также в рамках формата сотрудничества Китай – Центральная и Восточная Европа (ранее платформа «17+1») Пекин сумел добиться заметного уровня влияния — прежде всего за счёт кредитования инфраструктурных проектов, инвестиций и инструментов культурной дипломатии. Учитывая, что ещё полтора десятилетия назад китайское присутствие в политico-экономических процессах на Балканах практически отсутствовало, достигнутые результаты можно считать значительными.

В то же время после первоначального периода активного взаимодействия китайское влияние стало развиваться неравномерно по отдельным странам региона. Такая дифференциация обусловлена изменением политических позиций США, НАТО и Европейского союза по отношению к Китаю. Последовательное ухудшение американо-китайских отношений, а также рост напряжённости в отношениях между Китаем и ЕС оказали прямое воздействие на масштабы китайских инвестиций, кредитование и приобретение активов в балканских странах. В статье анализируются реализованные и приостановленные китайские проекты в регионе, причины отказа от ряда инициатив, а также современные позиции правительства балканских государств в отношении Пекина.

Исследование опирается на теорию структурного реализма, согласно которой глобальное перераспределение сил напрямую влияет на региональную динамику. В анархической мировой политической системе власть сосредоточена в руках великих держав, а малые государства обладают ограниченным пространством для самостоятельных

действий и вынуждены адаптироваться к системным ограничениям. Поэтому, несмотря на очевидные экономические выгоды сотрудничества с Китаем, многие балканские государства воздерживаются от его углубления, опасаясь политических издержек, которые могут негативно сказаться на их отношениях с США и Европейским союзом.

Ключевые слова: Китай, Балканы, инициатива «Пояс и путь», сотрудничество Китай – ЦВЕ, региональные отношения, США, ЕС, НАТО

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Конфликт интересов:

Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

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