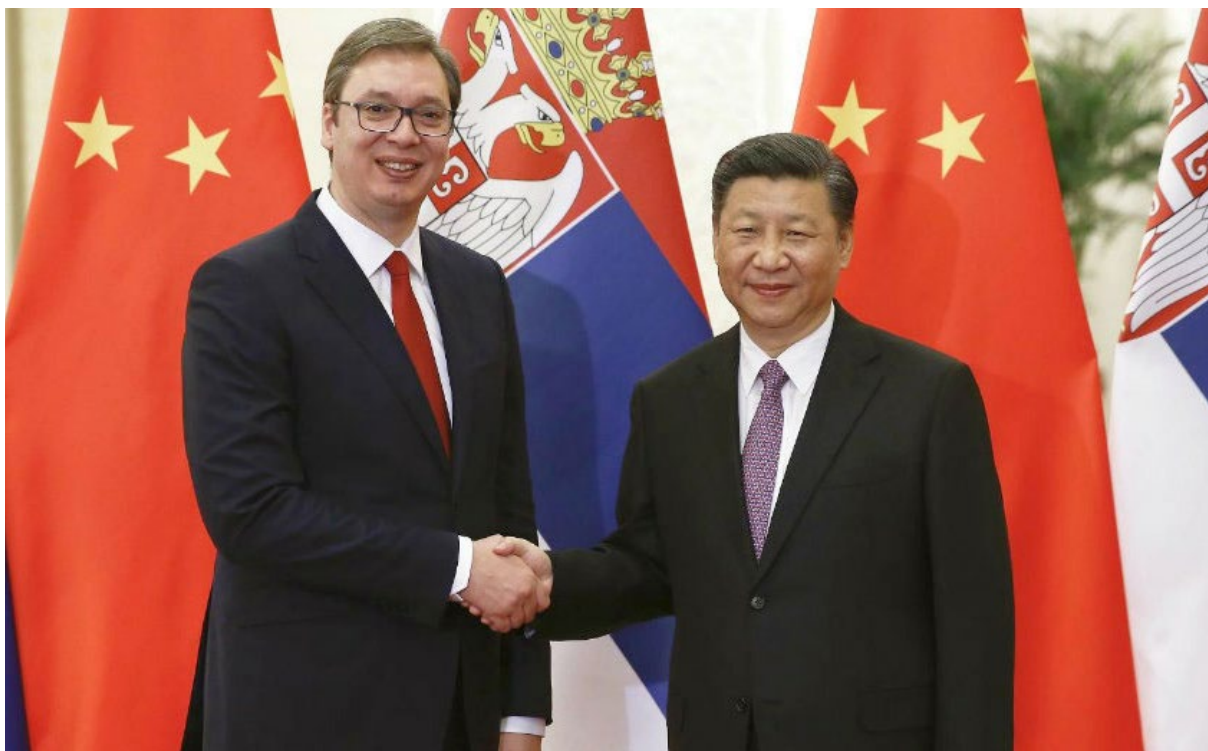


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Presidents Aleksandar Vučić and Xi Jinping

Photo: FoNet

SERBIA AND CHINA: UNEQUAL YET (STILL) CLOSE PARTNERSHIP

The war in Ukraine and its outcome (whatever it may be) will change the geopolitical map of the world and distribution of its key actors. Almost all politicians, experts, analysts and commentators who follow the dynamics of the processes taking place in the backdrop of the armed conflict agree with this prediction.

The unified response of the Western, Euro-Atlantic community to Russia's brutal aggression and the tightening of its ranks, is important, but is not the only characteristic of the new

realignments, groupings and potential alliances aimed at strategic positioning in the new circumstances (the virtual BRICS summit in June, US President's visit to the Middle East, tripartite meeting of the leaders of Russia, Iran and Turkey, also in July...).

When it comes to that, almost all analyses point to China as the possible "winner" of the world order crisis. It did not contribute to its outbreak in any way, but will definitely try to extract the maximum (not only economic) benefit from

someone else's mistakes: "The biggest geopolitical change of this century will come from China, not from Russia", said former British Prime Minister Tony Blair these days, calling it "one of the most important turning points in history".¹

At the June NATO Summit in Madrid, where all members unanimously stood behind the United States, Russia was declared the "main threat" and China "the biggest challenge".²

How the Euro-Atlantic community will deal with this challenge in the future will certainly affect Serbia in some way. Namely, China has close relations with Serbia, despite being incomparably bigger and more powerful. They are even tied by two strategic partnership agreements,³ big Chinese investments in infrastructure and industry, as well as the personal friendship of President Xi and Vučić (who often calls the head of the Chinese state and party "Brother Xi"). In the event of the West's relationship deterioration and confrontation with China, the pressure on Serbia, due to the "malignant influence" of its Far Eastern partner (now somewhat fallen into the shadow due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine), will depend on the assessment of the harmfulness of those relations on the Balkan and European stability. Of course, under the assumption that Serbia does not give up its aspiration to become an EU member, which is its proclaimed geostrategic aim.

The authoritarian regime of Chinese President Xi Jinping who, as the head of state and party (CPC), has comprehensive control over social,

economic and political life in the country, is an ideal model of state and society governance for Aleksandar Vučić and the increasing number of authoritarian rulers in the world. When it comes to Serbia, as shown by the latest public opinion surveys, Xi Jinping is the world leader with the highest approval rating (4.7) among the state-smen who were on the given list, slightly higher than Russian President Vladimir Putin (4.14).⁴

THE POSITION OF CHINA IN THE CURRENT INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

In early February, three weeks before the beginning of the Russian aggression on Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin met with his Chinese partner Xi Jinping in Beijing, where he attended the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics. Although the meeting was marked by the mutual agreement of the two big countries on "boundless friendship", it is not known for certain whether Putin informed Xi about the planned "special military operation" in Ukraine. In any case, China treats the global disruption caused by the war on European soil with caution and (as it seems) as a longer-term geostrategic consideration.

On the one hand, China helps Putin to overcome the impact of the drastic economic sanctions imposed by the Euro-Atlantic community with its energy and other trade arrangements with Russia (gas, crude oil, coal and grain) at a favourable price for itself. On the other hand, however, it refrains from openly supporting Putin's military adventure (and arms exports). So, for example, while refraining from directly

1 *Politika*, 18 July 2022.

2 *Danas*, 1 July 2022.

3 The first strategic agreement with China was signed by Serbian President Boris Tadić in 2009. Tadić also promoted the policy of reliance on "four pillars" (Brussels, Washington, Moscow and Beijing), which was then inherited and adopted by Aleksandar Vučić; the second strategic agreement was signed during the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Belgrade in 2016, when Tomislav Nikolić was the President of Serbia.

4 Research on the topic titled "Raising the Awareness of Foreign Authoritarian Influence", based on a representative sample, was carried out by the Third New Path Organization in June 2022, *Danas*, 26 July 2022.

condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine in the United Nations, it did not recognize the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (which has so far been done by Syria and North Korea), just as it never recognized the breakaway parts of Georgia (2008), Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty is the fundamental value postulate of the Chinese foreign policy doctrine.

As observed by the *Delo Asia* correspondent, Zorana Baković, who is one of the best connoisseurs of China, Beijing is watching the flame ignited by Russia in Ukraine and is – instead of extinguishing it – “openly using it as a geolaboratory test in order to find out how powerful America still is and whether it will dare to open two fronts at the same time, one on European soil and the other on Asian soil”.⁵

Even before the outbreak of the current crisis, China was largely profiled as a country looking for a proper position in the global order due to its growing economic, political and, as of more recently, military power. The well-known Chinese intellectual Zheng Shigung divides the history of modern China, modelled by its three leaders, Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and the current one, Xi Jinping, each in his way, into three periods during which China “rose” (Mao), “got rich” (Deng) and “became powerful” (Xi).⁶

As a “powerhouse” country, China has not relied on its military muscles until recently. Except when it comes to its immediate surroundings and, in particular, Taiwan. During the recent two-hour conversation between the Chinese President and his American counterpart Joe Biden, Xi Jinping sharply warned the United States “not to play with fire”.⁷ When the influential

American Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi ignored this warning and “stopped by” Taiwan during her Asian tour, Beijing retaliated with the unprecedented seven-day military manoeuvres, keeping the island “in the crosshairs” with live ammunition. The incident, which Beijing still has not recognized as the “red line”, has dramatically raised tensions in that part of the world, especially in the relations between the two powerful rivals, the United States and China.

In recent years, the trademark of China's global activity has been its “Belt and Road” mega project.⁸ Conceived as the follower of the medieval Silk Road route, it stretches ambitiously from the Eurasian mainland to other continents – from Africa to South America. As is claimed by President Xi, his initiative will be beneficial to all involved by building a “shared future for mankind”. At the same time, he emphasizes that the “Belt and Road” Initiative is not a military-political alliance or a “Chinese club”. It is a process... “designed to improve the world development patterns, global governance and economic cooperation”.⁹ In his book “The New Silk Roads”, Peter Frankopan, Professor of Global History at Oxford University, cites Xi Jinping's words that the peoples living along the Silk Road differ in terms of race, beliefs and cultural history, but are fully capable of sharing peace and progress.¹⁰

However, the Belt and Road project has alarmed the Western political community. In addition to the nascent “West side” initiatives, which should

5 *Delo*, 2 July 2022.

6 Helsinki Charter No. 151.

7 The reason for this reaction was the planned visit of Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the US House of Representatives, to Taiwan. On the same day there

appeared a short message on the Weibo account of the 80th Group Army of the Chinese People's Liberation Army which read: “Prepare for War”

8 Serbia has been a part of this project since the establishment of the 15 Plus One Platform in 2014 as a precursor to the most ambitious “Belt and Road” project.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Peter Frankopan's book “The New Silk Roads”.

match the Belt and Road Initiative,¹¹ it is also indicative that the ambitious investment project intended for Europe has been kept on hold in Brussels for a year already.

The Euro-Atlantic bloc does not hide its concern over the sharpened diplomatic rhetoric and military strengthening of the Far Eastern dragon as well as its concrete actions and influence in the Indo-Pacific region. As is observed by some analysts, the Chinese challenge has never been so high on the NATO agenda as it was at the Madrid summit on 30 June. In the strategic document adopted at the Alliance meeting – which was attended by two Asian countries, Japan and South Korea, for the first time – China was designated “as a systemic challenge to Euro-Atlantic security”.¹² As NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said on the same occasion, “China does not share our values and, like Russia, works on their undermining”.¹³

CHINA AND SERBIA

Relying on the tradition of good relations between the former Yugoslavia and China, all Serbian governments after the breakup of Yugoslavia tried to maintain the same course. When at the end of the first decade of the 21st century – due to Serbia’s wavering foreign policy orientation towards the EU – Belgrade was made aware that the accession process would be slow and long, it turned already then and, in particular, in recent years towards the East (politically

towards Russia and economically towards China).

Apart from the fact that the alliance with a rising global player flatters every Belgrade government, it is also based on pragmatic political reasons. Namely, together with Russia, China is the “defender” of Resolution 1244 in the United Nations Security Council. In other words, it does not recognize Kosovo (Beijing is against any separatism for internal reasons; this primarily refers to Tibet, but also to other possible movements for independence in the western part of the country with a majority Muslim population). In return, Serbia cautiously abstains from voting in the United Nations for the resolutions criticizing the violation of human rights in China (primarily when it comes to the Uyghurs in the Xinjiang Province).

The common interest is also reflected in Serbia’s desire to secure reliable financial injections for its poor, largely devastated economy and China’s effort to invest its overabundant foreign exchange reserves as close as possible to the European market. Since the opening of the Pupin Bridge on the Danube in Belgrade at the beginning of the last decade (2014), as China’s first direct investment in Serbia, this country has deeply penetrated the local economy through its investments, purchases of companies and loans. Apart from the purchase of the Smederevo Steelworks (HBIS Group), its entry into the Bor Mining and Smelting Complex and the adjacent Čukaru Peku gold mine is even more significant. In 2021, as noted by the Charge d’Affaires of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, Tien Ishu, these two companies were ranked as the first and second largest export companies in Serbia.¹⁴ (Due to a crisis on global markets and decrease in the demand for steel, the Chinese company HBIS in Smederevo had to shut down one of its two blast furnaces in the Steelworks).

11 At the July summit of the world’s most developed countries, G-7, in Germany, the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment was agreed; it anticipates raising 600 billion dollars from public and private funds over the next five years in order to finance infrastructure projects in developing countries.

12 *Politika*, 1 July 2022.

13 Ibid.

14 *Politika*, 12 June 2022.

Chinese investors participate in the modernization of the road corridors, Belgrade-Budapest railway, planned construction of the Belgrade Metro, sewage networks in some towns... The total value of the completed projects, those currently underway and those planned amounts to 8 billion euros, as was disclosed by Aleksandar Vučić during his meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi.¹⁵ Contracts with Chinese partners are mostly interstate ones, which implies that they are not transparent and, according to all indications, have a corruptive background. While the conditions under which the contracts and projects have been concluded are not publicly accessible, the media promote the role of the leading figures on both sides who have secured them.¹⁶

On top of all that, it has been announced that the two countries will sign a free trade agreement by the end of the year. The scepticism of the commentators who argue that the Serbian and Chinese economies are so unequal (to Serbia's disadvantage)¹⁷ that such an agreement, as rationalized by economists, is meaningless. According to them, Serbia could benefit from its increased exports to China after solid negotiations, which means that not all Chinese demands are met. Predrag Bijelić, Professor at the Faculty of Economics in Belgrade, says that this free trade agreement can be a chance for Serbia

to increase its exports to China, "if we negotiate skillfully".¹⁸

IN A SUBORDINATE POSITION

Professor Bijelić's warning is actually the reminder of the fact that, in an attempt to satisfy its investment "hunger", Serbia does not demand anything from foreign investors, especially Chinese ones. This especially refers to compliance with domestic laws prescribing the environmental standards and labour rights.

Just recently, some drastic cases of arbitrariness on the part of Chinese investors and managers have upset the public. Namely, at the end of last year, journalists from some independent media have discovered the unacceptable treatment of Vietnamese workers in the Linglong Tyre Factory in Zrenjanin, which is still under construction. In addition to the inhumane working and living conditions, the workers' passports have been taken away, which actually means that they are the victims of human trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation.¹⁹ Local workers have also complained about their inhumane and humiliating treatment. Namely, while waiting for the completion of the factory and the jobs they are qualified for, they have to do hard physical work at the construction site.²⁰

The next case involves the blasting of Starica Mountain rising above the town of Majdanpek in June of this year, when deafening explosions and collapsed earth and rock masses enraged the residents of Majdanpek. Blasting is carried out by Zijin Company from Bor, whose representatives claim to have all permits to work on this mountain ridge, which is a natural dam between

15 *Politika*, 29 October 2021.

16 On the occasion of the resumption of direct flights between Beijing and Belgrade in July of this year, the Chinese Ambassador to Serbia, Chen Bo, has emphasized that this is "the result of a fast realization of an important consensus reached by President Xi Jinping and President Vučić about a continuous progress of cooperation between our two countries"; *Blic*, 17 July 2022.

17 According to the official statistics for 2020, the value of trade between Serbia and China amounted to nearly 4.5 billion euros, with exports to China amounting to 82.2 million euros and imports from China to 3.5 billion euros.

18 *NIN*, 10 February 2022.

19 <https://www.danas.rs/bbc-news-serbian-ljudska-prava-fabrika-linglong-slucaj-vijetnamskih-radnika>

20 *Dnevnik TV N1*, 31 May 2022.

Majdanpek and the mining pits, while local activists who “defend” the mountain claim that the Chinese company operates without them, that is, illegally.

The residents of Bor and Smederevo often complain about poisonous gases and air pollution, as well as the increased incidence of respiratory diseases, but all this mostly remains without reaction: “... The citizens of Serbia feel that Chinese companies are privileged, and that their managers behave as if they are the ‘owners of everything’, not caring about the environment and quality of life. In the opinion of many Serbian citizens, such behaviour results from the servility of the state and granting of numerous concessions to the detriment of the population and local communities.” This was stated by the author of “The Research on the Position and Perception of Workers and Investors from China”, Maja Bjelos from the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy.²¹

SECURITY COOPERATION

At the beginning of April, six huge Chinese Y-20 transport planes delivered the FK-3 air defence missile system, procured by Serbia for the needs of its army, at the Surčin airport. Thus, “military neutral” Belgrade increased the number of countries from which it procures modern weaponry: some of them are in the West and some are in the East (Russia in the first place). Now China is among them²² and Serbia has become

the first country in Europe to have this missile system.²³

The procurement contract was signed back in 2020 and, as military analyst Aleksandar Radić points out, “neither Russia nor Europe were delighted with that deal”.²⁴ According to him, Russia was dissatisfied because President Aleksandar Vučić had previously announced the procurement of a Russian missile system, but then opted for a Chinese one, which is actually a copy of the Russian S-300 system. On the other hand, the European Union was unhappy because EU candidate countries should not maintain military cooperation with China²⁵. In any case, the missile system has now arrived and, as explained by the spokesman of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Zhao Lijian, “as a part of our annual cooperation plan”. “This project does not target any third party and has nothing to do with the current situation”, he added alluding to the war in Ukraine which was already in full swing.²⁶

Politician Nenad Čanak holds that security ties with China represent Vučić’s effort to ingratiate himself with the anti-Western forces in Serbia. According to him, it is overlooked that, through “economic and military cooperation with China”, we also import the “Chinese way of functioning”.²⁷

Apart from the military sphere, security cooperation with Beijing also implies a years-long partnership between the police authorities and the relevant ministries of the two countries. It

²¹ *Danas*, 28 June 2022.

²² On this occasion *Politika* wrote: “By procuring this weapon our country has finally resolved the issue of long-range air defence, which it lacked before and during NATO aggression against FR Yugoslavia in 1999. Back then (and later) the Russian S-300 system was dreamed of, but such dreams are now becoming reality in the form of FK-3...”, *Politika*, 12 April 2022.

²³ Dr Vuksan Vuksanović from the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy holds that “for China this is another penetration in European soil”. He also points out that China has been under then EU arms embargo since the Tiananmen Square massacre (1989), “so that as long as it is in force Serbia can serve as a route for China to circumvent the arms embargo”, *Delo*, 11 April 2022.

²⁴ *Danas*, 12 April 2020.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Danas*, 13 April 2022.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

also relies on the ties maintained in the days of the former Yugoslavia, which gained in importance and intensity over time, especially in the context of China's impressive breakthrough in the sphere of the advanced technologies of the future (artificial intelligence, robotics, IT technology, communications). China shares what it develops primarily for its own security needs with friendly countries.

This applies, for example, to "smart" cameras which, in addition to face identification, can also "read" the mood (coolness, anger, threat...) of the persons they are recording (such cameras are allegedly widely used in China's troubled Xinjiang province, which is populated by the Uyghur minority). Similar cameras have been installed and are still being installed on the streets of Belgrade, on the highway towards Niš and in other locations.

In the meantime, however, one of the joint projects was not realized. Namely, a few years ago, there was a lot of talk and writings in media that Chinese policemen would "soon" also start patrolling the streets of Serbian towns. This controversial idea provoked numerous doubts and questions ranging from the issue of Serbia's sovereignty, whose streets are to be patrolled by persons in foreign uniforms, to China's intention to "observe" and control the potential opponents of the regime in the territory of other countries. The formal explanation that Chinese policemen will help Serbian colleagues in incident situations among the Chinese (fights, thefts, murders, misdemeanours) as translators and providers of other services has seemed rather unconvincing. In any case, the project has not yet been realized and it is not known whether it has only been postponed (in the meantime, the outbreak of COVID-19 epidemic disrupted numerous plans) or shelved.

THE FUTURE WITH MANY QUESTIONS

The attitude of Serbian citizens towards the European Union is more negative than positive for the first time after more than two decades. According to the public opinion polls conducted this summer, 47 percent of citizens would vote for accession to the most significant European association (in the past, this percentage was over 70), while 53 percent would be against accession.²⁸

Serbia has proclaimed EU accession as its basic strategic commitment. However, during the accession negotiations, which have been going on for almost 10 years, it also kept other options open (colloquially, this means "sitting in two chairs" and foreign policy "based on four pillars"). This discrepancy between proclamations and actions gives rise to the reasonable doubts of the domestic and international public about the sincerity of the European commitment of the authorities in Belgrade.

The war in Ukraine has raised the question of Serbia's affiliation in an even more dramatic way: the majority of citizens supports Russia's aggression against Ukraine; Serbia is the only European country that has not imposed sanctions on Russia, while the conservative nationalist bloc with significant representation in the new Serbian parliament (the coalition of Nada, Dveri and Zavetnici) openly calls for the abandonment of the European path.

The current geopolitical dynamics, with plenty of uncertain outcomes and consequences, poses a challenge to many, including European countries that will try to position themselves in the future puzzle, which has already begun to be put together in accordance with their own economic, political and security interests.

28 *Politika*, 17 July 2022; the poll conducted by the New Third Path Organization.

After five months of the devastating war in Ukraine, it became evident that the Euro-Atlantic community and its measures against the aggressor were not supported by the “whole world”. The greatest unity of the global community was achieved immediately after the beginning of Putin’s attack, when more than 140 countries (including Serbia) condemned Russia’s aggression against sovereign Ukraine in the United Nations. As for the imposition of drastic economic sanctions against Moscow, the Euro-Atlantic bloc has remained rather lonely on the global stage in this respect, despite its expectations. For example, Turkey, which is a NATO member, has not joined it. This also refers to many other countries – from China to India, Brazil and Middle Eastern and African countries – which are otherwise significant international actors.

Almost at the same time, while US President Biden was unsuccessfully trying to persuade Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh to increase oil deliveries and thus reduce the price of this source of energy, which increased due to the anti-Russian sanctions,²⁹ Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Tehran where he met with his Iranian host, President Ebrahim Raisi, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The summit of the leaders of the countries, which differ so much (in terms of religion, culture and values), shows that, in a new context, differences can be overcome by interests. As commented by *The New York Times*, “Putin’s trip to Iran underscored how the war in Ukraine is helping to align two regional powers isolated from Europe and the United States, and altering the world’s geopolitical calculus.”³⁰

The Ukraine crisis has “shaken” the BRICS as well. The economic bloc of developing countries

(China, India, Brazil, Russia and South Africa), which has been functioning on the global stage with varying success for 15 years, held a virtual summit on 22 June, at Chinese President Xi’s initiative. In the adopted Beijing Declaration emphasis is laid on the commitment to multilateralism, international law and the central role of the United Nations.³¹ The BRICS countries are not a single “political club”. Moreover, China and India sporadically resolve their border disputes with armed actions; India has recently also become a member of the Quad group (the United States, Japan, Australia and India), formed as a counterweight to China in the Indo-Pacific region; Russia is currently at war and under the sanctions imposed by the international community.³²

However, the organization that covers 42 per cent of the world’s population and extends over more than 40 million square kilometres is not without weight in international relations. Especially if it is joined by Iran (which has already applied for membership) and Argentina (whose joining the bloc has also been announced). China stands out in this bloc of developing countries due to its importance and global influence, as well as the aspiration to create a global alliance against the liberal democratic order, as is predicted by some analysts.³³ This can also be read from the message sent to the heads of the BRICS countries by the Chinese host stating that “the world should stand against the unilateral sanctions and efforts of some countries to maintain their political and economic power”.

31 *Politika*, 18 July 2022.

32 India, China and South Africa have abstained from voting on the condemnation of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in the United Nations; Brazil condemned Russia, but criticized the West’s “indiscriminate sanctions”; they all voted against, or abstained from voting when it came to the exclusion of Russia from the UN Commission on Human Rights.

33 Dragan Bisenić, *Danas*, 9-10. July.

29 As commented by Milan Mišić, Biden’s visit is “a new proof that America needs allies more than they need it”; *Novi magazin*, 28 July 2022.

30 *Danas*, 23-24 July 2022.

According to some Chinese intellectuals, China should turn its attention to the huge continent to which it geographically belongs. One of them is Zhao Huasheng, Professor at Fudan University, who points out: “As it is often said, neighbours cannot split up; they will always live together, whether they like it or not. China, Russia and the European Union are located on the same Eurasian continent. Beijing and Moscow should do everything they can to develop their relations with the European Union in a positive way – to maintain a common economic and security space in *Greater Eurasia* and, if possible, avoid divisions and confrontations on the Eurasian continent.”³⁴

CHINA’S INTERNAL CHALLENGES

The assumption of the leading role in world affairs, to which China and its undisputed leader Xi Jinping are undoubtedly aspiring, is also faced with some considerable internal challenges. China’s economic growth has slowed down dramatically: its two-year unique effort to pursue zero-COVID policy, which implied the lockdown of the cities with multiple million inhabitants and industrial-commercial-banking centres (from Wuhan in early 2020 to Shanghai in the summer of 2022), has proved costly. In the second quarter of this year, a fall in output was

recorded for the first time after more than three decades of continuous growth.

The challenges for the country, which has been “covering up” and suppressing all problems with constant economic growth for years, are all the greater. More and more information crossing the Chinese borders testifies about the nontransparent yet present dissatisfaction of a significant part of the population that was isolated for weeks and months due to the epidemic, resulting existential uncertainty and other financial and market disturbances. As of recently, foreign media have also been speculating about discord among China’s top leadership.

All this is happening on the eve of the country’s most important political event – the Congress of the ruling Communist Party (CPC), which will be held in October. On that occasion, Xi Jinping will win a third term (despite the rule, which was respected for two decades, that the head of state and party cannot serve more than two terms). This would further strengthen Xi’s power at home and give him a “free hand” to take more resolute steps at the international level. Most sinologists and observers, who have been studying China over a long term, believe that he will succeed despite the current challenges. Some of them also associate that with a dramatic increase in tensions in American-Chinese relations (due to Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan), when Beijing will need a “strong leader”.

34 Ibid.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The emergence of China as a global power in the Western Balkans during the last decade is one of the most significant geopolitical changes in the region. In this way China has further expanded its planetary influence. In recent years, China has been extending its activities beyond the economy. It has increased its engagement in culture, academia, education, media and even a number of political parties and local authorities. The Chinese Cultural Centre has also recently been opened in Belgrade.

The geopolitical uncertainty of the Western Balkans, especially when it comes to accession to the EU, has prompted the countries in this region to look for other alternatives. The status quo creates the conditions for other actors, such as China, to infiltrate into sensitive sectors, while at the same time its loans pose a specific “trap” for all debtors.

Apart from relying on state leaders and officials, China is also increasingly focusing on nongovernmental and local actors, civil society and the like.

The Chinese presence in the Western Balkans has brought the Western political community back to the region. NATO has promptly admitted North Macedonia and Montenegro to its membership.

Serbia's foreign policy, which relies on four pillars (the United States, the European Union, Russia and China), was already adopted in the first decade of democratic changes, which is the result of its self-awareness of a unique international position that reflects not only its mentality, but also its frustration associated with the war legacy of the 1990s. During their ten years in power, the Serbian Progressive Party (SPP) and President Vučić only continued to pursue the same policy and, due primarily to the international context, succeeded in securing for Serbia an enviable position on the international stage. Regardless of the fact that Serbia is officially committed to European integration, it is not ready to adopt the liberal values imposed on the Western Balkans by the Western political community (EU, NATO). When it comes to China, Serbia is the most important Chinese hub in Europe or, more exactly, a kind of springboard for the European market. Therefore, it is not surprising that China is focused, among other things, on infrastructure projects and production facilities for strategic raw materials (steel, copper, gold).

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has additionally accelerated geostrategic changes, significant not only for Europe, but also for China itself. Many analysts agree that China is the main profiteer of this war, although it brings new challenges to it, because Russia, its important strategic partner, has been significantly weakened by its aggression against Ukraine. This autumn, China will also face an all-out domestic political challenge in the still uncertain international circumstances. Turbulences on the global political stage have also significantly affected its projects, especially the “Belt and Road” Initiative.

China is geographically too far from Serbia to remain its main economic (and political) pillar. As things stand, the global trends will also increasingly take on a regional character, which places Serbia in the European context (willingly or not).

The current dilemmas of the political elites as to whom Serbia belongs are more an expression of its unreadiness for a genuine step forward and effort towards European integration.

On the other hand, the Western political community is not sufficiently focused on the Balkan problem, because it has been under its control for decades, but without its resolution. This does not mean that local elites do not bear the greatest responsibility, but a more consistent attention to the Western Balkans would have so far yielded more significant results in Serbia itself.

The Western political community has missed the opportunity to initiate a substantive process of normalization in the region, thus creating the preconditions for its recovery. The policy of flattering Serbia as the key actor in the Western Balkans has not yet achieved visible results, because it is still the main source of regional instability. This does not mean that each individual country does not have its own internal limitations. One reason is undoubtedly the adoption of the ethnic principle as the most important, without the introduction of other ones, thus relativizing ethnic exclusivity.

The European Union has failed because it has not seriously monitored the implementation of both the peace agreements and the EU approximation process.

Bearing in mind that the consequences of the war in Ukraine are still unfathomable, the Western Balkans, as a constant neuralgic point in Europe, require a serious involvement of the Western political community, thus showing that it is capable of resolving the frozen conflicts in the Balkans despite Russia's constant provocations. This also requires a more rigorous attitude towards the current regime in Serbia.