



# China-CEEC Cooperation and the EU Response from the Perspective of Regional Security Complex Theory

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## Abstract

The sun of China's might has cast a dragon shadow over Europe. While China's economic influence in the world has been largely discussed—either in terms of its immediate neighbors in Asia, or in its strained but complementary relations with the US—its European vision has been kept in the dark. Considering the increasing involvement of China in international relations, this paper seeks to answer the following research question: What does the Chinese engagement with Central and Eastern European Countries—such as the one under China-CEEC 17+1 initiative—entail for the European security? To answer the mentioned question, we hypothesize that the involvement of China in the region has negatively affected EU's efforts to promote policy coherence and to form a common foreign and defense policy, and therefore, the EU has begun securitizing China to limit its influence in the region. Guided by these objectives, this study employs a qualitative research design using official EU and Chinese policy reports and statistics. Given the security dimension of China's involvement in Europe, Buzan's Regional Security Complex theory was adopted as the study's conceptual framework. The research findings suggest that China (through China-CEEC cooperation) has enjoyed direct access to sensitive-security sectors, and differences over the direction of EU project have exacerbated the EU's difficulty to mount a coherent response.

**Keywords:** Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe, China, China-CEEC 17+1 Initiative, EU Policy, Regional Security Complex Theory, securitization

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## 1. Introduction

China has been economically involved in Europe for decades. Beijing's engagement has usually been viewed as primarily economic in nature, rather than politically motivated. Recent China's inroads in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE hereinafter), however, seem far from apolitical. Given EU's complex institutional arrangement and EU-CEE nexus, China's approach to CEE has also been complex, multi-faceted, and flexible. In fact, previous studies indicate that following the CEEC trade with China, the EU and the rest of the world showed a growing interest in trading with China, especially after the China-CEEC 17+1 initiative (Stanojevic, Qiu, & Chen, 2021). Therefore, it is suggested that China has more significant geostrategic and political ambitions in CEE.

According to China's ministry of foreign affairs, in a recent phone call with European Council President Charles Michel in 2021, China's president Xi Jinping stressed that "differences between China and the EU... should be resolved through dialogue and negotiation...China hopes that the EU adheres to strategic independence" (Bermingham & Lo, 2021). Xi's emphasis on independence and negotiation sets tone for a range of Chinese policies at the European level, where gaining leverage for an acceptable outcome is paramount. In fact, Germany, despite itself maintaining strong economic relationship with China, has doubted the economic and developmental motives of China—as stated through official channels—and has started to implement the 'Berlin process' to build stronger ties with the western Balkan countries (Breiteneicher, 2018).

China's investments in the Balkan further complicates the matters for the EU, which has been obliged to react after the first

ever EU-Balkan gathering, by giving its “unequivocal support” for the six Balkan countries to eventually become members of the bloc, and offering them more financial support as to check China’s influence in the region (Emmott, 2020). Despite EU efforts to limit China’s involvement in the EU candidate states in the Balkans—by introducing a slew of safeguards designed to reduce the inflow of Chinese investment into the EU market—the growing Sino-western Balkan relationship has not affected, partly due to “17+1” Mechanism and the Belt and Road Initiative (Arežina, 2020). In such a dynamic context, this paper seeks to answer the following question: what does China’s engagement with the CEECs entail for the European security? The research hypothesis is that the China’s involvement in the region has negatively affected EU’s efforts to promote and form a coherent common foreign and defense policy, and therefore, the EU has begun securitizing China to limit its influence in the region. In doing so, this study employs a qualitative approach using various EU and Chinese policy reports and statistics. Furthermore, Buzan’s Regional Security Complex Theory was applied as the conceptual framework. In the following sections, prior research relevant to this study will be reviewed, the theoretical framework of the study will be offered, and the security challenges for the EU (caused by the China-CEEC cooperation), and the EU response will be discussed.

## **2. Literature Review**

In this section, the literature review related to impact of China’s engagement in CEE on the European security and policy-making is briefly discussed. In a recent study, Wang and Wang (2022) argued that “China-CEEC cooperation” has been well-received in Eastern Europe, and that countries in the region have shifted their attitude

toward the cooperation framework considering its positive effects in the region. In fact, it is argued that such platform building and participation in CEE have brought new opportunities for the Chinese foreign policy (Wang & Wang, 2022). Regarding the opportunities for Chinese banking system in the region, Yii and Zuokui (2019) analyzed the change in the landscape of banking sector in CEE. The findings indicated that despite the decade-old dominant position of western banks in CEE, China has succeeded in establishing a banking network in Visegrad countries in CEE as well as Serbia, and has signed currency swap agreements with 2 states in the CEE. Moreover, Poland and Hungary have already begun issuing bonds in the market. In another study, Tuszyński (2015) investigated the China factor in the Polish foreign policy in relation to the EU, and suggested that through different mechanisms in CEE (such as 17+1 initiative), China has the possibility to contribute to peace and stability in the region, including in Ukraine, since CEECs' leaders view China as an important player in the wider geostrategic arena of the Eastern Europe. It is further suggested that some of the countries in the region are using the China-established 17+1 platform to discuss political and security-related issues.

Recently, in another study, Kavalsky (2021) investigated the place of China in CEE in the era of the Covid-19 pandemic, and suggested that perceptions of China were deployed domestically for the internal audience to justify the adopted policies, or to hold on to a particular vision of the state. The author further argued, that China and its China-CEE cooperation platform have become a matter of public discourse and even split in CEE following the pandemic with some states siding clearly with China (such as Serbia and Hungary), and those suspicious of China.

With regard to the EU response to China-CEE cooperation, Pavličević (2019) suggested that China's engagement in the region has forced the EU to a reboot of EU's Western Balkan strategy, to adopt policies aimed to reaffirm the EU as a central force in the Western Balkans, and to limit the scope of Sino-Western Balkans relationship through a slew of regulative and policy frameworks. However, despite EU's attempts to slow down the speed with which China is building relationship in the CEE, it has been developing much stronger relationship with China as EU gave a green light to China to become the first non-EU state to contribute to the European Fund for Strategic Investment. Indeed, the EU has engaged with China in a plethora of cooperation programs (from telecommunications to infrastructure), despite its anti-China stance in the CEE (Reilly, 2017).

In another study, Habova (2021) analyzed the China challenge to the so-called EU model and suggested that China's involvement in the CEE has begun challenging the process of democratization in the Eastern Europe as China, contrary to the EU, grants loans without any strings attached to it. It is further suggested that given the lack of solidarity, the core and periphery approach taken by the EU, and the inability of the EU to propose a realistic view of the global power shift, China's involvement in the region could exacerbate the existing deficiencies in the European Union. In another study, Gries & Turcsányi (2022) investigated the public view of China-CEE cooperation and argued that across the CEE, attitudes towards the communist past shape views of China and that the enthusiasm about the 17+1 initiative is ebbing, as many CEECs participated in the latest 17+1 meeting at the ministerial level. It is further argued that American programs, such as "Clean Network" for building digital platforms, are now competing with Chinese

programs in CEE, as political and economic pressure on China are growing.

Considering the above-mentioned literature, it can be argued that there has been no serious academic study on investigating the wider impact of China-CEEC cooperation on the European security, its effects in different regions of Europe, and the EU response from the European security perspective. Therefore, it is hoped that this literature gap will be filled in this study through the application of the Regional Security Complex Theory, and taking into consideration the intra- and inter-regional security dynamics.

### **3. Conceptual Framework: Regional Security Complex Theory**

Ule Waever and Barry Buzan's Regional Security Complex Theory (hereinafter RSCT) has been widely used to explain security threats in Europe because of its comprehensiveness in several ways: by taking on board security patterns of different nature—such as economic, societal, and environmental—it expands the security sphere based on different security sectors (Hettne, 2005). Moreover, unlike other theories that tend to either lean towards a completely realistic or constructivist understanding of security, RSCT offers “a third way” for international relations researchers by integrating them. While liberals and realists have sidelined the security by concentrating on peace process or on power dynamics, RSCT addresses the issue of security as an essential element alongside power and peace in international relations (Buzan, 1991, pp. 1-5; Buzan, 1983).

RSCT provides a framework for analyzing regional security in the study of the intra-regional, inter-regional relations, as well as the interplay between outside powers and regional dynamics. In

fact, it approaches security by introducing and making use of regional security complexes (hereinafter RSC) and different emergent patterns of amity and enmity among regional actors (Kirchner & Berk, 2010). In addition, different security sectors may define different regions. Put another way, there can be a region defined based on common economic and environmental security issues. Thus, the region itself is understood as a level of analysis, subject to changes based on the assumed security perspective (Hettne, 2005). With regard to RSC, it is defined as “a group of states whose primary security concern so closely connected that their national security can’t be reasonably considered separately” (Buzan, 1983, p. 106). Another way of putting it is to define RSC in relation to the local security spillover-effect, which links a set of states together (El-Affendi, 2009). In fact, RSC is formed based on collective security patterns. Security interdependence between states defines the security complex; in other words, the security concerns of states and their security approach to securitization determine the “regional clusters” or the so-called security complexes (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 48).

Another key concept in RSCT is Securitization, which is defined as the process of social construction of threats resulting in an inter-subjective (collective) perception of threats. In other words, securitization implies moving away from ordinary politics, while desecuritization conversely implies moving out of threat-defense sequence and into the public ordinary politics (Kazharski & Tabosa, 2018). In fact, securitization is more of a presentation of an understandable threat to the citizens, where it entails framing something as an existential threat that requires urgent action, and justifies the use of extraordinary measures by doing away with rules (Buzan, Wæver, & De Wilde, 1998).

Furthermore, RSCT expands the security sphere, taking into consideration the military, political, social, economic and environmental spheres as one interconnected network and the dynamic process initiated by changes in an RSC (Stone, 2009, pp. 5-6; Erdağ, 2017). While it accepts some common realist views, such as the anarchy of the global order and the polarity, it also integrates the constructivist view of “securitization” and “deseuritization”, thus offering a more comprehensive view (Buzan, 1991, p. 103).

In the meantime, along the lines of constructivists, states are defined based on the relationship between the state and the nation, thus not defined per default (Buzan, 1991). Factoring in the history of state formation and transition, as well as the persistent patterns of friendship-enmity between the countries of the complex—thus path-dependent view—RSCT does not view states in isolation and offers a more holistic view.

#### **4. European RSC**

Since the mid-1980s there has been an explosion of various forms of regionalist projects on a global scale, with the widening and deepening of the European Union (EU) as its deepest and most extensive example. The expansion of the EU project coincided with the weakening and eventual fall of communism in the Eastern Europe, opening inroads for further entrenchment of EU project in the Eastern Europe (Larrabee, 2010). The collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) can be explained by two types of factors: internal factors, i.e., economic security concerns in these countries (the problem of low economic growth and foreign debt) (Åslund, 2007), as well as wider regional factor, i.e., the

existence of an EU institutional security complex (called the European Community at the time), which stimulated a sense of economic, political, and European belonging (or identity) in these countries (Mason, 2019). Before turning to the empirical part of the article, a qualification of the unit of analysis is in order, due to the adopted focus on the security aspect of Chinese involvement in the CEE. We define the European RSC as the EU and the states with candidate status (western Balkan countries) that are in a trajectory for candidate status. Moreover, the non-EU but geographically and economically interconnected states, i.e., Norway, Switzerland, and Iceland, can be considered as members of this RSC. In line with the RSCT application, there are important subsystems inside this European RSCT, such as CEE, West European and Balkan subsystems. Indeed, the newly independent Central and Eastern European countries (hereinafter CEECs) share similar cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, given their erstwhile communist past, decade-long trajectory of EU accession, and the transition to market economy. Thus, due to their similar perception of economic and societal challenges, these countries form a subsystem inside the European RSC.

## **5. China-CEEC 17+1 Initiative**

China-CEEC cooperation or 16 + 1 platform initiative (predecessor of 17+1 initiative) proposed by China—founded formally in 2012 in Budapest, Hungary—was widely welcomed by CEECs along with South-Western Europe in the Balkans; furthermore, following an expansion process with the membership of Greece in 2019, it officially dubbed as 17+1 initiative (Yun & Pakulin, 2021). The initiative institutionalized an annual meeting of the heads of the

states, regular meetings on ministerial and sub-ministerial level, and increasing number of exchange mechanisms covering various areas, such as trade and investment, agriculture, education and research, culture and media, tourism, etc. (Lilei & Yu, 2019). CEECs view China capable of indirectly supporting them against Western Europe. In fact, the strong dependence of CEECs on both technology and investment of Western Europe has led to the creation of a particular type of capitalist economy, i.e., dependent capitalism, which is characterized by: a banking sector dominated by Western European banks—the market share of foreign banks in the CEE region after expanding significantly from 10% in 1995 to 71% in 2016, reached 65% in 2019 (Nițoi, Clichici, & Moagăr-Poladian, 2021, pp. 597-598); high share of foreign companies in the CEECs exports—whereas the share of foreign-owned companies in exports of EU stood at 38% in 2017-18, that of CEECs ballooned to 57% (Jirasavetakul & Rahman, 2018); increasing FDI from Western Europe—to the extent that FDI inflow jumped from \$15 billion in 2014 to \$200 billion in 2020; low R & D expenditure to gross domestic product (GDP) in CEECs—whereas the share of R & D expenditure to GDP of CEECs stalled around 1.20%, that of the Euro-area average touched 2.19% in 2019 (World Bank, 2021); decreasing trend of domestic value-added in manufacturing exports (Jirasavetakul & Rahman, 2018).

Thus, in the event of any political opposition to the Western powers, CEECs would have to bear serious consequences, such as EU regional funds blockage, capital flight, banking sector vulnerabilities, etc. The recent threats to block as much as \$150 million of cohesion funds to local Polish governments over alleged anti-LGBTQ zones introduced in five provinces is an example of

Western European powers using different EU mechanisms against unwanted policies in CEECs (Nardelli, 2021).

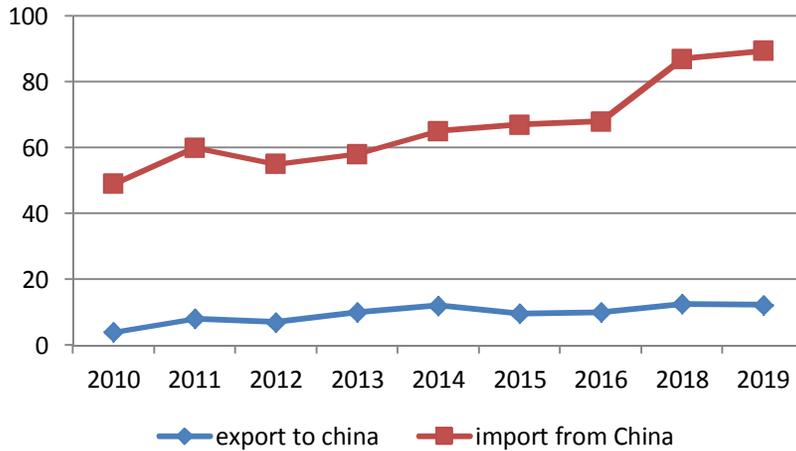
Given such tensions between Western and Eastern Europe in European RSC, China has attracted the attention of CEECs, as Asian century begins. Therefore, attracting China's investment helps CEECs diversify their investment portfolio and reduce dependence on Western Europe. Put differently, it is considered as the return of a lost sovereignty. Moreover, historically, CEECs are former socialist or communist countries with a long history of cooperation with China, especially in the diplomatic sphere (Zakic, 2020). From the Chinese perspective, CEECs are strategically important for Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as the main transport network connecting China to the Western Europe passes through the CEE (Yun & Pakulin, 2021). With regard to investment, China has put on disposal \$13 billion in loans and another \$3 billion in investment capital for the region in 2016, and is financing most of the initiatives under the China-CEEC framework; thus providing much needed diversification of CEECs' FDI (Song & Pavličević, 2019). As of 2021, CEECAS estimates that Hungary stands out as the main beneficiary of the Chinese investments—in the form of combined infrastructure related projects and FDI—among CEECs with the highest amount (EUR 5,4 billion), followed by Romania (EUR 2,8 billion), and Poland (EUR 2,7 billion) (Matura, 2021).

the EU common policy consists of shaping international standards, along with exporting EU domestic rules to third countries (through its common market forces) (Da Conceição-Heldt & Meunier, 2014); However, China—through its China-CEEC cooperation—has also been looking to avail itself of divisions in the EU, as to preempt such EU monopoly of standard setting in

international financial and commercial institutions (Sabbaghian, 2020). Following the launch of the 17+1 initiative, China's investment and development projects have multiplied and cover major fields, i.e., trade and investment, health, technology, energy, culture, green development, and education, according to the joint-statement on China and CEEC Beijing List of Activities in 2021 (*Xinhuanet*, 2021b). In the agricultural sector, for example, China's Xi has recently proposed to work with Poland to establish a China-CEEC wholesale market for agricultural products in Poland (Xi expects, 2022). Due to China and CEECs further institutionalization of their relations through 17+1 initiative, trade between the two sides has increased at an average annual rate of 8% from 2012 to 2020.

To benefit from the EU internal market, China has initiated a vast spectrum of development and infrastructure projects in CEECs. Regarding connectivity infrastructures, a total of 12,400 freight trains ran between China and Europe in 2020, with Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Lithuania and Slovakia serving as both corridors and destinations. In 2020, China signed \$5.41 billion worth of new project contracts in the 17 CEECs, a year-on-year increase of 34.6%, as stated by the country's Ministry of commerce (China International Fair for Trade in Services, 2020). Figure 1 illustrates the growing trend of export-import trade between CEECs and China from 2010 to 2020.

**Figure1.** Import and Export Trend between CEECs and  
China between 2010 and 2020 (in USD billion)



**Source:** Authors' compilation from Stanojevic et al., 2021

In addition, China's soft-power has been growing through infrastructure buildup, as it provides much-needed jobs to local communities, and to China's credit, more and more development projects are being initiated in the CEECs. Therefore, China's influence in Eastern Europe is a matter of concern for Western Europe, as it provides CEECs with bargaining leverage in EU negotiations; thus reaching a consensus on common military and foreign policy at EU-level has recently become significantly more difficult.

### 5. 1. CEECs and the EU

Given the conflict-ridden history of Europe, founding a community

of shared interests—consisting of post-modern states—was considered to be the only way to avoid defense dilemma in Europe; the coming of age of the European community further got a neoliberal turn, under the US influence and the securitization of communism (although substantial popular resistance brought some European flavor to the brute US type of neoliberalism) (Kotz, 2002).

CEECs reached their current states by the accession of CEECs to the EU, which was accompanied by securitizing communism (along with Russia) and accepting the EU's conditionality and neoliberal reforms (Morozov, 2021). In fact, there is a tendency in CEECs to present the Soviet era as an abnormality and the Russian-speaking minority as a fifth column, an alien element within themselves. As in the case of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania with significant Russian-speaking minorities, the excessive securitization of Russians has interfered a common national narrative (Lehti, Jutila, & Jokisipilä, 2008). Following the annexation of Crimea by Russia, it was suggested that perceptions of Russia as a military threat differ sharply across Europe and appear to be heavily influenced by geography and the proximity to Russia, which is an indication of the highly securitization of Russia in CEECs (Pezard, Radin, Szayna, & Larrabee, 2017). More recently, the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine also brought into light the rift between CEECs and the Western European powers with regard to a possible Russian oil embargo. In fact, Poland leads on sanctions on Russia by proposing to European Union leaders drastic measures, such as including imports of Russian coal and oil in the bloc's package of sanctions on Russia, while singling out Germany as the main roadblock to imposing more severe sanctions on Russia (*Reuters*, 2022).

CEECs comprise different ethnicities, all striving to affirm their belonging to Europe and this sense of identity and belonging to a European idea cuts through nationalities in CEECs, uniting them with the EU community complex and its supranational nature (Rehak & Kirillov, 1995). In the EU, however, under the design of Western European powers, the delegation of major policies to higher EU institutions creates dependency among the EU states and this shared sovereignty is the prerequisite for the EU internal market (Navarro, 2007). Furthermore, the Western European powers have been securitizing a possible backsliding of CEECs—walking back on Western liberal values and neoliberal policies—as a threat, thus justifying a harsher stance against CEECs. Therefore, there is an intense intra-regional dynamics in the European RSC.

## **6. Which EU Project? Tensions between CEE and Western Europe**

Through the application of RSCT, the analysis of the patterns of amity and enmity contributes to the understanding of the notion of security in the context of European RSC. In CEE-Western Europe relations, there is a considerable tension and mistrust due to several historical and economic factors, as follows: CEE region is located in the periphery of European economic system; thus, it is economically dependent on the core countries of the Western Europe, as well as historical animosities and mutual suspicion between the East and the West in Europe, such as the Nazi-Soviet Treaty on Non-Aggression (Barile, 2021). Therefore, there is a clear separation of the EU project and the Western European agenda in the eyes of CEECs' elites. As such, CEECs are demanding a greater share in the EU decision-making process.

Divisions in the approach to the 2003 Iraq war made Western Europeans conscious of the shortcoming of the common EU foreign policy (Levy, Pensky, Torpey, & Torpey, 2005). CEECs, unilaterally cooperating with the US, set an alarm in Berlin and Paris. In this regard, the then President of France Jacques Chirac's degrading remark that CEE countries "missed an opportunity to remain silent" highlighted the way in which Western Europe looked at CEECs (Toje, 2005, p. 119). Such denunciations by Western European officials are by no means new, and in fact reflect status and power hierarchy, i.e., a sense of superiority over the former members of the Eastern Communist bloc (Koschut, 2018). Indeed, CEECs became members of the European Union by accepting the heavy conditions of the EU's Western core.

While the formal discourse at the time was *a return to Europe*, the economic divergence has not disappeared. This divergence unveils itself in identity formation as well; whereas Western European countries define themselves as liberal states with liberal human rights at the core of their common culture, CEECs define themselves mostly based on Christian values, racial and geographic identity (Schimmelfennig, 2002).

Therefore, such disunity between the Western European powers and the CEECs is due to the different understanding of the EU project. The Western European concept of EU revolves around liberal and democratic values, pluralism, and economic cohesion around the Berlin-Paris axis; this contrasts itself with that of CEE, where the EU is about equal rights among members, respecting each other's sovereignty and cultural cohesion (Christian values). In such context, the words of Polish president Andrzej Duda evoke the way in which CEECs' elites regard the EU project when he says that, "the EU project is the most perfect thing invented for

Europe in the last centuries,” while cautioning that, “if the EU really wants to be European, it should pursue an open-door policy and not become a club”; he further argues that “autonomy” or “strategic sovereignty” in relation to the EU must include “respect for the nation-state” (Bodalska, 2021). Such emphasis on respect to nation-state and that the EU should not become a club of selected few (hinting to Western European definition of Berlin-Paris consensus) indicate the understanding of what the EU project is meant for the CEECs. Table1 presents differences of the conceptualization of the EU project in CEECs and Western Europe.

**Table1.** Different Perspectives of the EU project among CEECs and Western Europeans

Criteria	Western European perspective	CEE Perspective
<b>Organization</b>	Elite club	Inclusive club (open-door policy)
<b>Political Theory</b>	Pluralism	Community of equals
<b>Economic Framework</b>	Economic cohesion around neoliberal project	Sovereign economic policy
<b>Identity</b>	Liberal & democratic values	National & Christian values
<b>Type of States</b>	Post-modern	Nation-States

Source: Authors

### 6. 1. China-CEEC Cooperation and the Balkans

CEECs, as defined by China, do not form a cohesive group within the framework of the 17+1 initiative, some being CEECs and EU members, while others candidate for accession to the EU in the Balkan. Through such new definition, China works to benefits from fault lines within Europe through the cooptation of both EU member and candidate states. Cooperation with China, moreover,

allows many EU candidate states in the Balkans to play off China against EU, resulting in an increased bargaining power against the EU and Western Europe. On the other hand, the variation in terms of EU membership within China-defined CEE also allows China to circumvent compliance with some EU regulations by setting up projects in EU candidate states in the Balkans instead (Vangeli, 2017, p. 105).

By integrating Greece, while excluding Turkey, China has been enhancing its influence in the Balkans. The latter, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, also underwent significant changes. On the one hand, Turkey's influence in the Balkans as the flagship of the region's Muslims increased, fostering tensions within the Balkans. In fact, some key leaders involved in the conflict, which led to the breakup of Yugoslavia, had clear references to religion in their rhetoric, and through the religion factor, actors from outside of Yugoslavia, such as Turkey, dealt with the conflict (Mirilovic, 2019).

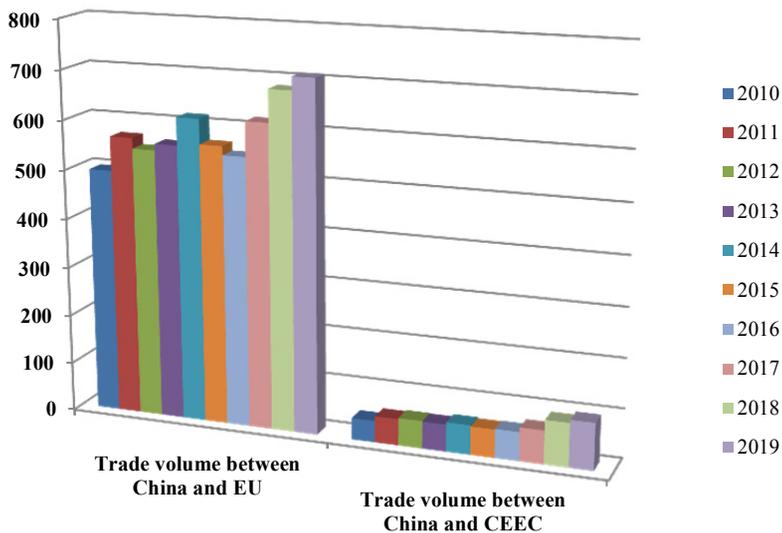
In the Balkans region, China has sidelined Turkey by engaging directly through the 17+1 initiative with Serbia and Greece. Turkey's marginalization has been exacerbated by its perceived biased approach to the region, and its public diplomacy rhetoric along ethnic and religion lines (Vračić, 2016). A good example of China's involvement in the Balkans is the project of the Belgrade-Budapest High-Speed Railway construction, conceived in 2013 on the China-CEEC Summit, which transport goods from China to Europe by setting up common railway and customs, connecting Greece's Port Piraeus—bypassing Turkey—through Macedonia with Serbia and Hungary (Jelisavac Trošić, Stojanović-Višić, & Petrović, 2018, pp. 22-23). Moreover, China's investment in Serbia alone surpasses that of Hungary by EUR 9.7 billion in 2021; almost

79% of the China-led infrastructure projects in the wider CEE-Balkans region are located in the Western Balkans (Matura, 2021).

## 7. Western Europe and Securitization of China

Despite the historical common heritage of communism between China and CEECs, the influence of the neoliberal hegemonic discourse and the conditions of EU membership led CEECs toward integrating to the EU and European Western economic core; while China-CEECs trade is growing significantly since the onset of the China-CEECs initiative, it is dwarfed by the mere volume of EU-China trade (see Figure 2); this, in turn, is indicative of delayed re-engagement of CEECs with China (Jaklič & Svetličič, 2019).

**Figure 2.** Trade Volume Comparison between CEEC-China and EU-China from 2010 to 2020 (in USD Billion)



**Source:** Authors' compilation from Xin & Zhigao, 2018; Stanojevic et al., 2021

Given China's rising power, the UK's exit from the EU, low economic growth in the Eurozone, and heavy dependence of CEECs on Western European foreign capital, CEECs consider Chinese capital and investment as an act of balancing. On the other hand, China views CEE as an entrance gate of Chinese products to the European Common Market; moreover, engaging with CEECs on a higher institutional and intergovernmental level through China-CEEC initiatives—such as 17+1 and BRI—gives China the upper hand on its own commercial negotiations with the European commission.

While China initially focused on economic relations and economic cooperation through the 17+1 initiative, since 2013, it has redefined the 17+1 initiative as part of the BRI, effectively turning the CEECs into a vital region for China's access to Western technologies. Indeed, not only does Cooperation within the 17+1 framework strengthen Chinese position at the economic level, but it also provides further impetus for the BRI in the region; Beijing, as a result, is providing preferential terms of financing for a variety of investment projects implemented in CEECs (Choroś-Mrozowska, 2019).

Furthermore, the 17+1 initiative compliments the Chinese multilateralism policy in the EU consisting of BRI and wider EU-China investment treaty, which is to be gradually implemented in the region (Hallinan, 2016). The inclusion of multilateral cooperation within the BRI has become part of China's foreign policy and has been the hallmark of the Chinese economic policy and multilateralism discourse. On the occasion of the G20 Summit in Rome, Chinese president Xi's speech mainly focused on building "a community with a shared future for mankind" through supporting true "multilateralism"; the multilateralism discourse has

been present in Xi's speeches in diverse forums from G20 to China-CEEC summits (*Globaltimes*, 2021). Meanwhile, the 17+1 initiative, which originally had an economic focus, has since seen gradually widespread institutionalization in the region, with many intergovernmental institutions within the 17+1 framework, preparing the ground for a future network of BRI in the EU. China's emphasis on intergovernmental institutional mechanisms—thereby creating necessary conditions for upgrading the relationship on the policy and normative front—and the importance placed on defining new regions (such as CEE comprising Central and Eastern Europe and South-East Europe) reflect China's specific regional policy.

With regard to institution, a plethora of institutions have been formed and more are planned to become operationalized within the 17+1 framework; such institutions include the likes of Technology Transfer Center, Tourism Promotion Center, Customs Cooperation Union, Logistics Cooperation Union, Transportation Infrastructure Cooperation Union, Commercial Union, and Think Tank Network. The foundation of such institutions reflects Chinese policy makers' betting on CEECs and the Balkan region as a strategic source of indirect advanced technology transfer from Western Europe (Vangeli, 2017, pp. 108-111). For instance, China's Fudan University (the first of its kind in EU) is determined to begin operations in Hungary by 2024, with an estimated cost of EUR 1.5 billion, which will be covered by a Chinese loan of EUR 1.3 billion to Hungary (Panyi, 2021). In addition, the integration of China-CEEC cooperation in the wider EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation, as the guiding document for China-EU relations, supports the linkage role of CEECs for a wider Western European technology access (Liu, 2021).

In the meanwhile, the contradiction of state-centric regimes in CEECs against system-centric liberal regimes in EU core complex has failed the CEECs, despite the EU's long attempts to integrate them into liberal-based EU institutionalization. In fact, fearing the further distancing of CEECs from the EU core, the European Union has been hesitant in sanctioning the backsliding CEECs on a wide range of issues from anti-abortion laws to anti-liberal political stances, which are mostly accredited to CEE elites' lack of liberal-democratic values (Cianetti, Dawson, & Hanley, 2018). CEECs are accountable to their nations within the framework of modern states, and consider themselves with absolute sovereignty over their borders and policies; the fact that EU has not been able to adopt a consistent migrant policy has been largely due to the CEECs rigid borders policy (Cieślińska & Dziekońska, 2019).

To many in CEECs, China is seen as an alternative to a weakening NATO, which the former US president Donald Trump described as obsolete (Shiffrinson, 2017). Given the US pivot to Asia policy, CEECs have begun playing catch-up to counterbalance their diminishing importance; meanwhile, China has become a helping hand to CEECs to increase their bargaining power and to leverage further West European concessions.

The historical animosity between Poland and Germany has taken on a new dimension with the increasing involvement of China in Europe. The enforcement of the 17+1 initiative and cooptation of EU member and candidate states is perceived as a serious threat to the EU's political project. As a result, there is a gradual securitization of China in the Western European complex. Conversely, in the minds of many Eastern Europeans (be in Poland, the Czech Republic, or Hungary) the EU is increasingly emerging as a project managed by Western Europe, while the two-speed EU,

apparent now in the form of Schengen and Eurozone areas, is already a reality and an internal threat to the politicization of the EU. Meanwhile, China's joint summits with the CEE Security Council (specifically led by Poland and Hungary) have added to the EU's security concerns over China and China's strategic investment in the EU. While China's investments in Germany and various other CEE countries have significantly increased in the last two decades, the country's active foreign policy in the region under the umbrella of China-CEEC summits and BRI is changing the power-balance of European RSC. Therefore, given the clear dichotomy in the EU between the Western bloc and CEECs, Chinese influence in the European RSC has exacerbated divisions both within and across Europe (Huntley, 2020).

To highlight the threats posed by China, Western European leaders have been more vocal about supposed human rights violations in China. Indeed, Western European elites have been explicitly aiming to raise public awareness regarding Beijing's economic, social and political practices, and to make sure China's threats become part of wider EU narrative and discourse, e.g., former Germany's Angela Merkel bringing up criticism of China's human rights record, saying: "There are differences of opinion here, especially when we think of the situation in Hong Kong, for example" (*Associated Press News*, 2021). Likewise, French President Emmanuel Macron raises strong concerns about "the situation in Hong Kong and human rights for China's Muslim Uighur minority" (*Reuters*, 2020). Indeed, divisions regarding the nature of the EU project have reached new heights with the enforcement of the 17+1 initiative and cooptation of EU member and candidate states; the Western European response, to the dismay of many in CEECs, has been the call for unity around the Western

European core as French president Emanuel Macron states that “there are different agendas... but the more we play on the united German-French front, and especially on a united European front, the better will be results and the credibility of our actions” (Ladepeche, 2019, pp. 1-2).

While the securitization of China is enacted with elements such as human rights violations, unfair economic practices, and state-authoritarianism, real causes can be found in Chinese projects undertaken in the CEE region—in the form of 17+1 initiative and BRI (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Apparent and Deep-Underlying Causes of Securitization of China

	Apparent Elements	Deep-Underlying Causes
Securitization of China	Human rights violations	China-CEEC 17+1 Initiative
	Authoritarian state	BRI project in Europe
	Unfair economic practices	Sino-Balkan nexus

Source: Authors

## 8. Clash of two Different World Views: International Economic Order

With the onset of 2010 financial crisis in EU, China as a major power has been much more involved in Europe. With the relative decline of the US economic strength—in innovation and economic growth, in particular—the EU community security complex has witnessed an increasingly influential China; in fact, China is now the EU's second-biggest trading partner after the US, and the EU is China's leading trading partner as of 2021 (European Commission, 2021).

China's influence in Europe has not exclusively a CEE-specific regional dimension. The case of some Western European countries expressing willingness to join BRI is indicative of high Chinese aspirations in Europe and its increasing soft power. As a turning point, on March 2019, Italy signed the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation within the Framework of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative and formally joined the BRI, where five cooperation priorities, namely policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people were to be attained (Durkin, 2020). Chinese challenge in Europe goes beyond the economic sphere, covering science and technology advancements as well. With the Western Europe 5G debacle and China's advances in 5G technology, as well as recent breakthroughs of Chinese space science and technology with its successful lunar and Mars missions, China is poised to become the unique power capable of replacing the US as the global hegemon (Peters, 2021).

With the emergence of China as a major power, there are now two competing international economic orders, namely the Western-led liberal order and the China-led rules-based order. One major trait of the latter might be an extension of what Chinese president Xi Jinping calls "socialism with Chinese characteristics" and establishment of "Xiaokang" or "moderately prosperous society" at a global level (Xi, 2017, pp. 15-16). When it comes to global order, China's president Xi Jinping states that it is necessary "to abandon ideological prejudice and jointly follow a path of peaceful coexistence, mutual benefit and win-win cooperation", and that in the post-COVID era "Equal rights, equal opportunities and equal rules should be strengthened," and that the world "should stay committed to openness and inclusiveness instead of closeness and

exclusion”; regarding the rules-based order, he states that “international governance should be based on the rules and consensus reached among us, not on the order given by one or the few” (*XinhuaNet*, 2021a, pp. 1-3).

A global order with “Chinese characteristics”—free from hierarchy, based on consensus and divorced from ideology—is the main point highlighted by China’s president Xi Jinping. This is, however, different from the mainstream discourse in China, which views China with the double identity of a great power and a rising power at the same time. Furthermore, other skeptical Chinese officials and scholars argue that even though China has the world’s second largest economy, ‘large’ is not equal to ‘rich’, since in per capita terms China is still lagging far behind the US (Zeng & Breslin, 2016, pp.773-774). Therefore, the perceived threats of China-led global order in Western Europe are more of an insecurity regarding internal cohesion, and strength of Western liberal values.

In this context of a divided Europe, with a significant Chinese game in the region, the UK—through Brexit—has chosen closer cooperation with the US and other Indo-Pacific powers over a dangerously divided Europe where the fault-lines run deep and there are still unhealed wounds; this has brought changes in the dynamics of Western European security complex (Levintova & Coury, 2020). The recent AUKUS agreement in 2021, which signifies a reinforcement of military industrial cooperation between Australia, the UK and the US in addition to the so-called 'Five Eyes' agreement, has brought the UK much closer to the US. In such an arrangement, the UK, with other partners are “to deepen diplomatic, security, and defense cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region,” as stated in the AUKUS joint communiqué (Perot, 2021). While being the largest recipients of cumulative FDI from China,

Germany is restricted by the EU community as the major stakeholder within the EU; whereas the UK, being outside the EU, has the upper hand, and assumes a significant role in the dawn of the Sino-US strategic competition (Cook, Ohle, & Han, 2021).

## 9. Conclusion

This paper sought to investigate the European security following increased Chinese involvement in CEECs, while hypothesizing that such Chinese engagement in the region has negatively affected EU efforts to tackle problems of poor policy coherence and lack of common foreign and defense policy, which in turn has led the EU to securitize China. Through a qualitative approach and by applying the RSCT to the study of European security in the context of China-CEE cooperation, our findings suggest that China has made significant headways in Europe by implementing the China-CEEC 17+1 initiative and coupling it with BRI, bypassing a set of safeguards designed to reduce the inflow of Chinese investment into the EU market (in the security-sensitive sectors). While China has been approaching CEECs in order to build a cohesive intergovernmental arrangement with the latter, differences over the direction of EU project between CEECs and Western Europe have brought about significant vulnerabilities for the Western European front in dealing with China. While these arrangements initially did not attract much attention in Western Europe, gradually there is a consensus in the making that China has been using the CEECs to gain access to EU internal market and to disrupt Western European standard-setting abilities (institutionalized under the EU community framework). What is more, China has been countering EU efforts to curb the Chinese influence in the region by incorporating the Western Balkan region—EU candidates—in the

China-CEE 17+1 initiative as part of its own defined CEE. As a consequence, China has been able to create confusion about what the nature of China-CEEC cooperation should be, and to bypass the EU regulatory framework. Additionally, China's significant investment in the CEE has been instrumental in CEECs enhancing their bargaining power vis-à-vis EU Commission and Western European powers. In the light of such Chinese influence, the Western European states have begun securitizing China and its development and infrastructure projects in the CEE. The research findings also indicate that Western Europeans see an inevitable clash of world systems, namely Western-led liberal system and China-led rules-based economic system. Such developments have had important consequences for the European RSC, such as the UK leaving the EU and joining the US-led AUKUS as to defend the Western liberal system.

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