



The Relation Between China, North Macedonia And Serbia In The Changing Geopolitical Context

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Budapest, March 2023

PREFACE

The research report in front of you is a thorough analysis that answers many questions about current international relations. It does so not only from the perspective of interstate cooperation as a classic model in international relations but also from the perspective of the relations between citizens and the state and how citizens perceive this multi-sector cooperation of states in international relations. This approach is at the core of critical geopolitics, which is at the centre of the research as a response to the current changing geopolitical context and security environment.

Taking into consideration the fact that modern humanity is directed towards democratic models of governance, while at the same time respecting all the historical peculiarities of the subjects of international law and thus the different "nuances" in the understanding of democracy, in this work, based on the research conducted in the social framework of North Macedonia and Serbia, we have shown and proved how modern tendencies of interstate cooperation are not directly and always dependent on geographical criteria but directed towards a new understanding of reality in a globalised world, in which the quality of interstate cooperation, apart from economic, is also measured by numerous other parameters that greatly contribute to the realisation of the national interests of each individual country.

The current state of international relations, the changes in the existing geopolitical context, and the increasing challenges, such as hybrid threats, health crisis, energy crisis and financial and investment crisis faced by modern humanity, most of which do not recognise the national borders of

states, represented the main determinants in this research. On the basis of the relationship between the People's Republic of China and North Macedonia, on the one hand, and Serbia, on the other, we have demonstrated that interstate cooperation in contemporary international relations is based not only on the willingness to provide mutual support in emergency situations and understanding of the challenges faced by each individual subject of international law, but also on multiple loyalties in uncertain circumstances.

The cooperation between the People's Republic of China and North Macedonia and China and Serbia, especially in the context of the continual geopolitical transition of power from the West to the East, and its development in various forms in diverse areas, including the fields of finance and investments, energy, health, and security and defence is a great case in point.

Through our analysis of these relations, we have shown that interstate cooperation in modern international relations is not just about being ready to help each other in emergencies and knowing what problems each actor in the international system faces. It's also based on having multiple loyalties in situations that are hard to predict, which is becoming more and more common in the modern world.

We used a lot of different methods to come up with results that aren't that unusual from the public's point of view, but they do mark a new stage in the science of international relations. This is because the intensity of interstate relations doesn't always lead to the realisation of national

interests. Instead, it leads to friendship and honest cooperation at the international level, which, according to the theory of international relations, is more important.

In fact, with this research on the People's Republic of China's relations with North Macedonia and Serbia in contemporary international relations as a case study, we opened a new space for academic discussion on the relations between big and small states in contemporary international relations and challenged the idea that relations between big and small states are always founded on an asymmetrical basis. More specifically, our main idea was to put forward the thesis that it is realistic for these relations to be established on an equal footing, despite the great economic, political, and military differences that exist when we look at them through the lens of power.

In the contemporary geopolitical and security environment, the study's findings provide a new framework for academic discourse and the study of international relations. On the other hand, this research study gives opportunities for decision-makers and creators of foreign policy strategies of both large and small states to define new directions and guidelines in the development of interstate affairs. These changes can be the foundation for a new phase of international relations that could contribute to achieving the national interests and foreign policy objectives of great powers while respecting the national interests and foreign policy objectives of smaller states.

06.03.2023, Skopje, Belgrade.

Research Team

“THE RELATION BETWEEN CHINA, NORTH MACEDONIA AND SERBIA IN THE CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT”

**Research project report
(2022)**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Today, we are living in a highly unpredictable and uncertain world. The 21st century is marked by a host of geopolitical and geostrategic challenges and security threats that are more specific to deal with than the previous century. All challenges appear in different forms: political confrontation, internal and international armed conflicts, and conflicts over natural resources. Also, the progressive growth of the world population initiates the fluctuation of prices and access to food as a result of climate change. The health, economic, and energy crisis, armed conflict in Ukraine and hybrid threats are the current geopolitical landscape in which the research project will have to respond to the most significant challenge: China's relations with North Macedonia and Serbia in the changing geopolitical context.

The research challenge stems from the fact that North Macedonia and Serbia have different foreign policy and security orientations. That crucial difference is reflected in the NATO membership of North Macedonia and the declared military neutrality of Serbia. North Macedonia aligns its goals with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. At the same time, Serbia leads its own so-called independent foreign policy, regardless of its European aspirations and the initiated process for accession to the EU.

The already determined geopolitical transition of power from the Euro-Atlantic to the Asian and Asia-Pacific regions (especially from the US to China) continues. The intensity of the changing geopolitical context is noticeably more dynamic with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the armed conflict in Ukraine. We will try to verify this prediction through

theoretical analyses of proven authors such as Brzezinski, Nye, Kaplan, Kissinger, Mearsheimer and Gilpin. Continuously, we will analyse the perception of the USA and China about the future of the geopolitical order.

The European Union's foreign strategy is oriented towards growth in an increasingly troubled world. The visionary multilateralism of the EU prefers that changes are needed to the global order, which will have the rule of law as the basis of things. The dynamics of EU-China relations will also be crucial for analysing and understanding China's relations with North Macedonia and Serbia.

Based on the set research questions and objectives of the research, the hypotheses that will have to be confirmed or denied through appropriate scientific argumentation are the following:

- Changing geopolitical context affects China's relations with North Macedonia and Serbia;
- EU-China and USA-China relations affect China's relations with North Macedonia and Serbia;
- Changing geopolitical context raises new security threats for China, North Macedonia and Serbia;
- Global finance, health and energy crisis affects China's relations with North Macedonia and Serbia;
- The contemporary geopolitical context is changing public opinion in North Macedonia and Serbia regarding China.

This research will be based on qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. The qualitative approach will be grounded theory, where the researchers collect rich data on the topic of interest and develop

theories inductively—gathering the data based on Open-source intelligence. OSINT sources will be collected from media print as printed newspapers, magazines, radio, and television from all over the World. Professional and academic publications from the internet as subscribed or purchased journals aggregators like J STORE, Project Muse of Johns Hopkins University, SAGE Journals, EBSCO Host, Cambridge Core, Elgar online and more. Also, the research will consider public government data such as public government reports, budgets, press conferences, websites and speeches. More specifically, the qualitative methodologies approach will be pivotal to the critical geopolitics method. It will examine the post-epidemic era and changing geopolitical context. That means utilising a holistic approach and dominantly using the essential methods of geopolitics: composition of mainly practical and formal geopolitical analysis and comparative, legal, and analytic methods. This method is appropriate because critical geopolitics sees itself as discourse. We use Fairclough's approach, and we have found that it is appropriate for our research (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012). According to Fairclough, discourse analysis is a form of argumentation that involves more practical argumentation. Argumentation for or against specific modes of action and argumentation can ground decisions. The research report, using discourse analysis, will try to analyse China by explaining its politics and role in the post-COVID-19 eras and the changing geopolitical context.

The quantitative research methodology relies on gathering public opinion by conducting a public opinion poll. For that need, research uses the CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) method through telephone interviews with an agreed representative sample in both North Macedonia and Serbia.

The research team has found a real scientific challenge in investigating China's relations with these two countries in the current geopolitical and security environment. The theoretical explanation of this research, complemented by a public opinion survey conducted by DEMOSTAT on relations with China in both countries, has to be a good base for further scientific research.

2. PREVIOUS STUDIES

The conceptual setting of this research represents an original scientific challenge and a contribution to the enrichment of the scientific gap that relies on the geopolitical discourse, that is, critical geopolitics in the study of the countries of the Western Balkans region. In the specific case of North Macedonia and Serbia. Even more significant is the theoretical elaboration of the two geopolitical game changers in the post-pandemic period and at the height of the Russian-Ukrainian war. All this was in light of China's relations with North Macedonia and Serbia.

Most of the literature dealing with the problems of relations between China and North Macedonia and China and Serbia is reduced to theoretical elaboration in the Belt and Road Initiative domain and the China-CEEC mechanism for cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe countries. In that section, we would especially mention the European Council on Foreign Relations project from 2022, "Mapping China's Rise in the Western Balkans," led by Vladimir Shopov. This project has had separate analyses for North Macedonia and Serbia. Also, it is necessary to point out two research of the Institute for European Affairs regarding the attitudes of Serbian citizens towards China. One from 2021 and the second from 2022. Primarily, research on public opinions in Serbia was oriented toward the foreign political orientation of the country. Belgrade Centre for security policy 2020 conducted a poll called "Many faces of Serbian foreign policy, Public opinion and geopolitical balancing." In 2021 Center for free election and democracy (CeSID) and International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted research: "Citizens' Perception of Serbia's Position in International Relations." And, Demostat in 2022, conducted public opinion

research "Foreign-political orientation of citizens of Serbia". Regarding North Macedonia and Serbia, recently, we have to mention research of the Washington Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) – "Chinese Influence in North Macedonia" and "Chinese influence in Serbia" from 2022.

Among the multitudes of scholarly articles and books partially related to this research report, it is worth mentioning the 2022 book "The Connectivity Cooperation Between China and Europe: A Multi-Dimensional Analysis" by Liu Zuokui and Branislav Djordjevic, published by Routledge. The book is a systematic China-based study on connectivity cooperation between China and Europe. Editorials include various scholarly articles from China and CEE countries regarding the origin and paradigm of China-European connectivity from various perspectives.

The underlying motive to research changes in the World geopolitical context and specifically how they relate to China, North Macedonia, and Serbia is based on two geopolitical game-changers - the post-COVID-19 era and the Russian-Ukrainian war. The literature review in this context shows a deficit of concrete research, although there is a certain amount of such literature in a broader context.

As a good foundation for studying and researching geopolitical change context, it is worth highlighting the collection of papers entitled "Security challenges and the place of the Balkans and Serbia in a changing world" issued in 2020. The primary purpose of the collection of papers, edited by Ana Jovic-Lazic from the IIPE, Serbia and Alexis Troude from the University of Versailles, France, is to offer a comprehensive understanding of the difficult position of the Balkans in the Contemporary World, which

is estimated as rapidly changing. Also, the book by Mileski, Albrecht, and Chitopoulou (2022), "Strengthening EU-China relation: Imagination or reality? 加强中欧关系：想象还是现实?", mainly focuses on understanding the state of relations in the modern era of the globalised World. The book's contents try to answer whether the EU and China can create cooperative relations for a constructive world order.

Continuously, as a solid base for researching and studying in the section on new security threats brought about in changing geopolitical context, we want to mention the book by Treverton, Thvedt, Chen, Lee, and McCue (2018) "Addressing Hybrid Threats" within the Swedish Defence University. The book gives us a comprehensive understanding of what we mean when we talk about hybrid threats - what types of threats we are dealing with and what tools are being used against democratic states. Gibson-Fall's (2021) article "Military responses to COVID-19, emerging trends in global civil-military engagements" has a basic thesis based on the statement that the COVID-19 pandemic is giving way to increased military engagements in health-related activities at the domestic level.

However, this study intends to deeply research China's relationship with North Macedonia and Serbia in changing geopolitical context. We are convinced that the originality of the theoretical examination based on the contemporary geopolitical situation provoked by the two geopolitical game-changers will succeed. The broader scope of examination relates to the historical point of research, which refers to the transition of geopolitical power from the West to the East (Asia – Pacific). In such a geopolitical context, EU-China and US-China relations have been affecting China's relationship with North Macedonia and Serbia, particularly in the field of

security and bilateral actions, and have been reflected in the empirical research of public attitudes and opinions on representative examples in North Macedonia and Serbia.

3. CONTEMPORARY GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT IN THE POST-COVID-19 ERA AND UKRAINIAN WAR

The world we live in is characterised by uncertainty like never before. Following the geopolitical discourse, it is noteworthy that the most significant part of the scholar's works concerns questions about the future world geopolitical order. Understanding the current geopolitical order is also quite controversial, but the influence on the economic competition between states is evident. Hence, it can be said that the logical continuation of geopolitics in peacetime conditions is geoeconomics, while in wartime, geostrategies.

However, what does the phrase "geopolitical world order" mean? The authors who deal with the world order changes and use geopolitics as a method of analysis call it the geopolitical world order. The geopolitical order is always understood by the organisation of the space in which specific centres of power take care of maintaining or revising the geopolitical order. Authors of the Cold War period, such as Morgenthau (Morgenthau, 1962; Morgenthau, 2020), Kennan (Kennan, 1972; Kennan, 1985), and later Cohen (Cohen, 1991), Kissinger (Kissinger, 1956; Kissinger, 1994; Kissinger, 2002), and Brzezinski (Brzezinski, 1986; Brzezinski, 1997) engaged in explorations of the geopolitical order of the Cold War and represented US national interests in those explorations. Robert Cox is one of the authors who has studied the theoretical idea of the geopolitical order.

Cox (1981), in his work "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory," elaborates on the concept of geopolitical

order as an analytical tool for researching the state of geopolitical relations in the World in a certain historical period. Cox associates the geopolitical order with the hegemony one state imposes over others and then seeks to maintain. Geopolitical orders represent a combination of social, political and economic structures. (Cox, 1981, pp. 126-155).

Also, the geopolitical order can be understood as a set of codes in which a single matrix is largely present, affecting all of them as an expression of the unique geopolitical order. The geopolitical code is the result of practical geopolitical thinking. It contains a set of political-geographic assumptions that support the state's foreign policy. The geopolitical code includes the definition of national interests, identifying external threats to those interests, the planned response to those threats, and the justification of such response. (Taylor, 1993, p.64).

A period of transition from one geopolitical order to another happens when the conditions for this are created in the geopolitical system, that is, when a geopolitical order experiences a crisis or the geopolitical relations in a geopolitical order become so unstable that they produce a rapid geopolitical transition. This implies a significant change in global geopolitical relations, which throughout history did not happen as suddenly and quickly as the last changes in the geopolitical order, which refer to the transition from the geopolitical order of the Cold War.

3.1. Verification and inspection of the geopolitical trends

This section includes a literature review and reflections on major scholarly works and arguments of key authors dealing with the research subject. We primarily examine Nye, Brzezinski, and Kaplan's arguments about the

geopolitical transition of power from the Euro-Atlantic to the Asian and Asia-Pacific regions. Additionally, we explore alternative takes by major authors, including the analysis of predictions of the relations between two leading global powers, the US and China, offered by major realist authors John Mearsheimer and Henry Kissinger. Finally, we apply Gilpin's theory of stability and change in world politics to the current state of world affairs to assess the possibilities of future developments in US-China relations and the changes in the geopolitical world order.

3.1.1. Joseph Nye

As Joseph Nye has written, power always depends on context. In his 2011 book "Future of Power," Nye presented the example of the child who dominates on the playground. Suddenly, the child could be a laggard when the context is changed in the well-ordered classroom. Starting with the statement that America would not be able to solve its problems alone, nor will the World be able to solve its problems without America. After a decade, in that context, it is evident that the post-COVID period and the war in Ukraine are changing the geopolitical context. Of the existing efforts of analysis and prediction, Joseph Nye's may be one of the examples with a reasonable analytical and predictable effort to confirm the contemporary situation.

Nye has written about the American smart power strategy. He describes it as a combination of soft and hard power or a combination of liberalistic and realistic approaches. Furthermore, explaining the challenges of implementing a smart power strategy, Nye identifies one of the challenges in China's rise as an economic hegemon that is gradually regaining its share

in the world economy and whose power corresponds to the number of the population and countries where it is economically active, dominantly.

According to Nye, this challenge requires a policy that welcomes China as a responsible and significant entity but guards against possible hostility by maintaining close relations with Japan, India and other countries in Asia that welcome the American presence (Nye, 2011, p. 233).

Recently, addressing the evolution of soft power, Nye has emphasised that China's hard military and economic power is growing, which could cause fear among neighbours who would create balanced coalitions. If China supports its rise by increasing its soft power, it would indirectly weaken the incentives for such coalitions. Chinese representatives have followed Nye's ideas and continuously invested in soft power. As a result of that state's direction, a considerable amount of money was spent, and large numbers of scholarly articles were written (Nye, 2021).

The above statements are at the core of changing the geopolitical context because hard military power is inefficient against cyber operative spaces and pandemics. Hard power has not attracted China's values and goods for others, including Asians. COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy shows that China has combined soft power (culture and health diplomacy) and hard power (economic power).

As we mentioned, a decade after Nye's smart power promotion, in the Bayden era the US new National Defence Strategy 2022 noted that China is a "pacing challenge" and the "most consequential strategic competitor for the coming decades." Moreover, the National Defence Strategy pointed out China as the most significant and systematic challenge. Various scopes

and scales of threats facing the US changed today. NDS 2022 sees China and Russia as posing dangerous challenges to US safety.

The different views on China and Russia are very interesting in that direction. China is a strategic competitor over the long term (imposing new bipolar US-China world order), while Russia is an acute threat. (Cherneva, 2022).

3.1.2. Zbigniew Brzezinski

In his 2012 book, 'Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power', Brzezinski starts from the observation that the World is interactive and interdependent and that, for the first time, issues of human survival are dominant in contrast to traditional international conflicts.

Brzezinski wrote about the changing distribution of global power. At the same time, it focuses on the influential Chinese growth but also on other powers such as, for instance, Russia, India, and Brazil. It generally describes the global arena of competitiveness relates to resources, security and economic advantage in which misunderstandings that can cause conflicts of interest are very likely. Based on that, Brzezinski admits that the US needs a broad geopolitical base for constructive cooperation in a global framework.

Such findings, at the very beginning of the book, confirm our presumption that a decade ago, there were arguments that the global geopolitical order was experiencing a transition to other centres of power.

Engaging in scientific observation of four key issues, Brzezinski foreshadows the transition trend in the distribution of global power from

the West to the East and analyses the possible consequences of that process. Explaining why America's attractiveness in the World is weakening and its symptoms in terms of domestic and international decline require a model of geopolitical reorientation to revitalise the world role of the US. If it fails to do so, it locates the immediate geopolitical casualties and effects at the global level, with the central question being whether China can take over the US's leading role in world affairs after 2025. To counter such a possible geopolitical transition, the US is trying, according to Brzezinski, to engage Russia and Turkey to create a larger and more energetic West. From today's distance, these assumptions seem challenging to achieve with the events in Ukraine, especially concerning relations with Russia. Brzezinski's strategic vision of a "Greater West" that would stretch from Vancouver to Vladivostok and cooperate with the East seems unachievable. His predictions in the book devoted a special place to the strategy for a stable and cooperative East. In doing so, he adds that success would be guaranteed if China's geopolitical concerns were successfully moderated.

It would mean reducing the potential dangers inherent in China's geographic environment, primarily due to US security ties with Japan, South Korea and the Philippines, the vulnerability of China's maritime access to the Indian Ocean through the Straits of Malacca and from there to the Middle East, Africa and Europe. China is attempting to make a favourable position in the Eurasian Economic Union and the existing ASEAN. To try to consolidate Pakistan as a counterweight to India. Gain a significant advantage over Russia in economic influence in Central Asia and Mongolia, which would partially satisfy China's resource needs. Moreover, a significant aspect that Brzezinski highlights is the resolution

of the unresolved legacy of the civil war in favour of China, the issue of Taiwan. Furthermore, there are China's efforts to establish a favourable position and an indirect political presence in many countries from the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. (Brzezinski, 2012).

Considering these assessments of Brzezinski from a decade ago, which are in the discourse of analysis appropriate to the formal geopolitical approach, the current US foreign policy shows that discourse does not guide it. Recently, has become evident that the US's practical geopolitical approaches and actions have been modified. This gives us the right to state that, especially in the area of the issue of Taiwan, but also the economic rise of China, the US has different operating practices than those described by Brzezinski.

3.1.3. Robert D. Kaplan

In his 2010 book 'Moonson: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power', Robert Kaplan argues that the Indian Ocean resides once again at the focus of the geopolitical world map. Kaplan presents the arguments with the statement that the Indian Ocean, beginning its modern history as a 'Portuguese imperialist lake', has remained a cosmopolitan space.

In a geopolitical sense, Kaplan seeks to indicate that the geopolitical power battle will be fought in a political-geographical space different from that of the last century. For him, Europe ceases to be in the geopolitical and geostrategic consideration of key world actors. Furthermore, he predicts that the battle will shift from the European littoral to the east.

Concrete indicators confirm Kaplan's discussion of the geopolitical transition from West to East. Namely, almost 40% of the World's crude oil

'leaks' through the Strait of Hormuz, at the western end of the Indian Ocean. At the other end, the East, 50% of the World's merchant fleet anchors in the Malacca Strait, a natural gateway to the Pacific. In the context of the movements of the entire world trade, 90% of it takes place by the sea. Half of it passes through the Indian Ocean, which prefers 70% of the World's petroleum products. According to certain estimates, such developments will gain even greater importance, as world consumption is predicted to increase by 50% by 2030. Realism is set at the centre of these analyses. The decline of American power, according to Kaplan, is inevitable. Simultaneously, it is emphasised that it is not about preventing the rise of China and India but about managing the changes and transition from a unipolar to a multipolar world. In the 21st century, the US will no longer act as a hegemon but as one of several major powers cooperatively managing global governance.

Kaplan's optimistic scenario of the "elegant fall" of the US could draw China into the global system as part of the Eurasian maritime alliance. Such a hypothetical engagement would aim to achieve American-Indian-Chinese cooperation in the Indian Ocean. At the same time, expecting that American civilisational tensions with radical Islam will decrease, ceding part of the responsibilities to, as Kaplan notes, like-minded states in that part of the World. In that way, China and India would bear the burden and the benefits of trade security. (Kaplan, 2010).

According to Kaplan, India is a military and economic counterbalance to China. The Indian Navy has been engaged in joint operations with the US, Japan, Australia and Singapore since 2007, considering the Ocean as its backyard. For Kaplan, their strategic rivalry is an additional impetus for a

strategic partnership between the US and India. (Kaplan, 2010). His discourse is also notable in more recent scholarly articles (Nga & Oanh, 2022); (Ye, 2021); (Kumar, 2022); (Bloomfield, 2021); (Wilson, 2021), whereas China considers India as its real strategic opponent. Moreover, Matthew Kustenbauder (2012) of Harvard University states that Kaplan's book is still enjoyable and positions the Indian Ocean as the World's new field of geopolitical competition. (Kustenbauder, 2012). Thus, Kaplan's work and Kustenbauder's criticism support our finding of a transition of geopolitical power from the West to the East.

3.1.4. John Mearsheimer

John Mearsheimer, one of the realist international relations theorists, tackles the changes in the world order in the updated edition of his seminal work, "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics." In the newly written last chapter titled "Can China Rise Peacefully?" Mearsheimer applies his theory of offensive realism as laid out in the rest of the book on the rise of China and the implications this development has on the hegemony of the United States.

Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism stems from the long tradition of realist understanding of international relations while offering a new approach to looking at the state behaviour and their strategies, motives and possibilities for war, limits of hegemony and stability of the international system. The author's arguments rely on five bedrock assumptions that drive the logic of offensive realism. The first is that the international system is anarchic, which means there is no higher authority over states to oversee their behaviour. The second is that great powers are inherently capable of offensive military action, while the third relates to states'

intentions, as they can never be certain about the intentions of other states. The fourth assumption is that survival is every state's primary goal, and the fifth asserts that states are rational actors. (Mearsheimer, 2014, pp. 46-47).

Accordingly, Mearsheimer argues that the states have a fear of the capabilities and unknowable intentions of other states, and the solution is for every great power to attempt to maximise its power to become the hegemon. However, the stopping power of water disrupts any attempt at global hegemony, leaving only the status of the regional hegemon as the achievable goal for great powers. The sole current regional hegemon is the US. Thus, Washington's main goal is to prevent other powers from achieving regional hegemony in their regions (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 346). In this regard, China is the most serious challenger.

Mearsheimer predicts that "If the Chinese economy continues growing at a brisk clip in the next few decades, the United States will once again face a potential peer competitor, and great-power politics will return in full force" (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 343). He argues that China will primarily continue to evolve its economic capacities through trade, but like the US, it will eventually aim to ensure the safety of its trade routes through military means. Unlike the US at the start of its development, however, China is a huge country without the need to conquer new territories. Still, as the Chinese rise continues, Beijing will have less patience for the US presence in the Asia-Pacific region and will attempt to push Washington out. (Mearsheimer, 2014, pp. 351-352).

The author argues that the Chinese accumulation of power will stimulate its neighbours to form a balancing coalition with the US and that war between the two great powers is highly possible in the future. In his

analysis, Mearsheimer starts from the same hypothesis as our research, namely that the transition of geopolitical power from the West to the East is and will continue to be a major trend. However, we differ in predictions about the probability of a conflict between the US and China.

Mearsheimer's main argument stems from the dichotomy of survival and prosperity. He argues that with the possibility of their survival being in danger, states will disregard the economic interdependence with China and the benefits it brings to protect its existence (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 370). However, Chinese behaviour should not threaten neighbouring states' survival, especially the US. The theory does not consider the specifics of the Asia-Pacific region enough. The long history of existence in the immediate proximity of China has made the regional states capable of developing appropriate strategies, such as hedging. On the other hand, the benefits China draws from the current state of the world order and its existing institutions and practices, even in the long run, do not motivate it to disrupt it through military conflict with the leading power.

3.1.5. Henry Kissinger

Henry Kissinger, another author belonging to the realist school of thought of international relations, one who had the unique opportunity to test his theoretical assumptions through foreign policy practice, sees the potential future of US-China relations and the corresponding influence of this dyad on the world order in a different light than Mearsheimer. In the epilogue of his book "On China," titled "Does History Repeat Itself? The Crowe Memorandum," Kissinger charts two possible alternative directions to which the transition of geopolitical power towards the East can lead.

The first is based on the parallels of the relations between the United Kingdom and Wilhelmine Germany in the last decades of the 19th century and at the start of the 20th century (Kissinger, 2011, pp. 516-517). The rising German power and ambitions caused deep concern in the UK, the leading hegemonic power of the time. This echoes the famous Thucydides' trap formulated by Graham Allison (2012), based on the underlying cause of the Peloponnesian war identified by the ancient historian. The German pursuit of the powerful Navy, which was the logical step to take, was a challenge for the UK, regardless of German intentions. This structural factor made conflict inevitable.

Similarly, this argument goes, rising China will have to build its Army and Navy and rely on the military to secure its interests. Whether this directly threatens the US is of less concern because Chinese capabilities and American fear of disrupting the current world order will put the two powers on a collision course (Kissinger, 2011, p. 519). We would point out that Mearsheimer's analysis is based on similar arguments.

However, the alternative understanding of the Anglo-German rivalry offers clues for a different interpretation of contemporary geopolitical transitions. It can point to the more peaceful scenario, where competition and cooperation coexist, while the war is not the fated outcome but a potential consequence of the direct choices of the actors involved. Kissinger is more partial to this interpretation. In the pre-WWI period, the system's crisis was inherent in its structure. Nevertheless, in their decisions, leaders of major powers, particularly Germany, could have avoided policies that exacerbated latent tensions (Kissinger, 2011, p. 517). They did not. Applied to the current structural changes in the international

system, the actions undertaken by both Washington and Beijing will shape the direction their rivalry takes.

In this regard, Kissinger points out several factors that can and should shape the thought processes of decision-makers on both sides. For one, the gains for one side do not automatically mean losses for the other. Additionally, the leading Chinese priority is national unity, and the strategic confrontation for world domination would bring a challenge (Kissinger, 2011, pp. 523-525). Thus, Kissinger sees the possibility for "co-evolution", meaning "that both countries pursue their domestic imperatives, cooperating where possible, and adjust their relations to minimise conflict" (Kissinger, 2011, p. 526). The most contested region of Asia-Pacific should be managed by establishing the wider Pacific community that would include major regional actors, thus minimising the fear in Beijing of an American-led coalition against China (Kissinger, 2011, p. 528).

Kissinger's approach offers insightful recommendations and shows when contrasted with Mearsheimer, diverse understandings of the consequences of the power transition to the East within the realist school of international relations, whose approach is, in our opinion, one of the better-suited ones for the analysis of the great power relations and geopolitical shifts in changing conditions in the international system.

3.1.6. Robert Gilpin

Another theoretical framework for analysis of the geopolitical transition from the West to the East is through the lens of Robert Gilpin's explanation of how change occurs in international relations, presented in his book "War

and Change in World Politics". Gilpin offers a structuralist-based comprehensive understanding of change, what causes it, when it happens and its possible consequences. Given the continuous transition, primarily in the economic, but in the political and military spheres as well, which puts the focus of international politics on the global East, mainly due to the exceptional rise of China, Gilpin's theory is a useful tool for analysis of current and future developments.

The author differentiates between several types of changes in the system. The first is the most fundamental as it includes a change in the nature of the actors that compose an international system - systems change. On the other hand, systemic change involves a change in the actors who govern the system, meaning the fall of one hegemonic power and its replacement with another. This type is the most relevant for analysing the current geopolitical power transitions. The third is the interaction change, which relates to regular interactions or processes among the entities in the international system (Gilpin, 1981, pp. 39-40).

For Gilpin, stability is based on the system's legitimacy being recognised by major actors, meaning that no state believes it would be profitable to attempt to change it. The distribution of power in the system is reflected in its main components, as they are designed and suited to the interests of the most powerful actors. However, as the distribution of power changes, the rising actor(s) aspire to change the system according to their own interests (Gilpin, 1981, p. 9). If successful, the basis of the new system will be norms, institutions and practices which reflect the interests of the newly established hegemon.

The actor's calculations and the actions that follow them are based on propositions that mirror each other. The first is from the point of view of the revisionist power and states that actors will try to change the system if expected benefits exceed the expected costs. On the other hand, for the hegemonic power, the tendency is for the economic costs of maintaining the status quo to rise faster than the economic capacity to support it (Gilpin, 1981, pp. 10-11). When these two processes cross or one of them reaches a threshold, the created disequilibrium can be resolved, and a new status quo is created. This can happen through hegemonic war, which includes a direct conflict between the dominant and challenging power(s) in which the nature and governance of the system are at stake, while the means employed are unlimited and the scope of warfare is general (Gilpin, 1981, pp. 199-200).

However, hegemonic war is not inevitable, and regarding the current system, we concluded that systemic change would probably not happen in the mid-term. Dominant power can cut costs through retrenchment, mainly by withdrawing from non-vital areas (Gilpin, 1981, p. 191). Still, Washington seems to be committed to its worldwide military and economic presence for the foreseeable future, since the costs are still much below the benefits the US draws from it. However, the benefits China has gained from its prudent incorporation into the system designed by the US after WWII also point to the stability of the current world order.

China's successfully implemented Belt and Road Initiative continues to grow, creating a more connected world and enabling trade communication through several routes across continents. The organisations, such as the Shanghai Organization for Cooperation or the BRICS, and institutions,

such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, present alternative formations to the ones created in the West and contribute to the shift in focus of international economic and political activity towards the East, but keep the changes, including the potential domination of China in Asia-Pacific region, at the level of the interaction changes as defined by Gilpin.

3.2. Geopolitical and geoeconomic power transition from the Euro-Atlantic region to the Asia and Pacific region

Based on the previous anticipation, which led us to the current stage of geopolitical order, this section offers a comprehensive overview of changes in the international system and geopolitical world order that move the focus to the Asia-Pacific region. We will sketch the following geopolitical discourse in the latest scholarly works: the rise of China in the economic, political and military spheres and the emerging Chinese importance in these areas. This approach should enable us to follow significant developments and milestones in EU-China and US-China relations in addressing the current and previous stages of great power relations. Such an approach is a good starting point related to the empirical part of the research. Additionally, space will be opened to analyse the impact of global geopolitical relations and China's relations with North Macedonia and Serbia, with the main focus on and review of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian war. These events have been identified as the leading global geopolitical game-changers.

3.2.1. Current and future geopolitical context

Today the World is experiencing a significant turning point in its existence, political, economic and military confrontation. According to this research,

the new situations caused by the health crisis, the armed conflict in Ukraine and the energy crisis are the starting points for analysing the contemporary geopolitical context and world order. Today's geopolitical and geostrategic challenges are different and more delicate to solve than those of the last century. Some scholars such as Noorali, Flint and Ahmadi (2022) try to explain that the shifts in port power can help explain the current state of geopolitical transition. The dominant port power in the twenty-first century will dominate the global geopolitical order, and China is currently positioned to take that role.

Also, the argument of Colin Flint could support the aforementioned geopolitical discourse. Following Colin Flint's geopolitical codes, we can verify the geopolitical and geoeconomic transition trends. There, three aspects are significant. The first aspect refers to the creation of military capacities, especially naval power, which contributes to increasing the possibilities of projecting power to China. In that context, the US now determines China as a military threat. Although, Flint pointed out that this is overstated and that China has not deployed any extensive overseas military. The second aspect is BRI as a form of (geo)economic influence. China's economic power is arguably more than a matter of its military strength. China is a global financial player.

Moreover, the third aspect refers to the increased institutional presence that China has acquired as a result of its economic growth. This means taking an active role in existing global institutions, such as its advocacy within the framework of the WTO during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, China is also developing new institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, a clear sign that it does not want to be just a compliant

member of US-led organisations: World Bank and International Monetary Fund. (Flint, 2022, pp.220-222).

Other ones, such as Leoni (2021), assert that the geopolitical world order has become post-American due to capitalism's uneven geographical development and China's rise in a highly strategic region of the World, the Western Pacific. However, two main indicators or geopolitical game changers which reflect the change in the geopolitical order, its dynamics and consequences are the COVID-19 pandemics and the war in Ukraine.

Even more, some scholars wrote about the already reached or in the long run approaching bipolar US-China world. One of them is Tunsjø, who argues about three development directions that have shifted the international system from unipolarity to bipolarity. The first direction concerns narrowing the power gap between the US and China. The second direction refers to widening the power gap between China and third-ranked powers such as Russia, India, Japan, Germany or any other country that can be included in this ranking.

Similarly, if that gap is greater and increases in the future, then according to Tunsjø, the international system is probably bipolar. Third, the distribution of capabilities is roughly similar between the contemporary international system and the origins of the previous bipolar system in 1950. If the current distribution of capabilities resembles the previous bipolar system, then the current international system is almost undoubtedly bipolar. More specifically, the US is not overtaken by the Chinese economy, even though the Chinese economy is now the World's largest in purchasing power parity (PPP). However, in terms of nominal GDP, the US economy remains larger than China's, though China is closing the gap at an

astonishing rate. Currently, China's nominal GDP is 64% of that of the US. In the early 1990s, this contrast was 15 times in favour of the US. Comparatively, in the 2000s, it was roughly eight times in favour of the US. In terms of military spending, the US leads by two to three times that of China. Clear differs, when, in the 2000s, the US defence budget was more than ten times that of China or 20 times in the early 1990s. Tunsjø alludes to the conclusion that China is more powerful than in the past. Even though China has not obtained power parity with the US, its position has increased considerably. Moreover, Tunsjø argued and examined the power distribution between China and other great powers contending for a position among the higher-ranking nations. For instance, in 1990, the Chinese economy was roughly 1.5 times that of India and roughly half that of the Soviet Union. In 1993, the nominal GDP of China and Russia was roughly equal. Today, China's nominal GDP is roughly ten times that of Russia and more than five times that of India. China's economy is nearly three times that of Japan, twice that of Germany, and more than four times that of France and the United Kingdom. China and Russia spent \$228 billion and \$55 billion on defence in 2017. China's defence budget is roughly four times that of India, the United Kingdom, and France and nearly six times that of Germany and Japan. According to the structural realists (Kenneth Waltz), bipolarity means a system in which no third power can challenge the top two. (Tunsjø, 2021). This data suggests that the process of emergence of the US-China bipolar world is underway. The next section will map the key developments on the trajectory of that process.

3.2.2. Geopolitical power transition road map: key developments

The transition of geopolitical power from the West to the East is not a short-term process. It is taking place over a longer time frame that can encompass several decades. The steady rise of China is happening concurrently with global changes to the world order that move the focus of political, economic and security developments towards the East. On the other hand, technological advancements make the World more connected than ever. This leads to the spillover of geopolitical competition into the technological sphere caused by these significant innovations, of which the most important are the 5G networks (Bojić, Djukanović, and Nikolić, 2021). The current power transition is a continuous process that will last well in the future. Until now, it has been marked by several key interconnected developments. Also, it is an interesting anticipative forecast of some scholars regarding the new geopolitical world order.

The first key development is the geopolitical competition between the US and China in the Asia-Pacific region. Since Washington recognised Beijing as its key challenger, the US has steadily focused on strengthening its geostrategic position in Asia-Pacific. The region is crucial for its maritime trade lanes that are important both for the US and China, leading trade and financial centres, the presence of several great powers, and several rising middle powers with conflicting interests. Based on historical and geographical arguments, East Asia is China's natural sphere of influence. The significance of the South China Sea (SCS) makes it a key contested issue. The disputes over territorial waters in SCS include Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam as the main claimants. The incidents between China and the Philippines in 2012 have

particularly verged on the edge of military conflict. While the US is not a directly involved party, it has supported arguments presented by countries opposed to China.

Additionally, it has conducted an increasing number of Freedom of navigation operations (FONOP) in the South China Sea, starting in 2015, and particularly expanding the program during the Trump administration (Smith, 2021). The second crucial focal point in the region is Taiwan. In the wake of the Ukrainian war, the possible escalation of the situation regarding Taiwan has become a significant concern. The tensions which resulted from the visit of the speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, at the beginning of August 2022 are a good example. However, for the time being, the logic for either side to seek escalation and a military solution does not seem convincing.

The second key development is the expanding Chinese economic cooperation with Europe. It is spearheaded by the Belt and Road Initiative, which is envisioned in Beijing as China's main geostrategic and geoeconomic initiative in the 21st century. Both the European Union and its member states individually were very eager to capitalise, based on mutual benefits, on the Chinese efforts to expand cooperation across Eurasia. The BRI, launched in 2012, led to a number of significant investments in European economies, for example, in Greece, where Chinese COSCO Shipping acquired controlling shares percent in Piraeus Port Authority, or Italy, where China National Chemical Corporation bought Pirelli tire company (Zeneli, 2019). However, the absolute gains became less relevant than the relative ones. The decision-makers, particularly in Brussels, Berlin, Paris and Rome, became concerned that

these Chinese investments in European economies could increase European dependence on China, strengthening Beijing's leverage. The willingness of Chinese banks to give loans without additional conditions relating to non-economic aspects, such as the political freedoms and state of the rule of law, made them rather appealing in Central and Eastern European member states and the candidate countries in the Western Balkans. Substantial efforts to limit Chinese investment were undertaken by leading EU states, mainly through the introduction of the FDI screening mechanism (European Commission, 2020). This led to a shift of China's focus on the China-CEEC format that includes countries from Central and Eastern Europe. In that context, Sino-North Macedonian and Sino-Serbian relations that are the focus of our analysis are shaped by this aspect in great measure.

In contrast to the first two developments, which are continual and with more prolonged implications, the third and the fourth are more recent and include immediate, concrete and visible effects. They are the major geopolitical game-changers. The third development relates to the geopolitical effects of the pandemic. The fourth development is the war in Ukraine and its geopolitical implications. The next section highlights their effects at the global level.

3.2.3. Geopolitical game-changers: COVID-19 and Russian-Ukrainian war

The global dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic makes its implications widespread and influential by default. The diverse ways in which it affected phenomena, dynamics and processes at the individual, state, regional and international levels in a number of aspects is beyond the scope

of this analysis. Regarding international relations and the consequences of the power transition towards the East, we can identify several important effects. As Daniel Drezner (2020) argues, the COVID-19 pandemic did not fundamentally change the fabric of international relations, the ways power relations work, and how the calculation of interests affects them. The effects are primarily felt in the economic sphere. Firstly, the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impeded economic activities worldwide and negatively contributed to the GDP of all major powers. Success in renewing economic activity will make a great difference in the future. China was, in that regard, very successful and has seen its GDP rise from 14.69 trillion US\$ in 2020 to 17.73 trillion US\$ in 2021 (World Bank, 2022). Secondly, the appeal of mercantilism and aspirations for achieving national economic autarky have risen. The countries want to become more self-sufficient to lessen the risks of similar crises in the future, especially in areas deemed as part of critical infrastructure and important for national security.

The third effect, a non-economic one, is that the international reputations of major actors China, the US, and the EU regarding COVID-19 have been damaged. The initial response by Chinese authorities, the strict "zero COVID" policy in later stages, and the subsequent campaign by the US to paint China as the main culprit for the pandemic negatively affected China. On the other hand, the "America first" policy in the US and the complete disregard for joint actions and solidarity in favour of solo measures and provisions of necessary medical supplies by the EU member states that characterised the response in the first months put in question the strength of ties and commitments between the allies in the West (Burrows & Engelke, 2020, pp. 14-16). In turn, this impacted the positioning of Balkan

countries, Serbia particularly, in relying on China for medical equipment support in the crucial, most unpredictable period of the pandemic in 2020.

Additionally, the coronavirus epidemic in the US has complicated internal politics, further separating it from China. Former President Trump tried to divert domestic attention away from the demonstrations brought on by George Floyd's death and rising COVID-19 cases. Mistrust between the two countries has increased as a result of conspiracy theories concerning the epidemic. On the other hand, because of the government's quick response to stop the virus's spread and the diplomatic dispute between the United States and China, nationalism and anti-Americanism have become more entrenched in China. The general public's opinions in China are substantially less favourable than they were a year ago. (Economy et.al., 2020).

Another important impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is the acceleration of the US-China decoupling and deglobalisation processes. Riham Bahi (2021) argues that COVID-19 is a geopolitical game-changer. His argument is going toward raising questions about COVID-19 geopolitical consequences. Geopolitical patterns that already existed have been reinforced by the coronavirus pandemic, notably the rivalry between the US and China described as the second Cold War. US-China anxieties about relative dominance have grown due to the pandemic. That has brought to light their interdependence and prompted a shift towards "decoupling". Mutual interdependence in the sense of economic and scientific benefits has helped keep US-China competition in check and is in danger of eroding due to this geopolitical trend. The two powers now worry that the other will take advantage of the current circumstance to obtain political,

economic, or military advantages that will give it a competitive advantage after the pandemic has subsided. Instead of creating competing globalisation and dividing the World into different economic blocs during the last Cold War, today's major competitors (the USA and China) are interconnected as a single "Cyborg," with their interactions serving as the foundation of world stability and economic growth. According to Henry Kissinger, a former US Secretary of State who is attributed with bringing the USA and China closer together, "There is always a solution since the development of US-China ties will depend on the peace and well-being of the world". Due to the pandemic, processes of fragmentation and decomposition of the global world order have indicated and hastened the transition of power dynamics in the contemporary world order. Mainly, it shows the signs of weakness of global governance and solidarity, but also has been shifting the balance of power from West to East. (Bahi, 2021).

In line with the changing geopolitical context, certain scholars emphasise the importance of understanding the geopolitics of vaccine nationalism in the context of the US-China relationship's escalating tensions, including their diplomacy and race to develop vaccines, which have made the challenges and uncertainties associated with the future of globalisation even more complicated. Additionally, short-term nationalist responses to the global pandemic may enable the naturalisation of the nation-state by using it to respond to a global crisis, which may compromise collective capacities to deal with other impending global crises, such as other pandemics and climate disasters, in the long run. Two approaches to COVID-19 vaccines, nationalist and globalist, and their coexistence suggests parallel and contentious processes of globalisation and deglobalisation; the World's growing political and economic divide; a lack

of (or lag in) our awareness of global interconnectedness, notably in non-economic spheres; and various structural barriers to global collaboration when confronted with a global threat to humanity's future. (Zhou, 2022).

The pandemic era, with its effects, accelerates interest among scholars in the processes of deglobalisation. Consequently, scholarly articles on deglobalisation are becoming increasingly common in the academic community. For instance, according to Kornprobst and Paul (2021), deglobalisation forces are rising, and the liberal international order is becoming increasingly isolated. They highlight that the connection between globalisation and deglobalisation processes will likely affect global politics in the future. (Kornprobst & Paul, 2021). Another author, Garg (2021), argues how cultural interpretations of self versus others underpin deglobalisation. He also highlights the positive aspects of deglobalisation, such as the postulation of a new world economy that is embedded in society. It ensures a fair income distribution rather than being governed by the logic of corporate profitability. He believes that the influence of multinational corporations or global organisations is diminishing. (Garg, 2021).

The second geopolitical game-changer, the Russo-Ukrainian war, will intensify the systemic gap between democracies and autocracies, enhance geopolitical risk, increase defence spending, reduce globalisation, increase financial market volatility and high inflation driven by surging energy and commodity prices, and lead to a significant push by Europe to diversify its energy supplies away from Russia.

With the start of the war on 24 February 2022, the invasion heightened geopolitical tensions between the West and Russia, lowering global growth

forecasts due to concern about the conflict's impact on global peace and, in the long run, changing the geopolitical context, but also an international world order. Geopolitical game-changer conflicts, such as the one between Russia and Ukraine, have far-reaching economic consequences for other countries. Imposing the sanctions was supposed to make Russia withdraw its military operations in Ukraine. However, the sanctions did not have a one-sided impact on the sanctioned country, namely Russia. Instead, it had an economic impact on other countries. The Russian-Ukrainian war demonstrated that sanctions against a warring country are not an optimal solution because they have spillover effects on countries that are not involved in the conflict, mainly when the warring countries are trade partners of countries that are not involved in the war. (Ozili, 2022).

Furthermore, severing political and economic ties between the West and Russia will direct Moscow to turn even more significantly towards the East. That process was taking place even before the start of the war, but the scope of sanctions and measures undertaken as a response by the US and the EU make rebuilding the relations between Russia and the West unlikely in the short and medium term. The Sino-Russian economic cooperation, primarily developed in the energy and arms departments, will continue to expand. The responses and stances on international issues and cooperation in regional organisations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS, between the two countries will probably evolve and become more coordinated. Beijing's influence is becoming stronger at the regional and international level, and for Moscow, China is becoming indispensable.

The strongest example of this cooperation was the signing of an unprecedented joint statement by Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin that

sounded alarm bells in Washington, DC, and European capitals. For the first time, China backed Russia's opposition to further enlargement of NATO and supported Putin's earlier demands for "long-term legally binding security guarantees in Europe." The joint statement also criticized US strategy in the Indo-Pacific, including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or "Quad") and AUKUS. On the other hand, the war in Europe, the instability of international trade, and the undermining of the principle of sovereignty are causes for concern that negatively impact China. For the Washington decision-makers, it also puts focus on Taiwan and makes them question whether China will act similarly to Russia. Although we have already stated this escalation is unlikely to happen, the renewed attention to Taiwan as a consequence of the Ukrainian war will strengthen US-China competition in the Asia-Pacific region. In general, US-China relations sank to new lows in the opening months of 2022. Relations soured further when the Biden administration shared intelligence with Beijing revealing that Moscow planned to invade Ukraine. At every opportunity, Chinese officials warned the US to stop supporting Taiwan's independence. (Glaser, 2022).

Additionally, energy and food supply disruption stemming from the war in Ukraine affects the whole European continent. The need for reliable partners and alternatives to existing ways of ensuring the provision of required resources is further highlighted by the ensuing crisis. The Western Balkan countries, Serbia and North Macedonia included are not an exemption in this matter.

These current global trends and geopolitical game-changers create the world's geopolitical context and change geopolitical patterns and

principles. In that context, further sections will analyse the processes of the impact of the geopolitical transition of power from the Euro-Atlantic to the Asian and Asia-Pacific regions on China's relation with North Macedonia and Serbia.

4. CHANGING GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT: NEW SECURITY THREATS AND CRISES

Since COVID-19 and the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, the world has faced a wider range of security threats. Their emergence demonstrates a significant change in international relations. Despite the danger of using conventional military weapons, the current states are concerned with various hybrid threats, energy, health, and financial and investment crises.

Most countries worldwide have declared a state of emergency or are in the process of doing so because of one of the crises or hybrid threats listed above. In this chapter, we will try to identify and verify them in the countries' and collectivities' strategic documents, which are the subject of this research. We will primarily look at the level of recognition and conceptualisation of security threats, particularly in the era of game-changing geopolitical issues like pandemics and war. That means analysing the last adopted strategic documents relating to modern hybrid threats, energy security threats, health and security, and financial and investment crises in the EU, NATO, the US, China, North Macedonia, and Serbia. In this way, we will attempt to determine the security focus at the state level (practical geopolitics) as well as the strategic orientation that we will later use to demonstrate the directions that undermine or improve relations between China and North Macedonia and China and Serbia.

4.1. Hybrid threats

In the twenty-first century, hybrid threats are becoming the dominant security challenge for all countries. Their appearance reflects a significant shift in international relations. In light of the complexity and ambiguity of

hybrid threats, such a shift tends to increase feelings of insecurity and, historically, disagreements in societies. In such a state, some people look for answers in the past, while others forget it. Some trends advocate adaptation to new conditions and changes, as well as those who attempt to defend the so-called established order. These perceptions indicate that the picture of the security environment is not black and white. It is esoteric, multifaceted, and multidimensional. As a result, understanding the nature of the current security environment in Europe and globally requires a thorough examination of what has changed, how it is changing, and what it means for democracies.

Treverton and his team give us excellent knowledge about six huge changes that are pushing hybrid threats to the forefront.

1. The first is the evolving nature of the global order. The post-Cold War era has concluded. Relational power, or the ability to influence others' beliefs, attitudes, preferences, opinions, expectations, emotions, and/or proclivity to act, is now more important than material power. International relations are being renegotiated as great and middle powers, in particular, seek to enhance their status and benefit immensely.
2. Second, the world is witnessing a new type of network-based action, which is the negative side effect of globalisation. Internal and external security dimensions are more closely linked than in previous decades. This benefits weaker state and non-state actors because networks amplify influence efforts and provide powerful tools to more vulnerable actors. The role of the nation-state is

called into question, as are alliances based on norms and rules that limit responses to asymmetric antagonistic actions.

3. Third, rapidly evolving technologies—a virtual revolution—give rise to new domains such as cyberspace, where national and international game rules have yet to be established. Space is no longer a frontier but an operating domain, posing a challenge to traditional security thinking. In general, new technology provides new tools for influencing.
4. The fourth significant change affecting today's security environment is the changing information space and media landscape. As new opinion developers, digitalisation and social media have changed the speed with which information travels, how it is produced, and how people are connected across national borders. This shift has highlighted the importance of understanding different political and strategic cultures because information produced in one country can be interpreted differently in another. Similarly, information gatekeepers are changing. The Internet has evolved into a new battlefield, with rules still being developed. The public domain is agitated by fake news, content confusion, and opinion-based "facts." One of the fundamental pillars of functioning societies is trust, which is eroding.
5. The fifth change is the transformation of conflict and war. Soldiers should not die in today's wars, and civilian casualties should be managed to avoid them. This has triggered a discussion about the blurred boundaries between war and peace. This situation poses difficulties for traditional military forces and internal law

enforcement. It also fuels hybrid threats, which seek to avoid open conflict. They are contests between societies, not battles between armies.

6. Finally, there is a generational difference. Today's new generation is influenced by both cosmopolitanism and neo-nationalism, which are opposite ideas. Historical memory evolves with generations, allowing for political manipulation of historical events. (Treverton et al., 2018).

As previously stated, we will attempt to identify the main strategic goals and the level of recognition and frequency of various terms associated with "hybrid" while analysing strategic documents.

As the last adopted strategy of the EU, *the EU's strategic compass for security and defence* mentions that Europe is immediately threatened, and many principles upon which international relations are based, including the United Nations Charter and the Final Act of Helsinki, are being questioned. A geopolitical game changer, the Ukrainian war has accelerated history.

The Russo-Ukrainian war is Europe's most severe security crisis in recent decades. However, despite the current situation, European security is challenged by various sources and actors, both within Europe and beyond. The EU's security interests are threatened in the Western Balkans, the Sahel, the broader Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific.

This EU strategic document recognises hybrid tactics and threats. They grow both in frequency and impact. Interdependence is becoming more conflictual, and soft power is being weaponized: vaccines, data, and technology standards are all political weapons. It is getting harder and

harder to get to the open seas, outer space, and the digital world. Economic and energy coercion are becoming more common.

Furthermore, conflicts and instability are frequently exacerbated by the threat multiplier effect of climate change. For the first time, China has been classified as a hybrid actor, pursuing its policies through cyber tools and employing hybrid tactics. This strategy addresses the concept of comprehensive hybrid threats to a greater and broader extent than previously; it directly addresses Russia and China as hybrid actors, but it still does not mention or approach the concept of hybrid war. This strategy also recognises the Indo-Pacific region as a new centre of global competition, where geopolitical tensions threaten the region's rule-based order and pressure global supply chains. The term "hybrid" appears 49 times in various contexts. (Council of the EU, 2022).

The NATO 2022 Strategic Concept describes the strategic environment as primarily dangerous, with peace in the Euro-Atlantic region under threat. The Russian Federation has broken many of the rules and guidelines that help maintain a predictable and stable security order in Europe. NATO cannot rule out an attack on the Allies' territorial integrity and sovereignty. This document highlights authoritarian actors as a threat to NATO's interests, values, and democratic way of life. They interfere with Allie's democratic processes, institutions, and citizens' security using hybrid tactics, both directly and through proxies.

Article 13 of the NATO 2022 strategic concept notes that the stated ambitions and coercive policies of the People's Republic of China (PRC) put NATO interests, security, and values at risk. The People's Republic of China uses various political, economic, and military tools to expand its

global footprint and project power while remaining secretive about its strategy, intentions, and military buildup. The People's Republic of China's malicious hybrid and cyber operations, as well as its confrontational rhetoric and disinformation, target and undermine Alliance security. The People's Republic of China wants to control key industrial and technological sectors, critical infrastructure, strategic materials, and supply chains. It uses its economic clout to form alliances and expand its influence. It seeks to undermine the international order based on rules, including in the space, cyber, and maritime domains.

Regarding the strategic concept, the Indo-Pacific region is vital for NATO because developments in that region can directly impact Euro-Atlantic security. NATO will improve communication and cooperation with both new and old Indo-Pacific partners to deal with problems that affect more than one region and to protect shared security interests. The term "hybrid" appears seven times in the NATO Strategic Concept (North Atlantic Council, 2022).

President Biden's statement at the beginning of the US 2022 National Defense Strategy that they are living in a "decisive decade" alludes to the fact that dramatic geopolitical, economic, and technological changes mark it. The US 2022 National Defense Strategy mentions hybrid action in Section VI: anchoring our strategy in allies and partners while advancing regional goals. The main context of hybrid action is positioning, concerning efforts, together with allies and partners, to build up capacity along Europe's eastern flank, strengthening defensive anti-area/access-denial capacities and indications and warnings; expanding readiness,

training, and exercises, and promoting resilience, including against hybrid and cyber actions.

Furthermore, the Department has identified China as a major strategic rival. It will reinforce and build a resilient security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region to maintain an open and free regional order and deter attempts to resolve disputes through force.

In addition, Strategy recognises that China and Russia are expanding their kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities, such as cyber, space, information, and advanced conventional strike, to supplement their growing nuclear force. Both countries can also use chemical and biological weapons against US, Allied, and partner forces, as well as against civilian populations and military operations. The term "hybrid" is mentioned only once in this document. (US DoD, 2022).

China's new defence strategy, National Defense in the New Era, came out in 2019. It explains how, why, and how much China is trying to build a strong military and a strong national defence. All of those activities were to help the international community better understand China's national defence. This China's White Paper refers to the spreading of extremism and terrorism. Non-traditional threats such as cyber security, biosecurity, and piracy are also rising. In previous wars, the foremost goal was to eliminate the enemy's effective forces, thereby changing the battlefield and ultimately winning the war. Because information system operation is required, the core of the future battlefield will be devoted to destroying the enemy's combat system. The goal is to cripple the entire combat system by destroying the enemy's high-tech weapons and equipment. The combat strategy is no longer limited to hard destruction. That means a combination

of hard and soft methods to achieve long-range engagement via a powerful electronic warfare system. (Mingkui, 2019)

The distinctive feature of this document is that China has never sought hegemony, expansion, or spheres of influence. Even if a country grows strong, bellicosity will lead to its demise. The Chinese people have always valued peace. Since the start of the modern era, the Chinese people have been subjected to aggressions and wars, learning the value of peace and the urgent need for development. As a result, China will never inflict such pain on another country. The People's Republic of China has never started a war or conflict more than 70 years ago. (Jiayao, 2019).

We do not find the word "hybrid" in the original document. Nevertheless, some contents allude to hybrid warfare (terrorism, cyber, and biosecurity). Regarding our interest in the transition of power to the Asia-Pacific region, the white paper states that the security architecture in the region is generally stable. All of China's supported and guided activities, as a reflection of US, Japanese, Australian, and North Korean engagement in the region, are in the direction of developing and achieving a balanced, stable, open, and inclusive Asian security situation.

The Macedonian defence strategy was adopted in 2020. In particular, the defence strategy identifies the key features of the contemporary security environment. It has several primary objectives that align the obligations and responsibilities arising from North Macedonia's membership in collective security systems. Among other things, it is stressed that the states will continue to face traditional military threats in the future. However, states are currently more vulnerable to non-military, asymmetric, hybrid, and cyber threats, as well as threats from non-state actors. The

influx of migrants, radical extremists, and returnees from the battlefields of the Middle East (Iraq, Syria), South Asia (Afghanistan), and North Africa (Libya) is apostrophised as a factor affecting the regional security situation. The strategy is in the direction of the Euro-Atlantic path of the state; that is, the defence and security policies are complementary to those of NATO and the EU. China is not mentioned in any context, nor is the geopolitical moment of power transition from the Euro-Atlantic region to the Indo-Pacific. The term "hybrid" is mentioned only three times (Ministry of defence, 2020).

Serbia's 2020 defence strategy noted that war and armed conflicts are still present in international relations. Terrorism, organised crime, ethnic and religious extremism, irregular migration, hybrid threats, competition for access to natural resources, climate change, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, as a dynamic set of challenges, risks, and security threats in many countries and regions of the world, represent key factors in the process of finding the appropriate model of the security and defence organisation of the state. On a broader scale, the strategy focuses on terrorism, organised crime, irregular migration, drug trafficking, human trafficking, corruption, natural and technical and technological disasters, conducting a cyber-attack on a critical infrastructure object, and spreading fake news and disinformation within the framework of hybrid and information warfare. Inadequate resolution of issues related to the return of escaped, exiled, and internally displaced persons and their assets, the prosecution of war crimes, and missing persons further slows down the stabilisation of the situation in the wider Balkans. In connection with this, the Serbian Army has developed various capabilities for performing various operations and tasks to respond to asymmetric and hybrid threats.

Despite Serbia's proclaimed military neutrality, it supports cooperation with NATO member countries and the "Partnership for Peace" program. PfP is particularly emphasised for the sake of regional security. China and the geopolitical transition of power from the Euro-Atlantic region to the Asian -Pacific region are not mentioned. The term "hybrid" is mentioned four times in the document (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, 2020).

Table No.1 Compares the use of various hybrid terms in strategic documents of the European Union, the US, China, NATO, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

The term 'Hybrid.'	EU	US	China	NATO	N. Macedonia	Serbia
hybrid threats	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hybrid tactics	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No
Hybrid strategies	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Certain States as a hybrid actor	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Hybrid operations	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Hybrid challenges	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
Hybrid warfare	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
Hybrid action	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Hybrid conflicts	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Hybrid attacks	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Non-traditional threats/actors	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No

Based on a review of the most recently adopted strategic documents of the entities mentioned above, it is clear that North Macedonia and Serbia issued their defence strategies in 2020, before the pandemic and the military conflict in Ukraine, implementing the term hybrid threats to a lesser extent. It is interesting to note that NATO's strategic concept for 2022 and the EU's strategic compass for security and defence both use and explain the word "hybrid" in different ways. China is not at all committed to hybrid threats, although they hinted at them in 2019 with their defence strategy as "non-traditional threats."

4.2. Energy crisis

In the energy field, the two geopolitical game-changers put at risk the energy transition process, energy supply chains, and energy security. First, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted many countries and economic sectors around the world. Various measures were implemented to contain the virus outbreak, including complete or partial lockdowns, travel bans, and confinement measures such as social (physical) distancing and remote working. These measures disrupted the mobility of people, goods, and materials, resulting in a decrease in the output of industrial and economic activities. As a result, various countries' economies shrank, sparking heated debate about health and economic recovery pathways and their climate impacts. The pandemic also posed a threat to the energy sector. Short-term developments showed a significant drop in energy demand due to reduced mobility and economic activity. Compared to the same period in an average year, transportation demand fell by 50% in countries under lockdown. Reduced demand for transportation fuels resulted in an unprecedented drop in global crude oil prices, raising concerns about the risks and resilience of energy systems that rely on volatile international energy markets.

In addition, disruptions in industrial activities and the introduction of online and digitalised business solutions reduced electricity demand in various countries. These supply-side effects were exacerbated by post-pandemic lifestyle changes and containment measures, such as remote working and homeschooling, resulting in new occupancy and energy consumption patterns in buildings at different times of the day. As a result of these changes, combined with consumers' decreased ability to pay their

energy bills, energy utilities found themselves in a difficult situation: lower sales and lower revenue collection. The invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation and the ongoing war has made the energy crisis even worse. Russia's physical blockade and sanctions have disrupted the energy trade and raised energy prices. Energy prices are expected to rise by more than 50% by 2022, according to the World Bank, which, combined with other effects of the conflict, could push the global economy into stagflation not seen in decades (Zakeri, 2022).

Keeping in mind that North Macedonia and Serbia want to move toward Europe, we will talk about the situation in the energy field in the EU. In this direction, which is a little predictable from the EU's point of view, the European Green Deal is the current flagship project of the European Commission. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen will present it on December 11, 2019. It is made up of several initiatives, strategies, and laws that, when put together, are meant to make society fair, sustainable, and prosperous. The transformation of European society and the economy should be inclusive. The goal of zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 is shared by all processes. Even though Europe is still facing big problems like the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russo-Ukrainian war, the climate crisis and other environmental problems can't be ignored. Undoubtedly, the recovery from the COVID-19 crisis provides an opportunity to accelerate a long-term transformation. In line with all this, the European Union's recovery program, "Next Generation EU," which was adopted in July 2020, reinforces many of the Energy Green Deals initiatives. (Fetting, 2020).

The European Union (EU) demonstrates its commitment to transforming to primarily renewable energy sources in electricity production. As a result, natural gas is the driving fuel behind this transformation, temporarily replacing coal as an energy source. Even so, the price of natural gas rose immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a country through which the gas pipelines from Russia to the EU previously ran, will contribute significantly to the price of natural gas continuing to rise. Because the EU's largest economies rely on Russian gas, the shortage has forced some of them to restart or extend the lives of old coal-fired thermal power plants to meet their energy needs. If Russia ultimately keeps cutting off natural gas supplies to the EU, it could force Europe to build renewable energy plants faster and more enormously, hastening the energy transition.

According to the EC report from March 8, 2022, around 90% of the EU's gas consumption is based on imports. Russia is responsible for about 45% of those imports, with varying levels across Member States. Russia also accounts for approximately 25% of total oil imports and 45% of total coal imports. (Representation in Cyprus, 2022). The EU provided two scenarios, one short-term and one long-term. In the short term, when the Ukrainian conflict was at its worst, the EU announced the REPowerEU initiative, which would cut demand for Russian gas by two-thirds by the end of 2022 and make the EU completely independent from Russian fossil fuels by 2030 at the latest. (EC, 2022). In the long-term scenario, the EU will switch to renewable electricity production faster than planned. Implementing the "green deal" would make the European economy less dependent on the import of energy, and the REPowerEU initiative will further accelerate this process. Also, it is essential to note that REPowerEU is a plan based on

two pillars. That plan is tightly connected with increasing the resilience of the EU-wide energy system: diversifying gas supplies through increased LNG (liquefied natural gas) and pipeline imports from non-Russian suppliers (Qatar, Egypt, the US, Azerbaijan, Algeria, and Norway); and increasing biomethane and renewable hydrogen production and imports. Moreover, the second pillar is reducing the use of fossil fuels in homes, buildings, industry, and power systems by increasing energy efficiency, renewables, and electrification and addressing infrastructure bottlenecks. (European Commission, 2022).

Table No.2 Identification of energy security threats

Country/Collectivity	Policy document reviewed	Major emphasis	Energy security threats identified (Yes/No)
EU	A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence. (2022)	“We have known for years that energy plays a disproportionate role in EU-Russia relations and that Russia has used energy as a political weapon. We are now fully mobilised to cut our excessive dependence on Russian energy imports”.	Yes
NATO	NATO 2022 Strategic Concept. (2022)	“They conduct malicious activities in cyberspace and space, promote disinformation campaigns, instrumentalise migration, manipulate energy supplies and employ economic coercion.”	Yes
US	National Security	“We have also experienced a global energy crisis driven by Russia’s weaponisation of the oil and gas supplies it	Yes

	Strategy (2022)	controls, exacerbated by OPEC’s management of its own supply”.	
CHINA	China's National Defense in the New Era. (2019)	/	No
North Macedonia	National defence strategy (2020)	“Economic-political problems: Energy security is a further concern, given our reliance on external sources”.	Yes
Serbia	National security strategy (2020)	“The energy security of the Republic of Serbia can be threatened by the disruption of a stable and regular energy supply from other countries”.	Yes

China has nearly one-third of the world's renewable power capacity and is the world leader in many renewable energy fields, such as hydropower and generation, biopower and generation, wind power capacity, and geothermal heat capacity. China aims to increase its share of clean energy in its energy consumption to around 20% by 2030 and more than half by 2050 (Zhang, 2021). The operationalisation of cooperation between the EU and China was closely established with the creation of the EU-China Energy Cooperation Platform in 2019. The overall objective of ECECP is very important today and refers to "enhancing EU-China cooperation on energy. In line with the EU’s Energy Union, the Clean Energy for All Europeans initiative, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and the EU’s Global Strategy, this enhanced cooperation will help increase mutual trust and understanding between the EU and China and contribute to a

global transition towards clean energy based on a common vision of a sustainable, reliable, and secure energy system" (ECECP, 2021).

4.3. Health crisis

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the Novel Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) as the second pandemic of the twenty-first century (WHO, 2020). Most states worldwide have taken rigorous measures for complete closure, declared states of crisis, and started implementing strategies to deal with the health crisis. The lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in various recommendations, with the hope that the responses to the following health crisis will hopefully be a more proactive, systematic, and efficient global response (Mallah et al. 2021).

Our research goal is to demonstrate that health crises, both historically and currently, promote long-term health security. Even though the term "health security" is used and accepted in both academia and politics, there still needs to be more agreement on what it should mean. This is because the term has an interdisciplinary character, and health and safety are different scientific disciplines. Also, at the individual level, health security refers to all aspects of public health that relate to protecting human lives. At the national and global levels, health security protects people from public health threats like infectious diseases and bioterrorism.

However, we agree with the arguments of Malik, Barlow, and Johnson (2021) about reconceptualisation the notion of health security by adopting a more comprehensive, ethical, and holistic notion of security that is adequately equipped to deal with contemporary and future public health

threats effectively. Also, all activities related to health security need to be connected with the concept of human security. Furthermore, the concept of human security, as conceived and advanced by the United Nations in 1994, has some distinctive features that can serve as a helpful guide in reconceptualising the notion of health security in a more inclusive, integrated, and holistic manner.

Table No.3. Identification of health security threats

Country/Collectivity	Policy document reviewed	Major emphasis	Health security threats identified (Yes/No)
EU	A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence. (2022)	“Moreover, we must be more resilient against hybrid threats, cyberattacks and climate-related risks, natural disasters and pandemics .”.	Yes
NATO	NATO 2022 Strategic Concept. (2022)	“We will continue to invest in our defence against Chemical, Biological , Radiological and Nuclear threats. We will enhance our policies, plans, training and exercises and assess our capabilities to ensure that these requirements are integrated into our deterrence and defence posture”.	Yes
US	National Security	“Climate change, pandemics , and other transborder challenges	Yes

	Strategy (2022)	will increase the demands on Department resources, federal civil authorities, and the public and private sectors”.	
CHINA	China's National Defense in the New Era. (2019)	PLA General Hospital and the PLA Center for Disease Prevention and Control.	Yes
North Macedonia	National defence strategy (2020)	“The most significant risks we face are from asymmetric, hybrid and cyber threats and other non-military threats, including those posed by non-state actors, natural disasters, technological disasters, epidemics and climate change”.	Yes
Serbia	National security strategy (2020)	“ Epidemics and pandemics of infectious diseases can threaten the population of the Republic of Serbia and carry the risk of serious economic and social consequences”.	Yes

Above, in the table, it is shown that all the analysed entities in their strategic documents, recognise and own the health security component.

Recently, one more crucial moment in the direction of health security has been noticed. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was noticeable that respectable military capacities were engaged in the health crisis. In military terms, the authorities, politicians, and scientists who were called in were trying to find a place for the health crisis. That, perhaps, was best done by an article on BBS emphasising that healthcare workers are on the front lines, scientists are the new generals, economists are plotting battle plans, and politicians are calling for mobilisation. (Bernhard, 2020) Even more, before the 'War on COVID-19,' there was the 'War on AIDS,' which was

preceded by the 'War on Cancer,' in the 1970s. Militaristic language is a weapon in the government's toolbox, used in times of crisis to elicit a patriotic reaction from civil society, uniting all in a shared struggle against a "common" adversary. (Fotherby, 2020).

Meanwhile, European leaders predict a "D-Day" when the outbreak will overwhelm the hospital system and allude to war with an unknown enemy. Many governments worldwide immediately put their military facilities and personnel at the service of civilian crisis management. The goal was to support the response to the global health crisis.

To counteract the spread of COVID-19, a large number of the military have deployed their medical skills. In the United States, 30,000 National Guard service members provided frontline treatment and community-based testing, as well as medical supplies and personal protective equipment to hard-hit communities. In Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Uruguay, military companies have switched over to producing medical equipment, and the armies of Brazil and Peru are working with researchers from the private sector and academic institutions to design and manufacture respirators. (Wilén, 2021). According to reports, China sent over 10,000 military personnel to deal with the outbreak, while France launched Operation "Resilience." Military assistance included moving patients and medical supplies, sending army medical logistics planners, moving healthcare workers, and cleaning and sanitising public areas like hospitals. It was notable that armed forces have been deployed abroad to help other countries deal with the health crisis. In particular, Chinese doctors and military supplies were sent to various partner countries, and Russian doctors, machines, and personal protective equipment were dispatched to

Italy. (Kalkman, 2021). We can point out that in the domain of health crises, measures should be taken to increase the Pandemic Resilience Index, which aims to give an overview of the global health resilience to pandemics like the coronavirus. It is critical to consider our capacity to anticipate such threats, recognise them early on, respond without turning to panic and hurried decision-making, avoid shortages, identify and address regulatory barriers, and maintain a state of preparedness. This is because there is every reason to expect that there will be many more similar outbreaks in the future. (Roeder & Chaplia, 2021).

4.4. Financial/investment crisis

In the early months of 2020, a market-wide financial crisis escalated in response to an emerging global health crisis, the consequences of which looked more like the Great Depression of 1929–1933 than the 2007–2008 global financial crisis. In response to the pandemic, countries worldwide have implemented various anti-virus measures, such as traffic restrictions, home office closures, and social isolation, all of which harm the global economy and disrupt global value chains, change the direction from global to regional cooperation, and force changes in business models toward digitalisation (Broadstock et al., 2021).

The annual real GDP decline rate was 4.8% in the first quarter of 2020, according to the World Trade Organization and the Bureau of Economic Analysis. This caused the biggest drop in international trade flows since the Second World War. (Li & Li, 2021).

Based on the experiences of the post-2008 financial crisis, Li and Li (2021) note that the economic recovery is the cause of declining energy efficiency,

which stimulated the economy and employment at the cost of energy efficiency and environmental protection. Today, the current economic recovery plans to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic also prioritise economic development and job creation while ignoring energy efficiency.

Economic decision-makers worldwide use expansionary macroeconomic policies to support economic recovery while fighting for the sustainability of the health system by locking and regulating prevention. One of the first measures was the relaxation of monetary policy. This measure is taken in 80% of countries worldwide and all emerging economies. In the short term, fiscal policy was important because it helped to increase demand. However, it also led to a rise in public debt, which is one of the things that will slow down future growth (Savić et al., 2021).

In contrast to the abnormally low level in 2020, global FDI flows in 2021 were \$1.58 trillion, an increase of 64%. With growing merger and acquisition markets and swift expansion in international project financing, the recovery displayed substantial rebound momentum. International FDI flows are expected to be negative, if not flat, in 2022. The Ukrainian conflict will have far-reaching implications for foreign investment in economic growth and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in all nations. It comes as a frail global economy begins an uneven rebound from the pandemic's ravages. The security and humanitarian problems, macroeconomic shocks caused by the conflict, energy and food price increases, and heightened investor uncertainty will all have an impact on global FDI in 2022 and beyond. (UNCTAD/WIR, 2022).

Also, there is no doubt that building strong economic resilience is an effective way to cope with and mitigate such external shocks and provide

favourable support for all countries' economic recovery. On the one hand, COVID-19 and natural disasters are external shocks that affect the economy's operating environment and harm economic development. Establishing a more comprehensive risk emergency mechanism and social governance system can ensure the stability of the economic operating environment and promote economic resilience, thereby creating the conditions for economic recovery. On the other hand, scientific and sound macroeconomic policies are essential to increasing economic resilience. The government should improve its ability to adjust dynamically and fully mobilise enthusiasm. Policy guidance can improve the vitality of the supply and demand sides and each economy's ability to deal with risks (Jiang et al., 2021).

Table No.4 Economics – the threats nexus in the strategic documents.

Country/Collectivity	Policy document reviewed	Major emphasis	Economics-the threats nexus
EU	A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence. (2022)	“State and non-state actors use hybrid strategies, cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, direct interference in our elections and political processes, economic coercion , and the	economic coercion

		instrumentalisation of irregular migration flows”.	
NATO	NATO 2022 Strategic Concept. (2022)	The PRC seeks to control key technological and industrial sectors, critical infrastructure, and strategic materials and supply chains. It uses its economic leverage to create strategic dependencies and enhance its influence.	NATO – PRC – economic leverage
US	National Security Strategy (2022)	“The PRC employs state-controlled forces, cyber and space operations, and economic coercion against the United States and its Allies and partners.”	US – PRC – economic coercion
CHINA	China's National Defense in the New Era. (2019)		No
North Macedonia	National defence strategy (2020)	An influx of migrants and economic refugees also offers the potential for destabilising the countries in the region.	Economic refugees – security threats
Serbia	National security strategy (2020)	The Republic of Serbia advocates that all disputed issues and issues of mutual interest in economic relations be resolved through cooperation and negotiations. Special attention will be paid to preventing the criminalisation of economic activity and protecting against economic espionage .	The criminalisation of economic activity – economic espionage.

In correlation with all the previously mentioned aspects of the financial and investment crisis at the global level, and in the context of the analytical framework in this chapter, a comparative analysis of recognition in the strategic documents of the main economic threats to the specific countries is made. The wide range of identification was noted: economic coercion, economic leverage, economic refugees, criminalisation of economic activities, and economic espionage.

5. REFLECTION OF THE EURO-ATLANTIC PROCESSES ON THE RELATION BETWEEN CHINA AND NORTH MACEDONIA AND CHINA AND SERBIA

China, although quietly, step by step is becoming one of the main players on the geopolitical map. China conceptualizes and brings a set of different policies together in a single strategy that has proved successful: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As part of this initiative, cooperation with both North Macedonia and Serbia has been strengthened.

But first, we will briefly return to the place of China in the geopolitical space to explain its presence in North Macedonia and Serbia. After the end of the Second World War, the world was divided into two world orders, capitalist order led by the United States and a communist order led by Russia and China. In 1991, one of the most significant events in world history took place, the collapse of the Soviet Union. This marked a new momentum, and in the geopolitical sense, it moved from a bipolar world to a unipolar one, with the United States as the only "policeman" in the world. The United States enjoyed this comfortable position in the following years until 2008, i.e., the financial crisis when slow but substantial changes began to take place on the geopolitical map. Some researchers even indicate that such changes can be observed since 2000, pointing to five geopolitical powers for the future: China, Brazil, India, Russia, and the USA (Renard, 2009). In Western Europe, there are no geopolitical actors, given that the EU does not yet have such characteristics. The US, through trade with the EU, but also through maintaining security through NATO, is present on this soil as a key player. Although over the years the French have been calling for EU sovereignty and geopolitical

actorness until today there are no real indicators that the majority of the other EU members understood the message and the need for such transformation.

In 2012, the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEE Cooperation) was launched as a "cross-regional cooperation platform based on traditional friendship and the shared desire of all the participants for win-win cooperation and common development," as it says on their web page (Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, 2021). China-CEEC is a cooperation format between China and 14 countries from Central and Eastern Europe. In 2013, President Xi announced the strategy "Silk Road Economic Belt", which was for a time known as One Belt One Road, and after 2016 as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Through the BRI, China has and will invest and foster trade with around 150 countries, from Southeast Asia to South Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Said in more simple terms, China will build global trade links, and with that ensure a smooth flow of goods from and to China (Marshall, 2021). This plan is some kind of avatar of the historic Silk Road, a network of routes used at the time of the Han dynasty by China traders for more than 1,500 years (130 B.C.E. until 1453 C.E). The term "Silk Road" is also used as a metaphor for the exchange of goods and ideas between diverse cultures (National Geographic, n.d.). This way, China would not be dependent on the US's willingness to cooperate, instead opening itself to new options for trade and investments. The dominant understanding of this China strategy, from the US point of view, and supported in some parts of the EU, is that this is a tool for the expansion of Chinese power and influence globally. Accordingly, in these circles, it is interpreted in negative terms. Similarly, some parts of Western academia

and the press believe that China's influence in the Balkans could undermine the EU reforms in the region, even their stability (Makocki, 2017). Also, there is fear that the absence of conditionality in using China funds would encourage Balkan countries to turn their back on the EU (Stanicek & Tarpova, 2022). However, these arguments overlook the rapid development that access to Chinese loans and grants and large infrastructure projects conducted by Chinese companies bring to the Western Balkan countries. This enables them to lessen the development gap existing between these countries and the EU member states, thus making them more attractive for further foreign investments, and more capable of meeting the criteria for EU membership in the future.

5.1. China, the European Union and the Western Balkans

Although the European market has always been at the centre of interest of the People's Republic of China when it comes to investments, cooperation was mainly limited to bilateral relations with several countries of Western Europe, while the rest of the continent was neglected. After the establishment of the European Economic Community (later the European Union), that relationship acquired a new, supranational dimension in which the European countries, together with Brussels, developed their relationship with Beijing. That relationship has had its ups and downs over the decades, but it has always been stable thanks to mutual interests (Arežina, 2017, p. 3).

Chinese relations with Europe which have been developing for years show that China's economy has come to the threshold of the 'Old Continent'. China carefully watches how the EU implements its defence and military sanctions but at the same time develops intensive economic cooperation

and trading on both sides (Šolaja, 2017, p. 247). In accordance with the objectives of the Twelfth Five-Year Plan (2011-2015), China continued the implementation of the "going out" policy. Chinese investments and aid continued to enter the countries of Western and Southern Europe, and through the China-CEEC mechanism, they began to penetrate more and more into the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Nash, 2012; Arežina, 2017, p. 3). As a result, the strategic documents of the European Union and the rhetoric of its political representatives speak of the People's Republic of China not only as a partner but also as an economic competitor and systemic rival (Igrutinović, 2022, p. 45). The Chinese economy continues on a strong upward trajectory and will probably overtake the American one in terms of GDP during this decade (Igrutinović, 2022, p. 46). On the other hand, the relatively slow growth of the EU economy speaks in favour of the comparative decline of its role at the global level (Igrutinović, 2022, p. 46). The European Union and the People's Republic of China became comprehensive strategic partners with the agreement of 2003 when their relations were maturing and acquired a more strategic note, building on earlier closer trade relations with new forms of cooperation in science, technological development and based on generally similar views on the desirability of global peace, stability and sustainable development (Igrutinović, 2022, p. 46).

But, as it can be assumed, there are those in the EU who are opponents of the partnership with China, and their main argument is that China is not a strategic partner but a strategic competitor, which is the syntax of former US President George Bush, who considers the EU's relations with China to be naive and unrealistic (Dai 2006, as cited in Lađevac, 2018, p. 48). Nevertheless, China is important to the EU and it tends to develop

cooperation both in the economy, trade and politics, and one of the signals of such a tendency is the EU-China Strategic Cooperation Plan 2020 (Lađevac, 2018, p. 48). But the reality is that the European Union is the most important Chinese trading partner and the Commission estimates that the amount of trade between the two sides is one billion euros per day (Zečević, 2017, pp. 108-109). This ambivalent situation is the main characteristic of China-EU relations today.

Negotiations on a comprehensive investment agreement between the EU and China began in 2013. The central aspiration of Brussels was to equalize as much as possible the market conditions under which companies from the EU operated in China with those under which Chinese companies operated in the EU while confirming the commitment of both sides in the field of trade to the normative principles of the World Trade Organization. Although this agreement was signed in December 2020, it remained unratified due to political problems as a clear signal of deteriorating relations (Igrutinović, 2022, p. 47). The European Commission under the leadership of Jean-Claude Juncker gave priority to the internal economic consolidation of the Union after the main wave of the economic crisis, while on the other hand taking in principle a positive position towards the BRI, and China was the first non-EU country to join the investment plan for Europe (Igrutinović, 2022, p. 49).

If the achievement of a comprehensive investment agreement at the end of 2020 was supposed to offer a positive boost in EU-China relations, at a time when the transition of power in the USA was taking place and while the EU did not want the new American administration to directly interfere with the conclusion of the agreement, soon the complete opposite

happened (Igrutinović, 2022, p. 56). It is visible that changes in strategic relations provoke a strong reaction from the United States, which is trying to create obstacles to the enhancement of non-Western partnerships (Šolaja, 2017, p. 253). For example, the United States works actively against the “Balkan Stream” and other similar pipelines and it is quite clear that they are not satisfied with the “New Silk Road”, also named the "Balkan Silk Road" (Šolaja, 2017, p. 253). On the other hand, unlike the US, EU member states consider Taiwan an integral part of China. Unlike the USA, no European country is interested in a military or strategic presence in East Asia (Ladevac, 2018, p. 56).

But EU activities toward China are not always friendly. At the end of March 2022, Brussels decided to impose sanctions against several Chinese officials, formally for violating the human rights of Uyghurs in Xinjiang province, all as part of a wider package of sanctions against officials from a number of countries. Again, when we analyze the relations between the EU and China from the US perspective, we have to mention that "simply by securing its own needs, China is shifting the balance of power in the Eastern Hemisphere, and it must mightily concern the United States" (Kaplan, 2010). The incredible economic progress, which the economist Jeffrey Sachs summed up in a simple sentence "the story of China is the most successful story of development in the history of the world" (as cited in Stojanović, 2013, p. 837), enabled the People's Republic of China, after two decades of accelerated development, once again to be in a position to, through economic aid and investments provided to countries around the world, project its power (Arežina, 2017, p. 23). The US is prompting the EU to align more with the American stance on this matter.

In the context of the Western Balkans and the cooperation of the states in this region with China, we have to mention that the EU in 2021 has designed an economic package for the countries of the Western Balkans to counter the penetration of China, which represents an attempt to offer tangible economic alternatives to Chinese money and construction capabilities. On this occasion, at the summit of the EU and the Western Balkans in October 2021, the European Economic Investment Plan was promoted, which in the next 7 years could bring about 30 billion euros to the Western Balkans, i.e. 9 billion euros in favourable loans and about 20 billion euros in investments (Igrutinović, 2022, p. 59).

In the period from 2013 to 2019 in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, 15.4 billion dollars of direct foreign investment came from China, mostly in infrastructure and energy projects (Igrutinović, 2022, p. 47). The model of interstate cooperation with umbrella agreements and strategic partnerships between China and EU member states and those that are not, the dominant form of cooperation, somewhat clashed with the preferred models of investment and development in the liberal EU model (Igrutinović, 2022, p. 47). There is a fear in the West that with such a Chinese presence, the countries of the Western Balkans will become "Trojan horses" (Heath & Gray, 2018). The official start of the Chinese economic entrance into Eastern and Central Europe was the establishment of the China-CEEC format.

The first reaction of the European Union was a concern because the format brought together many countries that are members of this supranational organisation, which is why this initiative, after Chinese investments in shipping, infrastructure, transport and energy, seemed to them to be

another in a series of Chinese attempts to enter European Union through the “small door” and break it into the East and the West (Arežina, 2017, p. 7). The warning sent by the official Brussels to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe that "when concluding economic agreements with the People's Republic of China countries should not violate EU regulatory regulations" clearly stated how far the states can go in their cooperation with Beijing and how Brussels views this initiative (Arežina, 2017, p. 8).

In fact, Central and Eastern European countries are the bridge to the European Union in the geographical and economic sense. The cooperation between China and the CEE within the framework of the BRI, particularly in developing the region’s transportation infrastructure, will enable physical connectivity and promote economic exchanges between China and Europe. On the other side, the region could be more economically connected and dependent on China (Zečević, 2017, p. 112). From Brussel's perspective, the Union needs to have a common policy towards China to preserve its economic and political interests. The danger is that, by developing economic relations with some of the countries of the China-CEEC initiative which are not ready yet to be members of the European Union, China will be in a position to influence them and break European unity (Zečević, 2017, p. 112). This stance neglects the positive aspect of China as a third actor within Western Balkans in the context of the EU connectivity agenda and contribution to the faster development of these countries that will enable them to become stronger and more effective partners for the EU.

The significant growth of China's economic and political presence in the Western Balkans should be linked to the appearance of the BRI, although

there were certain results on the bilateral level even before that (for example, the strategic partnership with Serbia dates back to 2009, while the Pupin's Bridge construction in Belgrade, the first relevant infrastructure project, that would be later typical for the BRI, dates from 2011) (Igrutinović, 2022, p. 56). Until 2020 China approved about 14 billion dollars in loans to the countries of the region, of which Serbia withdrew about 60% and is undoubtedly China's most important economic and political partner in the region (Igrutinović, 2022, p. 56). Unlike the European Union or the United States of America, when granting loans, Chinese partners do not set political conditions regarding moving towards a certain concept, such as the rule of law. Also, China provides loans with low-interest rates and long repayment terms (Hartwell & Sidlo, 2017, p. 23). For example, Serbia got the opportunity to unconditionally discuss development projects and investments offered by China. China's generous offer to countries interested in joining the BRI consisted of more attractive proposals for cooperation than those offered by the US or the EU. Unlike the USA and the EU, there are no hidden intentions in the case of China (Lađevac, 2018, pp. 54-55). As the Chinese economist Huang Weiping and his coauthors point out, unlike the Western world, which strives to maximise profits, China strives to maximise its share in the world market, agreeing to lower profits (Weiping et al., 2012, p. 106).

Although there are numerous studies in which the presence of the People's Republic of China is seen in a negative context as the "entry of a third actor" in the area of the Western Balkans that would reduce the role of the European Union, there are numerous positive aspects of Chinese involvement in the development process in the countries in the Western Balkans. If we analyse the role of China as one of the most important

investors in the Western Balkans, primarily in the infrastructural domain, but also in the domain of energy independence of the countries in the region, we will find that China's role is primarily contributing to regional integration, which is one of the guiding goals of the European Union when we are talking about the Western Balkans. The answer lies in the so-called Connectivity Agenda for the Western Balkans.¹ A Chinese official has repeatedly emphasised that they are not opposed to the European integration of the region. The rather limited Chinese objectives of increasing economic engagement with the regional countries and connectivity within the region do not seem to be at odds with the EU's objectives in its approach towards the region. The Chinese business-first approach, revolving mainly around objectives of economic investment and development, can by no means be compared to the scope, depth, and level of ambition of what the EU seeks to accomplish in the region (Zweers et al., 2020). In this context, we cannot claim that the roles of China and the European Union in the Western Balkans region are opposed, but in a certain way, they complement each other. Because China's role in the region contributes to additional economic dynamism while at the same time contributing to regional integration. On the other hand, the EU's role in the region, in the political, economic, and security context, is primarily focused on creating an economically sustainable, politically stable, and security predictable environment. In that context, Chinese investments are not opposed to these European goals in both aspects: neither when it comes

¹ In 2015 the European Union launched the Connectivity Agenda and set aside up to €1 billion of EU funds until 2020 to finance as a priority key transport and energy links in the region. The EU Connectivity funds are investment grants provided through the Western Balkans Investment Framework and complementing loans from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the European Investment Bank (EIB).

to the process of European integration of the region nor when it comes to the realization of goals in the direction of the European Connectivity Agenda.

But the main challenge is the harmonization of the legislation of the countries of the Western Balkans with the legislation of the European Union. In fact, this is the most challenging part of the relations between the Western Balkans and China, from the Brussels point of view. Official Brussels expresses displeasure when it comes to Chinese investments in the Western Balkans region, but we must emphasize that this displeasure refers primarily to legislative issues, and not because certain countries in the region are recording a significant growth of Chinese investments. The European Union requires countries in the region to adapt to European legislation, as states which are in the process of EU accession. In this context, official Brussels demands a more transparent procedure in these investment processes related to China, which is a question for the Western Balkans actors, and surely not a question on which we should seek an answer from Beijing or Chinese companies.

Finally, there is the geopolitical aspect to consider. Regarding Chinese cooperation with North Macedonia and Serbia and their importance for China's strategy, the evidence of current events proves that the old geopolitical theories are still relevant and very much alive. Especially the Mackinder theory of the Heartland. Mackinder argues in his famous article "The Geographical Pivot of History" that whoever controls Eastern Europe - the Heartland - would control the world (Mackinder, 1904). His point is that whoever controls Eastern Europe, controls the Heartland, also known as the Pivot Area, and whoever controls the Heartland, could easily gain

control of the World Island (Africa and Eurasia). However, for China to gain access to Eastern Europe and reach Ukraine and Poland, must have good transportation links. The route through Russia is not always the best option, not only due to harsh natural conditions and geography but also for political and security reasons. The second option is a path from Turkey through ports in Greece, and then through Bulgaria or North Macedonia and Serbia. On one side there is Bulgaria, a NATO and EU member, and on the other side are Serbia, with its proclaimed military neutrality and potential membership in the EU, and North Macedonia, which is also in the process of EU accession and has become a NATO member. The most secure, cheapest, and fastest solution to this question would be the route that goes through the ports of Greece, then through North Macedonia and Serbia, and up to Eastern Europe, from where China would have an open door to the Western Europe market, too. The similarities and differences in the engagement of China with these two key countries on this route, North Macedonia and Serbia, accomplished results of their relations and the potential for further cooperation will be researched in the following sections.

5.2. China and North Macedonia

The People's Republic of China and the Republic of Macedonia (from 2019 the constitutional name of the country, according to the Prespa Agreement, was changed into North Macedonia) established diplomatic relations in 1993, and their friendship has since grown in a spirit of mutual respect and cooperation. The Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Macedonia could be found at Co. Ltd. Peking University, web

lawinfochina.com. This character of the relationship between the two countries is also confirmed through the policies of the different governments in the Republic of North Macedonia (hereafter North Macedonia), which, although different in their ideology and politics, are on the same line about relations with China. When it comes to the governments in North Macedonia over the past 15 years, the intensity and level of meetings are almost the same. It's easy to notice the high level of officials from both countries who meet each year (Presidents, Prime Ministers, Ministers, and Ambassadors). Regardless of whether it is the government of VMRO-DPMNE or the government of SDSM, there is continuity in the support for and interest in cooperation with China, first through the China-CEEC from 2012 up to date and later via the BRI from 2014 up to date. In its words, the SDSM government seems to be moving away from other world powers, like China, in favour of the EU and the US. However, if we look at the long history of meetings and projects with China, there isn't much difference between them and the VMRO-DPMNE government, which openly and in its words left room for other world powers, like China, along with the EU and the US, as the most important allies. Hence, we conclude that North Macedonia has a strategic interest in cooperating with China. A confirmation of this claim is the fact that at all nine China-CEEC summits, North Macedonia was represented by the Prime Minister of the Government. It is worth mentioning that the historic path of the diplomatic relations between the two countries had a complicated period when the Macedonian government in 1999 decided to recognize the Republic of China (ROC), hoping that diplomatic relations with Taipei would resolve Macedonian economic problems (Tubilewicz, 2004). But this alternative to the People's Republic of China (PRC) failed,

and in 2001, again, the old friendship was renewed and built stronger in the following years through China-CEE cooperation and the BRI.

5.2.1. China-North Macedonia trade balance and FDI

The Republic of Macedonia and the People’s Republic of China have an agreement on trade and economic cooperation since 1995 ("Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia," no. 60/1995), but according to data from the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), trade and economic cooperation started growing later, so from the year of signing the agreement in 1995 up to 2020, in a period of 25 years, exports of China to North Macedonia increased at an annualised rate of 21% (\$4.44M in 1995 to \$516M in 2020) and the exports of North Macedonia to China have increased at an annualised rate of 42.3% (\$27.8k in 1995 to \$189M in 2020). We reviewed two years for analysis, the ones of interest for this project, 2020 and 2021. In the table below, we integrated the data of interest from the United Nations Comtrade database.

Table No. 5. Export China – North Macedonia and vice versa for 2020&2021

Source: United Nations COMTRADE database on international trade

year	export/country	\$
2020	export China to North Macedonia	\$599,564,700
	export North Macedonia to China	\$163,685,153
2021	export China to North Macedonia	\$760,184,265
	export North Macedonia to China	\$183,438,730

The data shows that China’s exports to North Macedonia are stable and growing year over year, even during the COVID-19 pandemic period. On the other hand, Macedonian exports to China are almost the same as the previous year, with slight growth. Since data for 2022 is still unavailable, we took an example for up to October. Analysing OEC data (OEC, 2022) for October 2022 we could expect the same trend in the trade balance for 2022 as the one in 2021, with the rise of China’s exports to North Macedonia and a decrease in export to North Macedonia to China, even there is a change for decrease on China to North Macedonia export side, but no significant changed to be expected. This is in the line with the findings of Gjorgjioska’s report (2022) for China-CEE Institute, where data is given for North Macedonia’s export to China mapping decrease from 125 518 thousand euros in (Jan-October) 2021 to 42 814 thousand euros in the same period in 2022, and rise for China’s export to North Macedonia from 517 497 thousand euro in the period January-October 2021, to 785 308 in the same period for 2022. Below, we look at trade flows over time, and based on World Bank data, we see an upward trend, with imports from China the highest in 2018, 2019, and 2020. But, even the exports from North Macedonia to China have a growing trend in 2019 and 2020, if we compare them with the previous.

Table No. 6 North Macedonia Trade - Exports, Imports with China

Source: World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS)

Year	Export (\$ Mil)	Import (\$ Mil)
2020	163,685.15	599,564.70
2019	166,041.21	545,143.47
2018	65,259.40	523,224.05

2017	10,214.96	445,832.67
2016	47,810.23	421,227.05
2015	146,436.08	393,830.00
2014	92,631.71	433,028.70
2013	106,951.91	379,657.41
2012	158,846.26	374,926.15
2011	127,461.03	354,895.74

Regarding the trade exchange between the two countries, the conclusion is that there is a continuous upward trend, and since 2011, there has been a bigger increase compared to the past years, but this is also due to the increased export of North Macedonia. In 2011, the volume of trade was about 480 million dollars, which is about 30% higher than the volume of trade compared to 2010 (377,959.5 \$). In the following years, according to the World Bank, the trade exchange moves in those amplitudes, up to 2015, when China breaks out into the first five countries that are North Macedonia's trade partners, as one of the five largest partners from which Macedonia imports.

The data show that trade between North Macedonia and China has been going up since the cooperation agreements were signed (China-CEEC in 2012 and BRI in 2014). This means that the initiative is working. The same conclusion applies to the post-COVID-19 period and the Ukrainian War, as data for 2020, 2021, and 2022 show a positive trend. What should be stressed is that the benefits are primarily on China's side; specifically, the increase in total trade exchange with North Macedonia is due to an increase in China's exports to North Macedonia. North Macedonia hasn't taken full

advantage of the chances for a positive trade balance, like increasing exports to China, even though it's clear that the trade deficit is getting smaller every year. Explaining Macedonia's absence from the China International Import Expo (CIIE) back in 2019, Vangeli (2019) refers to it as yet another instance of history repeating itself. Pointing out the increasing commercial relations with China and, in particular, narrowing the trade deficit between the two countries as a policy priority for the last several governments of the country, he argued that Macedonia has not taken up pro-active policy measures to back up these proclaimed goals.

The table below gives an overview of China's direct investments in North Macedonia, from the time of China-CEE cooperation and BRI until 2019. The data is extracted from the official reports of the National Bank of Macedonia.

Table No. 7 Direct Investment by China in the North Macedonia in Millions of US Dollars

Source: National Bank of North Macedonia

Country	Year							
		Total						
		Equity			Debt instruments			Total
		Equity other than reinvestment of earnings		Direct investor in		Between fellow	Total	

		Direct investor in direct investment enterprises (liabilities)	Reverse investments (assets)	Between fellow enterpriss (net-liabilities)	Total	Reinvestment of earnings (liabilities)	direct investment enterprises (liabilities)	Reverse investments (assets)	enterprises (net-liabilities)		
China	2019	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,09	17,46	17,37	17,37
	2018	0,15	0,00	0,00	0,15	26,82	-0,01	0,00	0,20	0,19	27,16
	2017	0,44	0,00	0,00	0,44	23,96	1,62	0,00	3,42	5,05	29,45
	2016	0,01	0,00	0,00	0,01	30,87	0,37	0,94	-1,15	-1,73	29,15
	2015	0,33	0,00	0,00	0,33	6,21	0,19	0,00	0,06	0,25	6,79
	2014	0,05	0,00	0,00	0,05	-5,19	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	-5,13
	2013	0,03	0,00	0,00	0,03	-0,11	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	-0,08
	2012	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	-0,07	0,04	0,00	0,00	0,04	-0,03
	2011	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,30	-0,05	0,00	0,00	-0,05	0,25
	2010	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,00	0,18	0,05	0,00	0,00	0,05	0,24

The trend of China's FDI in North Macedonia is growing, especially since 2015, similar to the trend we marked up in the trade balance. Overall, the cooperation between the Government of North Macedonia and the

Government of China can be classified into several areas, namely the areas of the economy, infrastructure, defence, education, culture, agriculture, health, and technical assistance. Projects and policy cooperations take place with the same intensity among all governments in North Macedonia. China has 15 projects in North Macedonia from 2013 to 2021, with an estimated value of 654.434.689 EUR. (The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, 2022), namely: procurement of Sinopharm and Sinovak vaccines; reconstruction of the Gotse Delchev school in Prilep; donation for the renovation of Rajko Jinzifov elementary school; loan and participation in the construction of the Miladinovci-Shtip road; loan and participation in the construction of the Kicevo-Ohrid road; donation of Sinoharm vaccines; donation of 3000 books and teaching material to the Confucius Institute; donation of IT equipment to educational institutions; donation for scientific activities; donation for health and social protection; donation to Shuto Orizari polyclinic; donation of 23 school buses; financial donation to the Ministry of Health for COVID-19 infections; donation of medical equipment for protection against COVID-19 to the Ministry of Health. Below, is a list of Chinese companies engaged in North Macedonia.

Table No. 8 Chinese Companies involved in projects in North Macedonia

Source: Balkaninsight

	Company
1	Chinese International Education Foundation
2	The Government of the People's Republic of China
3	Yutong Group Co. Ltd.
4	China National Corporation for Overseas Economic Cooperation

5	Huawei Technologies
6	The Government of the People's Republic of China, People's Liberation Army (PLA)
7	China IPPR International Engineering Co. Ltd.
8	The Government of the People's Republic of China, Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of North Macedonia
9	Sinohydro Corporation Limited
10	China National Pharmaceutical Group Co. Ltd. (Sinopharm)
11	Sinovac Life Sciences Company

We listed some of the activities that have been carried out between North Macedonia and China since 2011, i.e., we singled out the most significant ones for this research. Some of these projects have not yet been completed, and some have not even been started. They are divided by areas of cooperation.

5.2.2. Cooperation in the field of infrastructure

By investing in a network of transportation infrastructure, the BRI, aims to improve China's economic development, open new trade channels, and strengthen its worldwide footprint (Grimes, 2016). Precisely in that area is the key cooperation in the past years with Macedonia. We give an overview of the main aspects of this collaboration.

Table No. 9 Most important points in cooperation between China – North Macedonia in infrastructure

Source: Data from official web pages of the Macedonian Government and the Embassy of China in Macedonia

Year	Meeting/policy/project	Info
2011	Procurement for the construction of hydropower plants Cebren and Galishte was published.	The tender didn't work out, despite CWE from China making the best offer, due to some lack of understanding in other implementation-related areas.
2012	An Agreement for the construction of motorway sections and a Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Macedonia and the Export-Import Bank of the People's Republic of China.	The plan was, an amount of EUR 580 million to be used for the construction of motorway sections Miladinovci-Stip and Kicevo-Ohrid.
2014	An agreement was signed at the Summit in Belgrade between Serbia and Hungary with PR China, for a railway linking Budapest and Belgrade, being the first part of a high-speed. the railroad set to connect Hungary, Serbia, Macedonia, and Greece.	The construction was planned to start in 2016 and the project was to be completed by 2018, but now the project is still ongoing.
2014	An agreement on the procurement of four new three-car diesel passenger multiple units (DMUs) and two new three-car electric passenger multiple units (EMUs) was signed in 2014 by the Macedonian government and China's CSR Corporation Ltd. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development contributed the 25 million euro investment (EBRD). Additionally, 15 million euros for finance the purchase of freight wagons, and 10 million euros for restore existing locomotives, bringing the total expenditure for the renovation of Macedonian Railways' whole rolling fleet to 50 million euros.	

With the China-CEEC Agreement in 2012, "priority was given to infrastructure projects, i.e., road and railroad network, bridges, energy, and telecommunications facilities, encouraging cooperation among banks and

companies in both countries toward continuous and successful cooperation." It has been said that the Chinese government will put some of the 10 billion euros toward development in Southeast Europe. This will be done through the Export-Import Bank of China. (Xin & Zhigao, 2018). North Macedonia is one of the first countries to benefit from this credit line, primarily for constructing two major infrastructure projects for the highway sections Miladinovci-Stip and Kichevo-Ohrid, which form an important part of Corridor 8. The projects listed below, based on Chinese sources, lead us to the conclusion that North Macedonia has not fully or optimally utilized all of the opportunities provided by China.

Nevertheless, the cooperation is continuing, as an example, of Macedonian interest in the China project, would be the meeting between the Premier of the People's Republic of China and the Prime Minister of Macedonia, in Budapest in 2017, discussing a new railway connection along Corridor 8. The Chinese Prime Minister emphasised that with the realisation of Corridor 8 and Corridor 10, Macedonia will become a transport hub in the region, indicating that investments in infrastructure are one of interest in the future in Macedonia (Vangeli,2017). The agreement signed in Belgrade for the railway linking Budapest and Belgrade, happened in the presence of the Macedonian Prime Minister as, within the future, the railway connection ought to be expanded south by means of Macedonia towards Greece harbour of Piraeus (Levitin, Milatovic & Sanfey, 2016). Once again confirming the importance of the strategic position of North Macedonia for China but also the benefits of North Macedonia from Chinese infrastructure projects pushing up Macedonian connection with the World, which would bring a positive trend in her economy in the long term.

Table No. 10 China project records from 2011-2021 in North Macedonia

Source: AidData's Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset

project	type	year	additional
Chinese Government and Government of Macedonia sign ETCA for infrastructure projects.	economic cooperation and technical agreement in the field of infrastructure	2012	
Chinese company ZTE donates 500 barrels of drinking water to Macedonia following a rainstorm.	donation	2016	
Chinese Government pledges 3.13 million — via MOU — for unspecified purposes.	grant	2014	
Chinese Government provides \$3.1 million grant — via ETCA — for unspecified projects.	grant	2011	
Sinohydro dispatches technicians and provides equipment to support disaster relief efforts.	donation	2015	
Chinese Government provides a \$1.32 million grant for the provision of 23 school buses.	grant	2011	
China Eximbank provides \$505 million preferential buyer's credit for Kicevo-Ohrid Motorway Construction Project.	credit	2013	
Chinese Government provides grants for Vera Jocik Elementary School Construction Project.	grant	2012	
Chinese Government provides RMB 20 million grant — via ETCA — for the renovation of schools.	grant	2017	

Chinese Government commits grant funding — via ETCA — for the construction of educational facilities and the Confucius Institute building.	grant	2015	no implementation up to now
China provides scholarships to 10 Macedonian students to study at various universities.	scholarship	2015	
China Eximbank provides \$278.3 million preferential buyer's credit for Miladinovci-Štip Motorway Construction Project.	credit	2013	
Chinese Government commits grant funding — via ETCA — for Naim Frasher Primary School Construction Project.	grant	2014	no implementation up to now
Chinese Government donates rescue equipment worth EUR 230,000.	donation	2015	
China provides scholarships to 10 Macedonian students to study at various universities.	scholarship	2014	
Chinese Government provides RMB 32 million grant for Rajko Zinzifov Primary School Construction Project.		2011	
Hanban funds the establishment of the Confucius Institute at SS. Cyril and Methodius University.	grant	2013	
CDB pledges EUR 1.275 billion in loans for Vardar Valley Hydropower Project.	credit	2011	no implementation up to now

It's evident that the main economic cooperation between the two countries is through projects, the biggest one being the construction of two highway sections Miladinovci-Stip and Kichevo-Ohrid. As well as from the China loans side, these two projects are the subject, see the table below:

Table No. 11 China loans in North Macedonia, 2011-2021

Source: Ministry of finance of North Macedonia

Bank	Loans	year	amount in USD
Export-Import Bank of China	Law on Guarantee by the Republic of North Macedonia under the Loan Agreement for additional financing for the Project on Construction of Kicevo-Ohrid Motorway, to be concluded between the Export-Import Bank of China and the Public Enterprise for State Roads, published in the “Official Gazette of RNM” no.244/2019;	2019	USD 179,694,572. 51
	Law on Guarantee of the Republic of Macedonia under the Loan Agreement for the “Project on Construction of Miladinovci – Shtip Motorway” to be concluded between the Export – Import Bank of China and the Public Enterprises for State Roads of the Republic of Macedonia, published in the “Official Gazette of the RM” no. 149/2013;	2013	USD 278,374,071. 98
	Law on Guarantee of the Republic of Macedonia under the Loan Agreement for the “Project on Construction of Kicevo – Ohrid Motorway” to be concluded between the Export – Import Bank of China and the Public Enterprises for State Roads of the Republic of Macedonia, published in the “Official Gazette of the RM” no. 149/2013;	2013	USD 505,044,966. 98

Bank of China and CWE Company (China International Water & Electric Corp)	Law on Amendments and Modifications to the Law on Guarantee by the Republic of Macedonia under the Loan Agreements for the Project HPP “Kozjak” with the Bank of China and CWE Company (China International Water & Electric Corp.), published in the “Official Gazette of the RM” no. 13/06;	2006	
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The information previously presented makes it clear that China is making an effort to enter North Macedonia with more economic initiatives, but many of them have not yet been put into action.

5.2.3. Case study of the China projects for road infrastructure in North Macedonia

As one of the main areas of cooperation, the construction of motorway section Miladinovci-Stip, as well as the construction of motorway Kicevo-Ohrid, were the priority infrastructure projects in 2012 which the Macedonian Government planned to realize with cooperation and support provided by China. An Agreement on economic and technical cooperation in the field of infrastructure between the Government of the Republic of Macedonia and the Government of the People’s Republic of China (Public Gazette 15/2013), was signed. In this direction, in the same year, a mutually agreed text of the Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Government of the Republic of Macedonia and the Export-Import Bank of the People's Republic of China. This was the way for the Macedonian Government to benefit from the EUR 10 billion, which was announced by the Chinese Government that will be allocated towards development in Southeast Europe, with credit through the Export-Import Bank of China (China-CEEC, 2012). The Agreements for these two

projects were incorporated into the law order of the two countries. For the projects, two Chinese companies were interested, China International Water and Electric Corporation (CWE) and Sinohydro Corporation Limited. According to the financial and technical components of the offers, Sinohydro, a China state-owned company, was elected for both. Originally, the plan was, an amount of EUR 580 million to be used for the construction of motorway sections Miladinovci-Stip and Kicevo-Ohrid. The construction work was expected to commence in early 2014. Given the problems that arose during the implementation of these two infrastructure projects and to overcome the problems, the Laws on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on the Implementation of Infrastructure Projects for the Construction of the Miladinovci-Shtip and Kichevo-Ohrid highways were adopted, which was believed that a compromise solution had been found that would allow the continuation and completion of the started works, namely: Law 149/2013; Amendments to the Law 134/2017; 64/2018;168/2018; 208/2018; 22/2020; 285/2021. In the case of the Construction of Kichevo-Ohrid, five annexes to the Agreement were made, with doubt if the final date given in the 5th Annexe will be respected, as to 31.12.2023. According to the Report from the Macedonian State Revision (2022), due to the high risk of non-fulfilment of the undertaken obligations, possible additional compensation claims, and additional costs after the loan and extended term, the need for coordination and cooperation between the institutions, it, is unrealistic the fulfilment of the contract to be finished in 2023.

In 2017, at a meeting between the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia and the Ambassador of the Republic of China to Macedonia, was agreed to be intensified the economic cooperation

between the two countries, through new projects within the framework of the China-CEEC Cooperation, immediately after solving the problems in the construction of the two highways Miladinovci-Shtip and Kichevo-Ohrid. At the meeting, the Macedonian Prime Minister informed the Ambassador about the initial information about the months-long stoppage of the construction of the highways, which was caused by errors in the design, due to the untimely resolution of property legal relations on the first highway and the displacement of the route of the second. For this purpose, a meeting has been undertaken with the Chinese contractor and other parties involved in the projects, to find a quick solution (Macedonian Government, 2017). This was also reaffirmed at the meeting at Budapest Summit, the same year, between the high government delegation, the Prime Minister of the People's Republic of China and the Prime Minister of the Republic of Macedonia, mentioned before in the text. Finally, in 2019, the highway Miladinovci - Shtip was officially put into use (planned 2017). For the highway, Miladinovci-Shtip the loan from the Export-Import Bank of China was USD 278,374,071.98, but for the construction of the Kichevo-Ohrid highway from USD 505,044,966.98 approved at the start with the new loan in 2019 the amount of full loan came up to around USD 684,739,539.49. With the approved loan, the construction of the Kichevo-Ohrid highway was continued intensively, and to help the realisation of this project, the Chinese side decided to continue lending and approved a loan with a low-interest rate. Even the new government in Macedonia claimed that the Agreement with Sinohydro is one of no benefit for the country, they tried to find a solution to get the work pushed towards its final implementation. So, during the observations in 2022, the government emphasised that the Kicevo-Ohrid highway is being built with

good dynamics, the major administrative problems with the Export-Import bank and with the People's Republic of China, which is behind this project through a credit line and is part of the large pan-European Corridor 8, which connects to Durres, Tirana, Struga, Ohrid, Skopje, Sofia, and Istanbul, are solved. The Government of Macedonia received Information on Request number 11-1558/1 of 09.02.2022 for the regulation of debt by establishing new credit conditions for the Public Enterprise for State Roads with the Export-Import Bank of China due to its inability to repay the due obligations.

After these two agreements for construction, Sinohydro got involved in the market via the Construction of Expressway A3 Section: Kocani–Krupiste (Tender No. EBRD 01/17 KKE) as well as constructing the Gradsko-Prilep highway (on the second part of the project, EBRD 01/2021). Sinohydro is located in Macedonia via its "Sinohydro Corporation Limited, Beijing, Skopje branch," which, according to the latest analyses, is increasing its profit in North Macedonia.

Pan-European Corridor VIII (which includes Ohrid-Kichevo) and Pan-European Corridor X (which includes Miladinovci-Shtip) are two of the ten pan-European transport corridors listed in the Declaration from the 2nd Pan-European Transport Conference in 1994 (UN, 1994). These are distinct from the trans-European transport networks, an EU project (European Commission, n.d.), but they are still complementary. China's participation in the construction of these corridors contributes to the European Union's trans-European transport network project. According to the previous analysis, China's role in North Macedonia is primarily complementary to the EU's path for North Macedonia and poses no threat.

The area of engagement in North Macedonia is mostly in economic projects, and no political involvement could be identified at the moment. Even for China, the European integration of North Macedonia is of benefit, securing a reliable surrounding for further cooperation. The corruption scandals that some of the projects faced during their realisation, however, are of concern to China as well as to North Macedonia.

5.2.4. Cooperation in the field of energy

Briefly, we will elaborate on the energy area, where China also tried to start cooperation in a few projects, but except for Kozjak, no special ongoing cooperation in this field in the past years.

Table No. 12 Project Kozjak and China

Source: AidData's Global Chinese Development Finance Dataset

project Kozjak	Implementing agencies	Funding Agency	year	additional
CWE provides \$3.5 million supplier credit for 80MW Kozjak Hydropower Plant Construction Project	China International Water and Electrical Corporation (CWE) [State-owned Company]	China International Water and Electrical Corporation (CWE) [State-owned Company]	2002	Loan arrangements that ELEM had previously signed with the Bank of China and Hainan in 1998 were effectively modified by the loan agreements that it inked in July 2002.
Bank of China provides \$44.9 million buyer's credit loan tranche (Tranche A) for 80MW Kozjak Hydropower Plant Construction Project	China International Water and Electrical Corporation (CWE) [State-owned Company]; Hainan Construction Engineering Corporation [State-owned	Bank of China (BOC) [State-owned Commercial Bank]	2002	

	Company]; Macedonia ESM - Elektrostopanstvo na Makedonija [Private Sector]			
Bank of China provides \$44.9 million buyer's credit loan tranche (Tranche B) for 80MW Kozjak Hydropower Plant Construction Project	China International Water and Electrical Corporation (CWE) [State-owned Company]	Bank of China (BOC) [State-owned Commercial Bank]	2002	
Bank of China provides \$44.9 million buyer's credit loan tranche (Tranche A) for 80MW Kozjak Hydropower Plant Construction Project			2022	

The conclusion is that even China, with her companies and loans, tried to start cooperation in a few more energy projects, such as the Vardar Valley Hydropower Project as well as participation in the tenders for HEC "Chebren" and "Galište," but with no final results up to now.

5.2.5. Cooperation in the field of health

In the health area, some attempts at cooperation could be detected through the years. In 2016, the Center for Traditional Chinese Medicine at the "Goce Delchev" University in Shtip started to run. This initiative took place after the Macedonian President visited China, in 2013. The Center

employed experts who were educated in China, for six months to two years, as well as professors from China (Macedonian Government, 2016).

In the pandemic year of 2021, the Minister of Health signed the contract for the procurement of vaccines against COVID-19 from the Chinese manufacturer Sinopharm as well as Sinovac Vaccines. With the agreement, North Macedonia received vaccines from the Chinese companies "Sinopharm" and "Sinovac," which arrived from China at the airport in Skopje. Also, during the pandemic, China donated to Macedonia medical equipment as well as vaccines. In 2021, the Chinese Embassy donated medical equipment worth 37,000 euros to North Macedonia's Ministry of Health for the treatment of COVID-19 virus patients (Fokus, 2021). The donation for medical protection to the Macedonian Army in the amount of 250,000 euros (MIA, 2020), came in July 2020, as well as a donation from the Army of the People's Republic of China of 100,000 doses of vaccines from Sinopharm, in May 2021 (Ministry of Defence, 2021). With the procurement and donation of Chinese vaccines, mass vaccination in Macedonia began. To sum up, China contributed to a significant strengthening of the health system in Macedonia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the failure of the EU in supporting (Juncos, 2021), timely, Western Balkans with needed medical equipment and vaccines, China stepped in as a truthful friend in time of need for Macedonia.

5.2.6. Cooperation in the field of security/defence

In light of new security threats, especially hybrid threats, a measure that is increasingly being taken is the ban on the outsourcing of services by Chinese companies to implement the 5G network. This course in the field

of digitization, which has implications in the security and defense spheres, is also followed in North Macedonia. (Radio Free Europe, 2020)

It is primarily guided by North Macedonia's and the United States' strategic partnership since 2008, as well as NATO membership beginning in 2020. However, there are still some forms of cooperation that are shown in the table below.

Table No. 13 Most important points in China-North Macedonia cooperation in defence

Source: Data from official web pages of the Macedonian Government and the Embassy of China in North Macedonia

Year	Meeting/project/policy
2011	An official visit by the Macedonian Defense Minister, accompanied by the Chief of Macedonian Army (ARM) Staff, to the Peacekeeping Operations Training Center within the Ministry of National Defense in the People's Republic of China.
2013	Meeting between former and newly appointed defence attaché of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Macedonia and the Macedonian Minister for Defense, at the premises of the Ministry of Defense.
2013	Macedonian Minister of Internal Affairs, as part of a visit to the People's Republic of China, visited the Academy and Training Center of the Special Police Forces and the headquarters of the Shanghai Police.
2014	Macedonian Minister of Interior and People's Republic of China Deputy-Minister of Public Security, signed a bilateral cooperation agreement, in Skopje.
2015	Meeting in Beijing between the Macedonian Minister for Defense and the Minister for Defense of the People's Republic of China.

2018	Meeting between the Macedonian Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense with the Vice President of the National Committee of the Chinese Political and Consultative Council of the 13th National Congress. The meeting took place at the Government of Macedonia.
2021	The Macedonian President met the Minister of Defence of China; the Macedonian Prime Minister welcomed a delegation of the Ministry of Defense of the People's Republic of China. The meetings took place in Skopje.

On defence priorities, the two countries have cooperated duly over the years, in the form of training programs and in the form of exchanges of experience. They have been focusing on strengthening active cooperation, exploring new ways to improve them, sharing experiences related to defence reform, and supporting international peacekeeping missions. At the meeting at the Ministry of Defense, back in 2013, Macedonian Minister expressed its appreciation for the support China had provided to the Republic of Macedonia through courses for military personnel and for its in-kind donations to the needs of the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Macedonia. At the same time, the minister emphasised the readiness of the Ministry of Defense to send a military attaché from the Republic of Macedonia to the People's Republic of China (Macedonian Government, 2013).

From the table, for the bilateral cooperation, in the spirit of the Agreement for Cooperation in Defence between the two countries (from 2004), could be concluded that the intentions of all Macedonian governments until now were in the direction of deepening and developing in the spirit of mutual friendship and support. Considering the NATO membership from 2020

and the EU negotiation process, in these circumstances, if the intensity of the cooperation would be changed, is yet to be seen. In that sense, the visit of the Minister of Defense of China to North Macedonia, in 2021, had sent encouraging confirmation of the good relations between the two countries.

5.3. China and Serbia

Despite the pronounced geographical distance, the following overview of cooperation between Serbia and China testifies to the intensive multi-sector cooperation of these two actors in international relations. Based on the tables, it can be determined that the cooperation between Belgrade and Beijing is not based only on the economic interests of the two sides, but rather on a well-founded political, economic and security cooperation that includes various state segments, but also private sector entities from Serbia and China. Based on this, we can determine that the cooperation between Serbia and China has reached a significant level of strategic cooperation, as such in the understanding of international relations. The trust built between these two partners testifies to the constant growth of cooperation in all fields, and when it comes to the very importance of this cooperation, the process of improving it leads us to the conclusion that both sides are committed to further and deeper integrated cooperation, which is increasingly taking on the contours of allies on the international stage, primarily bearing in mind the frequency coordination in foreign policy activities of both states.

In fact, the example of cooperation between Serbia and China leads us in the direction of a new understanding of international relations in which not always and only geographically close state entities have opportunities for deepened strategic cooperation. On the contours of the multipolar order,

we are witnessing the expansion of cooperation between two countries, Serbia and China, which, although they are largely not proportional in comparison, contributes to a new way of understanding international relations in which cooperation is not only possible between large entities on the one hand and small entities on the other, but also between state actors among which there is a clear disproportion of their political, economic and military power. At the same time, it is important to point out that this cooperation between Serbia and China is primarily based on the principle of equality.

On the other hand, cooperation with China is compatible with Serbia's strategic goal of EU accession in the future. Professor of Chinese studies at the King's College in London, Kerry Brown, in the context of relations between China and Serbia, has said in an interview that, from a strategic point of view, the negotiating position of Serbia would be much stronger if it were a member of the European Union, and what it could offer for Chinese interests would be much more attractive (Vukotić, 2017).

5.3.1. Political relations

Serbia is China's main partner in the Western Balkans. In addition to the political support that Serbia has received from China in the field of international relations, there has been an increase in investments coming to Serbia from China. Serbia is included in the Chinese initiative "Belt and Road Initiative", but bilateral cooperation between the two countries was established even before it, in 2009 when Serbia and China signed the "Agreement on economic and technical cooperation in the field of infrastructure" (Vladislavljev, 2018). Serbia and China are historically linked by the legacy of communism, respective socialism as a form of

socio-political organization. Then, as is often pointed out, China is one of the two permanent members of the United Nations Security Council that did not recognize the unilaterally declared independence of Kosovo. On the other hand, Serbia has openly expressed its position in favour of the Chinese side in the territorial disputes that China has in the South Chinese Sea, as well as regarding the territories of Tibet and Xinjiang (Vladisavljev, 2018).

After the unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence on February 17, 2008, the People's Republic of China provided full support to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Serbia, as well as the consistent and complete implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1244, bearing in mind that a precedent of this kind could reflect on its internal problems (Arežina, 2017, p. 16).

Table No. 14 Cooperation Framework: number of state-to-state agreements, areas of formalized cooperation, agreements and projects with local authorities, exchange and training programmes with civil servants

Source: ECFR • ecf.eu

Year	Agreement	Area
2009	Joint Statement Between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Serbia on Establishing a Strategic Partnership.	Political relations
2009	Framework agreement on economic and technological infrastructure cooperation	infrastructure, economy

2009	Agreement on scientific and technical cooperation between the Republic of Serbia and the People's Republic of China.	Education and science
2015	Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Mutual Establishment of Cultural Centres.	Cultural cooperation
2016	Joint Statement of the Republic of Serbia and the People's Republic of China on the Establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.	Political relations
2017	"Smart City" project Agreement, Ministry of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications.	Security
2019	"Safe City" project Agreement, Ministry of Interior Affairs.	Local governance

5.3.2. Cooperation in the field of economy

The peculiarity of the relations between Serbia and China is the steady growth of economic cooperation despite the extreme asymmetry between them—geographic, demographic, economic, military, and political (Babić, 2018, p. 14). Serbia is the first country in Central and Eastern Europe with which China has established a comprehensive strategic partnership (Babić, 2018, p. 13). In 2009, the President of the Republic of Serbia, Boris Tadić, signed the Strategic Partnership Agreement with the President of the

People's Republic of China, Hu Jintao, which provided a new framework for the development of Serbian-Chinese relations in the coming period (Arežina, 2017, p. 17). Also, Serbia has become the first country in Europe with which China signed an agreement on the mutual cancellation of visas for holders of ordinary passports, which enabled the growth of visits by Chinese tourists to Serbia (Babić, 2018, p. 13).

Table No. 15 Chinese FDI to Serbia (including investment from Hong Kong and Taiwan). In millions of euros

Source: National Bank of Serbia

2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
2	19	1,1	23	84,5	66,4	217,9	177,5	685,5	339,4	528,5

China is one of the main foreign political and economic actors in Serbia, the dominant creditor for the construction of all major road routes, and a customer partner in the field of technology and construction of the 5G network. Relations between Belgrade and Beijing have been on the rise in recent years (Đurović, 2021). Belgrade and Beijing have had an Agreement on Strategic Partnership since 2009, and an Agreement on a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership since 2016. Chinese companies are the owners of RTB Bor and Iron and Steel Factory in Smederevo Hbis Group and the two countries have signed agreements on cooperation in the

field of infrastructure and on the modernisation of railways (Đurović, 2021).

Table No. 16 FDI projects worth more than €1m

Source: ECFR · ecf.eu

	Name of the project or acquired company	Investing Chinese company	Year of investment	Year of announcement	Location	Amount of investment (EUR in millions)	Additional investment at a later date (EUR in millions)	Type of investment	Shares acquired by Chinese investment	Transaction party	Sector
1	Automotive interior parts production factory	Yanfeng Automotive Interior	Not mentioned before 2019	2019	Kragujevac	40	300	greenfield	100		automotive industry
2	Cars headlight factory	Xingyu, automotive lights systems	2019	2019	Niš	60	N/A	greenfield	100		automotive industry
3	Yarn factory	Eurofiber	2016	2016	Čuprija	1	12	greenfield	100		textile
4	Plastic granule factory	Zong Qiao Nengyuan Zhi	2018	2018	Čuprija	2	N/A	greenfield	100	City of Čuprija	chemicals
5	Plastic recycling	Blue Sky Europe International Industry and Trade Technology	2018	2018	Čuprija	12	N/A	greenfield	100		chemicals

6	Car parts factory	Minh Automotive Europe	2018	2018	Loznica	100	N/A	greenfield	100		automotive industry
7	Smederevo steel mill	Hesteel	2016	2016	Smederevo	54	142	brownfield	?	Government of Serbia	metals
8	Ikarbus factory	Lanzhou Guangdong New Energy Automobile	2019	2017	Zemun	10	N/A	brownfield	51	Ikarbus	automotive industry
9		Health Care Europe	2012	2014	Ruma	50	N/A	greenfield	90		commercial goods
10	Video surveillance manufacturing	Dahua Technology	2016	N/A	Belgrade	At least 0,39	N/A	greenfield	100		surveillance technology

In the context of European integration of Serbia as a key foreign policy goal, China is not against Serbia's membership in the EU. On the contrary, it would enable it to penetrate the European market more easily, according to the opinion of many political scientists. The fact is, however, that the way of doing business with China is against certain EU rules. Negotiations on Serbia's membership in the EU could also potentially be jeopardized due to foreign policy mismatches on issues sensitive to China, such as the rights of the minority Uyghurs in Xinjiang province or relations with Hong Kong. Close cooperation with China could potentially be a thorn in the side of the US (Đurović, 2021). Serbia is important for China both geopolitically and geo-economically because it is located at the crossroads

between Europe and Asia, that is, Serbia plays the role of the door to Europe for China, and this will be proven by the completion of the modernization of the Thessaloniki-Belgrade-Budapest railway, which is being carried out as part of the Belt and Road project (Babić, 2018, p. 16). Ivona Lađevac from the Institute for International Politics and Economics in Belgrade assesses that "China has outgrown Asia and came to Europe to stay there" and that Serbia, in such a situation, has the freedom to cooperate with everyone (Đurović, 2021).

But, a group of 26 members of the EU parliament sent an open letter about Chinese economic activities in Serbia, stating the bad environmental result of investments in Smederevo Iron and Steel Factory, where air pollution far exceeds the permitted limits, and they asked the Commissioner for Enlargement to remind the Serbian authorities that they are obliged to respect national regulations in that sense. The parliamentarians stated that such Chinese investments are a symbol of the growth of Chinese influence in Serbia and elsewhere, that they are non-transparent, unsustainable in the long term and can have a corrupting influence on institutions (Igrutinović, 2022, p. 59).

But, the fact is that China is one of Serbia's top partners, so it is understandable that a lot is said and written about Serbia's cooperation with this great country (Babić, 2018, p. 12). Serbia has turned to financial instruments that ensure the inflow of capital from China because it is obtained under better conditions than loans and credits from international financial organizations such as the World Bank (Karnitschnig, 2017).

Table No. 17 Serbian imports from China (including Hong Kong and Taiwan), in euros

Source: ECFR · ecf.eu

2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
1,223	1,983.3	1,427.5	1,561.2	1,534.3	1,516.2	1,583.3	1,840.1	2,271.1	2,595	3,290.1

Table No. 18 Loans from Chinese Banks and Entities

Source: ECFR · ecf.eu

Price of the infrastructure development	Amount of the Chinese loan as a percentage of the total cost of the infrastructure development	Percentage of the project delivered by the Chinese side
In millions of euros, at the exchange rate of the time of investment	in %	in %
360,4	85	100
219,75	85	100
225,75	90	100
176,77	85	100
396,05	85	100
1,830 (approx.)	N/A	N/A

158 (approx.)	N/A	100
63.45	N/A	100
184.14	85	N/A (Azerbaijani company AzVirt is a sub-contractor)
500 (approx.)	N/A	N/A (Azerbaijani company AzVirt is a sub-contractor)
600 (approx.)	N/A	N/A
606	N/A	N/A
271.4	85	100
883.6	85	N/A (possibility that Russian company joins)
164.6	85	100
3,200	N/A	51
337	N/A	N/A
30	N/A	N/A

Table No. 19 Main Local Companies / Businesspeople with Economic Ties to China

Source: ECFR · ecfre.eu

Name	Sector	Relation with Serbia
Starlink Enterprise Limited	International Trade and Development Solutions	Founders and owners from Serbia, headquartered in Hong Kong
Energoprojekt	Engineering, International	Joint ventures with Chinese companies and subcontractors, or in many projects implemented by Chinese companies in Serbia

Table No. 20 Fairs and business meetings between Serbian and Chinese companies

Source: ECFR · ecfr.eu

Year	Agreement	Area
2018	The Chinese Product Fair (Zhejiang province)	Serbian Chamber of Commerce, Chinese Embassy, Department of Commerce of Zhejiang province
2019	Chinese International Import Expo (Shanghai)	Serbian Chamber of Commerce

2019	Business Forum with the Entrepreneurs from Zhejiang Province	Serbian Chamber of Commerce
2020	Chinese International Import Expo (Shanghai)	Serbian Chamber of Commerce, Development Agency of Serbia
2021	Chinese International Import Expo (Shanghai)	Serbian Chamber of Commerce, Development Agency of Serbia
2021	Serbia to China (startup competition)	Serbian Chamber of Commerce, Nihub accelerator of Startup - China
2021	China-CEE Expo and International Consumer Goods Fair, Ningbo	Serbian Chamber of Commerce

Table No. 21 Cooperation with local government – projects, initiatives, visits, etc.

Source: ECFR · ecfre.eu

Year	Agreement
2020	Agreement on institutional cooperation between the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina (Republic of Serbia) and Fujian Province (People's Republic of China). There are also several other agreements between AP Vojvodina and Chinese provinces

2021	City of Zrenjanin – City of Yantai Sister City ties
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In the context of the China-CEEC format, already on the first high-level meeting in Bucharest, the Prime Ministers of Serbia, Hungary and the People's Republic of China, Ivica Dacic, Viktor Orban and Li Keqiang reached an agreement on a joint project to modernize the railway between Budapest and Belgrade (Tanjug, 2013). This project is of essential and priority importance for Beijing, because it is a multilateral project that has never existed before - between the People's Republic of China, a member state and a candidate state for membership in the European Union (Arežina, 2017, p. 5). During the so-called "Belgrade meeting", also within the China-CEEC format, the greatest importance was given to the signing of the agreement for the multilateral project for the construction of the Belgrade-Budapest super-high-speed railway. It is planned to continue towards Skopje on the one hand to the port of Piraeus, where the People's Republic of China (COSCO company) has invested billions of dollars in port capacity, and on the other hand towards Vienna to reach the ports of Rotterdam and Hamburg. The construction of the Athens-Vienna railway transversal will create a "land-sea express line" from the People's Republic of China to Europe, which will reduce both transport costs and the time needed for products to reach any European destination (Arežina, 2017, p. 6). In fact, the country with the largest number of proposed and approved projects within the Initiative is Serbia (Tanjug, 2014).

Apart from traffic infrastructure, China is also interested in other projects in Serbia, such as an industrial park, transmission line, etc. (Babić, 2018,

p. 15). Along with the construction of road infrastructure, there is also cooperation in the development of energy, so the thermal power plant in Kostolac is the first power plant that China is building in Europe, respectively, Chinese companies have carried out the reconstruction and revitalization of block 2 of the thermal power plant Kostolac B, and the construction of Block 3 has also begun. There are practically no areas and issues at the bilateral level and in the field of international relations where Serbia and China do not agree and seek the best solutions (Obradović, 2018, p. 29).

Table No. 22 Cooperation within ‘China-CEEC’ – hosting of events, projects, hosting of centres, initiatives, etc.

Source: ECFR · ecfre.eu

Year	Event
2014	China-CEEC Summit
2016	Forum on Cultural and Creative Industries
2017	Summit on cultural heritage
2018	Forum of Mayors
2018	Summit of Ministers of Transportation
2019	Summit on Innovation
2021	Virtual Art Cooperation Forum
2014	Belgrade – Budapest Railroad project

Serbia and China have also developed cooperation in the field of digitization. Beijing is a strategic partner in the construction of the 5G network through the Huawei company, and at the same time, by signing the Washington Agreement, Serbia has committed to limit the participation of "unreliable suppliers" in the construction of the 5G network (Đurović, 2021). In the case of Serbia, in the absence of a consensus among key EU member states on a common 5G policy, the incentive structure to persuade Serbia to move away from its commitments to Huawei will remain weak. The Serbian side will delay decisions until a transatlantic consensus and a joint strategy regarding 5G networks are in place. (Ruge & Vladislavljev, 2020).

On the other hand, 2017 can be traced to the rise of military relations between Serbia and China, which is a novelty in China's approach to the European continent. Through a combination of significant donations from the Ministry of Defense, favourable political circumstances, the interest of the Serbian Armed Forces in weapons and equipment, and the commercial interests of the military industry, China has positioned itself as a significant supplier of these goods (Igrutinović, 2022, p. 56).

5.3.3. Cooperation in the field of energy

In the energy sector, the concrete ways of cooperation are limited by geographical distance, but there is potential for increased investments by Chinese companies in Serbia. The process of energy diversification is expected to accelerate in the forthcoming period and this is a chance to expand cooperation. While in the short term the focus will be placed on the diversification of oil and gas sources in order to lessen dependence on a single provider, the medium to long-term goals are to increase the share of energy from renewable sources (Derewenda, 2022). The space for joint projects with Chinese companies exists in both aspects. However, the importance of Serbia's energy diversification program is recognized in the EU and the US as a strategic priority as it will decrease the Russian influence in the country. Accordingly, these actors are interested to have a leading role in the process, and Serbia's cooperation with Norway, whose experts are being consulted, is indicative in this regard (Vujasin, 2022). Still, the development of a wide network of partners that leads to a higher level of energy security is imperative for Serbia, and cooperation with China can be an important part of this endeavour, although limited by the need to compound it with the geopolitical interests of all leading great powers.

For Serbia, the current energy crisis was a wake-up call. The problems with energy production caused by multiple factors, including poor management, at the end of 2021, and the consequences of EU sanctions against Russia, which impact Serbia's oil imports from Russia coming through Croatia, meant that energy diversification became a priority. In that regard, strengthening its partnership with China in the energy sector is one of the

available alternatives for Serbia. There are signs that Serbia is exploring this option, especially as the key existing joint project, the construction of ‘Kostolac B3’, an extension project of the Kostolac thermal power plant, is in the concluding phase of construction and expected to be operational by September 2023 (Todorović, 2022).

But we have to emphasise that the energy crisis facing the European continent, and therefore Serbia, is primarily a regional issue in a wider regional context. The alternative of potential concrete energy cooperation with China represents a longer-term initiative, still without clear strategic guidelines, while regional cooperation and the construction of regional energy corridors that will contribute to energy effectiveness and diversification in the medium term represent a concrete and visible goal. In that sense, the process of upcoming diversification surely opens up space for potential cooperation with China in the energy field. Accordingly, the role of China can primarily expand in the aspect of loans for and realisations of concrete infrastructure projects in the energy sector, where Chinese companies can build new or expand and modernize existing facilities for energy production or transportation, all as a part of a wider energy diversification effort conducted by Serbia.

The opportunities for direct energy cooperation with China are somewhat limited by the need for North Macedonia and Serbia to follow EU-China energy relations. Besides, geopolitical distance makes it hard for individuals to come up with more proactive plans. Still, there are good chances to expand the use of renewable energy resources and rely on China in that regard.

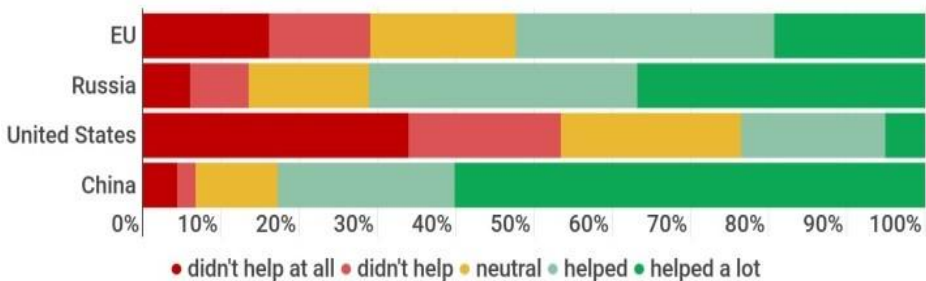
5.3.4. Cooperation in the field of health

In the midst of the novel coronavirus pandemic, when most countries are closing their borders and banning the export of medicines and medical equipment, China and Serbia, thanks to their "iron-clad" friendship and comprehensive strategic partnership, have become a shining example of solidarity in the fight against the virus (China Daily, 2020). The first plane carrying medical supplies and experts from China was welcomed by the President of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic and the Chinese ambassador to Serbia Chen Bo, which highlighted the importance of China's gesture for Serbia. Chinese medical experts offered valuable suggestions to their Serbian counterparts—including establishing makeshift hospitals to treat COVID-19 patients, restricting the movement of people and vehicles and locking down some cities—which helped prevent the spread of the disease in Serbia (China Daily, 2020). "The coronavirus pandemic will forever alter the world order", said Henry Kissinger, former US secretary of state, in an interview with The Wall Street Journal. In particular, small countries, such as Serbia, will need to expand cooperation with major countries, and improve their national emergency preparedness capacity. In the post-pandemic world, the greatest responsibility would lie with the heads of state and government to turn their sources of power into successful smart-power strategies and bring all countries together to achieve their respective national goals (China Daily, 2020). In research related to the perception of the public in Serbia about relations between Beijing and Belgrade during the COVID-19 pandemic, a vast majority of the respondents think China helped Serbia the most with the COVID-19 pandemic - more than 80%

feel China helped, and more than 60% that it helped a lot (Gledić et al., 2020).

Figure No.1. How much did the following countries/entities help Serbia during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Source: <https://ceias.eu/>



China’s importance for Serbia in the areas of security and defence is reflected in the fact that China is referred to in Serbia’s strategic documents, namely in the existing 2009 National Security Strategy in Chapter IV – National Security Policy, subchapter IV.I. Foreign Policy where it is stated that: „The Republic of Serbia will continue to give special attention to the deepening of close ties with the People’s Republic of China, India and Brazil, as well as with other traditional partners and important factors of the international community“ (CEAS, 2022). Over the past few years, a perceptible trend of intensified cooperation between the Republic of Serbia and China in the fields of military and civilian security is in evidence, which up to recently had not been the case (CEAS, 2022).

The military cooperation between the two countries goes back a long way. The countries signed their first defence cooperation agreement in 2008, and China made its first military donation to Serbia in the same year. Since then, the Chinese Ministry of National Defence has donated military equipment such as self-propelled machines; motor vehicles; integrated

transport vehicles; special vehicles for the engineering battalion; rubber dinghies with outboard motors; and snowmobiles (JustFinance, 2021).

The trend of intensified cooperation between Belgrade and Beijing in the areas of military and civilian security began in 2017. In fact, in June 2017, the then Minister of Defense of the Republic of Serbia received members of a high delegation of the Chinese People's Liberation Army headed by Colonel General Zhao Keshi, Head of Logistics and Supply of the Central Military Commission, which was paying a three-day visit to the Republic of Serbia (CEAS, 2022).

Later, in 2018, Colonel Milan Ranković, Head of the Department for International Military Cooperation of the Defense Policy Sector of the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia and Senior Colonel Ma Yongbao, Military Attaché of PR China to our country, signed the 2018 Plan of Bilateral Military Cooperation between the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Serbia and the Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China (Plan of bilateral military cooperation, 2018). In the Serbian defence ministry announcement from the meeting, in addition to improving military-technical and military-economic cooperation, it was noted that there is a possibility to develop cooperation in other areas, such as military-military, military-medical and military-educational cooperation, as well as other acceptable forms of cooperation (CEAS, 2022).

Also in 2018, the Defense Minister of Serbia paid an official visit to the People's Republic of China (Official announcement, 2018), during which he visited two Chinese defence industry companies, "AVIC" and

“CATIC”, which develop and manufacture aircraft, helicopters, unmanned aerial vehicles and anti-aircraft defence systems, as well as the elite 3rd Guard Division of the People’s Liberation Army which is responsible for the defence of Beijing.

In mid-September 2018 Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vučić led a Serbian delegation on an official visit to the People’s Republic of China (Blic, 2018). The media reported that during the visit the procurement of state-of-the-art drone systems for the Serbian Armed Forces was agreed, which would be assembled in Serbia, while the original components would come from Chinese manufacturers (Babović, 2018).

From this point of view, with its procurement of armed drones and missiles in 2019, Serbia became the first European country to have entrenched military cooperation with China. In addition, Serbian and Chinese security forces held joint anti-terrorism drills in the country, and China has donated military equipment to the Serbian army worth nearly EUR 10 million (JustFinance, 2021).

According to official Serbian documents, the country bought the Chinese medium-range air missile system FK-3, consisting of three batteries, in 2019. The purchase makes Serbia the first European buyer of this Chinese air defence system, which has a horizontal range of up to 100 kilometres and a vertical range of 27 kilometres. It can simultaneously hit six targets with 12 missiles. In the same year, Serbia also bought six CH-92A combat drones, also known as Rainbow drones, armed with laser-guided missiles (JustFinance, 2021).

5.4. Key findings

Table No. 23 Cooperation with the PR China				
Country	In the field of finance and investments	In the field of energy	In the field of health	In the field of security/defence
North Macedonia	High	High	High	High
	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
	Low	Low	Low	Low
Serbia	High	High	High	High
	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
	Low	Low	Low	Low

Field of finance and investments: North Macedonia and China

MEDIUM Level - Both countries have reached substantial results in the field of investments and finance through FDI, as well as Chinese loans for infrastructure development in North Macedonia. China has presented itself as a reliable partner in the process of dynamising the Macedonian economy, from the point of fast development rates to the creation of its sustainability. China is primarily active in the areas of construction of transport infrastructure, as well as trade. However, there is a lack of significant Chinese investments, primarily in the areas of critical infrastructure, for this cooperation to be rated at a high level.

Field of finance and investments: Serbia and China

HIGH Level - In the context of financing and investments, Serbia and China are recording comprehensive cooperation as Chinese companies are one of the main investors in the Serbian critical sector, including factories, plants and infrastructure (railways, roads, highways). Chinese companies also have a huge impact on the process of revitalisation of the mining sector in the Republic of Serbia. From that point of view, the significant Chinese role in the sector of finance and investments of Serbia contributes to additional rapid economic development.

Energy field: North Macedonia and China

LOW Level - Based on the available data, we can conclude that cooperation between North Macedonia and the People's Republic of China in the field of energy is at a low, not significant level. Chinese companies

are participating in a project to revitalise North Macedonia's energy capacities, but between these two countries, there are currently no concrete guidelines, plans and strategies on joint energy projects or ventures. There is potential space for Beijing and Chinese companies to contribute to the development of the sustainable energy sector in North Macedonia.

Energy field: Serbia and China

MEDIUM Level - Relations in the field of energy between Serbia on one side and the People's Republic of China on another side are characterised by positive developments, but bearing in mind the geographical distance between these two countries as a variable that prevents direct cooperation in the process of diversification of energy resources, which would be of equal interest to these entities. But the pronounced experience of the People's Republic of China in the infrastructural part of the construction of energy plants, their revitalization and modernisation following European standards contributes to the fact that Serbia has a relevant degree of cooperation with the People's Republic of China in this area as well. The space exists for future cooperation in the sustainable energy sector and its development in Serbia, where China's role can be significant.

Health field: North Macedonia and China

MEDIUM Level - From the perspective of the COVID-19 pandemic, the cooperation between the People's Republic of China and North Macedonia was assessed as satisfactory, taking note of the fact that the authorities in Skopje primarily relied on their European partners and allies within the framework of NATO in terms of donations, aid and support during the pandemic. However, it is important to point out that North Macedonia

acquired a large contingent of Chinese vaccines in the fight against the pandemic, which makes cooperation in this field important in times of crisis.

Health field: Serbia and China

HIGH Level - Based on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, cooperation between Serbia and China is also evaluated as high in this aspect. China was the first country that sent its expertise help to Serbia at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, in the same manner, Beijing has sent numerous contingents of support to Serbia during the pandemic, from medical equipment, through expertise, to donations of Sinopharm vaccines.

Security/defence field: North Macedonia and China

LOW Level - The main cause is the fact that North Macedonia is a NATO member state, so in that context it is oriented towards a deep and comprehensive cooperation with NATO member states in the field of security, from the creation of security strategies, through military exercises to the procurement of military equipment and weapons.

Security/defence field: Serbia and China

MEDIUM Level - Serbian declared military neutrality allows the country to create a widespread strategy for cooperation in the field of security with different subjects of international law, all of it based on the UN Charter. Based on it Serbia is a positive example in promoting military neutrality, accordingly cooperating in the field of security with NATO, USA, Russia,

as well as the People's Republic of China with which it has long-standing military cooperation, including respecting national views on the security strategies from both sides, as well as mutual procurement of military equipment and weapons.

6. PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH

CATI 1000 / November 2022

"The relationship between China and North Macedonia and Serbia in the changing geopolitical context"

Results of a public opinion survey by means of a telephone survey on a sample of 1000 respondents

Republic of North Macedonia and Republic of Serbia

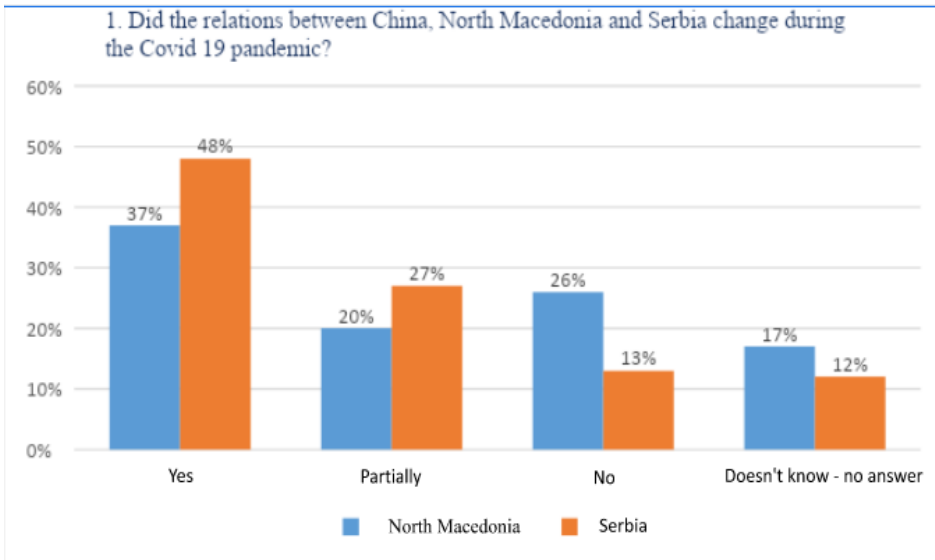
6.1. Methodology

CATI Basic data
Sample size: 1000 respondents from the Republic of North Macedonia and Serbia
The target population is citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia and Serbia aged 18 and over.

Sample frame: National census data, a telephone directory
Sample type: two-stage, stratified - nationally representative
<p>Sample stages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - First stage: random proportional selection by region - Second stage: random proportional ratio of a phone number
Cross variables: gender, age, education
Automatic procedure control is software, including interactive consistency control and logical response control. The margin of error is ± 2.9 at the 95 percent confidence level
Response rate: one conducted interview per 4 to 6 established telephone connections
Duration of the research: 1 st - 30 th November, 2022
Preliminary research report written from December 1 st to December 15 th , 2022, based on data from the CATI survey conducted in the period from November 1 st to November 30 th , 2022 on a representative sample of 1000 citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia and Serbia (18+).

6.2. Results and findings

1. Did the relations between China, North Macedonia, and Serbia change during the COVID-19 pandemic?



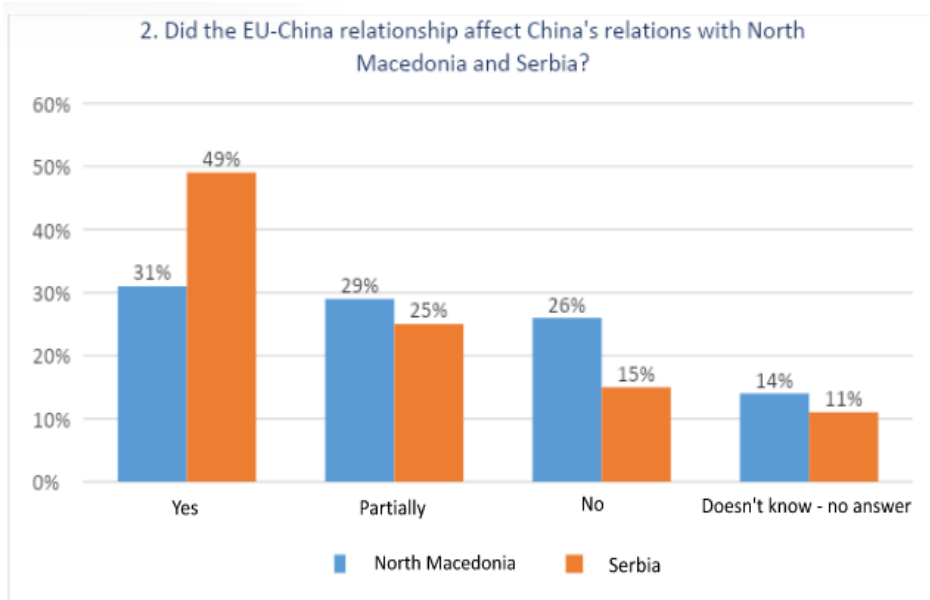
1. Did the relations between China, North Macedonia, and Serbia change during the COVID-19 pandemic?		
	North Macedonia	Serbia
Yes	37%	48%
Partially	20%	27%
No	26%	13%
Doesn't know – no answer	17%	12%

On the question whether the relations between China, North Macedonia, and Serbia have been changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, we obtained the following results: 37% of Macedonians answered with Yes;

20% with Partially; 26% with No and just 17% Doesn't know-no answer; while Serbians answer with Yes 48%, Partially 27%, with No 13% and 12% doesn't know- no answer. After careful analysis of the results, it could be concluded that in both countries, citizens saw changes in relations with China during the COVID-19 pandemic. If we are to assume where this comes from, having in mind our full research, it could be explained by China's increased presence in Macedonia and Serbia during the COVID-19 pandemic, which, as we see from the results, citizens have noticed and marked as relevant.

Comparatively analysed, the differences in the responses in North Macedonia and Serbia can be attributed to a larger Chinese presence in Serbia in terms of investments and assistance in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, but also as a consequence of intensified high-level political relations between both states during the last 13 years based on comprehensive strategic partnership.

2. Did the EU-China relationship affect China's relations with North Macedonia and Serbia?



2. Did the EU-China relationship affect China's relations with North Macedonia and Serbia?		
	North Macedonia	Serbia
Yes	31%	49%
Partially	29%	25%
No	26%	15%
Doesn't know - no answer	14%	11%

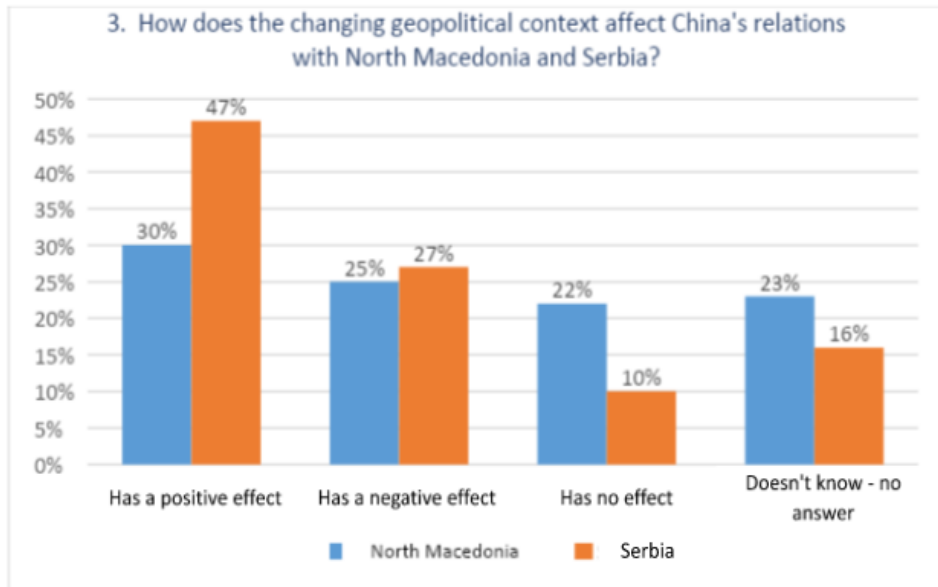
On the question of whether the EU-China relationship affected China's relations with North Macedonia and Serbia, we obtained the following results: Macedonians answered 31% Yes, 29% Partially, 26% No, 14% Don't know-no answer; and on the same question, 49% of Serbians answered yes, 25% Partially, 15% No and 11% Don't know-no answer.

Even the answers to this question are quite clear and that is Yes, EU-China relations did affect China's relations with North Macedonia and Serbia, but the catch in these results we see in the following, namely, Macedonia starting the EU negotiations and becoming a NATO member slightly became distance from China, on the other hand, Serbia, opposite, even they are in the process of opening chapters in the process of accession negotiations for EU, their strategy is to keep good cooperation with all partners of interest among which is China. So, indeed, EU-China relations did affect China's relations, but with opposite effects in both countries.

Additionally, the results show that the public in North Macedonia does not have a decidedly prevalent stance on this question. On the other hand, in Serbia, with almost half (49%) of the responses being that China-Serbia relations are tied to EU-China relations, this shows that the public sees Serbia's foreign policy as strongly dependent on the wider geostrategic relations between the major actors and corresponds to the view shared in the country's public about the constant conditioning of Serbia by the EU.

To be precise, the results of the survey on this concrete question show that the public in North Macedonia and Serbia understand relations between these two countries with China, from one side, and these two countries with the EU, from the other side, as non-complementary.

3. How does the changing geopolitical context affect China's relations with North Macedonia and Serbia?



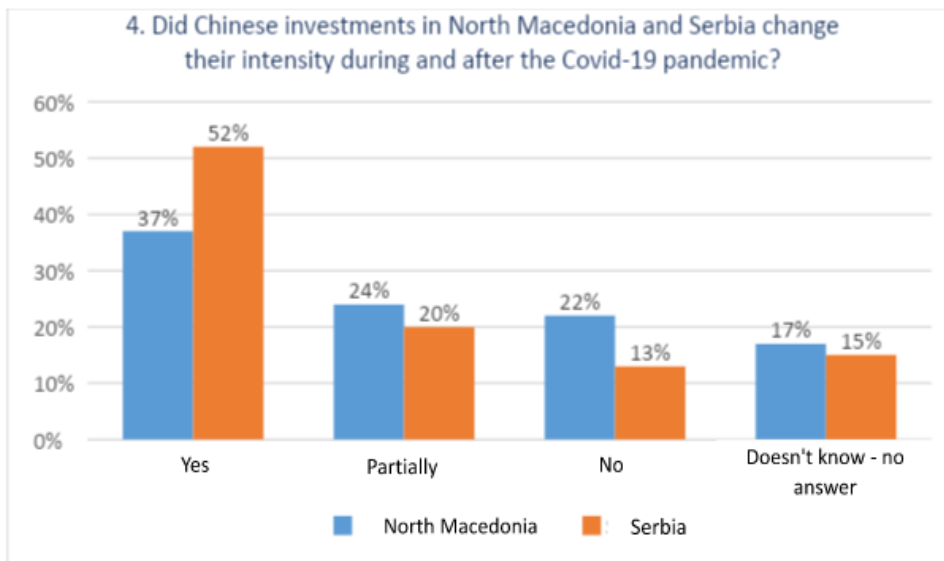
3. How does the changing geopolitical context affect China's relations with North Macedonia and Serbia?		
	North Macedonia	Serbia
Has a positive effect	30%	47%
Has a negative effect	25%	27%
Has no effect	22%	10%
Doesn't know – no answer	23%	16%

The changing geopolitical context resulting from the two geopolitical game-changers affects the relations between China and North Macedonia and China and Serbia. Following the project's research questions on how the changing geopolitical context affects relations, we obtained the

following findings: Respondents from North Macedonia answered as follows: A total of 30% said it had a positive effect, 25% said it had a negative effect, 22% said it had no effect, and 23% said they didn't know or didn't respond. To the same question, the respondents from Serbia answered in the following way: a total of 47% said it had a positive effect, a total of 27% said it had a negative effect, a total of 10% said it had no effect, and 16% said they didn't know or didn't respond.

The disparity of the assessment between the public opinion in the two countries, with 17% more responses in Serbia than in North Macedonia that the effect is a positive one, can be attributed to the reliance of Serbia on a multivector foreign policy, which in turn transforms a global geopolitical order towards the state of multiple centres of power much more favourable. On the other hand, nor is China's rise perceived as a negative one in North Macedonia, but the country's firm Euro-Atlantic strategic orientation contributes to the higher percentage of respondents saying that the changing geopolitical context does not affect bilateral relations with China (22% compared to only 10% in Serbia).

4. Did Chinese investments in North Macedonia and Serbia change their intensity during and after the COVID-19 pandemic?



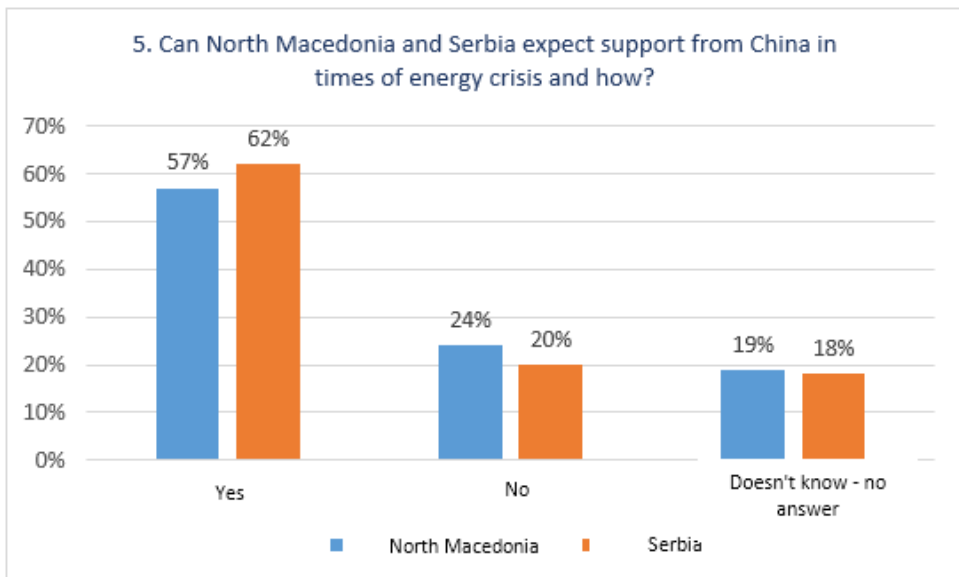
4. Did Chinese investments in North Macedonia and Serbia change their intensity during and after the Covid-19 pandemic?		
	North Macedonia	Serbia
Yes	37%	52%
Partially	24%	20%
No	22%	13%
Doesn't know - no answer	17%	15%

In the matter of Chinese investments in North Macedonia and Serbia and their change of intensity during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, we obtained the following results: most Macedonians think that the intensity did change so they answered with Yes 37% and 24% with Partially, 22%

think there is no change and 17% doesn't know-no answer; on the other hand, Serbians highly 52% confirmed with Yes and 20% with Partially, only 13% think the intensity hasn't changed and they answered No, and 15% doesn't know-no answer.

Although, once more, it appears that Macedonians were rather undecided in their responses to this question, as seen by a variably spread distribution of the percentage of answers for each of the available options. On the other hand, the Serbians once again exhibit a high level of confidence in their responses, allowing for a simple conclusion.

5. Can North Macedonia and Serbia expect support from China in times of energy crisis and how?



5. Can North Macedonia and Serbia expect support from China in times of energy crisis and how?		
	North Macedonia	Serbia
Yes	57%	62%
No	24%	20%
Doesn't know – no answer	19%	18%

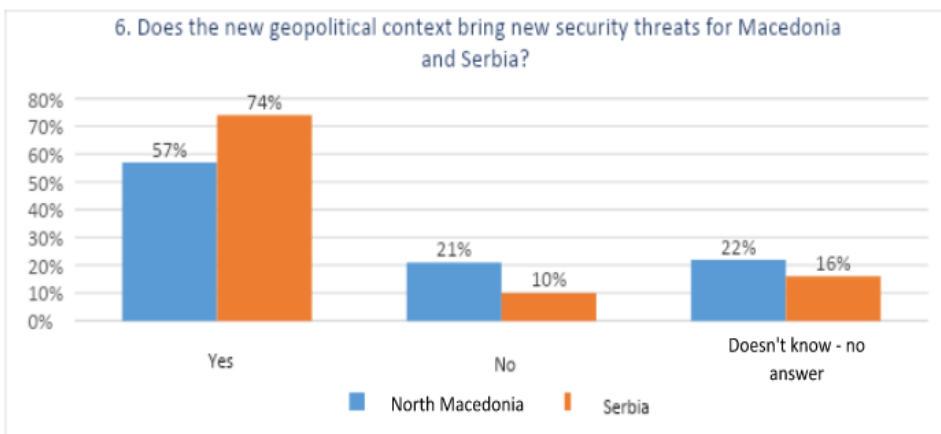
Respondents who answered "Yes"	In investments	In donations	Yes, but I don't know in what way	Other help
	34%	45%	20%	1%

On the question of whether North Macedonia and Serbia can expect support from China in times of energy crisis, the responses were in times of energy crisis, we obtained the following results: 57% of respondents in North Macedonia answered Yes, 24% answered No, and 19% didn't know or didn't answer. In Serbia, 62% of respondents answered Yes, 20% answered No, and 18% didn't know or didn't answer.

The expectations of potential assistance by China in times of energy crisis are shown to be on a high level in both North Macedonia and Serbia. The similar result in both countries shows that the rise of Chinese influence in

this aspect is seen as likely and positive. However, the results of the second part of the question, how could this support be expressed, show that public is not very well acquainted with the feasible ways the China can provide support in this matter, with 45% of answers being “in donations”, compared to 34% for “in investments” and 20% for “Yes, but I don’t know in what way” and only 1% “Other help”. However, the potential for Chinese support lies primarily in investments, through the realisation of infrastructure projects and loans in the processes of energy diversification and increase of renewable energy sources.

6. Does the new geopolitical context bring new security threats for Macedonia and Serbia?

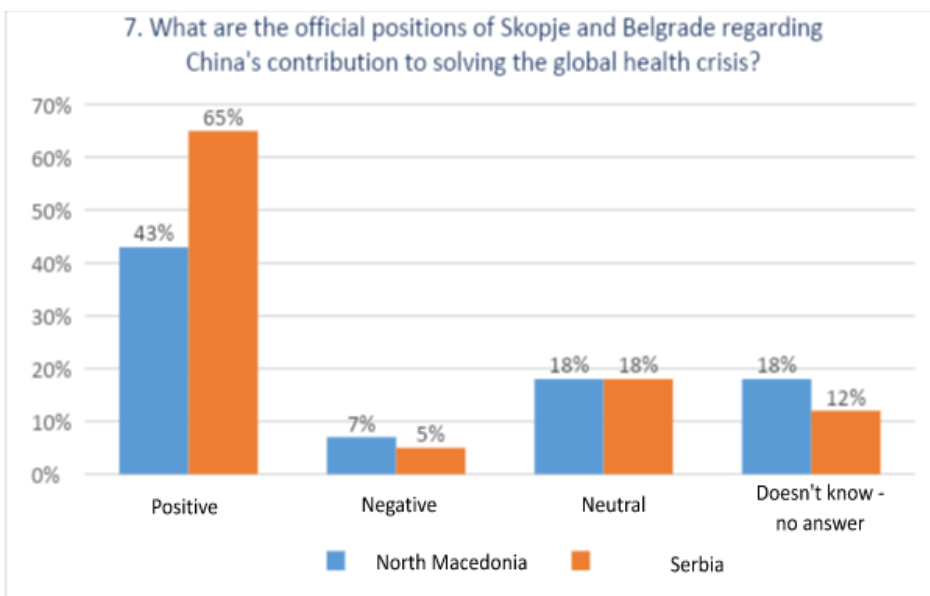


6. Does the new geopolitical context bring new security threats for Macedonia and Serbia?		
	North Macedonia	Serbia
Yes	57%	74%
No	21%	10%
Doesn't know - no answer	22%	16%

The dynamics of the geopolitical transition of power from the West to the East and the emergence of conventional and new multidimensional security threats indicate that the future is unpredictable and uncertain. Based on the question of whether the new geopolitical context brings new security threats we obtained the following results: 57% of respondents in North Macedonia answered Yes, 21% answered No, and 22% didn't know or didn't answer. The situation is quite different in Serbia. From the respondents, we obtained a higher percentage on the mentioned question, or 74% answered with Yes, a lower percentage, comparatively with North Macedonia's result, or 10% answered No, and 16% didn't know or didn't answer.

Given the differences between North Macedonia's and Serbia's national interests and geostrategic environment, the 17% higher percentage of "Yes" responses in Serbia results from the perception of the consequences of the Ukrainian war on the foreign policy orientation of Serbia, whose good relations with Russia are put in contrast with the EU accession process and the increase of tensions regarding Kosovo and Metohija.

7. What are the official positions of Skopje and Belgrade regarding China's contribution to solving the global health crisis?



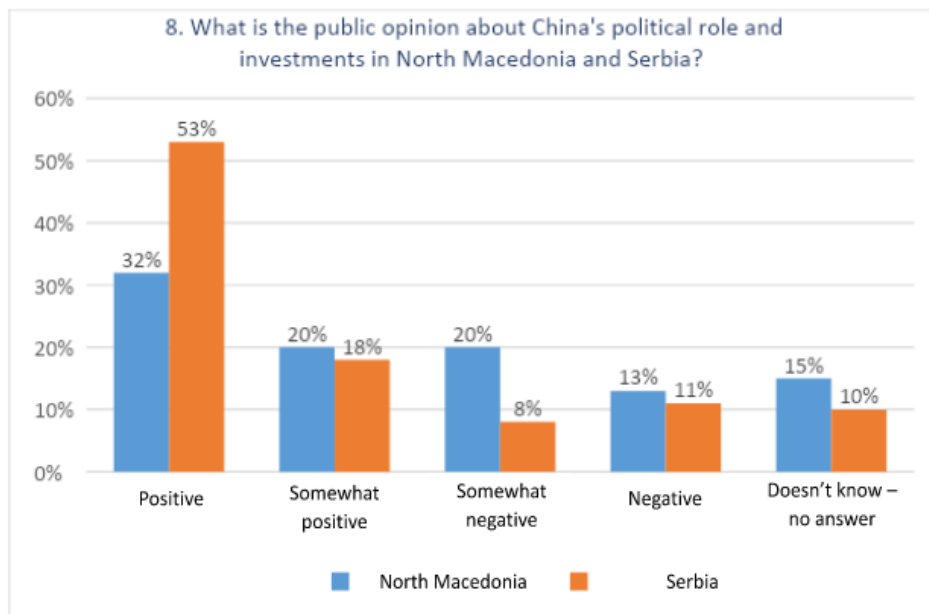
7. What are the official positions of Skopje and Belgrade regarding China's contribution to solving the global health crisis?		
	North Macedonia	Serbia
Positive	43%	65%
Negative	7%	5%
Neutral	18%	18%
Doesn't know – no answer	18%	12%

On the question of official positions on China's contribution to solving the global health crisis, we obtained the following findings: respondents from North Macedonia answered as follows: A total of 43% said Skopje has a positive stance, 7% said Skopje has a negative stance, 18% said the

Skopje's position is neutral, and 18% said they didn't know or didn't respond. To the same question, the respondents from Serbia answered in the following way: a total of 65% said Belgrade's official position is positive, only 5% said it is negative, 18% said Belgrade's position is neutral, and 12% responded that they did not know or did not respond.

Since the reliance on China as one of the four pillars of Serbia's foreign policy, and the expansion of Serbia's role as China's primary partner in the Western Balkans, the official rhetoric towards China in Serbia is very positive. Specifically, this is seen in the context of China's role in the pandemic, as Belgrade always highlighted the indispensable support provided by China, particularly in the first months of the pandemic, and later with the vaccine rollout process. This official position is recognised by the public.

8. What is the public opinion about China's political role and investments in North Macedonia and Serbia?



8. What is the public opinion about China's political role and investments in North Macedonia and Serbia?		
	North Macedonia	Serbia
Positive	32%	53%
Somewhat positive	20%	18%
Somewhat negative	20%	8%
Negative	13%	11%
Doesn't know – no answer	15%	10%

We attempted to gather public opinion on the question of what China's actual role in North Macedonia and Serbia is, based on the fact that with investments as soft power tools comes political influence. The results

showed that there are differences between the two countries. Public opinion about China's political role and investments in North Macedonia is 32% positive, 20% somewhat positive, 20% somewhat negative, and 13% negative, while 15% of respondents didn't know or didn't answer. In Serbia, 53% of public opinion on this matter is positive, 18% somewhat positive, 8% somewhat negative, 11% negative, and 10% of respondents didn't know or didn't answer. The answers are complementary to the factual situation in the field of direct foreign investments by China in North Macedonia and Serbia.

China's political role in North Macedonia is seen as more questionable in light of its strategic orientation towards the West. However, in the field of investments, there is enough space to collaborate in the direction of countries' needs to get and improve standards in the European integration process. China's investments can be observed as additional support and necessary help without undermining its geopolitical and geostrategic orientation. Regarding Serbia, China's political role is seen in the public as a positive counterbalance to Western influence and as a show of Chinese support for Serbia's position on the Kosovo and Metohija issue. The influx of Chinese investments is welcomed by the public because they are not tied to non-economic conditions such as rule of law or transparency.

6.3. Summary

The conducted public opinion research shows that both in North Macedonia and Serbia, the public is aware of the changing dynamics and relations at the level of the global geopolitical order and recognises the rising potential for new threats to their respective security stemming from these changes. China's role in this transformation and its role in these two

Western Balkans countries is perceived as generally positive, as investments and support, for example in the realm of energy, are recognized as beneficial. The public's perception of the official positions of Skopje and Belgrade on China's role in overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic is reflective of both countries' established official stances on the subject. The generally more positive attitude expressed in Serbia compared to North Macedonia towards China's political role, investments, support, and changes in bilateral relations is based on the more positive official rhetoric and the media framing of the partnership with China that exists in Serbia, its importance for Serbia's national interests and strategic goals, its role in the economic development of the country, and the existing concrete results of the cooperation up to this point. Nevertheless, the results of the research show that, from the point of view of the public, the potential for further enhancement of cooperation with China exists and would be welcomed both in North Macedonia and Serbia.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukrainian war are two geopolitical game-changers that are altering the world's geopolitical context and order. They are causing transformation in the Western Balkans region and a change in regional dynamics, not only by geopolitical actors interested in stable and secure states on the periphery of the EU and NATO alliances but also by geopolitical actors seeking to establish a new sphere of interests. The geopolitical position of the Western Balkans has always included divergent influence and activities by multiple actors. For example, the changing geopolitical context, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, has elevated China's role in the region, particularly in terms of supplying medical equipment and distributing vaccines in circumstances where the EU's support mechanisms were initially insufficient. The transition in geopolitical power from the West to the East places China at the centre of the new geopolitical context. China's pulling power is based not only on its economic growth, investment projects, and cooperation initiatives with European countries but also with the United States, where it is the largest foreign holder of bonds and the largest producer of goods that the United States imports (Maglajlija, 2021). This shows how much China and the US depend on each other and confirms the long-term transition to a new geopolitical order.

China's determination to be a global economic competitor and a systemic rival of the US and the complex relations with the EU, as well as the changing geopolitical situation, shape the dynamics of relations with North Macedonia and Serbia to a lesser or greater extent. In the case of North Macedonia, which recently became NATO's 30th member country and

began the European integration process, relations are primarily determined by the global positions of its strategic partners, the United States and the European Union, as well as the NATO alliance's strategic orientation and perception of China. But, as the health crisis showed, this shouldn't make it impossible for the two countries to work together. Specifically, in 2021, China's Minister of Defense visited North Macedonia as a part of a European tour that included Greece, Serbia, and Hungary.

Given Serbia's declared military neutrality, the situation in China-Serbia relations is somewhat more independent. Although Serbia is in the process of accession negotiation for EU membership, it undertakes and builds trust and partnerships with China autonomously and in the context of its own national needs. China, for the first time, will be Serbia's largest foreign investor in 2022, which speaks volumes about the two countries' strong bilateral ties.

But for both countries, the effects of EU-China and US-China relations on their relations with China are multifaceted. The progressive geopolitical transition from the West towards the East makes China much more attractive and a long-term reliable partner for the smaller countries, including North Macedonia and Serbia. The increased economic cooperation between the EU and China expanded the level of Chinese investments, loans, and general economic activity on the European continent as a whole. Countries such as North Macedonia and Serbia have the opportunity to use this shift and the rising Chinese expansion of influence and ties with European countries to strengthen their relations with China through bilateral engagements and initiatives within multilateral frameworks such as the BRI and China-CEE Cooperation. The

US-China relations are mainly being characterised by competition in the Asia-Pacific region, but the rivalry has its patterns replicated in other regions, such as the Western Balkans, as well. This also creates an opportunity for North Macedonia and Serbia, each constrained by its own geopolitical position, national interests, and membership in international organizations and alliances, to attempt to maximize benefits for themselves in fields where their interests align with those of the great powers in question.

Regarding China, the opportunities mainly relate to cooperation focused on tackling new security threats and developing innovative approaches to counter them. The two geopolitical game-changers that are the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have highlighted the various threats stemming from other sectors besides the security one, for example, the health or energy sectors. Smaller countries' need for assistance and reliance on a great power in times of global crisis was highlighted in these situations. The rise of new hybrid threats also stresses the need for cooperation and readiness to adequately respond to them in the future. In this regard, the changes in China's relations with North Macedonia and Serbia caused by the global financial and investment, health, and energy crises and the public opinion in the two countries about their respective relations with China provide an important foundation.

Specifically, in light of the global financial and investment crisis, especially during the period of COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine, Chinese engagement in overcoming interconnected multi-sector crises (finances, investments, energy, health, etc.) should be through the established multilateral cooperation mechanisms of China-CEE Cooperation and the

BRI. This kind of cooperation is definitely in the best interests of both North Macedonia and Serbia. It is also in the best interests of the European Union because it will help North Macedonia and Serbia meet the standards needed for full membership in the EU faster.

In the field of health, the cooperation between North Macedonia and China has its own genesis. A good indication of that is the opening of the centre for Chinese traditional medicine within the "Goce Delchev" University in Shtip. During the COVID-19 pandemic, mass vaccination of the population in North Macedonia began with Chinese vaccines. That was a strong confirmation and recognition of China's global engagement in dealing with the spread of the virus.

In Serbia, when most countries in the region and around the world were closing their borders in an attempt to prevent the spread of the virus and banning the export of medicines and medical equipment, strong friendship and comprehensive strategic partnership came to the fore. The help in overcoming the health crisis consisted mostly of sending medical supplies, providing medical experts as advisors and establishing makeshift hospitals.

The situations in North Macedonia and Serbia were a good indication that overcoming this type of global health crisis must rely on cooperation with large, developed countries and strengthening national capacities for emergency preparedness.

In the field of energy, China's projects in North Macedonia have been noted in the past. Even clearer is the fact that North Macedonia doesn't take advantage of the opportunities to work more closely with China in the energy field. Despite the reduction of the trade deficit between the two

countries and the proclaimed desire of the previous governments, it is evident that there is no political will for an intensively proactive policy in this field.

Because of the geopolitical distance, it is evident that China's assistance can be established mostly in the area of offering options for realising the concept of energy diversification, with special emphasis on the efficient use of renewable energy sources. This discourse is also prevalent in the EU-China relationship.

The established sanctions of the West against Russia, after the start of the armed conflict in Ukraine, raised the energy crisis to a high level. In relation to Serbia, energy production is affected by poor management, and the changed routes for delivering oil to the surface prioritised the issue of energy diversification. As an alternative in that direction, China is a relatively affordable option, especially in the construction, expansion, and modernization of new and existing energy facilities.

The opportunities for further cooperation are strengthened by a generally positive attitude towards China's role in North Macedonia and Serbia, as evident on the basis of the conducted public opinion research. The public opinion in Serbia, when compared to North Macedonia, is more inclined to grade Chinese presence as a beneficial opportunity. This is a consequence of Serbia's geostrategic position and foreign policy orientation and its general greater reliance on China in political and economic aspects. Still, attitudes towards China's role in the fight against COVID-19 and its position in the energy crisis are regarded as positive, and the space exists for the expansion of China's partnership with both countries.

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