

Serbia-China-EU Relations – From (De-)hedging to Win-Win?

ALEKSANDAR MITIĆ¹

ABSTRACT: The Republic of Serbia, as a military-neutral, EU candidate country, with Eurasian hedging tendencies in Euro-Atlantic surroundings, presents a unique case of cooperation between the People's Republic of China and Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. As an early adopter of the 16+1 (China-CEEC) and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) formats, Serbia entered a comprehensive, strategic relationship with the PRC at bilateral and multilateral levels due to its internal challenges, specific foreign policy orientation and geopolitical context. In a decade, Serbia revamped its development path, boosted its infrastructure, saved its metallurgy, improved internal and regional connectivity and received political support for its fundamental national interest of preserving territorial integrity. On the other side, Serbia's cooperation with China

1 Senior Research Fellow, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Makedonska 25, Belgrade, Serbia. aleksandar.mitic@diplomacy.bg.ac.rs; ORCID ID 0000-0001-6918-7561

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faces pressure from the “political West” aimed at curbing Serbia’s hedging through de-hedging, wedging and negative strategic framing. Nevertheless, Serbia’s objective remains to aim for win-win scenarios, which would not preclude either its EU membership talks, under way since 2014, or the building of the China-Serbia community with a shared future in the new era since 2024.

KEYWORDS: China, Serbia, CEEC, Belt and Road Initiative, EU, hedging

Introduction

In the fast-paced era of multipolarisation, flexibility, agility and resilience have become important traits of successful statecraft. Achieving them is difficult, however, in the face of rigid strategic framing, particularly by the “political West”, which depicts the global scene in antagonising bloc dichotomies, and (new) Cold-War era dynamics, while curbing attempts of individual states aimed at foreign policy diversification. Such an approach has targeted countries in Central and Eastern Europe, in particular, which praise or practise variants of multivectorism, be it European Union members (such as Hungary and Slovakia) or candidate states (such as Serbia). The Serbian case is of particular interest given its uniqueness as a military-neutral, EU candidate country, with Eurasian hedging tendencies in Euro-Atlantic surroundings. With Serbia formally negotiating its EU membership since 2014, but also building the China-Serbia community with a shared future in the new era since 2024, its interest lies in overcoming the zero-sum securitisation narrative and aiming for win-win outcomes. Again, not an easy task given the overall atmosphere of mistrust and uncertainty, and the context of geopolitical changes stemming from the conflict in Ukraine, the militarisation of the European Union and the policies of US President Donald Trump. Nevertheless, the Serbian case provides valuable insights into the range of opportunities and challenges countries in the CEE region face in their cooperation with the People’s Republic of China at bilateral and multilateral levels.

Serbia's unique position

Serbia's enviable geographic position, sitting on the most advantageous land route linking Central Europe with Asia Minor, has invited numerous invasions and wars throughout history. In the 20th century alone, after its liberation from the Ottoman Empire in the Balkan Wars, Serbia had to fight the Austro-Hungarian Empire in World War I, Nazi Germany occupation in World War II, and finally the NATO aggression in 1999, which was in clear violation of international law as it was carried out without consent from China and Russia as permanent UN Security Council members. The bombing was aimed at supporting the Albanian population and its separatist leadership in Serbia's southern province of Kosovo and Metohija. Following the aggression, the Western powers masterminded the "unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo" in 2008, in yet another breach of international law and the UN Charter (Mitić, 2024a). On the other side, Beijing and Moscow opposed this move and never recognised it. They cite these two cases – the 1999 NATO aggression and the 2008 masterminding of "Kosovo's declaration of independence" – as the clearest violations of international law and arrogance of the US-led "unipolar world" and "rules-based world order" (RBO). However, as a European country surrounded by EU candidate members, Serbia has pursued a path to EU integration since 2000. This has been a strenuous road, full of political conditioning, considered highly biased and controversial by the Serbian public, which has led to relatively modest popular support for EU integration. After opening talks in 2014, in a decade, Serbia opened 22 and concluded only two negotiating chapters with the EU, out of 35. Nevertheless, the EU remains Serbia's largest trading partner and formally its strategic objective. On the other side, the leading EU countries have

asked Serbia to recognise the independence of its province of Kosovo (22 out of 27 members do so), and to impose sanctions against Russia (and China). Furthermore, due to internal reform problems, a lack of political will and absorption capacity, which they call "enlargement fatigue", EU countries have been slow in making progress in EU integration talks with Serbia, as well as other Balkan countries. The combination of these factors contributed to heightened popularity for cooperation with Russia (as a traditional Serbian ally), but also China (as a relative newcomer to the region) (Mitić, 2024b). This eastward diversification – and indeed hedging – leans into the heritage of "non-alignment" from the period of socialist Yugoslavia, into "military neutrality" declared in 2007, as well as into a "four-pillar" (EU, Russia, US, China) foreign policy stated in 2009.

Serbia's stalled EU pathway

After a quarter of a century on the "EU pathway", the results of Serbia's integration process remain weak, spurring disappointment on all sides and a generally pessimistic perception among the Serbian public. A 2024 poll revealed that 63 per cent of the public believed Serbia would never enter the EU, with another 12 per cent citing the year 2050 (Mitić et al., 2025).

Belgrade had initiated its pathway towards Brussels on a high note following the political changes in October 2000, by participating at the EU-Western Balkans summit a month later in Zagreb (Mitić, 2024b). However, despite the promises of EU membership, promises of the Thessaloniki Agenda in 2003, the 2005-2008 negotiations in the first stage of the process – the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) – had

already dealt a blow to the EU's reputation. These talks were held in the context of pressure to hand over former Serb political and military leaders to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia – largely perceived by Serbs as biased. Furthermore, the EU crafted referendum conditions favouring Montenegro's independence from the union with Serbia, and at the December 2007 EU Summit masterminded the so-called “unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo” from Serbia in 2008 – in flagrant violation of the Constitution of Serbia and international law (Mitić, 2007). The EU thus dealt a crushing blow to Serbia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, while at the same time inviting it to continue the process of integration.

The period following “Kosovo's UDI” was marked by further pressure from EU leading powers on other EU and UN member countries to recognise the move and thus legitimise it, as well as by pressure on Serbia to remove its remaining institutions from Kosovo and Metohija. At the same time, the EU – facing its own financial and economic crisis – became increasingly disinterested in investing in Serbian and indeed Western Balkans infrastructure, further reducing the attractiveness of its membership. Serbia, in return, proclaimed a “four-pillar foreign policy” on the basis of cooperation with the EU, the US, the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, with which it signed the Strategic Partnership Agreement in 2009.

Membership in the EU remained a strategic objective for Belgrade, nonetheless, leading to the opening of EU talks in 2014, consisting of 35 negotiating chapters. Yet, beyond the challenges of Chapter 23, regulating respect of the rule of law – a significant hurdle for all candidate states – Serbia is in major contention with the EU on two fundamental issues defined in Chapters 31 and 35 of the EU-Serbia negotiations framework (Mitić, 2024b). Under Chapter 35, Serbia's EU accession process is conditioned by the issue of the status of the

province of Kosovo and Metohija and the “process of normalisation” between Belgrade and Priština. With the majority of EU countries recognising the “unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo” in flagrant violation of international law, Serbia has leaned towards the Russian Federation and China as the main backers in the UN Security Council. In turn, under Chapter 31, which calls for alignment with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, Serbia has refused to impose sanctions against Moscow or accept any restrictive measure or critical declaration against Beijing. Beyond negotiation chapters, the EU has also struggled with internal “enlargement fatigue”, particularly in the aftermath of the European economic and migration crises, effectively pausing the EU enlargement process officially (under the Jean-Claude Juncker European Commission presidency) or unofficially (Emmanuel Macron's French presidency). Despite an announced reinvigoration of the process due to “geopolitical” motives following the conflict in Ukraine, by mid-2025, Serbia had not opened a single negotiation chapter since December 2021.

Four cornerstones of Sino-Serbian cooperation

Serbia has unique relations with the People's Republic of China due to its specific geopolitical identity, shared memory and foreign policy orientation. While socialist Yugoslavia and China have had their ups and downs since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1955, and Beijing remained on the side lines of the Yugoslav conflicts in the 1990s,

the major turnaround was the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in May 1999. During the NATO aggression, on 7 May 1999, the Embassy of the People's Republic of China suffered an attack in which three Chinese journalists were killed. This attack prompted public outcry throughout China and transformed Beijing's foreign and security policy. Some US scholars, such as Peter Gries, considered that the impact of the bombing of the US embassy on Chinese foreign policy perception was such that one could talk about a "post-Belgrade China" (Gries, 2001). The attack made Chinese officials change their policies regarding the threat of the US unilateral actions and "coalitions of the willing", including in the Asia-Pacific (Pang, 2005). On the 25th anniversary of the bombing of the embassy, on 7 May 2024, Xi Jinping visited Belgrade and pointed out that "the China-Serbia friendship, forged with the blood of our compatriots, will stay in the shared memory of the Chinese and Serbian peoples" (Xinhua, 2024a). Indeed, memory culture has become one of the four cornerstones of China-Serbia's "iron-clad friendship", together with political cooperation inspired by Serbia's military neutrality and common fight for territorial integrity, comprehensive and unprecedented levels of economic cooperation and the shared vision of the global geopolitical transition towards multipolarity. This means a world order based on international law and the United Nations Charter and not a "rules-based" system based on the Western interpretation of international agreements and resolutions, which has had destructive consequences for Serbian national interests since the end of the Cold War through to today, as demonstrated by the 1999 NATO aggression and the 2008 EU-US masterminding of "Kosovo's UDI".

Based on these four cornerstones, under the auspices of President Xi and his host, President Aleksandar Vučić, China and Serbia elevated their relations from a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership by working together to build a "China-Serbia community with a shared future in the

new era" – the highest level of China's bilateral cooperation in Europe, including a Free Trade Agreement – a first in Central and Eastern Europe, taking effect on 1 July 2024 (Draškić, 2024).

Building a China-Serbia community with a shared future in the new era

Serbia-China bilateral, CEEC and BRI cooperation

A conflux of several processes led to Serbia's emerging and fast-paced adherence to China-led global and regional initiatives. By the time Beijing proposed the 16+1 cooperation model with Central and Eastern European Countries in 2012, and President Xi Jinping outlined "One Belt, One Road" (Belt and Road Initiative) in 2013, the overall context of Serbia's strenuous relations with the EU following "Kosovo's UDI" and the long-lasting impact of the 2008 economic and financial crisis had coincided with political changes in Belgrade following the 2012 elections. With Serbian public finances in trouble and the EU's proclaimed pause in EU enlargement, Beijing's initiatives landed on fertile ground in Serbia. The new authorities built on the 2009 Strategic Partnership to embrace China's frameworks at bilateral and CEEC levels. President Xi's proclaimed BRI connectivity was particularly motivating for Belgrade.

After the 2009 signing of the Strategic Partnership Agreement, 2014 became the second turning point in Serbia-China relations. Belgrade hosted the third 16+1 Summit of Heads of State, during which Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang initiated Beijing's first infrastructure project in Europe – the "China-Serbia Friendship Bridge" on the Danube. China,

Serbia and Hungary also signed a memorandum on the construction of the Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway, a flagship project for the 16+1. As such, it became an important connectivity project for the BRI as a whole, with its aim to integrate into the pan-European Corridor X, linking the Mediterranean Port of Piraeus, Athens – acquired by Chinese COSCO – through Northern Macedonia, Serbia and then Hungary, thus effectively connecting the Mediterranean (“end of the Belt”) with Central Europe (“end of the Road”). These initial successes prompted Serbia’s formal entry into the BRI and the historic first visit by President Xi to Belgrade in 2016, followed by the implementation of the BRI’s “five connectivities”.

Policy connectivity was boosted, in particular, by the signing of the Joint Statement of the Republic of Serbia and the People’s Republic of China on the Establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, signed on the occasion of President Xi’s visit (Xinhua, 2016). The agreement paved the way for sectoral cooperation, but laid the foundations for regular top-level coordination in particular. As a result, Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vučić became a rare European leader to participate in all three editions of the flagship Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing – in 2017, 2019 and 2023 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, 2024).

President Xi’s decision to visit Serbia in 2024 on his three-country first European tour since the COVID-19 pandemic made a clear statement about Beijing’s appreciation of Belgrade’s commitment to bilateral and China-CEEC cooperation. He specifically chose the 25th anniversary of the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade as a reminder of the shared past, but also future. Together with President Vučić, President Xi announced the building of a “China-Serbia community with a shared future in the new era”. Thus, after becoming China’s first “comprehensive strategic partner” in Central and Eastern Europe in 2016, Serbia was

again the first country in the region, and indeed in the whole of Europe, to elevate relations to the level of “community with a shared future”. China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs argued that “this speaks volumes about the strategic, special and high-level relationship between the two countries,” and it underlined that “high-quality Belt and Road cooperation between China and Serbia has produced substantial outcomes” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2024).

The “infrastructure connectivity” was particularly boosted after Xi’s first visit to Serbia in 2016, which gave impetus to China’s assistance in the takeover by the HBIS Group of the ailing Serbian steel mill of Smederevo, which had been abandoned by U.S. Steel in 2012, at the height of the economic crisis, effectively leaving the city in economic tatters and the Serbian budget in crisis. The takeover saw Smederevo’s luck take a turn, as the steel mill became Serbia’s largest exporter within a year (Mitić, 2024a). Furthermore, it became an important nod in the context of China-CEEC and BRI connectivity, as its operations are based at the strategic Smederevo port on the Danube, at the intersection between pan-European Corridors VII (Danube) and X (Athens-Belgrade-Budapest).

In the eastern Serbian city of Bor, near the borders with Romania and Bulgaria, China made another inroad into Serbia’s metallurgy. In 2018, Zijin Mining Group acquired 63% of Serbia’s primary copper mine, RTB Bor, a complex with a long-standing tradition and of key importance to the region, but also left in disarray after failed privatisation attempts. Zijin Mining went on to acquire the nearby copper deposits held by Canadian Nevsun Resources, investing 2.89 billion dollars in the green transformation of its copper and gold mines in Serbia, resulting in zero days with SO₂ transgressions in 2023 (Đorđević, 2024). At the same time, two Zijin companies joined HBIS to become the top 3 Serbian exporters, with 2.5 billion worth of exports in 2023 (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2024). Zijin’s production led Serbia to take an 18 per cent share of European

copper output, putting the country in the continent's second spot, with a leading position in sight for 2030 (Đorđević, 2024).

Further key projects were completed. When the new B3 350 MW unit of the Kostolac thermal power plant opened in December 2024, it became Serbia's first large-capacity energy facility in 35 years, aiming to provide five per cent of the country's electricity (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2024). Chinese companies also worked on constructing clean energy projects through the heating pipeline between Serbia's largest thermal plant in Obrenovac and Belgrade's most populous municipality of New Belgrade (Spasić, 2023), as well as through a key nationwide wastewater treatment project, worth EUR 3.2 billion and implemented by the China Road and Bridge Corporation in 65 municipalities across the country (Todorović, 2021).

The automotive industry became another key target for Chinese investment, particularly after Shandong Linglong invested in what turned out to be the most valuable FDI investment in Serbia since the breakup of Yugoslavia. In 2019, the company opened its first venture in Europe, and second overseas, worth over USD 1 billion, and immediately became an important player on the European automotive scene, with consumers such as leading German producers Audi, Volkswagen and MAN. The success of the investment project prompted further Chinese interest in Serbia's automotive parts production, particularly given the proximity of Serbia's sites to European transportation corridors, and including the vicinity of the newly-planned BYD plant in Szeged, just north of the Serbian-Hungarian border, sitting upon Corridor X (Athens-Belgrade-Budapest), including the highway and the Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway.

The high-speed railway, although a flagship BRI project – and perhaps because of it – faced numerous administrative and construction hurdles, particularly from the EU side. However, a decade after it was agreed, in 2024, Serbia completed its portion of the railway (180 km from Belgrade

to the Hungarian border), with the Hungarian portion expected in 2026. The first portion (from Belgrade to Novi Sad), opened in 2022, has already boosted internal connectivity, mobility and tourist activity.

Chinese companies also contribute to a host of highway construction projects in Serbia. The Belgrade-South Adriatic highway, named “Miloš Veliki” in its Serbian part, aims to link the Serbian capital with Western Serbia and Montenegro, primarily the port of Bar, as a further link towards Southern Italy, and other Adriatic and Mediterranean ports (Global Times, 2022). This project increases connectivity within Serbia and on the BRI network, contributing to local and regional development. By the end of June 2025, construction made a significant breakthrough in Western Serbia, with a new portion opened, and the beginning of the final part, aiming to reach the border with Montenegro, where Chinese companies work to connect it to the Adriatic. Furthermore, the “Miloš Veliki” highway has allowed the construction of a series of a high-speed motorways connecting the highway to major towns in Western Serbia, and thus contributing to connectivity with neighbouring Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Furthermore, the construction of the Belgrade Bypass by POWERCHINA and the China Communications Construction Company contributes to a faster, more secure and less polluted passage around Belgrade, effectively linking Athens-Budapest Corridor X with the Belgrade-South Adriatic highway. Further projects aim to speed up connectivity between the Belgrade-Budapest highway and the Belgrade-Zagreb highway through the Fruška Gora mountain tunnel and road, built by the China Road and Bridge Corporation. Connectivity with the east is provided by the construction of the Danube corridor (built by Shandong), linking Belgrade and Corridor X to Požarevac and Golubac on the Romanian border. Lastly, under the “Vojvodina smile” project, the construction of a series of high-speed motorways in the shape of a letter “U” is expected to improve connectivity, impacting various regions

of northern Serbia, with positive connectivity impacts on the Hungary-Croatia-Serbia border and the Hungary-Romania-Serbia border.

Trade and finance connectivity with China have become increasingly important for Serbia. Serbia's exports to China have increased steadily since the early 2010s, boosted to a large extent by Zijin's production and export of raw copper ore. However, the imports have also increased, leading to the tripling of the deficit. As a result, Serbia and China negotiated a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which was officially signed at the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing in October 2023. During his visit to Belgrade in May 2024, President Xi lauded the FTA as one of the first features of the Serbia-China community with a shared future in the new era, announcing its entry into force on 1 July 2024. Serbia thus became the first CEEC country to sign an FTA with China, and the first EU candidate country to do so (Chen, 2024). The agreement includes the immediate liberalisation of 60 per cent of the 10,412 products from Serbia, and 8,930 products from China, with the liberalisation of 90 per cent of the products to be completed within 15 years. With the FTA, Serbia aims not only to reduce the deficit but also to diversify its exports beyond raw materials, to boost the export of agricultural products such as apples, blueberries, wine, rakija and pharmaceuticals. It also aims to elevate its standing in the electric vehicle supply chain. Lastly, its objective is to complete its unique FTA network. It is the only European country with free trade agreements with the EU, the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, Turkey and China, thus becoming a potential hub for duty-free exports of most key industrial products – with only a few exceptions and annual quotas – to more than 2.5 billion people.

In sum, over the last decade China has become the largest single investor in Serbia, Chinese companies have been the country's top three exporters for years in a row and new deals on green energy promise to boost cooperation further.

One noticeable case is the military-technical trade cooperation, again unique in Europe, as Serbia became the first European country to acquire Chinese weapons systems. Belgrade has purchased CH-92A and CH-95 Chinese drones, and in 2022 acquired a battery of FK-3 medium-range, road-mobile, surface-to-air missiles made by the China Aerospace Science and Industry Corporation.

Serbia also helped the internationalisation of the yuan and its transactions in South-East Europe after signing a MoU on designating a clearing bank for the yuan in Belgrade (Xinhua, 2023).

Lastly, in terms of people-to-people connectivity, cooperation between Serbia and China expanded substantially in all fields. In the health sphere, China's "vaccine diplomacy" during COVID-19 was particularly hailed in Serbia, as it was ranked first in the world in the "Chinese Medical Diplomacy Index" by the Washington D.C. Center for Strategic and International Studies, which measured the success of China's efforts during the pandemic (ChinaPower Team, 2021).

A visa-free regime from 2018 opened the door to tourism from China. Despite being slowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the figures surpassed the pre-pandemic levels by 2024, and in the first quarter of 2025 increased almost 60 per cent in comparison to the previous year (Ministarstvo turizma i omladine, 2025).

Such records were spurred by yet another direct effect of the 2024 elevation of Serbia-China relations. President Xi had then announced an introduction of two more direct flights from Belgrade – to Guangzhou and Shanghai – in addition to the one to Beijing (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024). Furthermore, he underlined the importance of an exchange programme under which 300 Serbian youths and 50 young Serbian scientists were invited to study and research in China in the next three years.

The third Confucius Institute in Serbia opened in the southern city of Niš, while academic cooperation continued to flourish, notably in the field of international relations, with the expansion of the yearly Dialogues on China conference organised by the Institute of International Politics and Economics in Belgrade.

Boosting Xi's global initiatives

Serbia has particularly welcomed some of the key elements of Xi Jinping's diplomatic thought based on the core tenet of "community with a shared future for mankind".

Thus, Belgrade has viewed favourably the four Chinese global initiatives presented by President Xi.

Why are these initiatives favourable to Belgrade? The 2021 Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the 2023 Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) both argue in favour of particular, unique development pathways for countries and regions, taking into account their specificities. For Serbia, as a unique case in Europe, such an approach is particularly welcomed as it pursues its own development pathway based on the history of Yugoslav non-alignment, its own military neutrality and openness to diversification, as witnessed by its FTA framework.

Serbia's support for the 2022 Global Security Initiative is also fully understandable. The GSI principles are fully compatible with Serbia's interests. They argue against expanding military alliances (Serbia is militarily neutral), against double standards on territorial integrity (Serbia accuses the West of supporting Ukraine's but not Serbia's territorial integrity) and against unilateral non-UN sanctions (members of the Serbian government have faced US sanctions in recent years). Thus, it was not surprising to hear President Vučić assess that the Chinese-Brazilian

peace initiative on Ukraine is "common sense" and that "the People's Republic of China offered something that is truly the most logical that any grown-up, collected and sane person would offer" (Danas, 2024).

Lastly, Serbia's interests are fully compatible with Xi Jinping's 2025 Global Governance Initiative (GGI) and 2021 concept of "true multilateralism", with implications for key issues of territorial integrity, sovereignty, identity, political independence, security and economy. In fact, "true multilateralism" criticises the so-called Western "rules-based world order" (RBO) based on "pseudo-multilateralism" or "unipolarism in disguise", which creatively interprets international law to align with the interests of the political West (Mitic, 2024a). Serbia has suffered considerably from the "creative interpretations" of the RBO: in 1999, with the NATO aggression without UN Security Council authorisation due to opposition by China and the Russian Federation; in 2008, with the Western use of the argument of the "unique case"/"sui generis" to mastermind and organise "Kosovo's UDI" in breach of international law and with long-term consequences as a precedent for separatist causes worldwide; since 1995, with the constant eroding of the fragile Dayton Agreement on Bosnia-Herzegovina through the creative Western interpretations of the "Dayton spirit" to strip the Republika Srpska entity of its prerogatives and centralise Bosnia-Herzegovina. Here again, as in previous cases, Beijing has criticised the process, particularly when, in yet another demonstration of the RBO, Western members of the UN Security Council nominated German opposition politician Christian Schmidt to the post of the "High Representative for Bosnia-Herzegovina" without the approval of Russia and China in the UN Security Council. The refusal of Republika Srpska to accept such "nomination", and particularly in light of Schmidt's attempts to strip the entity from its property, in violation of the 1995 Dayton Accords, led to an escalatory crisis, including a trial against the President of Republika

Srpska Milorad Dodik and, in 2025, to one of the most serious political-security crises in the Balkans since the 1990s.

On the other hand, China's "true multilateralism" has complied with Serbia's key national interests to a large extent, with a particular focus on the UN Charter, the opposition to double standards regarding territorial integrity, opposition to the expansion of alliances and to unilateral non-UN sanctions (China Institute of International Studies, 2024). Such principles thus address the disrespect of Serbia's territorial integrity by the majority of the political West regarding Kosovo and Metohija, Serbia's proclaimed military neutrality and Serbian experiences with non-UN sanctions.

Serbia's eastward hedging

There have been various attempts made to describe modern Serbian foreign policy. The concepts of "balancing" (allying with others against the prevailing threat) and "bandwagoning" (allying with a potentially threatening power) do not apply to Serbia's current strategic posture, as it is a military-neutral country (Nikolić, 2024). The concept of India's "multi-alignment", as a "series of parallel relationships that strengthen multilateral partnerships and seek a common approach among the grouping towards security, economic equity and the elimination of existential dangers like terrorism" (Drishtiias, 2022), involves India's participation in a number of organisations (such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and QUAD), while Serbia remains outside NATO, the CSTO and (for now) the EU or BRICS.

A "multi-vector" policy – maximising national interest through diversified partnerships – as exemplified by Azerbaijan, Serbia's strategic

partner, has been a relevant concept, although not fully applicable as Azerbaijan is not an EU candidate and its multi-vector policy has strategic, rather than simply policy, tactical features.

The concept of "hedging" has thus been recently applied to Serbia's foreign policy actions. The concept has featured most importantly in the literature on China and Southeast Asia (Goh, 2005; Gerstl, 2022; Kim, 2023) and on the Middle East (Salman and Geeraerts, 2015; El-Dessouki and Mansour, 2020; Fulton, 2020). However, it is increasingly being mentioned in the Serbian case (Ejdus, 2023; Dettmer, 2023; Nikolić, 2024; Mitić, 2024a). Mitić and Nikolić both identify the sources of Serbia's hedging in the aftermath of "Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence" and the simultaneous rise of multipolarisation. Serbia's hedging policy has several underpinnings, grounded mostly in its slow, if not stalled membership talks with the European Union. Primarily, as mentioned earlier, these are due to Chapter 23 (respect of rule of law – a major hurdle for all candidate states), Chapter 31 (alignment with EU foreign policy) and Chapter 35 ("normalisation of relations" with the Kosovo Albanian leadership in Priština), in addition to chronic challenges of EU "enlargement fatigue" and a lack of political will (Mitić, 2024b). These hurdles have prompted Serbia's "non-Western" turn, which has manifested itself in a struggle for support for Kosovo at the UNSC (China and Russia) and at the General Assembly and UN bodies such as Interpol and UNESCO (Global South). In addition, Serbia has increased military-technical cooperation with Russia and China (imports) and the Global South (exports), as well as cooperation in energy security (Russian gas), mining and infrastructure (China's investments and loans) and overall trade diversification. In the context of the conflict in Ukraine, particularly since 2022, Serbia's hedging has turned more prominently in China's direction.

China-bound hedging thus became an important feature of Serbia's foreign policy due to a host of political, security and economic reasons

(support for Kosovo and Metohija, Republika Srpska, military neutrality, non-harmonisation with Western sanctions, unprecedented investments in infrastructure, energy and mining).

Western de-hedging, wedging and negative framing

Expectedly, Serbia's eastward hedging has not been welcomed by the European Union and the United States. Thus, the political West has used three types of strategies aimed at curbing Serbia's hedging: de-hedging, wedging and negative strategic framing.

First, Brussels, Washington and leading EU countries pushed for a “de-hedging” strategy, in reference to the process in the investment world of “closing out positions that were originally put in place to act as a hedge in a trade or portfolio,” and may occur either all at once or incrementally (Chen, 2022). This was particularly visible throughout 2024. Serbia's President Vučić was under strong pressure not to attend the BRICS Summit in Kazan in October 2024. As a result, a Serbian ministerial delegation was sent instead, while Vučić met in parallel with a host of EU leaders, including President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, Polish and Greek Prime Ministers Donald Tusk and Kyriakos Mitsotakis. In the security sphere, Serbia's long-term cooperation with Russia (MiG fighter jets) and potential expansion of cooperation with China after the purchase of the FK-3 system (J-10C fighter jets) was overturned by a deal with France to purchase 12 Rafale fighter jets from Dassault Aviation (Ruitenberg, 2024). French President

Emmanuel Macron hailed the 2.7 billion contract as an “opening towards a strategic change” and an “opportunity for Europe” (France, 2024). In the economic field, under the auspices of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, the EU and Serbia signed an agreement on a strategic partnership regarding sustainable raw materials, battery value chains and electric vehicles. One of its key objectives has been to limit Belgrade's energy dependence on Russia and China's access to lithium in Western Serbia's Jadar River Valley and other critical minerals in Serbia (Hodgson, 2024).

Second, there have been increasing attempts aimed at “wedging”, namely creating wedges between Serbia and China. Wedging strategies – coercive or accommodative – intend to “move or keep a potential adversary out of an opposing alliance” (Crawford, 2021). Here, the wedges are also targeted to achieve specific results that aim to undermine various aspects of the relationship between rival alignment or hedging. Following its rather successful wedging strategy regarding Huawei and 5G in CEEC countries in the late 2010s, Washington applied a similar approach to Serbia. Under the auspices of Trump, Vučić signed the 2020 Washington Agreement, according to which Belgrade committed to a number of actions, including acquiring 5G equipment “supplied by untrusted vendors”, an indirect dig at Chinese providers. Under the same agreement, Belgrade and the Albanian authorities in “Kosovo” committed not to pursue policies seeking (de-)recognition internationally. Such commitment was required by Washington to stop Belgrade's strong diplomatic success aimed at de-recognition of “Kosovo's UDI”, which was in full swing at the time, running in parallel, although not directly linked, with China's gains in its policy of de-recognition of Taiwan among Global South countries. Such an approach, however, led to Belgrade losing momentum, while the Albanian authorities in Priština continued to plan inroads into the Global South, with the sponsorship of Turkey in particular, resulting in recognition of “Kosovo's UDI” in 2025 by Kenya and Sudan.

Furthermore, in 2025, a “wedging offensive” by the US was noticeable with the visit by the Washington-based Atlantic Council to Serbia, and interviews by Vice-President and Senior Director for the Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security Matthew Koenig. He warned against relying on cooperation with China, arguing that “risks primarily stem from opening up to economic coercion by China, low-quality investments that fail to deliver on promises and security threats, as China is not a democracy based on Western rule of law but rather a dictatorship” (Newsmax Balkans, 2025).

Pro-US think tanks close but not directly linked to the Serbian authorities, such as the “Pupin Initiative” also pushed for stronger commitment towards the West. Its executive director, Vuk Velebit, has argued that Serbia should specifically work with CEE countries in a format reminiscent of the NATO-inspired “Three Seas Initiative” (Baltic-Black Sea-Adriatic): “For the stability and security of Europe, this will be a particularly important defence line for Europe against China, Russia, Turkey and other actors” (Apostolovski, 2025).

Western-sponsored Serbian think tanks, such as the BFPE in Belgrade, argued in May 2025 that the Sino-Serbian partnership presents “substantial long-term strategic risks, particularly in terms of technological dependence, surveillance concerns, and geopolitical positioning”: “By deepening ties with Beijing, Serbia risks undermining its alignment with the EU and NATO, raising questions about its long-term security commitments and European integration trajectory,” while “Chinese influence in Serbia could weaken NATO’s position in the Western Balkans and complicate the EU’s regulatory alignment efforts” (Vladislavljev, Dizdarević and Đorđević, 2025).

Such framing is in line with a negative Western depiction of China-CEEC cooperation over the last decade. Previous analyses have shown that “the obstructive narrative fosters negative sentiment and views

China-CEEC cooperation as toxic, undesirable and dangerous for the CEE countries. Such narrative encourages repulsion of cooperation, fosters disappointment, facilitates crippling criticism and smooths the way towards backlash against cooperation and concrete projects” (Mitić, 2022, 54).

Serbia’s win-win scenarios

Reaching win-win outcomes is an enviable objective in today’s geopolitical constellation. Examples from Asia and other regions show that maintaining diversified partnerships can yield long-term benefits in terms of economic growth, political stability and security.

Since the launch of the format, China’s President Xi Jinping has framed the Belt and Road Initiative as a “win-win”, “mutually beneficial cooperation” and as “sharing the fruits of development”, intending to build a “community of shared future for mankind” (Xi, 2014; Xi, 2017). It is in line with “true multilateralism”, which focuses on “the principles of the UN Charter as a foundational guideline”, on extensive consultation, joint contribution, shared benefits and adapting to changes, particularly the rise of the Global South, global development and preventive diplomacy” (China Institute of International Studies, 2024, 44-46).

Through its cooperation with China at bilateral, CEE and BRI levels, Serbia has attempted to achieve win-win scenarios.

Beyond the Sino-Serbian win-win outcomes, outlined above, one particular success story has been the cooperation with Hungary, strengthened by mutual cooperation and interest in cooperating with Beijing and BRI-related projects. While Serbia-Hungary relations had

faced difficulties in the past, including in the early 2000s, Belgrade and Budapest overcame them with Beijing's strong support role, with the Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway as a showcase.

Interestingly, the high-speed railway could become a curious case of (de-)hedging turning into a win-win outcome. Its ultimate objective is to link the railway to Athens and the Port of Piraeus. For China, which owns Piraeus port through the COSCO company, the completion of the route would mean a fast transport connection for its goods from one of the Mediterranean's busiest ports into the hub of Central Europe. However, the route is part of pan-European Corridor X (highway and railway), and the same strategic transportation reasoning could apply to EU connectivity. In February 2023, the European Commission, the European Investment Bank (EIB), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and Serbia announced a joint EUR 2.2 billion financial package for the modernisation of the Corridor X railway section between Belgrade and the southern Serbian city of Niš (Western Balkans Investment Framework, 2023), bringing the completion of Corridor 10 closer. Thus, Serbia's China-leaning hedging strategy and the EU's de-hedging push could yield a win-win outcome for all three actors.

Furthermore, the high-speed railway increased compatibility and connectivity with China-Europe Railway Express, yet another key BRI project. Thus, China's Shandong province opened its China-Europe Railway Express Assembly Center in September 2024, in the town of Indija, sitting on the high-speed train route between Belgrade and Novi Sad (Xinhua, 2024b). The aim is to assist the development of the "Shandong-Serbia-Western Europe" trans-Caspian transport corridor, an important BRI-related route.

Yet another win-win scenario is the construction of the Belgrade Metro, where POWERCHINA was designated as the constructor and French Alstom as the supplier of trains and signalling. In 2024, Serbia

signed a EUR 720 million contract with POWERCHINA for Lot 2 of Metro Line 1 (Lađevac et al., 2025).

Conclusion

Exactly one year after his visit to Belgrade in May 2024, President Xi met President Vučić again, this time in Moscow, on the margins of Victory Day celebrations of the 80th anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany. The two presidents agreed to increase coordination by setting up a meeting of heads of state "at least once a year" to increase mutual support and win-win cooperation (Blic, 2025).

Vučić and Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, however, came under strong criticism from EU leaders, including from the CEEC, for visiting Moscow and meeting with President Vladimir Putin. Indeed, the conflict in Ukraine, in particular, and the process of multipolarisation, in general, have intensified antagonisms, with considerable implications for China-EU and China-CEE relations.

One might argue that the trend has been present for some time. One particular contrast can be made with the Czech Republic. While Serbia and the Czech Republic both signed agreements on a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with China in 2016, their trajectories have since been diametrically opposed. Relations between Prague and Beijing deteriorated following a series of Czech political actions undermining China's sovereignty and territorial integrity with regard to Taiwan and Tibet. When Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met his Czech counterpart Jan Lipavsky in 2025, he "expressed the hope that the Czech side would engage in earnest self-reflection, develop the right perspective about

China, and take concrete actions to rebuild trust with China” (Xinhua, 2025). On the other hand, Serbia went on to a full upgrade of relations with China, with the two countries mutually expressing absolute support in terms of the protection of territorial integrity.

For the EU, the already complex environment has grown even more complicated – from the effects of de-industrialisation on the economies (Germany’s recession), Russia’s advances on the battlefields of Donbas, China’s growing prevalence in the EV industry and, finally, Donald Trump’s victory in the US elections.

Trump’s victory further complicated the tariff wars, but also opened up new avenues for cooperation between the EU/CEEC and China. Serbia is itself, in principle, opposing the excessive securitisation of globalisation, arguing against de-globalisation through protectionist concepts such as “decoupling”, “de-risking”, “tariff wars”, EU “subsidy investigations” and US “friendly shore outsourcing”.

Thus, given the uncertainty of its EU membership path, its unique geopolitical orientation and hurdles, Serbia is poised to continue its foreign policy and trade diversification. This vision will be further revealed at the Belgrade 2027 Specialised Expo, a worldwide hub for education, culture and innovation, drawing representatives from over 120 countries worldwide under the central theme and main title “Play for Humanity”, and supported by both EU countries and China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2024).

Perhaps Serbia’s lessons may not all seem applicable to fellow CEE partners. Yet, they are worth reinstating. Through bilateral, CEEC and BRI cooperation with China, Serbia has revamped its development path, stabilised its budget, boosted its infrastructure, saved its metallurgy, improved internal and regional connectivity, reached record tourist exchanges, completed its FTA network, contributed to alleviating poverty and pollution, initiated technology transfers and received political support

for its fundamental national interest in preserving territorial integrity. No small deed in the volatile and unpredictable era of multipolarisation, and a gentle reminder of the potential of China-CEEC cooperation.

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Czech-Chinese Relations under Pressure – Politics and Influence Networks

LADISLAV ZEMÁNEK, PHD¹

ABSTRACT: This chapter examines the trajectory of Czech-Chinese relations over the past decade, highlighting the pivotal role of political factors, structural limitations of liberal democratic regimes and influence networks in shaping foreign policy. Using the Czech Republic as a case study, it tests three core hypotheses: (1) the centrality of bilateral political cooperation for successful relations with China; (2) the impact of domestic political instability, electoral cycles and external dependence on foreign policy consistency; and (3) the influence of security and intelligence agencies, NGOs and media in steering public discourse and policy against China. Drawing on official documents, media reports, think tank publications, public databases and discussions with diplomatic and political figures, the study reveals how a small Central European country became entangled in competing geopolitical narratives, resulting in the breakdown of a once-promising strategic partnership with Beijing. The chapter concludes by proposing concrete steps to restore pragmatic

¹ Non-resident research fellow, China-CEE Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Budapest, email: zemanek.ml@gmail.com.