



## China's Increasing Cooperation with CEE: A policy to Counterbalance the EU?

İshak Turan <sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

China's successful implementation of its outward-looking policies and its acceptance into the WTO after the Cold War have led to a reduction in trade barriers. China has thereby accelerated its economic rise and developed its methods of cooperation with regional institutions. China, which initiated official and commercial relations with the EU in the 1970s, took a holistic approach to Europe until the 2010s due to its concerns about attracting investment and export concern. However, the rise of voices calling for preventing increasing dependence on China in the mid-2000s and the loss of income and employment suffered by European countries during 2008 economic crisis marked an important turning point. On the other hand, China's success during this period and its substitution of Central and Eastern European countries played an active role in the establishment of the 17+1 platform. China's promise to increase its global investments under the BRI has also increased interest in China across Europe. This has also raised suspicions that China is involved in a new initiative to divide the EU from within through its 17+1 platform in Europe. The main objective of this study is to reveal what China aims to achieve through its multifaceted cooperation in Europe and to determine how realistic the growing suspicions about China are. This study applies a qualitative research method, utilizing fieldwork, pre-interviews, and comprehensive data analysis. The findings of the study indicate that there has been no significant change in China's traditional perspective toward Europe, and investments in the 17+1 countries are not large enough to divide the EU. China's trade and investment policies continue to focus heavily on Western European countries. On the other hand, China's projects, acquisitions, and construction activities in different parts of Europe show that it is seeking to advance its national interests across the continent.

**Keywords:** 17+1, CEE, China, Cooperation, European Union.

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## Çin'in Orta ve Doğu Avrupa ile Artan İş Birliği: AB'ye Karşı Denge Oluşturma Politikası mı?

İshak Turan <sup>1</sup>

### Öz

Çin'in dışı açılım politikalarını başarıyla uygulamaya başlaması ve Soğuk Savaş sonrasında DTÖ üyeliğine kabul edilmesi, ticari engellerin azalmasını sağlamıştır. Böylece Çin, bir taraftan ekonomik açıdan yükselmesini hızlandırmıştır ve diğer taraftan da bölgesel kurumlarla olan iş birliği yöntemlerini geliştirmiştir. 1970'lerde AB ile resmi ve ticari ilişkileri başlatan Çin'in yatırım çekme ve ihracat kaygılarından dolayı 2010'lara kadar Avrupa ülkelerine yönelik bütüncül yaklaştığı görülmektedir. Ancak 2000'lerin ortasında itibaren Çin'e yönelik artan bağımlılığın önlenmesine dair seslerin yükselmesi ve 2008 ekonomik krizinde Avrupalı ülkelerin ciddi gelir ve istihdam kaybına uğraması önemli bir dönüm noktasıdır. Diğer taraftan, bu dönemde Çin'in başarılı bir sınav vermesi ve Merkez ve Doğu Avrupa ülkelerini ikame etmesi, 17+1 platformunun kurulmasında etkin olmuştur. Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi kapsamında Çin'in küresel yatırımlarını artıracığı vaadi de Çin'e yönelik kıta Avrupa'sındaki ilgiyi artırmıştır. Bu da beraberinde Çin'in Avrupa'da 17+1 platformu ile AB'yi içten bölecek yeni bir girişim içinde mi olduğuna yönelik şüphelerini artırmıştır. Çalışmanın temel amacı da Çin'in Avrupa'da yürüttüğü çok yönlü iş birliği ile aslında neyi amaçladığını ortaya çıkarmak ve Çin'e yönelik artan şüphelerin ne kadar gerçekçi olduğunu ortaya çıkarmaktır. Bu çalışmada nitel araştırma yöntemi kullanılmıştır ve bu doğrultuda saha çalışması, ön görüşme ve kapsamlı veri analizinden faydalanılmıştır. Çalışmanın bulguları göstermektedir ki Çin'in geleneksel Avrupa'ya yönelik bakış açısında ciddi bir değişiklik yoktur ve 17+1 ülkelerine yaptırımlar, AB'yi bölebilecek büyüklükte ve nitelikte değildir. Çin'in ticaret ve yatırım politikalarından halen yoğunluğun batı Avrupa ülkeleri olduğu görülmektedir. Yine de Çin'in Avrupa'nın farklı bölgelerinde hayata geçirdiği projeler, satın almalar ve inşaat faaliyetleriyle kıta genelinde ulusal çıkarlarını artırmaya çalıştığı da görülmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** 17+1, Avrupa Birliği, CEE, Çin, İş Birliği.

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## Introduction

When examining the historical process of relations between China and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), it is not possible to explain this entirely independently of European Union-China relations. CEE countries (CEEC) have been shaped within the arena of competition between major powers for centuries and, as a result, have not maintained direct relations with China, located in a distant region, for a long period of time. It is evident that most CEEC remained under the control and influence of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) after World War II, and only after the collapse of the USSR, they developed more independent diplomatic and economic relations. On the other hand, China's concern for Europe began to take shape through the European Community in the mid-Cold War period. When China began to open up its economy and take steps in line with the liberal market after Mao era, the official diplomatic rapprochement that began between the US and China was soon reflected in China-Europe relations. Thus, China managed to regain its seat at the United Nations (UN) thanks to its ability to act more independently than the USSR (Kasim, 2015, p. 89). After asserting its political sovereignty in the system, China's next step was to integrate with the global economy.

After the Cold War, the primary goal of most countries that gained independence from the USSR was to become part of the political and military security framework of the EU and the NATO. These countries, which have established political alliances over time, have also begun to develop bilateral relations with China. China's investments in the region began in the 2000s. Economic and political rapprochement between China and CEEC has increased especially since the 2008 financial crisis. In this context, China established a cooperation organization known as the 16+1 platform, with Greece's participation it turned into 17+1.

This initiative, launched by China with 16 European countries, primarily aimed to develop trade between the parties. In addition, the fact that Eastern Europe is an important route in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), known as China's global outreach policy, has led to an increase in China's concern for the region. It is imperative for China to be active on every continent and to develop strong economic ties for a sustainable economy.

This study utilizes a qualitative research method. To enhance the reliability of the study, data analysis was based on a wide variety of sources. The data used in the study, such as reports, articles, books, book chapters, and official statements, have been obtained from primary sources. Also, field study was conducted in the city of Lodz, Poland, which is one of the most important components of the study. This city, described as "If Poland is China's gateway to Europe, Lodz is its heart," hosts approximately one-third of the loaded or unloaded activities in rail freight transport between China and Europe (Kadar, 2022, p. 25). In this context, in May 2024, a pre-interview was conducted with two officials in the field to determine the scope of the study as they did not want their statements to be recorded. A similar method was used to interview an academic working on the subject at the Faculty of International and Political Studies at the University of Lodz. These preliminary interviews helped the study define its scope and provide insight into the shaping of China's trade with Eastern Europe.

## Literature Review

Considering that 12 of the 17 countries are EU members and the others are EU candidate members, it is understandable why this cooperation occupies an important place in the academic literature in terms of whether it is an attempt to divide the EU in terms of China-EU relations or to increase its effectiveness within the EU. Kavalski states that the EU is concerned that its multifaceted policies aimed at helping communist countries gain a new European identity through democracy after the collapse of the USSR could be undermined by China's regionalization approach on the continent (Kavalski, 2019, pp. 405–410). Kavalski argues that CEEC did not share a common structure or values even during the Cold War period, and therefore the 17+1 platform is a Chinese invention, but it is not an actor capable of influencing the EU's structure, which is integrated with NATO. During the Covid-19 pandemic, when supply chain and healthcare issues arose, China managed to send medical supplies to CEEC at a time when the EU was unable to do so. This temporarily silenced criticism of the growing trade imbalance between China and CEEC (Jing, 2020, pp. 170–178). However, the study of Jing reveals that Western European countries are increasingly dependent on China for supplies rather than perceiving it as a rising competitor, and that this is increasingly contrary to Europe's national interests. This nationalist approach, referred to as “industrial chain security,” has also been an attempt to make all of Europe understand the Chinese threat.

As seen in the 17+1 platform in Europe, the main reason for the growing concern about China was that China would reform Europe's economy through direct investments, but the “Made in China 2025” plan, which declared China's intention to surpass the West in technological developments such as 5G, artificial intelligence, and green technology, has been a turning point in the loss of expectations for China (Wright, 2020). Realizing it was lagging behind the US and China in the artificial intelligence race, the EU announced its €7.5 billion “2030 Digital Compass: The European Way for the Digital Decade” plan in March 2021 (Ghiretti, 2021, pp. 4–9). According to Brinza, while the EU seeks to increase its power in the international system through formations such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), she views the 17+1 as an attempt to divide the EU internally in terms of its technological competitive power (Brinza, 2019, pp. 214–230). In this regard, the EU is developing prohibition policies against China's increasing influence over the EU through investments in 5G technology companies such as Huawei.

Similarly, Roger Cliff explains that China's increasing economic investment policy towards the EU aims to enhance its “know-how” to compete with the world in technology and military fields, while also preventing the EU from acting in unison against China on issues it considers vital to its national security thanks to increased mutual interaction on 17+1 (Cliff, 2022, pp. 28–40). However, in 2019, China's two key partners in the CEEC, Poland and the Czech Republic, announced that they would ban 5G technology. Although China increased its investments in the CEEC between 2012 and 2018, it can be said that the fact that these investments did not reach a satisfactory level played a role in this decision (Kavalski, 2019, pp. 405–412). Godoment and Vasselier argue that suspicions that China is pursuing a “divide and rule” strategy toward Europe through its 17+1 mechanism have increased, particularly with the BRI, but when one looks at the facts on the ground, the amount of investment China has made makes this impossible in reality (Godoment & Vasselier, 2017, pp. 65–72).

On the other hand, some studies in the literature evaluate China's investments in the 17+1

platform within the framework of a win-win policy, but most agree that these investments are insufficient. Similarly, Matura, who reports on China's investments in CEEC, shows that China's investments in CEE are described as a "tsunami of Chinese money," but reveals with figures that investments in countries other than Hungary, Poland, Serbia, and Romania are modest (Matura, 2021, pp. 5–14). Gruebler emphasizes that China has invested more in sectors such as infrastructure, energy, transportation, and telecommunications, where EU funding has been lacking, within the framework of 17+1 (Gruebler, 2021, pp. 80–99). Gruebler also says that the share of CEEC in China's total investments remains limited compared to Western European countries, and therefore China has no intention of deepening geographical divisions. Valiyeva underlines that approximately 88% of China's investments in Europe are in Germany, France, the UK (the Big Three), and Hungary (Valiyeva, 2025, p. 61). The study of Stojanovic and Zakic reveals that when investments in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Romania are examined, Germany and the US have significantly higher FDI investments compared to China (Šekarić Stojanović & Zakić, 2024, pp. 7–14).

Fang summarizes the objectives of China's investment policy in CEEC in three points: 1) CEE serves as a gateway to the ancient Silk Road and the modern Eurasian corridor, 2) as a non-Western economy, China seeks to spearhead the formation of a multipolar, multinational, and multicultural structure through its investments in Europe, and 3) CEEC and China have historically suffered greatly in world wars and similarly desire peace and development (Fang, 2015, pp. 4–12). Kadar argues that China uses infrastructure construction as both a tool for development and political legitimacy. He claims that China launched the "Great Western Development Plan" policy in 2005 to develop its western cities, and that in 2013, it announced the BRI to continue sustainable development (Kadar, 2022, pp. 7–13). He further asserts that within this framework, China aims to integrate Western-China with Eurasia and Europe. Dica and Hurduzeu also focus on "The Three Seas Initiative," aiming to establish a commercial route that will strengthen China's economic expansion by investing in infrastructure, logistics, energy, and technology projects in countries between the Black Sea, the Aegean Sea, and the Baltic Sea (Dică & Hurduzeu, 2025, pp. 1841–1851). The fact that CEEC were not involved in China's colonization process by Western countries, also known as the "century of humiliation," makes these countries "a different Europe" in China's eyes (Valiyeva, 2025, pp. 58–60).

The literature review reveals that 17+1 platform is generally evaluated under four headings: 1) China's investments aim to create a political division within the EU, 2) China's investments should be evaluated within a "win-win policy" because China has not already invested large amounts in CEEC that would divide the EU, 3) EU's increased dependence on Chinese goods and investments after the 2008 crisis and the questioning of this dependence in terms of the supply chain during the Covid-19 period, and 4) increasing investments between the EU and China, particularly in the technological field, undermine US global interests. The literature review reveals that while most studies focus on outcomes, there has been insufficient discussion of how China has pursued a cooperation-based approach in the CEE and the extent to which it has been successful. Thus, the aim of this paper is to analyze the relations between the European Union and China in the context of the 17+1 platform to answer the research question of this work, namely: How does China's 17+1 cooperation model operate in practice, and to what extent does it serve as a counterbalance to the EU or a facilitator of Sino–EU cooperation?

## Conceptual Framework: The Concept of Cooperation

While historically there have been inter-state relations, post-World War II institutionalization and the rise of non-state actors have made initiating and maintaining cooperation in international relations an important issue. Axelrod and Keohane argue that cooperation has been addressed only in the military-security context rather than in the political-economy context, and that this is an incomplete approach because cooperation is a phenomenon that constantly changes over time (Axelrod & Keohane, 1985, p. 226). Thus, cooperation cannot be defined purely at a moral level; it is defined as actors adapting to each other according to their existing or anticipated preferences (Axelrod & Keohane, 1985, p. 226). In line with this definition, Milner, who seeks to explain the concept of cooperation, points out that states prefer the path of cooperation in order to reduce negative consequences by aligning themselves with policy (Milner, 1992, p. 467). Cooperation, a rational behavior, is intended to enable states to achieve gains through mutual negotiations. In this context, while cooperation does not guarantee equal gains between states, it is an effective political tool used to ensure that parties achieve satisfactory gains in some way, rather than resorting to competition or conflict (Milner, 1992, p. 468).

Although both neorealists and neoliberals accept the anarchic international system, they differ on whether states seek relative gains or absolute gains through cooperation. This leads to a divergence in their views on whether cooperation between states increases competition and conflict or cooperation and interdependence. Another reason underlying these two opposing views stems from the assumption of neoliberals that new non-state institutions and international corporations also influence state behavior. Whether small states wishing to join the EU are motivated by “mutual gains” in terms of benefiting from the union’s funds or whether they are adopting a “bandwagoning” approach within power politics is also a controversial issue in this context (Andrews, 2010, p. 216).

Robert Jervis, who examines the approaches of neoliberals and neorealists to the issue of conflict and cooperation, asserts that while neorealists emphasize security and interpret world politics as a constant struggle and dominance aimed at maximizing gains, neoliberals differentiate themselves by focusing on issues such as the international political economy and the environment (Jervis, 1999, pp. 44–45). Given this situation, neoliberals focus on institutionalization that will strengthen relations, while neorealists concentrate on how material gains will be distributed. It is also a fact that both views accept the state as the most effective actor in the implementation and enforcement of agreements. However, since nations are not homogeneous, it should not be overlooked that the preferences and interests of leaders and influential groups in decision-making processes are also one of the determining factors in establishing international cooperation (Smith, 2009, p. 854). This is because, beyond a state's position in the international system, elites' strategic ideas and their interactions play a decisive role in shaping the degree to which foreign policy is cooperative or conflictual (Doğan, 2025, s. 12-13). Consequently, changes in the leaders or political groups of some countries are also changing their approach to cooperation.

Neorealists, who argue that states act in pursuit of relative gains in the international anarchic system, claim that mutual interest does not mean mutual benefit and that weak or small states are forced to act within rules that appear to be based on mutual

dependence but are in fact determined by powerful states (Andrews, 2010, pp. 209–211). As understood from the “prisoners’ dilemma metaphor,” when bargaining power is unequal between the parties, it is claimed that the powerful state will force the other party into an agreement that will already provide maximum gain at the end of the negotiations (Barkin, 2004, p. 366).

However, in an anarchic system, where states seek more power or security, a state that pursues only relative gains will hinder the development of mutual trade opportunities. Furthermore, the purely zero-sum principle approach is problematic in the context of relations because it disregards the gains of other states (Snidal, 1991, p. 704). In other words, forcing one state to completely lose or suffer damage also makes cooperation impossible. From this perspective, cooperation enables small and weak states to be treated as equal and respected counterparts by powerful states and to benefit from the consideration of their interests. Relationships in which the parties are open and confident, aware of their common interests, and in which basic needs and expectations are met are defined as “normalized asymmetry,” and in such relationships, no perception of a hegemon arises against the great power (Lubina, 2017, p. 292).

In an era marked by increasing multipolarity and globalization, technological advances and artificial intelligence heralding a new era, and security threats diversifying and posing challenges such as global warming, terrorism, migration, and food and water security, intergovernmental cooperation has become far more important than in the past (Jiechi, 2015, p. 12). The fundamental elements of China’s global success are its successful diplomacy prioritizing cooperation and the effective use of foreign investments, state-owned enterprises, and small-scale private enterprises operating under state control in line with this approach (Womack, 2013, p. 911). The “public-private partnership” economic model, which particularly increases employment and infrastructure investments, brings together the private sector and the state and strengthens the dimension of cooperation based on “win-win policy” (Schachter, Daniel, & Liu, 2017, p. 645).

### **1. China’s Pivot to Europe and the Rising Influence of China in Europe in the Post-Cold War Era**

Just three years after the US and China began direct talks in 1972, mutual relations began between the EU and China. Although China remained politically committed to socialist principles in the post-Mao era, its desire to act in line with the global liberal order economically enabled the US and the EU to quickly engage in trade with China. According to European External Action Service records, the first diplomatic relations between the EU and China began with European Commissioner Christopher Soames’ visit to China in May 1975, and the first trade agreement between the parties was signed on May 2, 1978 (EEAS, 2011). However, the first legal framework for relations between the two parties was the 1985 EC-China Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement, which replaced the 1978 agreement and was revised in 1994 and 2002 to regulate the growing trade partnership in many sectors (Treaties Office, 1985). Although China officially began political and economic relations with the EU during this period, it was unable to develop direct relations with most CEEC as they were part of the Eastern Bloc

(Pavličević, 2019, p. 688).

The second factor accelerating China's march toward the west can be said to have begun with the swift and peaceful collapse of the USSR. Deng, who capitalized on this vacuum, decided in 1992 to open up many sectors of his country to foreign investment and markets through a new policy of openness, which began to dramatically increase Western foreign investment in China (Fung, Korhonen, Li, & Ng, 2009, p. 480). However, following China's bloody suppression of the Tiananmen protests, the EU froze its political relations with China in June 1989. Nevertheless, the EU countries supported Bill Clinton's decision to reestablish direct diplomatic relations with China in 1993. On the other hand, following the protests, it was necessary for bilateral relations to resume and for the EU to satisfy both its internal and international public opinion. In this regard, China ensured that its policy of opening up to the outside world remained intact by participating in the "EU and China Declaration and Program of Action of the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna" conference, led by the EU, on June 25, 1993. Although democracy and freedom of thought, as stated in the 8<sup>th</sup> article of the report, conflict with China's socialist structure, it was a necessity for China to overlook certain articles in order to increase its exports to the EU (OHCHR, 1993). The EU document, published in 1995, titled "A Long-Term Policy for China-Europe Relations" EU document states that trade relations between the two states reached record levels in 1994 and that "China has become part of world security and the economic system at a time of greater economic dependence, and that it is imperative to develop relations with China on global issues" (COM, 1995, p. 16).

After the Cold War, China found a multinational structure committed to democratic principles rather than a fragmented Europe. China refrained from pursuing a direct policy of increasing its influence over the newly politically independent states of Europe. Such a move could have led Western European states to portray China as a new threat instead of the USSR. Moreover, these countries, historically under Russian threat, are striving to join the EU for economic and political reasons, and NATO for military security. The fact that these European countries are focusing all their concerns on the West would already have rendered China's efforts futile. In fact, Serbia was the country with which China had the best relations during this period. The bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999 was a message to both the Serbs and the countries in the region (Pavličević, 2019, p. 690). Therefore, China continued its policy of approaching Europe with a holistic perspective during the first decade after the Cold War. During this period, the EU, which held the upper hand in bilateral relations, also had the ability to determine the level of cooperation.

With the US ending its policy of delaying China's membership process, which had lasted for approximately 15 years, in 2000, the EU also signed an agreement on China's accession process to the WTO in May 2000 without delay. In the document titled "A Maturing Partnership-Shared Interests and Challenges in EU-China Relations" published by the European Commission on September 10, 2003, the EU states that "it recognizes China as one of its most important partners" and notes that the WTO accession process will

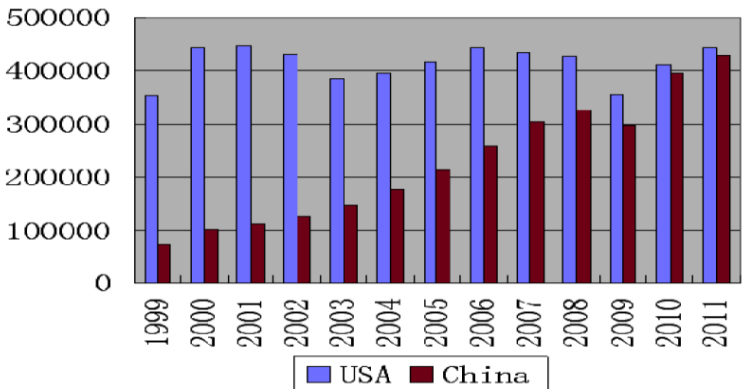


contribute to economic relations between the two sides (COM, 2003, p. 3). The statements in the report published in September 2003 still show the EU's hope that China will transform and become a more open country in line with the neoliberal system: "The EU has a clear belief in China's successful transition to a stable, prosperous, and open country that fully embraces democracy, free market principles, and the rule of law" (COM, 2003, p. 7).

In the 2000s, China had become one of the EU's largest trading partners, and growing mutual dependence had made it necessary to act together on everything from science and technology to space exploration, climate change, and detailed trade and investment agreements. On the other hand, the EU has understood that it was necessary to develop economic measures to counter the trade imbalance that increased further following China's WTO membership. For example, in 2005, the EU began developing protective trade measures against China by imposing anti-dumping measures on Chinese and Vietnamese bicycle and textile companies, followed by measures against footwear companies between 2005 and 2011 (Eckhardt, 2015, p. 2). Another sign that the EU's image of China has changed is the report published by the EU in 2006 entitled "Closer Partners, Growing Responsibilities: A Policy Paper on EU-China Trade and Investment." The report emphasizes that China's rise will create serious challenges for Europe in some manufacturing sectors and suggests that balance must now be achieved for mutually beneficial trade between China and Europe to continue (COM, 2006, p. 7). Nevertheless, the desire of some EU members to protect their differing interests in bilateral trade relations with China has made it difficult for them to develop a consistent policy toward China (Nicholas, 2009, p. 31).

It is observed that these approaches towards China initiated by the EU have gradually influenced China and compelled it to implement different policies towards the EU. In May 2004, leading Eastern European countries that joined the EU began to attract China's attention. China began to feel compelled to develop a new strategy for the region to prevent the growing voices against it in the EU from forming a bloc. The countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Romania, which joined the EU in 2004 and 2007, gained a reputation as investment hubs for China's investments in textiles, leather goods, and bags, as well as electrical and electronic machinery and equipment parts (Clegg & Voss, 2014, p. 34). China, which has increased its foreign investments in key sectors in countries with cheap labor and effective domestic markets compared to Western European countries, has thus been able to export the goods it produces there to other parts of Europe. Moreover, thanks to this trade taking place within the commercial conditions of EU countries, China has also easily overcome various trade barriers. As can be seen in the graph below, the growing trade potential between China and the EU after the Cold War had almost caught up with EU-US trade figures by 2011.

**Graphic 1:** EU Trade with the US and China (1999-2011)



**Source:** (Xin, 2012, s. 5).

**2. China's New Policy for Developing Cooperation within the EU**

China has realized that by playing a greater role in regional and international institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Plus China (ASEAN+1), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the WTO, it can become more effective in both regional and global cooperation (Nicholas, 2009, p. 43). In this context, China's strategy with regional organizations is twofold. First, China takes steps to build mutual trust and stability with regional or global organizations, and second, over time, it grants greater economic privileges to certain members within the organization to ensure that the organization acts in line with its own interests or that decisions contrary to its national interests are not taken within the organizations. Finding alternative channels for these countries, which are relatively weaker economically, may create difficulties in implementing the policies of the dominant powers within the EU. For example, when Poland disagreed with the EU Commission over the cutting of structural funds, it immediately announced that it would build its first two nuclear reactors (Sali, 2018, p. 31). The fact that Poland and Hungary are relying on China for high-speed rail projects that exceed their budgets is causing disruptions to the rules and order that the EU wants to implement across the entire European continent. Similarly, it is noteworthy that Greece blocked an EU statement condemning the EU's activities in the South China Sea in 2017 for violating human rights (Sali, 2018, p. 35).

**2.1. The Establishment of the 17+1 Platform**

China's first serious engagement with CEEC began in the 2000s with its “opening up” strategy, but within the first decade, China's perspective toward the region remained holistic (Budeanu, 2018, p. 57). The 2008 economic crisis severely impacted Europe financially and increased China's need for direct investment and loans, paving the way for China to develop policies targeting the region. With the bankruptcy of the US company Lehman Brothers, both public and external debt levels rose sharply in many countries, and EU member states found themselves facing problems of competitiveness



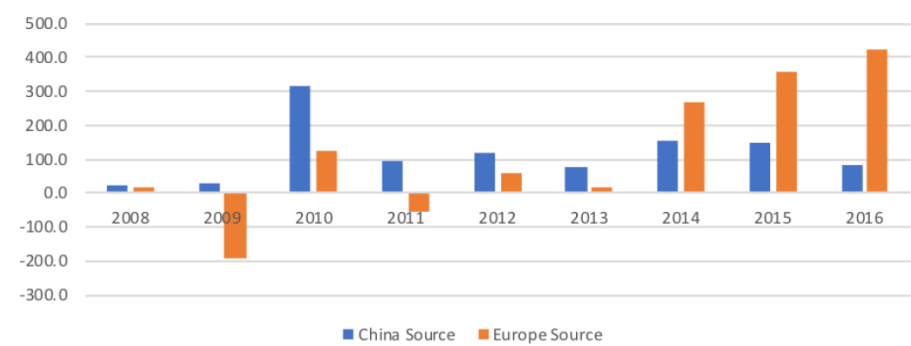
during which China announced it would invest billions of euros in the country, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited Warsaw in April 2012 and pledged that China would initially invest \$10 billion in CEEC (Jones, 2012, p. 85). Anyway Hungarian Prime Minister Orban turned to China to realize his dream of an “Eastern Opening Policy,” which was highly effective in establishing the 17+1 platform (Rencz, 2019, p. 5). China officially announced its objectives for this platform for the first time on April 26, 2012, in a document titled “China's Twelve Measures for Promoting Friendly Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries”:

*“Establish a US\$10 billion special credit line, with a focus on cooperation projects in such areas as infrastructure, high and new technologies, and green economy. The 16 central and eastern European countries may file project application to the National Development Bank of China, Export and Import Bank of China, Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, Construction Bank of China, Bank of China or China Citic Bank... China would like to work with the 16 central and eastern European countries to increase total two-way trade to US\$100 billion by 2015”* (FMPRC, 2012).

2.2. 17+1 Platform and Its Inclusion in the BRI

The 16+1 platform announced in 2012 was quickly aligned with the BRI, which was announced just one year later in Kazakhstan and Indonesia. In June 2015, Hungary became the first country to sign a participation agreement with the BRI. By November 2017, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined, meaning all 16+1 Platform countries had now participated in the BRI (Yongqi, 2017). In 2018, Greece joined the 17+1 platform, and this new member also joined the BRI in 2019. As shown in Figure 3, China's direct investments in CEEC between 2008 and 2014 exceeded those of the EU. Subsequently, the EU quickly balanced this and increased its investments by at least threefold. However, this situation clearly demonstrated that the EU is not unrivaled if the CEEC fail to make the necessary investments. Europe's major powers now feel China, far beyond their borders, closer to them than ever before. In this regard, CEEC that are not EU members in particular regard China as a counterbalancing power in order to attract the EU's concern and investments, while countries such as Hungary, dissatisfied with declining EU funds, are increasingly turning to China (Godement & Vasselier, 2017, s. 69).

Graphic 3: Foreign Investments Made by China and Europe in CEEC (2008-2016)



Source: (Yue Lin, 2018, p. 93).

Within the context of Eastern Europe, Hungary is one of the countries with the most diplomatic relations with China in the region. In particular, Hungary and Slovakia's silence between 2003 and 2009, in contrast to Poland and the Czech Republic, which criticized China's human rights violations in Tibet and the XUAR, also ensured that China gave Hungary a central place in its relations with CEEC (Zuokui, 2013, p. 8). As shown in Table 1, Poland is the country in the CEEC within the EU where China has made the most investments. The fact that the CEEC Working Council is in Poland is a strategic step. The dry cargo terminal in the city of Lodz in Poland plays a significant role in the distribution of trains arriving from China to Europe. Poland acts as a gateway for China's entry into Europe by land. On December 25, 2019, the first dry cargo ship departed from China's Xi'an province, traveling 9,478 km in 10 days via XUAR, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine to reach in Slawkow, Poland (China-CEE Cooperation, 2025).

China also transports its goods to the ports of Budapest, Vienna, Prague and to the interior of Europe using fast dry cargo ships. The third country China invests the most is Greece. The aim is to establish a connection between the Lodz high-speed rail line operated by the Chinese Overseas Shipping Company and the Greek port of Piraeus, thereby making the North-South line operational and creating a new trade hub for China's goods via the Mediterranean (Sali, 2018, p. 29). In this context, China began acquiring shares in the Port of Piraeus in Greece, which is located on the BRI maritime route. In 2016, China Ocean Shipping (COSCO) purchased a 51% stake in the port for \$320 million and in exchange for a commitment to make mandatory investments, additional investments of \$370 million in 2019 and \$110 million in 2021 were made (AEL, 2025).

A glance at Table 1 reveals that while investments in Western Europe have increased since 2005, almost all investments in the CEEC began in 2013 with the announcement of the BRI. From 2013 onwards, the share of CEEC within the EU in China's total investments is approximately one-seventh. When non-EU countries are included, this ratio only rises to one-quarter. This also demonstrates that China's investment policy towards the European continent has seen significantly more investment in the CEECs since 2013, yet the focus remains on Western European countries.

**Table 1:** China's Foreign Direct Investments to EU and CEE (2005-2025; billion\$)

Country	Total Investments 2005-2025	1 <sup>st</sup> Sector 2005-2025	2 <sup>nd</sup> Sector 2005-2025	Investments Since 2013
<b>Total Western EU</b>	<b>219.38</b>			<b>189.61</b>
<b>Germany</b>	54.89	Transport: 25.24	Real Estate: 6.46	49.88
<b>France</b>	37.11	Entertainment: 9.1	Energy: 6.78	28.77
<b>Italy</b>	27.47	Transport: 8.75	Energy: 6.48	25.22
<b>Netherlands</b>	21.77	Technology: 6.69	Agriculture: 4.02	19.75
Austria	1.11	Technology: 0.6	Transport: 0.28	0.83
Belgium	6.06	Finance: 4.03	Real Estate: 0.69	3.01
Greek Cyprus	1.33	Entertainment: 1.2	Real Estate: 0.13	1.2
Denmark	1.54	Technology: 0.81	Finance: 0.73	1.54
Finland	18.2	Entertainment: 14.54	Energy: 0.85	18.2
Ireland	8.12	Transport: 6.37	Technology: 0.69	8.12
Luxembourg	2.79	Finance: 1.76	Transport: 0.56	2.79
Malta	0.44	Energy: 0.44	-	0.44
Portugal	9.8	Energy: 5.6	Finance: 3.09	5.31
<b>Spain</b>	11.5	Energy: 3.1	Transport: 1.77	10
<b>Sweden</b>	17.25	Transport: 8.85	Entertainment: 3.56	14.55
<b>Total Both EU&amp;CEE</b>	<b>28.0</b>			<b>26.42</b>
Bulgaria	0.78	Energy: 0.32	Transport: 0.25	0.45
Croatia	0.87	Transport: 0.52	Energy: 0.22	0.87
Czech Republic	0.96	Finance: 0.55	Real Estate: 0.31	0.86
Estonia	-	-	-	-
<b>Greece</b>	10.45	Transport: 6.79	Energy: 2.51	4.41
<b>Hungary</b>	14.94	Transport: 10.16	Chemicals: 2.11	11.2
Lithuania	-	-	-	-
Latvia	0.11	Transport: 0.11	-	0.11
<b>Poland</b>	17.05	Energy: 10.56	Transport: 2.75	4.48
Romania	2.11	Energy: 2.11	-	
Slovakia	1.86	Transport: 1.73	Agriculture: 0.13	1.86
Slovenia	2.18	Entertainment: 1.05	Transport: 0.79	2.18
<b>Other CEE Countries</b>	<b>24.69</b>			<b>23.72</b>
Albania	-	-	-	-
Bosnia- Herzegovina	3.41	Energy: 2.07	Transport: 1.23	2.7
North Macedonia	0.65	Transport: 0.49	Real Estate: 0.16	0.65
Montenegro	1.12	Transport: 1.02	Energy: 0.10	1.12
<b>Serbia</b>	19.51	Transport: 9.79	Utilities: 4.12	19.25
<b>Total CEE</b>	<b>52.69</b>			<b>50.14</b>

**Source:** (AEI, 2025) \*This table was formulated by the author based on the source data.

As mentioned, China has accelerated its BRI projects in Central Europe and the Balkans, connecting Southern and Eastern Europe to realize its commercial presence across the

European continent since 2013. Projects such as the railway line planned by China under the BRI between Greece and Croatia via Serbia also demonstrate China's desire to reshape the economic geography (Godement & Vasselier, 2017, p. 67). Serbia's \$3.2 billion loan from China for its declining steel and petrochemical production, or Montenegro's €830 million loan from China for a highway project that will solve its mountain transportation problem, equivalent to approximately 21% of its GDP, are causing countries in the region to increasingly borrow from China (Godement & Vasselier, 2017, p. 71). Similarly, within the scope of the BRI, the Budapest-Belgrade-North Macedonia and Athens mega high-speed train project, which will be realized with Chinese investments as part of China-CEEC cooperation, will further indebt the countries in the region to China. The first phase of the project, the 350 km railway between Budapest and Belgrade, will be 85% financed by the Export-Import Bank of China (Rencz, 2019, p. 6). The main reasons behind China's decision to make the largest investment in Serbia among CEEC within the scope of the BRI are: 1) Serbia's ability to pursue an independent foreign policy within Europe, 2) its location at the crossroads of Southeast Europe, 3) its land and river transport links connecting eastern and western Europe as well as northern and southern Europe, and 4) its strong and reliable bilateral relations with China (Stojanović-Višić, Jelisavac Trošić, & Simić, 2023, p. 234).

**Map 2:** The Belgrade-Budapest High-Speed Railway Project



**Source:** (Eddy, 2020).

China's expansion of its sphere of influence through investment policies involving destructive lending to countries that are not yet members of the EU is hindering the development of the EU's candidate country process rules for these countries as desired. Mega projects financed with excessive debt are contrary to EU access criteria. Despite this dilemma, states seeking to increase their level of prosperity need China's investments. Although China has been creating the impression of forming new alliances within the EU since 2012 and creating different trade alternatives, its historical trade flow with Western European countries is nearly five times that of its trade with the 17+1 member countries. As shown in Table 2, China's trade flow within the CEEC does not appear to disrupt the trade balance or regional development balance on the continent. A similar situation in China's investment policies had previously been outlined in Table 1. Thus, China is

ensuring that the countries in the region remain dependent on it.

**Table 2:** Trade Balance of China with EU and CEE (\$billion, 2023)

Country	Export to China	Import from China	Trade balance
<b>Total Western EU</b>	<b>222.1</b>	<b>425.72</b>	<b>203.62</b>
Germany	104	151	-46.2
France	27.8	44.6	-16.8
Italy	20.9	47.2	-26.3
Netherlands	18.3	70.4	-52
Austria	6.08	13.7	-7.58
Belgium	7.11	22	-14.9
Greek Cyprus	0.36	0.92	-0.89
Denmark	5.89	8.64	-2.75
Finland	4.6	6.66	-2.06
<b>Ireland</b>	<b>16.8</b>	<b>8.07</b>	<b>+8.78</b>
Luxembourg	0.26	0.83	-0.56
Malta	0.38	1.15	-0.76
Portugal	1.42	5.82	-4.4
Spain	8.52	45.7	-37.2
Sweden			
<b>Total Both EU&amp;CEE Countries</b>	<b>19.42</b>	<b>118.89</b>	<b>-99.47</b>
Bulgaria	1.36	2.92	-1.56
Croatia	0.11	1.63	-1.51
Czech Republic	3.37	32.5	-29.1
Estonia	0.37	1.74	-1.36
Greece	0.54	9	-8.46
Hungary	3.09	10	-6.96
Lithuania	0.17	1.91	-1.74
Latvia	0.25	0.99	-0.74
Poland	3.73	43.7	-39.9
Romania	1.84	7.54	-5.7
Slovakia	4.59	7.04	-2.44
Slovenia			
<b>Other CEE Countries</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>7.46</b>	<b>-4.76</b>
Albania	0.14	1	-0.86
Bosnia-Herzegovina	0.59	1.34	-1.28
North Macedonia	0.11	1.02	-0.09
Montenegro	0.4	0.44	-0.40
<b>Serbia</b>	<b>1.41</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>-2.39</b>
<b>Total CEE</b>	<b>22.07</b>	<b>126.35</b>	<b>-104.2</b>

**Source:** (OEC, 2025) \*This table was formulated by the author based on the source data.

Furthermore, within the EU, only Ireland has a trade surplus with China, while all CEEC have a trade deficit with China. Even Poland, Hungary, and Serbia, where China has made the most investments, have a significant trade deficit with China as well. The total trade deficit of CEEC reached \$105.3 billion, which is equivalent to Germany's exports to China alone. Similarly, the total imports of all CEEC from China are only \$25 billion behind Germany's. The total trade of all CEEC with China is almost equivalent to Italy's



trade with China alone. All these data show that Western European countries still occupy a more important place in trade specifically between China and the EU continent. Nevertheless, the fact that mutual trade between all European countries and China is turning into a one-sided dependency is a warning sign for Europe.

### 3. Conclusion

Many states on the continent gained independence after the collapse of the USSR. Most sought to align themselves with Western European values to erase the traces of Russian domination and Communist ideology. Accordingly, most CEEC have aimed to become members of the EU politically and economically, and NATO militarily. China, aware of this reality, did not change its holistic perspective on Europe. Because, as a socialist state, China could not afford to treat the independent states in the region preferentially. The main factors were both the desire of independent states to rapidly distance themselves from communism and China's need for Western European countries in its economic development. In fact, the so-called accidental bombing of China's consulate in Belgrade by the US in 1999 was also a warning for China to be prudent in its political approach towards Europe. Moreover, the paper reveals that during this period, China's trade and investment policies with the CEEC were significantly less extensive than those of the EU.

The acceleration of trade activities between the EU and China, which developed particularly in China's favor after its WTO membership, led to a significant shift in the EU's perspective on China from the mid-2000s onwards. The 2008 economic crisis also caused CEEC, unable to secure sufficient investment and funds from Western European countries, to increase their concern for China. Filling this gap, China's investments in CEEC between 2009 and 2014 surpassed those of Western European countries. Therefore, in 2012, China ventured to establish the 16+1 platform, which became 17+1 after Greece joined the platform, with the economically lagging CEEC in Europe. It is observed that China has intensified its investments in the utilities, transportation, chemicals and energy sectors in particular.

The 17+1 platform, referred to as a Chinese invention, was integrated with China's BRI projects in 2013, and these countries were considered an important route for China's trade with the West. Furthermore, the paper reveals that China uses its acquired assets and investments in these countries as a tool to circumvent the EU's trade restrictions on Chinese goods. Thus, China aims to make more investments in certain countries within regional organizations to prevent decisions being made against China. However, the paper shows that China has sometimes succeeded in this through its privileged investments in countries such as Hungary, Poland, and Greece. For this reason, it is not expected that China's 17+1 platform or certain CEEC will completely block the decisions taken by the EU against China. The paper reveals that there are three main reasons for this: military, political, and economic:

- 1) Having been under Russian rule for many years, these states were quite inadequate in terms of military capacity against powerful forces such as Russia and therefore they wish to be under NATO's security umbrella to maintain their independence.
- 2) These states, which want to erase the traces of the Communist and socialist ideologies inherited from the USSR, consider democratic values to be vital because they want to create a new society after the USSR and establish a lasting

presence in their regions. Thus, these states aim to achieve democratic governance standards like Western European states.

- 3) The Chinese government, which is quite adept at using economic tools to achieve political objectives, has led to the 17+1 platform it developed within the EU being viewed as a “Trojan horse” due to this policy approach. China's total investment and construction activities in CEEC between 2005 and 2025 amounted to \$52 billion, while it invested \$219 billion in Western European countries. Similarly, while China's trade volume with Western European countries reached \$648 billion, its trade volume with CEEC was only \$138 billion. Moreover, while Western European countries had a trade deficit with China of ½, this ratio was 1/6 in CEEC. Taking all of this into account, it is not possible to divide the EU economically through the 17+1 platform or to create a second balancing bloc of CEEC against the EU. Even if China has such an intention, it has not taken concrete steps in this direction because it prioritizes Western Europe in its global and regional investment and trade policy.

China's cooperation with CEEC through its investment policies has an impact on the political economy. However, it is impossible to mention an alliance between democratic CEEC and socialist China that would politically and economically divide or balance the EU. Even within the European countries which have historical and sociological differences cannot form an alliance with China. They are also aware that China's poor human rights record and lack of democratic governance mean that CEEC must not stray from EU norms and values when developing bilateral relations with China.

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