



Getting Ahead of the Curve

Chinese Influence
in Central and
Eastern Europe



By James Lamond and Edward Lucas

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Executive Summary

- Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has been a strategic shock for Europe, the United States, and the world. In this new hyper-geopolitical environment, Europe is paying heightened attention to the long-standing threats posed by authoritarian governments.
- Central and Eastern European countries were among the earliest to warn about the danger posed by Russia (and, in some cases, by China). They now form a bulwark against encroaching authoritarianism.
- China’s flagship venture for cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe – the (now) 14+1 initiative – has proven overly ambitious, and its future is in doubt. Yet continuing Chinese Communist Party (CCP) influence operations in these countries deserve scrutiny.
- Understanding the CCP’s tools and tactics is critical to developing policy responses. These should remedy the local, national, and international weaknesses that China seeks to exploit. Improving governance and civil society in the region will have wider benefits too.

Introduction

The Czech Republic and Lithuania, both with long-standing ties to Tibetan and Chinese human-rights causes, have spearhead the regional pushback against CCP influence. The Czech Republic challenged the CCP’s attempt to enforce a diplomatic boycott of Taiwan by sending a highlevel delegation to the self-governing island in August 2020. In 2021 Lithuania led a six-country revolt against mandatory high-level attendance at a summit of what was then the 17+1 group. Lithuania withdrew from the framework, and then became the first European Union (EU) country to allow Taiwan to open a representative office designated “Taiwanese” instead of “Taipei.” This prompted sharp protests and sanctions from the regime in Beijing.

Decision-makers in Vilnius found little outside support for their anti-CCP stance. Privately and sometimes publicly, other European leaders blamed the small Baltic state for provoking the rising superpower.

Lithuania’s early efforts now appear more relevant, even prescient. More European countries are following suit and are reducing their ties with China. In August 2022, Estonia and Latvia joined Lithuania and withdrew from the initiative, reducing it to 14+1.¹

Better Late Than never

A belated geopolitical awakening is under way. Past US warnings of accelerating great power competition met mixed and confused responses from Europe. Although the European Commission labeled China as a “systemic rival” in 2019, the following year EU leaders inked the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment with Beijing, which was later frozen by the European Parliament.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has been a strategic shock for the United States (US), Europe, and the world. Europe has awoken to a new geopolitical reality, one in which the continent is much more attuned to the challenges posed by authoritarian governments. As a military alliance, NATO has taken center stage, renewing transatlantic sentiment. The EU’s role as a provider of economic security (notably in sanctions) and as the continent’s normative and regulatory center of gravity is in sharp focus. Membership of both institutions is growing and support for their missions is on the rise.² After twenty years of a foreign policy focused on the Middle East followed by a sharp pivot to Asia, US priorities are changing too. Decision-makers in Washington, DC, realize that Russia is not a challenge that can be neutralized or simply managed. The US has recommitted to European security to a degree few could have predicted just months ago. *The result is a Europe that is more united, refocused on democratic values, and more aligned with the US.*

Europe’s geopolitical awakening and recognition of threats from authoritarian states also extends to China. Prior to the war in Ukraine, the EU had become increasingly alarmed by the CCP’s human rights abuses at home and its more assertive posture abroad. The European Commission and other EU institutions were slowly, if reluctantly, taking a tougher stance toward China. The Chinese leadership’s tacit support for Russia has intensified this shift. For most of Europe, China is now on the wrong side. In an essay published earlier in 2022, the EU High Representative for Foreign Policy and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, notes, “On China, we have become less naïve and been doing our homework to counter the challenge of asymmetrical openness.”³

Yet China still has close partners on the European continent. Hungary remains the standout example in the EU of friendly ties to China. The Chinese firm CATL, the world’s largest car-battery manufacturer, announced in August that it would build Europe’s largest gigafactory in a €7.3 billion (\$7.3 billion) project in Debrecen.⁴ Serbia has bought FK-3 surface-to-air missiles, making it the only country in Europe to use the Chinese-made missile system.⁵



President Joe Biden participates in a virtual bilateral meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping Monday, November 15, 2021, in the Roosevelt Room of the White House. Credit: Official White House Photo by Cameron Smith.

Europe's strenuous attempts to reduce and eventually eliminate dependence on Russian fossil fuels through boosting renewable power generation also pose difficult choices: these technologies require materials with supply chains largely dominated by China. Beijing processes, for example, more than half of the world's lithium and cobalt and more than 80% of rare earth elements (which despite their name are not scarce, but just difficult to refine).⁶ Europe – and the West more broadly – risk replacing energy dependence on Russian hydrocarbons with dependence on Chinese raw materials.

As Borrell notes in his essay, China and other authoritarian states seek to exploit the openness and opportunities of democracies. In today's hyper-geopolitical environment, understanding and successfully countering such exploitations will be an increasingly important part of the geopolitical response. Perhaps nowhere is this more important than Central and Eastern Europe, the front line of the standoff between democracies and autocracies.

Background

China's relationship with Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has been marked by highs and lows over the last decade. In 2012, the People's Republic of China (PRC) established the initiative for Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European (C-CEE) countries, more commonly referred to as the 17+1 (at its peak), 16+1 (initially), or 14+1 (currently).⁷ The framework, part of the broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), was launched with the purpose of building greater engagement on infrastructure, transportation, investment, and people-to-people exchanges. Originally sold as a project to spur economic engagement, investment, and trade in CEE, the forum always carried not only economic, but also geopolitical ambitions. However, since its inception, the investment mechanism has failed to deliver on the bold early promises of infrastructure and investment. As a result, Beijing's political goals have taken on greater priority. While the future of the project is now in doubt, Chinese efforts to influence policy and politics in CEE reveal that the forum's principal value today as a geopolitical bridgehead.

While often referred to as a multilateral organization, the 14+1 is more of a mechanism with a hub and spoke structure. China is the hub, and the CEE member states the spokes. The important political decisions are made at the annual summits, led most recently by Chinese President Xi Jinping himself. However, the technical work and agenda setting are done through quarterly meetings which are held by a secretariat and led by the Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Deng Li, along with the national coordinators of the member states, who are local officials assigned to represent each government.⁸ The result of this structure is that the spokes – the CEE member states – have limited cooperation and coordination among themselves.⁹ Therefore, it is much less of a multilateral forum in the traditional sense, and more of what Justyna Szczudlik of the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) describes as “multilateral bilateralism.”¹⁰

The structure is opaque. As Andreea Brînză, Vice President of the Romanian Institute for the Study of the Asia-Pacific, has observed:

“It is very hard to define the 17+1 mechanism, just as it is hard to define the BRI. China has never clearly articulated its purpose, preferring loose concepts that can easily be promoted. The undefined and shifting nature of the mechanism led to numerous perspectives about its purpose. For the United States, the 17+1 mechanism is China's tool to create a sphere of influence in Europe by using soft and hard power; for the European Union, the 17+1 is a mechanism whose ultimate goal is to divide the Union. For the CEE region, however, it is just an annual summit featuring a plethora of unfulfilled promises and projects.”¹¹



第二届“一带一路”国际合作高峰论坛

THE SECOND BELT AND ROAD FORUM FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

2019年4月25-27日 中国·北京

25-27 APRIL 2019 BEIJING, CHINA



President Xi Jinping at the Second Belt and Road Initiative in Beijing, China, 2019. Credit: The Presidential Press and Information Offices of Azerbaijan.

Both the forum and perceptions of the forum have evolved over the last ten years. It was broadly welcomed in the region at its initiation in 2012, a time of warm Western relations with China. For CEE countries, it was seen as an opportunity to find new export markets and sources of investment. This was especially pertinent in the years following the 2007-2008 financial crisis. At a time of austerity, China was an attractive partner.

The initiative reached its zenith when Greece joined in 2019 — the first member from outside the “ex-communist” world. However, in the years since, momentum has dwindled. Hopes of substantial economic projects have given way to political and relationship-building efforts. For the countries of the region, this fundamentally undermines the initiative’s rationale.

A major factor in this is China’s weakness in multilateral diplomacy. Decision-makers in Beijing struggled to deal with 17 countries with diverse geographic, historical, social, and political characteristics. The limited and increasingly distant common historical experiences of communism (or in Greece’s case, dictatorship) are hardly a unifying factor. Moreover, the majority of the members are also members of the

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EU. This contributed to discomfort and increasing animosity in Brussels. Robust civil society and independent media in countries such as the Czech Republic scrutinized opaque aspects of the 14+1 initiative and linked the project to human rights abuses in China. Most member countries also have deep security and defense ties with the United States. As Sino-US competition increased, China's role in the region became increasingly unwelcome in Washington.

In a handful of countries, chiefly Hungary and Serbia, illiberal governments are happy to use Chinese support to boost their political capital and use this as leverage in relations with the EU and US.¹²

Dissatisfaction with the 14+1 accelerated over the years, reflecting frustrations over the PRC's assertive behavior abroad and human rights violations at home.¹³ This culminated in Lithuania publicly withdrawing from the 2021 forum.¹⁴ Five other countries, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, , Romania, and Slovenia, also sent ministers instead of the heads of state or government requested by the summit's virtual hosts.¹⁵ The 2022 summit, which would mark the ten-year anniversary of its launch, has yet to be scheduled, and the future of the forum is in question. Estonia and Latvia have withdrawn from the initiative. China's tacit support for Russia's war in Ukraine has also led other governments to question their relationship with Beijing.

Suggested Placement: Image Three with the caption: Photo: The Foreign Minister of Latvia attends the 2021 16/17+1 Summit virtually due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Credit: Vitolds Gabrāns, Ārlietu ministrija.

China has stated that the BRI, and by extension the 14+1, is purely economic in its intent and disavows any strategic rationale. Xi Jinping has said that the BRI is "an initiative for economic cooperation, instead of a geopolitical alliance or military league," and that China does not "play the zero-sum game."¹⁶ However, for China, the larger economies of Western Europe are far more important in trade and investment terms than the comparatively smaller and poorer CEE countries.¹⁷

In truth, the 14+1 project has always had political and geopolitical implications, which have only grown stronger as the economic rationale has deteriorated. Understanding China's approach across the region and how it has sought to influence members of the 14+1 is critical to formulating the necessary policy approach.

Forms of Influence and Tactics

The official format of the 14+1 has proven to be overly ambitious with negligible practical impact. However, it has been the flagship venture for Chinese cooperation with the countries of the region for the past decade, and PRC embassies and proxies in the region have engaged in repeated efforts to influence policy and politics. While the countries of the 14+1 do not make up a unitary political space, practical lessons can be drawn from Chinese efforts to exert influence across five key areas:

- Information;
- economy;
- culture;
- diplomacy; and
- local and regional administration.

Information Operations

The CCP propaganda machine has long sought to influence public debate and media coverage about China outside the country through censorship, propaganda from official outlets, and more covert disinformation campaigns. Over the past decade officials have significantly expanded these operations.¹⁸

In the 14+1 countries, these efforts have included domestic and CCP-controlled media and Chinese embassies which have sought to portray China as a benevolent power, genuinely interested in helping others. At the start of 14+1, this narrative focused on South-to-South cooperation and the shared history of Communism between China and the CEE region. However, rather than building a common link as intended, this approach alienated many citizens in the region who saw themselves as part of a developed, democratic West.¹⁹

Anti-Western narratives are another common instrument in China's propaganda toolkit. While not as prevalent as positive narratives praising China and the CCP, officials frequently advance negative narratives regarding democratic countries, including around COVID-19, racial justice protests, and the January 6, 2021 insurrection on Capitol Hill. These narratives purportedly contrast the chaos of liberal democracy with the strength and stability of China's own model.²⁰

China's use of anti-Western narratives is most pronounced in the countries where pro-US and pro-EU sentiments are stronger. In Poland, where the security relationship with the US has been strong since 1989, the Sino-US rivalry has occupied an important place in Beijing's efforts to manipulate public discourse. This was clearly on display in 2020 during a heated and public dispute between the

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US and Chinese ambassadors to Warsaw at the time. The dispute between Liu Guangyuan, former Ambassador of the People's Republic of China to the Republic of Poland, and Georgette Mosbacher, former Ambassador of the United States to the Republic of Poland, occurred over Twitter and quickly escalated from policy disagreements to accusations of Sinophobia and ultimately personal attacks.²¹ In countries with weaker Euro-Atlantic alignments, such as Serbia, Eurosceptic illiberal leaders spread anti-Western narratives, allowing China's diplomats to take a more hands-off approach in public.²²

China's more malign tactics include spreading overt disinformation about COVID-19, conducting technological espionage, and collecting intelligence on those spreading unfavorable opinions of China.²³

Despite its investment in the information space, China has limited narrative customization for individual countries in the region. Local Chinese embassies often amplify language and storylines already circulating from the Chinese Foreign Ministry or state media instead of creating tailored messages to reach new audiences. An example of this is the consistency of narratives about the spread of conspiracy theories on the origins of COVID-19 throughout the pandemic.²⁴ A key exception to this rule is Greece, a country that China prioritizes for its geostrategic location as well as its membership in NATO and the EU.²⁵ Chinese narratives in Greece include the two countries' past as ancient civilizations, which provides a shared history that China uses to build a connection.²⁶

However, by failing to customize narratives across the region for local audiences, Chinese messages have proven ineffective at persuading in-country listeners.²⁷ The intended audience for many of the messages spread by embassies may not be the local populations receiving them, but rather the Foreign Ministry in Beijing. In this way, communications have become a bureaucratic exercise for diplomats to demonstrate to their bosses they are vigorously performing their duties.

Content-sharing agreements between Chinese state media and local outlets in CEE countries are also common. The 2017 "Year of China-CEEC Media Cooperation" led to many such agreements, allowing for state propaganda to be published as authoritative news on China.²⁸ A more concerning development is Chinese entities purchasing stakes in local media outlets. An extreme example of this took place in the Czech Republic, where a nominally private Chinese firm bought *Empresa Media*.²⁹ According to a study performed by MapInfluenCE, the acquisition had a profound impact. Negative and neutral coverage of China disappeared, leaving only positive portrayals. Furthermore, topics such as the BRI were covered at much higher frequency than in any other Czech outlets.³⁰ While this may not be representative of a common pattern across the region, it does demonstrate potential vulnerabilities.



In 2014, the China Belt and Road Cooperation agreed to build the Bar-Boljare highway in Montenegro. The highway has been met with many delays and is still under construction. Credit: Miomir Magdevski, 2019.

Economic Leverage

China's use of its economic clout for geopolitical purposes is frequently pointed to in the context of the 14+1 and has taken many forms. The most aggressive example is China's use of extreme economic coercion against Lithuania after the government in Vilnius opened a "Taiwanese Representative Office" in 2021. The PRC has traditionally insisted that such offices be designated as representing "Taipei" to avoid implying that Taiwan is capable of conducting diplomatic relations.³¹ In response, China imposed an undeclared economic blockade on goods from Lithuania, including intermediary goods from third countries using any Lithuanian parts in their products.³² Punitive measures like this are designed to create a powerful deterrent effect for any country considering a challenge to China's core interests. The immediate and probably counterproductive effect of these sanctions was not to deter Lithuania, but to highlight China's use of coercive economic tactics.

Large construction projects in the energy and transport sectors were once the heart of the 14+1 project, offering both political and economic benefits for China. One aim was to promote trade and investment. Another was to build political support among

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the public and elites. In the long run, other more subtle tactics such as corrosive capital and strategic corruption hamper non-EU countries' membership aspirations.

However, for much of Central and Eastern Europe, China's economy is less attractive, the result of reputational risk and disappointing results. Governments and private actors are increasingly worried about the risks of partnering with the Chinese government and other Chinese entities, as Beijing's reputation has fallen in the CEE region due to an increasingly aggressive international stance, human rights violations at home, and its response to the pandemic.³³ Chinese projects have also been tied to corruption and environmental damage. Most importantly, the PRC has overpromised and underdelivered on investment and development assistance, especially among 14+1 countries that are members of the EU.³⁴

Cultural Influence

With limited success in the economic and information space, China has increasingly prioritized soft power, including culture, education, and people-to-people exchanges. Confucius Institutes (CIs) are now present in every 14+1 country and are often a hub for Chinese culture and language instruction.³⁵ Funded and supported by the CCP, these programs have repeatedly faced accusations of teaching the official CCP party line, distorting modern Chinese history, and prohibiting discussions of sensitive issues like Taiwan, Tibet, and Tiananmen Square.³⁶ Experts dispute the extent and impact of these omissions.³⁷ While expanding cultural and linguistic education on China is a laudable goal, such courses should not be part of influence operations.

While the Chinese diaspora in CEE is still small by Western standards, there are examples of these communities being exploited by Beijing for cultural and political ends. In Lithuania and Slovakia, for example, the Chinese diaspora has engaged in aggressive counter-demonstrations against protests by human rights activists when Chinese leaders were visiting. By some reports, these counterprotests were conducted in coordination with the local embassies.³⁸

To reach a more general public and engage in more traditional soft-power diplomacy, Chinese embassies throughout the region have created Facebook and Twitter accounts. This started in 2019 when the Hong Kong protests and subsequent crackdown created a domestic and public diplomacy crisis.³⁹ These were not only an attempt to advance the Chinese perspective in public conversation around sensitive topics like Hong Kong, but also to amplify soft power efforts, including people-to-people exchanges. However these accounts usually have limited impact, and much of the engagement they do receive is inauthentic.⁴⁰

Leveraging Diplomacy and Aid

China also deploys more traditional tools of statecraft. This was most recently on display during the pandemic through mask diplomacy. China provided masks, tests, and other equipment to countries in need at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak. Successful narratives resulting from mask diplomacy were most prevalent in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Serbia. In these countries, pro-China narratives were most effectively amplified by local political actors instead of the Chinese officials themselves.⁴¹ China's vaccine diplomacy – which largely consisted of exports, not donations – centered on Hungary and the Western Balkans while the more Western-oriented countries in the region, notably Albania, bought Chinese vaccines through Turkey to avoid upsetting their Western partners.⁴²

Subnational engagement

China is also increasingly building relationships in countries at the local and sub-national level. This is mostly a challenge in countries with deep ethnic, linguistic, or religious divides, but also in countries where it has become increasingly difficult for China to influence policy at the national level. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Chinese influence is clearer in the mainly Serb-populated and Belgrade-aligned Republika Srpska (RS) than in the rest of the country.⁴³ RS leaders have stated their plans to turn to China and Russia if they are sanctioned by the West for their dispute with the national government.⁴⁴

Even in countries with less serious domestic divisions, Chinese provinces, prefectures, municipalities, and cities are establishing ties with regional and local governments, occasionally in the form of sister city agreements. According to a report by the Mercator Institute for China Studies, a European think tank sanctioned by China in 2021, “There are no comprehensive databases, public resources, or monitoring mechanisms that list in detail all of the sub-national partnerships that have been established. National governments are also often unaware of the extent of sub-national cooperation with China.”⁴⁵ This may present a vulnerability because subnational governance in Europe is decentralized while China's localities are coordinated and can be used as part of a wider influence operation. Furthermore, local leaders in European countries typically lack the resources or expertise to understand China's goals.

Implications for Policymakers

China's influence in Central and Eastern Europe poses both challenges and opportunities for Western policymakers as they work to strengthen the resilience of democracies in the region. While these recommendations are based on research to counter Chinese influence, they will have the added benefit of countering foreign influence from other states, including Russia. The approach should include a mix of investments and reforms at the local, national, and international level to address the weaknesses that authoritarians seek to exploit, but also to improve governance across the region. These include:

Invest in good governance

Improving transparency and state capacity is potentially the most important means of ensuring long-term resilience to Chinese influence. Good governance helps make countries immune to not only interference from China, but also Russia and other authoritarian actors. For the US, there is a real opportunity to make progress on this front. In December 2021 countries around the world announced individual and collective commitments, reforms, and initiatives to defend democracy at the first Summit for Democracy. This included commitments from many of the 14+1 countries on issues including judicial independence, digital public services, increased accountability, and fighting corruption and organized crime.⁴⁶ With the second summit planned for this upcoming December, now is a critical moment for the US to work with partners in the region to ensure follow through on these commitments, the benefits of which go far beyond curbing Chinese influence. Additionally, the US, working with European partners, should implement the comprehensive counter-corruption strategy presented by US President Joseph R. Biden's administration in December 2021.⁴⁷ Again, the benefits will go far beyond curbing Chinese influence, but will also help address Russian malign finance and improve domestic governance.

Support independent media and investigative journalism

Robust independent media sectors with the capacity to conduct investigative journalism is key for building resilience to authoritarian influence. Only when citizens are aware of the negative aspects of Chinese influence can they build the will to push for policies that lead to sustainable development instead of the corrosive capital and strategic corruption that Chinese projects too often bring. A strong media sector can also prevent self-censorship by calling out examples of corruption when they occur (e.g., from companies and academic institutions) and supporting other outspoken media outlets by covering similar stories about Chinese influence. US policymakers should encourage greater financial support for institutions such as the US Agency for Global Media, which includes Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty



Demonstration against Fudan University and in defense of Student Town, 5 June 2020.
Credit: David72001.

and Radio Free Asia. Especially in rural markets, underdeveloped areas, and closed media spaces, these services share credible information with local audiences that may have limited access to such sources. Support for independent media where China is actively working to co-opt and influence the media space should be a priority.

Expand investment and public diplomacy

Expanded investment from the US, along with partners at the EU, for infrastructure and energy connectivity can help to serve as a counter to China's BRI. While the Biden administration's Build Back Better World partnership has been slow to get off the ground, its recent relaunch as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure will hopefully bring about a renewed momentum behind the initiative. However, at a conceptual level Washington should avoid trying to compete with China by attempting to replicate BRI and instead play to its strengths. This includes working through multilateral development organizations where Washington plays a leading

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role, such as the World Bank and regional multilateral development banks. As Charles Kenny and Scott Morris of the Center for Global Development write in a recent essay for *Foreign Affairs*, “Rather than trying to beat China at its own game, the United States needs to recommit to a vision of planetary prosperity through global cooperation, openness, transparency, and equal opportunity. When it comes to physical capital, the World Bank and regional development banks are best suited to accomplish those goals.”⁴⁸ Offering these alternatives would leverage the strengths of the Euro-Atlantic community including cutting-edge technologies, world-class companies, and support for the rule of law. This has become more relevant since the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the disruptions in energy and grain exports that have highlighted the strategic importance of infrastructure for the CEE region.

Additionally, US policymakers should consider deepening people-to-people connections. Engagements in sister city partnerships may build some helpful, though modest connections at the local and municipal levels. However, educational scholarship opportunities are likely to strengthen pre-existing soft power advantages and develop more meaningful ties. As Kenny and Morris rightly put it, “The higher education system in the United States is the envy of the world, one that has schooled business and political leaders from almost every country on the planet. China is trying to copy the model.” The US should play to its strengths rather than compete with China on its terms.

Enhance and harmonize investment screening mechanisms

In October 2020, the EU framework for screening foreign direct investment (FDI) became fully operational. While not all member states have a screening mechanism in place yet, once fully implemented this will be an important and powerful tool for protecting European interests from corrosive investment. Beyond screening foreign investments, the gap between investment screening regulations across Europe is still too large.⁴⁹ Enhancing these mechanisms and harmonizing them with other democracies can help ensure that Chinese entities do not get the opportunity to control key firms in strategic industries like telecommunications, media, and energy.

Additionally, governments should close security loopholes like foreign funding of political campaigns. The European Parliament recently adopted a comprehensive report from the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, Including Disinformation, which included recommendations for closing such loopholes.⁵⁰ The US law enforcement and federal elections officials have learned important lessons on investigating foreign money in politics. US officials and government experts should work closely with their

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counterparts at the EU and among member states to exchange lessons learned and best practices. For example, there have been several high-profile investigations performed by the US Department of Justice and Senate Select Committee on Intelligence into foreign interference operations against US democracy. Conducting a series of briefings with these investigators and their foreign counterparts would help further advance a more detailed understanding of how such operations are conducted.

Address the demand side of disinformation through media literacy programs

In the long run, media literacy programs can play an important role in building resilience to malign authoritarian influence, especially information operations.⁵¹ The Baltic states have particular expertise in this realm due to decades of experience combatting Russian information operations. The rest of the region can learn from these small but strong states. To further counter the effects of disinformation and broader information operations, governments and civil society should strengthen engagement with technology firms. Finally, to help disinformation researchers and content moderators in smaller countries, investments in technologies that can help analyze data and track narratives, such as automated sentiment analysis, should be improved for smaller language groups.

Prioritize tracking Chinese influence at the local and sub-national levels

With China increasingly directing its influence efforts beyond national governments, it is important to fund projects countering Chinese influence at the local and sub-national levels. Below the national level and among less educated constituencies, civil society, independent media, and universities generally have more limited capacity to build expertise on malign influence. This makes it easier for Chinese interference to have an impact. To address the challenge, it is also imperative to understand the scope of the problem by tracking and better understanding sister city agreements, Chinese investments in universities outside of capitals and major cities, and ties between the CCP and local political leaders.

Reform EU foreign policy decision-making

Deterrence by denial is a useful concept to prevent CCP influence operations in Europe. Such strategies seek to deter an action by making it unfeasible or unlikely to succeed, therefore denying a potential aggressor's confidence in attaining its objectives. China has put effort into influencing individual countries because the EU makes decisions on common foreign and security policy through unanimity. Any of the 27 member states – no matter the size or relevance on the issue – can



President Joe Biden and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen speak at press conference, Sunday, October 31, 2021, at La Nuvola Convention Center in Rome. Credit: Official White House Photo by Adam Schultz.

prevent or water down any decision. To remove the incentive for Chinese influence operations, the EU should consider significant reforms, such as introducing qualified majority voting (QMV) on common foreign and security policy decisions. This would mean that decisions on foreign policy could be adopted on the vote of 55% of EU states if they represent at least 65% of the population.

Such proposals have been debated for years and the exact contours of what decisions can be made through QMV deserves serious consideration and debate at the EU level. As a starting point, the EU should consider the parameters that European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen called for in 2021, applying QMV to areas such as sanctions and human rights. Such issue areas, which do not have military or defense implications, can be reformed without a treaty change.⁵² As the EU plays a more prominent role on the world stage it will need to operate as a more coherent and representative body, not subject to the whims and individual interests of each member state.

Conclusion

Geopolitics, moving into hyper-geopolitics, is back. The world has changed and while the framing of Russia's war in Ukraine as part of a broader conflict pitting democracy against autocracy can at times be overstated, it is undeniable that authoritarian regimes are seeking to exploit the openness of democracies as part of this geopolitical tug of war.

The war in Ukraine has put China in a difficult situation: it does not want to be seen in the same light as Russia, but it has also become increasingly distrustful of the West. Measures such as the stress test conducted in February and March⁵³ to see how resilient the Chinese economy would be to Russia-style sanctions and its "dual circulation" strategy of simultaneously promoting exports and stronger domestic demand⁵⁴ make clear that there is serious thought in Beijing about possible further divisions with the West and what that would mean for China's role in the world. While Russia is the most immediate threat to the liberal world order, policymakers in the US and Europe have not lost focus on the challenges posed by China's rise.

In this light, efforts to promote the resilience of democracies are more important than ever.

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