

THE POSITION OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA ON KOSOVO AND METOHIIJA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE DEFENCE OF INTERNATIONAL LAW AND THE EXPANSION OF THE INTEREST FRONTIERS*

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Despite the geopolitical challenges in the immediate environment in Central Asia and the Pacific, the People's Republic of China plays an increasingly active diplomatic role in the Balkans, primarily by providing unconditional support to Belgrade regarding Kosovo and Metohija. Is it an isolated step forward or a tactical move that is in line with the new strategic foreign policy thinking? In search for an answer, the paper considers the evolution of the principle of non-interference in China's foreign policy, its re-evaluation and adaptation in the context of the transition to a multipolar world order, the expansion of the "interest frontiers" conditioned by the Belt and Road Initiative, and the preservation of China's territorial integrity and sovereignty in the matter of Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The paper analyses the processes that have strengthened Beijing's position on Kosovo and Metohija in recent years: the derecognition of Taiwan and Kosovo and Metohija, the increased Western pressure on Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and the understanding that resolving the status of Kosovo and Metohija is impossible without China's approval in the UN Security Council. It has been concluded that the issue of Kosovo and Metohija reflects both the main postulates of China's foreign policy and its evolution. This attitude of Beijing will make it difficult for the West to complete the "independence of Kosovo", it will increase the pressure of the EU and the US on Serbia, and it will also strengthen the resilience of Belgrade.

Key words: China, Belt and Road, Republic of Serbia, Kosovo and Metohija, multipolarity, territorial integrity, interest frontiers, China-US relations

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China's transition to global power status

Despite the geopolitical challenges in the immediate environment in Central Asia and the Pacific - such as the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the formation of the AUKUS Partnership aimed at its "containment" - the People's Republic of China has an increasingly active diplomatic role in the Balkans. With its unconditional support to Belgrade and initiatives related to Kosovo and Metohija, Beijing has also rejected the appointment of a "High Representative" for Bosnia and Herzegovina as illegitimate. These moves have set off an alarm in the leading members of NATO and the European Union, which have reacted with indignation to the strategic Serbian-Chinese cooperation within the Belt and Road Initiative so far. Some Western analyses indicate that China represents an even greater danger than the Russian Federation for rounding off "Kosovo's independence".¹

Why is China ready to tolerate the Western criticism and condemnation that, together with the Russian Federation, it spreads "malign influence" in the Balkans? What are Beijing's interests? Is it an isolated step forward or a tactical move that is in line with the new strategic foreign policy thinking in Beijing? For the preservation of the territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia, these issues are of key importance taking into account China's membership in the UN Security Council and the Western confrontation with the fact that every solution to the issue of Kosovo and Metohija has to be confirmed in this body.

In this context, it is important to consider changes in China's foreign policy, especially the evolution of consideration of the principle of non-interference, which is traditionally one of the main postulates of China's foreign policy, but which experiences a kind of re-evaluation and adaptation in the context of the transformation of the global world order.

The evolution of the "principle of non-interference" in China's foreign policy

China's foreign policy traditionally relies on the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" from 1954, which refer to "mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty" and non-interference in internal affairs.² They were included in the preamble of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China from 1982.³

¹ David L. Philips, „China, not Russia, is the Greater Threat to Kosovo”, *BIRN*, 29.09.2021. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/09/29/china-not-russia-is-the-greater-threat-to-kosovo/>

² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, „The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence”, 30 July 2014, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjw_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbd_665378/t1179045.shtml

³ The State Council of the People's Republic of China, „Constitution of the People's Republic of China”, November 20, 2019, https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/lawsregulations/201911/20/content_WS5ed8856ec6d0b3f0e9499913.html

In its foreign policy, China was consistent and largely adhered to these principles.⁴ In the post-Cold War period, Beijing also viewed these principles as a great barrier to the Western “humanitarian intervention”. However, geopolitical changes in the world put the principle of non-interference under special pressure. In this context, three key topics for China’s foreign policy can be distinguished:

– *transition to a multipolar order.* China's economic growth in the last two decades has inspired great expansion of Chinese foreign policy interests to regions out of Asia and the Pacific, which, along with the partial decline of the US power, is leading to an evolution from a unipolar to a multipolar order in which Beijing plays a key role. China is viewed from Moscow as a “strategic partner”, from Brussels as a “systemic rival”, and from Washington as a “strategic competitor”, whose power of expansion should be limited, which opens an era of potential global rivalry in regions around the world;

– *preservation of internal stability, territorial integrity and sovereignty of China.* China faces constant systemic pressure regarding Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan, whose separatist aspirations, primarily under the guise of the “struggle for human rights”, are supported by the US and the EU, while Beijing insists that it will not allow any threat to its sovereignty and political independence;

– *implementation of strategic development projects at global level.* Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China has launched the Belt and Road Initiative, which includes cooperation with 140 countries spread across Asia and the Pacific, Africa, Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, which poses a huge challenge to security, especially trade, traffic and energy infrastructure.⁵

In this context, despite the proclaimed support to joining the policy of non-interference, an expert debate has opened in China about its sustainability.⁶

Chen Zheng points out that during the long-term debate in Beijing, a “loose consensus” has emerged, stating that it is necessary to introduce “more creativity and flexibility in practice”, while at the same time maintaining the principle of non-interference as a guide.⁷ Pragmatic concepts such as Zhao Huasheng’s “constructive involvement” and Wang Yizhou’s “creative participation” have been proposed, which advocate Beijing’s commitment to the principle of non-interference and “selective participation” in accordance with its interests.⁸

⁴ Stuart Harris, *China's Foreign Policy*, Polity, Cambridge, 2014.

⁵ Christoph Nedopil, „Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative”, Shanghai, Green Finance & Development Center, FISF Fudan University, <https://greenfdc.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>

⁶ Zheng Chen, „China debates on the non-interference principle” in Huiyun Feng, Kai He and Yan Xuetong (eds.) *Chinese Scholars and Foreign Policy Debating International Relations*, Routledge, New York, 2019, pp. 86-106.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁸ Huasheng Zhao, „Non-interference in internal affairs and constructive involvement - reflection on Chinese policy after the unrest in Kyrgyzstan”, *Xinjiang Shifan Daxue Xuebao (Zhaxue Shehui Kexueban)*, vol. 32, no. 1, January 2011, pp. 23–29; Yizhou Wang, „New Direction for China’s Diplomacy”, *Beijing Review*, 5 March 2012, www.bjreview.com.cn/world/txt/2012-03/05/content_439626.htm

In order to define an authentic Chinese theory on international relations, Yan Xuetong proposed “moral realism” in 2014.⁹ Based on the Chinese philosophy, he attempts to provide an alternative explanation for China’s rise to global power status in the emerging multipolar order.¹⁰ Skeptical of the interests of the Western powers, especially the US, Yan advocates the development of military and political partnerships and proposes to selectively reward those countries that “would like to play a constructive role in China’s growth”, and to punish those who are hostile to China.¹¹

On the one hand, Beijing does not formally renounce the principle of non-interference because it still considers it crucial for the defence of its territorial integrity and sovereignty. Nevertheless, Beijing’s intention to adapt its foreign policy to new circumstances and international networking is obvious.¹²

The development of transregional diplomacy was particularly emphasized by the establishment of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, which has opened not only alternative development paths for the participating countries, but has also developed new political partnerships. For China itself, at the same time, this area means the expansion of the “interest frontiers”, that is, “a geographical area that is defined (and constantly redefined) by the evolution of the Chinese interests and threats to them”, which means the necessity of transformation and expansion of foreign policy and security activities¹³. Thus, China, almost a decade after taking over patrolling actions in the anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden in 2008, opened a military base in Djibouti in 2017, also to protect economic interests and the Chinese citizens.¹⁴

Ghiselli believes that a foreign policy consensus is being created in Beijing that a military component is also necessary for the protection of global interests, and highlights the words of Zhou Ping, a professor and advisor at the State Council of China, who assesses that by military presence China should expand its “strategic boundaries” so that they coincide with the “interest frontiers”.¹⁵ Rolland assesses that the Belt and Road has expanded China’s national interests far beyond its borders, and that Chinese “strategic planners agree that

⁹ Xuetong Yan, „From Keeping a Low Profile to Striving for Achievement”, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 7(2), 2014, pp. 153-184

¹⁰ Svetlana Krivokhizh and Elena Soboleva, „The Past Serving the Present: Yan Xuetong’s Theory of Moral Realism and the Future of the Global Order”, *Mirovaya ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya*, 2017, vol. 61, No 11, pp. 76-84.

¹¹ Chen, pp. 95-96.

¹² Marc Lanteigne, *Chinese Foreign Policy: An Introduction*, Routledge, New York, 2020, p. 5.

¹³ Andrea Ghiselli, *Protecting China’s Interests Overseas: Securitization and Foreign Policy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 1.

¹⁴ Timothy R. Heath, Christian Curriden, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, and Jennifer Kavanagh, *China’s Military Interventions: Patterns, Drivers, and Signposts*, Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2021. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA444-4.html

¹⁵ Ghiselli, p. 2.

the limits of the Chinese national security are defined by the expansion of interests abroad”, which “has to be accompanied by the support of military power”.¹⁶ Thus, in 2018, the Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe pointed out that China is ready to “provide strong security guarantees to Pakistan for the joint construction of the Belt and Road”.¹⁷ Namely, one of the key segments of the Belt and Road is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which gives Beijing the access to the Indian Ocean and is located near the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20 percent of the world oil is transported by tankers.¹⁸ This corridor, however, is the target of terrorist groups, such as the so-called “Balochistan Liberation Army”, whose attacks could “slow down China’s momentum in South Asia”, and thus harm the Belt and Road.¹⁹

This development of the Chinese strategic thought and actions is, logically, followed with great attention in the US, which treats the Belt and Road area as a “proxy for possible competition with China”.²⁰ In the analyses of the Washington institutes, it is pointed out that the Belt and Road Initiative itself has “intentional military and strategic functionality” built into it, and that there is “extensive evidence” that China is “developing a network of strategic strongholds that can greatly increase the costs of any US military intervention and reduce the willingness of the Belt and Road members to provide the access or assistance to the US”.²¹ It is estimated that “there are all ingredients” for future Chinese military operations abroad, and that possible intervention of the Chinese Army abroad will not be decided by “rules”, but by “international crises and geopolitics”.²²

¹⁶ Nadège Rolland, „Securing the Belt and Road: Prospects for Chinese Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads“ in Nadège Rolland (ed). *Securing the belt and road initiative China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads*, National Bureau of Asian Research, Washington D.C., NBR Special Report 80, September 2019, p. 2.

¹⁷ Panyue Huang, „Chinese Defense Minister Meets Pakistani Naval Chief of Staff,“ *China Military Online*, April 19, 2018, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2018-04/19/content_4809874.htm

¹⁸ Karl Russell, Denise Lu and Anjali Singhvi, „Why This Narrow Strait Next to Iran Is So Critical to the World's Oil Supply“. *The New York Times*. July 11, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/07/07/business/economy/iran-strait-of-hormuz-tankers.html>

¹⁹ Eshel Rosen, „China in Afghanistan: „Not a luxury but a necessity“. *Eurasianet*. May 13, 2022. <https://eurasianet.org/china-in-afghanistan-not-a-luxury-but-a-necessity>

²⁰ Ivona Lađevac and Nenad Stekić, „Assessing the Political Risks in Eurasia in the Wake of the Fifth China's Grand Strategy“, *The Review of International Affairs*, Vol. LXXII, No. 1183, September–December 2021, p. 61.

²¹ Daniel R. Russel and Blake H. Berger, *Weaponizing the Belt and Road Initiative*, Asia Society Policy Institute, Washington D.C., 2020, p. 42.

²² Mathieu Duchâtel, „Overseas Military Operations in Belt and Road Countries: The Normative Constraints and Legal Framework“ in Nadège Rolland (ed). *Securing the belt and road initiative China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads*, National Bureau of Asian Research, Washington D.C., NBR Special Report 80, September 2019, p. 17.

A change in Beijing's strategic thinking

In the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade on May 7, 1999, three Chinese journalists were killed and 20 employees were wounded, which led to a chain reaction that has changed not only the awareness of the danger of the unipolar order for Chinese interests, but also the strategic foreign policy and security reflection.

The eruption of popular discontent has led to demonstrations against the US Embassy and Consulate, strengthening of anti-Western sentiment and national homogenization. Lampton points out that the majority of the Chinese has considered Washington's explanations "inadequate, insincere and unconvincing", and that the bombing of the Embassy has left a "scar of deep mistrust" between the US and China, "whose relationship has not fully recovered".²³

Shortly after the NATO aggression, China adopted the "New Security Concept", which, according to Ghiselli, aimed to "improve the view towards a multipolar world order as a response to the US global dominance, especially after the bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999 by the US aviation brought fear to the top of the Chinese civilian and military leadership of the onset of a new era of the US unilateralism".²⁴ Gries assesses that the Chinese, "alarmed by the Kosovo war and the US bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, began to reconsider their benevolent view of the international order".²⁵ According to him, "in post-Belgrade China" a "Manichean, black-and-white view of China-US relations" has been developed, and the bombing of the Chinese Embassy can be viewed as a "turning point in China-US relations", and he warned in 2001 that the resulting mutual perception of a zero-sum game can have "dangerous consequences for peace in the 21st century".²⁶

After the NATO aggression, China became concerned about the establishment of "coalitions of the willing" and the consequences this could have for international interference in the issues of Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang²⁷. Zhang Wei from the Chinese Navy warned in 1999 that "the Kosovo war and the resulting weakness of international organizations will negatively affect the security environment in Asia", and that "future US unilateral moves in the Taiwan Strait could also be expected on the Korean Peninsula".²⁸

²³ David Lampton, *Following the Leader: Ruling China, From Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2014, p. 118.

²⁴ Ghiselli, p. 23.

²⁵ Peter Hays Gries, „Disillusionment and Dismay: How Chinese Netizens Think and Feel About the Two Koreas" in Gilbert Rozman (ed.), *China's Foreign Policy: Who makes it and how is it made*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2012, p. 306.

²⁶ Peter Hays Gries, „Tears of Rage: Chinese Nationalist Reactions to the Belgrade Embassy Bombing", *The China Journal*, No. 46, July 2001, p. 26.

²⁷ Zhongying Pang, „China's Changing Attitude to UN Peacekeeping", *International Peacekeeping*, 12 (1), 2005, p. 88.

²⁸ Ghiselli, pp. 51-52.

The defence of territorial integrity in the conditions of the transition to multipolarity

For Beijing, Kosovo and Metohija is a part of the Republic of Serbia and represents an example of the defence of territorial integrity in the conditions of the unipolar order and the transition to multipolarity. To the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, in 2010, on the unilateral declaration of independence of the Kosovo Albanians, China responded by the announcement that “respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states is one of the fundamental principles of modern international law”, and that “China respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Serbia”.²⁹

Beijing maintained this position during the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue under the auspices of the EU, repeating it with every statement on the Kosovo issue in international forums, as well as during meetings with the Serbian officials. It is important to note that China's principled policy on the Kosovo issue was firm even before the intensification of the Chinese-Serbian economic cooperation within the framework of the China-CEEC and Belt and Road platforms - therefore, it is independent of economic interests, the Chinese investments and loans.

In the last few years, three processes in particular have strengthened China's position on the issue of Kosovo and Metohija.

(1) the derecognition of Taiwan and Kosovo. After the withdrawal of recognition by Kiribati and the Solomon Islands in 2019, and Nicaragua at the end of 2021, the number of countries that recognize Taiwan is reduced to 14 (Belize, Vatican City, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Marshall Islands, Paraguay, Republic of Palau, Republic of Nauru, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Tuvalu). From 2017 to 2021, seven countries derecognized Taiwan (Burkina Faso, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Kiribati, Nicaragua, Panama, Solomon Islands), and China is making diplomatic efforts to continue this process. In the same period, the process of withdrawing the recognition of the “independent Kosovo” by 18 countries (Burundi, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Granada, Commonwealth of Dominica, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Papua New Guinea, Republic of Nauru, Republic of Palau, Sao Tome and Principe, Solomon Islands, Sierra Leone, Suriname, Togo, Union of Comoros, Central African Republic) was carried out. Although these two processes are not directly related, the course of events alarmed the Western countries, which initiated activities that would slow down the negative trends for the “independent Kosovo” and Taiwan. Within the agreement on the “economic normalization” with Prishtina, signed in Washington in September 2020, Belgrade committed to a “year moratorium on its campaign for withdrawing recognition”, while Prishtina committed to refrain from submitting “requests for membership in

²⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, „Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang's Response to the International Court of Justice's Advisory Opinion on the Kosovo Case”, July 23, 2010, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/cgvn/eng/fyrth/t719113.htm>

international organizations”.³⁰ After Prishtina returned to the policy of requesting membership, and received the support of the leading Western countries for this, Belgrade continued the process of derecognition.³¹ At the same time, pressure is being exerted on the EU countries that have not recognized secession (Spain, Romania, Slovakia, Cyprus, Greece) to take steps towards establishing relations with Prishtina, such as opening trade representative offices.³² Regarding Taiwan, there are increasingly coordinated efforts to relegitimize Taipei in Central and Eastern Europe. These processes are particularly pronounced in countries that are strongly influenced by the US. In November 2021, Lithuania allowed a representative office under the name “Taiwan” to be opened in Vilnius, which represents a fundamental difference from the representative office called “Taipei” that existed in other European cities. Beijing saw this move as a kind of recognition of Taiwan, and it has lowered diplomatic relations with Vilnius and stopped approving export permits for the Lithuanian exporters.³³

2) The pressure on China over Xinjiang and Hong Kong. For the first time since 1989, and the events on Tiananmen Square, in March 2021 the European Union approved significant sanctions against China, in relation to the position of the Uyghurs in the Chinese province of Xinjiang.³⁴ Beijing responded with sanctions, and accused the EU of undermining the Chinese sovereignty in Xinjiang, where there are secessionist tendencies supported by the terrorist organization “Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement”. In addition to sanctions due to Xinjiang, Washington introduced a series of restrictive measures against the Chinese officials in relation to Hong Kong in mid-2021, and the pressure is increasing on the EU to follow the US position.³⁵ Beijing also views this situation as a threat to its territorial integrity, in the context of a comprehensive strategy of the Western pressure.

The Republic of Serbia has refused to join the declarations of the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union regarding China and emphasized its principled support for its sovereignty and territorial integrity, which is why it is subject to increasingly fierce Western criticism and diplomatic pressure. There is the

³⁰ Beta, „Šta je potpisano – tekst sporazuma“, *N1*, September 5, 2020, <https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a636581-tekst-sporazuma-beograd-pristina/>.

³¹ Maja Živanović i Ljudmila Cvetković, „Beograd nastavlja da radi na povlačenju priznanja Kosova“, *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, May 13, 2022. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-kosovo-savet-sednica/31846576.html>

³² Beta, „Grčka dopustila unapređenje statusa trgovinskog predstavništva Kosova u Atini“, *N1*, June 4, 2021. <https://rs.n1info.com/biznis/grcka-dopustila-unapredjenje-statusa-trgovinskog-predstavnistva-kosova-u-atini/>

³³ The Guardian, „China condemns opening of Taiwan office in Lithuania as ‘egregious act’“, November 19, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/19/china-condemns-opening-of-taiwan-office-in-lithuania-as-egregious-act>

³⁴ Robin Emmott, „EU, China impose tit-for-tat sanctions over Xinjiang abuses“, *Reuters*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-china-sanctions-idUSKBN2BE1AI>

³⁵ Reinhard Bütikofer, „The EU needs to step up on Hong Kong sanctions“, *Euractiv*, July 29, 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-china/opinion/the-eu-needs-to-step-up-on-hong-kong-sanctions/>

Western narrative saying that China does not want to recognize the independence of Kosovo “not only out of solidarity with its Serbian ally”, but also “so as not to open a discussion on the secession of Taiwan and Hong Kong”.³⁶

3) Resolving the status of Kosovo and Metohija. It is impossible without China's approval. The diplomatic process of derecognizing Kosovo, the lack of will or power of the EU as a mediator to influence Prishtina to implement the agreements with Belgrade, as well as international law and the position of China and Russia, have led to a consensus among the leading countries in the West that the solution to the status of Kosovo and Metohija, nevertheless, is not possible without the approval of these two countries in the UN Security Council, and that the process of unilateral declaration of independence coordinated in 2008 is weakened and insufficient to bring full international legitimacy to Prishtina.

These three processes indicate that, with its commitment to protecting the norms of international law regarding territorial integrity and sovereignty, the Republic of Serbia can count on the full support of the People's Republic of China in relation to Kosovo and Metohija. In this context, it is crucial to insist that, regardless of the mediation of the European Union in the dialogue, a solution to the Kosovo issue is not possible out of the United Nations system, that is, out of the international legal order based on the UN Charter. On the other hand, Beijing's support implies that Belgrade remains consistent in respecting the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the People's Republic of China, respecting the principle of “one China” and refraining from agreeing to declarations, restrictive measures and other activities directed against Beijing's fundamental interests.

The Belt and Road and Chinese-Serbian cooperation in the context of the expansion of Beijing's “interest frontiers”

The arrival of China as a new major power in the Balkans, in a geopolitical sense, brings Serbia “significantly more favourable prospects for the Serbian interests” by strengthening the presence of forces that are favourable to it and that are ready to provide it with strategic assistance.³⁷ China views Serbia as a particularly important and strategic partner to a great extent due to its political identity as a country that is military neutral. In addition, Serbia, although a candidate for the EU membership, does not join the declarations of Brussels which are critically intoned towards China. Belgrade also has traditionally close relations with Moscow, which has become an important strategic partner of Beijing. Finally, Serbia and China share common sensitivity to the violation of sovereignty and territorial integrity.³⁸ Relations at the highest level are intimate, and the political will to improve them is strong and proactive.

³⁶ China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe, *Empty Shell No More: China's Growing Footprint in Central and Eastern Europe*, Policy Paper, 7 April 2020, p. 30
https://chinaobservers.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CHOICE_Empty-shell-no-more.pdf

³⁷ Aleksandar Gajić, „Strateški okvir srpske političke kulture“, *Vojno delo*, 72 (4), 2020.

³⁸ Marko Filijović i Zoran Kilibarda, „Kineski 'pohod' na Balkan“, *Vojno delo*, 65 (4), 2013.

The intensity of the Chinese-Serbian partnership within the framework of the China-CEEC format and the Belt and Road has been particularly strengthened by comprehensive economic and military-technical cooperation. As a country with a strategically important geographical position, Serbia is located at the intersection of Pan-European corridors VII (Danube) and X (Athens–Budapest), which are of great importance for connecting land and sea routes in the Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe. In this context, Serbia is also an active participant in the modernization of railway traffic on the Belgrade-Budapest route. This relation directly refers to the importance of the Greek port of Piraeus, which China COSCO, in just a few years, has turned into the largest European port on the Mediterranean.³⁹ The long-term plans of the Chinese company are to expand the capacity of this port to 10 million TEU (the twenty-foot equivalent unit), which would make it “the greatest and most efficient logistics hub in Central and Eastern Europe”.⁴⁰ Taking into account these plans and the fact that the corridor to Central Europe passes right next to Kosovo and Metohija, it is clear that China needs security and predictability on the route. In addition, China particularly helped Serbia by taking over the steel plant in Smederevo (HBIS) and the mine in Bor (Zijin), which were the largest Serbian exporters in 2021.⁴¹ The Chinese investment in the region can also be viewed as “a part of its wider geoeconomic performance with strategic, long-term meaning”.⁴² In this context, it is logical to expand the “interest frontiers” of China, i.e. the expectation that Beijing will increasingly want to protect its partnerships and its interests - political, economic and infrastructural.

In accordance with the need to protect the Belt and Road, and also to enter the European defence and security market, the expansion of the comprehensive strategic partnership between Serbia and China to the sphere of military and security cooperation can be viewed, especially after the visit of the delegation of the People’s Liberation Army of China to Serbia in 2017.⁴³ In just a few years, from donations of rubber boats and snowmobiles, cooperation has evolved to the delivery of CH-92A UAV and the transfer of technology for the “Pegasus” combat drone, and the culmination of the cooperation so far is the delivery of the Chinese FK-3 missile system, which completes the air defence system of Serbia.⁴⁴

³⁹ David Glass, „Piraeus largest European med port in 2020”, *Seatrade Maritime News*, March 15, 2021, <https://www.seatrade-maritime.com/ports-logistics/piraeus-largest-european-med-port-2020>

⁴⁰ Ilias Bellos, „Turning Piraeus into a Logistics Powerhouse”, *Ekathimerini*, November 11, 2021, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/economy/1171529/turning-piraeus-into-a-logistics-powerhouse/>

⁴¹ Beta, „Kineske kompanije Zidin i HBIS najveći izvoznici u Srbiji za osam meseci ove godine”, *Politika*, 24.09.2021., <https://www.politika.rs/scc/clanak/488397/Kineske-kompanije-Zidin-i-Hbis-najveci-izvoznici-u-Srbiji-za-osam-mesece-ove-godine>

⁴² Nevena Šekarić, „China’s 21st Century Geopolitics and Geo-economics: An Evidence from the Western Balkans”, *Međunarodni problemi*, LXXII (2), 2020, p. 370.

⁴³ Dragan Trailović, „Vojna i bezbednosna saradnja Kine i Srbije: pokazatelj nove uloge Kine u Evropi”, *Politika nacionalne bezbednosti*, Vol. 18 (1), 2020, pp. 125-145.

⁴⁴ Igor Topalović, „Za Vojsku Srbije kupuje se i od Istoka i od Zapada”, *RTS*, <https://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/4775496/kupovina-vojna-oprema.html>

Conclusion

The interest in the issue of Kosovo and Metohija reflects both the main postulates of China's foreign policy and its evolution: as a symbol of the struggle to preserve territorial integrity and sovereignty against the coordinated efforts of the West to threaten them; as a traumatic experience from the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999, which has greatly influenced the change in strategic reflection in Beijing; as a security issue of Corridor 10 and support to Serbia as an important strategic partner.

Therefore, it can be said that the issue of Kosovo and Metohija is in accordance with the mentioned key priorities of China's foreign policy: the transition to a multipolar order, the preservation of territorial integrity, as well as the implementation and provision of strategic development projects within the Belt and Road Initiative.

It is clear that the West does not view this role of China without reaction. In this context, concrete moves aimed at jeopardizing China's position on the issue of Kosovo and Metohija, as well as stopping the strengthening of bilateral cooperation between Belgrade and Beijing, which every year move the boundaries in terms of spectrum and intensity, are noticeable. Among them are: 1) accusations of the Chinese "malign influence" and the spread of "illiberalism" in Serbia and the Balkans; 2) networking of environmental activism critical of the Chinese investment in the energy sector in Bor and Smederevo; 3) an attempt to collapse high-tech cooperation, from artificial intelligence to 5G; 4) diplomatic pressure on Belgrade to harmonize its positions with the EU declarations that are critical of China, for the sake of progress in the European integration.

Despite these efforts, it is obvious that China firmly stands behind its support for the territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia, and that it is ready to improve and expand this support, both in bilateral relations and in international forums.

Serbia's principled policy, in accordance with international law and respect for China's territorial integrity and sovereignty, entails maintaining multivector foreign policy and military neutrality, supporting initiatives that advocate the indivisibility of international security, as well as proactive diplomatic and military cooperation with international actors that support this commitment.

This attitude will make it difficult for the West to complete "the independence of Kosovo", it will increase the pressure of the EU and the US on Serbia, and it will also strengthen the resilience and position of Belgrade.

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Summary

Despite the geopolitical challenges in its vicinity in Central Asia and the Pacific, the People’s Republic of China plays an increasingly active diplomatic role in the Balkans, primarily through its unconditional support to Belgrade regarding Kosovo and Metohija. Beijing’s positions have worried the Western supporters of Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence. Is China’s policy on this issue an isolated step forward or a tactical move in line with the new foreign policy thinking in Beijing? In an attempt to answer this question, the paper discusses the evolution of the principle of non-interference in China’s foreign policy, including the debate within the foreign policy academic community in Beijing. Despite being one of the basic postulates of China’s diplomacy, the principle of non-interference has faced re-evaluation and adaptation in the context of the transition towards a multipolar world order, the widening of Beijing’s “interest frontiers” conditioned by the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as the preservation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the People’s Republic of China regarding Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan. With rising power and widening interests under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China’s foreign policy interprets the non-interference principle with pragmatism and flexibility. The paper analyses the development in the last several years which have consolidated Beijing’s position on Kosovo: the parallel process of derecognition of

Taiwan and Kosovo, the increased Western pressure regarding Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and the realization of the fact that any resolution on the status of Kosovo and Metohija is impossible without China's approval in the UN Security Council. The article concludes that the issue of Kosovo and Metohija reflects both the basic postulates of China's foreign policy and its evolution: (1) as a symbol of fight for the preservation of territorial integrity and sovereignty opposite the Western attempts to jeopardize it; (2) as a traumatic experience of the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, which has conditioned the change in strategic thinking towards a more ambitious struggle for a multipolar world order - including great power competition in areas such as the Balkans; (3) as well as in the form of support to the Republic of Serbia as a foreign policy ally and important partner within the Belt and Road Initiative. As a result, Beijing's position will aggravate the Western attempts to round off "Kosovo's independence", increase the EU and the US pressure on Serbia, and also foster Belgrade's resilience.

Key words: China, Belt and Road Initiative, Republic of Serbia, Kosovo and Metohija, multipolarity, interest frontiers, territorial integrity, China-US relations

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