Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG 25 Jahre

Navigating Multipolarity: Southeast Europe in the EU's China Strategy

Ana Krstinovska, Plamen Tonchev, Stefan Vladisavljev and Zlatko Simonovski

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Executive summary

The paper examines how Southeast European (SEE) countries navigate their relations with China within a rapidly changing international order. It highlights how domestic politics, regional dynamics, and global shifts influence these countries' positions towards Beijing and alignment with the European Union (EU). While most SEE states maintain a formal commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration, their approaches to China reveal significant variations, ranging from pragmatic caution to active strategic alignment.

Using a comparative and longitudinal approach covering the period 2019–2025, the study analyzes how SEE countries align with Western positions in international fora, especially the United Nations (UN), how they respond to EU restrictive measures towards China, and how they engage in Chinese-led initiatives such as the Belt and Road and the China–CEE cooperation platform. It combines desk research, statistical analysis, and expert consultation to trace patterns of engagement and identify the domestic and strategic factors shaping these policies.

The findings show that SEE countries adopt divergent stances in multilateral settings. Albania, Croatia, Bulgaria, and North Macedonia generally align with Western-led initiatives critical of China, while Serbia consistently sides with Beijing and Greece remains cautious or abstains. The gradual decline in SEE participation in UN statements condemning China since 2024 reflects not a policy reversal but a period of tactical restraint, shaped by electoral cycles, economic uncertainty, and the evolving US-China competition. Similarly, while EU members and candidate countries such as Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia maintain full alignment with the EU's China-related policies, Serbia resists restrictive measures and cultivates a "special relationship" with Beijing. Since 2019, participation of Southeast European countries in the Belt and Road Initiative and the China–CEE cooperation platform has steadily declined, with most governments reducing engagement to symbolic levels to avoid antagonizing Beijing while maintaining Euro-Atlantic commitments.

Economic engagement remains the main driver of relations. Across the region, trade with China is asymmetric, dominated by imports of industrial and technological goods and limited exports of raw materials. Serbia and Greece host the most substantial Chinese investments in sectors such as energy, mining, and transport, while elsewhere Chinese financing remains modest. The region's experience with large-scale infrastructure projects illustrates both opportunity and vulnerability: when conducted within transparent EU frameworks, as in Croatia's Pelješac Bridge, outcomes can be positive, whereas projects financed through opaque bilateral loans, as in Montenegro or Serbia, have raised concerns over debt, governance, and environmental standards.

Beyond economics, China's soft-power presence varies widely. In Serbia and parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, media cooperation and elite-level ties amplify pro-China narratives, while in most other SEE states public opinion remains neutral or firmly pro-Western. Beijing's influence in Bulgaria or North Macedonia operates mainly through local partnerships in academia, municipalities, and media. In EU membership hopefuls with limited accession prospects, it fills the space left by limited EU engagement. These dynamics reveal both the adaptability of China's approach and the uneven resilience of SEE societies to external influence.

Overall, the analysis suggests that SEE countries' positioning towards China is shaped less by ideology than by pragmatic balancing. Domestic politics, strategic dependencies, and perceptions of economic opportunity determine the scope of

engagement. Serbia stands out as the only country to align politically with Beijing, while most others pursue cautious cooperation under the constraints of Euro-Atlantic commitments.

For the EU, the region represents both a vulnerability and an opportunity. The fragmented approach of SEE countries highlights the limits of Europe's coherence on China, yet their consistent alignment with EU policy in most cases shows potential for strengthening Europe's collective stance. The study concludes that a more inclusive EU policy that systematically integrates SEE perspectives, accelerates enlargement, and offers credible economic alternatives would enhance Europe's strategic resilience and its capacity to navigate an increasingly multipolar world.

Introduction

The international order is undergoing a profound transformation. Over the past decade, global power has gradually shifted from advanced democracies and liberal market economies towards a wider set of actors, including emerging economies, regional powers, and increasingly assertive authoritarian regimes. At the forefront of this transformation stands the People's Republic of China (PRC), which has presented itself as a leading force in the development of a new multipolar world. By advancing initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and deepening ties with developing and middle-income countries, Beijing has sought to position itself as the champion of an alternative order—one that it describes as more just, democratic, and sustainable. In practice, these efforts are part of a broader strategy aimed at reshaping international institutions, weakening transatlantic dominance, and advancing China's political, economic, and security interests.

Since gaining its seat from the Republic of China (Taiwan) at the United Nations (UN) in 1971, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has transformed from a relatively marginal actor into one of the most influential players in the organization. Initially cautious and ideologically driven in its engagement, Beijing has gradually expanded its role to become the second-largest financial contributor to both the UN regular budget and peacekeeping operations. Over the past two decades, China has systematically increased its representation in senior UN leadership positions, leveraged its veto power in the Security Council more actively, and sought to shape norms on issues ranging from human rights to development and technology governance. It has also sought to embed its own perspective into multilateral discourse by pushing for the appointment of individuals aligned with China's worldview on key UN positions,[1] usually coming from states with higher voting affinity with China.[2] Ultimately, such dynamics contribute to outcomes more favourable to China.

For the European Union (EU), these dynamics pose both immediate challenges and long-term strategic dilemmas. On the one hand, the EU must contend with the global instability generated by great power competition, disruptions in supply chains, and the weaponisation of trade, investment, and technology flows. On the other hand, it must reconcile the divergent interests of its own member states, navigate uncertainty in its transatlantic relationship, and balance the imperatives of stability and competitiveness with its founding values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The EU's approach to China reflects these tensions. Framed simultaneously as a partner, a competitor, and a systemic rival,[3] China has become a focal point of European debates on economic security, strategic autonomy, and Europe's role in a changing world order.

Yet, much of this debate has been confined to the perspectives of EU member states and major EU powers, overlooking the strategic relevance of Europe's periphery and immediate neighbourhood. The countries of Southeast Europe (SEE)—including both EU members and enlargement countries—are directly affected by China's global and regional ambitions. Over the past decade, they have engaged in infrastructure partnerships, trade agreements, and political cooperation within China-led frameworks such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the cooperation platform between China and Central and Eastern Europe (China–CEE). At the same time, they have been asked to align with the EU's evolving China policies, common positions and restrictive measures, often without having a meaningful voice in their formulation.

This dual position creates both vulnerabilities and opportunities. On the one hand, China's influence in SEE — through investment, political leverage, and narratives of "win-win cooperation" — can challenge democratic governance, increase dependency,

and complicate the EU's integration strategies. On the other hand, by lending support to enhancing the European voice in the international arena, the SEE region ultimately acts as a contributor to strengthening EU's global actorness. SEE states' experience highlights not only the risks of fragmentation in Europe's China policy, but also the potential for greater resilience if their perspectives and interests are integrated into EU-wide strategies.

Therefore, this report seeks to bring the SEE region into the centre of the policy debate on Europe's global role vis-à-vis China. It focuses on nine countries—Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia—whose diverse political trajectories, economic structures, degrees of integration with the EU, and distinct relationships with China provide a rich basis for comparative analysis. Specifically, it examines three interrelated questions:

- How do SEE countries position themselves vis-à-vis China in international fora, like the United Nations (UN) and in relation to the EU's China-policy?
- How receptive are these countries to Chinese initiatives and bilateral advances, and what are the implications for alignment with European (and more broadly – Western) positions?
- In what ways can the SEE countries strengthen the EU's global role by contributing to a more coherent and effective European approach to China?

To answer these questions, the report employs a mixed-method research design that combines a longitudinal and comparative approach, focusing on the period 2019-2025. The analysis builds on extensive desk research drawing from a wide range of primary and secondary sources. These include official documents and government statements; resolutions, statements, and voting records from international organizations such as the UN; statistical databases and polling results that shed light on economic trends, trade and investment flows, as well as public perceptions. The research further integrates insights from existing scholarly literature and policy analyses on EU–China relations, Chinese foreign policy, especially in the UN, and the political and economic dynamics of Southeast Europe.

In addition, the study incorporates qualitative evidence through targeted consultations with diplomats, policymakers, and regional experts. This combination of methods enabled the research team to map patterns of engagement, alignment, and divergence between SEE countries, China, and the EU. By triangulating data across official sources, expert opinion, and quantitative indicators, the study identifies both the vulnerabilities that expose the region to Chinese influence and the sources of resilience that may strengthen Europe's strategic position in the evolving global order.

This approach aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of how these countries navigate a complex geopolitical landscape, balancing their Euro-Atlantic ambitions with pragmatic relationships with Beijing. The study's central thesis is that while these countries overwhelmingly prioritize their integration with the Euro-Atlantic community, their historical, political, and economic circumstances create specific reservations with regard to alignment with the EU (and Western countries more broadly) on China-related matters in multilateral settings. Those reservations can be explained by a set of factors including their domestic context and regional issues, bilateral ties with China, and broader foreign policy trajectories. Ultimately, the purpose of this study is to shed light on how this region—often treated as Europe's periphery—can play a meaningful role in strengthening the EU's ability to navigate an increasingly multipolar and contested global order.

The analysis proceeds in two main parts. The first part includes a descriptive overview of three cases related to SEE activity in three distinct multilateral arenas – namely SEE alignment: (i) in selected UN bodies – the UN Human Rights Council and the UNGA, (ii) with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and their engagement (iii) with Chinese-led initiatives like the Belt and Road and the China-CEE cooperation platform. The second part attempts to provide an analytical explanation of the outcomes detailed in the first part, by taking an in-depth look at the domestic, bilateral (Chinese) and foreign policy drivers behind their (non-)alignment.

Attitudes, Loyalties and Alignment in Multilateral Arenas

Alignment in the United Nations

In the UN, China has displayed an increasing willingness and capacity to engage in a diverse set of topics, and even take the lead on some of them.

Still, the issues of paramount interest to China traditionally include those most relevant to its domestic policies, namely Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong and in recent years especially Xinjiang, with human rights being the underlying theme.

Table 1: Alignment of eight4 examined countries with joint statements against China, 2019-2024

Third parties against China

Year	2019		2020		2021		2022		2023		2024	
UN body	UNGA	UNHRC	UNGA	UNHRC	UNGA	UNHRC	UNGA	UNHRC	UNGA	UNHRC[5]	UNGA	UNHRC
ALB	√	X	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	N/A	X	X
B&H	X	X	√	X	X	√	X	X	X	N/A	X	X
BUL	X	X	√	X	√	√	√	√	√	N/A	X	X
CRO	X	X	√	X	√	√	√	√	√	N/A	X	X
GRE	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	N/A	X	X
MNE	X	X	X	X	√	X	√	√	√	N/A	X	X
MKD	X	X	√	X	√	X	√	√	√	N/A	X	X
SRB	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	N/A	X	X

Table 2: Alignment of eight examined countries with joint statements supporting China, 2019-2024[6]

Third parties in China's defence

Year	2019		2020		2021		2022		2023		2024	
UN body	UNGA	UNHRC	UNGA	UNHRC	UNGA	UNHRC	UNGA	UNHRC	UNGA	UNHRC	UNGA	UNHRC
ALB	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	N/A	X	X
B&H	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	N/A	X	X
BUL	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	N/A	X	X
CRO	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	N/A	X	X
GRE	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	N/A	X	X
MNE	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	N/A	X	X
MKD	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	N/A	X	X
SRB	√	√	X	X	?	√	?	√	√	N/A	?	?

Source: Compilation by the authors based on various sources (UN voting records, statements published by individual states' missions to the UN, other relevant authorities such as foreign ministries, and Human Rights Watch)

China's significant influence and ability to block UN resolutions makes it difficult to formally condemn its human rights record. For this reason, countries often resort to using joint statements, delivered to bodies such as the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) or the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), which deals with human rights, social and cultural issues. For the purpose of this research, we conducted an analysis on the positioning of the SEE countries vis-à-vis joint statements focusing on China in the UNGA and UNHRC, both as a subject of condemnation by a group of (usually) Western countries regarding human rights violations, as well as in joint statements that reject those objections or further advance Chinese positions, usually initiated and supported by Global South countries.

During the period 2019-2024, there were 22 joint statements related to the People's Republic of China, on average 2-3 per year. Half of them are statements sponsored by Western countries and condemning China's human rights record in different circumstances – Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong, while the other half are counter-statements defending China or accusing in turn Western countries of human rights violations. In the first group, the US, UK, Canada, Australia and some Western and Northern EU Member States are among the most frequent initiators, while in the second group it is usually countries from the Global South, like Algeria, Cuba, Venezuela, Pakistan, or Belarus that lead the support efforts.

Although Albania was the single signatory among the SEE countries to the 2019 joint statement delivered by the UK at the Third Committee session on the Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination,[7] from the very next year it was joined by Croatia, Bulgaria, and North Macedonia. Bosnia and Herzegovina supported the statement in 2020 and 2021, but discontinued its alignment in 2022, while Montenegro joined the statements targeting China in the period 2021-2023. On the other hand, Serbia and Greece never supported any of the Western-tabled statements.

With their signatures, the countries usually raise their voice regarding the treatment of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang by Chinese authorities. In the words of the statements which have become harsher throughout the years, human rights violations in Xinjiang involve "large-scale arbitrary detention and systematic use of invasive surveillance on the basis of religion and ethnicity; severe and undue restrictions to legitimate cultural and religious practices, identity and expression, including reports of destruction of religious sites; torture, ill-treatment and sexual and gender-based violence, including forced abortion and sterilization; enforced disappearances and family separations; and forced labour".[8] In 2020 Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia and North Macedonia signed a German-delivered joint statement that in addition to criticizing China for the human rights situation in Xinjiang mentions Beijing's tightening grip on Hong Kong.[9]

The trend of alignment continued throughout 2021, 2022, and 2023 but stopped in 2024, when none of the SEE countries that previously aligned signed up for any of the tabled statements. The statements read by the representatives of the US[10] and Australia[11] had 10 and 16 signatories respectively, in the first case limiting the countries to the Core Group on Xinjiang.[12]

In contrast to the other SEE countries, Serbia has emerged as a particularly consistent China supporter in the UN. Since 2019, Belgrade has repeatedly sided with Beijing on a number of key issues. At the UN Human Rights Council, Serbia has consistently signed counterstatements defending China's actions in Xinjiang and opposing Western-led criticism of its human rights record. This support is notable as it includes endorsements of counterstatements in July[13] and October[14] 2019, as well as in 2021[15]. During this period, Serbia completely refrained from endorsing any joint statements critical of China. Its position supports China's argument that human rights are a domestic issue, not subject to international scrutiny.[16]

At the UNGA, Serbia has also demonstrated willingness to support China-aligned resolutions. In 2021, it voted in favour of a resolution promoting international cooperation on the peaceful uses of science and technology.[17] While this initiative, supported by China, Russia, and other countries in the Global South, was framed as a pro-development measure, it was widely viewed in the West as part of China's effort to weaken global export control regimes and increase its influence over dual-use technologies.[18] Despite Serbia abstaining

on a follow-up resolution in 2022, its initial vote positioned it as one of the few European countries to openly endorse the measure. On the other hand, North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Croatia, and Greece all chose not to vote on the respective resolution A/RES/76/234, while Bosnia and Herzegovina abstained. This pattern of voting behaviour suggests reluctance among SEE countries to take a definitive stance on the resolution. The same voting pattern was recorded in 2022.[19]

In 2025, there were no statements in the UNGA Third Committee specifically targeting China's human rights record, while in the UNHRC there was only a statement sponsored by the EU Delegation to the UN on behalf of all EU member states (plus Liechtenstein) covering all the human rights violation "hotspots" identified by the EU, including China.[20] In turn, there was a statement sponsored by China detailing its own global vision of human rights, supported by 28, mostly non-European UN members.[21]

In the UNGA Second Committee that deals with issues like economic growth, including sustainable development and development cooperation, China is quite vocal as well. It is consistently aligned with the Group of 77, a coalition of developing nations that jointly issues statements, with China acting as a major partner. These statements often advocate for the interests of developing countries and emphasize priorities such as poverty eradication, sustainable development, and a multilateral approach to global challenges. In that context, statements from China's delegation often put forward its contributions to global development, promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Development Initiative (GDI), and its significant achievements in poverty reduction, which China frames as a major contribution to the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.[22]

Over the years, the number of signatories in both camps has increased, with China supporters significantly outnumbering the countries that are more critical of Chinese policies. The count of countries is not merely symbolic: it effectively shields China from increased scrutiny and pressure, as demonstrated by the voting in the UN HRC to reject a debate on human rights in Xinjiang in October 2022.[23] Moreover, while China initially responded to Western statements by condemning the interference in its internal affairs, since 2021 China has upgraded its tactics by launching a "counterattack" and has become more vocal in criticizing Western countries for their own human rights violations.[24] Against such a backdrop, the alignment of Southeast European countries becomes more than merely symbolic support.

Taken together, SEE countries show a mixed but cautious approach in the UN arena. A few, such as Albania, Croatia, Bulgaria and North Macedonia usually align with Western-led statements, while Serbia consistently supports Beijing. Others, like Greece remain silent, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro display a wavering commitment to the Western camp. This pattern reveals an underlying fragmentation within the region, reflecting broader calculations about balancing Western commitments with sensitivity to China's potential reaction. It also pinpoints that SEE countries perceive alignment in multilateral settings as optional and not mandatory, weighting the implications against other interests in their relationship with China and more broadly. On the other hand, over the past few years China has managed to mobilize a coalition of UN members that support its own stance and outnumber countries that criticize China, making SEE alignment not merely symbolic but increasingly strategic matter.

Alignment with EU positions and restrictive measures

The past decade has revealed a profound shift in the EU's relationship with China, marked by a decrease in the normative pressure on the part of the EU in relation to its contribution to democratization in the PRC, as well as more pressing economic issues. Until recently, the 1989 arms embargo in the wake of the brutal repression of the Tiananmen Square protests was the only restrictive measure that the EU had in force against China.

From 2019 onwards, the EU gradually moved towards a more nuanced approach to China. The turning point was the 2019 joint communication titled EU–China: A Strategic Outlook, which for the first time formally described Beijing as simultaneously a 'partner, competitor, and systemic rival.' Building on this, the EU began issuing a series of statements condemning human rights abuses in Xinjiang, the erosion of freedoms in Hong Kong, and

cyber activities linked to China. In 2021, Brussels imposed its first-ever sanctions on Chinese officials under the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, targeting individuals and entities implicated in the persecution of Uyghurs. Beijing retaliated by sanctioning European parliamentarians, scholars, and think tanks, further straining relations.

In the following years, the EU repeatedly urged China to use its influence to end Russia's aggression against Ukraine, while also voicing concern about Beijing's growing alignment with Moscow. By 2022–2023, the discourse had shifted towards 'de-risking'—reducing critical dependencies on China without full economic decoupling—culminating in the 2023 EU–China Summit, which highlighted trade imbalances, human rights, and geopolitical tensions. In 2024, EU statements reaffirmed support for the One China policy while opposing any unilateral change to the status quo in Taiwan. Taken together, these steps illustrate a decisive evolution from largely symbolic criticism toward a multi-dimensional strategy that combines restrictive measures, political signalling, and an effort to safeguard European economic security.[25]

In terms of the EU candidate countries in SEE, the European Commission in its annual reports since 2022 has positively evaluated Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia as countries maintaining 100% alignment with statements by the High Representative on behalf of the EU and EU Council Decisions on sanctions, including all measures against China. This consistent alignment demonstrates a clear commitment to EU foreign policy principles, and positions, including those related to China.

Kosovo is still not an official candidate for EU membership, and is not formally invited to align with the CFSP. However, the European Commission's 2024 report notes that "Kosovo continued to condemn Russia's unjustified and unprovoked military aggression against Ukraine and continues to implement restrictive measures against Russia and Belarus".[26] The fact that Kosovo does not have official relations with the PRC, while China's support to Serbia is an obstacle to its international recognition could imply that its government would not have any reservation to side with the EU on China either.[27] That is also supported by the fact that Kosovo maintains a firm pro-Western position, aligning with the US and EU positions and initiatives whenever possible – its participation in the US-led Clean Network Initiative on Chinese telecom vendors being a case in point.[28]

Serbia's alignment with the EU's CFSP has gradually increased from 46% in 2019 to 59% in 2024. This improvement, however, has not been reflected in issues concerning China. Throughout this period, Serbia consistently refused to align with any of the EU's political declarations or restrictive measures on Hong Kong, Xinjiang, or China's cyber activities. Notably, in 2021, when the EU sanctioned Chinese officials over human rights abuses in Xinjiang for the first time, Serbia remained silent. This pattern persisted through 2022 and 2023, reflecting a deliberate strategy to avoid taking a side on contentious normative issues while maintaining close ties with both the EU and China.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's overall CFSP alignment improved from 69% in 2019 to 100% in 2024, ensuring, although belatedly, full alignment with the EU's CFSP, including with the sanctions against Chinese individuals or entities under the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime (GHRSR).[29] In the period between 2019 and 2024, Greece, Bulgaria, and Croatia not only fully aligned with the EU's common foreign policy towards China, but as EU member states contributed in part to shaping it. In that context, there is no evidence that any of them tried to soften or dilute China-related criticism - unlike some other member states, namely Hungary.

Here, the divide between EU members, candidate states, and Serbia is particularly visible. While most SEE countries consistently align with the EU on sanctions and declarations concerning China, Serbia actively avoids such steps. This confirms that SEE alignment with the EU is highly uneven, shaped less by formal obligations, and more by domestic political will and bilateral sensitivities.

Engagement in Chinese-led multilateral initiatives

All the SEE countries examined in this paper (with the exception of Kosovo, which does not have diplomatic relations with China) participate in China-led multilateral cooperation initiatives. They are all founding members of the China – Central and

Eastern European Countries cooperation platform at its inception in 2012, with the exception of Greece, which joined the forum in 2019, after it resolved the bilateral dispute over the Macedonia name issue. At the same time, they have all signed Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) to join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Some of the MoUs, such as the one signed with North Macedonia in 2015 have not been renewed, despite the fact that it expired in 2020.[30]

Two SEE countries hosted China-CEEC summits – Bulgaria in 2018 and Croatia in 2019.[31] Ever since, the actual participation of SEE countries in the China-CEE cooperation platform has been by far less intense compared to the previous period and especially compared to the beginning of the initiative. The 2021 virtual summit chaired by the Chinese president Xi Jinping was the last gathering with highest-level participation for all SEE countries except Bulgaria, which downgraded its level of representation in the summit in question by sending a line minister.[32] Greece was asked by China to host the 2022 summit, but declined, provoking Beijing's undisguised displeasure.[33] In the subsequent period there were no summit-level meetings, only sectoral and topical meetings.

At the end of the 2010s, many of the participating countries got to host specific China-CEE cooperation promotion centres, including Bulgaria for the area of agriculture, North Macedonia – culture, Bosnia and Herzegovina – veterinary research, Serbia – smart cities etc. Nevertheless, the relevance of these centres gradually decreased over the years, scaling down from the level of ministerial meetings that were previously a common practice.[34] Since 2021, most of the activity in the framework of the China-CEE platform took place in China and at the initiative of Chinese stakeholders, such as the annual traditional China-CEE Expo in Ningbo.[35]

This reflected the general downward trend in the cooperation initiative, especially with some of the countries – namely the three Baltic republics leaving the format in 2021-22 – or contemplating to leave it. While some of the SEE countries, e.g. Albania,[36] were also asked to leave the cooperation by the US, having weighed the pros and cons they decided to stay in. In most cases, the prevalent opinion has been that although staying does not bring any tangible benefits, leaving the China-CEE cooperation format entails the risk of upsetting China.[37] Mindful of their relations with the US as well, while none of the SEE countries has left the initiative, most of them have minimized their participation and reduced exchanges to merely symbolic gestures.

The declining engagement of SEE countries in Chinese-led initiatives suggests that by 2019 Beijing's appeal in the region had started to lose momentum. The outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 created a new dynamic: on one hand it tarnished China's image considerably, on the other hand it made many SEE countries dependent on Beijing for masks, vaccines and medical supplies. Serbia remains the main outlier among the SEE countries, continuing to embrace high-level cooperation. This divergence reflects the region's broader balancing act: maintaining formal participation to avoid antagonizing China, but limiting substantive involvement in line with Euro-Atlantic commitments.

What's Driving (Non-)Alignment?

The evidence presented in Part 1 shows that Southeast European countries adopt divergent positions when navigating China-related issues in multilateral settings. At the UN, some countries—most notably Albania, Croatia, Bulgaria, and North Macedonia— tend to align with Western-led statements, while Serbia consistently sided with Beijing and Greece opted for abstention. In relation to the EU's restrictive measures, candidate countries such as Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia demonstrated full alignment, whereas Serbia displayed a selective attitude or outright refusal to follow Brussels' lead. Participation in Chinese-led initiatives further amplified these divides, with most SEE states downgrading their involvement after 2021, and only Serbia maintaining high-level engagement. Together, these patterns point to **a region where rhetorical commitments to the West coexist with a hedging behaviour towards China, and where only certain countries emerge as consistent outliers**.

Support for multilateral initiatives is often shaped by lobbying from the countries that table them—either Western states or China and its allies. The EU often undertakes the coordination of its member states and candidate countries through its Delegations in the UN in Geneva and New York.[38] Chinese diplomats, for instance, are instructed to respond directly to governments that support initiatives seen as damaging to Beijing's interests.[39] While in some cases these interventions yield the desired outcome, the decisions of individual SEE countries to endorse or object to a joint statement, cooperation initiative, or restrictive measure are more deeply embedded in the broader constellation of their bilateral relations with China and the West (namely the EU and US), as well as the degree of their economic and political dependence vis-à-vis Beijing. In this context, SEE countries' attitudes towards China across the three arenas examined—UN alignment, EU restrictive measures, and participation in Chinese-led fora—reflect cohesion in their caution, but also reveal variation in how domestic politics, bilateral ties, and foreign policy trajectories shape each country's path. The following sections explore these drivers in greater depth.

Bilateral relations with China

Political engagement

While the 2019-2025 period saw diminishing intensity in the Chinese-led multilateral initiatives, in part due to the pandemic, there was some activity – even if similarly reduced at the bilateral level. For instance, North Macedonia signed a Memorandum for Cooperation with China in the field of education and science in 2021, which later on translated into several dozens of joint research projects.[40] In 2025, Bosnia and Herzegovina's Foreign Investment Promotion Agency and the China–Europe Association for Technical and Economic Cooperation signed an agreement establishing a framework for identifying and promoting Chinese investments.[41] Perhaps the most impactful development of all was the mutual visa exemption agreement signed in 2023 by Albania and China, allowing citizens to stay up to 90 days in the other country.[42]

At the same time, the pandemic offered a renewed perspective for engagement – even if largely performative - by the Chinese side. In 2021, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi and defence minister Wei Fenghe visited Tirana and Skopje respectively to discuss primarily vaccine supplies and distribution, but also the bilateral cooperation more broadly. In 2022, Bulgarian President Rumen Radev and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping met in Beijing, agreeing on closer ties through a strategic partnership between their countries. In November 2023, the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis paid a visit to China, preceded by the signing of a bilateral aviation agreement between the two countries.[43]

Throughout the period under examination, Serbia remained an exception, being active and committed in all China-led multilateral and bilateral initiatives. The climax happened during President Xi Jinping's May 2024 state visit to Belgrade, when he and President Vučić signed a Joint Declaration on Elevating the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, an agreement to establish a "China–Serbia community with a shared future in the new era", marking the first time a European country formally committed to China's global discursive vision.[44] The visit was also characterized by the signing of around 30 sectoral agreements, including an extradition treaty that undermines Serbia's obligation to align with the European Court of Human Rights' decisions.[45] While Greece also signed an extradition treaty in 2020, the parliaments in both countries have not (yet) ratified the agreements.[46] On the other hand, Bulgaria has had an extradition treaty with China since 1996 and handed over a PRC citizen in 2018.[47]

Diverging attitudes among SEE countries reflect not only geopolitical tensions and political caution, but also China's ability to appeal to political elites across the region. Serbian elites openly promote Beijing as an alternative partner to the West, emphasizing economic cooperation while downplaying governance risks. Infrastructure and industrial deals, often awarded outside competitive processes, reinforce patterns of strong influence over political elites. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, while Sarajevo remains cautious, Milorad Dodik of Republika Srpska (RS) has rhetorically aligned with Beijing, referring to China as a "sincere and proven friend" and publicly endorsing the BRI as a development platform that aligns with RS's infrastructure and investment ambitions, underlining mutual respect and economic complementarity as the cornerstones of RS-China relations.[48]

By contrast, Albania's elites, despite limited pragmatic engagement with China, remain firmly Euro-Atlantic in orientation, minimizing opportunities for Beijing's political leverage. Similarly, North Macedonia's foreign policy engagement with China has been pragmatic and cautious, at least at the central and official level, and among mainstream political parties. This is in large part due to North Macedonia's strategic orientation towards Euro-Atlantic structures as a NATO member and an EU candidate country.

In EU member states, elite engagement is more calibrated. In Greece, political leaders engage carefully, avoiding statements that might antagonize Beijing while still courting – rhetorically, at least - Chinese investors and embracing Beijing-promoted cultural diplomacy initiatives. Bulgarian elites, particularly at local and academic levels, often welcome Chinese delegations enthusiastically, a trend facilitated by limited public debate about China in the country. Pro-Russian forces such as the Vazrazhdane party have amplified pro-China rhetoric. Croatian elites have displayed ambivalence—welcoming Chinese construction firms for infrastructure while cancelling contracts under Western pressure.

Bilateral political engagement mirrors the region's overall orientation: cautious Euro-Atlanticism in most countries, contrasted with Serbia's full embrace of Beijing as a strategic partner. Elite-level choices, often driven by economic considerations or political symbolism, shape these ties. This reinforces the conclusion that SEE countries' bilateral approaches to China are less about consistent strategy and more about context-specific calculations.

Economic ties

Trade and investment patterns and dependencies

Across Southeast Europe, trade dependence on China manifests itself through deep asymmetries in volumes and commodity structures. Serbia stands out with imports surpassing €4.5 billion in 2024, primarily in electronics, machinery, and telecom equipment, while exports—valued at €1.5 billion—are limited to copper and agricultural goods.[49] The 2024 China–Serbia Free Trade Agreement institutionalized this imbalance, with tariff cuts favouring Chinese exporters and threatening local manufacturing.[50] Greece's trade deficit reached €6.5 billion in 2023, exacerbated by heavy reliance on Chinese clean-tech equipment crucial for the green transition. In other countries, the pattern is similar, though on a smaller scale: Bulgaria, Croatia, North Macedonia, and Albania all import far more than they export, while for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, overall trade volumes with China remain modest.

In effect, Southeast Europe's trade with China provides cost-efficient access to manufactured

goods but offers little in return beyond exports of commodities with limited value. This structural imbalance leaves the region dependent on Chinese imports while giving Beijing little incentive to deepen reciprocal market access. Serbia and Greece stand out as the only countries where the scale and profile of trade ties translate into political relevance, while elsewhere the economic impact remains limited.[51]

The level of Chinese direct investment varies significantly across the region. Serbia has attracted some of the most consequential inflows, including major acquisitions of the Smederevo steel plant and the Bor copper mining complex, as well as new investments in the automotive sector. These projects, often agreed through non-transparent arrangements, embed Chinese companies into the strategic sectors of Serbia's economy, and anchor them as key actors in Serbia's economic infrastructure, structurally tying Serbia to Chinese capital.[52]

Pireaus Port (Source Shutterstock)

Greece has also seen major Chinese investments, most notably COSCO's controlling (67%) stake in the port of Piraeus and China's State Grid's purchase of a (24%) share in the national high-voltage grid operator IPTO/ADMIE, both agreed during the country's fiscal and sovereign debt crisis. The actual contribution of these investments to the country's economic growth is smaller than the international discussion about them. China has also been active in Greece's real estate sector through the Golden Visa programme, where Chinese nationals comprised over 70% of beneficiaries in 2021, though their share has been diminishing lately.[53] Moreover, it is hard to overstate the role of the Greek shipping industry in the evolution of economic ties between Athens and Beijing, as it was shipping companies that promoted the idea of Chinese presence in the port of Piraeus.[54] By 2022, Greek shipping companies had also benefited from Chinese loans and had reportedly placed orders worth $50 billion at Chinese shipyards.[55]

Elsewhere, Chinese FDI remains marginal. In Bulgaria, Croatia, North Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, inflows rarely exceed 1% of the total FDI stock, and projects are typically small-scale or tied to single ventures.[56] An oft-quoted example is Norinco, holder of a majority stake in the Croatian Energija Projekt company, which allowed it to build and operate the €230 million Senj wind farm for 23 years.[57] Montenegro's Mozhura windfarm follows a similar pattern.[58] In Albania, a trend of disinvestment is underway, starting with Hong Kong Everbright selling the concession of Tirana International Airport in 2021.[59]

Overall, the pattern shows that Chinese capital in the region has focused on selective strategic sectors rather than broad economic transformation. Serbia and Greece stand out as exceptions; for the rest of the region, Chinese FDI is limited, fragmented, and easily overshadowed by EU and Western investment flows. New Chinese investments in the upcoming period could become even more challenging having in mind that the EU has adopted an FDI screening mechanism, and candidate countries, like North Macedonia and Albania, are advancing towards alignment with the EU regulation.[60]

Infrastructure projects and public debt

While Chinese commercial investments remained limited, some of the countries have opted for infrastructure engagement instead. One example from Republika Srpska is the construction of a highway section linking Banja Luka and Prijedor, backed by Chinese financing and executed by Sinohydro.[61] Beyond roads, Chinese state-owned enterprises have also expressed interest in port development, renewable energy projects, and wastewater processing infrastructure, thus illustrating a diversified Chinese interest that extends into several strategic sectors.[62]

Chinese financing has been a source of vulnerability for several countries, although they are far from reaching the so-called "debt trap". Serbia's debt to Chinese institutions represents only 4.5% of total public debt in 2025,[63] but the strategic sectors involved and non-transparent contractual terms amplify political risks. Bulgaria paints a different picture, where despite Beijing's ambitions, just $380 million of a planned $1.5 billion loan line from China Development Bank has been disbursed.

Montenegro's experience with the Bar–Boljare highway, financed with a $1 billion Exim Bank loan in 2014, had pushed its debt-to-GDP ratio above 100% by 2021 and remains the most emblematic case of debt distress linked to Chinese projects in the region.[64] The country managed to regain control over its debt only after the European Union stepped in to facilitate a hedging agreement through four Western lenders.[65] Despite this fallout, the Montenegrin government signed a new memorandum with Chinese firms to construct a 16-kilometer coastal road between Budva and Tivat, funded by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), estimated at over €50 million.[66]

While some projects create potential economic benefits, they are also prone to controversy related to transparency and execution standards. Chinese firms have become embedded across Serbia's energy and telecommunications sectors. The Kostolac B3 thermal power plant, a 350 MW expansion built by the China Machinery Engineering Corporation (CMEC) and financed via China Exim loans, accounts for around 20% of national power capacity. In telecommunications, Huawei has signed a €150 million contract to digitize Serbia's national network and rolled out surveillance-based "safe city" cameras in Belgrade, raising alarms by EU and civil society watchdogs over privacy and legal safeguards.[67] Although intended to dramatically boost intercity connectivity, the Novi Sad – Belgrade railway project is plagued by criticism following the November 2024 collapse of a part of the Novi Sad railway station, which killed 16 people.[68] The incident sparked allegations of overbilling and corruption involving Chinese contractors, former and current ministers, triggering national protests and leading to the resignation of Prime Minister Vučević.[69]

Montenegro. Bridge Moracica. Bar - Boljare highway (Source: Shutterstock)

The Tuzla Thermal Power Plant in Bosnia and Herzegovina, cancelled in 2021 serves as a stark reminder of poor environmental and governance standards often associated with Chinese projects.[70] The Bar-Boljare highway and Kičevo–Ohrid motorway in Montenegro and North Macedonia respectively have become a cautionary tale, facing challenges including delays, cost overruns, and governance concerns pertaining to the lack of transparency and risks of such ventures.

Conversely, the swift completion of the Pelješac Bridge in Croatia by a Chinese state-owned company was praised by local authorities and media. The main difference, however, lies in the different implementation model mandated by different funding sources: while the EU-funded Pelješac contract implementation followed strict EU rules, the road contracts funded with Chinese loans were implemented under a Chinese model, following the countries' national legislations and under non-transparent agreements with Chinese contractors.

The prospects for new landmark infrastructure deals with China seem limited, at least for EU members in the region. Namely, in February 2024, the European Commission launched a probe under the newly adopted Foreign Subsidies Regulation into a tender for the procurement for electric trains in Bulgaria. The rationale was that the winner, the state-owned China Railway Rolling Stock Corporation (CRRC), was likely to rely on subsidies to "submit an unduly advantageous offer". A month later, CRRC withdrew from the tender, without awaiting the result of

Construction of Kičevo–Ohrid motorway (Source: Vlada.mk)

the investigation.[71] This displays the influence of differing regulatory environments, demonstrating how evolving EU policies can directly affect the success and perception of Chinese projects in the region.

Shaping perceptions

Media partnerships and narratives

China's presence in the media landscapes of Southeast Europe is also uneven. According to a 2024 report, Chinese state media maintain formal cooperation agreements with leading Serbian newspapers and public broadcasters, which ensure the positive framing of China's domestic and foreign policy, while dissenting views are rare and marginalized.[72] There are also content-sharing agreements between Chinese state-run media organisations and Bulgarian media outlets. For instance, 24 Chasa (24 Hours), one of the most widely distributed daily newspapers, regularly republishes content from PRC state-run media, such as China Radio International and CGTN. Some of its articles concern the Uyghurs in Xinjiang province, with the key message being that there is no problem with Islamophobia in China, but with terrorism.[73] In addition, the Bulgarian National Television has an agreement with China Central Television to air Chinese content on its channels. In 2020, the Bulgarian and Chinese national unions of journalists signed a cooperation agreement.[74]

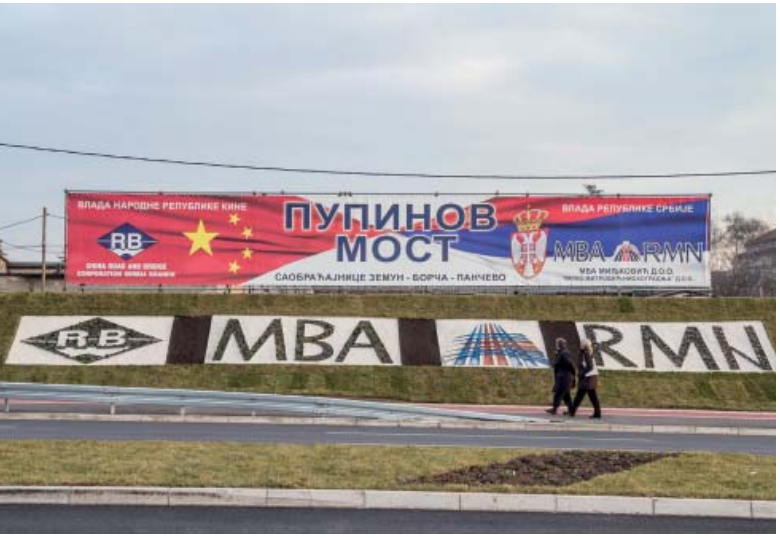
In North Macedonia, there is evidence that China is investing in setting up a loose and informal local network aiming to amplify pro-China narratives, using financial support, sponsored trips, and training programs for journalists from both public and private outlets.[75] Bosnia and Herzegovina shows a degree of diversity: Republika Srpska's media are clearly sympathetic to Beijing, while Sarajevo-based outlets remain ambivalent. Montenegrin public opinion has been more sceptical of China, especially after the debt crisis and poor performance of the Bar-Boljare highway construction. Local media outlets have critically covered China's activities, and political elites have increasingly emphasized EU membership as a national strategic priority.

A comparative study released in 2021 shows that Greek and Chinese media carry very different stories about their bilateral relations. Both the content and tone of Greek media coverage of China and Sino-Greek relations were marked by a negative sentiment, while Chinese media painted a remarkably positive picture of Greece and its relations with Beijing.[76] Croatia's coverage has been more limited in terms of content, with overwhelmingly positive reporting on the Pelješac bridge project, but little broader engagement. Interestingly, although the bridge was merely built by a Chinese company, but entirely funded by the EU and Croatian taxpayers' money, China has labelled it a BRI project and used it to enhance its soft power in Croatia.[77]

Public attitudes

Public opinion trends across the region mirror these dynamics and reflect a lack of informed China-related debate. According to regional polling data from 2023, over 65% of Serbian citizens view China positively, often as a reliable economic partner and an alternative to perceived Western conditionality. However, qualitative research reveals a widespread misunderstanding of the actual scale of Chinese investments, and many respondents conflate aid with commercial loans[78] In Bosnia and Herzegovina, public attitudes are generally neutral to positive but lack substantive engagement. Montenegro is taking on the role of the future EU membership frontrunner, being sceptical towards China due to the previous issues related to the highway construction project. However, according to data from the 2024 International Republican

Belgrade, Serbia. Promoting Chinese investments. (Source: Shutterstock)



Institute – IRI Regional Public Perception Research, the Montenegrin public is more concerned about transparency and sustainability than geopolitical balancing.[79]

In Albania the public opinion remains strongly pro-EU and pro-US, leaving little manoeuvring space for Beijing to gain meaningful normative influence or soft power leverage. For instance, in the latest 2024 Western Balkans Regional Survey conducted by the IRI, China is not among the most important allies, but appears among the threats.[80] North Macedonia shows a more dynamic shift: the proportion of citizens identifying China as the country's closest ally rose to 10% in 2023, compared to just 2–3% in previous years.[81]

In Greece, China remains a marginal issue in public discourse, with engagement focused on elites rather than the broader population. The general public in Bulgaria tends to view China more as a partner than a threat. Tellingly, nearly 70% of respondents in a 2024 survey did not consider China a danger to their country and China is ranked on a par with France and the United Kingdom in the Bulgarians' scale of strategic preferences.[82]

Across the region, in countries with predominantly pro-Western central governments but China-friendly public opinion, like North Macedonia or Bulgaria, China has been making significant advances in establishing cooperation with local authorities, universities, and media, as well as other (grassroot) entities not under government control. It is against this background that a growing network of joint initiatives – spanning business, academic, and media exchanges – along with a community of local facilitators of Chinese influence, is laying the groundwork for expanding bilateral engagement across the region.[83] China's ability to capitalize on these "low-hanging fruits" allows it to shape public attitudes and build a network of influence, presenting a significant long-term challenge to the EU's attempts to articulate a strong and unified position.

China's soft power reach in SEE remains uneven. In Serbia and parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Chinese narratives gain traction, while in Albania and Montenegro scepticism dominates. Public opinion often lags behind elite discourse, with many citizens overestimating China's economic role. This gap in informed debate provides fertile ground for Beijing's influence, but also presents opportunities for the EU to strengthen communication and resilience.

Domestic, regional and global political factors

In the UN, China usually counts on the G77 grouping of countries. Its philosophy resonates with the developing world and China is seen as protecting their interests – as opposed to the Western (especially former colonial) powers. While it continues to present itself as a defender of multilateralism and the interests of the Global South, China's approach in the UN has increasingly reflected its strategic priorities—emphasizing sovereignty and non-interference, promoting its Belt and Road Initiative within UN frameworks, and aligning coalitions to resist what it frames as Western dominance. This evolution underscores the PRC's dual strategy of embedding itself more deeply in the UN system while simultaneously working to reshape its norms and practices to better serve its own vision of global order.[84]

Geopolitical orientation remains the key constraint on China's penetration in the SEE region. Serbia, a non-NATO country, has openly diversified its defence partnerships, purchasing drones and anti-aircraft systems from China and conducting joint exercises such as "Peace Defenders 2024".[85] On the other hand,

Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Greece are NATO members, with EU membership or EU-candidate status shaping their policy options. These commitments limit the scope for strategic alignment with China, even as pragmatic cooperation persists in trade and investment.

UN Security Council (Source: Shutterstock)

China is generally perceived by all SEE countries as an economic partner that can provide tangible benefits, including market for both imports and exports, investments, funding for infrastructure projects, and tourists. However, for some of the countries the fact that China is a powerful player globally and in the UN system holds additional, strategic importance. This is most visible in the case of Serbia, which firmly counts on China's support on the Kosovo issue in multilateral fora.[86] China's calculus on Kosovo is closely related to the case of Taiwan, which Beijing views as a separatist province to be brought back into the fold by all means. The fact that China is a veto-holding permanent member of the UN Security Council serves as a guarantee that there will not be a Kosovo-related decision imposed on Serbia by Western countries without its consent. Moreover, China's relationship with countries from the Global South could readily translate into support, indirect at least, for Serbia's efforts to secure Kosovo's de-recognition and block Kosovo's bids to join international organizations.[87]

The Serbian case is further distinguished by a specific instance where it received direct support from China. In 2024, the UNGA adopted a resolution to designate July 11 as the International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Srebrenica Genocide. The resolution, which was adopted with 84 countries in favour, 19 against, 68 abstaining, and 22 not voting, was strongly supported by Western nations as a means of promoting reconciliation and preventing genocide denial.[88] Serbia, however, vehemently opposed the resolution, arguing that it politicized a tragic event and threatened regional stability by reinforcing ethnic divisions.[89] Notably, China aligned itself with Serbia, voting against the resolution and echoing Belgrade's position that the measure lacked consensus and was inherently divisive. In its explanation of the vote, China emphasized the importance of respecting state sovereignty and resolving historical issues through dialogue rather than international imposition.[90] This episode further illustrates the growing alignment between China and Serbia on sensitive international issues, driven by both a strategic partnership and a shared scepticism of Western narratives in multilateral institutions.

Similarly, in the case of Greece, in addition to economic engagement, the main driver behind the engagement with the PRC is strategic. Athens' top priority has always been fending off an assertive Turkey next door. To this end, successive Greek governments view China, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, as a significant political partner. A key consideration is the potential for a military escalation in the Aegean Sea or around Cyprus, in which case Greece would seek to maximize international support, including from influential global powers. An example of China's potential role as discussed in Greek foreign policy debates is the maritime delimitation agreement between Turkey and Libya, which has been submitted to the United Nations. While Athens's legal challenge to this agreement[91] is based on the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), it counts on Chinese intervention. However, as Turkey has not ratified UNCLOS, Libya has not even signed it, and Beijing has dismissed the convention as a legal basis for dispute resolution in its own stand-off with the Philippines in the South China Sea,[92] Greece's hopes may not be well-grounded in reality.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's attitude towards China, on the other hand, is shaped less by a clear strategy and more by its internally fragmented political system.

Its hesitancy to align with the EU and other Western powers is a direct result of the country's tripartite presidency, where the Bosnian Serb representative has consistently opposed foreign policy moves that are critical of China or Russia. Consequently, the country's alignment is often a reactive, inconsistent response to domestic disputes rather than a coherent foreign policy choice. Its complex administrative and political setup, with decentralized power structures, allows for different entities and cantons to pursue their own bilateral relations with China, often without a unified state-level policy. This fragmentation of authority creates opportunities for Chinese firms and state actors to engage with local officials, bypass the oft-dysfunctional central government, and further Beijing's influence at sub-state level.

Progress towards EU membership is another significant driver of societal attitudes and political direction for accession hopefuls. Six of the SEE countries examined in this paper are aspiring to join the EU. Five of them (all but Kosovo) have opened accession negotiations, though only two – Montenegro and Albania are on track to complete the accession by the end of this decade. In their case, the EU integration process invigorates a firm pro-EU policy direction, which has the potential to reduce their engagement with China, if mandated by the alignment with the EU, or help to mitigate potential risks and vulnerabilities.

Serbia demonstrates notable democratic backsliding in recent years and has not moved forward in the EU integration process. Bosnia and Herzegovina has also been stagnating due to the inability to reach domestic consensus on key issues. North Macedonia's EU accession is effectively blocked by Bulgaria because of bilateral issues. Hence, although mainstream political elites are guided by Euro-Atlantic priorities, increasing disillusionment with the stalled EU membership bid creates openings for Levica, a fringe political party that favours closer relations with China (and Russia).

For these three countries the lack of clear prospect for EU membership opens space for other global players – including China to shape normative frameworks and political decisions. In the case of Serbia, while the country has set EU integration as a strategic priority, it is only one of the four pillars in its foreign policy. The country's multi-vector policy also positions China as a strategic partner, alongside Russia and the US – a setup that arguably leads to conflicting priorities and difficult choices. The evidence in terms of alignment during the 2019-2024 period suggests that the inclination towards China tends to prevail over allegiance to the EU or the US.

In the absence of EU and Western incentive and/or pressure, or lack of membership conditionality, it is questionable whether any of the SEE countries would voluntarily support human rights-related statements. The silence among SEE countries in terms of alignment in the UN in 2024 could have been a form of passive non-alignment that allows these countries to avoid direct confrontation with China without formally abandoning their pro-Western principles.

However, the "pause" in the support for the statements in 2024 does not suggest a possible shift in these countries' foreign policy trajectories, but rather a more cautious approach in light of other domestic and international developments. While there is no single explanation to account for the change in thinking in all the countries, there are a number of important factors that all the capitals may have taken in consideration. As the statements were delivered in the run-up to the 2024 US presidential elections, all the capitals were uncertain what position vis-à-vis China the new US administration would take and how they would need to adjust their relationships with both Washington and Beijing. That influenced both the EU and its member states, which in general lack a unified stance on China, leading in turn to only a small minority of European countries supporting the statements – the ones most vocal on human rights (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Lithuania, Norway, Sweden, as well as France, the Netherlands and Germany in the case of the Australian-led statement).

At the same time, the period preceding the statements in 2024 coincided with the start of a new government in North Macedonia following the May 2024 parliamentary elections, a caretaker government in place in Bulgaria between two consecutive election cycles in June and October, as well as local elections in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina at the end of September and the beginning of October 2024, respectively.

Moreover, when comparing the 2024 statements with the 2023 one, the tone of the 2024 statements

appears to be harsher, as it not only condemns the human rights violations, but also the failure by Beijing to address them and its dismissal of the assessment of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in the 2022 report on Xinjiang. The second statement also introduces a new topic – human rights violations in Tibet. Hence, against this complex backdrop of global shifts and domestic constrains, SEE countries might have preferred to opt-out of a non-compulsory step to avoid confrontation with China.

Conclusions

SEE positions in international fora

The behaviour of Southeast European countries in multilateral settings reveals both symbolic convergence with the West and persistent fragmentation. Serbia has emerged as Beijing's most reliable supporter, consistently endorsing Chinese counterstatements in UN fora and refraining from joining any Western-led initiatives. In contrast, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia aligned fully with the EU's CFSP and repeatedly signed joint statements critical of China's human rights record. EU members Greece, Bulgaria, and Croatia largely followed the EU mainstream, while Bosnia and Herzegovina proved inconsistent, often due to political divisions within its tripartite presidency rather than strategic choice. Kosovo, though not formally bound to CFSP alignment, has maintained a firmly pro-Western stance and would almost certainly side with Brussels given the absence of diplomatic ties with Beijing.

Importantly, SEE countries perceive joint statements in the UN as low-cost symbolic gestures: they signal loyalty to Brussels or Washington, while coordination through the EU Delegation in New York shields smaller states from direct bilateral pressure. At the EU level, the evolution since 2019 has been equally telling. When Brussels imposed its first-ever sanctions on Chinese officials under the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime in 2021, SEE candidate countries demonstrated full alignment. Between 2019 and 2024, the EU had sanctioned 20 Chinese individuals and entities, with North Macedonia, Albania, and Montenegro maintaining 100% alignment, underscoring their commitment to eventual membership. The broader picture is one of symbolic but uneven convergence with the West, mediated by domestic politics and strategic calculations. It remains to be seen how the overall trends will evolve following the lack of alignment in 2024 and the absence of China-specific critical statements in 2025.

Receptiveness to Chinese initiatives and bilateral ties

Beyond the UN and EU, Southeast European countries have engaged with Chinese initiatives in ways that reveal both pragmatism and caution. Participation in the China–CEE cooperation platform has steadily declined since 2019, with most governments downgrading their involvement to symbolic levels. Serbia remains the exception, deepening its close and consistent alignment with Beijing and in 2024 formally endorsing China's "community with a shared future."

In economic terms, asymmetry is the rule. Across the region, imports from China far outweigh exports. Trade is thus the most significant source of economic vulnerability, with deficits widening even as FDI inflows remain modest, often below one percent of the total FDI stock. Serbia and Greece stand out as exceptions: Serbia due to major Chinese acquisitions in steel, mining, and energy, and Greece because of high-profile deals such as COSCO's stake in the port of Piraeus and Chinese financing of Greek shipping. Infrastructure projects — from thermal power plants in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to highways in Montenegro and North Macedonia or windfarms in Croatia — highlight both the opportunities and governance risks tied to Chinese involvement. Debt exposure is limited in most countries, with Montenegro's highway loan the only case that produced genuine distress. In EU members, new Chinese projects already face constraints from emerging regulatory frameworks, such as the 2023 Foreign Subsidies Regulation and the FDI screening mechanism.

Beyond economics, China's influence is reinforced through media partnerships and elite-level outreach. While Serbian and Republika Srpska outlets replicate Chinese narratives, Albanian and Montenegrin public opinion remains firmly pro-Western, leaving Beijing with little soft-power traction. Across the region, a

persistent gap between elite discourse and public awareness limits informed debate, making countries reactive and vulnerable to external pressure.

Implications for strengthening the EU's global role

These dynamics hold significant implications for Europe's ability to strengthen its global role through the inclusion of Southeast Europe. Candidate countries' consistent alignment offers Brussels an opportunity to institutionalize their input into EU–China policymaking, treating them as stakeholders rather than passive followers. With better coordination, SEE states could amplify EU positions in multilateral fora, reduce their exposure to Chinese pressure and enhance Europe's collective credibility. This is all the more important as China increasingly succeeds in convincing the Global South countries to back Chinese positions in international fora.

Yet, SEE countries limited agency and shallow public debate also represent vulnerabilities: without stronger awareness and capacity, SEE countries risk being drawn into reactive postures that Beijing can exploit. Addressing economic vulnerabilities is equally critical. While Chinese projects provide short-term gains, they often come with governance risks, environmental costs, and public debt exposure. The EU's Global Gateway initiative and connectivity programmes offer credible alternatives, but only if they are made visible and accessible to local actors. Finally, Brussels must account for country-specific sensitivities — Serbia's reliance on China over Kosovo, or Greece's concern with Turkey.

In conclusion, Southeast Europe is not merely a peripheral arena of great power competition but a microcosm of Europe's broader China dilemma. With the exception of Serbia's strategic alignment with Beijing, the region's engagement with China remains limited, cautious, and often symbolic. Its primary vulnerability lies in structural trade deficits, compounded by low levels of public awareness and fragmented policymaking. At the same time, these characteristics also present an opportunity: if SEE perspectives are systematically integrated into a coherent European approach, the region can evolve from a perceived weak link into a source of resilience for the EU's global role in an increasingly multipolar order.

Policy Recommendations

The analysis of Southeast European countries' behaviour towards China in multilateral settings underscores not only their vulnerabilities but also their potential contribution to a more coherent European foreign policy. Drawing on the evidence presented, several policy implications emerge for the EU and its member states:

Institutionalize SEE input into EU–China policymaking: Candidate countries such as Albania, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina since 2024, already display full alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. Their commitment should be rewarded by systematically involving them in discussions on China policy at the EU level. This would prevent perceptions of marginalization, increase buy-in, and ensure that Europe speaks more consistently with one voice.

Strengthen resilience to Chinese influence at the local level: In many SEE states, Chinese influence bypasses central governments and operates through local authorities, universities, media, or political elites. EU initiatives should expand support for independent journalism, civil society, and local governance, ensuring greater transparency in foreign investment and public procurement, as well as countering elite influence or disinformation campaigns.

Address economic vulnerabilities through diversification and EU-backed alternatives: Trade deficits and infrastructure projects with opaque financing expose SEE countries to economic and political risks. The EU's Global Gateway initiative and regional connectivity programmes should be prioritized in non-EU countries in SEE, offering credible alternatives to Chinese loans, contractors, and technology providers. This would demonstrate that aligning with Brussels brings tangible economic benefits before membership.

Leverage SEE countries as amplifiers of EU positions in multilateral fora: In the UN and other international settings, SEE states can play a symbolic but important role in reinforcing Western-led statements on human rights and rule of law. Ensuring that these countries receive diplomatic coordination and backing reduces their exposure to Chinese pressure and enhances the EU's global credibility.

Acknowledge country-specific strategic concerns: Serbia's reliance on Chinese backing over Kosovo and Greece's focus on Turkey illustrate how national priorities can constrain alignment. EU policymakers should account for these sensitivities when designing collective positions, providing reassurance and tailored incentives that mitigate the costs of alignment for individual states.

Source: Shutterstock

ANNEX 1: ***List of EU restrictive measures introduced against Chinese natural and legal persons in the period 2019-2025.***

Source: Authors' compilation on the basis of the EU's Sanctions Tracker

Sanctioned Chinese legal entities[93]

#	Full legal name	Year of sanctioning	Reason for sanctioning
1	Asia Pacific Links Ltd. / a.k.a. Asia Pacific Links Limited	2024	Supporting Russia in the aggression over Ukraine
2	ARCLM International Trading Co. Ltd		
3	Shijiazhuang Hanqiang Technology Co Ltd		
4	Juhang Aviation Technology Shenzhen Co. Limited / a.k.a. Shenzhen Juhang International Wuliu Co. Ltd. / a.k.a. Juhang Aviation		
5	Redlepus TSK Vektor Industrial (Shenzhen) Co., Ltd		
6	Xiamen Limbach Aviation Engine Co., Ltd		
7	Time Art International LTD		
8	Ele Technology Co. LTD		
9	Shenzhen Xingding Machinery Ltd		
10	Ningbo Blin Machinery Co., Ltd.		
11	Powerever Electronic Technology / a.k.a: Beijing Powerever Electronic Technology Co., Beijing Weiangda Electric Technology Co. LTD		
12	Qisda Optronics (Suzhou)		
13	Li Xiaocui / Russian: Софья ЛИ / a.k.a. Sophia Li / a.k.a. Sofya Li		

Sanctioned Chinese individuals[94]

#	Name and surname	Type of sanction(s)[95]	Year of sanctioning	Reason for sanctioning
1	Lin ZHONGHENG	F	2025	Undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine
2	Zhou DACHUANG	F+T	2025	
3	Xiaocui LI	F+T	2024	
4	Mingguo CHEN	F+T	2021	Serious human rights violations and abuses
5	Mingshan WANG	F+T	2021	
6	Junzheng WANG	F+T	2021	
7	Hailun ZHU	F+T	2021	
8	Shilong ZHANG	F+T	2020	Cyber-attacks threatening the Union or its Member States
9	Qiang GAO	F+T	2020	

ANNEX 2: ***Chronology of statements on China-related topics by key EU officials.***

Source: Authors' compilation based on data from EU official websites

Date	Topic
March 12, 2019	The European Commission and the HR/VP adopted the "EU-China – A Strategic Outlook" joint communication. This was a foundational document, defining China as a "partner, competitor, and systemic rival," which has guided EU policy ever since. While not a single statement, it's the overarching strategic declaration of this period
April 9, 2019	EU-China Summit Joint Statement
June 4, 2019	Statement by High Representative/Vice-President Mogherini on the 30th Anniversary of Tiananmen Square event, emphasizing the importance of freedom of expression and human rights
September 13, 2019	Statement by the Spokesperson on the case of Gui Minhai
Throughout 2020	Multiple statements concerning Hong Kong, particularly following the imposition of the National Security Law. These included condemnations, calls for respect of autonomy and human rights, and expressing solidarity with the Hong Kong people
Throughout 2020-2021	Statements expressing concern over the human rights situation in Xinjiang, calling for independent investigations into alleged abuses against Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities
December 2020	EU-China Leaders' Meeting
March 2021	Statements following the imposition of Chinese countermeasures/sanctions on EU entities and individuals (including MEPs, scholars, and think tanks) in response to EU sanctions over Xinjiang
Throughout 2022-2024	Frequent statements on China's position on Russia's war against Ukraine, consistently urging China to use its influence to bring an end to the war, emphasizing that China's support for Russia has implications for EU-China relations
Late 2022 / Early 2023	Speeches and statements reiterating the need for "de-risking" from China, rather than "decoupling," focusing on reducing dependencies and addressing economic imbalances and unfair trade practices
December 7, 2023	EU-China Summit. Statements revealing the complex nature of the relationship, addressing trade imbalances, human rights, and geopolitical issues
Throughout 2024	Statements on Taiwan (reaffirming the EU's One China policy while opposing any unilateral change to the status quo by force), and continued concerns about human rights and cyber threats

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The paper examines how Southeast European (SEE) countries navigate their relations with China within a rapidly changing international order. It highlights how domestic politics, regional dynamics, and global shifts influence these countries' positions towards Beijing and the European Union (EU). While most SEE states maintain a formal commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration, their approaches to China reveal significant variations, ranging from pragmatic caution to active strategic alignment. SEE countries' positioning towards China is shaped less by ideology than by pragmatic balancing. Domestic politics, strategic dependencies, and perceptions of economic opportunity determine the scope of engagement. Serbia stands out as the only country to align politically with Beijing, while most others pursue cautious cooperation under the constraints of Euro-Atlantic commitments.

For the EU, the region represents both a vulnerability and an opportunity. The fragmented approach of SEE countries highlights the limits of Europe's coherence on China, yet their consistent alignment with EU policy in most cases shows potential for strengthening Europe's collective stance. A more inclusive EU policy that systematically integrates SEE perspectives, accelerates enlargement, and offers credible economic alternatives would enhance Europe's strategic resilience and its capacity to navigate an increasingly multipolar world.