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**The Policy of the People's Republic of China
as the Threat to the international position
of the European Union**

**ZAKŁAD EUROPEISTYKI
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Introduction

Over decades the People's Republic of China has been successfully building its international position by competing effectively with other world powers, such as the United States and the Russian Federation. By its active participation in the life of the international community, China increases the possibilities of influencing contemporary international relations while pursuing its own national goals. The tactics of Chinese authorities were aptly defined by Grzegorz Kołodko, who claimed in one of the interviews that "nobody can as effectively as the Chinese - with great global consequences - combine the power of the invisible hand of the market and the visible hand of the state". This quote may refer not only to China's internal policy, but also to the philosophy of foreign policy. It should be noted that China is becoming a strong and powerful state, which deserves respect of the international community. It achieves its goals first through economic relations, and only then, and to a limited extent, through political relations. It must be admitted, however, that Beijing has right arguments to pursue such an international policy.

There are many facts that make the PRC an attractive cooperation partner not only for great powers, but also for smaller regions and countries. Leaders of individual countries are boldly asking about the possibility of raising Chinese capital and investment. The problems that European countries faced during the economic crisis have become a kind of a drive for Chinese investments in the region¹. It is enough to mention here the acquisition of the majority of shares in the Greek port of Piraeus by the Chinese consortium COSCO (China Ocean Shipping Company) or Portuguese policy related to the granting of so-called golden visas, which are mainly used by the Chinese². This type of activity is meant to make Europeans get used to, on the one hand, the Chinese being active internationally, and, on the other, the increasing dependence of the Old Continent countries on the money and investments flowing from Beijing. This activity is not

¹ P. Czarnowski, *Chiny kupują Grecję. I otwierają sobie drogi do Europy*, „Dziennik Gazeta Prawna”, June 16th 2010.

² Portugal has been granting the so-called golden visas to non-EU citizens since January 2013. The condition for receiving it is to invest a minimum of EUR 1 million in Portugal, create a minimum of 30 jobs or purchase real estate for a minimum of 500,000 euro. According to estimates 2014, 90% of the 1000 foreigners who had received such visits were the citizens of the PRC. See: *Portugalia: Złote wizy przyciągnęły 800 mln euro inwestycji*, „Puls Biznesu”, July 7th 2014; *Portugalia znów rozdaje „złote wizy”*, „Rzeczpospolita”, July 17th 2015.



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purely economic. It is also (or above all) an element of the diplomatic game, the aim of which is to gain influence on the European institutions in such important to China areas as dumping or human rights. According to the Chinese, having influence on the economies of some EU Member States should translate into gaining specific political benefits in the forum of the organization itself.

However, the pragmatism of Chinese foreign policy means establishing political and economic cooperation not only with the richer European countries, but also with those poorer ones that are not the core of European integration. This process is a big change not only in China's policy, but also in the countries of the region. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, most countries of Central and Eastern Europe focused on integration with Euro-Atlantic structures in the form of the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance. In turn, for China, countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary were not significant players in international politics to attach more strategic importance to them. In addition, the dichotomy in the perception of the international situation in the 90s of the 20th century comes down to the fact that these countries sought as much integration as

possible with the USA, while China tried to compete with the US. This state of affairs continued in fact until the global economic crisis, which developed Western countries suffered the most, including those belonging to the euro zone. The authorities in Beijing decided to take advantage of the moment of crisis in Western Europe and start more intensified cooperation with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, thus opening the way to expand investment throughout Europe. However, it should be emphasized that the Chinese see the area of Central and Eastern Europe much wider than the Europeans and recognize that this region comprises 16 countries: Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania and Macedonia³.

Foreign Policy Goals of the People's Republic of China

China's foreign policy has undergone quite a large metamorphosis in recent years. For several years we have been observing China's active for-

³ M. Kaczmarski, J. Jakóbowski, *Chiny – Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia: „16+1” widziane z Pekinu*, „Komentarz OSW” no.166, 2015, pp. 1.



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sign policy, aiming to strengthen cooperation with countries of nearly every region of the world. This *openness* to the world is not only a temporary change of course in foreign policy, but a fully conscious and rational action to implement specific interests of the state. According to French researcher Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "China needs the world to develop and modernize its economy, it must cooperate with countries that supply them with raw materials or, to a greater extent than before, food products [...] and are markets that are still necessary to sell huge part of the production [...]. Therefore, China's fundamental need is both to continue the process of integration with the international community and a peaceful international and regional environment"⁴. The strategy of peaceful development of China corresponds very well with this thesis. In 2011, the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China published a document entitled "China's Peaceful Development", which set out what China's foreign policy should look like so that it could effectively implement its national goals. The main emphasis was placed on greater international activity of the PRC, and the

essence of the so-called peaceful development is the quote: "China should develop by guarding world peace and support it with its own activities and development policy. [...] It is China's responsibility to seek for mutual benefits in contacts with other countries, to keep pace with global economy trends and to build with them a world based on peace, harmony and general prosperity"⁵. Chinese presence abroad is increasing and is therefore to protect the interests of the state. By engaging in the life of the international community, strengthening political and economic cooperation on all continents, China gains greater control and influence over international events, thus increasing its security. An extensive network of international connections strengthens China's superpower status, and thus allows it to effectively look after national interests. In other words, China's peaceful development strategy in foreign policy has become an instrument for shaping the international environment of the PRC. According to some authors, the concept of peaceful development is only a transitional stage in the process of building China's superpower position and

⁴ J.P. Cabestan, *Polityka zagraniczna Chin*, Wydawnictwo Akademickie Dialog, Warszawa 2010.

⁵ *Pokojowy Rozwój Chin (Peaceful Development of China)*, Wydział Informacji przy Radzie Państwa Chińskiej Republiki Ludowej, September 2011, <http://www.geopolityka.org/analizy/chiny-w-przyszlosci> [Accessed May 20th 2017].



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should be treated "as a temporary direction of China's strategy of action, allowing it to regenerate and prepare for a more aggressive foreign policy"⁶.

Xi Jinping's assumption of the president's office in 2013 greatly influenced China's international activity. Chinese authorities skillfully combine history, tradition and strategic goals of the state with the changing international reality and the multipolarity in international relations that has been taking place for several years. At the same time, they pursue their most important goal, which is to make China the strongest country in the world. Jan Rowiński wrote in one article that Chinese authorities (before Xi Jinping took office) would like to achieve this goal by 2049, i.e. the hundredth anniversary of the establishment of the state⁷. In Xi Jinping's policy, the strategy of peaceful development has given way to the so-called Chinese Dream, the essence of which comes down to several assumptions related to the future shape of the state (mainly in its internal aspect), the most important from the point of view of this text is the one con-

cerning the strong China (politically, economically, diplomatically, militarily)⁸. Considering China's policy in recent years, it is impossible not to get the impression that President Xi Jinping's plan is fully implemented. China is increasing its international political and diplomatic significance and developing its economic and military potential. The Chinese rightly assume that the security of their country and power largely depends on economic development, which at a later stage also forms the basis of military security.

Attention should be paid to the way China builds its international position. Unlike the US and Russia, it does not engage in international conflicts and disputes, but through dialogue it addresses the problems of the modern world, thus building support for their *Chinese dream*. Unlike Americans or Russians, the Chinese attach great importance to the issue of territorial integrity and non-interference in the internal affairs of states, making them a more *convenient* partner for discussion and cooperation. The tool that improves foreign policy is economic involvement and exploitation of economic potential by China. The best example to confirm this thesis is

⁶ A. Chłopek, *Strategia Chin na przełomie XX/XXI wieku*, „Przegląd Geopolityczny”, vol. 4, 2011, pp. 216.

⁷ J. Rowiński, *Ewolucja polityki zagranicznej ChRL 1949–2011 (Evolution of foreign policy of the PRC 1949–2011)*, in: K. Gawlikowski, M. Ławacz (ed.), *Wielkie przemiany w Chinach (Big transformations in China)*, SWPS, Warszawa 2013, pp. 224.

⁸ R.L. Kuhn, *Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream*, „New York Times”, June 4th 2013.



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the concept of the New Silk Road (land and sea), presented in 2013. This politically flexible project is another expression of Chinese pragmatism in foreign policy, and according to some researchers, it is "an illustration of China's philosophy of international relations, according to which all countries involved win"⁹. China, by popularizing the concept of the New Silk Road open to everyone, gives the international community an alternative. On the one hand, to American domination based on *imposed* democratization, and, on the other, to Russia's policy of addiction and control of the immediate environment (for example in the form of the Eurasian Economic Union). China wants, as most experts say, not only to actively participate in the process of building a new international order, but in some time get to manage it¹⁰. Therefore, the element that has been characterizing China's foreign policy in the last few years is also increased activity on the forum of international organizations. In the past, China did not attach much importance to multilateral cooperation in organizations such as the UN or the WTO.

However, recognizing the political or economic benefits of membership in these organizations, it quite actively participates in their current work, treating them, on the one hand, as a manifestation of its own power and, on the other, as an instrument to legitimize its policy in a specific field. Appreciating the value of international cooperation, China is also the initiator of supra-regional agreements, an example of which is the briefly mentioned cooperation with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in the 16 + 1 formula.

To sum up the topic concerning China's foreign policy, one should pay attention to several important elements. The first is clear evolution of China's foreign policy towards deepening international cooperation, based primarily on economic ties, taking advantage of the weaknesses of other players, e.g. EU Member States. In addition, China, unlike the US or Russia, conducts a relatively peaceful international policy, respecting the principle of sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of third countries. It seems to be one of the factors that allows China to remain a relatively neutral player, and thus more effectively achieve its national goals. It is difficult to hear comments from Chinese politicians on the functioning of third-country

⁹ M. Kaczmarski, *Nowy Jedwabny Szlak: uniwersalne narzędzie chińskiej polityki*, „Komentarze OSW”, no. 161, 2015, pp. 3.

¹⁰ J.M. Fiszer, *Unia Europejska i Chiny we współczesnym, „Biuletyn Analiz i Opinii Zakładu Europeistyki”*, no. 3, 2016, pp. 9.



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governments in the area of democracy, human rights or other matters concerning strictly internal affairs. Undoubtedly, this is one of the elements of Chinese strategy of functioning in international relations. A strategy that for the time being brings them tangible benefits.

China's Cooperation with Central and Eastern European Countries

As it was mentioned, for several years the authorities of the People's Republic of China have attached more importance to international cooperation, including cooperation in the area of politics. It is no different in the case of relations with Central and Eastern European countries. It is worth presenting the motives of Chinese interest in this part of Europe and the implications for both sides in a few sentences. The Chinese treat Central and Eastern Europe as a kind of an outpost of Western Europe. It seems, therefore, that Chinese perspective of perceiving the European Union continues to divide it into old (more influential) and new Member States. It may seem that adopting this logic of reasoning is a mistake of the Chinese side, but the pragmatism of its foreign policy shows something completely

different. Central and Eastern Europe needs Chinese capital and investment more than Western European countries. The level of economic and development diversification in the EU (between countries that joined before 2004 and after 2004) is still very high. It might seem that since the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (especially those EU member states) desire to equate development levels faster with Western European countries, they will adopt a more enthusiastic attitude towards Chinese economic plans. Also China, wanting to compete effectively with the United States and the European Union as a whole, must search for new markets for the goods they produce, thus ensuring the highest possible stability and profitability of supplies.

Another condition that may constitute one of the important reasons for China's interest in Central and Eastern Europe are ideological issues. The countries of this region are definitely less *sensitive* to human rights and democracy than mature Western democracies like Germany, France or Great Britain. This state of affairs reduces the risk of investment failure for non-business reasons, which has already happened in China, especially since the scale of criticism of the Chinese authorities' actions by Central and Eastern Europe is definitely lower



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than in the United Kingdom, France or Germany. In the practice of their foreign and economic policy, the Chinese try to clearly separate ideological and business / economic issues. In this respect, in the near future Central and Eastern European countries may become a more valuable partner than Western European countries. When starting investing in Central and Eastern Europe, the Chinese authorities are also striving to warm up the international image of the PRC, which is much easier in Central and Eastern countries than in Western countries.

Revival of mutual relations took place in 2011, when an economic forum was organized in Budapest. As it turned out later, it was the first stage on the way of creating a new form of cooperation, later called the 16 + 1 formula (China-Ceec). The inauguration of this initiative took place during a meeting of heads of government in Warsaw in 2012. Wen Jiabao, former Premier of the PRC, stressed in his speech the need to strengthen cooperation between China and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, especially in the economic and cultural field. He also emphasized the potentially positive impact of the 16 + 1 formula on EU-China relations (China-Ceec). It seems that Chinese Premier's statements expressed all the main goals of the

PRC towards Central and Eastern Europe. Among the key topics there is one about the impact of the 16 + 1 format on EU-Chinese relations. According to the Chinese side, some of these countries could be an effective lobby for Chinese interests in the European Union, and thus significantly increase the efficiency of Chinese economic expansion in Europe, as well as be a part of important allies in European institutions. It is difficult to disagree with this thesis, especially since currently 11 of the 16 countries of the format are members of the European Union, having representatives in all major institutions. It also seems that China has changed the perception of such countries as Poland, Hungary or the Czech Republic, and started considering them to be more influential than at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. In 2012, it seemed that the 16 + 1 formula would be a one-time attempt to establish cooperation with the CEE region. Meanwhile, there have been many leadership-level meetings over the past eight years, such as the summits in Bucharest (2013), Belgrade (2014), Suzhou (2015) and Riga (2016), or the last in Dubrovnik (2019). There have



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been some opinions that "16 + 1" is a Chinese way of dividing the European Union¹¹.

Marcin Kaczmarski and Jakub Jakóbowski rightly point out the strictly economic aspect of the entire 16 + 1 project. In their opinion, Central and Eastern Europe is another area of Chinese economic expansion, which is also good for greater expansion in Western Europe, and a *testing ground* for Chinese investments in the European Union¹². It is hard to disagree with such argumentation, especially in the context of Chinese plans related to the construction of the New Silk Road. Apart from strictly geographical issues, which facilitate solving the problems of transit and implementation of Chinese products on the European market, it is impossible to underestimate the level of Central European countries' demand for Chinese investments and support in modernizing countries. China is aware of the developmental backwardness of some Central and Eastern European countries. Claiming that the New Silk Road is a way to help these countries could in the long run not only improve infrastructure capabilities (e.g. construction of roads or rail infrastruc-

ture) in the CEE region, but also minimize the risk of a dispute between the PRC and the European Union and its most developed Member States (in which, however, many experts doubt). In other words, China would be able to successfully implement the idea of peaceful growth and realize the next stage of the Chinese Dream. It also seems that the markets of some Central and Eastern European countries, due to their limitations and specificity, could be a place for adapting Chinese products to the requirements of the European market. This is not about legal adjustment of product components, such as packaging, distribution, etc., but about their quality.

However, it cannot be denied that the Chinese strategy for Central and Eastern Europe faces many challenges. One of the most serious is the reaction of the European Union and its main Member States to China's greater than average involvement in the region. We note that from a formal and legal point of view, as many as 11 out of 16 countries of China's Central and Eastern Europe belong to the European Union. Of the other five, as many as four (Serbia, Montenegro, Albania and Macedonia) have the status of candidate countries, and only Bosnia and Herzegovina is considered a potential

¹¹ Expert: the '16 + 1' format is a Chinese way to divide the European Union,

<https://www.polskieradio.pl/7/1696/Artykul/2293892,Ekspert-format-161-to-chinski-sposob-na-dzielenie-Unii-Europejskiej>

¹² M. Kaczmarski, J. Jakóbowski, op.cit., pp. 3.



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candidate country. Therefore, from a geopolitical point of view, it can be concluded that all sixteen are in the EU's sphere of political and economic influence. It is hard to imagine that the European Union and its main member countries would allow themselves to be *pushed out* of this region, especially that since 2004 they have transferred 11 significant Member States financial resources under cohesion policy or agricultural policy. What is completely different is what the countries included by China in Central and Eastern Europe expect. Some of them have clearly defined priorities and want to be actively involved in the work of the EU, taking advantage of it and benefitting financially. However, it is hard to believe that without deeper reflection, guided only by the principle of European solidarity and loyalty, they would reject the possibility of using Chinese capital and investment. As time goes by and the conception of the New Silk Road gets materialized, this issue may have a significant impact on the entire European integration process (not only for the EU itself). It is true that the European Union is currently raising much greater confidence in Serbia, Albania or Montenegro, but as a result of negotiations and the increasingly vague perspective of membership, it may lose confidence. We should

remember that despite the time, since the collapse of the Soviet Union the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have not been economically stable enough yet to be able to accept EU declarations with all the benefits of inventory. Moreover, for Serbia, Albania, Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina it is more important to increase prosperity here and now, and not to live by hopes for a better tomorrow and to implement further, though needed and important, reforms prepared in accordance with the principles of conditionality (so-called *something for something*). Let us keep in mind that in the context of EU Member States located in Central and Eastern Europe, the distribution of funds in the next Financial Perspective for 2021-2027 will be of significant importance. It will determine the direction in which the EU will be heading for a long time. Let us note that while the EU sets specific requirements for its countries, China cares about what is going on here and now, without any preconditions or restrictions on its policy. The open secret is that some CEE countries consider European financial assistance to be the main argument in favor of EU membership.



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If the experts' suppositions¹³, that in the next perspective assistance for *new* member states will be drastically reduced (Brexit will also contribute to this) are confirmed, then the search for alternative sources of investment financing even by countries such as Poland, Hungary or the Czech Republic may become obvious. Furthermore, the views of some Member States, including Poland or Hungary, allow us to put forward theses about doubts over the future deepening of European integration, also in this strictly economic dimension. It should be remembered that treating the region of Central and Eastern Europe (but also the European Union) as a consolidated block of states is a huge mistake. The Chinese, realizing this, may in the next few years try to divide the Member States into those that support their economic concepts and those that oppose them. We have already been observing the above average activity of Poland or Hungary in relations with the People's Republic of China, especially that they are much more important for Budapest¹⁴. Victor Orbán has established a strategic partnership

between Beijing and Budapest. In the opinion of some experts it is the highest level of bilateral relations in China's foreign policy, except for Germany, the Russian Federation and Pakistan¹⁵. Hungary also quite actively supports China in its international policy, giving as an example the support of Beijing's aspirations in 2016 to obtain their economy as a market economy statute, or attempting (together with Croatia and Greece) to moderate the EU position regarding territorial disputes in the South China Sea, thus striking in the unity of the European Union's foreign policy. On the one hand, the example of Hungary shows how some countries of Central and Eastern Europe shape relations with China, and, on the other hand, also shows the asymmetry of these relations. According to the Polish Institute of International Affairs, Hungary's activities were not followed by any significant economic benefits arising from Chinese investments. In 2014, an agreement was signed, under which it is planned to build a railway connection between Budapest and Belgrade with the significant participation of Chinese enterprises and a loan granted by Exim Bank of

¹³ Elżbieta Bieńkowska: *Po 2021 r. fundusze UE dla Polski – o wiele „Rzeczpospolita”*, July 17th 2017.

¹⁴ D. Kałan, *Relacje o specjalnym znaczeniu? Chiny w polityce zagranicznej Węgier w okresie rządów Viktora Orbána (2010–2012)*, „Biuletyn Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej – Puls Regionu”, no. 1, 2013.

¹⁵ Among the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Poland and Serbia have a status of strategic partners of the PRC, see. V. Jóźwiak, *Rola Chin w polityce zagranicznej*, „Biuletyn PISM” 2017, no. 71, pp. 1.



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China. For Hungary, the benefit of this investment is improved communication with the Balkans, which the Budapest authorities are very keen on. China would benefit from the promotion of its infrastructure contracting companies. The real China's investments in Hungary include, for example, the establishment of the first in Europe Institute of the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Budapest¹⁶, which despite its scientific and cultural importance is not what Hungary dreams of. This example shows that the asymmetry in terms of China's goals and possibilities of cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe may in the long run be a factor that will significantly affect not only its quality, but its real existence, thus weakening the position of the European Union. The Chinese, despite the announcement, as we can see, are not eager to engage in the development of Central and Eastern European countries, which in the long run may threaten a dispute within the CEE countries about the profits from potential investments and profits resulting from the existence of the New Silk Road. The countries of the region already have a problem coordinating their foreign policies - the Visegrad Group

might be an example¹⁷. If billions of dollars offered by China come into play, the situation may be even worse. Therefore, from the point of view of China and CEE, the 16 + 1 formula has a huge disadvantage - too many partners on the European side. China is a pragmatic state and seems to know perfectly well the principle of not taking on too much and at some point selects the countries with which they want to actually cooperate and implement the concept of the New Silk Road, even despite the current rhetoric in the spirit of openness to all countries¹⁸. This, in turn, can lead to the aforementioned political division of states between the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, even among those who are members of the European Union. There is also a great risk that other EU Member States will be more sensitive and committed to strengthening China's position in Europe at the expense of the European Union. It seems that the EU does not fully appreciate the importance of above-average Chinese activity in Europe, especially in regions more vulnerable to influence, such as Central and Eastern Europe. Another problem that China will have to face in this

¹⁶ V. Józwiak, *Rola Chin w polityce zagranicznej Węgier*, „Biuletyn PISM”, no. 71, 2017, pp. 1.

¹⁷ A. Chojan, *Grupa Wyszehradzka w polityce zagranicznej Polski – między współpracą a rywalizacją*, „Biuletyn Analiz i Opinii Zakładu Europeistyki”, no. 4, 2016.

¹⁸ J. Szczudlik, *Trzy lata Jedwabnego Szlaku: sukcesy i wyzwania*, „Biuletyn PISM”, no. 73, 2016, pp. 1.



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part of Europe is the unresolved issue of political leadership and the challenge to be called the most important actor in the region, on the one hand, co-ordinating cooperation with China, and, on the other, settling disputes on the China-CEE line. There are several countries aspiring to become the regional leader. Among them is also Poland, which, however, cannot convince most of the countries in the region. There might be a number of clashes and disputes between the countries of the region (and also EU members) over this issue.

Conclusion

The future of the 16 + 1 format will require many adjustments and finding an appropriate modus vivendi between the expectations of Central and Eastern European countries and China's capabilities and willingness to implement them. Despite theoretically promising cooperation under the 16 + 1 formula in 2012, China still faces many challenges and has to do much to win the trust of European partners and show them real benefits. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe also have much work to do. They must learn to articulate their expectations related to Chinese activity in their territories more

firmly, as well as skillfully reconcile European co-operation with the Chinese proposals. In the long run, it is hard to imagine that effective cooperation among 17 countries would be possible. It can therefore be presumed that over time the Chinese side will either formally reduce the number of entities participating in the 16 + 1 formula, or will intensify bilateral cooperation with some of the most important countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which is partly taking place now (Poland, Hungary). This will not be without impact on China's relations with the European Union, as well as relations between EU Member States. It seems that China will ultimately not duplicate the Russian Federation's strategy of generating disputes between EU countries. For China, using such tactics would be highly detrimental to their national interests. Beijing wants to be seen as a responsible and predictable partner, focusing mainly on business, leaving political games to others, and generating an open dispute between EU Member States would completely contradict this thesis.



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