

Central and Eastern Europe – China Cooperation: A Bridge to the European Continent for China?

Initiated in 2012, the **Central and Eastern Europe – China Cooperation Mechanism (“17+1”)** seems to have been viewed as an opportunity for China to charter a common course with Central and Eastern Europe, a region previously ideologically affiliated to a similar political doctrine. **Described by the Chinese media as a “pioneering feat of great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics”**, the recently held edition of 17+1, comes after a one year gap caused by the pandemic. Scheduled for 2020, the meeting was initially delayed for several months to be eventually held on February 9, 2021.

Elevated by China at Head of State level, hence invested with a higher political and symbolical weight, the 2021 “17+1” Cooperation Mechanism was held virtually with the participation of the **Presidents of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, China, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia** and the **Ministers of Romania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania**.

Deemed by the **Chinese President** as a **“New Consensus”**, the newest “17+1” Summit brought in several other innovations, besides the elevation to Head of State level. Unlike the previous editions, the 2021 Summit did not result in releasing the so-called **“Guidelines”**, which traditionally mentioned when and where the next Summit will take place, but issued a **“Beijing Action Plan”** (*apparently not publicly available*), which, **by the virtue of its name, may symbolize a rather unilateral initiative**. In the Chinese diplomatic language, **“Beijing Action Plans”** have been formerly used under the auspices of the China-Africa Cooperation.

According to the **Chinese Foreign Minister WANG Yi**, the Summit **“rallied global consensus concerning the joint response to the Covid-19 pandemic”** and **“injected positive energy into cooperation between China and Europe.”** **This remark is a clear indication that the “17+1” Mechanism is a bridge for China to the European Continent**. According to the Chinese state media, the 2021 meeting of the 17+1 Countries represented **“the first diplomatic event hosted by China this year”**.

While political statements have been scarce in the Central and Eastern Europe, the spokesperson of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared all the present leaders have agreed on four priorities of cooperation: **“unity in fighting the virus, practical cooperation, connectivity and green innovation.”** Indeed, in terms of fighting the pandemic, at least 6 of the 17 European countries have either purchased or expressed the intention to purchase the

Sinopharm Covid-19 vaccine. Among them, Serbia is the first European country to use the Chinese vaccine and Hungary was the first EU country to approve it for emergency use. The “*Lianhua Qingwen*” capsules, a form of traditional Chinese medicine said to be effective for the mild Covid-19 cases, have been registered in Romania and also obtained temporary permission in Hungary for local coronavirus prevention and control, according to a faculty member of the Chinese Academy of Engineering.

It goes without saying that the agreed “**unity in fighting the virus**” will have multiple aspects of cooperation during 2021. “**Practical cooperation**”, may be taken in the sense that the cooperation will be pragmatic, i.e. based on a project to project treatment to the shared interest and profit of the involved partners.

Naturally, in the lack of a common declaration of the “17+1” Leaders or a publicly available “17+1” Beijing Action Plan, a more profound assessment of the Summit’s output remains a daunting task. As one may expect, this offered grounds to certain analysts to reiterate their views with regard **to the decreasing power of the “17+1” Mechanism.**

However, after the recent signature of the important **Comprehensive EU-China Investment Agreement**, the “**17+1**” Summit comes as a double reconfirmation by Beijing of its strong interest for Europe and the **viability of the “17+1” Mechanism.** **The presence of multiple Central and Eastern European Heads of State** at the “**17+1**” Summit as well as the video-conference occasioned by the finalization of EU-China investment agreement, where the **Presidents of Germany and France** were in attendance, along with the **European Commission President**, can be interpreted as a sign of readiness to consolidate the economic relations with China to the mutual benefit under the current international political, strategic and regional circumstances.

Naturally, in the light of this newly available investment instrument, China could additionally address its relations with most Central and Eastern European countries through its common policies with the EU.

Undoubtedly, 2021 will mark a significant moment in the Europe-China relations, as all parties are willing to adapt to the world’s circumstances, while protecting their interests in an ambit of pragmatic cooperation.

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