

New decade of the Belt and Road Initiative: Strategic positioning of Serbia-China relations and opening of a new chapter

Abstract: This paper explores in detail the key concept of the Belt and Road Initiative, which represents a pillar of PR China's foreign policy. The paper focuses especially on the analysis of Serbia's strategic position in the new decade of the global initiative, highlighting the importance of deepening cooperation with PR China. In light of the challenges faced by Serbia, including pressures regarding the recognition of so-called Kosovo and joining anti-Russia sanctions, Serbia's relations with the European Union, NATO, and leading Western countries are increasingly strained. Under such circumstances, it becomes an imperative for Serbia to search for new opportunities for development by boosting cooperation with China within the Belt and Road Initiative. This paper thoroughly analyses Serbia's strategic position, stressing its significant contribution and the benefits of participating in the Belt and Road Initiative. Also, it explores the potential for deepening cooperation between PR China and the Republic of Serbia, focusing on five key pillars: political coordination, development of infrastructural links, promoting efficient trade, improving financial cooperation, and intensifying cultural exchange. Special emphasis is put on eight new campaigns that could further reinforce this cooperation in the new decade of the Initiative. Furthermore, from the aspect of developing talents and building an ecosystem, the paper announces a new direction of future development of Serbia-China relations, providing theoretical support and strategic guidance for intensifying cooperation between the two countries in the next decade of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, Serbia, strategic positioning, Serbia-China relations

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Introduction

In the field of international relations, there is a recognizable lack of deeper understanding of Chinese foreign policy, its comprehensive and systematic approach. A comprehensive methodological approach is necessary for a thorough examination of Chinese diplomatic strategy and activities, which, however, still does not dominate academic discourse, especially not in Serbia. It is customary to view Chinese cooperation with Central and Eastern European countries, the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as Sino-Serbian relations as separate entities. However, from a broader perspective of Chinese foreign policy, these segments are interconnected and together have a significant impact on global political and economic structures. This macro perspective is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of China's role and strategy in the global political-economic landscape and requires us to focus, instead of individual events or policies, on systemic and comprehensive understanding.

In the current complex global context, China's foreign policy system has demonstrated its uniqueness and effectiveness. From adopting traditional ally relations with the USSR at the beginning of the establishment of the People's Republic of China to the contemporary emphasis on independent, self-reliant, and mutually beneficial partnerships, China's diplomatic strategy and practice have undergone significant transformations. These changes in China's foreign policy approach not only demonstrate its detailed un-

derstanding and adaptation to changing circumstances in international relations but also affirm its determination to actively contribute to shaping a world community that shares a common destiny. Through these transformations, China aims to promote new types of international relations characterized by mutual respect, fairness, and shared prosperity.

Traditional international alliance relations often focus on the military, political, or economic interests of a limited number of states, which can result in increased contradictions and conflicts between countries. Unfortunately, history is full of examples of wars and conflicts caused precisely by such allied interests. Among them are the NATO aggression in 1999, which resulted from NATO expansion to the east, as well as the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine, events with which the Serbian people are very familiar. These examples highlight the limitations of traditional alliance relations in maintaining long-term peace and stability. Through its foreign policy and philosophy, China seeks to overcome these challenges, emphasizing the weaknesses that traditional alliances bring.

Serbia, as a militarily neutral country, also has its own unique experiences and perspectives on alliance relations. This paper will analyze Serbia's strategic position, emphasizing its significant contribution and the benefits derived from the partnership with China in order to preserve Serbian independent, sovereign, and freedom-loving policy.

1. Evolution and practice of the Chinese foreign policy system before the “Belt and Road” Initiative

1.1. Global Partnership Network (全球伙伴关系网): Flexibility and inclusiveness of Chinese Diplomacy

The fundamental element and key unit of the Chinese diplomatic system is the partnership model, which aims to overcome the limitations of traditional alliances by establishing a broader and more flexible network of collaborators. This approach promotes peaceful development of international relations. Such partnership is not confined to any specific sphere or format but is based on principles of mutual respect, equality, and mutual benefit, with the ambition to foster common development and prosperity.

Xiang Haoyu, a distinguished researcher at the Institute of Asian and Pacific Studies at the Chinese Institute of International Studies, believes that China adopted a policy of non-alignment as early as the early 1950s, and after the end of the Cold War further clarified its diplomatic guidelines with the principle of "forming friendships without forming alliances" (结伴不结盟), thus initiating a practice of building partnerships (Xiang, 2023). Since the 1990s, China has developed various forms of partnerships with numerous countries, including comprehensive strategic partnerships (全面战略伙伴关系), cooperative partnerships, etc. (合作伙伴关系). These partnerships range from bilateral to multilateral arrangements, re-

flecting the flexibility and inclusiveness of Chinese diplomacy. Forming partnerships between China and countries or regions such as Serbia, Pakistan, Russia, the European Union, and the African Union serves as a typical example of this successful practice. At present, there are more than 20 types of partnerships, with nearly 100 countries carrying the title of "partner" in bilateral relations, and over 80 pairs of relationships involving the term "strategic" (ibid.).

Additionally, it is important to note that alongside common forms of partnerships, such as comprehensive strategic partners and comprehensive cooperative partners, there exists also special bilateral relationship positioning. These special forms of positioning typically reflect unique political, economic, and strategic considerations between countries, such as the frequently mentioned new model of major power relations between China and the United States (中美新型大国关系). This model is designed to avoid traditional conflicts and confrontations among major powers, aiming for cooperation with mutual benefits. Relations between the PRC, as the largest developing country, and the USA, as the largest developed country, have a significant impact on global political, economic, and security development. The proposal of a new model of major power relations aims to promote continuous healthy and stable development of Sino-American relations through enhanced communication, expanded cooperation, and managing differences.

The fundamental characteristics of the Chinese partnership system are equality, openness,

cooperation, and mutual benefit. Unlike traditional alliances, partnerships do not require homogeneity but strive for a common language while respecting differences, thus expanding the scope and depth of cooperation. This model of relations can effectively avoid zero-sum games and promote harmony and stability in the international community.

1.2. The N+1 cooperation mechanism: a new model of regional cooperation

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While the system and network of partnerships tend to be based on bilateral relations, the N+1 cooperation mechanism is a model of regional multilateral cooperation. Key examples of this model are the China-Central and Eastern Europe Cooperation Mechanism and the China-ASEAN 10+1 Cooperation Mechanism. The aim of this model is to share resources and complement advantages through cooperation among multiple countries in a specific region. The N+1 cooperation mechanism not only expands China's diplomatic horizons but also injects new vitality into the partnership system, making it more flexible and diverse.

1.3. Mechanisms of BRICS and SCO: Attempt and practice of a platform for developing countries

The mechanism of BRICS, as an international cooperation platform established by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, represents a significant attempt to create an economic platform led by

major developing countries. These five countries constitute the fundamental economic pillars in their regions, distinguished by exceptional market capacities and wealth of natural resources. In the field of security cooperation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), jointly established in 2001 by Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, is a new attempt to resolve disputes and preserve international security.

Although structurally different from bilateral partnerships and regional cooperation mechanisms like N+1, the BRICS and SCO mechanisms share a similar spirit in promoting international cooperation and common development.

The establishment of the BRICS and SCO mechanisms demonstrates the common aspiration of developing countries to achieve greater influence and presence in the processes of globalization. Through cooperation within these two mechanisms, they aim to strengthen mutual economic and security ties, effectively address global challenges, and promote the development of an international system that is fairer and more balanced.

Compared to bilateral partnerships, which primarily focus on cooperation between two states, BRICS and SCO prioritize multilateral and multipolar cooperation and collective action.

When compared to regional cooperation mechanisms like N+1, BRICS and SCO are characterized by greater representativeness. While regional cooperation mechanisms like N+1 focus on enhancing cooperation within a specific geographical area, BRICS and SCO transcend regional boundaries and bring together developing countries from different continents. This approach allows developing countries to broaden

their international vision, strengthening their contribution and influence in global decision-making processes.

2. Introduction to the Belt and Road Initiative and the establishment of the community of shared destiny for mankind

2.1. The Belt and Road Initiative: A culmination of promotion of international connectivity

Since its launch in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative has grown into a key element of Chinese foreign policy. This initiative, drawing inspiration from the ancient Silk Road of China, has not only facilitated trade and cultural exchanges between East and West but has also become a symbol of mutual enrichment and peaceful coexistence throughout history.

The initiative represents not only a significant bridge for establishing partnerships with countries around the world but also the culmination of previous bilateral partnerships, N+1 cooperation mechanisms, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and BRICS. Its primary purpose is to promote international connectivity, strengthen economic cooperation, and cultural exchange among participating countries. Therefore, the Belt and Road Initiative is not conceived as an isolated endeavour but is based on China's longstanding and solid bilateral and multilateral partnerships with countries worldwide. "Today, the Belt and Road Initiative has become internationally recognized as a platform for cooperation at all levels" (Jinping, 2022).

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(1) Five Pillars as the foundation of the first decade of the Belt and Road Initiative

The Five Pillars - political coordination (政策沟通), infrastructure connectivity (设施联通), promotion of effective trade (贸易畅通), enhancement of financial cooperation (资金融通), and strengthening cultural exchanges (民心相通) - represent the basis for a comprehensive framework of cooperation within the Belt and Road Initiative. These aspects are interrelated and supportive, providing not only a robust foundation for intensive cooperation among participating countries but also an impetus for regional economic integration and development. Political coordination enables governments to reach consensus and pave the way for cooperation; infrastructure development physically connects countries, bringing them closer together; efficient trade promotes the free flow of goods and services, strengthening economic dynamics; financial cooperation provides crucial financial support for projects; while cultural exchanges and interpersonal contacts strengthen friendships and understanding. This integrated framework of cooperation is crucial for maintaining stable progress and achieving fruitful results within the Belt and Road Initiative.

(2) Eight steps as the direction for the new decade of the Belt and Road Initiative

The Five Pillars have brought concrete achievements in cooperation among participating countries during the first decade of the Belt and Road Initiative. Looking towards the future, the "eight

steps" will guide the development of the Belt and Road Initiative in the next decade, aiming for higher levels and broader areas of cooperation.

President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China, on 18th October, 2023, at the opening of the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, announced China's support for the high-quality implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative through eight steps. These actions include building a multi-dimensional connectivity network for the Belt and Road (构建“一带一路”立体互联互通网络), supporting the establishment of an open world economy (支持建设开放型世界经济), implementing practical cooperation (开展务实合作), promoting green development (促进绿色发展), advancing technological innovation (推动科技创新), supporting people-to-people cultural exchanges (支持民间交往), building the road of integrity-based cooperation (建设廉洁之路), and improving the international cooperation mechanism (完善“一带一路”国际合作机制) (Jinping, 2023).

While the five pillars have laid a solid foundation for cooperation within the Belt and Road Initiative, the eight steps further deepen and broaden the scope and direction of cooperation, adapting to the needs and challenges of the new era. Together, they promote the profound development of this initiative.

2.2 Community of Shared Future For Mankind as the final link in the Chinese foreign policy system

The concept of the Community of Shared Future For Mankind (CSFM - further referred to as CSFM)

began to develop even before the Belt and Road Initiative. Professor Zhang Ji from Fudan University believes that this concept stems from the continuous development of Chinese foreign policy strategies since the founding of the People's Republic of China. It encompasses five principles: peaceful coexistence, advocating for the establishment of a new international political and economic order, avoiding division based on ideologies, commitment to the path of peaceful development, and striving for a harmonious world. The specific origin of this concept lies in the proposal of "convergence of interests" and "community of shared interests" at the beginning of the 21st century (Zhang, 2019).

Over time, the concept of a Community of Shared Future (CSF) has become a more precise description of global interdependence. In September 2011, the CSF concept was first mentioned in the *China's Peaceful Development* whitepaper. From around 2012, this term has been increasingly used, reflecting a growing consensus within the international community on the need for joint resolution of challenges and promotion of cooperation for mutual benefit.

After several years of developing this concept and practical research, in 2015, President Xi Jinping clearly outlined the vision of *building partnerships for mutual benefit and creating a Community of Shared Future for Mankind* (Jinping, 2015) in a speech at the United Nations headquarters. This speech not only promoted the term CSF in the international community but also marked its formal adoption as a key element of Chinese foreign policy.

Thus, China has developed a comprehensive diplomatic system, resembling a carefully woven network. In this system, bilateral partnerships are

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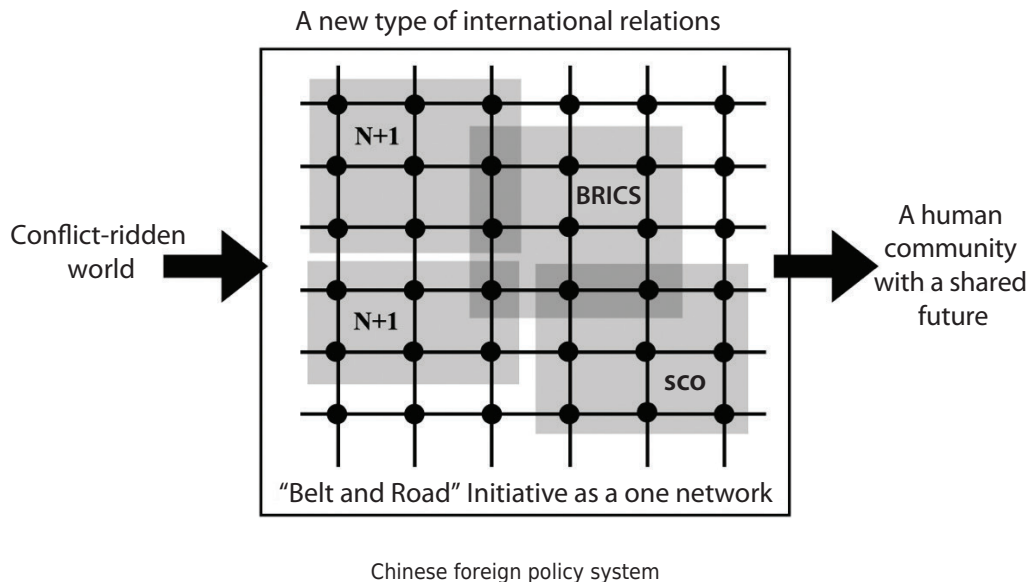
the basic units, serving as fundamental nodes of the network that lay the groundwork for broader cooperation through stable bilateral relations. Multilateral relationship mechanisms such as BRICS, SCO, and N+1 act as key frameworks of this network, playing a connecting role in regional and functional cooperation and closely linking various bilateral partnerships. The Belt and Road Initiative acts as the main artery of the network, tightly connecting participating countries, regions, and mechanisms, allowing for a clear definition of China's strategic positioning and understanding of the significant role it should play on the global stage. And, finally, the concept of CSF, as a macro-plan, provides goals and direction for this network – a new type of international relations (新型国际关系).

The concept of CSF emphasizes interdependence and common interests among nations, advo-

cating for a cooperative approach where everyone benefits, while also maximally respecting the principle that countries, regardless of size, strength, or wealth, are equal, respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations and respecting the right of nations to choose their own development path. The philosophy of CSF is against the mentality of the Cold War, interference in the internal affairs of other countries, and double standards (Yang, 2022), offering a Chinese solution to promote the construction of a fairer and more rational international order.

In the drawing, each circle represents a bilateral partnership between China and individual countries, while squares represent multilateral mechanisms (such as BRICS, N+1, or SCO). The lines represent the Belt and Road Initiative that connects them.

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3. Serbia: A shining example of the Belt and Road Initiative

After a comprehensive analysis of the Chinese foreign relations system, we need to engage in an exhaustive discussion about the position Serbia occupies in this significant global initiative. Additionally, we must clearly define our strategic positioning and clarify the important role we should play in this broad context.

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3.1. Serbia's disrupted EU integration strategy

Serbia, as a European country, undoubtedly holds significant geographical context when discussing its strategic position within the Belt and Road Initiative and the Chinese foreign policy system. In analyzing Serbia's role, the dynamics between the EU and Serbia naturally become an inevitable topic – more precisely, this dynamic directly relates to Serbia's political and economic stance on the Euro-Asian continent. Therefore, when discussing Serbia's relationship with the Belt and Road Initiative and the Chinese foreign policy system, it is necessary to thoroughly examine the current state of relations between the EU and Serbia in order to precisely understand the demands of strategic positioning.

Since the change in the ruling political structure in 2000, Serbia has officially designated accession to the European Union as a significant goal of its foreign policy. The government and the public generally believed that EU membership would not only bring significant economic benefits to Serbia

but also help in modernizing its domestic political and legal system. However, over time, due to slow progress in the accession process and frequent problems within the EU itself, public support for EU accession began to decline. Especially when the EU, together with NATO-led United States, started persistently demanding that Serbia recognize the independence of the separatist province of Kosovo and join sanctions against Russia, these factors further deepened Serbian dissatisfaction and public scepticism towards the EU.

According to a 2021 survey conducted by the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), the percentage of residents in Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia willing to join the EU was 94%, 83%, 83%, and 79%, respectively. In Serbia, support for EU accession was the lowest in the Balkans, with around 53% in favour and 43% against. One year later, in 2022, the percentage of support for EU membership dropped to 35%, marking the first time in recent years that euro scepticism has prevailed to such an extent. The survey also showed that Serbian respondents prioritized economic cooperation over membership, as EU membership seemed increasingly unattainable: 25% believed that Serbia would join in the next decade, while 44% considered it entirely unachievable (BiEPAG, 2021).

The economic role of the EU as Serbia's largest trading partner and a source of investment is crucial from the perspective of Serbian economic interests. However, the prospects of Serbia's accession to the EU remain unclear. On the one hand, due to internal problems within the EU, stringent conditions imposed on Serbia, and Serbia's

dissatisfaction with EU policies, the attractiveness of the EU for Serbia is gradually declining. On the other hand, Serbia actively seeks to diversify its diplomatic and economic cooperation to find new anchors on the international political scene. The challenge of balancing national sovereignty with economic development has become a significant strategic challenge for Serbia. In short, Serbia faces many challenges and uncertainties on its path to the EU, a sentiment widely shared by the Serbian people.

3.2. The past decade: Deep integration and development of Serbian-Chinese relations within the Belt and Road Initiative

Against the backdrop of tense political relations with Western countries, Serbia has actively begun to cooperate with China, Russia, and other developing countries to preserve its independent policy and maintain a balanced stance on the international political scene. Since the Serbian Progressive Party came to power in 2012, relations with Eastern countries have been thoroughly renewed and elevated to a higher level.

In the context of Serbian-Chinese relations, the partnership has reached unprecedented heights after decades of development. The Belt and Road Initiative has provided Serbia with a greater number of options for shaping its foreign and economic policies. This initiative has gained popularity in Serbia because it not only contributes to a new impetus in the country's economic development but also represents a model of cooperation that differs from the Western one. By intensifying

cooperation with countries like China, Serbia hopes to reduce its economic dependence on the EU, thereby enhancing its negotiating power and international influence.

Within the Belt and Road Initiative, bilateral projects between Serbia and China are focused on infrastructure and energy sectors, including industry - steel production, highway construction, mining, railways, automobile industry, and urban water drainage systems. These projects encompass initiatives such as the Hungary-Serbia railway line, the Smederevo Steel Mill, the "Danube Corridor" highway, waste water collection and treatment systems, and the exploitation of mines in Bor. Chinese investments undoubtedly had a positive effect on the Serbian economy, coinciding with the growth of Serbia's gross domestic product in recent years. Moreover, Chinese investments in infrastructure projects are directed towards directions that European investment groups currently cannot or do not want to develop, but are crucial for Serbia's national development. From this perspective, cooperation between Serbia and China unequivocally represents a lifesaving opportunity for Serbia.

In this context, China has become Serbia's second-largest trading partner, with bilateral trade volume reaching \$3.55 billion in 2022, representing an increase of 10.1% compared to the previous year. This includes \$2.18 billion in imports from China and \$1.37 billion in exports to China. In 2023, China and Serbia signed a historic Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The Chinese Ministry of Commerce highly praised this agreement, emphasizing that it represents China's first FTA with a Central and Eastern European country and the twenty-second FTA with countries and regions worldwide, making Serbia

the twenty-ninth free trade partner of China. The signing of the FTA between Serbia and China is an important step in implementing the consensus between the leaders of the two countries, a significant initiative to expand the global network of high-standard free trade areas, and a key achievement of the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2023).

In addition to economic interests, China and Serbia also share deep spiritual, cultural, and intangible connections. These intangible connections enrich the continuous development of bilateral relations, contributing to the uniqueness of the "ironclad friendship" between China and Serbia. This friendship has a deep historical foundation, where the two countries have gradually built a close relationship of "shared happiness and sorrow," facing challenges and difficulties together, such as the bombing of the Chinese Embassy during the NATO aggression in 1999. This friendship is not only a collection of common interests but also a cooperative relationship based on mutual understanding and trust. Over the years, the peoples of both countries have developed a deep friendship through economic and cultural exchanges and mutually beneficial cooperation.

At a crucial moment for the continuous development of Sino-Serbian relations and the Belt and Road Initiative, Serbia also played a role in the official establishment of the Belt and Road Institute. This research institution was established through joint efforts of the Serbian Government, the Chamber of Commerce of Serbia, and the University of Novi Sad in 2021, gathering resources and talents from various sectors. During the

same year, during a meeting between Serbian Foreign Minister Selaković and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, the two countries reached an agreement to strengthen strategic cooperation, qualitatively advance the further development of the Belt and Road Initiative, and practically implement key mutually significant projects. The Chinese side also expressed clear support for the Belt and Road Initiative. Since its establishment, the Institute has been supported by leading Chinese companies such as China Mining and China Copper as founding members, which has significantly contributed to its development. In 2023, at a crucial moment in the transition between the old and new decades of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Institute became a member of the Silk Road Think Tank Association (SiLKS) launched by the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. Over the past years, the Institute has signed more than 50 cooperation agreements with institutions, companies, universities, and other organizations across Europe, Asia, and Africa. With the aim of promoting the development of relations between China and Central and Eastern Europe, the Institute has been involved in organizing more than 50 significant intergovernmental exchanges, often taking a leading role.

3.3. The next decade: Building a talent infrastructure and ecosystems

When considering the new decade of development of the Belt and Road Initiative, it is crucial for China and Serbia to deepen cooperation through eight

actions, explore new areas, and open new chapters - especially in the domain of talent infrastructure. The first decade of the mentioned Chinese initiative enabled the connection between Serbia and China in the industrial infrastructure. As we move into the next decade, a focus on talent becomes a central aspect of the "infrastructure" to sustain, expand and enhance these achievements.

Improving talent development and induction, as well as building a high-quality talent pool, are key to the sustainable development of bilateral relations. In terms of talent development, China and Serbia can strengthen exchanges and cooperation in education, jointly developing talent development programs and curricula. Through student exchange, joint educational programs, and other methods, the two countries can encourage students to exchange and cooperate in culture, technology, and other sectors. In addition, both countries can expand cooperation in professional education and technology transfer, which would provide more high-quality talents for enterprises of both countries.

Regarding talent attraction, China and Serbia can adopt more favourable policies and measures to attract a larger number of exceptional talented individual to work and live in their own countries. Apart from that, the two countries can collaborate on establishing talent centres and developing innovative policies that would secure additional intellectual support and guarantees for talent, useful for businesses and research institutions in both countries.

Aside from that, China and Serbia should systematically completely utilize Chinese entities in Serbia, such as large Chinese companies, the

Belt and Road Institute, Confucius Institutes, and Luban workshops. By relying on industrial advantages, with large companies at the centre, both countries can gradually expand their influence on to the academic sphere and, ultimately, on to the entire society, creating a positive ecosystem. The aim of this mechanism is to promote deep cooperation between Chinese companies, Chinese and Serbian universities, institutions, and media in order to achieve a synergistic effect. Such a system not only provides a platform for talented people to demonstrate their skills, enabling them to use, maintain, deepen, and transform existing industries and infrastructure, but also strengthens the five pillars, further expanding and implementing the eight actions. By focusing on people, both countries should encourage the implementation of a variety of smaller projects, moving from individual points to lines, and from lines to areas, thereby encouraging comprehensive development. Also, we hope that other countries along the Silk Road will establish similar ecosystems, which would enable the global connectivity of ecosystems and take advantage of the Belt and Road Initiative in connecting different parts of the world.

In summary, when speaking about the development of a new decade of the Belt and Road Initiative, the cooperation in the infrastructure talent field between China and Serbia will become more intense and important. By improving talent development and its introduction, as well as creating a high-quality talent pool, both countries will significantly contribute to the further deepening of bilateral relations, as well as the promotion of global peace and development.

4. Conclusion and discussion: Balancing between the planned EU integration and the Belt and Road Initiative

As a developing country, Serbia naturally aspires toward a world with more diverse and inclusive values, systems, and norms, including the five pillars and eight actions of the Belt and Road Initiative as well as the frameworks of the EU, as well as the United Nations 2030 vision. This poses two main questions: How do we align relations between the East and the West and how do we balance between EU integration strategy and Serbian-Chinese relations focused on the Belt and Road Initiative?

EU, as an entity that advocates regional integration, has been striving to improve the quality of life of its members for a long time through coordinated cooperation, and to strengthen its economic, political and strategic impact globally. Still, this process is not without issues. Internal contradictions and weaknesses of the EU, especially when it comes to decision-making autonomy, have become pronounced, and affect primarily smaller countries and those who strive for membership. Such countries must carefully weight their ambitions for economic development in relation to the need to preserve political independence and satisfy EU's political criteria (Filipović, 2022).

In this context, the Chinese foreign policy system, which is centred around the Belt and Road initiative, offers Serbia a new opportunity for cooperation. Unlike the cooperation model promoted by the EU, the Belt and Road initiative focuses more on economic cooperation and mutual benefits, with-

out political preconditions. The current conflict in Ukraine and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict further highlight the weaknesses of Western international mechanisms, such as the lack of objective rationality in managing international crises and making decisions based solely on the interests of the great powers. This way of acting not only threatens global balanced development, but also puts pressure on the economic and political sovereignty of smaller states.

Therefore, while Serbia is considering the European integration process, it must strategically think about new methods and directions for deepening cooperation within the Belt and Road initiative, exploring new opportunities for economic development, while at the same time preserving national interests and independent policies. This balanced strategy not only reflects Serbia's thoughtfulness in the context of current international political and economic trends, but also demonstrates its wisdom in maximizing benefits in a complex international environment.

In the context of the Chinese foreign policy system, the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Serbia, also known as the iron friendship, stands out as a unique and firm relationship among all international systems of cooperation. The cooperation between the two countries is not just widely encompassing, but it is also being deepened on various levels, akin to two tightly intertwined, firmly joined segments.

At the regional level of multilateral relations, Serbia unambiguously shines as a positive example on the cooperation scene within the China – Central and Eastern Europe mechanism. Not only is it exhibiting a high level of cooperation enthusiasm,

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it also confirms its status as an active member of the mechanism through practical activities.

In the context of BRICS and SCO, even though Serbia as the most influential country in the Balkans is not an official member, the people have shown strong interest in this multilateral cooperation framework.

As a vital element of the “Belt and Road” Initiative, Serbia plays a key role in the promotion of interregional connection and functions as a bridge connecting the East and the West, facilitating trade and cultural exchange.

Finally, Serbia is actively realizing the idea of a community of mankind with a common destiny through cooperation for mutual benefit, by joining forces with other countries. Not only do deep friendship and cooperation between China and Serbia provide tangible benefits for the both peoples, they also serve as an example of a harmonious coexistence to the global community. This iron friendship presents a powerful impulse for a joint development of China and Serbia in all areas.

Ding Chun, Zhang Mingxin and Ji Haonan from the Fudan Insitute of Belt and Road and Global Governance, emphasized in their article entitled “Competition and Cooperation As Part of Belt and Road Initiative from the Perspective of China and Europe – Evolution, Causes and Impact on Europe” that China and Europe are coexisting in the state of competition and cooperation, which will continue in the future. However, China and European countries have achieved fruitful results within the Belt and Road Initiative, by collecting valuable experiences. There is a stable basis for cooperation between China and Europe (Ding, Zhang, Ji, 2023). It is believed that, in the face of various unstable factors, in the new decade of the Belt and Road Initiative, China and Serbia will start a new chapter together. It will not only build closer bilateral relations, but also positively contribute to the stability and prosperity of regional relations, as well as relations between China and Europe, working together to build and preserve the idea of a community of humanity with a common destiny.

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