PRAGUE PRAŽSKÝ STUDENT STUDENTSKÝ SUMMIT

BACKGROUND REPORT

# Chinese Influence in the Western Balkans

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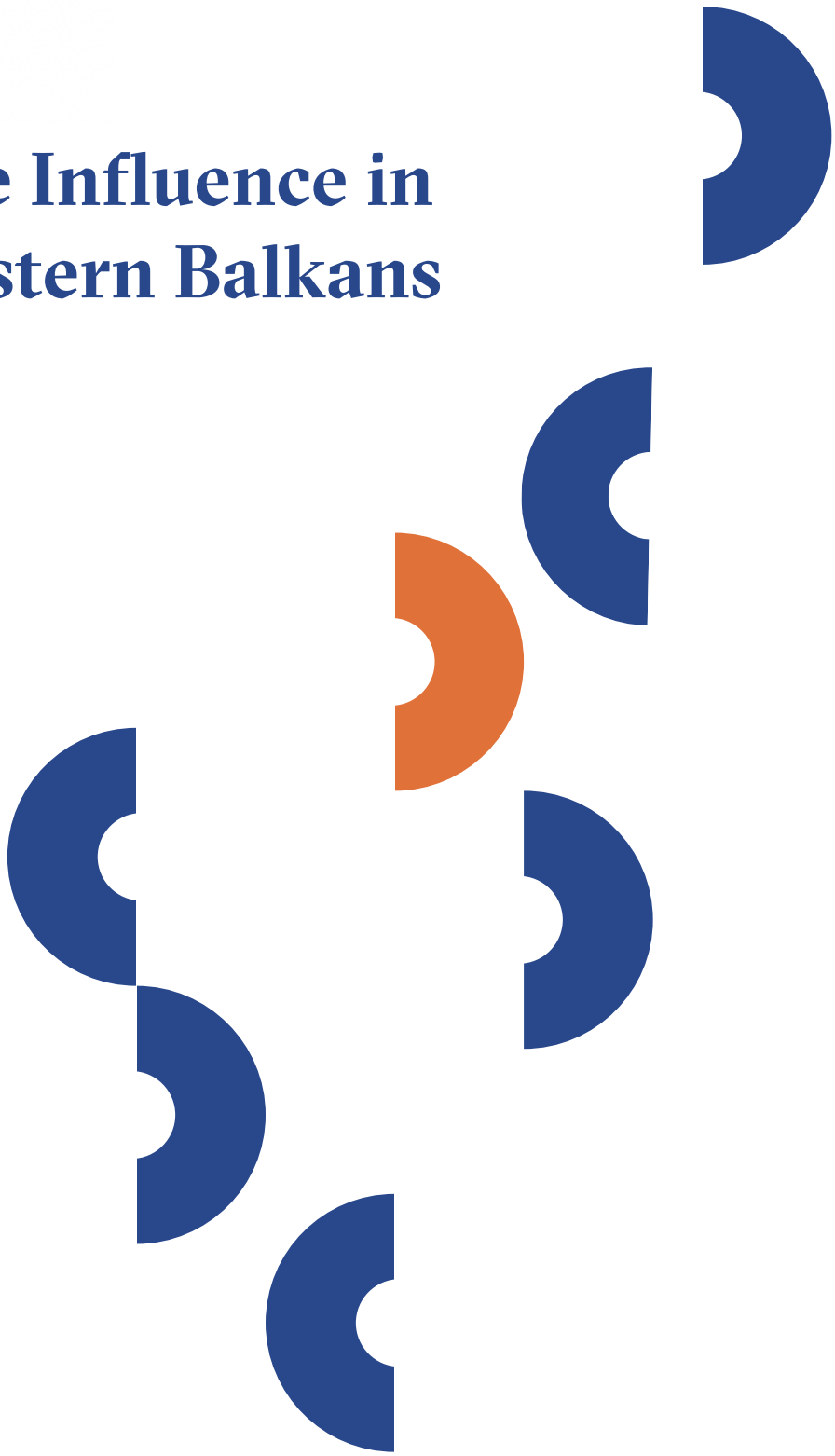

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# Contents


1 Preface 3

2 Introduction 3

3 Chinese influence 4

3.1 Risks of Chinese investment 4

3.2 Threats to Critical Infrastructure 5

3.2.1 Transportation 5

3.2.2 Digital and Security Infrastructure 5

3.2.3 Energy Sector 6

3.3 Cultural influence and disinformation 6

4 NATO´s position 7

4.1 Options for the Alliance 7

4.1.1 Creating Opportunities 7

4.1.2 Investment Monitoring 8

5 Conclusion 9

6 Questions for negotiations 9

7 Additional recommended sources 9

# 1 Preface

This background report was created for the purpose of the Prague Student Summit NATO simulation. The reader will be introduced to the topic of Chinese presence in the south-eastern European region known as the Western Balkans. This report will discuss the motivations of relevant countries, the extent of Chinese influence, possible risks and threats, as well as NATO's stance on the situation. This background report serves as one of the sources of information that can be used by the delegates during negotiations. Delegates are highly encouraged to do their own additional research, especially regarding the specifics of their respective countries.

# 2 Introduction

When it comes to regions of geopolitical contention, attention often gravitates towards places like Ukraine, the Middle East or Taiwan. A quieter, but equally significant, shift is taking place in south-eastern Europe. The Western Balkans – a region encompassing Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Albania, and sometimes Croatia – has become a playground for global superpowers.[1]

The region, known for its ethnic diversity and complex history, has been an unstable and ever-changing area since the breakup of Yugoslavia. The numerous wars of the 1990's have left the region scarred and plagued by bitter cultural divisions. NATO was not left standing by; the Bosnian War and the Kosovo War had prompted the Alliance to intervene in order to stabilise and rebuild the region. Accompanied with several initiatives by the European Union, this Western initiative has been widely considered successful.[2] However, tensions are still high in Kosovo, which struggles for independence from Serbia, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats have to share power between themselves. Slovenia and Croatia have become fully capable members of Euro-Atlantic structures - they are members of NATO as well as the EU. NATO's Adriatic Charter has successfully facilitated Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia joining the Organisation as well. At first glance, it can seem like Western Balkans integration is, slowly but surely, working. Serbia, however, stands out as a major exception. Its reluctance to embrace Euro-Atlantic integration sets it apart from the rest of the region, and its relationship with Western institutions remains complicated. Although Bosnia and Herzegovina is in the process of joining both the EU and NATO, the process is being largely obstructed by the Serb part of society.[3] [4]

In recent years, other actors have begun taking interest in the Western Balkans - namely the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Russian Federation.[5] This background report attempts to explain the dynamics between China and relatively small Balkan countries, their motivations, in addition to the underlying threats for the region and NATO as a whole.

# 3 Chinese influence

Western Balkan countries are among the least developed in Europe, with all of them being in the lower half when ranked by the UN Human Development Index.[6] Kosovo is the poorest, with the lowest GDP per capita on the entire continent.[7] The region is characterised by weak institutions and the rule of law, high levels of corruption, and the very limited role of innovation.[8] These factors make the region very risky and generally unpopular for Western banks and investors.[9] That is why funding from China has become more favoured in the region in recent years.[10]

The PRC has heavily invested in The Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to serve as a "new silk road" connecting global markets to China by a network of ports, highways and railroads. According to a study by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, there are more than 130 Chinese projects in the Balkans with a total value of around €31 billion.[12] The countries' involvement varies; Serbia, however, is by far the most important Chinese partner in the region. With its already troubling relation with the USA since the 1990's, Belgrade has been open to China for a long time, striving to balance these ties with engagement with the EU and Russia as a part of its neutrality policy.[13] The country accounts for 60% of Chinese trade with the region[14] and hosts more joint projects with China than any other Balkan country.[15] Beijing has even declared Belgrade as its strategic hub for the area.[16] Other countries, especially those already participating in Western structures, have also received Chinese investment; some have, however, been distancing themselves from it due to the numerous risks they bring, as well as pressures from the EU and the US.[17]

Why are the Chinese so interested in this region, then? The answer lies in its position in Europe, both physical and political. The PRC wants to expand its influence and see the Balkans as Europe's soft spot.[18] Such influence would help China to achieve two important strategic goals. Firstly, it will facilitate China-Europe connectivity and expand China's trade with the EU, Beijing's largest trading partner at the moment. Secondly, it will enable Beijing to solidify its influence and gain more bargaining power within the EU and NATO[19]. It is important to note that these effects are primarily not immediate but rather part of a long-term strategy for when the countries eventually join these organisations.

*Figure 1: The number of Chinese projects and their total value in EUR billions* [11]

## 3.1 Risks of Chinese investment

Chinese infrastructure projects in developing countries, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have increasingly drawn criticism for what some label "debt trap diplomacy." This strategy involves extending large loans to countries for the construction of infrastructure, such as highways, ports, and railways. In fact, the vast majority of Chinese investment comes in the form of loans.[20] The concern is that when these countries struggle to repay the debt, China can leverage the situation to gain political influence, acquire strategic assets, or impose economic conditions that favour its interests. The debts then also discourage any other investors from doing business with the country in question, making it even more reliant on the Asian

power. The loans provided often come with terms that appear beneficial at first glance but can lead to significant financial strain on the borrowing nation. Consequently, these projects not only affect the economic sovereignty of the recipient country but also pose broader geopolitical challenges.

It is also crucial to mention that all these contracts are well within the bounds of international law. The issue stems rather from the often unreasonable conditions, such as high interest rates, restricting business only to Chinese contractors, or unwillingness to renegotiate deals.[21] Because PRC loan agreements tend to be opaque, the public is also usually not aware of these loan terms.[22] While it is not clear if the PRC writes the contracts deliberately as a trap, the fact is that China does not avoid utilising its financial power through loans and has used it as leverage to coerce countries into favouring China in diplomatic areas of its interest.[23]

**"The PRC wants to expand its influence and see the Balkans as Europe's soft spot"**

## 3.2 Threats to Critical Infrastructure

Critical infrastructure is a broad and flexible term that generally describes infrastructure considered essential by governments for the functioning of a society and deserving of special protection for national security.[24] NATO defines this term as "a nation's infrastructure assets, facilities, systems, networks, and processes that support the military, economic, political and/or social life on which a nation and/or NATO depends."[25] Usually, this involves energy, water, digital infrastructure, the military, transportation, healthcare, financial services or critical manufacturing. It is imperative that critical infrastructure remains under domestic control. The presence of a foreign actor can bring numerous threats - it can be used as leverage, can give the actor options to disrupt the infrastructure, or establish a crucial foothold. The port of Sevastopol in Crimea can serve as an example. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukraine established multiple deals with Russia for the lease of the port. The port then became a cornerstone of Russian operations in the Black Sea and especially backfired after the 2022 invasion.[26]

### 3.2.1 Transportation

China's investment strategy in the Western Balkans focuses heavily on transport infrastructure since it is in line with the broader Belt and Road initiative. The most visible development has been focused around highways. The Bar-Boljare Highway in Montenegro might be the most infamous example, where after failing to attract Western investment,[27] Podgorica took a loan from the Chinese EXIM bank. Montenegro then struggled to pay the debt off, resulting in an economic decline while the highway sat mostly unfinished.[28] In 2020, Montenegro's national debt-to-GDP ratio rose over 100%, where over half of it was owed to China.[29] Moreover, the payoffs that followed consumed a third of the annual budget.[30] Other highway projects are also being undertaken in Serbia[31] and North Macedonia.[32]

While funded primarily by the EU, Chinese companies have also built the Croatian Pelješac bridge, which connects two separated parts of the country over the sea.[33] It illustrates that even EU countries are not immune to Chinese influence. There is an ongoing construction of the Belgrade-Budapest railway corridor as a part of the BRI.[34] It is meant to connect Chinese logistics hubs to Europe, notably through the Port of Piraeus in Greece. The Greek port is the biggest port in the eastern Mediterranean and has been owned by the Chinese shipping company Cosco since 2016.[35] Additionally, the PRC has tried to acquire stakes in additional strategic ports, such as the Croatian port of Rijeka, although such efforts have faced resistance from the EU and the USA.[36]

In Albania, the Tirana International Airport is one of the few cases where the Chinese actually left. After the airport was initially acquired by the Chinese state-owned firm Everbright in 2016, it was sold to an Albanian conglomerate with strong ties to the government only four years later.[37]

### 3.2.2 Digital and Security Infrastructure

One of the most important aspects of hybrid warfare is technology, which plays a critical role in the public, military, and private sectors. In the context of the Western Balkans, the increasing presence of Chinese technology firms, particularly Huawei, poses significant challenges. The influence of these companies extends beyond mere commercial interests since they have direct ties to the Chinese Communist Party, which may use them as a means of pursuing its goals abroad.[38]

The integration of Chinese technology into important networks could enable unauthorised access to sensitive data and surveillance, undermining national security. Furthermore, these companies often disregard the ethical implications of their products, which can be used to suppress human rights and strengthen authoritarian regimes. In regions with fragile democracies, like the Western Balkans, the unchecked deployment of such technologies poses a significant threat to both national sovereignty and individual freedoms.[39]

Huawei, a global leader in the technology sector, has established a substantial presence in the Western Balkans, with a particularly strong foothold in Serbia. The company has been a long-time partner of Serbian Telecom, and they have regional headquarters and an innovation centre in Belgrade.[40] Its ties to the Chinese government have been heavily scrutinised by the United States and the EU, especially their 5G networks. There are currently no such networks in the Western Balkans, despite China's best efforts. A part of the reason for that is the fact that all countries except Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina have committed themselves to the US-led "Clean Network" initiative, aimed at minimising Chinese data infrastructure in the Euro-Atlantic area.[41] Serbia was pressured into de-facto agreeing to the project by the United States in 2020 but still continues to make deals with Chinese providers.[42] Bosnia and Herzegovina seems to have not yet officially limited any Chinese digital influence.

Along with providing fast internet connection, Huawei is also cooperating with the Serbian government to develop the "Safe City" biometric surveillance project in Belgrade. It consists of placing 1000 cameras with AI capabilities, such as facial and license plate recognition, across the capital.[43] The project raises many concerns about digital privacy, the potential for misuse of the technology, Chinese espionage, and the impact on human rights, especially with the state skewing more and more towards authoritarianism.[44]

Significant military cooperation seems to be limited only to Serbia. In 2022, it received a number of Chinese FK-3 surface-to-air missiles and CH-92A drones[45]. The delivery of the missiles, in particular, was unable to arrive for a long time because NATO refused the system passage through its territory.[46] The growing military ties have raised concerns among leaders in the region and in the West as they could encourage the Balkan country toward another war, especially against its former province of Kosovo.[47]

### 3.2.3 Energy Sector

In the past years, China has been investing considerably in the region's energy sector, funding multiple coal power plant investments in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.[48] At present, on the other hand, Beijing could become a key actor in facilitating the green energy transition of the region as China is the largest global producer and exporter of clean energy technologies.[49] This is also tied to the fact that China has an interest in the numerous rare earth mines in the region. For example, Chinese-invested enterprises in Serbia and Albania are the biggest producers of copper in the respective countries.[50] Chinese companies have also invested in hydropower projects such as the Dabar hydropower plant in Bosnia and Herzegovina.[51]

## 3.3 Cultural influence and disinformation

To make Chinese partnerships an attractive option for governments, the PCR also needs to maintain some degree of public support. Cultural exchanges and media cooperation are strategic moves to win hearts and minds in a region where economic ties are already deepening. This helps China present itself as a benevolent partner, not just a distant superpower.

For instance, China has invested in university exchanges, Sinology programmes, and multiple Confucius Institutes (Chinese cultural centres) in Tirana, Podgorica, Belgrade Sarajevo and others.[52] Human Rights

Watch, other non-profit organisations, and Western governments have accused these institutions of censoring liberal ideas and topics that are controversial for China.[53]

In terms of media presence, the Xinhua news agency cooperates with fellow agencies in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia by organising lectures for journalists and providing them with free content.[54] In Serbia, media cooperation is even explicitly institutionalised by an agreement between the Serbian Ministry of Culture and China's State Council Information Office.[55] Beijing relies on these networks to shape favourable views not only on its local projects but also on Hong Kong, Taiwan, and human rights violations.[56]

# 4 NATO´s position

NATO has declared its official stance on China in the 2022 Strategic Concept. In it, member states hail the strategic importance of the Western Balkans region for the Alliance, including the countries that are not members yet.[57] Moreover, it warns that the PRC seeks to control key technological and industrial sectors, critical infrastructure, strategic materials, and supply chains in an effort to create strategic dependencies and enhance its influence. The Alliance has proclaimed that it will continue to support the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of interested countries in these regions and that it will enhance efforts to bolster their capabilities to address the distinct threats and challenges they face and boost their resilience against malign third-party interference and coercion.[58] At the same time, NATO is open to constructive engagement with the PRC with a view to safeguarding the Alliance's security interests.[59] The European Union is also explicitly mentioned as a relevant actor to "maximise synergies" with, further underlining how multifaceted the issue is.[60]

All these points fall broadly in line with Article 2 of the North Atlantic Treaty. While NATO is often thought of as only a military organisation, this article justifies the broader scope of the document. The military is, after all, not an end in itself but rather just one means toward the promotion of national security and prosperity. In the age of hybrid warfare, it gives NATO a great variety of options to deal with these complex threats. Let's take a look at some examples of the measures NATO could take.

Article 2 of the North Atlantic Treaty

The Parties will contribute toward the further development of peaceful and friendly international relations by strengthening their free institutions, bringing about a better understanding of the principles upon which these institutions are founded, and promoting conditions of stability and well-being. They will seek to eliminate conflict in their international economic policies and will encourage economic collaboration between any or all of them.[61]

## 4.1 Options for the Alliance

### 4.1.1 Creating Opportunities

If we look at the root of the problem, it is that Western Balkan countries are struggling to attract Western investment, so they turn to China. To counter this, NATO could create opportunities for the region by encouraging Western countries to invest more in local economies. Since there is already an economic push

facilitated by the EU, NATO is in a prime position to complement these efforts. This could include various schemes, like implementing fast-track approvals or proactively fighting local corruption. The Alliance can effectively provide support, expertise, and training in key sectors, such as cyber security, crisis management, capacity building, military cooperation, or regional stability.[62] By fostering these ties, NATO can build trust with the local populations and governments, making them less reliant on China and more integrated with the West.[63]

### 4.1.2 Investment Monitoring

The most direct way to tackle Chinese investments, however, is to agree on a common investment monitoring framework to promote transparency and assess the possible risks as early as possible. For example, the Atlantic Council think tank recommends that NATO allies and partners should coordinate assessments of risks within the transatlantic community and provide lending and investment opportunities to both each other as well as other states that are vulnerable to predatory lending, especially for critical infrastructure projects.[64] NATO could also put pressure on member states to transfer Chinese-owned critical assets to safer hands, as Albania did with its airport. The delegates should also keep in mind that the Western Balkans are not an isolated case of a complex hybrid warfare strategy threatening the West. It would be great for NATO to learn from the example of the Western Balkans so it can avoid similar movements elsewhere.

In regards to countries outside of the Alliance, namely Serbia and Bosnia, the options are way more limited since they are not bound by the Treaty. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country aspiring to join NATO. It is currently in the stages of the Membership Action Plan,[65] which is a convergence program with the goal of facilitating the joining of a new member. NATO could put additional conditions in place to ensure no further Chinese infiltration into the Alliance. Serbia, however adversary its view may seem, is still part of NATO's Individual Partnership Action Plan.[66] This could serve as a stepping stone into establishing some sort of strategic communication or deals to boost Western investment. Taking a more restrictive approach, NATO could restrict the movement of goods through its territory on account of security doubts as it did with the FK-3 missiles or conditionally restrict ties to Serbia altogether.

**„By fostering these ties, NATO can build trust with the local populations and governments, making them less reliant on China and more integrated with the West.“**

# 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the surge in Chinese investment in the Balkans has introduced a complex array of security concerns, particularly surrounding critical infrastructure, the infiltration of Euro-Atlantic structures, and the promotion of authoritarian tendencies. This influx of capital, while potentially beneficial for the region's economic development, presents strategic risks that NATO cannot afford to ignore. The countries within NATO have proven to be the most manageable partners in addressing these issues, highlighting the importance of solidifying alliances within the organisation.

To mitigate the security threats posed by these investments, NATO must adopt a dual approach: proactively encouraging increased Western investment in the Balkans and implementing conditional restrictions on engagements with non-NATO countries that could compromise regional stability. NATO should also cooperate with the EU on account of aligned goals in the region and the established synergy between the two organisations. Furthermore, NATO should apply the lessons learned from this situation to similar cases globally, ensuring robust mechanisms are in place to secure its interests and maintain the integrity of critical infrastructure against foreign influence.

# 6 Questions for negotiations

- What relationship does your country have with China?
- Security vs. economy - what is more important for your country, the Balkans and NATO?
- Should stricter foreign investment regulations be mandatory across the Alliance?
- How should NATO approach Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina?
- Is a new, dedicated NATO body focused on the issue needed?
- If yes, what should its purpose be, and how should it function?
- Is your country capable of providing an alternative to Chinese investments?

# 7 Additional recommended sources

1. The NATO 2022 Strategic Concept
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2. European Council on Foreign Relations - China in the Balkans: country profiles
   https://ecfr.eu/special/china-balkans/
3. Atlantic Council - The case for a comprehensive approach 2.0
   https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/NATO-Comprehensive-Approach-Report-2021_final.pdf
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## Pražský studentský summit

Pražský studentský summit je unikátní vzdělávací projekt existující od roku 1995. Každoročně vzdělává přes 300 studentů středních i vysokých škol o současných globálních tématech, a to především prostřednictvím simulace jednáníčtyř klíčových mezinárodních organizací – OSN, NATO, EU a G20.

## Asociace pro mezinárodní otázky

AMO je nevládní nezisková organizace založená v roce 1997 za účelem výzkumu a vzdělávání v oblasti mezinárodních vztahů. Tento přední český zahraničně politický think-tank není spjat s žádnou politickou stranou ani ideologií. Svou činností podporuje aktivní přístup k zahraniční politice, poskytuje nestrannou analýzu mezinárodního dění a otevírá prostor k fundované diskusi.

## Ota Repák

Autor je spolupracovníkem Asociace pro mezinárodní otázky a členem přípravného týmu Pražského studentského summitu.

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**Vydala Asociace pro mezinárodní otázky (AMO) pro potřeby XXX. ročníku Pražského studentského summitu.**
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