

China's bid for international leadership in Central and Eastern Europe: role conflict and policy responses

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Abstract

China and Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) have intensified their cooperation over the past decade or so. Despite some modest progress, this cooperation has performed below the expectations of the CEECs in general, and, even more so, generated negative feedback and implications more widely. This study is motivated by the puzzle over why there are widening discrepancies between the two sides after initially positive expectations. Informed by the role theory of international relations, this paper mainly argues that there is an intrarole conflict between China's perception of its international leadership role and the corresponding role expectations of China held by the CEECs. This framework is empirically assessed on the 17 + 1 cooperation, through which China strives to forge a leadership role for itself in relation to the CEECs. Amid generally low expectations of China's leadership role, three general patterns of responses can be identified among the CEECs, including those of dissenters, pragmatists, and persisting partners. Furthermore, China's leadership demands encountered challenges from other players, particularly the European Union and the United States.

Keywords

17 + 1 platform, Central and Eastern Europe, China, international leadership, role conflict

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Introduction

The tradition of relations between China and the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) is uniquely characterised by both familiarity and strangeness. The establishment of official diplomatic relations between the two sides in the 1950s was motivated by the Soviet-controlled communist bloc's rapprochement with the People's Republic of China (PRC). The short-lived honeymoon soon reached its limits, with the Sino-Soviet rift of around 1960. The two sides became psychologically distant over the succeeding decades. Despite the historical links and regular contact through normal diplomacy and institutions, China and the CEECs do not share substantial mutual understanding. On the one hand, the two sides seem familiar to each other due to their shared ideological past, whether this is regarded in a positive or negative sense. On the other, they have become rather estranged since their divergent paths of domestic transformation in the post-Cold War era. Indeed, the momentum of 1989/1990 generated a remarkable chasm between the two sides, as the CEECs generally got rid of their communist systems, whereas China has maintained its one-party rule until today. This divergence was further accentuated with the accession of most CEECs to the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

As part of its rise on the world stage in recent years, however, China's global ambitions have reached Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), largely through the so-called 16 + 1 (or 17 + 1 since 2019, when Greece officially joined the forum) process. Officially kicked off at the first 16 + 1 Summit in Warsaw, Poland in April 2012, this sub-regional forum has been roughly institutionalised, primarily on China's initiative. The CEECs were highly motivated to cooperate in the beginning, but most have explicitly or implicitly revealed increasing disappointment with the actual developments over subsequent years. Most recently, several states even identified China, with special reference to its information technologies, as a potential security threat.¹ The observation of this discord in the relations between the CEECs and China sparked the research questions that this paper addresses: What motivated China and the CEECs to construct this multilateral forum? Why are there widening discrepancies between China and its CEEC partners in their cooperation? How is there marked variation across the CEECs in their attitudes and policies regarding China?

Since the start of the 16 + 1 process, the China–CEECs relationship has attracted attention in policy and academic circles. Although some scholars have studied China's relations with individual CEECs, most of the research has focused on China's relations with the CEECs as a sub-region.² Mainstream studies of the topic address the operation and practicality of the China–CEECs cooperation and its outcomes, impacts and implications. Further on this topic, the literature provides conventional explanations from different perspectives, including economic analyses of material factors, such as complementarity, economies of scale and models of political economy,³ and liberal international relations (IR) analyses of normative aspects of economic relations, such as human rights, democracy and regime types.⁴ Kavalski⁵ discusses the CEECs–China interaction as roles mutually emerging through the *region-making* and *community-making* activities of Beijing, which attempts to 'position himself as the internationally responsible and reliable actor'. Bartosz Kowalski⁶ regards the 16 + 1 as having been

based on China-initiated multilateral regional formats for developing countries, such as FOCAC in Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), with China perceiving the CEECs as the part of the 'global South'. These studies made important contributions to our understanding of the topic. Without denying the explanatory power of conventional IR theories like realism and liberal institutionalism, this paper aims to provide a more alternative perspective and address the underlying causes of these two parties mutual perception and (dis)trust for gaining more insight into their relations and the wide policy implications as well, particularly, the great power competition.

Informed by role theory in IR,⁷ this paper delves into the main research questions, with reference to China's international leadership role-making and its ensuing impacts on and implications for the China-CEECs cooperation. More specifically, it draws on an analytical framework of the intra-role conflict in international leadership between the ego part (or self-perception) and the alter part (or others' expectations).⁸ The main argument is that China's initiative regarding CEECs is actually part of its global strategy of taking the lead in 'regional multilateralism',⁹ which it practises around the world, from Central Asia and Southeast Asia in its own neighbourhood to the distant regions of Africa and Latin America. China's decision to take up a selective international leadership was made as a result of its *guoji dingwei* (or international positioning) to redefine its international role.¹⁰ Although China tries to play an international leadership role, its national role conception was challenged and questioned by many CEECs due to the intra-role conflict and competition of the EU and the US as 'significant others'. Using this framework of role conflict, this paper traces the motivations and driving forces that shape the evolution of the China-CEECs cooperation in terms of China's initiative, the CEECs' assessments of and responses to the 17 + 1 cooperation, and their evolving and differentiated bilateral agenda with China.

In terms of research methodology, IR scholars who work to identify a state's national role conceptions and international roles usually rely on two types of sources: primary and secondary data. The former includes official documents, political leaders' speeches and interviews, media reports, and so on. The latter refers to scholarly work, in various forms such as policy briefs and analyses, and academic literature such as journal papers and monographs. These data are mostly presented as narratives which are collected and selected by role theorists to assess the national attributes of the countries under study so as to interpret the given state's role expectations and the feedbacks of its interlocutors in international affairs. An interpretive method of this kind, however, tends to be challenged for allegedly lacking objectivity. We wish to defend it, however, by arguing that complete objectivity is impossible in social research because every researcher has lived experiences that affect what they study and how they do their studies.¹¹ That said, we try to provide less biased analysis by means such as crosschecking different sources. In our interpretive study, this role dynamic is understood as an inter-subjective process between different state actors. In this study, both primary and secondary sources are selectively retrieved from both the Chinese and the CEEC sides, provided that they can shed light on identifying national role conceptions of China in the process of the China-CEECs cooperation.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section provides an analytical framework in which role theory is applied to China's self-defined role of international leadership. In

particular, the Chinese debate on its international leadership and the concepts of intra-role conflict, role-taking and role-making are discussed. This is followed by an empirical account of the role dynamics between China and its CEEC partners over China's role conception of international leadership in the 17 + 1 cooperation. The policy responses of the CEECs are further introduced in three major groups according to their attitudes and behaviour towards China's self-perceived leadership role. The three groups are *dissenters*, *pragmatists* and *persisting partners*, with the majority of the CEECs falling into the pragmatist category. Furthermore, Czechia is elaborated as a focused case due to its intensified role dynamic, regarding China's bid for international leadership in the region. The conclusion of the paper summarises the major findings and briefly discusses the broad policy implications.

China's quest for international leadership

Within Chinese policy circles and academia, a major debate over the current Chinese foreign policy concerned China's *guoji dingwei*, which is essential to its foreign grand strategy. The debate mainly centres around questions of what role or grand strategy China should play or adopt internationally, particularly whether it should take a more active or even a leadership role, against the backdrop of dramatic transformations in the international system. This debate was particularly triggered in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis and has continued amid the Covid-19 pandemic, which are both perceived by Chinese policymakers and analysts as a proper opportunity for China's global rise. In view of the so-called 'China's re-entry into the world centre stage', a veteran Chinese diplomat and strategist called for re-formulating China's grand strategy which ought to guide Chinese foreign policy with clearly defined long-term vision for the world, national goals, and fundamental national interests.¹²

From the role theory perspective, this involves domestic role contestation,¹³ a process of China's internal debate on (re)defining its own national role conception in international relations. National role conception refers to the domestic expectations of a nation as to what its appropriate role is and what this implies, and furthermore the perception of what the position of a person acting on behalf of a nation is vis-a-vis others.¹⁴ More immediately relevant to foreign policy behaviour are the two related concepts of role-taking and role-making. Role-taking is a state's behaviour in performing its perceived appropriate international role to meet needs of group belonging, with such a role required by social expectations and for relationships with others. Role-making is a similar behaviour of role enactment, but it is driven by the passionate process of making, acting upon and enforcing self-role conceptions.¹⁵ From this perspective, like any other state, China is engaged in the constant process of role-taking and role-making through positioning and re-positioning its own national roles against the ever-changing social milieu in the domestic and international arena.

Since its founding in 1949, the PRC's international role has evolved dramatically, with major policy adjustments and consequences. This is exemplified in the strategic shift in its foreign policy from the 'revolutionary foreign policy'¹⁶ or 'interventionism' in international affairs¹⁷ of the Maoist era to the development-oriented foreign policy, with paramount concern for its own national development, of the post-Cold War

period. This change in foreign policy behaviour is driven by a redefinition of China's national role conception, based largely on domestic considerations, from the radical ideological enthusiasm that has positioned China as a major leader of the communist revolution to the pragmatic development for China's consideration of itself as a responsible caretaker of the Chinese people. With its rise since the beginning of the 2000s, China arrived at another crossroads in terms of repositioning itself internationally. This domestic role contestation or strategic reflection tilted towards the mainstream view that now is the time for China to adjust, if not abandon, its long-held *tao guang yang hui* (hiding and biding) strategy and take a more active leadership role in international affairs, particularly through multilateral diplomacy and institutions, if necessary and possible. It's critical to note that international leadership does not equal hegemony. Here, international leadership is defined as effective actions of an international player which endeavours to solve or overcome a collective action problem for achievement of common gains.¹⁸

Although the wording 'international leadership' does not appear frequently in Chinese official discourse, China's ambitions can be palpably identified in both its rhetoric and actions. In the Report to the 19th National Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress in 2017, Chinese President Xi Jinping himself said that it was a CCP achievement that over the previous 5 years that China had championed 'the development of a community with a shared future for mankind' and had thus encouraged 'the evolution of the global governance system'. He continued that this marks 'a further rise in China's international influence, ability to inspire, and power to shape' and shows how China 'has made great new contributions to global peace and development'. As a plan for the next 5 years, the top Chinese leader further asserted that 'China will promote coordination and cooperation with other major countries and work to build a framework for major country relations featuring overall stability and balanced development', and it will 'continue to play its part as a major and responsible country, take an active part in reforming and developing the global governance system, and keep contributing Chinese wisdom and strength to global governance'.¹⁹

At the policy and behaviour level, China under Xi Jinping has become increasingly proactive and assertive in taking the international leadership role selectively, if not comprehensively. In fact, the consensus among high-level Chinese officials on China's grand strategy of taking a greater leadership role predates Xi's ascension. Already in the early 2000s, China was in the process of 'hesitant adaptation', with Chinese policymakers still uncertain about the role shift in its foreign strategy.²⁰ This strategic uncertainty changed dramatically after the 2008 global financial crisis, which convinced the Chinese leadership of its strategic opportunity to be more active in international affairs. This is evidenced by a series of recent developments in both previously existing and new fronts of the international institutions and order. Since Xi took power in late 2012, this trend accelerated, as he repositioned himself as a populist leader domestically while overseeing China's rise as a global power internationally.²¹ While China considerably increased its voice and might in old institutions such as the WTO, the UN and its various affiliates, it is much more noteworthy to witness China's phenomenal activism in initiating and creating new agendas, programmes, and institutions, mostly including, but not limited to, the well-known Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Such trends are described by analysts as the

gradual, but profound departure from its long held 'hiding and biding' strategy towards a focus on selective power projection.²²

In comparison to the implicit or tacit official lines, there has been an extensive open discussion of the topic in Chinese academia.²³ We can thus turn to scholarship by leading Chinese IR scholars for more insights into this strategic change. There is now a general consensus among the leading Chinese IR scholars that China should play an international leadership role.²⁴ Due to the drastic transformation of the international system and the always-acute structural pressures and challenges, the matter of China's international positioning became particularly pressing. A clear international positioning would help China better define its grand foreign strategy and take better approaches to international affairs and global governance. Regarding the motivations behind China's bid for international leadership, Chinese scholars almost unanimously pinpoint national interests and China's own development needs as the main drivers. For example, Wang argues²⁵ that of all the factors that might decide China's international status, the most important is the change and continuity of China's development, rather than any feature of the external environment. Furthermore, it is argued that China's attitudes towards international norms should be decided about based on whether the norms are useful for China's development.²⁶ Given that China defines itself as a 'developer', it is tasked with taking development as the paramount objective of its international relations. From this, it is clear that what characterises China's international positioning is its mostly inward-looking mentality with insufficient knowledge and consideration of foreign environments. This has much to do with China's inexperience in exercise of international leadership as well as its self-centred tradition in international affairs from ancient times.

Meanwhile, this international leadership role is increasingly a self-expectation of the Chinese, among both political elites and the general public. China's phenomenal rise over the past decades gave it more confidence than it ever had before. In the eyes of Chinese analysts, the current perception of China as a major power, even by the West, is unprecedented. Traditionally, China has been positioned in a Western-dominated international system,²⁷ and the time has now arrived for China to proactively position itself in the international arena, including for the international leadership role. This entails a shift from tole-taking to tole-making. This self-confidence is also widespread among the public in China, with China's growing presence on the global stage being well recognised by the Chinese people. According to a survey, three-quarters of Chinese citizens believe that their country plays a more important role in the world today than it did 10 years ago.²⁸ However, China faces daunting challenges in its role-making endeavour. According to role theory,²⁹ emerging or new states in the international system are likely to have more self-ascribed roles than achieved roles in their initial stages of development. In the case of China's international leadership role, its newly ascribed role has yet to be achieved. By definition, international roles are social positions that are constituted by both ego and alter expectations regarding the purpose of an actor in a social group.³⁰ One country's role conceptions comprise not only the ego perceptions but also the alter expectations – the implicit or explicit demands of others as signalled through language and action. The ego perceptions and alter expectations do not always conform to each other; rather, there is very often an intra-role conflict within a national role conception between the ego and the alter parts. The meaning of China's rise rests as much upon China's national capacity

as upon the views of those who evaluate China's role playing. Role conceptions not only directly affect China's international relations but also mediate between those who act on behalf of China and those who evaluate China's performance.³¹

Hence, an interactionist reading of role theory pays equal attention to the side of role-taking by potential followers, in terms of the constitutive social effects of role conception. Embedded in social interactions and contexts, the potential followers as role beholders face an increasing number of external expectations by various peer groups, also known as significant others. Significant others are those who have an important influence or play a formative role in shaping the behaviour of another. Peer groups as significant others and their proliferation contribute to the density of social expectations, or the thickness of social relations of the international community.³² When China practises its largely ego-motivated leadership role toward other state or non-state actors, this process of role-making implies that China as an agent sets out to reconstruct its new role, potentially setting in motion a reconstruction of counter-roles or commensurate roles in other target players. Its success thus relies equally on the responses of other states which are usually subject to simultaneous influences of various significant others. In other words, there could be a competition between China and other influential players. If these target states are democracies, it is highly likely that various domestic actors in such a state hold different, either diverging or converging role concepts towards different peer groups.³³ As a role conception is relational and interactionist, the international leadership role is fundamentally based on a working leader–follower relationship.

The uneasy leader–follower dynamic

China's outreach to the CEECs comes amid its international leadership redefinition in the broad context of its BRI endeavour. China's cooperation with the CEECs has been firmly integrated into its overall global strategy by the Chinese government as the former is intended to serve the general purpose of the BRI.³⁴ The synergy between 17 + 1 and the BRI was most authoritatively affirmed by Xi Jinping when he chaired for the first time the China-CEECs cooperation summit on February 9th, 2021: he said that steps were taken 'to explore the possibility of aligning cross-regional cooperation with Belt and Road cooperation, making Central and Eastern Europe the first region where all countries have signed agreements on Belt and Road cooperation'.³⁵ However, the BRI as a strategic blueprint itself is evolving and becoming enriched, in terms of goals and approaches, etc. because it is driven by multifaceted factors, including strategic expansion. Solving China's domestic surplus problem is just one of them and it itself doesn't warrant all the desire and energy that the Chinese government so far invested in it. Overall, the China-CEECs cooperation, now more incorporated as part of the BRI, is intended to contribute to the PRC's aim to play a leading role in selected areas.

To the Chinese eyes, the CEECs afford China a valuable opportunity to practise international leadership, which can be assessed from the role theory perspective. In this dynamic of role interactions, while China tries to play its international leadership role, the CEECs respond in both uniform and divided ways. Effort toward role-making, rather than role-taking, dominates in China's foreign policy conduct with the CEECs. Consequently, China takes a more proactive and accommodating agenda in

cooperating with CEECs. In turn, the CEECs are not merely passive respondents, but contributors to China's role-making through their various role-taking attitudes and responses, which might include acceptance, hesitation or rejection. Also involved in this dynamic process are some peer groups, or significant others, such as the EU, Russia and the United States (US), which participate in China's role-making process mostly as competitors or audiences.

First of all, China's aspiration to a leadership role vis-à-vis the CEECs inevitably produces several discrepancies in the views between the two sides. The notion that China has a leading role rarely explicitly appeared in the discourses of the 17 states, and identifying the CEECs as having subordinate roles to the global power in East Asia is highly sensitive and would be considered unacceptable by many in the region. The past common experience of being part of the Eastern bloc in a bipolar world, and playing the roles of Moscow's satellites, produced in the CEECs a sense of resistance to the Eurasian geopolitical gravity. In fact, public narratives in several V4³⁶ and Baltic states reveal suspicion about an emerging alliance between the illiberal and non-democratic powers of Russia and China. The historical memory of two world wars and two consequent waves of totalitarianism cemented the CEECs' leanings towards the Western-dominated global liberal order. In fact, the CEECs' relations with China have been very ambiguous, and some of these countries occasionally hesitate regarding the political acceptability of China as a partner in the context of their NATO-dominated security policies and EU-oriented democratic norms and values. A 'business first' pragmatism is thus the key driving impetus for a rapprochement with China, with discourses on the theme of Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) and infrastructure projects frequently mentioned in diplomatic formulas as being the 'gateway for Chinese investments to Europe'.³⁷

Driven by these pragmatic considerations, the CEECs' initially positive expectations of 17 + 1 have been expressed in joint statements of the 16 CEEC prime ministers during the annual summits held since 2012. The CEECs' expectation of China's role was framed within existing bilateral ties and was then upgraded with the emergence of the 17 + 1 process. So far, no specific leadership role of China was explicitly mentioned or defined. However, China's proactive role in the multilateral institutionalised platform was de facto established and broadly accepted in the 17 + 1 agenda due to its initiative in organising and hosting the summits, creating the institutional framework, including the Secretariat and Coordination Centre at the Chinese Foreign Ministry, and various sectoral associations, setting the agenda and narratives and financing and co-financing the administrative costs of the 17 + 1 summits. A position of quasi-leadership for China was implicitly acquiesced to by the CEECs in the hope of investment and business potentials. By issuing the Twelve Measures,³⁸ a list of 12 commitments to provide organisation, coordination and financial capacities for the 16 + 1 platform, China outlined its leading role by self-appointment. Indeed, as argued by Justyna Szczudlik,³⁹ the proposal presented by Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in Warsaw was drafted without proper consultation with the 16 CEECs. It is true that the CEECs' participation in the sub-regional 17 + 1 grouping with China was not the result of any bottom-up market-driven movement. Rather, it has been accepted as a China-led investment community, in which the CEECs took the role of followers, with their support for the political dimension of this China-centric model hardly meant in earnest.

Thus, China took on a strenuous path of multilateral diplomacy due to the huge role discrepancies. The complexity of China's multilateral approach to the region is reflected in analysts' endeavour to reveal the combination of bilateral, regional and sub-regional formats through both institutional and quasi-institutional arrangements.⁴⁰ However, the inconsistency of anything other than economic motivations, with certain exceptions in tourism, academia, culture and regional agendas, confirms that China is a latecomer in Eastern and Central Europe and lacks a sufficient tradition of a solid presence there as a genuine and qualified stakeholder in the region, as summarised Turcsanyi and Qiaoan.⁴¹ Analysts have adopted the term 'multilateral bilateralism' to describe the intensified bilateral relations between some of the CEECs and China in the wake of the ineffectiveness of the multilateral cooperation through 17 + 1.⁴² It is highly doubtful, however, that their apparent friendship is underpinned by the role compatibility of China's international leadership.

Moreover, China's cooperation with the CEECs generated strategic suspicion in other players, particularly the EU and the US. As most CEECs are full EU members and most of the others are on their way to joining the EU, the EU has sufficient clout to make a unifying community role for itself in Europe. To this end, the EU never fully accepted the existence of additional sub-regional organisations beyond the EU–China strategic partnership. Regarding tracing the discrepancies over the leadership role of China in the CEEC cooperation, some CEECs, particularly the Baltic states, Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania, perceive the EU and the US, and not China, as the global strategic *status quo* guarantors in a geopolitical sense. The CEECs have also been exposed to their Western partners' increasingly critical perceptions of China's increasing stronghold in Central and Eastern Europe. Brussels is concerned about the undermining of EU unity by CEECs' sectoral negotiations with China that might bypass EU competences.⁴³ In fact, the European Commission's 2019 Joint Communication entitled 'EU–China: A Strategic Outlook'⁴⁴ asserted a more negative perception of China by calling the Asian partner a 'systemic rival'. The Commission went on to highlight the need for stronger cybersecurity systems and 5G networks and for establishing screening systems for foreign investments.⁴⁵ The EC's proposed framework for a screening mechanism received overwhelming support from the member states. These statements and measures put pressure on most CEECs to unify their role as part of the EU vis-à-vis China and pose complexity for their relations with China. The recent European Parliament Draft Report on a new EU–China strategy (2021/2037(INI))⁴⁶ calls on the Commission with a series of assertive recommendations that include promoting transatlantic ties with the Biden Administration, and mentions that the future EU China strategy should provide the necessary tools and data to analyse the political, economic, social and technological threats stemming from China, its [...] BRI and 17 + 1 policies, its investment strategy and their implications for the Union's strategic autonomy and the liberal order'.

An even stronger pushback against China's growing presence in the region came from the US, which interpreted the 16 + 1/17 + 1 format as a geopolitical challenge to its interests in Central Europe. Weiss A. Mitchell, the former US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, mentioned that in the CEECs, 'geopolitical competition is sharply felt', as Russian and China expand their 'political, economic and

commercial influence⁴⁷ there. In addition, during his 2019 visit to Budapest and Warsaw, then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo mentioned strengthening ties with this region by pointing to the rising Russian and Chinese influence there in connection with cybersecurity, specifically the Huawei issue.⁴⁸ This reminder of their 'significant other' roles regarding the US and NATO poses a serious challenge to the CEECs in their relations with China.

There are several underlying/structural challenges to China's international leadership role-making regarding the CEECs. Authoritative IR scholarship holds that there are two major methods of exercising international leadership: material incentives, which range from negative sanctions to positive rewards, and the modification of the beliefs and values of the policymakers and public of the targeted follower countries.⁴⁹ The former refers to the hard dimension of state power and the latter to its soft dimension. China faces limitations in both respects, particularly the latter, in its international endeavours. China's role-making as an international leader vis-a-vis the CEECs is driven by a self-role perception that is informed mostly by domestic self-confidence and limited external experiences with more or less established followers in some part of the developing world. This particularly refers to China's roles in Africa via the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC)⁵⁰ and in Central Asia via the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.⁵¹ Nevertheless, this role-making effort faces greater challenges when it is extended to the relationship with the CEECs, namely the mismatch between China and the CEECs regarding their supposed leader-follower relationship and the variations in attitudes and policies towards China across the region and within individual CEECs.

Variations and fluctuations in CEEC responses

The sub-regional diversity of the CEECs and the substantial differences in their bilateral ties with China entail significant ambiguities in the perceptions of China's role and the corresponding attitudes and policies. The most recent scholarly research on China's perception in CEECs⁵² shows China's poor potential to construct a shared sub-regional identity for the 17 states, as well as a more negative image of China. The short history of the 17 + 1 platform points to an emerging shift in economic gravity within the China-conceived sub-region towards the Balkans. The dynamics of the V4 and the Baltic States' relations with China reveal stagnation, while other CEECs display political acts and gestures that strongly indicate role incompatibility. The revision of their tole-taking in 17 + 1 reflects a critical evaluation of the generally disappointing economic outcomes and a reconsideration of their relationship with China, against their political and security commitments to the EU and the US. Besides, the emerging West-China decoupling in technology competition, the seeking of restrictions on Chinese suppliers for building 5G networks, and the current Covid-19 pandemic brought about new domestic and external challenges to the CEECs' agenda with China. In terms of non-economic factors, which do not dominate the 17 + 1 agenda, some CEECs' commitment to common democratic values, respect for human rights, and a Western tradition-related national identity demonstrate varying degrees of role-taking, as China remains less attractive for its undemocratic domestic regime and its soft power, which is less effective in CEECs than in developing countries.

From the analytical lens of role theory, it can be argued that there is an acute intra-role conflict between China's ego-motivated leadership perception and the CEECs' generally negative role-taking. While China sets out to reconstruct its new role of international leadership in CEE, it potentially sets in motion a reconstruction of counter-roles of compliant followers from the CEECs. This role-making endeavour is, however, subject to outright competition from the CEECs' major significant others like the EU and the US, which have enormous formative power in the region. Taking it as a major strategic area, the EU particularly devoted considerable effort to incorporating the CEECs into the wider European community. After three decades of transformation, most of the CEECs are well integrated into the Western-dominated social relations. As a matter of fact, 11 of the CEECs are EU members and the other three are candidates. In their mainly alter-based role-taking, most CEECs defined the EU and, to a lesser extent, the US as international leaders. It's true that the EU, which is dominated by its Western members, still presents itself on some specific issues as the other to the eyes of its CEECs partners from time to time, for example, the recent 'East-West divide' over the refugee crisis and, more recently, the LGBT issue.⁵³ However, China lags far behind the EU in this race for international leadership in the region, a process involving persuasion, exchange, and transformation.

With the generally low acceptance of China's leadership role, the CEECs diverged into several major categories in terms of their patterns of response to China's involvement in the sub-region. The variation of the CEECs responses to China's bid for leadership are attributable to a host of factor, external and domestic alike. On the one hand, China's ambition is subject to competition from especially the EU and the US. On the other, the public opinions and elite preferences vary, and the views are very often divided or even polarised, or the people are unconvinced, regarding China's aspirations in individual CEECs and across the region. This is driven by divergence of domestic preferences and interests, rather than by domestic role contestation of individual CEECs. Furthermore, the domestic and external factors are closely intertwined.

As illustrated in the table above, three main patterns can be identified regarding the CEECs' responses to China's leadership demands. The *Dissenters*, the group most clearly demonstrating a conflict of roles are those states represented mainly by Czechia, Poland, and the Baltic States, which reveal their role expectations by critically reconsidering their originally positive leanings towards China, which were based on rational calculations of possible immediate gains from the sub-regional format 16(17) + 1. This results from the combined effect of the domestic politics and external influence of both the EU and the US as significant others. The dissenter countries generally take an alter-based role in conformity with the expectations of their Western allies. Among them, Poland, the country with the largest economic and political impact in the V4 region, has been largely perceived as the *de facto* leader of the CEEC group in the 17 + 1 process. Polish bilateral ties with China, which are robust in comparison to the general CEE sub-region, emphasised the economic prospects of non-European markets and capital resources. Amidst the rising tensions with Russia and Poland's tightening pro-Atlantic foreign policy, the abrupt political shift to the conservative right in Poland under the rule of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) did not formally derail its strategic partnership with China. However, the enthusiasm over the partnership with China has cooled, rhetorically and

Table 1. Variation of CEECs responses to China's international leadership.

Major categories	Typical countries	Broad context		Expectation of China's leadership role			Attitudes and policies on China		
		Domestic politics	Influences of 'significant others'	Rhetorical	Political	Economic	Security/threat perception		
Dissenters	for example, Czechia, Poland, the Baltics	Divided as a salient issue at the elite level; some interest in the society	The EU: very strong; The US: very strong	Reject	Occasionally assertive	Still engaged, but disappointed	Serious and relevant		
Pragmatists	for example, Albania, Greece	Moderately divided at the elite level; less interest in public opinion	The EU: very strong; The US: strong	Low	Moderately supportive	Engaged, despite occasional doubts	Relevant, occasionally mentioned		
Persistent partners	for example, Serbia, Hungary	Not a salient issue at both elite and public levels	The EU: moderate; The US: mixed	Ambivalent	supportive	Highly engaged	Occasionally mentioned		

Authors' own formulation.

psychologically, during recent years. In 2015, Polish Defence Minister Antoni Macierowicz declared that the proposed construction of a BRI-related logistics hub in Lodz, with a rail link connecting it with Chengdu, was a security concern, and banned the sale of the land to the Chinese investor. Macierowicz repeated the same concerns during the Russian–Chinese military exercises in the Baltic in 2017.⁵⁴ Although Warsaw still shows interest in an active partnership with China, it ceased to hide the fact that its policy towards China must be reconsidered while more attention should be paid to its more important strategic partners, such as the US. In comparison to Czechia (which is discussed later as a focused case), however, in Poland there is a lack of a spontaneous negative interplay between state and non-state actors, the media, public opinion, and academia that would bring the Chinese agenda to such a sharp decline.

This is also the case with the Baltic States. The 2016 16 + 1 summit in Riga signalled an abrupt increase in Chinese attention to this part of the region; however, despite accelerated high-level political meetings and planning for Chinese investments into Baltic countries and the opening of a cargo container shipping hub between Riga and Ningbo, the current state of FDI realisation remains unfinished, and trade ties failed to achieve the planned figures.⁵⁵ The Baltic States' geopolitical views and perception of values has remained strongly Western-oriented, and the sympathy for Tibet and Taiwan in this region is still remarkable. This is particularly the case of Lithuania, which, unsatisfied with the economic benefits of the 17 + 1 mechanism, terminated its membership in 2021, and called other EU member states in 17 + 1 to leave this EU-divisive mechanism as well, announced the opening of its economic representative office in Taipei, and replaced Huawei with the Swedish Telia as its cell phone technology supplier.⁵⁶ This case may set a precedent for other CEECs to follow.

In balancing their role-taking and role-making vis-a-vis China, the dissenter countries demonstrate state and non-state actors' reservations regarding various issues of their China policies such as support for the US-China decoupling, cybersecurity measures, and criticism of the issues of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Xinjiang, through high-level political statements and political acts. In contrast, their support for the 17 + 1 platform remains more nominal on occasions such as the annual summits. Strengthening their Atlantic ties, fulfilling their EU loyalty, and dealing with security issues are all prioritised over the increasingly questionable partnership with China, although they still generally do not seek a departure from the 17 + 1 platform. Their reservations about Chinese political culture and human rights abuse are expressed by ardent identity debates on the theme of being driven away from the West to the autocratic East, and assertive political gestures risking China's diplomatic and economic retaliations. Their national strategic decisions on investment screening and bans on technologies for the energy sector and 5G networks show their strong divergence from smooth partnership role-taking.

The second and largest group, the *pragmatists*, is comprised of those states that continue in taking the wait-and-see approach to China's initiative, despite undisguised doubts about the viability of the 17 + 1 platform, in terms of economic effectiveness and geo-political and values-based acceptability. Unlike the *dissenters*, however, they do not generally experience a strong political and media polarisation on China policy domestically. Most of the states in this group, similarly to the persisting partners, avoid raising politically sensitive issues with Beijing. Their governments' efforts to assume a

Beijing-friendly role are not severely blurred by strong domestic political polarisation, hostile media, or negative public opinion, as is so typical for the group of *dissenters*. In their foreign relations, they instead play a balancing game between major powers such as the EU, the US, Russia and China.

Heavily stricken by the 2009 government-debt crisis and estranged from the EU due to the imposition of tough austerity measures, Greece became a palpable pro-Chinese state. Chinese investment inflows to it reached about US\$2.6 billion in 2019,⁵⁷ with the key investment project being the China Ocean Shipping (Group) Company's (COSCO) purchase of a majority stake in the Piraeus port, which it aims to turn into the largest European sea port as it would serve as a transport hub between Asia, Africa and Europe.⁵⁸ It seems that Greece became China's strategic stronghold in Europe almost overnight, but such an observation provides an incomplete view of the economic and political situation of Athens. Despite concerns about the Greek role in subverting the EU's unity, there is a broader geopolitical context to be considered to grasp Athens' position. On the issue of Huawei's involvement in 5G infrastructure, for example, Athens issued no official statements. In fact, it is allowing Chinese technology suppliers to participate in a competition with other operators and IT providers, such as Nokia and Ericsson on its own territory.⁵⁹ This gesture points to a nuanced approach taken by the Greek government to handle the rivalry between China, the EU, and the US.

Within this group, one can also find most of the Western Balkans, where the China–CEEC cooperation is centred on infrastructure projects and energy projects. The EU's economic and political impact in the Western Balkans is essential, but still weaker than that in the V4 and the Baltic States, and the EU itself is more substantially challenged there by various non-EU actors. Among those, China is the robust newcomer. Amidst the EU's stagnating enlargement process in the sub-region, China seeks opportunities to reset its leadership role there. Albania, a China ally in the communist era but a NATO member since 2009, is prepared to reconstruct Kucova Air Base to meet NATO standards in a typical case of a Western Balkan state trying to balance its pro-Western policy with a pragmatic approach to Chinese involvement. Albania signed the BRI agreement and sought occasional Chinese investments in oilfields and the Tirana Airport.⁶⁰ It follows the typical Balkan role expectation in searching for an additional economic impetus from China when the opportunity arises. Among the pragmatists, China's leadership role is still not determined, as the interests of these countries in the 17 + 1 process largely derive from pragmatic considerations, rather than role expectation or strategic stakes. China's Serbia-focused investments also cover the construction of the highway connecting Serbia with Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Montenegro. China invested in the Tuzla power plant in Bosnia, and a Chinese loan for the construction of the Montenegrin-Belgrade Bar motorway raised concerns about accumulating public debt and the creation of obligations in the debtor country.⁶¹ The increasingly active ties between Croatia and China were rewarded by Dubrovnik hosting the 17 + 1 summit in 2019. Besides the modernisation of the Zagreb–Rijeka railway, the building of the Pelješac Sea Bridge (of which 85% is covered by EU funding) encouraged other Chinese investors who are interested in Croatian ports, especially Rijeka.⁶² Slovenia, which enjoys the highest living standards of the post-communist states, follows the typical Balkan role expectation in searching for an additional economic impetus from China when the opportunity arises.

In the Eastern Balkans, Romania is another significant case of a CEEC holding strong ties with the EU and NATO, with the country hosting a US military base and the Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense System. However, it is simultaneously interested in boosting its relations with China. The 16 + 1 Bucharest summit of 2013 elevated Romania in regional prominence and heralded a restart of its bilateral relations with China. However, a domestic political split over the tightening of relations with Beijing resulted in the country being represented only by a vice-premier at the 2017 summit. Romania is also among the CEECs that have not joined the Asian Infrastructural Investment Bank (AIIB). Infrastructure and the energy sector are the most relevant items on the economic agenda. In this regard, the enlargement of the Cernavodă nuclear power plant and the Rovinari thermal power station are the main pilot projects under negotiation. During his 2019 visit to the US, President Klaus Iohannis signed an MOU on 5G network construction that restricts Chinese suppliers that had been previously chosen for a key Romanian telecommunications provision.⁶³ While Romania hesitated, Bulgaria shifted closer to Beijing by hosting the 2018 16 + 1 summit in Sofia, engaging in more active bilateral meetings, and upgrading the economic agenda. The incoming Chinese investments into the Black Sea ports of Varna and Burgas, alongside considerations about China joining in the bidding for the Belene nuclear power plant, demonstrate the rising Chinese interest in this area, although the level of Chinese investment into Bulgaria remains very low, lagging behind that of Romania. Among the pragmatists, China's leadership role is still not determined, as the interests of these countries in the 17 + 1 process largely derive from pragmatic considerations rather than role expectation or strategic stakes.

The third group is the *persisting partners*, who take the role of the more devoted followers. It is represented by countries that prioritise the benefits of the Chinese agenda, especially in terms of investment and infrastructure, over China's role expectation of international leadership. Their official rhetoric and high-level policy highlight the prospects of the strategic partnership with China, although it would be unrealistic to assert that their geopolitical orientation primarily leans towards China to the detriment of the EU and NATO. These countries continue highlighting their pro-China policy despite rising Western pressure. Hungary and Serbia are the most typical countries in this category. These two countries rank among those CEECs where the Chinese FDI is the highest, and where the Chinese investment in transportation infrastructure and heavy industry is more relevant. In both countries, there has so far existed a strong political consensus on maintaining good relations with China, which has a tradition in the European context. In both countries, the media avoids sensitive themes related to China, and the public perception of China is generally rather positive.

This, however, does not guarantee the prevailing positive views on China in Hungary.⁶⁴ Under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who has been significantly pro-Chinese, the country has been following a foreign policy that is open to many global powers, including Russia, Turkey, and the Gulf countries. Hungary's political stance, however, revealed no intentions to revise its long-term direction, even when US Secretary of State Pompeo conducted his mission to Central and Eastern Europe in Budapest in February 2019. Having received no clear appreciation of Orbán's support for US President Donald Trump, Budapest negotiated with the US the Defence Cooperation Agreement and the stationing of US troops in Hungary.⁶⁵ The

Belgrade–Budapest railway link, a Chinese-financed flagship project for the 17 + 1 platform, raised concerns regarding EU internal unity because it bypasses EU investment requirement standards. Undisturbed by unfinished infrastructure and transportation projects and limited export results to China,⁶⁶ Budapest continues to play a role of a constant ally for all of the powers that matter, including Russia and China. Unlike Poland and Czechia's firm support for US diplomatic efforts to minimise the China-related cybersecurity risks, the Hungarian responses were significantly reserved. Upon the US claim for the exclusion of Huawei technology from 5G systems during State Secretary Pompeo's visit to Hungary,⁶⁷ Budapest decided to follow the German model and combine Western and Chinese suppliers in its 5G market. However, the public-backed Budapest municipality protests against the planned Fudan University campus⁶⁸ there indicate a concern about rising split in the public opinion on China.

In the European context, Serbia is a reliable and perceptible partner of China, having appreciated China's backing against the NATO campaign in the 1990s and its continued support regarding the deeply emotional issue of Kosovo. Because Serbia is not yet an EU member state and not fully obliged to follow EU public procurement procedures, Belgrade perceives China with greater expectations than most other CEECs which are EU members and have enormously benefited from the European Common Market, huge Western investments, and generous EU structural funds. The Serbian energy sector (notably the Smederevo and Kostolac power plants), the Bor copper mine and smelter, and transportation links, such as the Serbia–Montenegro motorway and the high speed rail link from Budapest to Belgrade, are all major China-financed projects, as are the Zemun–Borča Bridge and the highway from Surcin to Obrenovac.⁶⁹ The Sino-Serbian security cooperation has been observed in China providing supplies for Belgrade's 'Safe City' surveillance systems and military exports that include drones and transport, fire-fighting and sanitation vehicles. In fact, the Serbian-Chinese military diplomacy is regarded as the most active in Europe.⁷⁰ In the expected symbolic role playing, Serbian President Vučić attended an official welcome of Chinese medical aid and expert medical teams at Belgrade Airport and used expressive gestures and words to signify Serbia's deep friendship with China and gratitude for China's COVID-19 assistance.⁷¹

Czechia as a focused case. Together with Poland and the Baltic States, Czechia is a member of the dissenting group in terms of its acceptance of China's leadership role-making. Its critical official statements at the state level, actions critical of China in the context of the domestic political environment, and assurances of loyalty to the Western allies suggest a deeper contradiction to the declared efforts on the 17 + 1 agenda or the bilateral relations with China. In addition, the concurrence of negative media discourses, the long-standing prevailing anti-Chinese public opinion⁷² and decisions of state-level and municipal administrative authorities in Czechia give a complex picture of its hostile and distrustful approach to China. Therefore, Czechia presents itself as the most typical case of an acute intra-role conflict regarding China's bid for international leadership in the region. The country is witnessing a growing anti-Chinese consensus at the governmental level and among non-governmental actors, including the political opposition, mainstream media, broad public opinion, and media activism of state intelligence agencies. It is therefore selected here for some in-depth discussion as a more focused case study.

Czechia, having been an industrial export-driven economy, is potentially an ambitious role taker in the 17 + 1 platform for boosting the multilateral and bilateral agenda for cooperation with China. However, this optimism is much hindered by its dramatic fluctuations and ambiguity in political relations with China, which are related to the existing composition of the government coalition. The first ever visit of Chinese President Xi in Prague in March 2016 to confirm the strategic partnership was followed several months later by the arrival of the Dalai Lama, which marked Czechia's domestic split on its China policy. In October 2016, the Dalai Lama officially met with the Minister of Culture, the Vice Premier, and a large contingent of members of parliament and senators,⁷³ ostentatiously in a state-level office despite the explicit opposition of the government, the Foreign Ministry, and President Zeman.⁷⁴ As a matter of fact, the Tibetan exile leader visited Czechia 11 times so far. As a result of Vaclav Havel's 1990s legacy of emphasising democracy and human values over pragmatic considerations, Prague belongs to the most assertive critics of China in the whole CEE.

Against the backdrop of the Havel legacies, the Social Democratic government and president Zeman nevertheless sought to pursue a reset of the political relations with Beijing since 2012. Accommodating, if not accepting, the implicit role-taking through the most proactive Chinese agenda thus far and taking the opportunity to combine the multilateral 16 + 1 format with its bilateral economic diplomacy was a major turn in Czech foreign policy in 2014, when the government launched a pro-China policy shift after an absence of high-level contact with it that had lasted for about 15 years. The former premier Petr Nečas stated in an interview that joining the 16 + 1 platform was seen as opening a door for Prague to kick off a political dialogue and set out a higher level of economic cooperation. Consequently, the Czech–Chinese strategic partnership was signed in 2016 during President Xi Jinping's visit to Prague⁷⁵ while President Zeman visited China five times and became one of the most famous CEEC leaders in China.

However, the investment failure of the Shanghai-based CEFC Financial Group, the flagship project of the BRI and 16 + 1 in Czechia,⁷⁶ was a big blow to the pro-China faction of the Czech government and society. This necessarily added to the already spreading disillusionment surrounding the economic prospects of the partnership with China. CEFC's bid to acquire a 49% stake in the Czech J&T Finance Group (EUR 980 million) (ETNC Report 2017, p. 43) remained unapproved by the Czech National Bank, and the list of planned investments and memorandums shrunk to approximately 10 billion EUR of the FDI total.⁷⁷ Consequently, the pragmatic proactive policy gained little favour from the next coalition government of Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, which was formed in 2017. Premier Babiš declared a Huawei ban in December 2018,⁷⁸ signalling a Czech follow-up to the US–China decoupling. This move was soon consolidated by the 'Prague Proposals', highlighting cybersecurity risks, issued by the 5G Security Conference in March 2019.⁷⁹

The Czech pro-Atlantic policy shift was further marked by Premier Babiš' high-level visit to the US in March 2019, which was also attended by Czechia's National Intelligence Agency (BIS) director, who was introduced to the CIA headquarters in Langley and received there the special award of the George Tenet Prize in appreciation of the Czech intelligence and cybersecurity cooperation.⁸⁰ In addition, President Zeman, who had led Czechia's pro-Chinese strategy and was one of the top pro-Chinese leaders in Europe,

showed hesitation over whether to attend the 17 + 1 Beijing Summit in 2020. Meanwhile, Premier Babiš signed the US–Czech Republic Joint Declaration on 5G Security, which included a ban on Huawei and ZTE.⁸¹ In 2021 Czechia passed the legislation on investment screening in accordance with the EU regulations,⁸² and backed by a wide consensus with the opposition, the Czech Government and Parliament ruled out Chinese technologies from the bid for the enlargement of the nuclear power plant in Dukovany.⁸³

The Czech-owned PPF financial group, which is active in China in the field of retail financial services (Home Credit) and biotechnology (Sotio), is regarded as the most prominent pro-Chinese lobby and has strong political ties with President Zeman. It recently faced massive political and media protests that resulted in a prohibitive effect for its investment in the 5G network. Petr Kellner, PPF's owner, was called to the Czech Senate, the Upper House, for a hearing on the cyber security risk posed by the Chinese technologies.⁸⁴ At the same time, PPF faced accusations by US Republican Senator Rubio of being a 'Chinese agent' carrying out 'malignant activities abroad' when PPF acquired the multinational television conglomerate Central European Media Group Enterprises (CEE), which is located in five Central and Eastern European countries.⁸⁵ After PPF's fully owned operator CETIN signed a memorandum with Huawei, the final decision replaced the Chinese high-quality guarantor and cheaper supplier with the politically safe Ericsson.⁸⁶ The spectacular defeat of the prominent PPF indicates the weakening position of the leading domestic pro-Chinese economic lobby in the changing geo-economics and geopolitical environment in the country.

The near fiasco of China's charm offensive in Czechia was never more obviously revealed than in a diplomatic row between the Prague City Council and the Chinese government over the One China clause in the twin-city agreement between Prague and Beijing. The soaring wave of critical sentiment against China in the Czech media continued on the occasion of the high-level visit of Miloš Vystrčil, the President of the Senate, to Taipei.⁸⁷ Beijing's angry reaction, which included cancelling the twin-city agreement, and the remarks of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the Taiwan visit were portrayed in the Czech media as politics of arrogance.⁸⁸ This series of steps in the behaviour of various state and municipal authorities called into question the prospects of good relations with China and indicated resistance to and a rejection of China's assumption of a leading role in the region. The case of the controversial visit of the President of the Senate to Taiwan, which took place despite the disapproval of the Government, the Foreign Ministry and the President, indicated the Czechia's difficulty in pursuing a unified agenda,⁸⁹ which can be disrupted by the minority opposition at any time. Even more so, the variant of a change of government after the elections is another threat to the bilateral agenda, which may further decline, as has happened several times in the past. Czechia thus displays a clear rejection of China's leadership role due to the domestic polarisation and the strong influence of the EU and the US as the significant others.

Conclusion

Based on its mostly successful experience in the developing world, particularly Africa and Central Asia, China has sought a bold expansion of its multilateral regional diplomacy to CEECs via the 17 + 1 platform. The institutionalisation of this multilateral

platform and its almost decade-long history brought about the effect of establishing China's presence in Central and Eastern Europe, and of making this presence internationally visible. From the role theory perspective, the organisation and political initiative that China demonstrated in relation to the 17 + 1 process created a *de facto* leader–follower role schema, with Beijing setting the agenda and norms. Nevertheless, the experience of China's tole-making of international leadership in the region has been complicated. Overall, there is a remarkable intra-role conflict between China's self-made role of international leader and the generally passive role-taking of the CEECs. China's role concept of international leadership is generally not accepted across the region, and the co-constitution of role and identity is not taking place in the interaction between China and the CEECs. For the exercise of its international leadership, China's ability to modify beliefs and values of policy makers and the general public is severely limited. Additionally, China suffers from an inter-role conflict due to a struggle between its leadership role and its other roles, such as that of a major developing state with a strong egoistic pursuit of its own developmental goals.

China therefore relies heavily on material incentives, almost always in the positive sense, to play its leadership role. This has usually taken the form of delivering or promising opportunities for trade and investment in selected areas and countries. The widening discrepancies between the 17 states and China point to doubts about the coherence and economic benefit of these incentives, but in fact also over the essential motivations: the CEECs expect economic outcomes in terms of investment and trade, but the limited fulfilment of these outcomes makes the value of the 17 + 1 group questionable. As a partial solution, China implemented bilateral cooperation with some of the CEECs under a multilateral guise. Thus far, no CEE state except Lithuania declared an intention to leave the 17 + 1 platform, but there is a wide variation of policy responses across the CEECs, with the countries falling into the three broad categories of dissenters, pragmatists and persisting partners. This divergence is driven by various domestic and external factors: some CEECs are more influenced by domestic public opinions, lack of political consensus, and political culture; for others, their bilateral and multilateral partnership with China is not fully compatible with their economic, geopolitical and normative priorities given their strong ties with their significant others, namely the EU and NATO. The political gestures in several CEE states and the support for excluding Chinese IT suppliers from the 5G rollout in favour of the US position are good examples of these incompatibilities. Nevertheless, there are countries in the region that took a more balanced position on the China–US and China–EU rivalries.

China's development of institutionalised multilateral links with CEECs produced serious consequences and implications beyond its original intentions. First, the applicability of its South–South leadership model for developing countries to the CEECs is questionable due to the divergent geopolitical circumstances, identities and historical narratives, and the common frameworks for trade and investment. For about three decades, the CEECs have been engaged in a co-constituting process of role and identity formation, alongside economic interactions, with the significant players the EU and the US. Thus, China is exposed to the external pressures of leadership competition in this region. It has yet to clarify the meaning and additional value of the 17 + 1 format to the CEECs and perhaps also to their Western partners in the EU. Indeed, the 17 + 1 platform

generated unwelcome attention in the EU and the US thanks to the geopolitical challenge that it represents. Deep suspicions have mounted in the West about China's real motivations and its ever growing influence. While China's its expectations for the sub-region 17 are essentially predictable, the positions of the individual 17 states and their specific role perceptions and expectations regarding China are not entirely clear and, moreover, are changeable over time. All of this leaves China with a difficult role-making job if it is to play an international leadership role in Central and Eastern Europe.

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