

MILITARY-TO-MILITARY DIPLOMACY AND COOPERATION BETWEEN CHINA AND SERBIA: GENESIS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

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Abstract: This paper aims to analyse the genesis and prospects of Sino-Serbian military diplomacy. Both nations seek to enhance their bilateral relationship, aiming to create a mutually beneficial environment by upgrading comprehensive strategic partnership into the agreement on a community with a shared future in the new era. The paper is structured into three parts. The first part theoretically addresses the concept of military diplomacy. This theoretical framework distinguishes military diplomacy from related phenomena such as gunboat and coercive diplomacy. The second part examines the evolution and role of military diplomacy in China's efforts to achieve its national ambitions and the Chinese dream concretised into "Two Centenary" goals. At the same time, it represents an analysis of how military diplomacy contributes to China's efforts to enhance confidence-building measures and strengthen inter-state relations within the framework of global governance. The third part focuses on the bilateral military diplomatic relations and cooperation between China and Serbia. This section highlights the areas and methods through which China and Serbia have developed military-to-military diplomacy. It further explores how this cooperation has influenced the Sino-Serbian Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, elevated to a community with a shared future in the new era, Serbia's military

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neutrality, its ambitions to become a regional leader, and China's geopolitical intentions in the Western Balkans.

Keywords: Sino-Serbian relations, Western Balkans, military-to-military diplomacy, geopolitics, global governance.

INTRODUCTION

The scope of this paper is to analyse bilateral military diplomatic relations between the Republic of Serbia and the People's Republic of China. The authors consider this as one of the most important aspects of bilateral Sino-Serbian diplomatic relations for various reasons. First and foremost, China regards its military as a resolute defender of world peace (SCIOPRC, 2019). In the process of defending world stability, development, security, and simultaneously bettering the global order, the Chinese army faithfully adheres to the concept of a global community of a shared future, actively fulfils the international responsibilities of the armed forces of a major country, and comprehensively advances international military cooperation in the new era. Therefore, the Chinese military serves as a strategic safeguard for world peace and development and contributes to building a better world of lasting peace and common security (SCIOPRC, 2019). Second, Serbia follows the course of military neutrality. Third, Serbia and China build together a community of a shared future in a new era in which strong military and stable and wide military diplomacy networks are required.

The consistent pattern of China's foreign policy behaviour, in both economic and security domains, is characterised by proactivity, epitomised by its cooperative and relational "Going Global" strategy since 2015, shaped to form a global community with a shared future for mankind. This strategic approach signifies that the global order, security architecture, and geoeconomic distribution of wealth are entering a new phase in which China is becoming one of the most confident and influential actors. China is guiding and bringing for what it believes to be a bright future for humanity on the new crossroads. In this context, Serbia, as it does not exist isolated from the international community, is also influenced by the emergent global presence of China and its transformative and, for some observers, pretentious initiatives such as the Global Security Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, and the Global Civilisational Initiative.

Diplomatic relations between China and Serbia are maintained on both bilateral and multilateral levels, with a constant emphasis on deepening, broadening, intertwining, and enhancing their fruitfulness, practicality, and cordiality. In terms of multilateral engagement, Serbia is a member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and participates in the China+Central and Eastern European Countries framework of cooperation, former “17+1”, which was established by China in Warsaw in 2012 (Mitrovic, 2014; Mitrovic, 2016). Through this cooperative mechanism, the 16 European states have the opportunity to create more concrete and suitable *modus operandi* in dealing with China and to be the bridge between modern West and newcomer modernity offered by China.

Bilaterally, Serbia overtook diplomatic relations that former Yugoslavia established with China on January 2, 1955.¹ Sino-Serbian bilateral diplomatic relations are shaped and supported by many visits on a high political, military and economic level and by many agreements such as the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, Memorandum of Understanding between the People’s Republic of China and the Serbian Government on jointly promoting the construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, Agreement on a community with a shared future in a new era, Free Trade Agreement, Memorandum on Exchange and Cooperation in Economic

¹ Sino-Serbian relations had their ups and downs. Josip Broz Tito, a former Yugoslav Marshall, wanted to engage more strongly with China, but this was ignored by Mao Zedong because of Tito’s split with Stalin. For the first time, Tito visited China in 1977, when Sino-Soviet relations suffered many changes. High political visits continued, and former Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang visited Belgrade in 1986. After that, former Serbian president Slobodan Milošević visited China. This visit was two years after the famous Dayton Peace Agreement. Milošević’s China visit was portrayed as a success story in Belgrade, lending evidence to claims that the international isolation of the Yugoslav Federation could be overcome. The diplomatic breakthrough for Milošević allowed him to challenge the Pariah status in Europe with political support from his traditional ally Russia and supplement it through his Chinese interlocutors (Bastian, 2018). After this, Sino-Serbian relations were reinforced by the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia and the destruction of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade on May 7, 1999 (Vuksanovic and Le Corre, 2019). In recent times, the breakthrough has been supported by purely practical reasons. Namely, Aleksandar Vučić, in a speech he delivered at the Faculty of Security, University of Belgrade, declared, “Thirty years ago, you had one absolutely dominant military, political, and economic power [the US]...With its economic, but also with its military and political power, [the] People’s Republic of China dramatically catches up” (Kurir, 2017).

Development Policies, Memorandum on Joint Improvement in Industrial and Investment Cooperation Between Serbia and China, and the Mid-term Action Plan on Joint Implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative Between the Governments of the PRC and Serbia (The Government of the Republic of Serbia 2018) (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2019).

The grandiose political and, in many respects, unbalanced economic cooperation between China and Serbia is garnering significant attention not only from Serbian academia and public policymakers but also from regional countries and organisations interested in Serbia's political, economic, and security realities. On the other hand, Serbia focuses primarily on economic relations, particularly the challenges and opportunities presented by an increasingly intensive Chinese presence in Serbia, additionally reinforced by the signed Free Trade Agreement, which entered into force on July 1, 2024. That suggests that Serbian leaders see political cooperation between the two countries as stable. Simultaneously, there is a perception of a lack of understanding that deeper political cooperation translates into increased Chinese economic and security dominance. The complicated geopolitical setting of Serbia at a crossroads as the world enters a new era should help Serbian leaders realise that partnership should be built on mutually agreed-upon win-win cooperation.

Thus, a critical question arises regarding the extent to which these relations are conditioned and shaped by Serbia's ambitions to become a regional leader and bridge the "political distance", "value misunderstandings", and "economic links" between the Orient and West. Besides that, the authors examine the capacity and structural power of the Serbian government to influence the agenda of Sino-Serbian relations beyond the framework defined by China's understanding of win-win cooperation. Furthermore, the question arises whether Chinese investments enhance Serbia's social, business, and ecological environments. Are these investments and loans aligned with Serbia's efforts to further develop its economy and improve living standards and quality of life for its citizens?

In other words, will China leverage its economic strength to bolster the Serbian economy in accordance with Serbian developmental strategies, or will it seek to direct and shape this development according to its own preferences? Is there togetherness and mutuality, or only China's way?

Regarding international perspectives, the primary concern originates from the European Union (EU). According to EU officials, China's political and economic practices pose a threat to Serbia's European integration since Serbia supports Chinese initiatives aimed at interconnectivity not only in the region (such as the former "17+1" framework for cooperation²), but also globally through the Belt and Road Initiative and a global community with a shared future, among others.

The main argument of the EU is that China will use this mechanism to exploit EU position burdened by many crises, such as economic, ecological, security, political, and the crisis of EU identity and system of values.³ For example, Sigmar Gabriel, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Germany, stated at the Munich Security Conference that China, alongside Russia, is constantly trying to test and undermine the unity of the European Union, seeking to influence individual states with "sticks and carrots". The initiative for a new Silk Road is not, as some in Germany believe, a sentimental reminder of Marco Polo. Rather, it stands for an attempt to establish a comprehensive system for shaping the world in Chinese interest. It is no longer just about the economy: China is developing a comprehensive system of a modern alternative to the Western one, which, unlike our model, is not based on freedom, democracy, and individual human rights (Miller, 2018). Those concerns are additionally reinforced by the possibility of greater Chinese involvement in the Mediterranean Sea. Besides Greece and Italy's decisions to welcome Chinese capital in the development of its ports, China, in its first Military Strategy from 2015, announced that it will enhance its maritime geopolitical course to achieve the *Chinese Dream* concretised in *Two Centenary* goals (Ministry of

² This regional initiative evolved from the "16+1" framework, but following the Dubrovnik summit in 2019, Greece became a full member state. This Greek manoeuvre, coupled with Italy's signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Belt and Road Initiative and a MoU for the development of the Italian port of Genoa with Chinese funding, has further complicated China's geopolitical and geo-economic leverage in the "Old continent", particularly concerning EU unity (Il Secolo, XIX 2019; Popovic, 2021). However, Italy withdrew from the BRI.

³ On the other hand, 18 EU member states [now 17 since the United Kingdom is not an EU member state anymore], including the richest economies of the EU, have joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which gives great credibility to Chinese-led banks (European Parliament, 2019). At the same time, those countries record high trading values with China.

National Defence of the People's Republic of China, 2016). In that context, the predominant positions of the EU, the US, and NATO in controlling the eastern hemisphere and sea lanes of communications (SLOCs) are facing new challenges mirrored into a changed Chinese military position as a manifestation of China's ideas and power projection capabilities. Having all this in mind, it is obvious that China is a missing puzzle in debates regarding European security, economy, and political affairs.

In addition, Tilly's statement captures the essence of the relationship between military power and state formation: "War made the state, and the state made war" (Tilly, 1992, p. 42). This quote succinctly illustrates the interconnectedness of military power and state authority. However, we will see to what extent this quote explains the type of military diplomacy between Serbia and China since both of them are military neutral countries and China's way of dealing with security issues is through diplomatisation, i.e., security issues have to be resolved through diplomacy (Stefanović-Štambuk and Popović, 2022). China itself cannot be described by this type of quotation.

Serbia and China have nurturing practical, cordial, and future-orientated cooperation, while the world is standing on the new crossroads with powers creating the context of war as a manner of advancing. According to some authors, Serbia has become one of China's most reliable partners in Europe (Vuksanovic and Le Corre, 2019). This argument is supported by examples extracted from the practice of bilateral Sino-Serbian cooperation. Serbia and China support each other's territorial sovereignty, which is of tremendous importance for Serbia. Namely, the southern part of Serbia, the autonomous region of Kosovo, by non-abiding the rules of international law, strives to create its independent state. Chinese support is a mighty tool in Serbian efforts to sustain its sovereignty and prevent Kosovo's secessionism, encouraged by some countries in international society. Concomitantly, Serbia is a strong supporter of the "One China" policy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF MILITARY DIPLOMACY CONCEPT

This section of the paper addresses the concept of military diplomacy from a theoretical perspective by exploring several key questions: What are the main features of military diplomacy? What criteria differentiate military diplomacy from gunboat and coercive diplomacy? How does military

diplomacy impact a state's security and making strategic decisions and strategic choices? How is military diplomacy used in knitting inter-state relations and confidence-building measures?

Historically, military diplomacy has been examined through the lens of realism, primarily as a tool for forming military alliances. However, with the emergence of a multipolar international order and China's rise, there is a need to reconsider the characteristics and activities defining military diplomacy as an activity of making military alliances. At a time when the militaristic promotion of democracy is increasingly questioned, military diplomacy now focuses more on creating stable and peaceful environments through confidence-building measures rather than hegemonic stability and power politics. Developing military diplomacy through cooperation and coordination of security interests rather than an arms race renders the security dilemma an unsustainable relational concept in international relations.

Erik Pajtinka asserts that, compared to the 19th century, the contemporary functions of military diplomacy are significantly more diverse. He identifies five fundamental functions of modern military diplomacy:

1. Gathering and analysing information on the armed forces and security situation in the host state.
2. Promoting cooperation, communication, and mutual relations between the armed forces of the sending and receiving states.
3. Organising official visits by defence authorities and facilitating the peaceful presence of military units from the sending state in the receiving state.
4. Supporting business contracts involving arms and military equipment between the sending and receiving states.
5. Representing the sending state and its armed forces at official ceremonies and events in the receiving state (Pajtinka, 2016, p. 188).

Andrew Cottey and Anthony Forster note that military diplomacy operates in various ways and on multiple levels:

- Military diplomacy has a political role, symbolising the ambition of countries to develop broader, more practical cooperation.
- Military diplomacy enhances transparency regarding defence budgets, intentions, ideologies, and power projection capabilities.

- Defence diplomacy can build perceptions of common interests and foster confidence among states.
- “Disarmament of the mind”.
- Defence assistance may also encourage global partners to cooperate in other areas (Cottey and Forster, 2004).

Considering these activities, we can surmise what military diplomacy entails. According to Erik Pajtinka, military diplomacy can be defined as a set of activities primarily carried out by representatives of the defence department and other state institutions. These activities aim to pursue the foreign policy interests of the state in the field of security and defence policy through negotiations and other diplomatic and economic instruments (Pajtinka, 2016, p. 176). In contrast, Lt Gen Kamal Davar argues that there is no official definition or standard interpretation of military or defence diplomacy. While the terms “military” and “defence” are often used interchangeably, the concept of “military diplomacy” appears to be an oxymoron. The military typically achieves national objectives through hard power, and diplomacy seeks to accomplish goals through soft power, including dialogue, persuasion, cooperation, treaties and alliances, aid (both economic and military), and other forms of humanitarian assistance (Kamal, 2018, p. 2).

In accordance with the aforementioned definitions, military diplomacy in a world fraught with uncertainties and doubts can be understood on several levels. Firstly, military diplomacy serves as a highly effective, non-violent, and well-planned tool for fostering partnerships and avoiding conflicts and misunderstandings between nations. Additionally, it helps to comprehend other countries’ military positions, ambitions, and strategies. Furthermore, military diplomacy promotes the development of a common approach to addressing both traditional and non-traditional security challenges through diplomacy. Thus, military diplomacy is a tool of diplomatization (Neumann, 2022).

As previously discussed, the concept of military diplomacy shares similarities with, and yet differs from, gunboat and coercive diplomacy. Before outlining the similarities and differences, it is important to define gunboat and coercive diplomacy.

James Cable defines gunboat diplomacy as the use or threat of using limited naval forces to secure benefits or prevent losses in an ongoing international conflict. Traditionally, gunboat diplomacy is employed to protect

economic interests. However, it may also lead to disruptions such as cutting pipelines, communications breakdowns, strikes, boycotts, and the sabotage or hijacking of airlines (Cable, 1994, pp. 39, 79). In this context, gunboat diplomacy cannot be considered a form of diplomacy or negotiation. Instead, it should be seen as an instrument of intimidation and pressure to achieve national goals (Pajtinka, 2016, p. 185).

Coercive diplomacy, on the other hand, involves the use of all components of the armed forces (both air force and ground troops) as a tool of intimidation to achieve foreign policy objectives (Pajtinka, 2016, p. 186). Anton du Plessis further argues that coercive diplomacy, or the diplomacy of force, involves the supposedly “bloodless” use of military action or the coercive application of armed force to support diplomacy and pursue political objectives (du Plessis, 2008, p. 94).

The similarities between these forms of diplomacy lie in the actors involved and the goals pursued. The actors are invariably individuals and institutions related to the defence or military sectors. The desired goals typically involve altering the behaviour of other states in economic, political, and security domains. The main differences arise in the methods and tools employed. Military diplomacy leans towards non-violent methods, whereas gunboat and coercive diplomacy rely on violent approaches. Regarding tools, military diplomacy is based on negotiations and confidence-building measures. In contrast, gunboat and coercive diplomacy focus on the use or threat of weaponry.

Military diplomacy highlights that the term “military” should not be perceived solely in traditional militaristic terms involving the use of weapons. Instead, it should be interpreted and analysed as a set of activities—a channel of communication between stakeholders at the negotiating table rather than on the battlefield.

CHINA’S SEARCH FOR MILITARY DIPLOMACY

Within global governance, China’s actions and inactions have become a central topic of debate. Every decision made by China is meticulously analysed by academics, mass media, public policymakers, and numerous other entities uninvolved in China’s direct affairs. China’s decisions bring changes to global governance.

As China signals its intent to reform global governance, Beijing, both officially and unofficially, faces new and more complex challenges, which require a more resilient, flexible, and, at the same time, tougher China. China's national interests are increasingly global, thus complicating their protection. Yan Xuetong notes that rising powers, declining powers, and global superpowers have different national goals and face distinct challenges (Yan, 2006).

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) held in November 2012, the Central Committee, with Xi Jinping at its core, has undertaken significant theoretical and practical efforts to determine the nature of the military required to meet the demands of the new era and contribute to the realisation of the great Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation. These deliberations have culminated in what is now recognised as Xi Jinping's thoughts on strengthening the military. Central to this doctrine is the "Ten-Point Guidelines", which Xi Jinping articulated at a crucial military meeting following the 19th CPC National Congress. These guidelines underscore the necessity for continued development and reform of the military to enhance its preparedness across various domains, in alignment with China's principle of "active defence" (China.org, 2021).

The concept of active defence is fundamental to the CPC's military strategic thought. Stemming from the extensive experience of revolutionary wars, the People's Armed Forces have developed a comprehensive strategic framework of active defence. This strategy emphasises the unity of strategic defence with operational and tactical offence, the principles of defence, self-defence, and post-emptive strikes, and the stance that "We will not attack unless we are attacked, but we will surely counterattack if attacked" (Ministry of National Defence of the PRC, 2021).

In a press conference held by China's Ministry of National Defence on December 28, 2023, Senior Colonel Wu Qian, spokesperson for the Ministry, outlined the essential functions of military diplomacy within the context of China's foreign policy. He identified three principal functions of military diplomacy. First, military diplomacy serves to advance China's overarching political and diplomatic objectives. Second, it is crucial in safeguarding national sovereignty, security, and development interests. Third, military diplomacy is instrumental in expanding foreign-related military operations. For instance, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has organised and conducted 34 joint training exercises, drills, and international military games, including the China-Russia

“Beibu Unity-2023” joint exercise, the “Aman Youyi-2023” joint exercise with Southeast Asian countries, the China-Cambodia “Golden Dragon 2023” joint exercise, and the China-Laos “Friendship Shield-2023” joint exercise. By engaging in these expanded bilateral and multilateral exercises and training sessions, the PLA has deepened mutual trust and cooperation with the militaries of relevant countries and played a positive role in maintaining regional stability. Fourth, military diplomacy serves to provide innovative efforts in multilateral diplomacy. Fifth, military diplomacy contributes to building a community with a shared future for mankind (Li, 2024).

China’s ambitions as a rising global power are simultaneously advanced and endangered by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced in 2013 (China Power, 2017). The BRI, encompassing the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, represents China’s bold strategy to assert greater influence in global economic and political affairs. This initiative exemplifies China’s aspiration to shape both the world’s and its own future (Mitrovic, 2019). As a result, the BRI has garnered support and criticism from various nations. Criticism often centres on concerns regarding the initiative’s transparency, accountability, respect for state sovereignty, and adherence to ecological standards. Nonetheless, the support or opposition to the BRI largely depends on the geopolitical and geoeconomic interests of individual countries and their willingness to engage in cooperation with China.

The geopolitical protection of this new global initiative has significant geoeconomic implications. According to the Chinese scholar Cao (2019), trade between China and BRI countries totalled 1.3 trillion US dollars in 2018, marking 16.3 per cent year-on-year growth, 3.7 percentage points higher than China’s overall trade growth in 2018. China exported goods worth 704.73 billion dollars to BRI countries, a 10.9 per cent year-on-year increase, while importing goods worth 563.07 billion dollars, a 23.9 per cent year-on-year rise. Chinese firms invested 15.64 billion dollars in non-financial sectors in BRI countries, an 8.9 per cent year-on-year increase while receiving 6.08 billion dollars in investments from these countries, an 11.9 per cent year-on-year increase (Cao, 2019).

A stable and peaceful environment, continuous flow of goods, people, and ideas, and enduring military, diplomatic, and political relations are crucial for the sustainability and feasibility of the BRI. In this context, the Office for International Military Cooperation held a briefing on military cooperation along

the BRI on July 4, 2017, attended by over 60 military attachés from more than 50 states. Participants highlighted the main security concerns that could jeopardise further implementation of the BRI (China Military Online, 2017).

Therefore, Chinese policymakers must anticipate and prevent situations that could lead to global turmoil, which can endanger China's peaceful development. As China's ambitions are becoming more intertwined in the domestic security and economic policies of countries spanning the globe, particularly the Global South countries, China is forced to be more proactive, assertive, and cautious in bettering global governance. Consequently, Beijing has started defining its "interest frontier" and pursuing result-orientated security cooperation (Xiong, 2009). The decision of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to go global is a natural extension of China's expanding power and interests. That represents a significant shift from the early years of the open-door policy, which focused on domestic economic and security challenges (Lai, 2009). Over time, China, as a non-Western power, has become a more prominent and influential global player without yet becoming a military superpower.

As a confidence-building instrument, military diplomacy serves to counter doubts about China's alleged intentions to base its foreign policy on militaristic expansionism. In this context, military diplomacy plays a geopolitical, geoeconomic, and soft power role in portraying China as a responsible and benevolent global stakeholder. Gerald Chan highlights that questioning China's responsibility is inevitable as China grows stronger and has the potential to become much stronger (Chan, 2013, p. 60). However, there are many ambiguous interpretations of "responsibility" in the anarchic international arena. The criteria for responsibility remain unclear—whether they are based on Western, Asiatic, Sinocentric principles, United Nations principles, or international law. Additionally, it is uncertain whether responsibility is judged by soft or hard power and who determines which state is responsible. This judgement could fall under the auspices of international institutions such as the UN, the International Court of Justice, the International Monetary Fund, AIIB, or the Cold War victors and their allies.

In conclusion, China's approach to military diplomacy reflects a strategic blend of soft power, proactive global engagement, and pragmatic cooperation. Fostering stable, pragmatic, and cordial military relations with great powers, neighbouring states, and developing countries (Fan and Shixiong, 2019), China has positioned military diplomacy as an increasingly

influential element of its foreign and security policy. As China navigates the complexities of global governance and aims to achieve the China Dream and Two Centenaries, military diplomacy will continue to play a pivotal role in ensuring that its strategic interests are safeguarded and its global influence is effectively projected.

SINO-SERBIAN MILITARY-TO-MILITARY DIPLOMACY

The diplomatic and deepening cooperation in the military and armaments sectors between China and Serbia represents a newly opened area with significant potential to become an additional pillar in Sino-Serbian geopolitical and geoeconomic togetherness as part of broader bilateral diplomatic relations.

In 2018, China and Serbia signed the Programme for Bilateral Military Cooperation. The programme was signed by Colonel Milan Ranković, the then Head of the Department for International Military Cooperation of the Defence Policy Sector of the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, and Senior Colonel Ma Yongbao, the then Military Attaché of the People's Republic of China in Serbia. According to this programme, the two sides agreed to enhance existing collaborations and explore new areas for future cooperation. The official website of the Serbian Ministry of Defence states: "In addition to improving military-technical and military-economic cooperation, it was also concluded that there is a possibility to develop cooperation in other areas, such as military-to-military, military medical, and military educational cooperation, as well as other acceptable forms of cooperation. Both sides agreed that there is a possibility for defence cooperation to be raised to an even higher level by planning and implementing activities of international military cooperation of common interest" (Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Serbia, 2018). In line to deepen military cooperation, Serbia and China held their first military drill in 2020. On this occasion, Serbian Minister of Defence Aleksandar Vulin asserted that this military drill would provide the Serbian military with new experiences. As a non-member of any military alliance, China has become one of the most advanced military states in technology and weaponry. That fact is of tremendous importance for Belgrade, which seeks to maintain military neutrality and develop its military capabilities (Baković, 2019).

Military cooperation is complemented by high-level military visits, both bilateral and multilateral. According to the Ministry of National Defence of the People's Republic of China, on July 25, 2018, General Zhang Youxia, Vice Chairman of China's Central Military Commission (CMC), met with Aleksandar Vulin, then Defence Minister of the Republic of Serbia, in Beijing. On the same day, Wei Fenghe, the then China's State Councillor and Defence Minister, also held talks with Vulin. Participants of these meetings agreed that military diplomacy holds a key position in comprehensive Sino-Serbian relations. In recent years, China and Serbia have recognised the myriad opportunities for developing military diplomacy. China seeks to collaborate with Serbia to enhance military cooperation and strengthen bilateral military ties as a development accelerator of their relationship. Consequently, high-level exchanges between Chinese and Serbian militaries have been frequent, resulting in the smooth development of further bilateral cooperation. Expanding the scope of Sino-Serbian military diplomacy will enrich the Sino-Serbian comprehensive strategic partnership (Yao, 2018).

On August 27, 2019, during her visit to the then Serbian Minister of Defence Aleksandar Vulin, the then Ambassador in Serbia, Her Excellency Chen Bo, remarked that Sino-Serbian military cooperation is one of the most important aspects of the Sino-Serbian Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. She expressed her expectation that military cooperation between the two countries would further develop and attract greater attention from the region and other states (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2019). In September 2019, Chinese Central Military Commission Vice Chairman Zhang Youxia visited Belgrade for five days, watching the "Return 2019" Serbian tactical military drill (Gucijan, 2019). This visit represented another powerful signal of China's willingness to elevate Sino-Serbian military diplomacy to a higher level (China Military Online, 2019). At the multilateral level, then Serbian Minister of Defence Aleksandar Vulin participated in the Xiangshan Forum in China, where he articulated Serbian concerns about regional and global security challenges and discussed China's role in preserving world peace, stability, and prosperity.

In conclusion, the burgeoning military diplomacy between China and Serbia exemplifies a deepening strategic partnership with potential far-reaching geopolitical and geoeconomic implications. This cooperation, marked by significant high-level exchanges and collaborative military exercises, not only

enhances bilateral ties but also positions both nations to address regional and global security challenges more effectively. As China and Serbia continue to explore and expand their military collaboration, this partnership will likely become a cornerstone of their comprehensive strategic relations, contributing to mutual growth and stability in the international arena. Sino-Serbian military cooperation also involves the Serbian import of Chinese weaponry. During the second Belt and Road Forum in China, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić announced that Serbia would purchase weaponry from China as part of its military modernisation process, affecting 3,000 Serbian soldiers. China will also transfer know-how technology to improve Serbia's "Pegasus" programme (Popadic and Bakovic, 2019). As part of its military modernisation and efforts to boost power projection capabilities, Serbia is acquiring military drones from China. Specifically, Serbia has ordered nine Chengdu Pterodactyl-1 drones, known in China as Wing Loong, with predictions that an additional fifteen drones will be ordered in the near future. These medium-altitude, long-endurance drones are intended for surveillance and aerial reconnaissance and can be equipped with bombs and missiles for striking ground targets (Yan, 2019). The wingspan of these drones is nearly 10 meters, with a range of 4,000 km and an endurance of almost 20 hours. Their maximum speed is 200 km/h. Training for Serbian operators who will manoeuvre this equipment will be conducted in China (Politika, 2020).

Serbia is the first European country to purchase Chinese military drones and military equipment. This decision is part of Serbia's longstanding policy of maintaining good relations with China, which includes not imposing sanctions on China after the 1989 Tiananmen incident. This purchase represents Beijing's most significant foray into a continent where armed forces traditionally relied on US and European weapon-makers (Lekic, 2019). While this represents a considerable geopolitical breakthrough for China, it is anticipated that its future influence in the European arms market will face significant challenges due to the dominant positions of the US and top European suppliers such as France and Germany. Furthermore, NATO recognises China as a geopolitical and security challenge.

In 2017, the PLA donated military equipment worth approximately \$1 million to the Serbian army. This donation included 16 rubber boats with outboard engines, five snowmobiles, and ten portable devices for detecting explosives and narcotics, handed over to the Serbian army at the military

barracks in Pančevo (Huang, 2017). In an interview with VoA, the then Serbian Prime Minister Miloš Vučević highlighted military cooperation as the most critical aspect of Sino-Serbian relations. He stated that the Chinese medium-range air defence missile system FK-3 and the drones CH-95 and CH-92A are “undoubtedly” among the most important defence systems that Serbia has acquired. Serbia showcased its Chinese surface-to-air missiles in April 2022, alongside other military hardware purchased from Russia and the West. Serbia purchased the FK-3 air defence system in 2019, comparable to the Russian S-300 or the American Patriot system. It was delivered in 2022 (Reuters, 2023).

In conclusion, the evolving military cooperation between China and Serbia signifies a strategic partnership with substantial geopolitical and geoeconomic implications. The procurement of advanced Chinese military technology and the deepening of military ties reflect Serbia’s commitment to modernising its defence capabilities while maintaining its policy of military neutrality. This cooperation, marked by significant high-level exchanges and collaborative military exercises, positions both nations to address regional and global security challenges more effectively. As China and Serbia continue to explore and expand their military collaboration, this partnership will likely become a cornerstone of their comprehensive strategic relations, contributing to mutual growth and stability in the international arena.

As is well known, the Serbian government bases its foreign policy on four pillars: the European Union, the United States, Russia, and China. In this context, Serbia strives to maintain its military neutrality while NATO and Russia seek to influence its position in line with their respective military and security interests. Therefore, importing arms from China and incorporating the “China factor” into Serbian security could enhance Serbia’s ability to balance these competing influences. In this regard, China’s stance of not forming or participating in military alliances could serve as a significant source of legitimacy for Serbia’s ambitions to remain a militarily neutral country. According to military relations analyst Aleksandar Radić, China must identify new markets for its arms exports beyond Asia, Africa, and Latin America. He asserts that China aims to position Serbia as a bridge to access potential European buyers (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2018).

CONCLUSION

As the largest holder of foreign exchange reserves, China stands at a pivotal juncture in its pursuit of becoming the most technologically advanced nation globally. In this context, China is compelled to assume a prominent role in bettering global governance, where its relational and structural power is perceived as both a challenge and an opportunity in terms of international stability and security. Consequently, China has developed a keen interest in establishing a suitable international order that serves as a platform for achieving the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, alongside its national aspirations encapsulated in the China Dream and the Two Centenary Goals.

Goal-orientated military diplomacy has become a crucial element of China's intensive, deep, sophisticated, and assertive integration with the international community. This multifaceted diplomatic approach plays a positive role in enhancing and deepening cooperation with the armed forces of other nations. Through these efforts, China seeks to promote its foreign relations and contribute to maintaining world peace and global stability (Xiong, 2009). Military diplomacy is, thus, intended to foster a long-term, peaceful international and regional environment conducive to national development. It should actively implement a new security concept while mitigating the influence of hegemonism (Xiong, 2009, p. 285). General Liang Guanglie has stated that the Chinese military's engagement in the international security arena is not aimed at undermining the global security architecture; rather, China aspires to be a constructive participant and builder of this system, providing additional public goods from which the entire international community can benefit (Chi, 2015).

China's approach indicates that it does not intend to be a "free rider" or challenger while fostering conditions for the development of other states. However, a pertinent question arises regarding the operating conditions of the world order: Will the Western self-proclaimed Manifest Destiny give way to a Sinocentric system? As noted by Mitrovic, if China disregards the diverse needs and ambitions of other nations, it risks replicating the very mistakes of "Western universalism" that it has endeavoured to avoid while leading developing states in various arenas and bilateral cooperation (Mitrovic, 2018, p. 24).

In this context, Serbia views China's "go global" policy favourably, as a perspective reflected in the Serbian National Defence Strategy (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, 2009). Serbia sees China as a partner that supports its territorial sovereignty, integrity, and economic development and provides political leverage at the regional level. Through the development of military-to-military diplomacy with China, the Serbian government seeks to maintain its military neutrality and position itself as a military balancer in the volatile Western Balkans. By preserving its military neutrality, Serbia aims to leverage its geopolitical and geoeconomic position as a bridge between East and West. Additionally, this stance is a preliminary step in Serbia's broader ambitions to act as an "appeaser" in the ongoing geopolitical polarisation within the Western Balkans.

Historically, the region has been plagued by conflict, driven by nationalist politics and the geopolitical ambitions of various stakeholders, both direct and indirect. From this vantage point, China's involvement in Serbian military affairs could mitigate concerns about potential regional instability, particularly in response to NATO's efforts to curtail Russian influence in the area.

In conclusion, Serbia's strategic engagement with China through military diplomacy reflects a broader effort to navigate the complex geopolitical landscape of the Western Balkans. By fostering a partnership with China, Serbia reinforces its military neutrality and strengthens its position as a regional balancer and intermediary between the East and the West. This relationship is a critical component of Serbia's broader foreign policy objectives, enabling it to assert its sovereignty while simultaneously enhancing its regional influence. Moreover, China's involvement in Serbian military affairs offers a stabilising counterbalance in a region historically characterised by conflict and external power struggles. As Serbia continues to cultivate its role as a mediator in the Western Balkans, its strategic comprehensive partnership with China may prove pivotal in shaping the future dynamics of regional and global geopolitics.

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