

INSTRUMENTAL AND NORMATIVE DIMENSIONS OF THE SINO-SERBIAN PARTNERSHIP: BETWEEN TRANSACTIONAL COOPERATION AND IRONCLAD FRIENDSHIP

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Abstract: In recent decades, China and Serbia have developed a relationship that combines pragmatic cooperation with a shared commitment to key principles and norms of international conduct, and what both sides describe as an ‘ironclad friendship.’ This paper examines the instrumental and principal-based dimensions of the Sino-Serbian partnership, arguing that while strategic and economic interests drive bilateral cooperation, shared normative commitments to the principles of sovereignty and non-interference reinforce and justify this cooperation. Drawing on both realism and constructivism, the study contends that material considerations primarily shape the partnership, but historical experiences of external intervention have fostered a mutual sensitivity to sovereignty issues. This normative alignment provides a legitimizing framework that extends the relationship beyond mere transactionalism. The paper aims to demonstrate that ideational factors, principles, and norms interact with pragmatic interests to sustain long-term strategic cooperation. This principle-based dimension helps explain the resilience of their relationship despite power asymmetry, differing social systems and levels of development. It also clarifies why their cooperation has remained consistent over time, transcending changes in the international environment.

Keywords: Sino-Serbian partnership, transactional cooperation, principle-based cooperation, normative commitments, ‘ironclad friendship’, sovereignty, non-interference

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INTRODUCTION**

Numerous analyses, academic studies, policy papers, and media reports that examine China's presence, engagement, and influence in the Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC) and the Balkans, across the fields of economy, politics, security, culture and soft power, often conclude that Serbia stands out in many respects as the country with a significantly higher level of cooperation with China compared to others (Zweers et al., 2020; Jureković, 2021; Stanicek, 2022; Turcsányi, Liškutin, & Mochtak, 2023). When discussing relations between China and the countries of these regions, the phrase 'first in the region' is almost always applicable to Serbia in nearly every area of partnership between countries, and in some cases, Serbia has been the only one to establish such a type of cooperation.

Serbia was the first country in the Balkans to sign a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement with China. It was the first country in Europe where a Chinese company participated in infrastructure projects, including the construction of a bridge over the Danube and the high-speed railway between Belgrade and Novi Sad. Serbia was also the first European country to purchase weapons from China, including drones and air defence missile systems. The Chinese Cultural Centre in Belgrade is the first and largest of its kind in the Balkans. Serbia was the first European country where a Chinese company began large-scale production of car tires. It was the first country in Central and Eastern Europe to sign a Free Trade Agreement with China. Serbia was also the first country in Europe to sign an agreement with China on building a community with a shared future in the new era.

Additionally, studies show that Serbia stands out within Central and Eastern Europe as the country where China's soft power is significantly more visible. Public opinion research indicates that Serbian citizens generally hold very positive views of China, with consistently favourable

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perceptions over the years. In Serbia, China is viewed more positively than some Western countries and is regarded as an important factor in shaping Serbia's international standing (Trailovic, 2021a; Trailovic, 2024).

Given this context, one might ask: what makes Serbia unique? Why does it occupy an exceptional position in relations with China compared to other countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans? Why are the relations between Serbia and China qualitatively and quantitatively at a higher level than those between China and other countries in the region?

In this paper, we argue that this is because, in addition to the pursuit of strategic, pragmatic and material interests, the partnership between Serbia and China is also shaped by constitutive elements that include common historical experiences, shared political values and principles and normative alignment. These non-material factors play an important role in shaping their relations and fostering a deeper understanding between the two states.

The Sino-Serbian partnership has evolved significantly since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1955, with a strategic partnership declared in 2009 and upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016. Officially described as an 'ironclad friendship,' it was recently elevated to a 'community of shared future'. At its core, the relationship is built on practical cooperation in areas such as trade, investment, infrastructure development, culture and military technology. However, these instrumental aspects are consistently framed within a narrative of friendship, solidarity, shared political values, principles and norms (Mardell, 2024). As noted by Vladislavljev (2024), 'The statements coming from both presidents [Serbian and Chinese] have been in line with the notion that the partnership has surpassed the business level of cooperation. Leaders have highlighted the alignment on the issues of territorial integrity, supporting each other on this crucial issue for both sides'.

On the one hand, China, in its pursuit of greater global influence, views Serbia as a crucial partner, particularly within the framework of its Belt and Road Initiative. Instrumentally, Serbia is positioned as a critical transit and investment hub in Southeast Europe. From Serbia's perspective, the partnership with China is important for its economic development and strategic interests. Facing a need for substantial foreign investment, Serbia

has found in China a willing and significant partner. On the other hand, China's foreign policy, rooted in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, prioritizes mutual respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference — a stance shaped by its historical experiences. Serbia's foreign policy also emphasizes principles of sovereignty and non-interference, informed by past external interventions like the 1999 NATO bombing, and resists exclusive alignment with any specific bloc based on its declared military neutrality.

Based on all of this, the paper is structured as follows. It begins with a description of the theoretical framework. After that, a separate section is dedicated to the instrumental dimension of the partnership, presented through the main drivers that shape the cooperation between China and Serbia. The paper then focuses on the principled dimension of the cooperation between the two countries, which is examined through several factors such as their shared historical experience, the continuity of cooperation over time, the use of similar normative language, the application of principles even in the absence of immediate interests, normative convergence, the clear articulation of principles in bilateral documents, and their consistent application in other cases.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

In order to explain the two-dimensional character of the bilateral partnership between China and Serbia—both instrumental and principled—we rely, in a theoretical sense, on the fundamental premises and explanations provided by two schools of thought in the field of international relations, namely realism and constructivism. These explanations will help us understand what the main drivers of this bilateral relationship are on both sides. Furthermore, we do not claim that the combined explanatory potential of realism and constructivism is sufficient to encompass all the drivers and outcomes of this partnership. Therefore, while we do not dismiss or exclude the possibility that other IR approaches, such as liberalism and its variants, could also possess significant explanatory power in this case, our analysis predominantly relies on the two highlighted approaches.

Put most simply, realism, rooted in the idea of states as rational actors in an anarchic international system, focuses on power, security, survival and material interests. Constructivism, conversely, emphasizes how ideas, norms, and identities shape international relations by asserting that the facts of international politics are not reflective of an objective, material reality but rather of an intersubjective (socially constructed) reality. Constructivists emphasize the role of social interaction between states, which can consequently lead to the development of shared understandings, trust, norms, and identities, thus potentially fostering increased cooperation and the development of partnerships among states (Barkin, 2003; Cristol, 2019).

Realism thus provides us with a significant theoretical framework for understanding the instrumental dimension of Sino-Serbian partnership. The considerable power asymmetry between China and Serbia shapes the nature of their interactions, with both states pursuing their strategic national interests in the current international environment. The partnership has an explicit *quid pro quo* element.

At the same time, the premises of social constructivism help illuminate another dimension of the China–Serbia partnership by relying on the role of ideational factors and shared normative commitments. Both countries emphasize principles such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states as the cornerstone of international relations. The constructivist perspective serves to show that, for instance, common historical experiences, such as the bombing of Serbia and the Chinese embassy during the NATO intervention in 1999, or China’s own historical experience with foreign interference, along with the legacy of the Non-Aligned Movement and others, have led to an intersubjective perception of these principles and norms as shared and as the backbone of their national identities.

Moreover, it is important to note that although our structured approach explains the motivation behind the bilateral relations between the two countries strictly through two dimensions (instrumental and principled) we do not contend that these dimensions cannot overlap in practice or that a clear boundary exists between them. In practical terms, this is typically the case.

In this context, the patron–client framework, as applied by Kowalski and Rekść (2023), offers a useful conceptual lens for grasping the nature of Sino–Serbian ties. This model highlights how asymmetry and reciprocity operate in practice: the patron, China, extends material support and strategic benefits, while the client, Serbia, reciprocates through political loyalty and normative alignment. Importantly, Kowalski and Rekść (2023, p. 187, 189) draw on Carney’s insight that what distinguishes patron–client relationships from purely instrumental forms of cooperation is affectivity, the perceptual dimension that foster a sense of mutual loyalty and solidarity. According to their analysis, this is evident in Sino–Serbian asymmetrical and reciprocal exchanges, which unfold against the backdrop of moral obligations between countries bound by an ‘ironclad friendship’ and a shared sense of being oppressed by the West, as symbolized by the 1999 NATO bombings in Belgrade (Kowalski & Rekść, 2023, p. 186).

INSTRUMENTAL (PRAGMATIC) DRIVERS OF THE SINO-SERBIAN PARTNERSHIP: TRANSACTIONAL DIMENSION

The China–Serbia partnership and cooperation are fundamentally based primarily on the strategic (pragmatic/material) interests of both countries, with a notable feature of asymmetry in many respects. This partnership is characterised by a clear transactional orientation, grounded in reciprocity and mutual interests. To fully understand the transactional nature of the China–Serbia partnership, it is important to place it within the broader context of China’s global and regional initiatives, as well as Serbia’s own foreign policy priorities. On the one hand, China’s engagement in the Balkans reflects its growing geopolitical ambitions and efforts to project influence beyond its immediate neighbourhood. On the other hand, for Serbia, cooperation with China holds both economic and strategic significance in terms of safeguarding its vital national interests.

Over the past decade, the People’s Republic of China has been promoting new forms of regional and global political, economic, cultural, and security cooperation and connectivity among states. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the International Organization for Mediation (IOMed) are some of the most prominent

examples of this (Stekić, 2024, pp. 214–215). In addition, China has launched a number of new global initiatives, including the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative.

All of these are clear manifestations of China's aspiration to play a more active and prominent role in global affairs. This reflects not only its commitment to strengthening its influence in international relations but also its response to current global challenges. In this context, we are also witnessing China's growing engagement in the region of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), including the Balkans and the Republic of Serbia itself.

China's growing interest in the Central and Eastern European region led to the first business forum in Budapest in 2011 and the inaugural Summit in Warsaw in 2012. Since then, summits have been held regularly, with the most recent one in China in 2021. The countries involved adopted broad annual guidelines covering a wide range of areas. What began as the '16+1' format later expanded with Greece's inclusion ('17+1'), and then shifted to '14+1' as some countries withdrew. At that point, cooperation within the format encountered difficulties due to shifting geopolitical conditions, war in Ukraine, domestic political frictions and diverging interests among member states, as well as external pressure from major geopolitical actors like the US and EU (Weiwei, 2024). When it comes to Serbia, it remained a proactive member, hosting and implementing major Chinese-funded infrastructure projects, signing a China–Serbia Free Trade Agreement, and standing out as China's leading partner in the CEEC region.

In its pursuit of greater global influence, China regards Serbia as a significant partner in this part of Europe, particularly within the framework of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Beyond the framework of cooperation between China and the CEE countries, the BRI serves as a primary mechanism for expanding China's presence in the Western Balkans. Serbia's geographical position makes it a significant gateway into Europe, offering China access to crucial land routes for its infrastructure and connectivity projects. Through this approach, China seeks to secure its development interests, namely facilitating trade and investment, ensuring markets for its products, and diversifying sources of raw material supply.

This further facilitates the realization of its broader goal of enhanced connectivity with the European Union. One of the important corridors running through the Balkans is the China–Europe Land-Sea Express Line, which combines maritime and land routes, where goods are shipped by sea from China and then transported by rail through Central and Eastern Europe. The route has undergone significant expansion, with additional channels added over the years, the main one running via the port of Piraeus in Greece, operated by COSCO. A key segment of the China–Europe Land-Sea Express Line is the Budapest–Belgrade railway, formalized by a 2014 memorandum between China, Hungary, and Serbia (Zweers et al., 2020, pp. 8-11; Stanicek, 2022, p. 4; Li, 2022; Mitić, 2022, p. 26).

Over time, this Chinese engagement, which was initially focused exclusively on transport infrastructure (through Piraeus and Belgrade toward Western Europe), expanded to include industry, energy, communications, IT, culture, and in the case of Serbia, also extended to cooperation in the fields of military and security. Moreover, the Sino-Serbian partnership illustrates Beijing’s approach of cultivating loyal allies even in regions traditionally seen as Western spheres of influence.

From Serbia’s perspective, the partnership with China is significant for its economic development. Facing the need for substantial foreign investment, particularly in infrastructure, Serbia has found a key partner in China. Chinese investments are often portrayed in Serbia as transformative for the nation’s economic prospects. Serbia has established a strong and expanding partnership with China, marked by deep cooperation in trade, investment, and infrastructure. Anchored in bilateral agreements and enhanced through platforms like the Belt and Road Initiative and China–CEEC cooperation, Serbia has become China’s key economic partner in the Western Balkans (Mitrović, 2023).

Chinese investments in Serbia encompass greenfield projects, brownfield projects, and acquisitions of Serbian companies or assets. Many of these projects are financed through loans from Chinese banks, often under preferential terms but with conditions that sometimes include the involvement of Chinese contractors and labour. Notable examples include: Zijin Mining’s acquisition of RTB Bor, a major copper mining and smelting complex, HBIS Group’s takeover of the Smederevo steel plant, formerly owned by US Steel. Chinese companies and banks are heavily

involved in infrastructure projects—bridges, railways, highways, and energy systems—and have made major investments in metallurgy, mining, and the automotive sector (Ivanović & Zakić, 2023; Zakić, 2024, pp. 443-446; Vladislavljev, Dizdarević, & Đorđević, 2025, pp. 5-7). In 2023 China was reportedly the single largest foreign investor in Serbia (RTV, 2025). According to the Global Investment Tracker, China's total investment in Serbia amounts to \$5.76 billion. When including Chinese-funded construction projects, the combined total reaches approximately \$20.05 billion (American Enterprise Institute, n.d.).

Bilateral trade has grown rapidly, with total trade reaching \$6 billion in 2023 (International Trade Centre, 2025; Vladislavljev, 2025). Serbia's primary export to China is copper ore, predominantly extracted by Chinese companies operating within Serbia. In 2022, Serbia exported approximately \$1.3 billion worth of goods to China, with copper ore accounting for \$913 million of this total. Chinese companies, notably Zijin Mining and Zijin Copper, have significant mining operations in Serbia and are among the country's largest exporters. In 2023, Zijin Mining exported goods worth approximately €1.15 billion, while Zijin Copper's exports amounted to €746.3 million (ANSA, 2024).

In line with its strategic commitment to military neutrality, Serbia has maintained a diversified approach to defence cooperation by balancing relations with both Western countries and traditional partners such as Russia, but the practical implications of international sanctions on Russia have gradually compelled Serbia to shift its military procurement strategy, with China emerging as a key partner. This growing partnership with China, which is also driven by the modernization needs of the Serbian armed forces and China's advancements in military technology, has led to intensified military-technical cooperation, including arms procurement, technology transfer, joint exercises, and training. Since 2020, Serbia has acquired Chinese drones (CH-92A and CH-95), received missile systems (FK-3 and HQ-17AE), and developed its domestic drone 'Pegasus' with Chinese support. This marks a significant step, with Serbia becoming the first country in Europe to deploy the HQ-22 air defence system. The newly signed China–Serbia Free Trade Agreement includes phased tariff reductions on military goods, further facilitating cooperation (Trailovic, 2020).

In parallel, Serbia and China have developed a growing partnership in public security since 2017, notably in surveillance technology, joint police patrols, and counterterrorism exercises. These initiatives have included agreements with Huawei, the introduction of facial recognition systems, and bilateral police patrols in Serbian and Chinese cities, culminating in joint exercises and participation in security forums in 2024.

This expanding cooperation serves Serbia's goals of defence modernization and security enhancement while offering China not only a foothold in the European security domain, but also an opportunity to globally demonstrate the level of advancement of its military industry.

Beyond these economic and security aspects, good relations with China enable Serbia to balance its aspirations for European Union membership with its traditional ties to Russia and its growing relations with China, thus safeguarding its national interests. The clearest articulation of this approach came in 2009 under the leadership of then-President Boris Tadić, who introduced the Four Pillars of Serbian Foreign Policy—a framework identifying the European Union (EU), the United States, the Russian Federation, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) as Serbia's four essential external partners.

Intensive political relations between China and Serbia have notably deepened since 2009, when President Boris Tadić's visit to China resulted in the elevation of bilateral ties to a strategic partnership (Ladjevac, 2024b, p. 2). This marked a new phase of cooperation encompassing not only economic exchange, but also cooperation in cultural, educational, technological, and security sectors. Subsequent years saw frequent high-level meetings and declarations, such as the 2013 joint statement by Presidents Xi Jinping and Tomislav Nikolić and the 2016 upgrade to a comprehensive strategic partnership during Xi's visit to Serbia. These steps paved the way for expansive cooperation in trade, infrastructure, agriculture, and innovation, supported by numerous bilateral agreements and initiatives, including the opening of cultural centres. The partnership gained further traction during the COVID-19 pandemic, with China's medical aid viewed favourably by Serbian officials, contrasting with perceived EU delays.

This momentum continued with dense diplomatic engagement from 2020 to 2024, including regular meetings between top leaders and foreign

ministers. President Vučić's attendance at the Third Belt and Road Forum in 2023 and President Xi's landmark visit to Serbia in 2024 culminated in a new level of partnership—framed as a 'community of a shared future,' making Serbia the first European country to adopt such a formulation with China. Both sides reinforced their commitment to deepening strategic cooperation through the BRI, implementing a Free Trade Agreement, and aligning on multilateral issues. The relationship is underpinned by Serbia's support for the one-China principle and mutual backing on key sovereignty and human rights issues, such as Kosovo* and Xinjiang.

China's strong support for Serbia on issues of national sovereignty and territorial integrity, particularly regarding the Kosovo*, constitutes a major strategic advantage for Serbia. 'This position of Beijing will complicate the West's efforts to consolidate Kosovo's 'independence,' increase pressure from the EU and the US on Serbia, but also strengthen Belgrade's resilience,' as Mitić (2022, p. 17) put it. Given its geopolitical position and strained EU accession prospects, Serbia view China as a pragmatic partner out of necessity.

From China's perspective, the partnership with Serbia allows it to project the image of a responsible global actor that respects the independence and territorial integrity of its partners, particularly in a region where its engagement is closely monitored by the European Union and the United States. China's position is further influenced by its own concerns regarding separatist movements in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan, demonstrating a shared interest in upholding the Serbian territorial integrity.

This demonstrates that both states strategically invoke sovereignty to protect their national interests, particularly for Serbia regarding Kosovo* and for China concerning Taiwan (Vladislavljev, Dizdarević, & Đorđević, 2025, p. 13). But sovereignty serves a dual role: as a political instrument and as a foundational principle reinforcing their bilateral ties, a point we will elaborate further in the subsequent sections of this paper.

PRINCIPLED DIMENSION OF THE SINO-SERBIAN PARTNERSHIP

Shared History as the Foundation of Affective bound and Normative Convergence between China and Serbia

Relations between China and Serbia are often described by both countries as a 'ironclad friendship.' This enduring bond, which has lasted for more than seven decades, has evolved over time to reflect an increasingly deep alignment that goes beyond economic or political pragmatism and geopolitical maneuvering, resting instead on a relationship grounded in shared principles. Diplomatic relations were formally established in 1955 between the People's Republic of China and socialist Yugoslavia, whose legal successor is Serbia (Dimitrijević, 2020). Since then, the relationship has followed an upward trajectory, marked by mutual respect and cooperation, with no major disputes between the two countries (Ladjevac, 2024b, p. 1).¹ The formalization of this friendship continued with the establishment of a strategic partnership in 2009, which was then elevated to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016. The most recent step occurred in May 2024, when China and Serbia established a 'community of shared future in the new era,' marking the highest level of bilateral cooperation to date (Vladislavljev, 2024). This progression in the degree of mutual cooperation indicates a gradual political and value-based alignment, moving toward a shared normative framework embodied in the concept of a 'community of shared future.' This concept is a core element of China's foreign policy discourse, particularly under Xi Jinping. It is used to promote the idea of true multilateralism, mutual benefit, and global cooperation, with an emphasis on respect for sovereignty and non-interference (Tijanić, 2024, p. 53).

¹ Relations between the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and China underwent several fluctuations shaped by broader geopolitical and ideological dynamics, particularly during the Cold War. Although Yugoslavia quickly recognized the People's Republic of China, formal diplomatic ties were only established in 1955. Over the years, bilateral relations experienced both positive and negative phases, largely influenced by intra-socialist bloc tensions, especially involving the USSR. A notable improvement occurred after 1978, with Deng Xiaoping's rise and the launch of China's reform and opening-up policy.

One of the most significant factors underpinning the principled dimension of the China–Serbia partnership is their shared historical experience. The historical context of foreign intervention, experienced by both countries, has provided a foundation that reinforces the material dimension of their cooperation with non-material values.

Chinese history has been marked by periods of foreign influence and territorial concessions (such as the Opium Wars and the ‘unequal treaties’), which severely undermined its sovereignty at the time. The ‘century of humiliation’ continues to inform China’s foreign policy and its resolve to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Serbia, too, has undergone periods of foreign intervention and external domination. The breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, culminating in the NATO intervention, deeply affected Serbia’s perception of sovereignty and foreign interference.

In the context of their shared experiences with perceived violations of sovereignty and territorial integrity, both China and Serbia have faced persistent challenges linked to separatism, which they interpret as deeply intertwined with foreign interference. China has faced separatist challenges in regions such as Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan (which it regards as a breakaway province). Similarly, Serbia has faced a longstanding separatist issue in the autonomous province of Kosovo and Metohija, whose unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 has been recognized by many Western countries but is rejected by Serbia. Both countries have experienced attempts by external actors to internationalize these issues China and Serbia regard as internal affairs—framing domestic political or human rights concerns as matters of international significance (Xinhua, 2019). Ultimately, both China and Serbia have faced various forms of foreign interference in relation to the aforementioned issues. The repeated calls from Western governments and international bodies for investigations into human rights in Xinjiang, or for greater political freedoms in Hong Kong, are consistently met with strong condemnation from Beijing (Trailovic, 2021b; Mitić, 2022, p. 24). China argues these are internal matters falling solely within its sovereign jurisdiction. The constant pressure on Serbia to recognize Kosovo’s independence, often linked to its aspirations for European Union membership, is perceived as external coercion.

The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 represents a key shared trauma for both Serbia and China. For Serbia, this military intervention,

conducted without explicit authorization from the United Nations Security Council, was perceived as a severe violation of its sovereignty, fostering long-lasting distrust toward NATO and Western security and political structures (Đukanović & Lađevac, 2009, pp. 350-353). For China, the bombing of its embassy in Belgrade on May 7, 1999, which killed three Chinese journalists and injured at least twenty staff members, was understood as a blatant breach of Chinese sovereignty and of fundamental norms of international relations. The incident sparked a wave of protests in China and in other parts of the world with significant Chinese diaspora communities, including in front of United States diplomatic missions. Although the incident was officially described as a mistake and an apology was issued, it has never been accepted as such in China, where the attack has been viewed as deliberate. Even more significant was the long-term effect of the embassy bombing, which marked a turning point in China's growing distrust of NATO and especially of the United States, reinforcing opposition to Western interventionism and triggering broad military reform efforts (Xuewen, 1999; Mitić, 2022, p. 22; Mitic, 2024; Mardell, 2024; Cvetkovic & Heil, 2024; Chang, 2025).

The bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade further reinforced the sense of shared injustice and mutual understanding regarding the consequences of foreign intervention (Mardell, 2024; Chang, 2025). On the 25th anniversary of this tragedy in 2024, Chinese President Xi Jinping referred to the event as a friendship soaked in blood, calling it a shared memory (Belt and Road Portal, 2024; Mitic, 2024). The constant references to the 1999 embassy bombing by Chinese and Serbian officials go beyond mere historical remembrance. This shared historical experience contributes to shaping the China–Serbia partnership through a common sense of injustice and resistance to unilateralism (Mardell, 2024; Chang, 2025). It has created a moral bond between the two countries, providing a solid foundation for relations that are resilient to transactional shifts. Emotional and affective ties have encouraged mutual identification, fostering trust and solidarity. In this way, a shared narrative of victimhood has been established and is continually reproduced in nearly every context (Kowalski & Rekšć, 2023, p. 196; Mardell, 2024).

On the other hand, the shared historical experience of China and Serbia has also led to a common understanding of the principle of

sovereignty as absolute, in contrast to how they believe some other states interpret it. Both countries advocate the primacy of sovereign equality as both a political principle and a legal norm in international relations and international law. In response to what they perceive as violations of the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, Serbia through the NATO aggression and China through the embassy bombing, both states uphold the concept of indivisible and unconditional sovereignty (Mitic, 2024). China strongly opposes concepts such as 'humanitarian intervention' and the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P), aligning with Serbia's experiences from 1999. Having witnessed the selective application of international norms, both countries call for the rejection of hegemonism and bloc confrontation, insisting that any measures affecting sovereignty must be approved by the United Nations, especially the Security Council. The United Nations is regarded as the only legitimate mechanism for dispute resolution and the preservation of sovereign equality (Dimitrijević, 2024).

Patterns of Principled Conduct and normative alignment

Consistent patterns can be observed in the partnership between China and Serbia, which indicate the existence of a principled dimension of cooperation, consistent normative alignment between the two countries, and show that there is a long-term pattern of cooperation based on shared values, especially with regard to the issues of sovereignty and non-interference (Lađevac, 2024a, pp. 460-461)

Firstly, as already mentioned, their normative convergence is shaped by shared historical experiences. Both Serbia and China have faced what they perceive as illegitimate external pressures or interventions, particularly by Western powers. These experiences have fostered a shared sensitivity to issues of sovereignty and a mutual distrust toward the West, as well as a perception of double standards in international relations.

Secondly, their cooperation has remained consistent despite internal changes within both countries as well as shifts in the broader geopolitical environment. In other words, despite significant transformations on the international scene over several decades, which, alongside positive developments, could have had considerable negative effects on their partnership, Serbia and China have maintained a stable and constructive

relationship that has only deepened over time. From the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the bipolar system, through Serbia's democratic changes after 2000 and its transition to a market economy, to the growing pressure to align with Western norms, particularly in the context of European integration, relations with China have remained strong and gradually strengthened. Additional challenges have included the NATO intervention in 1999, the expansion of the EU and NATO into the former Eastern Bloc, the global financial crisis of 2008, the increasingly pronounced global rivalry between China and the United States, and the most recent geopolitical upheavals caused by the war in Ukraine. Over the past four decades, both Serbia and China have also undergone significant leadership changes and shifts in the structure of dominant political parties (in Serbia), yet this has not weakened the durability of their partnership. In the 1990s, amid severe isolation and Western-imposed economic sanctions, the political leadership of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Serbia actively sought to strengthen ties with China. During this time, the two countries established a range of political and economic contacts, including visits by high-level Serbian officials to China. After the 2000 following the fall of Milošević's government, various political figures came to power in Serbia, but cooperation with China continued to grow, exemplified by the opening of the Confucius Institute in Belgrade in 2006. From 2004 to 2012, under President Boris Tadić, more intensive cooperation with China began, which was further strengthened from 2012 onward under Tomislav Nikolić and later Aleksandar Vučić (Lađevac, 2020, pp. 274-278). During this entire period, China also experienced leadership changes, from Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping, under whom the Belt and Road Initiative was launched. Within this framework, Serbia has become a key European hub for China's engagement in the region.

Thirdly, the principles guiding their partnership are explicitly stated in almost all significant bilateral documents. China and Serbia consistently embed their shared normative positions, such as the primacy of sovereignty, non-interference, and sovereign equality, into formal state documents. Through three key joint declarations — from 2009, 2016, and 2024 — China and Serbia have clearly expressed that their partnership is based on shared values and a common worldview. As early as the first Joint Statement on Strategic Partnership from 2009, the two countries affirmed their respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as

their commitment to resolving disputes in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations. This was further deepened in 2016, when the relationship was elevated to a comprehensive strategic partnership explicitly based on the principle of non-interference in internal affairs. The two countries have repeatedly emphasized mutual respect, equality, and support for each other's chosen development paths. The joint declaration from May 2024 further strengthened this alignment by confirming that each side would firmly support the core interests and vital concerns of the other, based on sovereign equality, with a clear rejection of hegemonism and bloc politics, and with a strong commitment to resolving disputes exclusively through multilateral mechanisms under the auspices of the United Nations. Thus, the two countries explicitly underline sovereignty and non-intervention as the fundamental principles on which their partnership rests, formalizing these norms within their interstate relations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2009; Xinhua, 2016; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, 2024).

Fourthly, they support each other on the international stage even when there is no immediate strategic or visible material benefit, which is accompanied by normative convergence as well as a process of norm diffusion. It is also evident that both countries adopt and project similar normative language in foreign policy discourse.

At a practical level, mutual commitment to sovereignty and non-interference manifests in political support and voting behaviour within international organizations such as the United Nations. In the study 'Diffusion of Influence? Detecting China's Footprint in Foreign Policies of Other Countries' (Turcsányi, Liškutin, & Mochtak, 2023, pp. 470-477), the authors identify Serbia as a notable exception within the Central and Eastern European region when it comes to alignment with China. The findings indicate that Serbia exhibits a distinct foreign policy trajectory characterized by increased voting proximity to China in the UN General Assembly, reaching a level by 2020 where it matched its proximity to Germany and significantly exceeded that to the United States. Furthermore, Serbia has shown increasing semantic and syntactic similarity in its UN speeches with China, especially during the COVID-19 period, reflecting converging discursive patterns and shared diplomatic narratives (Turcsányi, Liškutin, & Mochtak, 2023, pp. 470-477, 480). Vladisavljev (2023) argues that Serbia's alignment

with China has deepened markedly in recent years, driven by a combination of diplomatic reciprocity and economic interdependence. He highlights that since 2020 Belgrade has abstained from endorsing any of the ten EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) declarations targeting Beijing, covering issues from Hong Kong's National Security Law to cyber threat attribution and human rights abuses in Xinjiang, making Serbia the sole EU candidate state to do so. Essentially, Vladislavljev (2023) contends, Serbia prioritizes safeguarding its own national interests, particularly Kosovo support, over aligning fully with EU foreign policy norms. This also indicates a proactive and consistent alignment with China's diplomatic positions, prioritizing their bilateral normative bond over potential alignment with Western-led criticisms.

In 2019, a group of 22 countries submitted a letter to the UN Human Rights Council condemning China's mass detention of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, which was countered by a statement from 54 countries supporting China's stance. Serbia did not take part in the initial letter, but it co-signed a subsequent letter in expressing support for China's policies in Xinjiang, thereby endorsing Beijing's narrative on internal security, human rights and minority governance (Xiao, 2019; Zweers et al., 2020, p. 20). Moreover, when criticized for its inaction on Hong Kong, Serbia invoked the norm of state sovereignty and noninterference, arguing that, as a sovereign state, it must conduct its policies in line with its interests and respecting international law (Stanicek, 2022, pp. 8-9).

These instances demonstrate that Serbia's abstentions are not merely tactical choices but reflect a principled alignment with Beijing's core norms on state sovereignty and interpretations of human rights. This underscores a deeper ideational consonance that parallels and reinforces Serbia's transactional relationship with China. A purely instrumental approach would likely shift in the face of significant economic or diplomatic costs. However, Serbia has consistently declined to endorse EU CFSP or UN bodies declarations on China, fully aware that this complicates its accession process, and even at times when Chinese investment was comparatively low.² The European Commission has expressed concern over Serbia's lack of alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security

² For comparison, see: (Zakić, 2024, pp. 434–436).

Policy, noting in its 2021 country report that Serbia's alignment pattern 'remained largely unchanged' and that several of its actions contradicted EU foreign policy positions (Stanicek, 2022, p. 9).³

While China does not always vote explicitly 'for' Serbia, its positions at the United Nations almost invariably align with Serbia's own stances. In 2015, Beijing opposed Kosovo's UNESCO membership bid, and in 2017, facing an 'unfriendly environment' and lacking Chinese backing, Kosovo withdrew its Interpol application (Zweers et al., 2020, p. 18; Vladislavljev, Dizdarević, & Đorđević, 2025, p. 13). More recently, China voted against the UN resolution on the Srebrenica genocide, a move widely seen in Serbia as a clear gesture of solidarity. Even when abstaining, China has emphasized its commitment to sovereignty and territorial integrity: it abstained on Security Council Resolution 757 in 1992, which imposed sanctions on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, (Ladjevac, 2024b, p. 1) and later accepted Resolution 1244 (1999) as the legal basis for resolving the Pristina–Belgrade dispute. In the ICJ's advisory proceedings on Kosovo's declaration of independence, China filed both a written submission and an oral statement in which it argued that integral parts of sovereign States do not have a right to unilateral secession and that sovereign States have a right to prevent unilateral secessions and protect their territorial integrity (Zhang, 2009).

Fifthly, the stated principles are applied consistently across various international disputes, demonstrating normative coherence across different contexts. Both countries demonstrate a consistent pattern in defending territorial integrity, advocating the principles of sovereignty and territorial inviolability as universal values rather than situational or

³ For example, in 2021, Serbia declined to align with two EU political declarations addressing human rights concerns in Hong Kong, reflecting a broader pattern of non-alignment with the EU's foreign policy positions on China. This stance was consistent with earlier actions, including President Vučić's 2020 letter to Xi Jinping, in which he expressed support for China's policies on Hong Kong and Taiwan and rejected external interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states. Serbia also did not join the EU's declaration attributing cyberattacks on EU institutions and industries to hacker groups based in China, nor did it support EU declarations issued under the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, which sanctioned Chinese individuals and entities (Stanicek, 2022, p. 9).

selectively applied positions. China has not recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia, despite its strategic partnership with Russia; likewise, Serbia has not recognized Crimea, even though it maintains close ties with Russia. In addition, both Serbia and China have formally expressed support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine, although they articulate this position with differing emphases: Serbia through its votes in the UN General Assembly (although it sometimes abstains or avoids full alignment with Western sanctions on Russia), and China through general statements affirming sovereignty and non-interference. China's 2023 position paper on the Ukraine crisis reaffirms the principle of territorial integrity.

CONCLUSION

The partnership between China and Serbia cannot be viewed solely through a transactional dimension, nor exclusively through a principled one, but rather as a hybrid model in which strategic interests and constructed norms coexist, enabling consistency despite changes within the states themselves as well as in the global environment.

China uses this partnership to advance its Belt and Road Initiative, to gain a certain degree of influence in Southeast Europe, and to secure political support for its global strategy. It therefore benefits from Serbia as a strategic point of support on the European continent, particularly through infrastructure projects, but also as a source of diplomatic backing on issues that are important to China. Serbia, on the other hand, gains practical benefits from Chinese investments and political support. These benefits are crucial for its economic development and for the pursuit of essential national interests, especially in relation to the issue of Kosovo* and in maintaining a balance among the great powers. This partnership can thus be understood as a pragmatic alignment in which both sides draw strategic, political, and economic benefits, even when there is an asymmetry of power.

However, numerous indicators suggest that the cooperation between Serbia and China, especially on issues of sovereignty, is based on shared values and normative principles rather than solely on strategic calculations. It is therefore also of a principled character.

For Serbia, the memory of the NATO bombing in 1999 and the unilaterally declared independence of Kosovo, accepted by a large number of Western countries, remains a symbol of violated sovereignty. Similarly, China views the bombing of its embassy in Belgrade in the past, as well as current criticisms of its internal policies, such as on human rights, as interference in its domestic affairs. This shared historical trauma is consistently referenced by the leaders of both countries on almost every occasion. These references serve to reinforce a sense of mutual understanding and support.

The shared historical injustices, in particular the NATO bombing in 1999 and the incident involving the Chinese embassy, have created a strong narrative of lasting friendship and of resistance to what is perceived as unilateralism. In addition, the mutual reinforcement of this narrative has led to shared interpretations of the concept of sovereignty and the principle of non-intervention. Alignment on these values contributes to the maintenance of long-term cooperation by providing a legitimizing framework that strengthens trust and predictability in their bilateral relations. Both Serbia and China have experienced what they consider illegitimate external pressure or intervention, particularly from Western powers. These events are not merely historical references, but foundational points around which their joint commitment to the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention has been built.

Although economic and strategic interests undoubtedly play a central role, many behavioural patterns indicate that the partnership is not exclusively transactional. First, the continuity of the partnership between China and Serbia over time, despite significant internal and external structural changes, points to this conclusion. Second, both countries employ similar normative language in their foreign policy discourse. When addressing international issues, particularly those related to sovereignty, Serbia and China emphasize principles such as non-intervention, territorial integrity, and respect for national independence (Vladisavljev, Dizdarević, & Đorđević, 2025, p. 13). This emphasis reflects a convergence in their understanding of international norms. Furthermore, the two countries offer each other support in international forums even in situations where there is no immediate strategic benefit, and sometimes even in cases where such support may come at a cost.

Serbia's decision not to align itself with the European Union on issues related to China cannot be understood solely in terms of economic exchange or geopolitics linked to Kosovo*. It also reflects a deliberate acceptance of China's normative framework concerning sovereignty, security, and human rights. In this sense, even while facing challenges on the path to European Union accession, Serbia actively promotes its relationship with China.

In addition, the principles guiding their partnership are explicitly stated in almost all official bilateral documents. Both countries articulate a shared vision of the international order. This vision is defined by opposition to hegemony, to power politics, and to unilateralism, and by support for multilateralism based on the role of the United Nations. Serbia's clear support for China's initiatives such as the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilization Initiative further emphasizes the depth of their normative convergence. Finally, both countries apply these principles consistently across a range of different contexts and to other cases, which further demonstrates the principled nature of their cooperation.

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