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„SPOLUPRÁCA 17+1“ V STREDNEJ A VÝCHODNEJ EURÓPE: ANALÝZA EURÓPSKÝCH A AMERICKÝCH FAKTOROV A TRENDOV

“17+1 COOPERATION” IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: ANALYSIS OF EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN FACTORS AND TRENDS

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Svetové veľmoci od druhej dekády 21. storočia zvýšili svoju pozornosť a investície v strednej a východnej Európe (SVE). Cieľom článku je pochopiť záujmy a obavy veľmocí, ako sú Spojené štáty americké a štáty Európskej únie (EÚ) v strednej a východnej Európe a analyzovať pozície a vplyv faktorov veľmocí na spoluprácu medzi Čínou a SVE („Spolupráca 17+1“). Prostredníctvom analýzy využívajúcej multidimenzionálny hermeneutický prístup možno vidieť, že EÚ zohráva vedúcu úlohu v SVE a Spojené štáty americké poskytujú SVE vojenskú bezpečnosť a dodávky energií. Model záujmov a interakcie vyššie uvedených strán v regióne strednej a východnej Európy sú dôležitými vonkajšími premennými, ktoré priamo alebo nepriamo ovplyvňujú spoluprácu medzi Čínou a SVE. Hoci existuje určitý potenciál pre spoluprácu, cesta sa zdá byť dlhá a nie je/ nebude jednoduchá.

Kľúčové slová: stredná a východná Európa, spolupráca medzi Čínou a štátmi strednej a východnej Európy, faktor veľkej sily, zainteresovaná strana, model záujmu

Since the second decade of the 21st century, the world's great powers have increased their attention and investment in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), and the game between great powers has intensified. This paper aims to understand the interests and concerns of great powers or international organizations such as the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) in

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CEE, and analyze the positions and impact of great power factors on China-CEE cooperation ("17+1 Cooperation"). Through the analysis using a multidimensional hermeneutic approach, it can be seen that the EU plays a leading role in CEE, the US is deeply involved in CEE by providing military security and energy supply, and the interests pattern and interactions of the above parties in the CEE region are important external variables that directly or indirectly affect China-CEE cooperation. As a "latecomer", China's cooperation with CEE countries coexists with opportunities and challenges in the game of great powers. While there is some potential for cooperation, the road seems bumpy and long.

Key words: Central and Eastern Europe, China-CEE cooperation, great power factor, stakeholder, interest pattern

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1 INTRODUCTION

After 30 years of transition and development, the politics, economy and society of CEE countries have undergone profound changes. Politically, these countries modeled these changes on the Western model to establish a new political system. Economically, the vast majority of countries embarked on the right track of development, achieved rapid economic growth and reached the average level of the EU, which has become a new driving force for the economic development of the EU. In terms of foreign relations, CEE countries have returned to Europe and are active in the political, economic and security territory of the European continent with a new look.

Since the second decade of the 21st century, the world's major powers have increased their attention and investment in CEE, and the game between major powers has intensified. CEE has once again become the focus of great powers, which is closely related to a series of factors, such as the reorganization of international relations in the European continent after the end of the Cold War, the continuous expansion of the EU, the evolution of transatlantic relations, the ongoing tension between the West and Russia caused by the Ukrainian crisis, and China's approach to the center of the world stage. In recent years, Brexit and the huge fluctuations in China-US relations have brought new uncertainties to the relations between major powers.

Therefore, the analysis of the EU and the US factors in CEE, especially the interest structure and deep relationship between major powers and CEE countries, as well as the positions and countermeasures taken by China for cooperation in the region, is of great practical significance to better understand and analyze the current situation and trend of China-CEE cooperation.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the establishment of China-CEE cooperation in April 2012, the phenomenon has attracted much attention from the policy and academic circles, and the number of studies on China-CEE cooperation has increased gradually. Since 2012,

there have been many examples of scholars examining bilateral and group relations from an economic or diplomatic perspective. For example, Szunomár (2014) presents the results of a research project on Chinese investment in V4 countries coordinated by the Institute of World Economics and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. This publication is a collection of analyses by various authors. In addition to economic issues and intents, the research examined the underlying political interests of both sides as well as the attitude of V4 societies to incoming Chinese capital and growing influence. From the perspective of Bulgaria, Kandilarov and Wang (2018) reviewed the development of diplomatic relations between China and CEE countries over the past 40 years, and analyzed the development opportunities provided by the Belt and Road Initiative and the cooperation between China and CEE countries for Bulgaria. This study provides a Bulgarian perspective on cooperation with China and CEE countries.

While the above-mentioned scholars have studied the cooperation and relationship between China and one or some CEE countries, other researchers have focused on China's cooperation with the CEE countries as a sub-region. For instance, Furst and Tesář (2013) analyze the historical evolution of China-CEE cooperation, and provide prospects for China-CEE cooperation from the perspective of international relations. The authors shed light on the complex perspectives on the historical events that led to the establishment of the China-CEE cooperation mechanism, and attempt to answer the following questions: Can China-CEE cooperation evolve into the complex sectoral dialogue that already exists at the EU-China level? The authors argue that this is unlikely to happen, but that China-CEE has the potential to be a platform that complements EU-China relations and presents many opportunities for both sides. Budeanu (2018) describes the historical background of China-CEE cooperation, defined the structure of China-CEE cooperation, and focused on the multiple opportunities created by China-CEE cooperation for CEE countries. This study provides a view of the CEE countries, focusing on the influence of the CEE countries on Sino-European relations. From the perspective of identity geopolitics, Kavalski (2017, 2018) has analyzed the different strategic discourses that prompted CEE countries to join the "17+1 Cooperation" in addition to economic factors, and compared the different identities of CEE countries relative to Europe as reflected in their relations with China. Matura (2019) examines trade, investment and politics between China and CEE countries. He evaluates the correlation between the quality of bilateral political relations and economic relations of China and CEE countries, and further assesses the importance of China's activities in the region on this basis.

In addition to focusing on research on China-CEE cooperation, there is also a certain accumulation of research on CEE stakeholders, such as studies on the influence of the EU, Germany, and the US in CEE (see, for example, Hofhansel 2005, Yang & Gao 2017, Glajar 2004). In reality, in the process of cooperation between

China and CEE countries, the influence of stakeholders has always existed. CEE is not only a geopolitically sensitive region, but also a region with a highly open market and a high degree of integration into the EU. Since ancient times, various stakeholders have intertwined. Glajar (2004) focuses on the analysis of the complex political and cultural legacy of Germany and Austria in East and Central Europe in the 20th century. This is an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural scholarly study that informs the discussion of 'German' identity in Eastern Europe, while enriching research on the interactions and influences between Germany, Austria and Eastern Europe. Hofhansel (2005) analyzes the "high politics" of German foreign policy towards Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic and Poland in his book, addressing the legacy of the past in contemporary Czech-German and Polish-German relations. This study discusses the future of German relations with its eastern neighbours, especially the enlargement of the EU. Zhu (2014) analyzes the relationship between CEE countries and the US after the Cold War. He believes that in the context of constant friction in US-EU relations, the US has strengthened its efforts to find new allies in Europe, and provided political, security and economic support to CEE countries, making them partners of the US on major international issues. The influence of the EU on CEE is also extremely important, which is mainly reflected in the fact that "Central and Eastern European countries are deeply dependent on EU markets and funds and highly identify with EU norms and rules, and their foreign policy choices have been deeply embedded in the process of European integration" (Jin 2015, p.29). Jin (2015) argues that the EU exerts influence on the foreign economic cooperation of CEE countries through its economic influence, institutional normative power and soft convergence pressure, and the study also touches on the EU's main concerns for China-CEE cooperation.

In conclusion, it can be seen from the above that most of the research on China-CEE cooperation involves the main features, structure and historical background of China-CEE cooperation. Moreover, most of these studies are carried out from the view of a single CEE country and China, or from the perspective of CEE and the EU and China. And most of the studies on stakeholders in CEE have discussed the significant influence of these stakeholders on CEE. However, there are few and insufficient studies on China-CEE cooperation from the perspective of factors and interest patterns of major powers such as the US or the EU. This paper attempts to understand China's rise, adaptability and prospects in regional and world affairs on the macro-level of international politics and diplomacy. It analyzes the position and countermeasures that China adopts in cooperation in the region based on the interest structure and deep relationship between major powers and CEE countries, which is valuable for better understanding and analyzing the current situation and trend of China-CEE cooperation.

3 METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH STRUCTURE

In terms of methodology, a multidimensional hermeneutic approach is adopted which incorporates the use of primary and secondary sources concerning the fields of economics, politics, security and energy. The aim is to critically interpret the complex interaction of a network of intersecting factors in relations between China, CEE, the EU, and the US. The multidimensional hermeneutic analysis is interwoven with quantitative economic data to support specific aspects of the argument. In terms of primary and secondary sources, the former includes official documents, speeches by political leaders, and media reports, while the latter refers to academic publications such as policy briefs and analyses, and scholarly literature, such as journal articles and monographs. Textual materials such as official documents are interpreted to analyze the interests and concerns of great powers or stakeholders such as the US and the EU in the CEE region and their deep relationship with CEE countries. Combined with the views and opinions and historical descriptions of other scholars on this topic, this study summarizes the positions and countermeasures of these great power factors on China-CEE cooperation, evaluates the influence of great power factors on China-CEE cooperation, and on this basis, discusses the progress and prospects of China-CEE cooperation.

Of course, this type of interpretive (hermeneutic) method tends to be challenged for allegedly lacking objectivity. It is hoped, however, to defend it by arguing that complete objectivity is impossible in social research because every researcher has life experiences that influence what they study and how they do it (Scott 2013). Nonetheless, this study attempts to provide a less biased analysis by cross-checking different sources. In this study, both primary and secondary sources are selectively retrieved from both the Chinese and the CEE countries' sides to ensure that viewpoints from different authors were incorporated.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section shows a general analysis of the past, present and trends of China-CEE cooperation. Such changes and trends in China-CEE cooperation are inseparable from the stakeholders in the CEE region. From the current situation, stakeholders in CEE can be divided into three types: one is institutional or structural actors, of which the most typical representatives are the EU and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); the second is important national actors, such as the US, Russia, and EU member states (Germany, Italy); the third is some influential non-state actors, such as multinational enterprises, non-governmental organizations and some special regional cooperation organizations (such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Visegrad Group, etc.). In view of this, the subsequent sections focus on the EU and the US, which are the most typical and influential stakeholders in CEE, and analyze the interest structure of the EU and the US in CEE and their deep relations with CEE countries. This is followed by the EU

and the US position and countermeasures toward China-CEE cooperation, especially their impact on China-CEE cooperation. The conclusion of the paper summarises the major findings and briefly discusses the broad policy implications.

4 THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF CHINA-CEE COOPERATION

China-CEE cooperation has been proposed since 2012. In the past nine years, it has carried out cooperation in many fields and achieved some cooperation results. However, new and old problems at home and abroad also need to be dealt with rationally. At the initial stage of cooperation, the annual foreign direct investment of CEE countries decreased and the economic growth slowed down due to the impact of the global financial and economic crisis in 2008. After the economic crisis, the former EU countries, as the main source of foreign direct investment, have significantly reduced their investment in the CEE Member States (Wang 2010). In order to strive for economic recovery, CEE countries initially welcomed Chinese investors to activities in the region, while China seized the opportunity and strengthened economic cooperation with Eastern European countries. These developments were finally institutionalized through the establishment of China and CEE countries cooperation, that is, the China-CEE cooperation platform. Although the oldest EU member states remain the main source of foreign direct investment in CEE, Chinese companies have become the key others in the region in the past few years. The cooperation between the two sides has achieved some fruitful highlights. For example, by 2015, the bilateral trade volume reached 56.2 billion US dollars, an increase of 28 percentage points over 2010. The total investment of Chinese enterprises in Central European countries exceeds US \$5 billion, which is of significance in the fields of finance, green energy, telecommunications and chemical industry (Ministry of Commerce 2016). This occurred mainly because the global financial crisis dealt a great blow to the CEE region, which was heavily reliant on Western Europe. It was natural to turn to China, which continues to flourish, as it increased the potential for diversification in the region.

However, with the deepening of China-CEE cooperation, due to the profound changes in the internal and external environment, the existing new and old problems have also been amplified to some extent. The launch of cooperation between China and CEE countries has raised great expectations among CEE countries, that is, the strengthening of China's investment and trade relations will help create jobs, create wealth, provide funds for research and innovation, and build and improve the infrastructure in the region. However, most observers of CEE countries believe that these expectations have not yet been realized, at least for now. For instance, "China was quick to make grand promises of widespread investment, thus elevating hopes (perhaps CEE countries allowed themselves to become unrealistically optimistic), yet failed to deliver on many of these promises. This has led to much frustration among

CEE countries" (Karásková & Hickman 2019). In addition, although China's direct investment in some CEE countries has increased, CEE's share of total Chinese foreign direct investment is still small. Britain, Germany, France and the other 15 EU countries are still the main destinations for China's foreign investment. Accordingly, the main partners of CEE countries in infrastructure investment, trade and financing are still Western European countries.

Recently, the world has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the economy has generally declined. The pandemic has negatively impacted China-CEE relations despite Chinese efforts to sustain cooperation. On February 9, 2021, President Xi Jinping hosted a video summit of leaders of China and CEE countries in Beijing and delivered a keynote speech. In the "2021 China-CEEC Cooperation Beijing Activity Plan" published at the summit, it was proposed to carry out cooperation in a more flexible way. The partners have overcome the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic and carried out a number of cooperation activities in a combination of online and offline methods. Bilateral trade continued to expand. Statistics from China Customs show that in the first three quarters of 2021, the total value of bilateral trade between China and CEE countries was 629.41 billion yuan, a year-on-year increase of 27.2%. Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary have become China's top three trading partners in CEE (Chen & Gu 2021). Nonetheless, under the influence of the complex background of Sino-US and Sino-European relations, the epidemic has made the contradictions more prominent, and some CEE countries have changed their judgment on the situation. Economic interests have been sacrificed. Lithuania has provoked China on regional cooperation, Xinjiang-related issues, Taiwan-related issues, etc., which has an impact on China-CEE cooperation and China-EU relations. The Russian-Ukrainian war has also – at least for the time being – undermined the entire basis of China-CEE cooperation.

On the whole, China-CEE cooperation has made some progress, but there are also differences and contradictions that force it to slow down. The reasons are not only the new problems caused by external factors such as the doubts of the EU and major Western powers in CEE, but also the old problems of China-CEE cooperation. These include the changeable internal political situation of CEE countries, the pressure to pursue quick economic cooperation, and the negative public opinion left over by history, which are the main challenges facing China's relations with CEE countries. Although differences and contradictions cannot be avoided, it can be predicted that cooperation between the two sides at the political level will still be very difficult. However, since "The development of economic and trade relations are a concentrated embodiment of the continuous settlement of problems and bridging differences between China and Europe" (Cui 2020), there is still broad space for cooperation in many fields between China and CEE countries.

5 THE EU FACTOR: PLAYING A LEADING ROLE IN CEE

The changes and development direction of China-CEE cooperation are inseparable from the major stakeholders in the CEE region, among which the EU factor plays a leading role. The EU is the most integrated regional organization in the world, and its membership was expanded for the fifth time in May 2004. The target of this expansion was the former socialist countries in CEE. After the drastic political changes in these former socialist countries in CEE, for historical, strategic, cultural and economic reasons, the political elites of CEE countries yearn to become part of Europe (Hoffmann 1997, p 139).

In response to the accession requirements of CEE countries, the Copenhagen Summit of the European Community held in June 1993 defined the basic political, economic and legal requirements for accession. This means that CEE countries are required to reform in accordance with EU standards and values in terms of politics, economy and law. Subsequently, the European Commission published the "Agenda 2000" (European Commission, 1997) in July 1997, which for the first time assessed the compliance of candidate countries according to the "Copenhagen Criteria". Since then, the European Commission has pointed out the gap between CEE countries in meeting the requirements for EU membership and the direction of future efforts through the annual assessment report. These reports amount to an action guide for CEE countries to standardize their institutional models in accordance with Western democracies. Arguably, "independent of whether the first democratic steps were or were not passively influenced by the prospect of EU membership, once that fundamental pro-democracy choice was made, the EU acted as an anchor for these countries, helping them to remain within the boundaries of the democratic regime type. The early development of formal membership-oriented ties with the EU contributed, together with other factors, but more so than other factors, to democratic developments in these countries" (Morlino & Sadurski 2010, p. 73). In other words, for the CEE countries, the start of the accession process not only means the beginning of the negotiation game with the EU, but also represents the beginning of the Europeanization of domestic political, economic and social life. The accession trajectory of CEE countries also confirms this point. Some countries postponed their formal accession because they failed to meet the accession criteria; other countries with more successful transitions and higher levels of Europeanization were able to join the EU first. By May 2004, the EU achieved its fifth expansion, with Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania joining the EU. Since then, a total of 11 CEE countries² have joined the EU.

² In addition to the eight countries that joined the EU in 2004, Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU on 1 January 2007 and Croatia joined the EU on 1 July 2013

For the Western Balkan countries, in addition to the above-mentioned accession conditions, the EU has established a special process "Stabilisation and Association Process " (European Commission 1999) for Western Balkans in order to politically stabilize these countries and encourage their rapid transition to a market economy, promote regional cooperation and ultimately make them EU member states. According to the European Commission, "The process helps the countries concerned build their capacity to adopt and implement EU law, as well as European and international standards"(European Commission 2003). In February 2020, the European Commission proposed to strengthen the accession process in the Western Balkans, emphasizing the importance of "build[ing] more trust among all stakeholders and to enhance the accession process and make it more effective. It has to become more predictable, more credible - based on objective criteria and rigorous positive and negative conditionality, and reversibility - more dynamic and subject to stronger political steering"(European Commission 2020a, p 1).

By moving closer to the EU, CEE countries are bound and driven by the EU's accession criteria, which means they need to meet the political and economic criteria for membership. The combination of EU accession and reform has put CEE countries on the track of healthy development, maintained regional stability, and at the same time further established and consolidated the EU's dominant position in the CEE region. Moreover, the Russian-Ukrainian war that broke out in early 2022 had a great impact on the regional pattern, and undoubtedly changed the ecology of the EU's eastward expansion. There are still unstable and uncertain factors in the east and southeast of the EU, which will affect the stability and development of the EU itself. In order to obtain political, security protection and economic development, some countries may show stronger willingness to join the EU than in the past, and the eastward expansion of the EU may accelerate in the future. For example, as Josep Borrell, EU foreign affairs chief, noted after his trip to the Western Balkans on 16 March 2022, "all the countries he has visited these days have the same requirements – closer to the EU" (CIBAL 2022).

The EU increases its international influence by expanding its membership, and gains a higher international status by expanding its size. Before and after the accession of CEE countries to the EU, the EU provided many trade support policies and huge financial assistance to these countries, vigorously promoted the economic reform of CEE countries, and promoted them to gradually reach the average level of the EU in economy. In this process, the economies of CEE countries are highly dependent on the EU (See Table 1).

Table 1: Intra-EU trade among EU and CEE member states in 2020

| <i>Country</i> | <i>Trade share of Central and Eastern European member states in the EU (%)</i> | |
|----------------|--|---|
| | <i>The proportion of exports to the EU in the country's total exports (%)</i> | <i>Proportion of imports from the EU in total imports (%)</i> |
| Bulgaria | 66 | 61 |
| Czechia | 80 | 73 |
| Croatia | 67 | 77 |
| Estonia | 66 | 75 |
| Hungary | 78 | 71 |
| Latvia | 62 | 76 |
| Lithuania | 56 | 71 |
| Poland | 74 | 67 |
| Romania | 74 | 74 |
| Slovakia | 79 | 80 |
| Slovenia | 67 | 59 |

Source: European commission, 2022

In addition, some extremely important political and economic powers in EU member states, such as Germany, are the most important economic, trade and political partners of CEE countries. On the one hand, Germany has intertwined historical ties with CEE. On the other hand, it is the member state with the closest economic ties with CEE countries in the EU, and it is the biggest beneficiary of the EU's eastward expansion. After the end of the cold war, with the unification of East and West Germany and the large-scale and all-round transformation of CEE countries, Germany and CEE countries began to commit themselves to establishing political and economic relations and building a security environment on a new basis (Zhu 2017, p. 46).

The twists and turns in the European integration process have also made the new CEE members of the EU have more diplomatic and development expectations with their neighbor Germany (Yang & Gao 2017). Germany has continuously strengthened its cooperation with CEE countries from the political and economic levels. For example, at the political level, it recognizes the Oder-Neisse River as the border between Germany and Poland and does not support the request of the German ethnic group expelled by some Eastern European countries after World War II to "return to (central) and Eastern Europe" (including requiring relevant countries to compensate for land and property), so as to achieve reconciliation with CEE countries such as Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia. At the economic level, Germany tightens economic and trade relations with CEE countries. With its strong economic

strength and vast market, Germany is the export destination and important import source country of almost all CEE countries, and the bilateral trade volume between Germany and CEE countries continues to expand (See Table 2).

Table 2: Trade value between Germany and Central and Eastern European countries in 2014-2018, millions euro

| <i>Country</i> | <i>2014</i> | <i>2015</i> | <i>2016</i> | <i>2017</i> | <i>2018</i> |
|----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Bulgaria | 5872 | 6357 | 6710 | 7642 | 8266 |
| Croatia | 3226 | 3835 | 4372 | 4813 | 4338 |
| Czechia | 70229 | 75673 | 80342 | 87449 | 89964 |
| Estonia | 2247 | 2154 | 2296 | 2478 | 2780 |
| Hungary | 41504 | 45599 | 47745 | 51344 | 53924 |
| Latvia | 2157 | 2265 | 1429 | 2655 | 2700 |
| Lithuania | 4165 | 4439 | 4728 | 5090 | 5360 |
| Poland | 87340 | 96871 | 101075 | 109537 | 118494 |
| Romania | 20976 | 22954 | 26065 | 30061 | 32185 |
| Slovakia | 24081 | 25838 | 27066 | 27066 | 28538 |
| Slovenia | 8921 | 9737 | 10250 | 11160 | 11192.7 |

Source: Federal Statistical Office of Germany, 2019.

6 THE AMERICAN FACTOR: DEEP INVOLVEMENT IN MULTIPLE FIELD

In the past, under the influence of the Obama administration's "return to Asia" policy, the US ignored the existence of CEE to a certain extent. In July 2009, 22 prominent former officials from nine Central European states jointly appealed to the Obama administration that the US should not forget CEE countries (Rhodes 2012). CEE's position in the US global strategy has been declining and has become the "victim" of recent US global strategy (Hynek et al. 2009). The relationship between the US and CEE countries is relatively alienated.

Since Trump took office in the White House, the US has been in constant discord with its European allies on climate change, the Iranian nuclear issue and the Palestinian-Israeli issue. Despite this, at the same time, the level of cooperation between the US and CEE countries in many other fields is gradually improving. And, now the war in Ukraine has brought them somewhat closer together. This is because, on the one hand, this is a strategic choice for CEE countries. On the other hand, it is also closely related to the positioning of CEE in the global strategy of the US. The

"return" of the US to CEE is a concept of degree³, which is not limited to military strategy, but involves investment in diplomacy, strategy, energy, security and other aspects to CEE.

In the field of energy supply, the return of the US to CEE may promote the diversification of its energy supply, commit to transforming CEE into a natural gas hub in Europe, and increase the economic participation of the US in the energy field in the region. In July 2017, the US actively supported and joined the "Three Seas Initiative", a regional cooperation initiative aimed at connecting the Baltic, Adriatic and Black seas, such as the construction of a highway connecting the Mediterranean and Baltic Seas (via Carpathia); the creation of a digital platform for trade, transportation and logistics services; building a Bulgaria-Romania-Hungary-Austria natural gas transmission corridor; setting up an investment fund and determining the list of priority projects (Bajnai 2019). At the Three Seas Summit in Warsaw, Trump expressed his vision for the Three Seas Initiative, which "will transform and rebuild the entire region ... binds you to all of Europe and, indeed, to the West". The US will have "greater access to energy markets, fewer barriers to energy trade and development, and strengthening energy security,[this is] what we're looking to do. The Three Seas initiative has the potential to accomplish all of these essential objectives" (The White House 2017). The "Three Seas Initiative" has become one of the strategic tools for the US to reshape its relations with CEE countries, through which the US can strengthen cooperation with CEE countries in trade, energy, digital and transportation infrastructure. Pompeo also further expressed the positive attitude of the US in the "Three Seas Initiative", "America will be your strongest ally and steadfast partner in this truly historic initiative", and "America will be a faithful and dependable partner in the export and sale of our high-quality and low-cost energy resources and technologies" (Pompeo 2020). At present, most CEE countries "coincide" with the energy policy of the US. Poland and Lithuania have made LNG part of their national security strategies (Bokša 2019). In 2018, Poland signed a 24-year LNG import contract with the US, and Polish Gas Utility Company (PGNiG) will import up to 9.4 billion cubic meters of LNG from the US from 2022 (Lang 2019). The US believes that the "Nord Stream 2" natural gas pipeline project jointly operated by Germany and Russia deepens Europe's dependence on Russian energy, so it openly opposes the "Nord Stream 2" project. Thus, "Washington has urged Berlin to abandon" this project (Emmott 2019). In December 2019, the U.S. government signed Defense Authorization Act for the fiscal year 2020, which contains sanctions for enterprises and

³ At present, there are mainly two views: the United States has never left Central and Eastern Europe, and the United States has accelerated its withdrawal from Europe. See Bindi, F (2019): *Europe and America: The End of the Transatlantic Relationship?*

individuals participating in the "Nord Stream 2" project (U.S. Department of State 2019).

In the field of military security, the US has actively promoted the eastward expansion of NATO militarily and deployed a large number of military facilities in CEE in stages. After NATO's first eastward expansion, the US successively established logistics bases in Poland, Romania and Bulgaria, deployed military training facilities and stored heavy weapons and power generation equipment. In 2013, after the Ukraine crisis broke out, the US began large-scale military cooperation with some CEE countries by taking advantage of their "fear of Russia" mentality. On June 3, 2014, during Obama's visit to Poland, he announced the "European Reassurance Initiative", and the US and its NATO allies increased their military presence in CEE (Lorenz & Piotrowski 2014). In December 2014, the US Congress approved the allocation of US \$985 million for the European re guarantee initiative in fiscal 2015 and US \$789.3 million in fiscal 2016 (Beardsley 2015), while the budget for fiscal 2017 reached a record US \$3.4 billion, so as to resident an armored brigade in CEE, increase the number of exercises and store combat equipment in advance. As part of these operations, in March 2015, the US military expanded its rotation deployment to Bulgaria and Romania (Vaughn 2015); Romania already has a rotation of 300 to 500 US Marines and the navy of the "Black Sea rotation force". In June 2015, the US announced that it would expand the Black Sea rotation force by establishing a new joint weapons company in Bulgaria. About 150 US Marines will be stationed in three six-month rotations (Harkins 2015). Since then, the military strength and military facilities of NATO led by the US in CEE have continued to increase significantly, greatly enhancing the US military presence in the region. For example, in 2016, the US launched and built the missile defense system (Aegis) in Romania and Poland respectively, promoted the largest deployment of U.S. personnel and equipment in more than 20 years, and strengthened its military presence in Poland, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and the Baltic States (Shevin-Coetzee 2019).

In addition, in addition to enhancing energy and security cooperation, the US is also strengthening its cooperation with CEE in many other fields. For example, it is strengthening political dialogue, promoting investment and trade, and expanding people-to-people and cultural exchanges. Since Trump assumed the presidency of the US, American high-level officials have rediscovered the strategic importance of the CEE region, and the frequency and intensity of high-level mutual visits have increased. In July 2017, Poland was the first European country Trump visited after taking office, and then he participated in the "Three Seas Initiative" summit held in Warsaw. In 2019, high-level exchanges between the US and CEE countries became more frequent. In February 2019, US Secretary of State Pompeo paid a visit to Hungary, Slovakia and Poland, the three countries in CEE. This was the first visit to Slovakia by a high-level American in 20 years, and the first visit to Hungary by a US secretary of state since

2011. From March to June 2019, leaders of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland were invited to visit the US (Tamkin 2019). In July 2019, the foreign ministers of Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic successively visited the US. Polish Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz said we cannot provide security without American help and strong ties with the US (Wemer 2019). Péter Szijjártó, Hungary's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Economics, noted that the relationship between the US and the Central European countries was strengthening after several years of estrangement (Wemer 2019). Miroslav Lajčák, Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Affairs of Slovakia, proposed the need to strengthen the relationship between the US and CEE and the transatlantic relationship, and emphasized the position and role of the transatlantic alliance in the competition between Western civilization and other powers (Wemer 2019). In general, the US had a low sense of presence in CEE before, and the frequent high-level exchanges in recent years seem to be aimed at changing the status quo of its insufficient participation in the region.

7 CHINA-CEE COOPERATION IN EU POLICY ADJUSTMENT: DO CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES COEXIST?

As a part of Europe, it is logical for CEE to "return to Europe" and join the EU. The EU also has a profound impact on CEE. The EU remains vigilant against the trend of extraterritorial powers to establish cooperative relations with their member states through political, economic and military means. Especially for cooperation projects beyond its control, the EU has introduced corresponding measures to offset or weaken the influence of extraterritorial powers on CEE countries. In recent years, with China's rising and growing influence in international affairs, China-CEE cooperation and the Belt and Road Initiative have been launched, which has increased EU doubts about China and somewhat increased negative aspects of China's policy. Some doubts or concerns of the EU continue to emerge. For example, Catherine Ashton, the former EU high representative for foreign and security policy, warned CEE countries to be wary of China's solicitation or alliance with China (Bolzen & Erling 2014). Major powers within the EU are also wary of China's cooperation with this region. German Chancellor Merkel once questioned why China held separate bilateral talks with CEE countries, and said that the EU in trouble "had to" accept China's approach (Liu 2013, p. 80).

Generally speaking, with the establishment of formal diplomatic relations in 1975 and the establishment of a strategic partnership in 2003, the EU-China relationship has matured and deepened over the past few decades and has undoubtedly become one of the most important in global politics (Brown & Beatson 2016). But while the EU and China have strong institutional links and regular interactions at bilateral and multilateral levels, as the Chair of the Parliament's delegation for

Relations with China stated that China-EU relations have "deteriorated in the last couple of years" (Banks 2020). The tension between the two sides is related to the recent frequent adjustment of the EU's policies in key areas such as the Belt and Road initiative and China-CEE cooperation. In 2017, EU powers began to carry out investment security review actions against China and finally issued a new Regulation (EU) 2019/452 establishing a framework for the screening of foreign direct investments into the European Union ("FDI Regulation"). In March 2019, the EU restricted non-EU investors for "strategic reasons" from accessing the core technology of European companies' acquisitions, with "equivalence" as a condition of the permitted investment, as part of the new EU foreign investment screening mechanism (Shi 2019, pp.114-115). The EU's intensified intervention further restricts investment from China, and the investment of Chinese enterprises in CEE is affected. In March 2019, the EU released the report "EU-China: A Strategic Outlook" (European Commission, 2019), which considered China to be "a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives" and "a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests". However, it also classified China as "an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership" and "a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance". These apparently contradictory statements constitute a brand-new multiple positioning of EU policy towards China.

At the same time, for the western Balkans, the EU regulates the space for cooperation between China and western Balkan countries through an "expansion policy". Over the past 9 years, China's investment in infrastructure and energy has made significant progress in the western Balkans, which has also attracted the attention of the EU. In order to hedge against the influence of Russia and China in the western Balkans, the EU has continuously affirmed its support for the accession of countries in the Western Balkans and strengthened investment in the western Balkans. In the new version of the Western Balkans "Expansion Policy" document "Enhancing the Accession Process - A Credible EU Perspective for the Western Balkans" published on February 5, 2020, the EU has added new conditions for the accession of western Balkan countries, emphasizing the importance of geopolitical factors in the accession negotiations, and pointing out that the western Balkan countries need to deal with the "bad influence" of a third country. Western Balkan countries must show the EU that they are making a "credible" effort in dealing with the bad influence. The term "third country" actually refers to countries such as China and Russia (European Commission 2020a). In October 2020, the European Commission adopted a comprehensive economic and investment plan for the western Balkans, which aims to stimulate the long-term economic recovery of the region, support green and digital transformation, and promote regional integration and integration with the EU. The economic and investment plan developed a major investment plan that raised up to 9 billion Euros for the region (European Commission 2020b).

However, in the long run, China and CEE countries can still tap the potential of cooperation. On the one hand, the EU is still optimistic about China-EU cooperation. There are opportunities for cooperation between the EU and China in global governance, climate change, regional conflicts and other fields. According to the European Commission, "China is a strategic partner of the EU in addressing global and international challenges", and the EU is committed to "cooperating with China to support effective multilateralism and fight climate change". In addition, "The EU's and China's shared commitments and interest in global sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda present opportunities for closer cooperation, including in third countries" (European Commission 2019, p 2). In fact, despite their differences, the EU and China have a lot in common. As Tonchev (2019) points out, "Both sides are committed to the joint comprehensive action plan (JCPOA) agreement with Iran and the Paris Agreement on climate change. Contrary to Trump's isolationist instinct, both support globalization, although Beijing's interpretation of the process is very different from European norms and standards. In any case, it is ironic that Europeans are supporting multilateralism and long held western values, which are basically questioned by the current US government".

Moreover, although the EU increasingly regards China as an emerging country challenging its interests, the EU's policy is more pragmatic. When judging China-EU relations, it also emphasizes multiple positioning, namely, that China is still the EU's "cooperative partner" (European Commission 2019) and "negotiating partner" (European Commission 2019) rather than experiencing a completely competitive relationship. Furthermore, from the perspective of understanding China-EU and China-CEE relations, Chinese leaders have clearly stressed in most official documents and speeches the importance of taking into account existing policy commitments and priorities at the EU level, so that China-CEE cooperation can become a "growth point of China-EU cooperation" (GOV 2013). China believes that its investment in CEE countries has eliminated the economic gap between the latter and other European countries and promoted the EU accession process of Balkan countries (Li 2013). In China's view, China's cooperation with CEE countries is not contradictory to China-EU relations. On the contrary, it should be conducive to the balanced development of Europe, and can enrich the content of China-EU relations (Li 2013).

At the same time, we can also see that both the EU and the major European countries value third-party cooperation with China. To carry out third-party cooperation with China in CEE, the two parties can perfectly combine capital, technology and experience to create win-win conditions. Third-party cooperation between China and the EU and European powers has already begun in CEE countries. In November 2019, the Bosnia and Herzegovina Pan-European "5C Corridor" Expressway Čaplina section project undertaken by China State Construction Engineering Corporation and China Electric Power Construction Group Co., Ltd.

officially started. The total project cost is about 100 million Euros. The European Investment Bank provides financing. This is the first time a Chinese company has carried out a tripartite cooperation project with the EU in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Zhang 2019). The Devnya Cement Plant project undertaken by China in Bulgaria was financed by Italy Cement Group and contracted by Sinoma Construction, providing more than 4,000 local jobs (Zuo 2014). The Peljesac Bridge project contracted by China Road and Bridge Corporation is the largest project in cooperation between China and Croatia, and it is also the largest single project undertaken by a Chinese enterprise and funded by EU funds. Including the connecting road, the total project cost is 550 million Euros, and the EU fund sponsored project funds are 357 million Euros. In July 2021, the Peljesac Sea-Crossing Bridge was successfully completed (Gao 2021).

On the other hand, China also attaches great importance to China-EU relations and cooperation with China and CEE countries, and is optimistic about the European market. Xi Jinping attaches great importance to China-EU relations. In December 2018, the Chinese government released its third China's Policy Paper on the EU, which is the third one issued by the Chinese government after 2003 and 2014. Beijing said that "the EU has been China's largest trading partner for 14 years in a row and China is the EU's second largest trading partner. Developing a sound relationship with the EU has long been a foreign policy priority for China"(Xinhua News Agency 2018). During the meeting between Xi and the leaders of Germany and the EU on September 14, 2020, new consensus and outcomes were achieved. The two sides announced the signing of the "EU-China Geographical Agreement", which indicates that the two sides have made important progress in this regard. Xi emphasized that "China and the EU are each other's important trade and investment partners, and China will continue to tap the potential of domestic demand to achieve better connectivity and greater benefits between the two major markets and resources of China and the EU, and promote the common development of China and the EU to be stronger and more sustainable"(Xinhua News Agency, 2020). In February 2021, Xi presided over the China-CEE Leaders Summit via video in Beijing. Xi delivered a keynote speech titled "Keeping up the Momentum and Working Together for A New Chapter in China-CEE Cooperation". Xi said: "Last year, ... China and the EU completed the negotiations on the China-EU investment agreement as scheduled. China-CEE cooperation is an important part of China-EU relations, and the positive development of China-EU relations has also brought new opportunities for China-CEE cooperation". Xi stated that China is willing to work with CEE countries to "promote the implementation of China-EU practical cooperation results in CEE as soon as possible, and make more efforts to promote mutually beneficial cooperation in trade and investment", and pointed out that cooperation should "adhere to a pragmatic orientation and expand mutually beneficial cooperation outcomes. China plans to import commodities worth

more than US\$170 billion from Central and Eastern European countries in the next five years"(Xinhua News Agency 2021).

China is also bullish on the European market, and the European single market remains attractive to Chinese companies. According to statistics, in 2020, China has become the EU's largest trading partner (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2021). Despite the impact of the epidemic and other factors, China-EU trade has shown resilience. "The COVID-19 crisis caused both exports and imports between the EU and China to fall in 2020. Imports reached a minimum of € 24.7 billion in March 2020. By December 2021 they had recovered to € 47.9 billion. Exports reached a minimum of € 14.9 billion in March 2020. By December 2021 they had recovered to € 17.9 billion"(Eurostat 2022). In short, on the whole, the opportunities and potential of China-CEE cooperation are still worth exploring.

8 CHINA-CEE COOPERATION UNDER US-CHINA RIVALRY: MORE DIFFICULT?

The US exerts extensive influence on CEE countries through military cooperation, military security and energy supply. China-CEE cooperation carried out by China in CEE has also aroused concerns in the US. Although the China-CEE cooperation mechanism always emphasizes the focus on economy and people-to-people ties, the US usually interprets China's intention from the perspective of geopolitics and believes that "the Chinese geopolitical presence, and impact, in the region will be directly proportional to the strength and vitality of U.S.-Central European relations, regardless of the amount of economic investment that may emanate from Beijing" (Soare 2012). In the field of investment, the US passed the BUILD Act in October 2018, which merged the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) and the Development Credit Administration (DCA) of the U.S. Agency for International Development into a new agency -- The International Development Finance Corporation (IDFC), which will increase its existing portfolio capacity by \$60 billion from \$29 billion, enabling the US to compete with its main rivals in regions such as CEE (Runde & Bandura 2018). The bill is seen as a response by the US to counter the Belt and Road Initiative and China-CEE cooperation.

The global coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated potential tensions in Sino-US relations, triggering a series of changes. After the US Biden administration came to power, it put forward the slogan of "reinvigorating the alliance system" and set out to repair the relations between Europe and the US that were severely damaged during the Trump era. The comprehensive competition between China and the US will cause certain pressure on China-CEE cooperation. The US no longer shies away from its competitive relationship with China, and characterizes China as a competitor or the biggest threat in terms of ideology and values (Wong 2019). The US started the largest

trade war with China in history, curbed China's high-tech development, and directly used CEE and even Europe as a battlefield to suppress China in terms of the Belt and Road initiative and 5G.

In February 2019, US Secretary of State Pompeo visited Hungary, Slovakia, Poland and other countries in CEE to launch lobbying activities, emphasizing that Russia and China pose security threats. After the Sino-US trade war broke out, some CEE countries, under the influence of the US, excluded Chinese companies from participating in communications and infrastructure projects on the grounds of "security concerns". On the 5G issue, the US has put pressure on the CEE countries, using the CEE countries as a breakthrough to encircle and suppress Huawei in the European market. Poland, Romania and other countries signed a joint statement with the US to consider excluding Huawei from 5G construction (Romania Insider 2019). Sino-US relations may never return to the past, and a new era of comprehensive competition between the two sides has begun. In a policy article in *Foreign Affairs* in March 2020, Biden claimed that "the United States does need to get tough with China". Given that "China is playing the long game by extending its global reach, promoting its own political model, and investing in the technologies of the future", and "the most effective way to meet that challenge is to build a united front of US allies and partners..." (Biden 2020, p. 64-75). The Biden administration is working together to counter China's growing economic and political influence in CEE by repairing the transatlantic alliance. In the foreseeable future, cooperation between China and CEE countries seems to be more difficult.

8 CONCLUSIONS

In the game of great powers in CEE, the European Union and Germany are dominant power, and the US is deeply involved in CEE. Based on their respective comparative advantages, the US and Europe have cooperated with CEE countries in various fields. China has been cooperating with 16 CEE countries in many fields since 2012, and expanded "16 + 1 cooperation" to "17 + 1 cooperation" in 2019. With the deepening of cooperation between China and CEE countries, China is facing increasing suspicions and restrictions at home and abroad.

The EU has intricate historical ties with CEE countries, and regards CEE as its sphere of interests. The EU has established extensive and close economic and political relations with the CEE region, and has the closest economic ties with the CEE countries. In view of this, with the deepening of cooperation between China and CEE countries, the EU's resistance has been accumulating. The EU regulates and restricts the cooperation between China and the CEE countries that have joined the EU by promoting relevant laws and regulations. However, the fundamentals of China-CEE cooperation and China-EU relations still have dynamism and opportunities.

From the Trump administration to the Biden administration, the US has boosted energy and security cooperation with CEE. Moreover, the US has also continuously strengthened its cooperation with CEE in many other fields such as politics, investment and trade, and has continued to maintain and expand its strategic presence in CEE. On the issue of cooperation between China and CEE countries, the influence and suppression of the US on China would become more obvious under the US-China rivalry.

In addition, due to space limitations, this article does not discuss the influence factors of Russia in CEE. But in fact, Russia has been inextricably linked with CEE countries in history. In the last decade, Russia "returned" to the CEE region mainly by virtue of its energy advantages and emerging soft power. In view of this, a series of changes in the relations between Russia and the US, and Russia and Europe are bound to become the geopolitical factors that have the greatest impact on CEE. The situation is complicated. The Russia-Ukraine war that started at the end of February 2022 has systematically changed the security structure of the CEE region. No matter how it ends, the conflict would increase the sense of insecurity of the vast majority of CEE countries and strengthen their Russophobia. One of the most immediate changes would be for a longer period of time that those CEE countries at the forefront of NATO have placed security interests as priorities in diplomatic matters. As a result, the vast majority of CEE countries may prioritize expanding security cooperation with the US and NATO allies, which would lead to a deepening of their dependence on US security. In the context of the continuous expansion of Sino-US strategic competition, the urgent need for security of CEE countries and the asymmetrical dependence of the US and CEE countries may prompt these countries to align their policies with the US in China policy, which in turn would affect China-CEE cooperation.

In short, from the analysis of this paper, it can be seen that CEE is a key area for the US, and the EU countries represented by Germany and other actors. The interest pattern and interaction relationship of the above parties in the CEE region are important external variables affecting the direction of the policies of CEE countries toward China. The geopolitical situation in CEE is a dynamic process, with both risks and opportunities coexisting. The interaction between great powers in this region directly or indirectly shapes the policy trends of CEE countries towards China, which in turn affects the sustainability of China-CEE cooperation. In the future, China-CEE cooperation is full of uncertainty. 2022 marks the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the China-CEE cooperation mechanism. China and CEE countries are at a critical stage of economic development, and there are many contradictions and differences. In addition, as of press time, at the beginning of 2022, the situation between Russia and Ukraine has undergone new drastic changes, and the world is undergoing great changes and adjustments, which makes the situation more complicated. However, peace is the common aspiration of mankind, and the

development of global multi-dimensional cooperation should also become a major trend. Continuing to deepen the economic and trade cooperation between China and CEE countries and giving full play to their complementary advantages is a favorable option for China and CEE countries to achieve mutual benefit, win-win and common development. It is also of great significance to promote the further development of China-EU relations. Of course, in the short term, the direction of China-CEE cooperation is more inclined to problems with the implementation, standardization and coordination of cooperation projects. In short, cooperation opportunities and challenges coexist. Although there is potential for cooperation, the road is bumpy and long.

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