

# Introduction

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[https://doi.org/10.25143/China-in-the-Baltic-States\\_2022\\_ISBN\\_9789934618154\\_04-05](https://doi.org/10.25143/China-in-the-Baltic-States_2022_ISBN_9789934618154_04-05)

The People's Republic of China is an obvious superpower of global politics. In recent decades, it has changed at an astonishing speed. Its economic, military, and political influence has expanded rapidly. It has reached out to regions with minimal or no prior experience of engagement. The Baltic states is one of such regions.

The Baltic-China case provides a particularly peculiar case for analysis. The last three decades of Baltic-China engagement have gone through ups and downs. Both the contentious issues and the factors of hope can be tied to concrete events and agendas. Unsurprisingly, most controversies have arisen surrounding Taiwan (the Republic of China), the Dalai Lama, and Russia. The hope factors were broadly confined to (unmet) expectations of meaningful economic cooperation.

In a way, the three-decade long Baltic-China voyage started and ended with Taiwan. In 1992–1994, Latvia permitted Taiwan to open a consulate general and thus de facto recognised it, whereas China, unsurprisingly, suspended diplomatic ties with Latvia. Almost three decades later, in 2021, Lithuania allowed Taiwan to open a representation office bearing the name “Taiwanese”, which included the characters “Taiwan”, rather than the usual formula “Taipei” that had been applied in countries that adhere to the One China policy. China, in response, severed diplomatic links with Lithuania and imposed an economic embargo. Lithuania did not succumb to China's pressure. In a major snub to China, it left the China-driven Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (17+1, initially known as 16+1) and raised the spat to the European Union level.

Although in the early 2010s, both Estonian and Lithuanian presidents met the Dalai Lama and thus angered China, that decade offered the most hope in Baltic-China relations. The 2016 Summit of the 16+1 cooperation format in Riga and the following engagements through this format and the Belt and Road Initiative raised expectations, in China's terminology, of a

win-win cooperation. The anticipation of significant economic gains from cooperation with China did not meet expectations.

China's growing authoritarianism at home and the support of authoritarian regimes abroad, especially Belarus and Russia, gradually made the Baltic states more cautious. China's implicit support for Russia over its 2022 invasion of Ukraine was a watershed, as Latvia and Estonia followed their southern neighbour and pulled out of the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries format, making it a bare 14+1. On top of that, NATO, the fundament of Baltic security, named China in its 2022 Strategic Concept for the first time and did so in a negative light.

Within a mere decade, the Baltics have undergone a complete reversal in their respective outlooks on China. The following chapters will explore the Baltic-China story and the current state of affairs in depth. It will be carried out by Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian experts. The chapter on Latvia was prepared by Justīne Kante from Rīga Stradiņš University. The country chapter on Estonia was prepared by Anniki Mikelsaar, currently at Oxford University. Finally, Lithuania is covered by Dr Vida Mačikėnaitė from the International University of Japan. The country chapters are complemented by a separate chapter presenting a nationally representative sociological survey on attitudes related to China in all three Baltic states.