

Conclusions: China in the Baltic States – from a Cause of Hope to Anxiety

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Historically, during the first two decades following the re-establishment of independence of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in 1991, China was not a visible presence nor an immediate concern in the region, aside from the Latvian experience with the general consulate of Taiwan in 1992–1994. The shared European and transatlantic strategic orientation of the three Baltic states dictated that the limited resources the countries had to be allocated in pursuit of first joining and then integrating into the EU and NATO, precluding the nations from targeted policies in other regions of the world, including East Asia. The framing of China as an unfamiliar entity viewed through its culture, language and history can be illustrated by a quote from the introduction of a 2006 book on the exhibition at the Academic Library of Latvia: “For Latvians, China is a distant and wonderful land of fairy tales, therefore the title of the exhibition contains lines from Kārlis Skalbe’s fairy tale “Cat mill” (1913): “I see a land where the tea tree blooms, and the blue garment of the king, in which curls a golden dragon”.²⁸²

The change began in the early 2010s, when China invited Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to join a Beijing-led platform of cooperation with Central and Eastern European countries, initially known as “16+1”/ (“17+1” in 2019–2021).

Excited to explore economic opportunities presented by China’s formats, the Baltics invested a significant amount of political capital into various activities of the format, including exchanges of official and business delegations, transit strategy alignment with some of China’s provisional routes, and elevated interest in attracting Chinese investment. The Baltic interest symbolically peaked in 2016, when the “16+1” Summit was held in Riga

²⁸² “Es redzu zemi, kur tējas koks zied: Ķīnas un Latvijas kultūru saskarsme: izstāde Latvijas Akadēmiskajā bibliotēkā”, Katalogs, sast. A. Poriete, Rīga, LAB, 2006

and the Baltic states signed Memoranda of Understanding with the Belt and Road Initiative. Gradually, however, two types of pressures set in, ushering in a change of approach.

First, China's perception as a challenge in the transatlantic space, exacerbated by wolf-warrior diplomacy right here in the region, in Lithuania, introduced the dimension of the geopolitical risk of engagement with China. In her chapter on Lithuania, Vida Mačikėnaitė demonstrates the recent convergence of the economic opportunity-security threat axis with the value axis in the country, leading to Lithuania's abandonment of China's platform in 2021 followed by a turn towards Taiwan.

Secondly, the lack of economic deliverables several years into the cooperation formats led to the discouragement of even the most pragmatic pro-engagement pundits. The increase of China as a media, policy and security topic was both a result of China's presence in the region, as well as a manifestation of global trends, and circular as well as bilateral interdependencies. In the chapter presenting the Estonian experience, Anniki Mikelsaar establishes that China has not become a significant investment, cooperation or trading partner to Estonia – the conclusion applies to Latvia and Lithuania as well.

As a result of these two types of pressures, Latvia and Estonia followed Lithuania and withdrew from the China cooperation with Central and Eastern European countries platform in 2022, symbolically closing the decade of prioritised attempts at engagement with China.

From a bird's eye view, the Baltics are back to being on the same page vis-a-vis the People's Republic of China. Still, as the country chapters rightfully suggest, there are both similarities and differences in the national Baltic approaches to China. The Lithuanian policy was high-profile, with high yield in international visibility, but also having recoil in the form of China's retaliatory measures.

The approach of the Baltic neighbours was milder. As Latvia and Estonia announced a coordinated farewell to China's format in Central and Eastern Europe, both nations underscored the interest in continuing engagement on the bilateral and EU levels. The Latvian method, as Justīne Kante argues, became about choosing a path where relations between Riga and Beijing are left in the hands of the EU, NATO and other big players of the Western world.

The data collected for this publication from a representative public opinion survey of all three countries populations' perception of the People's Republic of China on the attitudes of the Baltic populations to China also demonstrates the shared traits as well as national differences in the attitudes towards China across the Baltic states. The dominating perception of China is shared across the region and is a neutral one, with Latvia leading among the Baltics in the "neutral" perception, and Estonia and Lithuania slightly behind.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, almost half of the Lithuanian respondents saw China as a threat to other countries, significantly higher than in Latvia, with Estonia scoring in the middle of the two. Only approximately one quarter of the respondents in all three Baltic states see China as a "supporter and exporter of authoritarianism". The respondents of all three countries, however, overwhelmingly see China as an "economic and technological powerhouse" and an "ancient culture". The economic and cultural angles, not security or values are still behind the perceptions of China in the region.

As NATO has presented the Strategic Concept for the next decade or so, the attention of the Alliance is increasingly turning towards China. The member states, however, differ in their reading of the challenge of China. In order to contribute to a cohesive NATO and well-informed local audiences, it is important to measure, debate, analyse and compare the perceptions of China among NATO member states, and to determine how such perceptions measure up against their national security and collective defence. As NATO is entering the nuanced and difficult conversation over the Indo-Pacific, so should the societies of its Baltic member states. The overarching conclusion is the need to strengthen the link between stakeholders and the public in the Baltic region, debating China's role and approach as a security actor.