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DOI <https://doi.org/10.24919/2308-4863/78-2-2>**Stanislav NAUMOV,**

orcid.org/0009-0000-0126-5543

*Post graduate at the Department of History, Politology and Foreign Affairs  
Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University  
(Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine) stan.nau@ukr.net*

## CHINA-EUROPE GEOPOLITICAL COOPERATION EVOLUTION: NAVIGATING FROM HISTORICAL FACTS TO MODERN CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

*China's geopolitical trajectory has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, evolving from a regional power to a global force. This article delves into the historical aspects of relationship between China and Europe to modern geopolitical direction of China, examining its strategic initiatives, challenges, and opportunities in the contemporary world order.*

*Through an analysis of China's foreign policy, economic expansion, military capabilities, and diplomatic engagements, this study aims to provide insights into China's evolving role in shaping global geopolitics, tracing its evolution from a regional actor to a key player in shaping the contemporary geopolitical dynamics.*

*This article also shows the multifaceted benefits of this cooperation, highlighting how it fosters economic growth, technological innovation, sustainable development, cultural exchange, and geopolitical stability. The progress of international relations development between China and the world has been remarkable, reflecting China's rising influence and the growing interdependence of global economies. Over recent decades, China has expanded its diplomatic and economic engagements through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative, fostering connectivity and investment worldwide. China's active participation in multilateral organizations such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization underscores its commitment to global governance and cooperation. Moreover, China's partnerships with regions like Europe highlight its strategic approach to fostering mutual development and addressing global challenges such as climate change and poverty. These efforts have not only bolstered China's global standing but have also contributed to a more interconnected and cooperative international community, addressing common goals and enhancing global stability. The continued evolution of China's international relations will play a crucial role in shaping the future of global diplomacy and development.*

*Through a detailed analysis, it was underscored the importance of this alliance in addressing global challenges and promoting mutual prosperity.*

**Key words:** *China-Europe relation, Chinese diplomacy, geopolitics, international relation.*

**Станіслав НАУМОВ,**

orcid.org/0009-0000-0126-5543

*аспірант кафедри етнології та археології  
Прикарпатського національного університету імені Василя Стефаника  
(Івано-Франківськ, Україна) stan.nau@ukr.net*

## ЕВОЛЮЦІЯ ГЕОПОЛІТИЧНОЇ СПІВПРАЦІ МІЖ КИТАЄМ І ЄВРОПОЮ: ВІД ІСТОРИЧНИХ ФАКТІВ ДО СУЧАСНИХ ВИКЛИКІВ І МОЖЛИВОСТЕЙ

*За останні десятиліття геополітична траєкторія Китаю зазнала значних змін, перетворившись із регіональної сили на глобальну. Ця стаття допомагає зануритись у відносини між Китаєм і Європою починаючи від історичних аспектів до сучасного геополітичного напрямку Китаю, досліджуючи його стратегічні ініціативи, виклики та можливості в сучасному світовому порядку.*

*Завдяки аналізу зовнішньої політики Китаю, економічної експансії, військового потенціалу та дипломатичних зобов'язань це дослідження має на меті надати уявлення про зміну ролі Китаю у формуванні глобальної геополітики, простеживши його еволюцію від регіонального гравця до ключової сили у формуванні сучасної геополітичної динаміки.*

*У цій статті також показано багатогранні переваги співпраці між Китаєм та Європою, підкреслюючи, як вона сприяє економічному зростанню, технологічним інноваціям, сталому розвитку, культурному обміну та геополітичній стабільності. Прогрес у розвитку міжнародних відносин між Китаєм і світом є надзвичайним, він відображає зростання впливу Китаю та взаємозалежність світових економік. Протягом останніх десятиліть Китай розширив свої дипломатичні та економічні заходи за допомогою таких ініціатив, як «Один пояс, один шлях», сприяючи зв'язку та інвестиціям у всьому світі. Активна участь Китаю в багатосторонніх організаціях, таких як ООН і Світова організація торгівлі, підкреслює його відданість глобальному управлінню та співпраці. Крім того, партнерство Китаю з такими регіонами, як Європа, підкреслює його стратегічний підхід до сприяння спільному розвитку та вирішення глобальних проблем, таких як зміна клімату та бідність. Ці зусилля не тільки зміцнили*

*глобальне становище Китаю, але й сприяли створенню більш взаємопов'язаного та дружнього міжнародного співтовариства, досягнення спільних цілей і підвищення глобальної стабільності. Постійний розвиток міжнародних відносин Китаю буде мати вирішальну роль у формуванні майбутнього глобальної дипломатії.*

*Завдяки детальному аналізу було підкреслено важливість міжнародного розвитку Китайської Народної Республіки та альянсу європейських країн для вирішення економічних та соціальних глобальних викликів і сприяння спільному процвітання.*

**Ключові слова:** *Китайсько-європейські відносини, китайська дипломатія, геополітика, міжнародні відносини.*

The historical synopsis of cooperation between China and the world spans millennia, characterized by periods of extensive engagement, cultural exchange, economic cooperation, as well as conflicts and geopolitical tensions.

Here are some key historical facts about their geopolitical interactions:

**Silk Road:** One of the earliest examples of geopolitical cooperation between China and Europe was the ancient Silk Road, which facilitated trade and cultural exchange between East and West. This network of trade routes, established as early as the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE), when Chinese silk began to reach the Roman Empire. The route flourished from the 2nd century BCE until the 14th century CE, during which it was instrumental in connecting various civilizations. Spanning over 4,000 miles, it linked China with Europe, stretching through regions such as Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean enabling the exchange of goods, technologies, and ideas (Beckwith, 2009: 4-5). The Silk Road was not just about the exchange of goods but also about the transmission of culture and technology. Buddhist monks traveled from India to China, bringing with them religious texts and practices that influenced Chinese Buddhism. Likewise, technological advancements such as papermaking, printing, and the compass spread from China to Europe, significantly impacting European societies.

The Silk Road was not a single path but a network of routes. Key cities along these routes included: Chang'an (Xi'an): The starting point of the Silk Road in China; Samarkand and Bukhara: Major trade hubs in Central Asia; Baghdad: A significant center in the Middle East that facilitated trade between East and West.; Constantinople (Istanbul): The gateway to Europe. For Europe, the Silk Road opened up access to exotic goods and materials that were previously unknown. This exchange fostered a curiosity and demand for exploration, eventually leading to the Age of Exploration. In China, the influx of goods, ideas, and technologies from the West enriched Chinese culture and stimulated economic growth. The Silk Road also played a crucial role in the spread of Buddhism into China, which had a profound impact on Chinese spirituality and culture. The Silk Road remains a powerful symbol of the interconnectedness

of human societies and the enduring impact of trade on cultural and technological development.

**Medieval Diplomacy:** During the Middle Ages, diplomatic missions between China and Europe were conducted, albeit sporadically. One notable example is the journey of Marco Polo, an Italian explorer who traveled to China in the 13th century and served as an emissary for the Mongol ruler Kublai Khan. Polo's accounts of his travels in China contributed to the exchange of knowledge between East and West (Zhang, 2017: 4). The expansion of European colonial powers in Asia during the 16th to 19th centuries led to increased interactions between China and Europe, often characterized by unequal treaties and conflicts. The Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860) between China and Britain, followed by other European powers, resulted in China's territorial concessions and forced opening of its ports to foreign trade (Fay, 2009: 2).

**Treaty Ports:** In the aftermath of the Opium Wars, European powers, along with Japan and the United States, established «treaty ports» in China, which became centers of foreign influence and trade. These ports, such as Shanghai, Tianjin, and Guangzhou, played a significant role in facilitating economic and cultural exchange between China and Europe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These ports, located along China's coastal areas and major rivers, were designated under a series of unequal treaties signed between China and European powers, notably Britain, France, Germany, and later, Japan and the United States.

The Treaty of Nanking in 1842, which ended the First Opium War between Britain and China, marked the beginning of this system. It granted Britain extraterritorial rights and control over several Chinese ports, including Shanghai, Canton (now Guangzhou), Ningbo, and Amoy (now Xiamen). Similar treaties followed, with other Western powers securing concessions and treaty ports of their own. These treaty ports became hubs of international trade and cultural exchange, facilitating the flow of goods, capital, and people between China and Europe. European merchants, along with those from other Western countries, established businesses, warehouses, and consulates in these ports, bringing significant economic development to the region.

The impact of the treaty port system was profound and multifaceted. On one hand, it introduced Western technology, ideas, and institutions to China, contributing to modernization efforts in areas such as industry, transportation, and education. The influx of foreign capital and expertise also stimulated economic growth and urbanization in the treaty port cities. However, the treaty port system was also a symbol of China's humiliation and loss of sovereignty. The unequal treaties that established these ports deprived China of control over its own territory and resources, perpetuating a sense of national indignity and resentment. The extraterritorial privileges granted to foreign residents in treaty ports further undermined China's legal and judicial sovereignty, leading to widespread social and political unrest. (Fay, 2009: 3).

Moreover, the economic benefits of the treaty port system were unevenly distributed, with foreign merchants and concessionaires often enjoying preferential treatment and exploiting local resources to their own advantage. This fueled social tensions and anti-imperialist sentiment, culminating in movements such as the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, which sought to rid China of foreign influence and restore national pride. The treaty port era came to an end in the early 20th century amid the turmoil of China's modernization and the collapse of the Qing dynasty. The unequal treaties that had established the treaty ports were gradually revised or abolished, and China embarked on a new era of national rejuvenation and self-strengthening. However, the legacy of the treaty port system continues to shape China's relationship with Europe and the wider world, serving as a reminder of the country's struggles for sovereignty and dignity in the face of foreign encroachment.

**World War II:** During World War II, China and European countries, particularly the Allied powers, cooperated in the fight against Axis aggression. China's resistance against Japanese invasion received support from European allies, including military aid and diplomatic recognition. European nations also provided humanitarian assistance to China during the war.

During World War II, the relationship between China and Europe was complex and multifaceted, influenced by the broader context of global conflict and shifting alliances. The war significantly impacted both regions, and their interactions were shaped by military, political, and economic factors.

China, under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party), was embroiled in a brutal war with Japan, which had invaded China in 1937. This conflict, known as the Second Sino-Japanese War, became part of the larger World War II after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in

1941, which led to the United States and other Allied powers, including several European nations, formally entering the war against the Axis powers. Europe, on the other hand, was the central battleground of World War II, with Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler seeking to dominate the continent. The major European powers – Britain, France, and later the Soviet Union – were primarily focused on the war in Europe but were also keenly aware of the broader implications of the conflict, including the situation in Asia. (Cohen, 1973: 11-13).

The relationship between China and Europe during this period was largely defined by their common opposition to the Axis powers. Britain and the Soviet Union were China's main European allies. The British had colonial interests in Asia and were directly threatened by Japanese expansion. As a result, Britain provided military aid and support to China, albeit limited by their own strained resources. The Burma Road, constructed to transport supplies from British-controlled Burma to China, was a critical lifeline for Chinese resistance against Japanese aggression. The Soviet Union also played a significant role in supporting China. Before Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, the Soviets supplied China with military equipment, advisors, and financial assistance. This support was crucial in enabling China to sustain its resistance against Japan, even though the Soviet Union had to balance this aid with its own strategic needs and the Non-Aggression Pact it had signed with Japan in 1941.

France, under German occupation from 1940, had limited capacity to assist China directly. However, the Free French forces, led by Charles de Gaulle, supported the Allied cause and thus indirectly aided China's struggle against Japan. Additionally, French Indochina (modern-day Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) was a significant region during the war, occupied by Japan in 1940, which further complicated the geopolitical landscape of Asia and Europe. China's interactions with Europe were also influenced by diplomatic efforts and international conferences. Chinese leaders sought to gain greater international support and recognition for their struggle against Japan. The Cairo Conference in 1943, attended by Chiang Kai-shek, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill, was a significant moment where China was recognized as one of the major Allied powers. The conference discussed post-war plans and the future of territories occupied by Japan, highlighting China's importance in the Allied strategy (Mitter, 2013: 52-54).

Economically, China and Europe faced significant challenges during the war. China's economy was

severely disrupted by the Japanese occupation, and the country relied heavily on international aid. European economies were similarly strained by the war effort, limiting the extent of economic cooperation between China and European nations. However, the mutual interest in defeating the Axis powers fostered a sense of solidarity and common purpose.

**Cold War Dynamics:** The Cold War era witnessed complex geopolitical dynamics between China and Europe, with the latter divided between Western and Eastern blocs. While communist China aligned with the Soviet Union, tensions between China and the Soviet Union in the 1960s led to a rapprochement between China and some Western European countries, notably France and the United Kingdom.

The establishment of diplomatic relations between China and European countries, particularly in the aftermath of the Cold War, marked a new era of geopolitical cooperation. China's economic reforms and opening-up policies in the late 20th century paved the way for expanded trade, investment, and diplomatic ties between China and European nations (Li, 2008: 10-11).

Those historical facts described above highlight the multifaceted nature of China-Europe geopolitical relations, characterized by periods of cooperation, conflict, and evolving dynamics shaped by changing geopolitical landscapes.

Nowadays China's ascent as a global power has been a defining feature of the 21st century geopolitical landscape. The country's rapid economic growth, military modernization, and assertive foreign policy have drawn international attention, sparking debates about the implications of China's rise for global stability and the existing world order.

To understand China's modern geopolitical direction, it is essential to contextualize its historical trajectory. China's ancient civilization and historical prominence have shaped its national identity and strategic outlook. The legacy of imperial expansion, foreign invasions, and the century of humiliation continues to influence China's perception of its role in the world. The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 marked a significant turning point, as the country embarked on a path of socialist construction and geopolitical repositioning. Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms in the late 20th century accelerated China's integration into the global economy, laying the foundation for its emergence as a global power (Hunt, 1990: 21).

China's modern geopolitical strategy is its economic expansion, characterized by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Launched in 2013, the BRI aims to enhance connectivity and promote

infrastructure development across Asia, Africa, and Europe. According to data from the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, by the end of 2020, China had signed 203 cooperation documents with 138 countries and 31 international organizations under the BRI framework. The total trade volume between China and BRI countries exceeded \$9.2 trillion, and Chinese direct investment in these countries exceeded \$130 billion (Chinese Ministry of Commerce web-site, 2021).

By investing in large-scale infrastructure projects, China seeks to expand its influence, foster economic partnerships, and secure access to key markets and resources. However, the BRI has also raised concerns about debt dependency, environmental sustainability, and geopolitical competition, reflecting the complexities of China's economic diplomacy.

China's military modernization efforts have transformed its regional and global security posture. The rapid growth of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), coupled with advancements in military technology, has enhanced China's capabilities to project power and defend its territorial interests. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China's military expenditure increased by 76% between 2010 and 2020, making it the second-largest military spender globally after the United States (Dr Diego Lopes da Silva, Dr Nan Tian and Alexandra Marksteiner Stockholm International Peace Research Institute portal, 2021). Furthermore, China's military buildup in the South China Sea, including the construction of artificial islands and the deployment of advanced weapon systems, has raised concerns among neighboring countries and the international community. From maritime disputes in the South China Sea to territorial tensions with neighboring countries, China's assertive behavior has fueled concerns about regional stability and the potential for conflict escalation. Moreover, China's expanding naval presence and strategic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific have raised questions about its intentions and the implications for traditional alliances and security architectures.

Diplomatic engagement of China represents another dimension of its modern geopolitical direction. Through multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and regional forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), China seeks to shape international norms, promote dialogue, and advance its strategic interests. According to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China has established diplomatic relations with 180 countries and has signed more than 300 inter-governmental agreements on cooperation in various fields. Additionally, China's investment in cultural exchanges, educational programs, and media outreach

reflects its efforts to wield soft power and enhance its global influence (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China web-site, 2021).

However, China's diplomatic initiatives also face challenges, including criticism of its human rights record, concerns about its authoritarian model, and growing geopolitical rivalry with the United States.

The cooperation between China and Europe represents one of the most dynamic and influential global partnerships. This relationship, underpinned by significant economic, political, and cultural exchanges, has evolved over the years to address the challenges and opportunities of an increasingly interconnected world. The strategic alliance offers myriad advantages, contributing to the growth and development of both regions.

The economic relationship between China and Europe is characterized by substantial trade volumes. According to the European Commission, the European Union (EU) is China's largest trading partner, while China is the EU's second-largest trading partner. This trade relationship has been bolstered by various agreements, including the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), which aims to create a better balance in market access and investment opportunities (The European Commission's web-site, 2020).

European businesses benefit from access to China's vast consumer market, which boasts a rapidly growing middle class. Conversely, Chinese companies gain entry to Europe's mature and diverse market. This mutual access is vital for diversifying supply chains. Diversified supply chains enhance resilience, reducing dependency on single markets and mitigating risks associated with economic shocks.

China and Europe have engaged in numerous joint research initiatives, particularly in cutting-edge fields such as renewable energy, biotechnology, and information technology. These collaborations have led to significant technological advancements. For instance, the EU's Horizon 2020 program has facilitated joint projects that bring together leading researchers from both regions, fostering innovation (Horizon 2020 Program web-site, 2020).

European investments in China's high-tech sectors, including artificial intelligence, 5G, and electric vehicles, have been substantial. Similarly, Chinese investments in European technology firms have introduced considerable capital and expertise, driving innovation and competitiveness. The exchange of knowledge and best practices between Chinese and European institutions accelerates technological progress, benefiting both regions.

European expertise in green technology and environmental standards ensures that infrastructure

projects under China's Belt and Road Initiative contribute to sustainable development goals. Collaboration on sustainable infrastructure addresses climate change and promotes eco-friendly practices, ensuring long-term benefits for both regions.

The increase in student exchange programs between China and Europe has facilitated educational opportunities and cultural understanding. Programs such as Erasmus+ and various Chinese scholarship schemes enable students to study abroad, gaining insights into each other's cultures, languages, and societies. These exchanges build a foundation of mutual respect and understanding, fostering long-term relationships (Chinese Government Scholarships web-site, 2024).

Cultural exchange initiatives, including art exhibitions, film festivals, and language programs, have strengthened ties between China and Europe. These initiatives promote cultural diversity and enhance mutual understanding. Additionally, collaborative academic endeavors, such as joint degree programs and research projects, improve the quality of education and research outputs, contributing to global knowledge and innovation.

China and Europe often collaborate on multilateral platforms such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the G20. This cooperation is crucial for addressing global challenges such as climate change, international security, and economic stability. By working together, China and Europe can exert significant influence on global policies and initiatives.

The partnership between China and Europe promotes a more multipolar world order, counterbalancing other major global powers. This balance is essential for maintaining global stability and ensuring diverse regional interests are represented. Regular high-level dialogues between Chinese and European leaders facilitate dispute resolution and the strengthening of bilateral relations, covering a wide range of issues from trade to human rights and environmental policies (European Council on Foreign Relations web-site, 2023).

Both China and Europe are committed to tackling climate change, collaborating on various environmental initiatives. The EU-China Partnership on Climate Change focuses on areas such as carbon trading, renewable energy, and energy efficiency. These joint efforts are critical for meeting international climate goals and promoting sustainable development.

European companies lead in green technology, and their partnerships with Chinese firms have advanced sustainable technologies. Collaborative research on sustainability issues, including water management, pollution control, and biodiversity, has resulted in innovative solutions to environmental challenges. These efforts contribute to global environmental

protection and sustainability, demonstrating the importance of international cooperation in addressing environmental issues (Green Belt and Road Initiative Center web-site, 2018).

At the end it would be necessary to highlight the cooperation between Eastern Europe and China that has seen significant development in recent years, driven by mutual economic interests and strategic initiatives. A cornerstone of this partnership is the “16+1” cooperation framework, established by China in 2012, which brings together China and 16 Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries to enhance trade, investment, and cultural exchange. This initiative complements China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that was mentioned above.

Eastern European countries, many of which are members of the European Union, have benefited from Chinese investments in critical infrastructure projects, such as railways, ports, and energy facilities. These investments have facilitated better connectivity and logistics, boosting trade volumes and economic development in the region. Moreover, Chinese companies have found new markets for their products and technologies in Eastern Europe, aiding their global expansion efforts.

Cultural and educational exchanges have also flourished, with increasing numbers of student exchanges, joint research projects, and cultural events strengthening people-to-people ties. Politically, the partnership has provided Eastern European countries with an additional avenue for international cooperation, diversifying their foreign relations and enhancing their strategic autonomy. Overall,

the cooperation between Eastern Europe and China has created a dynamic and mutually beneficial relationship, contributing to regional development and broader geopolitical stability.

#### **Conclusion:**

Throughout history, China’s interactions with the world have been multifaceted, characterized by both cooperation and competition, mutual learning and cultural exchange, as well as periods of isolationism and conflict.

China’s modern geopolitical direction is characterized by a complex interplay of economic expansion, military modernization, and diplomatic engagement. As China continues to rise as a global power, it faces a myriad of challenges and opportunities in navigating the evolving dynamics of international politics. Examining of China’s strategic initiatives, challenges, and opportunities, contributes to a deeper understanding of the contemporary geopolitical landscape and the implications of China’s rise for global governance and security.

The cooperation between China and Europe yields numerous advantages, from economic growth and technological innovation to cultural exchange and environmental sustainability. This partnership not only benefits the two regions but also contributes to global stability and prosperity. As the world faces increasingly complex challenges, the collaboration between China and Europe stands as a testament to the power of international cooperation in achieving common goals and addressing shared concerns. The continued strengthening of this relationship will be vital for future global development and stability.

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