
The Trojan Dragon Comes to the Balkans

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, China has been expanding its influence throughout Africa, Asia, and Europe through the One Belt One Road Initiative (BRI). One area that has come under recent Chinese influence is the Balkan states bridging Europe and Asia. Technological development, especially through 5G networks, is a primary means of growing China's pull. However, the European Union is wary of the new Chinese influence in the Balkans and has tried to pull these states closer to the EU. It remains to be seen how the two opposing powers will reconcile their mutual goals for influence in the Balkans.

"I sent a letter to President Xi, in which for the first time I officially called him not only a dear friend but also a brother, and not only my personal friend but also a friend and brother of this country."

— Aleksandar Vučić, President of Serbia, March 15, 2020¹

Since 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has helped Beijing expand its economic influence throughout Africa, Asia, and Europe. To carry this out, China often focuses on smaller geopolitical zones rife with political and economic instability. Indeed, states benefiting from the BRI's construction of infrastructure, investment in trade facilities, and technological support are often at the periphery of other major global and provision of regional powers, such as the EU, Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.²

Bridging Europe and Asia, the Balkan states suffer from poor

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economic systems, high levels of corruption, post-conflict infrastructures, and are a far cry from cutting-edge markets.⁴ Although civil society and development grant-focused programs offered by European states and the United States are often generous, China's offers of more money and advanced technology, with less restrictive oversight, have allowed China to better capitalize on regional vulnerabilities.⁵ According to a report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "the main challenge for the EU is how to deal with state-driven subsidization of state-owned companies and subsidies of whole industries that are currently not regulated."⁶ This means that, not only do these private Chinese firms have access to public resources and funding, it is telling of how Beijing can jump the line without frittering away time on red tape. Examining Beijing's Balkan strategies, particularly those in the high-tech field, can provide insight as to how the United States and European countries can better use their economic and technological strengths (the latter chiefly via 5G networks explained in the next section) to counter a globally ascendant China.

China analyst Theresa Fallon termed China's advance in these areas as, "an anaconda strategy: surround it and squeeze it."⁷ Under the auspices of offering advanced technology—among other development projects—Beijing is continuing its efforts to use the Balkan states to make inroads into Europe.⁸ Having invested \$6.7 billion in the Western Balkans alone since 2010, China has stepped up as a serious power player in the region.⁹

THE ROLE OF 5G NETWORKS AND TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

An integral part of the BRI and China's strategy in southeastern Europe is the promotion and assembly of new alliances through the sale, maintenance, and integration of technological products.¹⁰ One major initiative for the Digital Silk Road, another component and objective of the BRI, has been the development of 5G, or "fifth-generation," wireless networks and supportive technology.¹¹

Beijing promises 5G to smartphones and other digital platforms to achieve quicker downloads, as a platform to run autonomous vehicles and robots, and to become the foundation for gleaming futuristic cities.¹² As a cornerstone of China's Smart Cities initiative, which develops cities structured around livable, workable, and sustainable technology,¹³ the use of 5G networks is touted as an affordable means to increase efficiency.¹⁴ Some examples of 5G technology in the "Smart Cities" model have featured intelligent lighting, power grids, and smart traffic management while also offering bolstered domestic surveillance capabilities.¹⁵

Aware of developing economies' desire for technological advancement, China promotes 5G as the key to top-down modernization for these countries.¹⁶ For less-democratically structured societies (in comparison to the United States, the European Union, and their allies), 5G and other Chinese-supplied technologies grant governments a dual advantage: futuristic technological advancement and a means to better control their own populations.¹⁷ Simultaneously, this creates a further dependence on Beijing and its technological capabilities.

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HUAWEI: FOLLOWING THE LEADER WHEREVER HE MAY GO

Huawei is a Chinese telecommunications giant that is leading the charge on cutting-edge 5G technology and technology equipment. In 2018, the company invested in approximately 170 countries and signed forty-two major commercial 5G contracts. That same year, Huawei also received \$222 million in grant money from the Chinese government.¹⁸ In 2019, Huawei received as much as \$75 billion in tax breaks from Beijing,¹⁹ and in the past three years, it has become the largest communications company in the world.²⁰

Huawei's rise appears to mimic that of China's state-owned enterprises (SOEs), having supposedly received billions of dollars' worth of financial backing from Beijing as it became the number one global telecom equipment provider in less than ten years.²¹ SOEs, as described by Danish political scientist and China specialist Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, are corporations that dominate China's strategic sectors and principal industries, and are key instruments for the implementation of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) policies and strategic initiatives.²² Every SOE is obligated to have Party members in its leadership, and all primary decision-making must be funneled through Party committees. This guarantees government involvement at each level of the enterprise.

Although consistently denied by Huawei's public relations team, state support may have been vital to Huawei's financial success, as it is potentially a key factor in Huawei's ability to offer significantly lower prices compared to other 5G competitors.²³ In addition, Huawei maintains lower price points through government-subsidized loans offered by Chinese state-owned banks.²⁴

While not an official SOE, Huawei is widely reported to have extensive ties to the ruling CCP and has been accused of being a vehicle for Beijing to gain leverage in the global telecommunication sector.²⁵ However, the tech giant asserts that it has distanced itself from the CCP, repeatedly stating that its equipment has never been used and will never be used to spy.²⁶ In a 2019 Reuters article, Beijing's foreign ministry stated that China has not and will not demand companies or individuals use methods that run counter to local laws or install "backdoors to collect or provide the Chinese government with data, information or intelligence from home or abroad."²⁷ United States federal government bodies such as the Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Commerce, have all countered this statement in recent years, proposing that entry could also be gained through more benign methods like software updates issued by the equipment distributors.²⁸

To cloud matters further, in mid-2019, Huawei drafted a legal report which stated the company would not be coerced into espionage due to a hazy Chinese espionage law which claims there is no mandate for Chinese businesses to hand over sensitive corporate information to the Chinese intelligence.²⁹ Yet lawyers in China and abroad have contested the validity and true position of this law.³⁰ The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) claims Huawei, among other Chinese private businesses, may have other unofficial links to the CCP.³¹ Since 1996, Huawei has received special status from the Chinese government and military, garnering the title of "national champion"—a title given to companies for supporting China's broader geopolitical objectives.³²

However, it is important to note Huawei has since received some pushback from countries like Australia, which was one of the first of Western countries to put 5G networks to the test, organizing a team of government hackers to find vulnerabilities in the system to be proposed by Huawei and other similar companies.³³ Six months after the August 2018 trial, the Australian government banned Huawei from any cooperation on core and non-core components of their networks.³⁴ Concerned about the company's close ties to the Chinese government, they declared the business offer too risky for their national security.³⁵ Following the decision, then Director-General of the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) Mike Burgess stressed the importance of the "country's critical infrastructure - everything from electric power to water supplies to sewage."³⁶ The United States also shared Australia's perspective on the issue, and has tried to convince its allies of the dangers of incorporating Chinese 5G networks into their own infrastructure.³⁷

Despite growing concerns over Chinese government interference and potential intelligence collection, Huawei's imprint on Europe has been considerable. A 2018 Bloomberg report found that China invested \$318 billion in European ventures over the past ten years,³⁸ chiefly through state-run and state-tied companies, with its global reach resulting in a reported \$100 billion in revenue.³⁹ In a 2019 CNN report, Huawei's European market share was determined to be between 35 and 40 percent.⁴⁰ These figures are expected to increase exponentially over the next decade.⁴¹

Countries such as South Korea, Thailand, and India are already beginning to incorporate Huawei's 5G plans.⁴² Huawei claims to offer quality and modernity, along with pricing 30 percent⁴³ less than that of other companies like Finland's Nokia and South Korea's Samsung.⁴⁴ In January 2020, the United Kingdom signed an agreement with Huawei to authorize the company to construct and manage some of its 5G infrastructure despite strong protests by the United States.⁴⁵ However, the British government noted that it worked to decrease any possible security risks inherent in the partnership by not incorporating certain sensitive structures into the shared network.⁴⁶

Huawei's vast global inroads have exacerbated concerns over the corporation's ownership structure, security, and the company's linkages to the Chinese government and intelligence apparatus. Nevertheless, as Western states adopt Huawei's offers, there is less incentive to push back against the telecommunications giant in other parts of the world such as the Western Balkans. While probing Europe's responses to its technology, China has received a relatively unequivocal welcome to work with Huawei.⁴⁷

BEIJING COMES TO THE WESTERN BALKANS

After two decades of divisive politics following the wars of the 1990s, widespread weak institutional structure, a crippled economy, high unemployment,⁴⁸ and rampant corruption throughout all levels of government across the Western Balkans, the region is especially vulnerable to foreign influence.⁴⁹ Unenforced EU regulations mean that there is no entity that can effectively restrict the flow of investments, money, and goods between the Balkans and non-EU states.⁵⁰ In addition, even after comparable grants were offered by the EU, the extensive red tape and other bureaucratic wrangling hindered Balkan interest in—and acceptance of—development assistance.⁵¹

In order to advance economic growth, modernize technology, and promote stability in line with their European neighbors, state govern-

ments from Serbia to North Macedonia are working to overcome their economic and industrial stagnation.⁵² Almost all countries in southeastern Europe, with the exception of Kosovo,⁵³ are signing up for joint ventures with Chinese companies that make temptingly innovative and seemingly financially-savvy offers—such as the promised super-highway recently constructed by a Chinese firm connecting Montenegro to Serbia. This highway is still unfinished and has plunged the Montenegrin government into debt.⁵⁴

SERBIA'S OTHER FRIEND TO THE EAST

Serbia is the host of numerous multi-million dollar Chinese projects, including the Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway, which officially opened at the end of last year.⁵⁵ Despite having the highest GDP of Western Balkan states, Serbia is one of the most enthusiastic recipients of financial assistance from China in the region.⁵⁶

In 2014, Huawei launched a Safe Cities⁵⁷ project jointly with the Serbian government in order to reduce police investigation times, enhance the state's capability of arresting and detaining individuals, decrease crime rates, and hinder organized crime networks.⁵⁸ This Safe Cities⁵⁹ deal will improve technological connectivity and develop a surveillance and facial recognition system in Belgrade and across the country.⁶⁰ The Serbian

..... Ministry of Internal Affairs says they own the surveillance system, but Huawei is the authorized supplier.⁶¹

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..... According to journalist Bojan Stojkovski, as of the beginning of 2019, Huawei's surveillance system comprised 1,000 high-definition cameras, all of which contain specific "facial and license plate recognition software," dispersed across 800 locations around Belgrade. Share Foundation, a Serbian human rights organization, says that this kind of software is a breach of "civil rights and freedoms" due to the way in which it collects information, including biometric data, on citizens. Bojan Perkov, a policy researcher with Share, stated that, "If a data protection impact assessment has not been conducted and if there are no precise rules for its processing, this sensitive data can be

misused.” Some Serbian citizens have also expressed concern regarding the infringement on civil liberties by this new surveillance system, especially because no official regulations on data privacy and usage are in place.⁶²

Recently, as Serbia and the rest of the world battles the Coronavirus, the Serbian president’s statement regarding the EU’s hesitation in providing medical aid has only deepened anti-EU and ant-Western sentiment. In addition, China has been quick to provide doctors and medical equipment to its “friend and brother”—a striking signal of the continued advancement of this partnership.⁶³

CHINA AND THE EU—WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS?

The EU is worried about Chinese intelligence links to Chinese corporations and what that means for civil privacy and sensitive data access in Europe and ally nations. Further, the EU is hesitant, in part for historical reasons,⁶⁴ to include an economically debilitated and politically fractious Western Balkans in its organization.⁶⁵ The region’s increasing economic reliance on China heightens these concerns.⁶⁶

In competition with China for influence in the Balkans, the EU has sent a number of mixed messages to Balkan states, further harming Western European influence in the region.⁶⁷ In 2019, France delayed the entry of Albania and North Macedonia into the EU for the second time since 2018⁶⁸ (for reasons related to continued issues with corruption, crime, and a lack of economic stability),⁶⁹ which caused significant disappointment for Albanians and North Macedonian politicians and citizens.⁷⁰ It also creates an opportunity for China as the two states move away from the security of the EU’s umbrella.

Until very recently, the EU asserted that Albania, North Macedonia, and the rest of the Balkans have been a part of a distant future plan for European integration, and therefore, EU policy makers did not present or approve of an exact timeline for their entry.⁷¹ Consideration for EU accession has always been contingent upon North Macedonia and Albania carrying out reforms to address the aforementioned issues.⁷² March 2020 saw a new date set for talks to start in the fall of this year that will entirely depend on “candidate countries [proving] they are reaching EU standards in areas such as the free movement of goods, and in taxation, energy and economic policies.”⁷³

The EU’s ambivalent approach to the Balkan states over the past decade has left a vacuum that Beijing has moved quickly to fill. China’s

advances into the region have only deepened the challenges Western Balkan nations face to integrate into the EU.⁷⁴ Cash-strapped and looking for a means to gain further economic and infrastructure improvements, governments in the Western Balkans have welcomed numerous Chinese-financed developments at the cost of their own autonomy.⁷⁵ On a local level, lax regulations, a lack of transparency, and poor governance allow Chinese companies to bypass the weak regulations of Balkan states.⁷⁶

China's foreign minister said in 2018 that "[there] is no backroom deal; everything is transparent. There is no 'winner takes it all,' but every project delivers win-win results."⁷⁷ Nonetheless, Beijing's projects have been marked by corruption. According to the European Union Institute for Security Studies, one Chinese plan to construct a highway in Macedonia was exemplary in terms of how Beijing is actually "fueling corruption in the wider Western Balkan region."⁷⁸ For instance, in the case of Kicevo-Ohrid highway in North Macedonia, which was funded by Chinese government-owned China Exim Bank, senior Macedonian officials accepted direct bribes from the Chinese firm.⁷⁹

Adding to concerns about corruption, economic, and political stability, the EU's hesitation regarding the Balkan states extends an internal lack of consensus among members on a variety of China-related issues, including a potential ban of Huawei's networks.⁸⁰ In light of mounting controversy over the use of Chinese telecommunications technology, Germany, France, and Italy have called for instituting their own procedures to more meticulously screen foreign investments.⁸¹ However, none of these regulations on Chinese advanced technology have yet been implemented.⁸² In fact, Italy has done little to obstruct Huawei's construction of 5G networks in the country, and Huawei has stated that it hopes to build a 5G factory in France to "supply the entire European market, not just France's."⁸³

In 2018, Johannes Hahn, European Commissioner for the European Neighborhood Policy,⁸⁴ said that China could deploy several "Trojan horses," in the form of political and economic influence, as Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia approach EU membership. In an interview with Politico, Hahn argued that the EU faces malign influences, such as corruption, due to Beijing's increased presence in the region.⁸⁵ The comparison is blatant: much like in the myth, China poses a risk to the EU as an alliance because the latter, by integrating vulnerable Balkan states into its union, would be inviting an enemy into their midst with the power to disrupt the whole system.

Hahn notes that the Chinese model combining capitalism and autoc-

racy could appeal to some leaders in the region.”⁸⁶ According to Philippe Le Corre and Vuk Vuksanovic’s analysis, Beijing’s presence in the Balkans also counters EU credibility through its capacity to build socio-political and economic trust in the People’s Republic of China. China offers its “own political and economic model in countries with weaker governance.”⁸⁷ For instance, in earlier efforts by the BRI, countries such as Sri Lanka and Djibouti have proven to become more economically vulnerable in the process, with sometimes unfinished and always expensive projects devastating these local governments’ coffers.⁸⁸

As it has sought to offer economic incentives in the Balkans and Europe, China’s efforts to gain access to key infrastructure nodes in the EU has come onto the radar of policy makers in Brussels. Clearly hinting at China and Russia, Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, advocated in 2017 for new screening measures for foreign SOEs, which were intended to hinder the “purchase [of] a new European harbor, part of our energy infrastructure or a defense technology firm.”⁸⁹

Delaying decisions on whether to incorporate Huawei’s 5G networks, EU member states have been buying time on how to handle their own relations with China.⁹⁰ In January 2020, one senior EU official said, “[there] is a big gap between what we say and what we do. That gap has been reduced but we are still not where we need to be.”⁹¹ For now, most member states have been moving very slowly to make any decision on China.⁹²

CHINA’S GRAND STRATEGY: AN ANALYSIS

The Balkans as a region does not have the capacity to regulate transparency in their political structure due to systemic corruption. In many cases, challenges already exist with freedom of the press, rule of law, and tendencies toward autocratic leadership.⁹³ State-run security systems can exacerbate these issues.⁹⁴ Finally, anti-Western sentiment present in Serbia, for example, creates an environment in which China can become a natural ally and undermines Serbia’s relationships with Western powers. Thus, China becomes the model for likeminded centralized, authoritarian political regimes.⁹⁵

To counter China’s malign influence and increase transparent cooperation between the Western Balkans and partners and political allies in Europe and with other democracies, the EU should take a long view on foreign interference.⁹⁶ China is reshaping the global world order and will continue to expand its spheres of influence in Europe.⁹⁷ According to an article by the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, “Beijing has

stressed time and again that there are no geopolitical calculations behind the BRI. Yet the initiative's massive scale means that it will necessarily have geostrategic ramifications."⁹⁸ With this economic growth, China's capacity can expand to influence host countries' politics and ideology.

It is only a matter of time before Europe and the United States realize the importance of protecting the Balkans' fragile democracy and precarious economy. If it chooses to prevent an escalation of tension, China needs to change its tactics by demonstrating its capacity to maintain transparent objectives and foster a stable and secure environment with its partner countries. The Western Balkans need greater stability and security in order to sustain cooperation built on shared interests and values.⁹⁹

CONCLUSION

China's soft power strategy has grown from resting on forging economic ties and political partnerships through the BRI into developing models for technological infrastructure in order to gain competitive

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ground on the European stage. This is evident in Huawei's strategic plans in the Balkans, which will ultimately create an international dependence on China.¹⁰⁰ China has global aspirations and a long-term strategy to expand its reach, and is using the Western Balkans as a stepping stone.¹⁰¹

and escalating tension with the Asian power.¹⁰² It is in the European Union's interest to support greater economic and political transparency in southeastern Europe.¹⁰³ The onus is also on state governments from Serbia to North Macedonia to strengthen their own cyber security groundwork through a unified system of security measures, investment protocol, and multi-level transparency in order to make themselves less susceptible to nefarious practices.*f*

As five of the seven Balkan countries wait their turn for EU membership over the next decade, China is poised to deepen its potential within the region, unless the EU unites on its stance toward China without damaging

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