

## Original Study

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# The Chinese Factor in the Baltic States' Security

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**Abstract:** Based on representative primary sources as well as authoritative academic and think tank analyses, this article aims to evaluate the role that Asia's emerging superpower came to play in the Baltic trio's security, with particular emphasis on its harder aspects and most recent developments, which marked a certain shift in the respective bilateral relationships. Structured according to the conventional levels of international relations analysis and rough chronological order, the qualitative study tracks the more or less direct impact of China for the comprehensive security of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania ranging from the systemic (global) to purely bilateral domains. The results show that China has indeed become a security factor to be reckoned with there, particularly since roughly 2017–2019 and primarily due to its deepening strategic partnership with Russia. Some of its security effects, however, are even older, more nuanced, yet still significant. Since roughly 2019, however, China's security factor has increasingly acquired challenging and even threatening characteristics as is most clearly demonstrated by its relationship dynamics with Lithuania.

**Keywords:** China, Baltic states, security, NATO, EU, Russia

## 1 Introduction

The People's Republic of China (PRC, China) is the world's most clear-cut emerging superpower with correspondingly expanding interests and profile in the whole international system. It is no wonder then that the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have been increasingly affected by the complex and momentous phenomenon, popularly touted as the 'rise of China'. Since this process has long manifested itself primarily in economic terms, the trio for a long time followed the widespread trend of perceiving the relationships with the Asian giant party-state as a major opportunity that would contribute to their development and growth, particularly as a result of the global financial crisis of 2007–2008. A rough decade after that economic shock, the Baltic states began to gradually acknowledge a rather surprising role that China came to play in their own security framework and perceptions. Such a shift acquired official undertones when the intelligence services of all three countries for the first time named China as a threat in 2019. A series of intensified developments on the global, regional and bilateral (Sino-Baltic) scale ever since call for a comprehensive analysis of the new realities, which corresponds to the general goal of this article. More specifically, however, it aims to assess the principal ways of how China has indeed become a factor—if not necessarily a threat—to the trio's security.

China's role in the Baltic states' security is a relatively new topic in academic research. The largely path-breaking article by Scott (2018) dealt with both traditional and non-traditional security issues by focusing on geo-economic challenges associated with the trio's participation in Chinese multilateral development and cooperation frameworks, Beijing's 'political pressurising' in response to the Balts' perceived infringements of its 'core interests', and the 2017 Sino–Russian naval exercises that were to a significant degree responsible for reassessment of China's conventional security profile in the Baltics.

Since Russia is recognised as by far the most important security threat in all three counties, it is not surprising that the deepening strategic partnership between Moscow and Beijing has long been a topic of some interest across the Baltic military and intelligence establishment. Another habitual way of 'factoring in' China among the trio's security

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elites has been linked to the possibly negative repercussions that would derive from declared ‘strategic rebalancing’ to the Indo-Pacific by the U.S., uniformly considered in the Baltics as the principal security provider to it and Europe at large.

Neither of these important concerns had long entered the academic debate, however, as the Baltic states clearly emphasised economic opportunities in their relationship with China until at least 2019 while the latter consistently fostered and reciprocated such interest. In accordance with novel developments since, scholars have increasingly focused on broader security matters that came to be unprecedentedly prominent in the trio’s interactions with Beijing. As a result, China’s influencing activities associated with its rapidly spreading ‘united front work’ were detected in Estonia (Jüris 2020b) and Lithuania (Andrijauskas 2020a), while a 2011 memorandum of cooperation between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the politically significant Social Democratic Party ‘Harmony’ (Saskaņa) suggested similar activities in Latvia (LSM.lv 2017). Other security-related and China-focused topics that were recently addressed primarily by the Baltic scholars include potential threats deriving from common connectivity projects (Jüris 2019; Andrijauskas 2021b; Zdanavičius 2021b), with 5G in particular serving as a side topic of growing significance (Guzdar and Jermalavičius 2020; Rakštytė 2021), Chinese economic statecraft (Zdanavičius 2021a), influencing through academic (Läänemets 2020; Andrijauskas 2021a), subnational (Andrijauskas 2021a) and most lately health cooperation (Andrijauskas 2020b; Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2021a), as well as general Baltic resilience to these activities (Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2021b).

Hence, arguably lacking is a piece of research that would deal with China’s diverse impact on the Baltic states’ security in a more comprehensive fashion with larger emphasis on its harder aspects and most recent developments. This article aims to at least partially address this gap in the scholarship by separately focusing on different levels of analysis that range from the systemic (global) to purely bilateral. Roughly based on such spatial narrowing down and chronological order, the research employs relevant primary (official documents) and secondary sources, including the above-mentioned academic articles and think tank policy papers. Where applicable and significant, the general case study in question provides a within-case comparison of varying circumstances among the three Baltic states. The trio is treated as a ‘group’ within larger sub-regions that themselves form part of the European region. Although deliberate emphasis would be made on harder security issues and topics, the comprehensive and multi-dimensional nature of the Chinese challenge to the trio (and the rest of the Western world) arguably necessitates the inclusion of broader security questions characterised by dual-use and ‘hybrid’ features.

## 2 Systemic Level: Global Commons and Security Crises

The rise of China has affected much of the world earlier than the relatively distant and small Baltic states. This is even more the case in security as opposed to economic matters. Often neglected, however, is the fact that the trio has been increasingly interacting with China on various security-related topics essentially pertaining to the global/systemic level of analysis. There are two principal but often interrelated types of such interaction: global security governance, including crisis management and resolution, and what is often referred to as the ‘global commons’. All being evidently small states with a long history of bloody foreign interventions, the Baltic trio naturally emphasise the imperative character of international law and corresponding rules and obligations in security and other matters. This has often put them at odds with China on both of the above-mentioned accounts, especially as a result of their own recent leaps in several related areas on the one hand and Chinese shifts of conduct on the other.

In the case of global security governance, the Baltic leaps have been primarily associated with Lithuania and Estonia that for the first time served as non-permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in 2014–2015 and 2020–2021, respectively. Most notably on both occasions, the Baltic states supported three resolution drafts dealing with the Syrian crisis, while China vetoed them all along with Russia (UNSC S/2014/348, S/2020/654, S/2020/667). Such Sino-Russian voting convergence and apparent coordination of the procedure is one of many signs of their deepening bilateral security cooperation that has increasingly become a serious concern in the Baltics (see below).

Indirect Sino-Baltic security interactions within the UN framework are not necessarily negative, however. As has been correctly noted, Beijing’s contribution to the UN peacekeeping operations is perhaps the most tangible indication of its support for global governance security-wise (Shambaugh 2013, 299). According to China’s 2020 white paper on

this topic, it is the largest troop-contributing country among the permanent members of the UNSC, having sent over 40,000 personnel to 25 UN peacekeeping missions. Notably, China dispatched force protection units for the first time in late 2013 to Mali (PRC SCIO 2020), one of the world's most unstable countries that is associated with major security repercussions for Africa, the Middle East and Europe as well. The Baltic states have also become increasingly present there as part of the same UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA), the EU-led training missions and the pan-regional counter-insurgency operation led by France (Barkhane) in the case of Estonia. Notably, in the early 2010s the Chinese high rank officer served as a force commander of the UNFICYP mission in Cyprus,<sup>1</sup> an EU country (UNFICYP 2021).

The global commons that belong to no particular state and provide access to much of the international community have gradually become another milieu of Sino-Baltic more or less direct interaction, with some security repercussions for the latter already apparent. As comparatively open economies relying on international trade and financial flows, the Baltic states are naturally interested in rules-based and undisrupted access to the open oceans and air space. Clearly growing Chinese power projection capabilities on both of these accounts along with its commensurate status-quo changing unilateral actions, such as the construction and militarisation of the disputed islands in the South China Sea and the 2013 proclamation of the Air Defence Identification Zone in the East China Sea, should thus be of some concern even for the distant Balts.<sup>2</sup> Although China's rising naval profile has actually contributed to the security of the sea lines of communication in and around the Gulf of Aden, its participation in the ongoing multi-national anti-piracy campaign there also provided a precious opportunity to establish the country's first de facto military base abroad – the one in Djibouti since 2017 – with notable security repercussions not only for the western Indian Ocean and the Red Sea but also the Mediterranean and beyond in Europe.<sup>3</sup> As the most visible military manifestation of Chinese power from the trio's perspective has still been associated with the 2017 naval drills in the Baltic Sea and thus is dealt with in the region-focused section below, three additional types of global commons require particular attention here.

Besides the open oceans, China's interests and capabilities have been consistently expanding in the polar regions, outer space and cyberspace (Pollpeter 2015). While Antarctic matters continue to be essentially outside of the distant Baltics' radar, the Arctic dimension has been of growing interest to the trio, especially its northernmost member. Despite its recent failure to become an observer in the Arctic Council (ERR News 2021), Estonia will surely further consider various economic opportunities associated with the relative opening of this huge body of water and potential site of other resources. On the other hand, long concerned about Russian activities in the Arctic, the Baltic states have increasingly become aware of Chinese interests there, with some scholars suggesting negative security repercussions potentially deriving from its respective plans and actions (Jüris 2020a). As if to confirm such suspicions, in March 2021 the news about China's first ever recruitment of a Baltic national for spying purposes broke out in Estonia. Notably, the culprit sentenced for 3 years imprisonment was a renowned marine scientist with his native Estonia's and NATO's security clearance (BNS 2021), and much of his research revolved around the Arctic matters, such as navigation through sea ice (ERIS 2021), i.e. crucial knowledge for any country that seriously contemplates penetration of the polar regions.

All being fairly digitalised countries, the Baltic states have long ago got used to regular cyber-attack attempts by Russia and thus developed relatively strong security perceptions and competences in this domain of constantly rising significance worldwide. China's malign digital activities against the West in general have also increasingly attracted the attention of the trio's national cyber security institutions as well as the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, based in the Estonian capital of Tallinn. Identification of Chinese traces in cyber actions against the Baltic states themselves is, however, a more recent phenomenon. Estonian and Lithuanian intelligence agencies have been registering digital scanning of their networks (both state and corporate) in order to gain data on technical vulnerabilities or personnel background and online recruitment attempts originating in China since at least 2019 (EISS 2020, 2021; SSD & SIDMND 2020, 2021). Due to the fact that cyber domain is closely intertwined with new generation technologies, another recent trend is growing security awareness of potential threats associated with using Chinese high-tech, both soft- and hardware, expressed by the Baltic cyber watchdogs. Perhaps most tellingly thus far, the National Cyber

<sup>1</sup> As of the end of November 2021, there were five Chinese and one Lithuanian individual police officers deployed there out of 65 such servicemen and almost a thousand mission members overall (UN Peacekeeping 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Lithuania's recent particular concern about safety of air passages has been associated with the forced downing of a Vilnius-bound international passenger jet by Belarusian authorities in May 2021 (Sytas 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Somewhat ironically, China's first aircraft carrier the *Liaoning* was initially named *Riga* by its Soviet builders (Shambaugh 2013, 292).

Security Centre under the Lithuanian Ministry of National Defence decidedly addressed the latter matter by assessing Chinese equipment, first video surveillance cameras and then smartphones, as insecure to use (NCSC MND 2020, 2021).

Since the topic of Sino-Baltic high-tech interrelationship is more thoroughly addressed below, suffice it to ascertain here that China's impact on the trio's security has been the least prominent in the outer space domain. Even in this most complex case, however, the rapidly rising Chinese profile on the one hand, and some notable Baltic leaps on the other, would probably lead towards more contact with possible security repercussions to the latter, particularly as a result of the trio's gradual integration into the European Space Agency (ESA).<sup>4</sup> As if to highlight its space research prowess on a global scale, in mid-2020 China completed its satellite navigation system, BeiDou (Sinkkonen and Lassila 2020, 6), that is a global rival to the American (GPS), European (Galileo) and Russian (GLONASS) equivalents, also characterised by quintessential dual-use traits and thus important security repercussions for their users.

Due to the fact that outer space research by great powers has always been tightly connected to military-strategic matters, especially nuclear weapons and their delivery capabilities, it seems proper to remind that the Baltic states have been within operational distance of China's ballistic missiles since it developed the limited range intercontinental Dong Feng 4/DF-4 in the 1970s (Chase 2015, 96), i.e. long before most of their European allies. Although geo-strategic context has significantly changed throughout this long period, it is remarkable that from the perspective of Beijing they still form part of a rival power block, with the Soviet occupation simply transformed into belonging to the U.S.-led alliance system.

### 3 Sub-systemic Level: European and Trans-Atlantic Security

Composed of small states with a rich experience of foreign interventions by neighbouring regional and great powers, the Baltic group correctly perceives its membership in the Western political, economic, normative and ultimately security community as essential to their independence and survival. The three countries are characterised by explicit support for the EU, the U.S. and NATO at the same time, and thus are committed Euro-Atlanticists. Having hugely benefited from their long awaited integration into both of the most powerful Western multilateral structures, they are faithful believers in liberal socio-economic and political order and democratic peace theory. Hence, the rise of China creates additional multilateral challenges with possible near-existential repercussions to the trio in the mid- to long-term future.

China's rapidly growing profile on the systemic level of international relations is naturally coupled with its emergence as a prominent actor first on the fringes of and a bit later within the Euro-Atlantic part of the world itself, calling for a certain reaction from its members, including security-wise. Since the Chinese leadership is viewing the U.S. as its most important hard security threat and the liberal democratic values as the principal comprehensive challenge to its rule, the West has increasingly been witnessing Beijing's proactive policies on both of these accounts. The Baltic states are thus righteously concerned about Chinese attempts to correspondingly drive a wedge across the Atlantic and discredit Western normative foundations, particularly considering that these same goals are shared by Russia.

As has been alluded to above, major negative repercussions of China's rise to the trio's security might also be indirect due to the U.S.-led reactive (re-)alignments in its alliance system and beyond, with the most worrying possibility being a new 'reset' towards Russia. In a troublesome fashion, the former case has already acquired a clear-cut manifestation in the 2021 proclamation of the trilateral AUKUS security pact that offended France, the EU's largest military power and now its only representative on the UNSC. Clearly prioritising NATO in their collective security and thus naturally averse to French idea about Europe's 'strategic autonomy', the Baltic group is feeling unease when disagreements among fellow allies are gradually pushing them all towards this outcome.

As a result, the Chinese factor's growing significance in the somewhat troubled Euro-Atlantic security community has already caused notable responses from the trio in general and Lithuania in particular, aimed at recognising 'new' threats associated with Beijing while also retaining the 'traditional' focus on Moscow (see below). The deepening Sino-Russian strategic partnership is making such efforts even more relevant. Contrary to most of Western (particularly American) analyses primarily interested in Chinese gains from this bilateral relationship, the Baltic trio would naturally

<sup>4</sup> As of the end of 2021, Estonia is a full member (since 2015), while Latvia and Lithuania share recent associate membership status (since 2020 and 2021, respectively) (ESA 2021).

put prime emphasis on the relatively novel reverse trend. Indeed, aside of the fact that deepening relations between China and Russia significantly increase the latter's room for manoeuvre at precisely the same time when the Western sanctions are aimed at it, the partnership's military-security dimension has been gradually acquiring more balanced and reciprocal characteristics due to joint long-term development of sophisticated weapons systems, most notably the ongoing work on heavy-lift helicopters (Sinkkonen and Lassila 2020, 6) and, allegedly, rising Chinese dual-use technology transfers to Russia, including electronic components for its aerospace programmes and marine diesel engines for its navy (Schwartz 2019, 93).

In other words, besides freeing a considerable amount of troops that would otherwise be stationed along their lengthy mutual border in Siberia and the Far East for other theatres and missions, the deepening strategic partnership increasingly contributes to Russia's military modernisation, and thus could even be viewed by the trio as a more negative development than its role in the rise of China's hard power<sup>5</sup>. On all of the three principal accounts, namely high-level contacts, arms sales and military exercises, Sino-Russian defence cooperation has arguably evolved towards security alignment, if not yet an alliance (Korolev 2019), and could at least be interpreted as supporting the thesis about an emerging 'axis of necessity' (Sherr and Jüris 2021) between the two, i.e. a major upgrade on Bobo Lo's (2008) famous definition of the whole relationship as a mere 'axis of convenience'.

In the most visible case of military drills, the 2017 Baltic Sea ones primarily strengthened Russia's attempts to exert greater sway there instead of signifying any naval threat from China to European countries, including the Baltic states. As if to highlight the latter point, the three Chinese vessels involved – the destroyer *Changsha*, the frigate *Yuncheng* and the replenishment ship *Luomahu* – paid friendly port visits to Helsinki (Finland) and Riga (Latvia) on their way back from Saint Petersburg. Showcasing a powerful extended deployment (Scott 2018, 31), these vessels were pretty much the most up-to-date representatives of each respective class in China's naval service back then. Notably, the three-day port call in Riga perfectly fitted the definition of a friendly visit, as opposed to a mere replenishment one (Saunders 2020, 199), and involved a welcome ceremony attended by more than 200 members of the local Chinese community and even a good-will football match between the naval personnel of the two countries (Xinhua 2017). One can speculate that this event was facilitated by Riga's hosting of the Baltic states' only summit meeting of the Beijing-inspired and -led Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEEC, also known as 16/17+1) initiative conducted a year earlier.

China has increasingly become a factor in the trio's security through its relationships not only with Russia but also Belarus, another officially recognised source of threats to them. Although Minsk has been an important contributor to Chinese military modernisation, there are indications about more balanced and reciprocal security cooperation between the two, exemplified by joint anti-terrorism drills and common work on the Belarusian multiple launch rocket system 'Polonez'. In a telling fashion, Xi Jinping was the first foreign leader to congratulate Alexander Lukashenko on his 2020 presidential election 'victory' that kick-started the relationship crisis with the West in general and the Baltic states in particular. Lithuania, as the country perhaps most affected by developments in Minsk, has a special sore point regarding Sino-Belarusian cooperation because a Chinese company has been actively participating in projects which essentially make the Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant, and incident-prone structure built by Russia barely 50 km from the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius, more viable (Nizhnikau and Kaczmarek 2020, 4–6), thus contradicting one of Lithuania's principal foreign and security policy objectives (Janeliūnas 2021).

As heavy supporters of the EU's Eastern Partnership in general and post-Euromaidan Ukrainian government in particular, the Baltic states should also be worried about possible less direct security repercussions deriving from the relationship between Kyiv and Beijing. It would be hard to overestimate Ukraine's overall contribution to China's military modernisation, but recent advances by the latter have gradually become of note in trans-Atlantic security deliberations due to Kyiv's suspected usage of this engagement as a bargaining chip while negotiating with the West, and, more specifically, its long ambiguous conduct in the ongoing controversy over Chinese investment into the Motor Sich, one of the largest aircraft engine manufacturers worldwide and thus a source for this key dual-use technology that China has yet to master (Nizhnikau and Kaczmarek 2020, 6–7). Lithuania, as the first country to officially supply post-revolutionary Ukraine with lethal weapons, should be particularly interested in the continuing integration of its

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<sup>5</sup> According to informed calculations, Russia is easily China's top military partner in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Saunders 2020, 202).

close partner's military-industrial complex<sup>6</sup> into the trans-Atlantic supply chains and standard frameworks instead of wandering away to America's principal competitor.

As a matter of fact, the Baltic states themselves have been criticised both inside and out for joining Chinese diplomatic projects, particularly multilateral ones, such as the China-CEEC and the Belt and Road (BRI) initiatives. Admittedly, however, these decisions had been made before 2019 when the EU officially recognised China as an 'economic competitor' and 'systemic rival' to it (EC 2019) and NATO made clear enough in its London Declaration that China would become a new strategic point of focus for the alliance (NATO 2019). Neither have the Baltic states acceded the Beijing-based Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, contrary to many of their allies. As will be showcased below, the trio is conscious of Chinese attempts to target the perceived soft underbelly of both the EU and NATO and pursue long-term 'divide and rule' tactics on the European and Euro-Atlantic dimensions. Especially problematic seems to be the China-CEEC initiative that has apparently facilitated rhetorical shifts by some Central and Eastern European leaders in support of Beijing as opposed to Brussels and in isolated cases even the former's security penetration, as was most clearly shown by Serbia's recent purchase of Chinese combat drones and air defence systems, the first such for the continent in general (Reuters 2020).

Although informed analysis has revealed that Sino-Russian policy coordination is especially limited in Central and Eastern Europe (Lo and Lucas 2021), the Baltic states cannot ignore increasing resemblance between their playbooks towards the region, particularly in terms of propaganda attacks (see below), or curious similarities between Russia's and China's provocative actions towards their respective neighbours deemed as hostile, ranging from cyber-attacks to air and sea border violations on a regular basis. The worst case scenario for the trio and arguably the rest of the Euro-Atlantic security community would be that China's investments into European critical infrastructure and political influencing there could allow to slow down or entirely preclude a response to Russia's potential aggression (Nouwens and Legarda 2020, 9), or that they could even coordinate simultaneous offensive actions in their respective theatres. All of this provides a necessary background in order to comprehend better recent bilateral policy shifts towards China initiated by the Baltic states in general and Lithuania in particular.

## 4 Bilateral Level: China's Rising Profile in the Baltic States

The Baltic states' intelligence agencies officially recognised China as a threat to their security in 2019. These nearly simultaneous decisions were made in reaction primarily to the above-discussed developments on the global and European levels of analysis, but also to some specifically bilateral negative trends that have only intensified since. As China's security impact on this level has not been seen as direct, immediate and based on hard power, particularly in comparison to neighbouring Russia, the emphasis was put on increasing comprehensive (social, economic and political) resilience to its advancing influence within the three countries. Besides Chinese intelligence gathering and influencing and recruitment attempts, there were two main areas deemed as potentially threatening, namely investment into the trio's critical infrastructure and cooperation in high- and deep tech.

Although the Baltic states' initial friendliness towards the BRI has been primarily associated with exploitation of their logistical advantages, China most notably reciprocated by the interest in the trio's existent or planned transportation infrastructure that more often than not was locally (and admittedly correctly) perceived as strategic. Fearful of potential military and economic security implications, the group has apparently closed the topic in gradual fashion, starting with Lithuania's decision to put off development projects in the country's only seaport of Klaipėda (and also one of the main logistical entry points to the whole Baltic states' region by the allied NATO forces) and ending with Estonia's rejection of the China-backed plan to build a controversial undersea tunnel between Tallinn and Helsinki due to environmental, economic and notably security concerns (Posaner 2020). In the meantime, the Baltic states have increasingly stressed the Brussels-and-Washington-backed Three Seas Initiative (3SI) that joins through concrete connectivity projects a string of twelve EU member states from Estonia in the north to Croatia and Bulgaria in the south.

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<sup>6</sup> Notably, the Ukroboronprom, Ukraine's state-owned military-industrial conglomerate, was briefly headed by a Lithuanian-born official in 2019–2020.

Tellingly, the initiative's 2020 summit meeting was hosted by Tallinn, while the next one (2022) is going to take place in Riga (3SI 2021).

In response to these developments, the focus of the Baltic states' security narrative on China has gradually shifted to the second principal area – high- and deep tech. Key in this regard have been the trio's deliberations on the fifth generation (5G) technology standard for broadband cellular networks. All three countries eventually joined the U.S.-led Clean Network initiative by signing bilateral declarations on 5G security in 2019–2020, and have been setting up corresponding legal frameworks to eliminate unreliable suppliers since (Rakštytė 2021). Besides the foremost American role, this policy shift was at least in part validated by Huawei-related spying accusations in Poland (Ptak and Pawlak 2021), the trio's essential ally and only terrestrial connection to the EU/NATO continental core. In addition, the Baltic economic security can arguably be affected by politically motivated and thus often inconsistent actions by Chinese tech enterprises, as has been shown by DiDi's 2017 investment into the rival Estonian ridesharing unicorn start-up Taxify/Bolt, with this alleged 'success story' only to be given up in 2021 under the apparent pressure by China's own regulatory authorities (Traub 2021).

Although the Baltic states have not followed their many Western European counterparts by markedly contributing to Chinese military modernisation through dual-use technology and equipment transfers despite a decades-long arms embargo (Duchâtel and Bromley 2017, 10–11), such potential still exists as has been indicated by the above mentioned spying episode in Estonia or the fact that China had for several years been the largest importer of Lithuanian lasers (Andrijauskas 2020a, 10). A cursory analysis of the Baltic states' top ten universities<sup>7</sup> revealed that most of them have signed bilateral cooperation agreements with Chinese counterparts listed on the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's (ASPI) China Defence Universities Tracker (2021), including top secret and very high risk institutions. Some of these usually formal relationships have actually led to more tangible results, as is clearly demonstrated by the joint research project between Lithuania's Vytautas Magnus University and China's Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics (NUAA) on the 'Development of a New Type of Motion Actuators for Flying Microrobots' (Andrijauskas 2021a), i.e. a technology whose military potential was recognised as early as mid-1990s (Solem 1996). Notably, the ASPI database characterises this Chinese entity as a top secret and very high risk institution, which has been included into official end-user lists abroad for non-cooperation at least once and has been involved in an espionage scandal (ASPI 2021)<sup>8</sup>.

## 5 The Instructive Lithuanian Case Study

Since 2019 Lithuania in particular has gradually become witness to what China's multi-dimensional rise and growing economic dependence on it might eventually bring not only for the Baltic trio but also other Western liberal democratic countries, especially small states. The first of the three to explicitly define China as a threat to its security in the beginning of 2019 (SSD & SIDMND 2019), Lithuania soon after was decidedly put on the map of Beijing's so-called 'united front work' designed to pursue political influence activities beyond the CCP both within and outside the country (Brady 2017). In May of that same year, Vilnius was visited by the head of the Party's empowered United Front Work Department, and some 12 weeks later the pro-Beijing group organised by and comprising the Chinese diplomats clashed with the local demonstrators conducting a solidarity event with Hong Kong that also commemorated the 30th anniversary of the famed Baltic Way in the capital's historic heart (Andrijauskas 2020a, 14–17).

Despite the initial stimulus for improvement of bilateral relations associated with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, those soured again when Lithuania indicated support for Taiwan's larger involvement in global efforts to tackle the unprecedented health crisis, while China's ambassador began to question the established version of the virus' origins in the country's media (Andrijauskas 2020b), thus reverting back to the so-called 'wolf warrior' mode

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<sup>7</sup> According to the QS World University Rankings 2022 (2021) in the declining order of succession: Tartu University (Estonia), Vilnius University (Lithuania), Riga Technical University (Latvia), Tallinn University of Technology (Estonia), Vilnius Gediminas Technical University (Lithuania), Kaunas University of Technology (Lithuania), Riga Stradins University (Latvia), Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania), Tallinn University (Estonia) and University of Latvia (Latvia).

<sup>8</sup> It is worthwhile to add that only four institutions of more than a hundred and fifty in this database do actually meet all these criteria, and NUAA's dual-use nature is implied not only by its name but also by its widely-known status as one of China's so-called "Seven Sons of National Defence."

of more proactive and often assertive diplomacy<sup>9</sup>. In the end of the year, the Lithuanian general elections brought to power a new centre-right government that pledged to conduct a ‘values based foreign policy’ with notable allusion to the review of its relationship with China. As a result, Vilnius focused on principal comprehensive and broader security gaps allegedly targeted by Beijing’s actions that could be subdivided into several topical areas.

Increasingly concerned about the risks deriving from economic and technological cooperation, Lithuania went even further than the above-mentioned 5G issue by scrutinising other controversial Chinese companies (Nuctech, Hikvision, Dahua) aiming to install their equipment in the country’s critical infrastructure (NCSC MND 2020; Andrijauskas 2021a, 4). More consistently worried by the decay of human rights in the world in general and China in particular, Lithuania continued its outspoken criticism of the latter both domestically and internationally, with the most notable example being the parliamentary adoption of the resolution ‘On China’s Mass, Systematic and Gross Violations of Human Rights and Genocide Against Uyghurs’ (Seimas 2021). Notably, the resolution was proposed by the only Baltic representative in the Chinese retaliatory list of personal sanctions on ten European individuals (PRC MFA 2021)<sup>10</sup> which had itself just marked the low point in the whole Sino-EU relationship.

Most significantly, however, Lithuania became the first country to leave the China-CEEC initiative, and soon after confirmed the plans to open a Taiwanese representative office in the country, the second such in the Baltics (after Riga’s) but only the first in Europe in almost two decades, with an important twist of this planned to be a ‘Taiwanese’ as opposed to ‘Taipei’s’ institution. While the former decision was informed by genuine Lithuanian fears that the Chinese-led initiative aimed to divide the EU, the latter one seemed to have made that unity somewhat more difficult to achieve as fellow Europeans had long respected China’s ‘red lines’ on this sensitive matter. In reaction to these developments, Beijing rather unusually recalled its ambassador asking Vilnius to do the same, and initiated a seemingly full-scale economic statecraft campaign ranging from threats to suspend freight trains previously passing through the country to actually freezing Lithuanian exports to China or issuing new licenses for these, and apparently even affecting its target’s importers of industrial and other components indirectly through supply chains. A senior anonymous EU diplomat in Beijing tellingly compared the Chinese response to the well-known local idiom about ‘killing a chicken to scare the monkey’ (Lau 2021). The *Global Times*, a jingoistic CCP tabloid, even suggested that China ‘should join hands with Russia and Belarus, the two countries that border Lithuania, and punish it’ (*Global Times* 2021). In a remarkably counterproductive fashion, this has only proved the now entrenched point of the Lithuanian security establishment.

Hence, the ‘chicken’ proved to be defiant. Thus far unwilling to back down on either of the mentioned topics, Vilnius called for the common EU-27 approach on China, indirectly implying that Brussels should actually align better with the Lithuanian position. In comparison to understandably cautious and economy-minded Eurocrats, more success of such calls for solidarity has been achieved within the security-focused NATO. Among the European members, Lithuania has become the clearest advocate of a common trans-Atlantic China policy since roughly the end of 2019 (Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2021a), and that position might have contributed to the alliance’s decision to host its 2023 summit meeting in Vilnius (NATO 2021). In the meantime, the southernmost Baltic state will have to further build up its comprehensive resilience to the world’s most clear-cut *emerging* superpower. There is no guarantee that the other two members of the group or indeed the rest of the Euro-Atlantic and Western security and normative community in general would not find themselves in a similar position vis-à-vis China. The ongoing Lithuanian case study thus has to be carefully observed and studied if not necessarily followed.

## 6 Conclusions

Throughout these last several years, China has indeed become an increasingly important factor in the security of the three Baltic states. Although the widespread acknowledgement of this trend continues to be primarily associated with the timespan of roughly 2017–2019, i.e. from the Sino-Russian naval drills in the Baltic Sea to the trio’s intelligence agencies’ explicit recognition of China as a threat to their security, the qualitative study of the rising Chinese profile

<sup>9</sup> The term derives from Chinese action movie series and describes a particularly aggressive style adopted by Chinese diplomats under Xi.

<sup>10</sup> Dovilė Šakalienė, a member of the Lithuanian Parliament (Seimas), notably belongs to the country’s largest social-democratic party, which is in political opposition to the current right-wing government.



at the superior levels of analysis, namely the global/systemic and European/sub-systemic, clearly revealed that the Asian emerging superpower has been affecting the Baltic security, particularly if understood in a broader way, for substantially longer.

All being open and fairly digitalised economies but also small states with a particular stake in preservation of international rules, obligations and peace in general, the Baltics have gradually become more exposed to China's stepped-up and often destabilising activities in the global commons of the open oceans, including the Arctic, as well as air, outer and cyber space. Despite the fact that Beijing's proactive efforts in tackling more traditional security crises across the globe through the UN or various ad hoc frameworks could really be interpreted as positive contributions to international order and peace, some of these have actually resulted in not only greater mutual contact but also larger, more regularised and diversified Chinese security presence first on the periphery of and then in Europe itself.

A decidedly negative development from the Baltic perspective is that these Chinese advances are often facilitated by Russia. Long concerned about the deepening Sino-Russian strategic partnership in general and its security component in particular, the trio should especially worry about Beijing's increasingly apparent support for Moscow's actions in the international arena and even its military modernisation. Moreover, China's emergence as a significant actor in the Eastern Partnership countries, particularly Ukraine and Belarus as the two largest and most proximate to the group, has already acquired a notable security dimension. In general, the Baltic states have come to notice a worrying resemblance between Russian and Chinese often provocative and destabilising actions towards their respective neighbourhoods.

As faithful members of the Euro-Atlantic alliance system and Western economic and normative community, the three countries paid growing attention to the imminent recognition of the Chinese challenge among their allies, and turned especially sensitive regarding suspicions that their previous formal adherence to Beijing-led multilateral initiatives contributed to divisions on the continental (pan-European), EU and NATO levels. Clearly having this unity in mind, the trio has recently started to scrutinise security-related aspects of their own bilateral relations with China, which was itself made more pertinent due to the latter's intensified activities in the Baltics. Initially surprised by Chinese intelligence gathering and influencing attempts, the group has been lately reviewing both main bilateral cooperation areas with clear security repercussions, namely critical infrastructure and high- and deep tech.

Ultimately at stake in this regard is the Baltic states' safe and relevant position within the Western alliance system, normative integrity, long-term prosperity and thus their comprehensive security. Failure to recognise this until it is too late might lead to near-existential challenges for the trio, particularly considering the deepening Sino-Russian strategic partnership. The Lithuanian case is indeed instructive on most of these accounts, as the Chinese factor has already acquired additional security dimensions (namely, energy-related) even in comparison to the fellow Baltic neighbours, while Beijing's retaliation for the decisions taken in Vilnius demonstrates not only the costs of such a review (the former's perspective) but also the price behind the actual relationship in question (the latter's perspective). China's objective transition from a mere security factor to a threat is in the making here.

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