

# Serbia and China – successful cooperation based on trust and respect

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(picture ma)

*The Third Belt and Road Economic Forum (BEF), held on 17–18 October 2023 in Beijing, was a global event of historic importance. It was devoted to marking the first decade since the inception of the Global*

*Development Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by the President of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping, in September 2013. Attended by heads of state or government and other high representatives of 140 countries of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Europe, as well as by representatives of 30 international organisations, including Secretary General of United Nations Antonio Guterres, the BEF has summed up unprecedented achievements in the past 10 years and laid down the firm foundations for continuity and clear vision of future priorities.*

The Third BEF Summit was, by all standards, an extraordinarily important global event with messages of economic, political, and cultural nature. Extraordinary attention of the world public comes from its agenda which, essentially, focused on the BRI's role in building a jointly safe and prosperous shared future for mankind.

The Beijing Third BEF Summit has summed up great achievements in the implementation of the goals set up 10 years ago. 150 countries and 30 international organisations have signed agreements for cooperation under BRI. The total value of investments in the development projects under BRI amounts to about one trillion US dollars. New trans-regional and trans-continental economic corridors have been established, and modern railways, roads, pipelines, electric grids, industrial parks, clean energy blocks, and many other projects have been built, providing new employment and better life for millions of people all over the world. Modernisation

and construction of the global infrastructure and establishment of direct continental and intercontinental routes, railways, seaways, and airways have extended and reinforced physical connectivity among countries, continents, and oceans without precedent in history.

People-centered orientation has always been of utmost importance in all fields of cooperation, including “small yet smart” programs, health laboratories, food production, education, and tourism. Cultural, scientific, and people to people exchange has been rising steadily, promoting mutual learning, understanding, and trust amongst peoples and civilizations. No other known initiative or international integration has ever contributed so much to the growth of the global economy and better life of the people on the planet as cooperation under the BRI has done. This has been the BRI's way of building peace through the development and community of a shared future for mankind.

The holding of the Third BEF Summit and CEO Conference, in parallel, coincided with the deepening of tectonic changes in global relations. Many new cooperation agreements have been signed during CEO conference, amounting to USD 97.2 billion in total. Two major Chinese banks – Development Bank and Export-Import Bank – have each set up a RMB 350 billion financing window. An additional amount of RMB 80 billion will be available to the Silk Road Fund. It was announced that China will carry out 1000 small scale livelihood assistance projects.

## The global majority stands firmly by universal principles and values

The global majority strives towards intensification of the process of building the new multi-polar world order based on equality, openness, inclusiveness, non-interference, and freedom of choice of socio-economic development. New democratic governance of global relations will serve equal rights and needs of all nations, all regions, and all human beings, not the chosen ones only. It has become quite clear that the global majority stands firmly by universal principles and values, by International Law enshrined in the UN Charter, not by so-called “rules” promoted by self-proclaimed “defenders” of democracy, human rights, and so on. The global majority firmly rejects any form of neo-colonial relations, hegemony, or interference in internal af-

fairs. They perceive BRI, its principles, institutions, and new integrations like BRIKS+, SCO, and EAEU as the pillars and forerunners of the just and truly democratic world order.

In the time of looming global recession provoked by broken supply lines, protectionism, illegal sanctions, energy and food crises, and enormous spending in wars and armament instead in development, the Third BEF Summit became the largest, unique global forum that successfully prioritises constructive approaches to sustainable development, stability, responsible governance, mutually beneficial cooperation instead of provoking Cold War divisions, confrontations and, even, wars, thus restraining peaceful development.

China's people and leadership headed by President Xi Jinping, provided lasting and steady progress in all spheres of internal socio-economic development, as well as in open bilateral and multilateral cooperation, in contributing to resolving the main world challenges and crises. “China can only do well when the world is doing well,” said President Xi Jinping in his opening remarks. China has become a synonym of the policy of openness and reform, rejuvenation and innovation, adaptation and stability, elimination of poverty, and highest achievements in the fields of G5, AI, robotics, microbiology, and space exploration – in new technologies in general. The country's ability to face new challenges and seek solutions in the interest of all, to keep initiative and prosper, to always perceive its own development closely linked with the global and development of others have won China a reputation of a friendly and trustful partner. A number of global initiatives, such as Development Initiative, Peace Initiative, Civilization Initiative, and normalisation of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have been acclaimed by the world public and all responsible, peace and prosperity-oriented people.

## Second Decade Priorities

Eight major steps strategy presented by President Xi Jinping at BEF Summit for the future development under BRI confirms a clear vision and determination that this unique integration will continue to gain strength and grow globally, open, inclusive, and multidimensional for the mutual benefit of participating countries and organisations, as well as for the

continued on page 11

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### “Serbia and China – successful ...”

continued from page 10

benefit of the global economy at its crucial juncture. In the words of President Xi Jinping, the BRI is: “Planning together, building together, and benefiting together.” Although it is pronounced in the context of economic cooperation, it is equally relevant when talk goes about the need to safeguard peace and equal security for all. Time and again, we realise that peace, security, and development are indivisible. Priorities for the next decade of cooperation under BRI include, among other: building high quality multidimensional connectivity networks in China and Europe; supporting an open world economy; green development; innovation for all; people-to-people exchange; compliance evaluation system for companies involved in BRI cooperation; promoting integrity-based BRI cooperation; strengthening institutional building.

BEF Summit was a clear manifestation of the will, interest, and decisiveness of all to work together, deepening mutual understanding, solidarity, and win-win cooperation – for a better future for humanity. In addition, the Summit provided an excellent opportunity for bilateral exchange among leaders of so many countries about issues of mutual interest, including ways and means to end tensions, confrontation, and wars, such as one in Ukraine and the other in the Middle East, how to channel resources, human and economic potentials to better satisfy the needs for equal development and equal security of all countries. To sum it up – how to build a democratic, just, pro-human multi-polar world order.

### Serbia, China, and BRI

Independent, military neutral Serbia and China are traditional friends and true partners. Their relations are based on profound mutual trust and respect. They support each other in safeguarding legitimate rights and interests in international forums, particularly in the United Nations. Serbia supports the policy of One China; China supports Serbia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, considering that the Province of Kosovo and Metohija remains an integral part of sovereign Serbia.

Since its inception, Serbia has played a prominent role in implementation of the BRI and China-CEEC cooperation under BRI. Being a Balkan and central European country, a crossroad of regional and Euro-Asian corridors, Serbia has arisen as the hub and bridge in China-Europe (EU) cooperation under BRI in promoting connectivity and trade and, particularly in enhancing Land and Sea Express Line from

Mediterranean Sea ports (Piraeus, Thessaloniki) towards Central and Northern Europe.

### 2016 Turning Point

While Serbia-China cooperation enjoyed and reached a long history of progress, the state visit of President Xi Jinping to Serbia in 2016 was a turning point in building a comprehensive strategic partnership. Dozens of different agreements have been signed, providing the legal basis for trade cooperation, infrastructure investments, energy production, industry, and public services.

In the meantime, the trade volume has increased 185 times. Chinese companies – *China Road And Bridge Corporation (CRBC)*, *China Shandong Int.*, *China Communication Construction Company (CCCC)*, *China Railway Int.*, *Shandong High Speed*, *Ling Long Zrenjanin* – have constructed hundreds of kilometres of modern highways, bridges, industries, mines, railways, laboratories. Three Chinese companies operating in Serbia (*Zijin Mining*, *Zijin Copper*, *Bor*, and *Hibis Group Serbia Iron and Steel*, Belgrade) became the first, second, and third largest exporters from Serbia. China became Serbia’s No. 2 trading partner. Beginning in 2021, China became the largest foreign investor in Serbia. Over 20,000 people have been employed in Chinese companies operating in Serbia. National and trans-border modern roads and railways constructed by Chinese companies under the BRI and China-CEEC framework have substantially expanded the benefits of Serbia’s favourable geo-political position, regional connectivity, and productivity of the national economy.

Coupled with impressive economic cooperation, other fields of cooperation have been advancing. People to people exchange is growing in all directions of science, education, culture, sports, youth, think-tanks, especially tourism. Serbia has opened a Cultural Center in Beijing, while China has constructed in Belgrade, one of the largest and nicest cultural Centres in Europe. The Centre is located at Confucius Square No. 1, near the place where the building of the Chinese Embassy used to be located by April 1999, apparently by mistake, bombed and destroyed by NATO planes during illegal military aggression against Serbia (FRY). The people-to-people exchange received strong impetus when agreements on abolishing visas and establishing direct air links came into force several years ago. Now, direct flights from Belgrade to Tianjin are operating, and negotiations are underway to

establish additional flights from Belgrade to Beijing and/or Shanghai.

### High-speed train from the Mediterranean to the North Sea

There are many symbols of the successful Serbia-China economic cooperation under the BRI. But two of them have particular reputation and relevance. First is *Steel and Iron Co.* in Smederevo, a town on the Danube River, employing over 5000 people, which President Xi Jinping visited in 2016 and later said that Serbia and China are “Steel Friends”. Ever since then, this expression has become common. The second symbol is the high-speed railway Belgrade-Budapest (350km), which will shorten the time of travel between Serbian and Hungarian capitals from the present 8 hours to 2.40 hours. First section of the railway Belgrade-Novı Sad has been completed and functioning since 2022. Serbia’s part till the border with Hungary is expected to be completed by the end of 2024, while the whole project, including Hungary’s section, is expected to be finalised by the end of 2025. This will be the first high speed railway financed and constructed by China in Europe and the first railway with a wireless communication system. Belgrade-Budapest railway is part of the railway modernisation on the *European Corridor 10*, vertically connecting the Mediterranean ports of Piraeus and Thessaloniki with Central and Eastern Europe and the Northern and Baltic Seas. It is noteworthy that, according to public statements of high-level representatives, the European Commission has recently offered Serbia financial assistance for the modernisation of the southern railway branch on the same E-10 Corridor from Belgrade to Nis (240km).

Serbian delegation headed by President *Aleksandar Vucic* and comprising several government ministers and a number of CEOs participated at the BEF Summit and CEO Conference. A new set of 18 agreements had been signed between Serbia and China, including a strategically important Agreement on free trade. It is expected that this Agreement will inject new impetus into bilateral trade, boosting, especially, Serbian export of food, wines and spirits, meat, as well as industry products. President Aleksandar Vucic and President Xi Jinping held strategically important talks about the ways to expand and intensify bilateral, multilateral, and especially cooperation under the BRI and CEEC framework. The two presidents have reaffirmed “steel friendship” among

continued on page 12

Democratic Republic of Congo/ICRC

## Humanitarian catastrophe continues to escalate after shelling of civilian population

In February 2024, the *Ndosho* hospital in Goma, in the east of the DRC, received six times more patients than usual, forcing it to double its capacity and transfer patients to the provincial hospital in Bukavu. Forty per cent of these patients were victims of heavy artillery used in urban areas, including near camps for displaced people on the outskirts of Goma. This is a sign of a new turning point in the conflict in the DRC, according to the *International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)* teams on the ground.

“I saw a baby who had been hit in the abdomen by shrapnel, a baby who was barely nine months old. It raises questions about the humanity that must prevail in armed conflicts, and it gives a very brief overview of the humanitarian disaster that is afflicting the east of the DRC today,” said *Robert Mardini*, the ICRC’s director-general, during a five-day visit to the country.

The wounded are pouring into medical facilities, which are often deserted by medical staff who had to flee the fighting. Hospitals are desperately short of equipment and the remaining staff are forced to evacuate patients to other towns, particularly Goma. The ICRC is transporting the wounded by boat to Bukavu to relieve the *Ndosho* hospital.

Between 1 October 2023 and 29 February 2024, 112 people injured in clashes were transferred from the *Ndosho* hospital in Goma to the Bukavu provincial hospital, a facility also supported by the ICRC.

“In 2023, we had 60 patients a month. But since 2024, we have seen a spectacular increase in the number of patients. In February alone, we received 342 cases, which is six times more than in a normal situation,” explained *Roger Mburano*, the ICRC’s surgical project manager at *Ndosho* Hospital.

The injuries recorded by the medical staff are varied and multiple. “There

are abdominal injuries, there are chest injuries, there are head injuries, there are upper and lower limb injuries,” continued *Roger Mburano*. “We receive people injured by weapons and bomb explosions, as well as stab wounds,” he concluded.

The ICRC has been supporting the *Ndosho* hospital in Goma since November 2012. Never before had the centre faced such an outbreak of violence, forcing the ICRC to increase its capacity from two to three surgical teams. This is in addition to the measures already taken, which include donations of equipment and medicines, staff training, financial aid, and the rehabilitation and fitting-out of various buildings. Since 2013, support has also been provided to the Bukavu provincial hospital, where the ICRC has opened a training centre for war surgery.

Source: <https://www.icrcnewsroom.org/story/en/2081/drc-the-influx-of-civilians-wounded-by-heavy-weapons-overwhelms-hospitals-in-the-ki-vus/0/oQeZVEEpZ> of 6 March 2024

### “Serbia and China – successful ...”

continued from page 11

two countries and peoples, mutual openness, and readiness to expand and intensify all fields of mutually beneficial cooperation. They underlined the importance of adherence to the policy of one China and respect of sovereignty and territorial integrity to Serbia, respectively. The end of 2025 was reaffirmed as the deadline for completing the high-speed railway Belgrade-Budapest. Serbia-China friendly relations and comprehensive cooperation have been praised as a good example and inspiration.

After the 17–18 October visit of President Aleksandar Vucic to China, his participation at the BEF Summit, and talks with President Xi Jinping, the dynamics of Serbia-China cooperation and the political dialogue have received new impetus. Serbia’s Prime Minister *Ana Brnabic* visited Shanghai on 4–6 November to represent Serbia as the guest of honour at the *Shanghai International Import Expo (CIIE)*. She held talks with Prime Minister *Li Qiang* and, on 6 November, was received by President Xi Jinping in Beijing. Serbia’s Prime Minister met a number of important business partners, including from *Shanghai Renewables Co.*, with whom she discussed implementation of renewable energy project.

Regular highest-level political dialogue, paired with practical business negotiation, continues to distinct Serbia-China relations and cooperation.

Serbia’s cooperation and strategic comprehensive partnership with China, as its active role in international cooperation under the BRI and China-CEEC framework, has brought Serbia multifaceted benefits.

First of all, Serbia received significant and stable support for the economic reconstruction of the country and dynamic socio-economic development; finances to renew, modernise, and extend essential infrastructure, particularly trans-border communication connectivity. It is crucial that China has never put any political precondition to support Serbia in any field.

Second, Serbia brought in new technologies and improved employment, especially for young, educated people. Living standard improved.

Third, BRI and CEEC cooperation helped Serbia to get better connected to the European and global infrastructure and trade; to modernise roads, railways, telecommunications, and electricity production; to be closely connected to the sources of innovation and new technologies, such as 5G, AI, robotics, green development and so on.

Fourth, to secure a higher rate of GDP rise, thus helping the national economy to bridge the development gap towards developed economies of Europe (EU). Over the past years, Serbia’s cooperation with China, BRI and CEEC frameworks has justified this expectation. Even today, in the period of recession in Europe, Serbia succeeds in main-

taining a higher GDP rise than most of her neighbours, some of whom are EU members.

Fifth, maintaining and further developing cooperation with neighbouring countries, countries of the western hemisphere, particularly with EU member countries, Serbia, at the same time, is working hard to expand and intensify cooperation with China, Russia, India, and countries of the Global South, thus endeavouring to secure more balanced dispersion of economic interests on geopolitical landscape.

Drawing from its own experience, Serbia understands well the risks of being economically and financially over-dependant on one geopolitical side. Economic sovereignty is not an outdated value, as some pretend. It may be that only conditions and ways to safeguard it have changed.

Serbia is confident that her best way to a better life is by safeguarding independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, openness for mutually beneficial cooperation, military neutrality, and respect for the principles of the UN Charter. Serbia does not need to be taught who are “democracies”, who are “autocracies”, who spread “malign influences”, and who export “coloured revolutions”, who are “reliable” and who are “unreliable” partners. Freedom to choose partners and areas of cooperation is an unalienable sovereign right. •

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