THE VISEGRAD FOUR COUNTRIES AS AN OBJECT OF CHINA'S GEOPOLITICAL INTERESTS IN THE CONTEXT OF GREAT-POWER CONFRONTATION

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Abstract

This article examines China's geopolitical interests in the Visegrád Four (V4) countries within the context of great-power rivalry. The study highlights how the ongoing global crisis has reshaped bilateral and multilateral relations, with the European Union (EU) emerging as a significant focus of China's strategic influence. The V4 countries, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary, have become especially relevant due to their industrial capacities, relatively recent EU membership, and geographical location on the EU's eastern borders.

The research reviews previous studies on China's influence in Europe, including soft-power initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), foreign investments, and trade relations. It explores how various political dynamics within V4 states have affected their stance towards China, noting Poland's cautious engagement, the Czech Republic's increasing alignment with Western allies, Slovakia's political shifts, and Hungary's deepening partnership with Beijing. Additionally, the article investigates China's role in Europe's green energy and digital infrastructure, assessing the implications of economic dependencies.

The findings suggest that while China perceives V4 countries as gateways into Europe, geopolitical shifts, including the EU's Global Gateway Initiative and growing concerns over technological security, challenge Beijing's strategies, prompting V4 countries to reconsider their engagement with China and seek alternative partnerships aligned with EU and NATO frameworks. Ultimately, the study underscores the dual pressures faced by V4 states as they navigate economic opportunities from China and political commitments within the EU and NATO.

Keywords: *Visegrad Four, China, geopolitical interests, global crisis, European Union.*

Problem Statement: In a global crisis, the confrontation between the world's geopolitical powers is driving significant changes in bilateral and multilateral relations. Under such circumstances, the European Union (EU), as a representative of the so-called "Global West," naturally becomes an object of interest for the People's Republic of China (PRC), which remains the primary competitor of the United States in the struggle for global hegemony. At the same time, the countries of the Visegrád Group (V4), comprising Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary, rank among the EU member states that attract the most significant interest from China. These nations hold a substantial share of industrial production within the Union, are relatively recent EU members, and are positioned along the Union's eastern border. As a result, they are more inclined to consider diversifying their external partnerships.

Analysis of Recent Research and Publications

The scholarly literature on China's presence in Central and Eastern Europe has expanded significantly in recent years, reflecting the growing importance of the region within Beijing's geopolitical strategy. However, much of the existing research remains fragmented, lacking an integrated comparative perspective on the Visegrád Group as a collective entity.

A significant body of work has focused on China's soft power tools and strategic initiatives. Casarini examines the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on EU and NATO security, emphasizing the risks posed by deepening connectivity with China (Casarini, 2024a, 2024b). Szczudlik analyses China's overarching interests in the region, underlining its perception of Central and Eastern Europe as a key zone for influence projection (Szczudlik, 2022). Rough identifies the main methods of China's influence in Europe, including hybrid tactics such as disinformation and cyber operations (Rough, 2024).

In the domain of economic dependence, several authors have addressed Europe's vulnerabilities in relation to China. Lipke, Oertel, and O'Sullivan investigate the risks of dependency on Chinese green industry components and propose strategies to mitigate them (Lipke, Oertel, & O'Sullivan, 2024). Similarly, Szunomar highlights Chinese investments in electric vehicle supply chains as a major avenue for economic leverage over V4 countries (Szunomar, 2024).

Country-specific studies offer additional insights into bilateral dynamics. Nawrotkiewicz provides a nuanced analysis of Poland's cautious political and economic approach toward China, shaped by the evolving geopolitical context (Nawrotkiewicz, 2023, 2024). Kowalski explores the complexity of Czech-Chinese relations, linking political leadership shifts with changes in strategic orientation (Kowalski, 2023). Šimalčík and Šebok investigate Slovakia's repositioning under Prime Minister Robert Fico, with particular attention to renewed political alignment with Beijing (Šimalčík & Šebok, 2024a, 2024b).

Together, these works illuminate various dimensions of China's engagement with Central and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, they largely treat V4 countries in isolation, without systematically assessing their shared characteristics or divergent trajectories in response to Chinese influence. The present study seeks to bridge this gap by providing a comparative geopolitical analysis of China's relations with the Visegrád Four in the context of intensifying great-power confrontation.

Results of the study:

The balance of relations between China, or PRC, and European states has dramatically changed over the past three decades, especially considering the absence of large-scale confrontations between the parties. In the early 2000s, economic relations between Europe and China gained new momentum due to increased European investments in the Chinese market. PRC's opening to foreign investors and improved market access led to a significant rise in foreign direct investment. This trend was driven both by the general liberalization of China's economic policies for foreign enterprises and the long-term growth potential of the Chinese economy (Taube, 2002).

European enterprises planned to significantly expand their presence in China by relocating production facilities to the country. This process aimed to capitalize on lower labor costs and access to a rapidly growing market. However, these shifts came at the expense of reducing European industrial capacities, posing challenges for local labor markets, particularly in Central and Eastern European regions that were less economically developed and more dependent on traditional manufacturing sectors. As a result, a global redistribution of production resources occurred, accelerating existing structural transformations. This resulted in the primary benefits being concentrated in Western European countries, while less developed nations experienced declining investment flows and faced competition from China in Western European markets.

The development of the PRC's financial system and expanding capital markets were anticipated to create opportunities for greater participation by European financial institutions. The increase in capital flows beyond direct foreign investments was also expected to be an essential element of economic cooperation. Alongside these changes, the adaptation of European companies to the Chinese market was seen as a strategically significant step for maintaining competitiveness in the context of globalization (Taube, 2002).

Over the past two decades, the consequences of these strategies have become increasingly evident. As of the time of writing, China is dominant in EU-China relations. From an economic perspective, the PRC has adopted a strategy focused on controlling global supply chains. Chinese subsidies, market restrictions, and dumping practices significantly challenge the European economy. Europe's economic dependence on China continues to grow, posing risks to the region’s strategic autonomy and stability. China employs a multi-layered strategy to strengthen its influence in Europe and weaken transatlantic coordination. In the economic sphere, the PRC utilizes dumping practices and export restrictions on critical resources such as rare earth metals, increasing Europe's reliance on its supplies. At the same time, China seeks to capture European opportunities through investments in strategic industries, including semiconductor manufacturing, port ownership, and infrastructure (Rough, 2024).

Concerns among European officials and business leaders have escalated in response to these trends. According to a 2024 survey conducted by the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China among European firms operating in China, approximately half of the respondents reported lost business development opportunities due to market access restrictions or regulatory barriers, expressed pessimism about short-term profitability, or planned to reduce expenditures. Meanwhile, only 42% of respondents intended to expand their operations in the PRC, marking the lowest level recorded in the history of monitoring this indicator (European Union Chamber, 2024).

China's military influence is reinforced by its close ties with Russia, which support the Russian defense sector and facilitate the circumvention of international sanctions. Moreover, Beijing promotes the concept of European "strategic autonomy," which aims to weaken Europe's ties with the United States through the use of political and informational tools, including cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns (Rough, 2024).

In response, the European Union has chosen a course aimed at reducing its strategic vulnerability. The EU's reliance on energy resources from the Russian Federation (RF), which became particularly evident following the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, underscored the necessity of reducing dependence not only on Russia but also on the People's Republic of China (Italian Institute, 2023). The principal instruments for implementing these plans were outlined in the European Economic Security Strategy, published by the European Commission. Most of these measures are designed to modernize and restructure industrial production and resource extraction, diversify external economic ties, and reduce dependence on individual partners (European Commission, 2023a).

Thus, in the early 2020s, China perceived Europe as a platform for expanding its potential sphere of influence. In this context, the Visegrád Four countries have found themselves in an even more disadvantaged position. The People’s Republic of China does not view the region's states as fully autonomous but rather as politically and economically dependent on external powers. A vivid illustration of China’s attitude toward Central and Eastern European countries is its proposal to France and Germany to establish a joint cooperation format with the countries of the region, bypassing direct multilateral engagement with Central and Eastern European states themselves. This initiative reflects China's perception of these countries as objects rather than subjects of international politics, implying a hierarchical worldview in which Central and Eastern European states are seen as instruments or arenas of influence, rather than as equal actors with agency and decision-making power in the international system (Szczudlik, 2022).

Furthermore, in its rhetoric, China emphasizes the control and pressure exerted by the United States and the European Union on the countries of the region, suggesting that this dynamic fosters a desire within the V4 states to attain greater autonomy and significance within both the EU and NATO. In addition to this political factor, there is also an economic dimension. China regards the region as a potential market not only for its goods but also for investment capital, taking into account the fact that these countries still lag behind Western Europe in terms of economic development (Szczudlik, 2022).

An important factor in how the governments of the V4 countries approach the PRC lies in the multi-party nature of their political systems. The Visegrád Group countries feature various political parties with varying ideological orientations. This plurality creates both opportunities and obstacles for China's influence-building efforts. While the presence of sympathetic political forces, such as those in Hungary or post-2023 Slovakia, enables deeper engagement, frequent changes in leadership and ideological polarization, as seen in the Czech Republic, can undermine the continuity and reliability of China's partnerships. The views of ruling political parties or presidents may differ significantly, yet they can still shape the national perception of China. For instance, the former president of the Czech Republic, Miloš Zeman, maintained an openly favorable stance toward China. At the same time, his successor, Petr Pavel, referred to the PRC as a "not friendly" state within the first days of his presidency (Trakimavičius, 2024; Triglavcanin, 2024).

These dynamics make the region a potential arena for Chinese expansion through soft power instruments, as the V4 countries remain open to cultural diplomacy, educational exchange, and investment in non-strategic sectors, areas where influence can be exerted without triggering immediate political backlash. The goal of such efforts is not only to strengthen China's position in the international arena but also to undermine the cohesion of the European Union as a principal ally of the United States, China's primary global competitor in the struggle for hegemony.

As previously mentioned, the conditions for developing relations between the V4 countries and China have been complex and have undergone substantial changes since the beginning of the 21st century. In retrospect, the foundation for increased engagement between China and the region was laid through cooperation under the "16+1" framework, which aspired to enhance connectivity, trade, and investment between China and Central and Eastern European countries. The initiative proposed to proceed by organizing regular summits, launching joint infrastructure projects, and facilitating financial support through Chinese development banks. This platform offered opportunities to expand investment, trade, and infrastructure collaboration between China and the participating Central and Eastern European countries. However, limited economic gains and increasing political risks led to a gradual stagnation of the initiative, which was ultimately discontinued following the withdrawal of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in 2021 and 2022 (Boyse, 2024).

A potentially promising instrument of China's soft power in the region could have been the BRI, which initially attracted interest from the V4 countries in the early 2010s. However, European participation in the initiative followed a trajectory similar to the "16+1" framework. As of 2023, only Hungary and Serbia among the European participants attended the forum for the BRI member states (Fook, 2023).

Until 2020, the PRC predominantly pursued an "easy money" policy to expand its influence in Europe, characterized by three main components. First, China invested in large-scale infrastructure projects, including modernizing logistics hubs, building and managing power generation facilities, and acquiring shares in strategic infrastructure assets. Second, it offered low-interest loans for major infrastructure initiatives, often tied to the requirement that Chinese companies be used for project implementation or equipment supply. Third, Beijing enhanced its international image through soft power instruments, such as cultural and educational exchanges via Confucius Institutes, state-funded centers promoting Chinese language, culture, and arts (Brattberg et al., 2021).

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the shortcomings of economic globalization, particularly in the domain of energy resources, became increasingly apparent. Simultaneously, the development of new trade routes and cultural exchanges encountered growing trends of heightened national security concerns and cultural nationalism. These trends, prevalent across much of Europe, have led to a decline in the effectiveness of traditional tools of influence within the Visegrád Group countries (Casarini, 2024b). As a result, the PRC has faced the necessity of identifying and deploying new levers of influence in Central European states. Among them are:

1. Investments in companies producing electric vehicles and their components (Zgut-Przybylska, 2023).
2. Sales of components for green energy production (Szunomar, 2024).
3. Sales of components and infrastructure construction for 5G telecommunications networks (Szunomar, 2023).

The PRC seeks to capitalize on the demand for environmentally friendly technologies, aligning its exports with the sustainable development agendas of EU member states. At the same time, this strategy poses the risk of creating a new form of dependency of European countries on Chinese goods and technologies as a counterpart to the former energy dependence on the Russian Federation. The rollout of 5G networks, in turn, has emerged as a less expensive yet profitable alternative to large-scale infrastructure projects.

China's cooperation with individual countries in the region has been particularly dynamic since 2020. For instance, the Polish government and its political parties have grown increasingly skeptical of dependency on China, even though economic collaboration remains important. Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, China's ambiguous stance has reinforced the perception of the PRC as a systemic rival in Poland. While Polish policymakers recognize China's economic potential, they are concurrently working to minimize dependence in strategically sensitive sectors, particularly renewable energy, pharmaceuticals, and advanced technologies (Nawrotkiewicz, 2023).

In political terms, Polish-Chinese relations remain unstable. Poland recognizes the value of economic cooperation with the PRC but deliberately avoids political confrontation. This is reflected in the cautious rhetoric regarding China's position on the Russia-Ukraine war, which coexists with efforts to eliminate external economic dependencies on the PRC. Such dependence could undermine Poland's economic security should it be forced to adopt a more confrontational stance against China amid the ongoing geopolitical rivalry between the PRC and the United States (Nawrotkiewicz, 2024).

It is also important to emphasize that despite official statements from both sides expressing intentions to deepen cooperation, the overall nature of bilateral relations remains relatively limited. For instance, in June 2024, Polish President Andrzej Duda visited the PRC, during which several narrowly focused economic agreements were signed (Bachulska, 2024). However, just one week later, Chinese troops participated in joint military exercises with Belarus near the Polish-Belarusian border. These drills were accompanied by statements from the Belarusian leadership emphasizing the need to respond to the "increased NATO activity at the Belarusian border" (POLITICO, 2024). Such an event indicates that Poland's relationship with the PRC is insufficiently robust to constrain China from prioritizing its support for authoritarian regimes.

The situation is further complicated by repeated declarations from Polish officials that Belarus poses a threat to Poland's national security and that the Polish-Belarusian border remains a source of instability, particularly due to ongoing waves of migrants arriving from Belarus (Euronews, 2025). From this, Poland views China as a temporary economic opportunity that should not be entirely dismissed. However, the current global geopolitical crisis compels Poland to refrain from developing risky dependencies on Chinese goods, instead prioritizing alignment with Western partners.

The relationship between the Czech Republic and the PRC has been unstable over the past decade. Miloš Zeman, president of the Czech Republic from 2013 to 2023, held a highly positive view of cooperation with China, as evidenced by his five visits to China during his presidency. Furthermore, in 2016, the two sides signed the Czech-Chinese Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement, which notably did not mention the Republic of China (Taiwan). During Zeman's presidency, other representatives of the Czech government repeatedly expressed support for Taiwan's autonomy or visited the Republic of China, and economic cooperation did not develop significantly even during the country's participation in the "16+1" format (Lau, 2020).

After Petr Pavel was elected President of the Czech Republic, the Czech political elite's perspective on China shifted, no longer favoring official Beijing. The newly elected president held a phone conversation with the

President of Taiwan on the day after his inauguration. This significant gesture shows the new Czech president's preference for Taiwan over the PRC. The discussion focused on shared values of freedom, democracy, and human rights, issues that Miloš Zeman had sought to avoid when addressing China (Kowalski, 2023). Therefore, the Czech Republic is unlikely to serve as an opportunity for the PRC's expansion in Europe and may, in fact, act as an opponent to Chinese influence in the region.

It is important to emphasize that the issue of Taiwan is a cornerstone in the relations between the V4 countries and the PRC, as since 2020, the Republic of China has had the potential to improve its relations with the Visegrad Group states. The lack of expected outcomes from cooperation with the PRC, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine have led to a deterioration in the status of the PRC in the region. In contrast, Taiwan serves as a democratic alternative to communist China. The Republic of China cannot compete with the PRC in terms of economic or political influence in the region; however, it remains an obstacle to Beijing realizing its geopolitical interests in the V4 countries (Rudakowska, 2022).

Slovakia's position towards the PRC has undergone significant changes between 2020 and 2025. As recently as 2021, Slovakia took actions that were in stark opposition to the interests of the PRC. A striking example is the mutual visits of Slovak and Taiwanese delegations. By 2023, the intensification of relations with the PRC lacked support from Slovak society and political forces, with strengthened ties between the two sides occurring primarily through economic elites (Šebok, 2022).

After the change of political leadership in the country in 2023 and the rise to power of Prime Minister Robert Fico, the situation changed radically. Although the PRC was not positioned as the number one partner in the rhetoric of the new Slovak government, Robert Fico's visit to the PRC in October-November 2024 demonstrated the new Slovak leadership’s exceptional commitment to official Beijing. Despite the absence of specific agreements, the outcomes of the visit included the signing of a strategic partnership agreement between the two sides, which contained provisions for Slovakia's "firm commitment" to the One China policy. The delegation included representatives from 56 Slovak companies and business associations, indicating the Slovak government's desire to develop economic relations with China (Šimalčík, Šebok, 2024a). Although Slovakia is not as close to the PRC as Hungary, the new Slovak government has the potential to become a reliable, though not equal, partner for China in Central Europe.

At the same time, Hungary's significance as China's primary partner in Central and Eastern Europe is growing. Throughout his tenure as Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán has been supportive of developing relations with the PRC. A confirmation of this is the signing of an all-weather comprehensive strategic partnership agreement in May 2024 during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Hungary. A number of agreements were also signed, outlining the directions for partnership development between the two countries. Both sides also supported the "One China" policy and the need to develop friendly relations between China and the EU during Hungary's presidency of the European Union in the second half of 2024 (The State Council, 2024). Shortly before this, in February 2024, a significant incident occurred in the security aspect. The Hungarian government rejected a proposal to meet with a delegation of U.S. senators who had arrived in Budapest to accelerate Hungary's ratification of Sweden's NATO membership. A week later, during a meeting between Viktor Orbán and Chinese Minister of State Security Wang Xiaohong, the two sides agreed to deepen cooperation in the security field (The Guardian, 2024).

The visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Hungary in early May 2024 can be considered an act of recognition of Hungary as an important partner in Europe. During the meeting between Xi Jinping and Viktor Orbán, both sides expressed mutual support in a range of economic, political, and security matters. In addition to Hungary, the Chinese leader also visited Serbia (which remains China's main point of interest in Europe outside the EU) and France (whose president Emmanuel Macron advocated for closer relations with China during his visit to Beijing in 2023). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that Xi Jinping's goal was to strengthen ties with the countries most loyal to China in Europe (Atlantic Council, 2024).

Another important aspect is the Hungarian Prime Minister's approach to cultural diplomacy. In 2018, the Hungarian government forced the U.S.-funded Central European University to leave the country (Central European University, 2021). In 2021, against the backdrop of the crackdown on protests in Hong Kong and condemnation of China's actions by the EU, Hungary invited China's Fudan University from Shanghai to establish a campus in Budapest (POLITICO, 2022). Besides that, Hungary, similarly to China, restricts democratic rights within the country quite often, moving closer to authoritarian rule. These restrictions include curbs on civil rights, media freedom, and discrimination against minorities (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

Thus, we can see that Hungary uses China to counter the EU and the USA. In a context where Russia is an open threat to Europe, China presents opportunities for developing relations with non-Western countries. This opportunity becomes increasingly attractive as the government of Viktor Orbán continues to distance itself from the democratic values that form the foundation of the EU's functioning. Therefore, Hungary is the primary target of China's political interest in the Central European region, as the Hungarian authorities are interested in further destabilizing the EU and NATO to promote their own agenda, while China offers an alternative to EU financial flows.

In examining the relationship between the Visegrad Group countries and the People's Republic of China, particular attention should be given to their economic cooperation and, especially, the share of Chinese trade in the external trade balances of each V4 country. As of the most recent data, China accounts for 18.8% of the Czech Republic's imports and 1.4% of its exports. In Poland, Chinese goods make up 10.5% of total imports, while exports to China constitute only 1.1%. Hungary imports 6.7% of its goods from China and exports 2.3%, whereas Slovakia sources 8.2% of its imports from China, with

4.1% of its exports directed to the Chinese market. These figures highlight a substantial trade imbalance, where China plays a prominent role as a supplier to the V4 economies but absorbs only a minimal share of their exports.

Additionally, the trade deficits with China are significantly higher for Poland and the Czech Republic, amounting to approximately $40 billion and $30 billion. In contrast, Slovakia and Hungary report comparatively smaller deficits, around $3 billion and $7 billion. This disparity may partly explain the divergent political approaches of V4 countries toward Beijing. The larger trade imbalances in Poland and the Czech Republic amplify perceptions of economic dependency and vulnerability, potentially reinforcing skepticism toward China's geopolitical intentions. Conversely, the more moderate trade deficits in Hungary and Slovakia may contribute to a more pragmatic or accommodating stance in their relations with the People's Republic of China (The Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c, n.d.-d).

Over the last several years the trend of China's deepening influence in the region is downward. As previously mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian war have revealed the negative consequences of economic globalization and dependence on imports and foreign investment. This led to the launch of the European Union's Global Gateway Initiative (GGI) in 2021. The initiative shares similar goals with the BRI, investment in infrastructure projects, but it is based not on direct economic gain, but on building economic ties aligned with EU values. The implementation of this initiative remains relatively inefficient due to bureaucratic hurdles, a smaller fund compared to the BRI, and requirements for partner countries to adhere to European values (Soler i Lecha, 2025; Costello & Leffler, 2024).

The Global Gateway Initiative aims to create a new infrastructure network that would help the EU gain broader access to the markets of the Global South without becoming part of external trade initiatives such as the BRI. Although the GGI is positioned as an initiative within the broader infrastructure program launched by the G7 in June 2021, it is becoming clear that the EU is attempting to create a system in which it holds the key levers of influence (European Commission, 2023b). Moreover, this initiative provides an opportunity for developing countries to establish beneficial infrastructure partnerships focused on cooperation and intensive development, as opposed to the extensive development and rigid dependency offered by China through the BRI (European Values Center, 2025).

For most Visegrád Group countries, the GGI offers a more complex but ultimately more beneficial alternative to Chinese investments. Considering the above-mentioned trends in the development of V4 states' relations with China, it is expected that the GGI will provide these countries with an opportunity to enhance not only their economic security but also their international standing and position within the EU. This is particularly true for the Czech Republic, whose representative, Jozef Síkela, has served as the EU Commissioner for International Partnerships since 2024, giving the Czech Republic a chance to improve its image and influence. Furthermore, the Czech Republic, as well as other V4 states, does not carry the negative post-colonial image associated with some other EU countries, which provides even better prospects for the V4 inside this initiative (Uhrová, 2025).

The GGI will likely become a key alternative to the BRI for the Czech Republic and Poland. Slovakia, given the change in foreign policy direction under Robert Fico, will not be as radical. As for Hungary, the BRI will remain the main initiative for infrastructure development. This is confirmed by the fact that Hungary ranked second after Indonesia in terms of Chinese investments under the BRI as of 2022 when other countries in the region reduced their activity in the initiative (Green Finance, 2023).

Considering the impact of new tools for China's expansion in relations with the Visegrád Group countries, it is important to note that they also face some obstacles. The supply of components necessary for creating green energy systems in Europe largely depends on China. In 2023, about 97% of components for solar and 27% for wind power plants came from China (Eurostat, 2024). Thus, China has leverage over the EU's plan to transition electricity generation to renewable energy sources. This situation poses a significant threat to the energy security of the European Union and, by extension, to the countries of the Visegrád Group. In response, on March 24, 2024, the EU adopted the European Critical Raw Materials Act, which includes provisions aimed at reducing the risks associated with dependence on raw material imports essential for functioning green energy generation facilities (Council of the European Union, 2024). Several scholars and research centers, both independent and EU-sponsored, have published studies addressing the negative impact of the EU member states' dependence on imports of components for green energy production from China, as well as potential solutions to this issue. The most common recommendations include diversification of imports, stimulation of local production, and international cooperation on this matter, primarily with the United States. However, all researchers acknowledge that while the dependence on China in the area of green energy is a threat to both the security of the organization and the individual member states, it is unlikely that this dependence can be eradicated in the short term (Zgut-Przybylska, 2023; Casarini, 2024a; Lipke et al., 2024; Trakimavičius, 2024).

Some steps towards ensuring the independence of European green energy from China were taken at the summit of leaders of the EU and five Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan held in Samarkand on April 4-5, 2025. One of the main topics of the meeting was cooperation on the supply of critical raw materials, batteries, and green hydrogen (Council of the European Union, 2025). Given that the summit was launched as a platform for cooperation within the framework of the GGI, it can be inferred that the EU's actions are also aimed at countering China's initiative, as the Central Asian states are a key part of the BRI and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Consequently, these actions by the EU not only obstruct the geopolitical interests of China in Europe but also extend further eastward.

Another important green initiative for the EU that China seeks to capitalize on is electric vehicles. According to Eurostat, as of 2024, the PRC is the largest exporter of cars into the EU, an increase of 1591.3% from 2019 to 2024 (Eurostat, 2025). This trend prompted the European Commission to launch an investigation into the Chinese government's subsidization of electric vehicle production. As a result of the investigation, on October 29, 2024, the EU imposed countervailing duties on Chinese-made electric vehicles (European Commission, 2024).

Notably, among the Visegrád Group countries, only Poland voted in favor of the imposition of tariffs on October 14, 2024, while the Czech Republic abstained, and Hungary and Slovakia voted against. Regarding the current state of car and battery production, one factory is already operational in Hungary, and two more are planned for construction. Additionally, one factory is planned for construction in both Slovakia and Poland (Center for Strategic, 2024). The positions of Slovakia and Hungary on this issue appear puzzling, as these countries already have announced or initiated projects to establish Chinese factories. This infrastructure will allow them to profit from Chinese investments, whereas importing finished cars is less profitable. In this situation, a logical explanation is the willingness of the pro-China governments in Slovakia and Hungary to sacrifice economic gains in exchange for political support from China.

In 2025, Hungary has emerged as a pivotal gateway for the expansion of Chinese electric vehicle (EV) manufacturers into the European Union. Among the most prominent developments is the decision by BYD, China’s leading EV producer, to establish its European headquarters and research and development center in Hungary. This move underscores Hungary’s strategic importance as a platform for Chinese industrial outreach and reflects the Orbán government's commitment to deepening bilateral economic ties with the People's Republic of China. In parallel, the Hungarian government has offered generous financial incentives and subsidies to attract Chinese automotive investment, prompting concerns within the EU regarding compliance with the Union’s Foreign Subsidies Regulation. These concerns have triggered investigations by the European Commission into the nature and transparency of Hungary’s financial support for Chinese firms (The Telegraph, 2025; Central European Times, 2025; New Mobility News, 2025).

This intensifying cooperation between Hungary and Chinese EV manufacturers carries broader geopolitical implications. It positions Hungary not only as a manufacturing base but also as a facilitator of Chinese market penetration into Europe under regulatory conditions that may diverge from prevailing EU standards. Observers have noted that, by leveraging its semi-peripheral position within the EU, Hungary enables China to circumvent more restrictive political environments in Western Europe and test the boundaries of the Union’s economic cohesion. This trend contributes to the fragmentation of the EU’s unified position on technological and trade dependencies, further complicating the bloc’s efforts to “de-risk” its reliance on China’s influence in strategic sectors. In this context, Hungary is increasingly portrayed not simply as a partner of China, but as an enabler of Beijing’s long-term strategic positioning within the European industrial landscape.

Against the backdrop of newly imposed tariffs, a significant challenge to the PRC's presence in the European electric vehicle (EV) market comes from the Republic of Korea's (South Korea) investment in EV manufacturing. South Korean producers are adapting their existing facilities, previously used to produce internal combustion engine vehicles, to manufacture "clean" vehicles. Notably, Korean investments surpass those of China ($14.6 billion versus $13.3 billion, respectively) and extend across all four Visegrád Group countries. In addition, Korean companies operate independently of government influence. In contrast, Chinese firms, such as Leapmotor, withdrew from the Polish market following Poland’s support for the imposition of tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles (Sebena, 2024). Consequently, under the current tariff regime, Korean EVs are well-positioned to present substantial competition to their Chinese counterparts, thereby limiting China's influence in this sector and threatening its broader geopolitical interests.

Significant obstacles have also emerged in the implementation of the Digital Silk Road initiative, which involves investments in the development of digital communication infrastructure. These challenges primarily concern the deployment of 5G networks and the operations of Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE. Due to U.S. sanctions imposed on Huawei and ZTE over concerns of potential data transfers to the Chinese government, other NATO member states have adopted similar positions regarding these corporations. As early as 2020, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic signed a Joint Declaration on 5G Security with the United States, committing to rigorously assessing 5G network providers in accordance with cybersecurity standards. In line with these provisions, Chinese companies such as Huawei and ZTE were effectively banned. Hungary, however, did not take comparable measures, and Huawei and ZTE's activities remain unrestricted within its territory (Karásková, 2020).

According to Cullen International, as of October 2024, the V4 countries have maintained their previously established positions on cybersecurity and their approach toward Chinese companies. Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic have not imposed outright bans on all Chinese 5G network providers (in contrast to some other EU member states). However, providers deemed high-risk, specifically Huawei and ZTE, remain prohibited in these countries (Cullen International, 2024). This stance reflects a commitment to the Euro-Atlantic security framework while indicating a reluctance to entirely reject Chinese technological capabilities. Such a position aligns with the European Union’s 2020 Cybersecurity of 5G Networks framework (European Commission, 2020).

As noted, Slovakia’s position has shifted following the return to power of Prime Minister Robert Fico. During his visit to Beijing in October–November 2024, Fico signed a cooperation agreement with the People’s Republic of China on the digital economy, encompassing areas such as cloud computing, artificial intelligence development, satellite navigation, and 5G technologies (Šimalčík, Šebok, 2024b). This move indicates a significant realignment in Slovakia’s cybersecurity approach, effectively replacing the United States with China as its primary partner in this domain.

When assessing the dynamics of trade and investment activity between China and the V4 countries, the trend remains favorable for the People’s Republic of China. According to reports and investment potential assessments conducted by Dezan Shira & Associates, China maintains a surplus in both bilateral trade and mutual investment with the V4 states, a surplus that has proven to be stable over time. All V4 countries have signed agreements with the PRC to avoid double taxation, which enhances the attractiveness of mutual investments. However, given the current balance of such relations, it is China that derives more significant benefits (China Briefing, 2024a, 2024b, 2025a, 2025b).

Among the Visegrád Group countries, analysts at Dezan Shira & Associates identify Poland and Hungary as priority destinations for investment across various sectors, while the Czech Republic is presented as the primary target for investment in the electric vehicle industry, owing to its already well-established automotive manufacturing base. Slovakia, by contrast, is assessed as having the lowest current level and growth potential for economic relations with China. Notably, Slovakia was the only V4 country whose trade volume with China declined over two consecutive years, 2023-2024. However, the overall outlook on the future of Slovak-Chinese economic relations is not viewed in a negative light.

The key sectors for trade and investment between the Visegrád Four and the PRC continue to include electric vehicles, components, and raw materials for green energy generation, as well as advanced technologies (China Briefing, 2024a, 2024b, 2025a, 2025b). Given the current state of bilateral trade between the Visegrád Group countries and the People's Republic of China, it is reasonable to assert that China’s presence in V4 markets will remain a significant tool for advancing its geopolitical interests in the region.

New opportunities for China's economic engagement in the V4 states may emerge following the large-scale imposition of a 10% tariff on all EU products by the United States (The White House, 2025). These tariffs have already disrupted global markets, adversely affecting trade flows and financial markets and triggering a crisis in global trade within days of implementation (The Guardian, 2025). Robert Stehrer, Scientific Director of The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, forecasted a particularly negative impact on the Visegrád countries, primarily due to the 25% tariffs imposed on automotive products. This is especially problematic given that these countries are among the EU's leading automobile producers and, consequently, major exporters of these goods to the United States (Stehrer, 2025).

It is unlikely that, under the conditions of the first half of 2025, the automotive industries of Poland and the Czech Republic will reorient toward the East and China in particular. It is also plausible that a decline in the production of electric vehicles will result in a reduced level of imports of components from China. In contrast, Hungary and Slovakia may perceive the situation as an opportunity to deepen their cooperation with the PRC as a counterbalance to the United States, an approach consistent with their recent foreign policy orientations. Overall, the new U.S. tariffs significantly destabilize global markets by disrupting the existing status quo, potentially creating new avenues for China to expand its influence within the V4 region.

Conclusions.

Within the PRC's geopolitical interests, the Visegrád Group countries occupy the position of a bridge to Europe. Despite being members of the European Union, these states have followed a somewhat different developmental path compared to Western European nations. During the early stages of EU-China relations, the V4 countries were unable to fully benefit from access to the Chinese market. By the 2020s, however, the PRC had attained a level of influence that began to pose risks to the economic and national security of the V4 states.

China has employed "soft power" tools in the region to advance its interests. However, these tools have evolved. The infrastructure investments that characterized the 2010s have been increasingly replaced by the export of components and raw materials for green energy infrastructure, electric vehicles, and emerging technologies. Furthermore, multilateral formats such as the BRI and the “16+1” cooperation framework have largely failed to meet expectations, while bilateral relations between China and individual V4 countries have gained significance. Two key factors behind this shift have been the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

China’s political relations with Poland have somewhat deteriorated. The PRC's neutral stance on the Russo-Ukrainian war and its deepening ties with Russia and Belarus have dissuaded Warsaw from pursuing closer political cooperation. Nevertheless, the Polish government remains interested in maintaining stable economic relations with China while simultaneously seeking to reduce its dependence on Chinese imports.

In the Czech Republic, the political course shifted markedly with the election of President Petr Pavel, whose administration has adopted a confrontational stance toward China and has openly expressed support for Taiwan. In contrast, Slovakia has moved in the opposite direction. The new Slovak Prime Minister, Robert Fico, has demonstrated an apparent political inclination toward the PRC, often in opposition to the positions of the EU and the United States.

Under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's leadership, Hungary has pursued an active policy of expanding and deepening cooperation with China across all sectors. Notably, Orbán has demonstrated a willingness to engage with China not only in economic and political domains, but also in the area of security, an approach that sharply contrasts with the strategic directions of both the EU and NATO.

From an economic perspective, the situation for China in the Visegrád Group is mixed. The limited success of the BRI and the EU’s interest in finding alternatives have led to the launch of the GGI. Although the GGI remains far more constrained due to bureaucratic hurdles and its emphasis on European values, it nonetheless poses a potential challenge to China's strategic objectives in Poland and the Czech Republic. Hungary, by contrast, remains firmly committed to BRI, and Slovakia has signaled interest in expanding cooperation with China in opposition to the goals of the GGI.

As of early 2025, all V4 countries maintain negative trade balances with China. Recent trends suggest that efforts to reduce the Visegrád countries' economic dependence on China will likely yield only marginal results in the short term. China's renewed economic approach toward Europe has proven relatively successful: all V4 states remain dependent on imports of components for green energy infrastructure and electric vehicle production. Among the V4, only Poland supported the introduction of countervailing duties on Chinese electric vehicles. Meanwhile, the Czech Republic and Poland have adopted restrictions on 5G suppliers from China. Hungary and the newly installed Slovak government continue to welcome all forms of cooperation with China.

Chinese electric vehicles pose a particular threat to the V4, whose domestic automotive sectors are substantial. However, South Korean manufacturers present significant competition to China in the region, which could influence future market share distribution.

A potential shift in the dynamics of China's economic cooperation with the Visegrád countries may be triggered by the introduction of U.S. tariffs in April 2025. These tariffs may catalyze deepening ties between China and countries such as Hungary and Slovakia. At the same time, they could also provoke adverse outcomes for the PRC by encouraging broader EU protectionism, not only against the United States but also against China.

Overall, two distinct trends can be observed among V4 countries. Poland and the Czech Republic, as pro-democratic states oriented toward the West, are reducing their engagement with China. In contrast, Hungary and Slovakia, governed by populist administrations intent on consolidating power and gradually curtailing human rights, have aligned themselves more closely with authoritarian China. Consequently, the PRC will likely prioritize its relations with Hungary and Slovakia, at least for as long as Viktor Orbán and Robert Fico remain in power. This aligns with Beijing's strategic interests, as both countries consistently oppose deeper integration within the EU and NATO and often promote initiatives that conflict with European values. Meanwhile, the Czech Republic and Poland are expected to maintain economic cooperation with China while simultaneously working to reduce their dependence on Chinese goods and investments.

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