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PRESENTATION OF THE THREE PHASES OF CHINA-CEEC COOPERATION IMPLEMENTATION

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Abstract

The author reflects on his first experience in China in 2014, highlighting the World Trade Organization's (WTO) discriminatory treatment of China despite its membership since 2001. Over time, China has emerged as a key global trade player, notably after signing the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) agreement, which covers approximately 30% of the world's GDP. At the 2021 China-CEEC summit, President Xi Jinping emphasized equal collaboration, balanced economic growth, and the significance of innovation. Trade between China and CEEC countries increased by 85% over nine years, with key projects like the Budapest-Belgrade railway underway. China is committed to green growth and digital transformation through the establishment of research centers and the promotion of sustainable energy. Cooperation in science and technology includes creating an innovative collaboration network linking research institutions and enterprises. A talent cooperation project fosters the exchange of high-level professionals between China and CEEC, with research centers coordinating resources and projects. Agreements with CEEC include infrastructure projects such as the Peljesac Bridge and support long-term partnerships. China continues to enhance its role in the international economic arena by focusing on sustainability, innovation, and interconnected development.

Keywords: *Xi Jinping, China-CEEC, WTO, Ningbo Innovation Cooperation Research Center, RCEP.*

1 INTRODUCTION

When the author first visited China in 2014 and attended a seminar entitled *WTO Rules and China's Approach*, organized by the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, he did not clearly understand the seminar's purpose. However, with the benefit of hindsight, it has become evident. The author finds it difficult to reconcile the fact that, at that time, the World Trade Organization treated China in a way that undermined China's status. According to one of the lecturers, the WTO regarded China as a less developed country compared to other WTO members.

China became a WTO member in 2001. For comparison, several other CEEC member states joined in a similar timeframe, including Albania (2000), Croatia (2000), Estonia (1999), Latvia

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(1999), Lithuania (2001), and North Macedonia (2003). (WTO, 2023)

China's entry into the WTO was a turning point in its economic rise, opening doors to global trade and accelerating its integration into international markets. With greater access to trading partners, lower borrowing costs, and a stronger position in global supply chains, China quickly became a dominant player. WTO membership also drove key reforms of liberalization, which led to an increase in foreign investment inflows (Kralj, Borsic, & Senekovic, 2022). This transformation fueled the rapid growth of companies like Huawei, Alibaba, and Lenovo, which leveraged China's expanding market access and economic modernization to compete head-on with established Western firms in technology and manufacturing.

At the seminar at that time, the organizers presented quite a few important and today very recognizable Chinese companies that benefited from China's entry into the WTO, among them Huawei, which is the leading technological company in the world in 5G mobile technology. As part of the seminar, participants visited Hainan Island, which was transformed into a free trade port after signing the world's largest free trade agreement in 2020. The signatories of the RCEP have a total of 2.2 billion inhabitants and generate around 30 percent of the global gross domestic product (GDP), so the trade agreement between them represents a major positive step forward for trade and investment in the region. Just 20 years after joining the WTO, China has risen so quickly that it is now able to write the rules of trade in the regional environment by itself, a point emphasized by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang at the signing of the agreement, where he stated that "the signing of the RCEP is not only a milestone in East Asia's regional cooperation, but also a victory for multilateralism and free trade" (CPPCC-China, 2020).

At the 2021 China–CEEC Summit, Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, praised the ongoing cooperation and outlined key guidelines for its future development. Among other points, he emphasized that nine years had passed since the launch of cooperation between China and the Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC) — a decision that, in his view, responded to the spirit of the times and aligned with prevailing development trends. (China-CEEC, 2024).

President Xi Jinping did not forget to mention that during the summit; countries are increasingly trying to fight against COVID-19. He said that in the face of such unprecedented challenges, countries must come together and respond with solidarity and coordination like never before.

2 PRESIDENT XI JINPING CCEEC SUMMIT SUMMIT ANALYSIS

The first was decision-making through consultation. All participating countries, regardless of their size, are equal partners in a cooperation mechanism that includes extensive consultation, joint input, and shared benefits. Driven by the belief that "*17 plus 1 can be more than 18,*" we have established a multi-dimensional cooperation framework led by a summit of leaders covering 20-plus sectors to ensure the participation of all CEE countries.

The second was ensuring equitable benefits for all participating partners. To make our cooperation more balanced, we have been striving for economic cooperation and cultural exchanges, giving equal importance to trade and investment, and making sure that the fruits of cooperation are shared by all countries and communities. Trade between China and the CEE countries is almost 85 percent higher today than nine years ago, and the growth of Chinese imports from the CEE countries is 22 percentage points higher than the growth of exports.

The third was promoting common development with openness and inclusion. Through mutual learning, we drew on each other's strengths, and through consultation and cooperation, we narrowed down differences and resolved disagreements. When cooperating, we followed generally accepted international rules and considered market principles, and the EU standards.

The fourth was achieving higher growth through innovation. With an innovative and pioneering spirit, we took early steps to explore the possibility of aligning interregional cooperation with Belt and Road cooperation. It made Central and Eastern Europe the first region where all countries signed Belt and Road cooperation agreements.

In 2020, overall relations between China and the EU made new progress despite the challenges caused by the pandemic. China-CEE cooperation is an integral part of China-EU relations, whose good progress means new opportunities for cooperation between China and CEE. (China-CEEC, 2024).

The summit was held during China's 14th Five-Year Plan for Economic and Social Development and the start of the country's renewed effort to develop a modern socialist society. And if we recall, China was faced with maintaining the stability of its industrial and supply chains that year. China was ready to cooperate with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe on vaccines. Until then, Serbia had received one million doses of vaccines from the Chinese company. In the latter vaccine development, cooperation took place between Hungarian and Chinese vaccine manufacturers.

The Technical University in Ningbo sent several packages of protective masks to Slovenia, as there was a chronic shortage. More. The same university previously provided instructions for protection against the SARS-CoV-2 virus, and Alma Mater Europaea was the first institution to translate and distribute this manual (the original editor of which was Prof. Tingbo Liang from China) throughout Slovenia. (AMEU-ECM, 2020)

Some key projects resulting from this cooperation include the Budapest-Belgrade railway line, a $2 billion initiative set to be completed by 2025. As the first Chinese–Hungarian development project implemented under EU regulations, it plays a strategic role in facilitating the faster transport of Chinese goods to Europe via Greek ports. The renewed railway line is also part of the broader Silk Road initiative, strengthening connectivity between Asia and Europe while supporting the EU's goal of shifting cargo and passenger transport to rail, reducing emissions, and improving logistics efficiency in the region (China-CEEC Custom Information Center, 2022).

Another key project under this cooperation is the E763 highway in Serbia, which was developed in partnership with China. The Preljina-Požega section, a €450 million investment financed through a loan from the Export-Import Bank of China, is a critical part of the highway corridor stretching from Belgrade to Montenegro. The project improves interregional connectivity, facilitates trade, and supports local economic development by attracting investors and revitalizing nearby towns and villages. Once completed, it will enhance Serbia's transport infrastructure while aligning with the broader Belt and Road Initiative, further strengthening ties between China and the region (China-CEEC, 2019).

Beyond large infrastructure projects, China-CEEC trade and investment ties have strengthened significantly over the past decade, with two-way investment reaching nearly $20 billion. In the first quarter of 2023 alone, China's direct investment in CEECs rose by 148 percent in annual comparison, reflecting growing interest from Chinese companies in sectors such as auto parts, home appliances, logistics, and energy. Trade between China and CEECs has grown at an average annual rate of 8.1 percent since 2012, with imports from CEECs increasing by 9.2 percent annually. The China-Europe freight train network has also expanded, with 16,000 trains operating in 2022, further enhancing connectivity. Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia have become key destinations, reinforcing China's role as a major trading partner for the region (Ministry of Science and Technology of the People´s Republic of China, 2023)

3 THOUGHTS AND SUGGESTIONS MADE BY PRESIDENT XI JINPING

During the 2021 summit, one of the key themes emphasized by President Xi Jinping was the fight against COVID-19 and the importance of strengthening trust through cooperation. He stated that the fight against the pandemic was the most urgent task for us. To complete this task, China would cooperate with CEE countries through solidarity, coordination, and cooperation. Our two sides could strengthen joint response and experience sharing on prevention and treatment, explore cooperation in traditional medicine, and strengthen public health and medical cooperation. It was emphasized that both sides should remain committed to open engagement, promote liberalization and facilitation of trade and investment, strive to build an open global economy and help move the global economy out of the shadow of the crisis as soon as possible.

Building on these priorities, he proposed to pursue high-quality Belt and Road cooperation while accelerating large-scale projects such as the Budapest–Belgrade Railway. At the same time, continued support for China–Europe Railway Express growth would help unlock the full potential of the partnership.

It was also stated that China would strive to establish a China–CIS Customs Information Center and a central customs clearance coordination point for countries along the China–Europe Land–Sea Expressway. Cooperation could also be explored on a pilot basis under the Smart Customs, Smart Borders, and Smart Connectivity initiative.

It was emphasized that both sides should strive for concrete results and increase the outcomes of cooperation that benefit both parties. Further efforts were encouraged to enhance mutually beneficial trade and investment cooperation, ensuring balanced and sustainable trade growth. China announced plans to import more than $170 billion worth of goods from Central and Eastern European countries over the following five years.

It was also proposed to strengthen business cooperation at the sub-national level and to continue developing China–CEE business cooperation demonstration zones and industrial parks in Chinese cities such as Ningbo and Cangzhou.

It was also stated that agricultural cooperation should be deepened to double the agricultural exports of CEE countries to China and increase two-way agricultural trade by 50 percent over the following five years.

Strengthening exchange and cooperation across culture, education, tourism, sports, media, and the press was identified as a continued priority, alongside fostering connections between think tanks, young professionals, and subnational entities. For that year, a new round of educational policy dialogue and consortium meetings for higher education institutions was scheduled, with additional support directed toward the founding of a university in Hungary by Fudan University.

It was highlighted that both sides should focus on green development and create future-oriented cooperation. To strengthen the green agenda, the China-CEE Green Development and Environmental Protection Year was presented as an opportunity to deepen exchanges and cooperation in the green economy, clean energy, and related fields.

The summit further highlighted the need to strengthen cooperation in science, technology, and innovation (STI). China proposed establishing a China–CEEC STI Research Center, organizing a China–CEEC Forum for Young Talents in Science and Technology, and publishing the 2020 China–CEEC STI Indicator Scorecard. It was also noted that various emerging business models could support expanded collaboration in the digital economy, e-commerce, and health sectors. Additionally, China expressed support for the development of a China-CEE dialogue mechanism on e-commerce cooperation and a China-CEE alliance in the public health industry. (Huo, 2022)

It is needless to emphasize that, already a year after the CCEEC 2021 summit, China has accelerated the implementation of the plan mentioned by President Xi Jinping. Among other things, the bridge to the island of Pelješac in Croatia was already opened in 2022 (China Daily, 2022), and the construction of the Belgrade (Serbia) - Budapest (Hungary) railway began. (China Daily, 2023)

The author wants to highlight an essential point raised by the Chinese President, the need to strengthen cooperation in science, technology, and innovation (STI). Given the significance of this topic, a dedicated chapter will be devoted to examining the operation of the China-CEEC STI Research Center. In this section, there will be also provided an overview of the Research Center's key activities, emphasizing its role in fostering collaboration and advancing STI initiatives.

In the first part of this chapter, the concept of cooperation of the Research Center with individual groups in CEEC and the method of communication will be presented. The second part of the chapter is dedicated to the presentation of operational content. For the final, the third part presents a concrete task carried out by a group of experts from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina,

Serbia, and Romania, led by Prof. Dr. Goran Pavel Šantek from the University of Zagreb (Croatia).

4 WORKING MECHANISM FOR COLLABORATIVE INNOVATION NETWORKS

Collaborative Innovation Network is a regular multilateral innovation exchange and cooperation channel jointly supported and promoted by the competent science and technology authorities of China and CEE countries. It aims to exchange innovation cooperation needs and development plans in several key areas, create innovation cooperation opportunities, serve innovation cooperation among enterprises, research institutes, universities, and other institutions in China and CEE countries, and exploit the innovation cooperation potential between China and CEE countries.

It is proposed that the collaborative innovation network will be composed of three parts: national STI functional departments, working groups (in various fields), and coordinating groups (in different fields). The national STI functional departments are the innovation (or science and technology) authorities of the CEE countries. The coordinate group is appointed by each national STI functional department. The working groups are formed with selected and recommended members by the coordinating group among research institutions, universities, science academies, enterprises, clusters, technology transfer centers, incubators, science and technology parks, etc.

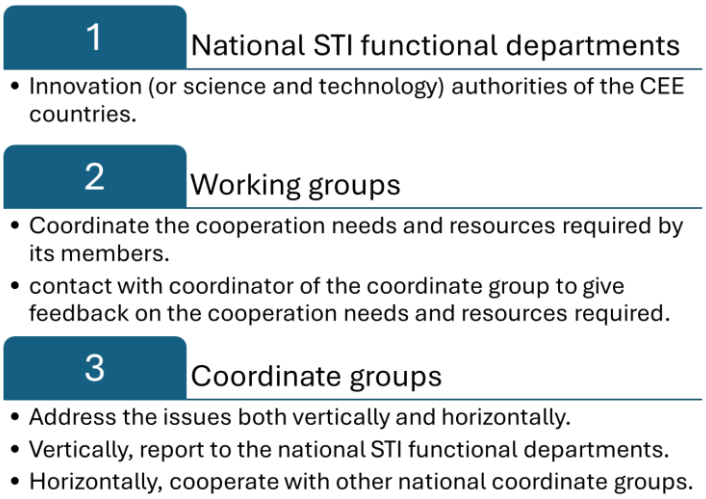

Fig. 1 Collaborative Innovation Network

Source: Author

The operational mechanism works as follows: the working group will coordinate the cooperation needs and resources required by its members and contact the coordinator of the coordinating group to give feedback on the cooperation needs and resources required. The coordinate group will address the issues both vertically and horizontally. Vertically, the coordinating group will report to the national STI functional departments on the resources needed and organize and promote the implementation of resource mobilization. Horizontally, the coordinate group will cooperate with other national coordinate groups to solve the resource issues and cooperation needs raised by the native working groups.

Based on various technology transfer entities and resources, information on the supply and demand of technology transfer can be deeply explored through a collaborative innovation network. All-round and multi-angle docking and promotional activities can be promoted through the promotion platform and co-construction alliance. The network, by actively assuming the role of a platform for resource gathering and information exchange, can unite multiple actors. It aims to jointly promote two-way technology transfer between China and CEE countries, coordinate resource allocation, and enhance the mobility of resources and the transformation of achievements. In doing so, it contributes to scientific and technological development on both

sides and fosters a mutually beneficial, win-win cooperation dynamic.

In the following, I will present part of the project content, which is related to the specific operational duties of the colleagues from the CEEC group.

5 HIGH-LEVEL TALENT COOPERATION: ESTABLISHMENT

5.1 Project Introduction

The "Talent Cooperation" project (hereinafter referred to as "Talent Cooperation") aims to leverage the technical needs and talent resources of various regions and platforms, fostering deeper innovation partnerships between China and Central and Eastern European countries. It provides pathways for high-level talents from Central and Eastern Europe interested in employment, innovation, entrepreneurship, and project collaboration in China.

The initiative focuses on high-level talents eager to pursue innovation and entrepreneurship in China. It promotes talent engagement through research centers and facilitates project cooperation with domestic scientific research institutes and enterprises. Additionally, it supports cooperative projects seeking government approvals, project funding, and relevant awards (see Section 6 for a definition of high-level talents).

Applicants may propose project ideas for evaluation or collaborating on projects initiated by research institutes, enterprises, or other entities, based on mutual interest. Submitted projects must align with the applicant's expertise, address the technological development needs of enterprises, or hold long-term strategic significance.

5.2 Suggestions for Cooperation Content

Since the China-CEEC STI Research Center has established a good cooperation foundation with local governments and has rich working experience in such applications, it is suggested that both parties carry out project cooperation and divide their responsibilities as follows:

1. Recommend high-level talents who meet the application conditions.
2. Assist China in maintaining close communication with foreign applicants, promptly convey Chinese information and requirements, and actively promote communication between the two sides.
3. Cooperate to complete the project application, provide relevant materials required for the application, such as a job certificate, thesis certificate, etc., and ensure the authenticity and integrity of the materials.
4. Ensure that the foreign party applies to participate in the project docking and defense.
5. Once the project is selected, ensure the foreign applicant works in the cooperative organization.

Responsibilities of the research center:

1. Find application units such as scientific research institutions and enterprises and be responsible for maintaining close communication with the application units and providing relevant materials.
2. Providing a list of materials required by the foreign party to apply for the project.
3. Writing application materials and completing the application work.
4. Facilitate coordination and evaluation between the enterprise and the foreign applicant.
5. Perform public relations maintenance.
6. Coordinate the entire process of managing project funds and distributing rewards.

By building innovation cooperation complexes with relevant institutions in various countries, the Research Center will jointly promote cooperation in science, technology, and innovation and explore new paths for international STI cooperation service industries. It will develop a collaborative network with core members and form a platform with multiple stakeholders to promote innovation cooperation between China and CEE countries (CCEECCIC, 2023).

Among many initiatives, this was demonstrated through the "Innovative Youth Share the Future" China-CEEC Forum for Young Science & Technology Talents and the China-CEEC Youth Innovation and Entrepreneurship Competition. The Forum, held in Ningbo in 2021, fostered cooperation among young scientists, focusing on talent exchange and innovation (China-CEEC, 2021). Meanwhile, the Competition, held in May

2023, provided a platform for young innovators and entrepreneurs to collaborate on projects and drive future development (China-CEEC, 2023). These initiatives highlight efforts to strengthen talent cooperation and innovation between China and CEECs.

6 FOREIGN EXPERT PROJECT (CASE PRESENTATION)

The China-CEEC Research Center prepared a project through the mechanisms and based on the letter of intent (number 2022-007), which enabled foreign experts, mostly from the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, to participate in the year 2022-2023.

More important than the letter of intent itself is that the CEEC Research Center has followed the directions given by President Xi Jinping at the China-CEEC Summit. In the articles of the agreement, for example, it is also stated that the partner (foreign experts):

"*Assist the research center to establish contacts with at least 20 scientific research institutions, science and technology parks, technology transfer centers, and innovation government departments in Croatia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Serbia, and Romania, carry out technology transfer (also part of the Innovation Collaborative Network), and carry out various science and technology docking and cooperation activities.*" (Letter of Intent, 2022-007)

By this agreement, a group of experts from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Romania compiled a list of institutions from each of these CEEC countries. The list includes scientific research institutions, science and technology parks, technology transfer centers, and government departments focused on innovation, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Proposed Institutions for Collaboration from Selected CEEC Countries

Croatia	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Serbia	Romania
University of Zagreb	University of Business Studies, Banja Luka	University of Belgrade	Banat University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Timisoara
University of Split	University of Banja Luka	University of Nis	University of Bucharest
University of Osijek	University of Mostar	University of Novi Sad	University POLITEHNICA of Bucharest
University of Rijeka	University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering	Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of Serbia	Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi (UAIC)
Ruđer Bošković Institute	Association of Technology Engineers of the Republic of Srpska	Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts	Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad (ARAD)
Science Park	Innovation Center Banja Luka	Science Technology Park Belgrade (STP Belgrade)	Ovidius University of Constanta
Tech Park	Alliance of innovators of the Republic of Srpska	The Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia	Technopolis Group
Zagreb Innovation Center	University of Tuzla	University of Kragujevac	Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI),
The Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development, Sector for Innovation	Institute of Technology	Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of Serbia	OpenAIRE
Ministry of Science and Education, Sector for Science and Technology	Association for Scientific and Technical Education of Youth in BiH, Sarajevo	Association of Lawyers for Medical and Health Law of Serbia, SUPRAM - Serbia	National Authority for Scientific Research In Romania

7 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, modern Chinese society is increasingly oriented toward development, science, and global cooperation. The analysis conducted in this study has demonstrated that China's economic policies, infrastructure projects, and trade agreements have solidified its position as a key actor in the global economy. Here, it is necessary to emphasize that the system is reinforced by innovations and fair competition, which we have not yet fully grasped in the EU.

There are vast cultural differences, and as President Xi Jinping emphasized in his speech at the 2019 Conference on Dialogue among Asian Civilizations the growing global challenges facing humanity require joint efforts by countries worldwide. He highlighted the role of culture and civilization in addressing these shared issues, promoting the idea that cooperation across civilizations is essential for peaceful coexistence and sustainable development. This vision aligns with China's strategic partnerships with CEECs, where economic cooperation has been complemented by cultural exchange and mutual learning.

In this article, we indicated exactly that. From trade agreements such as RCEP to major infrastructure projects like the Budapest-Belgrade railway and the E763 highway, China has positioned itself as a driving force for regional development. The continuity of China's strategic orientation under the leadership of President Xi Jinping reflects an ambition for global peace, cooperation, and shared prosperity. For those of us who lived during the era of the (Tito's) Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, this kind of international engagement echoes aspirations that were once deeply held. The emphasis on mutual respect between civilizations and the rejection of cultural superiority aligns with the cooperative model China has promoted in its relations with Central and Eastern European countries.

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