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LITHUANIA'S DECOUPLING
FROM CHINA AGAINST
THE BACKDROP OF
**STRENGTHENING
TRANSATLANTIC TIES**

POLICY PAPER

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Summary

- The review of Lithuania–China relations initiated by the current Government has already meant a significant decoupling on both the political–diplomatic and the economic–technological levels.
- Beneficial to Lithuania as it is, this process is taking place against the backdrop of the historic low point in relations between China and the West (unprecedented since the Tiananmen Square Massacre) and the strengthening of transatlantic ties between the EU and the US.
- From the spring of this year, Lithuania may, somewhat unexpectedly, position itself with respect to China as a not only brave but also far-sighted and active member of the Western normative and security community.
- In view of such global trends and its behaviour over the last decade, China’s response to Lithuania’s actions has so far been rather reasonable and measured.
- In combination with the effect of the pandemic, this provided a valuable opportunity to prepare for a potential response from China and give a closer look at hitherto little-discussed areas of bilateral cooperation.
- In the short term, China’s response may primarily take the form of the relatively painless information attacks and the potentially more harmful measures of economic pressure.
- To counterbalance these economic risks, consultations between interested parties from both public and private sectors and the economic dividends from a diplomatic diversification in Asia are essential.
- While developing the ability to resist China on the national level, one must not ignore instances of “lower” and, accordingly, less visible levels of cooperation: primarily, the paradiplomatic and the academic.
- When it comes to paradiplomatic cooperation (between respective cities and regions), it is essential to hold equivalent consultations with the country’s smallest municipalities, an admittedly unexpected point of focus of China’s.
- No less threatening is the cooperation with China in the academic area – primarily, the field of natural sciences and technology – and this should also receive special attention.
- Transparency should become the key extra principle in all Sino–Lithuanian relations and at every level of their implementation, from the national to the academic.

Introduction

Its significant change of content notwithstanding, the challenge faced by the Lithuania–China relations, which first became apparent on this scale in 2019, remained important in preparing the present analytical study in the middle of 2021. As demonstrated in previous EESC studies on the topic, 2019 became somewhat of a shock period for the bilateral relations¹, causing both sides to “throw off the mask” in the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic². And neither side liked what they saw. After being sworn in at the close of 2020, Lithuania’s 18th Government immediately started work on one of its declared foreign policy priorities: of revamping its relations with Asia’s budding superpower. What happened next can arguably be described by borrowing the term that has in recent years been used to summarise the trajectory of US–China relations, that of (strategic) decoupling.

Essentially, in the first half of 2021, Lithuania decoupled from China on two main levels. On the political-diplomatic level, it was the first to withdraw from the cooperation format between China and Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, reverting it back to its former numerical expression of “16+1”³. Lithuania also declared plans to open a trade representation office in Taiwan⁴ and took steps to further diversify its foreign policy in the Asia–Pacific region by announcing the opening of embassies in Singapore and South Korea⁵. On the equally important economic–technological level, which, moreover, brings us closer to the primary meaning of “decoupling” as used in today’s context of international relations, Lithuania not only legally barred Huawei from creating the country’s 5G network⁶ but also blocked another controversial Chinese company, Nuctech, from installing its equipment in the country’s critical infrastructure⁷. It is important to note that despite the aggressive rhetoric of the Chinese media (and the army of trolls surrounding it), whose discourse is in many respects similar to the Russian propaganda⁸, Beijing’s official response to these changes has so far seemed rather reasonable and measured. It is obvious that China needs time to properly assess what has happened, and its cautiousness is almost undoubtedly also attributable to the desire to not scare away too many other countries that are in two minds about it, including those in the CEE region.

The current situation in bilateral relations and the ongoing pandemic provides a bit of a breathing room⁹, which can meaningfully be used not only by foreign policy makers to prepare for a potential response from China, but also by researchers, who now have the opportunity to more thoroughly investigate certain topics that have hitherto been at the margins of the bilateral relations analysis or are entirely new. Accordingly, the present analytical study focuses on cooperation with China on the subnational level and in the academic field. It starts, however, with a brief discussion of a wider context of the bilateral relations in question, with an emphasis on the strengthening transatlantic ties between the US and the EU, especially on the issue of China.

1. The context of bilateral relations: A spring full of external challenges

As Lithuania marked its 31st anniversary of independence from the USSR and the world noted the end of the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, the National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China (China's rubber-stamp parliament), in an annual session of extraordinary importance that ended on March 11, 2021, not only reaffirmed China's efforts to strip Hong Kong of the vestiges of its political autonomy but also ratified the 14th Five-Year Plan on the country-wide socio-economic development for the period of 2021–2025, which focuses on the so-called "dual-circulation" (*shuang xunhuang*) economic strategy that boils down to prioritising the domestic market over the recently not-quite-so-welcoming international market¹⁰. It should be emphasised that both of these initiatives largely reflect the ruling Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) fear of losing its monopoly of political power or even a Soviet-style collapse of the state as such.

China's fears about international community's attitudes towards it came to fruition as soon as March 22, when the US, Canada, the UK, and the EU imposed coordinated sanctions on Chinese high-ranking officials and one institution for human rights abuses against Uyghurs and people from other Muslim ethnic minorities in the Xinjiang region¹¹. In what appears to be an attempt to "punish" the participant of these new transatlantic processes that is most likely to break under its pressure and do so along the lines of the imperial tribute system, the Chinese responded the same day by announcing, in a highly patronising manner, its own set of sanctions on four European institutions and ten individuals representing a wide spectrum of political persuasions and roles, including Lithuania's MP Dovilė Šakalienė¹².

This step of Beijing's had the opposite effect to that intended both on the EU level and nationally, in Lithuania. On May 20, the European Parliament voted by a hefty majority to freeze the ratification process

of the already-controversial EU–China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment until China lifts said sanctions, which were also directed against five MEPs¹³. On the same day and also by a hefty majority, Lithuania's Seimas voted to adopt the resolution On China's Mass, Systematic and Gross Violations of Human Rights and Genocide Against Uyghurs.¹⁴

Generally speaking, relations between China and the West in the beginning of the summer of 2021 can be described as having reached their lowest point in more than three decades, i.e. since the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989. This conclusion is primarily supported by the change in the EU's position, as Western liberal democracies in the Anglo-Saxon part of the world (US, UK, Canada, and Australia) have been showing much more consistency and continuity on this issue for a number of years already. Despite naming China as its "systemic rival" back in March of 2019¹⁵, the bloc and its largest member states – Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and Poland – had for two years been taking a stance towards China that ranged from the strictly pragmatic to the relatively favourable.

However, the key rationale behind this position looks far weaker today than it used to. First, the continuously worsening human rights situation in China (especially in Xinjiang and Hong Kong), the unwillingness to sincerely cooperate in investigating the origins of the pandemic, and, finally, China's so-called "Wolf-warrior diplomacy," which ranges from firm resolve to aggressiveness, all give Brussels good reason to doubt its ability to affect Beijing's behaviour. Second, despite China's becoming EU's largest trading partner¹⁶ for the first time in 2020 and the remarkable resolve of European businesses to not only continue but also deepen their involvement

in the Chinese market¹⁷, the continent's accelerating vaccination enables a more sober assessment of the prospects of China as an economic saviour. Third, cooperation on global issues (such as climate change, security of major shipping routes, fight against poverty and developmental aid, and the issue of international terrorism), which once seemed as perhaps the most promising area of partnership, now not only increasingly brings out the EU's and China's diverging interpretations of each issue but also has once again become the focus of Washington, as demonstrated by the G7's own infrastructure plan for developing countries announced in the June 12 summit (in which the EU was also present)¹⁸. Its competitive dynamic with the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative is likely to become one of the most interesting processes in the global political economy, especially given that all four European G7 members (and Canada) are also members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank founded in Beijing.

Fourth and last, with little grounds for optimism about EU–Russia relations and the Kremlin's ever more apparent authoritarianism both domestically and in Belarus, a country that finds itself between the two powers both geographically and in terms of value judgements, there is now serious doubt about the hopes – expressed in no uncertain terms by prominent European politicians, from Emmanuel Macron to Heiko Maas – of bringing Russia to the side of the West in its strategic rivalry with China. Even though closer ties between Moscow and Beijing, especially after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, seem like a forgone conclusion¹⁹, there are still ways to go before we see an actual alliance, and what their actions with respect to either the EU or CEE²⁰ have at least so far seemed to indicate

is not coordination but, at best, learning from each other. The topic of Sino–Russian relations is sure to remain a hotly contested one on account of Russia’s conscious effort to keep it such alone, and preventing its image as a swing state in the global configuration of powers from gaining currency among Lithuania’s allies and thus eventually becoming a reality should therefore be one of Vilnius’ foreign policy priorities. Turning back to China, the remainder of this study analyses two areas of its cooperation with Lithuania, which have only been mentioned in passing in previous analytical papers.

2. Subnational cooperation

The Covid-19 pandemic provided a much welcome breathing room regarding the hitherto rapidly developing and yet undeservedly overlooked or underestimated issue of Lithuania–China relations. In point of fact, the scope of subnational cooperation (viz., of cities and regions) between the two countries had been at its historic high prior to 2020 – in the form of peer visits or multilateral fora and associations within the 16+1 format. The first analytical study by the present author demonstrated that a good number of Lithuanian municipal entities have formed at least minimal relationships with Chinese cities and regions, the most interesting example of which, perhaps, was the visit by the mayor of Harbin, a megacity of 11 million people in its agglomeration, to its partner town Rokiškis (with a population of 12,000) in October 2019²¹. The results of a large-scale and in many respects unique research project on the present topic in neighbouring Poland have shown that the so-called Chinese paradiplomacy has especially intensified since the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative²² in the form of a widening range of areas for cooperation, where the traditional topics of economic relations and academic exchange were increasingly coupled with the fight against climate change and environmental protection. It should be emphasised that it is exactly this triangle – which became apparent on the paradiplomatic level – of economic, scientific, and municipal entities where the groundwork is laid for not only trade or investment oriented towards but also academic cooperation with the Chinese (see below)²³.

As demonstrated in the analytical study by the present author and other co-researchers from CEE published in the spring of 2020, sub-governmental relations between the region's countries and China not only became one of the key forms of cooperation within the 16+1 format but had also long been unrecognised as political by CEE national governments and, therefore, as something requiring special attention from them. All this despite the readily apparent impact of economic agendas of some of the key regions within a given country on its national-level decisions, which benefited the Chinese. However, the tussle

that broke out between the municipality of Prague and China in 2019 vividly illustrated the potential threats of such relations, mostly attributable to the fact that all forms of international cooperation with the Chinese ultimately depend on Beijing's political will.²⁴ It bears mentioning that a relatively larger impact of the agenda of international cooperation between capital cities on the national-level affairs was also brought to light in Lithuania, when the indirect repercussions of the infamous August 23, 2019 incident reached as far as the Office of the Mayor of Vilnius²⁵.

Analysis of publicly available information as of July 2021 on specific forms of subnational cooperation between Lithuania and China suggests that a remarkably active cooperation is indeed taking place, and yet the data on this is rather fragmented and contradictory. As one would expect, the oldest cooperation agreements have been concluded with the country's major cities. Interestingly, the first to conclude an agreement of this kind was Kaunas, having signed it with Xiamen back in 2000²⁶ and thus outcompeted Vilnius, which struck up a relationship with the megacity of Guangzhou in 2006, despite the analogous agreement it had concluded with the de facto capital of Taiwan, Taipei, back in 1998²⁷. However, in view of only a handful of news about events of essentially cultural²⁸ nature, it does not appear as if any one of these three partnerships actually amounted to anything more concrete or sustainable. On the other hand, the signing of the letter of intent on mutual cooperation between the port cities of Klaipėda and Qingdao²⁹ in 2004 has in fact led to a far more active cooperation between the two, including mutual visits of officials³⁰, even though the list of partners on Lithuanian seaport's official webpage does not include this major port of China's³¹.

As is the case with most countries still participating in the 16+1 format, subnational cooperation between the Lithuanians and the Chinese strongly intensified following the creation of this platform and Xi Jinping's rise to power. In the autumn of 2012, shortly after the first visit of its representatives to China³², the Association of Local Authorities in Lithuania (ALAL) announced the signing of mutual cooperation on the level of local municipalities with Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC)³³, the formation of ties with which spanned more than a decade, including the visits of Chinese representatives in 2003 and 2006³⁴. Its expressly "non-governmental" rhetoric notwithstanding, CPAFFC is directly linked to CCP's United Front, the purpose of which is to expand the party's influence over non-member elites and sectors of the wider society both domestically and abroad³⁵. It bears mentioning here the United Front's role in the August 23, 2019 diplomatic incident in Vilnius³⁶ and CPAFFC's in particular in the dispute in Prague³⁷.

During the most active period of subnational cooperation in 2012–2019, there were at least six visits of ALAL's management to China, with mayors or their deputies from at least a dozen other small Lithuanian municipalities participating in the delegations³⁸. Despite occasional criticism in the media on wasting time and energy on trips,³⁹ lack of transparency⁴⁰, and value-related matters⁴¹, cooperation agreements with China's municipal entities were signed by districts of Kaunas (with Jiashan County in 2015)⁴², Rokiškis (with Harbin in 2017)⁴³, and Jonava (with the city of Xuzhou in 2019)⁴⁴, yet the official website of the latter⁴⁵ has no information on it. At the level of signing the memorandum of intent, cooperation

was announced by Alytus (with the city of Ningbo in 2014)⁴⁶ and Anykščiai (with the city of Pengzhou in 2018)⁴⁷. However, the present author was unable to find any tangible examples of ways in which this kind of cooperation benefited Lithuanians during the preparation of the current study, but this may be attributable in part to the ongoing pandemic.

3. Academic cooperation

In January 2021, Kaunas's Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) announced the signing of its cooperation agreement with Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics (NUAA). A VMU press release⁴⁸ says that this way the university "seeks to solidify the decade-long ties between the two higher education institutions and ensure that scientific research is carried on." As Lithuania's main university of the interwar period very openly and tellingly admits, its Chinese counterpart "saw it important to formalise the ongoing, multi-year cooperation" and "have partners in Europe," whereas VMU, for its part, wanted to get "extra funding from China's [...] government." The same press release also says that "Researchers of the University's 'Intelligent Technologies and Materials in Applied Physics' cluster have been cooperating with said institution for more than 10 years, visiting it annually and presently implementing the mutual research project titled 'Development of a New Type of Motion Actuators for Flying Microrobots' and funded by the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences."⁴⁹

The topic of cooperation with Chinese universities, especially in the field of high tech, has long attracted the attention of political, security, and academic communities in Western countries, and for a good reason. However, even the general context of growing mistrust in Chinese higher education alone makes VMU's decision surprising. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute's (ASPI) China Defence Universities Tracker⁵⁰ lists VMU's long-time partner as a top secret and very high risk institution, which has been included into official end-user lists abroad for non-cooperation at least once and has been involved in an espionage scandal⁵¹. It should be emphasised that only four institutions of more than a hundred and fifty in this database do actually meet all these criteria, and NUAA's dual-use nature is implied not only by its name but also by its widely-known status as one of the so-called "Seven Sons of National Defence."⁵²

And we do not have to search far and wide for evidence on the threats of academic cooperation with China, either. Two months after the aforementioned agreement was announced, Estonian court sentenced a

noted local marine scientist for spying for China. He was a Tallinn University of Technology researcher who had security clearances from both Estonia and NATO to access classified information. According to Estonian intelligence officials, the sentenced marine researcher had been recruited by exploiting standard human weaknesses such as money and the need of recognition⁵³. Estonia's own sinologists had pointed to the threats involved in academic cooperation a year prior⁵⁴, which take the one of three main forms around the globe: the so-called soft power through cultural and humanitarian education, the influence exerted through mutual research projects, and plain espionage operations. Even though there had been at least one known case of China-related academic self-censorship in Estonia at the time, spying for China was still hard to imagine for many.

For comparison, an analytical study on Slovakia's academic cooperation with China published by the country's own researchers at the close of 2020 shows that out of 113 instances of cooperation of this kind at the time as many as 25 involved academic institutions with ties to the People's Liberation Army, including three out of the aforementioned "Seven Sons of National Defence." However, the most famous example to date of China's academic penetration into CEE is the developing story of establishing a campus of the Shanghai-based Fudan University in Budapest, which has set off a torrent of political infighting in the backdrop of an upcoming general election⁵⁵.

It bears mentioning that in all cases discussed above China has been primarily interested in cooperation in natural sciences and technology at the expense of social sciences. The latter field of study is seen as politically

sensitive not only domestically but also abroad, as the fact of including two researchers and a think tank in the aforementioned list of sanctions against Europeans vividly illustrates. It is only natural that, as Lithuania becomes a country of high tech with universities making slow but steady headway in international rankings, the attention from China in the field of academic research keeps increasing.

Analysis of publicly available information as of July 2021 on international cooperation of Lithuania's four largest universities brings out several important points. Bilateral cooperation agreements with Chinese academic institutions have been concluded by everyone in the „Big Four“, namely, Vilnius University or VU (a total of five agreements)⁵⁶, Vilnius Gediminas Technical University or VILNIUS TECH (three)⁵⁷, Kaunas University of Technology or KTU (five)⁵⁸ and the already-discussed VMU (six)⁵⁹. With the exception of VU, all remaining lists contain Chinese institutions included in the ASPI database mentioned above: two in VILNIUS TECH's, two in KTU's, and four in VMU's lists. Among the potentially most dangerous Chinese partners is not only NUAA – which, as an aside, is mentioned in the list of VILNIUS TECH but absent from VMU's – but also Beijing Institute of Technology (BIT)⁶⁰, which is another of the "Seven Sons of National Defence" and has cooperation agreements with both universities in Kaunas. However, aside from the VMU–NUAA research project discussed above, no further instances of potentially threatening bilateral cooperation have been identified⁶¹.

And finally, in the beginning of July, VU announced a new partnership between its Confucius Institute (CI) – the only such in the country – and the Shanghai-based East China Normal University, which, contrary to its pre-

decessor Liaoning University, is included in the ASPI database, albeit in the low-risk category⁶². Notably, however, VUCI has managed to keep itself out of any stories with a negative subtext for more than a decade now by focusing on strictly non-political topics of language and culture, and one can only hope the new administration on the Chinese side⁶³ will uphold this thoughtful line despite – or, perhaps, because of – the reform of the entire institute system that has been taking place in their homeland in recent years⁶⁴. Having become evident in the area of China-initiated academic cooperation, the relatively closer attention to natural sciences and Kaunas itself was also apparent in the announcement on opening a second Confucius class in Lithuania at the KTU Engineering Lyceum⁶⁵. The first such institution, dedicated to promoting China's language and culture at the level of school education, has been operational at the Engineering Lyceum of Vilnius Gediminas Technical University since 2014⁶⁶.

Conclusions and recommendations

The state of Sino-Lithuanian relations in the middle of 2021 lends itself to several conclusions. First, as little as half a year was enough for Lithuania to significantly decouple from the Asian giant on both the political–diplomatic and the economic–technological level, and the initial reaction of the latter towards these changes was rather more moderate than one might have expected given the recent predominance of its “Wolf-warrior diplomacy” on the global stage. Second, where, at the time of announcing the EU–China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment at the close of 2020, an overly radical reconceptualisation of bilateral relations with China was likely to prompt voices of concern among not only neighbouring CEE countries but also the major EU member states about needlessly provoking their economically important partner, now such a foreign policy shift on Lithuania’s part looks not only brave but also rather measured, timely, and even far-sighted⁶⁷. Third, this now-more-favourable context to Lithuania was caused, systemically speaking, by the contemporaneous worsening of EU–China relations and strengthening of transatlantic ties due to the change of the US administration. Fourth, the situation with exclusively bilateral relations with Beijing also remains favourable to Vilnius due to reduced economic contact during the pandemic and China’s involuntary carefulness so as to not scare away any more countries facing a similar situation. Lithuanian decision makers are advised to use this tactically important breathing room as productively as possible and in keeping with the following recommendations.

1. Bearing in mind that China’s measures of economic pressure may potentially cause the most harm to Lithuania, it is essential to properly prepare for such eventualities by promoting interchange between interested parties from both the public and the private sector, paying special attention to the search for potential alternative markets in Asia and beyond. The earlier precedents of cooling of bilateral relations and China’s practices of implementing its other elements of foreign policy strongly suggest the application of protectionist economic statecraft, ranging from freezing sectoral

trade negotiations to import bans or creating bureaucratic obstacles for foreign companies already operating in the country. Any and all plans of starting or expanding operations in China on the part of business entities should take this context into consideration.

2. Another recommendation is to start preparing for a likely imminent coordinated information attack against the country; current Chinese media narratives on this issue, however, have so far been similar to those in Russia, and may therefore be countered in analogous ways. In contrast with many of Lithuania's allies, China cannot use its favourite indictment of forgetting their own (neo)colonial past against Lithuania and therefore reject as morally invalid any and all criticism regarding the human rights situation in the country – and especially with respect to Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong, – and Lithuanian decision makers can therefore feel more confident when voicing this issue in the international arena. Given the highly personalised nature of sanctions imposed by China so far and the active collection of personal data of decision makers in Lithuania and across the globe even by its “private” companies⁶⁸, one should expect further rhetorical and legal attacks of the ad hominem variety, but, as is true of the more familiar case of Russia, their potential damage is likely to be limited in scope.
3. The pandemic-induced interruption of the hitherto rapidly accelerating subnational cooperation with China should be used as an opportunity to hold consultations with representatives from municipal bodies, making them aware of the economic and other threats posed by such ties. The pre-

sent analysis shows that over the last decade, these ties have been most actively developed by Lithuania's smallest municipalities, and their well-grounded expectations and ambition should therefore be taken into account on the national level. It is essential to bear in mind that these trends have been stimulated not only by limited opportunities for economic and international cooperation and simply travelling to more distant foreign countries but also by the de facto encouragement, on the part of previous governments, of behaviours of this kind. Given the paradiplomatic nature of such ties, decision makers are advised to proactively initiate similar relations with Taiwan, using the reinvigorated partnership between Vilnius and Taipei as an example to follow.

4. No less attention in illustrating the potential threats with known precedents in other countries should be given to consultations with academic and research institutions. When deliberating on strengthening ties in this highly sensitive area, one is advised to immediately run a check on the potential partner in the ASPI database and make decisions accordingly: the fact that the institution is mentioned on it should itself serve as a warning sign, let alone the cases of an explicitly named risk. The necessity of improving the general understanding of and expertise on China's language, culture, and current affairs, emphasised by the present author on numerous occasions, should become one of the more important facets of foreign policy diversification in Asia, especially when it comes to strengthening ties with Taiwan and Singapore. In these and other cases (e.g. with respect to Austra-

lia), decision makers are advised to include academic exchange, general research, and language studies issues focusing on China in the agenda of bilateral relations.

In summary, with the gradual development of the ability to resist China on the national policy level, one must pay increasing attention to the “lower” levels of municipalities and the general public, as any comprehensive and sustainable national response to threats of similar complexity would require. Transparency should become the key extra principle in all areas of Lithuania–China relations and at every level of their implementation, and decision makers are advised to encourage all interested parties to publicly declare the nature of their relationship with Chinese entities within the limits of the existing laws or public interest.

Endnotes

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