

CHINA IN THE BALTIC STATES' FOREIGN POLICY BEFORE THE COVID PANDEMIC

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The article considers developments of relations between the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and the People's Republic of China over the last three decades before the COVID pandemic. The author analyzes historical dynamics of Baltic-Chinese official contacts, which preceded contemporary situation, highlights main interests and contradictions which formed the agenda of their relations during the period under review, and describes how the formats of their cooperation have changed over this time. On the basis of this analysis conclusions are made on the main characteristics of Baltic-Chinese relations and their role for Baltic foreign policies.

Keywords: Baltic states; Estonia; Latvia; Lithuania; foreign policy; China.

While speaking about foreign policy of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania most scholars usually focus only on their relations with the West and with Russia. Such a simplified “bipolar” scheme of analyzing Baltic foreign policies, with collective West as their main ally and Russia as the main threat, became very popular. But in XXI century this scheme certainly needs some adjustments. First, because, as recent developments have demonstrated, the West is not as consolidated now, as it used to be in the Cold War times and first years thereafter. Second, because following its unprecedented economic growth China aspires for a status of global power with its interests and ambitions in such distant parts of the world as Latin America, Africa and even Europe. In competition for global leadership China has already become main rival to American (and Western in general) dominance, successfully replacing Russia in this role. And the recent COVID pandemic only accelerated this rivalry between China and the West which indicates the creation of the AUKUS military block in 2021 admittedly aimed at deterrence of China in Indo-Pacific region.

Although Baltic states are situated far from Eastern Asia and Pacific region and have no global leadership aspirations, they have also been engaged in the ongoing Western-Chinese confrontation. Especially prominent here is the case of Lithuania, which left in 2021 the regional “17+1” format of cooperation with China and invited to open an official Taiwanese representation on its territory. This provoked a response from China in a form of lowering the level of Chinese diplomatic representation in Lithuania. But how these events correspond with overall long-term trends of Baltic relations with China? Do they represent a continuation of previous policy, or on the contrary, indicate radical change of it caused by the growing tension in international order since the beginning of the COVID pandemic? To answer these questions, we need to analyze dynamics of Baltic-Chinese relations over previous decades, that preceded these dramatic events. It is the aim of this article.

Historiography on the topic of Baltic-Chinese relations so far is limited. First there should be mentioned the article by V. Sveics on how the leadership of the People's Republic of China (PRC) perceived the fact of the Baltic states' annexation

by the Soviet Union and how they instrumentalized this topic for their criticism of the USSR in times of worsening of Soviet-Chinese relations [1]. Although his paper analyzes events that preceded establishment of diplomatic relations between Baltic states and the PRC, it explains how these three small states first appeared in focus of Chinese foreign policy. As for the works which directly address various aspects of Baltic-Chinese relations and their significance for each side, there should be highlighted articles by D. Scott [2] and J. Tucker and M. Veliste [3]. These authors mostly focus on security issues and consider possible impact of growing Chinese presence on balance of power in the Baltic Sea region. In Baltic states relations with China were investigated first of all by Latvian scholars A. Bērziņa-Čerenkova [4] and M. Andžāns [5]. They concentrated on economic aspects of relations with China and prospects of participation in Chinese “Belt and Road” initiative for Latvia and the rest Baltic states. Recent developments and changes in Lithuanian-Chinese relations were also analyzed by K. Andrijauskas [6]. Finally, there should be mentioned two articles published in Russian language. The first one by V. Vorotnikov gives a brief overview of historical developments of relations between Baltic countries and Eastern Asian states of Japan, China and Korea [7]. And the last one is the article by author of this paper, prepared in collaboration with Chinese author Xing Jie and focused on bilateral relations between Baltic states and China in 1992–2018 [8].

As Sveics pointed out in his work, first Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania appeared in focus of the PRC leadership yet in 1970s when in period of worsening Chinese-Soviet relations it used the case of annexation of Baltic republics in order to blame the USSR for expansionism and oppression of small nations. According to him in that time Chinese diplomats even tried to establish contacts with organizations of Baltic political emigrants in Western countries [1, pp. 151–159]. Nevertheless, China recognized independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania not before it was done by the USSR Supreme Council on 6 September 1991. In the middle of the same month the PRC established diplomatic relations with all the three states and in 1992 opened its embassies in their capitals. Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian embassies in Beijing have been opened in 1995–1997, but first ambassadors to China were appointed only in late 1990s – early 2000s.

Foreign policies of Baltic states are characterized by remarkable continuity based on stable consensus among their political elites on major goals of their foreign and security policies. Therefore, changes in Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian relations with foreign partners have resulted from actions of external actors (e.g., withdrawal of Russian troops from their territory, admission of Baltic states into the EU and NATO etc.) rather than from the outcomes of their electoral campaigns [9, p. 137]. And because of this reason it makes sense to build periodization of Baltic-Chinese relations on the changing of political leadership in the PRC, since each Chinese leader has brought his new vision of the PRC foreign policy.

From establishment of diplomatic relations between three Baltic states and the PRC in September 1991 and up to the end of Jiang Zemin term of office as President of China in November 2002 there occurred 15 official meetings of representatives of Chinese officials with their colleagues from each of these three states: 8 visits of Chinese officials to Estonia, 7 – to Latvia and the same number to Lithuania; 7 visits

of Estonian officials to China, 8 – of Latvian and 7 – of Lithuanian [8]. It's interesting to note that over this period China never conducted joint meetings with representatives of all the three Baltic states, as it often did US and EU leaders in 1990s, but on the contrary preferred to negotiate with each state separately.

First visits of Estonian and Lithuanian ministers to China took place yet in 1992. As for Chinese-Latvian relations they were put on hold by Beijing in 1992–1994 because of Latvian decision to establish official contacts with Chinese Republic on Taiwan and open Taiwanese trade representation in Latvia. That directly violated the principal of “one China” which plays a fundamental role for the PRC government in its relations with foreign partners. Having realized that missed opportunities of relations with China cannot be compensated by relations with Taiwan, Latvia changed its position and in 1994 broke official relations with Taiwan and resumed relations with the PRC.

First Baltic leader to visit China was Lithuanian President A. Brazauskas on 8 November 1993. He signed in Beijing agreements on economic, cultural and railway cooperation between the two states. In 1994 he was followed by Estonian President L. Meri (in March 2001 he paid his second visit to China) and Latvian President G. Ulmanis. But most intensive visits of Baltic officials to China were in the end of 1990s. In May 1998 foreign minister of Estonia (and future president of the country) T. H. Ilves visited China and signed the agreement for avoidance of double taxation and prevention of tax evasion. In June 1998 Estonian minister of defence and in July his Latvian colleague paid visits to China. Even the leader of Lithuanian conservatives, V. Landsbergis, who traditionally criticizes Beijing for human rights violations, visited China in February 1999 as a speaker of Lithuanian parliament. As for visits of Chinese officials to Baltic states, they culminated in early 2000s. In September 2000 Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress Li Peng visited all the three Baltic capitals. With Lithuanian President V. Adamkus he met even twice – first time in Iceland on their way to the UN Millennium Summit in New York and in few days again in Vilnius. And in July 2001 the President of China Jiang Zemin visited Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius. As for agenda of Baltic-Chinese relations at this period, it was dominated by issues of economic cooperation in the fields of trade, investments and taxation regulating, while cooperation in the fields of sciences, technologies and culture could be defined as additional direction.

As Jiang Zemin was succeeded by Hu Jintao, who headed the PRC in 2002–2012 relations between China and Baltic states intensified greatly and the number of official meetings multiplied in this decade. There were 61 meetings between Estonian and Chinese officials (26 visits of Estonian officials to China, 32 visits of Chinese officials to Estonia and 3 meetings in third countries). Latvian and Chinese politicians met 96 times (40 visits of Latvian officials to China, 51 visits of Chinese officials to Latvia and 5 meetings in third countries). In Lithuanian-Chinese relations there were 88 meetings (32 visits from Lithuanian side, 51 from Chinese and 2 meetings in third countries). [8] Such statistics show that during this period China demonstrated more interest and initiative in developing relations with Baltic states. Besides we see some shift of priorities in these relations. If in 1990s Estonia slightly got ahead of the rest two Baltic countries in developing its relations with China, in 2000s this state obviously

lagged behind them in this respect. While Latvia demonstrated the highest interest in the region for developing cooperation with China – the tendency that preserved throughout 2010s as well.

But despite the increased number the level of visits, especially from the side of China, lowered – during this period neither Chinese head of state, nor head of government had ever visited Baltic states. As for Baltic leaders, in April 2004 there was a state visit to China by Latvian President V. Vīķe-Freiberga, in August 2005 – by Estonian President A. Rüütel and in September 2006 – by Lithuanian President V. Adamkus. But the record here holds Latvian President V. Zatlers, who visited China 3 times – in August 2008, September 2009 and October 2010 [8]. Some of the most important political meetings of this period took place during large international forums, exhibitions and ceremonies. First of all, there should be mentioned Olympic Games in Beijing in August 2008. Official delegations of Baltic states to these ceremonies included Latvian President V. Zatlers and prime ministers of three states: I. Godmanis (Latvia), A. Ansip (Estonia) and G. Kirkilas (Lithuania). All of them held meetings with their Chinese counterparts – President Hu Jintao and Prime-Minister Wen Jiabao respectively. Other formats for Baltic-Chinese political contacts in this period included the World Economic Forum in Dalian (2007), the Shanghai World Exhibition (2010), five annual forums “Europe – Asia” and most important the first summit “China – Central and Eastern Europe” that took place 26 April 2012 in Warsaw.

Agenda of Baltic-Chinese relations also widened substantially. Although economic cooperation still remained in the core, there added such foreign policy priorities of Hu Jintao, as cooperation in the field of culture and education. Another new direction became cooperation in the field of transport and infrastructure. For instance, in October 2009 during the “Europe – Asia” forum of transport ministers in Vilnius there was signed trilateral joint declaration on East-West transport corridor between China, Belarus and Lithuania. Besides Baltic states wished to capitalize on their new status as the EU most Eastern members and actively proposed their assistance in promoting cooperation between China and the EU. Such statements were made by Estonian Prime-Minister A. Ansip (2006) and President T. H. Ilves (2009) as well, as by Lithuanian Presidents V. Adamkus (2006) and D. Grybauskaitė (2010). But it would be wrong not to say also about political contradictions which occurred between Baltic states and China due to different views on the democracy and human rights. For instance, in 2011 Beijing cancelled a visit of Chinese minister of agriculture to Estonia after 16–18 August of that year Estonian President met in Tallinn with Dalai Lama whom the PRC views as the leader of Tibet separatists.

As Xi Jinping, the current leader of China, came to power in late 2012, both number and level of bilateral meetings with Baltic officials decreased dramatically. This happened due to advance of his ambitious New Silk Road initiative later renamed to “One Belt – One Road” (OBOR). This initiative gives clear preference to multilateral formats in Chinese diplomacy. Therefore, in 2013–2019 Chinese officials met with their Estonian colleagues 5 times in bilateral format and 6 times during multilateral forums, with Latvian – 7 and 4 times, with Lithuanian – 8 and 5 times respectively. Yet before the official announcement of the OBOR strategy Chinese government initiated in April 2012 first “China – Central and Eastern Europe” summit in Poland.

This summit gave start to the new multilateral format of cooperation between China and Eastern EU member states, including all the three Baltic countries, that is known now as “16+1” format. This format became the main platform for Baltic-Chinese negotiations in 2010s. Another important platform for their cooperation remained annual “Europe – Asia” forums and the Summer Asian Davos Forums in China.

Another reason for cooling of Baltic-Chinese relations were visits of Dalai Lama the 14th perceived in China as the leader of Tibet separatists to Tallinn and Vilnius. In August 2011 he was officially accepted by Estonian President A. Rüütel and in September 2013 – by Lithuanian President D. Grybauskaitė. Both meetings provoked official protests from China. Together with initially suspicious attitudes of Baltic political elites to the OBOR initiative this caused decrease in Baltic-Chinese relations in the first half of 2010s. Therefore, strategic partnership between Lithuania and China within the OBOR initiative was signed only in 2015. Latvia started its active engagement in this initiative only in 2017 but had to make serious concessions in the field of its railway tariffs. In second half of 2010s this country tried to get benefits from becoming a priority partner for China in the Baltic region. A series of high level Latvian-Chinese meetings in 2015–2018 indicate these attempts. Yet Chinese government didn’t wish to distinguish any of the three states as its priority partner in the region preferring to diversify its infrastructure investments. For instance, in 2018 instead of concentrating its investments in Latvia China signed agreement with Estonian logistics company “GTS Express” and showed interest in the project of Tallinn-Helsinki tunnel construction.

Finally, we shall take into account Baltic worries about the possible role that China could play in security architecture and balance of power in the Baltic Sea Region. According to D. Scott there are two main arguments on this point. First assumes that China will balance Russia as growing Chinese economic presence in the region will undermine Russian positions and its ability to exert pressure on Baltic states, thus strengthening their security. Second assumption suggests that China will act in the region as Russian ally, which greatly increases Baltic insecurities. This view is supported by increasing Russian-Chinese military cooperation and their joint naval exercises that took place in 2017 in Baltic Sea [3, p. 33].

To conclude we shall highlight the following positions. Throughout the period under review Baltic relations with China haven’t obtained such stable characteristics as “Western” or “Russian” vectors of their foreign policies. In Baltic foreign policy identity China is still not prescribed any specific permanent role – it is neither pure ally, nor pure enemy, but rather a factor in relations with actors that are more important for these states (the EU, the USA, Russia). Therefore, Baltic-Chinese relations mostly follow bargain strategy patterns where pragmatic calculations play more important role than any ideological considerations. Since Baltic states have not much to propose China, initiative in developing of Baltic-Chinese cooperation is clearly on the side of Beijing. But depending on evaluation of Chinese proposals Baltic states show more or less willingness to act in line with them. And direct gains sometimes can be sacrificed for benefits in some other directions (e.g., demonstrating commitment to unity with their Western allies in their policies towards China in order to get more of their support

vis-à-vis Russia, or, on the contrary distancing from the common EU approach to demonstrate their “special” role in promotion of relations between Europe and China).

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