

THE EUROPEAN UNION, “US+13” AND 17+1: NEW OPPORTUNITIES AFTER THE JOINT WHO-CHINA STUDY OF THE ORIGINS OF SARS COV-2

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SUMMARY

The policy brief discusses the recent triangular relations between Europe, China, and the United States. By focusing on the reaction to the WHO-convened Global Study of the Origins of SARS CoV-2 report, the authors argue that American diplomacy exercises its international mobilization power, while the European Union makes a more conciliatory approach. In this regard, China defends its claim of innocence when it comes to the origins of SARS-CoV 2. Nevertheless, the reaction to the WHO-China report may be seen as a catalyst that allows the European Union to regain momentum in supporting the civil societies in Central and Southeast Europe. From a global perspective, cooperation between relevant institutions within the United Nations is critical in combating the current pandemic. However, this will only be possible by forging the political will for cooperation in the different areas of common interest, such as climate change.

RECOMENDATIONS

1. Vocal support from the Central European countries backing the American position on the WHO-convened Global Study of the Origins of COVID 19, has called into question the 17+1 format between China, and Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. The EU should consider a more proactive policy in the CEE and the Western Balkans.
2. The European Union should acknowledge that in the mid-term, the CEE reaction to the report signals the future undermining of China's multilateral approach in CEE, at least in the northern part of the region (Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, and the Baltic States) with Beijing focusing more on its relations with Greece, the Western Balkans, and Hungary.
3. Along with growing concerns about the efficacy of the Chinese vaccines, the COVAX program should be offered on a larger scale to countries in the EU's geographical peripheries.
4. The EU should focus more on the southern peripheries of Europe – the Western Balkans and Greece, by supporting their respective civil societies. Despite being the biggest contributor to the region's development, there is little public awareness of the EU's commitment to Southeastern Europe. China influences the ruling elites in some countries (e.g. Serbia, Hungary) to promote cooperation, and through official channels promotes the public perception of China as a more reliable partner. The EU should therefore seek to improve the quality of its public diplomacy to communicate its engagement to citizens and bypass reluctant elites.
5. The future cooperation between the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), suggested in the European Union reaction to the WHO-China report, is highly dependent on the political good will in the relations between the EU, the United States and China. Therefore, the three parties should compromise in other areas of common interest, such as climate change, to build up mutual confidence.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the WHO team was allowed to investigate the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, global opinion has been waiting for the results. The report was finally announced on March 30, 2021 and marked a new era in the European Union- United States-China- relations.¹

In this policy brief, we discuss the recent dynamics in Sino-American relations in the context of the WHO report. Firstly, the American reaction to the report's findings. Next, we examine the reasons for supporting the American position by EU members from Central Europe. This is followed by a presentation of the major arguments concerning the report put forward by the Chinese government and the European Union.

The international group of experts (half of whom were Chinese) only began their investigation in Wuhan in January 2021, a year after the beginning of the pandemic. By February 9, during a press conference, the report's first conclusions about the origins of Sars-CoV-2 were presented. According to experts, the virus either came from a bat that infected another animal or it reached China via frozen food, imported from another country. They practically ruled out the theory that it could have originated from a laboratory in Wuhan.² The conclusions on the origins of the pandemic from the report, published on March 30, 2021, are not substantially different from those presented at the February conference. It should be noted, however, that WHO Director General, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, did not rule out further research and stated that "all hypotheses are on the table and warrant complete and further studies".³

THE EUROPEAN REACTION

The EU's reaction, although conciliatory by its nature, was issued in a particular context. It is also worth mentioning that in March 2021, relations between the EU and China were seriously strained. The EU imposed sanctions on Chinese officials responsible for human rights violations in Xinjiang autonomous region. China retaliated by punishing five members of the European Parliament and other individuals and institutions, including, the Political and Security Committee of the Council of the European Union and the Subcommittee on Human Rights of the European Parliament. After China's tit-for-tat

actions, EU Trade Commissioner, Valdis Dombrovskis warned that the ratification of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment "may be at risk".

In its reaction to the WHO COVID report,

the European Union called for more international cooperation between WHO and other organizations (the OIE, the FAO), and countries.

It was stated that the ultimate goal for the future of health care global management (governance) should be the adoption of a One Health Approach.⁴

However, during this time of Sino-West decoupling, future cooperation faces a challenge. The FAO is headed by the Chinese official Qu Dongyu, while OIE's president is Monique Eloit from France. The EU also sees the China and WHO report as the first step towards future research and investigation. By stating this, the EU has made vocal its doubts about the recent WHO investigation in China; the way the Chinese government dealt with the delegation; the limited access to early samples and related data as well as the lack of transparency in the process of the investigation. Finally, the EU called for a less politicized and a more scientific approach in the next steps of the investigation. But it may be too late as lot of time has passed and some evidence no longer exists.

"US+ 13": DECLARATION ON WHO-CHINA REPORT

The United States was skeptical from the beginning about the joint China-WTO research to uncover the causes of the pandemic. Donald Trump's administration supported the theory that the virus originated in the Wuhan Institute of Virology. He decided to withdraw the United States from the WHO, which he considered to be an organization influenced by China.

Although Joe Biden made the decision that the U.S. should rejoin the WHO, he did take a similarly distrustful stance toward the planned WHO report.

U.S. National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, expressed doubts about the independence of the research from Chinese government pressure. He stated that China should provide all information as to how events unfolded in the first days of the pandemic.⁵

It is noteworthy that the United States chose to issue a statement on the report along with the governments of other countries, reflecting Biden's pledge to take multilateral action in implementing policy toward the PRC. On the day the WHO-China report was released, a statement from the "US+13" group, signed by the governments of the US, Australia, Canada, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Israel, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, the Republic of Korea, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom was published. They stated that the WHO report did not meet their expectations. It was emphasized how important it was to know the real causes of the pandemic in order to fight effectively against its consequences. Thus, they questioned the process of research conducted by experts: its effectiveness, scientific basis, transparency, and independence. The signatories explicitly stated: "we voice our shared concerns that the international expert study on the source of the SARS-CoV-2 virus was significantly delayed and lacked access to complete, original data and samples".⁶

CHINA'S REACTION TO "US+13" AND EU STATEMENTS

The Chinese introduction of the report stated that the report itself was the result of a consensus and negotiations between the two sides.⁷ During the investigation, the Chinese Minister of the National Health Commission consulted with Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus regarding the research.⁸

The Chinese side reacted to the statement, delivered by the European Union, and the United States. Both statements were taken as "anti-China bullets" targeted at Chinese sovereignty and goodwill.

In this regard, China firmly opposed certain countries' politicization of the origin tracing issue, their making groundless accusations and holding China accountable. Separately, Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Hua Chunying said, "I would like to stress that virus tracing is a scientific issue that should be studied by scientists through cooperation".⁹ Moreover, Hua Chunying repeated the claim that the COVID-19 virus came from the

United States in order to shift the blame.¹⁰ The Chinese side then called two letters "spreading ill-motivated assumptions, the letters are full of fallacies, which are in essence political manipulations with a sinister intention and should be alerted against".¹¹

Apart from discussing the international reaction, the WTO report allows China's government to repeat well-known arguments about the importance of people's health, wellbeing, and a transparent and credible response to the fight against the virus. America's accusation of a lack of transparency, with limited access to information was rejected by a military expert, Cao Weidong, who accused the US of having non-transparent biological laboratories that threaten global peace and may harm the interests of other countries in the future.¹² According to Chinese statements, the "US+13" declaration is seen as a "consistent political trick" and "Biden's political farce" as self-defense along with accusations that the virus originated in the US, and that the US coordinates the "anti-China" camp as part of the broader USA-China conflict.¹³

THE POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES FOR CENTRAL EUROPE-CHINA AND EU RELATIONS

Taking a closer look at the motivation behind the reaction of the EU members, we need to emphasize that the majority of states which supported America's perception were countries from the former Soviet Union's sphere of influence or former Eastern Bloc countries: Czechia, the Baltic states and Slovenia. Moreover, all five belong to the Chinese driven format of the 17+1 group.¹⁴ One might say that the decision was taken under pressure from the United States, however this seems far-fetched.

The motives for the decisions taken by each individual signatory from the EU is worth considering. After almost ten years, since the format of China+CEE was established, initial expectations have not been met with all governments expressing their disappointment.

In the case of the Czech Republic, pessimism firstly set in at the local level when the Prague government terminated the sister city agreement with Beijing. The most controversial paragraph touched on the highly sensitive political issue of the Cross Strait relations saying that "The City of Prague confirms its continued commitment to the One China Policy adopted by the Czech government and acknowledges that Taiwan is an inalienable part of Chinese territory".¹⁵ As argued by many, the paradiplomatic channel

should not enter the political arena. Czechia approached China hoping to boost economic relations, especially by attracting Chinese investment. These hopes did not materialize. Instead, there were economic scandals related to Chinese investors (CEFC China Energy) and the cancellation of Huawei's services in the country. In addition, criticism of China as a country that violates human rights has grown. The Czech political scene is polarized, and one of the contentious issues is the policy towards China. From this perspective, the prospects for developing Czech-Chinese cooperation have dimmed.

In January 2020, the Prague government established relations with Taipei, angering Beijing.¹⁶ This move was solidified on a national level when the delegations led by Milos Vystrcil – the head of Senate visited Taiwan in August 2020. Vystrcil perceived the visit as a symbol of Czechia's foreign policy independence and declared that "the Czech Republic would not bow to Beijing's objections".¹⁷

From the perspective of the Baltic states, the situation appears to be somewhat different. A lack of economic gains from cooperation with China is seen through the lens of China-Russia relations. The Chinese side is not willing to antagonize its temporary ally through economic incentives given to previous Soviet territories.

In March 2021, the Lithuanian parliament decided to leave the group of 17+1 with the minister of foreign affairs declaring that the format had failed to bring benefits to the country. Moreover, Vilnius mentioned that the 17+1 multilateral format divides Europe and should be ended as it made 'zero contribution' to European integration.¹⁸ From the Lithuanian perspective, the country should work with democratic partners in Asia such as South Korea and Japan rather than with China which is showing aggressive ambitions to expand its influence. It is worth noting that five countries: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, and Slovenia were represented at the February 17+1 summit with Xi Jinping, by ministers rather than heads of state.

Although smaller states tend to adopt a policy of balancing cooperation with conflicting superpowers, continued disappointment regarding cooperation with China may prompt them to work more closely with the US.

Slovenia for example had a friendly relationship with the Donald Trump administration, and pledged not to cooperate with Huawei in building 5G networks. Slovenia's signing of a statement on the WHO-China report with the U.S. is another declaration of its foreign policy.¹⁹

CONCLUSIONS

Apart from the ongoing and increasing tensions between the United States and China, the outcome of the "US+13" countries' letter will result in a deepening skeptical mood between Europe and China, especially within the 17+1 group. The fact that the majority of signatories are from Central Europe means that there will be long-term consequences for the region.

The first consequence will be that of disappointment on both sides: Because of CEE's reticence in politically supporting China, and China's lack of investment in CEE, the multilateral format will come to an end. However, China has recently been keen to play an important role in fighting the Coronavirus pandemic, and it is in this respect that its cooperation with certain countries in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly EU Member States, would be of great symbolic significance for the PRC. But it seems this cooperation is deteriorating, and these countries are not eager to use Chinese vaccines (apart from Hungary).

Secondly, the external factor – a common approach towards China will reset United States-Europe relations. This cooperation may not result in bilateral or trilateral relations e.g. the United States-Germany-China but will rather focus on cooperation between the USA and the EU in other countries with which China has very close relations.

Taking into account the aforementioned factors, the EU should take a more active position and acknowledge its role in shaping Europe's future. First, it should be more visible and present in Central and Eastern Europe especially in the Western Balkans as the natural partner for economic and social development. Brussels can achieve this by offering economic incentives, preferably by financing investments that would be seen by a large part of the population as a public good, and would generate a significant number of new jobs.

But now, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the best way to do this is to accelerate vaccine distribution through the COVAX program. Some countries (Serbia, Hungary) have already benefited from Chinese vaccines. In contrast, EU-supported COVAX deliveries did not arrive in the Western Balkans until March/April 2021.²⁰ But along with discussions regarding the efficiency of the Chinese vaccine, the EU can coordinate more COVAX deliveries in the EU's southern peripheries.

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⁷ The word "consensus" (*gongshi* 共识) is a buzzword in the Chinese politics. Majority of decisions taken by the Central leadership are described as "consensus" and it means that the outcome of the decision making process is mainly resulted from the informal negotiations.

⁸ COVID-19 Virtual Press conference transcript - 9 February 2021. Online: <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/covid-19-virtual-press-conference-transcript---9-february-2021> (accessed 12 April 2021).

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¹⁴ 17+1 format is an agreement between China and 16 Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries and Greece (from 2019). It is mainly based on the announcement of Chinese infrastructure investments that are expected to boost economic relations between China and these 17 countries.

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