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Song, W. (Ed.). *China's Relations with Central and Eastern Europe: From "Old Comrades" to New Partners*. New York: Routledge, 2017.

The economic rise of China and its ever-increasing participation in international affairs has given China a significant role in contemporary international relations. Following the Chinese government's "going out" strategy,¹ announced in the late 1990s, China has not only transformed from a planned economy to a market economy but has also adjusted its foreign policy to ensure mutual benefits and "win-win" outcomes in its cooperation with global partners. As the world's largest developing country, China has had a long historical partnership with regions in the global South, especially Africa and Latin America. China's relations with Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs), however, have seemingly been neglected by international observers and have drifted into oblivion due to the domestic socioeconomic restructuring of both sides after the Cold War. Although most Eastern European countries shared a similar political background with China before the end of communism in the region, upon the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, most of these former communist countries tended to be more interested in returning to the West to gain political and economic benefits; they were more focused on domestic transformation and did not consider China to be a long-term strategic partner. The relationship between China and CEECs resumed gradually, picking up speed particularly after the launch of China's 16+1 cooperation² in 2012, when both China and the CEECs began to recognize the strategic value of more business-oriented linkages. In this regard, Song's newly edited compilation, *China's Relations with Central and Eastern Europe: From "Old Comrades" to New Partners*, is a timely reference to related topics. It examines the resumed economic and diplomatic ties between China and CEECs under the China-initiated 16+1 cooperative framework; explores current developments and trends of China's bilateral relation with the V4 (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, and Slovakia) and Balkan countries; analyzes the EU's role in CEECs; and presents some obstacles and challenges for both sides to be aware of for the near future.

In light of China's increasing appearance in the CEECs, Song's book carefully examines three questions throughout eleven chapters: What are the motivations behind China's 16+1 cooperation under the "One Belt One Road" (OBOR)³ initiative? What are some resultant geopolitical implications of the recent achievements between China and CEECs? What are the challenges facing China in cooperation? Each chapter applies different discussion methods. Statistics and case studies were employed for both quantitative and qualitative analyses, including descriptive statistical analysis, surveys, and interviews.

The first chapter, written by Peter Ferdinand, analyzes the linkages between "China's dream" and the nation's "going out" strategy. He argues that although China's dream was "a clever negotiation between collective identity and individual identity" (p.14), as it advocated a "successful, modern China rather than the dream of success for individual Chinese" (p. 12), the concept of China's "dream" was so vague in definition that it might not offer much guidance at the policy level because people have different standards and expectations when acting upon their own dreams. Ideologically therefore, when China attempted to apply a similar approach to win over its global partners, the West interpreted China's dream as a means of promoting the nation's soft power.

The second and the third chapters discuss China's motivations, investments, and achievements under the 16+1 framework. Liu, Szunomár, McCaleb, and Chen argue that there were at least three reasons that inspired China to explore markets in CEECs. First, industry

overcapacity and a rapid growing equipment-manufacturing industry all required China to adjust its economic structure and seek new business opportunities. With the OBOR initiative, the establishment of a convenient transportation network allowed China to seize a more favorable position to expand the market. Second, China tended to develop its western regions to “form a synergy with the industry chain of Eurasia in order to strengthen competitiveness in production” (p. 30), thus balancing regional development and sustaining China’s domestic economy. Third, since CEECs’ economic development has been largely integrated into the EU system, China tended to develop its relationship within the CEECs in order to become a production hub and to better prepare itself to enter a larger EU market. In other words, the 16+1 cooperation’s attempt to push forward the comprehensive and balanced development of China-EU relations also benefited CEECs and other European countries. After the global financial crisis, countries in CEE were also looking for opportunities to boost their economy, and China’s trade and infrastructure investments injected new impetus and possibilities to regional development. Some initial achievements in the past few years, for instance, have included the establishment of new transportation networks, which not only decreased logistic costs and time but also created jobs and production in CEECs and beyond.

In chapter four, Song reminds us that in addition to seeking economic benefits from international partnerships, China must make further efforts to improve its “self-image” in order to receive wider acceptance in the West. One major challenge in China-CEEC cooperation was “experiences in the communist past” (p.74). Specifically, the citizens of CEECs tended to associate Chinese society with the Soviet Union in the Cold War period, and even today, a rising China remains “one of the ‘others,’ [differing] from Western norms and values” (p.75). She argues that “the limited understanding of opinions from the civil society of these transition countries hinders China from playing suitable public diplomacy cards in the CEECs... and their perception has been mainly formed by the authority of the Western European countries, media and publications in an indirect way” (p.75). Based on that fact, Song suggests that China’s public diplomacy must be adjusted from “‘what the Europeans should know’ to ‘what the Europeans want to know’” (p.75) in the future to increase transparency and build mutual trust.

Despite differentiations in social norms and values between China and Western countries, partnership between China and CEECs has been relatively successful, with the rationale behind China-CEEC engagement being largely based on economic interests. As Auer and Stiegler claim in chapter five, although a few countries such as the Czech Republic and Poland have always hesitated to cooperate with China due to human rights concerns, the rest of the countries in the region have been interested in exploring commercial cooperation with China. However, the trends in cooperation have aroused EU’s suspicions of China’s 16+1 strategic intention in the context of the EU debt crisis. The EU was even concerned that the 16+1 framework was a “possible method to try to [implement] ‘divide and rule’ tactics to weaken the EU” (p. 100). Based on the EU’s concern, in chapter six, Jin argues that it was impossible for China to compete with the EU because CEECs are highly dependent on the EU common market, and the EU has been the primary source of FDI in the region. Also, as a newcomer, China lacked knowledge of local markets and regulations.

Respectively, chapters seven through eleven provide five case studies to elaborate on China’s relationship with each country in the region: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and the Balkans. China-Czech relations could be described as a “love-hate” relationship. Politically, the Czech Republic opposed China’s human rights issues; however, economically, China was still regarded as a great export destination. China-Hungary had a solid

historical and political foundation, and their cooperation has been the smoothest compared to the other CEECs. China-Poland have had a long diplomatic relationship, and both sides “acknowledged the importance of ‘socialism with its own characteristic’” (p. 158) in the 1950s. According to Mierzejewski, China-Poland relations experienced ups and downs during the 1960s-90s, and the current bilateral relations have shifted to the area of trade and investment since Xi’s visit in 2016. China-Romania also had a long relationship historically; however, due to the fall of the Iron Curtain, outside the current cooperative framework, Romania’s approach towards China could be described as reflecting a “wait and see attitude” (p. 171). Based on the above, Oehler-Şincai and Liu indicate that a premise of the creation of a strong and durable relationship between Romania and China was to eliminate prejudices and establish positive images of partner countries, and this goal could be achieved by increasing people-to-people exchange, mutual communication, and public diplomacy. Similarly, China-Balkans cooperation has been facing geopolitical challenges, and the relationship was limited in commercial interests based on a “capitalist-style” (p. 214).

Song concludes his book with discussions of future cooperation. In his conclusion, he recognizes China’s economic success but also raises several concerns regarding China’s inexperience in adapting its businesses in the CEECs. Of particular interest is his recommendation that China must “update the menu” (p. 223) and treat each country separately rather than treating them as a whole. In addition, he encourages China to explore further cooperation in tourism, education, and culture to enhance the nation’s image, meanwhile calling on Europe to understand and support China’s developmental ideologies. Although there are some expectation gaps between China and CEECs, and it is hard to predict a definite trajectory for future development, Song still believes that both sides have maintained a strong will to ensure a sustainable development in the context of globalization and that mutual trust will be further enhanced through more dialogues.

Song’s book provides valuable insights not only for China-CEECs relations but also for the emerging role of China in global politics and development. It is an excellent read and a useful resource that will help all foreign policymakers, development practitioners, and scholars of advanced studies in related fields.

Notes

¹ “Going out” strategy: (Chinese: “走出去”战略) was an effort initiated by the Chinese government in 1999. Along with China’s domestic economic reform, the nation was also attempted to open its door to assist domestic companies in developing a global strategy to expand local and international markets.

² 16+1 cooperation: is a transregional cooperation established with the aim of deepening the relationship between China and 16 Central and Eastern European countries, including 11 EU member states and 5 Balkan countries. The first 16+1 Summit was held in Warsaw, Poland, in 2012.

³ One Belt One Road (Chinese: 一带一路; OBOR or Belt and Road initiative): is a developmental strategy proposed by the Chinese government in 2013. OBOR is composed by a land-based Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and an ocean-going Maritime Silk Road (MSR); both aim to strengthen connectivity and cooperation between Eurasian countries.

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