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# Lithuania's position in building denial to China's authoritarian policymakers

The aim of the text is to verify such changing geopolitics through an increasing (possible) cooperation concerning the United States of America, Taiwan and Lithuania in the fields of politics and security, as well as to point out what China has lost by Lithuania's withdrawal from cooperation in the format '16+1'. The research problem is a diplomatic discussion between Lithuania and China, which has achieved increasing interest from foreign countries. The theoretical basis of the research is post-structural theory and Gustavsson's model. From this conception, Lithuania accepts and raises its identity as it is, primarily according to a huge and unsafe power.

## **Keywords**

policy of values, security, Lithuania, China, Taiwan, USA

## Introduction

One of the fields where the impact of Lithuania may be subject to change is that one that presents and promotes democratic principles. This includes human rights and support of the construction of an international order, which guarantees the peaceful and harmonious coexistence of various states worldwide – despite that the use of this concept could be negatively perceived by states across other areas of the globe.

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Today, 30 years after the end of the Cold War, the world faces gradual weakening of regimes which would represent these virtues, while imposing their own principle systems and finally opting out of the rules-based international community. Now, these powers are neo-totalitarian states, such as China and Russia. Nowadays, because of their great ambitions, they are a threat to the international order, which was pointed out during the 2023 NATO meeting in Vilnius (NATO, 2023)<sup>2</sup>. What is more, Russia and China also insist on their own concepts of democracy and human rights, while defining these as they see fit. In this way, they are seeking to avoid criticism for their authoritarian rule and violations of their citizens' rights (Tiezzi, 2023).

The question arises as to whether there exists a scope for multilateral efforts, including various talks by politicians to stop and reverse the trend adopted by China or Russia. There is no clear answer to such a question as to which solution or measures will prove to be more effective, as everything really depends on what the individual state political actors focus on. This is because each state pursues its own objectives and interests on the international arena by means of their foreign policy.

Today, Lithuania is the one of the few countries with an internationally recognised status that is conducting its policy on the international stage while observing human rights and democratic values, which is reflected in the foreign policy programme of Ingrida Šimonytė's government (Hyndle-Hussein, 2020). Lithuania is taking bold steps to stand up to China – the increasing global power of the century – as well as it seeking support from Washington. President Joe Biden's administration looks for leverage in transatlantic partnerships in the face of the West being afraid that China is considering supplying Russia with arms in the war with Ukraine. The purpose of the text is to analyse the changing geopolitical reality through the increasing cooperation between the US, Taiwan and Lithuania in politics and security, and to point out what China has lost by Lithuania's withdrawal from cooperation in the '16+1 format'. The starting point

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<sup>2</sup> On the sidelines of the NATO meeting in Vilnius in 2023, attention was been paid to NATO's policy according to China and Indo-Pacific countries. Moreover, its importance of cooperation in stopping China's aggressive policy in the Indo-Pacific area was emphasised. As for China, the summit document states, in line with the Lithuanian side's expectations, that Beijing is challenging the interests, security and principles of the Alliance with its ambitions and coercive policy. Beijing continually uses numerous political, economical and military equipment to expand worldwide influence and project power, and China's intentions, strategy and development of military capabilities are not transparent. From NATO's perspective, Beijing is using its economic position to create strategic dependency.

of the reflections is the following research questions: What prompted Lithuania to become involved in the US–PRC (People’s Republic of China) global rivalry at the time when the other EU states decided to remain neutral? Why did Lithuania opt for this confrontation? To fulfil the research purpose this has been based on a case study, which made it an opportunity to consider a specific case directly and draw a conclusion on the causes, course and effects of this country’s policy according to China. It also created a possibility to show how this country is contributing to increasing security in the region based on the so-called politics of virtue, and what kind of steps it has taken for that purpose. The argument formulated in this text is based on the thought that Lithuania’s policy to oppose China and its increasing aspiration in the area was possible thanks to the negligible volume of bilateral trade. It includes the desire to strengthen its reputation as a country supporting freedom, democracy and human rights, which are of key importance for the attractiveness of the Western cultural model for other countries in the area. Another argument the author poses is that the Chinese economic and diplomatic pressure towards Lithuania weakens Beijing’s ties with Central-Eastern European countries (primarily the Baltic countries). For examining the strategy of Lithuania for promoting Western values, a content analysis method has been also used, based on the usage of government documents, TV content, and scientists’ and other experts’ research and work.

The theoretical foundation of this study is post-structuralism. In this perception, the country accepts and actively raises its identity as it is, defined at first in relation to big or unsafe powers. It explains Lithuania’s consistent pursuit of common action and being an active player according to foreign countries, which was made to help it break away from the Chinese sphere of influence and build transatlantic ties. Post-structural theory rejects the objectivity and materiality of factors used by other theories. This concentrates on the use of discourse analysis within which the concept of Lithuania has been made. Considering it, the position of Lithuania is only one of the possibilities of perceiving reality, that could give different content which turn out to various strategies of action. Post-structuralism makes Lithuania a subjective state and focuses on its identity, made in the changing circumstances of international relations (Milliken, 1999). It means the essence of the concept of Lithuania will definitely change in time, as it will be associated not solely with weaknesses and limitations but, for instance, with flexibility and mitigating circumstances. Concentrating

on the conclusions, the perspective of Lithuania due to its resources in relation to its great neighbour, China, emerges. In the light of post-structural theory, Lithuania accepts and surely gains its recognition as a prospering country, defined at first in relation to a greater power. It gives an explanation to the consistent pursuit of integration with the European Union and NATO, the country's strong position in the context of the China's policy towards it. Also, the actions taken by Lithuanian elites (i.e. politicians) to promote Western values will be analysed in this article using a post-structural perspective. This theory has also crossed the Gustavsson model, which assumes the existence of different stages of foreign policy change, based on the interaction of structures and actors in international relations (Gustavsson, 1999, p. 84–85). Changes in Lithuanian–Chinese relations have been strictly linked to a series of steps taken by Lithuania beginning in 2021. These include the withdrawal from the '17+1 initiative', the recognition of the persecution of the Uyghur minority in China as a genocide, but also the announcement of the establishment of Taiwanese representation in Lithuania and the Lithuanian ones in Taiwan. It had the effect of tightening Lithuania's policy towards China. The research method used in the research is content as well as content analysis including secondary data analysis, which allowed access to publicly available sources such as the press, reports, expert reports and scientific sources.

## 1. Problems of Lithuanian–Chinese Relations in Literature

Earlier studies have shown that in 2020–2022, bilateral Lithuanian–Chinese relations were very tense – both in economic cooperation and political relations (Zhaoxiana, 2021; Kuo-Hsing, 2022; Chao-Hsien, 2021; Malužinas, 2022; Adamczyk & Matras, 2023, Biukovic, 2023). It can be said that during Dalia Grybauskaitė's presidency, China has still become a major country and main partner in trade of Lithuania (Janeliūnas, 2021).

On the other hand, when the literature on Chinese–Lithuanian relations is analysed, there are studies where authors consider both traditional and non-traditional security concerns faced by Lithuania and other Baltic states in the face of a growing Chinese presence (Juntunen, 2010; Soo, 2016; Weitz, 2017; Scott, 2018, Kaczmarki & Rodkiewicz,

2017; Petravic, 2018; Lin, 2019; Kazulenas et al., 2022; Mačikėnaitė, 2022; Mikelsaar, 2022). A great amount of research has been devoted to China's economic and political visions, interests and prospects towards Lithuania in strategic formats of multilateral cooperation in the Baltics area (Motieka, et al., 2005; Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2016; Kowalski, 2017; Kalendienė et al., 2017; Góralczyk, 2017; Li, 2019; Kukk, 2020; Kelpšaitė & Jastramskis, 2020; Kazakeviciute, 2020; Su, 2020;; Kavalski, 2021; Pilotta & Sedereviciute-Paciauskiene, 2021; Andrijauskas, 2021). What is more, there is no shortage of literature that similarly examines the effects of Chinese soft power and its impact on the creating opinions about China and Lithuania, as well as other, nearby countries (Liu, 2018; Jakimow, 2019).

On the other hand, in the books of the context of this subject, the authors have not yet encountered research mentioning Lithuania's leadership in the movement against Chinese influence in the international arena from a Lithuanian value-based foreign policy perspective. The text's aim is to fill this gap. It also adds to the Lithuanian political science discourse on the reasons for building Lithuania's resilience against China's influence in other countries, which provides a basis for the academic community to take a broader view of the processes in this country's foreign policy.

## 2. Changes in Lithuania's Foreign Policy Towards China

In 2010, China attracted much more attention in Lithuania because it appeared to offer possibilities for trade and economic cooperation. On the other hand, after a private meeting between Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė (in office from 2009 to 2019) and the Dalai Lama in 2013, China temporarily suspended all economic negotiations. Despite such a political situation, Lithuania's relations with China developed steadily through the decade. The first significant achievement in bilateral relations took place in 2015. JSC Lithuanian Railways (in Lithuanian: *Lietuvos geležinkeliai* – LTG) and the Chinese logistics company China Merchants Logistics Holding, a subsidiary of the state-run company China Merchants Group, signed an agreement to establish a joint company providing transport services, forwarding and logistics services in Lithuania. In 2016, Lithuania

formally confirmed that it was joining the Belt and Road Initiative (Andrijauskas, 2020). In that case, Lithuania's relations with China have been modelled on several other European countries. The developing economic relations of both countries seemed inspiring. In 2018, even before the COVID-19 global epidemic, the total trade between China and Lithuania increased by almost 16% and reached EUR 1.2 billion (Lietuvos Respublikos užsienio reikalų ministerija, 2020).

During Nausėda's presidency, it has been easy to see a great change in relations with China (Eriksonas, 2021). In 2021, quite unexpectedly for many international observers, Lithuania emerged as China's biggest opponent from among the European Union countries. Lithuania, with a population of merely 2.8 million, decided to take bold steps to counter China – a rising global power. While doing this, it took a great number of decisions, including withdrawal from the format '17+1', which issues a joint declaration with the United States on 5G technology security. This limited one of the few remaining areas of Chinese–Lithuanian cooperation: mobile technology, recognising the persecution of the Uyghur minority in China as genocide and, in effect, announcing the establishment of a Taiwanese representative office in Vilnius (Ferenczy, 2022, p. 3–7).

In response, to strengthen the already strong diplomatic partnership with Lithuania, on 20 July 2021 the Taiwanese Foreign Minister Joseph Wu Jaushieh announced the opening of a representative office in Lithuania, which (as the only one in the European Union) would contain the word Taiwan in its name. This proposal provoked a sharp reaction from Beijing. A communiqué published on 10 August 2021 by the regime in Beijing demanded an immediate recall of their ambassador to Lithuania and that Vilnius made a similar decision over its ambassador to China (The Economist, 2021). At the same time, the communiqué reminded us that 'there is only one China in the world'. Consequently, on 3 September 2021, the Lithuanian ambassador to China was summoned to Lithuania for consultations (Zhaoxiana, 2021, p. 8–10; Gołębiowska & Kuczyńska-Zonik, 2021).

### 3. China's Reaction to the Policy of Lithuania

After the opening of the Taiwanese representative office in the capital of Lithuania in November 2021 bearing the name 'Taiwan' instead of 'Taipei', the relations between Lithuania and China deteriorated rapidly. The powers in Beijing, in retaliation for the opening of the Taiwanese office in Vilnius, decided to hit the supply chains. The first step towards it was an implementation of economic reprisal against Lithuanian companies. Lithuania was deleted from PRC customs systems, complicating trade with China for these companies. Before this action, China stopped a few freight trains on the route between China and Lithuania, closed lines of credit to Lithuanian entities, implemented various restrictions on the export of their goods (products worth of EUR10 million or more were blocked). They also lost the ability to receive orders from China, even though they had already been paid. China also exerted pressure on multinational corporations (including those from the EU) to reduce investments in Lithuania and orders from the country, threatening to enact trade measures against their presence in the Chinese market.

However, according to expert estimates, Lithuania's trade volumes with China were quite low, so Beijing's repressive trade actions had a limited effect. The official message from Lithuania amid the diplomatic dispute is that mainland China remained a marginal trade partner for Lithuania. To confirm this theory, on 20 August 2021 the Central Bank of Lithuania gave a report analysing the effects of the so-called extreme scenario, i.e. a complete disruption of economic relations. It predicted that Lithuania's economic growth would then be slower by a mere 0.1% in 2021 and by 0.2% in 2022. To confirm China's low economic importance for Lithuania, export figures were also published for 2020. China ranked 22nd as a destination for Lithuanian exports. The same was indicated by the Lithuanian State Railways, which reported that the share of Chinese cargo remained a minute portion of the total rail traffic (Gołębiowska & Kuczyńska-Zonik, 2021). This proves that the Chinese economic retaliation against Lithuania's decision on Taiwan, which was not limited to the diplomatic dimension, did not create any major consequences for the economy of Lithuania. This is confirmed by China having a substantial trade surplus with Lithuania. In 2020, Lithuanian exports to China amounted to around USD 357.76 million, while Chinese exports to Lithuania amounted to around USD 1.34 billion (Figures 1 & 2), meaning that the Chinese threats have little credibility, as it is

China that benefits from trade with Lithuania, while Lithuania does not; this is evident from the trade balance perspective (Nikolova, 2021).

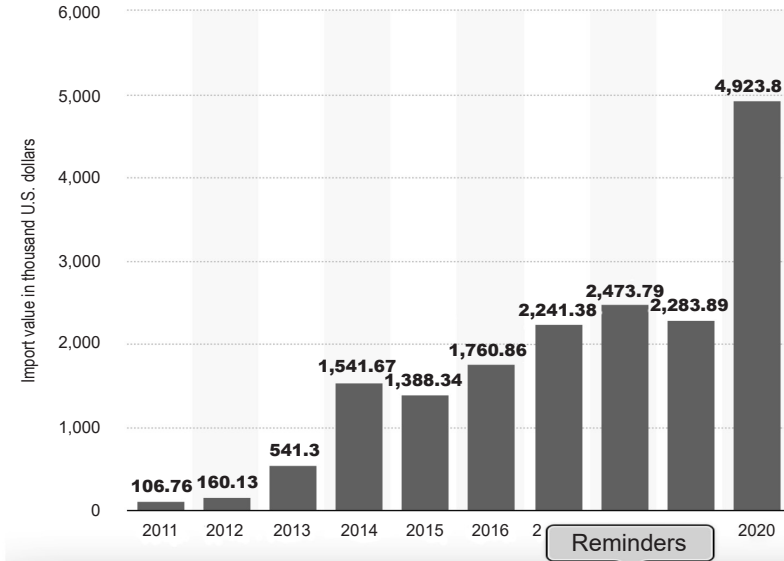


Figure 1. Import value of Lithuanian food products to China between 2011 and 2020 (in USD ×1,000)

Source: Ou, 2024 (Statista)

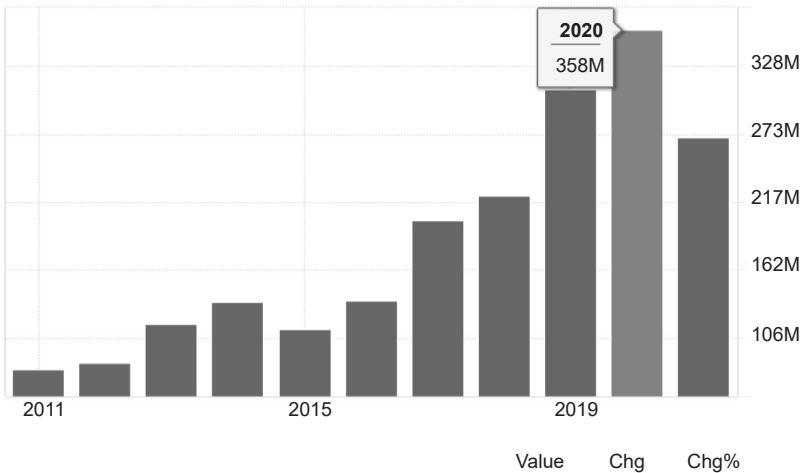


Figure 2. Lithuanian exports to China in 2011–2020 (in USD ×1,000)

Source: Trading Economics, 2024



The actions which Lithuania took to counter China's power seem to be motivated by both economical and political calculation. In another case, it represents disillusionment with the existing trade relations with China. Meaning, the economic cooperation – the efforts to strengthen economic relations, e.g. within the 17+1 format – did not yield any significant results, according to Lithuania. The diplomatic one – Lithuania rejects the Chinese way of diplomacy, based on attempts to exert impact and take over key infrastructure – in conclusion, shows that in Lithuania, there is a growing perception of China as a threat. In contrast, this decision is in line with the overall pro-Western foreign policy strategy pursued by the incumbent government, which envisaged help and involvement in the conflict of the EU and the United States of America. This strategy did not only side with Lithuania, but also, in January 2023, the EU initiated a trade discussion against China in the World Trade Organisation over its undeclared indirect secondary sanctions and other trade restrictions imposed on Lithuania (Lai, 2022, p. 47; Hass, 2023). In addition, an important move in support of the capital's policy was on 11 August 2022, when the foreign ministries of Latvia and Estonia announced the withdrawal of both countries from the Central European countries' cooperation with China, i.e. the 16+ format (Chao-Hsien, 2021, p. 9). Accordingly, they concentrated on their interest in practical bilateral cooperation with China's capital and strengthening the relationship between this country and the European Union based on respect for democratic values, international law and human rights. The decision adopted by Latvia and Estonia could also be perceived as an expression of solidarity with Lithuania. In a wider perspective, it might push other countries to take similar actions and undermine the foundations of the Chinese policy towards Central and Eastern Europe. Furthermore, it is arguably important that the Baltic countries and the European Union are recognising the benefits that Lithuania gained during the period of confrontation with the PRC. This includes a diplomatic rapprochement with the USA, which is showing an increasing interest in the Baltic countries region and its security (Jakóbowski & Hyndle-Hussein, 2022). While analysing these measures, it may be concluded that Beijing's efforts to showcase its punishment of Lithuania did not bring the expected effect, either politically or economically, in the current perspective.

## 4. The Lithuanian Government's Actions Towards China and its Motivation

When the motivation of Lithuania's government and its various actions towards China is analysed, it is necessary to start with the change of political elites that took place in late 2020. Following the success of the conservative politicians in the parliamentary elections in 2020, a declaration was made that the continuation of the existing policy towards China would be based on human rights and democratic values of the so-called global policy of values. The implementation of this policy started with expressing an emphasis on the need to protect human rights in various countries where ethnic groups are persecuted. In comparison to this, China became the first such area identified as the most vital for these processes to be monitored, focusing on the Uyghur population, their persecution by the Chinese power and the situation prevailing in Hong Kong (Sytas, 2020). Another item was the agenda and the problem of Taiwan: the perceived prospect of strengthening Lithuanian–Taiwanese relations and strengthening cooperation with other partners in Asia to seek new markets for Lithuanian entrepreneurs (Tsajunga.lt, 2020). After all, also seeing political opportunities, one of them emerged to be a pioneer and a bridge in the process of strengthening the relations between Asia and the EU. The first results of this can already be seen in Taiwan's closer cooperation with the Czech Republic and Slovakia. These motives may constitute an important element in the international perspective in building a positive image of Lithuania.

In addition, it is essential to point out that this policy direction has a significant impact on Lithuania as it strengthens its bilateral relations with the USA. Vilnius' policy is directly in line with the US vision of supporting the Taiwanese authorities (Li, 2017, p. 3–10), which the USA took a note of and appreciated. At first sight, it was merely a declaration. The USA quickly supported Vilnius in its dispute with China. The US Secretary of State Antony Blinken even asserted 'iron solidarity' towards Lithuania experiencing economic pressure from Beijing. The USA quickly moved to action, implementing measures to compensate Lithuania for its losses due to the Chinese sanctions. In November 2021, the Lithuanian Ministry of Economy and Innovation signed a USD 600 million export credit agreement with the US export–import EXIM Bank. It provided Lithuanian companies

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engaged in business with US partners with an additional tool in the form of an opportunity to obtain bank guarantees or loans. In addition, at the signing of the agreement, there was also discussion concerning opening the US market to Lithuanian commodities and developing joint investment projects (Voice of America English News, 2023). On the other hand, there is no doubt that the Chinese market remains essentially closed to Lithuanian companies. On the other hand, a few Lithuanian companies have found new ways to transport goods from the ports of neighbouring countries and thus avoid labelling their products as 'made in Lithuania'; some are circumventing Chinese sanctions by moving their entities to other EU countries.

## 5. Politics of Value as Part of Building a Vision of International Security

Lithuania's aspiration to recognise Taiwan to enable closer bilateral relations with the USA has more of a geopolitical nature rather than economical one. Its claims are confirmed by the words of Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis, who made sure that the opening of Taiwan's representative office in Lithuania being dictated by economic aspirations is questionable. It is obvious that such a country as Taiwan is far behind China in terms of its economical strength. This assertion may be correct as, for example, in 2020 Lithuania was not included in 90% of the countries which Taiwan exported its products to. Taiwan's main exports at the time were to China, Hong Kong, the USA and Singapore. It means this policy may be a direct result of Lithuania's political agenda to contribute to strengthening democracy globally (Nestorova, 2022). Therefore, the theory proposed by some experts that Lithuania is willing to perceive the pressures of authoritarian regimes that affect persecuted social groups may be accepted. In this way, Lithuania wishes to strengthen and sensitise international opinion to the situation of such groups, as well as the situation of such democratic states, bearing in mind its own security as well. Lithuania is subjected to various types of pressure from authoritarian states: examples include pressures in relation to raw materials from Russia since 2014, or the migration crisis caused by the Belarusian regime. All of this has resulted in strong concerns among Lithuanian inhabitants about their own safety.

## 6. The Idea of the USA–Taiwan–Lithuania Triangle and a Shared Vision for Building International Security

In addition to the great ideals adopted by the current Lithuanian elite to promote political values, there is also a component of hard political calculation in favour of the region. What needs to be noted here is that in the Lithuanian vision, the strengthening of the Lithuania and other countries' safety is possible through reinforcement and creation of alliances of various types: both political and economical. On the political side, the Lithuanian politicians have announced building deeper cooperation with the USA and strengthening of relations with European Union states. There is also the possibility of having some influence on the EU's international policy, as well as strengthening its cohesion in the face of the growing power of China and the '17+1' format (Kuo-Hsing, 2022).

In Lithuania's view, this format was perceived as a divisive agenda for the European Union. On the economical side, as already said, it involves the possibility of strengthening Lithuania's cooperation with other countries in Asia.

A frequently overlooked yet important factor for Lithuania is the possibility of developing a geopolitical triangle with the USA and Taiwan. As the USA–China confrontation is intensifying, Lithuania has joined the USA-formed alliance to counter the PRC, and has joined those Union countries which are openly critical of China. The three capitals share a common understanding that the PRC is becoming an increasingly aggressive threat to the democratic world and international security structures. As Chinese pressure is increasing, Taiwan is receiving bolder and stronger support from Washington and Lithuania.

The intensity of the triangle has been taking place since the first trimester of 2023, while high-level bilateral consultations between the Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis and the US National Security Council Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific countries Kurt Campbell took place in Washington on 6 March. The statement said they discussed 'shared commitment to democratic values, human rights and support for the rules-based international order' and 'the importance of the supply chain resilience', a diplomatic address on policies aimed to counter China's influence. Summing up the meeting, John Kirby, the Strategic Communications Coordinator at the National

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Security Council, said that the USA would be going to continue to work to strengthen Lithuania's already great economical partnership with Taiwan. This would be towards Taiwan's meaningful participation in international forums, and in developing and deepening people-to-people ties. An undoubted starting point in various foreign forums might be to seek ways to pressure China on its position on the Taiwan issue and the Russia–Ukraine war, but rather in a more global context. According to President Gitanas Nausėda's official rhetoric, 'China is supporting Russia, which has attacked Ukraine, and Beijing's role in the war is more destructive than constructive' (Verslo Žinios, 2023).

It is equally vital to note that the so-called triangle functions as a certain investment for the parties, mainly for Lithuania, if not economically – due to the lack of tangible business effects – then certainly politically. This relates to security, and the possibility of further cooperation in this area with the USA and Taiwan. In addition, the powers in Lithuania at the same time hope that their engagement with Taiwan will allow them to strengthen their own foreign position, as this country promises to be one of Taiwan's advocates in all formats.

## 7. The International Perspective and the Domino Effect

The Vilnius–Beijing conflict is to be seen as part of Lithuania's strategy to strengthen transatlantic partnership. This is because Lithuania's political agenda is directly in line with the US policy of supporting the Taiwanese authorities – which the US noticed – and offered support to Lithuania in its conflict with China. The USA Secretary of State Antony Blinken even asserted 'iron solidarity' towards Vilnius experiencing economic pressure from China. From the perspective of US policymakers, Lithuania's support for Taiwan gives support to Washington's own position vis-à-vis China and confirms the need to maintain relations with Taiwan. After all, it also sends the message that all the parties interested in protecting democracy and combating authoritarianism should only be encouraged by the expansion of USA–Taiwan–Lithuania military relations.

The EU has been much less involved in the conflict so far. Nevertheless, the European Commission (EC)'s swift response is the greatest example of political support from major EU officials for

Lithuania in its dispute in their relations with China. The EC's stance has moved the dispute from the bilateral level to the level of the PRC–EU dialogue, so it will influence the overall dynamics relations between China and the European Union. The identification of the China–Lithuania discussion as an area for potential implementation of a tool to counter coercive means foreshadows the EC's further political engagement in the conflict. It is evidenced by the fact that in late January 2023, the European Union launched a trade dispute against China at the World Trade Organisation over its undeclared indirect secondary sanctions and other trade restrictions on Lithuania. In addition, the Union publicly stated that Taiwan is a like-minded partner, and it supports the development of relations between Lithuania and Taiwan. In conclusion, the Union pointed out it will help Lithuania in resisting political pressure and economical coercion (Shankar & Welle, 2022). As Konstantinas Andrijauskas observes, 'China was not really willing to enter a serious conflict with the EU and other major Western liberal-democratic economic powers which, in effect, joined in the actual bidding for it'. Also, 'China has backed off and there is no public indication it is still applying indirect economical sanctions at this time – or from mid-spring 2022 onwards'. (Hass, 2023). The reason for this may have been that in January 2022, the EU started dispute settlement consultations against China at the World Trade Organisation over alleged restrictions on China's trade with Lithuania. Taiwan, Australia, Canada, Japan, the UK and the USA later expressed their willingness to join the consultations on this issue. As noted by Tomas Janeliūnas, this was welcomed as vital political support from Vilnius's democratic allies (Boruta, 2021).

China's strong reaction to Lithuania's behaviour has diminished other nearby countries' appetite for kind of an alliance with Beijing. In August 2022, Latvia and Estonia withdrew from the China–CEEC (China and Central and Eastern European Countries). Beijing seemed unmoved and did not take any significant retaliatory action. The reason for that might be that China has been unable in recent years to propose a positive economical position likely to foster interest in the 17+1 format. What is more, Beijing has not officially addressed Estonia and Latvia's decisions. So far, these types of actions have been interpreted as a result of behind-the-scenes US actions, and the region's concerns communicated to Beijing (e.g. regarding the strengthening of Chinese–Russian relations) have been presented as unfounded.

There was also a tangible response to Chinese economical



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pressure on Lithuania from Taiwan, which announced the creation of a USD1 billion loan fund for joint economic ventures with Lithuania and USD 200 million for investments in Lithuanian industry (Milne & Hille, 2022). The Taiwanese authorities will increasingly emphasise the island's essential distinctiveness, including the well-functioning democratic system there, counting on support from other countries and taking advantage of the Lithuanian–Chinese conflict. At the same time, Taiwan's development of cooperation with other countries may provide guidance to the EU on how to act in the situation of the US–PRC conflict.

The analysis presented above suggests that Lithuania's foreign policy may lead to an earlier than expected domino effect, and this is in favour of Lithuania's national interests (Kuo-Hsing, 2022). Mainly after the removal of Lithuania followed by Estonia and Latvia, the future of the initiative, currently limited to the 14+1 model with China, remains increasingly uncertain. A similar step is being considered by the Czechia and Romania governments, among others, and this means the desire to seek alternative economic contacts. The attitude towards China on the part of many countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) (Boruta, 2021), including Poland, has deteriorated significantly due to the position of 'pro-Russian neutrality' adopted by the authorities in Beijing towards Russia's aggression against Ukraine. In contrast, pursuing a policy of deeper diplomatic engagement with democratic Taiwan is expressed by an increasing number of countries in the region, including Ukraine, Poland (Wnp.pl, 2022) and Czechia (Yang, 2023). Otherwise, the struggle for diplomatic and political influence in CEE between Taiwan and China is likely to continue. Given the efforts of CEE countries to escape their communist past, the democratic Taiwan appears to be clearly more attractive to many in the region than communist China (Nikolova, 2021). At the same time, it proves Lithuania's effective role in this area, especially among the Baltic countries. From the very beginning, these have been perceiving the diplomatic dispute with China as an element of Lithuania's strategy to strengthen transatlantic relations, and an attempt to strengthen cooperation with other partners in Asia to seek new markets for Lithuanian entrepreneurs.

Despite the relatively low dependence of CEE on China, the situation in the other countries of the Union gives rise to deep concerns. This is mainly in the Western European countries, where Germany and France – which remain the head of the European economy – are

extremely dependent on trade with China, Germany's most important trading partner for the sixth consecutive year (DeStalis, 2022). Given these circumstances, the most essential fountainhead of support for Lithuania will fall on the EU's leading countries, especially Germany, as corporations there were hit hardest by Chinese pressure. This occurred at the end of 2021 when Beijing decided to escalate the vital conflict, extending it over trade relations with the EU and pressuring European corporations to reduce investment in and orders from Lithuania, threatening to repress their presence on the Chinese market (Hackenbroich, 2022). It had the aim to affect the image of Lithuania to undermine confidence in a country where investments can be made freely and safely. It is vital to note that there was no perceived political pressure on Lithuania from Berlin or Paris. What is more highlighted? – the absence of such a stance from the countries in question, even from the business community (Jakóbowski & Hyndle-Hussein, 2022).

Such a situation poses new challenges for the Union and has a great influence on the bloc's ability to adopt a tougher and more unified stance towards China that would better reflect and help protect the EU's common principles. Given China's increasing use of its economical leverage as a means of coercion, reducing its dependence on China should be one of the EU's most important long-term goals. Economic diversification would ensure China's significant loss of influence over the EU. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has already shown that trust in a neo-totalitarian power could cause painful economic consequences for the entire EU region, to a large extent (Boruta, 2021). Confirming this theory may be the draft position of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) in the Bundestag, which plans to move away from the pragmatic stance towards China that used to characterise Chancellor Angela Merkel's 16-year policy, claiming that peacekeeping through trade has failed (Rinaldi, 2023).

All this matters to the EU – and will matter even more in the future. In 2021, China was again the EU's main partner in goods trade, accounting for more than 10% of its exports and more than 22% of its imports. Taking into account indirect links as well, there is no EU country for which trade with China is not essential (Huotari & Jean, 2022).



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## Conclusions

Lithuania's power decision to fight China and its rising appetite in the area has been made possible by the low volume of bilateral trade. In 2020, trade statistics showed that Lithuania's economical ties with China were less strong than with virtually any other country in the area (Boruta, 2021). Anyway, it is not likely that the economical relations between Lithuania and China will return to the 2020 levels in the near future. Exports have decreased threefold and there are no options for them to start increasing. Moreover, China will not have a major influence on Lithuania's economical development. The reorientation of Lithuanian entities to other markets is already taking place, and this direction is going to increase effectively.

Lithuania is also going to carry on its existing policy towards China based on human rights and democratic principles. Its effectiveness and credibility will depend on the Union's coherence and support. In turn, the US support for Lithuania in its policy towards Taiwan will be crucial for the course of the US-backed rapprochement between other EU countries and the government in Taipei. It seems that Lithuania will seek to gradually sever the most sensitive economic ties with China to avoid painful consequences later. In the longer term, Lithuania's fight with China will also require active efforts on the part of the whole EU and the support of all democratic partner countries. China is a large country, but it hardly has any loyal allies. The consolidation and unity of many countries – even Lithuania – is probably the most effective way to counter threats from totalitarian regimes such as China. Therefore, the dispute between these countries is a kind of a test of the Union's ability to protect the single market in the face of economic coercion against Lithuania. In the longer term, the European Union will be looking for effective instruments which would make it possible to more easily impose sanctions on countries with unfair trade practices. The first step towards this was the agreement on retaliation in the event of economic pressure on a Member State (an anti-coercion instrument). The enactment of this tool could put a stop to economic blackmail on the part of China or Russia (Dombrovskis, 2023).

Lithuania has shown that it can stand up to China and its economic coercion – considering the nature of the Lithuanian economy. The tangible result of this is that the policy of sanctions against and

intimidation of Lithuania failed to become an effective instrument for maintaining Chinese influence in the area. On the other hand, Vilnius's struggle with the Chinese capital has encouraged the EU as a whole to look for solutions that would help protect the EU Member States from economical sanctions from poor countries. On 8 December 2021, the EC published its proposal on the EU's fight against coercive measures (Europos Komisija, 2021). Before that, in October 2021, the European Parliament for the first time formulated recommendations to the EC on the strengthening of relationships with Taiwan (Europos Parlamentas, 2021). All these trends indicate that the EU is beginning to understand more and more the economical risks of relations with China, while at the same time being ready to tighten its political support for Taiwan's sovereignty. It means that the crisis should be understood in a broader context of the degradation of relations between Lithuania and China, and starting from 2019, also with the EU. As such, the crisis is characteristic of a developing trend in the EU–China relations.

What is more, the great number of measures taken by the Lithuanian political elite were met with an aggressive response from China. Paradoxically, it strengthened the ties of the mutual support of all the three democratic partners within the US–Lithuania–Taiwan triangle, as well as the other Baltic countries. As the USA has been the most deeply involved in the conflict so far, it has not only sided with Lithuania, but also implemented measures to compensate for the losses incurred because of the Chinese sanctions. In addition, support was offered to Lithuania by Taiwan, which is at the centre of this dispute, where the opening of a trade office in Taiwan resulted in the launch of Taiwanese investments in Lithuania. According to the Lithuanian side, this step is referred to as a success of Lithuanian–Taiwanese economical cooperation. In conclusion, Lithuanian political elites believe in the potential benefits of increased trade and investment flows with Taiwan. What is a more optimistic aspect for Lithuania is that this country will soon become part of the semiconductor supply chain. Representatives of the Taiwanese government have expressed their willingness to help Lithuania develop its semiconductor industry in the areas of chip development, packaging, testing and manufacturing. With the increasing demand for semiconductors worldwide, Lithuania's involvement in this area of technology would be extremely important for the country's economic potential and it would even be of a geopolitical significance (Chang Chien-chung et al., 2022).

Taiwan also seeks to develop political and business ties in the

Baltic region using its resources in the sphere of highly developed technologies. What has been an expression of Taiwan's willingness to cooperate is the recent large donations to centres for refugees from Ukraine in the Baltic states. Another aspect is, according to the Taiwanese authorities, the assistance provided to Ukraine helps to strengthen Taiwan's relations with its Western partners.

From Lithuania's perspective, image-linked problems will also remain an important factor in this conflict from an international point of view. For example, *The Economist* listed Lithuania among the candidates for State of the Year 2021, considering its support of democratic principles, and *Politico* described Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis as a 'dragon slayer' and ranked him among the 28 most influential figures in European politics. In parallel, the next Chinese suspensions of economic relations with Vilnius are likely to further tarnish its foreign image among other essential countries in the international arena.

It can be seen without a doubt that such a political confrontation between China and Lithuania has shown that the regime in Beijing may use any kind of coercive measure against another country that is threatening its interests. It has been demonstrated by China's multifaceted pressure campaign, which only further confirmed its long-held reservations concerning deepening relations with China. This country's accusations concerning the resulting isolation of Lithuania proved unfounded; they secured the privilege of hosting the 2023 NATO summit in 2021 and were elected to the UN Human Rights Council for the first time. Perhaps even more vitally, various European countries have cautiously begun to move in a similar direction. Judging by Brussels' official support for Vilnius, it seems logical to expect that 'coercion with Chinese characteristics' will be one of the leading themes of the upcoming EU-China summit on 1 April, with a rather ironic choice of the date for this meeting. Furthermore, the successive EU Council presidency following the French one does not indicate any easy pro-Chinese change in the Union's approach, as both the Czech Republic and Sweden have joined the ranks of the most sceptical members towards China (Andrijauskas, 2022).

Lithuania's experience may prove useful for countries or entities that cannot belong to old (regional) democracies due to their geographical or geopolitical location, yet do not wish to remain a blind spot and be under pressure from the superpowers. In another context, based on their specific needs, Lithuania can also initiate a process that

can benefit the whole region and thus contribute in their own way to promoting and building international political values.

This article proves that Lithuania may have an active and effective foreign policy, which will be based not solely on its national interest, but on regional and other foreign interests and virtues as well. Considering all of this, while being a threat to the legitimate interests of large or regional powers, Lithuania's strategy of promoting a policy of principles as part of creating a vision of foreign safety is a great example of those kinds of measures.

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