

Chapter 2

“China’s 70-Year Development and the Building of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind”: A Serbian Perspective



Tomislav Nikolić

I am pleased for the opportunity to participate in this meeting and to make my contribution on behalf of the Republic of Serbia to the marking of the 70th anniversary of China’s development. I have been invited in the capacity as former President of the Republic of Serbia and as the incumbent President of the National Council for Coordination of Cooperation with the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China. This one of a kind institution in Europe is a clear indication of the importance that Serbia places on cooperation with the People’s Republic of China. Only Serbia boasts an institution led by a former Head of State, composed of nine Government Ministers, including three Deputy Prime Ministers. The National Council is tasked with implementing all agreements and deepening cooperation with two major world powers who are at the same time two great friends of Serbia.

Serbia is neither large in territory and population, nor in terms of impact in international relations, but it is a country of great men—Nikola Tesla, Mihajlo Pupin, Milutin Milanković, Novak Djoković, and Bata Živojinović, better known as Valter, from the films which have remained popular in China to this day. Serbia appreciates freedom and can recognize friends.

Serbia is proud of its friendship with China. There are no outstanding issues between us, no disputes. I believe that the relationship between our states is a role model for partnership marked by mutual respect and understanding. Both Serbia and China have undergone many challenges and times of hardship throughout their history, and we have learnt to choose our friends carefully. An old Chinese proverb, one close to my heart, goes: He who is wealthy but friendless is not rich. He who has many friends but no wealth is not poor.

T. Nikolić (✉)
Belgrade, Serbia
e-mail: hx101@ssap.cn

The Serbs will always remember the support lent by China in the darkest moments of our recent history. We will never forget that you suffered alongside Serbia in the 1999 NATO bombing campaign, when the bombs dropped on the Embassy of China in Belgrade took a toll of lives of Chinese nationals.

During my Presidency, I renewed the friendship between our countries, and today, at the helm of the National Council, I am helping to bring us closer together. It was in August 2013 that I paid my first presidential visit to China, on which occasion President Xi Jinping and I signed a *Joint Declaration on the Deepening of the Strategic Partnership*. Only three years later, our relations were upgraded to the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership, and this year we have signed the Bilateral Cooperation Plan, reaffirming our commitment to further mutually beneficial cooperation in many areas including infrastructure, energy, industry, agriculture, trade, finance, health, environmental protection, culture, education, and technology.

Never before have we witnessed so many Chinese investments in Serbia, which are always met with approval. The total value of projects that Serbia is currently implementing together with China is in the region of EUR 10 billion. Let me mention just a few investments that we can take pride in today—the purchase of Smederevo Steelworks by China’s Hesteel, the strategic partnership between Zijin Mining and MSC Bor, and the Shandong Linglong greenfield investment in a tyre factory.

China has shown its appreciation for the efforts that Serbia has invested in its own development and its readiness to work, together with us, on the implementation of Serbia’s development goals—reduction of unemployment, economic competitiveness, promotion of exports, and investment potentials. Unlike the initial investments primarily targeted at infrastructure and energy, today we see more and more projects carried out in company-to-company partnership and greenfield investments. Academic cooperation and cooperation in sectors of health, education, tourism, as well as military and police cooperation have recorded significant successes over the past years, which means that today Chinese and Serbian police officers patrol three major Serbian cities side by side.

According to a 2018 EP document about the CEE countries’ relationship and cooperation with China, Serbia is one of the top four “champions” of this collaboration.

It is no secret that many Western countries perceive today’s transformation of the global political system as a major threat. The governments of most European states allocate funds to combat “Chinfluence” and impose sanctions against Russia because the Western world sees the rise of Russia and the growing influence of China in Europe as a threat to be fought against. It is futile to fight the inevitable. The world is no longer unipolar, and it never will be again, because control over global politics from one centre of power has pushed many peoples to the brink of survival. Many countries want a multipolar world and equality, a world where we all have a voice, a world with no strings attached and without the solutions imposed by weapons, where international law is observed.

Owing to its actions in the United Nations, China has proven to everyone that it stands for these universal and universally accepted values, which lie at the core of this crucial international organization. It has proven this not only in the case of Serbia,

when it advocated for the respect of Resolution 1244 (1999), but also owing to its position vis-à-vis the unfolding crises in Syria and Iran. Small states and vulnerable nations have an ally in China.

All this would have been impossible without China’s special approach to international cooperation. The Belt and Road initiative is above all unique in terms of its concept, size, and creativity. Its uniqueness also mirrors the initiative’s adjustability to the ideas, conditions, and possibilities of potential partners. I am confident that the main reason behind its success is the fact that it acknowledges that not all countries are the same, that not all governments work in the same way, and that not all cultures can be offered identical rigid templates for cooperation. Every state or bloc of states can negotiate with China under terms that suit them, and agreements are concluded in line with individual benchmarks.

Today we are here, first and foremost, to jointly celebrate the 70th anniversary of the founding of modern China, which presents itself at its best under the leadership of President Xi Jinping. Everyone who participated in the creation of the contemporary China can take pride in their achievements over the past decades, and the friends of China, including Serbia of course, find it heartening.

Seventy years ago, China was subjected to foreign influence and humiliation, while today it stands at the forefront of its time, being the global leader in many areas—high-speed rail, renewable energy, e-commerce, artificial intelligence, innovation... This is an astounding pace of development. A pace that can leave no one indifferent. When we reflect upon all the achievements of China over the past 70 years, we can expect nothing but further admirable progress and innovation.

The fact that China’s investments in R&D last year amounted to about USD 280 billion, which is more than the entire EU’s budget in this field, is illustrative of China’s progress in this period, shorter than an average lifespan. This is just one of the ways in which China acquires the new know-how and technical expertise needed for further economic growth. The Chinese Yuan (CNY) has joined the IMF basket of currencies; the number of companies in China is growing day by day; the armed forces have been modernized; pollution in major cities has been reduced; 119 companies on the Fortune 500 list are Chinese, 121 are American, while only 20 years ago China had no more than 8 companies on the list. Four of the largest world banks are Chinese.

All these facts add up to the realization of one of the main goals that President Xi has set out for China in his statement before the CPC National Congress in late 2017—by 2050, the President said, China will have become the most influential country in the world. The facts directly confirm the President’s words, from this year’s military parade to the effect that no one can halt the development of China and that China is able to fight off any attack.

Finally, let me revisit the bonds between Serbia and China, which, regardless of the great distance between them, share similar ethical values. Even though this might be common knowledge, let me take the opportunity to recall an event from 1962, when the first satellite signal was sent up into space, beaming the greatest achievements of mankind, selected to present the people on Earth at their best. The

selected images included the symbols of China and Serbia—the Great Wall of China and the White Angel fresco from the Mileševa Monastery in Serbia. We believe to this day that every sensible person everywhere will understand these images as messages of freedom, peace, and love. This is our common gift to the world and a contribution to building the common future of mankind.