



Chinese-led Regional Multilateralism in Central and Eastern Europe, Africa and Latin America: 16 + 1, FOCAC, and CCF

Jakub Jakóbowski

To cite this article: Jakub Jakóbowski (2018): Chinese-led Regional Multilateralism in Central and Eastern Europe, Africa and Latin America: 16 + 1, FOCAC, and CCF, Journal of Contemporary China, DOI: [10.1080/10670564.2018.1458055](https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1458055)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1458055>



Published online: 11 Apr 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Chinese-led Regional Multilateralism in Central and Eastern Europe, Africa and Latin America: 16 + 1, FOCAC, and CCF

Jakub Jakóbowski

Warsaw School of Economics, Poland

ABSTRACT

This article examines the network of Chinese-led regional platforms, established throughout the developing world in the twenty-first century. It seeks to identify the common features of Chinese-led regional multilateralism: its normative basis, institutionalization patterns and the scope of cooperation. A comparative study of three selected platforms established in Central and Eastern Europe (16 + 1), Africa (FOCAC), and Latin America (CCF) is provided. These comprehensive dialogue mechanisms are based on Chinese-backed norms of non-binding agreements, voluntarism and consensus, derived from the tradition of South–South cooperation. This translates into a flexible and loose institutional structure that enables China to combine multilateral and bilateral approaches, creating a highly adaptable blueprint for managing foreign relations on a regional scale. The article evaluates the outcomes of the Chinese-led regional model and discusses the implications of the findings for the understanding of China's evolving foreign policy.

Introduction

China's shift to a more proactive role in the international sphere, which has been a hallmark of its foreign policy since 2012, has sparked an animated debate on its future ambitions and the quality of China's global leadership. With the initiation of the Belt and Road Initiative and the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the topic of Chinese-led multilateral institutions and groupings has entered the mainstream of debates on China's foreign policy¹. China's role as a sole initiator and leader was unlike its previous experiments with multilateralism, exemplified by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or BRICS, where it stood shoulder to shoulder with equal partners and was somehow balanced by other major international actors. Many have interpreted these new developments as an attempt to seize the leadership role that reflects its position as a rising global power, as well as to provide an alternative vision of globalization and the international order².

CONTACT Jakub Jakóbowski ✉ jakub.jakobowski@gmail.com

¹Mike Callaghan and Paul Hubbard, 'The Asian infrastructure investment bank: Multilateralism on the silk road', *China Economic Journal* 9(2), (2016), pp. 116–39.; Rebecca LaForgia, 'Listening to China's multilateral voice for the first time: Analysing the Asian Infrastructure investment bank for soft power opportunities and risks in the narrative of "Lean, Clean and Green"', *Journal of Contemporary China* 26(107), (2017), pp. 633–649.

²Hong Yu, 'Motivation behind China's "One Belt, One Road" initiatives and establishment of the Asian infrastructure investment bank', *Journal of Contemporary China* 26(105), (2017), pp. 353–368; Marcin Kaczmarek, *Silk globalization. China's vision of international order* (Warsaw: OSW, 2016).

However, Chinese-led multilateralism is hardly a new phenomenon. From the beginning of the 2000s, China has developed a world-wide network of multilateral dialogues with developing countries. The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the first of its kind, was established in 2000. As it proved to be an effective 'blueprint' for regional cooperation, it was then reproduced in other regions of the developing world, including the Middle East (China-Arab States Forum), Central and Eastern Europe (16 + 1), Latin America and the Caribbean (China-CELAC Forum or CCF) and South-East Asia (Mekong-Lancang Cooperation). Contrary to popular perception, the cooperation is not limited to regular high-level summits or 'forums'. The overwhelming content of relations is conducted within the complex realm of sectorial cooperation, consisting of dozens of sub-forums, instruments and cooperation mechanisms. Throughout the years, these platforms evolved into comprehensive dialogue mechanisms, covering economic, developmental, political and cultural issues.

All platforms share a number of common features regarding their normative basis, agenda-setting mechanisms and institutionalization patterns, as well as the spectrum of sectorial cooperation. Moreover, while developing regional platforms, Beijing is experimenting with institutional innovations that are then reproduced cross-regionally. It is perhaps best visible in the case of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), which became a testing ground for the Chinese-led regional platform model in the global North. The limitations of the 'blueprint' developed in Africa, resulting from CEE's different regional context, stimulated Beijing to experiment with new features. These included the higher frequency and rank of high-level meetings, a different agenda-setting structure, and new sectorial cooperation mechanisms and financial instruments. In many respects, 16 + 1 became the most sophisticated Chinese-led regional platform. Some of the features developed there were later reproduced in newer platforms, such as the China-CELAC Forum.

By analysing the development of Chinese-led regional platforms, this article intends to contribute to a broader debate on multilateral groupings initiated by China. It is structured as a comparative study of the three most institutionalized platforms: the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, the China-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) Forum and the China-CEE 16 + 1 platform. The study departs from the notion that the regional platforms instigated by China

'reveal the preferred norms, interests and practices that feature in contemporary Chinese approaches to multilateralism more clearly than studies of Chinese actions within already established international institutions, where Beijing is more likely to conform to existing norms.'³

The article addresses two general questions: What are the main characteristics of Chinese-led regional multilateralism? What does this tell us about China's general attitude towards multilateralism and its vision of the international order?

To answer these questions, the study will assess the normative foundations of the three Chinese-led regional platforms, their institutionalization patterns, and the areas of cooperation prioritized and pursued through them. It also analyses the distinctive elements of 16 + 1 as compared to the other two platforms, exploring the limitations of the Chinese-led regional platform model. The article proceeds as follows: First, a theoretical framework of China's approach towards regional multilateralism is presented, with a review of existing literature on the subject. The next section explains how the normative basis of Chinese-led regional platforms defines the terms of multilateral interactions and their institutional structure. Then a section is dedicated to the agenda-setting issues and the dynamics of institutionalization. The next section investigates regular high-level summits, highlighting the multilateral elements of the dialogue on international affairs. Then the article discusses the scope and form of sectorial cooperation, with special attention given to economic cooperation. The concluding section summarizes the findings, evaluates the effectiveness of platforms, and discusses the implications of the findings for understanding China's evolving multilateral foreign policy.

The study is based on an analysis of regional platforms' key deliverables, published in a form of medium-term cooperation plans and lists of cooperation implementation measures. Interviews with

³Chris Alden and Ana C. Alves, 'China's regional forum diplomacy in the developing world: Socialisation and the "Sinosphere"', *Journal of Contemporary China* 25(103), (2017), pp. 151–65.

diplomats and officials, personal observations, other related documents, specialized reports, speeches made by countries' representatives and press coverage are used as supplementary sources.

Chinese-Led Multilateralism: Theoretical Considerations

One of main shortcomings of the current theoretical debate on Chinese-led regional platforms is that they are usually analysed as an isolated phenomenon and are not put in a comparative perspective.⁴ Within China's academic and think-tank circles, on the other hand, a number of comparative studies on these platforms have produced concepts such as 'forum diplomacy' (论坛外交), 'intergovernmental multilateral consultation and a collective dialogue mechanism' (政府间多边磋商与集体对话机制) or 'holistic diplomacy' (整体外交).⁵ Each one is related to a distinctive feature of Chinese-led regional platforms. However, due to the practical orientation of the Chinese debate, some important theoretical questions regarding China's approach—including the interplay of multilateral and bilateral elements within it—remain unanswered.

Robert Keohane defines multilateralism as 'the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states, through ad hoc arrangements or by means of institutions'.⁶ The limitations of this approach, namely focusing on the nominal aspect of multilateralism rather than its qualitative features, have been pointed out by John Ruggie. The key component of *qualitative* multilateralism, according to Ruggie, is the existence of 'generalized principles of conduct', serving as a basis for cooperation for a 'class of actions, without regard to particularistic interests of the parties'. In other words, the basic principles of cooperation should be effectively and universally used by *any* particular party involved in a multilateral cooperation, regardless of the internal particular interests and the current balance of power. Bilateralism, in contrast, 'differentiates relations case-by-case based precisely on a priori particularistic grounds or situational exigencies' and 'segments relations into multiples of dyads and compartmentalizes them'.⁷ The sheer fact that three or more states are cooperating does not automatically imply that it is multilateral. There are some historic examples of international regimes and institutions based on the principle of bilateralism, such as Eastern Block's hierarchical subjugation to the Soviet Union⁸.

Chinese-led regional platforms can certainly be considered as *nominally* multilateral, as they provide venues for intergovernmental talks and policy coordination with a fairly coherent pattern of institutionalization. However, they are also extensively used by China to develop and manage bilateral relations with particular member countries. In many respects, these platforms serve as 'funnels channeling relations between China and the pool of regional countries in a bidirectional way, [rather] than multidirectionally among the plurality of actors involved'.⁹ Regular high-level forums and sub-forums are used as intergovernmental dialogue mechanisms, aimed to develop the general agenda and instruments of China's cooperation with a given region. However, the implementation, and individual deals and

⁴Li Anshan et al., *FOCAC twelve years later: Achievements, challenges and the way forward* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2012); Kerry Brown and Zhang Chun, 'China in Africa: Preparing for the Next Forum for China Africa Cooperation', *Asia Programme Briefing Note*, Chatham, (2009), available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Asia/0609ch_af.pdf (accessed 1 January 2018); Angela Stanzel et al., 'China's Investment in Influence: The Future of 16 + 1 Cooperation', *European Council on Foreign Relations*, available at: http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/China_Analysis_Sixteen_Plus_One.pdf (accessed 3 September 2017); Richard L. Harris and Armando A. Arias, 'China's South-South cooperation with Latin America and the Caribbean', *Journal of Developing Societies* 32(4), (2016), pp. 508–556.

⁵Long Jing, 'Zhongguo yu fazhan zhong guojia diqu zhengti wajiaojiao' ['China's regional holistic diplomacy with developing countries'], *Global Review* 47, (2017), pp. 40–60; Gao Yang, 'Zhongguo de luntan wajiaojiao' ['China's Forum Diplomacy'], *Huazhong shifan daxue zhengzhixue yanjiu xueshengbao* 4, (2013), pp. 29–34; Luo Jianbo, 'Ruhe tuijin zhongguo dui fei duobian wajiaojiao' ['How to Advance the China-Africa Multilateral Diplomacy'], (2006), available at: <http://waas.cssn.cn/webpic/web/waas/upload/2011/06/d20110613000146093.pdf> (accessed 3 September 2017).

⁶Robert O. Keohane, 'Multilateralism: An agenda for research', *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 45(4), (1999), pp. 1.

⁷John G. Ruggie, *Constructing the world polity. Essays on international institutionalization* (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003), pp. 110–112.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Nicola P. Contessi, 'Experiments In Soft Balancing: Chinese-led Multilateralism in Africa and the Arab World', *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* 3(4), (2009), pp. 407.

agreements, are then realized predominantly on a bilateral level. This happens either during a series of bilateral meetings on the sidelines of forums or by way of separate state visits.

This dual nature, a combination of multilateralism and bilateralism, appears to be a distinctive feature of China's regional approach. In order to develop an explanatory model of a Chinese-led regional platform, the key issue is to comprehend the complex interplay of these two elements. The theoretical framework proposed by Ruggie offers a useful tool to differentiate between multilateralism and bilateralism. First, a normative basis that determines the principles and terms of cooperation needs to be identified.¹⁰ Then, if these principles are 'generalized' and can be used by local participants despite the evident power asymmetry, it would indicate that indeed a form of *qualitative* multilateralism can be observed. On the other hand, if a certain aspect of cooperation is predominantly conducted on a bilateral basis and divided into separated dyads by China, it is rather a form of bilateralism. The following section will investigate how the underlying norms of Chinese-led regional platforms define multilateral interactions among its members, while leaving space for the extensive use of bilateralism.

South–South Cooperation and the Norms of Chinese-Led Multilateralism

The normative basis of multilateral cooperation introduced by China throughout the developing world is one of the central issues of the current Chinese academic debate.¹¹ The principles of equality, mutual agreement, inclusiveness and non-conditionality, with each country participating on a voluntary basis are also constantly repeated throughout the speeches of China's leaders, the preambles of each platform's official documents, media coverage, etc.¹² Norms promoted within Chinese-led regional platforms reflect a long-standing effort to unify the Third World as a community of shared interests. It is often pictured as a qualitative change to world politics, making it more equal and democratic. This narrative ranges back to the Bandung Conference in 1955, the Non-alignment movement and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.¹³ Therefore, the practice of multilateral engagement with the developing world through Chinese-led regional platforms is often labelled as the 'South-South cooperation'. Even China's cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe, not usually associated with the global South, was described by Xi Jinping as 'a new platform for South-South cooperation, which has the characteristics appropriate for North-South cooperation'.¹⁴

The key question regarding the normative basis of Chinese-led regional platforms is how the goal of fostering a more equitable, inclusive and consensus-based international order interplays with the asymmetric power relation between China and the individual regional partners. Can these principles be used by local participants to pursue their own goals, even when they are not in line with China's own interests? As shown in the empirical section below, in some cases the normative basis of Chinese-led regional platforms indeed provides local member states with some space to affect the agenda-setting process. In other words, sometimes the principles of consensus and mutual agreement are indeed 'generalized' within Chinese-led platforms, adding a *qualitatively* multilateral element to it.

¹⁰According to Ruggie, a *qualitative* multilateralism needs to be based on a certain set of norms, namely indivisibility, non-discrimination and reciprocity. Since Ruggie's provisions were coined in a non-Chinese context, this article attempts to identify an alternative normative basis that characterizes Chinese-led multilateralism, while retaining the main 'generalization' provision. The term 'multilateralism' is used in this context later on. See: John G. Ruggie, *Constructing the World Polity*, pp. 102–130.

¹¹Hu Dawei, 'Zhongguo zhengti hezuo wajiao pingxi—jiantan zhongguo zhongdongou guojia hezuo' ['Chinese holistic diplomacy revisited—the China-CEE countries cooperation'], (November 15, 2015), available at: http://www.ciis.org.cn/gyzz/2015-11/15/content_8377061.htm (accessed 21 September 2017).

¹²Declaration of the First Meeting of China-CELAC Political Parties' Forum Beijing', (2015), available at: http://www.chinacelacforum.org/eng/tdt_1/t1336834.htm (accessed 10 October 2017); 'Declaration of the Johannesburg summit of the forum on China-Africa Cooperation', (2015), available at: <http://www.gov.za/speeches/declaration-johannesburg-summit-forum-china-africa-cooperation-5-dec-2015-0000> (accessed 3 September 2017).

¹³Bartosz Kowalski, 'China's foreign policy towards Central and Eastern Europe: The '16 + 1' Format in the South–South Cooperation Perspective. Cases of the Czech Republic and Hungary', *Cambridge Journal Of Eurasian Studies* 1, (2017), available at: <https://doi.org/10.22261/7R65ZH> (accessed 12 December 2017).

¹⁴Li Weihong, 'Xi Jinping jiti huijian chuxi di si ci zhongguo-zhongdongou guojia lingdao ren' ['Xi Jinping Attends the Fourth China-CEE Leaders' Meeting'], *Renmin Ribao*, (November 27, 2015), available at: http://china.chinadaily.com.cn/2015-11/27/content_22522751.htm (accessed 10 October 2017).

The non-binding, voluntary nature of cooperation makes the overall success of any particular initiative dependent on the broad consensus of most if not all participants. This enables local countries to block or boycott unfavourable initiatives by obstructing the institutionalization process or by refusing to sign key guiding documents that set the general platform's agenda.¹⁵ As described by Alden and Alves, China's decision-making dominance within regional platforms is being increasingly contested by local member states. Their assessment of the Macau Forum and the FOCAC show that local participants often challenge the order introduced by Beijing, making Chinese-led multilateral platforms venues of constant negotiations, with diplomats on both sides shifting between 'strategies of obstruction and accommodation'.¹⁶ Examples of 'positive' agenda-setting power can also be identified, with some regional initiatives being endorsed by China and incorporated into a platform.

Examples of successful bargaining with China, however, should neither be considered as automatic nor as easy to achieve. The internal coordination of local participants vis-a-vis China is usually a necessary prerequisite to reduce the power asymmetry within Chinese-led regional platforms.¹⁷ Platforms themselves do not provide the space of mechanisms for regional countries to coordinate with no Chinese involvement. Where regional coordination mechanisms and organizations exist—such as ASEAN, the African Union and CELAC in Latin America and the Caribbean—they are increasingly involved in the decision-making process.¹⁸ Another strategy is to further institutionalize the dialogue, as is the case in the China-Lusophone Macau Forum, where a secretariat with permanent staff representing each participant was established. In the case of CEE, informal mechanisms like ad hoc coordination among CEE's embassies, that proved to be successful in formulating a common stance vis-à-vis China, can sometimes serve as a substitute for more formalized regional consultation mechanisms.

The utilization of the core principles of Chinese-led multilateralism is then highly dependent on the abilities of regional countries to formulate their own goals, coordinate, and then to use a platform's mechanisms to influence the general cooperation agenda. Where such preconditions do not exist, China tends to 'compartmentalize' the relations, channeling them into the bilateral level, where the power asymmetry is much more pronounced. China is often also the only player with a 'capacity to devise new ideas and concepts and, ultimately, with the power to create new institutions', as well as to shape the discourse that depicts the cooperation¹⁹. Moreover, the platforms' agenda-setting process is very China-centric, which also affects the actual cooperation outcomes. Therefore, Chinese-led regional platforms often serve merely as venues to announce the agenda prepared by Beijing, which is then implemented bilaterally with selected local participants. Such 'hub-and-spoke'-type cooperation, though *nominally* multilateral, should be considered as a form of *qualitative* bilateralism.

Why then is China upholding norms of cooperation that actually leaves some space for local participants to contest its own stance? From a constructivist point of view, the normative principles of Chinese-led multilateralism may be rooted in the actual beliefs and values of China's leadership. In this regard, South-South cooperation could be a genuine attempt to introduce 'principles and values that stand in contrast to those associated with the present hegemonic configuration of the international system, particularly as regards sovereignty, trade liberalization and third party intervention'.²⁰ Beijing's self-restraint, opening up some space for contestation to less powerful partners, would then be a way to introduce a new, non-Western type of multilateralism, based on an alternative set of norms: equality, sovereignty and non-intervention. An alternative constructivist explanation of China's behaviour was

¹⁵For every existing platform there is a long list of policy initiatives that were once proposed but never actually introduced. This is usually due to a lack of consensus on the principles of cooperation.

¹⁶Chris Alden and Ana C. Alves, 'China's Regional forum diplomacy in the developing world', pp. 151–65.

¹⁷Liu Zuokui, 'The Pragmatic Cooperation between China and CEE: Characteristics, Problems and Policy Suggestions', *Working Paper Series On European Studies Institute Of European Studies Chinese Academy Of Social Sciences*, 7(6), (2013), pp. 1–11; Bob Wekesa, 'FOCAC, African agency and Africa's China policy', *An International Affairs Review of The Institute For Global Dialogue* 16(1), (2017), pp. 3–5.

¹⁸However, China is often reluctant to share control with regional organizations. For example, the numerous attempts of African countries to move the FOCAC secretariat from the Chinese MOFA to AU's New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) is were not supported by China.

¹⁹See Anastas Vangelis's contribution in this special issue.

²⁰Nicola P. Contessi, 'Experiments in soft balancing', pp. 406.

provided by Alden and Alves, with the concept of ‘socialization from below’.²¹ With the assumption that China’s main goal is to retain ‘relative power in these asymmetric relationships’, it describes the contestation of China’s decision-making dominance as a form of ‘socialization’ to multilateral norms. Local countries ‘drawing implicitly from accepted norms of (...) most multilateral organizations’, actually force China to introduce more multilateral elements to the cooperation.

However, these approaches, both assuming a certain ideological orientation of China’s leadership, do not sufficiently explain the dual nature of Chinese-led platforms. Full devotion to the principle of equality stands in contrast to an extensive reliance on bilateral diplomacy, where the power asymmetry vis-à-vis developing countries is evident and often used by China’s internal actors to pursue its own interests. On the other hand, elements of multilateralism are systematically introduced throughout different regional platforms, often with Chinese approval or on its initiative. This implies that Beijing accepts, or at least tolerates, multilateral interactions that may limit its own interests.

The introduction of multilateral elements can be considered as a pragmatic method of maximizing the diplomatic output of China’s engagement with the developing world. As explained in the next section, the principles of cooperation introduced by China translate into a loose and incremental institutionalization pattern, with consensus-based agenda setting mechanisms. This provides Beijing with apparent benefits, such as flexibility, adaptability and openness to regional feedback. With local participation, the universal ‘blueprint’ of a Chinese-led regional platform can be easily adapted to local contexts. It also increases a sense of ownership and agency, promoting local involvement. In other words, the benefits of multilateralism may outweigh the cost of occasional local contestation. On the other hand, the set of norms introduced in Chinese-led regional platforms does not stop Beijing from conducting crucial negotiations on a bilateral level, where China’s internal actors can use power asymmetry to pursue their parochial interests. As shown later on, the actual choice between multilateralism and bilateralism is quite flexible and largely context-dependent.

Institutionalization and Agenda-Setting Mechanisms

The institutionalization pattern of Chinese-led regional platforms follows the ‘incremental, consensual-building approach of the forum and non-binding nature of understandings reached’, a common feature of China’s engagement with East Asian multilateral formats.²² As stated before, it can be considered as a direct consequence of the normative basis of Chinese-led multilateralism. Therefore, the degree and course of the institutionalization of individual platforms is uneven, depending on the duration of the dialogue and the willingness of all parties to push the cooperation forward.

Ministerial conferences—regular, triennial meetings of all the participating countries’ foreign ministers—are fulcrums of Chinese-led regional platforms (Table 1). They serve two major purposes, which are reflected in the formal structure of official documents issued after every meeting. Firstly, leaders’ meetings are used as venues to discuss and communicate a common stance on international issues. Joint ‘Declarations’ cover the effects of these talks, which include endorsements for specific policies, as well as joint initiatives within other multilateral institutions. Apart from that, leaders’ meetings are also used to publish practical guidelines for cooperation that set the course of further institutionalization. Every three to five years, a ‘Medium-Term Agenda’ in CEE, an ‘Action plan’ in Africa or a ‘Cooperation Plan’ in Latin America is jointly published that sets medium-term goals for sectorial cooperation.²³

In all three regions analysed, ‘Action Plans’ are structured in almost an identical manner. Cooperation is divided into separate fields, ranging from trade and investment to people-to-people exchanges and culture. In each sector, more specific policy initiatives are described, presenting future goals, specific policies, new cooperation mechanisms, propositions of various new sub-forums, etc. Official documents consist of initiatives in all stages of the institutionalization ‘pipeline’. The initial stage includes general

²¹Chris Alden and Ana C. Alves, ‘China’s regional forum diplomacy in the developing world’, pp. 151–65.

²²Ibid.

²³In the case of 16 + 1, yearly ‘Guidelines’ are also published to sum-up bilateral and multilateral achievements.

high-level endorsements for enhanced cooperation in a specific field, such as investment, agriculture and forestry. These are then negotiated and developed using dedicated mechanisms and further specified with proposals of specific policy measures. When consensus is reached, a specialized institution or dialogue mechanism is officially established. One example of this process is the cooperation on connectivity and logistics within '16 + 1'. It was first proposed as a general field of cooperation during the Belgrade summit in 2014; then a concrete measure for a 'China-CEEC Logistics Cooperation Mechanism' was proposed in 2015, which was then finally established during a leaders summit in 2016 in Riga. In the case of the relatively new China-CELAC platform, most fields of cooperation are in the early stages of the 'pipeline', with most sectorial initiatives presented in official documents (such as the 'China-CELAC Local Governments Cooperation Forum') still under discussion.

Due to the consensual nature of cooperation, coupled with a relatively low frequency of high-level meetings, the actual course of sectorial cooperation development relies heavily on the agenda drafting process. It takes place in-between leaders' meetings and is conducted by lower level officials. For each of the analysed platforms, a specialized mechanism responsible for agenda drafting and technical work has been established (see Table 2). In case of the FOCAC, this is carried out by the so-called 'Follow-up Action Committee', located at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It conducts consultations with African diplomatic corps at Beijing and is responsible for coordination among Chinese institutions involved in FOCAC cooperation.²⁴ The committee is supported by the so-called 'Senior Official Meetings', facilitating dialogue directly with African officials. In the case of '16 + 1', the secretariat at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs was established in 2012. It convenes quarterly meetings with the national coordinators of 16 CEE countries (local officials assigned to represent the government, occasionally joined by ambassadors). Interestingly, the newest China-CELAC Forum uses both types of mechanisms: the secretariat that cooperates with national coordinators and the Follow-Up Committee at the Chinese MOFA (Table 2).

These different institutional arrangements seem to influence the communication among key platform stakeholders and arguably affect the decision-making process. CEE diplomats involved in the process suggest that the lack of any efficient mechanisms for the internal coordination of Chinese stakeholders (ministries, governmental institutions, SOEs), such as a Follow-up Committees present in the FOCAC and CCF, is often an impediment to cooperation within the '16 + 1'.²⁵ On the other hand, when agenda consultations rely mainly on contacts between Chinese MOFA and diplomats located in Beijing, as seen in the FOCAC, it is said to hamper Beijing's coordination with local governments.²⁶ The existence of both systems in the China-CELAC Forum may serve as indirect evidence of reproducing successful institutional innovations cross-regionally, as suggested by Mierzejewski.²⁷

Contact mechanisms can either facilitate a *qualitatively* multilateral dialogue, or serve as merely consultative bodies where China's agenda is announced to a region. It depends mostly on the willingness of regional countries and their ability to jointly pursue their own agenda, as well as China's readiness to share control of a given issue. However, with no permanent multilateral secretariats and voting mechanisms, the whole process is generally very China-centric. Effective control of the agenda drafting process is maintained by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The outcome of final consultations is then largely dependent on China's willingness to accept local demands. As described by Li, the FOCAC's drafting procedure usually starts with the Chinese side putting forward a new initiative and then getting feedback from its African counterparts that is then put into a revised version. Usually several similar loops are conducted before a final agreement on a new initiative (sub-forum, mechanism or political declaration) is reached and put into the agenda.²⁸ This common pattern, with the Chinese side acting

²⁴Li Anshan et al., *FOCAC twelve years later*.

²⁵According to some accounts, in order to push proposed measures forward, CEE diplomats need to become actively involved and facilitate communication between the relevant Chinese institutions themselves. Conversation with a senior Romanian diplomat (2017).

²⁶See Note 24.

²⁷Dominik Mierzejewski, 'Perspectives on CEE-China Cooperation', *China Policy Institute Blog*, (October 3, 2014), available at: <https://cpianalysis.org/2014/10/03/a-multifold-perspective-on-cee-china-cooperation/> (accessed 14 September 2017).

²⁸See Note 24.

Table 1. High Level Meetings.

	Rank	Frequency	Locations
16+1	Prime ministers	Every year	Warsaw, Poland (2012) Bucharest, Romania (2013) Belgrade, Serbia (2014) Suzhou, China (2015) Riga, Latvia (2016) Budapest, Hungary (2017)
FOCAC	Ministers of foreign affairs	Every 3 years	Beijing, China (2000) Addis Ababa (2003) Beijing, China (2006) Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt (2009) Beijing, China (2012) Johannesburg, South Africa (2015)
CCF	Ministers of foreign affairs	Every 3 years	Beijing, China (2015) Santiago, Chile (2018)

Notes: The origins of the higher rank and frequency of the '16 + 1' meetings' can be interpreted as an intentional choice on the part of the Chinese, giving much higher dynamics to the cooperation. All annual regular prime ministers' forums play basically the same role as ministerial meetings present in other multilateral platforms.

Source: Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Table 2. Agenda-Setting Mechanisms.

	Mechanism	Meeting frequency
16+1	Secretariat at the Chinese MOFA + 16 national coordinators	Quarterly
FOCAC	Follow-up Action Committee at the Chinese MOFA + African ambassadors in Beijing	Every two to three months
	Senior Official Meeting	Twice every three years
CCF	Secretariat at the Chinese MOFA + national coordinators	At least once a year
	Chinese MOFA + CELAC 'Quarter'	Once a year, during the UN General Assembly
	Follow-up Action Committee at Chinese MOFA	–

Source: Li Anshan et. al., *FOCAC twelve years later.*, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

as an initiator and regional participants playing a more or less reactive role, can be observed in other Chinese-led multilateral platforms, including the '16 + 1'.²⁹ In the case of the CCF, initial institutional arrangements published in 2015 seem to imply that CELAC institutions may take a more proactive role in agenda-setting, however, no definite assessment can be made until the practical cooperation has been fully developed.³⁰

The China-centric agenda setting logic is usually reproduced throughout lower level, sub-forum cooperation. For example, within the FOCAC the sectorial cooperation mechanisms are managed by the relevant Chinese ministries and government institutions.³¹ However, while some elements of 16 + 1 platform are also managed in this manner, the institutionalization process of sectorial cooperation in '16 + 1' took a relatively unique course. Throughout the years, a set of so-called 'associations', 'contact mechanisms' or 'secretariats' was established. Each mechanism is dedicated to one selected sector of cooperation. As of late 2017, seven such institutions had been established, with nine more still in the pipeline (Table 3).

Each sectorial cooperation mechanism is led by one '16 + 1' participant country. 'Associations' are officially responsible for coordinating dialogue between regional participants and China and for facilitating cooperation among non-state actors, such as companies, industrial clusters etc. In some cases its operations are accompanied by other sectorial events that assemble high-ranking officials, such as ministerial forums. The method of assigning specific areas of cooperation to individual CEE countries is

²⁹Conversation with a senior Polish diplomat (2017).

³⁰The institutional arrangements and operating rules of CELAC-China Forum', available at: http://www.itamaraty.gov.br/images/ed_integracao/docs_CELAC/REGCELACHI.2015ENG.pdf (accessed 17 November 2018).

³¹See Note 24.

Table 3. '16 + 1' Sectorial Cooperation Mechanisms.

China-CEEC Mechanism	Host country (entity)	Status
Association of Tourism Promotion Institutions and Travel Agencies	Hungary	Established
Higher Education Institutes Consortium	Serbia	Established
Contact Mechanism for Investment Promotion Agencies	Poland and China	Established
Joint Chamber of Commerce	Poland (Executive Office) and China (Secretariat)	Established
Secretariat on Logistics Cooperation	Latvia	Established
Centre for Maritime Issues	Poland	Established
Association of Agricultural Cooperation	Bulgaria	Established
Inter-Bank Association	Hungary (Coordination) and China (Secretariat)	Established
Centre for Dialogue in Energy-Related Projects	Romania	In the pipeline
Coordination Mechanism for Forestry Cooperation	Slovenia	In the pipeline
Association of Heads of Local Governments	Czech Republic	In the pipeline
Think Tanks Exchange Cooperation Centre	China	In the pipeline
Association of Transport and Infrastructure Cooperation	Serbia	In the pipeline
Technology Transfer Centre	Slovakia and China	In the pipeline
Cultural Cooperation Coordination Centre	Macedonia	In the pipeline
16+1 SME Centre	Croatia	In the pipeline
Science Veterinary Cooperation Centre	Bosnia and Herzegovina	In the pipeline
Environment Protection Cooperation Mechanism	Montenegro	In the pipeline
Association on the Promotion of Health Cooperation	Not specified	In the pipeline
Youth Development Centre	Not specified	In the pipeline

Source: Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

not clear, though it is usually an extension of a given country's bilateral focus in relations with China. For example, Serbia's leadership in transport related association can be linked with its deep involvement in infrastructure cooperation with China.

The increasing role of these cooperation mechanisms within '16 + 1' implies that China is ready to implement more multilateral elements into regional platforms. 'Associations' are in fact a form of agency-sharing, as host countries are responsible for organizing multilateral sectorial events, such as ministers' meetings, and are drafting the agenda (often in collaboration with the Chinese side). It may be used both multilaterally (to promote the regional agenda) and as a form of bilateralism (to pursue bilateral interests vis-à-vis China). The 16 + 1 2nd Transport Ministers' Meeting, organized in September 2017 by the Polish-led China-CEEC Centre for Maritime Issues, may serve as an example. The meeting, accompanied by a business forum, served as a venue for regional countries to compete for China's capital involvement in regional infrastructure investments projects. At the same time, it was used to engage China in the development of regional transport corridors, such as the Polish-Czech inland waterway upgrade³².

Multilateral Dialogue on International Affairs

In the case of most Chinese-led regional platforms, regular high-level talks are also used for second major purpose, to formulate a common stance on international affairs. For Chinese diplomacy, both the FOCAC and CCF are currently becoming increasingly important tools to promote the principle of non-interference, sovereignty, the concept of a multipolar world order and the 'democratization of international relations'. These principles are common within joint 'declarations' on the reform of global political and economic governance. As Olivier puts it, this kind of cooperation is based on belief that South-South cooperation can help to reshape the current course of globalization, making it more beneficial to the developing world.³³

³² Author's participation in the event, September 2017, Warsaw.

³³ Nico Olivier, 'Between contradiction and co-operation: An analysis of China's evolving engagement with Africa,' *Insight on Africa* 6(1), (2014), pp. 17.

In case of the African platform, where such dialogue is already considerably rich and complex, the FOCAC's joint 'declarations' are used to take a common line on issues concerning the future shape of the United Nations and Bretton Woods institutions.³⁴ For example, in the 'Johannesburg Declaration', concrete commitments regarding the WTO Doha Development Round and the UN Convention on Climate Change negotiations were made. There is some evidence that high-level meetings are also used by African countries to input their own agenda into the platform, thus strengthening the multilateral component of high-level meetings. Before the summit in 2015, the draft versions of the 'declaration' were prepared jointly with the government of South Africa, which was co-hosting the summit in 2015.³⁵ During the 2012 summit, some joint commitments were made on cooperation between China and the African Union in conjunction with the UN Security Council.³⁶ Official platform documents also include joint endorsements for a regional socio-economic agenda, such as Africa's Agenda 2063.

Contrary to these trends, the multilateral dialogue on international politics is virtually absent in the '16 + 1' platform. High-level talks are generally focused on defining the *modus operandi* within '16 + 1', rather than on pushing any external international agenda. Communiqués issued after leaders meetings lack any joint statements on the reform of global governance and international issues. Up until 2017 Budapest meeting, where common commitment to uphold WTO rules was announced, 16 + 1 also lacked any joint actions within global multilateral institutions. The first joint 'Riga Declaration' was issued late, only after the Riga summit in 2016. It was relatively short and covered only a high-level support for cooperation on connectivity within CEE. Compared to other platforms, '16 + 1' cannot be considered as a venue for gathering international support or promotion of China's vision of a reformed global international order.

The absence of the political component in China-CEE multilateral cooperation should be, to a large extent, considered as a deliberate choice of the CEE countries. According to diplomats actively involved in establishing the '16 + 1' platform, some regional participants were from the very beginning reluctant to release any joint statements on international politics, or to further institutionalize the political dialogue,³⁷ thus limiting China's international agenda. The strong practical focus and lack of any statements on international politics in the 2016 'Riga Declaration' was, from the point of view of some CEE participants, considered to be a huge diplomatic success.³⁸ To be precise, cooperation on international affairs between China and CEE countries does occur, with Czech president Milos Zeman being the only Western head of state to attend China's military parade in 2015 or Serbia's Foreign Ministry endorsing China's stance on the South China Sea in 2016. However, this kind of political cooperation is conducted only on the bilateral level and, to date, not multilaterally.

One of the main factors limiting multilateral political cooperation within '16 + 1' is the political and economic diversity of the region, resulting in divergent interests. Another set of factors is related to the EU membership of 11 out of 16 CEE countries. Any possible undermining of EU rules and institutions through the expansion of multilateral political cooperation with China was perceived as a risk for some CEE participants. As the EU's unity and integrity is often considered to be in CEE's member states' core interest, regional diplomats acted as representatives of the EU interest themselves.³⁹ On the other hand, the sub-regionalization of China-EU relations has been widely criticized by the EU's institutions and non-CEE member states.⁴⁰ This has put considerable external pressure on both China and the regional

³⁴'Declaration of the Johannesburg summit of the forum on China-Africa Cooperation', http://www.focac.org/eng/ltada/dwjbzjjhys_1/t1327960.htm (accessed 20 December 2017).

³⁵See Note 16.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷For example, Wen Jiabao's announcement on establishing a permanent '16 + 1' Secretariat in his Warsaw speech in 2012 is said to have not been consulted with the regional participants, sparking huge controversy. Conversation with a Romanian diplomat (2017).

³⁸Conversation with a Romanian diplomat (2017).

³⁹See Note 29.

⁴⁰More on that topic see Richard Turcsányi, 'Central and Eastern Europe's courtship with china: trojan horse within the EU?', (January 1, 2014), available at: <http://www.eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/EU-Asia-at-a-glance-Richard-Turcsanyi-China-CEE.pdf> (accessed 12 October 2017); Wendy Wu, 'Berlin Uneasy about Beijing's Growing Clout in Eastern, Southern Europe', *South China Morning Post*, (February 18, 2017), available at: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2,072,046/berlin-uneasy-about-beijings-growing-clout-eastern> (accessed 23 November 2017).

participants. The main concerns were related to possibility of China using the principle of 'divide and rule' which would undermine the integrity of the EU .

Due to diplomatic pressure from both within and without, the dialogue on international and political affairs was effectively excluded from '16 + 1'. China has also adjusted its policy towards the EU's role within '16 + 1'. Since 2013 leaders meetings have been attended by external observers from EU institutions and member states. For example in the 2016 Riga summit, representatives of the EU External Action Service, the EBRD, and of Austria, Switzerland and Greece were present during the talks. Preambles of numerous '16 + 1' documents now include declarations on conforming with EU laws and regulations and the wish to seek synergies with the broader EU-China agenda and intra-EU development strategies. The official Chinese narrative is now aimed at dispelling the EU's concerns and depicts China-CEE cooperation as a vital part of China-EU dialogue, facilitated on three layers: bilateral relations, '16 + 1' cooperation, and the China-EU multilateral negotiations.⁴¹ European institutions are becoming increasingly involved in sectorial dialogue, for example the China-EU dialogue on connectivity in CEE is now conducted partially through the newly established China-EU Connectivity Platform.

Bilateralism within Sectorial Economic Cooperation

Chinese-led regional multilateral platforms are by no means limited to regular high-level 'forums'. The actual impact of China's engagement with Africa, Latin America and CEE comes from the comprehensive nature of cooperation platforms, reflected in a complex realm of sectorial cooperation. Each of the three platforms described here consists of dozens of individual initiatives, each in a different stage of the institutionalization 'pipeline', developed with the involvement of various of governmental and non-governmental institutions, on both the central and local levels. These include an extremely broad range of topics—from military assistance, city mayor's forums, trade fairs and seminars on scientific innovations to higher education consortiums, cultural heritage protection forums and poverty eradication programs. Due to these circumstances, it is clear that a detailed description or full cross-regional comparison cannot be provided in this article.

Nevertheless, even a brief comparison of the scope of sectorial cooperation (Table 4) may be beneficial for a better understanding of Chinese-led multilateralism. It provides a detailed map of issues that lie within the sphere of mutual interest for both China and the regional participants, offering insights into the current course of both multilateral and bilateral relations. One obvious takeaway from a brief analysis of the latest medium-term agendas for the CCF, FOCAC and '16 + 1' is that cooperation between China and CEE certainly lacks a strong political component, as described above. It is kept low-profile and focuses mainly on CEE's non-governmental actors. On the other hand, sectorial cooperation within 16 + 1 is much more developed in the area of connectivity and logistics, as the region plays a crucial role in the Belt and Road Initiative. These nuances show the flexibility of the Chinese-led regional platform model that evolves according to regional circumstances.

Cooperation on economic issues is arguably the most important and most developed part of all the Chinese-led regional platforms, as well as the one with the most apparent cross-regional convergence. The scope of economic cooperation in all three platforms is nearly identical; to a large extent this can be attributed to the China-centric structure of regional platforms. At least at the initial stage, each platform's agenda was strictly shaped by China's economic interests and government strategies. It included support for the expansion of Chinese investment, increased involvement in offshore infrastructural projects, securing the supply of resources (including agricultural products), opening new markets up for Chinese exports, expanding financial cooperation to internationalize the renminbi etc. Close links between the content of sectorial cooperation and China's key development strategies have

⁴¹China, EU need 'greater wisdom' for old problems: Chinese premier', *Xinhua*, (November 15, 2017), available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-11/15/c_136752504.htm (accessed 23 November 2017).

Table 4. FOCAC, CCF and 16 + 1 Sectorial Cooperation.

Cooperation sector	FOCAC	16 + 1	CCF
<i>Economic cooperation</i>			
Investment	●	●	●
Finance	●	●	●
Agriculture	●	●	●
Natural resources	●	●	●
Science and technology	●	●	●
Tourism	●	●	●
Industrial capacity cooperation	●	●	●
Connectivity (B&R)	●	●	●
Infrastructure and transportation	●	●	●
Energy	●	●	●
Natural resources	●	●	●
Maritime economy	●	●	○
<i>Social development cooperation</i>			
Health and medical care	●	●	●
Education	●	●	●
Poverty eradication	●	○	●
Human resources development	●	○	●
Sustainable development	●	○	●
Environment and climate change	●	○	●
<i>People-to-people exchanges</i>			
Culture and sports	●	●	●
Press and media	●	●	●
People-to-people exchanges	●	●	●
<i>Political cooperation</i>			
Parliaments	●	○	●
Military, police and anti-terrorism	●	○	○
Judiciary and law enforcement	●	○	●
International affairs	●	○	●
Internet governance	○	○	●
Local governments	●	●	●
Political parties	●	●	●
Think tanks	●	●	●

Sources: FOCAC Johannesburg Action Plan (2016–2018); Medium-Term Agenda for Cooperation between China and CEEC (2015–2020), China-CELAC Cooperation plan (2015–2019).

been explicitly mentioned by the Chinese leadership, encouraging the members of '16 + 1' to align its development strategies with China's new Five Year Plan.⁴²

Core economic instruments established to facilitate economic cooperation were in all three cases presented unilaterally by Chinese financial institutions (China's EXIM Bank or the China Development Bank), offering analogous funding schemes and conditions (Table 5). Currently, all three regions are provided with a Chinese preferential credit line. Funds are generally directed at priority sectors, mentioned in official platform documents. Concessional loans are often linked with special conditions regarding local state guarantees and the involvement of Chinese contractors.⁴³ Chinese financial institutions have also established dedicated private equity funds, investing in local companies and projects, focusing mostly on energy, industry and education. In addition, specialized funds are also established, like the FOCAC's fund aimed at supporting SMEs.

The structure of economic cooperation instruments—which are currently all provided unilaterally by Chinese financial institutions—translates into the 'hub-and-spoke' model of cooperation. All

⁴²Li Keqiang, 'Full text of Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's Remarks at the fourth summit of China and Central and Eastern European Countries', *Xinhua*, (November 25, 2015), available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2015-11/25/c_134854567.htm (accessed 24 November 2017).

⁴³Oleg Levitin, Jakov Milatovic and Peter Sanfey, *China and South-Eastern Europe: Infrastructure, trade and investment links* (EBRD, 2016), available at: www.ebrd.com/documents/comms-and-bis/see-china-investments.pdf (accessed 12 November 2017).

Table 5. Key Economic Cooperation Instruments

	Instrument	Capital assigned by China
16 + 1	China-CEE special credit line	US\$ 10 billion
	China-CEE Investment Cooperation Fund	US\$ 435 million
	SINO-CEEF Financial Holding	US\$ 10 billion (jointly with CEE)
	China-CEEC Interbank Association	US\$ 2.5 billion
FOCAC	FOCAC special credit line	US\$ 35 billion
	China-Africa Development Fund	US\$ 5 billion
CCF	CCF special credit line	US\$ 20 billion
	China-LAC Cooperation Fund	US\$ 3 billion

Source: Official FOCAC, China-CELAC and 16 + 1 websites.

cooperation projects that use China's funds, such as energy and transport infrastructure projects and government-supported FDIs, are negotiated and realized predominantly on a bilateral basis. This also applies to most of the other forms of economic cooperation, such as the reduction of non-tariff barriers (such as food certificates), currency swap agreements, additional bilateral credit lines etc. The actual terms of cooperation, such as technical details and the cost of loans, usually vary according to a specific case. As each project is negotiated individually, the terms and technical details are not always known to other platform participants. It needs to be noted, however, that some minor economic cooperation tools do contain elements of multilateralism, such as multilateral business forums and trade fairs. Nevertheless, through Chinese-controlled financial instruments that have the most impact on local economies, economic relations with local countries are effectively 'compartmentalized' into a number of separate dyads.

Judging by the level of utilization and regional allocation of China's financing, 16 + 1 should be considered as the least successful case.⁴⁴ The framework China used to facilitate business cooperation within '16 + 1' is largely based on its experiences in the developing world. The cooperation is supported by the same Chinese institutional actors, i.e. financial institutions and SOEs, that base their activities on experiences gathered in the developing world. Very often they are reproducing practices used there, especially the model of infrastructure financing. In some cases, even specific policy measures are reproduced cross-regionally. For example, the so-called 'Industrial Capacity Cooperation'—a mechanism intended to facilitate heavy industry relocation from China—was proposed to the Arab states, Africa and CEE in 2015 and 2016.⁴⁵

This approach to the CEE region has already encountered some serious limitations. First of all, the model of financing provided by China, linking project financing with procurement and based on state guarantees, cannot be used in 11 of the 16 countries due to the EU's regulations on public tenders. In effect, the US\$ 10 billion credit line offered to '16 + 1' participants has been utilized only in the Western Balkans, which lies outside the EU's legal framework. The only attempt to use the Chinese credit line within a '16 + 1' EU member state, the case of the Belgrade-Budapest railway modernization in Hungary, has resulted in a legal compliance investigation by the European Commission.⁴⁶ The utilization of '16 + 1' financial instruments is also limited by the fact that the Chinese offer is often unattractive compared to other sources of funding available to EU member states, such as the EU's Structural Funds or European Investment Bank loans.

Due to these circumstances, the need for adjustments in economic cooperation is currently gaining importance as a subject of '16 + 1' talks. The local administrations of 11 EU countries generally refuse to use the existing financing framework and use 16 + 1 channels to negotiate new means of financial

⁴⁴Though the credit line was approximately 70% utilized in 5 years (about US\$ 7 bn), loans were used in only 6 of the 16 countries. Source: *ibid.*

⁴⁵Author's observations at the Dialogue on China-Poland Production Capacity Cooperation event, organized by the Council for Promoting South-South Cooperation (CPSSC), Warsaw, June 2016.

⁴⁶James Kynge, Arthur Beesley and Andrew Byrne, 'EU Sets Collision Course with China over 'Silk Road' Rail Project', *Financial Times*, (February 1, 2017), available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/003bad14-f52f-11e6-95ee-f14e55513608> (accessed 24 November 2017).

cooperation; this sometimes leads to impatience on the Chinese side.⁴⁷ Currently a new investment fund named Sino-CEE Finance Holding Company Ltd. is being negotiated. With a majority stake invested by the ICBC bank, it will be co-funded by CEE states and jointly managed by all contributors, adding a multilateral element into it.⁴⁸ During the 2017 Budapest summit, a new China-CEEC Interbank Association co-hosted by China and Hungary was established, providing new source of financing for CEE policy banks. If successful, these new instruments could be another example of China's openness to increased multilateralism within regional platforms.

Conclusions

The Chinese-led regional platform model is set on a normative basis that enables China to balance between multilateralism and bilateralism. The principles of consensus, voluntarism and non-binding agreements are reflected in its loose institutional structure and are developed incrementally throughout regular intergovernmental meetings. This sets the stage for multilateral interactions that—instead of voting and formal procedures—are based on informal negotiations, consultations and sometimes obstruction of parties engaged in it. As Chinese-led regional platforms are complex and multi-layered structures, these interactions happen at many different levels, engaging state leaders, officials and non-government actors. However, due to the China-centric agenda-setting process, dialogue mechanisms sometimes serve merely as venues to announce China's agenda, with no *qualitative* multilateralism in it. The agenda is then implemented on a bilateral basis and China's relations with particular countries are 'compartmentalized' in separated dyads, forming a 'hub-and-spoke' structure based on bilateralism.

The eventual choice between these two modes of cooperation is largely context-dependent. In some cases, an occurrence of *qualitative* multilateralism is a hard-fought result of regional coordination vis-à-vis China. As the structure of the platforms itself does not provide local countries with such coordination mechanisms, it is usually conducted within existing regional groupings or through ad hoc dialogue. It also requires regional countries to be capable of formulating the multilateral agenda, which is often beyond their capacity. Sometimes, however, China is itself experimenting with agency-sharing innovations that support multilateral interactions, exemplified by 16 + 1's sectorial secretariats. China's behaviour can be attributed to a pragmatic cost and benefit calculation. The use of multilateralism brings apparent benefits, including the flexibility and adaptability of platforms, and their openness to regional feedback and increased local involvement. This often outweighs the cost of occasional regional contestation of Beijing's actions. On the other hand, in sectors that China perceives as its core interest, such as economic cooperation, it tends to stick to bilateralism, making use of the power asymmetry that comes with it.

To date, the impact that Chinese-led regional multilateralism has on Beijing's international position remains mixed. The flexibility of the regional 'blueprint' enables China to successfully navigate regional complexities, increasing its economic and political influence throughout the developing world. The 'learning-by-doing' approach was much needed in the early stage of its international rise. Unlike recent fully institutionalized or global initiatives, such as the AIIB or Belt and Road Initiative, it also enables China to promote the norms of international cooperation which it prefers while remaining relatively low-profile.

On the other hand, China's multilateral approach has displayed some important limitations. Local participants can often sense the power asymmetry that is embedded into the structure of Chinese-led

⁴⁷In 2017, CCP SC member Zhang Dejiang visited Poland, urging that that both sides 'could make use of existing mechanisms and platforms to deepen infrastructure cooperation'. Source: 'China, Poland urged to seize opportunity of Belt & Road Initiative for closer cooperation', *Xinhua*, (June 17, 2017), available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/17/c_136448311.htm (accessed 24, November 2017).

⁴⁸One of the key issues during the negotiations were the control mechanisms of the fund, the board of directors, and the location of its headquarters. Source: 'China's billions in standstill' (in Polish), *Puls Biznesu*, available at: <https://www.pb.pl/miliardy-w-zawieszeniu-863414> (accessed 24 November 2017).

regional platforms, as well as adverse consequences of bilateralism.⁴⁹ This creates a discrepancy between China's official discourse of equality, and the reality of the power struggle, lowering China's credibility. The non-binding nature of agreements and incremental institutionalization process results in a relatively slow pace of cooperation.

The case of 16 + 1 platform shows the ups and downs of Chinese-led multilateralism. The regional platform blueprint used in the CEE region has quickly displayed its limitations. Beijing has encountered a relatively well established normative environment, shaped and reinforced by the European Union. The general agenda introduced by China proved to be unfit for the political interests and economic needs of most CEE countries. This has greatly limited the use of China's economic cooperation model, as well as the willingness of regional participants to jointly pursue Beijing's political and international agenda. This started a process of adjustment, conducted through multilateral dialogue that determined the further evolution of the platform. Certain areas, such as international affairs or internal politics, were deliberately excluded from it. New fields of common interest, such as connectivity, were soon discovered and institutionalized. The high intensity of political contacts enabled Beijing to establish the multifaceted sectorial dialogue with CEE, increase people-to-people exchanges, and to reshape the local perception of China.⁵⁰ However, that did not save Beijing from occasional local feeling of threat and dissatisfaction with 16 + 1.⁵¹ The slow pace of cooperation and lack of economic deliverables has created a sense of impatience. The use of bilateralism caused criticism about inducing competition for China's resources among the CEE states, as well as the lack of transparency.⁵² Nevertheless, the Chinese-led regional platform model proved its flexibility and adaptability that has enabled the platform to evolve—and develop quite successfully—for more than five years now.

The study of Chinese-led regional platforms provides important insights into China's future approaches towards multilateralism. It can also help to understand the development of China's new grand international schemes, such as the Belt and Road Initiative. The first regular International Belt and Road Forum, organized in May 2017, gathered dozens of leaders from four continents. In many respects, it resembled Chinese-led regional platforms. The forum was used to sign more than 200 bilateral agreements, included a number of joint declarations on international affairs, and was followed by the establishment of a number of various sub-forums and cooperation schemes.⁵³ The further institutionalization of this initiative can provide us with new material to study the evolution Chinese-led multilateralism - this time on a global scale.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Jakub Jakóbowski is a PhD candidate at the Warsaw School of Economics and a senior fellow at the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), an independent public think-tank based in Warsaw, Poland. He specialises in China's international political economy, as well as CEE-China and EU-China relations.

⁴⁹Liu Zuokui, 'The Pragmatic Cooperation between China and CEE', pp. 1–11; Wekesa, 'FOCAC, African agency and Africa's China policy', pp. 3–5.

⁵⁰See Note 19.

⁵¹See Dragan Pavličević's contribution in this special issue.

⁵²Ed. book: Maris Andzanis, ed., *Afterthoughts: Riga 2016 international forum of China And Central And Eastern European Countries* (Riga: LIIA, 2017), available at: http://liia.lv/en/publications/afterthoughts-of-the-riga-2016-china-and-central-and-eastern-european-countries-564?get_file=1 (accessed 20 November 2017).

⁵³'List of deliverables of Belt and Road forum', *Xinhua*, (May 15, 2017), available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/15/c_136286376.htm (accessed 20 November 2017).