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BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN CHINA AND LATVIA IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBAL GEOPOLITICAL CHANGES: FREEDOM OF CHOICE OR GEOPOLITICAL IMPERATIVES?

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This article examines the dynamics of bilateral relations between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Latvia. Drawing upon established theoretical models, it identifies the key factors shaping these interactions and thereby provides a basis for projecting their probable development in the coming years within the evolving global order. Particular attention is devoted to the paradigm of interaction between great powers and small states that are not historically, politically, or geographically connected. The primary objective of this study is to assess the explanatory value of selected theoretical frameworks for analyzing a highly asymmetric and geographical-ly distant bilateral relationship, exemplified by Sino–Latvian relations. The authors conclude that the development of relations between Latvia and China is entirely determined by the current stage of evolution of the international system and its contemporary geopolitical context, which reaffirms the validity of political realism theory.

Keywords:

China's foreign policy, Latvia's foreign policy, small states, political realism

Introduction. The problem of interaction between great powers and small states: theoretical aspects

The theoretical paradigm of interaction between great powers and small states located within the same macro-region has been extensively examined in contemporary scholarship. Within the neorealist framework, this issue is addressed, inter

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alia, in the work of Mihundo and Kalenzo [1], where small states are conceptualised as elements of the systemic balance of power whose behaviour is largely determined by the structure of the international system. A conceptually similar approach is advanced by Clive, Bailes, and Wivel [2], who analyse the role of small states in the formation and functioning of international security regimes. Significant attention to the conceptual dimension of the problem is devoted by Crowards [3], who proposes various criteria for defining the notion of a 'small state' and emphasises the contingent and context-dependent nature of this category. In Hey [4], the analytical focus shifts toward the factors shaping the foreign policy of small states, including domestic institutional constraints and external systemic pressures. The relationship between small states and great powers as a specific form of asymmetric interaction is examined in detail by Neumann [5], whereas Vital [6] concentrates on the broader issue of inequality among states within the international system. The modelling of small states' foreign policy is presented in East [7]. In Russian scholarship, a substantial contribution to the analysis of the role of small states in international relations has been made by Novikova [8], as well as by Zverev and Mezhevich [9], who address terminological and classificatory issues using the Baltic states as empirical cases. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that existing models of interaction between small states and great powers are heavily dependent on both the underlying theoretical paradigm and the interpretation of the very concept of the *small state*, which complicates their direct application to specific regional contexts and leaves room for further empirical investigation.

Modern scholars define the category of small states in different ways. The lower threshold separating microstates is usually estimated at 0.5–1.5 million inhabitants, while the upper boundary distinguishing small from medium-sized states by population varies between 5 and 30 million. The territorial criterion is equally ambiguous, with the United Nations classification setting the limit at approximately 100,000 square kilometres. In general terms, taking into account both quantitative and qualitative indicators, small states are characterised by a limited population, restricted human capital, and small territorial size [10, p. 346].

Broadly speaking, three major theoretical approaches can be identified in analysing the interaction between small states and great powers:

A. The Neoliberal approach emphasises the "reluctance of small states to resort to coercive means, their preference for multilateral mechanisms of conflict resolution, and their appeal to legal and institutional frameworks" [11, p. 256]. However, the postulated natural inclination of small states toward preserving the status quo and peacefully settling disputes appears highly questionable in the case of Latvia. At the present stage, Eastern European small states appear to exert influence on the policies of larger European powers in ways that contribute to heightened international tensions.

B. The Neorealist Approach, as formulated by Kenneth Waltz, posits that “the structural properties of the international system are largely independent of the efforts of small and medium-sized states, being the outcome of interactions among great powers” [10, p. 347]. These great powers thus constitute the system, or the environment, within which all states are compelled to operate. Consequently, the foreign policy of small states is determined less by internal factors and more by external conditions beyond their control. “This approach, known as a capacity-based investigation, argues that it is precisely the lack of capacity that shapes the foreign policy of small states and thereby diminishes their significance in the international system” [12, p. 27]. Moreover, some scholars suggest that “small states may only choose between the role of lambs—weak entities whose sole aim is survival—and that of jackals, seeking the patronage of stronger powers in hopes of gaining additional advantages” [12, p. 27].

C. Constructivism explains the behaviour of small states through the concept of soft power. Some scholars even introduce the notion of *virtual enlargement* as a means of transforming the positive moral connotations associated with smallness into strategies of effective mediation and the promotion of their political and economic systems to attract investment. A common feature of this approach is the rejection of the idea that small states are inherently deficient [12, p. 29], and an emphasis instead on their additional opportunities arising from the successful implementation of discursive strategies.

Much less attention in international relations research has been devoted to interactions between great powers and small states that share neither historical, political, nor geographical proximity. The present study aims to assess the applicability of the aforementioned theoretical models to the analysis of asymmetric and geographically distant bilateral relationships, using China—Latvia relations as a case study.

The relevance of any theoretical model can be confirmed or refuted only based on available empirical evidence. The empirical foundation of this study consists of open-access statistical data, which are presented by the authors in tabular and graphical form for the sake of clarity. The study employs qualitative, theory-guided document analysis of official foreign policy texts, with particular attention to foreign policy strategies such as “A Global Community of Shared Future: China’s Proposals and Actions”, “The National Security Concept of Latvia (2023)”, as well as bilateral agreements between the People’s Republic of China and Latvia concluded between 2000 and 2025 (with due consideration given to the specific features and conventions of diplomatic language). The analysis focuses on policy priorities, security narratives, and patterns of strategic reasoning articulated in official documents. The methodological framework of the study is grounded in a systems approach to the analysis of international relations. In addition, comparative-historical analysis is applied to identify key trends in interactions between the People’s Republic of China and Latvia.

Thus, this article explores the dynamics of bilateral relations between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Latvia. Using established theoretical models, it aims to identify the main factors influencing these relations and, accordingly, to suggest a plausible forecast for their development in the coming years within the broader context of the changing global order.

History of Sino – Latvian relations

A substantial body of scholarship conceptualises the Baltic region as an arena of great-power politics. China's influence on the Baltic states has been examined by Sluka, Korobkov, and Ivanov [13], as well as by Guzenkova and Karpov [14], who situate the region within Beijing's broader strategic approach to Europe. French policy in the Baltic region is analysed by Chikhachev [15], while German strategy, together with its institutional and military-political dimensions, is examined in detail by Trunov [16]. The economic dimension of China's presence in the region is addressed by Shamakov, Mezhevich, and Guo Shohun [17], as well as by Varnavsky [18], who emphasize investment activity and trade-economic ties. A broader geopolitical perspective, within which the Baltic region is interpreted as a space of intensifying confrontation between Russia and the West, is presented by Khudoley [19], Mezhevich and Sazanovich [20], and Zverev [21]. Finally, Latvia's and other Baltic states' participation in NATO and the EU as a key determinant of their foreign policy orientation is analysed by Lanko and Dolzhenkova [22], Vivotnenko [23], and Pospelova [24]. At the same time, in most of the aforementioned works, the Baltic states, including Latvia, are treated primarily as objects of great-power politics or institutional integration, whereas their own strategies of adaptation to external competition and their capacity to leverage such competition in pursuit of national interests remain only fragmentarily examined.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of Latvia share a relatively long and productive history of bilateral relations. China was among the first countries to recognise the restoration of Latvia's independence on 7 September 1991. Diplomatic relations were officially established shortly thereafter, on 12 September 1991.¹ The relationship between China and the Baltic states has been the subject of scholarly attention in China, the Baltic region, and Russia. However, Sino-Latvian relations have not always been free of tension. As noted by scholars Vinogradov and Danilyuk, "this primarily concerns the actions of the Latvian leadership, which in 1992 even proceeded to open a consulate of the Republic of China (Taiwan) in Riga. This was interpreted by the PRC as a violation of the One-China principle, resulting in the withdrawal of the Chinese

¹ Latvijas Republikas un Ķīnas Tautas Republikas divpusējās attiecības [Bilateral relations between the Republic of Latvia and the People's Republic of China], URL: https://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/latvijas-republikas-un-kinas-tautas-republikas-divpusejas-attiecibas?utm_source=https%3A%2F%2Fyandex.ru%2F (accessed 01.06.2025).

ambassador and the de facto closure of the PRC embassy in Riga. Normal diplomatic relations were restored only in 1994, following Latvia's reaffirmation of its recognition of the One-China principle [25, p. 60]."

Other scholars examining the evolution of China—Latvia relations identify three key phases. The first phase (1991—2002) was characterised by the initial establishment of China—Baltic relations. The second phase, during the presidency of Hu Jintao, saw Latvia actively expanding cooperation with China, particularly in the fields of culture and education. The third phase, beginning in 2013, has prioritised cooperation within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative [26, p. 35].

Konstantin Khudoley identifies three dimensions of China's strategy in the region: "China operates in this region through three channels: its strategic partnership with Russia, the '16 + 1' format, and the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative." [27]. As noted by Tsvyk, cooperation with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, located along the transport routes of both the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road, has in recent years become one of the top priorities of China's foreign policy in Europe [28, p. 109]. Other significant contributions by Russian scholars include studies by Mezhevich [29], Vinogradov and Golubkin [30], and Yakovlev [31].

Chinese research on this topic remains relatively limited. Yuan Shenglong notes that "Latvia's unique geographical advantages, stable economic environment, and strong willingness to cooperate have made it a partner of our country in the joint development of the 'Silk Road Economic Belt', in advancing infrastructure and transport-logistics connectivity with Eastern Europe, and in expanding bilateral cooperation" [32]. Mu Chonghuai and Song Dianjiao likewise emphasise Latvia's advantageous geographic position, describing it as a key transit and transportation hub linking Western Europe, Northern Europe, and Russia [33]. Other notable contributions include Suan An's work on Sino-Latvian cooperation [34] and Zhao Sha's analytical report on bilateral trade turnover with Latvia [35].

Authors in Western, English-language scholarship tend to approach Chinese initiatives with a degree of scepticism, calling for a more nuanced assessment of the risks they entail. For instance, Sarkar analyses China's prospects in the Baltic states, highlighting Latvia's increasing economic dependence on China between 2016 and 2021, as well as the country's efforts to mitigate this reliance [36]. In another study, a group of Baltic authors examine not only the expansion of economic ties but also the political risks associated with alignment with Chinese initiatives [37]. Andrijauskas likewise considers China a strategic threat to the Baltic states [38]. Scott argues that economic dependence on China has the potential to generate tensions not only among the Baltic states but also within the European Union as a whole [39]. Nonetheless, most

experts agree that the Baltic region is of strategic interest to China primarily as a transit hub, contingent upon the continuation of active trade between Russia and Europe.

Although the academic literature on this topic remains limited, there is an ongoing and intense debate regarding the present and future of relations between the People's Republic of China and Latvia. First, many existing studies exhibit a degree of political bias, particularly those produced within Western scholarly traditions. Second, much of the research overlooks the use of economic indicators as empirical tools for hypothesis testing. Third, a substantial portion of the literature has become outdated, given the profound changes in the global political landscape since early 2022.

As a result, academic discourse continues to reflect divergent views on the prospects for China's relations with the Baltic states, particularly Latvia, within the broader context of escalating tensions between Russia and the West. At the same time, there remains a notable gap in comprehensive analyses of Sino-Latvian relations. Addressing this issue may therefore provide a valuable case study for understanding China—Eastern Europe relations under evolving geopolitical conditions.

The political dimension of PRC – Latvia relations in the contemporary period (2014 – 2024)

First and foremost, it is necessary to examine the legal and regulatory framework governing bilateral relations between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Latvia. To date, the two countries have concluded 20 cooperation agreements across various fields, 15 of which remain in force. One of the earliest agreements in the modern period is the “Agreement on Cultural and Educational Cooperation”, signed in 1996, which provides for cultural and educational exchanges, the organisation of sporting events, and the establishment of mechanisms for sustained interaction between governmental bodies.¹ As further evidence of the broad scope of cooperation between the two countries, one can also mention agreements from the early 21st century, such as “Agreement for the Avoidance of Double Taxation and the Prevention of Fiscal Evasion with Respect to Taxes on Income and Capital”,² “Treaty between the Republic of Latvia

¹ Latvijas Republikas valdības un Ķīnas Tautas Republikas valdības kultūras un izglītības sadarbības līgums [Cultural and educational cooperation agreement between the government of the Republic of Latvia and the Government of the people's Republic of China], URL: <https://likumi.lv/ta/lv/starptautiskie-ligumi/id/415-latvijas-republikas-valdibas-un-kinas-tautas-republikas-valdibas-kulturas-un-izglitibas-sadarbibas-ligums> (accessed 03.06.2025).

² Agreement for the avoidance of double taxation and the prevention of fiscal evasion with respect to taxes on income and on capital, URL: <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/starptautiskie-ligumi/id/417-agreement-between-the-government-of-the-republic-of-latvia-and-the-government-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-for-the-avoidance> (accessed 03.06.2025).

and the People's Republic of China on Mutual Judicial Assistance in Criminal Matters",¹ "Agreement on the Promotion and Protection of Investments"² and "Agreement on Maritime Transport".³

However, it is important to highlight cooperation in the economic sphere within the framework of bilateral interactions, rather than through international institutions. The "Agreement on Economic Cooperation" between the Government of the Republic of Latvia and the Government of the People's Republic of China, signed on April 15, 2004, defined the main economic priorities, which included industry and mining; agriculture, including agro-industry; science and technology; energy; communications; transport; tourism; and environmental protection.⁴

In the past decade, relatively few agreements have been concluded. Most of them have focused on promoting cultural, educational, and scientific ties between the two countries. In particular, the parties agreed: (1) to exchange visits by writers and artists; (2) to organise performing tours by artistic troupes; and (3) to hold cultural and art exhibitions.⁵ In another agreement signed in 2018, the two countries agreed to engage in scientific and technological cooperation⁶, which reflects a closer level of mutual trust and coordination. Thus, over the past

¹ Treaty between the Republic of Latvia and the People's Republic of China on Mutual Judicial Assistance in Criminal Matters, URL: <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/starptautiskie-ligumi/id/410-treaty-between-the-republic-of-latvia-and-the-peoples-republic-of-china-on-mutual-judicial-assistance-in-criminal-matters> (accessed 03.06.2025).

² Agreement on the promotion and protection of investments, URL: <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/starptautiskie-ligumi/id/408-agreement-between-the-government-of-the-republic-of-latvia-and-the-government-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-on-the-promotion> (accessed 03.06.2025).

³ Agreement on maritime transport, URL: <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/starptautiskie-ligumi/id/406-agreement-between-the-government-of-the-republic-of-latvia-and-the-government-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-on-maritime-transport> (accessed 03.06.2025).

⁴ Agreement on Economic Cooperation between the Government of the Republic of Latvia and the Government of the People's Republic of China, URL: <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/starptautiskie-ligumi/id/403-agreement-on-economic-cooperation-between-the-government-of-the-republic-of-latvia-and-the-government-of-the-peoples-republic-of> (accessed 03.06.2025).

⁵ Agreement between the government of the Republic of Latvia and the Government of the People's Republic of China on cooperation in the field of culture, URL: <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/starptautiskie-ligumi/id/1741-agreement-between-the-government-of-the-republic-of-latvia-and-the-government-of-the-republic-of-china-on-the-cooperation-in-the-field> (accessed 04.06.2025).

⁶ Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Latvia and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Cooperation in the field of Science and Technology, URL: <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/starptautiskie-ligumi/id/1784-agreement-between-the-government-of-the-republic-of-latvia-and-the-government-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-on-cooperation-in-the> (accessed 04.06.2025).

decades, relations between China and Latvia have expanded not only in practice but also through the development of a corresponding legal and institutional framework.

An important aspect of Sino-Latvian relations is the organisation of meetings and official visits between representatives of the two countries. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, cooperation extends beyond the economic and trade spheres to encompass areas such as foreign affairs, sports, transport infrastructure, tourism, and healthcare. Notably, an interparliamentary group on cooperation with China operates within the Latvian Saeima (Parliament).¹

Table 1

Recent visits of Latvian officials to China (since 2017)

Date	Events
13 November 2024	Visit of State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Andris Viļumssons to Beijing; bilateral political consultations between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Latvia and China
4–8 November 2019	Visit of Minister of Economics Ralfs Nemiro to China; participation in the opening of the 2nd China International Import Expo in Shanghai, and a visit to the city of Wuhan
17–21 October 2019	Visit of Minister of Defence Artis Pabriks to China; participation in a forum in Shanghai, and the opening of the International Military Sports Games
15–20 September 2018	Working visit of President Raimonds Vējonis to China; participation in the “Summer Davos” summit in Tianjin, organised by the World Economic Forum, and meetings with President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang
23–31 August 2018	Visit of a group of Saeima deputies cooperating with the Chinese Parliament, as part of a joint visit of Baltic parliamentarians to China
7 July 2018	Bilateral meeting between Latvian Prime Minister Māris Kučinskis and Premier of the State Council of China Li Keqiang in Sofia, Bulgaria, during the 7th summit of the ‘16 + 1’ countries
16–22 June 2018	Visit of Minister of Transport Uldis Augulis to China (Haikou, Hangzhou, Beijing, Shenzhen)
8–12 January 2018	Visit of Speaker of the Saeima Ināra Mūrniece to China as part of a joint visit of the parliamentary speakers of the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8) countries, including meetings with President Xi Jinping and Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress Zhang Dejiang

¹ Latvijas Republika Saeima [Saeima Of The Republic Of Latvia], URL: https://titania.saeima.lv/Personal/Deputati/Saeima14_DepWeb_Public.nsf/structureview?readform&type=DG1&lang=LV&count=1000 (accessed 04.06.2025).

The end of Table 1

Date	Events
27 November 2017	Bilateral meeting between Latvian Prime Minister Māris Kučinskis and Premier of the State Council of China Li Keqiang in Budapest, Hungary, during the 6th summit of the '16+1' countries

Table compiled based on data from the official website of the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹

Table 2

Recent visits of Chinese officials to Latvia (since 2016)

Date	Events
16 December 2019	Visit of the Chinese Minister of Culture and Tourism to Latvia within the framework of the high-level '17+1' Tourism Conference
4–7 July 2018	Visit to Riga by Zhang Qingli, Vice Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)
7–8 September 2017	Visit to Riga by Ma Biao, Vice Chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)
23–26 July 2017	Visit to Riga by Ma Xiaowei, Vice Minister of the National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China
12–14 April 2017	Official visit to Riga by Zhang Dejiang, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of China.
4–6 November 2016	Bilateral official visit of Li Keqiang, Premier of the State Council of China, to Latvia on November 4, 2016, and participation in the 5th summit of the heads of government of Central and Eastern European countries and China ('16+1') held in Riga on November 5, 2016
13–14 October 2016	Visit of Liu Haixing, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs of China and Secretary-General of the '16+1' Secretariat, to Riga; participation in the meeting of national coordinators of the '16+1' format, as well as political consultations with State Secretary of the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Andris Pildegovičs
28–30 May 2016	Working visit of Ji Bingxuan, Vice Chairman of the National People's Congress of China, to the Saeima in Riga

¹ Latvijas Republikas un Ķīnas Tautas Republikas divpusējās attiecības [Bilateral relations between the Republic of Latvia and the people's Republic of China], URL: https://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/latvijas-republikas-un-kinas-tautas-republikas-divpusejas-attiecibas?utm_source=https%3A%2F%2Fyandex.ru%2F (accessed 04.06.2025).

The end of Table 2

Date	Events
16—17 May 2016	Participation of Dai Dongchang, Vice Minister of Transport of China, in the first meeting of Transport Ministers of the '16 + 1' countries held in Riga.
17—20 February 2016	Visit to Riga by Ning Jizhe, Vice Chairman of the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) of China.

Table compiled based on data from the official website of the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹

Sino-Latvian relations demonstrate a positive dynamic across various sectors and are characterised by a long history and significant potential for further development. However, despite China's stated willingness to cooperate on the basis of equality with any country and its adherence to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, bilateral relations are also marked by notable tensions. These are largely rooted in the Latvian government's distrust of the mutual political and economic benefits of cooperation. Several examples may be cited in support of this argument. Moreover, the Russia—Ukraine conflict, which began in 2022, may have served as a trigger for the deterioration of relations between China and Latvia amid the growing tensions between the West and the East.

It is particularly noteworthy that in 2023, the Latvian Parliament adopted a key foreign policy document — the National Security Concept — in which China is mentioned 16 times.² Latvia identifies China as a primary threat at the tactical, strategic, and systemic levels. According to this document, "China's interests thus often conflict with the Western position based on universal values and the global security architecture."³ Latvia thus positions itself as part of the Western world, framing it as its responsibility to counter what it perceives as a Chinese challenge at the level of values, particularly in opposition to alternative models of global order. Moreover, from the perspective of the Latvian government, China — despite its formally balanced foreign policy approach — is viewed as a military and strategic partner of Russia, which contributes to its classification as an unfriendly state vis-à-vis Latvia: "Joint Russian-Chinese military exercises are part of the strategic partnership and rapprochement between the two coun-

¹ Latvijas Republikas un Ķīnas Tautas Republikas divpusējās attiecības [Bilateral relations between the Republic of Latvia and the people's Republic of China], URL: https://www.mfa.gov.lv/lv/latvijas-republikas-un-kinas-tautas-republikas-divpusejas-attiecibas?utm_source=https%3A%2F%2Fyandex.ru%2F (accessed 04.06.2025).

² Par Nacionālās drošības koncepcijas apstiprināšanu [National Security Concepts], URL: <https://www.vestnesis.lv/op/2023/189.1> (accessed 04.06.2025).

³ Ibid.

tries, which is directed against Western countries and involves joint positioning with Russia, including on global security issues”¹; “the number of cyber-attacks originating from Chinese territory is increasing in Latvia”.² It is also noteworthy that Latvia has proposed and implemented practical measures for overseeing Chinese investments in its national economy: “It is essential to continue working in the public and private sectors to reduce strategic dependencies and vulnerabilities, including by carefully assessing Chinese investments in all sectors of the economy”.³

An analysis of Latvia’s new National Security Concept, in which China is identified as the main geopolitical threat, helps to clarify the reasons behind the cooling of relations between the two countries. In 2023, another incident occurred that further escalated the already tense bilateral relationship. Chinese ambassador to France, Lu Shaye, stated in an interview with French news channel LCI: “According to international law, these former Soviet states do not have a valid status because there is no international agreement granting them the status of sovereign states”.⁴ Statements by official representatives that raise issues of national sovereignty serve as direct evidence of a visible deterioration in bilateral relations. Moreover, in 2024, the situation further deteriorated when a group of Latvian parliamentarians who had visited China were accused of corruption, as the visit had been funded by the host country.⁵

Cooperation between the People’s Republic of China and Latvia unfolds both bilaterally and within broader multilateral frameworks, including the “China +” format and various international forums. This regional mode of engagement is not novel in Chinese foreign policy; a comparable precedent is the China—Africa cooperation model. The most dynamic expansion of such arrangements occurred in the 2010s. In retrospect, the first half of the 2010s represented a particularly productive phase in European—Chinese relations. During this period, the European Union sought new drivers of growth, aiming to diversify its external partnerships in the aftermath of the economic crisis, while the PRC pursued access to new markets capable of absorbing its accumulated capital and labour

¹ Par Nacionālās drošības koncepcijas apstiprināšanu [National Security Concepts], URL: <https://www.vestnesis.lv/op/2023/189.1> (accessed 04.06.2025).

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Chinese Ambassador to France Sparks Controversy Over Unresolved Sovereignty of Former Soviet States; Ukraine and Baltic Three Express Dissatisfaction, *Hong Kong 01*, 23.04.2023, URL: https://www.hk01.com/article/890690?utm_source=01articlecopy&utm_medium=referral (accessed 06.06.2025).

⁵ Skandal s Podnebesnoi: Latviya vpala v antikitaiskii psikhhoz [Scandal with the Middle Kingdom: Latvia has fallen into anti-Chinese psychosis], 09.02.2024, *RuBaltic.ru*, URL: <https://www.rubaltic.ru/article/politika-i-obshchestvo/20240208-skandal-s-podnebesnoy-latviya-vpala-v-antikitayskiy-psikhhoz/> (accessed 06.06.2025).

force.¹ This format helped to stimulate economic cooperation between European countries and China without imposing any political conditions. Interestingly, a report by the European Parliament on the activities of the ‘16+1’ group concludes that there is a positive correlation between the level of Euroscepticism in an EU member state and the extent of its cooperation with China.² For the European Union, the possibility of direct engagement between member states and the PRC represents a strengthening of their economic and political autonomy, which may ultimately have negative implications for the cohesion of the Union as a whole.

Latvia joined this framework in 2016 with the Riga Declaration of the ‘16+1’ Summit, aimed to promote the development of ports, roads, railways, and logistical hubs under the Adriatic—Baltic—Black Sea Seaport Cooperation initiative.² This served the interests of both parties, as it facilitated trade between the European Union and China while also attracting Chinese investment into the infrastructure of the Baltic states. In the action plan adopted following the same Riga summit, the participants agreed to: “welcome Latvia in establishing the China-CEEC Secretariat on Logistics Cooperation in Riga.”⁴ Thus, Latvia assumed an important role as a coordinator for the implementation of logistics projects between China and the countries of Eastern Europe.

This active initial phase of cooperation between the PRC and Latvia within the ‘16+1’ format generated a certain degree of optimism. However, by late 2022, both Estonia and Latvia announced their withdrawal from this cooperation format, citing concerns over excessive Chinese influence on their respective economies.⁵ Lithuania had previously withdrawn from the “17+1” format (renamed following Greece’s accession to the group in 2019) in 2021. Several factors may explain this decision, as reflected in statements by officials of the Republic of Latvia. As noted by a representative of the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Latvia will continue to pursue constructive and pragmatic relations with China, both bilaterally and within the framework of EU—China cooperation, based on mutual benefit, respect for international law, human

¹ China and Europe: What Was It? The Rise and Crumbling of the ‘16+1’ Format, *Russian international affairs council*, URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytcs-and-comments/analytcs/china-and-europe-what-was-it-the-rise-and-crumbling-of-the-16-1-format/> (accessed 11.06.2025).

² China, the 16+1 format and the EU 2018, *Think Tank European Parliament*, URL: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2018\)625173](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2018)625173) (accessed 06.06.2025).

² Riga Declaration, 2016, URL: http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/zywj/ldrhhcgwj/202112/t20211222_10474160.htm (accessed 06.06.2025).

⁴ Riga Guidelines, 2016, URL: http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/zywj/ldrhhcgwj/202112/t20211222_10474162.htm (accessed 06.06.2025).

⁵ Estonia, Latvia withdrawing from China’s 16+1 cooperation format, 11.08.2022, *ERR News*, URL: <https://news.err.ee/1608682231/estonia-latvia-withdrawing-from-china-s-16-1-cooperation-format> (accessed 11.06.2025).

rights, and the rules-based international order.¹ This formulation is significant in that it highlights the role of the EU as Latvia's external political representative, indicating the country's willingness to delegate part of its sovereignty to a supranational level. According to researcher Melnikova: "In terms of turnover, the performance of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia was also quite modest, which means that they could afford to earn political points by leaving the format without risking economic losses [40]."

Latvia's current foreign policy priority is likely to position itself as an integral part of the European community, driven by concerns over the so-called "Russian threat." Moreover, the present geopolitical climate—shaped by issues of European security—compels smaller states to seek support from Western European allies. A more rigid stance toward China aligns more closely with the positions of the EU and U.S. leadership than a balanced approach based on national interests. It is therefore not surprising that the three Baltic states were the ones to demonstratively terminate direct cooperation with the PRC within the 17 + 1 format, signalling their loyalty to the EU's central authority in the hope of gaining additional influence among Western partners.

The economic aspect of PRC – Latvia relations in the last decade (2014 – 2024)

This study proposes to evaluate the economic relations between China and Latvia using several key indicators. First, it examines the trade balance between the two countries over the past ten years. Second, it compares the export and import volumes of Chinese companies with those of Latvia's other major trading partners. Third, it analyses data on China's foreign direct investment (FDI) in Latvia during the same period. This approach enables an assessment of the significance of the Chinese economic presence in Latvia, as well as the extent of the country's dependence on Chinese investment.

Overall, China holds a significant, though not dominant, position in Latvia's economy. According to the 2023 edition of the Atlas of Economic Complexity, China accounted for only 1.14% of Latvia's total exports. In terms of imports, however, the share was noticeably higher, amounting to 3.82%.² For comparison, even with Russia, defined by Latvia as an unfriendly state, these shares amounted to 6.50% in exports and 2.53% in imports. In terms of total imports over the past ten years, China ranks only seventh. Over the same period, China does not even appear among Latvia's top ten export destinations. More detailed quantitative data are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

¹ Estonia, Latvia withdrawing from China's 16 + 1 cooperation format, 11.08.2022, *ERR News*, URL: <https://news.err.ee/1608682231/estonia-latvia-withdrawing-from-china-s-16-1-cooperation-format> (accessed 11.06.2025).

² Atlas of economic complexity, URL: <https://atlas.hks.harvard.edu/explore/geomap?-exporter=group-1&importer=country-428> (accessed 12.06.2025).

Table 3

Latvia's top import partners (2014–2024)

Country	Import value (EUR)
Lithuania	4 480 310 867
Germany	2 527 940 649
Poland	2 436 161 431
Estonia	1 871 962 673
Finland	1 211 708 663
Netherlands	1 039 559 366
China	831 064 174
Italy	757 004 981
Sweden	711 635 956
Belgium	457 200 527

Table compiled based on data from the official website of the Latvian Ministry of Trade.¹

Table 4

Latvia's top export partners (2014–2024)

Country	Export value (EUR)
Lithuania	3 392 611 508
Estonia	2 200 447 308
Germany	1 219 448 672
Sweden	1 040 722 439
Russia	1 037 863 379
Great Britain	995 337 286
Poland	858 472 532
Denmark	801 905 338
Netherlands	621 212 567
Finland	556 703 866

Table compiled based on data from the official website of the Latvian Ministry of Trade.²

Figure 1 illustrates the dynamics of trade turnover between China and Latvia, as well as a comparison of export and import volumes over the past ten years. The graph clearly shows that the share of Chinese imports significantly exceeds that of exports throughout the observation period. While Latvia's export levels to

¹ Latvijas tirdzniecība pēc valsts [Latvian trade by country], URL: <https://eksports.csb.gov.lv/lv/years/countries/import/2014-2025-2024> (accessed 06.06.2025).

² Latvijas tirdzniecība pēc valsts [Latvian trade by country], URL: <https://eksports.csb.gov.lv/lv/years/countries/import/2014-2025-2024> (accessed 06.06.2025).

China have remained relatively stable over the past decade, the share of imports from China has steadily increased since 2016, the year Latvia joined the ‘16+1’ format. The main export commodities from Latvia include timber and mineral products, whereas the principal import items from China consist of machinery, mechanical appliances, and electrical equipment. Thus, China effectively exchanges high-tech goods for raw materials.

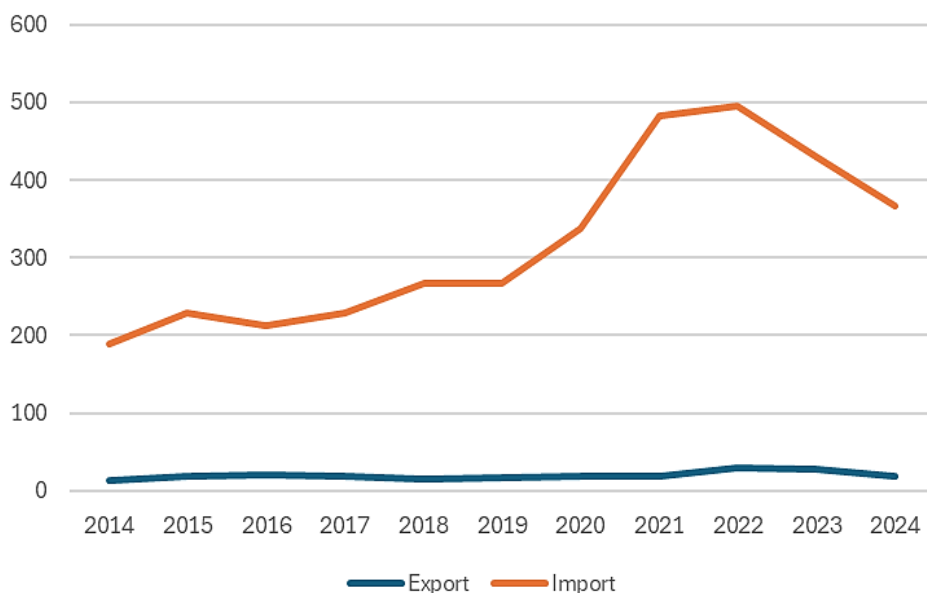


Fig. 1. Latvia's trade with China (2014—2024) (million US dollars)

Figure compiled based on data from the official website of the Latvian Ministry of Trade.¹

Finally, an important indicator of China's economic presence in Latvia is the level of foreign direct investment (FDI). As shown in Figure 2, the discourse among Latvian political elites concerning excessive Chinese economic influence appears to be greatly exaggerated. In fact, neighbouring countries play a much larger role and thus exert greater political and economic influence on Latvia. Specifically, even in 2021 — China's most successful year in terms of investment — Chinese FDI in Latvia amounted to only 104 million euros, which is 13 times less than German investment and 18 times less than Russian investment. In this context, the views of several scholars who regard the notion of a “Chinese threat”

¹ Latvijas ārējā tirdzniecība pēc valsts [Latvia's foreign trade by country], URL: <https://eksports.csb.gov.lv/lv/years/countries-selected/import/2024/TOTAL-XVI/CN> (accessed 06.06.2025).

as a form of political witch-hunting seem justified. The data suggest that even at the peak of bilateral economic engagement, China held only a secondary position in Latvia's economy.

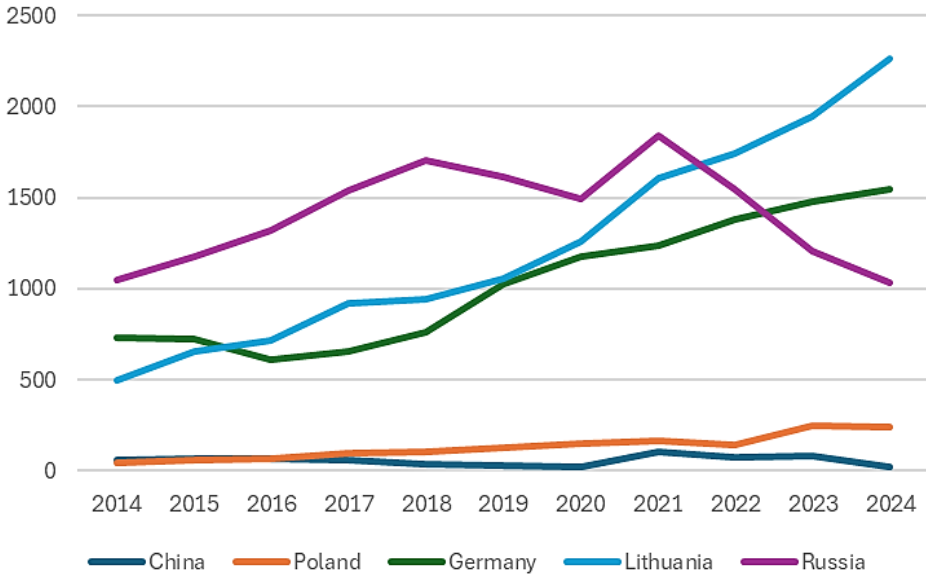


Fig. 2. List of countries investing in Latvia from 2014 to 2024 (million EUR)

Compiled on the basis of data from the official website of the Bank of Latvia.¹

Conclusion

The case of China—Latvia relations, when examined through a neorealist lens, constitutes a near-ideal example of “distant” interaction between a great power and a small state lacking deep historical, political, or geographical interconnectedness. In such interactions, outcomes are shaped less by the autonomous rational choices of the actors than by structural geopolitical imperatives generated by the external international environment.

The principle of the sovereign equality of states undoubtedly underpins contemporary international law and formally structures bilateral relations. However, theoretical frameworks developed within neoliberalism and constructivism to explain interactions between small states and great powers appear to be most applicable to a unipolar international system characterised by global governance mechanisms centred on a single locus of decision-making.

Political neorealism, by contrast, posits the existence of a factual inequality among states, which differ not only in population size, territorial scope, and economic and military capabilities, but also in their roles within international institu-

¹ Statistikas Datubaze [Statistical database], URL: <https://statdb.bank.lv/lb/Data/128/f81072350e77ab0172acdbe4a2af7e42-html> (accessed 07.06.2025).

tions and global politics. States of vastly unequal power coexist and interact with one another, even when separated by thousands of kilometres. Relations between the People's Republic of China and Latvia represent a clear empirical example of such interaction. The principal historical and geographical link between these two countries is their shared neighbour, Russia. This factor, together with relations within the quadrilateral framework of China—Russia—EU—United States, plays a key role in shaping the system of transcontinental Eurasian interaction, within which Latvia is involved regardless of its own interests.

What, then, are the interests of China and Latvia in developing bilateral cooperation? China is interested in expanding mutually beneficial economic and political cooperation with the European Union, particularly against the background of its strategic rivalry with the United States. Latvia is a member of the EU; however, it does not possess significant political influence over the formulation of coordinated foreign policy decisions within the Union. Moreover, unlike, for example, Hungary, Latvia, in the current geopolitical context, relying on the backing of stronger allies, has positioned itself as a state actively contributing to the escalation of confrontation between the West and the East. This posture has increasingly complicated China's use of Latvia as a convenient transit territory for the movement of Chinese goods through Russia to the EU.

Such transit was of considerable importance for China, which, in one of its key foreign policy documents — “A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions” — identifies as a common objective the development of harmonious relations with “all countries, both leading global powers and small states alike, on the principles of equality and mutual respect.” This vision is accompanied by efforts to develop a diversified ‘continental—oceanic’ transport and logistics system that emphasises the primacy of land-based geoeconomic interactions [41, p. 41]. However, since Latvia is by no means the only potential corridor linking the Asia-Pacific region with Western Europe, the intensification of geopolitical tensions among great powers has predictably led to a decline in Latvia's significance within China's foreign policy.

As for Latvia's interests, its clear economic incentives in expanding trade with China and attracting Chinese investment cannot be pursued in ways that contradict the broader policies of the major European powers that play a leading role within the EU. Moreover, given Latvia's position as a vocal proponent of comprehensive confrontation between Western countries and Russia, China is perceived domestically as a latent partner of Russia.

Within a realist framework, Latvia's behaviour appears logically consistent. As a small state pursuing its interests in Europe and relying on economic, political, and military support from the European Union and NATO, Latvia tends to

assume the role of a secondary actor, aligning itself with proximate great powers that are geographically close, culturally and civilizationally affiliated, and guided by similar economic principles in organising their economic systems.

Under the current stage of intensified confrontation among great powers, China and Latvia exist in parallel, occupying different positions within the global political system. While China continues to exert indirect influence on Latvia through trade flows, EU—China cooperation, and other channels, Latvia exerts no reciprocal influence on China. It is therefore likely that the future configuration of EU—China relations will be determined outside Riga, and that any potential resumption of Chinese transit to Europe via Latvia will depend primarily on Russia's policies and its relations with the EU. Prospects for the dynamic development of China—Latvia relations exist only within a unified European space—that is, in the event of a restoration of pragmatic, mutually beneficial relations between Latvia and Russia in particular, and between Russia and the EU more broadly.

Consequently, doubts arise as to the claim that “a number of realist approaches, especially those concerning the role and position of medium and small states, have become morally outdated and fail to accurately reflect current realities” [10, p. 347]. The trajectory of China—Latvia relations is largely determined by the current configuration of the international system and its prevailing geopolitical context, which underscores the continued explanatory power of political realism. Latvia lacks the resources required for fully autonomous foreign policy decision-making; accordingly, the international system is better understood not as a horizontal, egalitarian network but as a vertical, hierarchical structure. Moreover, contemporary geopolitical conditions increasingly resemble the confrontational dynamics characteristic of the Cold War era. As noted by Kaledin and Elatskov, “the modern bipolar geopolitical community, the confrontational Baltic geopolitical region, de facto consists of participants with differing geopolitical trajectories, dividing the region into two geopolitical subregions: the Baltic—Euro-Atlantic and the Baltic—Eurasian” [42, p. 154]. The previously promising and actively developing ties between China and Latvia, observed over the past decade, have now been reduced to mere diplomatic representation, with minimal capacity for planning or implementing long-term, mutually beneficial projects.

Latvia has never been a key economic partner for China, just as China has never occupied such a position for Latvia. Nevertheless, cooperation across various fields could have yielded tangible benefits for both sides. By foregoing potential economic gains in favour of alignment with the positions of its principal partners within the EU and NATO, Latvia effectively relinquishes a measure of its policy autonomy in exchange for prospective security guarantees. At the same time, given the continuation of diplomatic consultations and the ongoing development of cultural ties, the future of bilateral relations may still be approached with cautious optimism, as China remains open to dialogue with all states.

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