

China's Inventive Diplomatic Coercion: The Case of the Sino-Lithuanian Bilateral Relationship Crisis

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Abstract. Since mid-2021, Lithuania has emerged on the receiving end of China's unusually ferocious and multi-dimensional pressure campaign. The aim of this article is to comprehensively analyse those assertive measures that could be broadly defined as diplomacy-related and were employed by Beijing throughout the post-2018 decline of this bilateral relationship, especially its crisis phase. Based on an instrumental theoretical approach to foreign policy making embodied by the scholarship on statecraft in the international arena, this qualitative case study highlights the uniqueness and ingenuity of Chinese actions in this important but surprisingly overlooked domain. It thus offers a conceptual innovation that would allow for better research into similar diplomacy-related measures used elsewhere. The authors argue that the notion of 'diplomatic coercion' better encapsulates the variety and complexity of such foreign policy instruments employed by China or potentially any other resourceful country.

Keywords: China, Lithuania, diplomacy, diplomatic statecraft, diplomatic coercion.

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Kinų išradinga diplomatinė prievarta: Kinijos ir Lietuvos dvišalių santykių krizės atvejais

Santrauka. Nuo 2021 metų vidurio Lietuva tapo Kinijos neįprastai nuožmios bei įvairialypės spaudimo kampanijos taikiniu. Šio straipsnio tikslas yra detaliai išanalizuoti tas Pekino po 2018 metų prasidėjusio dvišalių santykių nuosmukio ir ypač jų krizės laikotarpiu Lietuvos atžvilgiu taikytas spaudimo priemones, kurias galima apibūdinti kaip susijusias su diplomatine veikla. Remiantis instrumentine teorine prieiga, pasirinkta nagrinėti užsienio politikos, kuriai atstovauja „valstybės amatui“ (angl. *statecraft*) tarptautinėje arenoje skirti tyrimai, įgyvendinimui, ši kokybinė atvejo studija išryškina Kinijos veiksmų šioje svarbioje, tačiau netikėtai primirštoje terpėje unikalumą bei išradingumą. Straipsnyje atitinkamai siūloma konceptuali naujovė, kuri leistų efektyviau tirti panašias su diplomatija susijusias priemones kitais atvejais. Autoriai teigia, kad „diplomatinė prievarta“ geriau apima tokių Kinijos ar potencialiai kitų išradingų valstybių pasitelkiamų užsienio politikos įrankių įvairovę bei sudėtingumą.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Kinija, Lietuva, diplomatija, diplomatinis valstybės amatas, diplomatinė prievarta.

Introduction

In less than half a year since late 2021, the southernmost Baltic state, Lithuania, became a unique country worldwide for having lost ambassadorial-level official relationships with both the most potent and consequential authoritarian great powers in the international system, the People's Republic of China (PRC, China) and the Russian Federation (Russia). While the fundamental reasons behind these diplomatic downgrades were different – respectively, deriving from China's response to the Lithuanian review of this bilateral relationship that included a non-official embrace of Taiwan (see below), and Lithuania's reaction to Russia's flagrant military aggression against Ukraine¹ – arguably underappreciated has been the variety and intensity of novel diplomacy-related measures used by the government in Beijing as part of a concerted and multi-dimensional pressure campaign launched to punish a distant and small target for its alleged misdeeds, and to reverse them, if possible.

¹ BNS, “Lithuania Officially Recalls Its Ambassador from Moscow,” *LRT English*, 13 May 2022, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1693749/lithuania-officially-recalls-its-ambassador-from-moscow>.

Considering that in this case China had employed what is increasingly recognised as its most comprehensive and intense ‘sanctions regime’ against any individual country to date², and having in mind the long-established scholarly focus on numerous economic measures of pursuing foreign policy at Beijing’s disposal³, it was perhaps logical that recent academic articles and think tank policy papers dealing with the Lithuanian episode paid particular attention to the economic dimension of Chinese pressure⁴. However, some of the most detailed studies dealing with this case conceded that China paired its economic measures with what they defined as ‘diplomatic pressure’⁵ or diplomacy-related tools of China’s economic coercion, specifically citing diplomatic contact freezes, diplomatic warnings, and diplomatic relations downgrades/ambassador withdrawals used against Lithuania⁶.

² Steven Blockmans, “Lithuania, China, and EU Lawfare to Counter Economic Coercion: Breaking Bad?” (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2021), <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/lithuania-china-and-eu-lawfare-to-counter-economic-coercion/>;

Bryce Barros and Krystyna Sikora, “China’s Sanctions Regime and Lithuania: Policy Responses for European Institutions” (Hinrich Foundation, 2022), <https://www.hinrich-foundation.com/research/wp/trade-and-geopolitics/china-sanctions-lithuania-european/>.

³ William J. Norris, *Chinese Economic Statecraft: Commercial Actors, Grand Strategy, and State Control* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2016); James Reilly, *Orchestration: China’s Economic Statecraft Across Asia and Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Scott L. Kastner and Margaret M. Pearson, “Exploring the Parameters of China’s Economic Influence,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 56 (2021): 18–44, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12116-021-09318-9>.

⁴ Matt Ferchen and Mikael Mattlin, “Five Modes of China’s Economic Influence: Rethinking Chinese Economic Statecraft,” *The Pacific Review* 36(5) (2023): 978–1004, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2023.2200029>; Victor D. Cha, “Collective Resilience: Detering China’s Weaponization of Economic Interdependence,” *International Security* 48(1) (2023): 91–124, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00465; Konstantinas Andrijauskas and Raigirdas Boruta, “China’s Economic Pressure Campaign against Lithuania: The Novelty and Limits of Chinese Economic Statecraft and Coercion,” *The International Spectator*, January 24 (2025): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2024.2444289>.

⁵ Wendy Cutler and Shay Wester, “Resilience & Resolve: Lessons from Lithuania’s Experience with Chinese Economic Coercion” (New York & Washington, DC: Asia Society Policy Institute, April 2024), https://asiasociety.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/Lithuanianreport_final_web%20%281%29.pdf.

⁶ Matthew Reynolds and Matthew P. Goodman, “Deny, Deflect, Deter: Countering China’s Economic Coercion” (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2023), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/deny-deflect-deter-countering-chinas-economic-coercion>.

Another notable comprehensive report, where Lithuania served as one of the three in-depth cases with Australia and South Korea, explored China's broadly described 'coercive diplomacy'. Defining it as a range of 'grey zone' or hybrid measures beyond the conventional diplomacy and short of military action used to force a target country to change its behaviour, the report's authors offered eight separate categories of Chinese coercion in both economic and non-economic domains, namely, restrictions of: 1) trade, 2) investment, and 3) tourism; 4) the so-called 'popular boycotts'; 5) state-issued threats; 6) arbitrary detention or execution; 7) cyberattacks; and 8) sanctions on individuals. The analysis confirmed that, since 2019, such 'coercive diplomacy' has become an established and favoured part of China's foreign policy toolkit employed abroad, including against Lithuania⁷.

However, as it will be further elaborated in the article's ensuing theoretical section, in the broader context of International Relations (IR) theory and practice, coercive diplomacy is primarily understood as a strategy of forceful persuasion that employs military threats to convince an opponent to do something rather than discourage his/her actions, as is the case with the better-known framework of deterrence. Therefore, in this narrower reading, coercive diplomacy would merely amount to one of Beijing's coercion categories mentioned above, state-issued threats, disregarding other assertive quasi- or semi-diplomatic tools. It is neither analytically helpful to use such generic concepts as diplomatic pressure nor to perceive such tools simply as a category of economic coercion.

While the difference between economic and diplomatic domains may not appear straightforward, as exemplified by the widespread phenomenon of economic diplomacy or the fact that countries often

⁷ Fergus Hunter, Daria Impiombato, Yvonne Lau, and Adam Triggs with Albert Zhang and Urmika Deb, "Countering China's Coercive Diplomacy: Prioritising Economic Security, Sovereignty and the Rules-Based Order," Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, *Report No. 68/2023* (2023): 1–6, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/countering-chinas-coercive-diplomacy>.

use economic measures to affect practices that are essentially diplomatic or at least diplomacy-related, as confirmed by the so-called Dalai Lama effect in the case of China's foreign policy⁸, we believe that sharper theoretical separation between the two is analytically promising. In other words, an increasingly apparent gap between China's numerous and inventive diplomacy-related measures used worldwide, and an established vocabulary, arguably inadequate in conceptualising this process on theoretical and practical grounds, provides a curious scientific problem that our research piece attempts to help solve.

In this article, we argue that the notion of 'diplomatic coercion' can better encapsulate the variety and complexity of such diplomacy-related foreign policy tools used by China or potentially any other resourceful country. We assert that, rather than being an example of unnecessary terminological proliferation, this proposal is advantageous on both theoretical and analytical counts, especially considering the helpful analogy with the widely agreed-upon insights from the comparatively abundant research of external influencing through economic, as opposed to diplomatic, measures, and also the increasing rhetorical embrace of this precise concept by foreign policy practitioners dealing with our case in Lithuania and also beyond. In other words, there is arguably something significant and specific enough to the Chinese diplomacy-related pressure on Lithuania to merit the introduction of a separate analytical category that would better describe the nature of such measures and thus serve as a superior means to study similar actions elsewhere on behalf of China or indeed another powerful and committed country.

Hence, in this article, we aim to comprehensively analyse those assertive measures that could be broadly defined as diplomacy-related, employed by China against Lithuania throughout the post-2018 decline of their bilateral relationship, especially its crisis phase

⁸ Andreas Fuchs and Nils-Hendrik Klann, "Paying a Visit: The Dalai Lama Effect on International Trade," *Journal of International Economics* 91 (2013): 164–77, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jinteco.2013.04.007>.

(mid-2021 to early 2022). More specifically, based on an instrumental theoretical approach to foreign policy making, encapsulated by the scholarship on statecraft in the international arena, and multifaceted data collection strategy, focused on publicly available official statements, secondary sources of academic and mass media character, and eight semi-structured interviews with high-ranking Lithuanian diplomatic and foreign policy practitioners informed about the issue in question, this qualitative case study attempts to highlight the uniqueness of Chinese actions in this important domain and to argue for a conceptual innovation that would allow for better research into similar instances of diplomacy-related measures used elsewhere.

The article's subsequent theoretical section provides a conceptual overview of existing attempts to define diplomacy-related foreign policy tools focused on three related but meaningfully different notions: coercive diplomacy, diplomatic sanctions, and diplomatic statecraft. We will argue for the latter category's choice as an analytical basis due to its instrumental value. The article's empirical part is structured according to chronological principles, thus allowing for the showcase of gradual intensification and diversification of Chinese diplomacy-related measures used against Lithuania. Finally, the assessment section presents the case for diplomatic coercion as a useful analytical concept in studying China's or any other resourceful and committed country's evolving foreign policy tools and their practical implementation, followed by conclusions derived from the analysis of the case in question.

1. Diplomacy-Related Foreign Policy Tools: Conceptual Diversity

In the broadest possible sense applicable to IR theory and practice, diplomacy can be defined as the profession, activity, or skill of managing international relations, typically by a country's representatives abroad, aimed at influencing the decisions and behaviour of foreign governments, peoples and international organisations through dia-

logue, negotiation, and other measures short of war and violence⁹. While formulating his strategic realist theory at the height of the Cold War, Thomas Schelling focused on overcoming the historically embedded but too extreme an opposition between diplomacy and war. In his attempt to reveal the limitations of the predominant realist framework, focused on deterrence, he suggested the concept of 'compellence', understood as a direct coercive action that persuades an opponent to give up something desired, rather than issuing threats to discourage an opponent from action, associated with deterring behaviour¹⁰.

Building on Schelling's work, other scholars, such as Alexander L. George and Peter V. Jakobsen, specifically focused on what they named 'coercive diplomacy', or the use of military threats and/or limited force in support of diplomatic negotiations¹¹. Contrary to the deterrence strategy which aims to *inhibit* behaviour by fear of the consequences, coercive diplomacy tries to *initiate* behaviour by fear of the consequences, and therefore is not necessarily as defensive in character as the former¹².

Therefore, considering the aims of this article, the concept of 'coercive diplomacy' in its most established meaning appears to be of limited value. We argue instead that a more helpful way of revealing the uniqueness of China's actions towards Lithuania in the diplomatic domain can be associated with an instrumental theoretical approach to foreign policy-making in general and the comparatively

⁹ Cambridge English Dictionary Online, "Diplomacy," <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/diplomacy>; Oxford Reference Online, "Diplomacy," <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095719998>; Chas. W. Freeman and Sally Marks, "Diplomacy," *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/diplomacy>.

¹⁰ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966).

¹¹ Peter V. Jakobsen, "Coercive Diplomacy," in Costas M. Constantinou, Pauline Kerr and Paul Sharp (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Diplomacy* (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2016).

¹² Paul Gordon Lauren, Gordon A. Craig, and Alexander L. George, *Force and Statecraft: Diplomatic Challenges of Our Time*. 4th edition (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 198–200.

rich exemplary literature on economic measures used to secure political influence abroad¹³ in particular. One could increasingly relate the instrumental approach, deliberately focused on foreign policy tools rather than actors and processes, as remains commonplace in academia, to the concept of ‘statecraft’. Originally meaning the skill of governing a sovereign state¹⁴, in the context of international politics, this notion refers to “the use of policy instruments to satisfy the core objectives of nation-states in the international system”, encapsulating both positive/inducing (incentives) and negative/coercive (sanctions) kinds of such measures¹⁵. Ever since David Baldwin’s seminal book which specifically focused on economic statecraft, IR scholars have increasingly recognised a fourfold typology which also includes military, diplomatic, and informational or cultural instruments (or ‘techniques’ to him) of statecraft¹⁶.

However, contrary to economic measures, empirical application of the three other types has been very scant in scholarship. In the more specific case of diplomatic statecraft, although this concept has been embraced by some researchers of diplomacy¹⁷ and international relations in general¹⁸, even a clear and specific enough

¹³ David A. Baldwin, *Economic Statecraft* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Jean-Marc F. Blanchard and Norrin M. Ripsman, *Economic Statecraft and Foreign Policy: Sanctions, Intentions, and Target State Calculations* (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2013); Robert D. Blackwill and Jennifer M. Harris, *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft* (Cambridge & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Jochen Prantl, “Reuniting Strategy and Diplomacy for 21st Century Statecraft,” *Contemporary Politics* 28(1) (2022): 1–19, 15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2021.1961387>.

¹⁵ Michael Mastanduno, “Economics and Security in Statecraft and Scholarship,” *International Organization* 52(4), Autumn (1998): 825–854, 826.

¹⁶ Baldwin, 1985.

¹⁷ Barry H. Steiner, “Diplomacy and International Theory,” *Review of International Studies* 30 (2004): 493–509, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210504006199>; *Diplomatic Theory: A Focused Comparison Approach* (Lanham & London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

¹⁸ Stacie E. Goddard, Paul K. MacDonald, and Daniel H. Nexon, “Repertoires of Statecraft: Instruments and Logics of Power Politics,” *International Relations* 33(2) (2019): 304–321, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117819834625>; Prantl, 2022; Keith A.

definition of it is surprisingly lacking. For instance, Stacie Goddard et al. broadly associate diplomatic statecraft with techniques that derive from the stock of social and political capital, including that embodied in individuals, accumulated through cross-boundary interactions (for instance, diplomatic style varying between competitive and collaborative or overt and covert ends)¹⁹. Joanne Wallis et al., while refraining from defining diplomatic statecraft, provide an expanded list of related tools, composed of diplomatic presence, visits by state leaders and officials, participation in multilateral and minilateral mechanisms, and sanctions, without, however, specifying any of them²⁰. Tara Maller focuses on what she calls ‘diplomatic sanctions’, understood simply as diplomatic disengagement from a particular target country, and consisting of short and temporary recall of the ambassador, downgrade in the diplomatic status, and embassy closure, from least to most severe applicable measures, respectively²¹.

It is imperative to point out that while the need to catalogue China’s tools for projecting its economic influence elsewhere in the world has already been acknowledged in academia²², this issue appears to be even more pressing in the case of primarily diplomatic instruments. The problem is particularly apparent if one is to compare the proliferation of such notions as ‘wolf warrior diplomacy’ or ‘hostage diplomacy’ in the context of China’s qualitatively new approach to diplomatic practices on the one hand and the manifest absence of a theoretically-driven study of them on the other.

Preble and Charmaine N. Willis, “Trading with Pariahs: North Korean Sanctions and the Challenge of Weaponized Interdependence,” *Global Studies Quarterly* 4 (2024): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksae031>.

¹⁹ Goddard et al., 2019, 307.

²⁰ Joanne Wallis, Henrietta McNeill, Alan Tidwell, and Czeslaw Tubilewicz, “Statecraft-iness: Weaving Webs of Statecraft in the Pacific Islands,” *Adelaide Papers on Pacific Security*, 01/2022, December 2022, p. 7.

²¹ Tara J. Maller, “Diplomacy Derailed: The Consequences of U.S. Diplomatic Disengagement.” Cambridge, MA: Ph.D. Dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011.

²² Kastner and Pearson, 2021, 27; Ferchen and Mattlin, 2023, 998.

In the public discourse, much attention has been given to the so-called ‘wolf warrior diplomacy’, a decidedly more confrontational outlook and behaviour adopted by Chinese diplomats during Xi Jinping’s second tenure in the late 2010s. While belonging to the field of public diplomacy and thus being most apparent in the rhetoric of Chinese diplomatic representatives, it was sometimes exemplified by assertive actions in a more or less clear breach of what is considered legal or at least normal in internationally established diplomatic practice. To name a pair of the most confrontational examples from across the world, in October 2020, the Taiwanese diplomat was hospitalised after an alleged attack by Chinese diplomats in the Oceanic island state of Fiji²³, whereas, two years later, a pro-Hong Kong autonomy protester was dragged into the Chinese Consulate in the British city of Manchester and beaten up there²⁴.

As will be alluded to in an introduction to our case below, although not in such an extreme way, Lithuania has witnessed China’s negative or, in other words, coercive diplomatic statecraft even before the eruption of the bilateral relationship crisis. The following qualitative case study of Chinese diplomacy-related pressure instruments used immediately before, during, and after the apex of the crisis (mid-2021 to early 2022) will specifically focus on their unique and extra-legal traits. The basic analytical yardstick for what may be considered beyond normal diplomatic conduct will be the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, to which both China and Lithuania are official parties.

²³ Ben Doherty et al., “Taiwan Official in Hospital after Alleged ‘Violent Attack’ by Chinese Diplomats in Fiji,” *The Guardian*, 19 October 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/19/taiwan-official-in-hospital-after-alleged-violent-attack-by-chinese-diplomats-in-fiji>.

²⁴ Ethan McAndrews, “The Hidden Audience of China’s Undiplomatic Diplomacy,” *The Diplomat*, 25 October 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/the-hidden-audience-of-chinas-undiplomatic-diplomacy/>.

2. China's Negative Diplomatic Statecraft against Lithuania before 2021

China and Lithuania established official diplomatic relations in September 1991, and, throughout most of the following three decades, their bilateral ties were relatively uneventful. The only consistent exception to that had been Dalai Lama's visits to the country that he congratulated with regaining its independence as early as on April 3, 1990, that is, less than a month after the respective declaration, when Lithuania was in desperate need of any international support it could get²⁵. Having come to Lithuania for the first time as early as in October 1991, which was immediately after the establishment of the country's diplomatic relations with China, His Holiness would return there three more times. When, during his third trip in September 2013, he met then-Lithuanian president Dalia Grybauskaitė in a 'private' capacity, China responded with a cancellation of the planned visit by its then-Deputy Minister of Commerce and, reportedly, imposed a two-year freeze of bilateral sectoral dialogues²⁶. The lesson seemed to have been learned, as, during Dalai Lama's next and last visit in mid-2018, Grybauskaitė declined to meet him and was eventually granted with an accepted invitation to the Trade and Investment Forum held in Shanghai later that same year, where she met her Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping in person²⁷.

However, partly mirroring broader developments in China's interactions with the West, including the increasingly sceptical EU, the relationship between these two countries took a decisive turn towards the negative the following year. Although, at the beginning of that year,

²⁵ Bernardinai.lt, "Prieš 30 metų Lietuvą pasveikino Dalai Lama," 3 April 2020, <https://www.bernardinai.lt/2020-04-03-pries-30-metu-lietuva-pasveikino-dalai-lama/>.

²⁶ Martin Šebeňa, Thomas Chan, and Matej Šimalčík, "Trade Weaponization: Vulnerabilities in the Baltic Exports to China" (Bratislava: Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2023) 7–8, https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/CEIAS_Exposures_Baltic.pdf.

²⁷ Konstantinas Andrijauskas, "The Dragon and the Knight: China's Growing Presence in Lithuania," Vilnius: Eastern Europe Studies Centre, 16 February 2020, <https://www.eesc.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/The-Dragon-and-the-Knight-Chinas-Growing-Presence-in-Lithuania-Konstantinas-Andrijauskas.pdf>.

Lithuanian intelligence agencies for the first time explicitly mentioned China as a threat to their country's national security²⁸, there has since emerged a consensus among foreign policy makers in Lithuania that the primary trigger for the downward spiral in these relations occurred in August, when several Chinese career diplomats, including the embassy's then-defence attaché and its second secretary, participated in an attempt to disrupt a peaceful public protest in solidarity with Hong Kong's autonomy held in the main square of the nation's capital, Vilnius²⁹. Given that the organisers of this event consciously planned it in order to coincide with the 30th anniversary of the Baltic Way, a global record-breaking human chain which joined the three Baltic capitals and marked a key event in their struggle for independence from the Soviet Union, one could not easily dismiss the first ever such outburst on behalf of the Chinese in the entire region.

Besides its symbolic significance, the August 2019 incident served as a landmark case of disregard for diplomatic law and practice that turned to be counterproductive in terms of what China aimed to achieve, immediately resulting in the official handling of a diplomatic note to then-Chinese Ambassador Shen Zhifei, who had also observed the commotion from the sidelines³⁰. From the perspective of Lithuania, the Chinese diplomats breached the Vienna Convention's Article 41, the first paragraph of which explicitly asserts that "it is the duty of all persons enjoying [diplomatic] privileges and immunities to respect the laws and regulations of the receiving State. They also have a duty not to interfere in the internal affairs of that State." At least in part based on

²⁸ State Security Department of the Republic of Lithuania and the Second Investigation Department under the Ministry of National Defence, "National Threat Assessment 2019," Vilnius, 2019, <https://www.vsd.lt/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2019-Gresmes-inter-netui-EN.pdf>.

²⁹ Mindaugas Aušra, "Chinese Demonstration in Vilnius Unmasks Beijing's Reach into Lithuania – LRT Investigation," *LRT English*, 9 October 2019, <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/news-in-english/19/1104874/chinese-demonstration-in-vilnius-unmasks-beijing-s-reach-into-lithuania-lrt-investigation>.

³⁰ Vaidotas Beniušis, "Chinese Diplomats Crossed the Line, Lithuanian Foreign Minister says," *LRT English*, 2 September 2019, <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/news-in-english/19/1093668/chinese-diplomats-crossed-the-line-lithuanian-foreign-minister-says>.

this negative experience, Lithuania's new centre-right coalition government, elected the following year, embarked on a radical review of this bilateral relationship, precipitating the ongoing diplomatic crisis selected for our case study that follows. Notably, one of the organisers of that solidarity event, Mantas Adomėnas, would, by the end of the following year, become Lithuania's new Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and a key figure behind the country's review of its relationship with China and its corresponding outreach to Taiwan along with the future head of the Lithuanian diplomacy, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Gabrielius Landsbergis.

3. China's Negative Diplomatic Statecraft during the Bilateral Relationship Crisis

In late 2020, Lithuania's newly sworn-in 18th government under Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė proclaimed its allegiance to “values-based foreign policy” that, besides other things, would include a significant review of the country's bilateral relations with China. The subsequent Lithuanian decisions made in 2021, such as leaving the China–Central and Eastern European Countries (China–CEEC/ then also known as ‘17+1’) platform of multilateral cooperation, and especially the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius (TRO; 駐立陶宛台灣代表處) led to Beijing's particularly assertive and multi-dimensional pressure campaign that also included significant diplomacy-related instruments. There were three stages of China's negative diplomatic statecraft roughly separated by TRO's opening in mid-November 2021 and the launch of Russia's full-fledged invasion against Ukraine in early 2022.

3.1. Stage 1: Measured Response: Signalling of Displeasure and Covert Pressure

Given Beijing's unprecedentedly radical reaction to the Lithuanian policy shift under its new centre-right government, one may easily

miss that the Chinese resort to negative diplomacy-related measures had actually occurred before the 2020 elections, and again, in rather peculiar circumstances. As indicated by the last Lithuanian Ambassador to the PRC Diana Mickevičienė, specific instances of Beijing's very nuanced diplomatic pressure aimed at signalling displeasure first appeared as early as in spring 2020 in reaction to her country's advocacy for Taiwan's pandemic-related engagement with the World Health Organisation (WHO)³¹, a fact that was also highlighted by Lithuania's then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Linas Linkevičius³², who had personally contacted the WHO's head regarding this matter³³.

The new government's proactive review of relations with Beijing first manifested in a decision to reduce its involvement in the China–CEEC cooperation platform. In response, China began to employ increasingly assertive interaction with the Beijing-based Lithuanian diplomats. In retaliation to Lithuania's plans to participate in the format's online summit on 9 February 2021 below the presidential or prime ministerial level as expected by the hosts, Ambassador Mickevičienė was summoned to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) on a late Friday night to indicate its displeasure with Vilnius' decision which disregarded the fact that it would be the first summit chaired by President Xi himself³⁴. China's diplomats were also proactive in engaging with the Lithuanian MFA and organising numerous high-level calls, initiated by then-Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Qin Gang. As noted by his former Lithuanian counterpart Egidijus Meilūnas, Beijing took a 'carrot-and-stick' approach that included both hints at negative consequences and incentives³⁵.

³¹ Cutler and Wester, 7.

³² Authors' interview with Linas Linkevičius, Lithuania's former Minister of Foreign Affairs, September 2024.

³³ Permanent Mission of the Republic of Lithuania in Geneva, "L. Linkevičius Discusses Taiwan's Participation in WHO," 13 May 2020, <https://mission-geneva.mfa.lt/en/news/33/l.-linkevicius-discusses-taiwans-participation-in-who:1052>.

³⁴ Authors' interview with Diana Mickevičienė, Lithuania's former Ambassador to China, April 2024.

³⁵ Authors' interview with Egidijus Meilūnas, Lithuania's former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, June 2024.

After Vilnius defiantly delegated its then-Minister of Transport and Communications Marius Skuodis to that summit, Lithuanian diplomats in China began to experience a ban from events organised by the hosting government³⁶.

A manifest intensification of Beijing's pressure campaign against Vilnius occurred in mid-July 2021 after both partners publicly confirmed their plans to open TRO. As expected, the Chinese embassy led this effort within Lithuania, initially trying to act behind the scenes. As noted by our interviewee, who asked to remain anonymous, Chinese diplomats stepped up their communication regarding this matter with governmental officials and some major Lithuanian businesses. While the style of their messaging was not aggressive so as not to cross the ethical boundaries, there were various implicit hints at potential consequences to Lithuania's future economic prospects and political repercussions in case the Taiwan-related foreign policy direction remained unchanged.

Given that Lithuania is primarily a parliamentary republic, it was unsurprising that similar diplomatic signalling attempts especially targeted its legislature – the Seimas. As stated by Dovilė Šakalienė, then serving as Deputy Chair of the Parliamentary Group for Relations with ROC (Taiwan) and Lithuania's would-be-Minister of Defence, she, along with several of her colleagues, received letters from the Chinese diplomats attempting to individually pressure parliamentarians towards abandoning their country's Taiwan-related plans³⁷. Notably, in March 2021, Šakalienė, along with her closest family members and among nine other individuals and four entities in the EU, was personally sanctioned by Beijing over “severely harming China's sovereignty and interests” in response to their Xinjiang-focused work³⁸.

However, despite the public rhetoric pointing at the TRO issue as an exceptionally provocative move contradicting its ‘One China

³⁶ Hunter et al., 13.

³⁷ Authors' interview with Dovilė Šakalienė, Member of the Seimas, August 2024.

³⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Announces Sanctions on Relevant EU Entities and Personnel,” 22 March 2021, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/fyrbt/202405/t20240530_11349690.html.

principle', Beijing's diplomacy-related response appeared unexpectedly slow. The Chinese MFA postponed for more than three weeks a much-anticipated decision to recall its ambassador to Lithuania, demanding Vilnius to reciprocate on 10 August 2021³⁹. Such a delay seemed to have been carefully designed since China waited for Ambassador Mickevičienė to return to its soil after several weeks spent back home, a move that, during our interview, she described as a clear example of 'diplomatic pressure'. The announcement coincided with her landing in Beijing, which meant that she had to undergo a mandatory 21-day quarantine before returning to Lithuania⁴⁰.

This incident's analogy with China's recent 'hostage diplomacy', a phenomenon where governments detain or restrict the freedom of foreign citizens under the guise of national law as a means to coerce the foreign policy of another country⁴¹, could not be lost. This episode also highlighted auxiliary foreign policy considerations behind Beijing's notoriously draconian anti-pandemic approach, criticised for its inconsistency with the freedom of movement granted by the Vienna Convention to diplomats⁴². China's non-diplomatic unilateralism became especially clear when the Lithuanian pavilion at the mid-2021 China–CEEC Ningbo trade fair, which Vilnius had abandoned just as the cooperation platform itself, was organised by directly contacting Lithuanian businesses and displaying Lithuania's flag there⁴³.

³⁹ LRT.lt, "China Recalls Ambassador from Lithuania," *LRT English*, 10 August 2021, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1466061/china-recalls-ambassador-from-lithuania>.

⁴⁰ EURACTIV with AFP, "Lithuania Envoy in Beijing to Leave China over Taiwan Dispute," *EURACTIV*, 12 August 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/china/news/lithuania-envoy-in-beijing-to-leave-china-over-taiwan-dispute/>.

⁴¹ Beatrice Lau, "'Hostage Diplomacy' – A Contemporary State Practice Outside the Reach of International Law?" *Georgetown Journal of International Law* 53 (2022): 343–398.

⁴² Josh Rogin, "Opinion: China's 'Zero Covid' Policy has been a Nightmare for U.S. Diplomats," *The Washington Post*, 21 July 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/07/21/us-diplomats-china-covid-fever-clinics/>.

⁴³ Interview with D. Mickevičienė.

3.2. Stage 2: Stepped-up Response: Unprecedented Pressure

The opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius on 18 November 2021 marked the beginning of a new, qualitatively more intensive stage of Beijing's pressure campaign against Lithuania that involved various foreign policy instruments, including several diplomacy-related ones. This period could be characterised by China's most intense negative diplomatic statecraft, both in scope and depth. Although TRO's opening was designed to be discreet and without customary celebrations⁴⁴, China's retaliation came swiftly and decisively this time. A mere three days later, Beijing announced that it was downgrading its official relationship with Vilnius to the level of *chargé d'affaires* (not to be confused with leaving a *caretaker*, as the Chinese insisted on *de jure* downgrading of the diplomatic mission type)⁴⁵, along with demands for its target to reciprocate accordingly.

While this situation appeared to be highly assertive and novel, historical precedents, although admittedly not identical, already exist. In perhaps the most superficially similar case, back in 1981, China announced a decision to downgrade its bilateral relationship with the Netherlands over Dutch submarine sales to Taiwan. However, in stark contrast with Lithuania's case, Beijing used a more formal, mutually face-saving approach, and the official downgrading took place only after bilateral negotiations attempting to solve the crisis failed. While China also demanded that the signs on embassy buildings be changed accordingly, it was done only when the Dutch officially complied with the downgrading and other related Chinese requests⁴⁶. The Lithuanian story went much further, however.

⁴⁴ Cutler and Wester, 7.

⁴⁵ *The Economist*, "Lithuania Evacuates its Embassy in China," 16 December 2021, <https://www.economist.com/china/lithuania-evacuates-its-embassy-in-china/21806843>.

⁴⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, "Downgrading of Chinese Diplomatic Relations with the Netherlands," Memorandum, 19 July 1982, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP83T00951R000100070041-5.pdf>.

Although the decision or voicing an intent to downgrade the relationship is not a legal issue itself, the very specifics and the method of how China attempted to impose it onto Lithuania is in a clear breach of the Vienna Convention's Article 15, which asserts that "The class to which the heads of their missions are to be assigned shall be agreed between States". In this case, Beijing's negative diplomatic statecraft amounted to the use of extra-legal measures that changed the facts on the ground unilaterally. However, according to Ambassador Mickevičienė, Vilnius initially decided not to contest the announcement about the downgrading to gather better information about the practical implications of this action⁴⁷.

However, Beijing soon resorted to such extremes that led one to question the very legality of Lithuania's diplomatic mission and the status of its staff on Chinese soil. China began a new stage of extra-legal offensive with a forceful demand to follow its own embassy's example and change the official name of the Lithuanian diplomatic mission in Beijing to reflect the type that it imposed on Lithuania⁴⁸. By mid-December, a new request was made for the staff of the Lithuanian embassy to hand in their local identification cards that serve both as a residence permit (visa) and proof of diplomatic status granting diplomatic immunity, ostensibly in order to re-issue them to reflect the new reality of the diplomatic relationship. Concerned about the implications for their diplomatic immunity, all of the embassy's Lithuanian employees, along with their family members, left China on 15 December 2021 in what international media described as "evacuation <...> in scenes worthy of a cold-war thriller"⁴⁹.

The feeling of uncertainty concerning the status of diplomatic inviolability of Lithuania's mission in China reached extreme heights

⁴⁷ Interview with D. Mickevičienė.

⁴⁸ It can be noted that such a specific decision involving nameplates of the diplomatic representation draws strong parallels to the naming of TRO, which is also seen as controversial. As a result, both cases are unique in the world: Lithuania hosts China's only Office of the Chargé d'Affaires and the island's only Taiwanese Representative Office, with 'Taiwan' being used in its Chinese language iteration.

⁴⁹ *The Economist*, *ibid*.

to the extent that, as one of our interviewees who decided to remain anonymous recalled, a decision was made to transfer technical equipment and diplomatic vehicles to a friendly embassy in Beijing for safekeeping. Since the whole story leading to the late 2021 abrupt departure of Lithuanian diplomats indicates a flagrant disregard for the Vienna Convention and also Lithuania's laws, Vilnius decided to retain the mission's legal name and status and insisted that the embassy continued to operate remotely, though presided *in absentia* by the Chargé d'Affaires *ad interim*, Mantvydas Bekešius⁵⁰. Notably, *ad interim* in this case suggests a temporary solution to the lack of a head of embassy, which means that Lithuania did not *de jure* downgrade the type of its diplomatic mission in China. Beijing, on the other hand, does not follow the same logic, as, according to the Chinese Regulations on Diplomatic Missions, only ambassador-level diplomatic relations could have a temporary head of mission during the transitional period between different ambassadors⁵¹.

Since TRO's opening, Beijing's broader approach to anything Lithuania- and Taiwan-related has become even more assertive. In August 2022, following the official visit to the disputed island by Agnė Vaiciukevičiūtė, Lithuania's then-Deputy Minister of Transport and Communications, Beijing announced personal sanctions on her as well as the official termination of bilateral cooperation in the international transportation sector⁵². Such a decision was significant as it marked the first case when a sitting member of the Lithuanian cabinet came under Chinese sanctions in retaliation to Vilnius' ties with Taipei. This move, although provocative, appeared to be carefully calculated, since, ac-

⁵⁰ Embassy of the Republic of Lithuania to the People's Republic of China, "Chargé d'Affaires." Accessed on 31 July 2025, <https://cn.mfa.lt/en/about-us/the-embassy/charge-daffaires/69>.

⁵¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Waijiao daibiao [Diplomatic representatives]." Accessed on 31 July 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/lbzs_674975/200705/t20070524_9284707.shtml.

⁵² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Announces China's Sanctions on Lithuanian Deputy Minister of Transport and Communications Agnė Vaiciukevičiūtė," 12 August 2022, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/fyrbt/202405/t20240530_11349752.html.

according to Šakalienė, another Lithuanian under Chinese personal sanctions, Beijing tends to target mid-level officials, such as both of them at that time, because such decisions carry lower risks⁵³.

Finally, it could be observed that, in the case of China's diplomacy-related pressure on Lithuania, the party-state's peculiar domestic political dimension was especially evident. Beijing's strongman approach forced the country's many official and private actors to operate in unison. The Chinese MFA⁵⁴ and state media actively spread disinformation about the 'untold dark history' of Lithuanian human rights abuses⁵⁵ and the former was quick to rename the Lithuanian embassy's title on the Ministry's website and to place the "Chinese Bureau in Lithuania" (驻立陶宛共和国代办处) under the category of "Overseas missions and bureaus" (驻外团, 处), with all other representatives on that list being China's missions to various international organisations and governance regimes⁵⁶. Meanwhile, the most popular Chinese mapping service, *Baidu Maps*, renamed the Lithuanian embassy's title to support the official narrative. Notably, even to this day, the Chinese MFA's website remains unchanged. Despite the China-imposed title for the Lithuanian diplomatic mission, no more details are given⁵⁷, whereas *Baidu Maps* now provides no matches to the "Lithuanian embassy". Accordingly, the country's leading search

⁵³ Interview with D. Šakalienė.

⁵⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on 30 November, 2021," 30 November 2021, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/fyrbt/lxjzh/202405/t20240530_11347173.html.

⁵⁵ *Global Times*, "GT investigates: From Running Secret Prison for US to Torturing Refugees, Lithuania has Untold Dark History," 25 November 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202111/1239954.shtml>.

⁵⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Zhu wai tuan, chu [Overseas missions and bureaus]." Accessed on 31 July 2025, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/zwjg_674741/zwtc_674771/.

⁵⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Litaowan gongheguo zhu hua daibanchu [Office of the Chargé d'Affaires of the Republic of Lithuania in the People's Republic of China]." Accessed on 31 July 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679354/1206x1_679368/ggzwwjjgxx_679372/.

engine, *Baidu*, is giving no results from official websites, as if the Baltic nation's embassy does not exist in Beijing⁵⁸. Curiously, Vilnius had been moving in a remarkably similar direction throughout that time.

3.3. Stage 3: *Residual Pressure and Lithuania's Defiant Response*

In late 2023, Landsbergis recognised that his country no longer faced economic pressure from China. He also expressed the desire to 'normalise' the bilateral relationship, which, according to him, both conflicting parties had privately talked about for at least a year⁵⁹. In late 2024, however, the Lithuanian MFA decided to expel three Chinese diplomats, whose undetermined status in its view had violated the Vienna Convention and Lithuania's domestic laws. In the Ministry's own words explaining this decision to the general public, Lithuania "ha[d] always been and remain[ed] open to constructive dialogue in resolving bilateral issues by *mutual consent*", while also "express[ing] hope that diplomatic relations between the countries will be based on the principles of *reciprocity and parity*, including in regard to the diplomatic representation of Lithuania in the People's Republic of China", and confirming that it "ha[d] also offered an interim solution to the Chinese side to ensure the continuity of the diplomatic mission's functions" (emphasis by authors)⁶⁰. It was later revealed that this decision origi-

⁵⁸ Baidu, "Lithuanian Embassy in China," Search results on 31 July 2025, <https://www.baidu.com>.

⁵⁹ Vytautas Bruveris, ELTA, "Lithuanian FM Landsbergis Talks Changing World Order, Security, Russia, and China," *LRT English*, 25 November 2023, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2133859/lithuanian-fm-landsbergis-talks-changing-world-order-security-russia-and-china>.

⁶⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, "Three Staff Members of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China have been Declared Undesirable in Lithuania due to Activities that Violate the Vienna Convention and the Laws of the Republic of Lithuania," 2 December 2024, <https://www.urm.lt/en/news/928/three-staff-members-of-the-embassy-of-the-peoples-republic-of-china-have-been-declared-undesirable-in-lithuania-due-to-activities-that-violate-the-vienna-convention-and-the-laws-of-the-republic-of-lithuania:43330>.

nated in an earlier incident, when one of those three diplomats caused a minor traffic accident and fled the scene, resulting in a discovery by the police that his diplomatic accreditation had already lapsed⁶¹.

Given that the authors of Lithuania's shift in its China policy had just lost parliamentary elections and prepared to vacate the cabinet for their centre-left contenders, one could interpret this decision as a troublesome legacy for their successors, particularly considering that the incoming Prime Minister Gintautas Paluckas had repeatedly signalled his country's willingness to negotiate the return of diplomatic relations to the ambassadorial level⁶². China also saw the governmental change in Lithuania as an opportunity to mend the bilateral relationship in a direction of its preference. This stance was exemplified by an early 2025 op-ed allegedly written by a Chinese diplomat working in Brussels, which hinted at willingness to normalise the ties⁶³. On the other hand, in order to emphasize its message about the remaining carrots and sticks, Beijing pointedly excluded Lithuania from its late November 2024 extension of the unilateral visa-free policy to more countries, Estonia and Latvia being among them⁶⁴.

However, it soon became clear that there was much more continuity in Lithuania's approach towards the dispute, as the country's new Minister of Foreign Affairs Kęstutis Budrys insisted that the "ball remained on China's side of the court"⁶⁵. In mid-June 2025, Lith-

⁶¹ Augustas Stankevičius, Jūratė Skėrytė, Saulius Jakučionis, "No Chinese Diplomats Remain in Lithuania," *LRT English*, 16 June 2025, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2591238/no-chinese-diplomats-remain-in-lithuania>.

⁶² Saulius Jakučionis, "Lithuania's Presumptive PM Vows to Restore Ties with China," *LRT English*, 31 October 2024, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2402538/lithuania-s-presumptive-pm-vows-to-restore-ties-with-china>.

⁶³ Office of the Chargé d'Affaires of the People's Republic of China in Republic of Lithuania, "Kinijos ir Lietuvos santykių praeitis, dabartis ir ateitis," 24 January 2025, http://lt.china-office.gov.cn/eng/en/202501/t20250124_11544482.htm.

⁶⁴ Xinhua, "China to Apply Visa-Free Policy to Nine More Countries: Spokesperson," 22 November 2024, <https://english.news.cn/20241122/f18a193549fe4e8b9f88a7cb-b594883a/c.html>.

⁶⁵ Saulius Jakučionis, "Ball is in China's Court Regarding Diplomatic Relations with Lithuania – FM Candidate," *LRT English*, 3 December 2024, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/2430096/ball-is-in-china-s-court-regarding-diplomatic-relations-with-lithuania-fm-candidate>.

uanian media broke the news about the Chinese mission in Vilnius being empty for a month. According to Lithuanian officials, the only remaining Chinese diplomat was refused re-entry into the country in mid-May after a short trip abroad because he lacked valid accreditation. While this decision demonstrated Lithuania's continuing defiance by triggering a *reciprocal parity* in both countries' diplomatic representation, or, better said, lack thereof, more specifically it pointed to the fact that Vilnius never recognised the unilateral downgrade of relations and therefore disregarded Chinese requests to renew or issue new accreditations for their Chargé d'Affaires Office, rather than the embassy. When Beijing began sending its diplomats stationed in other EU countries to Vilnius, the Lithuanian MFA adopted new rules that required all diplomats coming for official duties to notify it in advance. The decision not to allow the last Chinese diplomat to re-enter Lithuania thus marked the apogee of a years-long procedural duel between the two countries. In the words of Algirdas Butkevičius, Lithuania's former Prime Minister, currently serving as a parliamentarian, although representatives of the Chinese MFA had visited Vilnius in February looking into the possibility of repairing the bilateral relationship, Lithuania's latest decision reportedly caused them to say 'goodbye' to this country for good with no intention of re-establishing the ties anytime soon⁶⁶.

4. Assessment: The Case for Diplomatic Coercion as a Useful Analytical Category

The instrument-focused analysis of China's diplomacy-related pressure against Lithuania immediately before, during, and after the crisis in their bilateral relationship revealed progressive intensification and diversification of such measures to the extent of some of them becoming unique in terms of Beijing's known conduct. Before TRO's opening, the Chinese toolbox consisted of comparatively common-

⁶⁶ Stankevičius et al., 2025.

place, if not necessarily standard or well-intentioned, diplomatic instruments to signal Beijing's displeasure with the decisions made in Vilnius. Those measures – freezing of selected diplomatic contacts, informal and covert pressure on foreign policy makers in Lithuania, public rebukes, and hostile treatment of Lithuanian diplomats stationed in China itself – were usually carefully calculated as not to cross the acceptable boundaries or breach the Vienna Convention. After TRO's opening, however, Beijing resorted to unprecedented measures that contradicted the globally established diplomatic practices, not excluding those of its own. The unilateral downgrade of the bilateral relationship, coupled with forced physical expulsion of the target country's entire diplomatic corps, could hardly be encountered elsewhere.

It is imperative to note that neither of the three main concepts reviewed in the theoretical section above encapsulates these actions well enough. To begin with, although China's entire diplomacy-related pressure campaign against Lithuania manifested itself differently than the use of military threats and/or limited force in support of diplomatic negotiations, as covered by George's and Jakobsen's conventional definition of coercive diplomacy, their theorisation is helpful in terms of understanding the difference between the two identified stages of Chinese conduct: the initial one focused on inhibiting Vilnius from its decision to allow TRO's opening, and the latter one aiming at a reversal of this policy after the former's failure. While it was the second, more assertive stage that approximated the notion of coercive diplomacy, on no occasion had China gone beyond the rhetoric about economic or diplomatic, rather than military, negative consequences for its distant opponent, which, despite its objectively small size, also happens to be a member of both the EU and NATO.

Although Chinese personal sanctions against Lithuanian officials occurred throughout both stages analysed, Maller's much broader notion of diplomatic sanctions, understood as diplomatic disengagement from a specific target country, seems to better describe Beijing's assertive approach towards Vilnius after TRO's opening. However,

the main analytical problem, revealed by our case study in this regard, is that all of the main suggested phases of such disengagement, namely, a recall of one's ambassador, downgrade in the diplomatic status, and the closure of one's embassy, were marked by key extra-legal and informal characteristics, exemplified by creative intimidation of the opponent's ambassador and such unilateral and uneven downgrade of the entire diplomatic relationship that this measure ended up with the closure of the opponent's physical mission, while retaining one's own on its soil. In other words, the case of China's diplomacy-related pressure on Lithuania arguably calls for a conceptual framework that would highlight, rather than conceal, such grey-zone peculiarities.

We therefore remain convinced that the instrumental approach to foreign policy making, associated with the concept of statecraft, is the most promising direction to address this issue. Following Baldwin's original suggestion to treat it as the use of policy instruments belonging to the four main types of action and encapsulating both positive/inducive and negative/coercive approaches, we have thus conceptualised China's diplomacy-related pressure against Lithuania as negative diplomatic statecraft. In other words, we consciously follow an example provided by a much better researched type of statecraft in the international arena, namely, the economic one, which is composed of positive incentives and negative sanctions.

As a result, we argue that the notion of diplomatic coercion, a stylistically better and more concise synonym for negative diplomatic statecraft, can indeed serve as a helpful analytical category if its exact content is clearly defined and located within a broader theoretical discussion. Having thus made a conscious decision not to equate our instrumentally-designed notion with coercive diplomacy, as is sometimes the case in scholarship, we define diplomatic coercion as *the use of a combination of both formal and informal, including extra-legal, diplomacy-related instruments, aimed at forcing a target to alter its behaviour in support of the coercer's foreign policy interests*. As such, it would consist of both the formal means of diplomatic

disengagement ('diplomatic sanctions' in Maller's conceptualisation) and informal, quasi- or semi-diplomatic measures, including those that breach the 1961 Vienna Convention as the primary analytical standard for the legality of a particular instrument. Unlike conventional coercive diplomacy, which is limited to threatening diplomatic rhetoric coupled with the use of (or a threat of using) military force, diplomatic coercion aims to exert pressure without necessarily resorting to such hard manifestations of power. This notion, therefore, well encapsulates China's progressively diverse and assertive diplomacy-related practices used against Lithuania.

Finally, we are admittedly arguing for a concept that has recently become part of practical foreign policy-making discussions. As is sometimes the case in such circumstances, lacking an established vocabulary and a better conceptual alternative, analytically helpful notions can originate from policy practitioners, rather than scholars. Such terminological invention appears to have occurred in Lithuania, when, in the context of the bilateral relationship crisis, the country's high-ranking officials began referring to China's ongoing 'diplomatic coercion' along with the economic one⁶⁷. According to one of the co-authors of this concept in the local context, Lithuania's former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Jonas Survila, its content was precisely the one that we attempted to define above⁶⁸.

Aside from rhetoric, this term, along with other types of coercion, has also been included in the country's official documents, most importantly, in its mid-2023 Indo-Pacific Strategy, released on the eve of the Vilnius NATO summit⁶⁹. It was probably due to Lithuania that 'diplomatic coercion' re-entered the US political vocabulary in early

⁶⁷ Agenzia Nova, "The Foreign Minister of Lithuania: "European Countries Leave the 17+1 block," 8 June 2022, <https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/the-foreign-minister-of-lithuania-the-european-countries-leave-the-block-171/>.

⁶⁸ Authors' interview with Jonas Survila, Lithuania's former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, January 2025.

⁶⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, *Lithuania's Indo-Pacific Strategy: For a Secure, Resilient and Prosperous Future*, Vilnius, 2023, <https://www.urm.lt/storage/main/public/uploads/2024/02/eng-strategy.pdf>.

2022⁷⁰, having narrowed the meaning down from the one implied by the former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo a couple of years earlier while talking about China's alleged general approach of establishing deeply nonreciprocal relationships across the world⁷¹. Since 2022, the term has also appeared in foreign descriptions of Beijing's actions against Lithuania⁷², Taiwan⁷³, the PRC-sceptic Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China⁷⁴, and, indeed, Chinese own criticism of the US⁷⁵.

Conclusions

Throughout the four years from 2019 to 2022, and especially during several months since late 2021, Lithuania was on the receiving end of one of the most assertive, concerted, and multi-dimensional non-military pressure campaigns ever conducted by China against a Western country. While the so-called economic coercion attracted most academic and policy attention in this case, what we define as diplomatic coercion on behalf of Beijing was the most consistent aspect of the decline of the Sino-Lithuanian bilateral relationship in general and its diplomatic crisis stage in particular. Indeed, Chinese career diplomats were at the centre of the August 2019 incident, widely recognised as a key event that hastened the looming crisis in relations between the two countries. After a relatively calmer period in bilat-

⁷⁰ United States Congress, "Senate Resolution Celebrating 100 Years of Diplomatic Relations between the United States and the Baltic States," 31 January 2022, <https://www.congress.gov/117/bills/sres499/BILLS-117sres499is.pdf>.

⁷¹ Michael R. Pompeo, "Europe and the China Challenge," U.S. Department of State, 19 June 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/europe-and-the-china-challenge/>.

⁷² *The Economist*, *ibid*.

⁷³ Democratic Progressive Party, "DPP: Li Keqiang's Reaffirmation of One China Principle Disregards Taiwanese Opinion," 6 March 2023, https://www.dpp.org.tw/en/press_releases/contents/50.

⁷⁴ Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, "Following Beijing's Diplomatic Coercion of IPAC, We Are Pleased to Announce the Expansion of our Alliance..." X.com, 10 April 2025, <https://x.com/ipacglobal/status/1910345133855305884>.

⁷⁵ Xin Ping, "Guest Opinion: For U.S., there is no Diplomacy but all Coercion," *Xinhua*, 28 September 2022, <https://english.news.cn/20220928/e079252267d24b3f95606b-130375bf61/c.html>.

eral interaction associated with the common challenge of the pandemic, China's usage of inventive and extra-legal diplomacy-related instruments to punish Lithuania for its alleged misdeeds had become an essential but overlooked feature of the unprecedented post-2020 pressure campaign.

Based on the analysis of the decline in the Sino-Lithuanian bilateral relationship, we have identified three principal stages of Chinese diplomatic coercion. The first one involved China's use of comparatively more traditional formal and semi-formal diplomatic measures that were predominantly reactive to the developments in Vilnius' approach to Beijing and Taipei and did not necessarily cross the boundaries of accepted diplomatic conduct. Their main aim was to signal China's displeasure at Lithuania's actions, particularly to deter it from the semi-official embrace of Taiwan. The second stage, on the other hand, marked a significant turn in Beijing's approach to using diplomacy-related instruments. As a result, along with former diplomatic measures, to some extent fitting the notion of diplomatic sanctions, there were several instances where China resorted to qualitatively novel and extra-legal tools designed to compel Lithuania to alter its course regarding the already formalised embrace of Taiwan. Finally, the third stage witnessed an unexpectedly defiant and proactive response on behalf of Vilnius, while Beijing seemed to have exhausted or was unwilling to use new coercive measures at its disposal.

More precisely, China's use of diplomatic coercion against Lithuania during the bilateral relationship crisis first manifested itself in such relatively traditional measures as formal signalling of displeasure, freezing of diplomatic contacts, and other moves within the recognised diplomatic realm. However, several novel measures were additionally employed by Beijing at the height of the crisis, which was tied to the opening of the Taiwanese Representative Office, namely: 1) stepped-up intimidation and isolation of Lithuanian diplomats stationed in China by using the pandemic controls as an excuse; 2) unilateral downgrade of the status of bilateral relations; 3) demands

to adopt Chinese-imposed measures including switching the type of diplomatic mission; and, ultimately, 4) effective banishment of the entire Lithuanian mission from Beijing, leaving the physical 'embassy' there empty and the remote one unable to perform most of its functions. These cases can hardly be treated as consistent with the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations regarding both its letter and spirit. The most abused principles were precisely the ones that are essential for the practice of diplomatic intercourse, especially diplomatic immunity, inviolability, and sovereign equality. Admittedly, China framed those of its measures that it recognised explicitly or implicitly as merely reactive to Lithuania's alleged disregard of the non-interference principle that, in its widely known view, is closely associated with any outreach to Taiwan.

We can draw further insights from the research about the function and goals of diplomatic coercion. The case of China's diplomacy-related pressure on Lithuania does not simply fit into Maller's definition of diplomatic sanctions, since she sees them as a gradual process of disengagement with the ultimate cessation of diplomatic relations being at the very bottom. Conversely, for diplomatic coercion to be effective and viable as a foreign policy tool (that is, to exert additional pressure on the target country), the continuation of diplomatic relationships is crucial because it acts as leverage, enabling a broader range of actions that one could take. As is widely acknowledged, the 'Taiwan question' lies at the core of Beijing's interests, and a cessation of diplomatic relations with Vilnius would thus have a detrimental effect on Chinese attempts to isolate Taipei from the international stage further. From the perspective of Beijing, diplomatic coercion appeared to have served two additional purposes beyond its immediate target: signalling about the Chinese red lines to the international community writ large, and the legitimacy-related emphasis on the commitment to unification with Taiwan to its own society. Finally, as the Lithuanian proactive response to China's diplomatic coercion seems to have shown, its negative impact may be limited by the target's comparative lack of exposure to pressure, thanks to

the protection offered by its membership in influential alliances and, fortunately, its resort to international norms and rules.

In the broader context, the decline in the Sino-Lithuanian bilateral relationship marks a clear case of perilous expansion of diplomatic coercion that echoes the looming crisis in the liberal or so-called ‘rules-based’ international order. From a theoretical point of view, it allows one to question the established trend of perceiving diplomatic law and procedure as something much less assertive, aside from rhetorical warnings and threats (that is, coercive diplomacy), in comparison to economic and especially military tools of projecting one’s power and influence abroad. Like in the better-known case of economic coercion, the small and distant Baltic state served as a convenient target to test an array of diplomacy-related pressure measures that Beijing or another great power may use against other, including more influential, members of the international system. More specifically, this case shows that there is much more to China’s respective toolbox than the rhetoric-focused concept of ‘wolf warrior diplomacy’ or the established focus on its primarily economic coercive measures would imply and highlight. As the post-Cold War order appears to enter into a permanent crisis, we should look closely at the disintegration of diplomatic law and practice which served as one of its underlying pillars.

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