

KARIN KNEISSL

Minister of Foreign Affairs of Austria

Ali ASLAN

It is an issue of course that is hotly contested and debated in Austria as well, Minister Kneissl, but I know that is not the topic of your presentation this morning. Instead, it is my understanding you would like to speak about the implications of Chinese foreign policy in Europe these days. The floor is yours.

Karin KNEISSL

Thank you to our moderator, good morning ladies and gentlemen. I would first like to thank Thierry de Montbrial. It is a great pleasure to be with you again. At university, I avidly read the RAMSES publications, among other works, and learned a great deal about geopolitics from it. I would like to thank our Moroccan hosts as well. It is always a pleasure to come back in this beautiful country. Thank you for invited me to be with you.

I will go a bit further. It is not only China's foreign policy, but also its economic investment policy which, in the end, becomes a geopolitical strategy as well. That is what interests me in this topic. I went into similar deliberations in my last publication before taking on my responsibilities as Minister of Foreign Affairs. The book I penned last year is called "*Wachablöse*" which could be translated into English as, "Changing of the Guard". It refers to a shift of Transatlantic to something more Pacific which, incidentally, was already under discussion in the universities in the United States in the 1980s. I remember some conferences about that. Then, in 1989, everything changed. We turned our focus back to enlarging NATO. The US President at the time, George Bush, who had served as the first ambassador to Beijing in the 1970s, had already, in his *Chinese Diary*, reflected on a topic which I see as very timely: a new conceptual foray, expressed in the "go west" strategy, in particular the new beginning for the western provinces of the People's Republic of China. Today, this aim has become the Silk Road, the Investment Road - you know the names.

I will not attempt to summarise all of that, but rather focus, as Minister of Foreign Affairs, on what is going on in Southeastern Europe. I prefer that term to the infamous 'Western Balkans' which I utterly reject. It is one of those terms which the European Commission developed, and which lacks any historical and geographic semantic foundation. From our perspective, it is Southeastern Europe: Sarajevo is a European city, Belgrade is a European city. Any of you who have seen, once, the Contemporary Art Museum or attended a ballet performance at the Sarajevo National Theatre will have seen that it is Europe. It is a vacuum that we created ourselves because, up until 11 September 2001, many capitals had experts in the Balkans. After that date, we traded them in for experts in anti-terrorism. We abandoned the region. It is at risk of becoming a vacuum of sorts, where multiple players have engaged economically, but also politically. We all know who they are.

I will not waste time talking about what is going on amongst all these players, but will place the focus on China's activities. They consist – as is the case in Spain and in the Western Mediterranean region – of taking aim at crucial infrastructures: ports, airports and railway. Often, when we discuss these issues with colleagues from the region, whether in Bosnia-Herzegovina, or Montenegro, the response comes very naturally: "these are partners who don't ask too many questions, and don't cause too many problems. They come with the investments and the assurance of all these infrastructures that are established". I would like to offer a few thoughts. First of all, it was the request of the European Union, it was the request of the Presidency of the European Union. We made no mistake about China's potential, but we do ask for transparency and a level playing field. We discussed this at the Hainan Forum – the Boao Forum – China's Davos. We asked for this, but are still waiting for it to be implemented. The strategic partnership which the European Union concluded in 2003 had, ten years later, given way to a strategic agenda stretching up to 2022. The path chosen by the European Union was to lay out more tightly-meshed networks and to strengthen the partnership for lasting connectivity. This approach to taking up the challenges will work first and foremost to the benefit of the citizens, both of Europe and Asia. Today, it is up to us to reinvent with and for China, what multilateralism means and reinvent, first of all, what we mean by "levelling out the playing field".

I would like to call your attention to this gap. First of all, with regard to the programme I just mentioned: road infrastructures, etc. We know the role China plays in Central Asia, the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean region. This often goes hand in hand with over-indebtedness issues. This issue is, in my opinion, underestimated, particularly by our colleagues at the Commission, when it comes to tenders and contracts that we award.

I would like to conclude with the observation that I am fully aware of the power relationships existing in all the structurally-important international initiatives, whatever their origin. To make progress together, we will need well-enforced rules, transparency, openness in the awarding of public contracts, in particular intellectual property and risk-sharing. We will also need to go beyond acquisitions as they take place today. I am convinced that Europe and China can agree on one essential principle together – the need to set out a methodology that respects all of our interests – and that this initiative will be able to develop the reconstruction of effective multilateralism in response to the challenge we are facing together. In any situation, it is essential to keep the historical context in mind. I remember, when I taught in China ten years ago, the first place I visited was the Emperor's Summer Palace. There, schoolchildren aged 10 to 12 are presented with all the destruction of the Opium Wars of the mid-19th century, and told: "this is what the European barbarians did". That is how it is presented. I am aware of this, but I'm just saying it for those who haven't seen the site yet. It really got me thinking because it reminded me of my first visit to Persepolis. It's something we should never forget: there is an older nation-State, before Persia, which also has a view on these relationships with the rest of the world, based on a very distinct historical socialisation. This is what I think is sometimes underestimated, or not really understood, by other players. I would very much like to join you for the discussions on this issue. Thank you.

Ali ASLAN

Thank you for underlining the importance of the future of Chinese-European strategic issues. Sometimes we focus too much on transatlantic relations and inner-European relations, for obvious reasons, but it is very important to keep that side of the globe in sight as well.