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Prospects of an Agreement between China and the Holy See

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China has signalled its readiness to normalise relations with the Holy See. That would mean both the underground and formal state-controlled Catholic factions in China would come together. For China, it would facilitate the Chinese church's support for the country's social policies, create a unified, visible church organisation, and papal recognition of bishop nominations. Normalisation, though, would also require the Holy See to withdraw its recognition of Taiwan as a separate state. The improvement of relations between the two may also benefit Polish-Chinese contacts, in which the position of Catholics in China has been a controversial topic.

Chinese religious policy is based on three requirements for independence formulated in the 1950s: self-governance—autonomy from foreign entities (e.g., the Pope), self-financing, and a focus only on work by Chinese clergy. The Chinese authorities' attitude towards religion—especially after the "reform and openness" period of its history became more pragmatic, in particular under leaders Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping.

China's 1982 constitution states a "freedom of belief" in Article 36 but restricts it to "ordinary" religious practices, which it does not define. Additionally, there is an atheistic imperative for Chinese Communist Party (CPC) and People's Liberation Army (PLA) members. The activities of religious movements in China are supervised by the United Front Work Department of the CPC's Central Committee and the State Administration of Religious Affairs under the State Council. The everyday practices and structure of the supervisory institutions means in practice in China only five religions or branches are authorised: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholic, and Protestant (Chinese authorities do not differentiate between different Protestant beliefs). They can only function in so-called "patriotic associations" that gather believers and are responsible for the local structure. Any kind of religious practice on the central level by other entities is forbidden.

Catholics in China. In China, there are about 10 million Catholics, out of which almost 5 million are members of the so-called "patriotic church," whose institutional framework, the China Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA), was established in 1957, but is not recognised by the Holy See. The other 5 million are part of the so-called "refusal church," who recognise papal supremacy and thus remain outside the official structures. The Chinese authorities destroy the churches of the "refusal congregation," fire believers from their jobs, confiscate religious texts (including the Bible). By the end of 2016, there were 11 Catholics imprisoned on charges of illegal religious practices and another six detained by law enforcement authorities. This dual system of Catholic believers weighs on China-Holy See relations.

The State of the Bilateral Dialogue. Despite its repression of believers, China has signalled its openness to a possible agreement with the Holy See. The latter intensified rhetoric about a dialogue during Pope Benedict XVI's term and continued it under Pope Francis. Examples include the moment in March 2013 when Francis

congratulated Xi on his selection as CPC chairman. Then, in 2014, while flying to South Korea, Francis sent out special wishes to the Chinese nation. It was also the first time China had agreed to allow the papal airplane to fly over Chinese territory. Xi reflected a positive attitude to the Pope's gestures. China treated a suggestion by the Hole See of an informal meeting between Pope Francis and Xi on the sidelines of a UN General Assembly session in 2015 with openness. In the end, it did not take place because of the existing problem with bishop nominations. The Chinese authorities have confirmed their readiness to talks with the Holy See, but on two conditions: first, that the Holy See stop interfering in Chinese internal affairs when it comes to religion, and second, withdrawing its recognition of Taiwan.

Factors Supporting Agreement. While both sides have declared their readiness to improve bilateral relations, they have done so for very different reasons. Merging the Catholic congregations in China—even with concessions to the Holy See—would strengthen the Chinese authorities' ability to control the merged group. Moreover, the normalisation of relations would not create an opposition circle to the CPC because Catholics generally do not stand against the government and their number is relatively small. Better relations with the Vatican would also allow stronger support from the Catholic organisation in solving existing social problems in China, such as poverty. The Holy See is interested in improved relations because the Chinese believers are divided and persecuted and their practices sometimes fall out of line with Catholic church doctrine.

It seems the Holy See has taken a moderately positive stance related to the withdrawal of recognition of Taiwan's statehood as the possible price for the improvement of Catholics' situation in China. Proof of that may be the Holy See's decision to maintain its representation on the island at the *chargé d'affaires* level since 1971 (when the UN recognised China's permanent seat on the Security Council).

Main Obstacles. The most important issue is party and state institutional supervision over Catholics in China. A possible compromise would imply the elimination of the underground church by including it in the existing, legal church structures, but with some kind of subordination to the Pope. However, China's current position does not support that kind of solution. In April 2016, Xi participated in a central party conference on religion in Beijing—the first time since 2001 that China's top leader had attended. In his speech, he emphasised that religions should function under CPC leadership and support the Chinese socialist system. He warned that the state must defend itself from foreign infiltration through religion.

The supervision problem is best illustrated by the bishop nominations. With China aware of the importance of the rank in Church hierarchy, in 2016 and at the behest of the Holy See, the two sides established a working group that meets every three months in Beijing or the Vatican, with its main responsibility to reach a compromise on the issue. According to the Chinese practice, every candidate for bishop should first be accepted by the CPCA and only afterwards ask for the Pope's blessing. In 2016, out of 110 bishops actually working in China (both factions), 30 were appointed by the Holy See and not confirmed by the CPCA and seven accepted by the Chinese authorities but not confirmed by the Pope. The working group seems to have found a compromise, although there has been no confirmation. Under it, the Holy See would accept five of the seven Chinese-appointed bishops. More likely is a future nominations procedure in which the Pope could block nominations from the CPCA if justified.

Conclusions. Although small and gradual, the progress in the talks between the Holy See and China raises expectations of an agreement. Doubts are only related to the format, content, and timing. It is impossible to happen in 2017 because all the authorities' attention is focused on the success of the coming CPC congress on 18 October, with Chinese institutions and media trying to portray Xi as the key element to strengthening China's position in the international arena against the opposition—the general so-called "West" (including the Holy See). In 2018, the continuation of the talks in the working group format is likely as are possible arrangements on the bishop nominations issue (the Holy See here is under pressure to make concessions, which mostly would mean the acceptance of a candidate presented by the Chinese authorities). The organisation of an unofficial meeting between Pope Francis and Xi is also possible. The improvement of China-Holy See relations could also positively influence Polish-Chinese contacts, in which the fate of Catholics in China is one of the difficult topics.