

Narrating the China Threat: Securitising Chinese economic presence in Europe

Igor Rogelja and Konstantinos Tsimonis*

Abstract This paper unpacks the discursive construction of a European ‘China Threat’ narrative by European think tanks. We theorise think tanks as crucial actors in the securitising process, especially at the initial stages where ideas and reference frames are formed. Despite having no decision-making authority, think tanks participate as securitising actors in the process of idea formation and bidding, articulating a securitised frame of reference for policy makers. In the case of EU-China relations, we observe an emerging congruence between think tanks and policy makers that engage in a non-linear construction of a ‘China Threat’ policy frame. In this article, we review key think tanks reports that are circulated through official EU policy channels and deconstruct the assumptions behind the ‘China Threat’ discourse. We first argue that, analytically, their securitising attempt is characterised by a distorted representation of Chinese economic activities abroad, including those falling under the Belt and Road Initiative. Second, politically, this narrative produces a distorted notion of European politics where pluralism is weakness and disagreement dissent, promoting a view of the EU where ‘responsible’ core countries must contain the periphery’s ‘opportunism’. Third, we contend that despite defending ‘Europeanness’ as the epitome of human rights and democracy, the securitisation of Chinese FDI rests on othering practices that risk undermining those very ideals. By identifying the problematic undertones of this securitising effort, we call for a fact-based and pluralistic debate on the challenges of Chinese FDI for European economies and societies.

Introduction

This paper responds to an emerging practice of securitising Chinese presence in Europe that increasingly defines the way European media, citizens, academics, and state officials perceive and speak about China’s expanding economic activities on the continent. This practice resembles the ‘China threat’ thesis in the US since the late 1980s,¹ primarily concerned with national security and trade imbalances, and more recently in Australia, where the debate has centred on the corrupting influence of Chinese money in domestic politics.² At the forefront of securitisation in Europe, we find think tanks advocating a narrative on Chinese presence not only as a challenge to the EU’s economic interests and diplomatic cohesion, but also as an existential threat to European unity and democracy. A recent report by German think tanks GPPi and MERICS, titled ‘Authoritarian

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¹ Denny Roy. ‘The “China Threat” Issue: Major Arguments’, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 36, No. 8 (1996), pp. 758-71.

² Clive Hamilton, *Silent Invasion: China’s Influence in Australia* (London: Hardie Grant Books, 2018).

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3 Advance: Responding to China's Growing Political Influence in Europe',³ is the most
4 comprehensive attempt so far to construct China as a threat, yet it is just one example of a broader
5 trend towards the *securitisation* of Chinese presence in Europe. By employing the concept of
6 security as a 'speech act', we argue that the construction of a China threat is based on the ontological
7 criticism of the CCP's authoritarian regime that is used to cast a shadow of suspicion over the
8 conduct of Chinese companies, associations, and citizens, as well as their European partners.

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12 This European version of the 'China Threat' scenario is constituted by three discursive pillars
13 identified in the reports examined here: a) the politicisation of Chinese investments through a
14 downgrading or denial of the decentralised decision-making *agency* of the Chinese and European
15 actors involved; b) the notion that European *unity* is undermined over disagreement on how to
16 engage China; and c) the *othering* of Chinese actors and their 'enablers' as agents of a hostile
17 political, social, and economic order. These complementary pillars thoroughly politicise Chinese
18 presence in Europe, thereby setting the conditions for the final securitising move: the framing of
19 China as an existential threat requiring emergency measures on behalf of the EU.

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24 In building our argument, we have reviewed reports, policy briefs, articles, and other English-
25 language literature by think tanks across Europe. To ensure selection from a pool of policy-relevant
26 sources, we chose publications that had been routinely circulated to Members of the European
27 Parliament (MEPs) through official parliamentary channels. The reports we discuss vary
28 significantly in their scope, severity, urgency, and language, but many share a securitising narrative
29 directed at the various levels of executive power, from subnational levels to national and EU-level
30 audiences. The aim was to examine how advice towards a major policy shift is being substantiated
31 within the discursive space of European think tanks. Our intention was not to provide a
32 representative sample of *all* think tank writing, but rather to analyse a purposefully sampled
33 selection of reports that we identified as constructing a threat narrative. Among them, many exhibit
34 the distinguishing rhetorical structure of securitisation as defined by Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde:⁴
35 'if the problem is not handled now it will be too late, and we will not exist to remedy our failure'.
36 This tone of deliberate dramatisation is particularly prominent in the GPPi-MERICs report:

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China is not just at 'Europe's Gates' - it is now already well within them. Its rising influence and self-confident
promotion of its authoritarian ideals are not only a direct challenge to liberal democracy and Europe's values and
interests; they also call into question key assumptions that many have held about Europe's role in the world.⁵

The securitising discursive tactics employed in some of the reports reveal a polemical attitude
to an issue that requires a careful, fact-based analysis. When caught in the 'China Threat' frame, we
cannot discuss how best to socialise third-country investors in the European business context and
enforce compliance with EU norms and regulations. Instead, we end up tilting at windmills, and

³ Thorsten Benner, Jan Weidenfeld, Mareike Ohlberg, Lucrezia Poggetti, and Kristin Shi-Kupfer, 'Authoritarian Advance: Responding to China's Growing Political Influence in Europe', Global Public Policy Institute and MERICS, 2018, https://www.merics.org/sites/default/files/201802/GPPi_MERICs_Authoritarian_Advance_2018_1.pdf.

⁴ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap De Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), p. 26.

⁵ Benner et al., 'Authoritarian Advance', p. 5.

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3 chasing dragons that do not exist. The result is not only a sacrifice of analytical depth, informed
4 evaluation, and thorough identification of actual opportunities and challenges; exclusively assigning
5 political motives to Sino-European interactions leads to the practice of wholesale securitisation of
6 everything and everyone supportive of developments accompanying Chinese investment, namely,
7 the companies, organisations, politicians, employees, scholars, students, and citizens that its
8 proponents claim to protect.

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12 We organise the argument of this article as follows. First, we discuss the academic literature on
13 securitisation to theorise think tanks as securitising actors and explain the selection criteria of the
14 reports on which we base our analysis. Following that, we analyse the securitising discourse
15 structured around three main discursive pillars: ‘centralising agency’; ‘sanctity of unity’; and the
16 ‘authoritarian other’. We then explain how the ‘existential threat’ prism, the essential final
17 component of any securitisation attempt, rests on these pillars, giving an air of credibility to a
18 discourse that contains many erroneous assumptions as well as logical and factual fallacies. We
19 conclude by calling for an alternative analytical approach that would contribute to a pluralistic and
20 fact-based debate on Chinese FDI in Europe.

27 **Analytical Framework: Think Tanks as Securitising Actors**

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29 That China’s presence in Europe is a problem requiring policy intervention is almost axiomatic in
30 the writings of the think tanks under review. More interesting is how the increased presence of
31 Chinese entities and individuals came to be conceived of as a problem, given that the global liberal
32 order envisages a lively exchange of goods, capital, ideas, and people. This context, built on values
33 and norms of free-market economics and political liberalism, mitigates against outright targeting of
34 Chinese economic actors’ ‘undesirable’ presence. In order to resolve this contradiction, a ‘state of
35 exception’⁶ to the norm of openness is necessary. Since the liberal economic order and the reality of
36 competition in market economies cannot be problematised, China’s abuse of Europe’s openness and
37 absence of reciprocity in market access is problematised instead, as well as concerns over forced
38 technology transfers. This is a discursive exercise whereby a policy issue is reframed as evidence of
39 a wider, more pressing, and far more worrying problem.

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46 It is crucial to underline the difference between problematisation of bilateral investment and the
47 securitisation of Chinese economic presence. There are matters relating to trade that the two sides
48 need to solve bilaterally, or within international dispute resolution mechanisms. Equally, as the EU
49 negotiates an investment treaty with China, so policy-makers’ attention will inevitably gravitate
50 towards examples of Chinese ‘free riding’ or unfair trading practices. Some reports assessed for this
51 article raise such valid concerns over trade, competition, and market access in EU-China relations in
52 an analytically useful language and tone.⁷ Yet, especially in the last three years, the problematisation

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58 ⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 3.

59 ⁷ Examples of a fact-based analysis of problems and imbalances in EU-China trade relations include earlier reports by
60 Friends of Europe, ‘EU-China Relations’, 2016, <https://euagenda.eu/upload/publications/untitled-60272-ea.pdf>; Clin
gedael, Maaike Okano-Heijmans, and Daniel Lanting, ‘Europe’s Response to China’s Activism’, 2015, <https://www.c>

of Chinese economic presence has taken a different direction, one raising existential concerns over European security and cohesion, even though we find scant evidence to support such claims. As such, it is a problematisation which is becoming increasingly securitised.

Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde's (hereafter BWW) re-articulation of security chimes with our focus on the problematisation of Chinese presence in Europe and its logical outcome, a state of exception allowing politicised managing of China's access. BWW's work stems from concern over what security issues are and what they are not, i.e., what can be discussed as if it were an existential threat, thus justifying the adoption of emergency and extraordinary actions that break the rules of normal political procedure.⁸ Their interest is not merely academic; they believe there are 'intellectual and political dangers in simply adding the word security to an ever-wider range of issues'.⁹ We concur by calling for a scrutiny of the securitising discourse concerning Chinese presence in Europe and a careful consideration of its potential dangers.

This article's departure point is BWW's conceptualisation of securitisation and its four elements: a) the referent object, which must survive; b) the securitising actor, which seeks to make the referent object into an existential issue; c) the securitising move, the attempt by the actor to securitise the object; and d) the audience, whose response ultimately decides the success or failure of a securitising move.¹⁰ Methodologically, our investigation concentrates on the securitising move, analysing the discursive construction of the 'China threat' in the European context by looking at how leading think tanks create a narrative that has also come to be echoed by decision makers in key EU states.

The first step is to identify the role and space of think tanks in a securitisation move. In this regard, Sjöstedt¹¹ proposes an empirically observable conceptualisation of the securitising move as 'the public framing of an issue as a national threat, accompanied by a strategy for action'. She further draws our attention to the initial stages of this framing process¹² – what Kingdon calls the elusive 'pre-decision processes' that led to policy-makers' adoption of proposals.¹³ Sjöstedt and Kingdon thus offer a more nuanced view of the securitisation process which permits us to pin down the think tank's role and importance. Think tanks are not decision makers, yet participate as securitising actors in the process of idea formation and bidding, ultimately helping to articulate a securitising frame of reference that resonates with decision makers. In our case, think tanks operate as securitising actors to an audience of EU and national-level decision-makers, whose involvement is necessary for the securitising move to be carried forward. The success or failure of such a securitising move depends, according to Sjöstedt, on decision makers 'internalising' idea-frames that

lingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/2015%20Europe's%20Response%20to%20China's%20Activism%20-%20Clingendael%20Report%20MOH-DL.pdf.

⁸ Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, *Security*, p. 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹¹ Roxanna Sjöstedt, 'Ideas, Identities and Internalisation: Explaining Securitising Moves', *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 48, No.1 (2013), pp. 143-64.

¹² Sjöstedt, 'Ideas, Identities and Internalisation', pp. 146-7.

¹³ John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, 2nd Edition (Harlow: Pearson, 2014), p. 1.

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3 constitute something of a threat.¹⁴ Here, she gainfully redeploys the concept of ‘idea entrepreneurs’
4 who use their authority to give credence to the idea frame and insert it in the discursive space around
5 an issue initiating the internalisation process by decision makers.¹⁵ Sjöstedt’s understanding of the
6 securitisation move, however, is somewhat linear and can, therefore, miss the complexity of agency
7 involved.
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10 In Balzacq’s analysis, the success of securitisation depends on the audience’s predisposition to
11 a securitising narrative on one hand, and the securitising actors’ competency on the other.¹⁶ For both
12 these processes to work, therefore, the ‘idea entrepreneurs’ must not just ‘say’ security, but also
13 possess a recognised level of expertise and have access to an audience that is positively predisposed
14 to their message – in our case the institutional cachet accorded to top think tanks and their inclusion
15 in internal briefing papers for MEPs. What is more, the ‘idea entrepreneurs’ of the ‘China threat’
16 argument do not operate in a vacuum, nor are their audience passive recipients of their message.
17 Instead, we identify a process of securitisation that is bidirectional and discursive, involving agency
18 by both decision makers and securitising actors. This allows us to conceptualise the securitisation
19 move not only as a final outcome of a linear process, but as a dialectical construction of a common
20 frame of reference. In this frame, policy entrepreneurs and decision makers sharing a certain
21 predisposition to an issue start to discuss it in the same language, what Balzacq conceptualises as
22 ‘congruence’.¹⁷ Essentially, think tanks offer specialist narratives that enable decision makers to
23 crystallise their policy preferences, so explaining the credence given to the European ‘China Threat’
24 variant. That several European leaders, including Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron, Sigmar
25 Gabriel, and Jean-Claude Juncker, have made pronouncements congruent to the output of the think
26 tanks does not mean they were ‘convinced’ by a unidirectional process, but that a common
27 interpretive platform is emerging that understands Chinese economic presence as a threat requiring
28 extraordinary responses.
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31 As a result of this congruence, the European ‘China threat’ discourse is already legitimising
32 policy initiatives targeted against China. It also continues to fuel policy debates in Brussels and other
33 European capitals that call for further action, in the form of economic protectionism, or more direct
34 interventions by security apparatuses to Chinese companies, in effect producing what Hanneman and
35 Huotari call ‘downward convergence’¹⁸ with China. But the most disquieting element in this
36 discursive congruence is that it is becoming increasingly axiomatic, and thus ‘blinds’ the parties
37 involved to alternative explanations that empirical evidence may suggest. The screening
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54 ¹⁴ Sjöstedt, ‘Ideas, Identities and Internalisation’, p. 156.

55 ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 148-50.

56 ¹⁶ Thierry Balzacq, ‘The Three Faces of Securitisation: Political Agency, Audience and Context’, *European Journal*
57 *of International Relations*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2005), p. 192.

58 ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

59 ¹⁸ Thilo Hanemann and Mikko Huotari, ‘EU-China FDI: Working towards Reciprocity in Investment Relations with
60 China’, Rhodium Group (RHG) and the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), 2018, p. 17,
https://www.merics.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/180723_MERICS-COFDI-Update_final.pdf.

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3 mechanism's single-minded focus on security and public order¹⁹ also ignores legitimate areas of
4 concern such as environmental protection and sustainability. We believe that the emergence of such
5 a unidimensional discursive space around Chinese investment is ultimately harmful to the EU's
6 ability to respond to the challenges arising from China's expanding economic presence, and may
7 have negative implications for its traumatised cohesion.
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10 11 12 **Methodology**

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14 Our analysis of the securitisation of Chinese economic presence in Europe examines policy reports,
15 briefs, and articles regularly circulated to MEPs through newsletters and research digests compiled
16 by the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), self-described as 'the in-house research
17 service and think tank of the European Parliament'.²⁰ These circulars include comprehensive lists of
18 policy-relevant publications on EU-China relations which, according to the EPRS, are compiled 'for
19 and addressed to Members and Staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist
20 them in their parliamentary work'.²¹
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25 The reports we review here were published between October 2014 and September 2018, a
26 period characterised by the emergence of an alarmist, China threat discourse in both think tank work
27 and public speeches by European leaders. Essentially, the period covered begins after the official
28 launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (September 2013) and ends with the introduction of the EU's
29 Investment Screening Mechanism (November 2018, in force since April 2019), which is widely
30 understood as targeting Chinese investment.²² During this period, the EPRS flagged a total of 200
31 think tank reports in six circulars.²³ The EPRS stepped up the frequency of its think tank digests to
32 two per year from 2018, and has additionally published in-depth analyses on issues identified by
33 think tanks, such as China's political influencing and other activities in Eastern and Central Europe.
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39 The significant increase in think tank publications on EU-China relations between 2016 and
40 2018 is mirrored in the circulars published in 2017 and 2018 (a total of 136 out of the 200 selected
41 by the EPRS). In addition to the number of reports, the securitising discourse also intensifies after
42 2017. This increased interest corresponds to a concerted 'China threat' EU rhetoric over the same
43 period; in August 2016, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said industry leaders were 'naïve' to
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50 ¹⁹ Regulation (EU) 2019/452 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 March, 2019 establishing a
51 framework for the screening of foreign direct investments into the Union, 21 March, 2019, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019R0452&from=EN>.

52 ²⁰ European Parliament, European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/stay-informed/research-and-analysis>.

53 ²¹ EPRS, 'EU-China Relations', 2015, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2015/558349/EPRS_ATA\(2015\)558349_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2015/558349/EPRS_ATA(2015)558349_EN.pdf).

54 ²² Hanemann and Huotari, 'EU-China FDI', p. 18.

55 ²³ We include the following reports: 'EU-China Relations: What Think Tanks are Thinking', 3 July, 2015; 'China and Europe: What Think Tanks are thinking', 11 March, 2016; 'Foreign Direct Investment Screening, A Debate in Light of China-EU FDI Flows', May 2017; 'The EU and China, What Think Tanks are Thinking', 16 June, 2017; 'China: What Think Tanks are Thinking', 23 March, 2018; 'China's Foreign Influence Operations in Western Liberal Democracies: An Emerging Debate', 15 May, 2018; 'China, the 16+1 Format and the EU', September 2018. All published by EPRS, Brussels, t <http://europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/home.html>.

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3 believe that Chinese investment was just business-oriented;²⁴ in June 2017, French President
4 Emmanuel Macron urged European leaders not to be ‘naïve’ in their business relations with China;²⁵
5 in September 2017, President of the European Commission Jean-Paul Juncker introduced the idea of
6 an EU foreign investment screening mechanism on the basis that ‘we are not naïve free traders’; and
7 finally, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel demanded that China follow a ‘One Europe Policy’
8 in its dealings with EU countries.²⁶ Our selected time frame captures this peak of ‘China threat’
9 discourse and a corresponding political turn in Europe that, although still ongoing, has already
10 produced policy results, namely, the rapid introduction of an EU screening mechanism in November
11 2018 and various national-level decisions to block Chinese FDI projects.²⁷

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17 Our purposeful sampling of reports published in this period involved two rounds of selection. In
18 the first round we shortlisted sixty-nine publications out of a total of 200 circulated via EPRS which
19 addressed the particular issue of Chinese economic presence in Europe and were published by
20 European, rather than US or other, think tanks. As such, we excluded reports on China’s domestic
21 politics and human rights that were not directly related to the issue of Chinese investment. In the
22 second round, we excluded descriptive reports documenting investment and trade relations without
23 offering any policy analysis and recommendations. Thus, we selected a total of thirty-three policy-
24 prescriptive publications calling upon EU and national authorities to respond to increased Chinese
25 economic activities in Europe. Among these, we identified twenty reports (the majority published
26 between 2017 and 2018) that conceptualise Chinese economic activities as an actual or potential
27 threat by using one or more of the three discursive pillars of the emerging securitising discourse
28 analysed in this article. The EPRS devoted an entire brief to the most widely discussed of these
29 reports – PPI-MERICS’ ‘Authoritarian Advance’, giving special attention to its hard securitising
30 logic.²⁸ Our sampling, therefore, captures the securitisation of Chinese investments and business
31 deals.

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The publications circulated via EPRS come from think tanks across the continent, but exhibit a
strong bias towards those based in Western Europe. Out of 200 entries, only five originated in
Eastern Europe (Poland and Czech Republic) and South Europe (Italy and Spain), despite the EU’s
particular focus on Chinese activities in Europe’s eastern and southern regions. Moreover, the
selection made by the EPRS may have created an additional bias due to its exclusion of think tanks
from states such as Greece, where positive interpretations of Chinese economic presence have also

²⁴ Tom Mitchell, ‘Angela Merkel Can Coach Theresa May in Realpolitik with China’, *Financial Times*, 11 August, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/90d3edb6-5fa5-11e6-ae3f-77baadeb1c93>.

²⁵ Robin Emmott, Michel Rose, ‘At EU Summit, Macron Pleads for Limits to Foreign Takeovers’, 22 June, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-summit-macron/at-eu-summit-macron-pleads-for-limits-to-foreign-takeovers-idUSKBN19D2HY>.

²⁶ Lucrezia Poggetti, ‘One China – One Europe? German Foreign Minister’s Remarks Irk Beijing’, *The Diplomat*, 9 September, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/09/one-china-one-europe-german-foreign-ministers-remarks-irk-beijing/>.

²⁷ Arne Delfs, ‘Germany Toughens Stance and Blocks China Deal’, 1 August, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-08-01/germany-said-to-block-company-purchase-by-chinese-for-first-time>; Zak Bentley, ‘Germany Blocks China State Grid for 50 Hertz, Citing “National Security” Fears’, *Infrastructure Investor*, 27 July, 2018, <https://www.infrastructureinvestor.com/germany-blocks-china-state-grid-investment-50hertz-citing-national-security-fears/>.

²⁸ Benner et al., ‘Authoritarian Advance’.

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3 been published.²⁹ While it is entirely feasible that think tanks outside of the EPRS' field of vision
4 may represent views that favour China's investment, these were not circulated to MEPs and do not,
5 therefore, form part of our sample. In the next pages, we deconstruct the think tanks' securitising
6 discourse and organise our analysis around its main components.
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10 **The Discursive Pillars of the European 'China Threat'**

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12 The focus of the Copenhagen School, and the wider field of related security approaches, is on
13 discourse, because securitisation, and the phases that precede it, occur through a discursive process
14 led by securitising actors. While the European 'China threat' argument is multifaceted and cannot be
15 pinned down to a single author or institute, we have identified three discursive pillars upon which
16 the force of the securitising argument on China's existential threat to Europe rests as an architrave.
17 The pillars represent narrative strands that complement and reinforce each other, producing a
18 credible-seeming account of Chinese expansionism, yet taken apart, they hardly warrant the alarmist
19 tone typical of some of the publications we analysed.
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25 Before we turn to the investigation of the three constituting themes, a disclaimer on
26 'intentionality' is necessary. This paper will not unmask the motives of the securitising actors.
27 Lobbying on behalf of business interests, political parties, or governments, and strategically
28 positioning one's organisation in a debate to establish credibility for reputational and funding
29 purposes may explain a think tank's engagement with securitisation. Common sense may also
30 suggest that think tanks and policy analysts look for problems anyway, so raising concerns over
31 whether security is part of their job description. Yet what is relevant here is the harmonisation of the
32 discourse that goes beyond the pale of the think tank profession to include journalists, politicians,
33 and academics. What think tanks are thinking, the policies policy-makers make, and where leaders
34 lead has become increasingly similar, so producing an echo chamber wherein disagreement is
35 labelled either as dissent or naïveté. This emerging congruence is analytically more important than
36 attempting to divine the motives of think tanks – if indeed such an exercise is even possible. An
37 investigation of intentions and motives is also unnecessary methodologically, since we adopt a
38 bottom-up, interpretive approach of examining the think tanks' discourse and measuring it against
39 factual analyses of several key cases in order to show the gap between the securitising discourse and
40 more empirical approaches. Therefore, we approach the European version of the 'China Threat'
41 scenario in good faith, articulating a thorough criticism of the manner in which certain think tanks
42 speak about Chinese presence in Europe in the hope of contributing to a more pluralistic debate.
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54 **Pillar 1: Centralising Agency**

55 The rapid rise in Chinese outward FDI into Europe has reached an historic point and surpassed the
56 reverse annual flows of capital since 2010, yet in cumulative terms, EU-held investments in China
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59 ²⁹ Ίδρυμα Οικονομικών & Βιομηχανικών Ερευνών (Foundation for Economic & Industrial Research),
60 'Οικονομικές επιδράσεις από την ιδιωτικοποίηση του Οργανισμού Λιμένος Πειραιώς' ('The Economic Impact of
Piraeus Port Authority Privatisation'), March 2016, http://iobe.gr/docs/research/RES_03_08032016_REP_GR.pdf.

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3 exceed those of Chinese entities by a factor of 2.6, while US-held FDI stock in the EU dwarfs
4 China's by a ratio of 35:1.³⁰ Rather than size, what the 'China threat' discourse problematises is the
5 nature of Chinese investment, which is said to be centrally controlled and subject to the Chinese
6 state's geostrategic considerations.³¹ Moreover, as Tingley et al., have shown, opposition to
7 incoming Chinese FDI on grounds of national security is often a vehicle for other grievances,³²
8 while Nyman explains that the securitisation of US energy policy relies on similar, simplistic
9 accounts of strategic competition.³³ In this manner, Chinese investment as a whole is transformed
10 into a security threat even when the evidence to support security concerns in individual cases is scant.

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15 Establishing privatisations and foreign acquisitions as a threat to economic security in a liberal
16 economic context that promotes the role of businesses vis-à-vis the state in economic activity can be
17 'intellectually incoherent', as BWW note.³⁴ Therefore, securitisation depends on identifying or
18 constructing spill-over effects on politics, military security, society, and environment by ascribing
19 the agency of various actors involved in these deals up the command chain to Beijing. This is not to
20 say China, especially under Xi Jinping, has not promoted narratives of Chinese exceptionalism and
21 reassertion of the party's control, but such propaganda should not be taken at face value, as it
22 obscures the complex decision-making processes in China proper.

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27 'Centralising agency' involves two discursive tactics: a) subsuming all commercial rationality
28 of Chinese firms into a political frame; and b) negating informed rationality on part of the host states
29 or host business partners. In the first instance, centralising agency allows securitising actors to
30 attribute all Chinese economic activity to the machinations of the CCP, so obviating the need to
31 establish factually such a link on a case-by-case basis, and without considering the full set of
32 relevant contingencies, interests, and dynamics. Chinese firms, regardless of ownership status, are
33 cast as agents of the Chinese state, unable to make their own financial decisions and beholden to
34 their political masters in Zhongnanhai. This view of China as a singular entity does not take into
35 account a growing body of literature that understands the Belt and Road Initiative as an inherently
36 decentralised endeavour wherein SOEs, local governments, different bureaucracies, and private
37 companies pursue their own interests, often competing with each other for the centre's attention.³⁵

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45 ³⁰ Eurostat, 'Foreign Direct Investment - Stocks', July 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statisticsexplained/index.php?title=Foreign_direct_investment_-_stocks.

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47 ³¹ John Seaman, Mikko Huotari, and Miguel Otero-Iglesias, 'Chinese Investment in Europe: A Country-Level
48 Approach', *ETNC Report*, December 2017, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/publications-ifri/ouvrages-ifri/chinese-investment-europe-country-level-approach>; Gisela Grieger, 'Foreign Direct Investment Screening A
49 Debate in Light of China-EU FDI Flows', European Parliament, May 2017, p. 4,
50 [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/603941/EPRS_BRI\(2017\)603941_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/603941/EPRS_BRI(2017)603941_EN.pdf); Michal
51 Makocki, 'China in the Balkans: Battle for Principles', ECFR, 6 July, 2017,
52 https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_china_in_the_balkans_the_battle_of_principles_7210.

53 ³² Dustin Tingley, Christopher Xu, Adam Chilton, and Helen V. Milner, 'The Political Economy of Inward FDI:
54 Opposition to Chinese Mergers and Acquisitions', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2015),
55 pp. 27-57.

56 ³³ Jonna Nyman, "'Red Storm Ahead": Securitisation of Energy in US-China Relations', *Millennium*, Vol. 43, No. 1
57 (2014), pp. 43-65.

58 ³⁴ Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, *Security*, p. 106.

59 ³⁵ Ching Kwan Lee, *The Specter of Global China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Zeng Jinghan,
60 'Narrating China's Belt and Road Initiative', *Global Policy*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2019), pp. 1-10; Tim Summers, 'China's
61 "New Silk Roads": Sub-National Regions and Networks of Global Political Economy', *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.
62 37, No. 9 (2016), pp. 1628-43; Kerry Brown, *The World According to Xi* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018); Yu Jie, 'The

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3 The assumption that initiatives such as the Belt and Road constitute a centrally executed conspiracy
4 has a major impact on the way we analyse Chinese economic presence abroad.

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6 Because the securitisation of investment relies on establishing 'spill-overs', so-called critical
7 infrastructure is especially prone to such a biased interpretation. Thus, in the field of maritime
8 logistics, companies like COSCO are presented as CCP agents taking over Europe's port
9 infrastructure,³⁶ while emphatically ignoring alternative business explanations. The focus on security
10 achieved through centralising agency, no matter how tenuous, differentiates Chinese from other
11 (state-led) port investment companies, such as Dubai's DP World, without proposing comparative
12 insights between the effect of investment from different authoritarian states such as UAE or Saudi
13 Arabia. Furthermore, one should consider that during a time of falling profits for shipping operators,
14 port operations remain a highly profitable aspect of the logistics business. In addition, significant
15 overcapacity is predicted for terminal operations globally in the coming years,³⁷ signifying fierce
16 competition among European ports for market shares. Therefore, as the top eight big carrier groups
17 largely determine global cargo flows, a tie-in with a large carrier/port operator like COSCO,
18 particularly for less established ports, presents a viable strategy. Italy's IAI accurately notes that
19 Piraeus's takeover will increase competition for ports in 'Northern range' countries such as Belgium
20 and the Netherlands, but nevertheless frames it as a 'political and commercial threat'.³⁸ Seen from
21 Piraeus, however, both the 2008 (concession of container Piers II&III) and 2016 (Piraeus Port
22 Authority privatisation) deals had a clear commercial logic.³⁹ COSCO got involved in Piraeus
23 because it was looking for a faster transportation channel for Chinese products, and gradually
24 solidified its commitment to the Greek port, especially since its investment in Naples became
25 unsustainable.

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27 An even stronger attempt at securitisation is seen in comparisons of Piraeus to Chinese-run
28 ports outside Europe where the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has occasionally been
29 granted access – with the host country's permission.⁴⁰ Absolutely no indications that Piraeus will
30 become a 'double use' port hosting the PLAN exist, but framing a Chinese takeover of a port
31 authority as an existential threat to Europeanness is less plausible without linking it to a military ('a
32 base for Chinese warships') or political ('control over host government') issue. What these reports
33 disregard is that Piraeus often hosts foreign navies, both from NATO and third countries, including
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36 Belt and Road Initiative: Domestic Interests, Bureaucratic Politics and the EU-China Relations', *Asia Europe Journal*,
37 Vol. 16, No. 3 (2018), pp. 223-36.

38 Alexandr Lagazzi and Michal Vit, 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: Chinese Influence in the Western Balkans',
39 Europeum Institute for European Policy, 2017, p. 3, <http://europeum.org/data/articles/policy-paper-en-4.pdf>; Garrie
40 van Pinxteren, 'China's Belt & Road Initiative: Nice for China, Not for Europe', *Clingendael Asia Forum*, 2017, p. 2,
41 https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2017-07/Opinie_One_Belt_China_GvP_CAF.pdf; François Godement
42 and Abigaël Vasselier, 'China at the Gates: A New Power Audit of EU-China Relations', *European Council on
43 Foreign Relations*, 2017, pp. 15, 50, https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/China_Power_Audit.pdf.

37 'United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, *Review of Maritime Transport*', 2017, p. 11,
38 https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/rmt2017_en.pdf.

39 Nicola Casarini, 'Is Europe to Benefit from China's Belt and Road Initiative?', *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, 2015,
40 p. 9, <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaiw1540.pdf>.

41 Thanos Dokos, 'Who Lost Greece? The Geopolitical Consequences of the Greek Crisis', *ELLAMEP Policy Paper*,
42 No. 18 (2012), pp. 9, 14.

43 Godement and Vasselier, 'China at the Gates', p. 50.

Russia, and that the latter have no access to facilities or services that could sustain military action of any kind. The PLAN visits in Piraeus have taken place either under the UN anti-piracy mandate or as part of the evacuation of Chinese civilians from Libya. In addition, ECFR's 2017 report⁴¹ makes the unsubstantiated claim that Japanese ships have experienced difficulties when docking in Piraeus, arguing that there is no clear distinction between taking over the management of the Port and sovereign control over it.⁴²

The logic of centralising agency paints any Chinese investment at worst as a security risk and at best as a political one. The creation of such intersubjective meanings in the representation of Chinese companies as agents of a malevolent state blurs the boundaries between 'technical', 'economic', 'environmental', and 'political' matters, as well as between sectors and regions, in effect politicising any and all incoming investment. This is especially important when there are clear and valid concerns about the entry of Chinese investors who might fail to comply with EU laws on competition, labour standards, or environmental protection, for example. Yet the securitising logic which lumps disparate Chinese investments and projects together obfuscates rather than illuminates their contingent and complex nature.

For example, when Croatia awarded the €270m Pelješac Bridge contract to China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) in early 2018, it did so not due to direct political pressure or by circumventing public tender rules. Quite the reverse, this moment marked the first successful bid by a Chinese company for an EU-funded project and the culmination of the CRBC's decade-long effort to progress to public bids in developed countries. The Croatian authorities rejected the losing parties' allegations of price dumping because even the Chinese offer was significantly higher than the expected tender value set by the Croatian road authority.⁴³ More than the issue of price dumping – a longstanding concern of European industry – what is curious about the case is that the Austrian complainant specifically cited as a key argument in its complaint the interest of the Chinese state in entering the EU market. Accordingly, the bridge regularly features in articles discussing China's attempts to 'divide' the EU⁴⁴ or spread its influence to Western Balkan states.⁴⁵ CRBC's choices, however, seem consistent with the literature on Chinese outgoing investment, which emphasises the efforts of companies to leverage their firm-specific assets to gain market share in advanced

⁴¹ Godement and Vasselier, 'China at the Gates', p. 50.

⁴² The authors of the ECFR report do not cite any sources to support this claim. Our email request to clarify their sources was never answered. To verify the validity of this claim, we contacted the Japanese Embassy in Athens and representatives of PPA employees, all of whom confirmed that there were no delays or problems affecting specifically Japanese vessels. It should be noted that in June 2019, Nippon Yusen Kaisha (NYK) the world-leading Japanese logistics enterprise and biggest car carrier, awarded the Piraeus Port Authority Car Terminal for its excellent services. See Piraeus Port Authority, 'A Significant Award for PPA's Car Terminal', 27 June, 2019, <http://www.olp.gr/en/press-releases/item/4599-a-significant-award-for-ppa-s-car-terminal>.

⁴³ State Commission for Supervision of Public Procurement Procedures, 'Rješenje povodom žalbe na odluku o odabiru u ograničenom postupku javne nabave, predmet nabave: izgradnja mosta kopno-Pelješac s pristupnim cestama' ('Decision on the appeal in case 'Construction of the mainland-Pelješac bridge with access roads', 2018, p. 9, <http://pdf.dkom.hr/17646.pdf>).

⁴⁴F. Böge, H. Kafsack, S. Löwenstein, et al., 'Chinas Macht wächst: Wer anderen eine Brücke baut' ('China's Power Increasing: Who's Building a Bridge to Others'), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 17 October, 2018.

⁴⁵ James M Gomez and Jasmina Kuzmanovic, 'China's Reach and Europe's Money Meet in Balkan Outpost', 29 May, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-05-29/china-s-reach-and-europe-s-money-meet-in-remote-balkan-outpost>.

economies⁴⁶ – a relatively typical pattern of behaviour with few discernible security aspects.

Similarly, COSCO obtained gradual control of Piraeus following two international tenders (in 2008 and 2016), both scrutinised by EU institutions. In fact, COSCO was the sole contender for the 2016 privatisation of the Piraeus Port Authority, one of Greece's commitments under its 2015 bailout agreement with the EU. China's construction and infrastructure acquisition spree in SE Europe was thus more about Chinese actors pursuing their business interests within the legal framework of the EU than changing the rules of the game. This is not to say that the entanglement of politics and economics in China is irrelevant, yet denying Chinese firms' economic rationale provides a singular account of what is a complex form of decision-making.

The second thread of centralising agency concerns the role of European states, companies or other actors and treating them as naïve or selfish, dismissing their rational calculations as insufficiently considering China's 'true' intentions. In this vein, the 2016 acquisition of German robotics firm Kuka by the Chinese Midea caused a stir in the German political class, and is heavily used in think tank narratives as an example of technology-stripping by Chinese actors, with the ECFR report even calling it a 'raid'.⁴⁷ However, Midea and Kuka executives emphasised the business rationale for the deal giving Kuka access to a huge market ripe for automation in manufacturing.⁴⁸ Still, in a meeting with German industrialists, Chancellor Merkel reportedly told them that they were 'naïve' about Chinese intentions.⁴⁹ Essentially, by negating the business rationale of the deal the German state politicised competition. In the race towards 'Industrie 4.0', both corporate and state actors pursue strategies to ensure their continued competitiveness; these strategies may come into conflict but they are decided by autonomous and rational European actors.

The Belgrade-Budapest 'high-speed' railway is another case of allegedly naïve governments being 'duped' into paying for China's grand schemes. In this narrative, the railway, built using preferential loans from Chinese banks to Serbia, serves the purpose of creating a logistical corridor from Piraeus to the markets of central Europe at Serbian and Hungarian taxpayers' expense.⁵⁰ However, Serbian authorities had scheduled an upgrading of the rail line in question before the idea of a Chinese corridor from Piraeus even existed.⁵¹ The importance of the line to Serbia is traceable to decisions made not in Beijing but in Brussels. The TEN-T corridor from Athens to Hamburg bypassed the direct route via Serbia and Macedonia to favour member states Bulgaria and Romania. Imminent isolation from EU-funded infrastructural connectivities explains why Belgrade had been advocating a rail upgrading since the mid-2000s. China wasn't even the preferred lender, given that

⁴⁶ Peter J. Buckley, L. Jeremy Clegg, Adam R. Cross, Liu Xin, Hinrich Voss, and Zheng Ping, 'The Determinants of Chinese Outward Foreign Direct Investment', *Journal of International Business Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (2007), pp.499-518.

⁴⁷ Godement and Vasselier, 'China at the Gates', p. 15.

⁴⁸ Guy Chazan, 'German Angst over Chinese M&A', *Financial Times*, 9 August, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/e0897e24-598e-11e6-8d05-4eaa66292c32>.

⁴⁹ Tom Mitchell, 'Angela Merkel Can Coach Theresa May in Realpolitik with China', *Financial Times*, August 11, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/90d3edb6-5fa5-11e6-ae3f-77baadeb1c93>.

⁵⁰ Pinxteren, 'China's Belt & Road Initiative', p. 2.

⁵¹ Republic of Serbia, 'Strategija Razvoja Železničkog, Drumskog, Vodnog, Vazdušnog i Intermodalnog Transporta u Republici Srbiji Od 2008 Do 2015 Godine' ('Strategy for the Development of Rail, Road, Water, Air and Intermodal Transport in the Republic of Serbia from 2008 to 2015'), *Official Gazette of RS*, No. 44 (2008).

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3 plans originally envisaged World Bank participation, while the current upgrading is partly financed
4 by a Russian loan.
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6 Rather than being naïve, Balkan countries are using what leverage they can muster in
7 suboptimal surroundings, namely, the flexibility to accommodate bilateral deals by balancing
8 Western and other funders. Unable to rely on EU support, Serbia is a prime case since it should be
9 particularly susceptible to Chinese pressure and could so become a ‘Trojan Horse’ in Europe.⁵² Yet
10 Chinese influence has so far resulted in just one symbolic gesture⁵³ which illustrates the limitations
11 of Chinese ‘sharp power’⁵⁴ rather than its reach.
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15 Elsewhere, the ‘selfishness’ of European entities is emphasised, as with Italy’s premier
16 shipbuilder Fincantieri. Using suggestive language, a report by the ECFR attempts to construct a
17 conspiratorial web out of Fincantieri’s takeover of French shipyard STX, its joint venture in
18 Shanghai, and a Chinese SOE’s acquisition of a minor Italian yacht maker (Ferretti) without putting
19 forward a shred of evidence. It correctly points out that Fincantieri agreed to share cruise ship
20 production technology, but does not make clear why the business decisions of one Italian firm
21 should subsequently be linked to the takeover of another (Fincantieri was not a shareholder in
22 Ferretti), nor why Fincantieri’s takeover of a French shipyard should be considered a ‘still
23 apparently unrelated development’⁵⁵ rather than a genuinely unrelated one. The report then goes as
24 far as to characterise Fincantieri’s takeover bid for STX as being done ‘...in a very Chinese way’.⁵⁶
25 While we deal with the rhetorical tool of ‘othering’ in a subsequent section, the ECFR report
26 questions the economic rationality of this major (and, incidentally, state-owned) Italian shipbuilder
27 by suggesting that it is selling out cruise ship technology in pursuit of corporate profits. But as this
28 charge is not sufficiently alarmist, the issue of Ferretti’s military speedboat arm is loosely associated
29 with Fincantieri, and the securitising loop is thus complete: European corporate profit-seeking leads
30 to the leaking of military technology to China.
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40 Kuka, Serbia, and Fincantieri were following their own agenda – as were the Greek ship-
41 owning elite and the Greek government. Greek ship-owners promoted the idea of COSCO’s
42 presence in Piraeus to both sides, lobbying the Greek government in favour of the 2008 Concession,
43 and playing a crucial role in its successful conclusion.⁵⁷ The appeal of Piraeus for COSCO increased
44 due to the active support of this key constituency, who were clients of Chinese shipyards and
45 banks,⁵⁸ and trusted providers of services for COSCO and other Chinese companies.⁵⁹ The financial
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51 ⁵² Lagazzi and Vit, ‘The Good, the Bad and the Ugly’, p. 8.

52 ⁵³ Serbia’s Foreign Minister did not attend Liu Xiaobo’s Nobel Peace Prize ceremony, sending the country’s human
53 rights ombudsman instead.

54 National Endowment for Democracy, ‘Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence’, 2017,
54 <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Introduction-Sharp-Power-Rising-Authoritarian-Influence.pdf>.

55 Godement and Vasselier, ‘China at the Gates’, p. 41.

56 *Ibid.*

57 Asteris Huliaras and Sotiris Petropoulos, ‘Shipowners, Ports and Diplomats: The Political Economy of Greece’s
58 Relations with China’, *Asia Europe Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2014), pp. 215-230.

59 ⁵⁸ Ilias Belos, ‘Κινεζική κυριαρχία στα ναυτιλιακά δάνεια’ (‘Chinese Dominance in Shipping Loans’), *Kathimerini
60 Newspaper*, 24 July, 2016, <https://www.kathimerini.gr/868617/article/oikonomia/ellhnikh-oikonomia/kinezikh-kyriarxia-sta-naytiliaka-daneaia>.

benefits for Greek ship-owners, the Piraeus Port Authority, and the Greek economy have since been considerable.⁶⁰ Similarly, for all Greek governments since 2008, companies like COSCO constitute an important source of investment, especially at a time of financial crisis when privatisation tenders run the risk of low offers. A Chinese company's bid in such international tenders creates additional competition, which raises the value of the deal for the Greek state. What is more, COSCO's diversion of container traffic from other European ports to Piraeus could lead to technological upgrading of the Port's facilities, job growth, and spill-over effects in other economic sectors.⁶¹

Issues of reciprocal market access are a longstanding and valid concern of European businesses operating in China. Indeed, the future of EU-China relations will be largely defined by the ability of the two sides to resolve these issues, either through bilateral negotiations or dispute resolution instruments. Yet the discourse presented in the analysed reports does not stop there, rather advocating the upgrading of such concerns to full-blown panic about Europe's strategic industries and assets being bought, stolen, or neutralised by actors associated with the Chinese Communist Party. This level of analysis conveniently ignores the agency of firms, interest groups, and host states by instead concentrating agency in the hands of the Chinese state. Yet Chinese companies have adapted to dealing with the many practices, voices, legal and business environments, and individual agents across Europe. In a similar vein, European states, companies, and elites have shown a remarkable propensity to think about their own bottom line or national interest. Paradoxically, the centralising agency narrative portrays Chinese actors as subsuming their economic rationality to the state's political concerns, while European actors are faulted for following particularistic economic concerns instead of collective political interests. As the next section will clarify, the identification of 'collective' interests vis-à-vis China is a contested field, and we can ill-afford to assign the spectres haunting the politics and economy of Europe to Chinese agency or present them as a threat to European security through a one-size-fits-all contextualisation of Chinese investment.

Pillar 2: Sanctity of Unity

The second discursive pillar concentrates on EU's 'unity' as the referent object allegedly under threat from Chinese economic expansion. As the fragility of the EU's integration and its current and future unity has traditionally been an area of anxiety for European leaders, sounding this alarm strikes a chord. In this discourse, 'unity' is similar to the 'one voice mantra',⁶² a criticism of the polyphony and slow pace that characterise EU decision-making, occasionally leading to inaction. The 'one voice' argument, often repeated by EU leaders, officials, and analysts, essentially involves

⁵⁹ Frans-Paul van der Putten et al., 'The Geopolitical Relevance of Piraeus and China's New Silk Road for Southeast Europe and Turkey', *Clingendael Report*, December 2016, p. 11, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Report_the%20geopolitical_relevance_of_Piraeus_and_China's_New_Silk_Road.pdf.

⁶⁰ Foundation for Economic & Industrial Research, 'The Economic Impact of the Piraeus Port Authority Privatisation', p. 54.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 54-5.

⁶² Kalypso Nicolaïdis, 'The JCMS Annual Review Lecture Sustainable Integration: Towards EU 2.0?', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (2010), pp. 21-54.

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3 the gradual replacement of polyphony with a unified voice, especially in matters relating to external
4 affairs. But while the necessity of internal ‘unity’ within a state is taken for granted, the unity of a
5 ‘multi-layered’ and ‘multi-centred’ polity⁶³ like the EU is elusive, and the benefits of pursuing a
6 unified stance across different issue areas need to be thoroughly considered in light of the costs. As
7 the EU motto United in Diversity suggests, unity emanates from the nature of the EU as a non-
8 hegemonic and consensual polity comprising sovereign states. As such, internal negotiation and
9 consensus building, efforts to reach common positions and synthesise views, but also disagreement,
10 frustration, and inaction, are all part of the EU’s normal functioning. Indeed, pursuing a unified
11 voice at all costs may divert energy and political capital from achieving common goals, reduce the
12 ‘collective weight’ of the EU and the benefits for its members, and weaken diversity as a source of
13 creative strength in negotiations.⁶⁴ Imposing a unified voice under majority rule at the cost of the
14 individual interests of member-states may also strengthen Euroscepticism, allowing populist and far-
15 right parties to justify their discourse on ‘lost’ (as opposed to ‘pooled’) sovereignty.

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17 This elusive notion of EU unity is constantly negotiated and open to conflicting interpretations.
18 In this context, think tanks have significant leeway to set the unity benchmark in a way that
19 promotes their agenda. The securitisation of Chinese FDI is argued on the assumption that the EU
20 needs ‘to speak with one voice’ in all fields of interaction with China, and that member states have
21 to adhere to the European China policy.⁶⁵ This policy refers to broad principles agreed by the EU
22 Council,⁶⁶ and does not prohibit current or aspiring member states from pursuing their own
23 developmental objectives within the EU legislative framework. To clarify, certain think tanks speak
24 about EU-China relations as if it were either an area of exclusive EU policy competence or that there
25 existed a comprehensive agreement among member states specifically targeting relations with China.
26 The fact that neither is the case renders misleading accusations against individual members of
27 ‘breaking ranks on European China policy’⁶⁷ and ‘growing dissent ... over the Union’s policy
28 towards China’.⁶⁸

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30 If such ‘dissent’ indeed existed, it would take the form either of a violation of EU laws or of
31 regulatory standards; for instance, a breach of competition rules, or through undermining agreed
32 positions in the context of the EU’s common foreign and security policy. Regarding the former, it
33 should be noted that the securitising discourse on the assumed impact of Chinese investment on
34 unity does not concentrate on breaches of EU legislation. If common market rules or the *acquis*
35 communautaire were indeed eroding due to member states’ preferential relations with China, this
36 would constitute an alarming trend. Similarly, weakening a commonly agreed foreign policy could
37 trigger reasonable concerns. However, despite having no evidence of either, the responses of think
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⁶³ Gjovalin Macaj and Kalypso Nicolaïdis, ‘Beyond “One Voice”? Global Europe’s Engagement with its Own Diversity’, *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 21, No. 7 (2014), p. 1072.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 1072-4.

⁶⁵ Benner et al., ‘Authoritarian Advance’, p. 16.

⁶⁶ Council of the European Union, ‘Outcome of Proceedings - EU Strategy on China’, July 2016.

⁶⁷ Benner et al., ‘Authoritarian Advance’, p. 14.

⁶⁸ Stephan Klose, Astrid Pepermans, and Leia Wang, ‘An Uphill Struggle? Towards Coordinated EU Engagement with China’s Belt and Road Initiative’, European Policy Brief-EGMONT Royal Institute for International Relations, November 2017, p. 1.

tanks range from cautious warnings to alarmism. IAI modestly suggests that ‘a scramble for Chinese money could further divide EU member states and make it difficult for Brussels to fashion a common position vis-à-vis Beijing’.⁶⁹ ETNC points out that ‘China’s increased investment presence in the EU might also have political and geopolitical implications’, accusing certain member states of ‘an attitude of complacency with China because this will bring rewards, namely, more Chinese investment and perhaps more access to the Chinese market’.⁷⁰ Scaling up the gravity of the perceived danger, Clingendael warns that ‘if we join in on the Chinese Belt & Road instead, we will lose out in the end. We will be serving Chinese needs rather than European ones. ... But most importantly: it will lead to more tensions and divisions in an already divided Europe while China’s influence in Europe grows stronger’⁷¹. Lastly, in a significantly more dramatic tone, the GPPi-MERICS report notes that ‘EU unity has suffered from Chinese divide and rule tactics, especially where the protection and projection of liberal values and human rights are concerned’⁷². China, according to the authors, is ‘[b]uilding political leverage through economic investments and aligning with leaders willing to break EU unity’⁷³.

Such statements are supported by examples that emphasise member states’ different understandings on how to engage China, or depict European governments as occasionally acting opportunistically. A report by EGMONT, commenting on the investment screening mechanism, paints a routine disagreement during internal negotiations – a hallmark of European politics – as illustrative of ‘new lines of division’.⁷⁴ Similarly, a report by CIDOB portrays different views over anti-dumping measures targeting Chinese solar panels, the decision by certain EU countries to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank⁷⁵ (AIIB), and the debate on granting market economy status to China as applying Sun Tzu’s ‘divide and conquer strategy... on itself’.⁷⁶ ISPSW also concludes that the alleged ‘divide and rule’ tactics of Beijing drove EU countries to join the AIIB without first reaching an agreement or coordinating.⁷⁷ ECIPE concurs, adding that the ‘petty rivalries’ among EU member states and their ‘short-term national opportunism’ allows China to treat them as ‘tributary states’.⁷⁸ Lastly, a Clingendael report uses many examples from the rather modest, as

⁶⁹ Casarini, ‘Is Europe to Benefit from China’s Belt and Road Initiative?’, p. 1.

⁷⁰ Seaman et al., *Chinese Investment in Europe: A Country-Level Approach*, p. 13.

⁷¹ Pinxteren, ‘China’s Belt & Road Initiative’, p. 3.

⁷² Hanemann and Huotari, ‘Record Flows and Growing Imbalances’, p. 7.

⁷³ Benner et al., ‘Authoritarian Advance’, p. 13.

⁷⁴ Klose, Pepermans, and Wang, ‘An Uphill Struggle?’, p. 4.

⁷⁵ For an excellent discussion on the decision of Western economies to join and institutionally shape the AIIB see Jan Knoerich, Francisco Urdinez, Contesting Contested Multilateralism: Why the West Joined the Rest in Founding the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2019), pp. 333-70.

⁷⁶ Christina Müller-Markus, ‘One Belt, One Road: The Chinese Dream and its Impact on Europe’, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, May 2016, p. 4, https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/notes_internacionales/n1_148_one_belt_one_road_el_sueno_chino_y_su_impacto_sobre_europa/one_belt_one_road_the_chinese_dream_and_its_impact_on_europe.

⁷⁷ Volker Stanzel, ‘China Divides the West’, Institute for Strategic, Political, Security and Economic Consultancy, March 2015, p. 3, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/189361/335_Stanzel.pdf.

⁷⁸ Guy de Jonquières, ‘The European Union’s China Policy: Priorities and Strategies for the New Commission’, European Centre for International Political Economy (ECIPE), 2015, pp. 2-3, <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/174792/1/ecipe-pb-2015-03.pdf>; ECIPE’s 2016 report repeats accusations over China using its ‘cheque book’ to undermine EU unity, Guy de Jonquières, ‘The EU and China: Redressing an

regards speed and financial commitment, institutionalisation of the 16+1 group, to claim that China is threatening both EU cohesion and its future enlargement and integration.⁷⁹ Generalisations, examples taken out of context, and essentialist language are all employed to create the desired impression.

Other evidence of China's assumed corrosive effect on EU unity include the softening of a joint statement on the South China Sea ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration and the blocking of two official EU condemnations of China's human rights records. The initial disagreement on an EU investment screening mechanism was also attributed to Chinese economic influence.⁸⁰ These examples are framed repeatedly as instances of European disunity to demonstrate the negative effect of Chinese money on European politics, presenting polyphony and diversity as a failure/weakness. Alternative explanations highlighting the need to attract FDI at a time of crisis and austerity, the possibly uneven effect a screening mechanism may have on smaller EU countries, the fact that member states have traditionally pursued their own foreign policy and economic agendas in the EU context, as well as the need to assess the actual, as opposed to the assumed, spill-over effect in the realm of politics, are all side-lined when applying the 'threat to unity' prism.

The case of Greece is illustrative in this regard. Sino-Greek relations, until recently of marginal political importance, have now been given a fair amount of attention due to the rapidly expanding economic cooperation between Beijing and Athens in the last decade. Cautious about the effect of an EU screening mechanism on much-needed FDI, Greece exhibited a softer diplomatic stance towards China in relation to the UNHRC declaration and the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling on the South China Sea. But do these examples represent a threat to EU unity? The securitising actors argue that Greece's stance is the product of increasing dependency on China, an argument based on the deeply problematic suggestion that Greece is becoming politically dependent on a foreign power that is only the seventh largest investor in the country, well behind Germany, France, Cyprus, Switzerland, Canada, and the US.⁸¹ Chinese FDI opens opportunities for cooperation with Greek companies, brings potential bids in international tenders for public assets privatised under EU pressure, and has rejuvenated the domestic logistics sector. Despite this, Greece continues to purchase Western arms, and strictly follows EU and NATO in its foreign policy decisions and military operations. In addition, it has successfully privatised its railways to Ferrovie dello Stato Italiane, its airports to German Fraport, and the Thessaloniki port to a consortium that includes Deutsche Invest, France's Terminal Link SAS, and Cyprus-based Belterra Investments. When we compare Chinese and European investment in Greece, the former is clearly an important newcomer

Unbalanced Relationship', *ECIPE*, 2016, p. 2, <https://ecipe.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Policy-Brief-012016-The-EU-and-China.pdf>.

⁷⁹ Francesco Saverio Montesano and Maaïke Okano-Heijmans, 'Economic Diplomacy in EU-China Relations: Why Europe Needs its Own "OBOR"', *Clingendael*, June 2016, p. 4, <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/Policy%20Brief%20Economic%20Diplomacy%20in%20EU%E2%80%93China%20relations%20-%20June%202016.pdf>.

⁸⁰ Benner et al., 'Authoritarian Advance', p. 16.

⁸¹ Chinese FDI is approximately sixth of Germany's, a third of France's and less than half of Cyprus' investment in Greece. Enterprise Greece, 'Ξένες Άμεσες Επενδύσεις 2008-2018' ('Foreign Direct Investment 2008-2018'), <https://www.enterprisegreece.gov.gr/h-ellada-shmera/giati-ellada/ksenes-ameses-ependyseis>.

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3 but not a power that could challenge through economic incentives Greece's political commitment to
4 the EU. In the worst-case scenario, Greece may behave opportunistically through face-saving
5 gesture politics that have no repercussions on EU cohesion. Also, China strongly opposed a 'Grexit'
6 from the Eurozone in 2015,⁸² as this would reduce the profitability of its investment in Piraeus.
7 Paradoxically, the only threat to EU unity involving Greece came from schemes by certain European
8 political actors, rather than China or any other third states.
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12 To conclude, 'sanctity of unity' is the second discursive pillar of the securitising move under
13 investigation. By assuming that governments on the periphery are either not in a position or
14 unwilling to address the Chinese challenge to 'unity', think tanks call for extraordinary measures
15 from stronger member states and supranational institutions on behalf of the EU. Thus, every
16 disagreement on how to engage with Chinese investors can be reframed as a security concern
17 requiring intervention. This discourse underestimates how unity in the EU rests on its ability not to
18 reach a unified voice when conditions to do so do not permit this without causing a falling apart, in
19 view of the need to accommodate diversity in some areas while moving collectively in others, to
20 escape from hierarchical or majority-based perceptions of order, and to allow for the promotion of
21 both individual and collective interests. In fact, some think tank reports appear to adopt an
22 underlying hegemonic and monolithic vision of EU unity as univocal and disciplined—the polar
23 opposite of the intrinsic spirit of the European project.
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32 **Pillar 3: The Authoritarian 'Other'**

33 The third discursive pillar in the construction of Chinese FDI as a threat concentrates on the
34 authoritarian polity of the PRC. Of course, the CCP's authoritarian rule, its poor human rights and
35 civil liberties record, and the subordination of the judiciary and legislative branches to the executive
36 are the defining characteristics of the PRC's political system that render it the polar opposite of
37 'Europeanness'. At the international level, as Holslag has eloquently described, the EU's liberal
38 agenda and China's state-centred foreign policy making has led to a 'normative incongruence'
39 between China and Europe which has affected their strategic cooperation.⁸³
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44 The 'authoritarian other' logic, however, assumes that China's behaviour on the international
45 scene could never be compatible with the interests of liberal, democratic European states, or the EU
46 as a whole. We need to point out that the GPPi-MERICS report is the most explicit effort so far to
47 use identity as a basis for threat construction, and serves as the main point of reference in this section.
48 This report stands out as an illustrative example of the erroneous assumptions and potentially
49 harmful implications that 'othering' can have in the context of understanding Chinese FDI in Europe.
50 We concentrate on this case because we would like to record the transition from a fact-based
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56 ⁸² Chris Buckley, 'China Says It Hoped Greece Will Remain in Eurozone', *New York Times*, 6 July, 2015,
57 <https://www.nytimes.com/live/greek-debt-crisis-live-updates/chinese-says-it-hopes-greece-remains-in-eurozone/>;
58 Yannis Varoufakis, *Adults in the Room* (London: The Bodley Head, 2017); Shannon Tiezzi, 'Can China Save Greece
59 - and the EU?', *The Diplomat*, 30 June, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/06/can-china-save-greece-and-the-eu/>.

60 ⁸³ Jonathan Holslag, 'The Strategic Dissonance Between Europe and China', *Chinese Journal of International
Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (2010), p. 326.

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3 approach to a discourse of securitising everything – and everyone – Chinese.

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5 The most basic function of ‘othering’ in the GPPi-MERICS report is to establish China as a
6 threat not because of what it does but for what it is. This crucial element of the securitising discourse
7 deflects attention from an evidence-based discussion towards a vague interpretation of ‘motives’
8 based on the CCP’s essential characteristics as an authoritarian entity. In turn, this interpretation
9 provides the prism whereby various incidents can be reconstructed as a threat. It is a tactful logic,
10 which gives an aura of credibility to an essentially non-falsifiable argument that can be summarised
11 as follows: China is an authoritarian state, so whatever it does is potentially harmful. Let’s consider
12 the following passage:
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18 ...from the perspective of liberal democracies, all areas of interaction with China are potentially problematic and
19 deserve scrutiny. After all, China’s political model is based on an authoritarian regime intent on strengthening a
20 deeply illiberal surveillance state at home while also exporting—or at least trying to popularise—its political and
21 economic development model abroad.⁸⁴

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23 Ergo, all areas of Europe’s interaction with China have strong political undertones. This
24 ‘othering’ is distinct from recognising what has been described as ‘pluralisation and diversification
25 of the global ideoscape’⁸⁵— China’s normative impact at a global level. For the authors of this report,
26 China is a threat because of its domestic politics, which the CCP is allegedly exporting. Being
27 deprived of agency, according to the first discursive pillar, and with their economic activities
28 presented as a threat to EU unity, according to the second, Chinese actors are now villainised as
29 possible tentacles of authoritarianism. This is a key step in the process of reframing Chinese FDI as
30 an existential issue which requires extraordinary action. But assigning ulterior, dark motives to
31 Chinese actors on the basis of the PRC’s authoritarian system of government is not confined to
32 SOEs, as the report unfolds a logic of limitless securitisation. Indeed, in their effort to substantiate
33 ‘authoritarian advance’, GPPi-MERICS target not just the activities of Chinese intelligence services
34 or companies, but also that of Chinese think tanks, scholars, students, and associations, all of whom
35 are treated as ‘influencing’ tools.⁸⁶ In doing so, the report makes the dubious leap of assuming
36 perfect success rates for any of the Chinese government’s campaigns aimed at its citizens abroad.
37 Although the report warns in its introduction against ‘a campaign targeting Chinese citizens’, its
38 framing of the problem and suggested policy solutions achieve exactly that: the creation of an
39 environment of suspicion that can legitimise future extraordinary action against individuals.
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49 Constructing Chinese activities as a threat is pursued through the instrumentalisation of
50 institutional initiatives and individuals. The activities of Chinese think tanks are discussed under the
51 label ‘Tool 1: China sets up research exchange mechanisms and think tanks in Central and Eastern
52 Europe to influence perceptions and agendas’.⁸⁷ The first example is the creation of SiLKS (Silk
53 Road Think Tank Network) by CASS (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences), a network engaging
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58 ⁸⁴ Benner et al., ‘Authoritarian Advance’, p. 6.

59 ⁸⁵ Anastas Vangeli, ‘Global China and Symbolic Power: The Case of 16+1 Cooperation’, *Journal of Contemporary*
60 *China*, Vol. 27, No. 113 (2018), pp. 674-87.

⁸⁶ Benner et al., ‘Authoritarian Advance’, p. 26.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-9.

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3 European think tanks that includes, among others, Chatham House, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für
4 Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the France China Committee, the Fundación Alternativas, the
5 Institute of Development Studies, and the OECD Development Centre. The report does not explain
6 how the creation of a loose network will influence the research impartiality and integrity of these
7 reputable institutions, nor why engagement of this type is a source of concern. After all, interactions
8 between think tanks from democratic and authoritarian states are neither new nor a China-specific
9 phenomenon. What is more, the institutional affiliations of Chinese think tanks are well-known and
10 taken into consideration by European counterparts when developing joint projects.

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12 The example of SiLKS is followed by a consideration of the China-Central and Eastern
13 European (China-CEE) Institute, a think tank known for openly promoting China's BRI in the 17+1
14 framework. The authors of the GPPi-MERICS report claim that the China-CEE pursues 'track 1.5
15 exercises', involving 'exchanges tak[ing] place behind closed doors'. The lack of evidence to
16 substantiate the effectiveness of these activities and the presentation of routine public diplomacy as
17 harmful to EU interests demonstrate that these reports offer a discourse for policy consumption,
18 rather than fact-based analysis. Similarly, the section on knowledge production and lobbying ('Tool
19 2') uses random examples that fail to amount to more than a set of standard practices, such as
20 employing lobbyists and local 'experts' to promote Chinese interests in the EU's multifarious
21 policy-making process. In an effort to provide some evidence to support their discourse, the authors
22 refer to events organised by the Chinese Mission to the EU, the annual Europe-China forum, and the
23 involvement of China Daily in broadcasting them.⁸⁸ However, once again the reader needs to try
24 hard to discern how these activities, involving official actors openly affiliated to the Chinese
25 government, constitute anything more than standard public diplomacy efforts similar to those
26 undertaken by many third countries within the EU.

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28 The third institutional tool, titled 'China shapes academic programs', discusses the CCP's
29 alleged determination to 'control how China is taught and studied in Western academic institutions'.
30 The authors refer to controversies surrounding Confucius Institutes (CIs hereafter) in the US and
31 Europe, particularly their clumsy censorship attempts. The problematic nature of the CIs is a well-
32 discussed topic that has indeed drawn considerable criticism. Many studies have shown significant
33 variances of experience as regards the operation of CIs, and that attempts to use them as anything
34 other than their stated role have met with recipient universities' determination to protect academic
35 freedom,⁸⁹ particularly when CIs have been egregiously ham-fisted, as was the case at the EACS
36 conference in Portugal in 2014.⁹⁰ As Hartig⁹¹ has argued in his examination of CIs in Europe,
37 Oceania, and Africa, by attempting to project a state-sponsored image of China, CIs are

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⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-1.

⁸⁹ Joe Tin-yau Lo and Pan Suyan, 'Confucius Institutes and China's Soft Power: Practices and Paradoxes', *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (2016), pp. 512-32.

⁹⁰ Roger Greatrex, 'Report: The Deletion of Pages from EACS Conference materials in Braga', European Association for Chinese Studies, 1 August, 2014, <http://chinesestudies.eu/?p=584>.

⁹¹ Falk Hartig, 'Communicating China to the World: Confucius Institutes and China's Strategic Narratives', *Politics*, Vol. 35, No. 3/4 (2015), pp. 245-58.

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3 compromising their effectiveness in increasing China's soft power. Hubbert,⁹² in an ethnographic
4 study of CIs as soft power tools, reaches the same conclusion; when teachers side-lined official
5 teaching guidelines and material, putting aside propaganda content, they were more effective in
6 communicating an appealing image of China. Put differently, the more political CIs are, the less
7 effectively they operate as soft power mechanisms. Yet, the GPPi-MERICS report makes no
8 mention of these important findings in relation to CIs, as this would weaken the sense of urgency it
9 aims to create.

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14 'Othering' is ultimately extended to Chinese nationals (the fourth 'tool'), particularly university
15 students, who are identified as potential agents of the CCP. The report concentrates on the activities
16 of the Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSAs), a network developed under the
17 auspices of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office that has gained visibility in the US and Australia
18 with high-profile (counter-) protests during visits of the Dalai Lama, the 2008 Olympic torch relay,
19 and demonstrations by dissidents on minority rights.⁹³ The authors employ the same tactic of
20 lumping together non-EU related examples with certain minor incidents within EU member-states to
21 create an exaggerated sense of imminent threat. Characteristically, they confound probability with
22 intent:
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28 While there have not been as many cases of CSS-related retaliation in Europe as in the US, it is possible that this
29 trend might feature more prominently at European institutions in the future. These incidents represent an escalation
30 of Chinese government tactics...⁹⁴

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32 These descriptions are accompanied by a map titled 'The CCP Could Mobilise a Critical Mass
33 of Europe-Based Nationals Organised in Chinese Students and Scholars Associations' that shows the
34 number of CSSAs in European countries, essentially instrumentalising members of these
35 associations as CCP tools. We are not oblivious to the fact that the CSSA has been involved in
36 controversial activities. However, such examples are scarce (very few have taken place within the
37 EU⁹⁵) and cannot justify the exaggerated threat perception advocated by the authors of this report.
38 What is more, research on the role of Chinese students' associations as 'soft power' mechanisms⁹⁶
39 demonstrates that they face significant limitations, similar to those of CIs. However, GPPi-MERICS
40 operates under the assumption that Chinese nationals have a significantly enhanced potential for
41 political action compared to others. This is evident in the polemic language used, with references to
42 China's assumed 'retaliation' and 'escalation', especially since 2012. The authors do not take into
43 consideration that many student societies are formed on the basis of nationality, and engage in
44 political activities on European campuses, even in coordination with their respective embassies.
45 GPPi-MERICS imposes the authoritarian other lens that renders even inconsequential acts – for
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55 ⁹² Jennifer Hubbert, 'Ambiguous States: Confucius Institutes and Chinese Soft Power in the U.S. Classroom',
56 *Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (2014), pp. 329-349.

57 ⁹³ Benner et al., 'Authoritarian Advance', pp. 33-4.

58 ⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

59 ⁹⁵ Many of the examples are drawn from experiences in Australia, see *Ibid.*, pp. 36-7.

60 ⁹⁶ James To, 'Beijing's Policies for Managing Han and Ethnic-Minority Chinese Communities Abroad', *Journal of*
Current Chinese Affairs, Vol. 41, No. 4 (2012), p. 183-221; Ane Bislev, 'Student-to-Student Diplomacy: Chinese
International Students as a Soft-Power Tool', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (2017), p. 32.

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3 instance, Chinese students formally complaining about an invitation to a Falun Gong practitioner
4 and Human rights activist to give a talk at Durham⁹⁷ – as evidence of China’s authoritarian advance.
5 Under such an interpretative context, providing evidence of the actual influence and effectiveness of
6 these ‘tools’ becomes unimportant.
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9 Lastly, ‘othering’ is also applied in relation to European actors: governments, businesses, news
10 agencies, academic and research institutions, and individuals. As early as 2009, the first version of
11 the ‘China Audit’ ECFR reports categorised EU governments according to their China-policy
12 preferences,⁹⁸ while the recent GPPi-MERICS study identified ‘willing enablers’ within European
13 elites and opinion setters.⁹⁹ These references include justified criticism against populist politicians
14 who use China to legitimise their illiberal views, but they also target European newspapers and
15 agencies as vehicles of Chinese propaganda, accusing them of carrying content that is ‘prepared and
16 controlled by China’s party-state media’, thus ‘spread[ing] China’s concept of journalism’.¹⁰⁰ The
17 evidence provided is, once again, incoherent, including lists of European media carrying the
18 supplement ChinaWatch, and various media forums organised on a national basis. The authors
19 represent every instance of engagement as evidence of China’s instrumentalisation of European
20 media, disregarding their critical reporting on China’s domestic affairs.
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23 Going a step further, the AMO study, funded by the National Endowment for Democracy,
24 presents a ranking of domestic ‘opinion setters’ in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary,
25 including journalists, political scientists, economists, businessmen, business analysts, artists,
26 publicists, translators, and sinologists, according to their positive or negative attitudes towards
27 China.¹⁰¹ But whereas elected politicians and businessmen need to be scrutinised, the targeting of
28 non-political and non-business actors as pro-China opinion setters raises concerns about the
29 perceptions created, including potential damage to one’s professional reputation. This labelling, the
30 ultimate practice of ‘othering’ is a worrying development that we expect to see in a more intensified
31 form as Chinese FDI in Europe is increasingly discussed in security terms. Lastly, the GPPi-
32 MERICS’s continuous distinction between ‘independent’ and ‘dependent’ China expertise in Europe
33 creates the impression that sectors of the academic and research community on the continent
34 perform propaganda functions.¹⁰² Having neglected to provide any further justification for this claim
35 this repeated statement casts an unacceptable shadow of suspicion over the entire scholarly
36 community of Chinese Studies in Europe.
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39 Taken as a whole, the othering discourse on China’s institutional initiatives glues together
40 incidents of limited importance, disregarding both their actual (in)effectiveness and the resilience of
41 European democracy. Ultimately, there is no justification for such an alarmist tone. On the contrary,
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54 ⁹⁷ Benner et al., ‘Authoritarian Advance’, p. 33.

55 ⁹⁸ John Fox and François Godement, ‘A Power Audit of EU-China Relations’, European Council on Foreign
56 Relations, 2009, p. 4, https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR12_-_A_POWER_AUDIT_OF_EU-CHINA_RELATIONS.pdf.

57 ⁹⁹ Benner et al., ‘Authoritarian Advance’, pp. 3, 8.

58 ¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

59 ¹⁰¹ Ivana Karásková et al., ‘Central Europe for Sale: The Politics of China’s Influence,’ AMO, April 2018, p. 11,
60 https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/AMO_central-europe-for-sale-the-politics-of-chinese-influence.pdf.

¹⁰² Benner et al., ‘Authoritarian Advance’, pp. 3, 7, 39, 40.

we are concerned that if othering practices are adopted widely, they may fuel Sinophobic policies and social attitudes that will challenge the already repeatedly questioned liberal foundations of the EU and limit the debate on EU-China relations to a speculation regarding the motives of the involved parts. For the time being, the vast majority of think tanks examined are careful in this regard. However, the GPPi-MERICS and AMO cases demonstrate that the transition from fact to extreme discourse-based policy discussion is simple once the securitising prisms are applied. Indeed, considering the hardening political discourse of (mainly north-) European leaders in the last few years, it is not difficult to imagine that ‘othering’ will be used more extensively in efforts to securitise Chinese investment.

The Existential ‘Architrave’

The three pillars of the securitising discourse analysed in the previous pages politicise the assumed importance and function of Chinese FDI in Europe. Yet as the process of securitisation is a discursive one, not every politicised issue is automatically securitised through its construction as a threat to a referent object’s existence.¹⁰³ For instance, one could hardly find a more vexing situation for the EU than the planned exit of the United Kingdom. At a stroke, 15 per cent of its total GDP and 13 per cent of its population will be gone,¹⁰⁴ along with one of its strongest military forces. Yet, this loss has mainly resulted in manifestations of unity as Brussels basks in the glory of leading a successful negotiation with a politically weakened, divided, and increasingly repentant Britain. On the other hand, Chinese investment on the European continent at a time of crisis and austerity is systematically portrayed as an existential threat, even though it still only accounts for 0.9 per cent of total extra-EU stocks held by foreign investors.¹⁰⁵ This begs the question: why should Europe feel more threatened by Chinese investment? What is it about China’s presence in Europe that might endanger the foundations of the continent’s political, economic, and social structure?

A straightforward answer proposed by certain European think tanks is that China is engaged in an expansion of its political and economic model or is, at the very least, attempting to normalise it, thus challenging the prevalence of the liberal-democratic norms-based order, particularly when it has been weakened from within.¹⁰⁶ Essentially, having constructed Chinese investment as a politically important issue, certain think tanks attempt to take the last and most necessary step of their securitisation effort, namely, the elevation of Chinese economic presence to an existential danger. BWW explain that we do not need to observe the adoption of emergency measures to talk of securitisation, but only to demonstrate that a discourse on a suggested existential threat has ‘gain[ed] enough resonance for a platform to be made from which it is possible to legitimise emergency measures’ that would not otherwise have been contemplated or taken. For instance, we see a degree

¹⁰³ Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde, *Security*.

¹⁰⁴ Eurostat, ‘GDP and Main Components’, 2019. (Please ask authors to supplement the footnote, including website.)

¹⁰⁵ Eurostat, ‘Globalisation Patterns in EU Trade and Investment’, July 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Foreign_direct_investment_-_stocks.

¹⁰⁶ Yan Xuetong, ‘Chinese Values vs. Liberalism: What Ideology Will Shape the International Normative Order?’, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (2018), pp. 1-22.

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3 of congruence between the securitising discourse and pronouncements made recently by European
4 leaders, such as former German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, who appealed to the identical
5 themes of a China endangering Europe's economic position, internal cohesion, and identity.¹⁰⁷ This
6 platform, albeit distinct from the three pillars identified above, is the existential prism that rests upon
7 them, thus completing the discursive construct of China as a 'threat' to Europe.
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10 A successful securitisation move establishes a threat to the very existence of a referent object,
11 in our case, 'Europeanness'. We approach Europeanness as an emic term constructed in the
12 discursive space of the examined think tank reports and policy-makers' pronouncements. Although
13 fluid and open to interpretation, the notion of Europeanness under threat is distinct from the three
14 discursive pillars. Its core perspective is the EU as a normative superpower,¹⁰⁸ a crucial component
15 of European exceptionalism, and related perceptions of order within the continent and globally.
16 China, more than any other power, is seen as encroaching on areas where the EU has traditionally
17 seen itself as a leader, namely, rules and norms. These encompass elements of the Western liberal
18 order (market economics, transparency, separation of state and business), and some facets of
19 Europe's fading commitment to social democracy (welfare state, labour and environmental
20 protections). They sometimes overlap with values of democracy, human rights, and various political
21 liberties, while at other times they fit a realist conception of measurable power (soft, hard, sharp, or
22 smart). Thus, the architrave that the three pillars support securitises the EU's domestic order and its
23 global role as a normative superpower, suggesting they are existentially threatened by China's rise.
24 This constitutes an important escalation of the perceived challenge from China, which is portrayed to
25 threaten not only the EU's political unity but also what Europe stands for domestically and
26 internationally.
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29 Domestically, the threat is conceptualised by merging examples of Chinese companies doing
30 the bidding of their political masters and infiltrating European societies as unfair competitors,
31 challenging Europe's technological edge and leveraging corporate greed to serve political purposes.
32 The narrative of Europe's eroding influence vis-à-vis China is perhaps most visible in its peripheries,
33 from the austerity-ravaged countries of its South, the Eurosceptic governments of Central and
34 Eastern Europe, to the waiting room of the Western Balkans. Many reports suggest China is
35 capitalising on a power vacuum created post-2008 when the EU was in the midst of a debt crisis.
36 China is thus described as not following 'the EU model of market-based decision criteria',¹⁰⁹ as
37 'corrupt[ing] a free and open tendering process'¹¹⁰ and 'promoting its own model of infrastructure
38 construction'.¹¹¹ It is said to have engineered Greece's pivot towards it,¹¹² and encouraged Viktor
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53 ¹⁰⁷ Sigmar Gabriel, 'Europäische Union: Gabriel warnt Europäer vor Spaltung durch China', 2017,
54 <https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/international/europaeische-union-gabriel-warnt-europaeer-vor-spaltung-durch-china/20260368.html>.

55 ¹⁰⁸ Ian Manners, 'Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 40,
56 No. 2 (2002), pp. 235-58; Ian Manners, 'Normative Power Europe Reconsidered: Beyond the Crossroads', *Journal of*
57 *European Public Policy*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2006), pp. 182-99.

58 ¹⁰⁹ Lagazzi and Vít, 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly', p. 7.

59 ¹¹⁰ Pinxteren, 'China's Belt & Road Initiative', p. 3.

60 ¹¹¹ Michal Makocki, 'China's Road into Eastern Europe', Paris: Institute for Security Studies, 2017, p. 2,
https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief_4_China_Eastern_Europe_0.pdf.

Orbán's political agenda in Hungary through his 'sympathy for China's alternative illiberal-authoritarian model of governance',¹¹³ as well as providing no-strings-attached loans which undermine the EU agenda in Southeast Europe.¹¹⁴ Most of these cases are either opportunistic moves or examples of limited 'spill-over' effects of Chinese investment and the attendant business practices and incentives which they allegedly bring.

China's activity in Europe's 'peripheries' only gains a sense of urgency when combined with the global level of analysis. This enables the existential prism to present China as 'the bigger long-term challenge to Europe's values and interests',¹¹⁵ heading 'towards a systemic clash'¹¹⁶ with the EU. It is on the global stage that concerns over Chinese investment and influence blossom into a notion of China as a revisionist power positioning itself as a successor to the Western liberal-democratic paradigm. Again, the authors of the GPPi-MERICS report reach for the most dramatic expressions, leaving no doubt that Chinese leaders not only regard their political and economic order as superior but are actively promoting it.¹¹⁷ Moreover, this promotion is targeted at more 'susceptible' (eastern and southern) member states and their elites¹¹⁸ in order to compete with the EU¹¹⁹ or 'sponsor an alternative model'¹²⁰ that questions the liberal market economy model, as the first discursive pillar argues. Standing alongside is the discursive pillar of 'unity' connecting China's 'divide and rule tactics'¹²¹ with the survival of liberal values not just in Europe and its periphery, but globally. This sets China's grand strategy against a backdrop of a Europe set adrift by a world transitioning towards an illiberal future.¹²² Here, the role of the third discursive pillar, that of othering, is instrumental in cementing an idea of European exceptionalism threatened by enemies foreign and internal. And finally, by making Chinese presence essentially and intractably noxious to liberal values ('all areas of interaction with China are potentially problematic and deserve scrutiny'), the architrave of the existential prism designates what is meant to be at stake, namely the democratic values and liberalism as the basis of the EU project and of Europe's self-perceived contribution to world order.

Concluding Remarks

The structure is thus complete. In this securitising narrative, China's actions in Europe are wholly political, designed to sow dissent and discord and aided by a number of collaborators and sleeper agents. Yet as we have argued, the securitising discourse rests on rhetorical devices, de-contextualised cases, and a callous disregard for alternative, more convincing and falsifiable

¹¹² Godement and Vasselier, 'China at the Gates', p. 109.

¹¹³ Benner et al., 'Authoritarian Advance', p. 18.

¹¹⁴ Makocki. 'China's Road into Eastern Europe.' p. 2.

¹¹⁵ Benner et al., 'Authoritarian Advance', p. 6.

¹¹⁶ Godement and Vasselier 'China at the Gates', p. 11.

¹¹⁷ Benner et al., 'Authoritarian Advance', pp. 2, 7.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹¹⁹ Godement and Vasselier, 'China at the Gates', p. 68.

¹²⁰ Alice Ekman, 'Three Years of China's New Silk Roads', *IFRI*, February 2017, p. 21, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ekman_et_al_china_new_silk_roads_2017.pdf.

¹²¹ Godement and Vasselier, 'China at the Gates', pp. 33, 64, 65, 90.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 90.

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3 explanations which do not take CCP propaganda at face value. The resulting image of Chinese
4 companies, associations, and individuals as the long arms of the Chinese state is a distortion, and one
5 can easily identify many areas of overlap with the original version of the 1990s China Threat
6 scenario in the United States.
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9 What is missing in these reports is, first of all, a case-by-case examination of the deals, the
10 agency and the degree of involvement of different actors, the behaviour of Chinese companies
11 within existing regulatory frameworks, and a contextualisation through comparison with companies
12 from other third countries. This would include fine-grain academic research on Chinese-financed
13 projects, analysing their actual impact, and assessing their individual and collective implications
14 without recourse to disparaging comparisons to so-called 'banana republics'.¹²³ An analytical
15 approach that gives precedence to facts over perceptions would also contribute to a calmer
16 assessment of the broader issues of EU-China trade reciprocity and market access which need to be
17 resolved. In this regard, the 'China Threat' frame advocated by many think tanks, journalists, and
18 politician risks transforming these issues into a zero-sum game, thereby reducing the political space
19 for negotiation and compromise.
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22 Another common problem in these reports is that think tanks widely disregard areas of
23 immediate concern to European citizens, such as the impact of Chinese SOEs on industrial relations,
24 environmental standards, and local economies and societies. This bottom-up problematisation is
25 missing in the top-down securitising narrative, possibly because the negative impact of Chinese
26 investment in these areas is sometimes in accord with the dominant developmental paradigm of the
27 EU and its member states. In addition, a more careful line of analysis would need to consider how
28 current and prospective EU member states can best benefit from the availability of Chinese
29 investment and financing at a time when austerity and economic stagnation put the European project
30 in question. In this regard, the EU investment screening mechanism must not prioritise the interests
31 of high-tech sectors of the wealthy North over the labour-intensive industries of economically weak
32 countries, or risk further discord among member-states.
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35 Lastly, the securitising discourse ultimately reveals an underlying hegemonic assumption that a
36 'core' of one or two major European powers will decide the EU's terms of engagement with China,
37 according to their own economic interests and domestic political mood changes. This assumption
38 runs the risk of entrenching divisions among EU states on an issue that does not represent a threat to
39 European unity. In response, a balanced analysis of the challenges and opportunities that Chinese
40 investment brings needs to emphasise the EU's tested ability to synthesise different views and
41 interests, which is a fundamental promise to its members.
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¹²³ Pinxteren, 'China's Belt & Road Initiative', p. 1.