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Strategic Narrative Divergence

The Evolving Narratives of the EU and China on Global Security amid the Ukraine War

This article examines how the Russia–Ukraine conflict has influenced the strategic narratives of the European Union and China, transforming their discursive approaches to global security and international order. Drawing on constructivist theoretical framework, the study analyses official statements, policy documents, and diplomatic communications from 2022 through 2024 to demonstrate how both actors have recalibrated their narratives in response to the changing geopolitical landscape. The findings reveal that while the EU has shifted towards a more securitised narrative framework, emphasising territorial integrity and collective defence, China has maintained strategic ambiguity while promoting alternative governance paradigms. The analysis identifies three key developments: the intensification of narrative divergence between the EU and China, structural changes in their diplomatic alignments, and the emergence of competing visions for global governance. These evolving narratives have significant implications for international relations, suggesting an acceleration of bloc politics, technological decoupling, and competing economic frameworks. The study also highlights a fundamental tension between the EU’s traditional self-conception as a normative power and contemporary geopolitical realities, particularly as it adapts to new security imperatives while maintaining its commitment to democratic principles. These findings contribute to our understanding of how strategic narratives not only reflect but actively constitute international relations and influence the evolution of global order in an increasingly multipolar world.

Keywords: European Union, China, strategic narratives, Russia–Ukraine conflict, international order, security policy

Introduction

The BRICS summit in late October 2024 marked a historic moment as Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia, and Iran joined the original members Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa for their first meeting as an expanded group. During this extensively attended conference, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin advocated for what they termed a “more equitable world order” directly challenging U.S.-led global leadership.

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The summit, drawing leaders and representatives from 36 nations, exemplifies how strategic narratives shape global political dynamics and influence the evolution of the international order.

Strategic narratives serve as pivotal mechanisms through which global actors such as the European Union and China convey their positions within an increasingly multipolar international landscape. These narratives transcend mere expressive discourse; they embody foundational structures through which states exert influence, assert legitimacy, and shape international relations. The theoretical importance of strategic narratives is found in their dual roles: they reflect the existing power dynamics while also functioning as tools for political actors to extend their influence, change the discursive environment or even reshape the international order.

This article explores the approaches adopted by the European Union and the People's Republic of China in crafting and shaping their individual narratives in light of the Russia–Ukraine conflict. The study suggests three interrelated hypotheses:

Initially, the Russia–Ukraine conflict has acted as a catalyst for the divergence observed in the strategic narratives of the EU and China, measurable through their official statements, policy documents, and diplomatic communications, with the EU shifting towards a more securitised narrative framework, whereas China continues to uphold strategic ambiguity.

Furthermore, these narrative divergences reflect structural changes within the international system, as exemplified by the EU's increasing alignment with democratic allies and China's promotion of alternative governance frameworks.

The widening narrative divide between the EU and China concerning critical issues – spanning economic security to global governance – will likely give rise to intensified strategic rivalry between these entities in their efforts to influence the future international framework, which can be observed through economic, technological, and diplomatic initiatives by both powers.

The study looks into the effects of these changing narratives on future patterns in international relations and global collaboration, particularly as both entities recalibrate their strategies in reaction to a more volatile global landscape – the EU through the bolstering of strategic autonomy and China through its support for alternative frameworks of global governance.

Theoretical framework

The changing narratives surrounding the European Union and China in international relations, especially in light of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, require a coherent theoretical framework to effectively analyse their evolving strategic positions. This study employs constructivism as its primary theoretical lens, offering a robust foundation for understanding how narratives shape and reflect international relations.

Constructivism provides an ideal framework for examining strategic narratives, as it emphasises the socially constructed nature of international politics and the pivotal



role of ideas, norms, and identities in shaping state behaviour.² Unlike materialist theories that focus primarily on power distribution and tangible resources, constructivism highlights how states' identities and interests are formed through social interaction and shared understandings. This theoretical approach is particularly valuable for analysing how the EU and China actively reconstruct their identities and articulate their interests through narrative frameworks in response to the shifting global landscape created by the Ukraine conflict.

Through a constructivist lens, strategic narratives can be understood as more than mere rhetoric; they represent fundamental mechanisms through which states establish their identities, legitimise their actions, and attempt to shape the international order. As Wendt famously argued, "anarchy is what states make of it", highlighting how shared meanings and interpretations, rather than material structures alone, determine international relations. Similarly, strategic narratives reflect how states make their position in the international system by constructing particular understandings of world order.

The EU's narrative shift from a predominantly normative power to a more security-focused actor illustrates how identities are not fixed but continually reconstructed through discourse and practice. The EU's increasing emphasis on collective defence and strategic autonomy represents not merely a tactical adjustment but a significant reconstruction of its identity in response to perceived threats. Similarly, China's careful narrative balancing between non-interventionism and global leadership ambitions demonstrates how states navigate complex identity constructions through strategic narrative deployment.

Strategic narratives also serve as windows into states' normative frameworks and how they conceptualise the international order. The EU's persistent emphasis on a rules-based international order with democratic principles at its core reflects its constructed identity as a normative power, even as it adapts to new security imperatives. Conversely, China's promotion of alternative governance frameworks and emphasis on "indivisible security" reveals its different normative orientation and self-perception as a leader of the developing world challenging Western hegemony.

While this study primarily employs constructivism, it acknowledges that some insights from role theory³ regarding how states conceptualise their positions and responsibilities in the international system can complement this approach. The constructivist framework, however, remains the primary analytical lens, providing coherence and focus to the examination of how narratives shape international relations in the context of the Ukraine conflict.

Through this constructivist approach, the study examines how the strategic narratives of the EU and China not only reflect their identities and interests but also function as tools through which these actors attempt to influence the evolution of the international order in an increasingly multipolar world.

² WENDT 1992.

³ While this study primarily employs constructivism as its theoretical framework, it acknowledges that role theory also offers valuable insights into state behaviour, highlighting the importance of identity, self-perception, and societal expectations in determining foreign policy decisions (HARNISCH et al. 2011). However, to maintain theoretical coherence and respond to methodological considerations, constructivism remains the sole theoretical lens for this analysis.



Methodology and scope

This study employs qualitative discourse analysis to examine the strategic narratives developed by the European Union and China from 2022 until the end of 2024. This specific timeframe captures the critical first two and a half years of the Russia–Ukraine conflict, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of how both actors' narratives evolved in response to this significant geopolitical challenge while providing a clear temporal boundary. The endpoint serves as a natural conclusion for this analysis, as the international system entered a new phase of realignment following this period, marked by leadership transitions in key global powers and shifting international priorities.

The study analyses official statements, policy documents, strategic communications, and diplomatic declarations from both the EU and China. Primary sources include EU documents (such as the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, European Council conclusions, and the EU Economic Security Strategy), speeches by EU leaders and officials, China's position papers on Ukraine and global security, statements from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and addresses by the Chinese leadership at international forums such as BRICS summits.

A significant limitation of this study is the absence of Chinese-language academic sources and internal policy discussions. While the research draws on official Chinese government documents and statements available in English or official translations, it does not incorporate the body of scholarship and debate occurring within Chinese academic and policy circles in their original language. This limitation is acknowledged as constraining the study's ability to fully capture the nuances and complexities of Chinese narrative development, particularly in terms of how these narratives are constructed and debated domestically before being projected internationally.

The analysis is structured around key thematic areas: (a) security paradigms and interpretations of the Ukraine conflict, (b) economic security and interdependence, (c) international governance models, (d) human rights and democracy, (e) geopolitical alignments, (f) energy security, and (g) the Taiwan question. The selection of these specific narrative themes was determined through a preliminary content analysis of major policy documents from both actors during the study period, which identified these as recurring focal points of narrative divergence and contestation. These themes represent areas where both the EU and China have invested significant discursive effort to shape international understanding and where their narrative positions have undergone notable development or transformation in response to the Ukraine conflict. Furthermore, these themes were selected for their strategic significance in the broader context of EU–China relations, representing domains where narrative positioning has direct implications for policy formulation and diplomatic engagement.

This thematic approach allows for a structured comparative analysis of how narrative positions have evolved, identifying patterns of convergence and divergence between the EU and China across multiple dimensions of international relations. Rather than attempting to catalogue all narrative elements comprehensively, the study focuses on identifying significant shifts in narrative positioning and examining how these reflect deeper changes in each actor's strategic orientation and self-understanding within the international system.



A brief historical overview of EU–China relations

The evolution of EU–China relations has been characterised by notable historical milestones that reflect the intricacies and unpredictability inherent in global diplomacy. The formal establishment of diplomatic ties between China and the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1975 triggered a sequence of key accords that would influence their economic interactions. The signing of the first trade agreement in 1978, followed by the China – EC Trade and Cooperation Agreement in 1985, laid the groundwork for a multifaceted bilateral relationship. The aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests engendered a detrimental effect on diplomatic ties, prompted the imposition of sanctions and necessitated a reassessment of diplomatic engagement approaches. During the mid-1990s, the EU sought to rejuvenate dialogue through a new framework, culminating in the first EU–China Summit convened in London in 1998. The new millennium brought forth the dawn of a strategic partnership age, highlighted by the establishment of a comprehensive partnership in 2003 and the launch of negotiations for a partnership and cooperation agreement in 2007. The endorsement of the EU–China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation in 2013 further solidified the partnership, which aimed to enhance collaboration across various sectors. Subsequent developments post-2016 have introduced novel challenges, as the EU articulated a strategy emphasising reciprocity and fair competition⁴ and categorised China as a “systemic rival” in certain domains.⁵ The Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), provisionally concluded in 2020, faced significant hurdles, including a ratification deadlock in 2021 attributed to heightened political tensions. The geopolitical framework has further transformed in light of external occurrences, such as the Russia–Ukraine conflict, which has considerably affected EU–China relations, alongside the enduring ramifications of global supply chain disruptions and the Covid–19 pandemic. In 2023, the EU’s Conclusions on China⁶ signify a profound reassessment of its position, accentuating the necessity for a nuanced strategy⁷ to navigate the complexities of the bilateral relationship, particularly in light of recent tensions and the looming threat of a trade war, with the EU placing a high priority on strengthening resilience and reducing vulnerabilities.

This historical setting highlights the complex dynamics of cooperation and rivalry that persistently characterise EU–China ties in an increasingly interconnected world.

An overview of identity and system narratives in international relations: Influencing beliefs and behaviours

The constructs of identity and system narratives are pivotal in shaping the dynamics of international relations, providing critical insights into the self-perceptions of states,

⁴ European Commission 2016.

⁵ European Commission 2019.

⁶ European Council 2023.

⁷ BRINZA et al. 2024.



their perceptions of others, and their conceptualisations of the global order. These narratives play a substantial role in determining state behaviour and interactions within the international sphere. Identity narratives encapsulate the conceptual frameworks that states possess regarding their own identities and those of other entities.⁸ The European Union frequently characterises itself as a normative power⁹ championing principles such as democracy and human rights. In contrast, China positions itself as a peaceful emerging power and a leader of the developing world. Such self-perceptions are deeply rooted in historical contexts and core values. The identity of the European Union is largely influenced by its historical accomplishments in fostering peace through integration, whereas China's narrative emphasises principles of sovereignty and non-interference, reflecting its historical experiences. The aspect of other-perception is a significant factor, as China may interpret the EU as a potential ally in counterbalancing U.S. hegemony, conversely, the EU increasingly regards China as an economic competitor and systemic rival. System narratives represent comprehensive frameworks concerning the attributes and operational modalities of the international system. The EU generally advocates for a rules-based liberal international order, while China promotes an alternative vision of a "community of shared future for mankind". This complex Chinese foreign policy narrative positions China as a partner to developing nations, representing their interests in the international scene while simultaneously reaffirming its stature as a global leader.¹⁰

These narratives significantly shape governments' perceptions regarding acceptable behaviours within international relations as well as their interpretations of power relations. The EU supports multilateralism, whereas China endorses a multipolar international order. Both entities articulate global challenges in divergent manners, especially concerning democratic principles or the architecture of global governance. The interplay between identity and system narratives is both complex and dynamic. The narrative surrounding a state's identity often informs its perspective on the preferred international system, while system narratives can influence how states see their own roles and responsibilities, as well as those of others. The EU's characterisation as a normative power reinforces its dedication to a rules-based international order, whereas China's vision of a multipolar world underscores its self-perception as a major, non-hegemonic power. Divergent narratives may engender tension and discord within international relations, with the differences between EU and Chinese narratives potentially resulting in misconceptions and conflicts.¹¹

Thematic overview and structure

The following sections examine seven key domains where EU and Chinese strategic narratives have evolved significantly in response to the Ukraine conflict. These thematic areas – security paradigms, framing of the conflict, economic security, international

⁸ LEBOW 2016.

⁹ EEAS 2016; GÓRA 2023.

¹⁰ NATHAN–ZHANG 2022.

¹¹ KIRCHNER 2015.



governance, human rights and democracy, geopolitical reconfiguration, and energy security – represent critical sites of narrative contestation and divergence. Each was selected based on their prominence in official communications and their strategic significance in shaping the broader EU–China relationship during the study period.

This thematic approach allows for systematic comparison of narrative positions across domains that are central to both actors' strategic interests. While these narrative domains are analysed separately, they should be understood as interconnected elements within broader strategic frameworks. For instance, narratives about economic security directly influence approaches to international governance, while positions on human rights and democracy shape geopolitical alignments.

Each thematic section aims to follow a consistent analytical structure: first establishing the actors' baseline narrative positions, then identifying key shifts following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, analysing points of convergence and divergence, and finally assessing the implications of these narrative developments for EU–China relations. Through this structured comparison, patterns emerge that reveal fundamental differences in how the EU and China conceptualise global order, security, and their own roles within the international system.

The sequence of thematic sections progresses from direct engagement with the Ukraine conflict (security paradigms and conflict framing) to broader structural issues (economic security and international governance) and finally to underlying value systems and strategic orientations (human rights, geopolitical configurations, and specialised security domains). This organisation reflects how narrative contestation has evolved from immediate crisis response to more fundamental questions about the future international order.

The analysis will demonstrate how narrative divergences between the EU and China reflect not merely differing interests but fundamentally distinct worldviews, identity conceptions, and visions for global governance – differences that have been amplified and clarified by the strategic challenges posed by the Ukraine conflict.

Core narrative positions

Evolving security paradigms: EU–China narrative interplay in light of the Russia–Ukraine conflict

Narratives are intrinsically dynamic; they transform in reaction to both domestic and international circumstances. The EU–China narrative dynamics are significantly influenced by the United States as a key strategic actor, along with major global incidents like the Russian–Ukrainian conflict.

As outlined in the methodology section, this analysis employs qualitative discourse analysis to examine official statements, policy documents, and diplomatic communications from both the EU and China. Through systematic examination of these primary sources, we can trace how both actors have recalibrated their security narratives in response to the changing geopolitical landscape created by the Ukraine conflict.



The Russia–Ukraine conflict has significantly influenced the narrative frameworks utilised by both the European Union and China, especially concerning global security. Analysis of important policy documents and official declarations, such as China’s Position Paper on Ukraine,¹² the EU’s Strategic Compass,¹³ and other diplomatic correspondence from both parties, provides evidence for these narratives.

This conflict has revealed key intersections where their narratives overlap, diverge, and at certain moments, align in unexpected fashions. The EU emphasises the principles of territorial integrity, sovereignty, and a rules-based international order within its framework of global security, whereas China promotes the notion of “indivisible security” and expresses opposition to the emergence of military alliances, implicitly referencing NATO. The conflict has catalysed a transformation in the EU’s narrative, shifting from a historical emphasis on soft power towards a more pronounced focus on security, thereby reflecting newly recognised geopolitical realities. Conversely, China’s narrative has necessitated a delicate equilibrium between its strategic partnership with Russia and its longstanding principles of non-interference and respect for territorial integrity. Economic security has emerged as a critical theme in both discourses; the EU accentuates the role of sanctions as a tool for modifying state behaviour, while China underscores the disruptive ramifications of such measures on global economic stability. The narratives concerning energy security exhibit distinct priorities, with the EU focusing on diminishing reliance on Russian energy sources and accelerating transitions to renewable energy, whereas China advocates for diversification of energy sources while concurrently fostering its relationship with Russia. In multilateral contexts, the EU underscores the importance of collective action through established international institutions, while China champions improvements to global governance frameworks to more effectively accommodate diverse national interests. The humanitarian dimension of the conflict has led to differing narrative approaches, with the EU focusing on the defence of human rights and civilian protection, whereas China pushes for peace while upholding its non-interference policy.

Both entities have intensified their narrative contestation and are actively disseminating their respective viewpoints on global development and governance. Nevertheless, selective collaboration persists alongside this rivalry, particularly in areas such as climate change. The projection of values within narrative exchanges has also been amplified as a consequence of the conflict, with China enhancing its endorsement of alternative governance frameworks, and the EU increasingly articulating its commitment to democratic principles and human rights.

Facilitating cooperation on pressing global challenges while addressing their fundamental differences remains a significant challenge as the EU and China navigate these divergences. In the continually evolving global political landscape, it is imperative to grasp these narrative dynamics in order to interpret their actions, foresee potential sources of tension, and identify prospects for dialogue and collaboration.

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2023a.

¹³ Council of the European Union 2022.



The EU's evolving security narrative

The transformation of the narrative within the European Union is evident in a multitude of interconnected themes, which include an enhanced emphasis on territorial integrity and sovereignty, a renewed dedication to collective security and Western unity, an expanded discourse regarding strategic autonomy and the mitigation of dependencies, as well as a growing skepticism concerning China's role as a responsible participant in the global sphere.

The EU has markedly intensified its attention to matters of territorial integrity and sovereignty, particularly in light of Russia's incursion into Ukraine. The conclusions adopted by the European Council on 24 February 2022¹⁴ unequivocally condemned Russia's military incursion as a breach of international law and the fundamental principles enshrined in the United Nations Charter.

This enhanced focus on territorial integrity has been accompanied by a strengthened dedication to collective security and transatlantic collaboration. The EU's Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, released in March 2022, explicitly acknowledged that the return of war in Europe has hindered the EU's ability to pursue its strategic vision and protect its interests, thereby advocated for increased investment in security and defence capabilities to strengthen the EU's stature as a political and security entity.

Concurrently, the EU has dedicated greater attention to the pursuit of strategic autonomy and the alleviation of critical dependencies, particularly concerning energy supplies from Russia. This shift was explicitly articulated in President von der Leyen's 2022 State of the Union Address,¹⁵ and was further substantiated by the EU's Economic Security Strategy.¹⁶ The latter aimed to enhance the EU's economic security by addressing vulnerabilities within essential sectors.

The changes in narrative have coincided with an increasing skepticism surrounding China's status as a responsible global actor. This process was initiated by the 2019 EU–China Strategic Outlook, which characterised China as a partner in cooperation, a partner in negotiation, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival simultaneously. This skepticism has intensified, as evidenced by the European Parliament's resolution in September 2021 concerning EU–China relations, which articulated substantial concerns regarding China's "human rights violations".

These interconnected themes collectively illustrate a significant evolution in the EU's narrative concerning global challenges, signifying a more assertive and security-centric posture in its international engagements. The crisis in Ukraine has served as a catalyst, accelerating and amplifying these narrative shifts and profoundly transforming the EU's strategic approach in global affairs and its interactions with major global powers.

¹⁴ European Council 2022.

¹⁵ VON DER LEYEN 2022.

¹⁶ European Commission – EU High Representative 2023.



China's strategic ambiguity

China's recalibration of its narrative in response to the Ukraine crisis illustrates a complex interplay of diplomatic positioning alongside strategic objectives. Since the onset of the conflict, China has consistently maintained its purportedly neutral stance while championing a peaceful resolution to the situation. This was evident in the remarks of the Foreign Ministry Spokesperson the day after the Russian invasion,¹⁷ which meticulously reconciled respect for legitimate security concerns with adherence to the principles enshrined in the UN Charter.

China has proactively promoted its Global Security Initiative (GSI) as a distinctive reaction to global security challenges.¹⁸ Introduced by Xi Jinping at the 2022 Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference, the GSI represents China's strategic endeavour to establish its own framework for addressing international security. This initiative exemplifies China's aspiration to shape global security discourse while steadfastly upholding its declared neutrality. Indeed, this evolution reflects a broader tension in China's identity narrative balancing increased global activism with its traditional "peaceful" great power image¹⁹ and non-interference principle.

Throughout the conflict, China has promoted a sophisticated narrative that balances the recognition of territorial sovereignty with the maintenance of its strategic partnership with Russia. This intricate position was articulated in China's position paper published on 24 February 2023.²⁰ The document simultaneously reaffirmed the importance of territorial integrity while addressing Russian concerns regarding the development of military blocs, thereby demonstrating China's meticulous diplomatic manoeuvring.

China's self-identified role as a mediator, in conjunction with its so-called "pro-Russian neutrality", further illustrates this complex narrative adjustment. The statements made by China's special diplomatic envoy for Euroasian affairs underscore that China has consistently advocated for peace negotiations while notably abstaining from overt criticism of Russia.²¹ This calculated strategy embodies China's broader policy of managing the geopolitical repercussions of the Ukraine crisis while safeguarding its strategic interests and international relationships.

Divergence in the framing of the conflict

The divergence in the representation of the Ukraine conflict by the European Union and China underscores fundamentally divergent paradigms regarding international relations and global governance. Drawing on our methodological approach of qualitative discourse analysis, this comparative examination of key policy documents and statements

¹⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022.

¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2023.

¹⁹ SCIORATI 2023.

²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2023a.

²¹ XIE 2024.



reveals not only different policy positions but fundamentally distinct constructions of international reality.

The EU has consistently maintained a clear narrative of aggressor versus defender, repeatedly underscoring the paramount importance of a rules-based international order. The Conclusions of the European Council dated 24 February 2022 categorically denounced Russia's "unprovoked and unjustified military aggression" against Ukraine, while the EU's High Representative, Josep Borrell articulated that the invasion represents not only a profound violation of international law but also an infringement upon the foundational values of human coexistence.²²

In stark contrast, China has adopted a markedly different narrative, characterised by deliberate ambiguity and an emphasis on historical complexities alongside the security concerns of all involved parties. The statements issued by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson clearly encapsulated this perspective, accentuating the "complex historical context" associated with Ukraine and advocating for restraint from all stakeholders.²³ China's Position Paper on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis exemplifies this intricate stance, asserting the importance of territorial integrity while acknowledging what it delineates as the legitimate security interests of all nations.

This fundamental divergence in framing not only reflects distinct geopolitical positions and interests but also disparate conceptions of international relations and global governance. The EU positions itself as an advocate for a rules-based international order with explicit normative standards, whereas China advances a more adaptable approach that emphasises historical context and collective security concerns, thereby illuminating the profound disparities in the understanding and interpretation of international conflicts by these global actors.

Structural and economic dimensions

Economic security

The economic security narratives articulated by the European Union and China reveal fundamentally different approaches in the management of global economic interactions and associated risks. The EU has markedly intensified its focus on economic security, particularly in relation to critical sectors and the diversification of supply chains. The European Commission's Communication regarding the EU Economic Security Strategy distinctly underscored this development, explicitly aiming to alleviate risks stemming from economic dependencies while concurrently upholding an open and competitive economic environment. Commission President von der Leyen reaffirmed this position during her address to the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS), emphasising the imperative to "de-risk" engagements with China by addressing vulnerabilities and dependencies present within supply chains.²⁴

²² European Commission Statement by HR/VP Borrell 2022.

²³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022.

²⁴ European Commission 2023.



In contrast, China has cultivated a narrative centred on economic stability, while simultaneously cautioning against what it describes as “bloc confrontation”. This viewpoint was reflected in the comments made by various Chinese officials, who promoted the tenets of market economics and fair competition, in addition to President Xi Jinping’s discourse at the BRICS Summit, which emphasised motifs of unity and win-win cooperation.²⁵ China’s discourse consistently advocates for the preservation of global economic integration while contesting what it identifies as efforts towards decoupling or the establishment of economic blocs.

The EU’s accelerated deliberations concerning ‘de-risking’, especially with respect to China, signify a notable advancement within its economic security discourse. In her address to the European Parliament and the MERICS, von der Leyen was keen to stress that this strategy does not intend to decouple from China, but rather to manage risks through the diversification of supply chains and the alleviation of critical dependencies. This nuanced position illustrates the EU’s efforts to reconcile concerns regarding economic security with the maintenance of beneficial economic partnerships.

These differing narratives highlight the intricate dynamics inherent in contemporary global economic relations, wherein issues of economic security and strategic autonomy increasingly overlap with established trade and investment goals. The contrast between the EU’s risk-management paradigm and China’s focus on economic stability emphasises the fundamental challenges related to harmonising differing viewpoints on global economic governance.

International governance

The narratives surrounding global governance clarify the differing frameworks adopted by the European Union and China, while concurrently emphasising their mutual understanding of the growing importance of the Global South. The EU has consistently highlighted the effectiveness of sanctions imposed by Western powers and the necessity of international unity in addressing global challenges. Commission President von der Leyen’s 2022 State of the Union address effectively articulated the principles of European resilience and cohesion in the face of Russian aggression. Former High Representative Borrell reaffirmed this sentiment by accentuating the enduring strength of Western unity and transatlantic collaboration one year into the conflict in Ukraine.

In contrast, China has persistently contested the justness and effectiveness of the current global governance frameworks. Foreign Minister Wang Yi stressed in several speeches China’s advocacy for a governance system that is more just and representative, while President Xi Jinping’s address at the Johannesburg BRICS Summit highlighted the imperative of cooperative efforts in maintaining global peace and stability. This narrative consistently contests the existing international order while endorsing reforms that would elevate the representation of emerging nations.

²⁵ The National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference 2023.



Both the EU and China have acknowledged the strategic significance of the Global South in influencing global narratives, resulting in intensified engagement initiatives from both entities. The EU's Global Gateway initiative, introduced by von der Leyen with a substantial financial commitment, represents a significant effort to strengthen relations with developing regions. China's diplomatic initiatives, exemplified by the introduction of the Global Development and Security Initiatives, demonstrate its commitment to offering alternative paradigms for growth and security within the Global South.

The convergence of interests pertaining to the Global South, in conjunction with varying perspectives on global governance, exemplifies the intricate dynamics that characterise modern international relations. The EU advocates for the efficacy of multilateral initiatives led by Western powers, whereas China calls for comprehensive reforms to the existing governance frameworks, with both entities competing for influence among emerging nations.

Energy security

Consistent with our methodological approach of qualitative discourse analysis, the examination of energy security narratives reveals how both the European Union and China construct distinct meanings of energy independence, interdependence, and transition through their official communications.

The contrasting narratives surrounding energy security articulated by the European Union and China reveal their distinct positions and priorities within the international energy landscape. The EU has markedly intensified its focus on attaining energy independence and promoting its green transition, particularly as a response to the energy crisis provoked by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This transformation was originally prompted by the declaration of the European Green Deal in December 2019, which recognised environmental transformation as a vital component of its growth strategy. The urgency of this transition was significantly accelerated by geopolitical factors, culminating in the REPowerEU Plan launched in May 2022, which explicitly aimed to rapidly reduce dependence on Russian fossil fuels while fostering the integration of clean energy technologies. The firm position articulated by the European Council in relation to Russia's weaponisation of energy supplies further highlighted the EU's resolve to ensure the safety of its population and enterprises via coordinated initiatives.

In contrast, China has consistently underscored the importance of global energy stability, while concurrently warning against disruptions to established supply chains. This viewpoint was explicitly articulated in China's White Paper entitled *Energy in China's New Era*, which accentuated the necessity for international collaboration in "maintaining energy market stability, and safeguarding common energy security".²⁶ President Xi Jinping's remarks at the 4th Eastern Economic Forum further accentuated China's clear preference towards dialogue and regional cooperation in addressing energy-related challenges.²⁷

²⁶ Ministry of Ecology and Environment of the People's Republic of China 2020.

²⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2018.



These divergent narratives reflect the differing positions held by the two entities within the international energy landscape. The EU, characterised as a principal energy importer, prioritises the mitigation of external vulnerabilities and the acceleration of its green transition, whereas China, recognised as both a principal energy consumer and a pivotal actor in global supply chains, advocates for stability and international collaboration in energy governance. This divergence exemplifies how energy security concerns has become increasingly intertwined with broader geopolitical and economic considerations, thereby shaping the strategies of both parties in confronting global energy challenges.

Normative contestation and geopolitical positioning

Human rights and democracy

Narratives surrounding human rights and democracy elucidate significant divergences between the European Union's and China's conceptualisations of the interplay among governance, security, and development. The European Union has consistently underscored a narrative that intrinsically links security with democratic principles and the protection of human rights. The Strategic Agenda of the European Council for the period 2019–2024 distinctly articulates a dedication to the advancement of democracy and human rights alongside efforts aimed at fostering global peace and stability. High Representative Borrell reiterated this stance during the Annual Conference of EU Ambassadors, acknowledging the dual threats to liberal democracy emanating from external authoritarian regimes and internal populist movements.²⁸

In contrast, China advocates for the notion that human rights are intrinsically linked to cultural contexts, thereby highlighting the synergistic relationship between individual and collective rights, while underscoring the obligations of individuals towards their communities,²⁹ and asserts a discourse that regards economic advancement as the fundamental catalyst for social stability,³⁰ concurrently cautioning against perceived ideological rifts.

This perspective was unequivocally articulated in China's Democracy White Paper, which categorically rejected the notion of a universal democratic model and advocated for the recognition of diverse political systems.³¹ Foreign Minister Wang Yi's remarks at the Global Democracy Forum further reinforced this position, promoting mutual respect for varied developmental pathways while explicitly dismissing what China considers to be artificial distinctions between democratic and authoritarian regimes, as "countries have different ways to achieve democracy".³²

These divergent narratives exemplify profound philosophical and practical disparities in the governance and developmental methodologies of these global entities.

²⁸ EEAS 2022.

²⁹ YANG 2021.

³⁰ KRIVOKHIZH–SOBOLEVA 2023.

³¹ The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2021.

³² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2021.



The European Union emphasises democratic values and human rights as fundamental components for ensuring security and stability within a rules-based international framework, whereas China endorses a development-first paradigm that prioritises economic growth and stability over the adoption of Western-style democratic institutions. This fundamental divergence in perspective exacerbates the persistent challenges within the EU–China relationship and significantly influences their competing visions for global governance.

Geopolitical reconfiguration

Recent geopolitical realignments have unveiled significant transformations in the diplomatic discourses of both the European Union and the People's Republic of China. The EU has demonstrably forged closer ties with the United States and other democratic allies in its narrative construction, a trajectory that was initially delineated in the 2016 EU Global Strategy and has since been reinforced. This document accentuated the imperative of cohesion and underscored the importance of the transatlantic alliance through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The 2022 Strategic Compass further solidified this stance, unequivocally acknowledging Russia's aggression towards Ukraine as a breach of international law and reaffirming the United States as a resolute and reliable ally in matters of security and defence.

The 2021 EU–U.S. Summit Statement distinctly articulated this alignment with democratic counterparts, advocating for a renewed transatlantic partnership.³³ Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's 2022 State of the Union Address conceptualised contemporary global challenges as a fundamental conflict between autocracy and democracy, underscoring the EU's special ideological connection with democratic partners.

Conversely, China has adopted a stance of strategic ambiguity while progressively articulating its dissent regarding what it identifies as Western-centric frameworks. Foreign Minister Wang Yi's address at the 2021 Munich Security Conference explicitly articulated China's opposition to what it characterises as “bloc confrontation”, while advocating for dialogue as a preferable alternative to conflict.³⁴ President Xi Jinping's address at the BRICS Summit further clarified this perspective, cautioning against the proliferation of military alliances and what China perceives as coercive bloc politics.³⁵

This divergence in geopolitical narratives reflects profound transformations within the international system. The EU is increasingly aligning itself within a wider alliance of democratic states, while China promotes a multipolar global order and challenges what it perceives as Western hegemonic tendencies. Under Xi Jinping's leadership since 2012, China's “major country diplomacy”³⁶ has combined new concepts (China Dream, Asia Dream), policies (comprehensive diplomacy and security), institutions and initiatives

³³ EU–US Summit – Statement 2021.

³⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2021a.

³⁵ The National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference 2023.

³⁶ SMITH 2021.



(Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Belt and Road Initiative) to create a “community of shared destiny” that aims to reshape both regional and global order through these new governance ideas, norms and economic ties.³⁷ While initiatives may challenge existing global governance norms, certain academics contend that these challenges, especially in the case of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), are often inadvertent and arise predominantly from execution issues rather than intentional design, highlighting that the normative framework of BRI is intrinsically pro-market and pluralistic, rather than offering a systematic substitute for the current liberal framework.³⁸

These evolving positions illustrate the increasing intricacy of international relations, as both the EU and China endeavour to influence the developing global order in accordance with their distinct visions and goals.

Taiwan: Sovereignty versus regional security

The Taiwan issue has become a prominent source of friction within EU–China relations, as the European Union conveys heightened concerns regarding possible parallels with the war in Ukraine, consequently influencing discussions related to Asian regional security. The resolution passed by the European Parliament in September 2021 expressed “grave concern” regarding the military manoeuvres and coercive tactics employed by China towards Taiwan,³⁹ while the EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific endeavoured to balance support for Taiwan’s global engagement with adherence to the One China Policy.⁴⁰ The response from High Representative Borrell to Nancy Pelosi’s visit further illustrated the EU’s balanced approach, promoting a call for tranquility while simultaneously affirming the legitimacy of international legislative visits.

For China, the Taiwan issue represents a fundamental and non-negotiable core interest, which is essential to its national sovereignty and territorial integrity. This position has been consistently and emphatically articulated across various diplomatic platforms. The statements from the Foreign Ministry pertaining to international relations with Taiwan have decisively dismissed what China views as external interference, while the 2022 White Paper on the Taiwan Question explicitly reinforced Taiwan’s classification as an integral part of China.⁴¹ President Xi Jinping’s address during the 20th Party Congress underscored the critical importance that China ascribes to this issue, asserting that although peaceful reunification is preferred, China retains the prerogative to employ “all measures necessary”⁴² – a definitive indication of the issue’s paramount significance within Chinese policy.

This fundamental divergence in viewpoints has engendered a complex diplomatic interplay, with the EU striving to harmonise concerns regarding regional stability with its adherence to the One China Policy, while China remains steadfastly alert to

³⁷ CALLAHAN 2016; LAMS 2018.

³⁸ JONES 2020.

³⁹ European Parliament 2021.

⁴⁰ European Commission 2021.

⁴¹ The State Council of the People’s Republic of China 2022.

⁴² Nikkei Asia 2022.



perceived interference in its sovereignty. The crisis in Ukraine has further exacerbated this situation, with both parties diligently scrutinising its ramifications for cross-strait relations. For China, Taiwan signifies not only a political concern but also a pivotal matter of national identity and territorial integrity, which it deems entirely non-negotiable, thereby rendering it arguably the most sensitive dimension of its relations with the EU and the wider international community.

Findings, implications, and future trajectories: EU–China narratives in a changing global order

Core findings

This study endeavoured to illuminate the profound evolution of the strategic discourses articulated by the EU and China, particularly in reaction to significant global occurrences such as the Russia–Ukraine conflict. The analysis elucidates that both entities sustain divergent narrative frameworks – the EU prioritising a rules-based international order along with democratic principles, whereas China advocates for non-interference doctrines and alternative governance paradigms – yet their narratives are progressively influenced by security concerns and geopolitical rivalry. The results reveal that these narratives surpass basic rhetorical frameworks; they act as impactful forces that significantly shape policy trajectories, diplomatic approaches, and mechanisms for international cooperation. Moreover, it is apparent that both entities have adapted their narratives to confront emerging challenges, with the EU transitioning from its conventional focus on soft power to a comprehensive security framework, while China strives to balance its non-interventionist position with ambitions for enhanced global leadership.

Broader implications

These evolving narratives entail numerous significant implications. The analysis suggests an intensification of bloc politics, resulting in a more fragmented international order, heightened competition for influence, particularly within the Global South,⁴³ and the formation of new alliances based on shared narratives. The heightened security dilemmas may lead to increased military spending and force projection capabilities, consequently escalating tensions that culminate in a more divided international system with reduced prospects for global cooperation.

Simultaneously, the economic and technological landscape is being reshaped by these narrative tensions. Evidence suggests a swift adoption of “de-risking” strategies that may result in partial economic decoupling, accompanied by intensified scrutiny of foreign investments in critical sectors. The rise of rival economic paradigms and developmental models, along with increased competition for technological dominance, indicates

⁴³ GABUEV–STUENKEL 2024.



a transition towards parallel technology ecosystems, possibly marked by incompatible standards, potentially undermining global innovation and cooperative initiatives.

The EU's normative power paradox

A deeper examination of these findings reveals a fundamental tension between the EU's traditional self-concept as a normative power and contemporary geopolitical realities. This contradiction manifests in several critical ways:

First, the economic foundation that historically characterised the EU's global influence has changed significantly, particularly vis-à-vis China. While the EU has traditionally been analysed through a normative power lens, Damro argues that the EU's core identity is actually that of a market power.⁴⁴ This market power basis itself has been challenged by shifting global economic dynamics, especially in relation to emerging powers. The erosion of relative economic weight has implications for both the EU's market power projection and its ability to promote normative objectives through economic means.

Second, the rapid militarisation of EU policy in response to the Ukraine conflict has created an uneasy coexistence between its peace-promoting identity and growing security imperatives. This transition challenges the traditional "civilian power Europe" concept that has long characterised EU external action.⁴⁵

Third, the EU's green transition narrative, while central to its identity, increasingly depends on international cooperation, particularly given China's dominance in renewable technologies and critical raw materials.⁴⁶ This dependency complicates the EU's ability to maintain an independent normative stance.

Finally, the intensifying narrative of democracy versus autocracy,⁴⁷ while rhetorically powerful, faces practical limitations in a multipolar world where economic interdependence often overrides ideological divisions. The EU's narrative increasingly struggles to reconcile its normative ambitions with its strategic interests.

Future outlook

Looking ahead, these developments suggest the need for a recalibration of the EU's strategic narrative to better align with its actual capabilities and the complex realities of contemporary international relations. While maintaining its commitment to democratic values, the EU might benefit from developing a more nuanced narrative that acknowledges the limitations of normative power in today's geopolitical landscape. The recent growth of BRICS and its first summit with newly included members from the Global South, convened in Kazan, exemplifies these evolving dynamics.⁴⁸ As the international

⁴⁴ DAMRO 2012: 682–683.

⁴⁵ KEUKELEIRE–DELREUX 2022: 28–29.

⁴⁶ GARCÍA-HERRERO – VASSELIER 2024.

⁴⁷ YOUNGS 2022.

⁴⁸ Kazan Declaration 2024.



system continues to transform, both the EU and China must find ways to manage their competing narratives and identify areas for necessary cooperation – a crucial equilibrium for effectively addressing global challenges and maintaining international stability.

From a constructivist theoretical perspective, this analysis illustrates how strategic narratives function not merely as rhetorical tools but as constitutive elements that actively shape international relations. The evolving narrative frameworks of the EU and China demonstrate how identities and interests are continuously reconstructed through discursive practices in response to geopolitical challenges. The Russia–Ukraine conflict has served as a critical juncture that accelerated narrative shifts, revealing how both actors’ understandings of themselves and the international order are socially constructed and subject to transformation. As Wendt’s constructivist insights suggest, the emerging international structure is being made through these competing narrative frameworks, with significant implications for how power, security, and cooperation will be understood in the multipolar world. The narrative contestation between the EU and China reflects not just a struggle over policy positions, but a deeper competition over the very meanings and norms that will define international relations in the coming decades.

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