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Analysing the Effectiveness of the European Union's Strategic Narrative on China: A Media and Public Opinion Perspective

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Analysing the Effectiveness of the European Union's Strategic Narrative on China: A Media and Public Opinion Perspective

MA Thesis Asian Studies – Politics, Society and Economy of Asia

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Chapter 1. Introduction

“Do we believe that states are forever condemned to remain [...] never to trust another state? Or do we believe in the possibility of change, of gradually changing men's minds and their behaviour?”¹ ~ Max Kohnstamm

This quote was included by Ursula von der Leyen in her speech on EU-China relations in front of the Mercator Institute for Chinese Studies (MERICS) and the European Policy Centre. Her speech encapsulates the recent thematises in EU-China relations. During a time of increasing tensions between global powers in the context of an evolving international system and increased emphasis on differences, the quote is indicative of how the EU positions itself in the international system and its relation to China.²

In consideration of China's unprecedented economic rise over the last 40-years, the EU's engagement with China has become increasingly important. Chinese outward foreign direct investment (OFDI) was scarce before the reform era under Deng Xiaoping since 1978 and remained relatively low until the 21st century and China's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO). This was further fostered through the initiation of China's 10th Five-Year Plan in 2001 when the Communist Party of China (CPC) started to encourage Chinese companies to invest abroad. This momentum received continuous emphasis in the following Five-Year Plans. During the first ten years of the 21st century Chinese total outward foreign direct investment stock increased tenfold from US\$28 billion to US\$298 billion. Although not that much in absolute numbers, namely comparable to Singapore's level in 2010, the acceleration in capacity is impressive.³ These developments are relevant to the global economy as a whole, but hold particular significance to the European Union (EU). Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in Europe has increased roughly 30-fold between 2010-2016, demonstrating a growing shift in overall Chinese OFDI in Europe. Growth in quantity but also quality reflects the evolving sophistication of Chinese investment and the broader economic and political goals.⁴

The European Union contains important aspects of interest for Chinese investors. For example, they seek technology know-how, access to European markets for Chinese goods, access to third markets via corporate networks, brand names, integrated value chains, a stable environment

¹ For complete quote see: <https://www.nationalchurchillmuseum.org/green-lecture-quotes.html>.

² European Commission, “Speech by President von der Leyen.”

³ Blanchard, “Chinese Outward Foreign Direct Investment,” 525-534.

⁴ Seaman, Huotari and Otero-Iglesias, “Chinese Investment in Europe,” 9.

and political/ diplomatic influence. This is reiterated in China's 12th and 13th Five-Year Plan, which state that overseas investment should seek supply chain access, quality brand names and advanced technology.⁵ Increasing investments from China have brought economic opportunities to the EU and its member states, particularly in countries affected from slow growth or high unemployment rates following the Eurozone crisis. The Eurozone crisis caused a multitude of problems. For instance, states faced a public debt crisis and were forced to effectively sell off debt by privatizing certain state assets, commonly infrastructure assets such as ports. This was accompanied by a logical decrease in local investments. European policy makers actively attempted to make Chinese investment in Europe more attractive.⁶ However, the European Union has faced limitations in its tools to deal with foreign investment in the European market which are considered critical for the economy's long-term interest. Beyond economic factors, societal and political components of Chinese OFDI in Europe reveal the prominent political and symbolic nature of such investments. This new form of investment, coming from a less advanced- and non-democratic economy outside of the EU's security alliance, has brought about numerous perceived challenges. One noticeable internal limitation which has gained increasing attention is European unity, stemming from a mixed approach across member states in addressing these changes.⁷

Consequently, the EU needs to project its China strategy in a unified manner, aligning its member states within a joint strategic narrative. Strategic narratives are a means for political actors to create a shared image of the world and 'others', in hopes that their narrative will succeed over counter narratives. Moreover, they are a tool for political actors to create a 'shared meaning of the past, present and future' about the sphere of international political economy with the goal to influence global and domestic audiences.⁸ The interplay between foreign policy, media and public opinion provides an apt analogy. I consider public opinion as the dominant view on any certain topic amongst the general public and media as the collection of official news networks and sites, both private and public. The communicative process of strategic narratives (formation, projection and reception), which is central to the distribution of strategic narratives, aligns neatly with the framework of foreign policy, media and public opinion. Moving away from a state-centric approach, I aim to uncover the influence of the media and public opinion in shaping strategic narratives, particularly concerning the EU's strategic

⁵ China's National People's Congress, "12th Five-Year Plan," chapter 52, section two. & NDRC, "13th Five-Year Plan," chapter 4.

⁶ Meunier, "Chinese direct investment in Europe," 103-104.

⁷ Meunier, 105.

⁸ Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, "Introduction," 1-6.

narrative on China and Chinese investment in Europe. Thus, I have identified the following research question.

To what extent does the European Union's strategic narrative on Chinese OFDI in Europe, align with media projection and public perception, and how do they in turn limit the EU's China policy?

I aim to investigate whether the media narrative and public opinion possess the power to pull the EU's strategic narrative towards a closer alignment and to demonstrate the importance of narrative alignment among policy makers, the media and the public to facilitate a successful EU narrative on Chinese investment in Europe. Analysing the EU's China policy using the strategic narrative framework and contrasting it with the narratives present in the media ecology and amongst the public, I aim to identify the social limitations the EU faces in creating a shared and unified China narrative. To represent the media narrative, I am going to explore a case study on Chinese investments in the port of Piraeus, by analysing German newspaper articles published in the "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung" (FAZ). Based on the interrelation between foreign policy, media and public opinion, I hope to illustrate the importance of aligning narratives to achieve a coherent and shared image of EU-China relations.

Consequently, I posit two possible scenarios. Firstly, if the EU's strategic narrative is successful in creating a shared narrative, a noticeable alignment in media coverage and public opinion should be observable. The study expects to identify alignment between the strategic narratives employed by the EU and media narratives, which subsequently influence public opinion towards supporting the EU's foreign policy objectives. Secondly, if the EU's strategic narrative is not successful, a divergence between foreign policy, media narratives, and public opinion should be discernible.

The underlying will proceed as follows. First, I am going to analyse the relevant literature. This will be split into two parts. The first part concerns the literature on foreign policy, media, public opinion and their mutual influence. The second part focuses on the existing literature on the EU's strategic narrative. In the third chapter, I am going to lay out the theoretical framework for the thesis. This will be done by, first, establishing the strategic narrative framework, and second, identifying a triangular relationship between foreign policy, media and public opinion. The fourth chapter contains the methodological approach. The fifth chapter starts by analysing the EU's strategic narrative. Then I compare the findings to the case study and the public's

opinion. The sixth chapter analyses the shift in the EU's China strategy. In the seventh chapter, I am going to discuss the consequences of the findings. Lastly, I will conclude.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

In this part, I will give an overview of the relevant literature for this research question. To collect a variety of sources from the relevant fields, I applied a systematic literature review approach, searching multiple variations of the keywords "public opinion", "media", "foreign policy", "China-Europe", "strategic narrative"; and "OFDI" on different databases including the Leiden University catalogue, Google, Google Scholar, and Jstor. Further, I have applied a forward and backward snowballing technique to evaluate the relevant literature. The following is going to be split into two sections. The initial section focuses on examining the literature on the dynamic relationship between media, public opinion, and foreign policy. The subsequent part explores the existing literature on the strategic narrative framework and the European Union. Doing so, I aim to illustrate their connection and importance for answering the research question.

2.1 Public Opinion, Media and Foreign Policy

The literature on the interplay between media, public opinion, and foreign policy offers valuable insights into the complex dynamics shaping our understanding of reality. From ancient philosophers like Plato to modern thinkers like Walter Lippmann, there has been a continuous exploration of the subjective nature of human perception. Lippmann's concept of the "pseudo-environment" highlights the distinction between individuals' subjective realities and the objective reality they exist in. Just as Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" vividly illustrates, what we consider reality is often only a reflection of our environment. We tend to hold on to what we know or believe to know and refuse to accept the unknown. This idea aligns with Anthony Giddens's concept of ontological security, namely the need or sense of security that is given to a person's orderly and continuous experience. Similar to the cave dwellers in Plato's allegory, we often prefer the comfort of our familiar realities and are reluctant to entertain narratives that challenge our established beliefs. To put it differently, Lippmann underscores how we construct mental images or maps to navigate our complex and ever-changing environment.⁹ This holds true in how we perceive nations, as Kunczik argued, the cognitive representation an individual

⁹ Eyer, "Translation from Plato's Republic."; Lippman, *Public Opinion.*; Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity.*

holds about a particular country and its people is man-made and susceptible to external and internal factors. One crucial factor is the media.¹⁰

The influence of media on public opinion is widely acknowledged. George Gerbner's "Cultivation Theory" demonstrates that heavy exposure to media can shape individuals' perception of reality, aligning it with the messages portrayed by the media they consume.¹¹ Similarly, the "agenda-setting" theory by McCombs and Shaw highlights the media's power to control public discourse by emphasizing certain events over others.¹² Framing, as identified by Herman and Chomsky, enables the media to shape public opinion on nations and other topics by selectively emphasizing certain aspects.¹³ Moreover, McLuhan argued that media had the power to shape people's perceptions and beliefs by appealing to their emotions and subconscious desires. He saw media as a form of "persuasion" that could influence people's attitudes and behaviour, often without them realizing it.¹⁴

The image of China in Western media demonstrates a long history of predominantly negative rhetoric. Newman's 1975 article "China Myths" highlighted the enduring presence of negative portrayals of China in Western media during the Cold War era. Despite a decline in open hostility towards Chinese Communists, the underlying negative sentiments persisted.¹⁵ This created a national image of China that is full of orientalist perceptions of its history, exoticism, and the vilification of the nation as a threat to our social order.¹⁶ In recent years, Western media coverage of China has experienced fluctuations, not only in terms of quantity but also in the topics covered. Li Zhang's study on EU coverage of China between 1989 and 2005 revealed a significant increase in news coverage on China, reflecting the growing interest in the Western world. The increasing coverage of China-related news is accompanied by qualitative developments. Zhang's study focused on the topics most prevalent in news about China, with economic coverage taking up the majority of space compared to military coverage.¹⁷ Another comparative study by Seib and Power analysed reporting by international news media, such as CNN, BBC, and DW, categorizing their reports as positive, negative, or unbiased. The study found that BBC's coverage of China was more inclined towards political controversies and

¹⁰ Kunczik as quoted in Li and Chitty, "Reframing National Image," 1-2.

¹¹ Gerbner et al., "Living with television."

¹² McCombs and Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function."

¹³ Chomsky and Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*, 373.

¹⁴ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*.

¹⁵ Newman, "Lethal Rhetoric."

¹⁶ Richter and Gebauer, "The Portrayal of China in German Media," 2-5.

¹⁷ Zhang, "The Rise of China."

opinion-based pieces critical of the Communist Party of China (CPC).¹⁸ Several studies have shown similar developments in relation to the US's news reporting on China. For instance, following China's remarkable economic, socio-political and military development over the last 30 years, Chinese representation in Western media has grown considerably.¹⁹ Whilst this study focuses on media coverage in the EU on China, I have decided to include sources relating to the US, as Boyd-Barret has demonstrated that European media largely endorses US news reporting on foreign issues.²⁰

The treatment of "the other" in Western mainstream media, including China, has been criticized for marginalizing developing- and post-communist countries, extending negative images to reinforce Western notions of superiority. China's representation in Western media is highly controversial. Various authors have highlighted the predominance of adverse rhetoric in Western news media regarding China, focusing on unpleasant topics such as violence, crisis, and conflict, while portraying the People's Republic of China (PRC) in a negative light.²¹ A large body of literature has emerged which concerns the predominance of negative representations of China in Western media and the subsequent impact on public opinion.²² However, further research is needed to examine the underlying factors driving these negative portrayals and their consequences on international relations and public perceptions in more depth.

While the media's influence on public opinion is evident, the role of foreign policy cannot be overlooked. The "Manufacturing Consent" theory, proposed by Herman and Chomsky, asserts that the mainstream media serves as a propaganda tool for powerful elites, selectively presenting information to manipulate public opinion in favour of their interests.²³ On the other hand, the "CNN Effect" suggests that the media can influence government actions by bringing humanitarian crises and conflicts to public attention, potentially leading to policy interventions.²⁴ Both theories provide distinct perspectives on the relationship between media,

¹⁸ Seib and Powers, *A Comparative Analysis*.

¹⁹ Peng, "Representation of China."; Stone and Xiao, "Anointing a New Enemy."; Zhang, "The Rise of China."; Sparks, "Coverage of China in the UK national press."

²⁰ Boyd-Barrett, "Ukraine, Mainstream Media and Conflict Propaganda."

²¹ Huang and Leung, "Western-Led Press Coverage."; Riggins, *The language and politics of exclusion.*; Said, *Orientalism*.

²² Song, *China can say no.*; Riggins, *The language and politics of exclusion.*; Fingleton, "The quest for balanced reporting on Cina in the EU media."; Liss, "Images of China in the American Print Media."; Goodman, "Prestige Press."; Peng, "Representation of China."; Yang and Liu, "The 'China Threat'."; Zhang, "The Rise of China.";

²³ Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, 373.

²⁴ Piers, "The CNN Effect."

public opinion, and foreign policy. While they both demonstrate a different directional understanding, neither disputes that such a relationship exists. Considering the multidirectional movement of influence described by these theories, it becomes crucial to study the three aspects together. As Soroka notes in his study on the US and the UK, the media serves as the primary conduit between the public and policymakers, with the latter relying on media reports to gauge public opinion, and the media being the public's primary source of information on policy decisions. Furthermore, media plays a central role in shaping public understanding of foreign affairs, an area where personal experiences often prove limited.²⁵ Moreover, Baum and Potter compare the dynamic between media, public opinion and foreign policy with the economic concept of supply and demand in which information, as such, becomes the central commodity circulating between the three.²⁶ The existing body of research sheds light on the web of causal arrows linking these domains, emphasizing the mutual influence they exert on each other. Therefore, studying them in isolation would be a regression in our understanding of this complex relationship.²⁷

2.2 Strategic Narratives

The concept of strategic narratives has emerged as an area of study in international relations, offering insights into how narratives work to shape perceptions and influence behaviour.²⁸ The term was first coined by Lawrence Freedman in 2006, who demonstrated the power of narratives to counter opponents in a military conflict by using them as a tool to downplay the opposing force(s).²⁹ However, Alister Miskimmon has since adapted this idea to offer a broader understanding of strategic narratives and the interplay between narratives and international politics. According to Miskimmon's definition, strategic narratives are a means by which political actors attempt to construct a 'shared meaning of the past, present, and future' of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors.³⁰

In their volume *One Belt, One Road, One Story? Towards an EU-China Strategic Narrative* Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin focus on the EU's struggle for a strategic narrative on China and the need for strategic alignment between the two powers.³¹ Moreover, Li Zhang, in the same book, analyses British, French and German elite media's reporting on the Chinese

²⁵ Soroka, "Media Public, Opinion and Foreign Policy," 28.

²⁶ Baum and Potter, "The Relationship between Mass Media, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy."

²⁷ Baum and Potter, "The Relationship between Mass Media, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy," 41.

²⁸ Roselle, O'Loughlin and Miskimmon, "Strategic Narrative," 75.

²⁹ Freedman, "Networks, Culture and Narratives."

³⁰ Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, "Introduction," 4.

³¹ Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, "The EU's Struggle."

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to highlight the role of media narratives in China-EU relations and uncover the potential for mutual cooperation.³² From a member state perspective, Alister Miskimmon and Isabelle Hertner on Germany's strategic narrative during the Eurozone crisis, analyse the countries' position in the crisis and how the German narrative formation was essential, on the one hand, to foster domestic political support, and on the other hand, to propose possible solutions in agreement with the EU and the US.³³ From a supranational angle, Alister Miskimmon researches the institutional side of constructing and projecting strategic narratives in the EU. He hints at the difficult dynamics at play within the EU's institutional body that hinder the effective formation of strategic narratives.³⁴

Despite the increasing acknowledgment of the significance of strategic narratives, there are still notable gaps in the existing research that need to be addressed. One area that requires further investigation is the interrelation between the strategic narrative framework and the media, public opinion, and foreign policy triangle. By focusing specifically on the European Union's strategic narrative on Chinese OFDI in Europe, this thesis aims to shed light on the role of media and public opinion in either facilitating or hindering the successful projection and reception of strategic narratives. Although the importance of media is often highlighted, assessing the limitations of a strategic narrative by contrasting it against the media discourse and public opinion is yet to be researched.

In her book, *News Media and EU-China Relations*, Li Zhang examines the influence of media on the formulation of EU policy towards China. However, her study contains two key shortcomings that I aim to address. Firstly, by incorporating the strategic narrative framework, it becomes possible to emphasize the dynamic nature and fluidity of narratives and policy dissemination. This framework highlights the temporal aspect and the interconnectedness between narratives and policy decisions. Secondly, considering the temporal limitations of Zhang's study, which concludes her findings up until 2008, I seek to explore the impact question in a contemporary and timely context. By examining recent developments, I aim to provide insights into the ongoing influence of media on EU-China relations, thereby bridging the gap between past research and present dynamics.³⁵

³² Zhang, "China's Belt and Road Initiative in the European Media."

³³ Hertner and Miskimmon, "Germany's Strategic Narrative."

³⁴ Miskimmon, "Finding a Unified Voice?"

³⁵ Zhang, *News Media and EU-China Relations*.

Chapter 3. Theoretical Framework

The significance of strategic narratives lies in their ability to interpret complex global events and provide a sense of order amidst chaos. In an interconnected and rapidly changing world, the use of narratives allows political actors to frame issues, shape public opinion, and influence the trajectory of international relations. By crafting compelling narratives, political actors can shape the narrative landscape, define the terms of debate, and advance their interests on the global stage. As such, the concept has become increasingly relevant in the study of international relations today.³⁶

To better grasp the concept of strategic narratives, Miskimmon identifies five components that are central to the framework, namely character or actors (agent), setting/environment/space (scene), conflict or action (act), tools/behaviour (agency), and resolution/suggested resolution/goal (purpose). These components allow temporality to coexist with the explicit scene, act, and purpose within a narrative.³⁷ Furthermore, they can be separated into three different types, namely system narratives, identity narratives, and policy/ issue narratives. System narratives explain the structure of the world, its actors, and how the system operates. Identity narratives revolve around the story, values, and goals of a political actor. Policy/ issue narratives contextualize political actions by explaining the central actors, the problem, and how it can be solved through policies. It is important to note here that these different strategic narratives are totally entangled and contradictions between them can limit a strategic narrative's success.³⁸ Moreover, the communication of strategic narratives involves three steps or processes, namely formation, projection, and reception. The first step focuses on the formation of strategic narratives, including the role of political actors, institutions, and procedures. The second step is concerned with the methods used to report narratives, such as the media and how they are contested. Lastly, the reception of narratives emphasizes how they are received in terms of reach, but also how they are individually processed. This process is essential for the underlying analysis, as will be demonstrated below.³⁹

There are different ways of studying strategic narratives. For example, as a means to help policy makers better utilize strategic narratives but also making them aware of the ethical and political

³⁶ Roselle, O'Loughlin and Miskimmon, "A New Means to Understand Soft Power," 73-78.

³⁷ Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, "Introduction," 6-7.

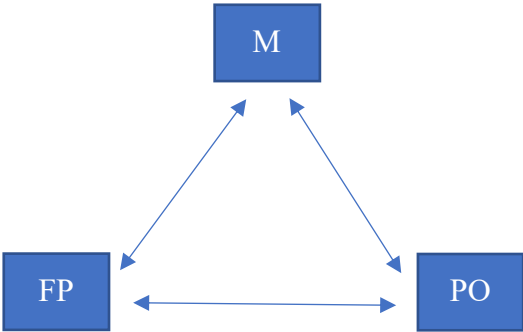
³⁸ Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 7-9.

³⁹ Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 7-10.

concerns related to such a tool.⁴⁰ However, this thesis applies a rationalist analysis in which observable outcomes can be explained through an analysis of observable interactions between actors with individual preferences. The strategic narrative is formed as an expression of interests of a certain actor or agent and are projected strategically moving in frames from political elites to media to publics.⁴¹ The research demonstrates a disparity between the strategic narratives put forth by the EU and the narratives propagated by the media and embraced by the public. This discrepancy is expected to lead to a reassessment and recalibration of the EU's foreign policy, including its strategic narratives, as part of the process of rapprochement. To effectively make use of the strategic narrative analysis, it needs to be put into context. Given the established interplay between foreign policy, media and public opinion, I aim to illustrate the limitations of the EU's strategic narrative by juxtaposing it to media trends and public opinion. In consideration of the temporality of strategic narratives, media and public sentiment towards China will be observed over time to see whether or not they are mutually realigning.

Utilizing a framework proposed by Zhang on the mutual influence between government and media, and adding public opinion, the subsequent graph illustrates the interplay and reciprocal influence among foreign policy, media, and public opinion as established in the literature review.⁴²

M=Media
 FP=Foreign Policy
 PO=Public Opinion



Analysing the interrelations between foreign policy, media, and public opinion, I aim to provide a social and domestic understanding of the limitations of the EU's strategic narrative. By merging the strategic narrative framework with the scholarly understanding of the interplay between foreign policy, media and public, the communicative framework of strategic narratives (formation, projection and reception) can be equalised with the foreign policy (formation),

⁴⁰ O'Loughlin, Miskimmon and Roselle, "Methods and Ethics," 28.

⁴¹ O'Loughlin, Miskimmon and Roselle, 27-29.

⁴² Zhang, *News Media and EU-China Relations*, 8.

media (projection) and public opinion (rejection) triangle. Thus, by contrasting the EU's strategic narrative on China and Chinese OFDI in Europe, first with the narrative and information portrayed in the media and then with the evolving sentiment towards China among the public, the effectiveness of the EU's strategic narrative in shaping domestic media content and public discourse can be demonstrated.

Chapter 4. Methodology

Understanding how strategic narratives are constructed, disseminated, and received is essential for comprehending their impact on media and public opinion. While strategic narratives are powerful tools to shape perceptions and behaviour, the extent to which they are effectively communicated and understood by the media and the general public remains a critical aspect that requires further exploration. By delving into the intricate web of causal relations between media, public opinion, and foreign policy, this research endeavours to uncover the mechanisms through which media coverage and public attitudes can influence the reception and effectiveness of strategic narratives. This investigation will shed light on how media organizations shape the narrative landscape, the factors that influence public understanding and interpretation of strategic narratives, and the subsequent implications for foreign policy formulation. Analysing the interplay between the EU's strategic narrative, media representation, public opinion, and foreign policy decisions will contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play.

For the analysis, I have chosen primary sources of policy papers published by the European Commission and the European External Action Service to gain an unbiased account of the EU's strategy on China. The research methodology employed involves a qualitative content analysis of the European Union's policy documents. This methodological approach allows for an examination of the textual content and the identification of key themes, objectives, and priorities embedded within the documents.⁴³ I have categorised key themes relevant to the research question, such as investment and trade, norms and values, and policies to establish a coherent narrative based on Miskimmon's system-, identity-, and policy narrative. Additionally, by analysing reoccurring themes across both policy periods, I have identified the EU's priorities when dealing with China. Lastly, by contrasting both policy periods I have established discontinuities to indicate shifts in the EU's China strategy.

⁴³ Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*, 3-19.

However, there are five problems that need to be taken into account when identifying and explaining strategic narratives. These include the fallacy of communication, the difficulty in establishing a causal relationship between narratives and recipients, the potential for narratives to create adverse effects, the lack of clear strategy and goals behind a narrative, and the difficulty in assessing or defining desirable and measurable outcomes.⁴⁴ Thus, this analytical approach does not presume to definitively identify the underlying intentions of policy actors. Rather, its objective is to examine and evaluate the various statements and information narratives that are disseminated among the public, and to assess which of these claims ultimately gains prominence and acceptance. This method of analysis is thus not concerned with the subjective intentions of political actors, but rather with shedding light on the discursive strategies and tactics they employ, and their effectiveness in shaping public perceptions and media narratives.

To illustrate the media narrative, I will utilise a case study concerning the Chinese state-owned shipping company COSCO's acquisition of controlling rights at the port of Piraeus in Greece. This case study, based on German news media article published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), is probative to demonstrate the media's narrative on Chinese OFDI in Germany. It builds on the study on German media perception of Chinese FDI by Golinski and Henn which found two periods of increased "othering" between 2004-2006 and 2012, arguing that the media landscape was dominated by the discourse on "a homogenous group of invaders contesting the current balance of power on the world markets", in which "past negative experiences and demonised images were cyclically reproduced".⁴⁵ These perceptions can be attributed to three main dimensions. First, perceived national superiority based on the assumption that German companies produce high-end goods while Chinese companies produce or assemble cheap and easy products. Second, based on China's increasing economic and financial power merged with its large size, investors are labelled as unpredictable players of mysterious China's quest for world dominance. Third, differences in political and social systems, ethical and social norms and culture, are used to portray the "other" as without common ground. As demonstrated in their nuanced analysis, these constructed images are largely based on popular discourse rather than rational reporting and mostly ignore the nature of specific investments. This approach endangers the investment climate and may lead to the adoption of protectionist measures and

⁴⁴ O'Loughlin, Miskimmon and Roselle, 25.

⁴⁵ Golinski and Henn, "Othering FDI," 16-17.

foster economic nationalism.⁴⁶ By juxtaposing the findings of the strategic narrative analysis, with the case study on media narratives and secondary polls on public opinion, I aim to demonstrate the intricate dynamics at play influencing the success of strategic narratives.

In order to elucidate the EU's strategic narrative on China, the analysis is structured into two distinct temporal periods. The first period encapsulates the EU's strategic approach leading up until 2019, while the second period commences in 2019 and extends up to the present day. This chronological distinction provides a nuanced understanding of the evolution and trajectory of the EU's stance on China, enabling the identification of any noteworthy shifts or continuities in its strategic narrative. Moreover, I made this distinction to fill the gap in the existing literature, by demonstrating a clear shift in the development of the EU's China strategy since 2019. By adopting this temporal framework, the analysis aims to present a comprehensive and contextualized depiction of the EU's strategic narrative vis-à-vis China. This two-step approach is based on Alister Miskimmon's, Ben O'Loughlin's and Laura Roselle's work and utilises their strategic narrative framework to contextualise the EU's China policy into a coherent strategic narrative.⁴⁷

Chapter 5. The European Union's Strategic Narrative

5.1 The European Union's China Policy (Formation)

In the following, I am going to analyse the first phase of the EU's China strategy from 2013-2019. The *EU-China 2020 strategic agenda for cooperation (2013)* represents a significant joint initiative between China and the EU aimed at promoting shared responsibilities for peace, prosperity, and sustainable development. I included a joint document in this analysis to demonstrate the similarities between the EU's own plans and the China-EU joint agenda. While this document encompasses a wide range of shared goals and linkages to specific joint policy arrangements, analysing each agreement in detail would be time-consuming and beyond the scope of this thesis. However, three of the four chapters within the document hold particular importance for this analysis: Peace and Security, Prosperity, and People-to-people Exchanges. The Peace and Security chapter highlights the shared norms and rules that govern China-EU cooperation, emphasizing the importance of a rules-based international order. Prosperity focuses on trade, investment, as well as transport and infrastructure, which are central themes

⁴⁶ Golinski and Henn, 17-20.

⁴⁷ O'Loughlin, Miskimmon and Roselle, "Methods and Ethics," 23-42.

in this thesis that demonstrate the narrative for economic cooperation. Lastly, the People-to-people Exchanges chapter emphasizes cross-cultural understanding and engagement.⁴⁸

The first decade of the 21st century witnessed significant economic globalization and rising multipolarity, with these trends continuing to deepen in the years following the 2008 financial crisis. The EU and China have committed themselves to promoting a just and equitable international order, advancing a multipolar world in which both parties are active participants and contribute to shaping rules and norms.⁴⁹ Within the document, point 4 highlights the emphasis on multilateralism, particularly through institutions such as the UN and the G20. Point 5 underscores the shared interest in fostering cooperation for just and effective rules in key fields, showcasing the EU's and China's commitment to a multipolar world and their role as rule-makers through cooperation and coordination.⁵⁰

The second chapter of the document focuses on prosperity, with an aim to protect and develop an open global economy through trade enhancement based on open and transparent markets, as well as a level playing field. Two key aspects stand out: First, the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), aims to promote investment liberalization, eliminate restrictions, and establish a secure legal framework for investors' protection and market access. This agreement also strives to replace individual bilateral investment agreements between China and EU member states with one comprehensive EU-China investment agreement, further solidifying the EU's supranational role. Second, the joint commitment to transport and infrastructure cooperation underlines their dedication to developing interconnected infrastructure systems.⁵¹ Lastly, the fourth chapter, focused on people-to-people exchanges, discusses the need to foster and develop contacts between China and the EU to increase mutual awareness. This chapter proves relevant due to the role of public opinion, which will be returned to later.⁵² Overall, this joint document, being a coordinated effort between the EU and China, maintains a more neutral tone compared to internal EU policy papers like the Elements for a new EU strategy on China.

Moreover, the document released in 2016 under the Juncker Commission focuses on the EU's internal strategy for China, acknowledging China's growing role in the international order. It

⁴⁸ EEAS, *EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation*.

⁴⁹ EEAS, 1.

⁵⁰ EEAS, 3-4.

⁵¹ EEAS, 4-8.

⁵² EEAS, 15-16.

emphasizes the need for a positive partnership with China while effectively managing differences. The key proposals include reinforcing EU-China relations, prioritizing reciprocity, fair competition, and a level playing field, advancing the completion of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), and fostering connectivity in various areas such as infrastructure, trade, digital economy, and people-to-people interactions. The EU also recognizes the importance of a unified strategy when engaging with China and highlights China's critical juncture, where domestic economic and institutional reforms are needed. The document identifies challenges such as restrictions on foreign operators in China's domestic markets, undermining the rule of law, and the need to address these issues.⁵³ Under the section "principles of engagement," the document reaffirms the EU's emphasis on reciprocity and the need for a clear and unified strategy in dealing with China. It also underscores the importance of reinforcing cooperation with the United States when engaging with China, drawing attention to the EU-US-China strategic triad.⁵⁴

Trade and investment play a crucial role in EU-China relations. The document acknowledges the reciprocal dependence between the EU's and China's economic success. It calls for discouraging China from subsidizing its national actors and implementing domestic market protection mechanisms. The document reiterates the significance of the CAI in achieving a deeper and more balanced cooperation and opens up the possibility for a potential future Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the EU and China. It also emphasizes the importance of modernizing trade facilitation and encourages productive investments as long as they comply with EU laws and regulations. However, it criticizes China's security-related reviews of EU investment, suggesting that such reviews should be limited to cases involving definite national security concerns. The document also proposes the establishment of an EU framework to define critical national infrastructure.⁵⁵

In summary, the document highlights the need for a unified approach in the EU's engagement with China, emphasizing reciprocity, fair competition, and the completion of the CAI. It addresses challenges such as market restrictions and the rule of law in China. The EU recognizes the interconnectedness of trade and investment between the two parties and calls for a balanced and mutually beneficial cooperation. Comparing the two documents, both the EU-China 2020 strategic agenda and the 2016 internal strategy for China emphasize the importance

⁵³ European Commission, *Elements for a new EU Strategy on China*.

⁵⁴ European Commission, 4-5.

⁵⁵ European Commission, 5-8.

of a positive partnership, reciprocity, and fair competition. They recognize China's role in the international order and the need for an EU-wide approach. However, the 2016 document specifically addresses issues such as China's market restrictions and security-related reviews of EU investment, advocating for a more balanced and regulated approach. Overall, both documents align in their pursuit of a positive partnership with China and a unified EU approach.

Building upon the theoretical framework established above, the following results pertaining to the European Union's strategic narrative on China can be derived.

Narratives:

- a) System Narrative: The EU's strategic narrative on China emphasizes the changing global economic landscape, with China's rise as a major global economic power. It acknowledges the need for a multipolar world order and recognizes China's increased role in the international system.
- b) Identity Narrative: It highlights Europe's aspiration for economic growth, innovation, and job creation. It recognizes the importance of attracting foreign investment, including Chinese investment, as a means to enhance economic competitiveness and technological advancements. But, it needs to be balanced with reciprocity and level-playing fields.
- c) Issue/Policy Narrative: The issue/policy narrative focuses on specific policies, goals, and challenges related to Chinese OFDI in the EU. EU-China policy negotiations such as the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment and a possible future FTA underline the EU's identity narrative for fostering cooperation in investment and trade.

Components:

- a) Character or actors (agent): The main actors in the EU strategic narrative are the European Union as a collective entity, its member states, and China. These actors shape and influence the narrative through their policies, actions, and interactions.
- b) Setting/environment/space (scene): The setting encompasses the EU as a regional entity and the European market where Chinese OFDI takes place. It includes the political, economic, and regulatory environment within which investment activities occur.
- c) Conflict or action (act): The conflict or action component highlights the challenges and tensions arising from Chinese OFDI in the EU. These include issues related to market access, fair competition and reciprocity.
- d) Tools/behaviour (agency): The agency component involves the policies, regulations, and strategies employed by the EU to manage Chinese OFDI, such as the CAI.
- e) Resolution/or suggested resolution/goal (purpose): The resolution component focuses on the desired outcomes or goals sought by the EU in managing Chinese OFDI. This includes fostering a balanced and mutually beneficial investment relationship through cooperation and coordination, ensuring reciprocity and fair competition, and safeguarding European economic interests.

Lastly, the EU's strategic narrative on Chinese OFDI is formulated through internal considerations, policy discussions, and consultations among EU institutions, member states, and stakeholders. It is projected through official documents, statements, and diplomatic engagements, aiming to influence perceptions and shape the discourse around Chinese investment in the EU. The reception of the narrative occurs among policymakers, the public, and international observers, who interpret, analyse, and respond to the EU's stance on Chinese OFDI based on their own interests and perspectives.⁵⁶

Although the EU uses official mechanisms to project its narrative, the general public relies heavily on news media to form its opinion. This is no wonder, considering the fact that public news media play a prominent role across Western Europe. According to a study by Pew Research, 32% percent of interviewees in Germany have responded that the ARD is their main news source and 80% percent have stated that they trust public news organisations.⁵⁷ This is further support by a press release by the European Parliament which included a survey of EU citizens stating that the majority trusts traditional news media. The press release also acknowledges the importance of the media in informing the public about the activities of the EU and its institutions.⁵⁸ Thus, news media needs to be studied to understand to what extent its narrative aligns with the EU's China strategy and to what extent this narrative is represented in the media. Focusing on the projection aspects of the strategic narrative framework next, the following is going to trace the narratives present in the media ecology.

5.2 Media (Projection)

Despite the multitude of benefits for economic development stemming from FDI, China's expansion of multinational corporations has often faced political and public backlash in Western economies. The "othering" of Chinese FDI, as explored by Golinski and Henn, suggests that foreign investment is perceived and positioned as different from domestic economic players. The more distance between an investors home country and the host country, the more difficult it is for the actor to obtain "normative legitimacy".⁵⁹ In many cases, there is a significant emphasis on the perceived potential losses from foreign takeovers, which distorts the overall understanding of the potential benefits. This is not only the case for Chinese investment in Europe but has been established in different contexts such as the hostile interpretations of US investment in Europe in the 60s and 70s and German investment in parts

⁵⁶ Based on the strategic narrative framework by Alister Miskimmon as formulated in the theoretical framework.

⁵⁷ Noe-Bustamante et al. "About a third of Asian Americans say they have changed their daily routine."

⁵⁸ European Parliament, "EU citizens trust traditional media most."

⁵⁹ Golinski and Henn, "Othering FDI," 10-11.

of eastern Europe during the 90s. Thus, discontent with FDI is a universal phenomenon for the most part. Moreover, FDI from countries with similar cultural backgrounds and institutional development is usually perceived as low risk, while investments from developing markets are followed with notable concern.⁶⁰ The media ecosystem tends to focus on negative information, which increases public awareness of risks and fosters feelings of anxiety. These media narratives blur the line between real economic and social concerns and blatant xenophobia.⁶¹

5.2.1 Case Study: Port of Piraeus in German Media

In the following I am going to analyse a collection of German media reports on the acquisition of the port of Piraeus by the Chinese state-owned shipping company COSCO. This analysis aims to complement the research on news reporting on FDI in two aspects. First, since the study concludes in 2013, I aim to demonstrate the continued validity of the authors findings. Second, by analysing any particular case study, the nature of a specific investment can be analysed under closer scrutiny. One point that holds true, as will be shown in the following, is the continued blur between economic and political concerns. This is by no means a comprehensive analysis of the total German media ecology, but it eloquently demonstrates the continuity of news reporting sentiment on China, particularly regarding Chinese OFDI.

The following is going to analyse articles in the German newspaper “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung”⁶² relating to Chinese investments in and consequential takeover of the Greek port of Piraeus. After doing a key word search “Piraeus” and then selecting all the articles relating to the described takeover, I have identified 7 relevant articles that either report on the takeover directly or mention the Piraeus case study in an attempt to cover Chinese infrastructure investment in Europe. This analysis is not aiming to generalise the findings and come to a conclusion concerning media and Chinese FDI, but rather provide an understanding of the media narrative concerning Chinese FDI in Europe. I hope by later contrasting the findings of the strategic narrative analysis with the findings of the media narrative to document the differences between the two.

First, to understand the Piraeus port takeover, a summary of the timeline and events is needed. The first deal between COSCO and Greece occurred in 2008, when the former obtained a 35-year lease to operate two of the three port terminals in the port of Piraeus. This investment

⁶⁰ Golinski and Henn, 11-12.

⁶¹ Golinski and Henn, 13-14.

⁶² Note: All the articles have been translated from German to English by the author.

occurred during a time, when the EU member states were discussing a possible exclusion of Greece from the EU and increasing pressure from international creditors to privatise Greek infrastructure to pay back loans. Additionally, in 2016 COSCO bought a 51% stake of the Piraeus Port Authority, who is handling the operations of the third terminal, and an additional 16% one year later.⁶³

The analysed articles exhibit several recurring themes in the media narrative. The first article, "COSCO buys shares of ports across Europe," describes the takeover of the port of Piraeus as a "coup" as part of Beijing's grand strategy to gain influence in Europe's port network.⁶⁴ Another article, titled "He who builds a bridge for others", emphasizes the increasing dependency created by China's investments, which consequently poses a threat to the EU and its member states.⁶⁵ This sentiment is also observable in an article titled "China increases its influence on Eastern Europe." The article states, that the port of Piraeus deal symbolises China's increasing influence and highlights the broader context of China's impact in Eastern Europe and the scepticism of Western European nations, who fear Chinese investment could pressure European politics, challenge the European economy, and threaten the unity of the EU.⁶⁶ Despite the success of the port of Piraeus after COSCO's takeover, as highlighted in "Port of Piraeus: With success comes dependency on China," the article predominantly focuses on the increasing dependency on China which seemingly outweighs any economic benefits. The Greek embassy in Berlin has sent letters to FAZ, stressing the need to avoid politicizing Chinese investments selectively. They further appealed to the FAZ to refrain from "twisting the narrative."⁶⁷ Moreover, article titled "How Peking plans to conquer the world with COSCO" directly frames China's ambitions in the title, emphasizing concerns about China's global influence through COSCO's activities.⁶⁸ Lastly, two articles discuss broader concerns related to ports and infrastructure. "How attackable are ports?" portrays China as a security threat, emphasizing the dangers of engagement going beyond port investments. "Europe pays, China profits" suggests that China benefits from increasing EU investment in Balkan infrastructure while failing to acknowledge and disregarding the essential nature of such development for the EU.⁶⁹

⁶³ Tagliapietra and Pandya, "China's strategic investment in Europe."; Bastian, "Cosco-Einstieg in Hamburg."

⁶⁴ FAZ, "China kauft sich in Europas Häfen ein."

⁶⁵ Böge et al. "Wer anderen eine Brücke baut."

⁶⁶ Geinitz, "China weiter seinen Einfluss auf Osteuropa aus."

⁶⁷ Martens, "Mit dem Erfolg kam die Abhängigkeit von China."

⁶⁸ Ankenbrand, "Wie China mit COSCO die Welt erobern will."

⁶⁹ Schiller, "Wie angreifbar sind deutsche Häfen?"; Martens, Europa zahlt, China profitiert."

Despite the remarkable economic success achieved by the port of Piraeus following its takeover⁷⁰, this aspect receives limited coverage in news reports, and when mentioned, it is often relegated to the side-lines. Instead, the articles predominantly focus on politicized topics, highlighting the perceived threat posed by China and its grand strategy to conquer the world. These findings align with the study conducted by Golinski and Henn. Chinese investments in Europe are frequently portrayed as a potential threat to the overall economic and political security of the European Union.⁷¹

Furthermore, a comparison between these findings and the analysis of the EU's China strategy reveals significant discrepancies. While the EU's approach emphasizes economic and political cooperation, seeking to foster development across various areas, including economics, norms, and values, the media narrative tends to "other" Chinese foreign direct investment by emphasizing alleged political threats and potential consequences. This disparity suggests a lack of alignment between the two narratives. Considering the importance of news media in disseminating information to the public, particularly with regard to the EU's stance on China, divergent narratives between these two levels indicate the EU's strategy has not been effectively projected through the media ecology. Consequently, examining public opinion in Germany regarding China can provide valuable insights into this issue. If the assumptions are correct, it implies that the lack of synchronicity between the two narratives leads to a closer alignment between public opinion and the media narrative, further underscoring the EU's lack of success in communicating its narrative.

5.3 Public Opinion (Reception)

Views of China, 2002-2022

% who have an unfavorable view of China

	'02	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09	'10	'11	'12	'13	'14	'15	'16	'17	'18	'19	'20	'21	'22
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Sweden	-	-	-	40	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	59	49	52	70	85	80	83
Netherlands	-	34	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	43	42	45	58	73	72	75
Germany	-	37	33	54	68	63	61	59	67	64	64	60	60	53	54	56	71	71	74
UK	-	16	14	27	36	29	35	26	35	31	38	37	44	37	35	55	74	63	69
France	-	42	41	51	72	60	59	49	60	58	53	49	61	52	54	62	70	66	68
Italy	-	-	-	61	-	-	-	-	64	62	70	57	61	59	60	57	62	60	64
Spain	-	21	38	43	56	41	38	39	46	47	55	50	56	43	48	53	63	57	63
Belgium	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	71	67	61
Poland	-	34	-	42	54	41	41	32	41	43	52	44	42	29	37	34	-	-	55
Hungary	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	44	45	47	37	-	-	52

Figure 1: Pew Research Center, September, 2023, "How Global Public Opinion of China Has Shifted in the Xi Era"

⁷⁰ LeCorre, "Chinese Investments in European Countries," 165-166.

⁷¹ Golinski and Henn, "Othering FDI," 10-23.

Based on data issued by the Pew Research Centre regarding the percentage of Germans who have an unfavourable view of China over the years, it is evident that there has been a consistent increase in negative sentiment towards China. Resulting from nationally representative surveys in roughly 60 countries over the last two decades, the figures show fluctuating percentages, but overall, the trend demonstrates a growing proportion of Germans holding an unfavourable view of China. This data indicates that the public opinion in Germany regarding China does not align with the European Union's strategic narrative on China, which emphasizes fostering positive and constructive cooperation. Rather, the increasing percentage of Germans with an unfavourable view suggests a divergence between public sentiment and the EU's strategic approach towards China. Therefore, the growing negativity towards China among Germans may pose a challenge for the EU in effectively projecting and implementing its strategic narrative.

This is not an isolated phenomenon within Europe. Looking at the survey data (where complete), this trend is similar across EU member states. Sweden, the Netherlands, France, the UK, Italy and Spain all show an increase in unfavourable views towards China. This trend is not only evident in western- and central European nations but also extends to the south-eastern region. Although generally having a lower percentage of unfavourable views towards China, Poland, Hungary and Greece have held their “most unfavourable” opinion on China in 2022.

By analysing the public opinion on China in Germany, the conclusion can be made that the sentiment towards China among the public is largely in line with the media narrative and thus also demonstrates fundamental differences from the EU's strategic narrative. Based on these findings, the assumptions made about the foreign policy, media and public opinion triangle were right. Without the successful same levelness of the three components, the EU's strategic narrative faces constraints in gathering public support because its projection within the media ecology is limited.

Understanding the interplay between foreign policy, media, and public opinion provides insight into the complexities of narrative construction, projection and reception. By acknowledging these dynamics and considering the interplay between foreign policy, media, and public opinion, policymakers and communicators can develop more nuanced and effective strategic narratives that resonate with the target audience and shape perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours within political communities.

Chapter 6. A Changing Narrative

Returning back to the triangular framework, which posits that influence runs in multiple directions among foreign policy, media, and public opinion, I established that the shared narrative between media and public opinion opposes the EU's strategic narrative and hinders a three-way alignment. In light of this, the final objective of this thesis is to examine whether the influence can work in the opposite direction. Specifically, I aim to investigate whether the media narrative and public opinion possess the power to pull the EU SN towards a closer alignment. To explore this hypothesis, the next part is going to analyse the recent shifts in the EU's China policy. By examining the developments in the EU's approach to China, changes concerning the foreign policy, media, public opinion triangle can be assessed. This analysis will follow a similar methodology to the initial phase of the study, allowing for further insights into the extent of realignment. Doing so, can deepen the understanding about the dynamics within the triangular framework, reveal their reciprocal relationship and provide insights into the factors that shape and reshape strategic narratives in the context of EU-China relations.

The document *Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council EU-China – A strategic outlook* released in 2019, signifies a notable shift in the European Union's approach towards China. By examining the document closely, it becomes evident that the EU's stance has evolved.⁷² The document explicitly refers to the "Elements for a New EU Strategy on China" as the foundation for the EU's strategic partnership and outlines a transformed policy that is more realistic, assertive, and multi-faceted. It marks a departure from the previous emphasis on China as a partner for cooperation and coordination, and for the first time, characterizes China as a "systemic rival" that promotes alternative governance models, which are seen as posing a threat to the established order.⁷³

While the EU still emphasizes its engagement with China in global affairs, this cooperation is now contingent upon clearly defined interests and principles that align with the EU's normative values. Consequently, the EU expects China to respect and uphold human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and other core values shared by the EU. The EU's approach reflects its commitment to preserving a rules-based international order and promoting its own normative

⁷² European Commission and HR/VP, *EU-China—A Strategic Outlook*, 1.

⁷³ European Commission and HR/VP, 2.

framework which China has to uphold.⁷⁴ Reciprocity and a level playing field are also stressed in the document. The EU expresses concerns over China's state-led authoritarian market economy, which creates unfair advantages for Chinese companies through subsidies and restrictions on domestic market access. These practices contradict the EU's objective of achieving reciprocal market access.⁷⁵ To address the issue of unfair competition in the EU internal market resulting from foreign state ownership and financing, the document highlights the need for the EU to establish mechanisms and reform its laws appropriately.⁷⁶

Regarding investment, the document acknowledges the mutual interest in concluding negotiations on the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) by 2020 to restore investment relations. This reference implies that the existing investment relations have already become distorted, marking a significant change. This is further underlined by the developments regarding the CAI since 2020, which will be analysed below. Simultaneously, the joint communication emphasizes the importance of safeguarding the EU against security risks associated with foreign investment in strategic sectors, critical assets, technology, and infrastructure. To achieve this, the EU has outlined the framework for a foreign direct investment screening mechanism, aiming to identify and assess foreign investments in critical sectors while ensuring a unified approach across member states through unilateral adoption.⁷⁷ In summary, the new EU-China strategy maintains several continuities with previous policies. For example, it emphasizes the importance of multilateralism and cooperation within international institutions to achieve shared global goals. However, the 2019 strategic outlook adopts a more assertive, cautious, and critical tone compared to its predecessor, as evidenced by its differences. Notably, China is now labelled as a 'strategic rival' for the first time, and greater emphasis is placed on addressing economic imbalances, market access barriers, unfair trade practices, and human rights and values. The document also recognizes security concerns related to China, particularly in the realms of cybersecurity and critical infrastructure, highlighting the need to confront challenges posed by Chinese technology.⁷⁸

Lastly, the revised EU-China strategy outlined in the 2019 joint communication document demonstrates a compelling and comprehensive shift in the EU's approach towards China. The document highlights the changing dynamics and challenges posed by China, while outlining

⁷⁴ European Commission and HR/VP, 2.

⁷⁵ European Commission and HR/VP, 4-6.

⁷⁶ European Commission and HR/VP, 7-8.

⁷⁷ European Commission and HR/VP, 9-11.

⁷⁸ European Commission and HR/VP, 12.

the EU's revised principles, interests, and measures to ensure a more balanced, reciprocal, and rule-based relationship with China. While some of the aspects of the strategic narrative framework stay the same, important differences can be highlighted.

Narratives:

- a) System Narrative: The EU strategic narrative on China's OFDI in the EU identifies China as a “systemic rival” which is threatening the existing global order and its norms and values. This is different from the previous system narrative, which emphasised China’s and the EU’s shared responsibility to a multipolar order.
- b) Identity Narrative: The EU strategic narrative on Chinese OFDI in the EU highlights Europe's emphasis on a more balanced approach when dealing with China and putting safeguarding of EU interests at the centre. Reciprocity and level playing field remain central to the EU China strategy. Although it continues to emphasise the importance of reciprocity, among others, the new identity narrative sees a more EU-centred proactive approach.
- c) Issue/Policy Narrative: The issue/policy narrative focuses on specific policies, goals, and challenges related to Chinese OFDI in the EU. Especially important in this regard are the developments of the CAI and the EU investment screening mechanism.

Components:

- a) Character or actors (agent): The main actors in the EU strategic narrative are the European Union as a collective entity, its member states, and China. These actors shape and influence the narrative through their policies, actions, and interactions. They stay the same across the two phases.
- b) Setting/environment/space (scene): The setting encompasses the EU as a regional entity and the European market where Chinese OFDI takes place. It includes the political, economic, and regulatory environment within which investment activities occur. The setting remains largely identical but new policies such as the screening mechanism adjust the investment setting.
- c) Conflict or action (act): The conflict or action component highlights the challenges and tensions arising from Chinese OFDI in the EU. These include issues related to market access, fair competition and reciprocity, as before, in addition with greater concerns over national security and long-term economic and political interests.
- d) Tools/behaviour (agency): The tools or behaviours component involves the policies, regulations, and strategies employed by the EU to manage Chinese OFDI. This includes developments regarding the CAI and the screening mechanism.
- e) Resolution/or suggested resolution/goal (purpose): The resolution component focuses on the desired outcomes or goals sought by the EU in managing Chinese OFDI. Initially this included fostering a balanced and mutually beneficial investment relationship through cooperation and coordination, ensuring reciprocity and fair competition, and safeguarding European economic interests. Now it includes economic protectionism, safeguarding European strategic and economic interest and ensuring level playing field and reciprocity.

This shift becomes more apparent when analysing two key policies: the EU screening framework and the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment.

6.1 Comprehensive Agreement on Investment

Initially, the CAI was a significant component of the EU-China joint negotiations aimed at fostering economic coordination and cooperation by drafting an EU-China investment framework that would replace the prior to the Lisbon Treaty⁷⁹ established bilateral investment treaties between China and EU member states.⁸⁰ However, recent developments in the EU's strategic narrative have also impacted the CAI. Following the conclusion of negotiations for the CAI in 2020, the European Commission has chosen to suspend the implementation of the agreement and undertake a reassessment. One significant factor influencing this decision was the Chinese countersanctions imposed in response to the EU's sanctions on China regarding human rights concerns in Xinjiang. These countersanctions further complicated the already delicate relationship between the EU and China, prompting the European Commission to re-evaluate the CAI's implementation in light of these developments.⁸¹

Nonetheless, the suspension and reassessment of the agreement reflect the EU's changing sentiment towards China, particularly regarding trade and investment liberalisation and cooperation. It underscores the evolving and complex dynamics of the EU-China relationship. Additionally, it highlights the missing unity amongst the EU and member states. While EU officials seem confident in putting a halt to the economic joint agreement, critique has come from the ranks of nation states' political leaders. The German chancellor Olaf Scholz, for example, in a phone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping has expressed hopes for the quick implementation of the CAI. Emmanuel Macron on the other hand feels no urge to do so.⁸² Such disagreements demonstrate the existent divide within the EU and the failure to address foreign policy issues in a unified voice.

6.2 Foreign Investment Screening Mechanism

On a different note, the shifting policy strategy can be further highlighted by analysing the implementation of the new EU foreign investment screening mechanism. According to a press release by the European Commission, the new 'tool' has become fully operational in

⁷⁹ The treaty went into force in 2009 and put the majority of investment issues into the responsibility of the EU. To read more see the EU factsheet on the treaty of Lisbon:

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/5/the-treaty-of-lisbon>.

⁸⁰ Grieger, "EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment," 1.

⁸¹ Deutsche Welle. "EU ratification of China investment deal laid on ice."

⁸² Anderlini, Jamil. "Europe's disunity over China deepens."

October 2020.⁸³ The new policy mechanism aims at establishing a unified framework in response to foreign investments that threaten the security and stability of the European Union. But this framework demonstrates some ambiguities. First, despite the policy's emphasis to establish a unified response mechanism, the document clearly states that the framework, by no means, may limit the right of any member state to decide whether or not to screen a foreign direct investment using this framework. Second, the European Commission reserves the right to issue an 'opinion' regarding a foreign direct investment into the union. Lastly, it falls in the shadow of previous EU legislations such as the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) which reserve the right for member states to be responsible for their national security and the right for member states to safeguard the nations' security interest.⁸⁴ Although not specifically targeted at China, the broader context of evolving dynamics in EU-China relations and the rising volume of Chinese investments necessitates the consideration of the new policy's direct impact on Chinese investments in the EU. This influence becomes particularly significant in relation to Chinese investments in areas highlighted in the EU's China strategy, including infrastructure, technology, and cybersecurity.

To sum it up, the new strategic narrative approach demonstrates a shift in the EU's perception of China, acknowledging China as a 'systemic rival' and promoting a more assertive, and multi-faceted approach. The narrative places a greater emphasis on addressing economic imbalances, market access barriers and unfair trade practices as essential elements of the EU's approach towards China and the developments regarding the CAI have demonstrated the EU's shift. It also addresses security concerns related to China, particularly in the areas of cybersecurity, critical infrastructure, and Chinese technology, reflecting an increased focus on protecting European interests, as demonstrated through the implementation of the new foreign investment screening framework. Overall, the new strategic narrative takes a more cautious and critical tone, recognizing the need to reassess cooperation and engagement with China, prioritising the safeguarding of the EU's economic and political interests, values, and security.

Moreover, the observed changes in the EU's strategic narrative on China and the consequent policy developments, highlight a realignment between foreign policy, media, and public opinion. By acknowledging the limitations of the EU's strategic narrative in influencing the

⁸³ European Commission (press release). "EU foreign investment screening mechanism becomes fully operational."

⁸⁴ Regulation (EU) 2019/452 Art 1.

media narrative and public opinion, the recent shift in the EU's China strategy indicates a convergence of the strategic narrative with the media narrative and public opinion.

To finish the strategic narrative framework, I will return to the communicative process. In light of the identified changes, the EU's new strategic narrative approaches a closer alignment towards the media narrative and public opinion. This realignment is in accordance with the mutual influence between foreign policy, media, and public opinion prior established. It is important to note that the media narrative and public opinion are not the sole factors driving this change.⁸⁵ However, the shift in the EU's China strategy, as suspected, demonstrates the realignment between foreign policy, media, and public opinion.

Chapter 7. Drifting Apart vs Alignment

The limitations of the strategic narrative, and the subsequent changes in the EU's policy highlight several important points. First, it underscores the difficulty of altering persistent narratives in the media and public discourse. The EU's strategic narrative has exhibited limitations in effectively influencing these narratives. The influence of the media ecology and public discourse plays a critical role in forging a coherent and successful strategic narrative. The communicative elements, particularly projection and reception, are vital for the success of any strategic narrative. Furthermore, it reinforces the established understanding of the mutual influence between foreign policy, media, and public opinion. As demonstrated, this interplay has resulted in a realignment of these three aspects. My initial suspicion regarding the divergence between the media narrative, public opinion, and the EU's strategic narrative has been substantiated. The demonstrated limitations have constrained the potential of creating realignment. Instead, the shift indicates a responsiveness of the EU's China policy to the persistent media narrative and public opinion, resulting in an adoption of unified narrative between the EU, the media, and the public opinion regarding China. Overall, this analysis underscores the challenges in navigating the interplay between foreign policy, media, and public opinion. It highlights the importance of addressing the limitations of the EU's strategic narrative and, considering the influence and persistence of the media narrative and public opinion, formulating a unified and effective approach.

⁸⁵ For further reading on other limitations see Hagström and Gustafsson, "The limitations of strategic narratives," and Schmitt, "When are strategic narratives effective?"

Moreover, the deteriorating views towards China over the recent years, have in turn influenced the public's increasingly negative view towards Chinese people living abroad, causing an increasing number of attacks. A recent study conducted by the Pew Research Center, for example, found that most Asian Americans “worry about being threatened or attacked, with a third saying they have changed their daily routine because of these concerns.”⁸⁶ Moreover, Gries and Turcsányi in their study on prejudice in China and the EU pointed out that US President Trump's anti-China rhetoric regarding COVID-19 and the stigmatisation of China in social media has not only increased implicit and explicit anti-China, and in the broader context anti-Asian, bias in the US, but the UK and other Western countries have also recorded an increase in anti-China/ Asian hate crimes after 2020. The causality between negative views towards China and the Chinese population raises concerns, especially when expecting the downwards trend to continue.⁸⁷

In light of the recent developments, the following changes for the EU's China strategy which aim to facilitate a more proactive and pragmatic engagement have been identified. The EU should reconsider its superiority and normative projection onto China and rethink its agenda on international values. To do so, the EU needs to respect China's position to reject unsolicited advice or political interference.⁸⁸ To be impactful, the EU needs to foster constructive engagement with China, which means that it also has to be constructive for China. As the Greek government argued, following its rejection of the EU's critiques concerning human rights in China, unproductive criticism towards nations fails to promote human rights and positive developments in bilateral relations. Chang and Pieke raise a valuable question about the success of public criticism in achieving effective results and reform changes in China, given its political system. Despite obvious normative, economic and political differences practical steps are needed to ensure progress over rhetoric.⁸⁹

To what extent the EU-China-US strategic triad will influence future EU-China and EU-US developments is up to see and demonstrates great potential for future research. However, recent developments continue to demonstrate the opposite. Dependence in general and in particular regarding China has taken up a central spot in media and policy discourse in Europe in recent years and especially so in the wake of the Russian-Ukraine conflict. On the policy level, the

⁸⁶ Noe-Bustamante et al. “About a third of Asian Americans say they have changed their daily routine.”

⁸⁷ Gries and Turcsányi, “Chinese Pride and European Prejudice,” 743-746.

⁸⁸ Chang and Pieke, “Europe's Engagement with China,” 325-328.

⁸⁹ Chang and Pieke, 325-328.

debate of decreasing dependence on China, in particular Ursula Von der Leyen's rhetoric of "de-risking", has become increasingly prominent. Whether or not it demonstrates similarities with the US pursuit of decoupling from China, such developments pose continued limitations for improving China-EU relations.⁹⁰ In terms of Infrastructure, the recent discourse surrounding COSCO's potential investment in the Hamburg Port Terminal demonstrate the dynamics and limitations discussed in this thesis. Considering the timely nature of this event, its development demands further observation and demonstrates great potential for further research, once the deal is finalised and tangible consequences have followed.

Lastly, returning to a state of cooperation and combining efforts to improve the relationship, in the long run, may have the power to format mutually beneficial policies, projecting them with a unified voice across the European media landscape and maybe a new, more positive image of China-EU relations can find reception amongst the public.

Conclusion

By utilising a mixed framework, combining strategic narratives and the interplay between foreign policy, media and public opinion, I have demonstrated the limitations of the European Union's strategic narrative regarding China, in particular Chinese investment in Europe. Doing so, the following research question has been answered:

To what extent does the European Union's strategic narrative on Chinese OFDI in Europe, align with media projection and public perception, and how do they in turn limit the EU's China policy?

Initially, the EU recognised China's development and the accompanied rising role in the international system. The Union further acknowledged China's position as a contributor to a multipolar global order and aspired for shared responsibilities within. In terms of investment and trade, the EU has emphasised increasing cooperation to facilitate trade and economic ties, and coordinatively working towards creating a level playing field and reciprocity for both players alike. Their ambitions have been categorised as follows. In terms of system narrative, the EU acknowledged China's increasing economic importance and its role in the multipolar international order. The EU's identity narrative emphasised the importance for attracting foreign investments, including Chinese OFDI, to enhance economic competitiveness and technological advancements to fulfil the EU's aspiration to achieve economic prosperity,

⁹⁰ Seaman et al., "Dependence in Europe's Relation with China," 10-12; 94-103.

innovation and job creation. The policy narrative has underlined these findings. The EU and China have worked together towards a comprehensive agreement of investment and the policy documents explicitly mentioned the potential for a future FTA between the EU and China.

These findings have been tested against two variables. First, by conducting a case study on German news reporting regarding the privatisation and acquisition of the port of Piraeus by the Chinese state-owned shipping company COSCO, I demonstrated divergent narratives between the EU and the media. One, that was at its basis ‘othering’ Chinese FDI. China was portrayed as a threat to the interest and stability of the EU and the investment was contextualised as part of China’s grand strategy to take over the world. Second, studying the development of public opinion in Germany regarding China has substantiated the previous findings and demonstrated the alignment of the public discourse and the media narrative.

In light of these differences, a recent shift in the EU’s China policy and subsequently in the EU’s strategic narrative on Chinese investment in Europe has been identified. Since 2019, the EU’s system narrative portrays China as a “systemic rival” threatening the existing global world order and its norms and values. The identity narrative has also shifted. The EU wants to adopt a more balanced approach when dealing with China and prioritises the safeguarding of EU interests. Lastly, the development and momentary suspension of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment and the establishing of a foreign investment screening mechanism further demonstrate the shift in the EU’s policy narrative. These changes have realigned the EU narrative with the media narrative and the public discourse leading to an aligned objective between foreign policy, media and public opinion.

Although domestically, this new narrative can generate momentum, to what extent it will be successful in coordinating the EU’s future engagement on China needs to be observed. The developments of the Hamburg port deal, for example, can offer valuable insights into the new EU mechanisms and their success. It hints at the relation between the Union and its member states and would be an appropriate case study for future analysis concerning the EU’s strategic narrative.

Nonetheless, the recent developments entice a potential drifting apart between China and the EU. To return back to the quote, maybe their engagement can be reassessed based on a new and mutual set of rules and norms.

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