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# **Constructing Identities, Countering Identities & Questioning Anarchy**

How China's Belt and Road calls for new understandings in conventional IR

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## Abstract:

This thesis is a constructivist qualitative case study of China's ambitious and world-spanning Belt and Road Initiative as an identity building exercise, and it reviews and criticizes popular approaches to the rise of China offered by China threat theory, offensive realism, and classical realism, but also the perspective of power transition theory.

It is a theoretical exercise that offers a constructivist alternative to the problematic Western centric bias and over-emphasis on anarchy and materialism provided by offensive and classical realism, and it systematically investigates the potential significance of identity to the rise of great power China. It theoretically models three processes of identity building based on the literature review and applies the model to the document analysis which results in the indication of a fourth complementary process of identity building. This constructivist approach also questions and expands the traditional understanding within IR of a great power and anarchy.

This thesis offers an alternative approach to the rise of China not yet offered in the field of IR.

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I recall back in 2013 when my belated grandmother and pillar of good-heartedness, wisdom, and strength said to me, with a confident and warming smile on her face as I proclaimed my determination to not go to school a second longer than I had to: “You’re going to go the University”. It was not said out of expectation or demand, but out of faith and love. Her calloused hands and sparkly eyes often told the story of a young girl who dreamed of education but was determined by the tides of her time to care for her family, her animals, and the land. Yet, she was grateful. Not a single living thing, however withered or weathered it was, did not blossom at her loving hands, and I thank her for gifting me the joy to learn about the world and not least the opportunity to pursue higher education.

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# 1 Introduction

In 2002 China announced its “go global” strategy and channeled its focus from domestic affairs to integrating itself as an equal actor in the global society of states (Mierzejewski, Kowalski, 2019, p. 31). However, China’s road to acceptance and integration as an equal player alongside the great powers of the world has been, and as this paper will show, is still a bumpy one. The studies of international relations have taken a turn back to great power politics as the world community of states, observants and thinkers have their eyes peeled on the rise of China to great power status, the simultaneous decline of US hegemony, and now the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Despite there being a return of “great power politics” and a revival of realist vitality, this qualitative study argues that the field of Political Science would not benefit from favoring classical or offensive realism to describe China’s power transition from middle to great power status. As an alternative, this thesis offers a theoretical exercise that demonstrates, through the literature review and document analysis of relevant policies, that a Wendt-inspired conventional constructivism is more suitable to describe and understand China’s transition from middle- to great power status in today’s modern context. It also criticizes two other popular approaches to the rise of China: China threat theory and power transition theory.

The Belt and Road (BRI) was announced in the fall of 2013 by President Xi Jinping and is key to understanding how China attempts to position its global “Self” in the international system, namely, if it will assume the position of a traditional great power like the United States or if there is something distinct about China’s transition to great power status. Therefore, this thesis has chosen the Belt and Road as its case study (Shang, 2019, p. xvi). In 2019, the estimated number of participants in the Belt and Road project was 138 states in South-East and Central Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and more alarmingly so for the US, in South America and Oceania (Anwar, 2019, p. 1; Lanteigne, M., personal communication, 10.05.22). It consists of two routes: one maritime road which will go through the Indian Ocean, and one land belt which will go through Central Asia (Anwar, 2019, p. 1). The most important domestic material goal of the Belt and Road is to reduce the economic inequality between China’s inland Western regions and the richer areas in the East, which would strengthen the stability of China’s domestic economy and attract foreign investment. The most important regional and international material goals are to pour out a large amount of excess infrastructure capacities from China and use them to build infrastructure in developing states and other developed

partners, which China hopes will have a positive effect on human development in underdeveloped states and the establishment of lasting trade and diplomatic relations, and finally to enhance president Xi Jinping's personal image (Anwar, 2019, p. 2; Shang, 2019, p. 2). This paper will focus on the non-material or social components of the BRI, but it will also avoid downplaying the significance of material goals.

The discussions of this thesis will be limited to the time frame from post-1978 up until present day because it assumes circa 1978 to be a natural, yet careful starting point of China's international identity re-building phase lead by the reforms of Deng Xiaoping (Mierzejewski, Kowalski, 2019, p. 44). China went from being identified as an outsider in the international system to becoming a member of the international society when it distanced itself from revolutionary communism and began to participate in international affairs when the reform and opening- up period was launched in 1978 (Acharya & Buzan, 2010, p. 45). However, it is uncertain whether the status quo great powers, with the US running point, are willing to accept the Asian newcomer and its Belt and Road Initiative which embodies China's intention to take more responsibility and produce norms in the international system.

Classical and offensive realists have contributed with valuable knowledge to the US transitions from middle- to great power status after World War II, and this paper owes gratitude to the realist tradition as it forms a part of the foundation that the literature review and the reflections of this thesis are built on. Isaac Newton and Bernhard of Chartres said it well: "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants" (Chen/ Newton, 2003/ 1675: 135). Realists are certainly considered "Giants" from the view of this thesis, but in past tense only with regards to describing and explaining the rise of China.

The most problematic trait of offensive and classical realist theories is their relatively static understanding of the structure of the international system as an anarchy, and that the characteristics of anarchy determine state behavior and social structures, also in the case of China. This paper emphasizes the international system as more dynamic, and critically – it is a social construct. It follows Wendt's understanding of anarchy as being "what states make of it", meaning that material structures are essentially dependent on social structures, like identity (Wendt, 1992, p. 395). Because classical and offensive realists exaggerate their focus on

anarchy and employ a rigid understanding of power which stems from Cold War and pre-Cold War experiences when theorizing on the rise of China, they fail to consider how changes in the structure of the international system like the increased density and exchange of ideas, norms, and institutions, affect the behavior of rising great powers today. These changes also call into question the concept of “great power” in IR which is traditionally understood as a state that has a large amount of military, economic, and diplomatic strength, and is able use these power capacities to advance its interests beyond its own borders (Ogden, 2019, para. 1). Other understandings of power like ideational or normative power, or often called “soft power”, is usually not included in this equation. If normative power or identity is included, it always depends on the structure of military, economic, and diplomatic power.

This paper believes that the structure of the international system has changed over time since the pre- Cold War and Cold War context. The increased social interconnectedness, more advanced information technologies, and the internationalization of national and regional ideas have greatly accelerated the development of national and international institutions and norms. In other words, we have seen a globalization of ideas, norms, and identities. These structural changes in the anarchy have arguably opened opportunities for states to extract normative power from the system. Normative power can be defined as the ability to “shape what can be normal in international life” (Kavalski, 2013, p. 247). Further, the rapid domestic economic and institutional development within China allows it to take advantage of these major advances within information technologies, which gives Beijing an effective channel to advocate and project Chinese ideas to the world.

In contrast, the high levels of insecurity that existed in the pre-Cold War and the Cold War due to the lower density of norms, institutions, social interactions, and the technology that spur social interactions, created an international environment that incentivized states to focus on and enhance their hard power capacities at the cost of others (zero-sum mentality). It is in these contexts that realisms were more useful to political science. Seen from a constructivist perspective, it was also more common for states, due to the insecurity of the system, to ascribe threat identities onto Others, thus causing states to compete for security and for bilateral and

multilateral relationships to be fragile and permeated with suspicion. States assigned those threat identities onto other states because of the uncertainty of the Others' intentions.

## Research Problem

This paper argues that offensive and classical realism are inadequate in producing thorough descriptions and understanding of the rise of great powers in today's context compared to the Cold War and pre-Cold War contexts. The debate surrounding the rise of great powers has mostly been conducted on the terms of the United States as a question of whether the US is capable and should protect the "status quo" of the international system against the rising China (Wæver, 2018, p. 78). In other words, a lot of IR theory is "produced by and for the West" and is based on an assumption that Western history is world history (Acharya & Buzan, 2007, p. 288). The research problem grows out of the bias problem caused by the dominance of American International Relations scholars, many of them realists, which calls for and leaves opportunities for more alternative perspectives within IR (Wæver, 2018, p. 75). This paper is a theoretical exercise which addresses offensive and classical realisms and advocates a material constructivist solution based on a literature review and document analysis of the Belt and Road. The BRI is more than belts, roads, and a push for a greater Chinese footprint in foreign countries. It is a vehicle of a broader social process playing out in China, one of identity building.

China has become the second strongest economy in the world despite of its authoritarian political structure and has proved resilient to external economic shocks, which has surprised policy makers and analysts alike in the West (Mierzejewski, Kowalski, 2018, p. 45). The democratic ideas of the US and its Western allies have dominated the liberal international order since World War II and were considered victorious over communist ideas when the Soviet Union fell. Beijing has advocated the idea of China as a key agent in the international system, and insists that in advancing its great power status, China is not seeking to challenge this established legitimate authority of Western international institutions or to push for regional hegemony in Asia. Beijing advocates anti-imperialist attitudes and anti-hegemonism, and claims that China's transition to great power status is non-traditional, meaning that China will not imitate US' behavior or ideas in establishing its great power identity. This view is countered

by the renewed relevance of the “China threat theory” originated in the 1990s, as well as offensive realism, who claim that China will follow in the same path as the US and seek to maximize its military and economic power at the expense of other states. This competition for economic and military power will eventually launch a dangerous security competition in the international system between the US and China.

There are some obvious strategic material incentives for China to construct its great power identity as a responsible actor and norm producer that cannot be ignored. If key agents in the international system accept Beijing’s identity narratives, there is a smaller risk of China’s ambitious foreign policy project, the Belt and Road Initiative to be slowed down. Because of the existence of these material incentives, offensive and classical realist perspectives are not irrelevant when analyzing China’s rise to great power in terms of the possible economic, security and strategic gains. For example, three of the main domestic motivations behind the BRI is to ship out excess industrial capacities, to reduce the developmental inequalities between China’s inland Western areas and the prosperous areas along the Eastern coast, and to enhance Xi Jinping’s status within China (Anwar, 2019, p. 1-2). The excess material capacities have slowed China’s economic growth since 2012 (Wang, 2016, p. 467). Despite these obvious material motivations, this paper maintains that the long-term goal of the Belt and Road is to advocate China’s identity as a responsible actor and norm producer in the international system through various narratives.

## Motives and Goals

The main goal of this thesis is to conduct a material constructivist exercise that has not yet been offered in the field of international relations which investigates the potential connections between identity and the rise of a new great power and provides an alternative understanding of what a great power is and the structure of anarchy. Limitations in time and resources are major obstacles for the potential of developing new theory. Therefore, this theoretical exercise does not follow the grounded theory tradition and will not produce new theory. However, the author is satisfied with providing a thorough description and hopefully an understanding of the BRI as a case of identity building and explain why the assumptions of constructivism are more analytically convenient than the perspectives of classical or offensive realism.

This paper criticizes theories which it has categorized as the “China threat perspective” consisting of China threat theories and offensive realism, and to a lesser extent classical realism, because they arguably distort access to more objective knowledge on the rise of China by relying on rigid assumptions on the structure of anarchy and definition of a great power. Yong Deng says that if China threat theory is not countered, it could “intensify to cause irreparable damage to China’s international status and translate into an insurmountable security dilemma (Johnston & Ross, 2006, p. 191).

## 2. Research Questions

1. To what extent is the BRI an exercise in Chinese identity building, and who is China’s intended audience?
2. Why are the classical and offensive realist schools inadequate in making descriptions and explanations for China’s rise to great power status?

### Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to fill a theoretical gap in current IR literature by using the case of the Belt and Road Initiative to demonstrate how China’s “road” or transition to great power status is essentially an identity building exercise driven by win-win ideas rather than rational calculations of material variables like economic and security gains incentivized by the desire to survive in a dangerous anarchy. It is a theoretical exercise that hopefully demonstrates through the literature review and an empirical analysis of public policy documents, that conventional, material constructivism is better fit to produce descriptions and explanations for China’s power transition process than classical and offensive realism.

The concept of identity requires more explanation. Identities are exogenously given and must be accepted and interpreted by Others, meaning that the process of China’s identity construction depends both on what ideal identity that Beijing tries to construct on itself and what identities

may be cast upon China from other key actors in the international system (M. Lanteigne, personal communication, 2022). The most important actors in this respect would be other great powers, and particularly the United States because it is still the regional hegemon in the West. China is not in full control of its “global” identity, and that was a major source of frustration in the 1990s given its concern over losing control over its economic structure and ideas to globalization (Lanteigne, 2020, p. 12, 68). China has shown a great dissatisfaction with other states giving identities to China, and it has been expressed through negative political sanctions against states perceived as insulting China as a nation (M. Lanteigne, personal communication, 07.02.22). One prominent example is China’s economic and diplomatic sanctions against Norway after the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Chinese dissident (opponent against Chinese official policy) Liu Xiaobo in 2010 (Kolstad, 2020, p. 4). This action was perceived by the Chinese government as an insult towards China’s legal and political system, and the following sanctions were launched to warn the West of the consequences of assigning negative identities on China (M. Lanteigne, personal communication, 15.04.2022).

Constructivism is, for analytical purposes, more convenient in offering explanations of the rise of China than classical or offensive realism because constructivism gives greater attention to the shifting, not static, contexts of space and time. As we saw in the introduction, the international system is now far more interconnected in terms of communication technologies, exchanges of ideas, and the rapid growth of institutions than it was before and during the Cold War. These components are all parts of the rather slippery term “globalization”, and with globalization followed the increased importance of identity in international relations. More importantly, within this modern context, we are seeing the rise of a non-Western great power with non-Western world views and a history of failed attempts to integrate Western values into Chinese political life. This modern context of the international system shapes a part of China’s rationale for constructing its ideal international identity. In the context of the increased importance of identity in IR, status remains a lucrative commodity for great powers seeking to enhance its power in international relations, and Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road emphasizes this point. Status becomes increasingly important as the US tries to slow down China’s growth because it triggers China to respond, and those responses will shape China’s great power identity. Indeed, China’s advances have triggered the US and its partners to respond as well,

through infrastructure projects like Biden's Build Back Better World or the EU's "A Globally Connected Europe", and they are also expected to affect China's great power identity building.

The first research question aims to answer to what extent the Belt and Road is an identity building exercise rather than an ambitious foreign policy project aimed to maximize its hard powers like the US did after World War II. Question two will move from descriptive to causal explanations of why the classical and offensive realist perspectives are inadequate in analyzing the rise of China, and why a material constructivist perspective is better (Bratberg, 2017, p. 75).

### **3. Theoretical Platform**

The purpose of this section is to explain why, in the author's opinion, mainly classical and offensive realist theories, but also the perspectives of China threat theory and power transition theory, are inadequate in analyzing the rise of China to great power status as embodied in the BRI, and why constructivism is better. The theoretical perspectives of this thesis owe much gratitude to Alexander Wendt's material constructivism. In the late 1990s, when Wendt wrote his "Social Theory of International Politics", the international system was still less interconnected in terms of information technologies, norms, and institutions than it is now (Blaikie, 2019, 255). This thesis believes that there is more identity construction in the international system today than, for example, during the Cold War when the US and Soviet Union were in open competition (M. Lanteigne, personal communication, 04.06.21). For that reason, Wendt's constructivist theories are perhaps even more relevant today than they were in the 1990s. We will return to China threat theory, offensive realism, and classical realism in the literature review section as they require a more in depth understanding than section 3 can provide.

The classical and offensive realist schools are not capable of producing thorough descriptions or explanations on China's transition from middle- to great power status. Classical realism and offensive realism both assume that state actors behave rationally to maximize their economic gains and their security and power gains to survive in the anarchic international system (DiCicco & Levy, 1999, p. 679). This is especially true for great powers, and their behavior is dependent on the structure of the international anarchy, which is a Hobbesian realm of



insecurity and a self-help system. In contrast, constructivism is “more flexible” and has less fixed assumptions than realism, meaning that the characteristics of the international system, for example, are not given (Rother, 2012, p. 50-51). There are more characteristics to be discovered that can explain great power behavior. The structure of the international system ought to be interpreted as dynamic and consisting of a myriad of social processes, and not fixed, law-like characteristics. However, it is possible to identify patterns in this “myriad” of social interactions that repeat themselves, for example norms, and analyze them to reveal if and to what extent they affect practical politics.

Identity has become increasingly important in the international system of states. It is largely ignored by realists because identity is a non-streamlined phenomenon, and it causes large analytical problems for them because it is difficult to quantify and it is not linked to the traditional sense of power (Lanteigne, personal communication, 10.05.22). It is problematic to assume a streamlined causal link between the conditions of the international system and political action or that states always act rational as a response to material conditions. However, many neo-realists acknowledge that there are exceptions. Conventional IR theories have developed from the experiences and the materialist ideas of the West and particularly the USA. The uncomfortable truth that realists are often confronted with is that their theory, like any other, is not neutral. In the famous words of Robert Cox: “Theory is always for someone and for some purpose” (Acharya and Buzan, 2010, p. 2).

Modern realism, this thesis would argue, is developed from the experiences of the Westphalian states system, and still serve the dominating interests of Western states over the interests of non-Western states. Realist theories maintain the status quo perception of the international order as a self-help system in which states cannot trust each other. If great powers perceive international relations as essentially a competition for hard power and consider power maximization as necessary to ensure its security and ultimately survival, then the anarchy becomes a self-help system powered by zero-sum logic. Anarchy becomes “what states make of it”. The dominating ideas of conventional IR theories are not “one size fits all” concepts or blueprints that could or should be attempted applied with ease on a non-Western phenomenon. Rother (2012) emphasizes the importance of culture and identity to IR theorizing “outside the West”, and this paper focuses on the latter (Rother, 2012, p. 50). It is in the view of this paper

the scientific ethical duty of realists, liberalists, and constructivists alike to look at its ontological and epistemological assumptions with greater scrutiny.

However, does that mean that this thesis advocates an exclusively non-Western theory over conventional IR theories? The answer is no, as it shares the core argument of Rother (2012)'s article that conventional IR theories have much experience that would benefit non-Western theoretical perspectives and could offer important contributions to a "theoretical decolonization" of international relations (Rother, 2012, p. 50). There is as of now no comprehensive non-Western international relations theory, but China is attempting to construct non-Western IR theories (Acharya & Buzan, 2010, p. 26). Rother says it well when he formulates a theoretical decolonization process as theory that is sensitive to non-Western perspectives without "imposing a Eurocentric view of the state system". In making this claim, he aligns with the conclusion made by Acharya and Buzan (2007) who call for a "wider rooting of Western IR concepts rather than" replacing them entirely (Rother, 2010, p. 26; Acharya & Buzan, 2007, p. 289). The benefits of such a development within IR would be the strength of experience from state development in the West in conventional theory combined with the strengths of state development and innovations in non-Western areas.

## Power Transition

Realist schools assume that stability and peace in the anarchical system is dependent on states checking each-others' power through power-balancing strategies, and that a high concentration of power in the international system causes instability and may lead to war. In contrast, the popularly applied perspective of power transition theory originated in the work of A.F.K. Organski believes that power competition between states is likely to cause war, and that hegemonies have a stabilizing effect on the international system and secures peace (Kim & Gates, 2015, p. 221). The term "power transition" means that a state's power exceeds that of another, and it became a popular perspective among scholars trying to explain the rise of China after the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s. Another contrast to the classical realist theories, or "balance of power" theories, is that A. F. K. Organski considers hegemonies to have a stabilizing effect on the international system and securing peace. DiCicco and Levy, but also Gilpin, label the logic behind power transition theory as "hegemonic realism" in contrast to the

balance of power logic of realism, which is also connected to the “rise and fall realism” of Layne and Kennedy (M. Lanteigne, personal communication, 15.04.22). Another conceptualization of power transition theory is the “hegemonic stability theory” (Kim & Gates, 2015, p. 221).

Power transition theory rests on two pillars. First, a country’s power depends on internal development, and this varies between countries. This variation causes nations to “rise and fall relative to one another” (Kim & Gates, 2015, p. 220). Second, power transition theory holds that the international system is designed by the hegemon, meaning that the hegemon has much power, or at least influence, to design the norms, institutions, and outcomes of international relations. The power-transition perspective advocates two central hypotheses to evaluate the likeliness of a power transition leading to war: “power parity” and the rising power’s “dissatisfaction with” the “status quo” structure of norms and institutions. The status quo is produced by the most powerful state in the international system (Kim & Gates, 2015, p. 222; Lanteigne, personal communication, 10.05.22).

Organski predicted the rise of China already in 1958, a long time before China’s rising power in the 1990s, and he also theorized on the dangers of a great power US in decline simultaneously as the rising (dissatisfied) China (Kim & Gates, 2015, p. 219). However, contrary to the beliefs of China Threat theory and offensive realism, which will be discussed in part 5, Organski is cautious to label China as a threat and emphasized that other factors apart from the declining power of the hegemon (US) and the rising power of a “challenger” needed to be considered (Kim & Gates, 2015, p. 220). Indeed, he acknowledges the possibility that the US can be a “hothead” and act as an aggressor, which is also one of the concerns of this paper (Kim & Gates, 2015, p. 222). However, Kim & Gates argue that in general, power transition theory has both empirically and formally been able to demonstrate that the “defender” does not act as the initiator of aggression because of its concern about maintaining the status quo. According to Kim & Gates (2015), Washington has started to show concern around a potential scenario of a rising dissatisfied China catching up with the US and has encouraged Japan and South Korea to join in on strengthening their alliance (Kim & Gates, 2015, p. 222). Furthermore, they say that power-transition theorists generally agree that a war between China and the US is not likely to happen until China’s military powers exceed that of the US. The latter claim shows that power transition theory, like offensive and classical realism, places hard power, specifically

military power, as the main explanatory variable for state behavior. In other words, mainly material conditions precede and affect state behavior.

This thesis strongly disagrees with power transition theory and argues from a constructivist perspective that it is not mainly material, but social structures that affect state behavior, and that is especially the case with rising China. This paper does not aim to explain or predict whether war will break out between the great powers, but it does argue that the ambitious flagship project of President Xi Jinping, the Belt and Road, is an exercise in building an identity of a responsible and norm-producing actor in the international system. Only when these identity building processes are acknowledged and analyzed, one may begin to theorize or make an “educated guess” on the likeliness of conflict and aggression in the international system. The existence and volume of military capacities alone, or even combined with economic capabilities, is no longer sufficient to predict state behavior.

Chan (2008) explains that when a “revisionist latecomer” eclipses the power of and takes over the power position of the previous leader of the international system, war is likely to break out (Chan, 2008, p. 2). He criticizes power transition theory and argues that there are two occasions of which power transition has taken place but not escalated into war, for example, the cases of the USSR and the UK being taken surpassed by Japan, India, Germany, and China (Chan, 2008, p. 26). He believes that, despite these peaceful shifts of global power, the remaining and arguably renewed relevance of power transition can be explained by the shifts not applying “to the central contenders for international dominance”, like the US, and that the “regime characteristics of some states make any power transition involving them less likely to result in war”. China’s rise to great power status is from a power transition perspective viewed as a threat to the status-quo and international stability (Chan, 2008, p. 5). However, Chan (2008) suggests that China is not considered a peer competitor alongside the US from a power transition perspective, and this view is also shared by China Threat theorists, but not C. Layne (offensive realist), for instance (Chan, 2008, p. 25-26). Rather, China is at best a regional great power.

As we recall, one of the original hypotheses to the power transition perspective is that when a dissatisfied rising power surpasses the powers of the status quo great power(s), the risk is higher for war than if the rising power is satisfied with the status quo. There are not many indications

that China expresses revisionist ambitions. Chen (2008) says that “compared to the conduct of other states (including the U.S.), China’s words and deeds do not suggest an obvious case of revisionist agenda” (Chen, 2008, p. 36). Further, he cites a scholar who said that Beijing is more integrated and “cooperative within international institutions” and adds that there is “significant skepticism” among US’ closest allies towards whether US’ policies promote peace and stability in the international system or not (Chen, 2008, p. 37).

## Shifting Contexts

There has arguably been a historic shift in international relations for the past forty years, and both classical and offensive realism fail to effectively include the possible effects of these changes in space and time in their analyses. The processes relevant to this discussion is the increased density and sophistication of communication technologies, norms, exchange of ideas, institutions, and the increased relevance of identity on domestic, regional, and global levels. Today, normative power as introduced in the introduction has become a more attractive commodity to states. States prefer soft-balancing whenever possible. International politics is no longer all about “the guns, turfs and money”, though it would be naïve to deny the relevance and importance of so-called “high politics”. The point is that China cannot rely on those material capacities alone to achieve great power status and to be identified and acknowledged as a responsible agent and norm-producer by Others in the modern context. The long-term strategy of the BRI is to construct a great power identity as a responsible agent and norm-producer that is perceived as an “equal” alongside the status-quo great powers, but also to be a reliable and preferred partner to the developing world and smaller powers.

Today, the power of attraction is preferred over the power of cohesion as the exercise of cohesion is not only problematic to diplomatic relations but can also be damaging to economic development and security. China has caught up on the potential benefits of acquiring and exercising normative power, and therefore, it arguably has incentives to construct an identity of a non-traditional great power and advocate opposite narratives to the predicaments of the China threat narrative and offensive realists. Marc Lanteigne (2020) describes this shifting context well when he says that China is the first state to transition from middle- to great power

status in an international context that is so dense in “norms, organizations, regimes” and information exchanges, and to enjoy the “tools” for projecting its ideas offered by the international system (Lanteigne, 2020, p. 16).

The Cold War is a critical juncture in time for the United States marking the now almost taken-for-granted legitimacy of the US and Western liberal-democratic ideas in the international system. The US rose from great power to global power status (M. Lanteigne, personal communication, 07.02.22). Realism suffered a major backlash after the Cold War as it had grossly miscalculated the military and economic capabilities of the Soviet Union and ignored the influence of actors beyond the state. During the Cold War, the world was far less “globalized” in terms of technological innovations and communication technologies. There was not much sharing of information across state borders, and if it were, it took time to transfer information between states and institutions. Crucially, this information was more under state control. Some of the information could only be accessed through physical presence, and even then, the opportunities to contain and limit information on state capabilities were much larger as information had fewer channels to leak through. There was also greater potential for states to manipulate information.

## Identity in International Relations

This paper uses Qin (2003)’s wide and basic definition of a state identity, which is “what a state is in relation to international society in terms of the identification between the two” (Acharya & Buzan, 2010, p. 45). State identification has, according to Qin, three operational degrees: “positive identification, zero identification and negative identification”. Identity building processes in Asia are characterized by a “high uncertainty about the role of Self and Others”, and China as a new great power thus needs to construct its ideal Self and to identify the Others (Rother, 2012, p. 58). A more specific understanding of identity is given by Jennifer Mitzen, who in her article on “ontological security” views state identity, like individual identity, as “a dynamic process from which action flows and in turn sustains identity” (Mitzen, 2006, p. 344). Identity is “formed and sustained through relationships, and when the “cognitive certainty” of the routines and practices of these relationships is strengthened, so is the states’ attachment to

these relationships (Mitzen, 2006, p. 342). Following the argument of Mitzen (2006), this paper argues that the developments discussed above in the post-Cold War context can strengthen this “cognitive certainty” of inter-state relationships, and therefore, makes the processes of states identifying Self and Others a more important part of the “game” than it was in the pre-Cold War and Cold War context. This paper hypothesizes that China is consciously trying to construct a great power identity as a responsible actor and norm-producer vis à vis the other great powers.

International relations theory has traditionally been based on the experiences and history of Western states. This creates a bias that Acharya and Buzan have creatively named a “Westphalian Straitjacket” when researching the rise of non-Western great powers (Acharya & Buzan, 2010, p. 17). This bias causes mainstream IR researchers, and particularly realists in a various degree, to exaggerate the effects of the structure of “anarchy” on state behavior and underestimate other ways in which the international system “could (and have) been constructed”. It is only in the recent years that other possibilities to what constructs the international system, like identity, have been acknowledged but it is still under-theorized, which leaves an opening for the theoretical exercise of this paper.

## Constructivism Over Realisms

The current suspicion of offensive realists in the US and the re-emerging China Threat School that the BRI is a Trojan Horse concealing Chinese imperialistic agendas to turn over established Western institutions is inaccurate and misleading because they give too much explanatory weight to the material aspects in the international system on state behavior in a time, and in a political space, where it is arguably more accurate to give explanatory power to identity. One example can be drawn from the US perceiving China’s monetary loans to developing states in the South not as aid, but as a strategy for China to use its economic power to indebt developing states and gain leverage for its foreign policies. From a realist perspective, China acts in an imperialist manner just like the US did as to create a dependency for these developing countries on Chinese finance and development efforts. Scholars in the conventional political sciences need to acknowledge that the changes in the international system have affected international relations and should affect our study of it. Ideas and identities matter more now than they did

in the post-Cold War period and during the Cold War. Modern realists need to soften their epistemological rigidity to capture significant variance in ideas over time and political space to produce adequate, modern explanations to China's rise to great power status as embodied through the BRI.

It is important to acknowledge that the US does have some advantages over China through its status as world hegemon since World War II and after the Cold War, at least from the perspective of J. Mearsheimer. The most valuable of these advantages is its accumulation of experience, knowledge, and legitimacy as an active and leading producer of norms and values to direct the "rules of the game" in the international system. Arguably, this power has given the US much freedom to shape the political and economic norms of the system to best serve American interests. These advantages can be conceptualized as "system determining power", meaning that the US can draw "power from structures in the international systems" and "create regimes" to benefit US interests (M. Lanteigne, personal communication, 08.02.22). It has been labeled "structural power" by Barnett and Duvall (Barnett & Duvall, 2009, p. 18). Comparatively, China has up until now been a "norm entrepreneur" but is now pushing for a "norm producer" identity (M. Lanteigne, personal communication, 08.02.22). The US has had more than 75 years to accumulate experience and knowledge through international institution building and leadership, using its hegemonic position to project its ideas of liberal democracy and battling non-liberal ideologies like communism during the Cold War. The Western and US' dominated ideas of the international order are not likely to remain resilient to major changes in political space, particularly in the face of rising Chinese economic power.

Ideas are the fabric of politics, and they are the main drivers for foreign policy action over material hard power capabilities. It is obviously not possible for researchers to gain direct access to actors' real intentions or to access perfect information. We cannot measure or count ideas as easily as, for example, states' military capacities, economic growth, or nuclear warheads. This is one of the reasons why constructivists and other critical approaches are having a harder time arguing that ideas have a greater push on states' international behavior than realisms have linking foreign policy decisions to material variables. However, by choosing a constructivist approach which emphasizes the humans behind the state and social structures



rather than states as “billiard balls”, we have a greater chance of gaining indirect access to actors’ ideas and to some degree theorize on how they might affect future political action. Indeed, there are other relevant actors beyond the state, but the state is in the view of this paper the most important actor in the international system.

A constructivist approach to the rise of China can reduce the risk of misinterpreting great power behavior and give too much explanatory weight to anarchy and states’ hard power variables like military capabilities, economic growth, or technology. This paper employs Wendt’s material constructivism and acknowledges that “social structures include material resources” (Wendt, 1995, p. 17). Contrary to neo-realists, for example, constructivists believe that material resources only “acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge” that surrounds them. Resources like military weaponry are not decoupled from social structures and knowledge, which means that the political will to use these military resources against other states does not rise in tandem with their quantity or quality. Wendt illustrates this point well when he says that five hundred British nuclear weapons are less of a threat to peace and stability in the international system than five North Korean nuclear weapons (Wendt, 1995, p. 74).

This thesis acknowledges that misperceptions of the intentions between state actors in the international system can cause dangerous security situations, like the security dilemma. The security dilemma is the situation where defensive security actions by one state can be perceived as signs of aggression by another state, and this situation may escalate into conflict. Therefore, constructivist approaches emphasizing ideas as drivers for political action in their research, especially how they are embodied and communicated through institutions and eventually form an identity, are key to reduce misperception among state actors. We should accept that states in some situations are power seeking and aggressive, but in some situations, they behave altruistically and seek win-win cooperation. In some situations, state intentions and behavior are not that clear cut to define as either altruistic or egoistic. We should also accept, from the perspective of “rise and fall” realism, that a new big player in the field means some changes to the “rules of the game”, but it does not need to mean that the entire game will be couped and dominated by this new player. Neither does it need to mean that we should assume that the foreign policy agendas of Beijing will mirror the authoritarianism and suppressing policies that

it imposes on its domestic level, which are doubtlessly worthy of criticism. China's active involvement in international institutions, relations with businesses, NGOs, and several levels of civil societies through the Belt and Road will result in some material (legal), normative and cultural adjustments on the international level. However, participation in producing and adjusting norms and institutions in the international system is far from equal to overthrowing, eliminating, or dominating international institutions, which are some of China threat theorists' and offensive realists' concerns. How do we best explain how the social aspects of the structure of anarchy and ideas affect great power behavior? The answer is identity, but to not ignore the significance of power and material variables. The starting point is to acknowledge that states, like the humans that really make out the black box notion of the "state", are sometimes selfish, sometimes not, their information capacity and quality vary in time and space, and sometimes their behavior is irrational.

The BRI is an exercise in identity building. This is a tough constructivist claim to make in the field of International Relations, which is a realist's playing field, especially in the context of returning great power politics as we have seen with Russia and the conflict in Ukraine. It might come off as somewhat naive to the defenders of realism and/or materialism, but such accusations are not justified. In the words of Wendt, «materialism does not have monopoly on pessimism or conflict» (Wendt, 1999, p. 24). The main reasons for placing explanatory weight in "identity" are the level of consistence in China's sensitivity to how it is perceived in the international system, and China's multilevel relationship-building in developing and developed states in Africa, for instance. Guo Sheng (2011) claims that it has become central for China's foreign policy strategy to promote positive labels on China's identity, particularly to counter the China Threat perspectives (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 138).

A central example of offensive realist criticism against China's efforts to promote positive labels on its nation is J. Mearsheimer. He acknowledges that China is sensitive to being labeled "revisionist" and he deems it only rational that China strategically uses the rhetoric of rising peacefully to avoid counter-strategies from the US. However, he claims that this is only a temporary cover to ensure that China continues to strengthen its domestic economic capabilities

before revealing its true intentions of maximizing power, undermining US regional domination, and establish domination in Asia through economic means (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 16).

It is not likely that China would display the same level of sensitivity to its identity as a non-aggressor if its long-term strategy was to establish regional hegemony in Asia and challenge the US through imperialist policies. One would assume that traditional hard-power strategies would be sufficient to achieve this dominance and push forward Beijing's autonomy at the cost of others, and that China would be less concerned with strategies to construct positive and lasting identities as a responsible actor and norm producer. What is the point of pouring material and human resources into building, maintaining, and strengthening relationships with other states, like in Nigeria – not just with the government, but several levels of society, if the goal was to dominate them? For example, Beijing has through the BRI offered Africa and Nigeria opportunities within “work”, “infrastructure”, “investment”, “connectivity”, “social cohesion”, “inter-cultural marriages”, “tourism”, medical aid, and “African unity” through its extensive railway projects, financial aid, institutional integration like partnering with the African union, and other infrastructure projects (Ibrahim & Bibi-Farouk, 2020, p. 22).

This paper must position itself somewhere in the academic debate between rationalists versus constructivists (Wendt, 1999, p. 37). In this debate, this thesis can be labeled as «Wendtian» material constructivism». It agrees with Wendt that there is a continuum between holism and individualism, and idealism and materialism. Therefore, the views of this paper are placed in neither of the extremes, but somewhere around the middle of the continuum. This thesis positions itself more towards holism than individualism, and it is more materialist than idealist (See “figure 2”; Wendt, 1999, 31-32). Holists are interested in how identities, not just state behavior, are affected by the international system (Wendt, 1999, 21). At the same time, one must not underestimate the significance of hard power in the international system, though it is not the main explanatory variable to great power behavior in the case of China.

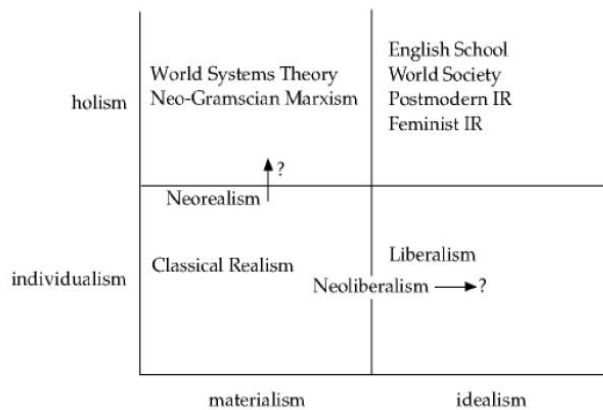


Figure 2

Source figure 2: (Wendt, 1999, p. 31-32)

International relations should be viewed as «ongoing process(es) of states taking identities in relation to Others (...)» (Wendt, 1999, p. 22). This paper adds to Wendt’s claim that international relations ought to be viewed as dynamic social processes of A) Others giving identities to China in relation to Self, B) China giving identities to Others in relation to Self, and C) China taking identities in relation to Others. Knowledge about these identity-building processes is best achieved through a materialist constructivist approach that favor explanatory power to social rather than material variables, but that does not ignore the relevance of materialism, power, or the state in international relations. Rather, “the «meaning and effects» of material structures «depend on the social structure of the system» (Wendt, 1999, p. 20). State identities are mostly made by and embedded in a systemic context, which supports this paper’s argument that the context of the international system affects state behavior differently now than it did before and during the Cold War (Wendt, 1999, p. 21). The context of international relations is essentially a social construct, identities are social constructs, and so are state interests (Rother, 2012, p. 55).

China does not want to be identified with the “threat” narrative of the offensive realists in the West, both for material concerns of being subjected to economic sanctions or resistance from coalitions of Western states, and for social concerns as it does not want to be identified as an aggressor or an uncivilized actor in the international system. Identities can come from many actors in the international system, and China’s key actors are sensitive to negative impressions and insults to the Chinese nation, particularly from those who benefit from trading with China (Johnston & Ross, 2006, p. 202). The key agents or at least initiators behind the Belt and Road

are President Xi Jinping, the CCP, and his government. They do not want China to be perceived as an imperialistic great power pursuing hegemonic goals in the international system. Rather, they insist that China's "road" to great power status need to be constructed on win-win cooperation with other states, which is connected to the Chinese traditional thought that reducing poverty enhances security (M. Lanteigne, personal communication, 15.04.22).

## Ontology and Epistemology: Logics of Inquiry

This section presents the ontological and epistemological frame of the research that will guide the thesis in answering research questions one and two. This project will be question-driven rather than excessively loyal to epistemology because it is a theoretical exercise rather than an empirical project. However, the author acknowledges the need of clarifying the analytical frame of this paper.

The famous quote "We inhabit a world of our making" illustrates the foundational logic behind constructivism, and the logic of this paper (Onuf, 2002; Onuf, 1989, 22). This paper's ontological assumption is that there exists a "knowable society" "independently" of researchers, but that "direct access to this world" is blocked by "cultural assumptions". Therefore, this thesis falls within the ontological category of "subtle realist" rather than "idealist" (Blaikie et al. 2019, p. 121).

According to Blaikie and Frost (2019) inductive logic is useful in answering "what" questions and identifying the "distribution of and patterns of association amongst individuals and social phenomena" (Blaikie et. al. 2019, p. 135). Inductive logic will be applied to answer (1) "To what extent is the BRI an exercise in Chinese identity building, and who are China's intended audience?". The qualitative data collected through this initial stage should offer a description which will then be used as a stepping-stone to a causal explanation of the thesis' "why" question. The epistemological orientation to research question (1) is conventionalism. The assumption behind conventionalism is that we cannot gain full access to the social world, but we can make "theories" that are "convenient tools for dealing with the world". This is appropriate since an overwhelming amount of IR theory employs a traditional understanding of

a great power and the anarchy, and because there is not much theory available on rising powers from an identity building perspective or identity as a component of anarchy. These tools do not, however, “describe reality” apart from what the scientist perceives to be real (Blaikie et al., 2019, p. 123). It is therefore important that the researcher strive for objectivity by staying sensitive to own bias and the bias of his tradition. Conventionalism works good in combination with inductive logic, and the same is true for the preferred subtle realist ideology rather than idealism (Blaikie et al., 2019, p. 131). In short, the analytical frame for research question 1, with inductive methods as the logic of inquiry, is the ontological ideology of subtle realism in combination with the epistemological tools of conventionalism.

Abductive logic will be used to answer question (2) “Why are the classical and offensive realist schools inadequate in making descriptions and explanations for China’s transition to great power status?” (Blaikie et al., 2019, p. 136). Abductive logic is useful to understand, not only describe the BRI as an identity building process because it emphasizes “the social actors’” own “meanings and motives” (Blaikie et al., 2019, p. 111). Moreover, it is convenient when there is a shortage of literature on the research subject, as is the case in this paper. The use of abductive logic is helpful in identifying “similarities and differences” in how the relevant agents “conceptualize and understand their social world”, and it may reduce the risk of imposing the researcher’s cultural or political bias on the data. However, the risk can never be eliminated as fully objective scientific inquiry is not possible. In other words, this thesis will be attentive to the subjects’ own concepts and meanings. This, however, does not mean that the paper adopts a purely “low stance”, as some pre-established analytical concepts, typologies or categories are necessary and useful tools in reducing and analyzing the data (Blaikie et al., 2019, p. 234). After all, these tools have been developed by scholars to make sense of complex and overwhelming social processes.

The epistemological orientation to research question (2) is constructionism. Again, it is necessary to remind ourselves of the ontological stance of this paper; we cannot directly access the facts of the social world because we are restricted by our own cultural ideas. However, the researcher may have a chance of overcoming some of the problematic cultural and political bias by focusing more on the language used by the research subjects than the language used by the researcher which is based in his scientific tradition. In other words, the researcher should be aware of the potential consequences of imposing prefabricated terms on the data. According to

the tradition of constructionism, the researcher can arrive at social scientific knowledge by mediating between “everyday- and scientific language”, but there are no specific criteria determining if this knowledge is true (Blaikie et al., 2019, p. 122). This means that we ought to use some of the analytical tools that we have available, but not force empirical data into preestablished molds, especially when keeping in mind that conventional political science is highly “Westernized”.

## **4. Methodology**

Rationalist methodology is “not designed to explain identities and interests” as they tend to assume identities to be constant (Wendt, 1999, p. 35 and 38). A more pluralistic scientific approach and interpretive methods are preferable to rationalist methodology in understanding the BRI as a vehicle for Chinese international identity building and why classical and offensive realist perspectives are inadequate in providing this understanding (Wendt, 1999, p. 40). This paper employs the theory of conventional constructivism and its emphasis on how state identities affect state interest and state action in international politics (Williams et. al., 2018, p. 52-53). According to Wendt, when looking at social processes like identity construction we analyze “how processes of interaction produce and reproduce the social structures, cooperative or conflictual, that shape actors’ identities and interests and the significance of their material contexts” (Wendt, 1995, p. 80). This citation is interesting to this paper as it can be used to distinguish between the “Threat Perspective”, which fits with the “conflict” concept, and the “Non-Threat Perspective”, which fits in with the “cooperative” concept. This thesis will use idea analysis to collect data from documents and answer research questions one and two (Wadel, 1991, p. 139, 143, 150).

### **Document Analysis**

Bowen (2009) defines document analysis as “a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents”, and that includes both “printed and electronic material” which need to

be interpreted to develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). The main purpose of using document analysis is to unveil “meaning” in documents (Bowen, 2009, p. 33).

It is often used as an addition to another method like a form of interview or observation to triangulate data and to strengthen the research by providing an additional source of evidence (Bowen, 2009, p. 28). As Bowen points out, however, document analysis has been used and is useful as a “stand-alone method”. This thesis chose to derive knowledge from the literature review and document analysis for three reasons. First, the Belt and Road is a recent phenomenon and a moving target (announced in 2013). Moreover, we are only recently seeing relatively sporadic responses to the BRI from the US and the West through the announcements of Build Back Better (2021) and “A Globally Connected Europe” (2021). If this paper were to include a primary source of data such as interviews, it would demand a lot of resources in terms of time and workload. The thesis would first need to identify appropriate research subjects, and second, perform interviews surrounding a very broad research phenomenon with many open questions and outcome uncertainties. The transcript of primary data would then need to be analyzed and interpreted in relation to the scarce available number of secondary sources of established literature and the document analysis. Second, as this paper has previously stated, this project is a theoretical exercise, not an empirical one. Considering the time and word-count limitations of this project, it would be idealistic and inefficient to process and inject primary data into a project relying so much on secondary sources. Research question two is a case in point because it is aimed to provide causal explanations on the adequacy of classical and offensive realism in producing knowledge on the Rise of China as embodied through the BRI. Third, document analysis is useful because documents are not affected by the research process or affected by the researcher’s presence other than the researcher’s potential bias (Bowen, 2009, p. 31).

To sum up, the main rationale behind choosing one method of data collection rather than two is because method- triangulation would be too time consuming and inefficient, and because document analysis is best suited to answer research questions one and two in the current context of the Belt and Road and associated processes being new and moving targets. This thesis argues that if this phenomenon is researched again, say in ten or fifteen years from now, document analysis alone is likely not sufficient as a method alone to gain knowledge on the Belt and Road as an identity building exercise, but it may be useful to contextualize the study and a method of



interviews, for example (Bowen, 2009, p. 30). It is reasonable to expect that the availability and quality of documents on the BRI, Build Back Better World, and A Globally Connected Europe, would be greater in a few years from now.

The method of document analysis is dynamic and up for change as the research process evolves; it is not carved in stone. However, there are some core features and general guidelines that will be followed while developing the literature review, collecting, and analyzing data from documents and answering research questions one and two. The features and guidelines followed in the document analysis in part 4 are inspired by Prior's 2011 article on using documents in qualitative research, and are listed in the following four stages: (1) get a brief overview of the content of the document, (2) use "archeological" methods to establish how the content was made, (3) investigate how the document is used by purposeful agents to construct a certain narrative, and (4) investigate how documents are meant to affect social structures and if there are empirical cases demonstrating that documents have affected social structures (Prior, 2011, p. 95, 104). The empirical cases investigated in this thesis are the Belt and Road Initiative and the US response of "Build Back Better World" and EU's alternative "A Globally Connected Europe" and related documents.

More specifically, Bowen (2009) describes the document analysis process in three stages: skimming (superficial reading), reading (more thorough than skimming), and interpretation (Bowen, 2009, p. 32). This process combines "elements of content analysis and thematic analysis". Content analysis means that the researcher organizes the text into categories that are related to the research questions for the purpose of identifying meaningful passages of text. Thematic analysis tries to recognize patterns within the data, and Bowen (2009) emphasizes the importance of the researcher to "demonstrate objectivity" and "sensitivity" in choosing and analyzing the documents. "Sensitivity" means that the researcher should be sensitive to "subtle cues to meaning".

Using document analysis to acquire and analyze qualitative data does not mean that we ought to accept the content of these documents as "evidence" or true (Prior, 2011, p. 99). It is crucially important for any observer of this thesis to understand that empirical data gathered from

documents and analyzed in this thesis are not hard facts about the social or material world, but they have a chance of demonstrating how and why different narratives are advocated by purposeful agents to construct identities. For example, it would obviously not be in good scientific spirit to accept the contents of the document “Visions and Actions on Jointly Building Belt and Road” as hard facts or evidence on China’s real rationale behind the Belt and Road (Bowen, 2009, p. 33). The constructivist stance confirms this: objectively defined interests are not sufficient to predict action (Bratberg, 2017, p. 70). However, we can focus on unveiling the narratives in construction and the ideas and meanings of the purposeful actors constructing them, as well as the potential consequences these ideas have had or may have to practical politics.

This paper shares the belief of Bratberg 2017 that ideas are key in understanding political actors and their behavior, and therefore it will focus on the presence of ideas, or specifically, ideas of identity in the document analysis. Ideas are the “drivers of politics” (Bratberg, 2017, p. 67). Idea analysis is broadly speaking “relevant for any research question in which actors, perceptions and decisions are involved”, and that is very much the case in the two research questions of this thesis. Ideas are central to international relations, and particularly as they accumulate over time into identities. We distinguish between normative and descriptive ideas. Normative ideas reflect what is perceived as valuable by actors. Descriptive ideas carry actor(s’) perceptions of what the world looks like to them (Bratberg, 2017, p. 72, 73). Idea analysis fits well with the constructivist views and approaches used in this paper. To analyze the BRI as an identity building exercise, this paper employs an inductive strategy using a predeveloped analytical model. The model will be developed through the literature review and then applied in the document analysis to answer research questions one and two. It is important to emphasize that the literature used in the literature review to produce the theoretical model will not be “re-used” in the document analysis because, citing Bergström and Borélius: “if the model is the result, it cannot also be the analytic tool” (Bratberg, 2017, p. 82, 90).

“The state is ... tied to powerful ideas of identity of belonging” and these identity ideas are transported in narratives which are “told and re-told” and interpreted in light of context (Medby, 2018, p. 1, 5). The interpretation of these narratives is key to the document analysis (Bratberg, 2017, p. 67.) This thesis emphasizes interpretation of the presence of ideas in a text over the

frequency of which these ideas occur (Bratberg, 2017, p. 92). The purpose of using document analysis to answer research questions one and two is to map out the dominating identity ideas of China and the United States and explain how these ideas may form the basis for action (Bratberg, 2017, p. 70). Rhetoric and argumentation will be central targets for the analysis, which is inspired by Aristotle (Bratberg, 2017, p. 26). The assumption of this paper is that these ideas form patterns of narratives intended, by agents, to support certain identities, and that document analysis focused on ideas is the appropriate method to acquire this knowledge.

Despite a lack of consensus on the methods of idea analysis, there are two core assumptions from Bratberg 2017 worthy of attention. The first assumption is that “objectively defined interests are not sufficient to predict action”, and this fits in with the previous argument made in this section that we cannot accept ideas communicated by agents through documents as facts on how the material or social world really is, or predictions on how it will be in the future. Rather, these ideas must be interpreted by the researcher and analyzed in relation to the contexts of which they are embedded. Bratberg’s second assumption is particularly relevant to constructivism: “Interests must be acknowledged and interpreted to form the basis of action” (Bratberg, 2017, p. 70). Perception is key in understanding how ideas as independent variables affect not only the political actions of actors but their identities. We cannot assume that ideas as they are understood by the sender(s) of said ideas are automatically understood in the same way by their audience, thus creating these dynamic processes of, in example, China taking identities in relation to Others and Others giving identities to China in relation to Self. Ideas are always interpreted by a specific audience, and it is how these ideas are perceived by their audience that forms the basis of the audience’s political action. It is not the ideas themselves that are key independent variables; it is the senders and their audience’s perceptions of said ideas, always embedded in complex social and material contexts, that are key in understanding contemporary international relations.

The specific focus of the document analysis is to investigate if there are regularities in the data that can answer research questions one and two. To create and maintain this focus, we need to review available relevant literature on the topic of China’s rise to great power status in general, and specifically literature on China threat theory, classical realism, offensive realism, and

Chinese perspectives, and from this review draft an analytical model to be applied in the document analysis.

The research process is considered adequately flexible to capture relevant data that would otherwise be lost because it is mostly pragmatic and question-driven, following the recommendations of Alexander Wendt, but it can also turn out to be flawed. In contrast to the idea analysis, the often-used method of studying ideal types, as known from M. Weber, are not fitting for this research as they would require a larger volume of fine-grained empirical data, which is very time consuming and costly. More crucially, the Belt and Road is still a relatively new phenomenon, a moving target, which means that much of the data required to develop ideal types may not exist. Indeed, China has eclipsed to great power status very quickly compared to the historically slower development of other established great powers in the system, like the United States. We do not know the outcomes of the Belt and Road or whether China's rise to great power status will slow down or continue, or if China's relations with the West or its neighbors in Asia will result in conflict.

## **5. The Literature Review**

The literature review process is key in “contextualizing” this work in relation to existing, relevant literature on the topic of China's rise to great power and “describe the bigger picture that (...) creates the (...) gap” of my thesis (Ridley, 2012, p. 6). The aim of the literature review is to “indicate the state of knowledge with respect to each research question”, and we can use this already established knowledge to build the analytical framework for the document analysis (Blaikie, 2019, 96). The literature review is divided into two sections: The Threat Perspective which reviews literature on China Threat theories, offensive realism, and classical realism, and the Non-Threat Perspective which reviews the perspectives of anti-threat theories and constructivism. A table overview of the key arguments of both perspectives will be offered in the conclusion, and finally, the analytical model is presented.

# The Threat Perspective

## China Threat Theories

The China threat theories grew out of the post-Cold War concerns of the West that communist, non-democratic China was becoming too powerful because of its rapid economic growth after Xi Jinping's successful domestic economic policies and reforms in the end of the 1970s and onward. Yong Deng describes the "China threat theory" as the process of other states and academics ascribing attributes to China as being "harmful" and "destabilizing" (Johnston & Ross, 2006, p. 186). He holds that these theories may lead to "discrimination" towards China and "political and psychological estrangement from its neighbors and other major powers" (Johnston & Ross, 2006, p. 199). This paper would go a step further and argue that the extent that the US and its allies succeed in assigning threat identities to China will affect whether China is identified and accepted as an equal, responsible and norm-producing player in the international system, and to what extent China will succeed with the Belt and Road. In the words of Marc Lanteigne (2020), China's efforts to build an identity "as a responsible and helpful partner... will... be tested" (Lanteigne, 2020, p. 81). The actors that have been leading in pushing the China threat theories are Japan, Taiwan, and the US, but China has perceived the US as the largest threat to Chinese interests (Johnston & Ross, 2006, p. 187, 198). There have been cases of the China threat theory being used strategically by states to justify strengthening its military power. For example, India used the China threat theory to justify its acquisition of nuclear weapons, and Japan is currently using it to enhance its military (Johnston & Ross, 2006, p. 194; Reuters, 2022).

Yong Deng broadly summarizes two responses from Beijing to the threat theories as "equating" the theories with Cold War power politics and by "reassuring the international community of China's peaceful intentions" by seeking recognition as an equal player in the system. The latter response is of particular interest to this thesis' claim that the Belt and Road is a case of identity building, mainly as an equal player and responsible actor in the international system, and a vital channel for China to project its non-threat narratives to counter the concerns of China threat theory and offensive realism. China criticizes threat theorists for employing an outdated "Cold-

War mentality” with regards to power and security by overstating its hard power capacities and “assign irresponsible, destabilizing motives to Chinese external behavior” (Johnston & Ross, 2006, p. 194; Lanteigne, personal communication, 2022). China threat theory strengthens the alleged distinctiveness of the “in-group” identity of the great power democratic identities, especially the US, by ascribing a negative identity on the “other”, in this case China (Johnston & Ross, 2006, p. 191). This in-group identity of the Western elites has recently been referred to as “small circles” by Xi Jinping and others (Al Jazeera, 2022, para. 7).

China threat theorists were concerned with mainly two security aspects of China’s potential rise to great power status, namely, economic threats and military threats against peace and stability in Asia and the international system. Emma Broomfield (2003) briefly describes the core argument of policy makers and academics in the West, the actors behind the China threat theories: in the context of China’s expanding economic power, CCP’s totalitarian dictatorship “with its expansionist goals...” for regional dominance “and ruthless policies cannot co-exist in peace with the United States (Broomfield, 2003, p. 265). In other words, China is not readily accepted as an equal player, responsible actor, or norm-producer alongside the great powers of the West. China’s attempt to assume the role as a great power involved in “governing” the anarchy among the great powers of the United States and its partners is widely perceived as a challenge against the established norms and institutions of the Western world, especially democratic ideas. Finally, the agents behind the China- threat narratives argue that China’s enhanced economic position will enable it to threaten the security, peace, and stability of the international system (Broomfield, 2003, p. 266). In the words of Larry Wortzel, “China seems locked in pre-Cold war, almost turn of the century modes of quasi-imperial competition for regional hegemony” (Broomfield, 2003, p. 268).

China first responded to the China threat narratives of the West in 1992 in an article in CCP controlled “The People’s Daily” which claimed that G. W. Bush had used the “China Threat” narrative as an excuse to sell 150 F-16 combat aircrafts to Taiwan (Storey & Yee, 2004, p. 21). The criticisms from China picked up pace from 1996 and onwards, and the government made use of its propaganda mechanisms to counter the threat-ideas of the West. The official Chinese response was to push for a “China peace narrative”, and Chinese resistance to the threat

narratives rose in tandem with the escalation of the US' threat theorizing (Storey & Yee, 2004, p. 22-23). China's resistance against the China-threat idea was evident in practice as well. For example, President Jiang Zemin continuously stressed the "peaceful rise" element of China's foreign policies in a speech in 1997, and so did Premier Li Peng in an interview the same year. However, the "peace" narrative died out around 2004 because the idea appeared more as "wishful thinking" to Beijing due to the ongoing crisis with Taiwan and other security concerns (Johnston & Ross, 2006, p. 200). China's resistance against the China Threat narrative became more coordinated and took the form of published "defense white papers" and a research group set out by the CCP to compare the "comprehensive national power of the..." USA, "Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Japan, and China" between 1988-1998, which concluded that China should be ranked number seven in the world in terms of "Comprehensive National Power" (CNP) (Storey & Yee, 2004, p. 24).

This paper argues that this intensifying "battle of narratives" in the early 1990s as described above between the US, including its allies, against China, illustrates two processes of identity building. First, the US was consciously and more intensively attempting to assign a "threat" identity onto China in relation to the US' and its allies' peaceful, democratic Self which has had monopoly of norm-production in the international system since World War II. Second, China responded by attempting to take on a "peaceful" identity as opposed to the US' threat narrative. One may further argue that Beijing's interest of national cohesion was strengthened in this period (see discussion under "Second critical juncture") as Chinese intellectuals and youth began to resist the perceived hostile policies of the US against China (Storey & Yee, 2004, p. 25). On the other hand, Beijing also faced some resistance from within when the public demanded that the government used a tougher approach to counter US policies against China besides mere rhetoric responses (Storey & Yee, 2004, p. 26).

We are very recently seeing empirical examples of actors in the West constructing and advocating China-threat narratives to counter China's relative material and normative success with the Belt and Road. In 2021, the US and EU both launched their economic foreign policy alternatives to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative. We will return to these responses to the Belt and Road in the analysis section, since the schema which concludes this literature

review will be applied to that material. Not surprisingly, the threat theorists' concerns about China as a military threat have been enhanced because of China's increased military capacities (Broomfield, 2003, p. 277). However, this paper agrees with Broomfield (2003)'s argument that a will to use that military power against other states does not follow consequently from the volume and quality of military capabilities (Broomfield, 2003, p. 278).

This paper agrees with Broomfield (2003)'s core argument saying that the China threat theorists exaggerate the potential threat that China's booming economy posed and poses against the stability of the international system and US interests. However, she argues that "China's priority is economic modernization and development..." which "... encourages cooperation with its neighbors rather than conflict" (Broomfield, 2003, p. 275). This is true, but it is only a part of the story. Economic modernization, growth, and development are secondary material consequences of a wider social process of international identity building, and the BRI is the embodiment of this process.

Further, it agrees with Storey & Yee (2004)'s argument that China is not likely to threaten peace and stability in the international system (Storey & Yee, 2004, p. 33). However, similar to Broomfield (2003), they base their argument on material economic variables such as China's contributions to "global economic development and prosperity" and its success in attracting foreign capital, but also remaining domestic challenges that restrain China from pursuing aggressive foreign policies. This thesis argues that China's foreign infrastructure policies should rather be interpreted as a part of China's efforts to be identified as a responsible actor and norm producer in the international system. This paper stresses that China is mainly concerned with constructing its great power Self and to be accepted as an equal competitor, a responsible actor, and a norm producer in the international system; it does not mobilize state efforts to overthrow the norms and institutions of the US and the West or to dominate Asia. The term "norm-producer" is inspired by Björkdahl (2012)'s term "norm-maker" (Björkdahl, 2012, p. 80). China's rise to great power status ought to be analyzed as a process of identity building. This argument is strengthened further by China's leaders interpreting the "China threat" narratives of the US "as a threat to China" already in the 1990s (Storey & Yee, 2004, p. 34). To put it this way: would China have been expressing and continued to express such high levels of sensitivity to how its Self is perceived by Others, especially great powers, if it sought to utilize



its hard power capacities to ultimately dominate Asia as a coercive hegemon and aggressively overthrow Western norms and US hegemony in the West?

## Offensive Realism

### Anarchy > < State Behavior

The ideas of offensive realists cannot only be found in academic work but have also had implications on public debate. A study by Liu and Yang (2012) analyzes US print media from 1992 to 2006, and they found that the emergence of China threat narratives corresponded with China's impressive economic uptick in the 1990s (Liu & Yang, 2012, p. 695). Further, they find that American media shifted its focus from China as a political or ideological threat onto China as a military threat, much because of the massacre committed by the Chinese military against peaceful pro-democratic demonstrators in Tiananmen in 1989 (Cheng, 1990, p. 1).

J. J. Mearsheimer argues that China's rise to great power status has the potential to "fundamentally alter the architecture of the international system" as well as launching great power politics back in "full force" (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 2). The "structure" that is referred to is the realm of insecurity and distrust in the "anarchy" of the international system that incentivize states to reduce this insecurity by maximizing their own security, whether it is economic or military, at the expense of other states. The best way to maximize this security, according to Eric Labs, is for the state to maximize its relative power (Labs, 1997, p. 5). Expansion in relative power means that states will take any opportunity available to enhance their power regardless of facing a threat or the division of power in the international system, as long as the benefits of power enhancement exceeds the costs (Labs, 1997, p. 11). Such opportunities are often connected to power vacuums (Labs, 1997, p. 16). The more powerful a state is, the larger chance it has at survival (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 5). The familiar security dilemma that might arise from states maximizing their power out of a rationale to reduce insecurity and ultimately increase their chances of survival via defensive measures, is that such actions may be perceived as offensive by other states, thereby reducing the security of all states (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 17).

The core of Mearsheimer's offensive realism consists of two parts. First, "the (...) structure of the international system forces states (...) to compete with each other for power". Second, emerging great powers are bound to seek regional hegemony and challenge the potential existing hegemon, which reinforces the structures of anarchy (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 4). This paper would interpret this process as a feedback loop between the effects of anarchy on state behavior, and the effects of state behavior on anarchy. Further, a regional hegemon will attempt to prevent other states from achieving similar power status (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 6). From the perspective of offensive realism, China cannot escape the effects of the structure of the international system on its power transition process; the international system will eventually push China into the role of a traditional great power seeking to maximize its own security and eventually seek regional hegemony through military means (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 10). In other words, state behavior follows causally from the law-like formal and informal structures of the international system.

Contrary to Mearsheimer's logic of anarchy, the argument of Anthony Reid suggests that the Asian region may follow a logic of anarchy distinct from the deterministic logic of anarchy of the West. The Malacca strait, for instance, has been a site of communication between China and its neighbors for a long time, and there are "profound commonalities in Southeast Asia (...) arising from a similar environment" and "a long history of maritime interaction" (Rother, 2012, p. 60). One of the most interesting common features of a regional "culture of anarchy" in Southeast Asia, as opposed to a Western understanding of anarchy, is the one that refuses regional collective defense. The 1971 declaration of "Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality" is an example of this culture (Rother, 2012, p. 61). This may strengthen the argument of this paper that China is not aiming to take on the identity of an "aggressor" in the Asian region.

Further, China has historically had a different cultural understanding of the state. China does not emphasize clearly defined boundaries in its perception of the state (Acharya & Buzan, 2010, p. 36). Rather, the Chinese understanding of the world is "all things under the heaven and the earth", which forms the foundation of the Tianxia IR theories. The controversial Tianxia theories are highly popular among Chinese scholars who attempt to build an IR theory consisting of traditional Chinese ideas (Chu, 2022, p. 57). The core idea behind these theories

is that an international order based on the ideas of Tianxia would better promote peace and stability than the current Westphalian system (Chu, 2022, p. 58). What makes the theories controversial is according to Chu (2022) their “selective (...) reading of (...) Chinese history”, exaggeration of Confucian pacifism, uncritical favorizing the “Chinese experience in theory building”, “celebrating (...) authoritarianism”, “deemphasizing” the patriarchal traits of Confucianism, “implicit racism (...)”, “projection of racial sovereignty (...)”, a static distinction between West versus Non-West, “advocating a Sinocentric world order” and covering up (...) “Chinese nationalism” (Chu, 2022, p. 61).

### Hegemony

The US is the leading norm producer in the international system and arguably still the regional hegemon of the West, or as C. Layne (2002) would argue; the US is a global hegemon (Layne, 2002, p. 121). Mearsheimer does not believe that a Chinese global hegemony in the traditional sense is possible due to the problems of sustaining power over large geographical distances, but China will seek to dominate its neighbors (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 6). The stability of the entire international system is at risk because China’s rising power will inevitably attempt to eclipse that of the US, and because the US will inevitably attempt to stop China’s rise to great power status.

Mearsheimer’s perception of a stable international system depends on the US remaining on top as the dominating military and economic great power of the world. He points out that the situation of a global bipolar system of the Cold War consisting of the USA and the Soviet Union is not likely to happen in Asia. There is a high probability that there will be more great powers ascending besides from China, though China will be the most powerful. Therefore, the result will be a regional multipolar system in Asia (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 32). According to offensive realist thinking, multipolar systems are more unstable than bipolar systems. In contrast, according to power-transition theorists, bipolar and multipolar systems are both unstable, but bipolar systems even more so than multipolar systems. Overall, his perception is that China is likely to seek regional hegemony through imitating the US imperialist strategies, and that Asia is likely to be more war-prone than Europe “during the Cold War” (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 9, 32). He says: “China poses a more serious threat to most countries in Asia than the United States does (...)” (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 24). He reasons this claim by acknowledging that the

US has acted aggressively in Asia in the past, exemplified by Korea and Vietnam, but they did not “threaten to conquer” them like a great power- China can do.

China, like other states, is assumed rational by realists and will architect its strategies accordingly to its need to reduce insecurity and eventually survive. Mearsheimer argues that the US historically has acted according to the “dictates” of offensive realism for the purpose of surviving the dangers of anarchy and position itself as a regional hegemon, reflecting that his offensive realist theory is inspired by the experiences of the US.

As has already been discussed, according to Mearsheimer’s predicaments, China will, in the long term, use its great power position to dominate Asia like the US dominates the West (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 3). For example, C. Layne refers to Benn Steil’s observation that the US projected its growing economic power against Great Britain through the establishment of the Bretton Woods system to “set the terms by which (Great Britain) would cede its dwindling domination over the rules and norms of foreign trade and finance”, meaning that the US replaced Great Britain as the leading norm producer within global economy (Layne, 2018, p. 92). Other examples of US’ favorable role of norm producer within global politics and political economy since World War II was its leading role in establishing other key institutions like the UN, the World Bank, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the World Trade Organization (replacing the GATT after 1995) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to govern the international system. Moreover, it had significant coercive power with its monopoly on nuclear weapons (Layne, 2018, p. 91). To sum up, the post-World War II order of the international system was dominated by both the US’ hard power and normative power. However, this article argues that soft power was secondary to hard power priorities in the time prior to the Cold War and especially the Cold War, since the Cold War underpinned the dangerous superiority of hard power capacities as means of pushing through the political will of great powers.

In terms of how the US is likely to balance China’s rising power, Mearsheimer argues that India, Japan, South Korea, Russia, and Vietnam will most likely side with the US in preventing China from achieving regional hegemony. It is important to emphasize that the security situation between the West and Russia was significantly different in 2014, in the light of Russia’s current aggression against Ukraine. It is uncertain whether Mearsheimer would uphold his argument on Russia joining the United States to balance China if his article had been

published today. Specifically, “containment” is the strategy that Mearsheimer recommends for the US policymakers, and this includes forming a coalition with as many of China’s neighbors as possible and taking the lead in checking China as most of those states are not strong enough alone to balance China (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 20). He considers China’s neighbors to be most likely to coalition with the US and attempt to balance China’s rising economic and resulting military power rather than band- wagoning. However, in making this claim, he underestimates China’s major economic power. For example, many of China’s “neighbors” resisted American pressure and joined the Beijing- initiated Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank which provides finance for infrastructure needs in China’s neighboring regions in Asia and has now in total 103 approved members (Weiss, 2017, p. 1-2).

In the case of relations between the US and China turning into a security competition, he drafts twelve likely “ingredients” or characteristics of this scenario. To mention some, they predict bloody “proxy-wars”, intensive “threat labeling” by both sides and travel restrictions (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 27-28). He makes references to similar situations during the Cold War, again, dismissing the possibility that the nature of the international system was different in many critical aspects before and during the Cold War compared to the post- Cold War period up until today. Moreover, when Mearsheimer reasons his arguments in examples from the Cold War, it indicates that much of his theorizing is not only an expression of problematic Western- centrism but is based on an outdated perception of great power-ness and power. He does, however, refer to the differences in geography between Europe and Asia, and predicts that the “likelihood of nuclear escalation (...) in potential conflicts is (...) smaller than it was in Europe during the Cold War” (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 30). Nevertheless, war is more likely in Asia between China and its neighboring countries than it was between Soviet and the US, and Mearsheimer bases this argument on the reasoning that wars in Asia would be less costly than wars in Europe. This logic can be summed up as the lesser the cost of conducting armed conflict, including that there is not a major risk of nuclear weapons being used in conflict in Asia, the greater the chance that states will engage in war (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 31).

### Neighbors and Conflict Resolution

This paper acknowledges Mearsheimer’s argument that China’s neighbors, Japan, India, Russia and South Korea, Vietnam, and Singapore, display major concerns around China’s increased power and whether China will use its power to dominate and violate their territories

(Mearsheimer, 2013, p. 26). Further, in context of the conflict in Ukraine, the relationship between China and Russia has complicated (Lanteigne, e-mail, 15.04.2022). The potential dangers of a state's increased economic and military powers cannot be ignored, and neither should one underestimate state will to use violence against other states under circumstances of conflict or uncertainty. Dismissing the dangerous nature of power would indeed be dangerously naïve and idealistic, and that is why this paper maintains that material structures are not irrelevant for international relations; they are just not the main explanatory variables for great power behavior.

Mearsheimer argues that China is likely to resolve its territorial disputes, for example with Taiwan, through military coercion. As we have seen in the recent months, China appears to reconsider its threats against Taiwan in light of the Ukraine conflict and Russia's failure to achieve its goals with the invasion (Martina & Bing, 2022, para. 1-5). The best way for a lasting resolve is by China ultimately achieving regional hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 13). The US should respond with containment policies, which he argues, is a defensive action, but he admits that war is a possibility (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 24). It is important to emphasize, however, that Mearsheimer agrees with diplomat Cui Tiankai that it is China's neighboring states that have initiated territorial disputes in the past few years, not China (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 18). Further, he does acknowledge that China expresses no intention to wage war with its neighbors or the West, because it would cause serious economic backlash to China and global trade (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 16). Lastly, Mearsheimer does visit non-material strategies when he recommends that China should use the rhetoric of rising peacefully to avoid counter-strategies from the US. The narrative of a peaceful rise is according to offensive realism only a temporary cover to ensure that China continues to strengthen its domestic economic capabilities before revealing its true intentions of maximizing power, undermining US regional domination, and establish domination in Asia through economic means. However, the relevance of the "China peace narrative" has decreased since it fell apart in 2004.

A strong counter argument to Mearsheimer's claim that China is likely to use violence and act revisionist to solve its disputes in Asia is that China has "settled most of its border disputes on terms generally favorable to its counterparts" (Chen, 2008, p. 40).

Regarding China's alleged goal of dominating its region through economic means, Mearsheimer criticizes China for using threats and employ economic sanctions against its

rivals, which arguably “raises the temperature and undermines Chinese efforts to pursue a low-profile foreign policy” (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 19). Here, it appears that Mearsheimer ignores the significance of the international principles of “sovereignty” and non-interference, norms that are important to all states, but China in particular. Quite the contrary, this thesis would rather argue that such classical diplomatic and economic responses to perceived violations of sovereignty or perceived threats to state security enhance both national cohesion in terms of Beijing exercising its ability to protect China’s global integrity and more importantly, is a central expression of Chinese global identity building. It is, using the concepts of realism, defensive. We will return to the concept “national cohesion” under “The Non-Threat Perspective”.

Mearsheimer further says that “China has major economic and political interests in Africa”, just like the US. That is doubtlessly true. However, this thesis holds that China, from an identity building perspective, has a long- term political interest in strengthening diplomatic and economic ties to African countries by playing on a narrative of shared identities with both African governments and non-government actors. One of which is the historical narrative of both China and African countries having experienced the traumas of Western imperialist policies, racism, and economic exploitation. Further. China has been able to strategically take advantage of local frustrations in Africa over neo-colonialist policies from European states and the US (Lanteigne, personal communication, 15.04.2022). Consequently, as these tactics have been relatively successful seeing that many African countries have signed on to various Belt and Road agreements, both China and the African continent may benefit materially in the long-term. A central rationale behind China’s win-win oriented diplomatic and economic approach to Africa is Beijing’s perception of the development model of the US and the West, growing out of liberal democratic ideas, has failed in reducing poverty and increasing stability in developing states.

Mearsheimer refers to events in which China has opposed to the US sending military vessels into the Yellow Sea and the South China Sea and uses them as empiric representations supporting his arguments that China already acts in line with offensive realist theorizing (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 10-11). What these examples demonstrate, however, is that China, as any state, has legitimate security concerns in its own region due to the insecurity of other states’

intentions in the international system. Not to mention that maritime rights is considered the first pillar of national interest by President Xi Jinping, so it is only to be expected that China wants to maintain a footprint in its surrounding waters. In the opinion of this paper, China perceives US military presence in its neighboring seas as a potential security threat, particularly in the historic context of the US' previous offensive hard-power foreign policies, and in the present context of the US' declining power vis a vis China's ascending power. Mearsheimer partly acknowledges that China has suffered exploitation and violation of its sovereignty from US' forces in the past, during the First Opium War and the end of World War II, and that it makes sense that China is concerned with Americans roaming the South China Sea (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 11).

This paper maintains that China is not likely to "follow basic realist logic", in the words of Mearsheimer, because the conditions of space and time has fundamentally changed compared to the international system during and prior to the Cold War. China's rationale to behave imperialistically and using offensive security strategies to maximize its military power is therefore weakened compared to if the state had power-transitioned, for example, fifty years ago.

Mearsheimer compares the likeliness of China's strategies and actions to the US strategies and actions during the Cold War (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 21). For instance, the US was ultimately willing to use nuclear weapons against the Soviet Union because they perceived the risk of the Soviets launching their nuclear weapons against the US first as alarmingly high. He regards the context of the international system as a set of "laws" that prevent China from fulfilling its will in the international system without coercion. Arguably, he fails to see the profound effects of changing political space over time on the foreign policy strategies of China. For example, some of these changes include the failures of the US to fulfill its hegemonic responsibility to ensure stable economic and human development in developing states and recovering the global economy after recession like in 2008, and China has been able to take advantage of those "windows of opportunity" to strengthen its normative power and exercise its will in some areas in the international system without turning to force. This paper expects that the empirical document analysis will demonstrate that the Belt and Road is a long-term identity building strategy rather than a short-term power-maximizing strategy.



## Nationalism and Comparing Self to Others

Nationalism is another concern brought up by Mearsheimer, and we further discuss Chinese nationalism and how it is related to national cohesion in the section reviewing Mierzejewski and Kowalski (2019)'s social constructivist perspective. He claims that nationalism is likely to be a core cleavage in the United States; China rivalry as a nationalist narrative makes out a strong form of group loyalty which "overrides all forms of identity" (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 33). Further, he labels "hyper-nationalism", the phenomenon where a nation not only feels superior to another but labels it a threat and demonizes it, can be a "source of war" (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 34). This paper agrees to the latter statement, but it suggests that hyper-nationalism and "demonizing" labels are not prevalent at least in Beijing's ideal "global identity" which it attempts to construct through the public policies of the BRI. He goes further in expanding his argument of the prevalence of nationalism in China to be not only a top-down phenomenon, but that there is a high level of nationalism in the Chinese public as well. This, he argues, makes China "ripe for hyper-nationalism", an argument which this thesis dismisses despite there being some signs of increased Chinese civil resistance against the US.

This thesis agrees with Mearsheimer when he says that nations tend to compare themselves with other nations, particularly when it comes to material capacities (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 34). As this paper has previously stressed, material hard-power capacities do matter in international relations, though they cannot be assumed to always be the main drivers of state behavior. It appears peculiar from the perspective of this paper that Mearsheimer does not tease out the concept of identity in his theorizing, as great powers also tend to compare their soft power and overall identity to that of others. Indeed, his reluctance in theorizing on identity can be argued to be an indication of the epistemological inadequacy of offensive realism to describe and explain the rise of China. However, this paper would rather formulate the process of nations comparing themselves with other nations as states consciously attempting to construct their identities in relation to Others and assigning identities to Others. We will later see in the review of Mierzejewski and Kowalski (2019) that the degree of which states are free to be selective of their identities is rather limited. The main criticism of this paper towards Mearsheimer's offensive realist theory becomes very clear after this discussion, and it can be made on Mearsheimer's own terms: the current structure of the international system drives great powers

to promote positive labels of their nation-state and thus attempting to construct certain international identities.

The potential benefits of and attractiveness of using military power to protect and serve state interests abroad has decreased compared to the context of the Cold War. In other words, this thesis reaches a different conclusion than Mearsheimer who claims that “in sum, there is little basis for the claim that China is an exceptional great power that eschews realist logic” (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 39). Because of critical changes in the structure of the current international system compared to the pre-Cold War and Cold War context, the likelihood of China acting out on an identity as an “imperialist aggressor” and traditional great power within Asia and against the USA is relatively low. This standpoint is not grounded in liberalism’s “economic interdependence” theory either, which claims that the mutual dependency of upholding trade relations between China and the US, for example, provides a powerful incentive for peace (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 40). The BRI is a case in point of China pursuing identity building goals. Rather than displaying short term strategies for maximizing profit, the BRI is a unique foreign policy model which is characterized by long term- strategies of global identity building. Therefore, it indicates that China does not follow the predicaments of offensive realism. Beijing uses the BRI as a vehicle for long- term identity building strategies to construct not only stable economic relations and diplomatic ties, but to establish lasting, multilevel win-win relationships with other states and non-state actors, and consequently reduce insecurity in the anarchy and the risk of conflict or war.

When looking into the review of Mierzejewski and Kowalski’s “Selective Identities” under the “Non-Threat Perspective” of this paper, we will see that national cohesion is a precondition for China’s potential success in promoting positive identities on its nation on an international level. It has remained a vital concern to Chinese national interest for three decades, first through former president Deng Xiaoping’s period for the purpose of strengthening China’s domestic economy and development to prepare the state and the public for increased economic and diplomatic interaction with other states, and then in current president Xi Jinping’s career. Mearsheimer argues that hyper-nationalism could lead to conflict or war, but as this thesis holds, Beijing appears to have every intention of avoiding war with the US and its neighbors.

This paper expects to find indicators of China's efforts to avoid being identified according to the gloomy predicaments of "China Threat Theory" in the document analysis process. However, it does not expect to find that these efforts are mainly reasoned in Confucian culture. Mearsheimer claims that culture is the main explanation that Chinese policymakers and academics refer to when they claim that the rise of China is the rise of a non-traditional great power (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 36-37). This may well be true, but this thesis emphasizes that it is not culture that makes China's power- transition non-traditional. It is how the current context of the international system provides greater incentives for soft- power balancing through promoting attractive identities over hard power balancing – incentives that were not as strongly present in the context of the pre-Cold War or the Cold War. If we assume states to be mostly rational and hold survival as their goal, this paper argues that in today's socially interconnected and technologically advanced context of the international system, rational state adaption to the system's condition entails at most maximizing its power of attraction by advocating positive identities, and at least, minimizing the risk of containment or aggression from Others by advocating tolerable identities.

Mearsheimer criticizes Confucian "theory", which has been subjected to various and open interpretation for a long time, for not reflecting the actual behavior of Chinese policymakers and strategic culture over "centuries" (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 37). His argument that China has not acted according to the "dictates of Confucianism" is true, and it is hard to deny when looking at the Maoist era, for example. The same criticism can be made about the United States (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 38). There are numerous examples of state elites deriving far from the "dictates" of their liberal democratic ideology, like the US' devastating invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan under the high banner of "war against terrorism" or the CIA's torture strategies against suspected terrorists that have not faced a just process of trial. The point is, from the perspective of this thesis, that no theory is an "accurate description of (...) strategic culture", as culture is neither static over time, nor can it be assumed to hold the most explanatory power to state behavior over varying time and space. This paper does by no means claim that China has not forfeited aggressive policies against its own population or its neighbors in the past.

The links between the Chinese history of Confucianism to China's current international behavior are learning and adaption, meaning that China has chosen a pragmatic approach to both culture and ideology and chosen the parts that best serve China's political and economic

goals on domestic, regional, and international levels. China has discarded the revolutionary front of communism, for example, and now advocates a socialist- capitalist hybrid which is adapted to Chinese national conditions and national interests. This thesis is organized around three critical time periods spanning from the late 1970s until today, as we will return to in the review of Mierzejewski and Kowalski (2019). Through these three time periods, there are strong indicators that the Chinese political elites have learned from the social and material failures of revolutionary communist political and economic models. Therefore, they have shifted their strategies towards a softer, non-revolutionary version of communism in the form of a modified Chinese socialist model that contains elements of renewed interpretations of Confucian culture, but also, a pragmatic adaption to and adoption of, capitalist market principles that serve socialism and state development.

Mearsheimer supports the argument of Alastair Iain Johnston that the “parabellum paradigm”, which means that China values the “use of pure violence to resolve security conflicts”, holds an equal status in “traditional Chinese strategic thought”, but is mostly dominant (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 37-38). There is much empirical evidence that China does not turn to brutal violence to resolve security conflicts. For example, Yong Deng in Johnston & Ross (2006) says that since the mid-1990s, China has tried to “deepen China’s international interdependence”, to forge multilevel partnerships, “and embrace various forms of multilateralism”. Moreover, he argues that it is “well documented” that Beijing has been concerned about its “image” and that this concern has “contributed to China’s progress in compliance with the international arms control and disarmament regimes” (Johnston & Ross, 2006, p. 201). This is hardly an expression of Chinese values encouraging the use of violence to resolve security conflicts. This paper suggests that China prefers to use conventional strategies of diplomacy or economic sanctions to solve its disputes, and to construct an identity which strengthens China’s normative security. According to Mearsheimer’s thoughts, related to the previous discussions of nationalism and Confucian culture, the alleged emotional aspect of “cultural superiority” of Confucian culture may lead China to wage a just war against states they consider “immoral” (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 38). This thesis does not believe that the center of gravity in China’s rationale to advocate Confucian culture is its alleged “superiority” to other cultures. Rather, China maintains a pragmatic approach to the ideas of Confucian culture and looks at how they may guide Chinese foreign economic policy and diplomatic relations towards other nations and cultures and serve China’s domestic interests.

### Backbone of “Status Quo” & C. Layne’s “Pax Americana”

The US’s road to regional hegemony started in 1783 when gaining independence from the British Empire, and it was generally characterized the next hundred years by imperialist strategies such as targeting Native Americans to take their land, buying territories from European colonialists, conducting war against Mexico to gain control of the South West and eventually pushing the European colonialists out of the Americas following the Monroe doctrine (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 7-8). As Mearsheimer himself points out, the US started its journey towards regional hegemony as a small nation, in contrast to China which became more concerned with involvement in the international system after it had strengthened its national economic power and control (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 9). Therefore, he argues, China will not seek to conquer territories in its own region, because it already has strong territorial power, but he does argue that China will try to “maximize the power gap” between China and its neighbors.

J. Mearsheimer is supported by fellow theorists like Christopher Layne who celebrates his “Tragedy of Great Power Politics” as the greatest contribution to realist theorizing since Kenneth Waltz’s “Theory of International Politics” (Layne, 2002, p. 120-121). Layne draws references to two orders of peace and stability in the international system caused by the successful policies of Western political systems: the “Pax Britannica” from 1815 to the beginning of the first world war, and more importantly to this discussion, the “Pax Americana” post 1945 (Layne, 2018, p. 89-90). Layne explains this lasting peace in the international system as being formed and maintained by the Western liberal and economic values and policies conducted by hegemonic Great Britain, a time named Pax Britannica, and later the hegemonic (though heavily challenged during the Cold War) United States (Layne, 2018, p. 90). This explanation is conceptualized as “Hegemonic stability theory”, and the core argument of this theory is that “a liberal international order requires a hegemonic power to manage, and stabilize, the international political and economic systems” (Layne, 2018, p. 92). This power has since World War II been the US, but it is rapidly declining. Layne describes the “Pax Americana” into four categories of power: economic power, institutions, and soft power (Layne, 2018, p. 94).

C. Layne shares the perception of J. Mearsheimer that China's rise to great power status will lead Beijing to seek "regional hegemony" and that it is only a matter of time before China's military power exceeds the one of the US (Layne, 2018, p. 94-95). Further, he expresses deep concern of China's increased "relative economic power" compared to the US and European powers. For example, China has taken the lead in exports, trade, manufacturing, and technology, the latter of which is considered an immediate determinant of economic growth (Layne, 2018, p. 95-96). It does not help the US' hegemonic position that it has become one of the biggest debtors in the world, and that China had to step up to "nurse" the global economy back to health during the Global Recession between 2007-2009 because the US was not capable of fulfilling its hegemonic duty to "jump-start recovery by purchasing other nations' goods" (Layne, 2018, p. 97). Layne makes an important point about China's economic pull: "economic trends suggest that" China's neighbors in Asia will be attracted to cooperate with China because of the "overpowering magnetic pull of the Chinese economy" (Layne, 2018, p. 99). In contrast, this paper argues that it is not only economic variables that attracts other states, particularly developing states, to cooperate with China. It is China's great power identity narratives as a powerful and responsible, anti-colonialist alternative to the US that attracts the support from many non-Western partners in Africa, South America, and Asia, especially as it is projected through the Belt and Road. Also, the frustration of many regional African and Asian states towards the US' economic development and diplomatic policies in Africa and parts of Asia has played a crucial role for the rallied support for China's foreign economic and political policies.

One example that confirms the trend of US' declining economic power, and this paper would argue soft power as well, is the G8 institution (group of eight largest economies) changing into the G20 in 2008 after pressure from China and other large emerging markets that they ought to have a greater say in "international economic affairs" (Layne, 2018, p. 100). He also presents the powerful argument that after the Great Recession, the "prestige and authority of the United States and Europe as stewards of the international economy" had drastically declined. This paper adds that this development illustrated that the US and its European allies were no longer the undisputed leading norm-producers of the international system, and that the point of the spear of the booming Asian economies, China, was taking on a greater role as norm-producers rather than just norm-entrepreneurs. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank is an empirical example of China attempting to establish its identity as a norm-producer within economic development and management in the international system. It is also a case of a Chinese

international project that the US tried to curb under the Obama administration, but failed (Layne, 2018, p. 102). Interestingly, China attempted to integrate itself more strongly with the US established institutions of the IMF and World Bank in 2010, but it took the US six years to have the US Congress “enact the necessary legislation” to enhance China’s voting rights within the organization (Layne, 2018, p. 103). This event, Layne (2018) argues, incentivized China’s decision to establish the AIIB. Contrary to Mearsheimer, Layne pays more attention to social structures like status and “ideational power” and the importance of prestige. For example, he admits that China’s economic success and resilience after the 2008 global recession and, at least in some cases, soft- power pull and growing attention to its economic models, puts the American model or the “Washington Consensus” on “free markets, democracy and globalization” as only path to “economic and political development” into question (Layne, 2018, p. 100). Moreover, this thesis would argue, the American-dominated understanding of what it entails to be a “great power” and the understanding of “power” itself should be questioned.

As pointed out by Layne (2018), many analysts argue that the Belt and Road will be the Chinese alternative to the Marshall Plan and that it is a strategy to establish China’s dominance over the “Eurasian ‘heartland’” (Layne, 2018, p. 101). This thesis disagrees with this conclusion for at least two reasons. First, the Marshall Plan was launched by the US in 1948, a time where the US held the undisputed position as the only world hegemon. In contrast, the BRI was initiated in a time where China’s economic powers in some respects had surpassed those of the United States, and where the US hegemony was declining in both social and material aspects. However, China is still inferior in terms of hard power like military capacities compared to the US and its allies. Second, the Marshall Plan was an emergency rescue plan aimed to recover the substantial damages on European economies and infrastructure to recover the global economy. This situation gave the US a form of “blank canvas” and its military and economic superiority gave it a great pull in terms of molding the economic, military, and diplomatic relations of the Western world, along with taking the lead in establishing international governance norms based on the American ideas of liberalism. In contrast, China’s Belt and Road is not aimed to recover material damages from war or violent conflict, and the world economy does not need “repairing” like it did in the aftermath of World War II (Ibrahim & Bibi-Farouk, 2020, p. 6-7). However, it does need recovery after the Covid-19 pandemic. The question one may ask is what role China will take in healing the global economy during and in the aftermath of the conflict

in Ukraine, as it obviously has severe consequences for global trade in fossil resources from Russia and various food resources from the fields of Ukraine. Moreover, the BRI is likely to face large blowbacks due to China's complicating relationship with Russia and the fact that some of its planned routes will go through Eastern-Europe and Russia. Beijing has tried to maintain a "neutral" position regarding the conflict in Ukraine to avoid being "associated with the conflict", but also to not break the "no limits" partnership that it made with Moscow only a few weeks before the outbreak of the Conflict in Ukraine (Denisov, 2022, para. 15-16; Martina & Bing, 2022, para. 7). Beijing's "neutral position" is balancing on a thin line seeing as it is criticizing Western sanctions on Russia (Martina & Bing, 2022, para. 6).

The future of the international system, according to "lock-in" strategists, entails China aiming in the long term to enhance its military capacities so that it can compete with the US to dominate Asia (Layne, 2018, p. 106). Indeed, like the argument made by J. Mearsheimer, they believe that China's narrative of "peaceful rise" and careful integration into the global economy under the reforms of Deng Xiaoping was only designed to allow China to advance its economic and military powers so that it would be capable of challenging the US. The assumption of lock-in theorists, according to Layne (2018), is that the Pax Americana liberal order can be maintained if its "institutions are reformed". However, Layne (2018) dismisses the assumptions of lock-in strategists and says that if the US were to reform the institutions of the Pax Americana, it risks undermining its own international influence and reduce its power to act unilaterally (Layne, 2018, p. 107). Layne (2018) argues that China is not close to becoming a global hegemon compared to the US after WW II, but it will act like "any Great Power". Contrary to Mearsheimer, however, his assumptions are closer to those of this paper seeing as he does not believe that we will "see a dramatic overhaul of the international economic system" and he acknowledges that China, unlike the US, has been "a victim of Western Great Power policies of imperialism and colonialism" (Layne, 2018, p. 108). He does fear, however, that China will attempt to change the norms of democracy, humanitarian intervention, human rights, and the responsibility to protect (Layne, 2018, p. 108).

This paper will not join in on speculation whether China will attempt to undermine the norms of the liberal order listed above, because it is not possible to gain access to Beijing's real intentions. It will point out, however, that China constructs a narrative of "peaceful coexistence" which counters Layne's perception of China as a threat against the established



norms and institutions of the status quo. Peaceful coexistence suggests that it is possible for different value systems to exist side by side in the international system without clashing into conflict. Liberal democratic states like the US and authoritarian socialist states like China can from this perspective co-exist as “governors” of the international system, despite of their domestic ideological differences. Sovereignty is important to China, and one could expect, following Beijing’s logic, that China will respect the sovereignty of other states and not impose its own value system on them. The problem, however, is that China’s attempts to distinguish the domestic and international spheres of governance and identity breaks with the logic of the status quo of the international system which is founded on the liberal democratic ideas, and one could argue, is intimately connected to the domestic identities of the United States and its allies. This is a tough normative landscape to navigate for Chinese policymakers attempting to construct its great power identity while avoiding escalation of conflict over ideational cleavages between Chinese authoritarian socialism and democracy, or between international norms like sovereignty and human rights or responsibility to protect (R2P) (Layne, 2018, p. 109).

Institutions like the ones above do not exist in a “vacuum” and they are not neutral. Layne (2018) argues that that they “reflect the distribution of power in the international system”, indicating that the United States and its allies have enjoyed much autonomy in constructing the normative landscape of the international system as best fits their domestic needs (Layne, 2018, p. 110). Layne’s account of offensive realism, like Mearsheimer but less so, is too materialistic compared to the constructivist account of this paper. This thesis agrees with the argument that institutions and norms do not exist in a vacuum and that the institutions and norms of the international system are dominated by the ideas of those states that are more powerful than others. However, in today’s modern context enabling more voices to be heard, we are seeing that the dominating ideas of “Pax Americana” are withering not only because of a rising China, but because China sides with the developing world and growing economies of Africa, in particular, under the relatively successful narrative of a common history of subordination and humiliation by Western powers and the narrative of shared prosperity (win-win relations) through the Belt and Road. In this narrative of win-win economic and social relations with developing states, China can take advantage of these regions’ frustration with the failed and at times neo-colonial development policies of the US and Europe.

Finally, Layne (2018) concludes his article by deeming the days of “Pax Americana” over, but contrary to Mearsheimer he acknowledges the possibility that change can come either “peacefully” or “violently”.

### Constructivist Counter Claims

First, this thesis’ stark critique against offensive realism can be shaped on offensive realists’ own terms: the current (social) structure of the international system, as well as the ideas that are advocated and implemented in foreign policy through the Belt and Road, suggest that it is not likely that China will push for imperialist goals in Asia or elsewhere. In other words, this paper argues from a constructivist perspective that it is not likely that China, unless facing military aggression from its neighboring countries or the US, will rise as a traditional great power copycatting the experiences and behavior of the US during its transition to great power. This paper believes that the stability of the international system is more likely to be threatened if the Sino-American relationship is conflictual during the parallel processes of a rising China and a declining USA because the US, in the words of Mearsheimer, “has never tolerated peer competitors” (Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 19). However, unlike an offensive realist perspective, this thesis does not assume that China’s power transition is determined to take place within a context of conflict.

Second, this thesis attempts to counter the offensive realist theory in arguing that China’s rise to great power status ought to be viewed from a material- constructivist perspective as a wider social process of identity building taking place within a global context of time and space significantly different from the contexts surrounding the US expansion from middle- to great power status. The constructivist model that will be applied in this thesis does not share the assumption of offensive realism that the structure of the international system, or “anarchy”, has a determining effect on great power behavior. Rather, in the frequently cited words of Alexander Wendt: “anarchy is what states make of it”, meaning that the structures of the international system are socially constructed (Rother, 2012, p. 56). We should acknowledge, using a dynamic perception of the characteristics of anarchy, that profound changes in the

architecture of the international system over time can affect state ideas and identities, and these ideas and identities can affect the structure of anarchy. It is therefore important that ideas are “analyzed in relation to the contexts of which they are embedded” (Bratberg, 2017, p. 70).

This thesis agrees with Mearsheimer that theory is important to make at least an educated guess on future events in the international system. However, theory is important first and foremost to bridge current intellectual work with the academic “heavyweights” of the past. We need to view established theories of international relations in the context of time and political space in which they were developed and continue the work by “standing on the shoulders of giants”. In practice, the latter quote entails seeing established theories in modern contexts. To honor the academic work of former theorists, we cannot rely on static assumptions of state behavior or the anarchy through shifting contexts of space and time. Western theories like realism have evolved from the historic experiences of Western states rising to great power status. Contrary to the US, for example, China has developed within a context of dense, and complex social interactions in the international system. Highly developed communication technologies and infrastructure have been key drivers causing many of these interstate social interactions to develop into norms and institutions over time. We should acknowledge that the transition of the international system itself from the highly materialist context of the Cold War, for instance, to the highly socially interconnected context of the early 1990s until today, can give valuable insight into China’s transition to great power status.

A key assumption behind this thesis is that the development of the modern context of today’s international system has raised social (identity) concerns higher on states’ agendas with regards both to their domestic level, but also the regional and international levels. Rather than China seeking to imitate the offensive strategies of the US more than 200 years ago and eventually attempting to establish hegemony in its region, China’s power transition should be conceptualized as non-traditional. It is non-traditional in the sense that the process consists of conscious identity- building processes carried out in practice through foreign policy projects like the BRI, in a context of domestic constraints and in an anarchy significantly different from the pre- Cold War and Cold- War context.

It must be stressed that this paper does not advocate that materialism is irrelevant. Quite the contrary, materialism is important, but materialist variables ought to be viewed as dependent on the ideas of actors in the international system, not the other way around. In other words, materialist capacities are arguably not the main drivers of political action; ideas are the drivers behind political action. To sum up, the logic of offensive realists is that the static structure of the international system and division of power capacities affects the behavior of rational great powers. In comparison, the constructivist perspective of this paper assumes that there are other possible explanations to the structure of anarchy that may affect the behavior of great powers, and states are not always rational.

## Classical Realism

We have discussed the contents of and commented on some of the shortcomings of offensive realist perspectives on the rise of China, but what about the more tuned-down classical realist argument? The creative title of Jonathan Kirshner “The tragedy of offensive realism: classical realism and the rise of China” clearly implies that the offensive realist perspective faces resistance and differing interpretations from its own camp. We need to discuss the classical realist perspective because, as Kirshner argues, Mearsheimer’s offensive realist perspective is a realist perspective, but “it is not *the* realist perspective” (Kirshner, 2010, p. 53). However, this does not mean that classical realists do not share the concerns of offensive realists. Quite the contrary, Kirshner urges classical realists to be particularly “alarmed by the rise of China”.

From the perspective of R. Gilpin (1981), a shift in the relative power distribution in the international system is the result of variations in economic growth over time and these variations are a mainspring of international political conflict (Kirshner, 2010, p. 54). He also expects a streamlined relation in which a state’s rising material capacities create powerful incentives for states to expand their power and “challenge the status quo”, resulting in “changes to the balance of power”. In other words, as a state’s material capabilities increases, so does its interests and ambitions to further expand its power (Kirshner, 2010, p. 58). The counter-measure that Kirshner suggests is not direct confrontation against China, like Mearsheimer implies, but rather engaging with China (Kirshner, 2010, p. 65).

If this paper were to dismiss the role of power and China's incentives to further protect and strengthen its materialistic capacities, it would not only be idealistic but truly naïve and "utopian" (Kirshner, 2010, p. 66-67). Power is central to the political realities of international relations, and there is little doubt that it is both dangerous and may escalate into war. This is an acknowledgement that this paper shares with realists, but it is derived from Alexander Wendt's work. Indeed, this thesis holds that in a potential case where China discards its identity construction strategies and turn to offensive hard- power balancing against the US, or in a worst-case scenario, engage in a hot- war with the US, it is because the US and/or its allies have forced China into defending its national interests by military means.

However, without reflecting more around the "what if's", the point that this paper tries to make, is that the largest foreign policy initiative throughout Chinese history, the BRI, places identity building as the top- priority, whilst economic growth, strategic military gains, and diplomatic gains, are expected secondary effects of these identity construction efforts. The BRI is not designed for immediate short- term winnings. Rather, it is characterized by long- term identity construction strategies that require much investment of human- and economic resources. Therefore, China's power transition is not only immensely interesting, but it should open the eyes of political elites in the West and conventional IR theorists alike, to the possibility that we may be facing a non-traditional, non-Western great power which should call into question our understanding of a great power and power itself.

### A Weaker Determinism of Anarchy

Classical realists appear to have a softer view on the level of which great power behavior is determined by the structure of the international system, compared to offensive realists. First, they claim that great powers enjoy a considerable flexibility in the strategic choices they can make, contrary to the perspective of offensive realism that suggests that their choices are strongly affected by the structure of the international system. Second, classical realists believe that the choices made by great powers are shaped by the context "in which they" were made, which suggests that classical realists are more context-sensitive, like this paper.

Kirshner emphasizes that state behavior and goals are likely to vary greatly, and that state behavior cannot be predicted by looking only at “structural variables and constraints”, contrary to much of Mearsheimer’s writings (Kirshner, 2010, p. 57). Kirshner views humans as essentially rational, but admits that it may be affected by history, ideas, ideology, and fear (Kirshner, 2010, p. 68). Moreover, he dismisses Mearsheimer’s explanation of aggressive state behavior as an effect of rational calculation of material variables motivated by security maximizing interests. Rather, he shares the ideas of E. H. Carr, Thucydides, Morgenthau, and Gilpin, in saying that politics is conflicts of interests, and the outcome of these conflicts is determined by military power (Kirshner, 2010, p. 58). Kirshner offers a useful criticism of Mearsheimer’s claim that great powers are likely to, and ought to seek regional hegemony to maximize their chances of survival in the international “anarchy”. He asks: “Is China’s survival (...) in jeopardy if it does not aggressively bid to dominate (...) Asia?” (Kirshner, 2010, p. 61). For great powers to seek regional hegemony to survive, he says, they would need to completely ignore the lessons of history. Those lessons of history can be summed up in the trend of great powers that have sought hegemony in the past have often failed and lost their “territorial integrity”, except the United States.

In conclusion, classical realism falls short as well in explaining the rise of China, mainly because it does not give enough explanatory power to social variables, specifically identity, in explaining state behavior and shaping the structure of the international system. However, there are two common traits between the classical realist perspective and the perspective of this paper. First, both this thesis and Kirshner criticize Mearsheimer’s offensive realist account. Second, Kirshner brings up the matter of context, but he does not elaborate the effect of context on state behavior like the contribution of this paper which suggests that the modern context of space and time has not only made identity more important for states, but the construction of positive identities has become a more attractive choice of strategy over traditional power balancing through military strategies. Third, in sum, Kirshner disagrees with Mearsheimer and says that China pursuing regional hegemony would not be a rational decision because it is likely to escalate great power conflict, and because of China’s conflictual history with its nuclear neighbors, i.e. Japan or Russia (Kirshner, 2010, p. 64). Indeed, he sharply deems offensive realism as “utopian” because Mearsheimer allegedly advocates a wish to “reshape the world” as he would like it to be (Kirshner, 2010, p. 70).

## The Non-Threat Perspective

### Anti-Threat Perspectives

The first category of China as a non-threat follows a materialist logic. Theories within this category claim that China may not be “able to develop into a threat even if it wanted to” because it is restricted by “interdependence” with its “markets and suppliers” (Roy, 1996, p. 762). Therefore, China’s economic relations and prospects for economic development is the mechanism which disincentivizes China from acting as an aggressive imperialist in the international system. This liberalist hypotheses that economic interdependence is a sufficient mechanism to prevent Chinese imperialism or aggression is flawed because it assumes the presence of these material incentives to be the reason why China does not act like an aggressor, and it does not consider the effects of stable social structures such as identity, which is formed through long-term social interactions with the Other.

The second category of non-threat theorizing considers historical and cultural variables to explain and predict Chinese policy making (Roy, 1996, p. 763). For instance, Chen Jian argues that Chinese rules have a history of non-imperialist policies, contrary to the West. The culture narrative speaks of a China with a cultural tradition for high moral and honor, and the norm of “righteousness”, as exemplified by the Confucian saying: “do not do unto others that you do not like others to do unto you”. We have previously discussed the limits of culture and the problematic traits of Confucianism. This paper argues that neither culture nor historic variables are sufficient to explain China’s current great power behavior because China has pursued a pragmatic approach to history by choosing the narratives which best supports China’s preferred great power identity and Chinese national cohesion, and it has also chosen the ideas of Confucian culture which best serve Chinese domestic and international interests. These practices have been evident in China’s design, advocacy, and implementation of the Belt and Road initiative, and therefore, it is more accurate to perceive China’s international policy as an exercise in identity building.

The third category of non-threat theorizing is highly materialist and looks to China's "military spending" to counter the threat narratives. For example, theorists within the third category of the non-threat paradigm point to the CCP leaders not giving priority to the fiscal and modernization needs of the Chinese army, the People's Liberation Army, in the 1990s (Roy, 1996, p. 765). Roy (1996) rightfully criticizes the theories within this category and their tendency to manipulate statistics just as readily as "the China threat school" by calculating "military spending per capita", meaning that they take advantage of the dampening effects of China's large population when making comparisons to the military spending of the US, for example.

The fourth category of non-threat theorizing identified in Roy (1996)'s article focuses on the accusations that China-threat theories are racist, growing out of the fear of the "Other", or that China threat narratives are strategically constructed to serve the narrow self-interest of political and economic elites in the West. Other accusations point to the USA wanting to remain "on top" as world hegemon and norm producer, and therefore tries to slow down China by framing it as a security threat. This thesis dismisses the claims of theorists within the fourth category of China anti-threat theories that China threat theories are racist and have grown out of a "fear" of the other. Rather, their fear is based on the logic that previous rising Western powers have acted imperialistically and sought hegemony in its own region (first the UK, then the US). The economic rise of non-democratic China and following political pressures for producing and affecting existing norms within a global context of dominating liberal democratic norms and institutions is the main cause of China threat theorists' fear of instability and war.

The fifth and last category of non-threat theories claims that China is not likely to seek regional hegemony because a richer China is more likely to democratize. Again, we have previously discussed China's failed attempts to adopt to Western values and practices to domestic politics in the past, and there are strong indications that China, at least under the leadership of the CCP, is not likely to democratize despite its economic growth. Rather, post-Mao era China has developed and continues to develop its political and economic systems based on the values of the CCP government and on the terms that best serve national interest.



## A Social Constructivist Account: Mierzejewski and Kowalski (2019)

Authors Mierzejewski and Kowalski (2019) employ a social constructivist perspective in their book “China’s Selective Identities – State, Ideology, and Culture”, and their work has proven very useful for this thesis to navigate the intellectual debates and state of knowledge on China from an identity building perspective and to develop counter arguments against China threat theory, offensive realism, and classical realism. Indeed, their work is critical for the arguments put forward in this paper that the Belt and Road is an exercise in identity building and that realist approaches are insufficient in describing and explaining the rise of China in context of the Belt and Road. Their social constructivist stance follows in a similar vein of this thesis’ material constructivist perspective. Mierzejewski and Kowalski’s core argument is that China has tried to shape its own identity by using a pragmatic “selective identity” approach, and that the BRI is an umbrella for China to exercise a selective identity approach (Mierzejewski, Kowalski, 2019, p. 4, 229). This indicates a problematic assumption that China has a substantial amount of control over its identity construction processes; an assumption that is dismissed by this paper.

China has, according to authors, tried to construct a Chinese identity in relation to the “other” on the international level, and these actions “articulate” a need to understand its “self” on a domestic level and to build relationships with the “other” (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 138). The authors’ conclusion of China failing to construct a global identity is, in the opinion of this thesis, premature. Rather, China’s global identity construction process is a work in progress, or a “moving target”. The construction of China’s global identity consists of a myriad of social processes, many of them beyond the control of Chinese political elites. China is attempting to construct a global “character”, or identity, but it is not in full control of this narrative. Identities are given and taken, and they can come from many actors in the international system. Therefore, it is important to identify the “sending” actor of identities and who is the intended “recipient” when analyzing cases of identity construction. The arguably largest threat to China led identity construction are China threat theories and offensive realism which were previously discussed in this paper, but also their impacts on policy makers like the US’ attempts to label Chinese foreign policies as a threat to the international system. The extent that China can be selective of its preferred identities and control how other states in the system perceive these identities is limited (Mierzejewski, Kowalski, 2019, p. 47). To make matters

even more complicated, identity construction processes happen on domestic, regional, and international levels (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 138).

This thesis holds that Mierzejewski and Kowalski (2019) give too much explanatory weight to historic variables in describing these identity building processes (Mierzejewski, Kowalski, 2019, p. 3). They make very useful analyses of the domestic factors central to shaping China's identity, and this thesis acknowledges that identities may be path-dependent regarding historical events and crises to a certain extent. However, the point is that one should be cautious to exaggerate the effects of this historic path dependency on China's identity construction (Mierzejewski, Kowalski, 2019, p. 16). The historical experiences referred to in their book are roughly divided into Qin Yaqing 2010's three "social identity" groups of (1) domination by the Other, as China during the Opium War and under the Soviet Union; (2) maintaining stability of identity, like China's passiveness and economic development focus in the 1980s and 1990s; and (3) China's 21<sup>st</sup> century active participation on the international level based on "identity" and "cultural heritage" (Mierzejewski, Kowalski, 2019, p.10). This review will encompass Mierzejewski and Kowalski's entire work, but following the structure inspired by Qin Yaqing (2010) it will emphasize mainly the third "social identity group" of China's increased involvement in international relations.

The view of this paper is that China is consciously attempting to construct its international, regional, and domestic identities through the foreign policy project "Belt and Road Initiative". Based on the review of Mierzejewski and Kowalski (2019)'s book, this paper believes that Beijing's long- term strategy is to construct a global identity that faces minimum diplomatic resistance and sanctions, thereby enabling China in the long term to position itself as an "equal actor", responsible actor and norm-entrepreneur vis-à-vis other great powers in the international system. As we recall, until recently, the US has been the undisputed leading norm producer in the international system, though this thesis would argue that it still is. Beijing is very sensitive to how China is perceived in the international system, and insults to the Chinese nation has, as we have seen previously in this paper, tended to trigger a negative diplomatic response from the Chinese government. It is likely that China wishes to construct an identity that contrasts from the West because historic experiences has taught China that "imitating experiences from

other countries has failed to fit domestic conditions” (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 138). From a more materialist perspective, China’s foreign policy approaches are conducted cautiously to not trigger resistance or sanctions from Western powers (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 230).

The following examples illustrate a selection of Mierzejewski and Kowalski’s diverse and important generalizations on variation in Chinese foreign policy behaviors over decades. They have inspired this paper to categorize Chinese identity building processes into three critical junctures, beginning from when China took the first cautious steps towards opening- up in 1978 up until its full international participation today. In the beginning of the 1990s, under former Chinese President Deng Xiaoping, China kept a “low profile” in its engagement with the international society as it was occupied with domestic development and concerned about internal weak spots. At the same time, China emphasized making contributions to international developments. In stark contrast, after the 2008 economic crisis, China changed its profile towards the international community and became more confident in challenging the United States on matters of China’s “core interests” such as securing the dominance of the Party, securing state sovereignty, territorial integrity and “stable economic development” (Mierzejewski, Kowalski, 2018, p. 45). China was frustrated with American economic policies which Beijing accused of only escalating the global recession (Lanteigne, personal communication, 15.04.2022). China did not only gradually become more confident in advocating Chinese interests in relation to the US, but more importantly, it became more confident in advocating Chinese ideas and construct its great power identity as an equal actor, responsible agent, and norm-producer alongside the US.

This thesis suggests that China’s success in constructing narratives of shared identities with developing African countries has had a positive effect on China’s confidence to challenge the dominating Western ideas. Chinese leaders have succeeded in using historic narratives to portray China as a victim of Western intervention, like many of the developing countries in Africa (Mierzejewski, Kowalski, 2018, p. 24-25, 182). China’s identity as a “victim” is still referred to in its foreign policy today (M. Lanteigne, personal communication, 07.01.22). For example, the narrative of China as a victim of imperialist exploitation by Western states and

Japan has been important in strengthening the government's "national pride" project, and not least, securing support for, or softening the resistance against, the continued dominance of the Chinese Communist Party. The narrative of shared historic traumas caused by Western interventions has contributed to a cooperation platform with developing countries and increased support for Chinese ideas in the South. Mierzejewski and Kowalski also emphasize, through their study of various policy speeches, the importance of China's historic experience of being treated as an unequal actor in the international system in the past (Mierzejewski, Kowalski, 2019, p. 40, 43, 44). The two historical narratives of being unequal and a victim can be expected to affect Chinese identity building and the rationale behind the Belt and Road project today.

Mierzejewski and Kowalski discuss China's identity formation process in the light of Organski's power transition theory, as mentioned in part 3 of this thesis (Mierzejewski, Kowalski, 2018, p. 19). They do however criticize this perspective for only being "based on Western examples" (Mierzejewski, Kowalski, 2018, p. 20). This critique shares common traits with the critique of this thesis that conventional IR theories are too heavily "Westernized" to be applied unmodified on China's identity construction process. We are reminded that from a power transition perspective, in contrast to a power balancing perspective, the international system is more likely to remain stable and peaceful if there is a global hegemon at the top, and for the past seven decades, except from during the Cold War, the USA has held the role of the Western world's patriarch. China's rise to great power status simultaneously to the declining power of the USA can, from a power transition theory point of view, be interpreted as a destabilizing factor to the international system if the transition happens within a context of conflict. This is particularly true if the declining hegemon perceives China's foreign policy behavior as a challenge, or more critically, as a threat to the status quo dominating values and ideas of the international system (Mierzejewski, Kowalski, 2018, p. 20).

Authors argue that China can escape the "power transition effect", which refers to the assumption that rising powers always "challenge the position of the" hegemon, by using soft power strategies to strengthen the state, institutions, and culture (Mierzejewski, Kowalski, 2018, p. 23). This alternative to hard- power balancing appears vague. This paper, in contrast, would conceptualize these "soft- power strategies" as identity building exercises conducted through projects like, for example, the Belt and Road. From a power transition perspective, authors further argue that China tries to "minimize potential conflict" by "grouping different

types of collective identities”. This is particularly visible in their claim that China has “entered international society” by using a “selective identity approach” (Mierzejewski, Kowalski, 2018, p. 30). This paper sides with Mierzejewski and Kowalski in arguing that China is consciously trying to construct a global identity, but it maintains that the authors are exaggerating the level of control that Chinese elites have over its own identity on a global level (Mierzejewski, Kowalski, 2018, p. 24). China attempts to construct positive identities on itself, but other states, like the US, attempts to construct negative identities on China.

### First Critical Juncture: “Poverty Is Not Socialism” (Deng Xiaoping)

The first critical juncture begins when the former paramount leader of China Deng Xiaoping launched his new reforms for China in the late 1970s. The first critical juncture marks, from a constructivist perspective, a significant shift in Chinese identity building from the zero-sum mindset of Mao towards a win-win approach to international relations (Lanteigne, 2020, p. 93). As emphasized in the discussion, the late 1970s indicates a sensible starting point for this thesis and helps sharpen the focus and limit the amount of information.

Deng Xiaoping’s reforms were conducted in experimental “small steps” and focused on pragmatism and materialism to guide China’s political behavior (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 136). The pragmatic aspect of the reforms refers to China giving up the revolutionary face of communism in exchange for a socialist political model adapted to national needs and conditions - a Chinese socialism. This intentional attempt to construct a distinct “Chinese” socialist model implies that Beijing was carefully beginning to define a national Self, an identity. The overall aim of this incremental strategy was for China to develop a stable national economy and strengthen its underdeveloped regions and aligning civil interest to national interest. In other words, China was not materially or socially stable enough to engage actively in international economic and political relations during the first critical juncture. Engaging with other states in the international system would expose China to external economic and military threats, and thus it would be vulnerable to exploitation or aggression from more powerful states.

From an ideological perspective, China's strategy of strengthening its internal material capacities before interacting with the international community is in line with the Marxian idea of "economy as a precondition for social political development". The strategies were based on an ideological platform of "anti-revolutionary" socialism (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 128). Interestingly, as Mierzejewski and Kowalski point out, Beijing was already in the first critical juncture very cautious not to be perceived as "revisionist" by other states, which indicates that China had begun to imagine its global "Self" though still being relatively isolationist. Moreover, the US had begun to soften up its attitudes towards China and expressed careful optimism towards Deng Xiaoping's reforms (Roy, 1996, p. 758). However, that attitude drastically shifted after the Tiananmen massacre in 1989 which set fire to the China threat perspectives that were addressed under "The Threat Perspective" and the US perceived the threat of China not to be mainly ideological (communism), but militarily.

Despite the reforms, China was still struggling with social and material domestic problems such as class contradictions left unsolved after the Cultural Revolution and under-development, lack of infrastructure and the like (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 129). That is one of the reasons why China can be described as rather isolationist up until the 2000s as it needed to improve its domestic stability before engaging with other states in the international system. It also faced the mounting challenge of losing its identity as an aggressive revolutionary from the Maoist era both domestically and later when engaging with the international community.

The government under Deng Xiaoping's reforms was "obsessed" with stability as preconditioning development, and only "the party" could save China" (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 130). The CCP went through some drastic changes as well, including, but not limited to, becoming more nationally oriented, focusing on serving the people, promoting social justice and equality through administrative rather than revolutionary means, and encompassing all Chinese citizens, not just the working class. In other words, the general logic behind the policies of the CCP from the first critical juncture and onwards was collectivism, which contrasts both its Maoist revolutionary history of forced re-distribution of its citizens' economic means and property, which ultimately lead to poverty and gross underdevelopment, but also the individualist logic of the West favoring individual freedom and rights over collective needs.

National interest was and is still an important reference for China's foreign policy. In the first and beginning of second critical junctures, Deng Xiaoping defined national interest as mainly sovereignty and security, reflecting China's inward-looking policies (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 46). IR Professor Yan Xuetong, a representative of the "moral realist school", defines national interest as "everything which is material to the ideological security of the nation state" (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 48; M. Lanteigne, personal communication, 07.02.22). The two components of sovereignty and security as mentioned in Deng Xiaoping's speeches can be argued to have been highly relevant to the Chinese identity building process from the late 1970s to the early 1990s.

Another important development in the first critical juncture was in Chinese academia. Many institutions started to pop up in China, several of them focusing on international relations (Acharya & Buzan, 2010, p. 28). In addition, Western IR theoretical works were translated from English to Chinese, which introduced Western IR thinking into Chinese academia (Acharya & Buzan, 2010, p. 29). At the end of the first critical juncture, moving into the cautious opening-up period from the 1990s, China faced the challenge of having to balance their foreign policy values between socialism and capitalism. Deng Xiaoping justified China's economic and social pragmatic adaptation to the capitalist values of the West by acknowledging that both socialist plan-economy and market economy could serve socialism (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 132). Into the 1990s, the work of classical realist H. Morgenthau "Politics Among Nations" was translated and circulated in China, more than a decade after its original publication, and realism swiftly became the dominating theoretical orientation of Chinese IR scholars. In the years to follow, more books were translated and the scope of IR theorizing in China expanded to advocates of liberalisms, the English School and constructivism. Indeed, the number of IR related works published in China increased from 15 in 1990 to 80 in 2004 (Acharya & Buzan, 2010, p. 34).

## Second Critical Juncture: Post 1990

The second reform period began in the early 1990s, also known as the “reform and opening up period”. It was mainly concerned with the relation between socialism and capitalism, and modernization (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 133). This was the period where China adopted some capitalist values based on the rationale that the values would serve Chinese socialism. As China’s confidence rose in tandem with its increasing power, the “policy of the US became the most crucial point of reference for Chinese state interests” (Mierzejewski, Kowalski, 2018, p. 45). Already in this first reform and opening- up period, General Secretary at the time Jiang Zemin provided a counter argument against the threat narratives of the West saying that China would not assume the identity of an aggressor or regional hegemon because “China needs a long-lasting peaceful international environment for its development” (Roy, 1996, p. 762).

The Chinese government insisted that a “harmonious society”, the securing of social justice and prosperity for all Chinese citizens, and eventually the “revival of the nation” under CCP dominance, could only be achieved through a “socialist (political) system with Chinese Characteristics” (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 134). The domestic social problems in China could, according to the government, not be solved through adopting liberal democratic ideas from the West, but through national cohesion and “increasing the materialistic well-being of society”. Rather, liberal, and democratic values widely recognized in the West and perceived by Western states as just and morally valuable, were perceived by the Chinese government as a threat to China’s domestic social and material stability and continued economic development. To put it briefly, from China’s perspective, the Chinese nation would be better off under the continued leadership of the CCP.

There are some major cleavages between Western values and Chinese values that need to be addressed to describe and understand China’s rationale behind its domestic level identity building processes. When addressing these contradictions, it is useful to keep in mind that non-Western world views and their interpretation of concepts can differ from the until- recently- dominating Western liberal ideas in the international system. This is a basic constructivist mindset that has analytical value when doing qualitative research on non-Western phenomenon. We briefly addressed this issue under “The Threat Perspective” when discussing China’s understanding of “anarchy” as “all under heaven”, a concept derived from Confucianist culture.



China's domestic policies have at times been labeled "human rights violations" by state and non-state actors in the West (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 131). A major explanation for the conflict between China and the US and the West is the deep cleavage behind logics of what is considered just state action towards its own population in the West and in China. These logics are based in the ideology of modern democracy on one side, and communism on the other. The UN itself, but especially the UN Convention on Human Rights, is the birth child of the dominating liberal individualist logic after World War II. The liberal individualist logic suggests that states should enhance the rights and freedom of the individual citizen. Western individualism is usually embodied in various liberal- democratic governments, like the USA. This logic is not only considered morally just in the West, but more importantly, is considered the best way for states to serve the interests of all citizens. Individual freedom in this discussion would mean to give each citizen as much freedom from state intervention and cohesion as possible.

In contrast, Chinese collectivism is embodied in a one-party ruled system dominated by the Chinese Communist Party. James Riley (2012) has an interesting definition of the political system of China as "responsive authoritarianism". It means that though the political system is not a democracy, it is still to a certain degree responsive to public opinion to the extent that public opinion secures regime stability (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 76). Authors Mierzejewski and Kowalski (2019) conceptualize this phenomenon as China having a "selective toleration of public mobilization", which means that public opinion is accepted if it serves the ideas and goals of the CCP and it may serve as a distraction from domestic problems (Lanteigne, personal communication, 10.05.22). China considers just state action towards its citizens, both from a moral and material perspective, to be state control over civil life and to prioritize collective interest over individual interest. This approach serves the interests of all citizens, whereas the liberal individualist logic of the West threatens the interests of all citizens by benefiting a few at the cost of everyone (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 131-132). Finally, China considers a collectivist logic and state control as political means that best serve its citizens and eventually the Party/-state. This collectivist logic is reflected in one of China's defined national interests, national cohesion. National cohesion is not only a Chinese national interest, but this paper assumes national cohesion to be a precondition for Chinese identity building on domestic, regional, and international levels (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 139). This argument can be expanded. China's preoccupation with "national cohesion" in the

early 1990s is mainly rooted in its goal of creating a collective national identity, one that is based on a “collective Confucianist culture” (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 137). Beijing wants the civil population to identify themselves with the “coherent” collective identity of the state. For example, in 2001, the “Civic Morality Policies” were launched as political means to further strengthen national cohesion (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 177-178).

The second critical juncture was also highly influenced by the policies initiated by Deng Xiaoping (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 45). Beijing still had to be sensitive to how the policies could be perceived by the civil population to secure support for these domestic policies and take the first “small steps” out of the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, the isolation, and economic struggles towards national cohesion and stability. Though leaving some of the revolutionary mindset behind in Maoist history, it was important for Deng Xiaoping that the government was not perceived as being an anti-revolutionary movement. This sensitivity to ideological cleavages within the state allowed Deng Xiaoping to move on with modern reforms, strengthening the position of technocrats and allowing conservatives to support his economic reforms though they did not support the ideas in political life. Mierzejewski and Kowalski have, usefully so, described this process of identity construction as “the first step” towards changing CCP’s identity from a “party of class” to a “whole nation party”, or one that was able to create national cohesion of all classes (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 135). Moreover, China’s relations with the outside world were based on a narrative of “peaceful coexistence” or China’s “peaceful” rise (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 46).

The economic reforms were inspired by the ideas of Marxism and ended up being an economic hybrid model which combined “market economy with planned economy”. Deng Xiaoping took “extreme” caution in implementing privatization and free trade policies. Again, this is an example of Chinese pragmatism in domestic and international policy making, all stepping-stones towards constructing a successful global Chinese identity (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 139). Mearsheimer would argue that this adoption of capitalist ideas and practices only shows that offensive realism is right in its predicaments that China imitates the US, and that China will rise like a traditional great power. However, China’s economic “hybrid” model has baffled economists, policy makers and academics alike, as they expected China’s economic uptick in the late 1990s and early 2000s to flatten out and eventually take a drastic downturn. The Western reasoning for these predicaments rest on the idea that no de facto authoritarian

state can experience stable economic development over time. For example, authoritarian states often turn to mercantilist policies to protect own industries.

### Third Critical Juncture: Xi Jinping

The third critical juncture identified in the literature is when Xi Jinping assumed power in 2013 and the party acknowledged that materialism is not the only important component of human development (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 134). According to the authors, a “new historical chapter” began in 2012. Xi Jinping’s government intensified China’s international identity construction efforts by working to “strengthen political cooperation”, “eliminate third party interference” and facilitate “sharing of transformational experiences” (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 144). In 2012, President Xi Jinping stressed that China would go about a peaceful way to great power status, but without sacrificing what China perceives as its legitimate rights or core national interests (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 49).

The two pillars of current national interest identified by authors Mierzejewski and Kowalski based on the public speeches of President Xi Jinping are (1) maritime rights and (2) national cohesion. The first pillar, enhancing China’s maritime rights, is key to exporting not only Chinese goods and labor power, but more importantly, to export Chinese ideas overseas. The BRI is an example of how this maritime pillar of national interest is exercised in practice, seeing as the project encompasses both land and maritime “roads”. According to Mierzejewski and Kowalski (2018), China’s second pillar of national interest, national cohesion can be achieved if the people equate their individual Self with the state “through institutions” (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2018, p. 51). We will return to a discussion of the possible role of institutions below. They define “national cohesion” as the “alignment of state and civil interest”. Without the support of, or at least minimum resistance, from its citizens and internal economic stability, the state would not be able to channel its resources and political efforts towards constructing an ideal “self” on the international level. The idea of democracy does not fit into the equation of China’s understanding of national cohesion, and this is a part of the rationale for the CCP to resist and strike down any bottom-up pressures for democracy. This was painfully evident in the CCP’s response to the protests for democracy at Tiananmen Square in 1989. The CCP has

used patriotism strategies as instrumental means to strengthen national cohesion and shape its domestic identity since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Patriotism can be viewed as a state instrument which does not only affect national cohesion on a domestic level, but it can also explain some of China's sensitivity to insults against the Chinese nation (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 50). Further, China's concern about how the state is perceived and its need to promote positive labels on China in the international system can, as argued by Guo Sheng (2011), be seen in the context of countering the China Threat Narrative of the United States (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 138).

In 2014, the concept of fairness was introduced as a core value of international policy by Xi Jinping's government, and it was backed up by referring to China's traditional values (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 157). Materialism remained central to shaping China's regional identity narrative in Africa (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 147). A core goal was still to be perceived as an "equal" actor in the international system by other states. Further, China's processes of identity construction on an international level was driven by a continued "need" to define differences "based on historical and cultural values", or, to define Self and Other. Authors refer to the BRI and claim that culture has instrumental value for China to develop its international identity. This thesis analyzes the BRI as a vehicle for Chinese identity building, and therefore agrees with the authors' choice to refer to the Belt and Road as an example (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 175, 181). However, this paper is careful to favor much explanatory power to culture, as we have seen, China has been rather pragmatic when implementing parts of Confucian culture into its identity building narratives. Authors claim that "by promoting Chinese heritage", the political leaders think that China can be perceived as a peaceful nation and smoothly go through a period of power transition in IR" (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 176). This paper dismisses the latter claim. Rather, Chinese leadership is not that "idealistic" and confident about the convincing force of its historical narratives on "Chinese heritage" only.

The face of Marxist ideology changed further during the third critical juncture. The Chinese government started advocating a more technocratic interpretation of Marxism, fronting it as a science or belief, or even religion. This spurred domestic debates. According to Chinese scholar

Pan Wei (2008) China has four, unique basic features in: “social organization, economic organization, political organization and world view” (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 135). The latter, the unique Chinese world view, suggests that there is no “one” world system, end of history or fixed principles. “Everything is under the process of becoming”. It is an expression of a dynamic view of the course of “history” and the international system(s?) (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 185). For example, China acknowledges that states rise and fall, but they have a more static view of the resilience of people’s traditions, beliefs, and culture (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 228). Unlike China’s domestic identity, China’s ideal international identity is not supposed to be rooted in ideology like communism, and neither should it be founded on liberal ideas (Mierzejewski, Kowalski, 2018, p. 45). This world view also carries an underlying assumption that China does not accept the liberal international order based on democratic values as the “final product” of norms that best serves the interests of humanity.

According to authors and Chinese intellectuals, the so- called “China model”, or also known under the term “the Beijing Consensus”, has three characteristics. This paper interprets authors’ attempt to conceptualize a distinct Chinese model of domestic and international political and economic structures as an acknowledgement that China did not and does not rise as a “traditional great power”, in the words of Mearsheimer. First, the ideology of the political system is described as “socialism with Chinese characteristics, or “Sinization of Marxism”. Second, the economy is based on a socialist system. Third, China has developed a unique foreign policy strategy for developing countries, arguably reflecting China’s alleged “win-win” logic behind bilateral and multilateral relations (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 136). Moreover, China’s development model is unique because it entails multilevel involvement and strengthening of relationships between China, Chinese companies, and other relevant actors to the BRI, and all segments of society in the developing countries – not just the government or local firms.

From a Western liberal- democratic perspective there is an obvious contradiction between the political ideas expressed by China on the one hand, and its practical implementation of domestic policies on the other. The contradiction is that the CCP claims that its “socialist” model”, which is de-facto authoritarian, enables the Chinese people to be “the masters of their own destiny”, but the political system does not grant the citizens individual freedoms to live life on their own

terms. In a Western liberal individualist mindset, the political structure of democracy is a necessary condition for any state to enable its citizens to truly “be the masters of their own destiny” by ensuring the citizens individual freedoms and rights. Perhaps the most central of these rights is the right to attend free and fair, competitive elections so that they may choose their own rulers.

### Institutions

Since the Second Opium War, China has attempted to adopt Western concepts and ideas into a Chinese context. This was particularly the case in the construction of China’s bureaucracy (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 53). However, the following dominance of the CCP put an end to state attempts to integrate China into the international system by adopting Western ideas (M. Lanteigne, personal communication, 07.02.22). Despite the failure of integrating Western ideas into a Chinese context, institutions have arguably been central to the development of domestic, regional, and international identities. It is also important to emphasize that China did integrate itself into major international organizations such as the UN and WTO. China joined the latter and applied for a greater influence because of its wish to not be identified with the China threat theory. As commented by Long Yongtu and cited by Yong Deng, “whether the rise of China was viewed as an opportunity or threat would determine China’s international environment” (Johnston & Ross, 2006, p. 201).

Mierzejewski and Kowalski argue that institutions have a role in “shaping the nation state” in the form of people equating its individual “self” with the collective national interest, particularly after 2002 (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 51, 52, 68). This increased significance of institutions in Chinese identity building goes in tandem with the large expansion of international norms and institutions in the international system (Lanteigne, 2020, p. 4). Institutions also played an important role in shaping China’s international Self from the beginning of Deng Xiaoping’s first reform and opening- up period during the first critical juncture. From the beginning of the first critical juncture until 2004, China had joined 266 international multilateral conventions (Acharya & Buzan, 2010, p. 44). For example, in 1996, China (and Japan) ratified the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, an important international institution to regulate marine activity in disputed areas like in the South China Sea

(Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 82). Several Chinese scholars argue that the success of China's economic institutions is rooted in a dynamic development model based on Marxism and a pragmatic approach to economic problem-solving. Further, they argue that Chinese economic institutions surviving the 2008 global economic shocks proves that F. Fukuyama's famous statement of liberalism as the "end of history" is wrong (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 136). According to scholar Wu Yumin (2010), China's economic success did not only result in material gains, but it created a "solid basis for promoting Chinese wisdom and justice" both domestically and internationally (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 137). China's successful economic institutions, but also integration into major international economic institutions like the WTO, have arguably been important for Chinese identity building on domestic, regional, and international levels.

China has made important changes to its foreign policies, as we have already discussed, and furthermore, it has complied with several major established norms in the international system like "joined multilateral efforts to control armament and the spread of weapons technology" (Chen, 2008, p. 40). Compared to the Maoist years, despite still being an authoritarian government, China has softened up its domestic policies by employing "socio-economic reforms that extended personal freedom and individual rights".

Material factors matter in international relations, and we must therefore be careful not to exaggerate the effects of ideas and institutions. The idealistic goals of international institutions are not always put into practice. China came to that realization when the League of Nations, according to authors, "failed to protect Chinese territorial integrity" when the West gave Japan the captured territories of Shantung Peninsula through the Versailles treaty, and later, in 1931, when Japan invaded Manchuria (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 62, 84, 100). This is an example of a failed attempt to integrate Western ideas into a Chinese context, as mentioned in the beginning of this discussion. These events also had a lasting negative effect on the diplomatic relationship between the US and China. For example, in 2012 Xi Jinping made the US responsible for Japan's actions and viewed the US as a "middle-man in Sino-Japanese relations" (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 85). A main goal for China on an international level is to be acknowledged as an equal among the great powers. To fulfill this goal, China had to enhance its material capabilities, and this is where a materialist constructivist approach to Chinese identity building proves particularly useful compared to, for example, a strictly

idealistic approach. The motivation for Chinese political action was immaterial or social; it was important for China to be perceived and accepted as an “equal” player among the great powers of the international system. The enhanced material capacities were merely a means to a non-material end.

It is important to consider the context of globalization when attempting to describe Chinese identity building processes on domestic, regional, and international levels. China’s younger population is growing up in an increasingly open state and tends to have both “internationalist” and “nationalist” ideas (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 51). This two-faced sense of identity among the younger population may be either an advantage to or a disadvantage to China’s goal of national cohesion. It may be an advantage to the extent that this younger population is loyal to the collectively oriented policies of the Chinese Communist Party over the largely individualistic oriented internationalist ideas. The risk of social resistance on a domestic level could hamper the CCP leadership’s goal of national cohesion. Moreover, this “dual-identity” situation on domestic level among China’s young citizens is an effect of the current state of the international system, which supports this thesis’ argument that China’s power transition takes place within a modern context distinct from the pre-Cold War and Cold War context.

### Identity Scholars Debating Global China

There is no clear consensus among Chinese scholars on what China’s international identity should be based on (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 179). A very interesting statement from scholars Zhang Xiaomin and Luo Jinbao (2008) reflects what authors describe as the “first important dimension” of Chinese domestic identity building, and it sounds as follows: the “Western world’s values failed to shape effective solutions for the global economic system” and it failed to resolve poverty problems in the “developing world”. Further, they criticize the US’ exportation of democracy as leading to “chaos” and “global terrorism” (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 180). This critique is three-fold. First, it criticizes individual oriented liberal values for not facilitating global economic effectiveness. This is an expression of (immaterial) values as affecting economic (material) variables. Second, it targets the individual oriented



liberal democratic values' inability to relieve poverty in developing states. Third, they criticize what they label the "American model of exporting democracy" as a cause of conflict and instability in the international system, which opposes the concerns of the West that China's version of communist ideology is a threat to peace and stability in the international system. It can be interpreted as a criticism of the liberal attitude that "one size fits all" when it comes to political and economic models or that liberalism should be regarded as "the end of history", in the words of Fukuyama after the Cold War.

## Conclusion

The literature review has placed the work of this thesis within a theoretical debate on what theory is more robust in describing and explaining the rise of China, and how authors outside and within China have already theorized around the question of identity. Moreover, this paper has carved three critical junctures in time essential to organize phases of Chinese identity building in the early years of and during the state's major economic uptick. Finally, the literature review has strengthened the perception of this thesis that China's rise to great power status as it is embodied in the case of the Belt and Road should be analyzed from a constructivist perspective as an identity building processes. The literature review of China threat theory, offensive and classical realism can be summarized in two main categories: (A) Threat Perspective and (B) Non-Threat Perspective, with three assumptions each. Each of the main categories have a very different set of core ontological and epistemological assumptions. This overview is a simplification of the literature review and contains little detail. Rather, it gives an overview of the critical distinctions between the assumptions on China's power transition from a threat perspective and a non- threat perspective.

### **A: Threat perspective**

a1) The relatively static material structure of the international system launches states into zero-sum competition for power, and China's power transition takes place in the same structural context as the ones surrounding the US' power transition from middle- to great power status.

a2) China's transition from middle- to great power status has a destabilizing effect on the international system.

a3) The rationales behind China's foreign policy are regional hegemony, domination, and to challenge the status-quo norms of the international system.

The core assumptions behind A) a1-a3 are that the structure of "anarchy" is static, and it has streamlined effects on state behavior in the direction of selfishness rather than altruism, which is the most rational response to the dangers and uncertainties of world politics and increases the state's prospects for survival. However, classical realists believe that the behavior of state elites is less determined by the structure of anarchy, and their behavior cannot be predicted only by looking at structural variables. State actors, according to offensive realists, are perfectly rational. According to classical realists, state actors are mostly rational, but there are exceptions. Power-competition between particularly great powers helps to maintain the structure of anarchy, thus making it "static", and its mechanisms are assumed to have streamlined effects on state behavior and outcomes of international relations.

### **B: Non-Threat perspective**

a1) The dynamic social structure of the international system can affect great power behavior.

a2) The effects of China's transition from middle- to great power status on the international system depend on whether China tries to take on the identities of a responsible actor or an irresponsible actor.

a3) China’s power-transition takes places in a context of significant changes in the structure of the international system compared to the context surrounding the US’ power transition from middle- to great power status.

The core assumptions behind B) a1-a3 are that the structure of the international system is dynamic and essentially social, but also material, and that it does not have streamlined effects on state behavior. State actors are not always rational. In assuming that the international system is dynamic, this paper also hypothesize that the structure of the international system has changed profoundly since the pre-Cold War and Cold War contexts, as explained in the theoretical platform under “Shifting Contexts”, and that these profound structural changes affect great power behavior. A schematic presentation of the key arguments offered by the various theoretical stances reviewed in this paper follows below in figure 1.

Figure 1.

ARGUMENT	CHINA THREAT THEORY	OFFENSIVE REALISM	CLASSIC REALISM	POWER TRANSITION	NON-THREAT (PERSPECTIVES)	THIS THESIS’ CONSTRUCTIVISM
INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM (INT.SYST.)	is stable if China’s rising power is checked and the status quo structural power of the US remains.	is a relatively static self-help system dictating great power behavior.	is more stable when states check and balance each other’s power. Does not determine state behavior; it can vary due to context.	is more stable with one global hegemon at top, maintaining status-quo.		is dynamic & a social construct. Structure of int. syst. opens opportunities for states to extract normative power.
RISING POWER OF CHINA	is dangerous and destabilizing because of its booming economy. China is irresponsible & a threat to Western status-quo norms.	will use enhanced military capacity to challenge US hegemony & seek regional hegemony itself. Can cause security competition escalating into war. US should contain China to maintain status quo.	is a conflict of interests and its outcome depends on military power.	creates powerful incentives for power-expansion & to challenge status quo	is not likely to become a threat because of economic interdependence, culture, growth stimulating democracy, or lower military spending than US.	as presented in the case of BRI is an identity building process which aims also to draw normative power from structure of int. syst., not only material power.
CHINA’S FOREIGN POLICY	is ruthless and driven by goals of regional dominance	is imperialistic and aimed to dominate Asia. Rhetoric of “peace” and “win-win” is strategic cover for hegemonic goals.	is not likely to be imperialistic & aggressively aim for hegemony but may challenge status quo.	is aimed to challenge status quo & expand relative power	Western threat perception of China’s foreign policy is fueled by fear, self-interest, and racism.	is a process of China taking identities of responsible & norm producing actor in relation to Others & giving identities to Others in relation to <u>Self</u> .

### The Theoretical Model

After a thorough literature review this paper lands on a theoretical model to assist the researcher in the document analysis process. How can we apply a theoretical model that is dominated by constructivist theoretical ideas when we try to explain why offensive and classical realist

theories are inadequate in explaining China's rise to great power status, as exemplified by the case of the Belt and Road? First, any analytical model is based on a theoretic tradition, and it needs a theoretical foundation. However, despite of the observations in the document analysis being theory laden, they will not be theory-determined. The key is to develop a model that follows the logic of constructivism but is also capable of demonstrating that the theoretical path chosen is insufficient to offer any new perspectives or knowledge on China's rise to great power status. For example, this model is as any epistemological approach not fully objective, but it does not seek to "prove" that China will rise peacefully. It may as well be that this model will find observations indicating that China is attempting to take on the identity of a traditional great power, like the US and following the predicaments of offensive or classical realism. Similar, it is not given that the "Others" in the international system will label straight-cut "threat" identities on China, which allows the model to capture nuances in the data.

This paper agrees with the argument of Peter Burke that "language is one of the most important signs of identity", and the language in the documents will reveal what identities China tries to take in relation to Others, what identities China attempts to give Others in relation to Self, and what identities Others assign China (Mierzejewski and Kowalski, 2019, p. 11). The model is open for discredit; it may not work. In that case, it might be necessary to acknowledge that identity is not a useful variable for understanding the rise of China through the case of the Belt and Road. Indeed, it may be necessary to discard constructivism and acknowledge that classical or offensive realism, for example, may be better suited to describe and understand the rise of China. Another possible outcome is the conclusion that neither classical or offensive realism, or constructivism, is suited to describe and understand the rise of China through the case of the BRI. Perhaps a partly or exclusively non-Western theory of international relations is more up for the task than either of the theories discussed in the literature review. Either way, the result of the analysis will boil down to either strengthening or weakening the assumption of this paper that the BRI is essentially an exercise in identity building and that offensive and classical realism are inadequate in making descriptions and explanations for China's transition to great power status.

The model is illustrated in figure 2.

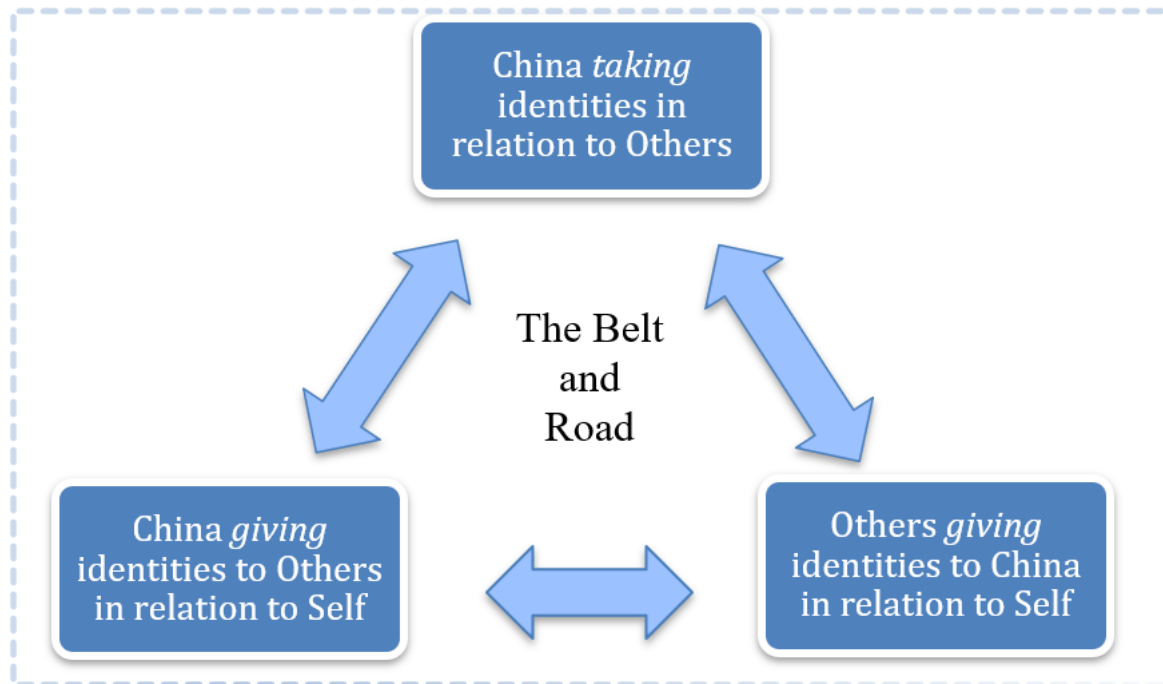


Figure 2.

The outer line of the model refers to the constructivist ontological view of this paper that the international system or anarchy is dynamic, as symbolized with the line not being whole, but dotted, and socially constructed by states rather than existing as a static structure of material laws determining state behavior. The arrows illustrate the point made earlier in this thesis that identities can come from many directions in the international system. They show the possible directions of social identity building processes from a sender, or agent, to an intended audience, and it is the purpose of the analysis part to search for identity building processes in text and the direction of these processes. What is not immediately visible in the model are the identity processes on domestic level, which we recall often affect identity building processes on other levels like regionally and/or internationally. Those processes are implicitly embedded in the statement “in relation to self”, which illustrates the fact that identity building processes on domestic level are often of great significance when discussing international identity processes.

## 6. Document Analysis

### Doc. 1: “Visions and actions on jointly building Belt and Road”

#### Content

The “Vision and actions on jointly building Silk Road economic belt and 21<sup>st</sup> – century maritime Silk Road” is a document authorized by the Chinese State Council in 2015 and was published on April 19, 2017 in Xinhua, the newspaper controlled by the Chinese government. It is a thorough and relatively long document which in detail drafts out the normative and material goals of China’s largest foreign policy project – the Belt and Road. The thoroughness of the document indicates to this thesis that it may be a case of “China taking identities in relation to Others”, and we will specifically look at two categories of identities: China as a responsible actor, and China as a norm-producer.

The document is divided into eight chapters which address the normative and material goals and priorities of the project, the underlying principles, norms of conduct, and intended cooperative partners. The three broadly defined normative pillars of the BRI are based on the expressed values of the Chinese government: “peace and cooperation”, “openness and inclusiveness”, “mutual learning and mutual benefit” (Xinhua, 2017, para. 11). The overarching material goal of the BRI is to connect the Asian and European economic circles, and the related subgoals are to connect China with “Central Asia, Russia and Europe (the Baltic), to link “China with the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central Asia and West Asia”, to connect “China with Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean”, and to “improve the openness of the Chinese economy” (Xinhua, 2017, para. 21).

A key observation in the data is that Beijing consistently refers to “we” when describing how China and its partners are to fulfill the normative and material goals of the BRI, rather than how “China” should fulfill these goals, which indicates to this paper that the Chinese government purposefully uses this document to persuade its audience that the project depends on collective action and that China is not the only relevant actor. Beijing uses infrastructure development as means to enhance the security of land, sea, and air routes, and to establish “free trade areas”.

However, the outcomes of these ambitious material infrastructure goals are dependent on the social processes of China and its partners' ability to "work in concert" towards achieving "mutual benefit", "common security", learning, "peace and friendship".

The immediate impression after manually mapping out the content of the document is that Beijing does not appear to push imperialist or hegemonic ideas in the Belt and Road policy. China does not explicitly address a specific audience but opens to cooperation with the willing Others along the Belt and Road's planned land and sea routes across Europe, Asia, and Africa (Xinhua, 2015, para. 6). China advocates specific narratives to attract support and acceptance for a great power identity as a responsible actor and norm-producer. Indeed, the Belt and Road depends on multilateral action and deep and stable relationships to fulfill its material and non-material goals, which is expressed already in the headline emphasizing "jointly" building the BRI. This is an empirical example of intended social variables (structures of ideas, norms, and identities) preceding material variables, and that the outcome of the project's stated material goals is dependent on these social structures.

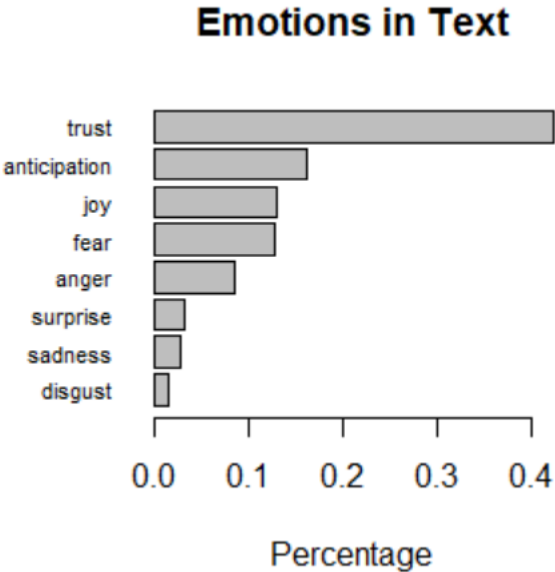


Figure 3: Visions and actions on jointly building the Belt and Road Emotion Bar

This paper has used R Studio to analyze the overall sentiment score of this Belt and Road document as a crude overview of the nature of the content of the document, and it owes much gratitude to Sanil Mhatre (2020) for the resulting model in figure 2 (Mhatre, 2020). This method of sentiment analysis counts the amounts of English words in the document that are associated

with the most common human sentiments such as “trust”, “fear”, “anger”, “joy”, “anticipation”, “surprise”, “disgust” and “sadness”, and it then visualizes how large of a percentage of the text each category makes out. This model demonstrates that words associated with the emotion “trust” makes out a 0.4 percentage score, or approx. 40 per cent of the text. We are reminded that this paper does not employ quantitative methods to answer its research questions, and this “sentiment” analysis is not an exception as R Studio may be used for qualitative purposes as well. This point is underlined by the fact that figure 3 is merely a simplified representation of the document, and more in-depth document analysis and interpretation is needed. However, it is a good indicator that the “purposeful agents” behind this document have constructed it on the purpose of invoking emotions of “trust” in its audience, and thus attempting to construct its identity as a responsible agent in the international system.

### Analysis

This thesis has identified and organized the narratives in the “Visions and actions on jointly building the Belt and Road into four categories, and they will be addressed in turn:

- (1) Narrative of shared history through the “Silk Road Spirit”
- (2) Narrative of China as responsible agent
- (3) Narrative of China as norm producer
- (4) Narrative of China as traditional great power

(1) The document begins with telling the tale of the ancient Silk Road and how the “courageous” Eurasian people connected Europe, Asia, and Africa. It emphasizes the historic ideas of “peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit” that surrounded the Silk Road for “thousands of years” (Xinhua, 2017, para. 1). The rationale behind the BRI’s normative goals can be interpreted as partly being based on the historic narrative and Chinese imagination of a shared “Silk Road Spirit”. It is the first indication of Beijing concentrating its foreign policy on shared ideas rather than ideas causing or worsening existing cleavages. This passage demonstrates that argument well: “Symbolizing



communication and cooperation between the East and the West, the Silk Road Spirit is a historic and cultural heritage shared by all countries around the world”.

Further, China bridges this historic narrative of the “shared Silk Road spirit” over to the context of the international system today to underline the relevance of these “ancient” ideas in a modern context. Beijing focuses on the normative structure of this modern context and emphasizes values like “a new era marked by the theme of peace, development, cooperation and mutual benefit”, and underlines the importance of employing these norms when addressing global economic problems and “complex international and regional situations” (Xinhua, 2017, para. 2). This is another example of how the document reflects China’s priority to social structures as means to strengthen the outcome of material structures like economic growth, quality of infrastructure, or security. Beijing identifies the largest global challenges as the slow recovery of the global economy after the financial crisis of 2008 and uneven global development and offers the Belt and Road as a Chinese “medicine”.

As we recall from previous chapters, this thesis argued that critical shifts in the structure of the international system since the Cold War and pre-Cold war contexts in institutions, norms, and communication technologies, have enhanced states’ opportunities to extract normative power from the structure. Moreover, in the case of China, which is yet to establish its great power identity, these shifts have made the exercise of normative power preferable over traditional hard-power mechanisms like military coercion.

(2) The Belt and Road allegedly embraces “the trend towards a multipolar world, economic globalization, (and) cultural diversity...” and is driven by the ideas to “uphold the global free trade regime and the open world economy” (Xinhua, 2017, para. 5). This passage is the first indication that China attempts to assign itself an identity of a “responsible actor” in the international system, and it is the second indication of China countering threat arguments from the West. For example, as we recall from the literature review, the offensive realist theory argues that China’s ambitions are not to peacefully co-exist in a multipolar system, but to seek regional hegemony in Asia. From this perspective, Chinese foreign policy is a threat against established norms like “free trade” and “open world economy” in the international system.

The first examples demonstrate how Beijing uses the document to construct an identity as a responsible actor by advocating narratives of China as a non-aggressor and non-imperialist. For instance, Beijing explicitly states that the Belt and Road is a “pluralistic and open process of cooperation which can be highly flexible, and does not seek conformity” (Xinhua, 2015, para. 27). The passage “China is committed to shouldering more responsibilities and obligations within its capabilities...” and contributing more to “peace and development” is interpreted as China consciously constructing its identity as a responsible actor and advocates these narratives towards the status-quo great powers (Xinhua, 2017, para. 6). Further, this extract mirrors China’s desire to be accepted as an equal among the great powers of the world. For example, China explicitly states in the document that the BRI does not violate the “purposes and principles of the UN Charter”, which expresses Beijing’s cautiousness to be perceived as an aggressor. Further, the document states that the Belt and Road “will abide by market rules and international norms” and take “advantage of existing bilateral and multilateral cooperation mechanisms” to implement the Belt and Road (Xinhua, 2017, para. 9). Beijing explicitly embraces and promotes the ideas of “trade liberalization”, “transparency”, removing tariff barriers, and to ensure protection of the rights of investors. These can all be categorized as “established norms”. Based on these findings, China does not express intentions to challenge the established norms and institutions of the international system and implicitly counter concerns of the threat perspective.

Three other examples demonstrate that China tries to establish its great power identity as a responsible actor by advocating narratives of Beijing as a cooperative actor, and the BRI being dependent on joint action. China advocates that the idea of enhancing people-to-people bond” will ensure “public support” for the Belt and Road (Xinhua, 2017, para. 18). First, Beijing states that joint “efforts should be made to promote green and low-carbon infrastructure construction and... management” (Xinhua, 2017, para. 13, 16). In this extract, China appears sensitive to the criticisms and concerns of the West that the BRI will promote high-carbon solutions to development and infrastructure challenges along the routes which will set back the aim of the Paris Agreement to slow global warming down to approx. 2 degrees Celsius. However, an interesting observation is that this statement outlines less consistent aims in terms of practical implementation, and it is also more vague and less confident than other statements in the document. This is an indication in disfavor of China being able to take a responsible role with regards to environmental-friendly infrastructure solutions, and this interpretation is

strengthened because of the obvious contradiction in Beijing encouraging cooperation in the “exploration and development of coal, oil, gas...”, but also renewable resources. This contradiction is interpreted as China showing reluctance in taking responsibility for lowering global Co2 emissions. Second, Beijing emphasizes the importance of BRI partners cooperating on matters of mutually recognizing laws and enforcing these laws, as well as reaching agreement on common norms and standards and ensure that the “WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement” is implemented (Xinhua, 2015, para. 15). Third, China calls for health cooperation among the BRI partners, and this cooperation encompasses epidemic information sharing, exchanging technologies, medical training, and enhancing capacity to “jointly address public health emergencies” as well as addressing global health issues like AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria (Xinhua, 2015, para. 18).

(3) The Belt and Road is more than belts and roads, and as this paper has previously stated, it is an exercise in identity building. A major component of China’s identity building process is Beijing positioning itself as a norm-producer in the international system. China tries to position its identity as a norm producer through the Belt and Road by “seeking new models of international cooperation and global governance” and claims that these efforts will “inject new positive energy into world peace and development” (Xinhua, 2015, para. 5). This paper interprets this passage as an implicit critique fitting into the larger debate in which China and developing countries in Africa have been dissatisfied with the West’s attempts to ensure peace and development in conflict-ridden and developing countries in the past.

Beijing displays entrepreneurship in encouraging its partners to cooperate in establishing institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Shanghai Cooperation Organization and more. The successful establishment of the AIIB as a subgoal of the BRI is an empirical case that strongly supports the argument of this paper that the BRI is an exercise in identity building and that China is consciously trying to take the identity of a norm-producer alongside the other great powers.

It is not only the establishment of new institutions, but Beijing’s approach to areas of cooperation with its partners that strengthens the argument of China trying to assume the role and identity of a norm-producer. For example, Beijing encourages partners to pool their

resources to cooperate on matters like “youth employment”, “entrepreneurship”, “training”, “social security management”, “public administration”, and other “common interest areas” (Xinhua, 2015, para. 19). Further, the Chinese government calls for more communication and “friendly exchanges” between the partners with regards to “political parties and parliaments”, “friendly exchanges between legislative bodies”, “cooperation among cities” and to encourage big cities to become “sister cities”. These passages are interpreted as a process of China taking leadership in encouraging not only sporadic, but long-lasting relationships and deep involvement between BRI partners. Arguably, deep involvement and exchanges of ideas and culture between states will in the long-term result in norms that will affect state behavior and the BRI processes.

The narrative of win-win cooperation is a central part to China’s attempt to establish its identity as a norm-producer. It promotes the ambitious goals of “world peace” and “development” and “economic prosperity of the countries along the Belt and Road”. Win-win cooperation is expressed to be achieved through “joint efforts” of regional economic cooperation and mutual learning (Xinhua, 2017, para. 3). This narrative is based on the rationale that the Belt and Road is “in the interests of the world community” (Xinhua, 2017, para. 5). Further, the document emphasizes the ideas of “consultation” and “mutual interest” when cooperating with partners along the Belt and Road so that the BRI can be adapted to their existing “development strategies”. This passage subtly indicates a conscious attempt by the sender of the document to counter China threat perspectives arguing that Beijing’s ambition is to challenge established norms or dominate its neighbors or partners through imperialist policies. The “win-win” as a contrast to the “zero-sum” concerns of those perceiving China as a threat, is embodied in a multilevel engagement development model with China’s BRI partners in Europe, Asia, and Africa. This multilevel engagement model is designed, at least normatively, to ensure mutual benefit through seeking “conjunction of interests” and give “full play” to the creativity, knowledge, “strengths” and “potentials of all parties” (Xinhua, 2017, para. 10). Beijing expresses intentions to build relationships on several levels with its partners, not just the government which is the traditional form of building inter-state relationships. For example, China states that it supports “localized operation and management of Chinese companies” to ensure local economic growth, “increase local employment”, “improve local livelihood, and

take social responsibilities...” (Xinhua, 2017, para. 16). More importantly, this development model is allegedly aimed to improve the lives of poor people in areas along the route.

(4) Finally, we will address example that points towards China’s identity as a traditional great power. Compared to the identities of “responsible actor” and “norm-producer”, there are less indications in this document of China positioning itself as a traditional great power than indications of China positioning itself as a non-traditional great power. We have previously discussed China’s sensitivity to be identified with the characteristics of the US, for example, and the rationale that Beijing seeks to go its “own way” may explain the near absence of rhetoric that indicates that China is a traditional great power. However, China stresses the importance of “respecting each other’s sovereignty and security concerns”, and it acknowledges that “closer cooperation and greater progress” is required for the disputed areas of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar economic corridor (Xinhua, 2017, para. 11-12). These areas of conflict are not given further attention in the document, which indicates China’s purpose with the document to rally support for the Belt and Road rather than stirring up debates on the disputed areas in its South-West neighboring regions and with India.

## Doc. 2: “... President Xi's speech at opening of Belt and Road Forum 2017

### Content

This speech was conducted at the Opening Ceremony of The Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation on May 14, 2017, three years after the document “Visions and Actions...” was finished in 2015. It was published in the CCP controlled newspaper Xinhua. It shares the material and normative characteristics of document 1 and has some structural characteristics. Document 2 puts more emphasis on various historic narratives that President Xi

tells the audience to emphasize his point that they share a history of the over 2000 years old Silk Road and its principles of “peace and cooperation”, “openness and inclusiveness”, “mutual learning” and “mutual benefit”. These principles form the normative backbone of the Belt and Road and its related institutions and norms of which the outcomes of the project’s material goals depend on. The overall impression of document 2 is that it contains a greater volume of and more specific details on how the normative and material principles and goals are to be implemented in practice compared to document 1.

### Analysis

This thesis has, apart from the historic narratives already mentioned, identified three key observations in Xi Jinping’s speech at the Belt and Road Forum in 2017 that relate to the observations made in document 1 “Visions and actions...”.

First, Xi Jinping appears confident when he, like the “Visions and actions...” document, bridges the narrative of the historic heritage of the Belt and Road to advocating its relevance in a modern international system which is “increasingly multipolar, economically globalized, digitized and culturally diversified” and creates a context in which the “trend toward peace and development” is stronger (Xi Jinping, 2017, para. 9). It is a statement that, from the perspective of this paper, indicates China’s conscious attempts to establish its identity as a responsible actor and norm-producer in the international system.

Second, President Xi claims that the first four years of the BRI has made progress in the areas of “policy connectivity”, “infrastructure connectivity”, “trade connectivity”, “financial connectivity”, and “people-people connectivity” (Xi Jinping, 2017, para. 12-16). More importantly, this paper observes an indication that Beijing does not seek to overthrow or threaten established Western institutions as President Xi emphasizes that the BRI’s new financial institutions and mechanisms complement traditional ones like the WTO. Arguably, this is a subtle counter argument against advocates of China-threat ideas who fear China’s new institutions and norms on the one hand, and Chinese demands for deeper involvement in the WTO on the other. Further, similar to document 1, Xi Jinping argues that the BRI partners should jointly establish a fair and “equitable and transparent system of international trade and investment rules” for the partnership, and “uphold the multilateral trade regime” and “promote

liberalization” globally (Xi Jinping, 2017, para. 26, 27). This is another indication that China consciously tries to establish its responsible Self in the international system and its ambition to be accepted as such by the status-quo great powers.

Third, Xi Jinping advocates narratives of the Belt and Road encouraging “cultural and educational exchanges” through initiatives like “Silk Road culture year”, “tourism year” and exchanges of cultural expressions like “art”, “film” and think-tanks (Xi Jinping, 2017, para. 16). These narratives arguably support China’s preferred identity as a norm- producer, and they appear to be attempts of building a BRI trademark to gain attention globally and popular support for the project.

This paper has also identified four key observations in Xi Jinping’s speech that are unique to document 2.

First, it appears to be an attempt to re-emphasize the peace narrative, and President Xi makes historic references to the Silk Road that “thrived in peace, but lost vigor in times of war” (Xi Jinping, 2017, para. 19). This is a strong indication that the peace narrative may see a revitalization as a component of Chinese identity building through the Belt and Road.

Second, Xi Jinping explicitly emphasizes the importance of the BRI partners respecting each other’s sovereignty, “dignity and territorial integrity”, “each other’s development paths and social systems”, “and each other’s core interests and major concerns”. This passage is interpreted by this paper as a strong signal of Beijing’s dissatisfaction with the US and its partners attempting to assign threat identities onto China but also their inclination to bend or violate the principles of non-interference and sovereignty based on human rights concerns or their use of diplomatic and economic sanctions to resolve disputes. Moreover, it is a strong indication that in some respects, China will assume the role of a traditional great power.

Third, this speech brings up the matter of “security”, and President Xi argues that the BRI partners ought to “foster the vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security” to address global problems like areas of violent conflict and terrorism (Xi Jinping, 2017, para. 20). This statement is interpreted by this thesis as a conscious and confident attempt by Beijing to establish and strengthen its identity as a responsible actor in the international

system. Further, he puts a greater emphasis on sustainable development in his speech than what is present in document 1, and he directly refers to the importance of reaching the UN's "2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" (Xi Jinping, 2017, para. 24, 30). Finally, unlike document 1 on the "Visions and Actions..." of the BRI, he explicitly addresses the problem of corruption and calls for strengthened cooperation to solve it (Xi Jinping, 2017, para. 32). This is one of the central areas of concern for the United States, and President Xi addressing the problem may be an indication of Beijing countering the threat narrative of the US that the BRI will foster corruption.

Fourth, Xi Jinping expresses confidence in saying that "(d)evlopment holds the master key to solving all problems" and urges the BRI partnership to pursue "innovation-driven development" and multilevel engagement with communities (Xi Jinping, 2017, para. 21). This narrative is arguably aimed to strengthen China's identity as a global norm-producer.

Fifth, this thesis has uncovered direct criticisms against the United States and its partners which indicates that China labels the identity of the United States as imperialist, neo-colonialist and being stuck in a Cold-War mentality towards security, power, and development. For example, President Xi states that: "we have no intention to interfere with other countries' internal affairs, export our own social system and model of development, or impose our own will on others", use "outdated geopolitical maneuvering", or "form a small group detrimental to stability" (Xi Jinping, 2017, para. 34). From the perspective of this thesis, these statements are arguably the strongest indications of the Belt and Road in general being an exercise in identity building, but specifically being an empirical case of China advocating narratives on its Self and Other to construct an identity as a responsible actor and norm-producer in the international system.

**Doc. 3: "FACT SHEET: President Biden and G7 Leaders Launch Build Back Better World (B3W) Partnership"**



## Content

The US' alternative to the "Belt and Road", the "Build Back Better World", was announced in June 2021. We are still awaiting more specific details on the normative and material goals of the initiative. The first impression of this official document published on the official pages of the White House is that it is significantly shorter and less specific in terms of the project's goals compared to that of the Belt and Road. The shortage of the document forms a poorer data foundation for sentiment analysis in R like was performed in analyzing the official policy document of the Belt and Road, and therefore it will not be applied to this document. Several news agencies and commentators like, for example, Keith Johnson at Foreign Policy, has labeled Biden's initiative as a response to China's Belt and Road (Johnson, 2021, para. 1).

On June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021, US President Joe Biden and the G7 leaders met to discuss "strategic competition" to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative by applying a Western democratic model of economic development to help low- and middle-income countries overcome their infrastructure gap. The US identifies itself as the leading partner and the project is also expected to serve the US' domestic need for increased employment (Doc.3, 2021, para. 4). The "B3W" project focuses the efforts of the G7 on four areas, "climate, health and health security, digital technology, and gender equity and equality", and it will generally encompass South America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Indo-Pacific, however, "different G7 partners will have different geographic orientations" (Doc. 3, 2021, para. 3-4). The normative "principles" or values of the B3W are transparency, sustainability, good governance, high standards (i.e., anti-corruption), climate friendliness, strong strategic partnerships (i.e., consulting with communities) and norm-adaption to the "rigorous standards" of various international development banks (Doc. 3, 2021, para. 7).

## Analysis

What becomes evident after analyzing document 3 is that the US has launched a global infrastructure and investment project, but unlike China who attempts to "rally the willing" along the land and maritime routes of BRI regardless of their ideological stance, Washington's intended audience is "the world's democracies" and one of its goals is to "demonstrate our shared values". The US' sides with the other six largest economies of the world (the G7) to

solve infrastructure and development problems in low- and middle- income countries and to revitalize not only the US' and the West's economic superiority and competitiveness, but also the alleged ideational superiority of democracy. This paper interprets the “Build Back Better” initiative as a quest lead by the US and the G7 to respond to and slow the rising normative power and increased engagement of China in international affairs, and to reaffirm its identity as, at least, a (continued) regional hegemon and leading norm producer fueled by democratic ideas. In contrast, China is a new player in the field attempts to establish its international identity as a responsible actor and norm producer through win-win cooperation.

Washington's explicit reference in the “FACT SHEET (...)” to “demonstrate our shared values” and to engage in competition with China is interpreted by this paper as a strong signal that China has recently been acknowledged as an equal competitor in the international system, or at least one to be taken seriously. Further, this paper interprets the meaning behind the document as the US and its partners perceiving China as a challenge against their already declining normative power, which has opened windows of opportunity for China to enhance its normative power through the Belt and Road. An example of a “window of opportunity” can be Beijing's rising popularity in Africa due to its more successful models for development and arguably successful projection of narratives of anti-colonialist values.

The fact that the Biden-administration has chosen to prioritize the launch of this ambitious counter-policy and that the G7 have embraced the project into its agenda is a strong indication of the US' realization that China is a rising power to be taken seriously. This thesis interprets document 3 as reflecting the attitudes of the US and its key partners that China is not identified as a responsible actor or will be accepted as a norm-producer vis a vis the US and its allies. Rather, it appears for this thesis that US and the G7 project ideas through the documents which label China as an irresponsible newcomer. There is a reluctance in the document to directly label China as a threat, and it may be interpreted as a purposeful attempt by Washington to avoid spiraling already tense relations with Beijing, and to avoid these relations escalating into conflict.

Document three does not offer sufficient data for evaluating how the Build Back Better World initiative contributes to answering research question one and two, and therefore, President

Biden’s “Remarks... in Meeting on the Build Back Better Initiative” will be included as an additional source.

## Doc. 4: “Remarks by President Biden in Meeting on the Build Back Better World Initiative”

### Content

Document 4 is a speech made by President Joe Biden on November 02, 2021 at the United Nation’s Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Scotland. The climate context that this speech was presented in must be kept in mind since President Biden has some obvious incentives to present the B3W as a climate friendly initiative. The President’s focus is to offer “sustainable infrastructure” to developing countries. His speech addresses three material and three normative goals. The B3W’s material goals are to contribute to reaching UN’s goal of “net-zero emissions” of Co2 in 2015, develop and employ climate-friendly technology, and to partner with South-Africa to transform its economy into a “clean economy”. The project’s normative goals are to re-vitalize democratic ideas, ensure transparency, and battle corruption in the project’s implementation.

### Analysis

This paper has identified three narratives in Biden’s speech at the COP26. First, J. Biden underlines the importance of the partnership between the US, the G7, the EU, and established institutions like the World Bank in achieving the material and normative goals of the B3W (Doc. 4, 2021, para. 2, 5, 8, 18, 24, 25). By defining the leadership of the US and its partner states and organizations, he arguably also advocates a narrative of their (continued) legitimate identities as responsible and norm-producing actors in the international system. For example, he claims that the B3W projects “should be designed in close partnership with the countries where they will happen” and that they should benefit and engage the communities, which is a similar claim that Beijing makes in the BRI announcement with its “people-people” term. In

terms of advocating the US and the West as the leading norm-producers, Biden says: “democracy is still the best way for delivering results and repeats the statement again to emphasize its importance, which indicates that a large part of the rationale behind the B3W is a response to a perceived ideational threat from the values projected by Beijing through the Belt and Road initiative. The word “still” is arguably a reference to and acknowledgement of the declining normative power of the US and the fear of having its democratic values threatened by the rising normative power of non-democratic China.

Second, this thesis finds strong indications of Biden advocating threat narratives on China’s Belt and Road in normative terms of “debt traps” and “corruption”, but also in material terms of promoting top-down, non-sustainable solutions to infrastructure development. He offers an “alternative” built on “high quality” and “high standards”, and that does not dictate “projects from afar”. This may further be interpreted as Washington not accepting China as a responsible actor and norm-producer in the international system. A strong counter argument would obviously be that Biden does not explicitly mention China as its target of criticism in this document, so it is not evident that it is the BRI he criticizes. However, there is a wide consensus among journalists, academics, and policy makers alike, that the Build Back Better World partnership is the US’ response and alternative to the Belt and Road. Therefore, when the document is seen in context, it appears reasonable for this thesis to interpret the criticisms above as directed towards China.

Third, President Biden takes advantage of one of the BRI’s known weaknesses, or at least an area that is thin in detail on practical implementation – climate change and sustainable development. Arguably, the major “push” behind the B3W is its advocacy of the environmental-friendly infrastructure narrative which rests on his expressed rationale that the “climate crisis is an enormous opportunity”. It appears to this thesis that the meanings advocated by Biden through his speech on the B3W is to re-vitalize the normative dominance of US and Western values, its identity as the most responsible actor and norm-producer, and to promote negative labels on China’s identity.

## Doc. 5: “Carbis Bay G7 Summit Communiqué Our Shared Agenda for Global Action to Build Back Better”

### Content

The document “FACT SHEET: (...)” referred to the “G7 leaders’ communique” for more information on the Build Back Better World partnership. Therefore, this paper analyzes the “Carbis Bay G7 Summit Communiqué”. The G7 Summit Communiqué addresses a wide range of global challenges from health and gender equality to armed conflicts and the aggressions of Russia, and much of the content is related to their responsibilities of healing economies after the Covid-19 pandemic and to promote and ensure stability in areas in which the Covid-19 is yet not under control. This thesis will focus on the parts that are related to the B3W and China.

### Analysis

The section where the G7 summit declares its “global responsibility” and visions for “international action” is of particular interest to this thesis. First, the G7 emphasize their roles as key agents in the international system, due to being the seven largest economies of the world and define their responsibilities to uphold “the rules-based international system” and “international law” in partnership with all states in the G20 and with the UN under the high banner of democratic values (G7, 2021, p. 19). This may be interpreted the G7 labeling, or revitalizing themselves as the status-quo responsible leaders and norm-producers of the international system, and it is evident in this their argument that they will promote “our values” and call on China to “respect human rights and fundamental freedoms (...)” (G7, 2021, p. 19)

Second, document five more explicitly than documents three and four reflects the G7’s dissatisfaction with Chinese involvement in the global economy and call for “collective action” to counter the challenges of what they label China’s “non-market policies and practices which undermine the responsibilities in the multilateral system”. This paper interprets the latter passage as the G7 assigning threat identities to China not only against the liberal economic order, but also against the general “responsibilities” in the international system. Moreover, the G7 express their “serious concern” with the security situation in the South China Sea and declare that they “strongly oppose” unilateral “attempts to change the status quo and increase

tensions” (G7, 2021, p. 21). This paper interprets the two latter passages as the G7 assigning threat identities to China not only against the liberal economic order, but also against the general “responsibilities” and stability in the international system.

Third, the G7 argues that their aim with the Build Back Better World partnership is to maximize their efforts to meet the needs of their partners “on the ground”, and that these efforts are “more than the sum of its parts” (G7, 2021, p. 23). The G7 Summit declares that the key focus of B3W is to support “sustainable growth in Africa”, which is the area that China’s development efforts through the BRI have been particularly successful (G7, 2021, p. 24). Their expressed shift of focus in their development approaches “from crisis response to promoting” long term growth is interpreted by this paper as an acknowledgement that they have failed to ensure long term development in low- and middle- income states in the past, but that they will now prioritize long-term, sustainable development (G7, 2021, p. 1).

## Doc. 6: “A Globally Connected Europe”

### Content

This thesis includes EU’s suggested infrastructure project “A Globally Connected Europe” as well because, like the Build Back Better World project, it is interpreted as an early-stage, work-in-progress response to China’s Belt and Road initiative. Moreover, it strengthens the assumption of this paper that the US, but also its partners in Europe, acknowledge the need to re-vitalize their normative leadership and protect the liberal-democratic norms that forms the structure of the status-quo international system against what they perceive as a threat from the increased power of non-democratic China.

The document “A Globally Connected Europe” was published on July 12. 2021 by the General Secretariat of the Council and is the outcome of discussions in the Council of the European Union on infrastructure connectivity. Under the “Vision, principles and goals”, the EU acknowledges the need to “advancing the EU’s economic, foreign and development policy and

security interests, and promoting EU values globally”, and considers a “geostrategic approach to connectivity” (General Secretariat, 2021, para. 1). This document shares similar characteristics to the announcement of the Build Back Better World partnership. It lacks specific details on the material and social goals of the project and how it is to be implemented in practice, which creates an overall impression that it is, as of now, a reflexive reaction to the relatively rapid success of the BRI and increased attractiveness of China’s development approaches.

### Analysis

The first indication of the EU responding to the BRI and more importantly, labeling China as a non-responsible actor and dismissing China’s attempts to assume the role as a norm-producer, is the phrase “it reaffirms the centrality of human rights and the rules-based international order”. This statement is the backbone of the intended “A Globally Connected Europe” initiative.

Secondly, this thesis finds that the EU appears to take advantage of some of the weaknesses of the Belt and Road, namely, the challenges of sustainable development and the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, to demonstrate the vitality and competitiveness of Western leadership in solving global issues (General Secretariat, 2021, para. 4). To revitalize the status-quo ideas of the West, the EU advocates a “Team Europe Approach” in which they will develop a “unifying narrative for actions taken by all relevant actors”. Previously this paper discussed processes of identity building as various actors constructing narratives that support certain identities. The “A Globally Connected Europe” document’s use of the concept “narrative” indicates that the senders’ intentions are to construct narratives to support its own identity as leading responsible actors and norm producers in the international system, but they are relatively vague at this early stage. EU states that this “narrative” should “include a recognizable brand name and logo developed together with the Member States” and “supported by a campaign for greater public visibility” (General Secretariat, 2021, para. 9 iv).

Third, the EU advocates the continued legitimacy and importance of upholding the status-quo norms of the system by arguing that “predictable international norms and standards, and sound regulatory frameworks, are essential for a level playing field...”. Further, the EU calls for establishing partnerships with “like minded countries”, particularly by supporting the B3W

ideas of the United States to balance China's increased normative impact in the international system (General Secretariat, 2021, para. 6). This thesis interprets the EU's emphasis on predictability as mirroring the organization's uncertainty and arguably fear towards the increased popularity of Chinese norms and ideas globally, but particularly in Africa and parts of Asia and Eastern-Europe. The assumption of this paper that the EU expresses uncertainty and concern towards the BRI is strengthened by this passage saying that The Council "... notes that other key economies have developed their own approaches... to connectivity", and it emphasizes the "need for all such initiatives and actions to apply high international standards" (General Secretariat, 2021, para. 5).

## Results

This paper argues that the US' initiated B3W and the associated G7 Summit addressing the B3W, and the "Globally Connected Europe" initiative of the EU, reflect the acute realization by the Western great powers that the Belt and Road was not merely a rhetorical stunt by Beijing that would not have significant practical impacts on international policy in Asia or elsewhere and eventually fall apart. As we recall from the introduction, 138 countries had signed up on Belt and Road contracts in 2019, and it has succeeded in some key low- and middle- income areas, particularly in Africa, in which the US and the G7 have previously failed (Anwar, 2019, p. 1; Ibrahim & Bibi-Farouk, 2020, p. 22).

The analysis of document 1, the "Visions and Actions..." on building the Belt and Road revealed four narratives, (1) shared history, (2) responsible actor, (3) norm producer, and (4) traditional great power, that are constructed by Xi Jinping's government, and its ideas are advocated towards existing and potential BRI partners, but also towards the United States and its partners, for instance, the G7. There is a very similar pattern in document 2, Xi Jinping's speech at the 2017 Belt and Road Forum, in which each of the four narratives found in document 1 is repeated and re-emphasized and contains a greater amount of and more specific details than document 1. The overall impression of President Xi's speech four years after the announcement of the BRI is that Beijing expresses more confidence and determination in advocating the



narratives of its identity as a responsible actor and norm-producer, but also as a traditional great power calling upon the US and its Western partners to respect China's sovereignty, internal affairs, and dignity. There are strong indications of China expressing a stronger confidence to criticize the United States' and its European partners' foreign policy and models for development as being imperialist, neo-colonialist and based on an outdated perception of development, security, and power.

Documents 3, the announcement of the Build Back Better World, and 4, President Joe Biden's remarks to the B3W, both have a slimmer body of information and less details on the normative and material goals of the initiative than documents 1 and 2 on the Belt and Road. The overall impression after analyzing documents 3 and 4 is that the B3W is on a very early stage of development, and it is a direct response to a perceived threat of the increased normative power of Chinese ideas parallel to its own liberal-democratic ideas being put into question, and the increased economic dependency of developing economies on Chinese support. There are strong indications of the US constructing and advocating narratives to re-vitalize its ideational superiority as the leading responsible actor and norm-producer to the liberal-democratic status quo, and to demonstrate its economic capacity and competitiveness in the face of a serious threat from the rising normative and material competition from authoritarian China. Particularly document 4 is a strong indication of the US taking advantage of its position as a status-quo power and attempting to label China's identity as an irresponsible actor and illegitimizing China's attempt to label it Self as a norm-producer in the international system.

Document 5 is similar to documents 3 and 4 short on detail on the specific material and social aims of the B3W, but it indicates that the group of seven largest (democratic) economies of the world consciously construct narratives to re-vitalize their global identity as the leading responsible actors and status-quo norm-producers in the international system.

The EU's alternative to the Belt and Road, "Globally Connected Europe" is similar to documents 3, 4, and 5 short on detail on its specific normative and material goals, but this paper interprets document 6 as a strong indication that the European Union acts on a need to re-vitalize and re-emphasize its values and identity as the most responsible actor and leading norm-producer in Europe. The emerging narratives suggest that the EU implicitly, yet more directly

so than documents 3, 4, and 5, label China as a non-responsible actor and dismisses China's narrative of it Self as a norm-producer in the international system. Particularly documents 5 and 6 provide a useful addition to this paper's theoretical model, which was developed after the literature review, namely, the indication that the "status-quo Other revitalizing Self in relation to China" as the leading responsible actors and norm-producers.

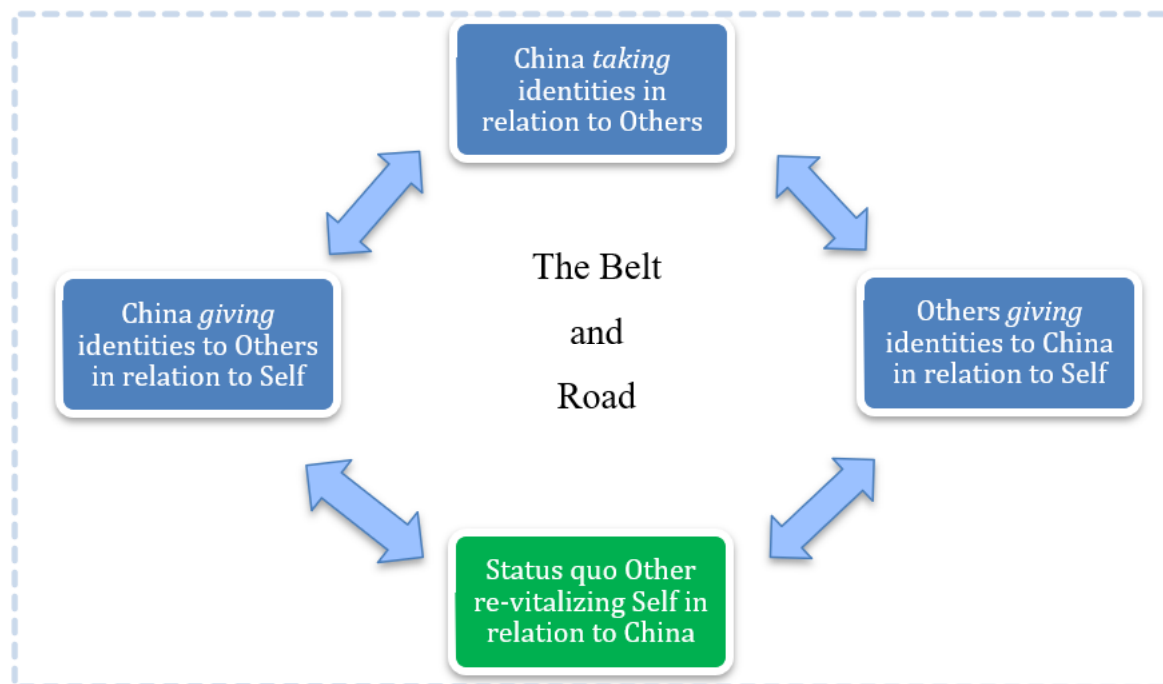


Figure 4.

## Problems & Limitations

There are some methodological limitations in document analysis that need to be addressed. First, especially idea analysis carries less theoretical baggage than, for instance, content analysis and discourse analysis. Second, particularly the official announcements of the Build Back Better World and A Globally Connected Europe lack in sufficient detail to answer research questions one and two, especially since they appear relatively sporadic, general, and fragmented in their specific policy goals (Bowen, 2009, p. 31-32). A major reason is of course that the documents are not designed for research; they are official announcements from the Chinese and

US governments and the EU. The accumulation of any acquirable related documents was therefore key to answer research questions one and two and strengthen the credibility of this theoretical exercise. Third, “biased selectivity” is a common flaw when using document analysis, and it means that the researcher has not gathered enough documents for the analysis. Bowen (2009) cites Yin (1994) and says that in “an organizational context, the available documents are likely to be aligned with corporate policies and procedures and with the agenda of the organization’s principles” (Bowen, 2009, p. 31). The official announcements are the main sources of interpretation and data, and related documents have been chosen to the extent that it is possible from other government agencies/- departments. Moreover, this thesis tries to uncover the ideas and narratives at work in documents, and therefore, the more of the “agenda of the organization’s principles” that is present in the text, the better. This paper agrees with Bowen (2009) that the advantages of document analysis far “outweigh the limitations”.

Fourth, the limited availability of and the quality of documents regarding the Belt and Road, but particularly, the B3W and A Globally Connected Europe, was a major obstacle for this analysis. If the same project was conducted in a few years from now, this paper expects that there would be a greater quantity and quality of data available for document analysis and other methods.

## **7. Conclusion**

The discipline of International Relations is mainly founded on the history and experiences of Western states. Mainstream IR researchers that study the rise of new powers have suffered from this Westernized bias because they place too much explanatory weight in the structure of anarchy and its assumed streamlined effects on the behavior of rising great powers. This is generally true for realism(s) in general, but as this paper has demonstrated, particularly for offensive realism and classical realism. This paper has offered a constructivist alternative to the over-emphasis on anarchy and materialism provided by offensive and classical realism. It has theoretically modeled three processes of identity building based on the literature review and applied the model to the document analysis which resulted in the indication of a fourth

complementary process of identity building. This constructivist approach also questions and expands the traditional understanding of a great power and anarchy. Arguably, this thesis has the potential to provide more objective theory than classical and offensive realist theories. This case study's contributions to the study of great power behavior and identity politics include: a concrete theoretical suggestion of four processes of Chinese great power identity building based on existing literature and a document analysis, and a less (though not absent) biased understanding of the Westernized concepts of anarchy and great power based on a sensitivity to the effects of shifting contexts of political space over time. Looking ahead, China is facing a major great power dilemma in the face of the Ukraine-crisis; whether to condemn Russia's actions and jeopardize its diplomatic relations and its BRI routes across and along Russia's borders, or to not condemn Russia, risking Sino-American relations to spiral downwards and launch greater resistance against the BRI. Either way, major bumps are expected in the Belt and Road, and this thesis holds that the conflict in Ukraine as well as China's current downturn in economic growth will have negative consequences to the implementation on Beijing's infrastructure plans in Eastern Europe and Russia.

1) The Belt and Road is essentially an exercise in identity building because Beijing consciously constructs and advocates narratives of its great power identity as a responsible actor and norm-producer through the Belt and Road; it displays a major sensitivity to how its identity is perceived by Others; the material outcomes of the BRI depend on the social structures developed through the BRI; it has triggered counter projects and following negative identity narratives from the US and its partners in the G7 and EU against China; and its main audience is the United States and the G7.

2) The offensive and classical realist theories have become more inadequate in analyzing great power rise and behavior because they fail to acknowledge that the eclipsed density and exchange of norms, institutions and technology since the Cold War have opened several windows of opportunity for a global "newcomer" like China to extract normative power from the structure of the international system, which also calls the traditional conceptualization of a "great power" and the "anarchy" into question.

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