

# Climate security and China's challenge to the liberal international order: How should the EU respond to the geo-economic game of China?

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## Keywords

Climate Security, Geopolitics, EU-China Relations, Geo-economics, Strategic Autonomy



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## Information YCST

*Climate change will be one of the largest security threats in the (near) future. Yet, in recent years, little to no attention was paid towards climate change in the security domain. We understand the importance of supplying future decision makers with knowledge and skills to understand climate change and negate the challenges which it will bring. Hence, YCST was created in November 2021. The YCS Research Team was founded in September 2023, to further build upon this project. The Research Team gives young professionals and students the opportunity to write about climate security related topics and put their articles into public discourse.*

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## Introduction

Energy has always been key to power and wealth. From 1500-1800, the Netherlands used wind and water energy through windmills, boosting its economic and military strength during the Dutch Golden Age. The steam engine's advent in the UK shifted global power dynamics, making coal a crucial resource. This change impacted international power and domestic labor-capital relations, as coal-rich regions gained importance and labor strikes could disrupt industries. This led to imperialist actions like Japan's invasion of Manchuria and Germany's conquest of Alsace-Lorraine.

The transition to oil and globalization further changed the energy landscape, reducing coal's dominance and lessening labor-intensive processes. Oil, often extracted remotely and transported via pipelines, is less vulnerable to strikes. This shift gave new geopolitical relevance to oil-rich states and created immense wealth in countries like those in the Middle East. For example, Russia sustains a war economy through oil sales. The 1973 oil embargo by Middle Eastern producers after the Yom Kippur War dramatically showcased oil's power, quadrupling prices and causing severe economic disruption in the West.

The course of history has shown us how energy can shape nations, and how those nations can shape the world. Now that the world is recognizing the importance of transitioning away from fossil fuels and towards clean energy, these historical examples can be illustrative for the future of Europe's geopolitical approach. In the pursuit of open strategic autonomy, a holistic assessment of Europe's main rivals' capabilities and motivations is imperative, considering geoeconomic, ideological, technological, diplomatic, and military factors in unison; factors that often influence each other. For example, dependence on close allies with similar ideology is often disregarded, while asymmetric dependency on competing regimes is considered problematic.

In this article, I aim to explain why European climate security is linked with our ideological security. China, as a revisionist actor, seeks to challenge the Liberal International Order which is upheld by the US, the EU and its allies. Simultaneously, China is a key player in the future fight against climate change, both in terms of domestic pollution and international trade in renewable technologies and resources. Therefore, with this article I seek to explain the threat our current dependency on China poses to our liberal democratic way of life.

## Systemic rivalry between the EU and China

To understand why souring Sino-European relations is a potential hazard for future climate-security related threats, a broader perspective of international relations and the position of the two blocs in the world order has to be examined. The US-China rivalry is no secret, and European states have found it difficult to position themselves between this clash of two titans. The EU's External Action Service (EEAS, 2022) officially calls China a **systemic rival**, while at the same time considering them a *partner for cooperation* and an *economic competitor*. These terms might seem confusing and contradictory, so I will briefly explain what the EEAS means by systemic rival.

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When the EU refers to China as a systemic rival it is referring to the inherently contradictory ways the two blocs manifest themselves in the international system. When we refer to the *international system* we are speaking about a relatively stable framework of international relations, consisting of various international actors. It is a complex system of systems, encompassing economic, political, scientific, technological, and military systems. It's important to note that there are different interpretations of what constitutes an international system, but all theories of international relations accept some form of structuring of the relations between states, often centering around some form of power. Realism focuses on the anarchic nature of the system and the power dynamics between states as principle actors; Liberalism emphasizes the role of international institutions and interdependence; Constructivism considers the social constructs and shared norms that shape state behavior; Marxist and Critical Theories highlight the impact of economic structures and power disparities, focusing on networks of economic elites. Each interpretation has been founded in different eras throughout history, but these variations have many modern variations (for example, *Progressive Realism* is a variant on Realism as described [in a recent article by Jurre Kok](#)). Central to many conceptions of the international system, is the relative *anarchy* under which this system operates (although the emphasis on anarchy and the importance of actors differs between theories), meaning that there is no true central authority above states. Within this anarchy, states are free to use their capabilities to shape international relations in a manner that they deem to be beneficial to themselves. Below I will highlight the competing interests and goals of China and the EU in the international system. The focus will be on China since it is the challenger to the current system, and it is understood less widely than the EU's position.

## The EU's position in the international system

In the EU's Strategic Compass for Security and Defense (EEAS, 2022), a key common foreign policy document published just after the war (in fact, the document was basically ready when Putin invaded Ukraine, which required major last minute adjustments to the policy document including a shift in priorities from the Indo-pacific towards areas closer at home), the EU sets out its vision and ambitions for what kind of world order it seeks to uphold and promote:

*“Partnerships are an essential instrument to support the EU's ambition to be a global strategic player. Partners will also benefit from a stronger and more capable EU in security and defense. They can help us **uphold the rules-based international order and effective multilateralism, with the UN at its core, set international norms and standards and contribute to peace and security around the world. We will bolster tailored partnerships where they are mutually beneficial, serve EU interests and support our values, particularly when there is a shared commitment to an integrated approach to conflict and crises, capacity building and resilience.**”*

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What is very important to know when analyzing official EU documents, is that the language that the document uses has been debated extensively and the highlighted key words signify the EU's ideology in foreign policy, namely Liberal Internationalism, which emphasizes the importance of international cooperation and partnerships. *Effective multilateralism, with the UN at its core*, underscores a commitment to working through international institutions and a rules-based international order, which are central tenets of liberal internationalism. *A rules-based international order* indicates a preference for an international system governed by agreed-upon rules and norms, rather than power politics alone. This aligns with the liberal internationalist perspective that international law and institutions can help manage relations between states. The Western world believes in the *Liberal International Order*. For the West and its partners, the LIO means democratic international governance, universal human rights, as well as international governance through liberal democratic institutions like the UN, WTO and IMF.

## **China's rising relevance in the international system and its increasingly assertive posture**

The CCP's post-Mao's strategy has intelligently adjusted itself to its relative standing in the international system. China's incredible economic growth has propelled it to great power status within the international system. This growth has been made possible by the accommodating stance of the West towards China which could be considered naive in hindsight, but many in the West were blinded by the idea that the fall of the Soviet-Union meant that the *end of history* was here as infamously said by Francis Fukuyama. It was believed that economic prosperity would automatically democratize and further liberalize China, encapsulated within the German policy of interdependence called *Wandel durch Handel* (change through trade), which led European states to increase investment and trade with China. This economic growth was enabled by Deng Xiapoing's *reform and opening up* period, in which the economy was gradually liberalized, foreign direct investment was encouraged and joint venture laws were established to enable technological transfers.

Contrary to the wishful thinking in the West however, China was not democratizing with these liberalizations but was adopting a pragmatic foreign policy focused on economic development while avoiding direct confrontation with the West. This policy is captured perfectly by Deng's policy of *Tao Guang Yang Hui* roughly translated as *hide your strength, bide your time*. According to Stevens (2014, pp. 1-2) sentiment within the Chinese government started shifting in the 2010s, due the financial crisis in 2008 and the resource intensive US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, combined with the symbolic achievement of holding the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Some officials believed that the balance of power was shifting, and that China should be more assertive towards a declining US (Stevens, 2014, p. 1). The 2008 global financial crisis exposed vulnerabilities in the Western financial system and marked a significant shift in global power dynamics. China viewed the crisis as evidence of the flaws in the Western liberal economic model and as an opportunity to assert its own model of state-led capitalism. Following the crisis, China became more assertive in its regional and global ambitions, evidenced by its actions in the South China Sea and the launch

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of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. However, comparatively to the contemporary situation this was not a dramatic change in policy, which was to come later with Xi Jinping taking the stage.

The ascension of Xi Jinping as Chinese leader has dramatically altered the way China interacts with the world. Bolstering development was no longer the only priority. A new moral objective inspired by the century of humiliation had entered the picture (the century of humiliation refers to the. Essentially, Xi Jinping has changed Chinese state identity within the international system. Under Xi Jinping, China no longer lay low and started to figuratively stand up, from 2013 the new guideline was to be *Fen Fa You Wei* (奋发有为, “striving for achievement”) (Sørensen, 2015), with the ultimate goal of achieving the “Chinese dream”.

The Chinese dream is inspired by historical revanchism, with the ultimate goal being the great “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”, in which China regains its international status, rights and power (Sørensen, 2015, p. 10); reminiscing over times when China made the rules as hegemon within East-Asia. Essentially, Xi Jinping slowly and methodically started reconstructing Chinese state identity within the international system.

## Why is China challenging the Liberal International Order?

When we talk about this Chinese assertiveness towards the West, the question that naturally arises is: what does China want to achieve with this assertiveness? This question is rhetorical of course, since the Chinese government is an authoritarian one, its mode of governance is in fundamental opposition to the Liberal International Order (LIO). For China and much of the Global South, the LIO is perceived as merely a power tool of the West, which is strongly rooted in and dependent on economic superiority. Ideally, the Chinese would like to see a model of governance imposed on the world which is modeled after the Chinese mode of governance. Attitudes in the West among politicians, analysts and academics long assumed that the changes Beijing desires do not relate to the order’s most important features and that the threat is primarily to Western pride, but according to Daniel Tobin (2022) of the Center For Strategic & International Studies Xi’s (in)famous *New Era* speech on the 100th anniversary of the CCP should have put an end to these perspectives:

*“These perspectives, concentrating either on China’s status or its level of participation in the order as the key issues, undersell the nature of U.S.-China strategic rivalry, which is driven not only by concerns about changing relative power but also—and more crucially—by competing domestic governance systems with morally incompatible values. The rivalry between these competing systems, moreover, is exacerbated by their contest to define the predominant norms and values governing a single, integrated world.”*

Historical materialism, a Marxist theory emphasizing the material conditions of society, plays a critical role in informing the CCP’s challenge to the LIO and these “competing systems” Tobin (2022) described. This theoretical framework underpins the CCP’s ideology and strategic objectives, shaping its approach to international relations and

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global governance. It explains societal changes and historical development through the lens of economic conditions and class struggles. At its core, it posits that the material base of society, including the mode of production and economic relationships, fundamentally shapes the political and ideological superstructure (in this case the LIO). This means that the way goods are produced and distributed in a society determines its laws, politics, and cultural norms. A key aspect of historical materialism is the dialectical process, which involves the interaction of opposing forces. This process is often described through the concepts of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis:

***Thesis:***

Represents the existing state or condition, often characterized by a dominant economic and social system (The LIO);

***Antithesis:***

Represents the opposition or contradiction to the thesis, often emerging from inherent conflicts and inequalities within the existing system ([Socialism with Chinese characteristics](#) model);

***Synthesis:***

Represents the resolution of the conflict between thesis and antithesis, leading to the creation of a new state or condition, which becomes the new thesis (A new Chinese world order.)

This dialectical process drives historical change and societal development, with each synthesis becoming the starting point for new contradictions and struggles, propelling society forward through stages such as feudalism, capitalism, and eventually socialism and communism. Historical materialism thus provides a framework for understanding how economic forces and class struggles shape the trajectory of history.

Historical materialism critiques capitalism for creating inequalities and crises. The CCP extends this critique to the global capitalist system, arguing that the LIO perpetuates Western dominance and exploits developing nations. By challenging the LIO, the CCP seeks to disrupt this capitalist hegemony and promote an alternative socialist order. China promotes its state-led development model as a viable alternative to Western liberal democracy. By exporting this model, particularly through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China aims to establish a new global economic base that challenges the ideological foundations of the LIO. Historical materialism informs China's strategic use of its economic power to reshape global trade and investment patterns. Through the BRI and other economic partnerships, China seeks to create a network of dependent and supportive states, thereby undermining the economic structures (the “material” in historical materialism) that support the LIO and promoting a multipolar world order. The CCP views the ideological contest between socialism and capitalism as a central element of its rivalry with the West. Historical materialism provides the theoretical basis for this contest, framing it as a struggle between two fundamentally different economic and social systems. The CCP’s efforts to enhance its *discourse power* aim to shift global norms and values in favor of its ideology, challenging the

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moral and ideological foundations of the LIO. The reason the CCP is exporting this authoritarian model of control, is because it sees a liberal order with political freedom as an existential threat to the party, Hellström (2021) from the China media project describes it as follows:

*“Cultural security is aimed at protecting Chinese society from cultural infiltration by hegemonic powers, Westernization and cultural decay. The concept of cultural security is intertwined with “ideological security”, which involves threats including “Western-style democracy, Western cultural hegemony, the diversified dissemination of Internet information and public opinion, and religious infiltration”. In 1994 Wang Huning, a member of the Politburo’s Standing Committee and a prominent ideologue, asserted that globalization should be understood as Western cultural hegemony, which constituted an existential threat to the party.”*

## **How is China challenging the Liberal International Order?**

The alternative world order, which the CCP seeks to establish, differs from the Western way of living in numerous ways. The West prioritizes individual rights, even if this makes political decision-making more complex and contentious. In contrast, the CCP values [common prosperity](#) over political freedom. For the CCP, the measure of success is not the extent of political freedom but the ability to ensure economic and social welfare for the collective (Tobin, 2022). The CCP adheres to a Leninist view of politics, where the party is seen as the sole representative of the people's collective interests. This perspective positions the party as a safeguard against the particular interests that often dominate the political process in liberal democracies. China actively promotes its governance model as an alternative to Western liberal democracy, particularly to the Global South. This involves showcasing the successes of its state-led development approach and offering “Chinese wisdom” as a solution to global problems. In essence, the CCP seeks to export its model of authoritarianism to the rest of the world. China’s efforts to enhance its *discourse power* are evident in its extensive media expansion and strategic partnerships in regions like Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. Through state-run media and international forums, China promotes narratives that emphasize state sovereignty, non-interference, and collective economic prosperity. By doing so, it aims to counter Western criticism and build a coalition of supportive states (Thibaut, 2020). This is exemplified by its *digital silk road* part of its Belt- and Road Initiative, [in which China exports its digital surveillance methods to African governments](#) (Quarts Africa, 2018) as well as [giving government's advice on how best repress dissent by censoring the internet and social media](#) through various legal and technical ways (Freedom House, 2017).

China’s engagement with the Global South is a critical component of its strategy to build a new world order. Through initiatives like the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, Beijing fosters strong economic and political ties. These relationships are based on principles of mutual benefit and respect for sovereignty, appealing to many developing countries that feel marginalized by the Western-led order

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(Rolland, 2020). The BRI is central to China's strategy of creating economic dependencies and fostering political alliances. By investing in critical infrastructure projects and providing loans to developing countries, China not only secures access to vital resources and markets but also increases these countries' reliance on Beijing. This economic leverage allows China to exert political influence, aligning these states with its vision of global governance. Additionally, it gives China a stronger grip on resource markets that are important for the economy of the future, which is a key risk for Europe's autonomy.

## **The link between Europe's climate security and its liberal democratic security**

Europe's ambitious climate goals, including achieving net-zero emissions by 2050, rely heavily on renewable energy technologies such as wind turbines and electric vehicles, which are dependent on rare earth minerals. These technologies are crucial for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and combating climate change.

Through its strategic use of industrial policy China has managed to forge several dependencies for the West, notably in the area of green energy, where it dominates the refining of rare earth minerals, the production of electric vehicles and batteries (Hárven, 2023). Chinese leaders have long realized the geopolitical importance that rare earth minerals would play in the future, as Deng Xiaoping said in 1987: "The Middle East has oil, China has rare earths."

The EU's heavy reliance on Chinese rare earths exposes it to supply chain vulnerabilities. Any disruption in the supply of these critical materials could hinder the progress of green energy projects, jeopardizing the EU's climate goals. China [accounts for 70% of world mine production and about 70-90% of processing](#) depending on the specific rare earths involved. Worries about the CCP abusing such dependencies are not simply Western paranoia, as China has been forcing others to bow to their will by economic coercion on numerous occasions. In a testimony to the US congress, Senior Vice president for Asia and Korea Chair at CSIS Victor Cha (2023), perfectly articulates the consequences of Chinese economic coercion:

*"China's economic coercion has become part and parcel of its foreign policy against many trading partners. Countries that interact with Taiwan, support democracy in Hong Kong, oppose genocide in Xinjiang or offend any other "core interests" of China face discriminatory, non-WTO-conforming sanctions and embargoes. Targets of this weaponization of trade since 2008 range widely. Eighteen Western and Asian countries, including Japan, Lithuania, Norway, and Australia, and over 123 private companies, including Walmart and the National Basketball Association, have been targeted precipitating tens of billions of dollars in economic damage."*

Cha (2023) went on to call on the United States and like-minded partners to consider a "collective resilience" strategy to deter China's economic coercion. Even though Cha (2023) recognizes that most targets of coercion are asymmetrically dependent on China, he highlights

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that there are still a number of export items these countries possess on which the Chinese market is “highly dependent” and “in some cases almost 100% dependent”. If states come together to promise collective retaliation, Cha (2023) argues, it would be enough of a deterrence to Beijing to cease its aggressive behavior. In Europe too there has been a response to Chinese economic coercion, with the introduction of the Anti-Coercion Instrument, which went into force on the 27th of December 2023, providing the EU with means to deter and respond to economic coercion acting as a deterrent for future coercion by China (European Commission, 2023).

## Recommendations

The EU is already taking certain measures to address its asymmetrical dependency and its waning influence in the Global South. As mentioned it is passing legislation to have a united response to economic coercion with the Anti-Coercion instrument, it is “countering” the Belt- and Road Initiative with its [Global Gateway](#) program, and recently it has launched [an anti-subsidy probe against Chinese EV’s](#). These steps are necessary, but they do not address the ultimate cause of the issue. Therefore, I have provided some policy recommendations.

### Recognize and address valid critiques from the Global South

In some sense, the liberal international order has not always been fair to less developed countries in the global south. The European Union’s (EU) approach towards Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with African states has been characterized by what Fioramonti (2013) describes as “aggressive multilateralism.” This strategy, which pressured African states into accepting trade agreements, mirrors colonial dynamics and undermines genuine partnership. To address this, the EU must reconsider its approach and foster negotiations that prioritize mutual benefits and respect for the developmental needs of African states (Fioramonti, 2013). Trade agreements should be designed to support sustainable development and fair-trade practices. The EPAs, in their current form, often favor the economic interests of the EU, placing African economies at a disadvantage. Reforms should ensure that trade agreements facilitate market access for African products and support local industries without imposing unfair competition from European goods (Fioramonti, 2013).

Developed economies undoubtedly have benefited more from the accession of many developing countries to the World Trade Organization. In the current dominant trading regime under the WTO, “free trade” is characterized by the Most-Favored Nation principle, which obliges members of the WTO to give all states the same treatment in terms of trade barriers. Additionally, there is very strict protection on intellectual property rights which effectively bars a lot of developing countries from the newest and most innovative technology, thus reducing their competitiveness in sectors benefiting from high-tech innovations. De Souza (2013) argues that the WTO was “an offer developing countries could not refuse.” In short, the rules of the WTO were inherently beneficial to developed states, but due to the market power of developed states with large consumer markets, the costs of exclusion from the WTO would outweigh the costs of joining. According to De Souza, (p. 22) the trade policies

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established by the WTO are influenced by the priorities of the world's top two trading entities (The US and the EU at the time of writing) and their most influential constituents. These policies include relaxed regulations concerning agriculture and textiles, limited liberalization in manufacturing and services, and stringent regulations regarding intellectual property (De Souza, 2013, p. 22). Such barriers in trade eventually lead developing states to become dependent on growth from the West, as they lack technological prowess to compete with Western countries economically.

### Improving Relations with developing countries

Therefore, I recommend that the European Union engages in dialogue with the grievances of developing countries to improve relations and addresses valid grievances through changes in the international systems; this will be crucial for maintaining our ideological but potentially also our resource security. Western countries should apply more moral consistency in international relations to improve legitimacy. The EU should renegotiate its trade agreements with global South countries to ensure they do not impede industrialization or limit policy space in these countries. This includes excluding provisions that guarantee the EU's unrestricted access to critical raw materials (CRM) while limiting the regulatory capabilities of these countries (Müller et al. 2024). Future trade agreements must prioritize environmental protection and human rights over corporate interests. This includes mandatory social and environmental impact assessments for every mining or energy project, ensuring free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) of affected communities, especially indigenous populations, and making corporations accountable for any human rights abuses or environmental damages (Müller. The EU should ensure that its strategies for securing access to raw materials do not merely shift the burden of exploitation to the global South. Instead, it should promote bilateral partnerships that genuinely increase local value addition in these countries. This means avoiding policies that force resource-rich countries to exploit their natural resources without significant local benefits and ensuring that the processing and value addition of materials can also happen in these countries, not just within the EU.

### Build economic deterrence from economic coercion.

The EU is already enforcing the anti-coercion instrument, which is a regulatory tool designed to protect the EU and its member states from economic coercion by third countries. If economic coercion is determined, the Commission engages in consultations with the third country to resolve the issue amicably. If consultations fail, the Commission can propose and implement proportional countermeasures. These measures could include restrictions on market access, trade in goods and services, foreign direct investment, and more. The goal is to induce the third country to stop its coercive actions.

Due to structural domestic demand problems in the Chinese economy (Klein, Pettis 2020) its export-oriented economy is very vulnerable to protectionist measures, whether it be in the form of industrial policy or trade barriers. If China engages in economic coercion, the EU should not be afraid to respond to coercive measures by reducing market access. So far,

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China has proven unsuccessful in resolving their domestic demand issues, and I think this will be unlikely to happen in the future with China's shrinking demographics.

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