



UNIVERSITY OF  
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# THE EUROPEAN UNION'S ROLE EXPECTATIONS OF CHINA

A qualitative content analysis of the European Union's  
role expectations of China from 2003 - 2023

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## **Abstract**

This study is investigating the European Union's political approach to the People's Republic of China by the application of role theory. The objective of the study is to analyze how the EU's role expectations of China have developed during the time period of 2003-2023, and to anchor these changes in geopolitical events to understand when the changes in role expectations occurred. The study is applying a methodology of qualitative content analysis with material from official EU communications and policies. The analysis is conducted with role theory and an application of liberal and realist international relations theory. The analysis demonstrates three distinct eras of EU-China relations, with noticeable changes in EU policy language over time, changing from liberal to realist. The EU indicated high normative role expectations of China in the early 2000s but altered these expectations in the late 2010s. This can be traced back to various geopolitical changes and demonstrates China's overall ability to reject the EU's role expectations and liberal norms while retaining its economic relationship with the EU. During the research period, the EU's role conception changes from an actor that wishes to disseminate liberal values in its cooperation with China, to an actor that wants to protect liberal values in its international engagements.

**Keywords:** International relations, the EU, China, Role Theory, Policy analysis

**Wordcount:** 16078

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# 1. Introduction

The European Union and the People's Republic of China have a long diplomatic history with various bilateral arrangements. In 2003, the two international actors formed a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' which encompasses political, economic and cultural cooperation (Maher, 2016). Since then, there have been significant developments in the dynamics of the strategic partnership between the EU and China. The country has developed from a promising economic power to the second largest economy in the world, surpassing the economy of the EU (Barboza, 2011). Parallel with its rising economic power, China has become a more forceful geopolitical actor on the world stage in terms of military power and diplomatic assertiveness (Huang, 2022; World Bank, 2021). Moreover, China has created its own international institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative, which according to some scholars threatens EU-led liberal institutions of global governance (Ghiasi, 2018; Shah, 2023). Meanwhile, Human rights concerns, tensions in the strait of Taiwan, and support of Russia in the Russo-Ukraine War, are causing the European Union to reassess China's international intentions (Stent, 2023; Bermingham, 2023).

Historically, the EU has demonstrated a willingness to promote normative values such as the rule of law, human rights and democracy through economic cooperation (Manners, 2002). However, as China is demonstrating a growing *rejection* of the liberal agenda, the normative power of the EU is challenged and is putting a strain on the relationship between the EU and China. These developments have caused the EU to re-evaluate its engagements with China, as well as provoked questions regarding the very actorness of the European Union. The changing dynamic in the bilateral relationship is moreover visible in the EU's China policies with an increasing focus on security and strategic interests. While the EU is commonly studied as a non-traditional actor, exercising normative power rather than hard power, this change in dynamics between the EU and China have led to a questioning of the EU identity and its role as an international actor (Manners, 2002; Hyde-Price, 2021). To what extent this shifting dynamic between the EU and China will have implications for their bilateral relationship remains to be seen, and motivates further scrutiny of EU-China policies.

## **1.1 Objective**

The objective of this thesis is to investigate the European Union's political approach to the People's Republic of China, by analyzing the EU's role expectations of China over time. The aim is therefore to analyze how the European Union's *role expectations* of China have developed between the years 2003 - 2023. The analysis will hence aim to anchor these developing role expectations within contextual factors in order to answer *when* certain changes have occurred. Moreover, the study aims to generate a discussion of what the EU's developing role expectations of China implicitly tell about the EU's *role conception* of itself as a global actor. The selected methodology of 'role theory' will serve as the analytical tools in *how* these changes can be understood and explained.

## **1.2 Research questions**

### **Main research questions**

1. *How* has the European Union's role expectations of China developed between the years of 2003 - 2023?
2. *When* did the EU's role expectations of China change during the time period?

### **Secondary question**

3. How is the EU's *role conception* manifested in its role expectations of China from 2003-2023?

## 2. Previous research

The objective of this thesis is to study the EU's developing *role expectations* of China from 2003 - 2023. In order to do so this study builds on a number of previous research that are helpful in answering this objective. Since multiple interpretations exist of how to analyze the EU's foreign policy and self-perception depending on the theoretical tradition applied, a number of fields appear helpful and will be referred to in this section. My study will derive from previous research that is conducted with role theory, or in similar ways are deconstructing how one can analyze behavioral patterns in EU-China relations.

### 2.1 Introducing role theory

As previously stated, this thesis will study the EU's changing expectations of China over time, by using role theory as a methodology. Role theory derives from sociology and is a well-established approach in how to study international relations (Breuning, 2011, p. 20). It derives from an understanding of international actors playing certain 'roles', entailing predictable behavioral patterns that hence can be studied over time (ibid). As argued by Alexander Wendt (1992; 1999), international politics should be interpreted as a social construct and hence be analyzed as "states are people too". Research by Alexander Wendt (1999; 1992) is therefore providing interesting implications for how to study behavioral patterns in EU-China relations. In Wendt's 1992 article *Anarchy is what states make of it*, he challenges fundamental assumptions of the dominating international relations theories, and argues that the traditional focus on material factors such as military power or economic interests are insufficient in understanding the complexities of the international system. He argues that states have the ability to view each other as friends or enemies and that this view is shaped by social norms, ideas, and constructs of identities shared amongst members of the international community. For example, how the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union gradually diminished when they started to increasingly "consider each other as legitimate actors", which led to the end of the Cold War. Also, Wendt argues that the European Union was created because European states began to consider themselves part of a larger community with a shared European identity. Both of these examples show the power of language and ideas in formulating identities that have a material effect on international politics (Wendt, 1999, 1992). Role theory is likewise utilizing concepts such as identity and

(self-) image, which overlap with key concepts of constructivist international relations theory (Harnisch et al., 2011, p. 7).

In international relations, role theory as a methodology was first introduced in a seminal article by Kalevi Holsti in 1970. In the article, Holsti constructed a framework for studying decision-makers perceptions of their own nation and argued that a state's foreign policy is influenced by a country's respective 'national role conception' (Holsti, 1970). Holsti defines a national role conception as "a product of a nation's socialization process and influence by its history, culture, and societal characteristics" (Holsti, 1970). The study of role theory thus centers on the identification of 'roles' that international actors ascribe to themselves and others (ibid). In role theory, states are indeed regarded as people, the concept of 'role' is an analogy from the theater where actors (individuals, states) are expected to behave in foreseeable ways according to a script (Jackson, 1972). The actors play specific 'roles' and, just like the stage actor, have predictable behavioral patterns. The actor "operates with a script written for him which he has learnt at some point in the past... He is motivated to follow the script, to comply with the rules of the game" (Aggestam, 2006, p. 12).

## **2.2 Role theory and EU-China relations**

One important study that applies role theory to the changing dynamics in the EU-China relationship is the 2017 article *Role Dynamics in a Structured Relationship: The EU-China Strategic Partnership* by Anna Michalski and Zhongqi Pan. The study analyzes the competitive role-playing that occurs in the EU-China strategic partnership by reviewing official statements from four periods of significance to EU-China relations (Michalski & Pan, 2017). Strategic partnerships are treated by the authors as arenas where actors engage in role-play to assert their international identities and enhance their prestige as global actors (Michalski & Pan, 2017, p. 612). Moreover, the EU-China partnership is described as an arena for socialization, where the two countries have the opportunity to socialize each other to norms and worldviews that are central to their respective international identity (ibid). Although the EU and China relationship consists of a multitude of roles, the authors only study the role conceptions that are actively used in the official discourses of the EU and China (Elgström & Smith, 2006; Michalski & Pan, 2017, p. 615). The authors identify a multitude of Chinese role conceptions throughout the four periods analyzed. These include the roles of 'rising power', 'guardian of national independence', 'champion of the developing



world’, ‘responsible partner’, and ‘China’s peaceful rise/development’ (Michalski & Pan, 2017, p. 617). These findings are important for my study as I will use a similar approach in looking for patterns in the EU's role expectations of China over time.

## **2.3 How to study the European Union**

Inherent in the study of the EU’s role expectations of China is a long academic tradition of studying the European Union's activities and engagements beyond its regional borders, known as the EU’s ‘external action’ (Gstöhl & Schunz, 2021). The EU ‘external action’ refers to the Union’s official international policies on issues such as security, trade, development, and human rights (Gstöhl & Schunz, 2021, p. 3). Since its foundation in 1948, the EU has progressively become a larger and more assertive global actor, with various international treaties extending the EU’s power and purpose (Gstöhl & Schunz, 2021, p. 1). As the EU’s role as a global actor grows and undertakes more responsibility in the international sphere, various studies have applied different perspectives to explain the ever-changing role of the EU, and its perceptions of ‘itself’ and ‘other’ global actors (Gstöhl & Schunz, 2021, p. 10). This study will continue this tradition, and hence examine how the EU perceives itself and other global actors, and the role expectations that reveal these changes. Here follows some of the previous studies that represent different perspectives on how to explain what kind of actor the EU is.

### **2.3.1 Normative Power Europe**

A common way of studying EU external action is through the concept of ‘Normative Power Europe’ by Ian Manners (2002). A perspective popularized by Manners article *Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?*. According to Manners (2002), the EU serves as a normative power with the ability to spread its values and shape what is considered “normal” or “universal” in international relations (p. 239). The EU is hence exerting this normative power by playing the role of a promoter of liberal values; peace, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, human rights, multilateralism, sustainable development, and good governance (Manners, 2002, p. 242-244; Manners, 2008). Manners is underlining that not only are these values at the forefront of EU foreign policy but that the EU is exerting power by insisting on the *universal* application of these norms. Manners exemplifies the ‘normative power’ concept with a case study on how the EU seeks to abolish the death penalty around the world. He argues that instead of considering the death penalty a sovereign issue of criminal justice, the

EU has framed the death penalty as an international issue and has insisted that its abolishment constitutes an international ‘norm’ (Manners, 2002). While this has been constructed as an objectively “normal” or “naturalized” global standard, Manners is not considering this a natural process of international human rights progress, but rather a key example of how the EU exerts power by presenting its own norms that all countries should, and perhaps must, adopt (p. 245-252).

The ‘normative power’ approach is altogether a common way to study the EU’s relationship to other actors in areas of conflict, economy, society, ecology and polity (Gstöhl & Shunz, 2021). It is often demonstrating how the EU’s normative power works to strengthen the EU’s promotion of good global governance through trade policy, often bringing together its economic strength with its larger normative vision (see Gstöhl & Shunz, 2021, p.73-76). However, studies are also demonstrating how the EU’s normative power is limited by its larger economic agenda. In a case study by Wenwen Shen (2015) the EU’s promotion of *Human Rights* in China is studied through a ‘normative power’ perspective. In order to understand how human rights problems are addressed in Tibet, the study shows how the normative power exercised by the EU in terms of non-coercive means (e.g. invoking norms) is highly limited in regards to China (Shen, 2015). As argued by Shen (2015), the ‘Tibet question’ reveals how normative power is limited when it comes to the EU’s external relations with strategic partners in trade, and hence shows how EU’s norms are also in conflict with their own economic interests. A study that shows interesting implications for this research, as it demonstrates how the normative power of the EU is ever-changing. The ability to exercise normative power is hence also dependent on multiple interests and the different roles which other international actors possess in relation to the EU.

### **2.3.2 The European Union from a realist perspective**

In order to further understand the EU’s behavioral patterns aside from normative power, a realist perspective is essential to the analysis of EU-China relations. Studies deriving from a perspective of realist international relations theory, are based on the assumption that states act out of self-interest and that economic, political and military -power are the driving forces of international relations (Burchill et al., 2004; Steans et al., 2010). An assumption that builds on the notion that the international system is inherently anarchic and that no global ‘orderer’ guarantees security, and hence motivates why states act out of self-interest to safeguard

national security (ibid). Realist international relations theory is concerned with the implications of unequal distribution of relative power capabilities, and how this dictates how global actors relate to one another and behave on the international stage (Hyde-Price, 2021, p. 151).

According to Hyde-Price (2006), the realist perspective is more appropriate than the normative power lens when studying the EU. Chiefly because the latter neglects *power* as a key variable in international relations. Hyde-Price (2021) illustrates the importance of realist international theory in a case-study about the EU's approach to its Eastern neighborhood. The study aims to answer why the liberal optimism, and the export of liberal institutions and norms by the EU after the fall of the Soviet Union was a failure (p. 157). The realist theoretical lens emphasizes the importance of material power, and as such the EU failed to disseminate normative influence since it neglected the shifting balance of power in Eastern Europe, and the interests of Russia as a resurgent great power. Most of all, the EU failed to account for the political and geostrategic importance of Ukraine to Russia, as well as mistakenly overstating its own normative power toward Russia. These, according to realist analysis, are examples of how the EU and its focus on 'normative power' greatly failed to understand the dynamics of the anarchic international system (p. 157).

Against this backdrop, role theory provides a useful conceptual framework to navigate the different perspectives on EU-China relations, and to identify the EU's role expectations of China formulated in the EU's *external action*. As previous research demonstrates, the EU-China relation has been changing over time, and it is hence motivated to further analyze how political events of the 21st century have shaped the relationship and its explicit expectations, and how these expectations have affected the self-conception of the EU.

## **3. Theoretical framework**

### **3.1 Constructivist international relations theory**

The most important underlying theoretical assumption of this thesis is that ‘reality’ is socially constructed through ideas and norms shared in the interactions among actors (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Patton, 2014, p. 267-275). This is a chief philosophical underpinning of the constructivist international relations theoretical tradition (and a key philosophical prerequisite for role theory). The constitutive nature of ideas and norms can be found in texts by Alexander Wendt (1999; 1992), a central social constructivist researcher in International Relations. He states that “the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature” (Wendt, 1999, p. 1). The ‘shared ideas’ that Wendt describes are constituted by language that is intersubjectively understood among actors. Ideas that hence have a material effect on how actors interpret the world and subsequently the actions they take (Wendt, 1999). According to constructivism, ‘reality’ cannot and should not be objectively understood, but rather as ‘ideationally’ created by shared ideas, norms, values and perspectives among actors (Wendt, 1999; Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Hence, language can be analyzed as the empirical traces of these ideas, norms, values and perspectives (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Constructivist international relations theory emerged in the 1990s as a critique of the dominating paradigms of international relations, namely liberalism, and realism (Burchill et al., 2004; Steans et al., 2010). While these theories suggest that the international system adheres to certain pre-given logics, such as self-interest in the anarchic international system, constructivism argues that the international system is socially constructed and that culture, norms, and identity are the key drivers of state action (McCourt, 2022). Constructivist scholars Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink describe that “human interaction is shaped primarily by ideational factors” (p. 4) and hence that these ideational factors construct the interest and behavior of purposive actors (ibid). In other words, ideas that are shared among people ‘intersubjectively’ construct the interests of states and thus the nature of the entire international political system.

To conclude, constructivism as a theoretical lens helps deconstruct the power of language in creating identities and roles that change over time, which is in line with the objective of this thesis, to study *how the European Union's role expectations of China have developed over the past 20 years*.

### **3.2 Liberal international relations theory**

Liberal international relations theory is another key theoretical understanding important to this thesis. According to liberal thought, peace is the normal state of international affairs, while war is unnatural and irrational, created by militaristic and undemocratic governments (Burchill et al., 2004, p. 58). Peace can thus be achieved through liberal tenets such as democracy, free trade and human rights (ibid). At the end of the Cold War, liberalism grew in popularity at a time when liberal democratic governance had seemingly prevailed over the authoritarian political system of the Soviet Union. In particular, Francis Fukuyama's article *The End of History?* (1989) proclaimed the ultimate victory of liberal governance and adhered to a logic of linear progression. According to this idea, societies evolve in a linear manner and democratic liberal systems were regarded as the ultimate and most evolved political system that all countries were destined to reach at some point in time (ibid).

Liberal institutionalism is a core tenet of liberal ideology, emphasizing economic and political cooperation among countries (Burchill et al., 2004, p. 64). Liberal theory demonstrates one of the main perspectives on how to deconstruct the behavior of states and actors in the international system, and is therefore pivotal to the objective of this thesis. In order to approach the EU-China relation, liberal theory is furthermore essential to the thesis as the EU represents a liberal institution that follows the liberal logic of international cooperation, democracy and rule of law (Burchill et al., 2004). In particular, the terminology of liberalism will be used to deconstruct the language of EU-China policy documents.

### **3.3 Realist international relations theory**

The main opponent to liberal international relations theory is realist international relations theory. Although the theories share some similarities such as actors being driven by self-interest, a main theoretical assumption in realist international relations theory is that nation-states act out of self-interest in an *anarchic international system* (Burchill et al., 2004, Steans et al., 2010). According to realist international relations theory, international politics

consists of sovereign nation-states that all hold complete authority over their own territory and people and enjoys independence in the international system (Weber, 2004, p.14). States are not bound to any higher power because there is no world government to which they are subject. The absence of a higher authority, in combination with the principle of state sovereignty, creates a condition of anarchy in international relations (ibid). Anarchy refers to the absence of a self-conscious *orderer* - someone or something that imposes order in a top-down way onto sovereign nation-states (ibid). Even in apparent “order”, such as membership in international organizations, power-balancing among states, or the existence of a hegemonic state with great power, the international system is still considered anarchic. The anarchic nature of international relations, as prominent realist Kenneth Waltz argues, is “...the permissive cause of war” (Waltz, 1959). The lack of international accountability, and the constant threat of military aggression from other states, create a condition of power politics where each country's domestic security and relative gains becomes the primary concern. Each country must act out of self-interest to pursue power and security to ensure the survival of the nation (ibid). Realist theory is therefore demonstrating another pivotal theorization to the objective of the thesis, as it is contrasting the liberal lens on how to explain states’ and international actors’ behavior.

### **3.4 Role theory**

Role theory is operationalized both as a theory and a method in this thesis. A more comprehensive demonstration on the role theoretical concepts can be found in methodology (*see* 4.3). Role theory is a social theory in international relations with roots in sociology (Breuning, 2011, p. 20) . The concept of ‘role’ is an analogy from the theater where actors (individuals, states) are expected to behave in foreseeable ways according to a script (Jackson, 1972). The actors play specific ‘roles’ and, just like the stage actor, have predictable behavior patterns. This conceptualization is intriguing as it shines a light on the relationship between the individual and social structure. The actor “operates with a script written for him which he has learnt at some point in the past... He is motivated to follow the script, to comply with the rules of the game” (Bradbury, 1972). The ‘roles’ that individuals play are an integral part of the sociological discipline. “It is because the individual plays roles that there is a discipline of sociology at all... It is because individuals are role-players that their behavior is neither idiosyncratic nor random” (ibid). The identification of roles can thus be used to identify state behavior over time. Role theory constitutes a theoretical framework

for studying decision-makers perceptions of their own nation, as well as how this interplays with a state's foreign policies (Holsti, 1987, p. 13). Holsti defines this behavior as "a product of a nation's socialization process and influence by its history, culture, and societal characteristics" (Holsti, 1987). The role theory approach is different from other theories in international relations such as realism, where 'roles' are seen as part of a structure in material reality, whereas the focus lies in analyzing state's position within that structure (Weber, 2004). In contrast, Holsti (1987) emphasizes the possibility of predicting state's behavior by deconstructing the 'roles' that policy-makers subjectively take on and perceive on other actors. In this thesis, role theory is therefore used to decipher what roles the EU expects China to play over time.

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Motivation of method**

The objective of this thesis is to investigate the role expectations the European Union has for China, through official communications by high-level EU officials and policy documents. The study will apply a qualitative content method to study these role expectations. The underlying philosophical assumption of this research design is that ‘reality’ is socially constructed through ideas and norms shared in the interactions among actors (Patton, 2014, p.267-275). The qualitative method aligns well with the philosophical assumptions of role theory, liberal constructivist and realist international relations theories. In this study, the language expressed in the official EU communications is regarded as the empirical trace of different realities, which in this case is found in the role expectations and ideological rationales (liberal or realist) that change over time (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p.17-19). Qualitative method is necessary to identify these changes as they may be subtle and difficult to capture if the study would have used a purely quantitative method (Patton, 2014). In such cases, the simple quantification of words such as “democracy”, “liberty”, or “security” are insufficient because the role expectations the EU expresses toward China usually requires a closer reading of the material that can easily be missed by a purely quantitative methodological approach. The qualitative method's attention to nuances in language and subtle undertones is necessary in order to apply a role-theoretical methodological framework (Patton, 2014; Breuning, 2011).

### **4.2 Qualitative content analysis**

Qualitative content analysis is a research method to systematically identify and describe the meaning of textual or visual data. The research method involves systematically examining qualitative data to identify patterns, themes and meanings to understand the (inter)subjective perspectives, social context and constructs embedded ‘realities’ within the data (Patton, 2014, p. 1075; Kuckartz, 2014). In this thesis, the qualitative method is partly inductive and partly deductive. It is inductive in the sense that general patterns are identified during the reading of the material purely based on the perceived themes embedded in the material. It is also deductive in the sense that liberal constructivism and realism serves as the “theoretical glasses” through which the material is read (p.1076-1077). As such, there are certain



pre-existing expectations of results based on liberal constructivism and realist international relations theory, such as formulations in the material on liberal democratic expectations or emphasis on national/regional security. The choice to use qualitative content analysis is hence also supported by the theoretical approach. The systematic examination and interpretation of large amounts of textual data are necessary components of role theory that make use of the organized material in identifying recurring themes and roles in the material (Patton, 2014, p.1075; Breuning, 2011). Qualitative content analysis as a method creates structure for the role theoretical analysis by providing the necessary methodological tools to code, categorize, and highlight the identified themes and roles in the research material (Boréus & Bergström, 2018; Kuckartz, 2014).

### **4.3 Applying role theory as a method**

Role theory will be further used as a method to deconstruct the language used in official EU communications on China. As previously mentioned (see 3.4), role theory is a social theory in international relations where states and global actors are treated as stage actors with ‘expectations’ that influence their behavior (Breuning, 2011, p. 20). Identifying the ‘role expectations’ that a global actor has of another is a practice that helps identify patterns in the relationship between the two actors over time. Whether the EU considers China a “responsible actor”, “peacekeeper”, “a reliable multilateral actor”, “a geopolitical threat” or a “systemic rival” has implications for the relationship between the two global actors. Role theory and the role theoretical analytical concepts are useful to identify and organize such ‘role expectations’ and to shed light on the dynamics and development of the relationship over time. According to role theory, state-behavior adheres to a “script” and by charting the changes in this “script” over time, a level of predictability of behavior is created (Elgström & Smith, 2006, p. 12). When applying role theory as a method, it becomes a useful tool for deconstructing language. By examining how the EU perceives ‘itself’ in the reflection of its role expectations of China, certain patterns emerge with implications for real political behavior between these two global actors. The following are three concepts central to the role theoretical analytical tradition that are applied in the analysis.

#### **4.3.1 Role expectations**

A number of role theoretical concepts will be used in this study. The most prevalent concept is the one that is directly related to the main research question, namely ‘role expectations’.

Role expectations are defined as “[...] the expectations that *other actors* (alter) prescribe and expect the role-beholder (ego) to enact” (Aggestam, 2006, p.18). Role expectation thus exhibits both an internal and external component, ego and alter (Gurol & Starkmann, 2021, p. 520). An actor is then usually both a receiver and a prescriber of expectations (Aggestam 2006, p. 19). Role expectations may thus vary both in form and scope as well as in the obligations they entail (Harnisch et al., 2011, p. 8). The concept of ‘role expectations’ will be used primarily as a methodological tool to uncover role expectations over time, what contextual factors may have affected this change in expectations, and see how these expectations reflect the self-image (ego) of the European Union.

Role expectations are operationalized by allocating expressions of expectations that one actor places onto another. These expectations are coded into themes and categories both inductively and through the “theoretical glasses” of liberal and realist international relations theory. I will then ask what roles are expected based on the two theories. For liberalism, I will examine textual expressions central to the theory such as *democratic governance*, *economic cooperation*, *multilateralism*, and *human rights* (Burchill et al., 2004, p. 55). Realism attaches importance to concepts like *security*, *power*, *anarchic system*, and *balance of power* (Weber, 2004, p. 14). As such, the role expectations based on the concepts attached to these theories are treated extra attentively and role expectations that fall within these categories are coded as either “liberalism” or “realism” in the coding frame.

### **4.3.2 Alter-casting**

The second analytical concept from role theory used in this thesis is the concept of *alter-casting*. Alter-casting is defined as “[...] projecting an identity, to be assumed by other(s) with whom one is in interaction, which is congruent with one’s own goals” (Weinstein & Deutschberger, 1963, p. 454). In role theoretical analysis, alter-casting is manifested when an actor states their own goals and interests in formulations that imply consensus between two actors such as “us”, “we”, or “shared”. In Michalski and Pan’s study on role dynamics in the EU-China strategic partnership (2017), alter-casting is expressed as the formulations in which the EU uses China as a device to express “shared goals”, even though it is not explicitly stated by China that the country shares the goal with the EU. The authors exemplify alter-casting in policy documents by the European Commission: “the EU and China have a fundamental *shared interest* in strengthening the rule-based multilateral

trading order” (Michalski & Pan, 2017, p. 619). This type of alter-casting strengthens the EU’s own role conception as a ‘normative power’. Another example from the same European Commission document highlights the EU’s self-image as a ‘liberal trade power’: the EU expects that Chinese ascension into the World Trade Organization would result in “further market opening” and that China would “actively participate in further trade liberalization” (ibid).

These examples show how alter-casting is used as a device in role expectations and role conceptions. The EU simultaneously places expectations on China and reinforces its self-image through the very same statements. In the same way, this thesis will use the concept of alter-casting to answer the research objective and explore the interrelation between the EU’s role expectations of China, and how the role expectations reflect the EU’s self-conception. Furthermore, alter-casting is operationalized through identifying phrases in official EU communications that use expressions that indicate consensus (e.g. “we”, “us”, “shared”) between the EU and China.

### **4.3.3 Role conception**

The final analytical concept from role theory is role conception. Role conception is the normative *expectations* that the role-beholder expresses *towards itself*, or the “ego-part’s own definition” (Aggestam, 2006, p. 19). Role conceptions define the ego's responsibilities and obligations in foreign policy, or "the meaning of action" (ibid). As Harnisch et al. (2011) note, role conception encompasses what Wendt (1999) calls the "social identity" of an actor. In this thesis, the concept of role conception will be used to answer the research question *How is the EU’s role conceptions manifested in its role expectations of China from 2003-2023?*. The normative expectations that the EU has of itself are studied in two different ways with the concept of role conception. Firstly, role conception is used to identify the implicit self-image of the EU, reflected in its role expectations of China. Secondly, formulations in the research material that illustrate the explicit self-image of the EU will be studied, albeit as complementary aspects of the first.

## **4.4 Sampling process and motivation of material**

The thesis aims to analyze the European Union’s role expectations of China. The analytical material has been chosen because it represents the official political standpoints of the

European Union. In order to analyze the official standpoint of the EU, official statements of the highest EU officials: the President of the European Commission, the President of the European Council, and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, are used as research material. These three positions are the most influential figures in formulating the European Union's foreign policy and their respective statements are regarded in this thesis to reflect the official standpoint of the EU. The selected research material consists of 64 official communications, speeches, policy documents, policy papers, and political documents that have significance for EU-China relations from 2003 - 2023. The majority of the material solely covers the topic of China, while a minority have lengthy mentions of China. Some of the sources, such as the EU-China Summits, are joint press releases co-written by the EU and China. In such instances, only sentences that are explicitly formulated by EU representatives are coded as recording units and considered in the analysis.

The material was gathered from various European Union website databases such as EUR-lex, the European Commission press corner, the European Union External Action newsroom, and the European Council newsroom. The search for the material was made with key search words such as "Josep Borrell China", "EU China", and "China", and later summarized manually by the degree of relevance. The year 2003 delineates the starting point of the EU-China strategic partnership which is a milestone in Sino-European relations that enhanced cooperation and dialogue between the two actors (European Commission, 2003). Due to time constrictions, the material ends in May of 2023.

## **4.5 Analytical procedure**

As previously referred to in the section on qualitative content analysis (*see* 4.2) the first step of the analytical procedure was to familiarize myself with the research material in order to create code classifications for different categories (Patton, 2014; Boréus & Bergström, 2018, p. 58-59). The material was read both inductively - with codes created on identifiable patterns in the material such as economy, security, multilateralism, Belt and Road - and deductively based on "role theoretical glasses" concerning the key concepts of liberalism and realism such as democracy, security, multilateralism, power and human rights (Patton, 2014, p.1076-1077; Steans et al., 2010). The identified key concepts are later analyzed with role theory to identify the construction of roles that are assigned in the EU-China relationship. For example, how the EU's democratic expectations of China in the early 2000's indicates the

EU's confidence in its liberal normative power. Conversely, when the material contains a portrayal of China as a "systemic rival", as in the late 2010's, it suggests that a turn towards realist logics and sentiments (power, security) are dominating the EU's role expectations of China.

The coding and identification of themes were made manually with the program NVivo, where the research material was uploaded and categorized according to the identified themes (NVivo, n.d.). Manual coding, as opposed to automated coding, is required in advanced textual analysis to account for more complicated assessments and interpretations that can be overlooked when using strictly quantitative methods (Boréus & Bergström, 2018, p. 58). The codes were then separated into categories with the help of a coding frame based on the identified themes.

In this study, the coded material consists of formulations that are aligned with the research questions of (1) *How* has the European Union's role expectations of China developed between the years of 2003 - 2023?, (2) *When* did the EU's role expectations of China change during the time period?, and (3) *How* is the EU's role conceptions manifested in its role expectations of China from 2003-2023? Moreover, the analytical procedure consists of identifying certain formulations in EU policy on China that are explanatory to the research questions. From a liberal international relations perspective, the EU's role expectations of China should include liberal core values such as democracy, rule of law, and economic cooperation (Burchill et al., 2004, p. 55). These liberal values are indeed visible in the material and are coded according to the matching liberal expectations in both theory and in the research material. The coded material is then divided into several larger categories such as "Economy", "Political system", and "Security", and smaller sub-categories. The sub-categories are categorized according to key concepts of liberalism and realism such as "level economic playing field", "democracy", and "multilateralism", as well as "strategic autonomy", "systemic rivalry", and "military capabilities". This analytical procedure is demonstrated in the analytical matrix in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1: Analytical matrix

<b>Category</b>	<b>Liberalism</b>	<b>Realism</b>	<b>Roles identified</b>
Economy	Level playing field, cooperation, rule of law	Unequal trade agreements, strategic autonomy, economic power	‘Liberal reforms through economic cooperation’  ‘Level economic playing field’  ‘Responsible actor’
Political system	Democracy, rule of law, human rights, liberty, liberal institutionalism, civil society, liberal norms, United Nations	Authoritarian governance, fundamental difference, systemic rivalry	‘Liberal reforms through economic cooperation’  ‘Big and responsible actor’  ‘Democratic ambivalence’  ‘Systemic rival’
Security	Responsibility, multilateralism, international law, cooperation, peacekeeper	Systemic rival, assertiveness, military capabilities, zero sum game, strategic autonomy, condemnations, warnings, deteriorated relationship	‘Peacekeeper’  ‘Responsible actor’  ‘Peacekeeper and geopolitical threat’

## 4.6 Limitations

The research process has faced a number of limiting factors which will be presented and reflected on in the forthcoming section.

One of these limitations has been regarding the scope of the study and the sampling of analytical material (Patton, 2014, p.544-546). Some years have entailed more available material than other years, such as the year of 2022 with six sources in comparison to 2009 with only one available source. The scope of the material has therefore been limited by its variation between different years. However, this variation is also a find and can have interesting implications for the analysis. The EU's variation in policy focus on China is reflecting a variation in political prioritization during this period, such as the 2008-2009 financial crisis and subsequent years of economic stagnation that occupied a large amount of the EU's attention.

The research is moreover limited to studying certain aspects, while leaving many themes unexplored. While the analysis has been focused on expressions of 'security', 'political system' or 'economy', perspectives on climate change have for instance not been further explored. This is motivated by the limited scope of the thesis in order to reach a more analytical depth with the chosen variables. The choice to study the time period of 2003-2023 is also generating a limiting factor. However, as 2003 indicates the starting year of the 'strategic partnership' between the two global actors, this period of time is motivated by this bilateral cooperation.

Aligned with a qualitative approach, the patterns identified in the upcoming analysis shows important implications for the EU-China relation, but is however limited by the scope of the study and should therefore be accompanied by more research. While this study is navigating around the theoretical concepts of liberalism and realism, future studies should widen the theoretical approach to capture a more complex and nuanced image of the EU's possible role expectations of China. This study is shedding light on *some* of the patterns and indications on the EU's role expectations on China during this specific time period, and is therefore merely providing an analytical point of departure for future research.

## 5. Analysis

The European Union's role expectations of China are divided into separate "eras" that have been identified in the research material, consisting of the "liberal expectations era", the "transitional era" and the "systemic rivalry era". Each era will be introduced by a contextual section that provides relevant background information on important geopolitical events that shape EU-China relations, both explicitly and implicitly stated in the research material. Following the contextual introduction, three key role expectations for each era are presented and analyzed based on role theoretical concepts, and international relations theories.

### 5.1 The *liberal expectations* era

#### 5.1.1 Context: The Fukuyaman zeitgeist

Before exploring the EU's role expectations of China during this era it is helpful to summarize the contextual factors that are visible in the research material. The EU's role expectations of China during this era can be seen reflected in the geopolitical context of the early 2000's. An era not far removed from the Cold War and with great liberal optimism (Fukuyama, 1989). China and Russia were weakened during this period and were not considered the ideological and military threats they once were in the decades before the end of the war (ibid).

**"Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free.** The violence of the first half of the 20th Century has given way to a period of **peace** and stability unprecedented in European history." (Solana, 2003, p.1).

"[...] our outstanding achievement, above all others, is without doubt the **stability** that the creation of the European Union has brought to the whole European continent [...]" (Prodi, 2004 a, p.2).

The liberal optimism is visible in the language of the EU during this period. The European Union was confident in its ability to disseminate liberal norms and values, as we shall see in the role expectations (*see* 5.1.2). In the research material, Europe is described as "more secure than ever", and states have lost their status as the primary threat to European security.



Instead of traditional military power, the EU experienced “new threats” to European safety during this era, consisting of non-state actors with strong religious ideological conviction.

“Our traditional concept of self-defence – up to and including the Cold War – was based on the threat of invasion. With the **new threats** the first line of defence will often be abroad.” (Solana, 2003, p. 11).

The documents from this era are notably influenced by the recent September 11 attacks, with a noticeably lacking focus on states as the primary threat to regional security. These documents furthermore indicate a distancing from the realist logic of security to a liberal understanding of security (Burchill et al., 2004; Steans et al., 2010). Aligned with liberal thinking, democratic governance is here portrayed as a means to achieve peace rather than military capability (ibid). As seen in the following quotes, the EU and China are in this era adapting to the rise of non-state security concerns.

“Both the EU and China are, since 2001, engaged in a process of adaptation to a changing global environment. International terrorism, as well as growing concerns over the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, have brought **new types of international security concerns** to the top of the global agenda.” (European Commission, 2003, p. 7).

“The threats of the new era are often distant. In an era of globalisation, distant threats may be as much a concern as those that are near at hand [...] **Terrorists** are now able to operate world-wide: their activities in central or south-east Asia may be a threat to European countries or their citizens.” (Solana, 2003, p. 11).

Another important contextual factor during this era is China’s recent 2001 admittance into the World Trade Organization. The EU played an active role in advocating for Chinese membership in the WTO and had ambitious role expectations of what a Chinese membership would mean for China politically (as will be explored in the upcoming sections).

“It is welcome that since the end of the Cold War, key institutions in the international system, e.g. the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the

International Financial Institutions, have extended their membership. China has joined the WTO and Russia has applied. **It should be an objective for us to widen the membership** of such bodies while maintaining their high standards.” (Solana, 2003, p. 8).

“[...] the EU and China have an ever-greater interest to **work together** as strategic partners to safeguard and promote sustainable development, peace and stability [...]” (European Commission, 2003, p. 3).

Aligned with the theoretical perspectives of this study, the contextual setting of this era is distinctively characterized by the values and rationale of liberal international relations theory (*see* Burchill et al., 2004; Steans et al., 2010). The research material shows many examples of this. The EU’s emphasis on non-state actors and non-traditional security threats, and the call for cooperative international efforts to combat “new threats”, suggests a liberal security logic where cooperation among states reduces their status as threats to one another (Burchill et al., 2004). The role of the state as the greatest security threat is downplayed which goes against the traditional realist understanding of security (Hyde-Price, 2021). The framing entails certain expectations toward China, in terms of economic cooperation and as a promoter of liberal values. Aligned with Manners (2002), this could be interpreted as an expression of the EU’s belief in its normative power toward China during this era. Considering a key tenet of liberalism is the belief that economic cooperation between nations fosters liberal values (Steans et al., 2010).

### **5.1.2 Role expectations: Liberal reforms through economic cooperation**

In line with the context of the early 2000’s, the research material shows the EU’s role expectations of China explicitly expected liberal reforms. As argued by liberal international relations theory, economic cooperation can play a significant role in the democratization of a country by stimulating economic interdependence between nations, middle-class empowerment and institution-building (Steans et al., 2010). These liberal theoretical sentiments are hence also visible in the research material. In line with Manners normative power (2002), the research material shows the EU considers economic cooperation to be a transaction of liberal norms and explicitly expresses that the Union’s economic cooperation

with China will contribute to a liberal *transition*. What this transition entails is formulated in a variety of ways throughout the material which all imply liberal reform such as ‘a rule of law based society’, a ‘stable, prosperous and open country’, ‘best practice’, and ‘democratic participation of citizens’ (*see quotes*). Moreover, the material emphasizes how China’s economy is expected to perform better under democratic governance.

“The EU [...] aim remains to contribute as much as possible to ensure that China masters successfully its **transition** to a stable, prosperous and open country. [...] The EU offers open and **liberal markets** for Chinese exports, the transfer of European capital, technology and know-how that come with reinforced commercial ties, but also European experience and **best practice** in relevant economic, environmental and social sectors.” (European Commission, 2003, p. 15).

“Supporting China’s transition to an open society based upon the **rule of law** remains an essential element of EU policy towards this country. [...] The EU believes that the respect for **human rights, democratic accountability** and the **rule of law**, as well as a **democratic participation** of citizens in decision-making processes, constitute the best guarantees for the long-term stability of a society and for the sustainability of a country’s economic development, in China as elsewhere.” (European Commission, 2003, p. 12).

The EU’s liberal expectations of China also entail vague indications of future democratic reforms from the Chinese leadership. The reform process in China is described in the material as slow, which motivates the EU to continue to pursue economic cooperation with China even more urgently in order to instigate political change. The material indicates that the EU must continue to assist China’s reform process and influence positive change in “a more open society and more accountable government” (European Commission, 2006, p. 4). The EU’s expectations of liberal reform in China indicates what kind of global actor the EU envisions China will become. The research material includes a number of *alter-casting* techniques by the EU, or the projection of an identity onto another actor that is congruent with one’s own goals (Weinstein & Deutschberger, 1963, p. 454). For example, Romano Prodi (2004 *a*) expresses that the current Chinese political system is not satisfying “the part” that the EU

envisioning China to “play” on the world stage and that China’s “integration into the international community” is central to both the EU and China’s interests. Moreover, China is expected to have a “genuine desire” to “fully” engage with Europe. This illustrates the EU’s confidence in their normative power.

“The Chinese leadership has repeatedly stated its support for reform, including on basic rights and freedoms. [...]. The EU must consider how it can most effectively assist China’s **reform** process, [...] a more **open society**, and more **accountable government** would be beneficial to China, [...].” (European Commission, 2006, p. 4).

“[...] supporting China’s rapid and full integration into the international community, both politically and economically. **Achieving these goals will be central for both China and the EU to play their full part on the world stage.** [...] there remains a profound EU interest in a stable, prosperous and open China that embraces **democracy, free market principles**, and the **rule of law**. And I believe that on the Chinese side, there is a strong and **genuine desire** to engage fully with Europe [...].” (Romano Prodi, 2004 *a*, p. 6).

This period contains many of the elements of Manners (2002) ‘normative power’ conceptualization of the EU’s power. In the above examples, the EU assumes the role of promoter of liberal values such as democracy, human rights, and rule of law while insisting on the *universal application* of these norms. Shaping what is considered “normal” is central in Manners conceptualization of normative power. By implicitly and explicitly referring to liberal democratic governance as the only legitimate system internationally, and a prerequisite for playing a meaningful part on the world stage, the EU’s continuous attempts to shape what is considered “normal” is very evident in the research material during this era. Moreover, the EU applies a paternalistic undertone in guiding China into what the EU considers to be politically “normal”. The benefits for the EU in supporting liberal change in China are explicitly stated in the 2003 Commission Policy Paper and the EU expresses its full support in China’s transition to an “open country that fully embraces democracy”. The EU refers to its experience in disseminating liberal systems in Eastern Europe, solidifying the paternalistic tone.

“Europe thus has a major political and economic stake in supporting China’s successful transition to a stable, prosperous and open country that fully embraces **democracy, free market** principles and the **rule of law**. The EU has much to offer here, stemming in part from its own **experience** in integrating accession countries from East and Central Europe.” (European Commission, 2003, p. 3).

This first role expectation, ‘liberal reform through economic cooperation’, is clearly visible in the research material during this period. The EU expects its economic cooperation with China to instill liberal political change in the country. In line with Shen (2015), the EU is hoping to invoke norms *and* pursue economic benefit in its engagements with China.

### **5.1.3 Role expectations: Big and responsible actor**

A second recurring role expectation the European Union casts onto China during this era, as well as subsequent eras, is that of a ‘big and responsible actor’. This role expectation is characterized by specific traits and behavioral expectations that the EU prescribes to powerful global actors, as well as what specific political spaces that legitimate/responsible global actors can operate in. The role is characterized by expectations to act “responsibly” due to their size and political influence in the world. The EU uses the term “responsible” in conjunction with liberal values, such as ‘free trade’ and ‘multilateralism’. The role expectation entails that China must ‘responsibly’ use its economic means to promote liberal values of peace, sustainable development, rule of law and multilateral solutions in international issues.

“Size does indeed matter, but so do responsibilities, and as China emerges as a major player on the global economic scene, it is important that it **plays its full part** in ensuring that the global economic order develops in a stable and balanced way. [...] It is to be hoped that China will indeed act the role of the ‘**big and responsible**’ player in the years to come.” (Prodi, 2004 *b*, p. 2).

“[...] The EU expects China to contribute to global stability by gradually taking on more **responsibility**, commensurate with its political and

economic weight, both in the bilateral and the **multilateral context**.” (European Commission, 2003, p. 7-8).

“[...] the EU looks towards China to act as a constructive and **responsible player** in the world economy, playing a role commensurate to its size and importance. The preservation and development of a **liberal global trading system** is in China’s own long-term interest [...]” (European Commission, 2003, p. 15).

*Multilateralism* is emphasized in the ‘big and responsible’ role expectations. China is expected to engage in legitimate intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization. These expectations of liberal institutionalism are core tenets of liberal international relations theory (Burchill et al., 2004, p. 55). The EU applied a great deal of alter-casting during this era, indicating a strong belief in its ability to disseminate normative values (Manners, 2002; Weinstein & Deutschberger, 1963). Chinese engagement in multilateralism is presented as an important feature in the EU’s role expectations of China and the country’s ability to “play its part”. The EU alter-casts China to “work together” to safeguard strategic interests. In two examples of alter-casting techniques, the EU exemplifies the United Nations as a multilateral forum to work together on international issues. In another example, increased cooperation in multilateral organizations is followed by mentions of Chinese domestic reform indicating a linkage between multilateral platforms (where the EU can disseminate norms) and domestic political reforms within China.

“[...] Following its accession to WTO in December 2001, China is actively engaged in both the new round of multilateral negotiations [**China**] **is expected to continue on the path of domestic reform and economic liberalisation**.” (European Commission, 2003, p. 6).

“EU and China share views on the importance of **multilateral systems** and rules for global governance, which includes the further strengthening of the United Nations system [...]” (European Commission, 2003, p. 8).

“[...] the EU and China have an ever-greater interest to **work together** as strategic partners to safeguard and promote sustainable development, peace and stability [...].” (European Commission, 2003, p. 3).

“[...] China and the EU have the same broad agenda [...]. We are both strong supporters of **multilateralism** and international law [...].” (Solana, 2005, p. 4).

The multilateral space in which a ‘big and responsible’ China cooperates, serves as a platform in which the EU may influence normative political and economic values in China. The ‘normative power’ framework suggests the EU has the power to define what responsible (or “normal”) international behavior entails, and thus what behavior a ‘responsible actor’ should perform (Manners, 2002). The EU describes trade liberalization, sustainable development, peace and stability, and anti-terrorism policies as traits of responsible actors.

“The EU is also looking to China to play its part. It is in **both our interests** to **work together** as strategic partners on the international scene to safeguard and promote development, peace and stability. [...]. The EU and China share a deep commitment to **multilateralism**, and we hope to intensify our dialogue in this area, as China looks to play a role on the world stage commensurate with its relative size and influence.” (Prodi, 2004 *a*, p. 5).

Implicitly, multilateralism is described as the vehicle in which responsible/normal behavior is formed. Like the previous role expectation ‘liberal reform through economic cooperation’, the EU expresses expectation that China will conduct domestic reforms, and seemingly implies a logic of causation between China’s ability/expectation to act ‘responsibility’ and its ability to ‘reform’.

#### 5.1.4 Role expectations: The role of peacekeeper

The final role expectation during this era is that of ‘peacekeeper’. The European Union’s role expectation of China is to play a constructive role in international security issues. The EU expects China to be a peacekeeper in response to the perceived non-state security threats, and to cooperate in solving these “new threats” such as underdevelopment and terrorism. Although the EU recognizes the reduced propensity of geopolitical inter-state conflict in Europe since the end of the Cold War, the material shows that the EU still recognizes the risk of wars of invasion in other parts of the world. For example, the EU expects China to solve its political and territorial disputes with Taiwan through constructive dialogue and not through unilateral force (i.e. a war of invasion). China is expected to mediate peace through dialogue in Taiwan and to resolve regional conflicts in Asia through multilateral cooperation.

“The EU also looks towards China to use its considerable influence in Asia to **promote peace** and stability in the region, by taking a lead role in furthering regional integration and by helping to resolve pending regional conflicts.” (European Commission, 2003, p. 8).

“The EU side reaffirmed its continued adherence to the one China policy, and expressed its hope for a **peaceful resolution of the Taiwan question** through constructive dialogue.” (EU-China Summit, 2004, p. 3).

“The EU and China have an interest in promoting peace and security through a reformed and effective multilateral system. They should co-operate closely in the framework of the UN, working to find **multilateral solutions** to emerging crises, and to **combat terrorism** and increase regional co-operation, [...]” (European Commission, 2006, p.10-11).

The peacekeeper role is altogether present in all of the identified eras. Aligned with previous research by Shen (2015), the EU is during this period still demonstrating a strong belief in their own normative power towards China. Liberal institutions and multilateralism are framed as the legitimate solutions to international disputes, and China must respect these legitimate spaces to play its role as peacekeeper.



## 5.2 The *transitional era*

### 5.2.1 Context: Human rights concerns, financial crisis and new leadership

The research material illustrates that the liberal optimism and the dynamics of the EU-China relationship changed in the late 2000's and early 2010's. Here are some of the most relevant contextual events expressed implicitly and explicitly in the material. This period is also characterized by what was earlier discussed in limitations (*see* 4.6) regarding lacking material during the timespan 2006 - 2012. However, this is also a find in itself and is mirrored in the contextual findings. For example, the EU-China relationship deteriorated in the year leading up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. China received international criticism for violating various human rights, most notably the rights of minority groups within the country (Human Rights Watch, 2008; Amnesty International, 2008). The French president met with Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama in the same year and as a result China canceled the annual EU-China Summit, and imposed economic sanctions on France (Traynor, 2008). However, the subsequent 2009 EU-China Summit makes no mention of the canceled meeting.

The absence of proper EU condemnation of China was in all likelihood influenced by the abnormally high economic interdependence of the time. The 2007-2008 financial crisis exposed flaws in the European financial system. China emerged from the crisis comparatively unscathed and the financial crisis served as a 'coming out' declaration of the resilience of China's economy and solidified China's role as a major global economic powerhouse (Wong, 2011). Before the crisis, trade between the EU and China was very unbalanced and the EU had frequently expressed a desire for a 'level economic playing field' with China (EEAS, 2013, p. 5). The crisis exposed European financial fragility which possibly made the EU's desire of establishing a 'level economic playing field' more urgent. José Manuel Barroso expresses the gravity of the financial crisis and the "tectonic" shift in economic world order in favor of China in his 2011 State of the European Union speech.

"We are facing **the biggest challenge in the history of our Union**. This crisis is financial, economic and social. But it is also a crisis of confidence. A crisis of confidence in our leaders, in Europe itself, and in our capacity to find solutions." (Barroso, 2011, p. 2).

“[...] Tectonic **shifts in the world order** and the pressures of globalisation, have made matters even worse. The result is clear: concern in our societies. Fear among our citizens for the future [...].” (Barroso, 2011, p. 2).

This transitional era was also influenced by a significant shift in Chinese leadership, and China’s increasingly assertive and expansionist global role. In late 2012, Xi Jinping succeeded Hu Jintao as the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and initiated a new form of assertive and confrontational Chinese diplomacy, or “wolf warrior diplomacy” (Martin, 2021). In 2013, the Chinese infrastructure investment project the Belt and Road Initiative was launched and has since received criticism for spreading China’s authoritative economic model throughout the world, as well as to produce debt-traps for countries in the global South (Jie & Wallace, 2021). Despite these criticisms, the research material during this era frames the BRI as something that *can* be beneficial to the EU, but only if the two actors work *together*.

“We believe that big infrastructure projects [...] should be about sustainable development for local communities, and not about crafting new spheres of influence. **Only if we engage together** with China, we can make our interests, our goals and our vision on connectivity converge.” (Mogherini, 2018, p. 2).

“I am very much encouraged by China's statements on making the "Belt and Road" an open, transparent, inclusive initiative. Let us work on these projects **together**. Let our companies build them together.” (Juncker, 2017, p. 3).

During this transitional period, the EU treats the BRI with cautious optimism and urges China to be responsible. However, only *together* with the EU - i.e. working under the EU’s normative values - can the BRI be fruitful. These framings are in line with Manners normative power (2002) as they imply that the EU’s liberal norms are the criteria against which the success of the BRI is measured by.

### 5.2.2 Role expectations: Democratic ambivalence

The European Union's role expectations during the 'transitional era' are characterized by similar expectations as the 'liberal expectations' era. One notable exception is that the expectations of liberal reform, which characterized the first era, diminish around the 2010's. In the following example, democracy is no longer conceptualized as a political system the EU expects China to *adopt*, but rather as a liberal value that characterizes the EU's engagement with China.

“[...] **The protection of human rights will continue to be a core part of the EU's engagement with China.** The EU believes that treating human beings with dignity and respect is essential if citizens are to fulfill themselves and flourish creatively, and is good for the stability and security of Chinese society and the world order.” (European Commission, 2016, p. 4).

This distinction is important as it symbolizes an important shift in expectations regarding China's ability/willingness to reform through economic cooperation and normative influence from the EU. Manners 'normative power' theory (2002) relies on self-confidence in the EU's ability to shape norms and values, and this change in democratic expectations indicates that the EU is less self-assured in its ability to spread liberal values in China compared to the early 2000s. Similar to the findings of Shen (2015), the EU's normative power is less confident in its ability to influence liberal norms within China. This phenomenon may have been influenced by increased Chinese resistance to external influence during this time and increased assertiveness in its own authoritarian political system under Xi Jinping. Subsequently, the limited success in influencing normative values in its interaction with China may have factored into the EU's reduced democratic expectations of China.

Despite the reduced democratic expectations, other liberal values such as multilateralism remains an area where the EU expects China to play a constructive role.

“[...] As important actors in a multipolar world, the EU and China commit to enhancing **dialogue and coordination** at bilateral, regional and global levels, to meet regional and global challenges **together**, and work to make

the international order and system more just and equitable.” (EEAS, 2013, p. 3).

The EU applies alter-casting techniques and expects that China will cooperate in dialogue and multilateral procedures in order to make the international order more equitable. Adherence to multilateralism through liberal intergovernmental institutions can be interpreted as an expression of normative power (Manners, 2002), as those institutions are based in liberal values.

### **5.2.3 Role expectations: Responsible actor**

The role expectation of the previous era, ‘big and responsible’ actor (*see* 5.1.3), is also represented during this period. Similar to the previous era, the EU alter-casts China as a responsible global actor with global interests that overlap with European liberal values. As identified in the research material, China is expected to act responsibly in a number of areas such as peace and security, sustainable development, technological cooperation, human rights, and global trade. Although the EU’s self-confidence in its ability to influence liberal reforms has reduced - as shown in the previous example (*see* 5.2.2) - the EU continues to uphold expectations of Chinese engagement concerning liberal norms and values. The following examples show the EU’s expectations of China to uphold liberal values, as well as sustainable development commitments.

“As important actors in a multipolar world, the EU and China share **responsibility** for promoting **peace**, prosperity and **sustainable development** for the benefit of all. They agree to continue to consolidate and develop their strategic partnership to the benefit of both sides, based on the principles of equality, respect and trust.” (EEAS, 2013, p. 2).

“The EU and China face the common task of achieving innovative, inclusive and **sustainable development**. [...] The EU and China have a common responsibility for advancing global development.” (EEAS, 2013, p. 9).

New to this era, the Chinese development-investment project the Belt and Road Initiative (*see* 5.2.1), receives similar expectations. The EU expects the Belt and Road Initiative to respect “international norms”.

“China will need to fulfill its declared aim of making its "One Belt, One Road" initiative an open platform which adheres to market rules and **international norms** in order to deliver benefits for all and to encourage responsible economic behaviour in third countries. [...] and guarantee a **level playing field** for economic operators from both sides.” (European Commission, 2016, p. 10).

This is another example of the EU expressing its ‘normative power’ to shape “normality” in international relations (Manners, 2002). Moreover, the EU expresses a desire for a ‘level economic playing field’, which is a recurring theme in the research material.

#### **5.2.4 Role expectations: Level economic playing field**

The previous quote on the Belt and Road Initiative highlights the importance of a ‘level economic playing field’. This discourse on the unjust trade imbalance between the EU and China is visible throughout all the identified eras and escalates in urgency over time. The European Union is dissatisfied with the extensive market access barriers in China and calls for more equitable economic trading terms. The EU has sought for China to play the role of a ‘responsible economic actor’ that ensures a fair and level economic playing field, but has expressed disappointment in the material concerning China’s failure to combat the trade imbalance. The following are examples from fourteen years of role expectations of a ‘level economic playing field’ between the EU and China.

“While European consumers benefit from imported Chinese goods, the current trend of **trade imbalance** between China and the EU is not sustainable in the longer term.” (Council of the European Union, 2007, p. 3)

“[...] leaders also welcomed the newly established dialogue on industrial policy that aims at ensuring a business-friendly **level playing field** for

industrial operators and at contributing to smooth and sustainable trade relations between the EU and China.” (EU-China Summit, 2003, p. 2).

“China should open its own markets and ensure conditions of **fair market competition**.” (European Commission, 2006, p. 2).

“Both sides share responsibility for ensuring that their economies remain key drivers for global economic growth and providing prosperity for all [...] by promoting open, transparent markets and a **level-playing field**.” (EEAS, 2013, p. 5)

“The EU wants a China which is economically more open and stable, with significantly improved market access for foreign companies as well as a **level playing field** and fair competition for business and investment, [...]” (European Commission, 2016, p. 5).

“This meeting [G20] is an opportunity for China to show **the responsibility that comes with greater economic power** – an opportunity to promote a global economy that is based on rules, and which works for everyone.” (Juncker, 2016 *a*, p. 1).

“[...] we believe that real competition and real openness can only work with a **level playing field**” (Jucker, 2017 *a*, p. 2).

Adjacent to the disappointments regarding trade imbalance, the research material shows the EU started to increasingly express frustrations about other parts of Chinese foreign politics in the latter part of the 2010's. China's emergence as a global power with illiberal intentions became an increasingly distinct part of official EU communications during this time. The need to construct a more consolidated EU strategy, with the ability to address the growing differences between the two global actors, is manifested in the research material during this time. Moreover, China is explicitly criticized for interfering in international organizations like the United Nations, which was not visible in the previous era.

“[...] China's increased weight and a renewed emphasis on "going global" mean that it is seeking a bigger role and exerting greater influence on an evolving system of global governance. [...] **the EU needs its own strategy**, one which puts its own interests at the forefront in the new relationship; which promotes universal values; which recognises the need for and helps to **define an increased role for China in the international system**; and is based on a positive agenda of partnership coupled with the constructive management of differences.” (European Commission, 2016, p. 2).

“**We must improve our ability to speak with one voice** when it comes to our foreign policy. It is not right that Europe silenced itself at the United Nations Human Rights Council when it came to condemning human rights abuses by China because one Member State opposed it [...].” (Juncker, 2018, p. 7).

The research material indicates increased frustrations and a changing view of China's international intentions. The EU gradually changes its language from soft power norms and liberal values to hard power formulations of security, rivalry, and power. The upcoming era solidifies this trend, with EU policy growing increasingly more realist in its terminology.

### **5.3 The systemic rivalry era**

#### **5.3.1 Context: Covid-19, Human Rights criticism, and the war in Ukraine**

The current era of EU-China relations has been characterized by a number of significant geopolitical events. The Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 caused geopolitical tensions between the EU and China. Some EU states expressed concerns about misinformation campaigns about the disease, while others lobbied against the trade imbalance to cultivate greater European economic resilience (Seaman, 2020). The human rights situation in China deteriorated and received more direct criticisms from the EU, and its member states, during this period compared to previous eras. For example, China received criticisms for its deprivation of democratic rights and repression of protestors in Hong Kong in 2019-2020, its maltreatment of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang internment camps, suppression of Tibetan cultural and political rights, and escalation of tensions in the Strait of Taiwan (Bermingham, 2023; Camut

et al., 2023; Gerace, 2023). The research material is moreover showing that the Belt and Road Initiative is increasingly regarded as a threat to the status quo of the liberal global system, and the consequences of this development-investment project are openly criticized. The Russian invasion of Ukraine re-introduced the threat of interstate violence in Europe and elsewhere. China has failed to condemn the invasion and has instead strengthened its economic and political ties with Russia (Hirwani, 2023).

The increasingly unpredictable international environment has accelerated the EU's consolidation of a more autonomous geopolitical strategy to safeguard the Union's political, economic, and energy interests. The invasion has led to a significant re-alignment of Europe's energy infrastructure, reducing dependence on imports of Russian energy (European Commission, 2022). Similarly, the material shows that the EU is increasingly striving to consolidate strategic autonomy in relation to its other geopolitical interests. Moreover, a discourse of 'fundamental differences' between the EU and China has fully developed during this era regarding the political, economic, and human rights values of the two global actors.

“[...] the EU should continue working towards becoming a **more effective geopolitical player by ensuring a more united geopolitical approach** of its Member States, as well as by fostering its **strategic autonomy** and capacity, working together with the US and other like-minded partners;” (European Parliament, 2021, p. 12).

### **5.3.2 Role expectation: Systemic rivalry and fundamental disagreements**

The first role expectation of this era is characterized by an increased emphasis on inherent differences between the political and economic systems of the European Union and China. China is framed as a global actor with norms and values *fundamentally different* from the EU's liberal values. The 'fundamental differences' between the two global actors are reflected in the EU's role expectations of China. The interactions and cooperation between the two are no longer considered to influence domestic reform in China (compare 'liberal reform' expectation of the first era 5.1.2). Instead, China is framed as a fundamentally different actor whose political and economic system rivals that of the EU. This is a significant difference compared to the earlier eras.



“[...] Engaging and cooperating with China is both an opportunity and necessity. But, at the same time, we have to recognise that **we do not share the same values, political systems, or approach to multilateralism**. We will engage in a clear-eyed and confident way, robustly defending EU interests and standing firm on our values.” (EU-China Summit, 2020).

The EU has ceased to express Chinese values as something that can be altered and influenced, which indicates both a reduction in the EU’s self-assurance in its capability to influence liberal norms, and a shift to a more realist disposition in EU external action (see Manners, 2002; Hyde-Price, 2021). This is a significant shift in tone in the EU’s rhetoric as aligned with the logic of realism.

The EU still acts pragmatically and calls for cooperation between the two global actors despite these fundamental and systemic differences, but without explicit expectations that China will adopt its normative values through this cooperation, as it did in the first era. Against this realist backdrop, the research material illustrates that the significance of European norms and values shifts from being something the EU should *export* to something the EU should *protect*. The EU highlights its normative integrity in its interaction with China by reaffirming that the EU will not depart from its liberal normative foundations *despite* its interaction with China.

“[...] today we do have, compared to five years ago, a new strategy with China, but most importantly **we have a new kind of relationship with China**: a more intense one, but also a more frank and open one, based on clear words, clear principles, and clear interests that we are not shying away from affirming in the clearest possible manner.” (Mogherini, 2019 *b*, p. 1).

“We know that the Chinese government does not share all our principles and values, [...] **we will continue to engage with China** precisely to advance our values and our interests.” (Mogherini, 2018, p. 3).

The following quotes demonstrate that the EU perceives ‘fundamental differences’ between itself and China but that cooperation will continue despite these differences. Notice the

difference in tone between 2018 and 2019 as China is framed as a “systemic rival” in the latter policy document.

“The European Union and China are two of the great powers of the world of today. We do not always see eye-to-eye; on the contrary, we have some **fundamental disagreements** that are very evident. But as two global powers, we both understand that our cooperation is essential to address the main challenges we face.” (Mogherini, 2018, p. 1).

“China is, simultaneously, in different policy areas, a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a **systemic rival** promoting alternative models of governance.” (European Commission, 2019, p. 1).

“We **do not share the values** on which the political and economic system in China is based.” (Michel, 2020 *a*, p. 4).

“The relationship between the European Union and China is simultaneously one of the most strategically important and one of the most **challenging** we have. From the outset, I have said China is a negotiating partner, an economic competitor, and a **systemic rival**.” (Von der Leyen, 2020, p. 15).

“[...] we are in the process of **rebalancing our relationship**: we want more of a level playing field, more reciprocity. On the issue of human rights, we will not look the other way, and we are prepared to promote our values.” (Michel, 2020 *b*, p. 2).

In addition to a more honest language concerning the ideological differences between the two actors, the research material shows the EU is explicitly considering China a security threat. A realist understanding of international politics, with states yet again becoming the main security concern to European safety, is expressed in EU policy (Burchill et al., 2004; Steans et al., 2010).

### 5.3.3 Role expectations: Peacekeeper and geopolitical threat

The role expectations in regards to security during this era are characterized by the EU's framing of China as a geopolitical threat to European security. This is a crucial development in EU-China relations. Prior to this, EU-China security relations were framed as a partnership where the two countries cooperate in multilateral forums to combat terrorism and tensions in East Asia (see 5.1.4 'peacekeeper'). The material did not entail expressions of China as a direct threat to the EU until 2019, and since then China has been framed as a security threat in a number of areas such as development, education, economic, and military.

“China's increasing military capabilities coupled with its comprehensive vision and ambition to have the technologically most advanced armed forces by 2050 present **security issues for the EU [...]**” (European Commission, 2019, p. 4).

In particular, the Belt and Road Initiative and other Chinese economic policies, tensions in the South China Sea and Strait of Taiwan, aggressive diplomatic pressure on European politicians, and the soft power language program the Confucius Institute, are framed as security threats to the EU. The BRI is framed as a plan by the Chinese Communist Party to systematically change the international order with China at its center (Von der Leyen, 2023 *a*, p. 2), to have negative political effects in the EU (European Parliament, 2021), and to neglect socioeconomic sustainability and compromise efforts by the EU to promote good governance, rule of law and human rights in Eastern Europe and elsewhere (2019 policy document, p. 4).

“[...] the Chinese Communist Party's clear goal is a **systemic change of the international order** with China at its centre. (Von der Leyen, 2023 *a*, p. 2).

“the Chinese Government's [...] , **aims to reshape norms, standard and practices globally in order to foster China's long-term geopolitical strategy and economic interests**; regrets that Chinese domestic censorship, now being exercised, inter alia, at the UN, aims to manipulate procedures to minimise scrutiny of China's conduct” (European Parliament, 2021, p. 8-9).

“ [...] the BRI must meet international standards; underlines that BRI projects must be closely monitored, including with regard to their **negative political effects in the EU**;” (European Parliament, 2021, p. 7).

“[...] **warns of the increasing role of China in the immediate neighbourhood of the EU**, including candidate countries; calls for a strategic approach at EU level to counter Chinese actions [...].” (European Parliament, 2021, p. 13).

“[...] China is asserting a stronger global role both as an economic power and as foreign policy actor, which **poses serious political, economic, security and technological challenges to the EU**, [...] and poses serious threats to rules-based multilateralism and core democratic values;” (European Parliament, 2021, p. 2).

As a response to the perceived Chinese security threat, the EU calls for closer cooperation with NATO with mentions of security implications for China’s presence in the South China Sea, the Arctic, and Africa.

“Calls for stronger EU cooperation with NATO on **Chinese security challenges**; [...], including the possibility of the further deterioration of security in the South China Sea, [...] welcomes NATO’s efforts to carefully monitor the security implications of China’s increased physical presence in the Arctic, as well as in Africa;” (European Parliament, 2021, p. 9).

Despite this new framing of China as a security threat, the role expectations the EU places on China are still that of ‘peacekeeper’. China is still expected to play a constructive and ‘responsible’ role in peacekeeping efforts, notably in the South China Sea, the Strait of Taiwan, and the Russo-Ukrainian War, as well as adhering to the rules-based international system.

“China has the capacity and the **responsibility** to play an important role in addressing regional security challenges.” (European Commission, 2019, p. 3).

“The EU called on China to assume greater **responsibility** in dealing with global challenges through the rules-based international system, promoting international peace and security, [...]” (EU-China summit, 2020).

“We underlined that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is not only a defining moment for our continent, but also for our relationship with the rest of the world. [...] China, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, has a special **responsibility**.” (EU-China summit, 2022).

“[...] it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the European Union to maintain a relationship of trust with China, which I would like to see, if China does not contribute to the **search for a political solution** based on Russia's withdrawal from the Ukrainian territory.” (Borrell, 2023 a, p. 5).

The framing of the EU’s ‘peacekeeper’ expectations of China during this era are significantly different from the peacekeeper expectations of the first era (*see* 5.1.4). In the early 2000s, the peacekeeping duties of China centered on liberal cooperation with the EU. The threat of non-state actors disturbing the liberal order, and the joint security efforts between the two global actors to prohibit this disruption, were the chief security concerns. This liberal framing largely omitted mentions of interstate war between countries.

A realist reading of the material would infer that the early 2000s were a period of European naivete about the nature of the anarchic international system and the true intentions of China (Burchill et al., 2004). Economic cooperation, as the EU saw it, would lead to liberal reforms in China and thus increased international security. Instead, the economic cooperation between the EU and China has had a limited effect on spreading liberal values in China and a large effect on turning the country into an economic powerhouse.

Today, realists would argue that the expressions of China as a security threat to the EU indicate that the reality of economic cooperation, i.e. that it has fueled China's self-interest and relative gains, is finally understood by the European Union officials (Burchill et al., 2004; Hyde-Price, 2021). War, and the threat of war, is regarded as an inevitable byproduct of the anarchic international system (ibid). As such, China will pose a greater security risk the more powerful the country becomes. Soft power and 'normative values' - albeit still a core part of EU foreign policy - are inferior to "hard power" and military security threats. China's current hard power capabilities were made possible by European over-belief in the ability of its 'normative power' to influence liberal reform in China. Instead, the current military capabilities of China were funded with the help of EU economic cooperation and international commerce. China's increased assertiveness on the international stage is a natural expression of an emerging powerful state that wants to safeguard its own political, economic and security interests in an otherwise anarchic world where all states ultimately look to their own self-interests (Burchill et al., 2004; Steans et al., 2010).

#### **5.3.4 Role expectations: Assertive but responsible actor**

This era is characterized by skepticism from the EU concerning China's international intentions. The skepticism covers a range of areas such as economy, international development, aid, human rights, and multilateralism. Compared to earlier eras, China is described as much more assertive in the international arena. Moreover, China's assertiveness is explicitly described in terms of security threats and fundamental differences compared to the previous eras. The EU is explicitly described to not share the same political and economic values as China (Michel, 2020 *a*, p. 4). Such a description has not been found in the research material in the earlier eras. This reaffirms that the EU significantly altered its official communications on China during this period and expressed more explicit criticisms, discourses of difference, human rights critique, and critique of economic protectionism. The relationship is described to have deteriorated and China is framed as a "political issue" for the European Union (Borrell, 2023 *b*, p. 3). Financially, China is described as assertive and challenging for the EU (Michel, 2023, p. 2).

“[...] EU-China relations have deteriorated substantially, [...] a crucial **political issue** is emerging for Europe, and that is China.” (Borrell, 2023 *b*, p. 3).

“As for China, we face the reality as it is today. China is a major trading partner and has become **more assertive** and more challenging.” (Michel, 2023, p. 2).

“We clearly do not have the same vision as China on the issue of human rights and the respect for people’s fundamental rights. In all international fora and with other countries, including many countries of the [Global] South, China develops a narrative **subordinating fundamental freedoms** [political rights] to the right of economic development.” (Borell, 2023 *b*, p. 4).

Despite the framing of China as an increasingly dangerous and assertive international actor, the EU’s role expectations of China are still characterized by responsible political and economic behavior. The same as the previous eras, ‘multilateralism’ and respect for the ‘rules-based international order’ is described as a “responsibility” China has.

“In the last decade, China's economic power and political influence have grown with unprecedented scale and speed, reflecting its ambitions to become a leading global power. [...] Its increasing presence in the world, including in Europe, should be accompanied by greater **responsibilities** for upholding the rules-based international order [...].” (European Commission, 2019, p. 1).

“the EU [...] urges China to comply with its international obligations and to commit to **respecting** human rights [...]” (European Parliament, 2021, p. 10).

“[...], China has the **responsibility** to support all three pillars of the United Nations, namely Human Rights, Peace and Security, and Development.” (European Commission, 2019, p. 5).

It shall be noted that against this backdrop, the role expectation “responsible actor” in this era is different from the other eras depending on what theoretical lens is applied. Consider for example that the EU’s liberal expectations of China during the early 2000’s genuinely expected liberal reforms in exchange for economic cooperation. According to constructivist international relations theory, it may be argued that the description of “similarities” in political and economic aims between the EU and China during the early 2000s sought to create a unified liberal identity between the two global actors (Wendt, 1992). Under the same identity, the two global actors can act “responsibly”, i.e. act in accordance with the liberal rules-based international order.

Consider the difference in the current era, where the role expectation “responsible actor” is less confidently ascribed to China, and where a discourse of “difference” between the EU and China is evident in the research material. According to realist international relations theory, the EU’s increased mentions of the two actor’s political and economic self-interests, as well as framing of the international arena as a zero-sum game where only either liberal EU values, or authoritarian Chinese values, can exist, indicates a stark shift in geopolitical narrative concerning the two actors. This framing of a battle of international values, alongside the EU’s efforts to solidify its stance as a ‘geopolitical actor’, indicates a clear realist disposition in the EU. It perceives itself as a realist and rational actor with a self-interest to achieve security in the anarchic international system against the Chinese “threat”. By framing China as a “threat”, the EU implicitly communicates that there is something that needs to be “secured” (Burchill et al., 2004). The framing suggests that the liberal foundations that Europe is built is existentially threatened. In this light, the role expectation “responsible actor” should no longer be regarded as the EU expecting China to assimilate liberal reforms. Rather, “responsible actor” in the “systemic rivalry era” does no longer expect liberal reforms from China, but it does expect China to uphold its commitment to international agreements, multilateral solutions, and transparency.



## **5.4 The EU's *role conception* reflected in its role expectations of China**

The following analysis will briefly explain the role conception of the EU reflected in its relationship with China during the identified eras. Role conception is the normative *expectations* that the role-beholder expresses *towards itself*, or the “ego-part’s own definition” (Aggestam, 2006, p. 19).

### **5.4.1 The EU's role conception in the liberal expectations era**

The research material has shown a gradual change in the EU's role expectations of China over time. The initial period indicated liberal expectations and democratic reforms. The ‘transitional era’ saw a gradual change in expectations. The current era is characterized by framings of fundamental differences and China as a threatening global force. The EU's role conception is hence reflected in this gradual change in expectations over time. In the ‘liberal expectations era’, a discourse of “sameness” and “similarity” is prevalent in the EU's role expectations of China. The EU alter-casts China as a responsible actor that values the same democratic and liberal principles as the EU. The EU employed a confident and paternalistic tone in its official communications during this era in the role expectations of China to act ‘responsibly’ and according to the ‘rules-based international order’.

By framing itself as a paternalistic moral guide to China, the EU implicitly undermines China's space for self-determination during this first era. In similarity with Shen (2015) and Hyde-Price (2021), the normative power of the EU is overstated, as reflected in China's ability to reject the liberal agenda of the EU. A shift that generates interesting implications for the EU-China relation and to what extent the soft power of the EU stands against hard power such as economic and military power. The European political and economic models and institutions are presented as the only legitimate options in global governance. The EU's role conception is that of moral superiority and liberal dogma.

### **5.4.2 The EU's role conception in the transitional era**

The ‘transitional era’ is harder to define in terms of the EU's role conception. A prevalent observation is that there are fewer examples of confident alter-casting and democratic expectations in the research material. Democracy is gradually framed not as a political system

China should adopt, but a liberal value the EU should *protect* in its engagements with China, indicating a reduced confidence in its normative power (Manners, 2002). The EU maintains alter-casting techniques in its multilateral expectations of China and expects China to respect liberal values in its international interactions. The Belt and Road Initiative is encouraged to uphold international norms during this era. There are increased mentions of the EU's desire for a 'level economic playing field'. The changing role expectations the EU has on China during this era indicate a gradual loss of confidence compared to the first era. It may be argued that the more China is framed as an actor that is resistant to the EU's norms and values, the less certain the EU is of the effectiveness of its 'normative power' approach (Manners, 2002). There is a gradual change of tone and rationale in the EU's communications during this era from distinctly liberal to distinctly realist. This change indicates that the EU ceases to perceive itself as an actor in a liberal world, and starts to perceive itself as an actor in a world order dominated by realist logic (Steans et al., 2010).

### **5.4.3 The EU's role conception in the systemic rivalry era**

The 'systemic rivalry era' highlights fundamental disagreements and systemic rivalry between the two global actors. China is framed as an assertive geopolitical threat with ambitions to promote illiberal modes of governance. The Belt and Road Initiative is framed as a great concern to the EU's interests. These findings suggest that the self-conception of the EU during this current era is characterized by an increased perception of threats. In response to these threats, the EU calls for a unified geopolitical strategy amongst its member states. In this anarchic world, the EU's role is to protect itself and its own political and economic interests from the Chinese threat. However, China is still expected to act 'responsible' in terms of multilateral engagements and to respect the 'rules-based international order', but the framing of China as a rogue international actor indicates that the EU has very limited actual expectations of China's ability to act 'responsibly'. The EU's self-conception is thus vastly different than during the early 2000s and has transformed from self-confident and liberal, to anxious and realist.

## 6. Policy implications

The policy implications of this thesis are many. By applying a role theoretical lens, policymakers can better understand the role expectations actors place on each other. These role expectations are not only dependent on geopolitical events, and diplomatic ebb and flow, but reveal greater patterns of “how international actors perceive the world”, and their own roles in it. In the research material, the role-theoretical “glasses” reveal the EU went from a self-confident actor with a liberal worldview to an actor who perceives the world in realist terms. For example, role theory has helped identify that while the EU promotes liberal norms, this is highly contextual and challenged by the different roles that other actors possess in relation to the EU. With China’s ability to *reject* the liberal agenda, other values (and role expectations) are formulated by the EU aligned with a more realistic approach to international relations.

Moreover, tracing the language of EU policy over time and identifying patterns are helpful for future policymaking. The research material has shown that China’s rejection of liberal norms - i.e. human rights violations, assertive political tactics, authoritarian political system - has influenced the EU’s role expectations of the country. For policymakers, tracing role expectations over time gives certain predictability of the future structure of the EU-China diplomatic relationship. The research material has demonstrated China’s ability to reject the EU’s role expectations and liberal norms while retaining its economic relationship with the actor. This allows China to govern the diplomatic relationship to their own benefit. This demonstrates a significant shift in power in the bilateral relationship which is important to account for in future policy-making regarding EU-China relations.

## 7. Conclusion

This thesis explored the European Union's *role expectations* of China from 2003 - 2023. Three distinct eras of EU-China relations were identified with noticeable changes in EU policy language over time, changing from liberal to realist. The geopolitical context in the different eras that are discernible in the research material has been presented. The development of the EU's role expectations of China have been traced over time. Various role expectations have been identified during the research period regarding political, economic, and security expectations. The EU indicated high normative role expectations of China in the early 2000s but altered these expectations in the late 2010s, implying that the EU's normative power is contextual and dependent on reciprocation from its cooperative partners. China's rejection of liberal norms over time, while retaining its economic cooperation with the EU, has moreover altered the power balance in the diplomatic relationship, which is also visible in how the European Union is addressing these geopolitical changes in their official policies. The research material shows how the EU is gradually undertaking a realist disposition in its relationship with China over time, which reflects in their construction of policies to safeguard their own liberal values, such as strategic autonomy.

Moreover, the thesis has analyzed the EU's *role conception* based on the identified role expectations of China. In the early 2000s, the EU alter-casts China more frequently than during the late 2010s, indicating a waning confidence in its normative power over time. The EU demonstrates a transitional period in which the liberal normative expectations are gradually reduced. The realist tone in the research material of the late 2010s and early 2020s indicate a new EU role conception where the EU seeks to consolidate a new identity as a realist actor while maintaining its liberal normative identity. For future policies, policymakers should account for this duality in identity when constructing EU policies on China. Future research should continue to trace the EU's role expectations of China, and vice versa, to discern the patterns and logic that dictate their diplomatic relationship over time.

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