Check for updates

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Policy and discursive shifts in China's economic diplomacy amid rising geopolitical tensions

[version 1; peer review: 1 approved, 2 approved with reservations]

Gábor Szüdi[1], Frank Gaenssmantel[2], Carmen Amado Mendes[3], Philipp Brugner[1]

[1]Centre for Social Innovation (ZSI), Vienna, Vienna, Austria
[2]University of Groningen, Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands
[3]President of the Macau Scientific and Cultural Centre (CCCM), Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal

v1 **First published:** 13 Apr 2026, **6**:109
https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.23140.1
Latest published: 13 Apr 2026, **6**:109
https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.23140.1

Abstract

Background

China seems to have entered into a new global leadership phase of economic diplomacy where its actors increasingly resort to new resources, tools and strategies serving well-defined national interests, such as the Made in China 2025 initiative, the Dual Circulation Strategy (DCS) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This has intensified the interrelated challenges to the EU's economic security, industrial competitiveness and strategic autonomy, contributing to increasing supply chain vulnerabilities and dependencies. This increased economic challenge resulted in more assertive multi-layered EU-level policy approach, characterized by the de-risking strategy with four complementary policy goals.

Methods

We used deductive coding of meticulously selected leadership speeches by Chinese top policymakers between 2013 and 2022 to assess whether this shift in EU-China economic diplomacy relations had an impact on the key narratives within the official Chinese high-level policy statements. The coding focuses on the significant and meaningful representation of the EU by China and vice versa, and on particular positive or negative descriptions of the EU by China and vice versa.

Results

Open Peer Review

Approval Status ? ? ✓

	1	2	3
version 1 13 Apr 2026	? view	? view	✓ view

1. **Mordechai Chaziza**, Ashkelon Academic College, Ashkelon, Israel
2. **Benjamin Daßler**, Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, Oettingenstr, Germany
3. **Yanuar Rahmadan**, Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Jakarta, Jakarta, Indonesia

Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

Our main findings entail that, despite the more grounded EU approach towards China, no significant alterations are apparent in Chinese leadership discourse which remains at a pragmatic level focused on mutual benefits as long as economic engagement affairs are not interlinked with Chinese governance or territorial issues.

Conclusions

These findings suggest that China needs the EU as a reliable economic partner amid the growing geostrategic tensions towards the US or Japan, which provides the EU with a strategic room for manoeuvre towards open strategic autonomy. Such autonomy could be strengthened by re-negotiating core aspects of economic links with China, such as the relocation of more productive facilities of Chinese green technologies to Europe or pushing for a more open attitude from China towards European investments in critical economic sectors.

Plain Language summary

This article looks at how China's approach to economic diplomacy has changed in recent decades, especially towards Europe.

We see that China now relies more on big national strategies like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or Made in China 2025 initiative. The main aim of these strategies is to make China's economy stronger and more independent, therefore they create political and economic problems for the EU, such as greater dependence on Chinese supply chains and risks to Europe's economic security and industrial strength.

In response, the EU has also changed its official policy, dubbing China a "systemic rival" and adopting a strategy to reduce risks. This includes strengthening EU industries, using trade protection tools, protecting critical sectors and working more closely with like-minded partners.

In spite of the changed European rhetoric, China's official language has not changed much and still stresses cooperation and mutual benefits. This is true until the EU does not delve into issues perceived sensitive by China, such as governance or territorial questions.

Overall, the article argues that the EU is still not powerless and has room to rethink and reshape its economic relationship with China.

Keywords

China, European Union, Economic diplomacy, De-risking, Discursive representation, Leadership speeches

This article is included in the Horizon Europe gateway.

Corresponding author: Gábor Szüdi (szudig@gmail.com)

Author roles: Szüdi G: Conceptualization, Funding Acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing; **Gaenssmantel F**: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing; **Amado Mendes C**: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing; **Brugner P**: Conceptualization, Funding Acquisition, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft Preparation

Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information: This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 101061483 (Reconnect China: generating independent knowledge for a resilient future with China for Europe and its citizens [Reconnect China]).
The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

Copyright: © 2026 Szüdi G *et al*. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

How to cite this article: Szüdi G, Gaenssmantel F, Amado Mendes C and Brugner P. **Policy and discursive shifts in China's economic diplomacy amid rising geopolitical tensions [version 1; peer review: 1 approved, 2 approved with reservations]** Open Research Europe 2026, **6**:109 https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.23140.1

First published: 13 Apr 2026, **6**:109 https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.23140.1

Introduction

This research paper tries to assess – through coded analysis of Chinese leadership speeches – whether the interrelated and mutually reinforcing recent changes in China's and the European Union's (EU) economic diplomacy had an impact on the tone and narratives of official Chinese high-level policy expressions. Before the presentation of the methods used and results obtained from the coding, the Introduction aims to provide historical context by describing the different phases of the Chinese economic diplomacy, arriving at its modern stage which is characterized by three main national policy instruments operationalising China's key economic goals. Then we shortly present the de-risking strategy and its related key measures introduced by the EU to counter the political-economic challenges – manifested in supply chain vulnerabilities and dependencies – exacerbated by the Chinese policy instruments.

The modern era of Chinese economic diplomacy: the push for global leadership

For the purposes of this article, we understand economic diplomacy as "decision-making and negotiation in international economic relations" (Bayne & Woolcock, 2016) for which all available economic tools and resources can be utilised to achieve national interests (Chohan, 2021), including among others policy decisions to influence trade relations, exports, imports, investments, lending or aid (van Bergeijk & Moons., 2009).

Aligned with this broad definition, we argue that a noticeable shift can be observed in the official Chinese economic diplomacy in recent decades, characterised by more authoritative policy norms and instruments that challenge the EU and other global like-minded partners in fundamental ways. The main economic goal of China is not global (re-)integration any longer but the build-up of an unchallenged leadership position which also offers a counter-narrative to the traditional Western economic and trade models.

The Chinese policymakers have realised the strategic importance of economic diplomacy in foreign strategy early after the declaration of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 but – due to the undeveloped economic realities and the global political isolation of the new Communist state – the relevant actions remained extremely limited both in scope and intensity. (Li, 2022) As the PRC's official economic policy went through a paradigm shift with the gradual opening up of the country, the methods and goals of economic diplomacy also fundamentally changed.

China's economic diplomacy always served its stated national interests that reflect the evolving relationship between the PRC and the outside world. In this framework, China's economic diplomacy can be divided into five stages (He, 2019): (1) *isolation* (1949–1978) when China was mostly disengaged from other countries; (2) *engagement* (1978–1989) when the country re-started its foreign trade after abandoning the Maoist policy of economic self-reliance for the development of productive forces under Deng Xiaoping; (3) *integration* (1989–2001) when China was successfully re-integrated into the global economic and trade system, culminating in the country's entry to WTO in 2001; (4) *participation* (2001–2008 or 2012)[1] when the PRC put economic issues at the service of diplomacy, characterised by a newly intensive participation in the international economic system, along with the established global powers; (5) *leadership* (since 2008/12 –) when – in the wake of its newfound economic power and in the name of security and control – the PRC put forth a series of strategic notions on economic diplomacy that would put China at the centre of the international order.

This new Chinese economic vision – that can be interpreted from a Western perspective as an alternative to the current multilateral system – have increasingly led to tensions with other key actors, notably the United States and the European Union (Li and Sun, 2014). In its modern incarnation the Chinese economic diplomacy has become more assertive and aimed to turn hard power to soft power by offering alternative narratives to Western economic and trade policies in addition to economic carrots and sticks. China's soft power initiatives have become more global, with growing influence in Africa, Asia and Latin America through investments in economic development and infrastructure (Rafiq, 2025). Since 2013, the infrastructure projects are mainly implemented under the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) providing the means and locations (global infrastructure) to sell high-tech products and services according to the Chinese central strategies of domestic technology ambitions, with the aim of fostering economic interdependence and expanding China's geopolitical influence by integrating other countries into its economic, trade and technological ecosystem.

The national strategies behind China's contemporary economic diplomacy

The nationalistic objectives of China's new period of economic diplomacy are operationalised through a suite of integrated national strategies – notably the *Made in China 2025 initiative*, the *Dual Circulation Strategy (DCS)* and the *Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)* – which collectively exert pressure on the EU's core economic sectors, create critical supply chain vulnerabilities and extend China's geopolitical influence into the European neighbourhood. As such, this

[1]Some scholars argue that China entered into its leadership phase at the global financial crisis in 2008, while others date this shift from the 18th CPC National Congress in 2012 when the new concepts for China's economic diplomacy were put forth. See Li, X. (2022).

section analyses the multifaceted challenge posed by China to the EU's economic security, industrial competitiveness and strategic autonomy.

The primary vectors of economic challenge stem from China's assertive, state-led industrial policy aimed at achieving global dominance in high-technology sectors. The Made in China 2025 initiative serves as the roadmap for this transformation, seeking to elevate China from a labour-intensive manufacturer to a global leader in key high-tech areas, including robotics, aviation and new energy vehicles (Kuo, 2025; Wübbek et al., 2016). This initiative is characterised by massive state subsidies, opaque public funding, and the strategic goal of domestic sourcing and indigenous innovation, often at the expense of fair market competition (Liu et al., 2022). The resulting resource misallocation and targeted state support have further contributed to significant industrial overcapacity in China, particularly in "green" technologies that are critical for the EU's own decarbonization goals.

The Electric Vehicle (EV) sector is the most prominent current example, encapsulating the systemic friction between the two economic models. China has consolidated its position as the global powerhouse in EV and battery production, manufacturing approximately 60% of the world's EVs and 80% of its batteries (IEA, 2025; Mazzocco, & Featherston, 2025). This dominance, fuelled by years of successful industrial policy and state subsidies, has given Chinese EV manufacturers a substantial cost advantage, estimated to be up to 25% lower than their European competitors (Leggett, 2025; Osthoff & Goodman, 2025). This cost disparity, combined with declining domestic demand in China, has resulted in a surge of subsidised Chinese-made EVs entering the highly open European market, threatening to cause "material injury" to the foundational European automotive industry (Featherston, 2024).

Complementing *Made in China 2025* is the *Dual Circulation Strategy (DCS*), adopted by Beijing to enhance self-reliance and technological resilience against external shocks (García-Herrero, 2021). The DCS prioritises "internal circulation" – bolstering domestic production and consumption – while maintaining "external circulation" through selective, strategic engagement with the global economy. For the EU, the DCS presents a double risk: domestically, it pushes for import substitution, effectively making the Chinese market less accessible to high-value European goods (e.g., intermediate components and high-end machinery); externally, it accelerates the export of China's massive industrial overcapacity into third markets, including the EU, as a means of sustaining domestic growth and mitigating internal economic slowdowns (EC, 2025a). This strategy thus actively undermines the principle of reciprocal market access, forcing European companies to compete against state-backed Chinese rivals not only globally, but increasingly within the European single market itself.

Overall, the geopolitical dimension of China's rise is encapsulated in the *BRI*, a massive infrastructure development and investment strategy that has evolved into a tool for projecting strategic influence and creating dependencies. While initially presented as a benign connectivity project, the BRI's activities globally, including in Europe and its neighbourhood, often lack transparency and adherence to international standards, leading to concerns about debt sustainability and strategic control (Calabrese, 2025).

A concrete example of the BRI's strategic impact on Europe is China's acquisition or partial control of key logistical infrastructure within the continent. The investment in the Piraeus Port in Greece, transforming it into a major regional logistics hub and a key point of entry for Chinese goods into Europe, provides Beijing with strategic footholds and leverage over European supply chains (Kotoulas, 2024). Similar partial acquisitions or investments have occurred in other critical ports across Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Croatia and Italy (Budak, 2025; Jacobs, 2023). These investments in strategic assets within EU member states raise concerns regarding potential control over communications systems, cyber espionage risks and the ability to influence EU foreign policy positions by capitalising on existing economic leverage over recipient states.

Furthermore, the BRI has been criticised for creating unsustainable debt burdens in vulnerable nations, often termed "debt-trap diplomacy" (Chellaney, 2017; Brautigam, 2019; Jones & Hameiri, 2020)[2]. The controversial Chinese-built highway project in Montenegro, for instance, significantly increased the country's debt load, illustrating how stringent loan-repayment conditions and opaque financing models can expose already fragile economies to fiscal instability and over-dependence on Beijing (Euractiv, 2021; Muller, 2024). The proliferation of the *Digital Silk Road* – the component of the

[2]Even though the term was mentioned at least already in 2017 in context of China (see Chellaney, B. (2017, December 20). *China's Creditor Imperialism.* Project Syndicate, https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-sri-lanka-hambantota-port-debt-by-brahma-chellaney-2017-12), there is an ongoing scholarly debate on the viability of the claim on a conscious Chinese debt strategy (see e.g. Jones, L., & Hameiri, S. (2020). *Debunking the myth of 'debt-trap diplomacy'. How recipient countries shape China's belt and road initiative.* Chatham House, or Brautigam, D. (2019). A critical look at Chinese 'debt-trap diplomacy': The rise of a meme. *Area Development and Policy, 5*(1), 1–14).

BRI focused on digital infrastructure and emerging technologies – poses an additional systemic challenge by exporting elements of China's techno-authoritarian governance model, such as facial recognition software and surveillance systems, to partners like Serbia (Janković & Standish., 2025; Krivokapić, 2022). This not only extends China's technological reach but also challenges the democratic principles of privacy and governance in the EU's immediate vicinity.

The impact of China's contemporary economic diplomacy on the EU: supply chain vulnerabilities and dependencies

Beyond the direct challenge to industrial competitiveness, China's centralised economic model creates profound supply chain vulnerabilities and dependencies for the EU across strategically vital sectors. The reliance on China for Critical Raw Materials (CRMs) and Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs) represents a significant non-market risk that challenges the EU's ambition for strategic autonomy and exposes it to potential economic coercion (GlobalData, 2024; Ragonnaud, 2024).

For instance, the dependence on CRMs, which are essential for the EU's green and digital transitions (e.g., electric vehicle batteries, wind turbines, semiconductors), is acute. While CRMs are globally dispersed, China holds a dominant position in the crucial mid-stream stage: refining and processing (Glaser and Naas, 2025). Specifically, the EU is dependent on China for an overwhelming majority of its rare earth element (REE) imports, and the reliance on specific materials like Magnesium stands at approximately 96% of all EU imports (Banin et al., 2025; Corlin, 2025). China's actions to leverage this dominance, such as imposing export restrictions on strategic materials like gallium and graphite in 2023, illustrate the geopolitical nature of these dependencies (Huld, 2025; Reuters, 2025; Zimmermann, 2025). The concentration of production and processing within a single, strategically motivated jurisdiction enables China to exert significant leverage, effectively weaponizing supply chains for economic or political ends.

A similar, though often less publicised, vulnerability exists in the pharmaceutical sector. While Europe produces many APIs for innovative medicines domestically, a significant proportion of APIs for generic medicines and the raw chemical materials required for both innovative and generic drug production are overwhelmingly sourced from China and India (EC, 2025a; GlobalData, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic sharpened the EU's awareness that a disruption in this supply chain, whether stemming from force majeure as in the case of the pandemic or from geopolitical conflict or economic coercion, could pose a major health and security crisis (Gaub, 2020).

The European response to China's contemporary economic diplomacy: de-risking and its four pillars

The more assertive Chinese economic diplomacy made the EU rethink its official stance towards the Chinese government. This policy shift was formally acknowledged in 2019 when the EU defined a more critical, multi-faceted approach towards its relations with the PRC, characterising China not only as a cooperation and negotiating partner but also as an economic competitor and systemic rival (EC, 2019b; EEAS, 2023). After decades of consensus on broad and expanding, mutually beneficial economic links with China, this language signaled a significant shift in European economic diplomacy, reflecting increasing concerns over trade imbalances, dependencies and vulnerabilities, lack of reciprocity and the violation of fundamental principles of competition and transparency.

In March 2023, *de-risking* became the official objective of the EU-China (economic) relations. In a keynote speech, Commission President von der Leyen claimed that the new Chinese strategies to steer the economy mean *"that the imperative for security and control now trumps the logic of free markets and open trade",* which necessitates to "*rebalance this relationship on the basis of transparency, predictability and reciprocity"* (EC, 2023a). She called for an economic de-risking strategy – based on risk assessment and stress-testing – across four pillars: (1) making the EU economy and industry more competitive and resilient, (2) better using the existing EU toolbox of trade instruments, (3) developing new defensive tools for critical sectors and (4) seeking closer alignment with partners around the world (MERICS, 2023).

In order to fulfil the objective of the first pillar, the EU introduced a set of policies aiming to make its economy more competitive and resilient. The growing dependencies on critical raw materials necessitated a coordinated European strategy, exemplified by the *Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA)* in 2024, which was coupled with efforts to reinvest in domestic extraction, refining and recycling capacities, along with diversifying partnerships with non-Chinese suppliers (EC, 2025b). The *Net Zero Industry Act* (NZIA) also aimed to reduce the unilateral dependence on Chinese suppliers for critical clean energy components and vowed to make the EU able to domestically produce at least 40% of its strategic net-zero technology needed for the Green Deal, such as solar, onshore and offshore wind, batteries and storage, heat pumps and grid technologies (EC, 2025a). The *European Chips Act* also aims to promote European production in a critical technology area, namely semiconductors, thus promotes higher independence from Chinese suppliers and the timely availability of critical components within the EU (EC, 2023b). By providing an exemption to semiconductors from the

state aid ban, the Chips Act enables innovative subsidies to support the EU-wide development and expansion of advanced semiconductor plants, as well as investment into research and development (Bandemer et al., 2025).

In addition to these novel acts, it is not clear what will happen to the stalled negotiations around the *Comprehensive Agreement on Investment* (CAI). China's decision to impose sanctions on members of the European Parliament, along with a series of legal entities, essentially made it impossible for the European Parliament to continue its work towards the ratification of CAI. CAI is of utmost importance since it could address, at least in part, the decade-long key problem of overcoming "*the persistence of market access obstacles in China*" as already stated in a 2003 EC document (EC, 2003).

With regard to the existing EU toolbox of trade instruments that can be relevant also in connection to economic security concerns, several had been in place already before the start of the de-risking strategy in 2023. These measures should be efficiently implemented to counter economic distortions and threats posted by China. In response to the rapidly growing sales of subsidised Chinese-made EVs the EU initiated an anti-subsidy probe which led to the imposition of countervailing duties ranging up to 38% on Chinese EV imports, which underscores the seriousness of this competitive threat (Labiak, 2024; Grieger, 2023). A new trade instrument is the *anti-coercion instrument (ACI)* (EC, 2023c) which enables the EU to use import tariffs and other measures (import or export licenses, restrictions in service procurements). The countering of such external threats is coupled with addressing subsidized investments in the EU under the *Foreign Subsidies Regulation (FSR*) (EC, 2022) which helps assess intra-EU cases such as Hungary's subsidies granted to BYD but also addresses cases of subsidies by third-country (non-EU) public entities (Tagliapietra et al., 2025).

The 2019 *Investment Screening Framework (ISF)* (EC, 2019c) established a Cooperation Mechanism for Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) to support EU Member States (MS) in addressing economic security risks stemming from FDI. MSs and the Commission jointly review FDIs potentially affecting security, engaging in information exchange and raising concerns, if needed, on e.g. critical technology, infrastructure or data. Increasing China's FDI certainly provided a stimulus to adopt the ISF, and its reference to "*state-led outward projects or programmes*" is generally read as a reference to the BRI. At the same time, its actual screening activities are not predominantly aimed towards Chinese investors, also targeting trade partners from Western countries such as the US and UK (Peragovics & Szunomár, 2025).

The *EU Toolbox for 5G Security* (EC, 2020) was adopted in 2020. While the toolbox encourages cooperation among EU MSs to mitigate potential risks related to 5G, it does not entail legally binding obligations (Bandemar et al., 2025). This resulted in a varying level of implementation among EU MSs: even though the toolbox recommended restrictions on "high-risk" suppliers such as Huawei or ZTE, some countries failed to introduce effective measures. There is however a trend towards stricter 5G security measures following the recent Chinese interference into telecommunications networks and the alleged bribery of Members of the European Parliament linked to Huawei (Kroet, 2025).

As regards new defensive tools for critical sectors, the EU started to re-shape its future relationship with China in sensitive high-tech areas such as microelectronics, quantum computing, robotics, artificial intelligence (AI) or biotech through the new *Economic Security Strategy.* (EC, 2023d). The Strategy and its follow-up recommendation (EC, 2023e) mapped out where economic security needs to be strengthened and how trade defence tools could be improved. 10 critical technology areas were identified for joint risk assessment by the EC and EU MSs, out of which four areas are to be done urgently, namely in advanced semiconductors, AI technologies, quantum technologies and biotechnologies. The urgency of the risk assessment is justified by their potentially high exposure to foreign interference and the related risks of technology security infringement and technology leakage. The risk assessment led to an EU recommendation on screening outbound investment (EC, 2025c) in three critical technologies (semiconductors, AI, quantum technologies) where investment can result in the development of military capabilities that pose risks to EU and national security. This entails that where dual-use purposes cannot be excluded there needs to be clear guidance or rules on whether investments or exports are in the security interests of the EU or EU MSs.

Finally, concerning greater alignment with other partners, the results are mixed: the EU-US Trade and Technology Council ceased its activities after the second inauguration of Donald Trump, while the second meeting of the EU-India Trade and Technology Council successfully took place in 2025 (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 2025), and the joint statement following the EU-Japan Summit in 2025 reiterated the need to promote enhanced cooperation based on the EU-Japan Green Alliance, the EU-Japan Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure and the EU-Japan Digital Partnership (EC, 2025d). The strengthened economic partnership with India and Japan will enhance cooperation on sectors such as digital and clean technologies, also mitigating dependencies and vulnerabilities towards China. In addition, the EU was successfully entering into a new free trade agreement with New Zealand (EC, 2024b), while the negotiations with India, Mexico and the Mercosur are in advanced stages.

The EU has also continued its investment into infrastructure in developing countries through the *Global Gateway strategy*, (EC, 2021) offering an alternative to the BRI in terms of investment and finance. Countering China's BRI, the EU aims to move from development-centred aid towards a more geostrategic use of investment tools where long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships are built with developing countries that align their priorities with European interests. In financial terms, the Global Gateway is a success, surpassing its initial development goal of EUR 306 billion in investment by October 2025 (with a new goal to mobilise a total amount of EUR 400 billion by 2027) (Bilal, 2025).

Methods

We aim to explore the potential discursive changes among Chinese policymakers towards the EU in the last decade that might be related to the shifting economic diplomacy relations as described in the Introduction section. Our main method is to use deductive coding on Chinese leadership speeches to gain a sophisticated picture on the Chinese high-level policy representation of the EU and its policies relevant to economic diplomacy.

We examined representations of the EU as an economic partner in leadership speeches and similar statements by Chinese top leaders between 2013 and 2022. The discussion relies on findings from the research project Changing Representations of the Other in China-EU Economic Relations—Tracing Discourses on the "Economic Other" through Leadership Speeches (or the Economic Other Project, in short), implemented at the University of Groningen with support from the ReConnect China consortium[3]. The Economic Other Project includes speeches from the President, the prime minister, the minister of foreign affairs and the minister of commerce across the period from 2013 to 2022, i.e. the full first two terms of office of Chinese President Xi Jinping. Speeches were selected from official Chinese-language websites of the Chinese government bodies, most importantly the State Council website (www.scio.gov.cn), with substantive statements on the EU as an international partner as main selection criterion. This means that speeches on non-EU related topics, where reference to the EU is limited and typically embedded within wider categories of international actors (like developed economies, destination of migration flows, etc.) were generally excluded. For the full list of selected speeches please refer to our dataset at Zenodo (Gaenssmantel, 2026).

This coverage allows us to trace Chinese approaches towards the EU across a period of heightening bilateral tensions, stretching on the EU side from the Juncker Commission to the first three years under von der Leyen until just before the announcement of the de-risking strategy. It includes the moment when the EU shifted to the multi-faceted labelling of China as a partner, economic competitor and systemic rival in 2019 highlighted in previous sections. Since the project also addresses EU leadership discourse, we are able to comment on Chinese reactions to European criticisms as well.

Methodologically, the coding of leadership speeches started from a set of "expected representations", extracted from academic commentary, policy analyses and news media on both the Chinese and the European side, including for example characterisations of the respective other as protectionist in either the commercial or investment spheres, as unfair trader or investor, or as complementary partner in technical spheres. To better grasp the role of economic engagement with the counterpart against major issues on the bilateral agenda, we also traced discourse on cooperation on climate change cooperation and within the BRI. Aside from this deductive dimension, the project also worked inductively to pick up major themes or characterisations of the counterpart that appeared prominently in the discourse beyond our specific expectations, such as the counterpart's respect for economic governance rules. On top of concrete representations of the counterpart we also implemented more general codes on various degrees of negative or positive views on the counterpart, both in the economic sphere, but also beyond it. For the detailed coding system, please see our dataset on Zenodo (Gaenssmantel, 2026).

As a caveat we must mention that leadership discourse is a challenging source. The collective mindset of policy makers is essentially inaccessible, in China just as anywhere else in the world, but the careful study of publicly available material can provide some clues on underlying ideas and intentions (Cao, 2024); Nie, 2024). On the one hand, in China such speeches are carefully crafted, with no room for spontaneous, emotional expressions that could reveal "genuine" opinions or preferences of the speaker. But it also takes the listeners to the very core of the creation of China's foreign policy discourse, namely to the "strategy makers [who] discursively construct a macro-narrative scenario of the context of the times and the international situation". (Song, 2022). In addition, the very fact that it is highly moderated confers a certain authoritativeness. After all, leadership discourse reflects input from scores of high officials reaching out to various groups within the foreign policy system, thus representing a pragmatic consensus across key players at the top of the political process. Also, policymakers are by no means isolated. They are at the heart of what has been termed a "discourse coalition," comprising also official media and academics. (Zhang & Orbie, 2021). The influence of think tank researchers on central foreign policy making is also well-established (Xin, 2023).

[3]The project is led by Frank Gaenssmantel. Chen Fangjia, Li Haoqi, Yang Xiaotong and Hui Zhong provided valuable research assistance.

Results

China's economic diplomacy entered a new phase in recent decades with a policy push towards global leadership, represented by comprehensive national strategies for pursuing China's economic interests, as well as a bolder, more strategic rhetoric offering a new economic vision for the country's partners and competitors. As seen in the Introduction section, this resulted in the recalibration of the EU's economic strategy with the introduction of de-risking as the overarching goal. Through the above-described methodology we aimed to find out how the Chinese leaders represent the EU as an economic partner in this more disruptive period characterised by evolving tensions and conflicts, and whether it is possible to observe any significant changes in Chinese discourse over the past decade.

In the following paragraphs, we will highlight a few major trends that emerge from this extensive engagement with Chinese leadership discourse on the EU as an economic counterpart. When looking at the coding of Chinese leadership speeches across the years, what first hits the eye is the continuous dominance of positive, cooperative themes and the almost complete absence of representations of the EU as a problematic partner. With some fluctuations, we see a strong inclination of Chinese leaders to represent the EU as an important partner for technical cooperation in general, and more specifically for infrastructure and connectivity initiatives, both within and outside the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (even though towards the end of the period covered there is a decline of BRI-themed representations, clearly in reaction to more critical views on the initiative from actors within the EU).

An example are Prime Minister Li Keqiang's comments at the Sixth China-CEEC Economic and Trade Forum in November 2016: "*China has superior equipment and production capacity, mature, with good technology level and service systems and high cost performance; Central European countries have a need to speed up their industrialisation; developed countries in Western Europe have the most advanced technology and management experience; combing the respective advantages of the three sides will lead to considerable gains for all sides.*" (Li, 2016). Later we see various examples of Foreign Minister Wang Yi emphasising the benefits of China-EU green and digital partnerships (Wang, 2021a; Wang, 2022a). We also see frequent general references to the many areas of shared interests and agreement on international matters, as well as variations on the idea of "*seeking commonalities, while reserving differences."* (Li, 2017; Wang 2021b; Wang 2021c).

References to the considerable potential of China-EU technical partnership peaked twice, in 2016 and 2020–2021. These peaks coincide with periods of sustained EU criticism of China, in the first phase in relation to overcapacity in steel production, in the second phase on barriers to EU investment in China and the absence of a level playing field during the final months of the negotiations on the CAI. This might suggest a tendency to counter criticism by emphasising the positive potential of economic cooperation.

The concrete representations most commonly associated with critical reporting on the EU in Chinese official news media, e.g. protectionism and discriminatory practices, are rarely visible in leadership speeches. But when they come, they are connected to specific EU policies or policy debates that are considered problematic. Thus in 2016, Li Keqiang indirectly criticises the EU for its hesitance about recognising China as a market economy and asks for respect for international commercial law in this regard. He also highlights concerns about fairness for Chinese investors amidst the debate on an EU investment screening mechanism (Li, 2017). In 2019, Foreign Minister Wang Yi indirectly denounces European bans on Huawei's participation in the construction of 5G infrastructure by calling for fair and non-discriminatory treatment of all firms, including those from China (Wang, 2019a; Wang 2019b).

While the specific representations of the EU in the coding of Chinese leadership speeches fluctuate across time, no particular trend emerges. This suggests that EU policies or attitudes that are deemed unfavourable to China do not seem to have pushed representations of the EU by Chinese leaders in any particular direction. The same is true for most of the broader coding on positive and negative references to the EU. Across the entire period under study here, Chinese leaders bestowed generous praise upon the EU, both indirectly and directly, and both in the economic sphere and beyond. This includes for example comments on the "*solid tradition of European commercial diplomacy*" (Li, 2015) or praising the EU as an "*independent power*" which constitutes an "*important factor in multipolarisation.*" (Wang, 2022b). In the economic realm, we also see a regular pattern of criticism, but this is mostly cautious and defensive, as for instance when Li Keqiang states that "*putting the blame for excessive production capacity on China is neither objective nor fair,*" or when Foreign Minister Wang Yi picks up EU discourse on China as an economic competitor and then contradicts: "*we are partners, not competitors*". (Li, 2017; Wang, 2019b).

In stark contrast to the fairly continuous pattern of discursive engagement that has emerged so far, there is a sudden jump in negative comments on the EU outside the economic sphere, which started in late 2020 so towards the end of the period covered here. All these comments relate to instances of perceived violations of Chinese sovereignty. For example, in

2020, President Xi Jinping reacted to EU criticisms on the human rights situation in Xinjiang and Hong Kong by stating that China "*does not accept lecturing on human rights with a schoolmaster's attitude*," a phrase also picked up later by Wang Yi (Anonymous, 2020; Wang, 2021b). The latter also accused "*some people in Europe*" of "*politicising economic issues*," after the decision of the European Parliament to suspend deliberations on the CAI in reaction to Chinese countersanctions to the EU's restrictive measures in relation to Xinjiang. (Wang, 2021d).

This overview of Chinese leadership discourse across the first two periods in office of Xi Jinping suggests a few answers to the questions raised at the beginning of this section. Firstly, Chinese interest in the EU as an economic partner appears to remain unchanged, even in light of EU initiatives and debates that are seen as economically problematic by China. Critical representations do appear but are rare, and they are usually connected to specific developments that go against concrete Chinese interests. At the same time, European criticisms of China are countered by underlining the potential benefits of cooperation. This suggests a highly pragmatic discursive approach to economic engagement in the sense that questions of principle – as in the case of the provisions in the WTO accession agreement that relate to market economy status – are secondary as long as cooperation on the basis of negotiated compromise is possible.

A second conclusion, however, points to the limit of China's pragmatism, namely any rhetoric or policy that is perceived as interfering with internal affairs, be it questions of domestic governance or territorial issues. This is of course nothing new and rhetorical tensions over human rights and Taiwan have been a regular feature of China-EU relations since the end of the Cold War. But that very continuity also means that change in Chinese attitudes on these matters is unlikely, which also entails that the recent momentum towards stronger cooperation with Taiwan will further complicate relations with Beijing. (Gaenssmantel, 2025).

Conclusions

Ultimately, we argue that the confluence of *Made in China 2025*, the *Dual Circulation Strategy* and the *BRI* has triggered a fundamental challenge to the EU's commitment to a market-driven, liberal global economic system. China's model is one of state capitalism where the innovation and growth of state-owned and major private enterprises are aligned with national strategic targets rather than purely commercial motives. In its external manifestations, as through strategic acquisitions, exports or investments that benefit from state subsidies and also non-reciprocal market access, this model challenges some core principles of European economic integration such as competition rules, transparency and reciprocity. The EU has considered this, at least partly, as a systemic challenge: it has moved beyond traditional trade defence mechanisms toward a comprehensive strategy of *de-risking*. As showcased above, this involves targeted new tools, e.g. the anti-subsidy regulation, but also a broader strategy of focusing heavily on building internal resilience, fostering domestic industrial champions and diversifying global supply chains in crucial areas such as critical raw materials and pharmaceutical inputs.

Therefore, it can be said that the EU's future economic security and development will hinge on its ability to execute this pivot towards strategic autonomy while managing the complex interdependence of the world's two largest trading blocs. This task becomes more complicated when we take into account that the interpretation and implementation level of de-risking widely varies between EU MSs (Andersson & Lindbergh, 2024). A stronger European coordination on de-risking between EU MSs and EU institutions and an open discussion within the EU – and with the EU's global partners – on the future priorities of de-risking would be beneficial to leverage the strategy at EU level. (Casarini, 2024).

The momentum is right for such a leverage since China's relations with the other key large developed industrial partners, notably the US but recently also Japan, have significantly deteriorated in the last years. China also needs the EU as a reliable economic partner – the economic, trade and supply chain dependencies work in both ways. This can explain the overall pragmatic tone of Chinese leadership that often goes hand-in-hand with underlining the potential benefits of EU-China economic cooperation (as evidenced by the analysis in the previous section). Bearing also in mind the limitations of China's pragmatic approach when it comes to core political principles, the EU should take advantage of its current position and use its economic diplomacy toolset to re-negotiate key aspects of its economic links with China, such as moving more productive facilities of Chinese green technologies to Europe or enforcing a more open attitude from China towards European investments in certain economic sectors, (Hemminga, 2025) possibly by way of a return to discussion on finalising and implementing CAI. In this way, the Chinese leadership need to show whether they truly intend to act upon their pragmatic discursive approach towards the EU with mutually beneficial trade deals in specific economic fields or they solely follow the declared goals of China's national strategies of economic self-interest.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required for this research.

Data availability

The following datasets support the results and analysis of this article:

- Code summary
- List of selected Chinese leadership speeches

Both datasets are available at open repository Zenodo under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International with DOI 10.5281/zenodo.18822892. Gaenssmantel, F. (2026). Reconnect China code summary and list of speeches (Version v01) [Data set]. Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18822892

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to express their gratitude for the dedicated research assistance provided by Tiago Botelho dos Santos and Diogo Borges, researchers at the Macau Scientific and Cultural Centre (CCCM). Their instrumental work focused primarily on the thematic analysis and initial drafting of content concerning the development of China's trade diplomacy over the past decade, and its consequences for the EU in terms of competition and economic security. The final content, analysis and conclusions remain the sole responsibility of the listed authors.

References

Andersson P, Lindberg F: *National Perspectives on Europe's De-risking from China. A Report by the European Think-tank Network on China (ETNC).* Stockholm: Swedish National China Centre; 2024.
Reference Source

Anonymous: *Xi Jinping tong deguo oumeng lingdaoren gongtong juxing huiwu (Xi Jinping holds a meeting with German and EU leaders).* Xinhua; 2020, September 15.
Reference Source

Bandemer S, Daßler B, Rittberger B, *et al.*: **Politics of de-risking: how the EU confronts vulnerabilities in critical digital infrastructures.** *J. Eur. Publ. Policy.* 2025; 1–29.
Publisher Full Text

Banin M, D'Agostino M, Gunnella V, *et al.*: **How vulnerable is the euro area to restrictions on Chinese rare earth exports?.** *ECB Econ Bull.* 2025; **6**.
Reference Source

Bayne N, Woolcock S: *The New Economic Diplomacy: Decision-Making and Negotiation in International Economic Relations.* Routledge;4th ed 2016.
Publisher Full Text

Bilal S: *The Global Gateway in context.* Foundation for European Progressive Studies; 2025.
Reference Source

Brautigam D: **A critical look at Chinese 'debt-trap diplomacy': The rise of a meme.** *Area Dev Policy.* 2019; **5**(1): 1–14.
Publisher Full Text

Budak H: *Adriatic Allure: China's Relationship with Croatia and What India Can Offer in Its Search for New Strategic Partners in Europe.* CHOICE; 2025, October 22.
Reference Source

Calabrese L: *The Belt and Road Initiative: what impact on China and the global economy?.* Economics Observatory; 2025, May 27.
Reference Source

Cao L: **(Un) problematising and reshaping: discourse analysis of the rural poor's representation in poverty-alleviation texts during the Xi and Hu eras.** Bērziņa-Čerenkova UA, editor. *Discourse, Rhetoric and Shifting Political Behaviour in China.* London: Routledge; 2024; 93–110.
Publisher Full Text

Casarini N: *Europe's De-risking from China: Dead on Arrival?.* IAI Commentaries; 2024.
Reference Source

Chellaney B: *China's Creditor Imperialism. Project Syndicate.* Project-Syndicate; 2017, December 20.
Reference Source

Chohan UW: ***Economic Diplomacy: A Review. CASS Working Papers on Economics & National Affairs* (Working Paper ID: EC007UC, 2021).** 2021.
Publisher Full Text

Corlin P: *European Commission calls for no escalation with China over rare earths.* Euronews; 2025, October 21.
Reference Source

Euractiv: **Montenegro starts paying off $1 billion Chinese road loan.** 2021, July 22.
Reference Source

European Commission: **EU-China: Commission adopts new strategy for maturing partnership.** 2003.
Reference Source

European Commission: **Note to the Pharmaceutical Committee updating on the actions undertaken with regard to the quality of Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (API).** 2019a.
Reference Source

European Commission: **EU-China – A strategic outlook. Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council.** 2019b.
Reference Source

European Commission: **Regulation (EU) 2019/452 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 March 2019 establishing a framework for the screening of foreign direct investments into the Union.** 2019c.
Reference Source

European Commission: **The EU toolbox for 5G security.** 2020.
Reference Source

European Commission: **Global Gateway.** 2021.
Reference Source

European Commission: **Regulation (EU) 2022/2560 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2022 on foreign subsidies distorting the internal market.** 2022.
Reference Source

European Commission: **Speech by President von der Leyen on EU-China relations to the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the European Policy Centre.** 2023a.
Reference Source

European Commission: **Regulation (EU) 2023/1781 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 September 2023 establishing a framework of measures for strengthening Europe's semiconductor ecosystem and amending Regulation (EU) 2021/694 (Chips Act).** 2023b.
Reference Source

European Commission: **Regulation (EU) 2023/2675 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 22 November 2023 on the protection of the Union and its Member States from economic coercion by third countries.** 2023c.
Reference Source

European Commission: **Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on European**

Economic Security Strategy. 2023d.
Reference Source

European Commission: **Commission Recommendation (EU) 2023/2113 of 3 October 2023 on critical technology areas for the EU's economic security for further risk assessment with Member States.** 2023e.
Reference Source

European Commission: **Regulation (EU) 2024/1735 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 on establishing a framework of measures for strengthening Europe's net-zero technology manufacturing ecosystem and amending Regulation (EU) 2018/1724.** 2024a.
Reference Source

European Commission: **EU-New Zealand Trade Agreement.** 2024b.
Reference Source 2024b.

European Commission: **China. EU trade relations with China. Facts, figures and latest developments.** 2025a.
Reference Source

European Commission: **Critical Raw Materials Act.** 2025b.
Reference Source

European Commission: **Commission Recommendation (EU) 2025/63 of 15 January 2025 on reviewing outbound investments in technology areas critical for the economic security of the Union.** 2025c.
Reference Source

European Commission: 2025d. **Joint statement following the EU-Japan Summit 2025.**
Reference Source

European External Action Service (EEAS): **EU-China Relations factsheet.** 2023, December 7.
Reference Source

Featherston R: *Slamming the Brakes: The EU Votes to Impose Tariffs on Chinese EVs.* CSIS; 2024, December 16.
Reference Source

Gaenssmantel F: **The risks of continuity—pitfalls of the EU's policy stance on China after the European elections of 2024.** *Asia. Europe Journal.* 2025; **23**: 535–548.
Publisher Full Text

Gaenssmantel F: Reconnect China code summary and list of speeches (Version v01). [Data set]. *Zenodo.* 2026.
Publisher Full Text

García-Herrero A: **What is behind China's Dual Circulation Strategy?.** *China Leadersh Monit.* 2021; **69**.
Reference Source

Gaub F: *The geopolitical implications of the COVID-19 pandemic (Study).* Policy Department for External Relations. DG for External Policies of the Union; 2020, September.
Reference Source

Glaser BS, Naas P: *Rare Earth Statecraft Phase Two.* German Marshall Fund; 2025, October 15.
Reference Source

GlobalData: *EU Critical Medicines Act: closer to ending overreliance on Asian manufacturers.* Pharmaceutical Technology; 2024.
Reference Source

Grieger G: *EU anti-subsidy probe into electric vehicle imports from China.* European Parliamentary Research Service; 2023, October 18.
Reference Source

He P: **China's Economic Diplomacy in 70 Years: Overall Evolution, Strategic Intentions and Contributory Factors.** *World Economy Studies.* 2019; **11**: 3–14.
Reference Source

Hemminga L: **Partner, competitor, or both? Thoughts on derisking in EU-China economic relations. Reconnect China Policy Brief no.18.** 2025, January.
Reference Source

Huld A: *How Will China's Rare Earth Export Controls Impact Industries and Businesses?.* China Briefing; 2025, November 10.
Reference Source

IEA: **Global EV Outlook 2025.** 2025.
Reference Source

Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: **Joint Statement: Second Meeting of the India-EU Trade and Technology Council, New Delhi.** 2025.
Reference Source

Jacobs KS: *Chinese strategic interests in European ports.* European Parliamentary Research Service; 2023, February 27.
Reference Source

Janković J, Standish R: *Leaked Files Reveal Serbia's Secret Expansion Of Chinese-Made Surveillance.* Radio Free Europe; 2025, August 13.
Reference Source

Jones L, Hameiri S: *Debunking the myth of 'debt-trap diplomacy. How recipient countries shape China's belt and road initiative.* Chatham House; 2020, August 19.
Reference Source

Kotoulas IE: **Greece external relations briefing: The Port of Piraeus as a Model of Greek-Chinese Cooperation.** *China-CEE Institute Weekly Briefing.* 2024; **76**(4). 2939-5933

Krivokapić Đ: *A Disturbing Marriage: Serbia and China Team Up on Digital Surveillance.* CEPA; 2022, January 27.
Reference Source

Kroet C: *Lawmakers call for binding 5G security measures in wake of Huawei scandal.* Euronews; 2025, March 19.
Reference Source

Kuo K: *Made in China 2.0: The future of global manufacturing?.* World Economic Forum; 2025, June 26.
Reference Source

Labiak M: *EU threatens China EVs with tariffs of up to 38%.* BBC; 2024, June 12.
Reference Source

Leggett T: *China's electric cars are becoming slicker and cheaper - but is there a deeper cost?.* BBC; 2025, June 10.
Reference Source

Li K: *Xieshou kaichuang zhongou guanxi xin jumian – zai zhongou gongshang fenghui shang de zhuzhiyanjiang (Joining hands to start a new phase in China-EU relations – keynote speech at the China-EU business summit).* Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China; 2015, June 29.
Reference Source

Li K: *Zuo changqi wending hezuo gongyin de hao huoban – zai diliu jie zhong zhongguo-zhongdongouguojia jingmao luntanshang de zhuzhiyanjiang (Making a good partner for long term, stable cooperation and mutual gain – keynote speech at the 6th economic and trade forum between China and Central Eastern European countries).* Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China; 2016, November 5.
Reference Source

Li K: *Gongtong zouxiang gaoshuiping huli hezuo xin yuezhang – zai di 12 jie xhongou gongshang fenghui shang de yanjiang. (Jointly playing the new music of high level, mutually beneficial cooperation – speech at the 12th China-EU business summit).* Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China; 2017, June 2.
Reference Source

Li X: **China's Economic Diplomacy: Concept, Organization, Implementation Mechanisms and BRI.** *Chin. Econ.* 2022; **17**(3).
Publisher Full Text

Li W, Sun Y: **Understanding China's Economic Diplomacy.** *Foreign Aff Rev.* 2014; **4**: 1–24.

Liu X, Megginson WL, Xia J: **Industrial policy and asset prices: Evidence from the Made in China 2025 policy.** *J. Bank. Financ.* 2022; **142**.
Publisher Full Text

Mazzocco I, Featherston R: ***The Global EV Shift: The Role of China and Industrial Policy in Emerging Economies* (Report). CSIS Trustee Chair in Chinese Business and Economics).** 2025
Reference Source

Mercator Institute for China Studies: **Von der Leyen calls for de-risking EU-China relations in speech to MERICS.** 2023.
Reference Source

Muller N: *Montenegro's Scandal-ridden Chinese Road.* The Diplomat; 2024, January 13.
Reference Source

Nie Y: **China's BRI on social media—a study of Xinhua's discursive adaptations in the context of a shifting leadership.** *Discourse, Rhetoric and Shifting Political Behaviour in China.* Bērziņa-Čerenkova UA, editor. London: Routledge; 2024; 111–128.
Publisher Full Text

Osthoff K, Goodman S: *EU's Risky Business: The Challenge of Chinese Electric Vehicles in Europe.* Friedrich Naumann Foundation; 2025, May 23.
Reference Source

Peragovics T, Szunomár Á: **The European Union's Investment Screening Framework and China – a Complicated Picture.** *Asia Eur J.* 2025; **23**: 479–487.
Publisher Full Text

Ragonnaud G: *Implementing the EU's Critical Raw Materials Act.* European Parliamentary Research Service; 2024, November 19.
Reference Source

Rafiq A: *China's Strategic Diplomacy in 2025: Navigating a New World Order.* Policy Wire; 2025, April 16.
Reference Source

Reuters: **China expands rare earths restrictions, targets defense and chips users.** 2025, October 19.
Reference Source

Song W: **Seizing the window of strategic oppportunity': a study of China's macro–strategic narrative since the 21st century.** *Soc. Sci.* 2022; **11**(10): 461.
Publisher Full Text

Tagliapietra S, Trasi C, Gregor S: *A smart European strategy for electric vehicle investment from China.* Bruegel; 2025.
Reference Source

van Bergeijk P, Moons S: **Economic diplomacy and economic security.** *New frontiers of economic diplomacy.* Costa C, editor. 2009; 37–54.

Wang Y: *Guowuweiyuan jian waizhang Wang Yi jieshou Faxinshe zhuanfang shilu (Record of exclusive interview of State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi with Agence France Presse).* Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China; 2019a, October 21.
Reference Source

Wang Y: *Zengjin huxin, shenhua hezuo, yingjie zhongou guanxi gengjia meihao de mingtian – Wang Yi guowuweiyuan jian waizhang zai ouzhou zhengce zhongxin juban de ouzhou zhiku meiti jiaoliuhui shang de yanjiang (Improving trust, deepening cooperation, welcoming a tomorrow of even better China-EU relations – State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi's speech at the European think tank and media exchange at the European Policy Centre).* Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China; 2019b, December 16.
Reference Source

Wang Y: *Yingnan ershang, wei guo dandang fenli – kaiqi Zhongguo tese daguo waijiao xin zhengcheng (Facing difficulties directly, taking responsibility for the nation – spare no effort in commencing the new journey of great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics).* Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China; 2021a, January 16.
Reference Source

Wang Y: *Bingchi kaifang baorong xintai, gaoju duobian zhuyi qishi, gongjian renlei mingyun gontongti (Keeping an open and tolerant attitude, holding high the banner of multilateralism, jointly building humankind 's community of shared destiny).* Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China; 2021b, May 25.
Reference Source

Wang Y: *Wang Yi tong oumeng wai jiao yu anquan zhengce gaoji daibiao boleili juxing shipin huiyi (Wang YI holds a video meeting with EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Borrell).* Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China; 2021c, July 8.
Reference Source

Wang Y: *Wang Yi huijian oumeng waijiao yu Anquan zhengce gaoji daibiao boleili (Wang Yi meets with EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Borrell).* Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China; 2021d, July 16.
Reference Source

Wang Y: *Wang Yi tong faguo zongtong waishi guwen bona gongtong zhuchi zhongfa zhanlue duihua (Wang Yi hosts Sino-French strategic dialogue, jointly with the French president's foreign affairs advisor Bonne).* Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China; 2022a, January 13.
Reference Source

Wang Y: *Wang Yi huijian oumeng liren zhuhua daibiaotuan tuanzhang yubai (Wang Yi meets former EU ambassador to China Chapuis).* Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China; 2022b, June 28.
Reference Source

Wübbek J, Meissner M, Zenglein MJ, *et al.*: *Made in China 2025 - The making of a high-tech superpower and consequences for industrial countries (Report no. 2).* Mercator Institute for China Studies; 2016.
Reference Source

Xin H: **The influence of Chinese foreign policy think tanks on China's EU policy: a comparative analysis of CIIS and SIIS.** *Asia Eur J.* 2023; **21**(2): 173–208.
Publisher Full Text

Zhang Y, Orbie J: **Strategic narratives in China's climate policy: analysing three phases in China's discourse coalition.** *Pac. Rev.* 2021; **34**(1): 1–28.
Publisher Full Text

Zimmermann A: *China tightens its rare earth choke hold on Europe.* Politico; 2025, October 23.
Reference Source

Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ? ? ✓

Version 1

Reviewer Report 30 April 2026

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.25032.r72437

© **2026 Rahmadan Y.** This is an open access peer review report distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

✓ **Yanuar Rahmadan**
Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Jakarta, Jakarta, Indonesia

Overall, the manuscript adheres to the current debate of the topics. Study design has appropriately used and fit to answer the research question. Although, there are a couple of things that may be included to give better pictures on the methods. For example, it may be helpful to specify the number of speeches and statements analysed in the study. The study uses official Chinese-language websites of the Chinese government bodies, but the sources could be specified more clearly. For instance, does the dataset include materials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website? Given the apparent reliance on MOFA sources in the references, it would be useful to provide a breakdown of the data: such as how many documents are drawn from the State Council website, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and other sources. This is crucial as I was unable to identify coding results derived from statements or speeches by senior officials from the relevant ministries. It may also be valuable to consider incorporating the role of the Chinese Communist Party into the analysis as Chinese' the evolving ideology of communist may also come to play (you may refer to article from Barsky, Vinogradov and Salitskii (Dialectic Unity of the Domestic and Foreign Policy of ChinaOn the Centenary of the Communist Party of China - PMC). Furthermore, it would be beneficial to include a summary of the coding results in the results section, enabling readers to gain an initial overview before engaging with the more detailed narrative discussion.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Yes

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: European Union external relations (trade); framing, discourse and content analysis.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 24 April 2026

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.25032.r72434

© 2026 Daßler B. This is an open access peer review report distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

?

Benjamin Daßler
Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, Oettingenstr, Munich, Germany

Thank you for the opportunity to read this interesting article! This is a timely and well-structured paper that tackles an important question: has the EU's increasingly assertive stance toward China actually changed the way Chinese leaders talk about Europe? The answer that the authors arrive at, “essentially no”, is credible and (in the context of the author’s data analysis) well-grounded. I also found the contextual sections convincing. The five-stage periodisation of Chinese economic diplomacy and the treatment of Made in China 2025, the Dual Circulation Strategy, and the BRI as interlocking rather than separate instruments reflects command of the literature. The four-pillar de-risking framework is also explained clearly and accurately. The decision to work from official Chinese-language government sources rather than translated summaries is a justified methodological choice, and depositing the full dataset and coding framework on Zenodo is a model of transparency that I would encourage other authors to follow.
That said, I have some framing, theory, and analytical suggestions which I hope to be helpful and constructive.
The most important issue is the temporal gap. The contextual analysis draws on events through 2025, including Chinese export controls, countervailing duties on EVs, and the full de-risking legislative package. Yet the speech dataset ends in 2022, before de-risking was even formally announced. The paper's core claim is therefore tested against early signals of the EU's pivot, not its full enactment. I would encourage the authors to be much more explicit about this. The findings should be presented as a baseline for the pre-de-risking period, not as a definitive verdict on whether Chinese discourse has or has not shifted.
Secondly, the paper documents that Chinese discourse did not change; it does not explain why.

The structural argument that China needs the EU amid US-China rivalry is offered as a kind of background explanation, but it is never formally derived or tested. While I believe descriptive mapping of an under-studied phenomenon has value, the authors should be clear about what the paper is (a descriptive mapping of Chinese discourse over time) and is not doing in explanatory terms (theorizing changes/continuity) in this discourse.
My third point is about how the results are presented. The Results section is informative and the illustrative quotations are well-chosen, but I cannot tell from reading it how many speeches contained negative versus positive representations of the EU, or how that balance changed year to year. A simple summary table or figure showing the distribution of key codes over time would make the finding of "discursive stability" more convincing. Right now it reads as a well-argued impression rather than a documented pattern.
Fourth, I think the paper needs to grapple more seriously with what I would call the discourse-action gap. The authors rightly note that leadership speeches in China are carefully crafted consensus documents rather than genuine windows into policymakers' minds. But they do not fully confront the possibility that cooperative rhetoric toward the EU could coexist with or even serve to mask the systematic deepening of European dependencies through port acquisitions, the Digital Silk Road, and export controls on critical materials. I thought that the literature on strategic communication in authoritarian foreign policy would be a useful touchstone here.
Finally, the speech selection criterion, which focuses on speeches where the EU is a substantive subject, likely introduces some upward bias toward cooperative language. The authors could acknowledge this explicitly.
I have not independently verified the coding against the original Chinese-language speeches, nor have I accessed the Zenodo dataset directly to check its completeness. My assessment of the empirical findings relies on the authors' own characterisation and the quotations provided in the text.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Partly

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: International Relations; International Political Economy

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 22 April 2026

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.25032.r72430

© **2026 Chaziza M.** This is an open access peer review report distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

?

Mordechai Chaziza
Ashkelon Academic College, Ashkelon, South District, Israel

This manuscript addresses an important and timely question: how China's economic diplomacy, particularly toward the EU, has evolved discursively amid rising geopolitical tensions. The combination of discourse analysis with geoeconomic developments is promising, and the empirical base (coded leadership speeches, 2013–2022) is potentially valuable.
However, in its current form, the manuscript does not yet meet the journal standards. The central limitation is the absence of a clearly articulated, theoretically grounded **"why"** argument. The paper remains largely descriptive and diagnostic, rather than explanatory. While the empirical material is solid, the analytical contribution is underdeveloped, and the causal mechanism linking geopolitical change to discursive continuity is insufficiently specified. With substantial revisions, particularly in theory-building, causal clarity, and analytical integration, the manuscript could become indexable in a high-ranking journal.

1. The manuscript asks whether discourse changed, but not why it did not change. The findings (discursive continuity despite structural change) are interesting but under-theorized.
2. The manuscript uses a broad definition of economic diplomacy but lacks engagement with International political economy theory, strategic narratives/discourse theory, and signaling and audience-cost frameworks.
3. The manuscript identifies patterns (pragmatism, continuity, limits at sovereignty issues) but does not sequence them into a causal mechanism.
4. The Introduction (and early sections) are overly long and policy-descriptive, especially on Made in China 2025, BRI, and EU de-risking instruments.
5. The coding strategy is described but lacks clarity about replicability, coding reliability, and justification of case selection.
6. The Results section reports patterns but often describes them rather than explains them.
7. The conclusion shifts into policy recommendations (an EU strategy), which dilute the theoretical contribution and feel disconnected from the discourse analysis.
8. Some sections are formulaic and repetitive; overuse of phrases like "this suggests that…"; occasional policy-report tone.
9. "Economic diplomacy," "discursive representation," and "strategic narratives" are used loosely.
10. Heavy reliance on policy and institutional sources. Limited engagement with top-tier

academic literature.

Major Revise & Resubmit

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it engage with the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?
Partly

Are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
I cannot comment. A qualified statistician is required.

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: China

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.