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**Contesting Contestation?! How the US and EU respond to  
BRI impact**

Master Thesis

**Birger Pommerenke, 19.08.2024**

Supervisor I: **Dr. Shawn Donnelly, *University of Twente***

Supervisor II: **Prof. Dr. Thomas Dietz, *Universität Münster***

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## **Abstract**

The Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) functions as key Chinese mechanism to contest Liberal International Order processes and paradigms, which challenges the power of its Western proponents. The research analyzes how the US and EU respond to BRI impact on the international order. International relations theory suggests that they employ distinctive countermeasures to balance Chinese power and preserve their global influence. Explaining these responses and their impact elicits understanding great power competition and international order change. A staged research design builds evidence by tracing BRI and rival development funding processes on program and project level towards pinpointing EU and US response strategies and outcome. The research identifies that China utilizes the BRI to transform economic into geopolitical power, and how it exploits accumulated interdependence in global networks to shift international order power distribution. It discovers that the US and EU engage in balancing patterns, but that the US balances more confrontative and holistic whereas the EU balances softer and more issue-oriented. By comparing BRI patterns with US and EU responses, the research uncovers strategic differences concomitant to serve varying targets and program logics, but identifies similarities in pursuing geoeconomic output and its trickle-down effect on global power. It distinguishes development funding regarding projected efficiency and impact on the international order, carving out that Chinese development funding short-term projects to prevail, but US and EU challenges mitigate its power output mechanisms and long-term project to contest its dominance.

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## List of Abbreviations

AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
ASEAN	Association for Southeast Asian Nations
B3W	Build Back Better World
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CASCF	China-Arab States Cooperation Forum
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
DFC	US International Development Finance Corporation
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
EEAS	European External Action Service
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FOCAC	Forum on China-Africa Cooperation
FOIP	Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy
G20	Group of 20
GG	Global Gateway
GVC	Global Value Chain
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LIO	Liberal International Order
MCC	Millennium Challenge Corporation
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NWC	New Washington Consensus
PGII	Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment
QUAD	Quadrilateral Security Dialogue
REE	Rare Earth Element
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SOE	State-owned Enterprise
UN	United Nations
US	United States
WTO	World Trade Organization

## Introduction

How do dominant actors react when emerging challengers threaten their position of power and tools to exercise such? How do they sustain the order they benefit from, or take adaptive measures? Trivially, one would assume that the powerful entities employ straightforward strategies to fend off described challengers and protect the status quo. The more complex the setting with divergent actors and interests becomes, however, the more nuanced strategies and interactions become.

This research examines described struggle for power in one of the most complex settings imaginable: The International Order. Its Western protagonists, mainly the United States (US) but also European actors, used to shape the Liberal International Order (LIO) and its institutions and developments. Their great power is increasingly contested by emerging actors striving for influence, most successfully China. Researchers and decision-makers ascribe China transformative capability, as influential leaders like Hungarian president Viktor Orbán are convinced of its success in assuming global leadership: *“Then [Twenty years ago] we were living in a unipolar world order, and now we live in a multipolar world order – and one of the structural pillars of this new world order is the People’s Republic of China. It is the country that is now determining the course of world economic and political developments”* (About Hungary, 2024).

While scholars dispute the extent of Chinese success in contesting the international order, the ambition to challenge LIO paradigms is evident: China utilizes a plethora of mechanisms, most successfully the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is a foreign direct investment (FDI) program which exports excess infrastructure-building and development-funding capacity to transform economic into geopolitical power and secure access to critical infrastructure, future technologies, and raw materials. Its overwhelming economic resources allow China to simultaneously enhance bilateral cooperation with BRI associates and systematically challenge the Western development partnership model by outperforming their institutions in attracting cooperation as developing countries tend to prefer the BRI model over Western development programs.

As a result, US and European Union (EU) capability in shaping economic, political, and societal developments in developing countries declined to the benefit of China. These advances shift the balance of power within the international order, threatening Western dominance in favor of a rising China. Consequently, Western actors urge to preserve their influence by reacting to BRI impact onto the LIO. This research analyses the nature of such reaction: *How do the United*

*States and the European Union respond to Belt & Road Initiative impact on the international order?*

There is inevitable evidence demonstrating how BRI impact triggered both the US and the EU to reshape its development funding programs to re-establish competitiveness: *Global Gateway (GG)* (European Commission, 2024d) by the EU, *Build Back Better World (B3W)* (The White House, 2021) and its rebrand *Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII)* (The White House, 2022c) by the US spearhead Western program-scale reactions. More indirect reactions include changes to Western dominated international economic institutions, such as the *World Bank* or the *Paris Club* (Karimova & LeMay, 2021). The essence of this research is to uncover not only the surface output, but the underlying causalities between the means and ends of BRI responses to assess and explain their scope and impact on the international order.

To comprehensively analyze causalities and implications, the research conducts a distinct, four-folded analysis: The first level of analysis is China-centric, precisely identifying its main leveraging mechanisms to accumulate power as fundamental revenue of the BRI. The second level takes gathered insights onto the global perspective, assessing how BRI output shifts the power distribution within the international order. The third level abstracts global impact findings to the regional scale by aggregating US and EU strategies to combat Chinese BRI-related contestation. Finally, the fourth level of analysis compares US and EU responses with one another and Chinese BRI strategy regarding efficiency and international order impact.

By analyzing the US and EU responses to BRI impact, this research contemplates about the pinnacle of contemporary great power contestation research: How actors aspire to enable or interfere with transformative developments from a Western-dominated LIO towards a more multipolar global system. By contributing to understand strategic international order behavior, the research serves the intrinsic nature of international relations research to examine its nature and function as cause and outcome for key developments within and beyond nation-state interaction. It further satisfies the societal thirst for keeping track with global developments, the responsive behavior of its leaders, and how that may impact civilization. As the playground for great power competition increasingly relocates its stage from great power territory into mostly developing countries, especially in BRI context, understanding US and EU responses and assessing their potential impact concerns any individual.

To validly carve out BRI responses and their impact on the international order, the research first describes regulatory means to the international order, its competition and change, such as the concepts of balancing of power and weaponized interdependence. It accounts for divergent

paradigms in Chinese, US, and European world views and their effect on geopolitical and economic strategies, and enables subsequent hypothesis on the four analytical levels. The analysis follows up on existing imbalances to aggregate, explain, and evaluate developments of similarities and differences between the BRI and US and EU responses. Using a qualitative design, the research traces processes of BRI and Western response developments on programs and selected projects, which catalyzes quality assessments beyond surface observations explaining multi-level linkages on project, program, and international system scale. The research uses these findings to examine US and EU responses, facilitating a conclusive evaluation of BRI responses and their impact on the international order.



## **Theory**

To understand and classify US and EU responses to BRI impact on the international order, the research first characterizes the international order, how it evolves and how competition within the order functions. This theoretical chapter further transposes two key concepts that contemporarily determine great power competition and related international order development: Balancing of power and leveraging interdependence. Puzzling those pieces together settles the framework to cluster and assess US and EU strategies that respond to Chinese power contestation. The research condenses these strategies through the lens of geoeconomics via development programs, namely the Chinese BRI and its Western competition, before abstracting research hypotheses.

## **Global Concepts**

To deep-dive into analyzing Western responses to Chinese contestation via the BRI, the research must first conceptualize key functioning aspects of international relations. These include the arena of interaction, the international order, and how it evolved to its current state. It further outlines common power competition patterns that determine current interaction within the international arena.

## **The International Order and its Development**

The research conceptualizes international order as the global arena that provides an institutional framework for interaction beyond the nation state-level. Such interaction can be any form of bilateral or multilateral state-to-state interaction, or involve non-state actors. The international order guides such interaction with the principles, norms, and rules settled in the contemporary system (Maull, 2018). International order development is dynamic and tends to correlate with the interests of the actors most capable of influencing its key institutions, oftentimes nation states categorizable as global powers.

Historically, international order paradigms shifted concomitant to power distribution changes between the most impactful actors. Post World War II, two antagonistic global powers – the communist Soviet Union and the capitalist United States – clashed in a bipolar world order dominated by fierce competition between those leaders and their allies (Cox, 2018). This clash culminated in the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union shifted the balance towards the United States and the so-called West (Ikenberry, 2012). This now hegemonic alliance seized the

opportunity to steer the global system towards a rules-based, unipolar international order (Fukuyama, 2015). This allowed Western actors to promote liberalist ideas and institutions in line with their interests (Ikenberry & Nexon, 2019). The resulting Liberal International Order built on interdependence and the capability of networks of exchange to orderly regulate global interaction and distribution (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Ikenberry, 2012).

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, emerging challengers contested described liberal dominance (Cooley & Nexon, 2020). China first used its economic strength to gain influence, to then extend its global ambition towards other fields, such as politics and security. Their power surge contested paradigms anchored in several ideas and functions within LIO institutions and processes (Mações, 2021). Russia stalled early post-Soviet convergency policies in favor of global contestation and a reaffirmed hegemonic self-conception, culminating in territorial expansion within its perceived “*sphere of influence*” and global military interventions (Paikin et al., 2019). The erosion of a common Western strategy to uphold initial LIO blueprints also accelerated from within: Rising nationalism and diverging perspectives on shared norms and values loosened alliances, as Europe drifted towards an idea-based global leadership pretense (Moravcsik, 2010) while the US increasingly re-emphasized materialist ambitions under the Trump administration (Stokes, 2018). These internally divergent developments erode international order unipolarity, and instead contribute to shift the system into a more multipolar one characterized by intense leadership contestation (Acharya, 2017; Mearsheimer, 2019).

### **Competition in the International Order**

As demonstrated, the contemporary international order steadily evolves. Competition for power dominates these dynamics on multiple levels: Changing power distribution and the competition for such shapes macro-scale norms, values, and institutions (March & Olsen, 1998). Likewise, it determines micro-scale processes and stakeholder interactions (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). This reciprocal relationship enables abstraction from individual competition and its means to global implications and vice versa. Its mutual actor-system-codetermination magnifies as each individual action is intertwined within a complex set of dependencies: Actors use multiple channels of cooperation and competition in their political, economic, social, and environmental interactions (Keohane & Nye, 1998).

Further, an actor’s contribution to and position in the international order shapes the way others interact with it. Power shifts not only affect the balance of global political power and responsibility, but also trickle down to actor-to-actor interaction (Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999). This potential of codetermination incentivizes actors to compete for power. Likewise,

anticipated power shifts matter: Actors projected to raise their international order impact, for instance through untapped political or economic capability or critical resources, are likely to be more impactful than less equipped competitors (Ikenberry, 2020). The complex nature of international order networks accelerates power shifts, as supplying one means that serves several ends can fast-track actor importance within the system (Hasenclever et al., 1996).

As the actors capable of contesting power and shaping the international order often employ heterogeneous interests, world views, and methods to exercise power, international order research needs to adapt its perspectives accordingly to understand and explain each actor's behavior individually. This research thus matches explanatory argument streams with sophisticated theoretical arguments tailored to the action patterns of its main subjects rather than one systemic belief. This approach benefits understanding and explaining both interaction between divergent actors and institutions and ones that seem cohesive but face underlying differences (Hooghe et al., 2019).

Two concepts are key to examine action and response patterns when actors compete for power within the international order: Balancing of power describes the central desire for a great power to maintain a status quo of influence, and serves as a toolkit to explain responsive counter-action in cases of power imbalance. Leveraging interdependence describes a key mechanism to contest power within the LIO, as it allows determined and resourceful actors to target weaponizable imbalances in its networks of exchange.

### **Balancing of Power**

Classic *balance-of-power* theory goes back to neorealist ideas by Waltz (1967). Waltz describes the international system as a competition between countries as interacting units in an anarchic setting, in which countries are interested in relative gains. He attributes states rational and interest-driven behavior that strive to accumulate power to secure its survival. This power can be military, political, or economic. He argues that if power is dispersed, a state strives to balance the anomaly, either by trying to increase power itself or by joining alliances (Waltz, 1979).

While Waltz conceptualizes balancing power in a very general way of interaction, Walt (1989) refines the concept to a more issue-oriented matter. His *balance-of-threat* theory argues that states only try to balance out against countries when they pose a threat to the state. They specifically balance against this issue rather than holistically against an actor. Walt extends causes for threats from Waltz's idea of power to include geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived intentions (Walt, 1989). Both theories by Waltz and Walt offer

defensive realist explanations that assume reactive measures to international relations developments.

Mearsheimer (2001) instead theorizes the idea of offensive realism, which argues that states not only balance preemptively to ensure survival in an anarchic system. He ascribes countries the natural desire to maximize power to achieve hegemony, as hegemony provides the best guarantee for security. Thus, Mearsheimer attributes countries a constant state of balancing as they always seek to maximize their power (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Translated to the research setting that anticipates a threat to the LIO, these theories would each assume different reactions by unipolar world order leaders, like the US, or rising powers, like China. Following Waltz, the leader would react by balancing the challenger on all levels. Following Walt, the leader would balance the very specific sources of threat a challenger would pose. Following Mearsheimer, the leader would already be in a state of balancing, and just seek improvements to their balancing strategies.

For catch-up actors not holding international order leadership, like European countries, strategies differ: To assess cooperative options for actors not capable of accumulating hegemonic power themselves, separating the concepts of balancing and *bandwagoning* offers theoretical explanation capacity. Balancing describes how states join forces to counter a rising power or threat, aimed at preventing one dominant state from becoming too powerful. Bandwagoning instead describes an alignment of a state with a more powerful side to share the spoils of hegemony (Walt, 2009). Mearsheimer and Walt (2016) describe balancing to be the more widespread strategy than bandwagoning, especially in bi- or multipolar systems but also in unipolarity.

Finally, different actors enact different balancing strategies, and different settings likewise incentivize distinct strategies. A great power can often utilize its power in classic neo-realist hard balancing. Great powers may also facilitate buck passing to divert responsibilities and burdens that accompany the balancing processes to bandwagoners that otherwise may free-ride (Mearsheimer, 2001). Less powerful actors usually employ different balancing strategies, such as *soft balancing*. Soft balancing specifically entails non-military means like diplomatic, economic, institutional, and normative actions to counterbalance more powerful actors (Pape, 2005; Paul, 2005).

There is a broad set of variations in strategies to balance power. The research uses these concepts to identify and cluster Chinese, US, and European strategies within that framework.

This classification is one pillar to enable a causality-driven analysis that can attribute context and explanation to actions. The other pillar is to identify and match mechanisms to actors for strategically balancing power in the international order. One central means to accumulate power within the LIO is to exploit the structural importance of network interdependence.

### **Leveraging Interdependence**

The research established how the dynamic nature of the international order makes it a constant subject to change. The current state of institutions and interactions is built on the liberalist premise that interdependence among states reduces the likelihood of conflict and promotes peace. The LIO, characterized by open markets, multilateral institutions, cooperative security arrangements, and the promotion of democracy and human rights, heavily relies on interdependence and cooperation to maintain stability and promote prosperity. Contradicting classical neo-realist beliefs the dominant Western actors built LIO institutions and interaction patterns on idea-based paradigms and soft power rather than hard power (Ikenberry & Nexon, 2019). The underlying liberal norms and values of these paradigms spilled over onto global politics and international relations. Such input-driven mechanisms combined with the cooperation-based institutions enhanced the interconnectedness between international order actors, resulting in an entanglement of individual action streams. In the macro-perspective, those entangled streams form the contemporary regime complexity within the order (Alter & Meunier, 2009). Within this complexity, the paradigm of interdependence is meant to enhance cooperation. Yet, the vertical hierarchies within cooperative constructs are prone to exploitation, as more power- or resourceful actors can overpower the more vulnerable ones utilizing their superior economic or political capital (Alter & Raustiala, 2018).

Counterintuitive to its input-dominant design paradigm, actors intending to maximize their output benefit from described interaction stream entanglement. Zürn (2018) identifies this as key means to competitor contestation of international order paradigms, more specifically its economic and political institutions and mechanisms. Thus, the nature of the LIO structure aids rational actors and action to outperform more idea-based ones in transforming power into achieving ambitions, be they materialist or non-materialist (Bird, 2021).

Farell and Newman (2019) identify global networks of exchange as pivotal facilitators for influencing the international order. They argue that globalization enhanced highly asymmetric structures of exchange, in which powerful actors can utilize structural advantages coercively to project power. States employ two strategies to weaponize interdependence: The *panopticon effect*, which describes how actors gather sought after information and technology, and the

*chokepoint effect*, which describes how actors deny network access to adversaries, such as to critical resources or infrastructure (Byrne, 2020). In the international system, control over a hub that contributes to a panopticon or chokepoint serves as a source of power and potential means to leverage dependent actors for access (Cartwright, 2020; De Ville, 2022; Farrell & Newman, 2019). In an international order where complex interdependence magnifies how critical impact to one means influences several ends, accumulating such hubs (and thus power sources) increases an actor's capability to leverage critical mechanisms to a threshold that could endorse systemic change (Drezner et al., 2021). Consequently, great power to an extent is tied to influence on the critical hubs with the international networks of exchange.

This relationship between influence on the international order and control over their networks inspires actors to adapt strategies that increase their grasp on global hubs. Neoliberal paradigms rooted in LIO institutions imply that systemic interdependence regulates such power competition with its cooperative incentives, but 21<sup>st</sup> century backlash questions the success of intrinsic self-regulation (Nye, 2019; Walter, 2021). Instead, competition for global hubs increases corresponding to materialist interest and soft power bargaining (Nye, 2023b), while rival powers and adversaries are either seeking to insulate themselves from global networks or to displace those networks their opposition controls (Farrell & Newman, 2019).

One strategy is closer to liberal ideals and builds on cooperation, yet more nuanced than the global cooperation paradigm that followed the Cold War aftermath: An actor assumes that sufficiently influencing enough critical networks to favorably impact its distribution and holistically secure its interests is unlikely (Avant & Westerwinter, 2016), and thus seeks affiliation in selected global advocacy coalitions (Sabatier & Weible, 2019). This effort re-emphasizes alliances, and builds on a collaborative community deemed trustworthy enough to ensure stable cooperation and strong enough to provide access to desired value chains (Mikic et al., 2023). Such friend-shoring strategy aims at sustaining panopticons and chokepoints deemed critical to an actor's functioning and prosperity within its range of allies (Maihold, 2022; O'Brien & Williams, 2020). A related, more determined strategy is to on-shore as many of its critical supply chains, technologies, and processes as possible to ensure the highest achievable degree of self-sufficiency (Siddiqui, 2024).

The competing strategy also relies on involving other actors, but is based on coercion: An actor weaponizes its influence in asymmetric independencies to enforce compliance beyond that area of dependency towards other issues in a way that benefits their political or strategic objectives (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Hass, 2021). This way a powerful actor leverages regime complexity

into enforcing affiliations based on dependencies (Drezner et al., 2021). These affiliations piece together into a network of partners that depend on complying with their senior affiliate in order to sustain access to the hubs and networks this partner controls, while the power-holder can enforce faction discipline that is prone to spill over to other areas of global interaction (Moon, 2022).

Both streams of strategies increase friction within the international order and fuel competition between its most powerful actors. As a result, international relations with its institutions and processes adapt from the cooperative paradigm that determined the LIO towards the contemporarily prevailing more competitive, selectivist partner-shoring environment (O'Brien & Williams, 2020). This change translates to great power competition, as it offers rivals distinct soft power tools to enact balancing strategies against the influence of its antagonized competitors.

## **Great Power Competitors**

Three key protagonists centrally determine great power competition: The United States naturally assumes hegemony due to its historic capability to dominantly shape the international order (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016a). European countries used to affiliate themselves within a US-led Western bloc of common power projection, but increasingly emphasize own leadership ambitions in times of LIO contestation (Szewczyk, 2021). China emerged as the most prolific antagonist to Western international order paradigm dominance, first through its economic might but also via political contestation (Bo, 2021). The following chapter outlines their national preferences and world views, allocates them in the international order, and clusters their main geopolitical and economic strategies. This proceeding enables the analysis to connect their behavior with international relations concepts, thus allows the research to uncover causalities within action patterns specifically tied to the European and US reactions to Chinese BRI-related success.

### **US geopolitical & economic strategies**

The United States acts as a global superpower. It assumes international order leadership not only due to historic capability of shaping international relations, but also due to modern power sources. A multifaceted web of economic, political, military, technological, and cultural strength allows the US to exert significant influence on global affairs and maintain a leadership role in the international system (Beckley, 2018; Bergsten, 2022; Brooks & Wohlforth, 2016b;

Kagan, 2021). As incumbent global leader, the US is most capable of designing and employing impactful strategies (Layne, 2018).

Furthermore, it still is the most influential actor to shape international norms and values (Mazarr, 2017). Historically, the US has pursued leadership by creating and decisively shaping several central international relations institutions like the United Nations (UN), the World Trade Organization (WTO), or the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to embed its interests and values into their foundational rules. Consequently, the US internationally mainly functions as conservative actor protecting the status quo of the institutions and paradigms it helped to establish (Acharya, 2017). As these tend to benefit its creators and main influencers that design them aligned to their national interests and global ambitions, the US more than any other actor has stakes in fending off challengers and competitors to key international order institutions and paradigms (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999).

To protect its natural interests and global ambitions, the US employs diverse yet cohesive geopolitical and economic strategies. It has built an unprecedented global network of military bases and presences in strategically important hubs and global chokepoints, such as the South China Sea and the Gulf of Aden (Yeo, 2017). The network of bi- and multilateral security alliances, spearheaded by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and an East Asia *hub-and-spokes* structure with different allies as spokes and the US as the hub, enhances its strategic reach and collective defense capabilities (Simón, Lanoszka, & Meijer, 2021). This network approach enables buck-passing to junior partners while incentivizing them to bandwagon into alliances, which benefits US global deterrence capabilities and potential costs (Brands & Feaver, 2017; Kinne, 2018).

Institutionally, the US seeks a global approach of diplomatic initiatives and international organization leadership to promote its legitimacy. It advocates for human rights, diplomacy, and rule of law through the means of the UN and its affiliates to maintain order (Abbott & Snidal, 1998; Cottrell, 2011). As the different nature of security alliances suggests, however, the US diversifies its modes of interaction adapted to its regional interests: The European strategy is based on common norms and values, and NATO-cooperation (Simón, Desmaele, & Becker, 2021). US involvement into the Middle East evolves about economic (energy) interests and strategic partnerships while supporting allies and countering terrorism (Yom, 2020). The *Asia Pivot* under the Obama administration instead focused on a specific rising competitor, China (Campbell, 2016). First, US leaders voiced the intention to deeper engage in mutual relations,



which later turned into efforts to counterbalance Chinese competition and influence through economic, military, and diplomatic means (Allison, 2018).

Most of these geopolitical strategies, especially those on global affairs and institutions, rely on continuity and cooperation. 21<sup>st</sup> century developments led to an increased erosion of trust, however. Not ratifying key international treaties – like the *International Criminal Court* or the *Law of the Sea Treaty* – questioned US global leadership credibility anyway, whereas backing out of the *Paris Climate Agreement* caused further friction with allies. Under the Trump administration, the US broke with plenty of its reliable, longstanding international policies and cooperation paradigms, challenging some of the self-established concepts and world views that were considered national interests (Stokes, 2018). As a result, Western alliances splintered into a more realist US-led fraction (Ettinger, 2020) and an alienated idea-based European fraction that used to align with US policies but increasingly established divergent ambitions (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2019). This decline in alliance solidity impeded the US ability to jointly project power with allies and decreased its bandwagoning appeal but increased its buck-passing and faction discipline enforcement credibility.

Despite receiving backlash from its decreased institutional trust and proclaimed value promotion credibility, the US assumes LIO paradigm guardianship as perceived global hegemon (Duncombe & Dunne, 2018). Protecting liberal international paradigm contrasts the gradually shifting US behavior in more regional issues, where it regularly emphasizes relative gains increasingly since the Trump administration: The US-China policy ambition shifted from a focus on mutual benefits to one of containment and relative gains. Scholars argue whether the US employs a strategy to balance China overall or mostly balances the means through which it threatens US interests within the international system (Doshi, 2021; Silove, 2016). Regardless of the balancing scope, however, there is clear evidence for an influx of neo-realist ideals shifting US global and specifically China-related policies. Mearsheimer & Walt (2016) thus cluster US regionalized balancing efforts as a grand strategy labeled *offshore balancing*.

This development further transposes to US economic strategies: While historically encouraging free trade both through bi- or multilateral agreements and the international organizations it influences – like the IMF or the World Bank – (DuBoff, 2016), the US increasingly endorses the importance of trade network and supply chain security. It used to embrace global supply chain interconnectedness for its common benefits, but since the Trump administration efforts to increase self-sufficiency surged (Kose et al., 2017). Access vulnerabilities in critical goods and resources, such as rare earth minerals and oil and gas, and large US market dependency on

foreign actors turned the US prone to foreign leveraging or even hostile weaponization, especially to China (Lee & Dacass, 2022; Maihold, 2022).

As the US geopolitical turn towards relative gains would assume that China utilizes such vulnerabilities to contest its international influence, this fear inspired a new policy focus on *friend-shoring* (Vivoda, 2023). In an effort to secure supply chains with trustworthy allies or coercible partners, the US redesigns its trade paradigms (Helleiner, 2021b). This includes efforts to re-build and expand critical infrastructure to increase control over panopticons and chokepoints or relieve pressure from ones the US lacks access to (Gereffi et al., 2021), like digital infrastructure or energy corridors, re-introducing a sense of economic nationalism that focusses on US capabilities (Helleiner, 2021a).

The *New Washington Consensus* (NWC) is the key tool of the Biden administration to relocate supply chains and re-shape the global economic order (The White House, 2023a). Following up on Trump's *America First* economics that strictly focused on boosting the US position via tariffs and quotas in an economic competition likewise with “friends and foes” (Guliyev, 2020; Posen, 2018), the NWC also aims at boosting domestic manufacturing and supply chain resilience to lessen dependence on foreign actors (The White House, 2023a). It differs in distinguishing between allies and antagonists, referring to its role to facilitate global development by inviting friendly cooperation while voicing the desire to counter China's economic influence (Charillon, 2023). Bipartisan support for being “tough on China” incentivized the Trump and Biden administration to follow national interests in goal-selection, but clear-cut policy and strategy divergencies to pursue such prove how office-holders shape US policies beyond national interests (C. Carothers & Sun, 2023). The more nuanced Biden administration approach not only materializes in domestic projects, but also in outward-oriented economic decisions like sanctions, aid, and development funding (F. Liu & He, 2023).

The US pivoted its geopolitical and economic strategies reactionary to increasing contestation to its incumbent global leadership. It resolutely voices ambitions to balance perceived Chinese threats to its national security and global ambitions. Economically, this materializes in a more cautious perspective on interdependence and vulnerable supply chains, catalyzing ambitions to on- or friend-shore critical infrastructure and supply chains.

## EU geopolitical & economic strategies

The most powerful European countries used to ally with the US and other Western partners in joint post World War 2 ambitions within international competition (Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999; Walt, 1985). This first materialized in commonly struggling against communism, then in contributing to building and then protecting the LIO and its fundamental paradigms (Ikenberry, 2018). The intensity of such contribution varied depending on *zeitgeist* and degree of buck-passing by their senior affiliate, the US: In military terms, European countries could often *free ride* under the NATO alliance umbrella (Kivimäki, 2019), whereas in economic terms they took a fair share of common competition and deterrence strategy costs, such as funding and sanctions (Dong & Li, 2018; Weber & Schneider, 2020).

Despite their international order contributions, European countries since 1945 would rightfully not be considered capable enough to be labeled “great power competitors” (Savoy & Staguhn, 2022). Contemporary international order developments, however, vindicate great power competitor framing: Rising European Union importance as a representative and legislative entity for most of the powerful European countries allows scholars to cluster their projection capacity into one entity, which concentrates their impact to greater capability than each country employs individually (Nugent, 2017).

Since 1993 the EU employs a *Common Foreign and Security Policy* (CFSP), which aims at preserving peace, strengthening international cooperation and security, and developing democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights worldwide (European Commission, 2024a). This policy includes a *Common Security and Defence Policy* (CSDP), which allows for EU-led military and civilian missions for crisis management (EEAS, 2021). EU foreign policy focus strengthened through establishing the *European External Action Service* (EEAS) and a *High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy* in the Treaty of Lisbon (2007), accelerated in Juncker’s presidency and further under von der Leyen (European Parliament, 2020). However, intergovernmental tensions impede collective decision-making and foreign power projection. Prevailing internal disagreements range from rising anti-European parties to nation states like Hungary that contradict EU foreign cooperation policies also regarding the BRI to setbacks to common power like Brexit (Staab, 2020). Despite that, EU communication and actions imply strategic geopolitical intentions towards determined foreign policy. It gained legitimacy from its involvement in their neighborhood and global issues, such as the common approach to the Russian invasion of Ukraine or the constitutive participation in international institutions like the *IMF*, the *World Bank*, or the *Group of 20* (G20) (Keukeleire & Delreux,

2022). This evidence of EU capability to representatively project power for its member states in the international system allows the research to validly consider it a “global power competitor” (Bradford, 2020).

Further, it is important to explain why the EU matters more than just as casual US ally. Throughout the 21st century and most visibly in the Trump administration, the confederation alienated from US global preferences (Castells, 2018). European approaches deviated from the US counterparts in the economic and foreign policy paradigms when the US employed more neorealist, confrontative patterns than the EU pursued in their cooperation-driven strategies (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2019). Those relied on the idea-driven, persuasive strength of liberal institutions (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022; Schmidt, 2010). Most notably, the European Union proclaims leadership ambitions regarding international norms and values (Oberthür & Dupont, 2021), solidifying a self-conception of capably exercising distributive power and democratic leadership (Meunier & Vachudova, 2018). Even if further challengers and global conflict – like the Russian invasion of Ukraine – incentivized re-alignment tendencies between Europe and the US (Howorth, 2021), as demonstrated by NATO re-bonding (Reich, 2022), the European Union distinctively voices normative global leadership aspirations (Miskimmon et al., 2014).

Due to its limited military capabilities, the EU does not appear as a traditional superpower (Hyde-Price, 2013). But Europe employs considerable issue-oriented strengths beyond military capability that matter in modern international order competition (C. Hill et al., 2023a). As normative global actor, it exercises soft power employing a rule-by-example rather than a rule-by-force approach (Moravcsik, 2018; Sjursen, 2013). Further, its member states combine for the world’s largest single market, which facilitates projecting economic power as a trading giant capable of setting standards, shaping international economic policy, and utilizing economic leverage in bargaining beyond economic matters (Meunier & Nicolaidis, 2019; Verdun, 2011). Hence, the EU is capable of projecting power separate from US means despite its restricted overall influence as a catch-up actor. Forced to tailor strategies to its core strengths rather than relying on holistic might, the EU can and does influence international geopolitical and economic developments (C. Hill et al., 2023b).

Its geopolitical strategies focus on soft power and diplomacy while leveraging economic power. The EU utilizes international institutions like the UN and the WTO as channels to address global challenges and promote (occasionally modified) LIO paradigms (Börzel & Zürn, 2021), while linking its economic power to its normative approach and set of values as source for prosperity (C. Hill et al., 2023a). Contrary to US developments, the EU desisted from turning to distinct

neo-realist strategies (B. Didier, 2021), although some entities within its governance structure demand for a higher focus on relative gains (Simón, 2017). Nevertheless, the EU increasingly employs soft balancing strategies. Those include normative and economic leveraging in their neighborhood policy combatting Russian power plays in its perceived “sphere of influence”, economic sanctions against Russia following its invasion of Ukraine (Knodt et al., 2020), and economic and normative pressure against Chinese human rights records and trade practices.

However, increased global contestation also spurred the EU to emphasize *strategic autonomy*. This idea targets reducing EU foreign reliance for defense purposes, aspires increased investment in domestic military capabilities, and introduces the possibility of hard balancing if demanded by future developments (Koppa, 2022; Zandee et al., 2020). Economically, this similarly to US developments incentivizes efforts to cover key supply chains and dependencies either self-sufficiently (Helleiner, 2021b) or via friend-shoring (Maihold, 2022). The geoeconomic nature of this strategy is more defensive than the US approach, as it neglects the idea of holding panopticons and chokepoints rather than reducing the vulnerability to exploitation through such (Schmitz & Seidl, 2023). Instead of decoupling, the EU employs an economic security strategy of de-risking (Farrell & Newman, 2023). Still, it affects projects within and beyond EU territory, like restricting critical infrastructure stake sales inside EU borders while promoting EU industrial policy and protecting its single market (Di Carlo & Schmitz, 2023) and seeking reliable partnerships outside (Alcaide & Llave, 2020). EU investments into global value chains (GVCs) are more tied to normative alignment than ones of competing global powers (De Ville, 2022; Poletti et al., 2021).

Overall, the EU as a catch-up actor employs significant economic and geopolitical capabilities. These are less resourceful but more norm-based than US counterparts. The EU facilitates an idea-driven approach that traditionally evolves around absolute gains and liberal cooperation paradigms. Recent LIO contestation spurred changes to its economic and geopolitical strategies, which increased protective measures including friend-shoring supply chains and soft-balancing perceived threats. These strategies reflect its status as a normative global power.

### **Chinese geopolitical & economic strategies**

Contrary to its Western competitors, China did not influence the LIO and its paradigms in its build-up. Instead, it utilized LIO characteristics to rise through its ranks aspiring global superpower status, and arguably is the main challenger to its institutions and procedures (Foot & Walter, 2010). As the research investigates US and EU reactions to this international order contestation through BRI means, aggregating the Chinese geopolitical and economic strategies

that result in BRI-related contestation is important to analyze goals, modalities, and compatibility of the Western responses, which the theory suggests are likely designed to anticipate and potentially counterbalance Chinese strategies.

Scholars agree that China is the main challenger to the contemporary international order (Allison, 2018; Ikenberry, 2018; Mastro, 2019; Mearsheimer, 2019). This assessment is tied to how China utilizes its transformative economy, which is bound to surpass the US to become the biggest economy in the world. Chinese state-controlled capitalism allows it to align strategic sectors with state policies, and utilize them in national and global economic strategies (Morrison, 2019). Initiatives like "Made in China 2025" allow China to facilitate investments into in-demand technologies and increase innovation capacity, providing national companies a head start over global competitors (Levine, 2020). Such steering enables China to optimize its economy towards leveraging the Chinese market and companies into a distinct global economic strategy: One of *jingji waijiao* (economic diplomacy) where excess capacity and state-related funds can be utilized to secure favorable trade agreements and investment opportunities into strategic assets to promote its economic security (Garlick, 2019a) and project power (Heath, 2016).

Chinese geopolitical strategies settled in its *Grand Strategy* balance regional and global ambitions. While seeking regional dominance, China rather aims at displacing US hegemony than replacing them as a hegemon (Mastro, 2019). Its foreign policy logic is based on 36 settled principles, most importantly *Sun Tzus* ambition to achieve foreign policy objectives without war and the five *Panchsheel* principles of peace and cooperation including non-intervention, non-alignment, and realism (Ping & McCormick, 2015). This leads China to employ a generally risk averse foreign policy that emphasizes strategic autonomy (Huotari & Heep, 2016). Consequentially, China aims to address its key vulnerabilities, including the US dominance and alliances in its regional sphere and its vulnerability to geoeconomic chokepoints like the *Strait of Malacca* for importing critical resources (Paszak, 2021).

Regionally, China pursues to enhance its leadership through investment, diplomacy, and military means (C. Lai, 2018). It actively asserts territorial claims in the South China Sea along the *9- or 10-Dash Line*, constructs artificial islands and establishes military bases to project regional power, and control vital maritime resources and routes (Fanell, 2019). In their regional ambitions, it refrains from using its growing military force to more than deterrence, but instead utilizes economic and diplomatic carrot-and-stick methods to incentivize alignment (L. Didier, 2018). Through institutions like the *Shanghai Cooperation Organization* (SCO) and the *Asian*

*Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)*, China seeks to strengthen regional ties and create alternative platforms to Western-dominated institutions (L. Liu, 2021; Loke, 2018).

For its global geopolitical ambitions, China relies even heavier on transforming economic capability into geopolitical power through both coercive and consensual means (Doshi, 2021). Chinese FDI, through the BRI and its predecessors, enables strategic investments into critical technology, resources, infrastructure, and other assets (Ho, 2020). This helps mitigating strategic vulnerabilities and resource insecurities and fosters partnerships or even alliances, enhancing Chinese partner-shoring ambitions regarding critical networks (W. Liu & Dunford, 2016). Further, the Chinese economy benefits from utilizing excess capacity especially in the construction industry, as its investments usually are tied to contracting Chinese companies (Moblely, 2019). Its currency *renminbi* benefits from increased internationalization as predetermined mode of financial transactions (Ly & Tan, 2020b).

In the international system, China combines strategies of utilizing beneficial LIO features with contesting other aspects (Schweller & Pu, 2011). Exploiting LIO mechanisms enabled China to transform economic aspirations into geopolitical success, assuming future leadership in shaping the international system and its key institutions like the UN, IMF, and WTO (Baumann et al., 2024; Pabst, 2018). In other policy fields, mostly economic and development-related, China created alternative institutions – like the AIIB, the BRI, or the SCO – to compete with established ones in order to shape global norms and rules to better reflect Chinese interests, often successfully (Friedberg, 2018; Pei, 2018; Scobell et al., 2020). This powerful, two-folded challenge to LIO paradigms inhering both contestation and exploitation is capable of transforming international order policy, program, and even paradigm change (Breslin, 2021). Its success necessitates China to apply balancing strategies itself to sustain the success of its contestation against Western actors, like in development funding (Han & Paul, 2020).

China navigates the international system as a rational, materialist actor that follows distinct principles. It voices clear leadership aspirations and mixes economic with geopolitical strategies to compete for regional and global influence in shaping norms and institutions with Chinese paradigms, either through altering them from within or establishing competitors (Doshi, 2021). This contestation incentivizes Western actors to respond in a balancing manner to protect the LIO paradigms China challenges but the US and EU desire.

## **Geoeconomics**

The theoretical framework established how great powers resort to various balancing strategies in international order competition. China effectively contests LIO institutions and paradigms utilizing geopolitical and economic strategies leveraging interdependence. This proves how international relations dynamics are best understood at the intersection where those strategies intertwine: Geoeconomics.

In geoeconomics, economic tools function as levers between actors. Those pivot between national interests and global interdependence considerations. Traditional geoeconomics concern trade and investment policies, economic and financial sanctions, and financial and monetary policy (Blackwill & Harris, 2016). As adaptation to LIO tendencies of globalization and interdependence increasingly determine global influence, reliable access to critical infrastructure and resource networks surges in importance (Farrell & Newman, 2023). This development turned foreign investment key to geoeconomic interactions, especially if directed towards developing countries that hold desirable resource-based, technological, or infrastructure potential that is yet to materialize into power (Fägersten et al., 2023). Given the centrality of geoeconomics to contemporary international relations, the research focuses on the specifics of development funding as geoeconomic competition and balancing means.

## **Development Funding**

Development funding can take different shapes that range from profit-driven foreign direct investment to value-driven institutional development loans.

FDI refers to investments made by an entity in one country into a business or project in another country. It serves as means for companies or governments to invest substantial capital and resources to expand their reach and influence abroad (Asiedu & Lien, 2011). FDI promises the junior partner to gain funds to improve national projects, potentially causing economic growth, infrastructure development, or knowledge transfer towards the recipient population. The senior partner receives a financial, political, or cultural foothold into the recipient country (Le Corre & Sepulchre, 2016), and benefits from potential advantages in market access, labor cost, resource acquisition, or strategic cooperation (Blonigen & Piger, 2014). Thus, FDI on paper promises to be a mutually beneficial strategy.

In practical terms, however, there are common FDI issues. When inviting FDI, a country concedes significant control over that part of its domestic projects or industry (Herzer, 2012). This deepens recipient dependence onto the provider, a problem which magnifies if countries



fail to repay investments (J. Jones & Wren, 2016). Further, FDI is often tied to additional preconditions that exceed the economic nature of investment, especially if the funding is state-sponsored (Babic et al., 2020). Ideological or strategic attachments tend to complicate investment evaluation as they entangle economic goal-selection with alternative indicators, complicating recipient-investor dependence streams (Alami et al., 2022). State-sponsored FDI already blurs the lines towards other types of development funding.

Those other types often come in public- or donor-funded loans that either focus on specific development goals, or other preconditions or requirements. Development funding is less profit-driven and more value-oriented than conventional investments, but more likely to have strings attached that exceed refinancing (McEwan & Mawdsley, 2012). Development loans often entail concessional terms benefiting poorer borrowers, but in turn seek alternative compensation in exchange for such concessions. This compensation can be of idea-based nature, such as linked to rule of law, democratic, or human rights standards, but likewise of geopolitical or strategic nature. Thus, development funding often increases the dependence of the recipient to the lender (T. Carothers & Gramont, 2013; M. Chen, 2020). The more complex and riskier the investment or loan to the providing entity is, the likelier the dependence sustains.

### **Belt & Road Initiative**

The Belt & Road Initiative functions as the main Chinese tool to transform its economic capacity into geopolitical strength. Thereby it often blurs the lines between FDI and development loans, as it mixes and matches different financing approaches tailored to respective purposes under the framework of open industrial and infrastructural cooperation with emerging countries (W. Liu & Dunford, 2016). It serves as a strategic tool that evolves over time to fit Chinese global interests, seeking to establish new and deepen existing partnerships.

Xi Jinping first introduced the BRI early in his first presidential term in 2013 as part of his vision on a Chinese Grand Strategy that was later enshrined in the party constitution as part of “*Xi Jinping thought*” (Shepard, 2017). The BRI built on a network of investments into its regional neighborhood and resource-rich African countries via the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) (Du Plessis, 2016), with the intention to integrate its foreign investments within strategic infrastructure that allows China to enhance trade with European markets (Yu, 2020). The BRI unites an economic belt around extended Silk Road territories and a Maritime Silk Road under its label, containing and connecting land and sea infrastructure projects.

The BRI officially has five goals: policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds. These goals are supplemented by a more recent turn towards more selectivity, focusing on “green” and “high-quality” projects (Nedopil, 2024). BRI 2.0 aims at expanding its Digital, Green, and Health Silk Road (Wei, 2022). BRI investments traditionally channeled into the energy sector and transportation. More recently, investments into metals and mining as well as technology surged. Planned future engagements cluster into six project types: manufacturing in new technologies, renewable energy, trade-enabling infrastructure, ICT, resource-backed deals, and high visibility or strategic projects (Nedopil, 2024). This proves that China uses the BRI to secure access to most crucial resources and infrastructure to existing and anticipated networks of geopolitical significance.

There is no official governance structure steering the BRI. Instead, Chinese leaderships give top-down program instructions to various institutions that determine project choice and design (Gallagher & Qi, 2018). These projects are usually funded by loans of Chinese financial institutions, commercial banks, or specialized investment companies. Loans vary between pure aid, preferential loans, development finance, commercial loans, and special funding (K. P. Y. Lai et al., 2020). The concessional loan model, in which lenders provide borrowers with development finance at better than open market conditions, is the most common one (Gelpern et al., 2022). Its beneficial financial terms enable recipients to finance ambitious projects that rely on concessional funding to facilitate national development. However, such loans predominantly demand recipients to contract Chinese companies to execute project construction, preventing developing countries from creating desirable high-skill employment opportunities through BRI loans (L. Liu, 2021).

As of February 2024, Chinese BRI investments since its inauguration amount to \$1.053 trillion in 151 countries, split into \$634 billion in construction contracts and \$419 billion in non-financial investments (Nedopil, 2024). It is the runaway most impactful global financing program, giving China leading capability to shape development and cooperation in the developing world. On paper, these developments are mutually beneficial: China benefits from partnerships and resulting access to trade infrastructure, resources, and political and cultural ties. The recipient benefits from the economic growth opportunities and benefits to infrastructure and industry (Dunford & Liu, 2019). Contrary, the real outcome often differs from the benefits on paper: As development funding tends to attract instable countries that lack economic or geopolitical structures to self-sustain investment and thus fail to secure loans from traditional private actors or public entities, there is significant risk of project failure (X. Li & Zeng, 2019; Yao Wang et al., 2019). Further, loan repayments often rely on growth generated

through investments. With low investment hurdles especially in its starting phase, aspired economic output to cover BRI loans is often unachievable or only materializes through long-term, secondary benefits decoupled from direct project revenues (Tudoroiu, 2023). Repayment failure thus jeopardizes plenty of BRI projects unless both parties agree to repayment alternatives, such as the recipient conceding project stakes or resource or infrastructure usage to the lender: China (Rolland, 2017).

This proves that BRI projects entail significant risks to both actors involved. Nevertheless, the scope and resurging volume of BRI projects implies that Chinese decision-makers value its benefits over its risks, and that recipient countries likewise welcome BRI projects with all their implications. BRI adaptations including BRI 2.0 and the emphasis on green and high-quality projects prove that China pursues the strategic ambition of fitting its investments onto geopolitical and economic needs to project power.

### **BRI Competition**

In post-colonial international relations, FDI used to be a more distinctively economic tool, separated from geopolitical ambitions. Development funding meant to enhance global infrastructure and industrialization used to come through multilateral global institutions like the World Bank, which were mostly funded and in their paradigms and processes shaped by Western actors (Kapur et al., 2011). States also facilitated development funding, but that was of lower scope, less structured, and targeted to rather deepen existing relations than eliciting new ones. As economic crises shifted donor focuses inwards, multi- and bilateral development funding downscaled (Poulsen & Hufbauer, 2011). The BRI filled the resulting development funding gap, overwhelming existing frameworks in volume and impact.

As the BRI grew successful in projecting power, plenty of Western initiatives arose or modernized that share similar goals and mechanisms. The US established the 2018 *US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC)* aiming to invest into critical infrastructure projects in developing countries. The program prioritizes economic returns for the US and partner countries through financially viable projects and public-private partnerships. The program is driven by national security interests as the DFC considers strategic interests in their investment choices (DFC, 2024). Contrary to LIO paradigms, this is an output-oriented program drawn to mimic BRI mechanisms.

In 2021 the G7 countries led by the US launched the *Build Back Better World (B3W)* initiative that aims to offer developing countries an infrastructure development alternative to the BRI.

The global infrastructure initiative specializes in increasing connectivity between Western actors and developing countries, their strategic institutions, and resources. It focuses on transparency, sustainability, and collaboration with multilateral institutions of expertise like the World Bank to ensure responsible project development and implementation. The B3W resource mobilization strategy budgets private funding to complement public funds. (The White House, 2021). It shares similarities with the BRI and traditional value-based Western programs, yet naturally lags behind in volume and experience (Mutlu, 2023).

The 2022 *Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII)* evolved from B3W with the goal to advance sustainable, inclusive, and resilient infrastructure development in low- and middle-income countries. Like B3W, it relies on combined public and private sector investments to fund high-quality infrastructure projects that adhere to Western standards and principles. G7 countries frame the PGII to provide an alternative to the BRI that more distinctively focusses on sustainability, transparency, and good governance (The White House, 2022c). Yet, PGII scale and investment volume fall considerably short of BRI scope and impact (The White House, 2023b).

Finally, the EU designed *Global Gateway (GG)* as the operative tool to its connectivity strategy *Globally Connected Europe*. This project aggregates formerly standalone development funding and FDI programs by individual European entities towards a more cohesive approach that pursues distinct European interests. It promotes European values and interests worldwide while decoupling from volatile dependence by funding highly visible and impactful projects (Council of the European Union, 2021). GG aims to invest up to €300 billion into the digital sector, climate and energy, transportation, health, and education and research. Half of the investments are Africa-bound, with further investments allocated to Asia and the Pacific plus Latin America and the Caribbean. The projects follow six underlying principles: democratic values and high standards, good governance and transparency, equal partnerships, green and clean behavior, protected security, and enhanced private sector investment (European Commission, 2024d).

Finally, reform ambitions to existing multilateral approaches gain traction. Exemplifying, the World Bank member countries agreed in October 2023 to a reform package that increased voting power for developing countries, focuses on climate action and sustainable development goals, and emphasizes tangible results (World Bank Development Committee, 2023). Those modernization tendencies, representative for multilateral LIO institutions, focus more on accurately depicting the current state of international relations rather than following an active pursuit to affect its landscape and developments.

Concluding, the BRI established itself when development funding competition and engagement by states or institutions was low. Its success led several actors to craft projects of similar ambitions or modernize existing ones. Yet, BRI competition fails to meet its size, scope, or impact on the global stage.

## **Hypotheses**

The research established that the LIO and its institutions and paradigms are contested. China emerged as the key challenger to Western paradigms, utilizing the BRI as a central strategy to accumulate power. The research aims at understanding how exactly the United States and the European Union respond to BRI impact on the international order.

The first part of the analysis investigates the mechanisms China leverages to accumulate power from the BRI. As the research identified leveraging interdependence as a key tool to accumulate power in the LIO, and the development funding and FDI by nature assume asymmetric power mechanisms where a more capable actor concedes economic terms to a less capable one in favor of other benefits, China accumulates weaponizable interdependence streams. Literature suggests that China uses the dependencies to aggregate reliable partnerships, either by cooperation or coercion. It further assumes that China utilizes BRI investments to increase its foothold on global networks of exchange, either by establishing control over panopticons or chokepoints or by developing infrastructure to bypass others.

***H<sub>1</sub>:** China leverages asymmetric interdependence to aggregate reliable global partners and increase Chinese influence on global networks of exchange.*

When deciphered Chinese leveraging mechanisms, the research turns to analyze the impact that such BRI-related output has on international order power distribution. Theory suggests that networks of exchange crucially influence the power distribution between LIO actors. Further, partnerships resulting from BRI investments enhance Chinese power projection onto global institutions and processes by itself and through its BRI-related affiliates. The research thus assumes that BRI output considerably shifts power in favor of Chinese influence on the global economic and political landscape.

***H<sub>2</sub>:** BRI output significantly shifts power distribution towards growing Chinese influence on global institutions, their paradigms, and economic and political processes.*

As this shift challenges the LIO paradigms that Western countries carefully built, powerful actors naturally interact strategically with such emerging contestation. Scholars suggest that this engagement takes shape in balancing strategies to prevent further shifts, reinforce the desired former status quo, or adjust to enforce evolved idea paradigms.

*H<sub>3</sub>: The US and the EU engage in balancing strategies to combat Chinese contestation.*

However, with diverging preferences, power distribution, and normative ambitions it is unlikely that different actors employ uniform balancing strategies. As actors compete by employing diverse types and intensities of balancing strategies, and former Western strategic conformity crumbled, the US and the EU are expected to balance Chinese ambitions by different means to pursue each individual global interests. BRI competition shows that the US and EU both share common approaches but likewise divert into different programs. The research thus hypothesizes that these different approaches root in underlying goal-selection and engagement strategy differences.

National preferences and the history of US hegemony within the LIO suggest that the US takes a more offensive balancing approach to protect its incumbent leadership. As China poses the most direct threat to its global impact, and the US displayed more realist interaction patterns since the Trump administration, it is likely to follow a hybrid strategy that securitizes the Chinese economic challenge as a threat inevitable to balance. Recent China-focused programs suggest that US strategy returns towards zero-sum-game and absolute gains considerations that aim at offshore balancing Chinese global influence holistically to contain its key challenger and restore international order dominance by necessary means.

*H<sub>3.1</sub>: The US offensively balances Chinese international order contestation holistically to restore international order dominance.*

The EU is more likely to take a nuanced, softer balancing approach. Due to its weaker global influence and normative self-conception, European balancing strategies usually employ economic means and have value-driven or security-related intentions. The research expects the EU to engage in issue-oriented balancing to secure its networks. Further, Europe likely is concerned about normative BRI impact on development funding paradigms and implied value transfers, and thus projects to engage in soft balancing strategies specifically targeting value-shaping output.

*H<sub>3.2</sub>: The EU soft balances Chinese normative and geoeconomic impact to ensure supply chain security and promote European values.*

Finally, after explaining the strategies to combat Chinese contestation, the research analyzes how these strategies compare against one another and the BRI regarding efficiency and impact on the international order. BRI competition proves that there is a considerable knowledge and funding cleavage between the Chinese and Western approaches. Therefore, the research expects US and EU strategies to trail Chinese strategy effectiveness in the short term. Prospectively, the EU and US strategies may contribute well to balancing efforts, especially if they adapt to learn from BRI success and failure and eliminate inefficiencies that impede current program success.

*H4: US and EU strategies trail Chinese efficiency short-term, but inhere long-term balancing potential.*

Based on state-of-the-art theory and literature, the research hypothesizes that China leverages asymmetric interdependence from the BRI to accumulate power. Such output then shifts LIO power distribution considerably in favor of China. This leads the US and the EU to balance Chinese contestation, with the US likely to employ a more determined and holistic approach than the EU. These responses probably have moderate short-term effects, but could prove impactful in the long-run.

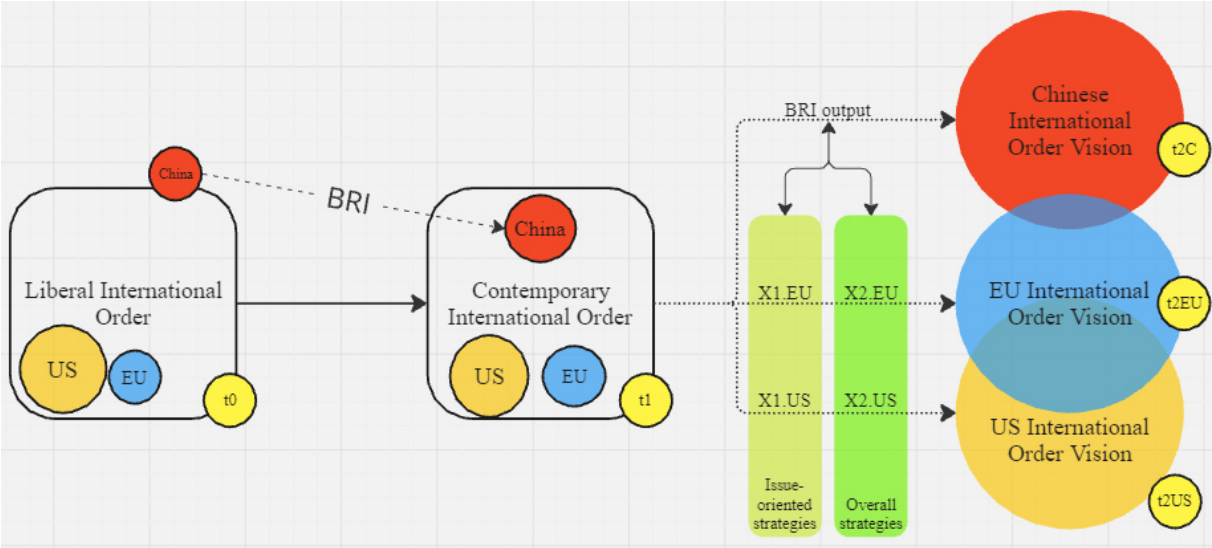
## Method

The following method chapter elucidates the research design most fitting to test the outlined hypotheses, mainly that the US and EU pursue different balancing strategies in response to Chinese LIO contestation through the BRI. It first describes the overall research strategy to analyze the research question and its sub-issues. It operationalizes important variables. Finally, the chapter emblazes research data collection and analysis.

## Research Design

The research aims at identifying *how the United States and the European Union respond to Belt & Road Initiative impact on the international order*. To best utilize accessible data, it combined process tracing with comparative elements in a staged analysis, in which each step builds on insights from the previous one to maximize explanatory capability. This method works well as its core investigated the *blackbox* of processes when preconditions and (desired) outcomes are given but the processes and its underlying intentions and causalities are the main subject of interest. Each analytical step enabled the research to test a further theoretical hypothesis. The research culminated in comprehensively explaining competing process streams of action and reaction within BRI-related power competition. Comparing and judging those streams provided quality analysis on US and EU responses to BRI impact. *Figure 1* displays the international order developments and embedded development funding strategies the analysis builds evidence from.

Figure 1: Analytical stages & their causalities



As the first step, the research considered the LIO blueprint before Chinese contestation as  $t_0$  and the contemporary, contested state of the international order as  $t_1$ . Within this setting, the theoretical framework established that China gained considerable power. The research assumed



that BRI-related output (x) serves as one major explanatory variable for the outcome of Chinese accumulated power (y). Its first analytical pillar traced the processes within the BRI to understand Chinese power accumulation mechanisms through BRI leveraging. It mostly considered the BRI on the program scale as subject of analysis, but also abstracted from project-scale processes representative for BRI leveraging mechanisms.

The second analytical step scaled up these considerations: It contextualized BRI leveraging blackbox findings into the more holistic blackbox of Chinese impact on international order change between  $t_0$  and  $t_1$ . At this point, the research focused on the explanatory capability of Chinese accumulated power through the BRI (x) for overall international order change (y) at  $t_1$ . Prepared in the theory chapter, the research sharpened the Chinese allocation in the contemporary international order. It achieved abstraction from BRI leveraging mechanisms towards its impact on shifting power distribution through contextualizing these findings with traced power evolution in central institutional international order processes and expert analysis.

In the third analytical step, the research forwarded its timeline towards including a fictional  $t_2$ .  $T_2$  depicts the desired international order state for each actor key to the research design: China ( $t_{2,C}$ ), the United States ( $t_{2,US}$ ), and the European Union ( $t_{2,EU}$ ). Those states can gradually vary over time and leadership, and their analysis relies on qualified projections based on the distinct visions of desirable international order shapes for each actor outlined in the theory. The research used the resulting different ideal types of  $t_2$  and its differences to the current state  $t_1$  to investigate the blackbox of measures by each entity contextualized to its setting and key actors to gravitate the international order closest to each ideal type. Based on hypotheses  $H_1$  and  $H_2$  and validated (or falsified) by outcomes of previous analysis parts, it assumed that the BRI is a key determinant for international order change. Logically, the research anticipated a US and EU response to BRI-related contestation as part of that blackbox. Specializing there, the research analyzed US- and EU-bound BRI competition. Similar to the first analytical step, it focused on tracing program-scale processes and developments, but also investigated project-scale competition. The research then zoomed out by assessing how the BRI-related responses translate into the bigger picture of holistic country interaction to reach aspired international order shape  $t_2$ . It identified overarching strategies through tracing response processes and scrutinizing scope, intensity, and intention of balancing ambitions. As a result of these analytic steps, the research diagnosed how the US and EU strategies to combat BRI-related contestation on program level ( $X_{1,US}$ ;  $X_{1,EU}$ ) and overall ( $X_{2,US}$ ;  $X_{2,EU}$ ) elicit effective measures to combat BRI-output (Y) in pursuit of a desired international order shape ( $t_{2,US}$ ;  $t_{2,EU}$ ).

For the final step, the research zoomed into the blackbox of analyzed strategies concerning the BRI and related competition contextualized with corresponding actors and moments. This part used comparative analysis on the program scale, aggregating similarities and differences between each strategy to assess efficiency and impact of the competing strategies. Technically spoken, the research explained how each approach ( $X_{1.US}$ ;  $X_{1.EU}$ ; BRI) is likely to shift power dynamics in the development funding competition, and how that contributes to each actor's ambitions to pull the international order closer to their desired ideals ( $t_{2.US}$ ;  $t_{2.EU}$ ;  $t_{2.C}$ ).

This staged analysis based on process-tracing and comparative analysis enabled the research to scholarly answer the research question in-depth. In not only uncovering surface responses but also developments and causalities in the blackbox of key processes related to the moments and actors involved, the research gained the desired tools to judge how the United States and the European Union respond to Belt & Road Initiative impact on the international order.

By taking a deductive approach that tested theoretical assumptions with empirical outcome, this research design followed international relations research tradition. It separated itself from more streamlined designs by mixing in exploratory questions and building on evidence uncovered in the research process. This strategy heeds the typical international relations phenomenon that uncovering complexity on holistic questions often benefits from hybrid research designs (Blagden, 2016; Waltz, 1979). It used hermeneutic interpretations to identify central causalities (Tomkins & Eatough, 2018). The explanatory character of this research serves the intrinsic political science motivation to understand and validly explain the most significant causalities rather than just describing observations (Johnson et al., 2015).

Case selection, when necessary, was carefully done to be as inclusive as possible but as narrow as necessary to justifiably assess measured data (Gerring, 2017). This guideline narrowed the case selection down to the most engaged development funding actors that simultaneously also are global powers capable of influencing the international order: China, the US, and the EU. Project-scale development funding case selection likewise followed the principle of most representative and most impactful cases. This strategy limits the risk of ad hocery when disentangling observations and causalities by ensuring case representativeness and analytical precision.

Research design and strategy fit analyzing a holistic research topic that exceeds traditional research of comparable resources. This was necessary to account for the complexity of scholarly uncovering causalities of great power competition in the international order, even through the specific lens of BRI responses.

## **Operationalization**

This next chapter operationalizes the measurable variables. As the research strategy built the argument step-by-step through the analytical chapters, the following paragraphs operationalize each variable in chronological order and in context of most similar research operationalizations.

For the first analytical sub-chapters, the research needed to operationalize variables for BRI-related power. It operationalized BRI-related power as geoeconomic power drawn from economic capability, geopolitical power, and strategic advantages tied to BRI projects. Most impactful researches and methodology proposals on BRI impact – such as Schulhof et al. (2022), Hillman (2018), Zhang (2018) and Blanchard (2021, 2022) – identify these categories as fitting BRI output operationalization. For identifying and clustering leveraging mechanisms, the research referred to ones that are BRI-related and designed to accumulate power. The research built on economic strength, military strength, political influence, cultural influence, technology advancement, and global reach as global power indicators (Huntington, 1999; Kagan, 2007; Mearsheimer, 2010; Nye, 2003).

The second step demanded for operationalizing what constitutes shifting power distribution within the international order. In international relations research tradition, this is tied to the influence a country can have on its institutions and processes (Bull, 2012; Legro, 2016; Nye, 2023b). Like scholarly precedents, such as Schulhof et al. (2022), did in similar research designed to assess BRI-related change, the research operationalized BRI-related output power shifting capacity as the capacity to create international institutional and process scale change. It used the definitions of Haas (1990) to distinguish between project, program, and paradigm change, with the latter being the most impactful type of change measurable.

The third analytical step built on previous measures on Chinese BRI-related contestation. To measure issue-oriented balancing, it operationalized combatting strategies as the causalities accompanying programs and their projects directed towards the issues of BRI-related output (Mohan, 2018; Yong Wang, 2016). Upscaled to measure holistic balancing, the research operationalized whether and how underlying paradigms in interaction towards China shifted (Allison, 2018; Z. Chen, 2016). The final analytical step built on outlined previous operationalizations of strategic projects, programs, and paradigms and international order impact.

This operationalization is valid as it covers all dimensions and variables, sharply distinguishing between them while contextualizing their relations. Abstraction from impactful research design

ensured that the research measured the intended data, which enabled it to validly assess underlying concepts and their variables. The research further implemented precautionary measures to grant its reliability: The holistic approach prevented impactful causalities from being overlooked. Conceptualization, argumentation, and operationalization relied on a thick and robust theoretical framework. Generalizability is no main research concern remarking the unique scope and impact of involved actors and processes, but some findings project to translate well to related research designs (Carminati, 2018). Therefore, the research does well in fulfilling the quality criteria of research (Leung, 2015).

## **Data Collection**

The following sub-chapter describes instruments and procedures of disposed data collection. The research used flexible qualitative methods to describe and understand its important phenomena in detail and account for phenomenon context. It interpreted quality data by identifying causalities and contextualizing them with theoretical knowledge to craft rich analysis and findings (Boeije, 2002). Its explanatory strategy led the research to use qualitative data collected from expert analysis and official documents; a typical method to extract valid and reliable data as preceded in political science methodology that suits understanding the complexity of intercausal relationships best (Gerring, 2017; McNabb, 2015). In shape of observations and interpretations, this data was transformed into research context to not exceed research capacity but validly perform impactful analysis (Merriam, 1998).

This data collection strategy followed a rich tradition in BRI-related research (Kamel, 2018). Secondary quantitative data can strengthen research robustness concerning BRI impact and competition, as via Gelpert et al. (2022), but in BRI context is very limited due to transparency and reliability concerns related to key actors and their official data. Further, qualitative data does better at uncovering causalities in complex blackbox frameworks where causalities often intertwine (Suter, 2012), especially if some actors prefer their means and ends to stay covert as likely in BRI context (Ferchen & Perera, 2019; Voon & Xu, 2020).

Concluding, the research uses qualitative data from expert analysis to best perform its strategy and feed the variables with quality input. The restriction to pre-existing secondary data and refraining from collecting primary data was necessary to feasibly proceed the research given its limited resources. The analysis accounted for researcher bias by following objectivity guidelines and collecting data aligned to validity and reliability quality criteria (Sackett, 1979).

## **Analysis**

Framed by robust theory and a fitting method, the research proceeds with the analysis. It first identifies the main mechanisms China leverages to accumulate power from the BRI. The research then analyzes to what extent such BRI output shifts the power distribution within the international order. Next, the focus switches to the US and EU as competing actors, assessing their strategies to combat Chinese BRI-related contestation. Finally, the analysis compares how those and the Chinese strategy compare regarding efficiency and global impact. This step-by-step process enables a final judgement towards how the US and EU respond to BRI impact on the international order.

### **BRI Leveraging Mechanisms**

The first level of analysis concerns the main mechanisms China leverages to accumulate power from the BRI. It traces BRI macro-developments and processes of representative projects. The sub-chapter categorizes leveraging processes into relations towards building economic strength, military strength, political influence, cultural influence, technological advancement, and global reach, and examines their power output. Based on theory, the research built the hypothesis  $H_1$  that *China leverages asymmetric interdependence to aggregate reliable global partners and increase Chinese influence on global networks of exchange.*

The theory established that BRI projects are often very heterogenous despite following the cohesive purpose of promoting Chinese interests as constitutionally enshrined. Therefore, different projects may serve different ambitions that only pieced together solve the puzzle of fully understanding BRI program ambitions and how they fit the underlying Chinese foreign policy paradigms. Indicator by indicator, the research aggregates project with program analysis to identify leveraging processes and outcomes.

***Economic strength*** is the indicator that China pre-BRI arguably was most powerful in. Such power mainly rooted in raw domestic economic strength, but was also tied to its existing FDI into developing regions such as South-East Asia and Africa. Those investments used structures like FOCAC, SCO, the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) or the China-Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Cooperation Mechanism and Free Trade Area (Rimmer, 2018). While the BRI may superficially appear as an economic tool, evidence suggests that increasing economic strength is of neglectable priority in its evaluation. Contrarily, it concedes economic output to leverage alternative power outputs.

However, the program evokes some economic benefits in the aftermath of opening Eurasian economic corridors and land bridges or the *Blue Economic Sea Road Passages* network (Deepak, 2018). Further, economic trivia suggests that country-specific investment opens the investor a foothold and more opportunities to invest, and that increased trade leads to reduced trade costs and the opportunity to expand markets (Marr & Reynard, 2010; Moosa, 2002). BRI economic outcomes, however, are vastly more nuanced than traditional economic FDI benefits.

The BRI is not only meant as an outward investment program, but also comprises an internal dimension. There firstly is structural impact: BRI projects using land corridors often facilitate development to the underdeveloped Western and Southwestern provinces and connect them to richer and more developed Eastern ones (Mierzejewski, 2021). This internally redistributes economic development, and further benefits Chinese political ambitions of tying these often deviant regions of geopolitical and security-related importance closer to the Chinese economic network (Ferri et al., 2019).

Another inward-directed BRI leveraging mechanism is its capability to export Chinese surplus labor capacity and expertise. Especially in the construction sector, China faced an economic boom that led construction firms to flourish. As the construction bubble of the Chinese *Field of Dreams*-strategy that provided supply before demand burst when many construction projects became unviable, China utilized the BRI to redirect that excess capacity outwards and alleviate domestic oversupply (Kenderdine & Ling, 2018; Yan, 2020). By tying BRI infrastructure loans to contracting Chinese companies for executing appendant projects, China turned the domestic economic problem of surplus infrastructure-building capacity into an asset (Skidmore, 2021).

Further, domestic economic success also depends on resource import modalities like price, access, and availability. BRI investments ensure easier access to resources, foster their extraction, and both accelerate and secure trade routes and supply chains that fuel the Chinese domestic market (Johnston, 2016). At the crossroads between economic and geopolitical considerations, this allows China to strengthen its networks from interdependencies to solidify its domestic economic potential. By closing economic ties with foreign, mostly emerging stakeholders, this economic integration also has an outward economic impact of expanding the Chinese-affiliated institutional network to shape macroeconomic trends. The more actors are involved in these networks, the more economic strength China holds globally.

One way China leverages economic strength through its BRI network influence is by promoting its currency, the Renminbi. BRI development funding usually demands Renminbi payment, which alleviates the domestic economy as less cost is sunk into currency exchanges. It also

strengthens Chinese global monetary power, as each BRI transaction contributes to establishing the Renminbi as globally recognized transaction currency, leading more trade partners especially within Chinese networks to build up Renminbi reserves (Cai, 2022).

Despite described advantages to the domestic economy and Chinese outward economic projection, BRI investments are neither considered tools directed towards economic success nor good economics. Instead, BRI project facilitators often face significant losses from investments and loans, which destabilized prominent Chinese economic institutions, even state-owned enterprises (SOEs), to an extent that the BRI jeopardized parts of the Chinese economy (Zhai, 2018). This is tied to the prevalent problem of repayment failure, mainly due to the high-risk low-(economic)-reward nature of its projects that are mainly financed through concessional loans. As financially distressed countries hold 60% of Chinese overseas BRI loans, underperforming investments compromise loan repayment ability and thus the chances of re-financing investments (Horn et al., 2022).

Consequently, the BRI drove China into becoming the world's largest creditor, often on unstable terms (Gelpern et al., 2022). While China can leverage some BRI mechanisms for domestic benefits, like building networks that open the domestic economy to trade routes and resources and utilizing domestic surplus capacity abroad, Chinese economic performance suffers from the BRI, specifically repayment failure. But despite the financial risk of project failure often outweighing monetary rewards from interest, China benefits from the spillover of its economic concessions to other sources of power.

*How China lends* by Gelpern et al. (2022) illustrates how Chinese BRI loans differ from conventional ones in three main items: Its unusual confidentiality clauses, its favorable collateral arrangements such as lender-controlled revenue accounts and anti-debt-restructuring clauses, and its cancellation, acceleration, and stabilization clauses that allow lenders to influence debtors' domestic and foreign policies. This limits the sovereign debtor's crisis management and debt renegotiation options (Gelpern et al., 2022), expanding Chinese leverage in already asymmetric dependencies between junior partners and China. This way China may amend financial concessions when repayment fails, but can often leverage desirable compensation in alternative repayments. Some researchers picture these mechanisms a "debt-trap diplomacy" that consciously leverages economic BRI project concessions for other means to accumulate power (Ameyaw-Brobbe, 2019), while others consider them more recipient-country driven practicalities (Carmody, 2020; L. Jones & Hameiri, 2020). The following

paragraphs on other indicators for global power assess whether and how such leveraging processes factually materialize.

### ***Military strength***

Military strength primarily refers to the capability of national forces, which makes FDI and development funding a very atypical predictor for military power change. However, scholars provide evidence to how the BRI contributes to Chinese military capability. This contribution does not materialize in classic army strength, but in Chinese strategic locations, capacities, and mandates to pursue oversea security interests (Ratner, 2022).

Neorealist scholars attribute BRI investment to a *string of pearls* strategy. They identify a Chinese habit to leverage asymmetric interdependencies into coercing permission to control ports or build military facilities (Carmody et al., 2022). Those accumulate to a strategic network of naval bases for military purpose. Developments from several BRI projects and military build-ups in BRI partners support this theory with evidence: China built its only officially acknowledged overseas military base in Djibouti, on the economic chokepoint at the Horn of Africa (Downs et al., 2017). There is further yet officially unconfirmed indication for China building a naval base at Cambodia's Ream Naval Base (Oxford Analytica, 2022). Several ports along the Maritime Silk Road, such as in Hambantota (Sri Lanka) or Gwadar (Pakistan), failed to refinance, leading the authorities to lease control over the ports onto Chinese authorities (Carrai, 2018a; Gholizadeh et al., 2020). Researchers additionally identify the African ports of Bata (Equatorial Guinea), Kribi (Cameroon), Nacala (Mozambique), and Nouakchott (Mauritania) as targets for future Chinese bases. They share evident reliance on Chinese concessional financing, and their national finances assume engulfing economic dependence to China (Wooley et al., 2023). Consequently, those ports fit as pearls into the string of Chinese control along the Maritime Silk Road. No matter whether considered a string of military assets (Dreyfuss & Karlin, 2019) or the more neo-liberal interpretation as accumulation of important strategic hubs injected with Chinese characteristics to enhance trade (Marantidou, 2014), the number of assets China controls through benefiting from repayment failure insinuate a distinct Chinese strategy of leveraging weaponizable interdependence (van der Merwe, 2019).

Finally, every asymmetric interdependence inheres another incentive for the junior partner to align with China in case of military conflict, either via coercion or cooperation. Bandwagoning into security alliances can become a desirable strategy, especially in the unstable regions that accommodate several more heavily dependent BRI partners (Starkweather, 2023).



### ***Political influence***

The theory suggests that political influence likely is a key BRI target. It estimates that political alignment rises with BRI-related interdependence.

BRI projects prove to align recipients with Chinese ideas and institutions. SCO growth exemplifies how the BRI incentivized countries to join the Chinese *circle of friends*, either through direct membership or through institutional affiliation (Seiwert, 2023). China-bound institutions and BRI projects often combine as influence multipliers for political matters. As the Chinese loan patterns regularly include political steering clauses, aligning with Chinese ideas often is the most efficient strategy for a BRI lender to pursue prosperity. This way China can both directly – through alignment – and indirectly – through institutional affiliation – reconstitute national and regional development priorities, interests, and relations in ways that benefit China’s overall strategic interests (Reeves, 2018). This evokes a perpetual motion where deeper multilateral affiliation incentivizes closer bilateral alignment and vice versa; a continuum that is hard to exit as breaking out entails significant costs that are often unbearable for developing countries.

This process ever increases the asymmetry in BRI-driven relations, through which China can afford to rest its carrots and threaten with sticks. In case of non-compliance, China employs comprehensive tools for weaponizing this dependence to coerce its junior affiliates into political compliance. The manners of coercion and cooperation through BRI dependence are often covert and implicit, yet tangible in the resulting political developments. Coercion examples especially concern South-East Asia, where ASEAN BRI countries like the Philippines and Vietnam faced backlash for their non-compliance with Chinese maritime claims in the South China Sea (Le Thu, 2019) and Myanmar struggled under pressure to enact Chinese political will most visibly concerning the port of Kyaukphyu (Dossi & Gabusi, 2023). The case of Taiwan further proves how Chinese BRI-related means convince actors to change political perspectives: Countries like The Gambia, Sao Tome and Principe, Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Burkina Faso switched their diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China. Notably many African countries re-align their UN voting behavior considerably towards China since receiving Chinese loans and investments (C. Jones et al., 2022).

An important dimension to BRI-related political influence materializes where economics and politics intersect: China utilizes investments into critical infrastructure and resources, especially rare earth elements (REEs) and energy sources, to secure critical supply chains and materials invaluable to its economic ambitions. By enhancing partnerships with key sources for such

resources, China decreases its vulnerability to foreign coercion that otherwise may leverage influence on critical resource hubs. Similarly, its infrastructure investments allow China to either circumnavigate unfavorable strategic chokepoints or occupy or create new ones, turning geopolitical weaknesses into strengths (Oberhauser, 2024). The concessional BRI investments and underlying dependencies elicit reliable partnerships, often strategically chosen to fit countries in strategic locations or holding critical resources, with which China expands its friendly network (ChinaPower, 2024). These BRI leveraging processes allow China to increase its foothold onto political networks of exchange and exercise influence on their modern hubs, transforming economic power into political influence.

### ***Cultural influence***

The cultural perspective likewise matters. As the BRI loan model compels recipients to contract Chinese companies to exercise construction, those often bring Chinese workers with them (Gamso & Moffett, 2023). This has both direct and indirect consequences: Directly, those workers embrace Chinese culture and transfer it with all its facets onto their host country. They use Chinese standards on the job while following homegrown values and world views in everyday life. Indirectly, the influx of Chinese people is accompanied by rising demand for Chinese goods and services. This effect stretches from popularizing Chinese brands and media towards building shop and service infrastructure that targets the often wealthier Chinese customers (Winter, 2021). Such structural impact is likely to outlast the construction period, which sustains the cultural influence of BRI projects. Consequential to the sustained cultural impact, the related adaptation costs of future Chinese interaction with the recipient, be it through further BRI projects or other exchanges like tourism, lowers, which is mutually beneficial and incentivizes closer ties (Kuah, 2019). African BRI countries like Kenya, Ethiopia, and Angola and South-Asian BRI countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Malaysia especially faced spiking popularity for and from Chinese people and brands (Freyman, 2022).

Another aspect of Chinese cultural influence through BRI means is education investment. Beneath the occasional benefits of education infrastructure investments, a key strategy to Chinese investment is the creation of globally spread *Confucius Institutes*. They not only provide educational opportunities, but also transfer Chinese values and beliefs into host countries (Q. Li et al., 2021).

Finally, China gains cultural influence through its lending means, specifically the absence of idea-based requirements. Traditional development funding programs by multilateral institutions or Western actors often inhere specific sets of normative demands concerning rule of law,

equality, human rights, transparency, or accountability. Oftentimes, development funding recipients are averse to such demands, as they in non-democratic countries tend to conflict country realities and leadership interests or are perceived as post-colonial patterns of paternalism. Authoritarian states regularly prefer BRI investments and the underlying principles of non-interference over Western counterparts, often even if competitive offers are financially more attractive and have less geopolitical implications (Dollar & Thornton, 2018). In this sense, the Chinese branding of having “no cultural ties or values” and respecting local governance (H. Wang, 2019) conversely leads to increased cultural influence, an outcome that China often utilizes to market its institutions as protective *South-South cooperation* against neo-colonialism (Mwadi Makengo et al., 2022).

### ***Technological advancements***

Technological advancements are another means of accumulating global power. The BRI, especially since its shift to BRI 2.0 and the emphasis on the Digital Silk Road, actively promotes the Chinese strive for technological leadership (Ly & Tan, 2020a). Its strategic investments into REEs, minerals, and other critical resources aim at enhancing technological development through securing a steady influx of necessary materials (Kalantzakos, 2019). This also is a key motivator behind China’s Polar Silk Road projects that target critical resources for technological advancements (Hossain, 2019). In power projection terms, technological excellence increases China’s chance to bypass contemporary panopticons or create new ones through innovation and development.

A key means to China materializing technological advancements besides investing into resources is to facilitate that its innovations are tested. Technical cooperation with the Middle East, whose countries often construct with state-of-the-art technological demands, is central to such facilitation efforts. Increasingly, regional actors rely on Chinese industry to provide necessary technology, while China benefits both from field testing and from returning access to big data (Chaziza, 2020). While not being the typical BRI investment as gaps between lender and recipient are smaller than usual, the authoritarian nature of all actors involved allows for indiscriminate gathering of information utilizable in feedback cycles to enhance further technologies (Gurol & Schuetze, 2022). This impact expands when utilizing dual-use technologies such as surveillance, as according feedback may spill over to expedite military power enhancements (Peterson & Hoffman, 2022).

Chinese ambitions for technological advancements also materialize in its bid to rewire the global digital architecture, concerning both hard- and software. It strives to become a leading

provider for regional network connectivity and utilizes its economic and construction capacity to facilitate comprehensive offers, like in the telecommunication network industry (Triolo et al., 2020). These BRI-scope projects are supplemented by its global bid to reroute the deep sea internet cable structure to increase access and control (Nouwens, 2020).

### ***Global reach***

As final power indicator, global reach refers to the breadth of coverage China can project power on. It is a natural end to the global project scale amounting to 151 partnering countries. More importantly, it appears as targeted rather than coincidental outcome to BRI processes aimed at promoting global China-bound linkages.

The cultural dimension shows how China emphasizes mutual benefits in South-South cooperation and promotes the BRI as alternative to Western development funding. This not only is a manner of pursuing cultural connectedness, but also a distinct strategy to enhance Chinese popularity in the developing world that grows increasingly important in global decision-making and power play (Duggan, 2020; Murphy, 2022). Scope and indiscriminate project choice enhance its global image as a reliable development partner (Deng, 2021). This reputation and reach allows China to export its foreign policy principles and world views more effectively.

Further, the networks it enters and creates contribute to growing reach in projecting power. The BRI specifically targets critical hubs and networks that are projected to grow in importance, like the Green and Health Silk Road (Schulhof et al., 2022). By leveraging the institutional power of BRI organizational exchanges and forums, China increases the platform and volume of its voice on the global scale, most notably towards developing countries (Dunford, 2021).

*Table 1: BRI-related leveraging processes & power output*

<b>Global Power Indicator</b>	<b>Leveraging Processes</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
<i>Economic strength</i>	Domestic excess economic & construction capacity → investment into developing actors & critical network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased access to resources &amp; trade opportunities</li> <li>• Slowing economic power</li> </ul>
<i>Military strength</i>	Alternative repayment → control over strategically important ports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potential for naval bases to increase security abroad</li> <li>• Coercion potential</li> </ul>
<i>Political influence</i>	Asymmetric interdependence & contractual steering capacity → collective network control by choice or by coercion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• China-bound institutions &amp; networks gain influence</li> <li>• Strong partnerships</li> <li>• More geopolitical capital</li> </ul>
<i>Cultural influence</i>	Chinese contractors → cultural idea transfer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stronger cultural affiliations and Chinese brand</li> </ul>
<i>Technological advancement</i>	securing critical resources → more panopticon control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased innovation &amp; technology capacity</li> </ul>
<i>Global reach</i>	South-South cooperation & indiscriminate projects → popularity in developing world	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing network impact</li> <li>• Broader power projection</li> </ul>

*Table 1* recaps and aggregates described Chinese main leveraging mechanisms to accumulate power from the BRI, and demonstrates generated outcome. China frequently leverages a special type of contracting that allows it to flip its economic capital via concessional loans into other forms of power. The research identifies that, as hypothesis  $H_1$  suggested, China indeed leverages asymmetric interdependence consistently since the BRI inauguration. This strategy aggregates reliable global partners and enables it to increasingly exercise influence through networks of exchange. One way or another, China utilizes the BRI to transform economic strength into considerable global power. Such power particularly comes in political influence and global reach, but also in cultural influence, technological advancements, and military strength. Counterintuitively, despite huge financial concessions China also leverages economic power through the BRI by strengthening supply chains, opening trade opportunities, and securing resources desirable to the domestic economy. Thus, China massively increases power projection capacity through leveraging the BRI.

## **BRI Impact on the International Order**

But to what extent does this increased power projection shift the power distribution within the international order? The next chapter analyzes the impact of Chinese BRI output on the current state of the LIO and its development. The research hypothesized in  $H_2$  that *BRI output significantly shifts power distribution towards growing Chinese influence on global institutions, their paradigms, and economic and political processes*. To test this hypothesis, the research contextualizes Chinese power leveraged from the BRI with potential project, program, or paradigm change in international institutions and processes.

The research established that the BRI serves as central tool to pursuing China's Grand Strategy and overcome the *Century of Humiliation*, in which China was vulnerable to foreign influence rather than capable to project its power outward (Goldstein, 2020). In this role, the BRI functions as key mechanism to contest US dominance, fueling the Chinese transition from stakeholder to competitor (Leverett & Bingbing, 2017). The strategy not only targets contesting US global reach, but also pursuing de-dollarization together with the BRICS to break US global financial control via the *Bretton Woods* system, and mitigating its influence through LIO institution and process design (Carrai, 2018b; Z. Z. Liu & Papa, 2022). This is part of an effort to reshape the global system and its LIO towards multipolarity (Doshi, 2021). China exploits underlying liberal mechanisms, mostly those blending political and economic power that incentivize leveraging interdependence, to challenge Western systemic dominance in global processes and institutions (Dossi, 2022).

Such exploitation takes place in China utilizing its development funding and FDI superiority to turn developing world affiliations and dispute Western-designed LIO principles (Gill & Huang, 2023; Roy et al., 2024). China pursues alignment – despite preaching non-alignment – by exporting its foreign policy logic with the 36 underlying principles, most notably the principles of non-interference and absence of value-based preconditions (Zhou & Esteban, 2018). This setting appeals especially to non-democratic countries considerably more than comparable conventional development funding processes that used to transfer Western-based LIO values, leading such countries to phase out value-driven programs in favor of the BRI (Vangeli, 2018). International institutions concerned with development funding, like the World Bank or the IMF, diminish in influence due to the successful emergence of the BRI as an alternative program (Joshua, 2019). Further, multilateral debt restructuring efforts like the Paris Club become less relevant with BRI clauses preventing their effective forms of mitigating financial issues (Bennon & Fukuyama, 2023).

On the macro-scale, these shifts lead developing countries to revoke traditionally incentivized development funding ideas in favor of the normative logics that accompany the BRI. This alteration challenges key international principles of transparency, governance, and social justice. Resulting, the economic Chinese power projection that implies political and cultural influence onto common developing world logics shifts the paradigms of asymmetric interaction processes between actors of different impact (Benyon & Fukuyama, 2023; Garlick, 2019b).

This exceeds changing logics of bi- or multilateral international relations processes that cluster around developing countries, translating into institutional change beyond economic institutions: United Nations voting behavior development proves a significant shift from US-aligned voting in developing countries towards China-aligned voting (C. Jones et al., 2022; Xun & Shuai, 2018). This is most significant in topics concerning Taiwan or Uighur suppression, where China expects junior affiliates not to interfere with its interests (Piccone, 2018). China institutionalizes this political influence program through their BRI project clauses that allow it to “take action” if BRI partners pursue adverse interests (Gelpern et al., 2022), threatening with coercion in case of non-cooperation. It pursues both impact and symbolism of this geopolitical closeness to shape outcomes and processes within the most impactful global institutions (Benabdallah, 2019).

Simultaneously, China-bound partnerships concerning resource and infrastructure chokepoints and resulting panopticons shift strategic control away from Western dominance towards Chinese contestation. This transpires at the geoeconomic power intersection, at which China-bound infrastructure and resource investments shift critical supply chain balances in favor of Chinese influence (Hillman, 2022; Nagy & Nguyen, 2021). Exemplary, China weaponizes its critical mineral market dominance by dictating access of less resourceful countries to uphold technological advantages and ensure control and dependence (Coyne & Bassi, 2024). Resulting, international actors securitize GVCs, which increases global competitiveness in a growingly common struggle to secure supply chain resilience and robustness. On the political/military power intersection, China expands its geostrategic foothold by controlling critical (maritime) infrastructure it accessed via alternative compensation when financial BRI project repayment defaulted (Blanchard & Flint, 2017; Chung, 2018). This likewise mitigates the US strategic military dominance, both in important overseas territories that host critical supply chains like Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America and in the Chinese near abroad where the US used to assume control via its hub-and-spokes strategy (Brewster, 2017).

Consequently, geopolitical and geoeconomic processes of strategic, economic, and political competition surge in importance. The LIO governance structure based on interdependence fails to moderate related conflict, as its most competent institutional tool, the UN Security Council, is structurally inadequate to deal with great power competition due to its veto constellation. But as BRI-related power output transforms international relations into a more competitive struggle of great powers and their alliances, and economic output spills over into political, cultural, technological, and military competition, institutional demand shifts from global interdependence towards affiliation-based networks. Through leveraging the BRI into solidifying partnerships and institutionalizing them in organizations such as the SCO, BRICS, and BRI forums, China gained a head start into this newer form of great power competition (Mladenov, 2021). This also affects Western organizations that slowed down in times of LIO cooperation but now reengage more ferociously in competition, such as the G7 (Crabtree, 2023). *Table 2* illustrates described BRI impact on international order processes and institutions with the given examples.

*Table 2: BRI-related international order change*

<b>IO Change</b>	<b>BRI Impact</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<i>Processes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More power competition</li> <li>• Leveraging interdependence</li> <li>• Development funding paradigms shift from value-based to outcome-based</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multipolar affiliation sources</li> <li>• Importance of alliances &amp; networks</li> <li>• More geopolitical power play</li> </ul>
<i>Institutions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changing alignments</li> <li>• Emerging &amp; declining institutional types</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• World Bank, IMF, Paris Club</li> <li>• United Nations</li> <li>• SCO, G7</li> </ul>

Mastering the transformation of global projects, programs, and even paradigms in their processes and institutions enables China to transform their global reach into considerable power shifts. Therefore, the analysis confirms  $H_2$  as BRI output significantly shifted global power distribution towards Chinese influence on global institutions, their paradigms, and economic and political processes.



## **BRI Response Strategies**

The research established that China leverages its economic capability through the BRI to gather alternative power sources, like political influence and global reach. It also uncovered how this accumulated power changes the paradigms of international order processes and institutions. This challenge to core LIO values and mechanisms threatens Western power, naturally eliciting a protective response. This chapter analyzes the strategies the United States and the European Union employ to react to growing BRI-related contestation. The theory suggests that (*H<sub>3</sub>*) *the US and the EU engage in balancing strategies to combat Chinese contestation.*

To test this hypothesis, the research traces US and EU processes to establish their desired international order ideal. In this design, the projects and programs that directly engage with development funding are most significant to extract the issue-oriented program response to the BRI. As the research demonstrated the vast spillover effect of BRI-related power towards international paradigms, it likewise is important to contextualize issue-oriented responses with macro-level strategies that exceed the BRI program scale. This way, the research identifies and explains response strategies and their causalities, whether they entail balancing, and which shape, intensity, and scope potential balancing takes.

Considered as a joint entity, Western countries exercise a tangible and distinct response towards the BRI in their programs, processes, and political communication. The increased emphasis of multilateral cooperative organizations, such as the G7, on China relations proves response urgency. The G7 issued statements expressing concerns about Chinese international order contestation and related activities (Lau & Stokols, 2023). Those concerns include the lack of transparency and good governance enforcement mechanism in BRI projects. They also exceed the direct BRI scope and tackle spillovers, such as Chinese military expansion or the demand to secure GVCs to prevent economic and technological dependence on China and concomitant potential coercion (Auswärtiges Amt, 2024; The White House, 2024b).

Further, the G7 in direct response launched its *Build Back Better World* program in 2021 at a time when the Biden administration aimed to re-bond with its global partners, especially Europe. B3W aimed to provide a BRI alternative by financing infrastructure development in developing countries focusing on transparency, sustainability, and climate action. It specialized in enhancing connectivity between Western actors and developing countries, their strategic institutions, and resources. B3W paradigms entailed a shifting perspective from Western countries on China that is more concerned with relative competition than the absolutist national or global institutional (via World Bank, IMF) development programs. Its mechanisms displayed

geostrategic influences driven by a perceived threat of relative concessions to China (Zhao, 2021). B3W emphasized the importance of public-private partnerships in order to combat BRI investment volume and targeted more practical benefits from regaining influence in developing countries (The White House, 2021). This would materialize in control over influential institutions, resources, and chokepoints. This way, B3W mirrored some BRI leveraging mechanisms, even if they naturally trail BRI volume and expertise (Mutlu, 2023).

Its successor, the *Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment*, formally also is a multilateral G7 initiative, yet the United States asymmetrically assumed leadership. This materializes in its design that inheres a neorealist zero-sum game logic regarding BRI impact and even more evidently combats China (The White House, 2022c). It rebrands the B3W in an effort to provide development funding more comprehensively, challenging Chinese superiority by imitating their program (Yu, 2024). While on paper promising similar results, the PGII assumes significant private sector funds to accompany public investments. But as private sector enthusiasm does not match public expectations, it practically lacks necessary public and private funding to flourish to its intended extent (The White House, 2024a).

Further cohesive efforts by Western institutions likewise demonstrate BRI response patterns. The *D-10 Strategy Forum*, which focuses on maintaining the LIO through cooperation between its 10 members (G7 + Australia, India, South Korea) developed a set of shared standards for infrastructure development that emphasize transparency, debt sustainability, and environmental and social safeguards. This strategy directly targets Chinese revisionism and its BRI-related development funding exploitations (Kroenig & Cimmino, 2020). Multilateral development funding institutions central to LIO networks with major Western influences, like the World Bank and the IMF, revise and reform their approaches to adapt towards catching up to BRI capacity and attractiveness by including more developing actors (Cornell & Swanström, 2020). This mostly concerns economic institutions and Western-dominated ones. But the fixpoint of the international order, the UN, conserves its established shape.

Displayed reform and revision efforts demonstrate how LIO institutions and processes engage with BRI dominance and power output. B3W and PGII prove that the West employs balancing strategies to steer such developments and combat Chinese contestation, therefore validating  $H_3$ . These strategies vary depending on the actors controlling its design and selecting desired output, even within the same institutional framework. Therefore, the research continues the analysis by separating its two most powerful Western actors, the US and EU, and their BRI-related strategies to identify individual patterns.

## US overall Reaction

Being the main protagonist of the unipolar post-Cold war international system, the United States used to be the hegemonic global superpower shaping the LIO. Thus, it perceives the threat of Chinese international order contestation most extensively, as such not only challenges the US-infused paradigms but also its hegemonic self-conception, both globally and in contested regions (Middle East, Indo-Pacific) where Chinese and US interests clash. Analyzing US behavior and policies directly or indirectly targeting Chinese influence enables the research to assess presence and scope of US balancing responses.

The US identifies China as main competitor to its national interests, with both sides increasingly antagonizing each other (Allison, 2018). It categorizes the Chinese near abroad and global stage power play as hostility towards its national interests, and emphasizes the importance of dealing with such in its National Security Strategy (The White House, 2022b). The degree of hostility, however, changed between the different administrations. While the Trump administration took a hard neorealist stance regarding China emphasizing a zero-sum game mentality for hegemony (Nye, 2020), the Biden administration refined this antagonization towards a clash between democratic and autocratic ideologies in a globalized world, while taking a more nuanced, issue-oriented perspective (Nye, 2023a). But as no matter the administration there is bipartisan voter support for being “tough on China” (Irwin et al., 2023), the domestic political landscape incentivizes neorealist perspectives and balancing measures.

This led the US under Trump in 2017 to claim that “*great power competition returned*” (The White House, 2017). Consequently, the US created the *China House* to coordinate and implement China-related policies. Those policies have different layers of perspectives: The strategic perspective concerns great power competition in the Indo-Pacific. As a response to Chinese contestation of international law in the South China Sea and US influence in regional processes and institutions, the US strengthened its military presence and strategic alliances in the Indo-Pacific (Scott, 2018). Key cornerstones to these policies are the repeated manifestation of security guarantees towards Taiwan, and the re-establishment and strengthening of the *Quadrilateral Security Dialogue* (Quad) and the *AUKUS* as alliances to jointly project power (Cheng, 2022; Sarkar, 2020). These strategic decisions imply a relative gains perspective, in which the US hard balances Chinese power via deterrence. This effort expands on the Asia Pivot under Obama, promoting US-China competition to spearhead US foreign policy interests.

The political level complements this strategic competition: By promoting the *Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy* (FOIP) under President Biden, the US and its regional partners endorsed

a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific by emphasizing international law, freedom of navigation, and democratic values while promoting cooperation via enhancing digital and infrastructural connectivity. This strategy also has an economic layer that proposes alternative financing to mitigate BRI reliance: The *Indo-Pacific Economic Framework* fosters trade and investment to promote high-standard economic integration and regional partnerships resilient to Chinese influence (The White House, 2022a). This type of response, even more than the military-related hard balancing, invites regional block-building to jointly engage in balancing efforts.

Another impactful competition layer is the mutual technological clash. Due to copyright infringements, the struggle for key resources, and partial dependence on Chinese panopticons via their tech giants like Huawei, the US views China as their technological archenemy (Drezner et al., 2021; Gulley et al., 2018). This led US lawmakers to promote several laws destined to both reduce Chinese influence on the US economy and its technological innovation and advancement capability and increase US competitiveness relative to China in the global technological race. The *CHIPS and Science Act* (2022) under Biden promotes long-term investments into domestic semiconductor production and essential technological components to reduce reliance on China and technological backlog (The White House, 2022d). The *Clean Network Initiative* (2020) under Trump discourages using technology from untrusted Chinese vendors in critical infrastructure, limiting Chinese influence and setting security standards (The White House, 2020). The *Strategic Competition Act* as part of the *US Innovation & Competition Act* (2021) under Biden complements these policies by endorsing a broader framework for strategic competition with China in terms of technology, economy, and geopolitics. Both Trump and Biden administrations pursued containment-driven legislations, yet they differ as the Trump administration employed more distinctively relative measures combatting China whereas the Biden administration focused on domestic capacity building as indirect relative challenge.

The US response to Chinese power contestation displays balancing patterns in its urgency, targeted nature, and broad policies. Governing administrations impact balancing scope and manners, as the Trump administration behaved more confrontative than Biden administration. US containment strategies inhere Waltzian characteristics of zero-sum game logic, realist perspectives, and a focus on relative gains in its response when they concern US domestic issues and the Chinese near abroad, the Indo-Pacific region. Globally however, the US either struggles to effectively craft balancing strategies or lacks ambition to do so. Therefore, US holistic balancing only materializes on the regional level, but not to a Waltzian extent on the global scale. Further, the research indicates that Mearsheimer's idea of a constant state of balancing

fails to explain US behavior, as the US massively increased domestic and foreign efforts to target Chinese contestation since BRI output materialized in the international order.

### **US issue-oriented Reaction**

After analyzing the general US reaction to Chinese contestation, its specific, issue-oriented reaction to the BRI is next up. As Walt's balance-of-threat theory and identified strategic patterns suggests, the research expects the United States to emphatically balance the BRI as the key means to Chinese contestation. It expects US development funding programs and projects to specifically target BRI output strategies.

The US issue-oriented reaction splits into two types of strategies to deal with Chinese BRI leveraging processes: Defensively, the US engages in decoupling or de-risking supply chains. This is an effort to prevent suffering from the panopticon or chokepoint effect of critical dependence to networks in which China controls hubs (Çevik, 2024). While decoupling appears to rather be an ideal scenario than a viable ambition due to the inextricable interdependence between both countries, the US pursues de-risking GVCs by friend- or on-shoring supply chains (Farrell & Newman, 2020; Hu et al., 2021). This process demands the increased emphasis on alliances and domestic investments that the US overall reaction analysis uncovered. Demonstrative examples of US strategic de-risking include the semiconductors industry through the CHIPS and Science Act, the efforts to source REEs and minerals from outside of China, and the re-routing of pharmaceuticals production towards trusted partners (Luo & van Assche, 2023).

Another layer to the defensive strategy is the prevention of growing Chinese global port control. Chinese companies operate 96 ports in 53 countries, with control mostly shared between Hutchison Ports, Cosco Shipping, and China Merchant Ports, the latter two being Chinese SOEs. As such port control inheres dual-use functions with potential economic (trade benefits, supply chains) and military (docking, refueling of naval vessels) purposes, the US seeks to prevent Chinese global expansion. It is not an offensive strategy as the US does not pursue ownership or control over the assets itself, it rather intercedes for port independence or ownership by companies not perceived as Chinese power projection tools (Kardon & Leutert, 2022). This strategy has mixed success: In traditionally friendly instances, like under Biden at the Port of Hamburg where the government capped Cosco investments (Sullivan, 2023) or under Trump where Port of Rijeka stakes went to Danish Maersk instead of Chinese investors (Simmonds, 2021), the US could diplomatically incentivize decision-makers to rethink Chinese control. In other instances, like the expanse of the strategically important commercial port of

Bata into military usability, this approach failed (Phillips, 2024b). The balancing strategy in this regard is rather one of containment than re-establishment of former power distribution.

Offensive measures concern reimagining its slacking development funding approach to challenge Chinese superiority, a key source of Chinese contestation. As the West failed to prevent BRI leveraging means through institutional design and LIO norms, and China approached the developing world with preferable opportunities, the only solution to challenge BRI ends is to compete by investing significant economic capital into an alternative program that outperforms or at least challenges Chinese development funding dominance and rebuild Western soft power. As the BRI has proven to be the means to several power-related ends, the research expects that a competing development funding program is the key strategy to combat Chinese (BRI-related) LIO contestation.

### ***Program Level***

The project closest to US program-scale BRI competition is the Biden administration PGII. Pivoting at the fringes between multilateral and US ownership, it distinctively inheres US-China relations logic and characteristics and scholarly described as US program (Larsen, 2024). Its structural ambition is a neorealist one of relative gains towards the BRI as Chinese program, and a zero-sum game between both competitors. PGII also turns the defensive logic of de-risking into an offensive one of controlling: By aiming to gain control over resource and infrastructure hubs in the most critical geoeconomic, strategic, and technology-driving networks, the US threatens to turn the panopticon and chokepoint tables on China (Schindler et al., 2024). This further securitizes the GVC nexus and development funding competition, potentially towards eliciting a security dilemma of pushback balancing (Wu & Ji, 2020).

However, the PGII also employs characteristics that fall short of US strategic ambitions to mirror China and the BRI. By emphasizing public-private partnerships to achieve the desired investment volume, the PGII concedes more influence to the private sector than the BRI does with state-owned enterprise investments. The program lacks enforcement mechanisms to reach similar control over leveraging mechanisms, and its transparency standards forbid leveraging clauses comparable to BRI utilization, thus PGII is less likely to benefit when projects bust. Instead, the US together with Australia and Japan created the *Blue Dot Network*, a Trump era quality infrastructure certification initiative that aims to ensure proper project choice (Losos & Fetter, 2022). The US and its allies can strategically benefit from PGII development funding when the investments enhance its critical networks, supply chains, and relations, and thus spill over into political and cultural influence, technological capacity, and global reach.

Further, the PGII inheres project-scale ambitions that exceed US China-focused balancing strategies. First, its G7 co-actors are less incentivized to directly balance China as they have less global power at stake and more economic cooperation to lose. Thus, they may deviate from the materialist US focus towards idea-based considerations within the framework, and prioritize less strategical (digital connectivity, energy security, resources) and more value-driven (climate action, health security, gender equality and equity) projects (The White House, 2022c). To isolate US strategies, the research supplements the program analysis with a project analysis that specifically examines key US investments regarding potential balancing towards China.

### ***Project Level***

Most of the project-scale US balancing is directed towards critical infrastructure projects. If they concern GVCs, as they often do, those are less frequently targeted at projects that aim to extract such resources, but rather at the transportation corridors. This proves a clear ambition to control current and future chokepoints of critical resource GVCs.

A key project to integrate the African continent into US-bound global supply chains are the PGII investments into developing the *Lobito Corridor* from Lobito to Kolwezi. This project aims at connecting the resource-rich Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Zambia, and Angola, and further implies supporting the establishment of processing industries along the economic corridor. The US invests \$360 million into restoring the Benguela railway to counter Chinese investments, and works together with the Africa Finance Corporation to facilitate project execution and create special economic zones (Phillips, 2024a; US Department of State, 2024). These should capitalize on the infrastructure to enhance Atlantic exports of regionally rich minerals like copper, lithium, nickel, and cobalt, resources central to the clean energy transition. As the DRC is the largest global producer of cobalt, and holds significant untapped reserves of copper, investor benefit through potentially increased resource access is immense (M. Hill, 2023).

This project not only proves US determination to facilitate critical infrastructure and resource investment for geoeconomic benefits, it also strategically purges Chinese influence on the region: Angola initially hired Chinese SOEs to rebuild the railway line in 2006, but construction and maintenance failure led to further rebuilding demand. Yet, repayment is still ongoing and partly facilitated by crude oil deliveries to China. In 2023, a conglomerate of European companies (Trafigura, Vecturis, Montaengil) attached to US development loans to finance its facilitation won the bid over Chinese offers to modernize construction on the corridor (Ogunmodede, 2024). Thus, financing the Lobito Corridor not only inheres absolute gains for

the US and its allies benefitting from growing influence over the mineral and logistics hub, but also offers the US relative gains in competition with China. This makes it a distinct case of balancing.

Lobito Corridor efforts are supplemented by further US investments. Smaller scale investments funnel into solar energy and infrastructure projects within Angola, or EV-battery factories in the DRC and Zambia (Soulé, 2023). Further US investment funds corridor expansion ambitions via Zambia and Tanzania towards the port in Dar Es Salam, potentially connecting a land-line to enhance free trade from coast to coast. Other investments imagine a junction to add a Zambia-Lobito railway line (M. Hill, 2023). However, resource investments fail to match displayed US infrastructure investments in the region: Most mineral extraction and trade flows are controlled by Chinese companies, whereas US companies backed out in the 2000s. By now incentivizing US-based private investments into regional mineral extraction, the US pursues regional geoeconomic balancing. If successful, this would further trickle down to political influence and technological capability, as it would change hub alignment within the network in its favor.

Further investments into African infrastructure are central to strategically balance BRI impact. The DFC funded the *Nacala Corridor Project*. By modernizing infrastructure between Mozambique, Malawi, and Zimbabwe, and connecting it with global trade routes, this investment benefits ambitions to facilitate US-bound trade (AfDB, 2017). Such investments help the US by enhancing trade opportunities and by improving its image of a credible and quality development partner, thus regaining political capital and reach in the developing world that it formerly conceded to the rising China. Relatively, such projects contribute to challenge Chinese development funding hegemony.

Another mode of US-China competition is the clash for gaining control over lithium supply chain infrastructure corridors. As the largest lithium processor, China controls 55% of the global market. Its most important lithium sources are imports from Africa and Latin America, through which they control a third of the global lithium supply chain (Blair, 2023). As crucial element to technological evolution and the development of batteries, energy storage systems, and consumer electronics, lithium is considered the “white gold” for the electric vehicle and renewable energy industry. Researchers consider it central to contemporary geoeconomic competition, claiming “big shovels” to be the successor of “big oil” (Yergin, 2020). Thus, the US tries to contest Chinese lithium market and supply chain dominance that leaves the US vulnerable to being choked off access to critical economic components (Altıparmak, 2023).



Consequently, the US invests into breaking Chinese supply chain dominance and building alternative network infrastructure through friend-shoring. US partners like Australia and Canada stopped sales of mine stakes to Chinese companies (Fildes, 2024; S. Liu & Shakil, 2022). Resource nationalism leads others to ban raw lithium sales (f.e. Zimbabwe), or reduce foreign ownership opportunities (f.e. Mexico), to add value to their industry by processing it (van Halm, 2023). More strategically notable, the US aspires to facilitate investments into infrastructure projects targeting the forefront of the lithium supply chain. A key to strategic success would be infrastructure investments into the “*Lithium Triangle*” in Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile that approximately hold 58% of global lithium resources (Berg & Sady-Kennedy, 2021). However, as Chile limits foreign company involvement, US-China competition for Bolivian and Argentinian lithium is high. Chinese companies hold a strong foothold in Bolivia, whereas Argentina usually tends to sell to the highest bidder no matter the affiliation, turning infrastructure investments into the triangle both tricky and costly (Ahmad, 2020).

As a result, the US employs a trial strategy: It attempts to promote self-sufficiency by increasing domestic capacity, yet lacks lithium resources to ever satisfy national demand. Incentivizing private investments into lithium stakes further suffers under high cost. Thus, its key means to contesting Chinese lithium dominance is investing into the *Bi-Oceanic Corridor* (Reinsch et al., 2024). The Bi-Oceanic Corridor connects the Atlantic Ocean with the Pacific Ocean via Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina, and Chile. This increases connectivity, trade integration, and connects critical resources such as lithium and copper with US-bound trade routes. Most notably, it replaces a fallen-through China-bound railway corridor to connect Brazil and Peru ports via Bolivia, two countries more economically interlinked with China. This matters as Cosco funds and majority owns the first Chinese-built Latin American deep sea port in Chancay, Peru, and would have made significant progress connecting it to its lithium and copper supply chains (Oxford Analytica, 2024). The partly World Bank loan-funded alternative uses road infrastructure and parallel railways to enhance the trade of critical resources. US endorsement ensures relative gains, as the countries benefitting from the corridor over its Chinese-planned alternative are more friendly to the US than China (Goodman & Schneider, 2023). This makes it a geopolitical play to restore influence in Latin America and narrow the lithium and copper supply chain gap to China.

Similar clashes happen in Central America. While the US tightened partnerships with Costa Rica and Panama to prevent widespread Chinese investments, those spiked in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. They not only enable infrastructure developments of ports, highways, railroad, and airports, but also in mining, clean energy, and technology building

operations. Beyond geoeconomics, China also benefits politically as those actors recognized China in the UN and signed BRI *Memorandums of Understanding* (Ellis, 2024). This Chinese political success shows how US balancing ambitions are prone to failure, and how its programs are susceptible to being overpowered by Chinese offers. It also hints towards a more regionalized balancing strategy towards key BRI regions, infrastructure, and supply chains that generate the most power output. The research suggests that the US lacks economic power and steering capability to foster fully comprehensive BRI balancing.

This explanation gains traction when further investigating US-China competition regarding critical chokepoints: China increased its political and economic influence on the Panama Canal through investments into linked key naval and infrastructure assets. Despite its strategic neutrality treaty, this led the US to employ balancing strategies into convincing Panama's authorities to drop Chinese led-projects that projected power onto the US (Chavez Rodriguez & Mohlin, 2023), which was successful under Presidents Cortizo and Biden (Runde & Doring, 2021). In a similar power play, the US contributed towards blocking an alternative to the Strait of Malacca, one highly impactful global economic and potential military chokepoint that inheres significant vulnerability to Chinese supply chains. Its planned Thai canal construction in the Kra isthmus aimed at creating a Malacca Strait alternative (Grare & Samaan, 2022), but got dropped over geopolitical tensions and feasibility issues (Ehrlich & Crispin, 2024).

Further US investments contest BRI-related power beyond infrastructure-related financing. With a volume of \$1.5 billion, the biggest US investment through the DFC concerns *Rovuma LNG* in Mozambique. It enables the development of offshore gas production to process liquefied natural gas. This aids the US in strengthening its strategic partnership with Mozambique, diversifying its gas supplies, and countering Chinese regional influence in energy creation (DFC, 2019). The *Millennium Challenge Corporation* (MCC) facilitates similar investments, increasing US reach in developing countries. Exemplary, the MCC *Ghana Power Compact* invested into national electricity infrastructure to foster power generation and distribution (MCC, 2022). US energy investments exceed Africa as strategic location, as the *Attapeu Solar Project* in Laos demonstrates (Convalt Energy, 2024). It exemplifies how the US incentivizes companies to invest into (renewable) energy production abroad, which benefits both its companies and the US impact on strategically important regions, like ASEAN countries. Aggregated, such energy investments secondarily seek economic advantages or foster critical supply chain or infrastructure influence, but primarily accumulate political leverage for contesting Chinese South-South cooperation narratives as inevitable development facilitator.

Finally, the US balances the technological BRI impact. The *Pacific Islands Digital Connectivity Project* facilitated by USAID aims to provide funding and technical assistance to improve digital connectivity in Pacific Island nations. This could counter China's growing regional influence in the telecommunications sector (USAID, 2023). Globally, the US and China compete for subsea cable contracts, as they carry dual-use potential. The struggle over contracting to *South East Asia–Middle East–Western Europe 6*, eventually won by the US based SubCom over the Chinese HMN Tech, is the latest in a series of US attempts to thwart Chinese projects and sustain its cable network panopticon. US state agencies advocated for and incentivized the deal with subsidies, supplementing its contracting with investments into countries on the cables route, such as Egypt, Djibouti, India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, while also coercing decision-makers by threatening with sanctions against HMN Tech to potentially render their construction useless (Brock, 2023). This panopticon effect leveraging effort not only proves US dedication to strengthen its assets in technological competition, but also displays a more hostile offensive balancing perspective towards China.

Concluding, the US engages in balancing strategies to contain China. It balances China holistically, and specifically targets BRI leveraging mechanisms and power sources. The US employs both defensive and offensive balancing strategies. Its key BRI balancing modes are challenging Chinese infrastructure building hegemony, mitigating its critical resource dominance in some GVCs, and preventing further port expansion to strategically important locations that render the US vulnerable. As with the BRI, the US contestation strategy through development funding trickles down towards various power projection ends that ultimately target rebalancing global interdependence while de-risking vulnerabilities to China. Offshore balancing efforts, while theoretically expected to have similar global impact, cluster around regional impact preferences that highlight Africa and South-East Asia. US response strategies are not yet capable of holistically balancing the BRI, but prove successful in containing some impact mechanisms.

The general notion of  $H_{3.1}$  proves correct as the US balances Chinese international order contestation holistically to restore international order dominance. However, such balancing not always has an offensive character, shifts manners with changing administrations, and further inheres regional preference in intensity and decisiveness. Thus, US balancing employs more selective and nuanced approaches than conventional balancing theory and US preferences would suggest, yet confirms its prediction of overall balancing efforts.

## **EU overall Reaction**

Contrary to the US, the EU pictures China less antagonistically. The EU faces less of the leading power syndrome that the US has, where there is a threatening rising power that has to be contained by any means necessary. Instead, the EU itself is a catch-up actor that, especially over the Trump administration, decoupled from the fringes of US alliance or bandwagoning in global unipolarity and instead embraces value-based opportunities in international order multipolarity (Smith, 2021; Smith & Steffenson, 2023). In growing economic and political ambitions to become a normative leader, the EU pursues more absolute than relative gains. This leads the EU to approach China with a mixture of cooperative and competitive strategies (Casarini, 2022; Keukeleire & Yang, 2023).

When discussing EU strategies regarding China, the research considers common EU foreign policy communication and interests. Those do not necessarily reflect the positions of each member state. The EU's most influential actors, France and Germany, deviate from each other as Germany is slightly more US-aligned and economically open to China whereas France prefers higher degrees of autonomy and acts more cautious (Huntley, 2022). Italy, after previously approaching China and welcoming BRI investments, turned to fiercely rejecting Chinese involvement (Sacks, 2023). Other primarily Eastern and Southeastern countries are deeply involved with China, such as Greece with the port of Piraeus (Bali, 2022) and Hungary with China as primary foreign investor and the prestigious Chinese-funded Budapest – Belgrade railway project (Dahl, 2024). Nevertheless, the EU has the authority to unite deviant positions into a cohesive foreign policy strategy (European Union, 2016) and set specific policy goals targeted towards China (Brinza et al., 2024).

With growing Chinese international order influence, instances of EU-China clashes surged. As ideas and world views between Chinese and EU leaderships severely differ, and Chinese contestation involves most value-based LIO paradigms that the EU favors, tensions in the EU-China relations rose. While aspects of economic cooperation through its interdependent markets prevail, political confrontation rises (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022). This confrontation like the national US-China clash concerns actor-centric issues, but significantly focuses on Chinese global reach and the concomitant value transfer that often conflicts European normative ideals.

Direct EU-China competition mostly regards their economic and technological disbalance. European markets economically benefitted from China's rise that fostered trade and growth. As Chinese competitors grew stronger, and national policies boosted their success over foreign competition, European companies struggle under asymmetric preconditions in the interlinked

markets (Brinza et al., 2024). These asymmetries mostly relate to Chinese subsidies for its major private companies and SOEs, their access to critical resources, and benefits from state-driven programs for technological innovation and development. Economic dependence on China and its networks coerces the EU away from levelling the competition, leading the EU to securitize its critical supply chains (Drezner et al., 2021). Resulting, the EU increasingly employs interventionist strategies to strengthen the domestic economy and corporations while incentivizing technological development (McNamara, 2023; Seidl & Schmitz, 2023). One key strategy to such measures is de-risking critical economy by friend-shoring European supply chains from weaponizable asymmetric interdependence, thus circumventing leverageable panopticons and chokepoints in its network by strengthening friendly hubs (Brinza et al., 2024).

Another intense level of competition concerns the Chinese global reach and its spillover on values and worldviews, especially in the developing world. The idea transfer of South-South cooperation and Chinese institutional power projection conflict key EU foreign policy goals clustering around its normative impact. Chinese paradigms of non-interference and focus on materialist cooperation confront European paradigms of promoting good governance and liberal values (Xing, 2021). As developing nations increasingly rally behind Chinese paradigms in international and regional arenas, this stealthily shapes global institutions and processes in contradiction to EU preferences. With development funding being a key means to transfer values through global reach and political and cultural influence spillover effects, this demarks the BRI as target worth contesting. Besides the value dimension, BRI-related global reach compromises EU ambitions to become a regulatory power, as it spreads Chinese norms and institutions to networks that the EU aims to set standards for (Bradford, 2020).

On the specific issues of geoeconomic security and value transfer via global reach, the EU shows patterns of confrontation with China. These hint towards issue-oriented balancing. Cooperation, especially economic and diplomatic, used to be higher during its peak liberal times. But despite rising competition in the late 2010s and early 2020s when a degree of *Realpolitik* gained traction in EU foreign policy logic (Biscop, 2022), EU-China relations still target mutual benefits. Thus, there is no holistic balancing effort. The European Union rather functions as a third power in US-China great power competition, that while cooperating with or endorsing US policies also engages cooperatively with China to mostly pursue absolute gains. When the EU engages in balancing strategies, then it competes in a Waltian, issue-oriented approach where the EU aspires to balance asymmetric dependencies defensively and Chinese normative impact offensively.

## **EU BRI-related Reaction**

Analyzing the BRI-related response by the European Union offers key insight on the scope and intensity of issue-oriented balancing. As development funding can impact both supply chain security (thus geoeconomic power) and value projection (thus global reach), the program level response via the Global Gateway is the perfect nexus of analysis. The research also assesses the project level response, but as Global Gateway is more concise and targeted with fewer outside influences than the PGII to the US, project level findings are less likely to deviate from program level design.

### ***Program Level***

Global Gateway is the institutionalized EU BRI response program. As a broad infrastructure development strategy it aims to create smart, sustainable, and secure links between the EU and the developing world by providing development funding via digital, energy, and transport sector investment through aggregating private and public financing. It distinctively positions itself as a “*strategic global alternative to the BRI*” (European Port Strategy, 2024) with the ambition to make the EU the most attractive partner to developing economies through its emphasis on promoting transparency, sustainability, and good governance (European Commission, 2024d). Commissioner von der Leyen framed the BRI as burdening recipient countries into “*selling their future*” with the “*strings attached that cause environmental damage, strip workers rights, bring foreign labor or compromise national sovereignty*” (European Commission, 2023). This antagonization proves distinct aversion to the BRI and implies that the EU aspires to balance the BRI.

These balancing ambitions combine goals of normative and geoeconomic power projection. Global Gateway employs a value-based program logic that materializes through two effects: First, project selection and implementation demands its stakeholders to comply with an attached set of values (democracy, rule of law, good governance, transparency, equality, sustainability, security), which directly inflicts those values onto recipients. Second, its projects and resulting partnerships broaden the global reach of the EU and its values, enhancing a sustained confrontation with European ideas in recipient countries (Furness & Keijzer, 2022). This impact magnifies if Global Gateway projects foster cultural influence as BRI projects do.

Second, the emphasis on infrastructure, energy, and resource investments proves a definite EU focus on its geoeconomic vulnerabilities: Steering potential trade routes through infrastructure investments in high value corridors aids the EU ambition to de-risk supply chain vulnerabilities.

Political impact through Global Gateway partnerships fosters the effect of infrastructure investments, as it increases cooperation reliability with recipient countries along the routes.

Energy investments tackle the urgent geoeconomic demand of countering energy dependence. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine when perceived European energy security vanished, the EU seeks resilient alternative corridors to compensate its energy production deficit. Connecting potential energy hubs and infrastructure to European trade routes through investments could open new or strengthen existing energy corridors (Mišík & Nosko, 2023). This would relieve pressure from potential energy network chokeholds that more resourceful actors can inflict on the EU if they weaponize European energy dependence. Global Gateway thus contributes to approximating strategic autonomy through friend-shoring. If those energy resources are mostly renewable as Global Gateway communication advertises, then this further boosts EU reputation as global leader in fomenting a clean energy transition and climate action, a recognition that the EU actively seeks to enhance its normative power.

Like energy investment considerations, critical resource investments nurture EU aspirations to mitigate leverageable dependences to overcome its deficit between industrial and technological demand and domestic supply capacity. Due to a lack of minerals, REEs, and other resources, the EU relies on imports to participate in GVCs. This reliance embodies vulnerabilities to suffering under chokepoint effects in import pricing and availability, and long-term panopticon effects if supply chains collapse. Resource investments alleviate geoeconomic pressure as they shift interdependence into partnering developing countries less likely to comprehensively coerce the EU through supply chain-related means (Amighini et al., 2023).

By competing with the BRI, these ambitions naturally conflict Chinese interests that aim to nurture development funding leadership into geopolitical power. This conscious contestation may in some aspects, like supply chain security, be motivated by absolute gains, yet in its geoeconomic reality materializes as relative competition for influence. Therefore, Global Gateway inevitably is an EU tool to balance Chinese influence via the BRI.

However, EU balancing neither targets China holistically nor BRI output aspects indiscriminately, but focusses on specific issues. By capping out at a volume of €300 billion in its initial phase (European Commission, 2024d), Global Gateway cannot compete with BRI scope or holistic impact, but specializes on investments to most impactfully de-risk supply chains and promote values. Therefore, Global Gateway soft balances the BRI on the program scale, but intensifies balancing on specific issues like infrastructure, energy, and resources to accomplish both absolute and relative gains.

### *Project Level*

On the project level, the analysis investigates evidence for EU balancing strategies through Global Gateway. The Africa-Europe Investment Package receives half of the investment share; both the Asia-Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean regions receive a quarter. Investments into the Western Balkans, Middle East, and Eastern Europe supplement those corridors towards a total of 90 projects in 2023 (European Commission, 2024d, 2024f).

The EU perspective concerning foreign investment into port infrastructure developed responsive to shifting power distribution and related impact. When Cosco took control over and expanded the port of Piraeus in 2016, the EU did little to contest the ownership transfer (Bali, 2022). When a Chinese consortium approached the port of Rijeka in 2019, the EU together with the US applied immense pressure to prevent the takeover (Simmonds, 2021). Now the EU itself invests into several ports abroad to increase connectivity with EU trade routes and enhance critical supply chains: Besides conventional trade route port investments into Brazil and Senegal, there also are specific investments into strategic locations (European Commission, 2024b, 2024c). The ports of Lagos (Nigeria) and Assab (Ethiopia/Eritrea) sit at strategic trade hubs at the heartbeat of powerful African economies. The Port of Pointe-Noire (Congo) marks the point where considerable Congolese minerals are traded to the global markets. Mauritanian port investments pursue establishing local blue economy. Investments into the ports in Mindelo (Cape Verde) and Lumut (Malaysia) aim at connecting renewable energy and hydrogen hubs to the EU trade network (European Commission, 2024b, 2024e).

The most outstanding EU investment co-funds the Mexican Port of Coatzacoalcos. Superficially, this deepens energy trade routes between the EU and Mexico while also strengthening other industrial supply chains. More importantly however, this opens the EU a foothold onto the *Interoceanic Corridor of Tehuantepec* in Mexico. This strategic Mexican infrastructure project provides an alternative to the Panama Canal via rails and roads. It includes industrial zones that target health, high-tech, and logistics industries, in which the EU invests into multidimensional energy projects concerning renewable energy, EV production, battery manufacturing, and the solar panel value chain (European Commission, 2024c; Gobierno de Mexico, 2024). This turns Mexico into a cornerstone of the EU ambition to promote green investments, and simultaneously fits into the US near-shoring ambitions to generate revenue from investment. With the Panama Canal subjected to increased contestation and reduced capacity, the Interoceanic Corridor projects to become a rival hub that could turn into an economic chokepoint, and potentially increase in importance if the US follows through on their



near-shoring ambitions (The Economist, 2024). Rivaling competing Chinese infrastructure investments into Mexico, like *Tren Maya* (Soutar, 2020), the EU investment into the Port of Coatzacoalcos and the Interoceanic Corridor soft balances potential fallout from US-China competition (Gachúz Maya, 2022) while securing influence on a future chokepoint.

Global Gateway facilitates similar geoeconomically driven infrastructure investments into Africa. As described, the EU-restored Lobito Corridor opens Atlantic trade routes to critical resources. Critical raw material extraction contracts in the DRC and Zambia supplement these investments with further geoeconomic benefits. Likewise, investments into new corridors connect the port of Douala (Cameroon) with N'Djamena (Chad) and the ports of Libreville (Gabon) and Kribi (Cameroon) with oil- and mineral-rich trade routes. Investments into the *Northern Strategic Transportation Corridor* between Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC and the *West Africa Strategic Transport Corridor* on the routes Abidjan-Lagos, Abidjan-Ouagadougou, Dakar-Abidjan, and Cotonou-Niamey aim to increase regional connectivity. Funding sustainable investment in the developing world bolsters EU global reach. The infrastructure development in Eastern Africa is supplemented by the *Critical raw materials Partnership Roadmap* in Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia, which aims to promote sustainable raw materials value chains (European Commission, 2024b). These extensive infrastructure investments rival the modern image of China as the inevitable infrastructure facilitator in instable regions, and further contradict the EU image of an unwilling partner in countries with instable governments. They mainly provide political and cultural capital as return on investment, but also deepen critical resource supply chain integration into EU-bound trade routes.

A different aspect of EU investment concerns energy sources, mainly renewable ones. The *African Team Europe Initiative* engages European and African public and private sector stakeholders to increase electricity production and secure energy access. This partnerships offers efficient and sustainable green energy to African actors, while fostering further European FDI and incentivizing European imports from surplus power production (European Union, 2024). Individual projects include rehabilitating (DRC, Uganda) and building new renewable energy sources through hydroelectric (Cameroon) and solar (Ghana) power plants. The EU co-financed Africa's biggest wind farm at Lake Turkana in Kenya, and implemented a green hydrogen concept for Namibia to enhance value chains that diversify African and EU energy consumption and trade (European Commission, 2024b). This measure increases long-term energy security and decreases vulnerability to weaponized energy-related interdependence.

EU investments into Asia focus on different issues, like the *ASEAN Team Europe Initiative*: While also targeting value chains, it mixes renewable energy ambitions with digitalization and submarine cable investments. The partnership with Central Asia has two clusters: Combating climate impact with water and energy production measures concerns normative benefits, and a common critical raw material cooperation concerns European geoeconomic power and resource security (European Union, 2024). This directly contests Chinese regional ambitions, especially its strategic partnership with Kazakhstan on raw materials, batteries, and renewable hydrogen. The EU soft balances Chinese regional BRI-related influence politically and economically through institutional cooperation and integration via Global Gateway.

Technological balancing beyond ASEAN competition concerns projects such as building the Egyptian submarine fiber optics connector as part of the *MEDUSA project*, rivalling Chinese investment ambitions an access to transferred big data (European Commission, 2022). It further includes strategic investments into future technology enabling resources, like sustainable lithium value chain funding in Argentina (European Commission, 2024c). Such Global Gateway balancing efforts often combine value-based input with tangible material output. As conventional European development funding used to focus on the input-dimension but neglected the output-dimension, Global Gateway projects increased their attractiveness to private investment and private-public partnerships by focusing more on return on investment. This increased project-scale investment willingness enables the EU to more capably project collective power through Global Gateway on the program scale, which results in enhanced balancing capability.

The EU uses this capability specifically to facilitate normative and geoeconomic balancing against China. While the EU is less interested in conventional military balancing, and only loosely supports related US aspirations, it focusses on balancing two key strategic clashes with China: First, Global Gateway development funding defensively balances Chinese coercion potential to its critical networks, mostly by enhancing alternative supply chain routes via well-disposed hub and transportation infrastructure. Increasing stakes in critical resource production augment these de-risking efforts. Second, Global Gateway's program strategy actively balances Chinese value transfer onto BRI partners through political and cultural influence and global reach. By promoting a credible BRI alternative that positively impacts recipient development and fosters partnerships, the EU ambition to exercise normative power through positive proposition for the values attached to Global Gateway development funding benefits long-term.

Therefore, the research validates hypothesis  $H_{3.2}$  that the EU balances Chinese normative and geoeconomic impact to ensure supply chain security and promote European values. This balancing via Global Gateway is mostly soft, but in critical issues can also be confrontative. The research proves that project-scale balancing aligns with program-scale strategies, and that these measures serve the EU strategic purpose of relatively containing Chinese influence in some policy areas to increase its absolute power projection capability.

## **Strategy Comparison & Output**

After analyzing both the Chinese BRI and its power-related output and the effect of US and EU responses and underlying strategies, the research continues with its final stage of analysis. This sub-chapter compares the strategies that determine development funding programs for similarities and differences, and then estimates how those influence program efficiency and international order impact. Literature suggested that ( $H_4$ ) *US and EU strategies trail Chinese efficiency and thus struggle to effectively balance in the short-term, but inhere long-term balancing potential.*

## **Development Funding Strategy Comparison**

*Table 3* aggregates the results from the previous levels of analysis that concern Chinese, US, and EU development funding strategies. It compares the key targets, the perspective on gains, the input/output dimension, power output, and balancing modes.

First, there is a distinct difference in the key targets each actor set through development funding. China is clearly focused on maximizing the power output it can generate. It utilizes development funding as contestation means to US dominance and enabler of multipolarity. The US response displays clear balancing ambitions that target Chinese power output and aim at combatting its LIO contestation to re-establish power. It also aspires decoupling from Chinese-dominated networks to mitigate dependence as a security means. The EU also emphasizes the supply chain perspective and shares common strategies to establish and strengthen friendly networks, but envisions de-risking rather than decoupling from Chinese influenced hubs. It pursues the goal of raising normative power by linking development to its ideas and values.

*Table 3: Development funding strategy comparison*

<b>Goal Selection</b>	<b>China</b>	<b>US</b>	<b>EU</b>
<i>Key Targets</i>	Maximize power output, challenge US global dominance, secure networks	Balance Chinese influence, decouple critical supply chains, re-establish power	Raise normative impact, de-risk critical supply chains, enhance networks
<i>Absolute Gains</i>	High	Medium-Low	High
<i>Relative Gains</i>	Medium	Very High	Medium-Low
<i>Input-Focus</i>	Low	Medium	High
<i>Output-Focus</i>	Very High	High	Medium-High
<i>Economic</i>	Low	Low	Medium-Low
<i>Military</i>	Medium-High	High	Low
<i>Political</i>	High	Medium	Medium
<i>Cultural</i>	Medium	Low	High
<i>Technological</i>	High	High	Medium
<i>Global Reach</i>	Medium-High	Medium	High
<i>Geoeconomic</i>	High	High	High
<i>Balancing</i>	regional, implicit, targeting the US	Holistic, offshore, targeting China	issue-oriented, soft, targeting dependence

These discrepancies lead to different gains perspectives from the development funding strategies. Both China and the EU are mainly concerned with building its influence through their programs, thus pursuing a high degree of absolute gains. The US instead explicitly focusses on contesting China, thus clearly targets relative gains towards China in its projects. China itself uses the BRI as tool to contest US dominance, therefore seeking relative gains regarding the US. The EU targets relative gains through balancing China in strategic networks and its generated value-output, but this relative perspective is more a mode to absolute gains than a sustained paradigm.

Differences in key targets and perspectives influence the input/output dimension: China is the least focused on the modalities that come with development funding. Its economic abundance allows it to be the least selective in program choice and take higher risks. Instead, its program intends to maximize BRI power output. The EU in turn has a high impact focus given the centrality of values to its strategy, which means that the value throughput linked to its idea-based input can be of higher importance than the factual output. With limited economic resources and alternative power projection capabilities, Global Gateway is more selective with

project scope and size, focusing on projects that fit their idea-based input conditions. However, the focus on power output increased compared to conventional EU development funding which often was value-attached aid. The US similarly, yet more intense, changed directions. While there is value-based input and the economic pressure to choose projects more selectively than China, development funding is clearly output-driven to compete with Chinese power.

Power output emphasis notably differs between the three actors, but has one common denominator: Traditional economic benefits are less relevant than other modes of power. While the EU mostly considers military power through the lens of alliance contribution, the US and China compete for military development funding through the global securitization of port control for strategic use. The EU seeks port influence mostly for geoeconomic purposes. The asterisk to Chinese military power is that it materializes through the dual-use capacity of its port control. That may be a constructed security dilemma, but significant usable military output hints towards such functioning.

China specifically seeks political output to contest LIO institutions with accumulated support. While the BRI generates political impact via its loan clauses, the EU and US seek to balance this output but lack the tools to enable political balancing.

US interest in cultural power is low. China significantly generates cultural output through the BRI. This is more a byproduct than a project-scale target, but validates the program-scale narrative of South-South cooperation. The EU specifically targets cultural output with its value-based approach, both to restore development funding credibility and raise normative power through value transfer in conditional funding.

EU technological power output is lower than US and China counterparts, both because it lacks the distinct ambitions and abilities to compete at that level. China seeks data and material input and operational testing of its innovation capacity through the *Digital Silk Road*. The US identifies balancing technological outcome as key means to contain China, and thus specifically targets projects where they can contest, like in deep-sea cable engineering, to sustain global panopticons.

The global reach dimension is strongly interlinked with the political and cultural ones and shows correspondent differences. Global Gateway targets global reach through its distinct area projects that promise to enhance normative impact by transferring values. China seeks global reach to balance US influence broadly. US development funding pursues global impact to

counterbalance China's rise, but its reactionary project potpourri hinders a cohesive strategy to enhance global reach compared to the more self-determining BRI and Global Gateway.

Finally, while not a conventional mode of global power, the geoeconomic impact matters especially through the lens of development funding as means of international order competition. As the research proved how controlling interdependent networks, their hubs, and GVCs matters to project power, all three analyzed actors logically seek geoeconomic power. This struggle materializes in strategic investments, competition for critical infrastructure and resource extraction funding, and mutual balancing of influence. Geoeconomic competition is the pinnacle of US, China, and EU development funding strategies; and its effect on diverse power ends that impact LIO institutions and processes catalyzes the identified modes of balancing and contestation in development funding competition.

These balancing strategies differ by actor: When China upscaled development funding to contest the LIO, it envisioned to soft balance US systemic dominance. Contestation success and the concomitant usage of its several power ends enabled more powerful, holistic balancing against the US. Such balancing intensifies in the Chinese near abroad, where it targets US military presence and allied control over critical chokepoints. The US in turn holistically balances China through military means and geoeconomic competition. While still focused on offshore balancing in South-East Asia, growing Chinese global reach transcended this scope onto the global stage. EU balancing is more issue-oriented, and converges at the crossroads of geoeconomic competition and clashing values with China. Despite bandwagoning in alliance with the US and regular buckpassing aspirations from the US side, the EU mostly engages in a more nuanced, soft balancing approach regarding competitors.

Overall, China, the US, and the EU employ three diverging approaches to development funding that superficially seem comparable but are deeply divided in their logic, goals, processes, and outcomes. However, a striking similarity stands out: They focus on networks of critical infrastructure and resources to harvest geoeconomic power that is leverageable towards each individual global interests and power projection.

## Development Funding Output

How do those strategic similarities and differences influence the capability to shape the international order? And are the implied balancing strategies working in conserving or restoring desired LIO paradigms in institutions and processes?

Development funding output is not only determined by these strategies, but also through competition preconditions: To overcome established power, rising challengers usually have to outperform incumbent leaders to contest their dominance. China managed to achieve that as the BRI overwhelmed multilateral institution development funding by the World Bank or IMF with its unique approach of “no strings attached” and consequently achieved development funding leadership. The re-emerging development funding challengers, US and EU programs and projects, similarly need to outmatch the BRI to re-write development funding paradigms.

Due to raw economic power and state control over its important economic stakeholders, funding quantity heavily favors China. BRI overall funding exceeding \$1 trillion dwarfs Global Gateway (\$340 billion) and PGII (\$600 billion) resource mobilization goals, with the PGII significantly trailing its funding goals (The White House, 2024a). Chinese yearly spending, while decreased with BRI 2.0, likewise vastly outnumbers its competitors (Nedopil, 2024). This enables China to hold a greater project portfolio and take more investment risks.

Despite financial disparity, all development funding initiatives mostly rely on concessional loans on comparable terms. However, these concessions require recipients to comply with different attachments fitted to divergent lender priorities: As Chinese lending is very output-oriented, its concessional terms are tied to maximizing Chinese project control. Global Gateway mostly attaches value-driven input strings, but institutionalizes EU project attachment via company contracts or implicit trade routes. The US prioritizes non-China alignment as concessional condition.

*Table 4* provides an overview on how the interplay between strategies and development funding modalities impacts its efficiency and impact on international ambitions. Chinese project-scale efficiency is mixed, as its initial indiscriminate nature of development funding enabled several rewarding projects, but likewise inherited severe failures. This impeded Chinese financial power and incentivized it to refine project selection towards more qualitative control, but its scope and size allowed it to stomach project failure and establish high program efficiency via its successful projects (Schulhof et al., 2022). This program success led to very high paradigm change efficiency, as it allowed China to dominate development funding mechanisms.

*Table 4: International Order Output*

<b>Strategies</b>	<b>Scale</b>	<b>Efficiency</b>	<b>Impact</b>
<b>China</b>	Project	Mixed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• shaping institutions &amp; processes</li> <li>• global contestation</li> </ul>
	Program	High	
	Paradigm	Very High	
<b>US</b>	Project	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• balancing China’s impact on global power distribution</li> <li>• not really impacting development funding paradigms</li> </ul>
	Program	Low	
	Paradigm	Niche	
<b>EU</b>	Project	Medium-High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• contesting Chinese development funding processes</li> <li>• less international order process or institutional output</li> </ul>
	Program	Medium-High	
	Paradigm	Niche	

The US projects distinctively target strategic ambitions to confront Chinese projects. Despite restricted quantity, analyzed representative projects imply high project efficiency. But a lack of cohesion and program strategy curtailed program efficiency in comparison to its competitors. Yet the US employs niche efficiency in evoking paradigm change, as its confrontative nature to China balances its capability to further shape paradigms uncontestably. This paradigm output does not restrict itself to development funding, but likewise concerns its trickle-down effects.

Enhanced quality control ensures Global Gateway project efficiency, as it matches limited resources with strategic needs. Nevertheless, some projects are more supplementary to enable others more important to EU program-scale ambitions. There, the EU efficiently provides a credible program alternative that competes with the BRI. Applying pressure to China to adapt its program to competition complements the main purpose of establishing a tool to enhance geoeconomic and normative power, which Global Gateway proved efficient in. On the paradigm scale, however, the EU is less capable to elicit overall change as it adapted to its competitive geoeconomic paradigms, yet manages to contest the niche of value-based development funding paradigms through its loan concessions.

Overall, this proves how US and EU development funding can outperform the BRI on the project scale, but trails on the program and paradigm scale. Global Gateway has the structure to efficiently compete with the BRI on the program scale, but its limited scope and resources currently prevent it from catching up. The US is more concerned with the balancing perspective of contesting Chinese power output, but the project level progress needs to upscale to translate into paradigm efficiency.



What do these findings imply for the international order impact of each strategy? China is most capable of impacting the international order through the BRI. It enabled its capability to exercise global contestation onto the LIO and its protective actors, mainly the US, through shaping institutions and processes with the diverse power output resulting from geoeconomic spillovers. The US aims to balance this impact on the global power distribution through specifically targeting the sources of Chinese power output, mainly its critical resource and infrastructure investments. It is less concerned with impacting development funding paradigms, but more concerned with the bigger picture of fierce great power competition. The EU response impacts the international order issue-oriented while being less engaged in overall process or output balancing. It focusses on geoeconomic output and value-based input, which conflicts the way China leverages more than its overall rise in the international order.

Conclusively, BRI responses suggest that the US holistically balances Chinese power through any means necessary, whereas the EU balances the ways China exercises power that contradict their normative power projection and geoeconomic interests. So far, the balancing strategies elicit only mixed success in shaping the international order or desired aspects towards its interests, but contribute to stalling the previously ineffectively contested Chinese BRI-related power projection by mitigating its power output mechanisms. The efficiency of contemporary balancing efforts projects to translate into wider balancing success if US and EU development funding strategies further establish, refine its mechanisms, and potentially upscale, which roughly validates  $H_4$ . However, to restore pre-BRI power distribution through development funding, the US or EU would need to emphatically outperform the BRI, which appears unlikely given Chinese developing world influence, economic capacity, and leveraging mechanisms.

## Conclusion

The research analyzed how the US and the EU respond to BRI impact on the international order. Its staged design gathered evidence through process tracing to conclusively answer its puzzle. First, the research identified that China utilizes the BRI to leverage asymmetric interdependence, aggregate reliable global partners, and exercise influence through its network dominance. Second, it confirmed that BRI output significantly shifts global power distribution towards Chinese influence on global institutions, their paradigms, and economic and political processes. Third, the research uncovered that the US and EU engage in balancing strategies to combat Chinese contestation and mitigate their influence on processes that contradict their influence. The US balances Chinese international order contestation holistically to restore international order dominance, but does so in more regionally selective and nuanced approach than conventional balancing theory and US preference literature suggests. The EU balances Chinese normative and geoeconomic impact to ensure supply chain security and promote European values, and employs mixed strategies via Global Gateway that are mostly soft but occasionally confrontative. Fourth, the research identified the geoeconomic output focus as common denominator in the otherwise heterogenous strategies, and that the US and EU strategies trail the BRI in contemporary output but project to translate into wider balancing success if they build on existing project level efficiencies.

These extensive findings explain US and EU responses to BRI impact on the international order, and emblaze the interactions and processes that determine development funding policy design and balancing strategies. Such results matter as they contribute to scholarly research on great power competition, international order change, and the strategic dynamics of development funding. Future research benefits from accounting for outlined development funding impact on global power competition, especially considering how globalization and technological development raise developing world impact onto the global stage.

The importance of development funding and findings on strategic similarities demonstrate how geoeconomics surge in influencing global decision-making, and how the securitization of critical infrastructure and resources blurs the lines of conventionally detached modes of competition. It proves how leveraging LIO interdependence turned supply chains from a cooperative source of security to a competitive source of contestation, thus urging future research on international order change to consider it central to its explanatory patterns.

The research further enhances explanation patterns for studies on Chinese, EU, and US behavior in international relations. It uncovers how conventional balancing theory oversimplifies the

nuances of balancing strategies in a pivoting international order. Future research should modernize the concept of balancing towards a more fluid conceptualization that accounts for the diversity of power sources in highly interdependent systems, and expand the (soft) balancing framework towards more multipolar considerations of interconnected balancing though described diverse power sources. In the analyzed multipolar system where power, its modes, and global interests are both diverted and heterogeneous, and different actors hold and aspire power through divergent sources, the concept of balancing may be best enriched by the concept of containment. Different modes of containment would describe the varying, specific shapes of balancing that the analysis identified in US and EU responses that aim to suppress the Chinese rise overall or to specific issues, most notably the US effort to constrain the Chinese bid to contest its hegemonic position. Such containment terminology would add precision to the balancing framework in less rigid, multipolar systems like the contemporary international order.

The research was limited by its scope and resources. Its zoomed-out nature conceded detailed accounts of most individual projects to validly explain macro-scale implications. *How China lends* by Gelpert et al. (2022) does great at aggregating detailed project evaluations to assess program-level development funding. This and future research would benefit from a similar design for US and EU development funding strategies, to then enhance comparative concepts. More resourceful research designs would gain from collecting primary data by accessing decision-makers and analyzing related processes that pondered between offers from the rival development funding initiatives. Such data collection could enrich explanatory robustness on evaluating programs and their underlying strategies, also to predict future success and strengthen political advocacy on development funding paradigm, program, and project design.

The research analyzed that the US and EU respond to BRI-related international order change through leveraging LIO interdependence with mixed strategies of holistic (US) and issue-oriented (EU) balancing. Policymakers should acknowledge the importance of geoeconomic power to enable influence on global processes and institutions when designing strategic policies and learn from research insights when drawing or adjusting development funding projects and programs.

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