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## A New and Complicated Threat to European Security: China

China has been pursuing a foreign policy aimed at becoming a global hegemonic power, and its rising penetration and sway are reshaping the globe. Beijing is a progressively active international actor with improving military, economic, and technological capabilities. Relations between Europe and China are more complex than ever before. China has increasingly been a threat to European security, and there has been a conflict between Beijing's foreign policy purposes and European security. China's ideals and priorities do not overlap with Europe's own, and so Europe does not longer view China as a possible responsible stakeholder, but rather as the champion of a competing set of values and institutions. China and Europe have incompatible identities, and Beijing has been encouraging an alternative perspective on a liberal international order. China's autocratic state-capitalism model presents inspiration to adversaries of a democratic, liberal, West-led international order. This study argues that China poses both a material and an ideational threat to European security. The main objective of the article is to demonstrate the material and ideational dimensions of China's threat to European security through empirical evidence by utilizing the explanatory power of realism and constructivism theories. The article adopts the case-study method for understanding complex phenomena and providing detailed descriptions and analyses based on qualitative data and research.

**Keywords:** Europe, China, Security, Threat.

## Avrupa Güvenliğine Yönelik Yeni ve Karmaşık Bir Tehdit: Çin

Çin, küresel hegemonik bir güç olmayı hedefleyen dış politika izlemekte ve artan nüfuzu ile dünyayı yeniden şekillendirmektedir. Pekin, gelişen askeri, ekonomik ve teknolojik kabiliyetleriyle giderek daha aktif bir uluslararası aktör haline gelmektedir. Avrupa ve Çin arasındaki ilişkiler her zamankinden daha karmaşık bir hal almaktadır. Çin, Avrupa'nın güvenliği için giderek artan bir tehdit haline gelmekte ve Pekin'in dış politika amaçları ile Avrupa'nın güvenliği arasında bir çatışma yaşanmaktadır. Çin'in idealleri ve öncelikleri Avrupa'ninkilerle örtüşmemekte ve bu nedenle Avrupa artık Çin'i olası sorumlu bir paydaş olarak değil, rakip bir değerler ve kurumlar dizisinin savunucusu olarak görmektedir. Çin ve Avrupa uyumsuz kimliklere sahiptir ve Pekin liberal uluslararası düzene alternatif bir bakış açısını teşvik etmektedir. Çin'in otokratik devlet-kapitalizmi modeli, demokratik, liberal, Batı liderliğindeki uluslararası düzen karşıtlarına ilham kaynağı olmaktadır. Bu çalışma, Çin'in Avrupa güvenliği için hem maddi hem de düşünsel bir tehdit oluşturduğunu savunmaktadır. Makalenin temel amacı, realizm ve inşacılık (constructivism) teorilerinin açıklayıcı gücünü kullanarak Çin'in Avrupa güvenliğine yönelik tehdidinin maddi ve düşünsel boyutlarını ampirik kanıtlarla ortaya koymaktır. Makale, karmaşık olguları anlamak, nitel verilere ve araştırmalara dayalı ayrıntılı açıklamalar ve analizler sunmak için vaka çalışması yöntemini benimsemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Avrupa, Çin, Güvenlik, Tehdit.

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# **A New and Complicated Threat to European Security: China**

## **1. Introduction**

During the previous twenty years, China has become a major economic partner for European countries. Following Beijing's participation in the World Trade Organization in 2001, trade relations between China and Europe significantly gained momentum. Europe once considered Beijing's competitiveness as an economic occasion, but now views it as a danger to security (Ghiretti, 2023). Relations between Europe and China are more complex than ever before. There has been a conflict between Beijing's foreign policy purposes and European security. Targets of China are not compatible with European interests, and it has been forming a threat to the Western-centric liberal hegemonic order. China has been encouraging an alternative perspective on a liberal international layout. Beijing's rising economic, military, and political power is highly likely to constitute an intentional menace to Europe.

This paper aims to contribute to the existing literature, both theoretically and empirically, by providing a comprehensive analysis of the case. The primary contribution of the article is that it serves as a sound theory-informed examining how different IR paradigms make sense of China as an object of threat to European security. Empirically, it aims to discover China's threat to European security by focusing on the economic, military, and technological dimensions of the threat. While existing works often focus on the material dimension of the threat, this study discusses the relevant case through both material and ideational dimensions. This article will also try to fill the relevant gap in the existing literature. My research question is "does China pose a security threat to Europe? Why and how?". I argue that China is both a material and an ideational threat to European security. I intend to illuminate the material dimension of the Chinese threat to European security by applying offensive structural realism and shed light on the ideational dimension of the Chinese threat by using constructivism.

The main objective of the article is to demonstrate the material and ideational dimensions of China's threat to European security through empirical evidence by utilizing the explanatory power of offensive structural realism and constructivism theories. The article adopts the case-study method for understanding complex phenomena and providing detailed descriptions and analyses based on qualitative data and research. Qualitative data were derived from official documents from China and Europe, policy papers, official statements, academic books, journal articles, and news articles. In this paper, first of all, it will be tackled with offensive structural realism and constructivism. Secondly, material and ideational aspects of the Chinese threat to European security will be discussed by using the relevant theoretical framework.

Different theories set forth different explanations regarding China's threat to European security, and they make different sense of China as an object of threat. I argue that the explanatory power of offensive structural realism enables a better understanding and explanation of the material dimension of China's threat to European security. On the other hand, constructivism, focusing on norms, identity, social construction, ideas, meanings, and beliefs, presents a stronger explanation for the ideational dimension of the relevant threat.

## **2. Offensive Structural Realism and Material Dimension of the Chinese Threat to European Security**

In his seminal book "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics", John Mearsheimer suggests that in an anarchic international system, states may use their power to damage others. Under this environment, relative capabilities are of predominant significance, and security necessitates obtaining as much power in comparison to other states as possible (Mearsheimer, 2001). As can be seen in the following parts, China has been increasing its economic, military, and technological power to the detriment of Europe. As an authoritarian global power, China has been shifting the balance of power in world politics at the expense of the West. By using its growing economic, military, and technological power, China has been damaging Europe by way of cyber attacks, the

South China Sea issue, technology theft, controlling the supply chain of critical materials, and providing support to Russia in the Ukraine war.

Mearsheimer's offensive realism has five suppositions: the international system is anarchic; major powers are capable of some offensive warfare, and they can harm one another; states can never be sure regarding others' intentions; survival is the principal aim; major powers are rational actors. Great powers can depend only on themselves for their security. The maximization of relative power is the best way for states to entrench their survival (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 30-36). The anarchic architecture of the international system does not offer any options to China and Europe but the maximization their relative power. Like other states, European states cannot make sure of the intentions of global hegemon China. The final aim of China is to have a hegemonic place in the global system to sustain its security.

The structure and design of the international system largely explain the behavior of states. States live in an anarchic system and under that structure, those states have no recourse to a higher authority in the event of problems. If a state is weak in the international system, a powerful state can take advantage of it. Being as strong as possible is the optimum situation for every state within the international system, as it is the most viable option for survival. The international system's framework is what leads to governments acting aggressively and competing for security (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 30-42). It can be maintained that in the last two decades, while the relative power of Europe has been decreasing, the relative power of China has significantly increased. China started to benefit from the weakening position of Europe on a global scale. China, trying to become as powerful as possible in every field, has become a threat to the security of Europe in the economic, military, and technological fields.

The nature of anarchic system compels states to pay great attention to the balance of power (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 30-42.). The rise of China has triggered a shift in the global balance of power (Chatham House, 2019). In the global system, the power center has been shifting from the West to the Asia-Pacific. As China's material power has been growing, it poses a significant threat to European security and the West-led liberal international order. At least in the past two decades, the balance of power between China and Europe has changed to the detriment of Europe.

Mearsheimer emphasizes that states work particularly hard to increase their percentage of global power. They search for ways to shift the balance of power by gaining more power to the detriment of possible competitors. States use a range of strategies -military, diplomatic, and economic- to change the balance of power for their own benefit. Even if doing so provokes mistrust or even hostility from other powers. When interacting with one another, great powers frequently adopt a zero-sum perspective (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 34) In this context, it can be argued that there is a zero-sum game between China and Europe. China's gain in power is Europe's loss. It seems that China, like other great powers, tries to maximize its share of global power. One of its fundamental aims is to alter the balance of power in its favor, and to some extent, it has succeeded in shifting the power balance.

Mearsheimer maintains that security necessitates obtaining as much power in comparison to other countries as possible. Growing capabilities might develop a country's security without inciting a retaliatory reaction. Revisionists' careful scheduling, potential targets' buck-passing, and knowledge asymmetries all contribute to the so-called hegemon's success (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 417). Josep Borrell acknowledged that the EU has been naive regarding China (Guillot, 2020). As we see in the China example, the West has been quite late in taking action in order to contain China and stop or slow down its rise as a threat. Until it gains sufficient power, China will refrain from fully demonstrating its military, economic, and technological capabilities.

In his book called "War and Change in World Politics", Robert Gilpin argues that "the fundamental nature of international relations has not changed over millennia. International relations continue to be a recurring struggle for wealth and power among independent actors in

a state of anarchy.” (Gilpin, 1981, p. 7). States prefer to engage in conflict since the international system is formed by and for the spearheading state in the system, shifts in power elicit confrontation over system leadership (Gilpin, 1988, p. 591–613). The current international system was constructed by the USA and the West after the Cold War. This international order has not met the expectations of a rising China. The changing balance of power in favor of China makes confrontation between Europe and China inevitable.

According to Mearsheimer, “... hegemony is the best way for any state to guarantee its own survival” (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 4). It seems that China is in pursuit of global hegemony. As Mearsheimer specified, if China keeps growing economically, that will convert that economic might into military might. China cannot rise peacefully (Mearsheimer, 2005). In this regard, the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept underlines that “The PRC is rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal and is developing increasingly sophisticated delivery systems, without increasing transparency or engaging in good faith in arms control or risk reduction” (NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, 2022).

Realism assumes that capability is the main indicator of a threat. Intention and capability constitute two principal factors that shape threat perception. Realism supposes that shifts in the relative balance of power leads to security concerns. It argues that asymmetries of power alone may form perceptions of threat (Walt, 1990). In this context, it can be maintained that the significantly growing military, economic, and technological capabilities of China have been triggering a threat perception in Europe. The changing balance of power in favour of Beijing has elicited security apprehension in Europe. The next section delves into how China’s economic, military and technological power can be examined as threat to European security within the framework of structural realism.

### **2.1. China as an Economic Threat to European Security**

China is referred to as a “state-permeated market economy” by certain authors. In China, official control extends to large enterprises. The government controls trade in company shares and limits the free flow of cash. For the sake of economic expansion, the state is a major player in the development of capitalism (Nölke, Brink, Claar & May, 2015, p. 538–567). Some governments in Europe consider Beijing’s economic clout a potential threat to their national security and a source of hybrid threats. The Chinese government at times utilizes its economic penetration to endorse foreign policy aims. The close relationship between the Chinese government and business in China allows the state to put foreign economic pressure on other countries without imposing formal sanctions (Putten, 2022, p. 5-10). Europe, which is dependent on China, is vulnerable to Beijing, which exploits its economic impact for political aims. Although China and Europe operate in the capitalist economic system, Beijing has adopted state capitalism, which predicates solid state and government control over Chinese companies doing business in Europe. The control of Chinese companies by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) carries considerable security risks for Europe.

Economic coercion has been one of China’s instruments. China has been leveraging its economic power to impact other states’ behaviour and decisions (Ghiretti, 2023). One critical is that when China has targeted Lithuania with a trade embargo following its construction of closer economic ties with Taiwan (Lau, Lynch, & Barigazzi, 2022). In the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, Beijing tried to hamper the sale of two navy submarines to Taiwan by the Netherlands. Primarily, China threatened to block access to the Chinese market for Dutch companies (Putten, 2022, p. 10).

Some Chinese policies pose challenges to the rule-based international order. In 2016, regarding the South China Sea conflict, Beijing dismissed the arbitral tribunal's judiciary power established under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, despite being a party to it. The Arbitral Tribunal ruled in favor of the Philippines (Besch, Bond, & Schuette, 2020, p. 6-7). This example explicitly reveals that China does not recognize international law and norms when they contradict Beijing's interests and its irredentist policies in the South China Sea, which has quite critical waterways for the European supply chain.

The South China Sea has been a vital passageway for European foreign trade. It has been militarized by China, and it has constructed artificial islands and airbases to support its allegations (Deni, 2021). Roughly 40 percent of the EU's international trade goes through the South China Sea. Until now, France, Germany, and the Netherlands have sent naval vessels to the South China Sea to defend their freedom of navigation or for military exercises, frequently in collaboration with the UK, US, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand (Wieringen, 2023). The 2016 European Union Global Strategy underscores that "In East and Southeast Asia, we will uphold freedom of navigation, stand firm on the respect for international law, including the Law of the Sea and its arbitration procedures, and encourage the peaceful settlement of maritime disputes. We will help build maritime capacities and support an ASEAN-led regional security architecture" (European Union Global Strategy, 2016, p. 38).

The economic interaction of Europe with China can entail strategic dependency. It is a high possibility that China would abuse this dependency in order to prevent Europe from taking initiative and measures concerning violations of human rights in China, cultural imperialism, assimilation, and repression policies in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong. Its control of the South China Sea and Europe's dependence on China for many products give China a great trump card that it can always use.

The economic dependency of Europe on China tends to have national security outcomes. 98 percent of Europe's supplies of rare earths come from China. Those critical raw materials are necessary for Europe's most sophisticated weapons, electric cars, batteries, solar panels, etc (Amaro, 2023). Beijing poses security and investment risks to Europe's strategic sectors, and their reliance on the Chinese market expose them vulnerable (Dempsey, 2023). Following the Covid-19 epidemic, Europe has suffered from supply chain disruptions and viewed how overdependency on China threatened its economic security (Ghiretti, 2023).

Josep Borrell argued that Beijing's pressure on Taiwan and its show of force against Taipei might directly impact the security and prosperity of Europe by emphasizing the importance of Taiwan for European needs in terms of semiconductors, supply chains and critical value chain (The European External Action Service (EEAS), 2021). Europe-China economic relations have national security ramifications. Europe's vital infrastructure and supply chains, particularly chips, port facilities, semiconductors, and 5G networks that are progressively controlled by China, reveal the fragility of Europe vis-à-vis China, and constitute a security threat to Europe in terms of intelligence gathering and economic security (Gramer, & Iyengar, 2022). Chinese law necessitates that firms from China cooperate with state secret services (The Group of the European People's Party (EPP Group), 2021).

According to the Netherlands' intelligence agency, China is the biggest danger to Dutch economic security. It has drawn attention to commercial espionage and covert investments. The agency has underlined that Beijing's military aims are driving the initiative to acquire Dutch and Western technologies. It has argued that "China uses both legitimate investments, corporate takeovers and academic cooperation, as well as illegal (digital) espionage, insiders, covert investments and illegal export. Dutch companies, knowledge institutions and scientists are regularly victims of this (Reuters, 2023).

Beijing's involvement in European ports such as Italy, Spain, Greece, the Netherlands, and Belgium has significantly augmented over the past decade (The House Foreign Affairs Committee, 2022). China Ocean Shipping (Group) Company (COSCO) purchased a majority share in Greece's

largest port, Piraeus Port, in 2016 (Amaro, 2022). Chinese control of some major European ports constitutes both an economic and military security problem. Some military planners argue that such ports may not be accessible in the short term if troops had to be transported via them in a crisis (Besch, Bond, & Schuette, 2020, p. 10-11). Beijing's investment in European infrastructure such as ports, telecommunications networks, and shipping terminals enable a suitable opportunity for intelligence gathering for China. It will likely weaponize its ownership of infrastructure in Europe to achieve its goals (Deni, 2021).

Chinese telecom companies constructing Europe's 5G infrastructure and getting majority shares in key European ports pose a geopolitical and intelligence threat and vulnerability to Europe (Gramer, & Iyengar, 2022). As offensive structural realism argues, great powers can depend only on themselves for their security. European reliance on China in the fields of technology, communications, and artificial intelligence poses a vital threat to European security.

Europe progressively depends on Beijing for final products (Besch, Bond, & Schuette, 2020, p. 10). China poses a significant potential to use its economic penetration for political potency that would undermine the sovereignty of European countries (Putten, 2022, p. 8). UK PM Rishi Sunak claimed that China was the largest state-based threat to UK economic security (The Independent, 2022). China has been consolidating its economy at the cost of the competitiveness of European industrialized countries. It has been widening global sway while limiting the impact of European countries (Putten, 2022, p. 8).

## **2.2. China as a Military Threat to European Security**

NATO has 30 members in Europe. In other words, they are military allies of the US, which is the most significant rival and even threat to China. When China and the USA or NATO confront in the Asia-Pacific region, Europe is highly likely to become one of China's main targets. In such a situation, Beijing could employ its economic leverage to cause harm to European NATO members. If a war emerges between Washington and Beijing, it is highly likely that NATO members of Europe will support their NATO ally, and China-Europe economic relations will be negatively affected. This would elicit a disruption of supply chain in Europe and endanger the security of supply.

It seems that the EU-NATO strategic partnership has a high probability of turning Europe into a target for China. Dated January 10, 2023, the Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation designates bilateral relations as "strategic partnership". This declaration touches upon authoritarian actors and China as follows: "Authoritarian actors challenge our interests, values and democratic principles using multiple means – political, economic, technological and military" (The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2023).

Adopted during the June 29, 2022, NATO meeting in Madrid, the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept underlines that "The People's Republic of China's (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values. The PRC employs a broad range of political, economic and military tools to increase its global footprint and project power, while remaining opaque about its strategy, intentions and military build-up. The PRC's malicious hybrid and cyber operations and its confrontational rhetoric and disinformation target Allies and harm Alliance security" (NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, 2022).

Chinese students with ties to military scientific research establishments have been conducting research at European universities (Besch, Bond, & Schuette, 2020, p. 14). Beijing undercuts Europe's military abilities by taking intellectual property connected to the military and giving it to the country's defense industry while Beijing improves new weapons (Deni, 2021). As offensive realism suggests, if China keeps growing economically, that will convert that economic might into military might. China has been determinedly developing its military capabilities and increasing its military expenditure (The World Bank Group). The rising momentum of China's military expenditures in the last decade is shown below.

**Military expenditure by China, in current US\$ m. (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2023).**

2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
164070	182109	196538	198538	210443	232530	240332	257973	285930	291958	296438

The militarization of the South China Sea, the construction of artificial islands, and the building of airbases by China to support its illegal territorial allegations pose a military security threat to Europe. As explained above, the South China Sea has been a vital passageway for European foreign trade, and the interests of Europe require the protection of free and safe shipping there.

According to the NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, China aims to dominate vital infrastructure, strategic minerals, supply chains, important industrial and technological domains. It builds strategic dependencies and expands its power by using its economic might. “It strives to subvert the rules-based international order, including in the space, cyber and maritime domains. The deepening strategic partnership between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order run counter to our values and interests” (NATO 2022 Strategic Concept, 2022).

China-Russia cooperation seems to pose a threat to European security. Deepening and growing China-Russia economic relations have ensured economic lifelines for Russia’s heavily sanctioned economy. According to the senior European diplomat: “What may be finally helping Europe wake up to the China threat is Beijing helping Moscow and giving it more diplomatic cover to carry out the war” (Gramer, & Iyengar, 2022). In Russia’s Ukraine invasion, China supports Russia in order to undermine European security.

China and its businesses have been supplying Russia with critical components such as machine tools, micro-electronics, and optics so that Moscow can produce more weapons for the Ukraine war (The BBC, 2024). China is providing Russia with significant assistance in expanding its defense industrial base. It is contributing a lot of machine tools, drones and turbojet engines, as well as technologies for microelectronics, nitrocellulose, cruise missiles, and cruise missile defense. China’s assistance is significantly affecting Russia’s capacity to carry out its attack on Ukraine. China is assisting Russia in enhancing its satellite and other space-based capabilities for use in that country (Atwood, 2024). As the conflict in Ukraine rages on, China and Russia are strengthening and expanding their security and commercial cooperation (Al Jazeera Media Network, 2022).

It can be argued that the reasons listed above—the COVID-19 crisis and China’s support for Russia in the Ukraine war—have increased Europe’s threat perception towards China. This situation has approximated Europe and the USA one another. On the other hand, it seems that, contrary to the Europe-USA equation, China has been deepening its economic, political, and military relations with Russia. It appears that this polarization may become far more apparent in the forthcoming years. As offensive realism asserts, what really matters the most is the balance of power.

**2.3. China as a Technological Threat to European Security**

In 2015, China launched the “Made in China 2025” (MIC2025) programme. In accordance with this scheme, Beijing aims to acquire high-technology firms outside China and transmit their intellectual property to mainland. In this context, in 2016, the robot-maker company Kuka from Germany, the microchip company Silex and the semiconductor firm Norstel from Sweden, and in 2017, British chip designer Imagination Technology from the UK were purchased by Chinese manufacturers (Besch, Bond, & Schuette, 2020, p. 10). A Chinese owned manufacturer Nexperia tried to purchase the UK’s biggest chipmaker Newport Wafer Fab (House Foreign Affairs Committee, 2022).

Beijing poses obvious security risks to Europe, especially in terms of critical infrastructure and the significant dependency of Europe's digital network on Chinese technology. The Chinese government can be allowed access to any private company's data in China under its law. Chinese equipment is highly likely to permeate telecommunications and infrastructure networks in European NATO members (Pallanch, & Zhang, 2021). Cyberattacks from China on European industry, military, academic, and government institutions have been massive (Deni, 2021). Beijing has been a substantial source of cyberattacks aimed at data collecting (Putten, 2022, p. 11). According to cybersecurity firm Proofpoints, Chinese cyber espionage group Mustang Panda which is believed to be operating for the sake of the Chinese government has been targeting European diplomats. It previously has targeted telecommunications companies in Europe (Arghire, 2022).

Britain's PM Rishi Sunak considered China the biggest danger to both national and international security. He argued that Beijing "*was stealing our technology and infiltrating our universities*" and supports Russia by purchasing Russian oil (Al Jazeera Media Network, 2022). Josep Borrell has underlined the importance of hindering sensitive technology from being used by China for military aims (Borrell, 2023). China's threat to Taiwan also constitutes a security threat for Europe's semiconductor needs derived from Taiwan. It seems that China may blackmail Europe by exploiting its control over critical industries and global supply chains. Beijing is highly likely to use its global leadership in artificial intelligence, 5G, quantum computing, UHV power, satellites, and drones as leverage and a threat instrument against Europe (Hickman, 2022).

Europe's overreliance on Chinese technology and investment elicits fragility and vulnerability for Europe against China. Chinese compulsive economic practices and the threats of spyware embedded in its technology have increased security concerns in Europe (Gramer and Iyengar, 2022). Many European countries have taken action in recent years to de facto prohibit or limit Chinese telecoms from using their 5G networks (Wieringen, 2023). Britain has prohibited Chinese-made security cameras from sensitive state buildings (Al Jazeera Media Network, 2022). Britain and France have prohibited TikTok, which is owned by the Chinese firm ByteDance, from official devices. Their security concern was that it might endanger sensitive user data, and put it into the hands of the Chinese government. There have been allegations that the application was transmitting users' data to servers (Maheshwari and Holpuch, 2023).

The Chinese telecommunication company Huawei and its role in 5G infrastructure in Europe could pave the way for Chinese intelligence penetration and espionage (Besch, Bond, & Schuette, 2020, p. 12). Britain has prohibited the buying of new Huawei 5G devices after 2020 and ordered all Huawei 5G kits to be removed from British networks by 2027 (The House Foreign Affairs Committee, 2023). Britain and Germany have prevented Chinese firms from buying semiconductor manufacturing facilities in their countries, citing domestic security apprehensions (Gramer and Iyengar, 2022).

Security concerns in Europe have been growing as a result of the TikTok's ties to China and worries about the privacy and security of the Chinese-owned video-sharing app. The Danish Defense Ministry forbade personnel from installing TikTok on their work phones and instructed those who had already done so to do so as soon as possible. Invoking concerns about data security, the Dutch central government forbade the use of TikTok and similar apps on work phones. The Norwegian parliament outlawed Tiktok on work devices (Chan, 2020).

### **3. Constructivism and Ideational Dimension of the Chinese Threat to European Security**

Constructivist theory operates under the premise that security is a social construction. Ideational elements are pivotal to the construction and practices of security in international relations. For constructivists, security has different meanings in different contexts, and identity and norms are fundamental to security studies. According to the constructivist approach, threat perception is connected to both identity politics and the legitimacy of some actors within the framework of shared norms (McDonald, 2008, p. 61-67).



Ideational powers such as identity, ideas, and political ideology can be a national security threat, trigger threat perception, and influence state policy. For targeted states, this nonmilitary power could undercut their internal political stability and regime survival. Ideational powers have the possibility of subverting the legitimacy of regimes in targeted states and leading to social turmoil in those countries (Rubin, 2014, p. 5-19).

The main focus of constructivism is the impact of ideational factors and the social construction of international relations. According to Matt McDonald, "... constructivists argue that the world is constituted socially through intersubjective interaction; that agents and structures are mutually constituted; and that ideational factors such as norms, identity and ideas generally are central to the constitution and dynamics of world politics" (McDonald, 2008, p. 59-60). It can be claimed that China's authoritarian political system is one of the main determinants determining Europe's perception of China. China's authoritarianism and Europe's democracy considerably affect intersubjective interaction in this relationship.

Constructivists argue that threats are not objective, and they are social constructions. In this framework, ideas and identities may become security issues. For constructivists, identity and the social actions of countries play a pivotal role in world politics (Rubin, 2014, p. 15). McDonald underlines that "... conceptions of who we are and what we value encourage particular ways of thinking about where threats to those values might come from, what form they might take and how they might be dealt with" (McDonald, 2008, p. 64). As an ideational component, threats to liberal democratic values come from authoritarian states, and threats to authoritarianism come from democratic countries. In other words, for European democracies the main threats stem from countries like China, for the Chinese Communist Party, threats spring from democracies like European states.

As constructivism argues, identities are formed by mutual interactions. It will be useful to remember the example given by Alexander Wendt regarding the social construction of reality. He asserts that "500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons" (Wendt, 1995, p. 73). In this context, it appears that mutual perception and intersubjectivity shape interactions between China and Europe. In the framework of historical and cultural experience, national identity assists determine the content of a state's interests (McDonald, 2008, p. 62). There is a causal relationship between identity and interests (Wendt, 1999; Katzenstein, 1996). In other words, the liberal-democratic identity of Europe sets the framework of its interests, while the authoritarian identity of China ascertains its interests. Accordingly, their identities and interests are contradictory. Different identities mean different interests.

While China is a one-party state, the European political system has been forming multi-party and pluralist democracies. China and Europe have different social systems, religions, cultures, and histories. China is "other" for Europe, and Europe is "other" for China. China has experienced European imperialism in its history, and European colonialism has been living in the memories of Chinese people.

With the defeat in the First Opium War between Britain and China (1839-1842), the "Century of Humiliation" (1839-1949) began for Chinese people. In the 19th century, Chinese territory was exposed to Western imperialism. Many Chinese cities underwent the European invasion. China was coerced to give concessions such as extraterritoriality to British, American, and French subjects in China (Schiavenza, 2013). For China, the century of humiliation meant the loss of national pride and territorial sovereignty, internal instability, invasions, imposed unequal treaties, and a corrupted society due to the opium trade. The Western countries demoted China to a semi-colonial status, along with Japan, in the era of the century of humiliation (1839-1949). The century of humiliation as a collective memory, narrative, and discourse has been one of the principal sources of modern Chinese nationalism.

The century of humiliation discourse has been a crucial element of modern China's principal narrative. It has been seen by Chinese to offer a historical experience of how powerful Western countries appear to treat China. In the period of the humiliation century, China was obliged to open and assign control over a range of ports (Kaufman, 2011). The past has had a significant impact on China's worldview (French, Johnson, Jenne, Crossley, Kapp & Meyer-Fong, 2017). China's foreign policy is still heavily influenced by the trauma it endured at the hands of foreign countries. 110 years old humiliation century witnessed military defeats, unequal treaties, invasions, and land concessions such as Hong Kong and Macau for China in the face of Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, Russia, and Japan (Williams, 2016).

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has ruled the country since 1949. China's foreign economic policies and domestic structure are largely shaped by the CCP rule. China's state and society are dominated by the CCP, which is intolerable to anyone who disagrees with it (Dumbaugh & Martin, 2009). There is not a civil society in China (Huang & Yang, 2002). As a one-party state, China is a type of textbook version of a contemporary totalitarian state (Bond, Godement, Maull, & Stanzel, 2022, p. 26). According to the constitution of China, "The People's Republic of China is a socialist state under the people's democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants" (The National People's Congress (NPC), 2019). Different and contrary political ideologies comprise a basis for China and Europe. China's treatment of protesters in Tiananmen Square in 1989 and Uyghurs in Eastern Turkistan for decades evidently reveals the nature and character of the Chinese autocratic regime.

In 2017, internment camps were established by the CCP rule for assimilating the Uyghur minority, committing cultural genocide, and committing crimes against humanity by way of so-called re-education. "By 2020 these held at least one million Uyghurs (of around 12 million in Xinjiang). In addition, a system of electronic and personal surveillance has been established throughout the region, Uyghurs are forced to move to other parts of China as labourers" (Bond, Godement, Maull, & Stanzel, 2022, p. 28). The June 9, 2022, resolution of the European Parliament about the human rights situation in Xinjiang underscores massive and structural human rights violations, systematic, brutal, and arbitrary repression, family division, political indoctrination, and mass deportations, limitations on freedom of religion and cultural devastation, and widespread monitoring in the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang. It also emphasizes widespread forced sterilization and forced labor schemes supported by the government, excessive and arbitrary prison sentences, the practice of arbitrary detention without accusation, and trial. It underscores that birth prevention precautions and the separation of Uyghur children from their families are tantamount to crimes against humanity and pose a grave risk of genocide (The European Parliament, 2022). In 2021, due to abuses of human rights in Xinjiang, the European Union levied sanctions on four people and one Chinese government institution, China retaliated with counter sanctions against four EU institutions and ten individuals (Bond, Godement, Maull, & Stanzel, 2022, p. 28).

Since European identity is inherent in liberal and democratic values, Beijing's foreign policy undercuts European interests (Putten, 2022, p. 8). China's priorities and values do not overlap with Europe's own. Europe does no longer view China as a possible 'responsible stake holder', but rather as the champion of a competing set of values and institutions (Besch, Bond, & Schuette, 2020, p. 1-4). The most salient ideational dimension of international relations is norms and rules for constructivists (McDonald, 2008, p. 63). China has not been meeting the shared expectations of Europe in terms of the South China Sea issue, the Taiwan dispute, economic coercion and human rights abuses, and minority rights. The growing and rising autocratic China has been a model and prototype for illiberal authoritarian regimes around the world. It has been gradually weakening democracies around the globe.

Constructivism suggests that specific meaning to be given to different actors and their purposes in the context of an array of social, cultural, and historic factors (McDonald, 2008, p. 61). From the standpoint of constructivists, identity occupies a pivotal place in the construction of security. Identity is one of the main determinants in designating a state as a friend or enemy (Hopf, 1998, p. 171-200) The Chinese political system and practices in the international arena constitute a threat to the European democratic order. China's autocratic state-capitalism model presents inspiration to adversaries of a democratic, liberal West-led international order.

Hong Kong Security Law undermines Hong Kong's long-established autonomy and freedoms by way of silencing opposition, carrying out mass arrests of pro-democracy activists, targeting journalists and academics (The Group of the European People's Party (EPP Group), 2021) Beijing's hardness in the East and South China Seas poses a challenge to Europe's democratic allies in that area. The rule-based international system that Europe seeks to protect is threatened by Beijing's illegitimate territorial claims in the South China Sea (Besch, Bond, & Schuette, 2020, p. 1, 17).

The world's spearheading autocracy China has been exporting its anti-democratic rules, norms, procedures and practices to other countries (Abramowitz, 2017). China has sold surveillance technologies like facial recognition to authoritarian governments. In this way, it exports its own authoritarian standards for controlling masses by way of surveillance (Besch, Bond, & Schuette, 2020, p. 15). Michael Beckley and Hal Brands suggest that "If Woodrow Wilson and his followers wanted to make the world safe for democracy, the PRC's rulers want to do the same for autocracy... The PRC is a brutally illiberal regime... "democracy prevention" is very much at the heart of Chinese strategy today" (Beckley & Brands, 2022).

International factors can exert a substantial impact on the prospects for transitions to authoritarianism. When authoritarian China becomes a global hegemon, it can be suggested that this situation will encourage autocracies and weaken democracies. The economic, technological, and military rise of China is a source of inspiration for all non-democratic states aiming for development. The Chinese model of development reinforces the thesis that democracy, freedom of expression, and the rule of law are not necessary for development. China shows the world that development and technological improvement are possible without democracy. Chinese experience put forward that democracy is not an integral and inseparable part of economic growth and development. Rising and growing China has been creating a driving force and motives for democratic backsliding and the reversal of democratization processes.

The liberal world order and global democracy form a menace to China's form of government. Liberal democracies undermine the legitimacy of autocratic regimes by creating a model and an example in terms of the rule of law, freedom of speech, free press, and respect for human rights for people who live under autocratic regimes. Just as Chinese autocracy poses a threat to European democracy, European democracy poses a threat to the Chinese autocratic political system. China's autocracy based on one-party rule shapes its foreign policy behavior by supporting autocracies against the threat it perceives from democracies.

Liberal democracies and China have different ideologies and social systems. A liberal world order is intrinsically worrisome for the CCP and their rule in China. A hegemonic democracy poses a threat to the Chinese regime. In this regard, for example, China sees Taiwan's democracy as a threat to its autocratic regime. Economically wealthy and politically democratic Taiwan refutes the CCP's allegations that Chinese culture is inharmonious with democracy. So, it has been trying to destabilize Taiwan (Beckley & Brands, 2022). Moreover, China subverted Hong Kong's democracy.

Democratic emulations and inspirations have a high possibility of undermining the Chinese Communist Party and its autocratic rule. While democracies pose an ideational threat to the authoritarian Chinese regime, autocratic China also poses an ideational threat to democracies. Ideational threats are as substantial as material ones. Rising and growing China does not only set an economic model for autocratic and hybrid regimes but also a political model. As the second

most powerful state in the world, authoritarian China generates an alternative to democratic states. Just as the US and the EU promote their own political system, China does the same and supports its own political model around the world. Like democracies, autocracies also learn from each other. Autocracies learn suppression methods, anti-democratic instruments, propaganda, and manipulation ways from each other.

All authoritarian regimes have an extent legitimacy dilemma. An authoritarian state has not the consent and approval of the governed, so it can never feel secure about its rule. Moreover, a world dominated by liberal democracies creates insecurity for autocrats, and they can never feel safe because of the spillover possibility of liberal democratic values and ideas. Strong and vibrant democracies will tempt the people of states ruled by tyrants. Authoritarian regimes often topple in waves, and popular uprisings in one state inspire upheavals in others such as the Arab Uprising and a democratic domino effect across Central and Eastern Europe in the following 1989. A democratic revolution anywhere is a threat to autocratic regimes everywhere (Beckley & Brands, 2022).

Samuel Huntington draws attention to the “snowballing” phenomenon. Change in one country stimulates change in other countries (Huntington, 1991). The snowballing effect is valid for not only democratization waves but also democratic backsliding and shifting back to authoritarian government. Not only democratization sets a model for other countries, but also autocracy, the reversal of democratization waves, and democratic backsliding constitute an example for others. If democracies are dysfunctional and autocracies are extensive, the CCP’s internal power will be increased. In this situation, the Chinese people will not emulate and inspire the unsuccessful democracies. The CCP considers political liberalism as an infectious disease against the regime and its people (Beckley & Brands, 2022).

It can be argued that European governments assumed that the economically growing and enriching China would be far more integrated into liberal international order and global capitalism. It seems that they predicted that enriching and strengthening the middle class in China would force the CCP to liberalize the political system towards a pluralist democratic system. It tends to be seen that until now, democracy demands, and liberal tendencies have not improved in the thriving Chinese middle class. It is difficult to say that authoritarian inclinations have decreased in China in the last three decades. The opposite way around, due to technological advancements, the authoritarian CCP has solidified its position by way of surveillance devices and technologies, as seen in Hong Kong and Eastern Turkistan. Furthermore, it can be maintained that Europe could not foresee that China would reach such a technologically advanced level.

Alice Politi argues that perceptions of both “self” and “other” in the mutual interaction have also shifted. Their changing perceptions of themselves and of their counterparts have had a significant effect in deciding their actions in the reciprocal connection. The main reason behind shifting China’s perception of Europe is the rise and strengthening of Beijing. The principal cause behind changing Chinese perception toward Europe is due to it views itself stronger than Europe. She argues that “For China, the awareness of having become a global power has led it to become more assertive in wanting to operate on its own terms, rather than adapting to European expectations” (Politi, 2023, p. 687, 676).

China prefers autocracy-dominated global order. So, China has been one of the main supporters of authoritarian regimes in the world. In this context “The CCP provides fellow autocracies with guns, money, and protection from UN censure while slapping foreign human-rights advocates with sanctions. Chinese officials offer their authoritarian brethren riot-control gear and advice on building a surveillance state...” (Beckley & Brands, 2022). The top 15 countries to which China sold the most weapons in the period 2013-2023 are as follows (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute). In brackets, their rank in the democracy index is shown (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023): Pakistan (118), Bangladesh (75), Algeria (110), Myanmar (166), Thailand (63), Venezuela (142), Saudi Arabia (150), Nigeria (104), Indonesia (56), Turkmenistan (161), Cameroon (138), Morocco (93), Sudan (158), the UAE (125), Tanzania (86).

When Beijing holds leadership posts in international organizations, it uses its power in an illiberal direction. For instance, China, as head of the International Civil Aviation Organization, protected the ferocious Lukashenka rule from condemnation when Belarus contravened international law by forcing down a plane carrying a wanted opponent in 2021. Beijing's global reach is more penetrating and widespread than that of any other autocracy in the world. As the second strongest country in the world, China has a wide range of instruments in order to silence free speech beyond its borders. A vast number of democratic countries have recently encountered China's economic wrath (Beckley & Brands, 2022).

China represents a digital authoritarianism with its ability to data collection, artificial intelligence, biometric, speech, and facial recognition technologies. Chinese digital technology let the CCP to have surveillance tools and control society by way of modern digital means and propaganda instruments. Invisible algorithms, social control tools, surveillance technologies, and censoring devices are integral parts of the Chinese authoritarian regime, and China exports these technologies to other oppressive, brutal autocratic regimes. Chinese companies sell surveillance systems to a vast number of countries, and in this manner, China exports its digital authoritarianism (Beckley & Brands, 2022).

#### **4. Conclusion**

As it is seen in this paper, different international relations theories disparately comprehend the Chinese threat to European security. While realism rather focuses on the material dimension of the threat, constructivism concentrates on the ideational dimension of the threat and emphasizes identity, ideas, meaning, and social construction of the Chinese threat.

Offensive structural realism argues that the main aim of states in the international system is to secure their own survival. Since there is no higher authority and other states could pose a threat. States cannot rely on others for their security. In this self-help world, states act according to their own self-interest. States may never be sure what other states have in mind under an anarchic international system. States become extremely motivated to gain maximum power as a result. Being extremely strong is the best method to survive in the global system. In this context, China is in pursuit of global hegemony. There is a zero-sum game between China and Europe.

Relations between Europe and China are more complex than ever before. China has increasingly been a threat to European security and interests. There has been a conflict between Beijing's foreign policy purposes and European security. China has been forming a threat to the Western-centric liberal hegemonic order. China's targets are not compatible with European interests. A strong Chinese leadership is actively working to undermine and weaken democracies while also creating a secure environment for autocracies.

Constructivism considers security as a context-specific social construction. According to the constructivist assumption, security is assigned meaning within contexts. Ideas and political ideologies can threaten states and their regime's legitimacy and facilitate social unrest in the targeted country. China is an "other" for Europe in terms of ethnicity, religion, history, culture, and political system. China's priorities and values do not overlap with Europe's own. China has increasingly been a threat to European interests. China and Europe have incompatible identities and aims. There is a close relationship between interests and identities of countries. Different identities constitute different interests and shape state behavior.

Historical experiences are integral parts of identities. Like many states, China was exposed to European imperialism in its history. It can be argued that the narrative of "the century of humiliation" has played a significant role in the construction of modern Chinese identity. Historical experiences are one of the main components shaping national collective memory and identity. The century of humiliation has been existing in the collective memory of Chinese people.

Europe's reliance on Chinese companies for critical infrastructure subsumes security risks for the European economic, military, and information sectors. China is able to damage European economic security by using its economic leverage as a strategic tool. Chinese investments in

sensitive sectors of Europe pose a threat to the economic and information security of the continent. It is highly probable that European reliance on China might be used against Europe. The overdependency of European companies on Beijing constitutes a significant vulnerability to European economic security. It is highly likely that China could use its economic leverage to bring European countries to its knees. Dependency has been weaponizing by China.

Europe's vital infrastructure and supply chains, particularly semiconductors, chips, port facilities, and 5G networks that are progressively controlled by China, reveal the fragility of Europe vis-a-vis China, and constitute a security threat to Europe in terms of intelligence gathering and economic security. The Chinese government utilizes its economic penetration to endorse foreign policy aims. Economic coercion has been one of China's instruments. China has been leveraging its economic power to impact other states' behavior and decisions. Some Chinese policies pose challenges to the rule-based international order.

The interests of Europe require protection of free and safe shipping in the South China Sea. By stealing defense-related intellectual property and sharing it with its defense sector, Beijing undermines Europe's military prowess while simultaneously developing new weaponry. Moreover, Beijing's aid and support for Moscow are highly likely to undercut European security. One of the most important effects of the Chinese threat to Europe on world politics is the further development of transatlantic relations to balance China. On the other hand, it appears that Beijing-Moscow relations will deepen in order to maintain the balance of power.

The growth of China, which has a different economic model and set of values and is essentially altering the architecture of global power, is a significant element influencing the change in EU-China ties. China does not wish to be a taker of Western norms, thanks to its increasing aggressiveness in the military, economy, and politics. Rather, it attempts to modify international rules to suit its interests as a global actor.

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