

Diverging China Strategies in the West: Securitization and the Overlooked Role of Business Interests

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Amidst the current great-power competition and geopolitical tensions, why have western states formulated different strategies towards Beijing? Drawing upon literature on domestic politics and securitization, this article posits that the different China strategies are jointly shaped by, *ceteris paribus*, (1) whether interdependence with Beijing is anticipated to bring cost or benefit to the interest groups central to the decision-making process and (2) whether securitization of China is high or low in the country. The combination thereof leads to four main types of China strategies: pragmatic detachment, confrontation, business as usual, and distancing. These four strategies are further empirically assessed in a focused, structured comparative case study on Germany, the US, New Zealand, and Romania. Findings from this research support the societal approach of studying international relations in that foreign strategies are more than an automatic response to structural conditions, e.g., interdependence, and are constantly constructed and contested by societal actors within the confines of state-led securitization.

Dans le contexte actuel de concurrence entre grandes puissances et de tensions géopolitiques, pourquoi les États occidentaux ont-ils formulé différentes stratégies à l'égard de Pékin ? Se fondant sur la littérature relative à la politique nationale et la sécuritisation, cet article postule que les différentes stratégies vis-à-vis de la Chine sont façonnées conjointement par, *ceteris paribus*, a) si les groupes d'intérêts centraux dans le processus de prise de décisions doivent bénéficier ou non de l'interdépendance avec Pékin ; et b) si la sécuritisation de la Chine est faible ou élevée dans le pays. En combinant ces deux éléments, l'on obtient quatre principaux types de stratégies par rapport à la Chine : le détachement pragmatique, la confrontation, la routine habituelle et la distanciation. Ces quatre stratégies sont évaluées plus avant sur le plan empirique dans une étude de cas comparative structurée et concentrée sur l'Allemagne, les États-Unis, la Nouvelle-Zélande et la Roumanie. Les résultats de ce travail de recherche viennent étayer l'approche sociétale de l'étude des relations internationales en cela que les stratégies étrangères se révèlent être bien plus qu'une réponse automatique aux conditions structurelles (l'interdépendance). Les acteurs sociétaux les construisent et les contestent en permanence, dans les limites de la sécuritisation menée par l'État.

En medio de la actual competencia entre las grandes potencias y las tensiones geopolíticas, ¿por qué los Estados occidentales han formulado diferentes estrategias con respecto a Pekín? Este artículo se basa en la literatura sobre política interna y securitización y postula que las diferentes estrategias con relación a China están configuradas conjuntamente por, *ceteris paribus*, a) si se prevé que la interdependencia con Pekín traerá costes o beneficios a los grupos de interés de mayor relevancia en el proceso de toma de decisiones; y b) si la securitización de China es alta o baja en el país. La combinación de estos dos factores conduce a cuatro tipos principales de estrategias en relación a China: desapego pragmático, confrontación, «hacer como si nada» y distanciamiento. Estas cuatro estrategias se evalúan empíricamente en un estudio de caso comparativo estructurado y centrado en Alemania, Estados Unidos, Nueva Zelanda y Rumanía. Las conclusiones de esta investigación respaldan el enfoque social del estudio de las relaciones internacionales en el sentido de que las estrategias en materia de política son más que una respuesta automática a las condiciones estructurales, como por ejemplo la interdependencia, y que son constantemente construidas e impugnadas por los agentes sociales dentro de los límites de la securitización dirigida por el Estado.

Introduction

Geopolitical tensions and great power competition have led policymakers in the West to be increasingly concerned about a more assertive People's Republic of China (PRC), with which countries have deepened their economic interdependence since the beginning of twenty-first century. While scholars and pundits have come to the realization that the PRC poses severe contestations against the existing world order and stability (Schweller & Pu 2011; Mearsheimer 2014; Goddard 2018; cf. Weiss & Wallace 2021; Börzel & Zürn 2021; Pearson *et al.* 2022; Lim & Ikenberry 2023), and despite that several Western-led international organizations have labeled Beijing as a systemic challenge to the rules-based international order, Western states engage with Bei-

jing quite differently.¹ On the one hand, Western states that are similarly interdependent with the PRC—Germany and New Zealand, for example—are not engaging with Beijing in the same way. Specifically, while Germany is pragmatically disengaging from the Asian giant, New Zealand is continuing a business as usual approach. In other words, a similar level of interdependence has not produced similar China strategies from some Western countries. On the other hand, among those countries that have actually securitized

¹In 2021, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization issued the Brussels Communiqué in which it defines Beijing's state ambitions and behaviors as systemic challenges to the rules-based international order. In 2019, the European Commission labeled China as a systemic rival in its *Strategic Outlook*, alongside being a partner and competitor.

the PRC—Germany and the United States, for instance—some still stick to pragmatism while others have become confrontational. Among those who have yet to securitize the PRC, the China strategy of some Western states (e.g., New Zealand) remains unspoiled by the rising geopolitical tensions, whereas in some others (e.g., Romania), the strategy has been to distance from Beijing. Simply put, a similar level of securitization of China—by designating it as a security threat—or, un-securitization thereof, also has not resulted in a similar foreign strategy towards Beijing.

The variance in Western countries' China strategies and the lack of a uniformed one are theoretically unaccounted for in the current international relations (IR) literature. First, the fragmentation of China strategy from the West challenges the structuralist, balance-of-power or balance-of-threat theses that states would automatically team up together to countervail the *systemic threats* or *challenger* (Walt 1985; Pape 2005; Paul 2005; cf. Meijer & Simón 2021). French President Emmanuel Macron's "defiant" comment in 2023, for example, in which he said that France was not a "vassal" of the United States and that the country should not be caught up in the Taiwan issue, is a case in point (BBC 2023). Second, *bandwagoning* with the weaker side of the rivalry, and in this case China, is hardly the case among Western countries (Schweller 1994). Third, a liberal institutionalist approach with its emphasis on interstate cooperation also cannot explain the presence of a host of strategies from some Western countries aiming to contain, deter, or compete with the PRC (Keohane & Nye 1987; Grano & Huang 2023; Winkler 2023). Therefore, structuralist IR theories fall short of giving answer to the diversity of Western countries' approaches towards a putative systemic challenger to the existing world order like China.

This article seeks to address the question: *why have Western states formulated different strategies towards the PRC amidst the current great-power competition?* In a bid to tackle the question, the point of departure is that the formulation of foreign strategies largely depends on state preferences that are formed by a variety of domestic actors who, in turn, operate within ideational and institutional constraints (Putnam 1988; Moravcsik 1993, 1997, 2008; Schirm 2020). Specifically, by analysing why the China strategy in the West is as fragmented as it seems, I argue that the fragmentation is due to distinct domestic business influences and different levels of state-led securitization of Beijing (Moravcsik 1993, 1997, 2008; Hudson 2005). Recognising the role of business groups in foreign policy decision-making process, I attempt to shed light on their under-theorised impact on the varying China strategies among Western countries (Milner 1997; Schirm 2020). In so doing, this article is situated at the intersection of foreign policy analysis (FPA) and international political economy (IPE), and contributes to understanding how Western state preferences for China amidst the current political environment are intricately shaped by different factors at play.

In this article, two important factors are chosen to address the research question, namely (1) the influence of core business groups that benefit or lose from economic interdependence with China, and (2) the domestic level of state-led securitization of Beijing. The focus on these two factors is informed by the lack of a systematic analytical framework in the existing literature—hence, the literature gap—to theorise the cause of the differing China strategies from the West. Especially, as noted, the structuralist IR theory falls short of accounting for this observed variance in how Western countries in similar conditions have articulated their respective engagement strategies. To fill the lacuna, an

analytical perspective at the intersection of domestic politics and international relations is thus helpful in providing an answer as to how China strategies are formed in Western countries amidst the rise of the Asian giant and the ongoing great power competition. I argue, firstly and intuitively, that core business groups benefiting from economic interdependence with China will *stabilize* the bilateral relations, whilst core business groups losing from economic interdependence with China will *destabilize* it (Milner 1997; Copeland 1996; Dietrich 1999; cf. Gartzke *et al.* 2001; Brooks 2013). Here, by moving the discussion beyond the *pacifying* effect of economic interdependence in the IR literature, this article highlights specifically the role of business groups in actively *stabilizing* or *destabilizing* external relations. Secondly, I contend that state-led securitization of a foreign target is bound to unfold in an environment that can be constrained or unconstrained by business influences (Buzan *et al.* 1997; Balzacq 2008; Buzan & Wæver 2009; cf. Ecker-Ehrhardt 2014; Zürn 2019; Friedrichs 2022; Destradi *et al.* 2022). Concretely, all things equal, whether the state-led securitization is manifested in the actual China strategy hinges upon whether it is impeded or bolstered by business influences (Schirm 2020). Altogether, fourfold strategies towards China can be discerned as a result of this interaction, namely pragmatic detachment, confrontation, business as usual (BAU), and distancing. As explained later, pragmatic detachment aims to overcome conditions of long-term dependency while being attentive to existing economic interests without resorting to extraordinary measures beyond the day-to-day routines or adopting a confrontational stance. Confrontation entails the pervasive use of restrictive and coercive measures to thwart the perceived security threat and to protect business interests. A BAU strategy refers to the maintenance of status-quo and the continuation of existing policies, while distancing is a purposive act of moving away from the erstwhile close partner due to the perceived loss of mutual benefits without invoking extraordinary policies or measures.

To be sure, the existing scholarship sheds some light on how one could possibly explain the different types of engagement with the PRC. For instance, the variance in China strategy could be a result of Beijing's *wedge* strategy, that is, "a policy of preventing or dividing an adversary coalition" (Izumikawa 2013: 498; cf. Crawford 2008, 2011). In other words, it might as well be the case that China's *division* policy has provoked the disarrayed strategies of these countries. Other scholars (Meijer & Simón 2021) point to the *hedging* strategy that secondary states oftentimes employ, apart from *bandwagoning* and *balancing*. Here, the focus is on the *agency* of secondary states that actively opt for a strategy that best suits their national interests. The distinct China strategies may also be shaped by varying efforts of the Established Great Power to solidify the balancing coalition, say, for example, by means of *binding* strategies (Izumikawa 2018) or *covert balancing* (Meijer & Simón 2021). In sum, all these alternative explanations—perhaps with the exception of *hedging* strategy—treat factors *external* to secondary states as independent variables that lead to different foreign policies. Granted, what has been left out from the existing scholarship, however, is why such exogenous factors as "wedging" or "binding" even work in the first place in inducing target countries' behaviors. Put differently, strategies of Country A (be it China or the United States) to induce the desired behaviors of target Country B should a priori somehow suit the latter's state preferences or at least correspond to the latter's domestic circumstances (Moravcsik 1993, 1997, 2008). In this sense, solely emphasizing external fac-

tors risks endogenizing domestic preferences to structural imperatives.

The article will proceed as follows: It begins with reviewing key concepts related to economic interdependence, business groups, securitization, and state preferences before proposing a fourfold typology of Western countries' strategies towards Beijing. Thereafter, it explains the comparative research design, justifies the case selection (namely Germany, New Zealand, the United States, and Romania), and introduces the research methodology. Empirical case analyses on the four countries will ensue, and concluding remarks with indication of avenues for future research will be drawn in closing.

Formation of State Preferences

Business Groups and State Preferences

As noted by [Aggestam et al. \(2023, 6\)](#), “[a] key ambition in FPA scholarship is to “unpack” the state and problematize the institutional setting, bureaucratic politics and role of individual policy-makers.” Existing scholarship notes the role of interest groups in international cooperation and foreign policy ([Trice 1978](#); [Jacobs & Page 2005](#)). Assuming that national executives are office-seekers with the motivation of maximizing chances of reelection, [Milner \(1998, 34–35\)](#) argues that national executives should be concerned with the preferences of domestic interest groups that support them (cf. [Ripsman 2009](#)). Broadly, *interest groups* refer to “political organizations with autonomy from both government and political parties that make some attempt to influence government” ([Bloodgood 2011: 97](#)). This distinguishes them both from social movements for having an institutional structure and from governments. Among them, business interest groups are those associations of individual or collective business entities—usually formally organised—to promote a common interest.

Business groups, like any interest groups, play two major roles in the formation of state preferences. On the one hand, they are *pressure groups* that shape preferences of the executives by virtue of their fundraising capability and the possibility of mobilizing the electorate; on the other, they serve as information providers or *signallers* to political actors, for instance, by conveying private intelligence about the ramifications of certain policies ([Milner 1997: 60](#); cf. [Dietrich 1999](#); [Gelpi & Grieco 2003](#)). [Bloodgood \(2011: 99\)](#) added a third, related role to interest groups, that is, grassroots representation and mobilization. This means that interest groups can collect information and exert sustained pressure by mobilizing the grassroots and/or “sponsoring a public action” (*Ibid.*). Faced with a variety of societal actors, the state is “most receptive to those groups that are best organized and endowed politically” in formulating policy ([Simmons 2003, 37](#)).

Albeit growing relevance, interest groups do not determine foreign policy, and at best only shape the content of foreign policy. As [Dietrich \(1999, 281\)](#) contends, neither activity nor access is “sufficient for [...] actual influence,” because “[t]he paths to government decisions are extremely complicated and interest groups activities are but one variable in the pathway.” [Ripsman \(2009, 186\)](#) argues that interest groups are expected to exert the greatest influence over foreign policy in a low-threat or permissive international environment for the lack of risks to state survival, and the weakest influence in a high-threat or restrictive international environment due to the paramount urgency of survival and security. In addition, [Ripsman \(2009, 189](#); cf. [Simmons 2003](#))

also notes that “[a]ll things being equal, the more structurally autonomous an executive is, the lesser the ability of domestic actors to interfere with the government’s foreign policy agenda.” On the contrary, the less autonomous (or the less insulated) the executive, the greater the ability of interest groups to influence foreign policy. In order to examine interest groups’ influence, [Dietrich \(1999, 281\)](#) suggests “look[ing] beyond high levels of activity and to view interest group efforts in the broader context of the domestic and foreign pressures shaping particular policy decisions.”

One question still remains: what kind of effects do business groups exert on external relations? [Milner \(1998, 60\)](#) contends that interest groups “prefer policies that increase their income over those that decrease it, and most prefer those that maximize their income.” Drawing upon the literature on interdependence and peace ([Copeland 1996](#)), I argue that domestic business groups benefiting from interdependence—or expected to benefit from interdependence in the future—tend to stabilize external relations, whereas those losing from interdependence—or expected to lose from interdependence in the future—tend to destabilize it.² Existing works indicate that the prevalence of industrial policies, (unfair) competition, observed intellectual property theft, and industrial overcapacity, together with China’s retaliatory countermeasures, are the factors that allegedly affect Western businesses ([Cerutti et al. 2019](#); [Brainard 2024](#); [García-Herrero & Schindowki 2024](#)). To stabilize external relations, business groups can (1) directly pressure the government to delay or abandon policies perceived to harm the relation in question, (2) provide positive information regarding benefit of such interdependence, and (3) mobilize public actions to shape positive opinion, e.g., through media. To destabilize such relations, business groups can engage in behaviors contrary to the causes mentioned above. To clarify, core domestic business groups, according to *pluralistic theories*, are often those economic actors operating in the strategic sector(s) of the national economy and have facilitated access to policy-making institutions ([Milner 1992](#)). They are often large employers, taxpayers, or even sponsors of the executive officeholders ([Milner 1998](#)).

Admittedly, there are other types of interest groups beyond businesses that play an important role in influencing a country’s foreign policy (including towards China), e.g., human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSO), or diaspora communities ([Knup 2019](#); [Aggestam et al. 2023](#)). This said, their relevance varies from country to country, especially when it comes to China strategy: that not all (Western) countries have human rights NGOs or CSOs that deal with China matters renders a cross-country comparison difficult, particularly when their extent of influence on foreign policy in general differs even if there exists one. On the other hand, China’s integration in the global market since 2001 has sparked enormous economic interests from transnational businesses whose impact on foreign policy (towards the PRC), nonetheless, remains understudied systematically.

²[Copeland’s \(1996\) trade expectations theory](#) introduces a new causal variable, i.e., the expectations of future trade. The main arguments are twofold: if trade level is anticipated to be high in the foreseeable future, interdependence creates incentives for peace, as argued by liberals; however, if trade level is anticipated to be low, then highly dependent states are likely to initiate war out of fear of “losing the economic wealth that supports their long-term security,” as argued by realists (*Ibid.*: 7). In other words, contingent upon the expectations of future trade, “high interdependence can be either peace-inducing or war-inducing” (*Ibid.*).

Securitization and Foreign Policy

One of the pronounced phenomena in great power rivalries is the securitization of the rival (Gilpin 1981). Securitization in its most original definition refers to the move of “designation of an existential threat requiring emergency action or special measures and the acceptance of that designation by a significant audience” (Buzan *et al.* 1997, 27). In essence, a securitized issue requires urgent measures beyond normal politics due to the perceived threats it poses. Securitization is an extreme form of politicization, and involves elements crucial to politicization. Zürn (2019, 977) conceptualizes *politicization* as the “demand for, or the act of, transporting an issue or an institution into the sphere of politics—making previously unpolitical matters political.” In other words, it means “moving something into the realm of public choice, thus presupposing the possibility to make collectively binding decisions on that matter” (Ibid, 978). Involving majoritarian institutions (e.g., legislature) in foreign policy-making is an example of the politicization of foreign policy (Ecker-Ehrhardt 2014; Zürn 2019). Ultimately, both securitization and politicization are determined by political actors.

What is different in the current episode of great power competition and, thus, the securitization of the *great rival*, however, is that economic interdependence with China is deep. Only in terms of trade, in 2023 China was the top trading partner of over 120 countries (Green 2023). State-led securitization, therefore, is bound to unfold in a domestic environment with business influences either bolstering or undercutting its effect. Better said, domestic businesses play an important role in multiplying or constraining the state-led construction of a security issue through speech act (Wæver 2011). Business could add to the efforts of state-led securitization by giving consent to newly proposed security measures during the decision-making phase (of the China strategy) and by cooperating with the state during the implementation phase. They could also curtail the securitization efforts by opposing the state imposition of extraordinary measures during the decision-making phase and by even not circumventing those measures during the implementation phase. As such, due to the presence of business influence, whether state-led securitization can materialize into a broader foreign policy is, among others, shaped by whether and how business influence such process.

Still, the discussion above presupposes that state-led securitization already exists in a country. Just as businesses can influence whether state-led securitization can be fully manifested or implemented in the ultimate foreign policy, the level of securitization can also in turn constrain (or not) how and to what extent businesses can influence foreign policy decision. It may well be the case that China is not (yet) securitized in a Western country. In a context where Beijing is non-securitized or where the level of securitization remains very low, foreign policy may generally follow logics of normal diplomacy and politics un-overwhelmed by security imperatives. In sum, business influence and state-led securitization mutually affect each other. In analytical terms, solely looking at the effect of non-/securitization on foreign policy risks neglecting societal forces (e.g., core business groups) in shaping state preferences, while merely contemplating societal influence on foreign policy misplaces the policymaking *locus* outside of the state and overlooks the fundamental role of the state in directly making foreign policy.

This brings to the analytical question of how we should discern the level of securitization of an object. In this study, a non-securitized issue is understood as the absence of any

designation of a matter as a security threat by the state. This means either that there is no official discourse from the government to securitize a given matter, or that such securitization effort is sporadic—for example, from individual legislators—and hence not accepted by a wider audience (Buzan *et al.* 1997, 27). Accordingly, no extraordinary policies or measures need to be taken to counter this designated threat. At the other end of the spectrum is a high level of securitization, which refers to the presence of designation of a matter as a security threat that is widely accepted and is accompanied by extraordinary—often discriminatory—measures or policies to address the securitized matter. Therefore, a highly securitized issue can be discerned not only from the codified official discourse through government documents or leader speeches, but also from the actual policies or legislations promulgated as a result of the state-led securitization. Low level of securitization means that there has been official designation of a given object as a security threat, but such designation is either targeted to a narrower issue area or sector (e.g., telecommunication) with a specific actor being the explicit threat, or is only taken by a single government agency and thus is not amplified or reproduced by the wider government actors. This may happen at the early stage of securitization, where the securitizing country still needs time to work out how to best deal with the threat in question.

Noteworthy, this article does not focus on tracing the process of securitization or, borrowing Wæver’s (2011, 477) observation, *when* and *where* securitization happens; rather, it seeks to understand “what securitisation does,” hence its effects—particularly in conjunction with business influence. This is to say that how securitization is shaped by different societal actors is beyond the scope of this study. The point made here is that after all, business groups need to navigate and operate in an environment where the level of state-led securitization has already been set by political actors at a given time. While politicization can be used to raise awareness of a foreign policy issue, mobilize and garner political support, and contest the political opponents, securitization can (at least temporarily) overcome affective polarization and achieve bipartisan or multi-partisan consensus on a foreign policy issue (Buzan *et al.* 1997; Destradi *et al.* 2022). If we treat foreign policy’s *hawkishness* as preferences faraway from those of the foreign country and dovishness closer to those of the foreign country, a highly securitized issue will likely lead to a more hawkish stance and a non-securitized issue a more dovish one, but this will depend on whether it can be bolstered or contained by societal interests (Milner 1997).

Business Groups, Securitization, and China Strategies

I argue that state preferences for a certain engagement strategy with the PRC are jointly shaped by, among other factors, the influence of core business groups and the level of securitization of the PRC. To be sure, engagement strategy does not mean a specific policy, decree, or executive order, nor is it within the scope of this article to discuss those. Rather, it refers to a general state as to how a country organizes its long-term relations and interactions with and position itself vis-à-vis others. Noteworthy is that this study specifically deals with the PRC under President Xi Jinping. This is to say that the timeframe of the research is limited to 2013 onwards. It is within this timeframe that the PRC has been increasingly securitized by some Western countries, as it grows more assertive and aggressive externally and more repressive domestically. It is also within this period that the great-power com-

Table 1. Engagement strategies towards the PRC (elaborated by the author)

	<i>Core business groups benefiting from interdependence</i>	<i>Core business groups losing from interdependence</i>
High level of securitization	Pragmatic detachment	Confrontation
Low level of securitization or non-securitization	Business as usual	Distancing

petition has greatly intensified, if the outset of the competition could be traced back to Hillary Clinton's *pivot to Asia* strategy in 2011.

The first underlying assumption and scenario here is that, under a high level of state-led securitization, powerful business groups benefiting from interdependence could serve as one of the last—if not the last—constraints that stabilize the relations by opposing the state position and lobbying for *pragmatism*, cooperation, and absolute gains. As mentioned, during this process they can be *pressure groups*, information provider, and grassroots mobilizers. In this context, the securitizing state realizes that, despite the security threat posed by the foreign state, it is still domestically too costly to foreclose room for *pragmatism* in the short run and to be utterly confrontational, be it in economic or in electoral terms. Hence, constrained by the stabilizing influence of business groups, it is in the state preference to enact *pragmatic detachment* from the designated security threat without resorting to coercive measures or adopting a confrontational posture (see table 1).

Pragmatic detachment has two connotations. First, achieving pragmatic detachment means being attentive to existing interests that cannot be rapidly disrupted. Hence, pragmatic detachment may serve to overcome—with minimal use of coercive measures—long-term conditions of dependency that would otherwise be weaponized (Pinheiro & Lima 2018). Second, a pragmatic detachment strategy in a globalized world also simultaneously entails that states strive for diversification of partnership away from the designated threat. In reality, for example, the EU's current de-risking strategy and its call for strategic autonomy are manifestations of such a pragmatic detachment strategy.³

The second assumption and scenario is that the existence of powerful business groups that anticipate loss from such interdependence, however, may add as another destabilizing factor to the already strained bilateral relations due to domestic securitization of an object, which possibly leads to conflicts or *confrontation* propelled by zero-sum game logic and relative gains. Business interests that anticipate rising costs from interdependence may contribute to the formation of an antagonistic state preference. The state would thus be more inclined to use negative sanctions (e.g., covert balancing, deterrence, coercive diplomacy, and containment) that are beyond the confines of normal diplomacy and politics to counter the security threat (Resnick 2001; Meijer & Simón 2021).

The last two scenarios are more straightforward. When core business groups anticipate benefiting from interdependence with a non-securitized state, the liberal logic may begin to manifest itself, as such interdependence will lead to a BAU approach. This can be discerned from the continuity of close economic cooperation in terms of trade and in-

vestment, robust diplomatic exchanges, and policy coordination. To be noted is that BAU is used in this article as a normatively neutral concept, so long as the BAU strategy corresponds to state preferences.

The fourth assumption and scenario is that, when a foreign policy issue stays within the confines of normal politics or technocracy and, by extension, is not securitized, the destabilizing effect of business groups that lose from interdependence does *not* amount to provoking a broader confrontational stance. Nonetheless, less interdependence reduces state incentives to strengthen diplomatic ties, thus leading to a *distancing* strategy. In other words, *distancing* is oftentimes a purposive act of states to move away from an (erstwhile) partner due to the loss of mutual benefits. Meanwhile, measures addressing grievances may still remain on a day-to-day basis, without the necessity of invoking special procedures or actions due to the low level of securitization.

To be sure, engagement strategies are by no means static, and countries can make adjustments according to the evolution of state preferences.

Research Design and Methodology

To address the research question, this article employs a structured, focused comparative case study design to empirically analyze the differing combinations of conditions that result in the fourfold strategies (George 2019). It mainly follows an outcome-centric research design, meaning that it seeks to explain the observed variation in the outcome variable (i.e., Western countries' different China strategies). The case selection follows the most-similar system design, and I chose Germany, the United States, New Zealand, and Romania as four case studies to account for engagement strategies of pragmatic detachment, confrontation, BAU, and distancing, respectively. All four nations are considered high-income countries, NATO members or major non-NATO ally (i.e., New Zealand), OECD member states, and are culturally part of the West. Still, they demonstrate differences in the degree of securitization of the PRC domestically and the effect of the core business groups on the bilateral ties with China. Hence, a comparative case study with congruence approach can enable an investigation on the effect of explanatory variables on the outcome variables.

Several factors are held constant in this study to enable a structured and focused comparison (George 2019). They include political system (presidentialist vs. parliamentary), the influence of other non-state actors (e.g., media, epistemic community, activist groups, international organizations), national identity or roles, as well as the exogenous factors (e.g., wedging or biding strategies from China or the United States) mentioned in the introductory section. Also, securitization is not a static concept, as one securitized issue at a given time can be de-securitized later. But to enable a controlled comparative case analysis for the purposes of this article, I will only assess the level of securitization at a given

³For more details on the topic, see the *Speech by President von der Leyen on EU-China relations to the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the European Policy Centre* on 30 March 2023.

point in time against the current backdrop of great power competition.

This study relies on qualitative methods and involves mainly research on both primary and secondary data. To determine the level of securitization, it looked into government policy documents, acts or decrees, presidential executive orders, and think tank reports. To discern the effect of business groups on bilateral relations, it first identified the domestic business groups with utmost importance for the country's economy (in terms of their weight in the national economic structure and employment) under investigation with regards to China and analyzed their statements regarding their assessment on the current and future state of interdependence with Beijing. Data were also triangulated with academic articles, media reports, and online, open-access expert or elite interviews.

Pragmatic Detachment, Confrontation, BAU, and Distancing

This section aims to provide an empirical analysis on the four types of China strategies from Germany, the United States, New Zealand, and Romania by assessing the role of business groups and the level of securitization of the PRC. In the end, it will also discuss the findings comparatively.

Germany's Pragmatic Detachment Under the Traffic Light Coalition

Berlin's approach under the current traffic light coalition government (i.e., the coalition between the Social Democratic Party, the Free Democratic Party, and the Alliance 90/the Greens) towards Beijing represents a pragmatic detachment strategy, that is, the strategy to pragmatically overcome conditions of long-term dependency with minimal use of coercive measures and with the objective of diversification. Pragmatic detachment, in this sense, is commensurate with the EU's ongoing calls for "de-risking" without decoupling. This is manifested in the *Strategy on China* published by the German Federal Foreign Office, which characterizes China as a partner, competitor, and systemic rival and which outlines nine guidelines for de-risking, including promoting location policy, diversifying supply chains, reducing technology dependency, and using a range of trade instruments or export controls ([The Federal Government 2023](#)). This strategy is conditioned by the stabilizing effect of German business groups benefiting and anticipating to benefit from interdependence with Beijing and by the medium to high level of securitization of the PRC domestically.

The German economy is highly dependent on China, much more so than China on Germany. In 2022, China continued being German main trading partner for seven years successively with a trade volume of almost EUR300 billion ([Reuters 2023](#)). According to a recent study by the German Economic Institute, "2,7 percent of Germany's total economic value added and 2,4 percent of total employment depend on exports into China's final demand. By contrast, the figures for China are only 0,5 and 0,6 percent" ([Matthes 2022](#), 4).

Core German business groups have called for a pragmatic stance when engaging with China. In contributing to the Federal Government's new China's strategy, the German Foreign Chamber of Commerce (AHK) notes that "[e]ven though companies are aware of increased risks are diversifying their businesses and making their supply chains more resilient, they cannot and do not want to miss this crucial growth market. For this reason, the German govern-

ment must continue to support German companies on the Chinese market—especially through personal meetings with government representatives on site in China—in order to reduce market access barriers and advocate for a level playing field" ([AHK 2022](#), para. 2). The AHK also highlights the importance of exploring new common interests in the fields of health, digitalization, and nutrition, and suggests that continuous dialogue between both sides is essential in this regard. As early as in 2019, the German Federation of Industries (BDI) outlined its position on China. Although it recognized the competition and rivalry posed by Beijing, the solutions proposed by BDI mainly involved strengthening Germany and the EU's resilience and competitiveness and diversifying the country's international partnership ([BDI 2019](#)). It also suggested using non-coercive measures, such as trade instruments (e.g., anti-subsidy instruments) or investment screenings to tackle security concerns. Consequently, the final version of the new *China Strategy* echoes these positions. While welcoming the launch of the *China strategy*, the President of the Federation of German Wholesale, Foreign Trade and Services (BGA) Dirk Jandura criticized a purely value-based approach, saying that "[t]here are not only trading partners in the world who agree with our values, but also a whole range of countries that happen to be diametrically opposed. If we took the chance to continue trading and engaging in dialogue with these countries, where should that lead? What is the alternative if we stop trading?."

In the meantime, other economic actors are calling for maintaining interdependence with China due to its significance to Berlin. Executives from huge German corporations like Volkswagen, BASF, and Mercedes Benz have long been distanced from the growing skepticism in the country towards China ([Der Spiegel 2022](#)). And economic motives have triumphed over security concerns and drove the Federal Government to approve of China COSCO's acquisition of 24,9 percent of the Hamburg Tollerort Terminal in early 2023, notwithstanding internal backlash ([Politico 2023](#)).

On the state side, Beijing has been framed increasingly as a national security concern, particularly against the broader backdrop of Russia's war in Ukraine, the weaponization of energy by Moscow, the *watershed* moment of German foreign policy, and the launch of the *National Security Strategy*. In other words, the PRC is securitized by political actors, making the policy room increasingly restrictive.

In the final version of the *China Strategy*, *security* was mentioned 82 times, even more than trade (56 times) or investment (40 times). It explicitly wrote that "unfair practices on the part of China can have a negative impact on our *security*, sovereignty and prosperity. We must address this *threat* in Germany and at European level with suitable means" ([The Federal Government 2023](#), 34).

Among all political parties, the Green Party represents the most hawkish voice in the governing coalition regarding Beijing, with the Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock alerting time and again that China has become increasingly repressive domestically and aggressive abroad. In the speech to launch the *China Strategy*, [Baerbock \(2023, para. 29\)](#) pointed to the risks that China has posed to Germany's economic security, warning that "companies that make themselves very dependent on the Chinese market will in the future have to bear more of the financial risk themselves." Also from the Greens, Vice-Chancellor and the Economy Minister Robert Habeck warns against the security threats of foreign encroachment of critical infrastructure, having vetoed the acquisition attempts of a chip plant and a healthcare company by China ([BMWK 2022](#); [Politico 2022](#)). Even prior to the traffic light coalition, in 2019, Germany's intelligence and

security services already urged the government to “exclude Huawei from the construction of 5G networks,” citing security concerns (Chen & Gao 2021). In this sense, securitizing discourse and policies have been amplified by a range of state actors. Moreover, preoccupation with Beijing is also shared by a larger citizenry. According to the monthly opinion poll *ARD-DeutschlandTrend* in November 2022, around 50 percent of the German respondents thought that Germany should reduce economic ties with the PRC, and 68 percent disagreed with the prioritization of German economic interests over the human rights situation in China. As per the same poll in March 2023, 83 percent of the German respondents identified China as an untrustworthy partner.

In sum, with the PRC being securitized, the stabilizing effect unleashed by the core German business groups has so far managed to steer the securitizing German state in a pragmatic direction and to water down the hawkish stance of the government, albeit a general trend of detachment from Beijing. In Chancellor Scholz’s (2022, para. 1) own words, this pragmatic detachment strategy suggests that “Germany will seek cooperation where it lies in our mutual interest, but we will not ignore controversies either.”

Washington’s Confrontation with Beijing

Strategic competition underpins current Washington’s approach to Beijing, despite calls for cooperation in limited issue areas like climate change and anti-drug efforts (Heath 2021.; Grano & Huang 2023; Winkler 2023). Since the Trump Administration, a more confrontational strategy of engagement has come to the fore, which is conditioned by an exceedingly high level of internal securitization of China and the destabilizing effect of core business groups on the bilateral relations. Notably, the 2018 National Defence Strategy emphasizes long-term competition with China, mainly to deter the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)’s aggressive capabilities. And the Trump Administration published a policy document titled *United States Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China*, in which it says that “[t]o respond to Beijing’s challenge, the Administration has adopted a competitive approach to the PRC” (White House 2020). In comparison, the Biden Administration has dropped the predecessor’s all-encompassing *decoupling* policy and instead put forward the “invest, align, compete” strategy (Blinken 2022, para. 35). But even in this case, President Biden himself acknowledged that stiff competition defined Sino-US relations (Li 2021). In 2021, the US State Department spokesperson stated that “We are in serious competition with China. Strategic competition is the frame through which we see that relationship” (Price 2021).

Needless to repeat here how interdependent the United States and China’s economies are. But such interdependence has not produced expected stability. To begin with, more US companies hold pessimistic views on doing business with China, nowadays. As per the *2023 China Business Climate Survey Report* by the American Chamber of Commerce in China, more than half of its over 900 member companies (55 percent) no longer regard China as a top-three investment destination, while 49 percent of them view that the country has grown less and less welcoming to foreign businesses. This is even more so after the zero-Covid restrictions were lifted at the end of 2022, when 23 percent of respondents acknowledged in mid-April of 2023 that they still planned to leave China (Asia Times 2023). Nevertheless, even before Joe Biden became the president, investment on both sides in every tech sector had already “fallen off a cliff in the second half of the Trump Administration,” and for

some, venture capital decoupling took place as early as in 2015 (Iyengar 2023, para. 3).

With a dimmer economic outlook and expected benefits, core American business groups have supported the government for a tougher stance on Beijing due to fierce competition posed by Chinese products, the perceived unfair practices by Chinese companies, and the party-state authoritarianism that clashes with the US economic system (Pearson *et al.* 2022). Put differently, the issue came down to the fact that “the material benefits accruing to both sides from their economic cooperation have declined in comparison to the period between 1990 and 2015” (Perthes 2020, 6). Perthes (Ibid) concludes that “[b]ilateral trade between the United States and China is no longer a stabilizing factor capable of ameliorating political conflicts. Instead trade conflicts are politically instrumentalised.” In the same vein, Hilpert (2020, 25) notes that “[i]t has become harder for US companies to increase sales and make profits in the Chinese market—especially as administrative restrictions are increasing rather than decreasing—and main service branches in which US business possess competitive advantages remain closed to them.” The Trump Administration, for example, has received endorsement to levy protectionist tariffs from American steel and aluminum industries that suffered a great deal from the competition with Chinese producers (Overhaus *et al.* 2020, 17). Also, the Wall Street Journal reported in early March 2023 that a group of executives and venture investors from the Silicon Valley had teamed up with legislators at the US Congress in forming an alliance named “Hill & Valley Forum” to battle against TikTok and alleged Chinese influence, ahead of the congressional hearing of TikTok CEO (Wells 2023). Even in Beijing, the US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen—often thought to be a dovish member of Biden’s cabinet—criticized in front of executives of American businesses against China’s punitive measures of foreign companies and the latter’s decision to impose export control on some critical metals (Rappeport & Bradsher 2023).

Certainly, this is not to say that in America there is no business group favoring a more pragmatic approach towards China. After all, actors such as the US-China Business Council, the Semiconductor Industry Association and the National Retail Federation have allegedly exerted influence on the Congress and the White House to attenuate anti-China legislations and measures (Bateman 2022). But as Tooze (2023, para. 2) points out, “the “peace interest” anchored in the investment and trading connections of US big business with China has been expelled from centre stage.” It is those business groups that are more critical of China that seem to get an upper hand in the agenda-setting and in shaping hawkish state preferences.

This is even not to mention the high level of securitization of the PRC in the United States. A string of restrictive policies, containing measures, and deterrence have been in place since Trump administration, ranging from categorizing China as a security threat to America’s interests in the 2020 *United States Approach to the People’s Republic of China* and as a currency manipulator, to launching a series of sanctions and restrictions curbing China’s hi-tech industry. The surveillance balloon incident at the outset of 2023 further raised the securitization to a new level.

Furthermore, it is not only the executive branch but also the US Congress that are securitizing the PRC. The very involvement of a majoritarian political entity, i.e., the Congress, reflects the politicization of the erstwhile technocratic foreign policy. The promulgation of a plethora of laws, e.g., the *China Technology Transfer Control Act of 2021*,

the *Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act*, and even the *Taiwan Invasion Prevention Act*, signifies an anti-China preference that transcends partisanship. Particularly, Section 2 of the *Countering Chinese Espionage Reporting Act* (2022) stipulates that “[t]he Chinese Communist Party poses pervasive and growing threats to United States domestic national security.” Through politicization and legalization, securitized discourse and practices concerning Beijing have already been institutionalized in the United States (Buzan et al. 1997; Carothers & Sun 2023). This occurs against the backdrop of an overall acceptance of the securitization move by the US general public and subnational governments. According to the 2022 Chicago Council Survey, American views about China hit the lowest point in 2023 in a timeframe of more than 40 years. And over half of Americans view Beijing’s territorial ambitions constitute as a critical threat to the US’s vital interest. In addition, reports show that over a dozen American states have considered limiting China-linked entities from owning farmland, with the Democrats-controlled Senate of Virginia approving a prohibition of land ownership by foreign adversaries (Bloomberg 2023).

All in all, the destabilizing effect of the core business groups within the United States, reinforcing an exceedingly high level of state-led securitization of the PRC, produces a confrontational strategy with China that is characterized by containment, balancing, strategic competition, and deterrence.

New Zealand’s Business-as-usual Strategy Towards China

Despite being considered one of the United States allies and members of the Five Eyes group (incl. the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, and Australia), New Zealand has maintained a business-as-usual strategy vis-à-vis China—for which it is sometimes viewed as the “weak link” in the intelligence-sharing group and an outlier of the Western coalition (Smith & Holster 2023). Wellington’s preferences for a BAU approach with Beijing is shaped by core business groups benefiting from interdependence with this crucial partner in an environment with relatively a low level of securitization. In this sense, economic benefits prevail over security concerns, making it the first developed Western country to ever sign (in 2008) and upgrade (2021) a free trade agreement with China, to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2015, and to subscribe to the memorandum of understanding of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2017 (Köllner 2021). In 2014, both sides signed an agreement to establish a *comprehensive strategic partnership* and reiterated its importance in 2023 during Prime Minister Chris Hipkins visit to Beijing.

China is the biggest trading partner for New Zealand in terms of both export and import by a significant margin. In 2022, even amidst the pandemic, China still absorbed more than one fourth (28 percent) of New Zealand goods exports (esp. dairy, meat, and wood products), albeit a slowdown of export growth to China in that year, according to the assessment by its foreign ministry (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2023). Commentators said that as New Zealand entered recession in June 2023 after the economy suffered from contraction for two quarters in a row, “China is key to three of New Zealand’s engines for post-pandemic economic recovery: exports, tourism and education” (Associated Press 2023, para. 5).

The sheer weight of bilateral trade for Wellington and the complementary interdependence cultivate pro-China business groups lobbying for tighter cooperation, diplomatic ties, and engagement. For instance, the New Zealand-China

Business Council reportedly endorsed the country’s participation in the Belt and Road Initiative, as it expects huge trade opportunities for the country.⁴ Kiwi agribusinesses are lobbyists for robust Sino-New Zealand relations, and the dairy industry has benefitted tremendously from Chinese investments, which are seen “as a positive development that puts money in farmer’s pockets, improves infrastructure and drives the industry forward at a frenzied pace” (Whitehead 2018, para. 30). As businesses from other Western countries are concerned about China’s economic prospects and are moving towards de-risking, Kiwi business leaders remain optimistic. In accompanying Prime Minister Hipkins visit to Beijing, the CEO of the multinational meat company Silver Fern Farms assessed that

“The rising demand for meat gives us a lot of confidence in the Chinese market. Fueled by urbanization and rising disposable income, there is more room for further growth in this market down the line. We see great potential in online fresh grocery delivery channels as advancements in the cold chain resolve home delivery concerns. Chinese consumers are also turning more frequently to online shopping and expect more convenient offerings as the stay-at-home economy booms” (Yuan 2023, para. 7-8).

Meanwhile, the level of securitization of the PRC remains low in New Zealand. While politicians have taken note of some security risks posed by Beijing to the Indo-Pacific region and to the country itself, Wellington neither intends to band with America’s anti-China coalition nor directly confronts Beijing the way other Western powers do (Köllner 2019; Khoo 2022; Craymer 2023). Smith and Holster (2023, 1582–3) observe that Wellington, unlike other Anglo-Saxon nations, “often refused to jointly admonish China and instead chose to use softer language when responding” and that “New Zealand remained committed to pursuing strategic communications with China that helped maintain the semblance of “constructive bedrock bilateral relations””. Such a non-provocative way of approaching China came to the fore, especially when the country rejected Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau’s personal call to condemn China’s imprisonment of Canadian citizens (Khoo 2022). Politicians in the island country very much prefer that China as a topic remain in normal politics that does not require extraordinary measures. In 2019, then Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern maintained that New Zealand would not use language or geographic frames like *Indo-Pacific* “as a subtext, or a tool to exclude some nations from dialogue [meaning China]” and underpinned that the country’s success would “depend on working with the widest possible set of partners” (Ardern in Smith & Holster 2023, 1584). Though aware of China’s growing influence in the Pacific Islands, New Zealand is staunchly opposed to the AUKUS nuclear alliance and is “loath to join any new security coalitions that might amplify tensions in the region” (Grossman 2022: para. 20). Although the New Zealand intelligence service banned Huawei from supplying equipments to its own telecommunication industry in 2018 citing security concerns, this securitization effort has been only limited to a specific Chinese actor rather than the entire country, and has not been amplified by other government departments (Greenfield 2018).

In a word, New Zealand’s strong economic dependence on China and the prevailing business interests in maintaining the relationship, coupled with an environment with low

⁴The interview with the President of the New Zealand China Business Council on the BRI can be found on the Radio NZ website under the title “Lobby group says Belt and Road project to lead to better trade.”

level of securitization, have conditioned the country's BAU strategy with Beijing. This signifies the continuity of a more moderate and cooperative style of engagement than that of Germany, for it does not explicitly seek *de-risking*, let alone confrontation.

Romania's Distancing from Beijing

For the past decade (2013–2023), Bucharest has been distancing itself from Beijing, despite the initial political push by the then Prime Minister Victor Ponta to strengthen the relationship (2012–2015). This can be seen from Bucharest's absence from or lukewarm reception of China's initiatives, and the fading of Romanian politicians' enthusiasm to reinvigorate the relationship. Sino-Romanian ties is going downhill mainly due to the lesser extent of trade interdependence and myriad unfulfilled investment projects. Nevertheless, the non-securitized nature of PRC in the country has prevented the government from taking extraordinary measures. All these have led to the Central European state drifting away from Beijing without directly criticizing or confronting the communist regime. In Brinza's (2023, para. 19) words, "[w]hile China still calls Romania an 'old friend,' in reality, the relations between the two are cold and only live from the memories of the communist times and Ponta's prime-ministership."

Pundits do not consider the Romanian economy to be highly dependent on China. For starters, China is only Romania's 18th largest export destinations in 2022, accounting for 1.2 percent of its total exports in the first seven months of 2022 (Popovici 2022, 3). In terms of imports, in 2022 Beijing became Bucharest's 4th most important source of imports after Germany, Italy, and Poland, representing 6 percent of the country's total imports of the same period in 2022. In this light, trade with China generates huge deficits for the account balance for Romania. At the EU level, "Romania is a marginal trader with China," making up of 0,3 percent of EU's total exports and 1,3 percent of imports (Oehler-Şinca 2022., 146). Meanwhile, analysts point out that most of the traded products between the two countries can be substituted in other countries and that such trade relations do not carry the same weight as they do for some other European countries (Expert Forum 2022, 12).

Despite having joined the BRI in 2015 and being a member of the erstwhile 17 + 1 Initiative, Chinese investments in Romania have rarely materialized, leading to a Romanian think tank conduct a report in 2022 titled *China's presence in Romania: The Hundred Flowers that Never Bloomed*. Contrary to previous expectations, various investment projects have either been aborted or never started. These include the Budapest-Bucharest high-speed railway, a nuclear power plant in Cernavodă, a canal linking Siret and Bărăgan, among many others (Expert Forum 2022, 19–20). Then Deputy Prime Minister Dan Barna revealed that "Chinese [...] acquired a poor reputation in Romania because they underbid the competition on contracts but then turned out to be unable to deliver on projects owing to a lack of appropriate regulatory credentials or insufficient resources in Romania" (Politico 2021). Others echo that "[a]ccess of Romanian investors and trading companies to the Chinese market remains difficult, blocked by all sorts of tariff and non-tariff barriers, while almost none of the large projects envisioned by Chinese investors in Romania have been realised" (Expert Forum 2022, 7).

The economic costs to Romanian businesses and the reputational costs to Chinese companies have partially driven Bucharest in 2021 to sign a memorandum that would block

Chinese companies from bidding for public tenders in the country (EURACTIV 2021). The slow progress in the negotiations (incl. price guarantees) in the nuclear cooperation between China and Romania and the new nuclear agreement signed with the United States have also catalyzed Bucharest's change of mind to cancel deals with Beijing. To sum up, the relatively low level of economic interdependence and the fruitlessness of planned projects have added to Romanian businesses and elites' resentment that has come to destabilize the country's political affinity with China at least under Ponta's premiership.

On the other hand, China remains a non-securitized issue in the country, even against the backdrop of the war in its neighboring Ukraine. Notwithstanding apparent diplomatic withdrawal from a number of China-led fora, Romanian politicians have been careful not to directly criticize the communist regime and have not framed it as an existential threat to the country's sovereignty or security. Consistent with the European narrative of strategic autonomy and resilience, Romania chooses to politically align with the EU's position, to deepen cooperation with like-minded partners, and to distance from non-link-minded ones (Oehler-Şinca 2022). For instance, in 2021 Romania adopted a law effectively barring Huawei and any other Chinese company from the country's 5G rollout, without naming Beijing directly (Ibid). According to Oehler-Şinca (Ibid: 149), "Romania has used European arguments to distance itself from its most important Asian trading partner in favor of cooperation with like-minded partners."

In closing, Bucharest's distancing from Beijing occurs against a less interdependent and securitized backdrop. Hence, the Central European country is drifting away from China without adopting a confrontational stance.

Discussion of Findings

Examination of the four cases sheds light on how the effects of core business groups and the level of securitization co-shape state preferences for different strategies of engagement with Beijing. Firstly, we see that the PRC is securitized by both Berlin and Washington. The difference between them is that the stabilizing effect unleashed by German businesses benefiting from interdependence with China pushed the hawkish government to rather opt for a *pragmatic detachment* strategy, characterized by de-risking, diversification and pragmatism without direct confrontation; conversely, the destabilizing effect from the American businesses losing from such an interdependence further propelled the White House and the bipartisan Capitol Hill to adopt a confrontational strategy, marked by strategic competition, balancing, containment, and deterrence.

Secondly, the PRC remains a non-securitized issue for both Wellington and Bucharest. Nevertheless, the difference thereof is that major New Zealander businesses profiting from interdependence with Beijing contributed to shaping state preferences that entrench Wellington's BAU approach with the Asian giant and emphasize cooperation, whilst the low level of interdependence with China and the unfulfilled investments prompted the Romanian government to distance itself from the erstwhile partner in search for like-minded, alternative investors.

Thirdly, let us control business groups influence and look at how securitization shapes the dynamics. Both core German and New Zealander businesses have benefitted from economic activities with Beijing. But that China has been securitized by the German governing coalition (and the EU) has led Berlin to be vigilant of security risks and to overcome

conditions of dependency. The low level of securitization in New Zealand has made Wellington distance itself from the predominant Western narrative of de-risking and competition and de-align even from the hawkishness of its neighbor, i.e., Australia.

Lastly, core American and Romanian business groups have been critical of the interdependence with the PRC. All things equal, a highly securitized China in the United States justifies the use of extraordinary measures to tackle the perceived *existential threat* posed by Beijing, thus aligning the hawkish positions from the businesses and the policymakers (e.g., the Valley & Hill coalition). The politicization of the PRC in Washington further leads to the legalization and institutionalization of securitized discourse and practices. This creates conditions for general confrontation with Beijing. A non-securitized PRC in Romania, however, does not condition the use of extraordinary measures, making Bucharest reticent to directly challenge, provoke, or criticize Beijing.

Conclusion

Amidst the current great-power competition, Western countries engage with China in four different ways, that is, pragmatic detachment, confrontation, business as usual, and distancing. This article analyses and explains Western countries' fragmented China strategies from the angle of business influence and securitization, and argues that the combination of business groups' de-/stabilizing effects and the level of state-led securitization of the PRC shapes state preferences for a particular form of engagement. It further conducted a focused, structured comparative case study with congruence approach on Germany, the United States, New Zealand, and Romania, which provided empirical evidence supporting the theorization of the relationship between business groups, securitization, and their respective China strategies.

The article contributes to the existing foreign policy analysis literature in both theoretical and empirical terms. First, it contributes to the ongoing debate about the effect of economic interdependence on foreign policy. Particularly, it highlights that foreign strategies are more than an automatic response to structural conditions (e.g., interdependence) by a monolithic state and are constantly constructed and contested by societal actors benefiting or losing from interdependence. As such, they are able to shape different non-violent strategies of foreign engagement, ranging from BAU to confrontation, according to their preferences. Second, it posits that business influence and securitization mutually affect one another. While businesses operate in dissimilar contexts of securitization, which impose constraints on their influence, state-led securitization unfolds in a domestic environment constrained or unconstrained by business influences. It elucidates on the one hand why some similarly interdependent Western states with the PRC have adopted different strategies, and on the other hand why a similarly securitized PRC has not led to a uniformly confrontational foreign strategy.

Admittedly, the comparative case analysis under a broad mapping of China strategies did not permit an in-depth, thorough investigation of each and every case, but the insights from this exercise lie more in the theorization that is backed up by plausibility tests than on extensive case studies. It also sheds light on the actual interplay between business and securitization and on how countries formulate strategies concerning China. This said, future studies would indeed benefit both from zooming into the cases discussed above and from looking at wider samples. Also, they could

contribute to the literature by studying how interest groups feed into the de-/securitization dynamics of the PRC, apart from applying the same theoretical model to analyse China strategies of other (non-Western) countries. Moreover, it would be important to investigate how in some countries (e.g., Japan or the Republic of Korea), albeit high level of securitization, core business groups still manage to stabilize bilateral relations with China, or how a country, if any, whose core interest groups are losing from economic interdependence with China and whose government is not interested in securitization. The latter touches upon the question as to whether business can lead the change in terms of state-led securitization.⁵ In any case, in an era of high economic interdependence and great power competition, the influence of business groups on foreign policy should be closely followed.

Declaration of interests

The author declares that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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⁵I owe this point to an anonymous reviewer.

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