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Desecuritisation and Strategic Narratives: China's 16/17+1 Initiative in the Central and Eastern European Countries

M.A. Dissertation

Author: Dongyu Zhai

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Supervisor: PhDr. Jan Hornát

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1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on 29th July 2020

Dongyu Zhai

References

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Abstract

This dissertation uses Critical Discourse Analysis to examine China's strategic use of desecuritised language in its 16/17+1 foreign policy targeting the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region. Through the lens of securitisation theory and strategic narratives, the analysis suggests that China's foreign policy narrative targeting the CEE countries is strategic in nature and is a representation of China's ambition to form a new global order. As such, the desecuritisation strategies are used instrumentally to alleviate 'China threat' perception, increase the attractiveness of China in the region, and to further achieve its economic and geopolitical goals. Among political elites in the Visegrád 4 countries, namely Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, the level of reception of China's strategic narratives varies. The pro-China attitude at the governmental level is mainly motivated by economic incentives promised in the Chinese narrative as well as the governments' own political agendas. In a parallel process, converse anti-China sentiments and re-securitisation of China in the countries are largely connected to the primacy of the trans-Atlantic relationship with the US as well as the importance attached to European values.

Keywords

Chinese foreign policy, Central and Eastern European Countries, desecuritisation, strategic narratives, international norms, 16/17+1 format

Title

Desecuritisation and Strategic Narratives: China's 16/17+1 Initiative in Central and Eastern European Countries

Abstrakt

Magisterská práce používá kritickou analýzu diskurzu k analýze čínského strategického použití desekuritizační rétoriky ve své 16/17+1 zahraniční politice, která cílí na země střední a východní Evropy. Z hlediska sekuritizační teorie a strategických narativů, analýza naznačuje, že čínská zahraniční politika strategicky cílí na země střední a východní Evropy, za účelem uskutečnění ambicí nastolení nové mezinárodní normy. Desekuritizační strategie se používají na zmírnění vnímání Číny jako "čínské hrozby" a zvýšení atraktivity Číny jako perspektivního regionu jako centra pro světovou ekonomiku a geopolitiku. Mezi politickými elitami V4 se vnímání čínského vlivu liší. Pro-čínský postoj na vládní úrovni je motivován zvláště ekonomickými pobídkami a politickou agendou. Paralelně, anti-čínská a re-sekurizační politika vůči Číně je silně propojena s dominancí trans-atlantických vztahů s USA a také hájením evropských hodnot.

Klíčová slova

Zahraniční politika Číny, země střední a východní Evropy, desekuritizace, strategické narativy, mezinárodní normy, iniciativa 16/17+1

Název práce

Desekuritizace a strategické narativy: čínská iniciativa 16/17+1 cílící na země střední a východní Evropy

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Table of Contents

Introduction and Literature Review

Introduction

In the past few decades, China has been increasingly growing its presence on the international stage. Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, there have been prominent changes in China's approach in interacting with the rest of the world. This approach has seen a change from a low-profile strategy of 'hide brightness, nourish obscurity' (taoguang yanghui) to a much more proactive manner, which is exemplified by the initiation of the massive Belt and Road (BRI) project. With a series of 'ritualistic' languages outlining new international initiatives and prospects in its foreign policies, China attempts to define a new world order with itself holding the central position.

The Central and Eastern European (CEE) region has been one of the focuses of China's foreign engagement under the BRI over the last few years. Since the initiation of the 16+1 (now 17+1) cooperation between China and the 16/17+1 CEE countries in 2012, the region has witnessed a drastic increase of China's presence both on normative and practical levels. With institutionalised cooperation mechanisms like annual national meetings as well as the signing of bilateral and multilateral partnership agreements, China has managed to build an interconnectivity between itself and the region at the official governmental level.

However, while China is trying to expand its global influence with its multilateral geopolitical project in the CEE region, the region has also seen a surge of 'China threat' perception. With incidents such as the accusation of espionage of the Huawei company in Poland and Czechia, together with suspicions that China is attempting to divide the EU with its geopolitical project, there is a trend to securitise China's presence and include its 16/17+1 activities into security agendas. Such fears of infiltration of Chinese influence in political, security, and normative domains form a counter-narrative to the China-led 16/17+1 framework.

Moreover, in the context of EU enlargement, the engagement of China in the region actively contributes to not only the dynamics of domestic politics in the 16/17+1 countries, but also their relationships with the EU. Situated at a crossroad of two sets of competing norms, the CEE region thus serves as an interesting case representing the geopolitical rivalries between the major normative powers in the world to compete for influence.

With a closer look into the European integration of the CEE countries, the V4 countries stand out as interesting cases not only due to their geographical proximity to both Western and Eastern Europe, but also because of their unique social conditions. While they have experienced relatively successful political, economic, and social transitions and are among the first countries in the CEE region to become the EU members in the post-Cold War era, they still show certain differences with the core European countries. In this context of being under the influence of Western norms as well as their distinct historical legacy, the V4 countries are good examples that might help to examine the reception and rejection of the China-promoted norms.

The aim of this research is to investigate how China uses desecuritised strategic narratives to contest dominant global norms and exert its influence in the Central and Eastern European region. Using the method of Critical Discourse Analysis, this research strives to answer the following questions: (1) How is China promoting a new normative order in the world with its general foreign policy and why there is a need to use desecuritised language in its foreign narratives? (2) How does China use desecuritised strategic narratives to target the CEE region and what are the strategic goals behind this? (3) To what extent are the V4 countries receptive towards/against China's desecuritised narrative, and what are the factors contributing to the reception and resistance?

To provide a general structure of the research, Chapter 1 introduces the theoretical frameworks of (de)securitisation and strategic narratives as well as the methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis to lay foundation for this research. Then the empirical study

follows three types of narratives Miskimmon et al. (2013) define as International System Narratives, Identity Narratives, and Issue Narratives. Next, Chapter 2 examines the International System Narratives regarding the rise of China both in the West and in China. This understanding of the China threat narrative in the West as well as the Chinese outlook of the world system provides the context in which China's desecuritised CEE foreign policy is formed. Then for the same purpose, China's self-role in the international system, its Identity Narrative, is discussed in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 focuses on the Issues Narrative, which, in this case, is China's 16/17+1 narrative. It identifies different desecuritisation strategies embedded in the language and further addresses China's strategic goals in the CEE region. Some contradictions between the normative and practical level are also pointed out. Last, but not least, reception of the 16/17+1 narrative in the V4 countries is examined in Chapter 5, which provides a focal point in which all the above-mentioned dynamics play out and are evaluated.

Literature Review

Since the initiation of China's 16/17+1 cooperation, numerous constructivist scholars have explored how China's foreign policy narrative exerts influence in the CEE region. For example, Vangeli (2018a) emphasises how China's soft power alters the perceptions of boundaries and historical legacies in the CEE region and shapes new regional norms. Taking a similar stance but relating to China's broader presence in the current international politics, scholars have extended the scope to the global norms. For instance, it is argued that China's effort in the CEE region is increasingly an example of China's capability to challenge the existing norms and rule with its economic power (Fust and Tesar, 2013; Ling, 2019).

Others have explored the interdiscursivity between China's 16/17+1 policy and its broader 'South-South' format claiming both to be the Chinese effort to export its political and normative influence by means of investment promises (Kowalski, 2017). Scholars have also paid attention to the multilateral and multilayer mechanisms through

which the 16/17+1 platform function to exert its soft power and normative influence (Jakóbowski, 2018; Song and Pavlićević, 2019). To get a more conclusive picture, efforts have also been made to quantitatively map the soft power influence of China in the CEE region at the political, media, and social levels (Karásková, Matura, Turcsányi et al., 2018).

In exploring China's normative influence in the CEE region, scholarly attention has also been paid to the CEE states' agency of receiving the Chinese soft power influence. Kavalski (2019), for example, argues that the CEE countries' engagement can be attributed to their own agenda of identity politics to articulate their own distinctive identity, in both their 'Europeanness' as well as their foreign policy independence from the EU. To take things further, Jakimów (2019) explores the subtle relationships between China's 16/17+1 narrative and the transformations happening in the region in terms of political systems and values. Moreover, to evaluate factors that impact the implementation of the 16/17+1 cooperation on the CEE side, Turcsányi and Qiaoan (2019) analyse how diverging perceptions of the communist past in the CEE states contribute to reception or resistance of China's narratives.

However, the existing constructivist literature on the Chinese 16/17+1 framework either focuses on the application or the factors contributing to the function of the framework in the CEE region. Extensive research has been carried out on the analysis of China's general strategic narratives and soft power efforts in the past few years (see for example: Cao, 2014; Callahan, 2015; Lee, 2016; Lams, 2018), but almost no attention has been paid to China's narrative efforts targeting the CEE region despite the significance of Sino-CEE relations in the global political agenda in recent years.

Turning now to the scope of security studies, Vangeli (2018b) discusses in his study how China's presence in the CEE region has contributed to the surge of 'China threat' perception in the 16/17+1 countries. In the same vain, Pavlićević (2018) further examines the oscillation of 'China threat' and 'China opportunity' perceptions in the CEE countries. Taking into consideration the security implications of realist

geopolitical rivalry, Scott (2018) suggests a possibility of a security dilemma that the Baltic states may face due to being situated at the crossroads of China, Russia, and the EU's influence. In addition to this, security analysis is also conducted on specific issues, for example, the Huawei incident (Kaska, Beckvard and Minárik, 2019) and China's energy investment in CEE countries (Turcsányi, 2017).

Despite that these studies represent increased security concerns in the CEE region, they all only focus on the security implications to the states in the region. The specific mechanism through which China tackles its securitised status in the CEE region has not yet been investigated. Even though Jakimów (2019) has innovatively pointed out that desecuritisation can be a means for China to achieve soft power influence in the CEE region, her study does not draw out the important links between China's desecuritised language and its broader intention to alter and shape the existing world order.

Generally, China's presence in the CEE region is a relatively new phenomenon and studies on this topic are not yet extensive. Given the above-identified gaps in constructivist literature as well as security studies related to this issue, it would be useful to conduct a research which examines the Chinese efforts to formulate its strategies towards the CEE countries to deal with the heightening security concerns in the region. This research thus has a two-fold aim: empirically, it aims to contribute to a better understanding of the strategies and mechanics through which China exerts its normative influence in the CEE region; theoretically, it intends to explore the compatibility of strategic narratives and securitisation theory and consequently provide new perspectives to both theoretical frameworks.

Chapter 1. Theoretical Frameworks

1.1. Securitisation/Desecuritisation Theory

1.1.1. Securitisation

Developed by the Copenhagen School and rooted in constructivist and poststructuralist theory (Balzacq, 2010:1), securitisation theory provides a way of conceptualising security and threats in the post-Cold War context (Buzan et al. 1998). Though the Copenhagen School's definition of security is compatible with the traditional realist notion of security, which is 'about survival' (Buzan et al., 1998: 21), it questioned the realist perception of security threats. While realists would argue that security threats as inherent in the uni- or multi-polar world order (Waltz, 2000; Wohlforth, 1999), securitisation theory proposes instead, that security threats are constructed discursively and subjectively (Waever, 1995; Collins, 2010).

Taking a constructivist epistemological stance, securitisation theory regards security and security threats as subjective constructs. Regardless of the reality of the claimed ostensible existential threat, the securitisation process takes place from the moment an issue is presented and articulated as an existential threat. Thus, the ability to discursively endow a certain issue with the nature of, and perception as, an existential threat is one of the key determinants of a securitisation (Balzacq, 2005: 179). In this sense, securitising a certain issue is a process of shaping a performative speech act around it.

Going further, securitisation is defined as a more extreme version of politicisation (Buzan et al., 1998: 23). That is to say, the securitisation of an issue firstly needs to go through the stage of politicisation, which refers to the point when an issue that was not included in the public debates appears in the political agenda and is involved in the normal political procedure; then, when the politicised issue is perceived to have security implications and is thus included in the security agenda, its securitisation takes place.

A successful securitisation requires a securitising actor, referent object, threat, audience, and facilitating conditions. Securitising actors are the ones who 'securitise issues by declaring something… is existentially threatened' (Buzan et al., 1998: 36). They are usually affiliated to governments, including 'political leaders, bureaucracies, governments, lobbyists and pressure groups' (ibid: 40), or in a broader sense, anyone with the authority to formulate and define existential threats. Referent objects refer to the things that are perceived to be under threat and at the same time being essential for survival (ibid: 36). They can be individuals, certain groups of a population, state sovereignty, national economy, or the environment, as well as less tangible ontological concerns such as identity, values, and even one's perception of self.

Successful securitisation largely relies on the acceptance of an audience, whom the securitising actors strive to persuade (Buzan et al., 1998: 41). Only when audiences are convinced by the speech acts and accept the existence of an existential threat is the securitising actor granted the legitimacy to implement exceptional security measures (Balzacq, 2005: 184) and the extraordinary procedures beyond the normal politics can be tolerated (Collins, 2010: 139; Floyd, 2016). In this sense, securitisation could also be understood as a process of 'bargaining' between the securitising actors and audiences around suspension of ordinary rules and rights (Hansen, 2012: 531).

This process of securitisation shows that it is both a self-referential and intersubjective process (Hui, 2019: 36). On the one hand, defined as a discursive construct, the securitising move already starts when an actor claims something to be a threat, which refers to its self-referential nature (Waever, 1995: 55). On the other hand, securitisation moves can only be successful when the audiences agree with the actor upon the constructed reality of threats. Thus, an intersubjective understanding of the threats presented in the speech-acts between actors and audiences is essential for the inclusion of the constructed threats into the security agenda.

Resonating with this self-referential and intersubjective nature, there are two kinds of facilitating conditions that contribute to a successful securitisation according to the

Copenhagen School (Buzan et al., 1998: 32). Firstly, the self-referential nature requires the actors to have enough implementation potential. This reflects the need for the 'external facilitating conditions', which relate to the functions of contextual and social settings, in which the securitising actors have the authority and enforcement capability to act (ibid), for example, with the authority or credibility of the securitising actor. Next, intersubjectivity voices a need for the logic of securitising discourse to be compatible with that of the audience. This need could be met by what Buzan et al. term as the 'internal facilitating conditions'. It refers to 'linguistic-grammatical' construction in the securitising process requiring the speech acts to be in accordance with the existing grammar of security in the society, as well as to providing reasonable solutions to the existential threats (ibid). This thus requires the speech-acts to be compatible with the perception and ideology of the audiences.

1.1.2. Desecuritisation

1.1.2.1. Desecuritisation as Negative Corollary of Securitisation

When certain issues are no longer considered as existential threats, securitising actors remove the issues from the security agenda. This is where the reversed process of securitising an issue, desecuritisation, takes place. According to Buzan (1997: 4), desecuritisation is a process where an issue is shifted out of emergency mode to the normal political procedure. In other words, to desecuritise an issue means to downgrade it from securitisation to politicisation.

Desecuritisation, as the conceptual twin of securitisation, first arose from Waever's (1993) contemplation on the changing ecology of international security in the post-Cold War context. Desecuritisation is described as a process of 'détente' or 'change through stabilisation' (ibid: 9), which refers to the process through which the traditional security conflicts between the West and the Eastern bloc lose their security urgency and become the issues of normal international politics.

In this understanding, desecuritisation is regarded as 'the negative corollary of securitisation' (Vuori, 2018: 3) by being viewed as the post hoc process of the

securitising moves. Moreover, when it comes to the comparison between securitisation and desecuritisation, a normative preference for desecuritisation could be found in the Copenhagen School's framework. The notion 'panic politics' was used to describe the period of securitisation, referring to the situation when the normal rule of law and the open political debates are not functioning (Buzan et al., 1998: 34). Since the whole process of securitisation is beyond 'normal and ordinary politics', to eventually desecuritise an issue and restore the normal political order is seen as the optimal long-term choice (ibid). Thus, desecuritisation is regarded as a means to stop the extraordinary measures securitisation has triggered and to restore a normal political status.

In the post-Cold War context, the notion of desecuritisation was further developed and applied in various new contexts. Critical IR theorists like Aradau (2004) regards desecuritisation as a 'Foucauldian-inspired' normative project which brings back the democratic politics that was taken away by the initial securitisation and which struggles for changing the non-democratic nature of security. Behnke (2006) understands desecuritisation in a more absolute sense, arguing that desecuritisation can never really happen due to the intrinsic inseparability between politics and security. Desecuritisation is sometimes also understood as a process of deconstructing collective identities where the division of self and other is conceptually connected to existential threats (Roe, 2004).

With the emergence of new forms of political and security situations in the few decades following the Cold War, there have further emerged new conceptualisations of strategies of desecuritisation. For example, Hansen (2012) terms four strategies to achieve desecuritisation. Firstly, 'change through stabilisation' is largely identical with Wæver's (1993) 'détente' approach, where an issue slowly fades out of the security agenda and gradually stabilises as a political issue. Though this happened at the end of the Cold War on a large scale, it is argued that it is not particularly relevant today in a globalised world (ibid: 539). Secondly, the strategy of 'replacement' refers to the situation where one security issue is desecuritised at the same time as another is

included into a security agenda (ibid: 541). In this case, desecuritisation of an issue is accompanied by the simultaneous securitisation of another one. Thirdly, to desecuritise an issue through 'rearticulation' means to provide political solutions to the existential threats, which is a more direct and active way to resolve threat perception among the audiences (ibid: 542). Lastly, there is also a strategy of 'silencing', which means to desecuritise an issue by excluding it from the discursive representation of security (ibid: 544). In this sense, desecuritisation is achieved through an absence of security discourse or speech-acts.

1.1.2.2. Later Development: Active Desecuritisation and Desecuritising Actor

Despite that desecuritisation serves as a useful framework in various empirical studies, the conceptualisation itself has received some critiques concerning its vagueness due to under-theorisation and its possibilities for open interpretation (see for example Aradau, 2004; Floyd, 2015; Hansen, 2012). Another major criticism of the early stage theoretical development centres around the normative preference for desecuritisation. Floyd (2010: 57) questions the Copenhagen School's view that desecuritisation would always lead to politicisation and argues that depoliticization could also be the outcome. In a later study, from a moral perspective, Floyd then criticises that desecuritisation is not necessarily morally superior to securitisation, since there is also a possibility of moral/just securitisation (Floyd, 2011).

In the most recent development of the theory, scholars also questioned the necessity for desecuritisation to be the ontological post hoc move to securitisation. For instance, Vuori (2011) proposes that desecuritisation is not just the 'negative ontological corollary' to securitisation, it can serve as an active counter strategy to securitisation. By this definition, the process of desecuritisation can be presented by active moves and explicit speech acts independent from already-existing securitised narratives around an issue. In other words, desecuritisation could happen earlier than the securitisation process and function as a pre-emptive move to prevent the inclusion of certain public issues into a given security agenda.

Furthermore, contrasted with the early literature's vagueness concerning actors which have influence on the desecuritisation process, scholars have also expanded on this understanding. For instance, Oelsner (2005: 4) argues that the actors that desecuritise an issue do not necessarily have to be the same as the ones who advocated for securitisation. Rather, they can be other actors who have the ability to deliver their re-interpreted ideas around previously constructed threats (ibid: 15). Resonating with this conceptualisation, de Wilde (2008: 597) brings up with the notion 'desecuritising actor'. These are defined as the ones who 'can afford to acquiesce in, evade, circumvent or indirectly oppose securitising moves' (ibid). That is to say, desecuritising actors can be 'external' in the sense that they are not confined to those who have constructed threats in the first place. They can be actors with enough agency to complete the communication process and change the audiences' perception of threats. In addition, there are also arguments pointing to the possibility of desecuritising actors being the ones who were previously silenced in the process of securitisation (Aradau, 2003: 20; cited in Coskun, 2009: 100). This suggests that even the groups who are marginalised during the construction of threats can be the agents of desecuritisation.

Based on these understandings of desecuritisation, Bourbeau and Vuori (2015: 259) suggest a new strategy of desecuritisation termed 'pre-emptive desecuritisation through rebuttal'. According to them, explicitly rebutting the security frames could avoid the escalation of a security issue before it is perceived as an existential threat and be included into the security agenda. Thus, this kind of active desecuritisation happens prior to the actual securitisation and the extraordinary measures are taken. By doing this, desecuritisation is achieved by preventing securitisation from happening in the first place. Also, this separation of desecuritisation from the securitising actions further implies that desecuritising actors can also be independent and different from the original securitising actors. Taking post-Maoist China as an example, Bourbeau and Vuori further point out that China's goal of a 'peaceful rise' could be regarded as a rebuttal of the China threat discourse in the West (ibid: 260). Therefore, apart from 'détente' proposed by Waever (1993), and 'replacement', 'rearticulation', and

'silencing' suggested by Hansen (2012), Bourbeau and Vuori contribute to the fifth strategy of desecuritisation, and so largely broadens the conceptualisation of the theory.

Given the topic of this research, it will approach desecuritisation in the active sense that Vuori (2011) proposed. Meanwhile, it adopts the notion of 'desecuritising actor' that de Wilde (2008) and Aradau (2003) apply and regards China as a desecuritising actor that was not involved in the securitisation of China, but potentially has the agency to exert influences to change the perception of security threats of audiences. Taking the lens of active desecuritisation to examine its application in the globalised world, the research is also parting from the context of merely traditional security around military power to a more diverse perception of security threats, which includes economical, ideological, and normative threats.

1.1.3. Chinese Scholars on Securitisation/Desecuritisation

In the past two decades, securitisation and desecuritisation theory has also actively been applied and developed by Chinese academics to build up favourable narratives well suited to Chinese foreign policy. For instance, the subjective nature of securitisation is often used to criticise the perception of China being a security threat to other countries. For example, in their empirical study of the armament build-up in East Asian countries, Guo and Chen (2018) coined the notion 'pan-securitisation', meaning the excessive securitising of the non-traditional security issues (such as economic security, information security, technological security, cyber security etc.) in a traditional way. Linked with the 'Cold-war mentality' and 'unilateralism', the increasing armament of South Korea, North Korea and Japan is criticised for conducting pan-securitisation and including excessive concerns into security agenda (ibid: 52).

Yu and Xie (2015) further add some pitfalls of the securitisation process. Defining securitisation theory as a political choice, they bring up some of the problems around the process of choice-making: 'excessive choice' (when the securitising actors choose to exaggerate the seriousness of the actual threats for the purpose of their own political

agendas), 'insufficient choice' (when the securitising actors underestimate or ignore the existing security threats), and 'the choice of making an adversarial other' (when an enemy is created during the securitisation process). Based on the analysis of these problems, they voiced a need for China to expand securitisation theory and adopt a 'peaceful', 'collaborative', and 'win-win' approach when constructing security issues to avoid the identified pitfalls (ibid: 122).

Resonating with the problem of 'creating an adversarial other' proposed by Yu and Xie (2015), scholars have also tried to deconstruct and refute the China threat narrative with the subjective nature of securitisation. Wang (2013) for example, argues that the US is trying to securitise the Other by constructing China as a security threat to the West and defines 'China threat' as a political myth which only exists on the level of speech acts. Song (2015) further argues that the securitisation process could be regarded as the US's struggle to impose an authoritative interpretation of the rise of China (ibid).

While securitisation is often used to deconstruct China as a threat, the desecuritisation dynamic is linked to China's own foreign policy in the Chinese literature. Yu and Zhang (2019: 20) argue that desecuritisation should be one of the main characteristics of Chinese diplomacy narratives and would work as an optimal way of promoting foreign policy. They emphasise the importance of promoting other countries to have a value of 'harmony and coexistence' through the strategy of desecuritisation. From a different angle, Li (2015) voices an urgent need to develop the desecuritisation aspect of the theory. He suggests that the optimal ways to achieve desecuritisation are by making the audience rationally realise the compatibility between their own benefit and the outcomes of desecuritisation (ibid: 60). Meanwhile, the political actors should also refrain from increasing their own authoritative power to lessen the obstruction of desecuritisation process (ibid: 61).

1.2. Strategic Narratives

1.2.1. Soft Power

In the 1990s, Joseph Nye (1990a) contemplated power in the post-Cold War context: a new era of globalisation and economic interdependence where the great powers are less likely and less able to use traditional forms of military power, and an era broadly characterised by the state-centric power of the past being diffused to more actors. To reflect this, Nye coined a new form of power, soft power, which he famously defined as 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments' (Nye, 2004: x). Distinguished from traditional hard power, soft power soon changed the understanding of international politics from the focus of traditional security to the liberalist framework of cooperation (Callahan, 2015: 216).

According to Nye, hard power and soft power are distinguished along a spectrum of command to co-optive power behaviour. Even though both forms of power point to the ability of controlling others' behaviours and getting preferred outcomes, command hard power changes the actions of others by coercion or payments, while the co-optive soft power forms other actors' wishes and wants or manipulates political agenda setting by means of one's cultural or ideological attractiveness (Nye, 1990b: 181-182). Hard power originates from military or economic power and is usually associated with command behaviour. In contrast, soft power relies on three resources: 'its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when others see them as legitimate and having moral authority)' (Nye, 2008: 97).

1.2.2. Strategic Narratives: A Useful Way to Understand Soft Power

While soft power analysis has become an essential means to understand international politics in the past few decades, it is sometimes dismissed as being a 'fuzzy concept' or being ambiguous (see for example, Lukes, 2007; Mattern, 2007; Callahan, 2015). Nye's early conceptualisation of soft power is also criticised for being 'unstrategic' and having little conceptual space to fit in the subject of power (Lock,

2010: 3). Furthermore, it also receives critiques around the difficulty and the vagueness present in identifying the resources of power as well as around the under-researched mechanism of how soft power produces attraction and leads to desired outcomes (Hayden, 2012; Solomon, 2014). The question of how exactly an actor could wield soft power to get strategic outcomes by means of attraction remains largely unanswered. To fill the conceptual gap within the concept of soft power, political communication scholars have proposed that the notion 'strategic narratives' is helpful to better understand soft power in the 21st century and the mechanisms through which it functions (Roselle et al., 2014).

Narratives refer to stories describing events in a way that points to certain definite conclusions, or 'frameworks constructed to allow people to make sense of the world, policies, events, and interactions' (Rosselle, 2010, cited in Lams, 2018: 388). When used strategically, narratives aim to shape the identity groups and the shared normative preferences of a given population. Based on this understanding, strategic narratives are defined as 'a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political elites attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives' (Antoniades et al., 2010: 5). Put differently, strategic narratives are a set of stories created by political actors for the purpose of achieving their desired outcomes, which include expanding their influences, managing audiences' perceptions, and forming the discourse around them.

In their systematic study of strategic narratives, Miskimmon et al. (2013) distinguished three different levels of narratives. The International System Narrative outlines the structure of the international stage and its actors. For instance, the Cold War narrative or the China threat narrative in the West. The Identity Narrative describes the story and values that are attributed to certain political actors, which is constantly being negotiated and contested in the interactions with other actors (ibid: 7). Examples of this would be China identifying itself as peace-loving and a nation of courtesy (in the Chinese discourse), or China as authoritarian power seeking to be a world hegemon

(in the Western discourse). Finally, there is also the Issue Narrative. This forms stories in a certain context, explaining its actors, the solution of its issues, and the reasons why a policy is desirable around the specific issue. It is this that provides context for specific policies of governments. For instance, the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative is presented within larger narratives of the Chinese culture and the Silk Road history to appeal audiences and create positive images.

When actors attach different meanings and interpretations to a certain issue, their narratives may clash with each other. Under this circumstance, they would attempt to delegitimise and defend their own version of the story. According to Miskimmon et al. (2013: 104), the clash of strategic narratives between different actors does not simply lead to the effort to eliminate enemy's version of narratives, but it may also include the 'destruction of the conditions that make alternative narratives plausible, communicable, and intelligible'.

So, how could strategic narratives be conducive to the analysis of soft power and why can they be part of the soft power diplomacy? To answer this question, firstly it is necessary to look at the sources of soft power. As already mentioned in the previous part, soft power originates from a country's culture, values, or foreign policy (Nye, 2008). From a constructivist perspective, the resources of soft power are the results of socio-linguistic constructs and would always fit into some already-existing narratives. Nye himself also acknowledged that in the era of soft power, those whose stories, thus narratives, prevail, and attract people win (Nye, 2013; cited in Roselle et al., 2014). The study of strategic narratives would accordingly contribute to a better understanding of the sources of soft power.

Secondly, strategic narratives provide oriented frameworks to analyse soft power (Roselle et al., 2014: 75). As it has been pointed out, soft power analysis, despite its importance in the current IR studies, does not offer a structure to study the political communication phenomenon which includes the formation, projection, and reception of the constructed discourse. Meanwhile, the study of strategic narratives provides a

way to identify the soft power recourse and offers a broader context to understand the whole communication process of soft power with its multi-layered structure.

1.2.3. Compatibility of the Proposed Theoretical Frameworks

Despite that there are few studies exploring the connection between soft power/strategic narratives and desecuritisation currently in the Critical Security Studies, a significant compatibility between the two frameworks can be observed. This is reflected by Nye (2008: 107) in a later effort to explain the representation of soft power as he conceptualises a mechanism through which soft power functions. This basically follows a process of strategic narrative: the 'sources of soft power' (culture, values, foreign policies) are projected and represented by the governments, NGOs, or media in order to create attraction for the 'receivers of soft power' (foreign governments and publics). Meanwhile, (de)securitisation is an intersubjective process in which the actors actively deliver the construct of security threats by means of speech-acts to achieve the goal of audience acceptance. It is not difficult to see that they all go through a process of political communication where actors or agents strive to manipulate narratives or discourse around certain issues for the purpose of changing the perceptions and behaviours of audiences.

Furthermore, the most important sources of soft power, namely culture and values, are also reflected and included in the intersubjective constructs/deconstruction of threats. The (de)securitisation discourse serves as a perlocutionary act where the discourse reflects values and identities of the actor. To achieve the desired audience acceptance, these value-laden contents need to be compatible with the values or cultures that audiences hold. It is through this process that audiences can find the narratives provided by securitising/desecuritising actors 'attractive'.

Lastly, in addition to these commonalities, the combination of the theoretical frameworks may also contribute to a better conceptualisation on both sides. For instance, the existing literature on (de)securitisation has largely overlooked the mechanism through which a (de)securitising actor wields its leverage to influence the audiences.

While, soft power/strategic narratives often are not seen to have a direct link with security frameworks. A foreign policy analysis which explores the desecuritising narratives in the representation of the official strategic narratives of a nation offers new ways to view non-traditional security in the contemporary world. This research thus aims to contribute to a better understanding of desecuritisation, strategic narratives as well as their combination both theoretically and empirically.

1.3. Methodology: Critical Discourse Analysis

1.3.1. Critical Discourse Analysis

Discourse is defined as 'a system of statements which constructs an object' (Parker, 1992: 4), or, more broadly, as a process which includes the whole communication event (Bloor and Bloor, 2007: 7). The analysis of discourse is a both reflexive and interpretive process (Philips and Hardy, 2002: 5), as it investigates the texts as well as interprets the constructed nature of languages. In their attempts to categorise different approaches of discourse analysis, Philips and Hardy (2002) put Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) into the contextual and critical dimension. Different from other approaches to discourse analysis, CDA critically scrutinises power relations within social contexts which are hidden behind the discourse.

In CDA, language is regarded as a social practice connected to certain historical contexts (Fairclough, 1989). The use of language shapes or challenges social relations. The centre of analysis mainly focuses on contexts of language use, taking a particular interest in the relation between language and power. It strives to examine and explain discourse around certain issues in a broad social and political context instead of only studying the textual and linguistic aspects (Tenorio, 2011: 187). Given the focus of CDA on revealing power inequality and manipulation, this approach tends to critically deconstruct, rather than actively construct a discourse.

An important aspect of the approach is that CDA requires researchers to assume a

double role of both analyst and reader. According to Fairclough (1989: 167), the only way that the researcher can have access to how a discourse is produced and interpreted is to engage with it as if he or she is the reader of the discourse. In this process, it is the self-consciousness and the realisation of the power embedded social practices that distinguishes an analyst from a mere reader of the discourse. Moreover, similar to critical theory, CDA also highlights the ability to inter-disciplinarily apply and synthesise knowledge. This is because, in order to adequately analyse the connection between discourse and society certain social issues, the methodology requires researchers to understand the issue at hand from different disciplines which usually include politics, culture, social cognition, history and so forth (Fairclough, 2012: 452).

1.3.2. Notions of Critique, Power, and Ideology

Despite the variety of different approaches to CDA, critique, power, and ideology are the three essential concepts recursively concerned in every approach (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009: 87). Or in Breeze's (2011: 495) words, all schools of CDA include 'a more or less political concern with the workings of ideology and power in society; and a specific interest in the way language contributes to, perpetuates and reveals these workings'.

The intellectual foundations of the critical aspect of the approach can be traced back to post-Marxism, the Frankfurt School of critical theory, as well as Foucauldian post-structuralism (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009: 87). Taking a critical stance implies having distance from the studied discourse, understanding the data within its social context, uncovering the political stance taken by the discourse participants, while also requiring constant self-reflection of the researchers involved (Wodak, 2001). Thus, the critical aspect of CDA requires not only the analysis of the text, but also engages with the processes and social structures in which the discourse was produced, as well as the process of how actors engage with discourse and create a shared meaning.

Another defining characteristic of CDA is its focus on power. It takes a particular

interest in how language is applied and used in the expressions and manipulations of social power (Wodak and Meyer, 2011: 10), and how power abuse and inequality are produced, reproduced, and maintained through discourse (Van Dijk, 2015: 466). Due to the continuous connection between the use of language and social processes, language is always interwoven with social power. Language 'indexes power, expresses power, is involved where there is contention over and a challenge to power' (Wodak, 2001: 10). Through various linguistic and grammatical forms, power is appointed by different positioning expressed in the text. It is important, though, to note that language itself is not powerful, power is dependent on the power potential of the actor and derives from how the powerful actor makes use of it (Wodak and Meyer, 2011: 10). In other words, language does not produce power. Instead, it functions as a media to signify and represent social power as well as a tool to influence, change, or maintain structure of social power.

Closely related to the representation of social power, ideology is understood as an important mechanism through which power relations are formed and maintained (Wodak and Meyer, 2011: 9). According to the definition of Hodge and Kress (1993), ideology includes and reflects social realities that are organised in a systematic way. Languages and texts are not shaped in a vacuum, they are always constructed in certain social settings and realities and embedded in ideologies.

1.3.3. Application to Research and Selection of Discourse

CDA functions as a useful tool well-suited to the aim of this research, as its focus on both realist notions of power as well as discursive elements enables the analysis of strategic narratives and (de)securitisation to honour both perspectives. More specifically, in one respect, CDA facilitates acknowledgement of the realist aspects of the issue, such as China's increasing international presence and global power struggle. In another respect, it also emphasises the constructivist elements such as the subjective constructed nature of strategic narratives and (de)securitisation speech acts. Therefore, by making realist accommodations while providing the tools and space to account for

discursive power relations without reducing either of them, CDA is very conducive to the understanding of the topic.

With this considered, this research applies CDA to examine the strategic use of desecuritised language in China's general foreign policy and its 16/17+1 policy targeting the CEE region. In the analysis of China's International System Narrative and Identity Narrative, the main sources of data come from significant government speeches, statements, and policy papers. Given the close links between Chinese academia and the governmental political agendas, selected works by some Chinese scholars will also be considered. The analysed discourse of the Issue Narrative, the 16/17+1 policy, comes from the speeches of high Chinese officials, government publications and statements. The discourse is selected according to the 'critical discourse moments' when there were important domestic/diplomatic events relating to China's foreign policy towards the CEE region taking place.

Regarding the analysis of the reception in the V4 countries, though there are multiple layers of discourse around the topic at hand, including individual, social and official levels, the research will be mainly focusing on the discourse on the governmental level due to its symbolic significance and higher potential to translate into policy-making process in the countries. The analysed discourse here comes from, but is not confined to, political speeches, documents, and official pronouncements. In addition, some published analysis of new agencies and major think tanks is also included.

Chapter 2. International System Narratives

2.1. International System Narratives: China Threat

According to Miskimmon et al. (2013), the International System Narrative outlines how the global system is, how it functions and how it assigns the actors in play. It may include the depiction of friends and enemies, conflict, and action as well as the perception of danger on the international stage. With the aim of this research, it would be logical to first explore the historical context of how and why the China threat perception came into being as one of the prominent features of the International System Narratives in the West. Supportive arguments of realist IR theory, followed by major developments of the China threat narrative in the US as well as in Europe, will be discussed.

The 'China threat' perception follows the logic of realism and refers to anxiety and uncertainty around China's rise as well as the fears that China might apply its growing power to destabilise and upset the regional and global security (Broomfield, 2003: 266). For realists like Mearsheimer, states strive for survival in the anarchic international order, and clashes between hegemonic powers are inevitable. The great powers regard attaining hegemony as their final goal with a 'zero-sum' mentality. With the increasing visibility of China on the international stage in the past few decades, he further predicts that China will strive to become a regional hegemon and will then seek global hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2001).

Following this logic, China is, as such, not a 'status-quo' power, but a revisionist power which attempts to upset the existing balance of power on the regional, as well as global level, for its own benefit. According to offensive realism, there is no chance for a peacefully rising China and it is predicted that China's economic growth will lead to 'intense security competition with considerable potential for war' between China and the US, and that most of the Asian countries will stand in line with the US to balance China's power (Mearsheimer, 2006). This argument shows the anxiety around a rising

China revolves around its growing military and economic power, as well as its potential to change the existing international order and norms.

Even though several other political theorists hold that there is a possibility of China's 'peaceful rise', it is argued that this can only happen when China follows the mainstream rules and is willing to assimilate within the prevailing global norms. According to Buzan (2010:6), China's peaceful rise would be possible if China abides by the principles in the existing international norms including 'sovereignty, non-intervention, territoriality, nationalism, international law, diplomacy, great power management, the equality of peoples'. This implies the possibility of resolving the threat narratives by assimilating China into the current US-led world order. However, the flip side of this conditionality again suggests that China will be perceived as a threat if it is not compatible with the existing mainstream norms; needless to say, if it attempts to change the international norms.

In the US, the China threat narratives were formally translated into its foreign policy during the Bush administration. Starkly different from the previous Clinton administration, the Bush administration saw China as a strategic competitor with potentials to threaten the stability of the Asia-Pacific region (Rodhan, 2007: 43). As such, China was identified as one of the major threats and challenges posed to the existing world order in the 21st century (Ikenberry and Slaughter, 2009:9, cited in Ling, 2013: 552). There was also support for maintaining US military advances as well as the possibility of 'pre-emptive war' with China (ibid). Moreover, the key issue of the China threat stems from not only the growth of economic and military power, but also the deeper threat that centres around Chinese presence in the western Pacific area and Southeast Asia (Ross, 2005: 83). Thus, resonating with the realist interpretation of the China threat, the ultimate fear of the US policy makers is that the economic and military growth of China may lead to a structural change of the current US-led world order and even the subsequent decline of the US.

2.1.1. China Threat Narrative in Europe

Given the similarities of political values as well as the closeness of transatlantic ties, the European narrative of the China threat is very similar to that of the US. The difference, however, is that Europe does not focus as much on the traditional military power of China as threat, but is rather more centred around European ontological security. Due to the great importance the European countries attach to universal norms and democratic values (Vangeli, 2018:4), compared with the US, China's presence in Europe is perceived to have more potential to disrupt the unity of the EU. More precisely, China is perceived as a threat due to its potential to harm the self-identity and unity of Europe as a whole and European institutions like the EU and NATO.

This ontological concern is further reflected in the *Strategic Outlook Paper* published by the EU in 2019 where China is labelled as the its 'systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance' which requires the EU to have a 'a principled defence of interests and values' when dealing with China (European Commission, 2019). This labelling of 'systemic rival' shows that the European perception of China threat largely revolves around the Chinese political influences and the potential ideological infiltration in European countries. This is also reflected in numerous academic efforts. Benner et al. (2018: 3), for example, argued that all Chinese interactions with European countries 'have strong political undertones' and involve certain manipulative political agendas. It is argued that the main Chinese agendas include attempts to create and exploit divisions within the EU by means of the 16/17+1 format which targets countries marginal to the EU (Bachulska et al., 2020: 30; Benner et al., 2018: 7); or to use political manipulation in the guise of soft power and cultural diplomacy (Vangeli, 2018: 5; Benner et al., 2018) and subsequently undermine the European unity and democratic values (Rogelja and Tsimonis, 2020: 104).

Moreover, since the initiation of the 16/17+1 framework in 2012, the core European member states like France and Germany have been getting increasingly uncomfortable with interactions between China and their eastern periphery. Concerns

include the Chinese project's potential geopolitical implications as well as the possibility of deteriorating unity within the EU due to potential competition around economic benefits. Concerns are also raised around Chinese investment which is usually bounded with requirements for certain political positioning in accordance with China's stance. It is suggested that the economic incentives offered by China might potentially cause a West-East divide within the EU and further impede the coherence of EU values as well as foreign policies in its member states (Jakimów, 2017).

To summarise, the China threat narrative came into being in the context of China's rapid economic growth and the modernisation of its military power in the past few decades. The narrative is based on a realist binary logic according to which states either assimilate to the existing order or compete for survival. Despite there being increasing anxiety around China's economic and military power, the deeper structural anxiety revolves around China's potential to change the existing international order. More specifically, this equals disruption to the US-led regional and sub-regional order for the US, and for Europe, a challenge to the European values, regional norms, and the unity within EU.

2.2. International System Narrative: How China Perceives the World

While the China threat narrative is gaining support in the Western countries and is widely accepted in the existing US-led world order, there has been increasing discontent with the dominant world order within the Chinese discourse. The existing world order has long been described as 'unfair and unreasonable (bu gongzheng, bu heli)', and the need for a 'just and fair global governance' has been a recurrent topic in official discourse. In her speech in London in 2016, the former Chinese ambassador to the UK, Fu Ying (2016), defined the current world order as 'Pax Americana', which is based on Western values, the US-led military alignment, and the UN institutions in which China has long been politically alienated. As such, she suggests that despite the 'tremendous progress' of China and other rising developing countries, they do not have a proportionate say in the current world order. Furthermore, a distinction between 'world

order' and 'international order' is made. Fu claims that China has a 'strong sense of belonging' to the latter, which refers to the UN institutions and international law, and is 'learning and offering its own ideas and initiatives to improve the international order system' (ibid). Yet, importantly, implicit in Fu's critique of the current world order is the need for China to hold important roles in changing the US-led order and shape a new one more compatible with its own interests.

While the US-led international system narrative voices a binary between China and the West and regards China as a potential threat to the current world order, the Chinese version of its International System Narrative paints a totally different picture. The following part will discuss the perception of the world order in the Chinese foreign policy discourse. It will first feature a brief discussion of the different schools of Chinese international relations theory, which serve as the foundation to create the China's own version of international narratives. Then the key concepts in the current Chinese foreign policy will be examined. Due to the fact that the foreign policy under the most recent leadership is the most relevant to the research topic, the main focus of this part will be the key concepts brought up under Xi's term, namely the 'Community with a shared future for mankind', the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the new model of great power relationships.

2.2.1. The Theoretical Background for a New World Order

The formation of a new International System Narrative which challenges the universal applicability of the dominant Western-led one needs theoretical support. Deploying a distinctive Chinese social scientific theoretical system has long been the backbone of the CCP's work around ideology and propaganda both domestically and globally (Rolland, 2020: 26). Thus, the imperative of developing theories that are compatible with China's vision for the new international order is left to the Chinese IR scholars.

Taking up this mission, there are a few different approaches present in the Chinese academic circles. Yan Xuetong, for example, proposes a moral realist approach which

combines ancient Chinese thoughts and contemporary international relations. Based on his contemplations on the inequality of discursive powers between the strong and weak states in pre-Qin (pre-211 BCE) China, he argues that the post-Cold War world order is largely created and imposed on the rest (the 'weaker') by the developed (the 'stronger') states (Yan, 2013: 68). Emphasising the role of morality in the rising of great powers, he urges China to establish a new international order based on values of 'fairness, justice, and civility' (Yan, 2014).

Another prominent Chinese IR scholar, Qin Yaqing (2009), explores international relations through the Confucian ideas of 'relationality' and 'relatedness' in contrast to Western individualism. He argues that it is through the process of interactive practices among states that a nation's goal can be achieved and that norms and identities are constructed on the international level. Lastly, there is the school, led by Zhao Tingyang (2003), which attempts to develop an alternative world order to the anarchic and zero-sum Westphalian one with the traditional notion 'tianxia' (all-under-heaven). His Tianxia system is a hierarchical international society characterised by 'compatibility' and 'co-existentiality' where the legitimacy of the system's ruler is gained by its ethical and moral prestige (Zhao, 2015).

As suggested above, apart from incorporating ancient Chinese thought into their theoretical frameworks, one of the distinct features common to all three schools is their blueprint of a hierarchical international system in which the ruling power gains authority by its ethical and moral superiority. As the theoretical foundation of China's new world order, this idea is further reflected and expanded in China's foreign policy, which will be explained in the following parts.

2.2.2. Community with a Shared Future for Mankind

With distinctive IR theories as its basis, China has brewed its own vision of a world order. With its most recent leadership especially, the country has become more assertive in voicing its desire to change the current order as well as express its own design of the 'tianxia' order. Reflecting this change, the 'Community with a shared future for

mankind' is one of the most conspicuous examples. First proposed on the international stage during Xi's speech in Moscow in 2013, the notion refers to a world where countries are unprecedently sharing interconnectivity and interdependency with each other. In this world, people, 'by living in the same global village in the same era where history and reality meet, have increasingly emerged as a community of common destiny in which everyone has in himself a little bit of others' (Xi, 2013a). In a further articulation, when the notion was mentioned the second time during UN General Assembly in 2015. Xi again urged his audience to 'build a new type of international relations featuring win-win cooperation' upon the understanding of the values of all mankind. To achieve this goal, efforts include promoting multilateralism and rejecting unilateralism, as well as the call to 'abandon Cold War mentality' and 'promote open, innovative and inclusive development that benefits all' (Xi, 2015).

According to the Chinese discourse, there are significant differences between the Chinese advocated 'common values of mankind' and so-called 'universal values'. According to an article published on Qiushi (Seeking Truth), the Chinese authoritative propaganda journal, universal values are Western capitalist values with no universal applicability since they stem from the Western experiences and do not take other countries' conditions into account (Qiushi, 2015). On the contrary, the common values of mankind are rooted in the traditional Chinese culture as well as the core values of socialism; they are held to respect every country's values and actively search for the common values shared by all (Wang, 2015).

Even though the idea of the 'Community with a shared future for mankind' seeks to search for a set of values that are universally applicable without being confined to certain cultures, what is implied in the discourse is still a dichotomy of China and the West, and of the Chinese world order and the dominant Western world order. Seeking to challenge and to alter the existing norms and values, China is attempting to play a role of a global revisionist power by means of expanding its ideational influences. Constructed on the basis of traditional moral and ethical doctrines, the Chinese

International System Narrative aims to export its own version of values to the rest of the world. It clearly reflects China's need to strive for the agency to normatively change the world with its ideological and soft power.

2.2.3. Belt and Road Initiative

Resonating and intertwined with Xi's blueprint of the community with a shared future for mankind, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) works as the institutional means to achieving the China promoted international order. It aims to promote 'policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructure, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and closer people-to-people ties' in Asia, Europe, and Africa (BRI, c.2014). Potentially covering a total population of 4 billion and 1/3 of global GDP (Ferdinand, 2016: 950), the multilateral institution functions as a prominent tool for Beijing to connect with countries and areas that are outside of regions within the traditional sphere of Chinese influence (Rolland, 2020: 41)

The ambitions behind the BRI can be understood in two aspects: economic and political. Officially based on the idea of the ancient Silk Road, the ancient trade route across the Eurasian continent, the historical reference of the BRI pictures peaceful and diversified culture and trade exchanges between various civilisations. Yet it also puts China into the economic centre. In Xi's words, the BRI helps other countries to 'get onto China's high-speed rail of economic development' by means of win-win trade and infrastructure development facilitated by China (Xi, 2016).

Beyond economic gains, the BRI is also designed to bring political and strategic benefits to China. The narratives of the BRI are closely intertwined with those of the community with a shared future for mankind. The BRI is referred as the 'important material basis' needed to achieve the goal of a shared multinational community since it 'effectively meets the needs of other countries' and functions as a beginning point of structured cooperation (Zhao and Qin, 2019). Together with its community narratives, the BRI further conjures up a world where international cooperation is based on 'mutual benefits and common development' and is not limited by 'a country's political system

or ideology'. It is by this clear strategy that the material and economic incentives which aim to promote and increase the attractiveness of the China-led new order are exported to other parts of the world through the institutionalised means of BRI.

Though officially claimed that the BRI is not the 'Chinese Marshall plan' or the 'repetition of the old geopolitical game', and that it is inclusive to all kinds ideologies (Qiushi, 2019), there are certain patterns of political regimes that can be observed in the BRI countries. According to the global democracy rankings of the Economist Intelligence Unit, out of 66 countries included in the BRI, there are 23 authoritarian regimes, 17 hybrid regimes, 24 flawed democracies, and only 2 full democracies (Yu, 2019: 191). Due to the fact that most BRI countries do not hold high democratic values, it would be relatively easy for China to export its own autocratic values and the China Model. In addition, Beijing also seeks to expand its 'friends and partners' and create a 'favourable environment' for its development (Xi, 2013c). Thus, another political implication of the BRI is that it can function as a tool for China to diffuse its own values, ideologies, and soft power internationally. As an inherent part of the BRI, the China-CEE cooperation follows the same pattern, which will be discussed in a more detailed way later in the section of issue narrative.

2.2.4. New Model of Relationships Between Great Powers

While the BRI mainly focuses on connectivity with the developing countries and the Eurasian continent, China also voices a need to have a new model of relationships between China and the US. Due to globalisation and economic interdependency, the new model of major-power relationships differs from 'the historical clashes and confrontations between major powers' and is based on 'the fundamental interest of the people of the two countries and of the world' (Xi, 2013b). There are two clear implications in this narrative. Firstly, China has clearly defined itself as one of the world's 'Great Powers', which is different from how previous leaders self-identified as 'a developing country', and expects the world (especially the US) to recognise this status. Secondly, such a statement shows the change of direction from the previous

‘hide capabilities and keep a low profile’ foreign policy guideline to a more proactive ‘striving for achievement’ strategy (Xi, 2013b). By initiating a new type of great power relationships in a proactive way in its discourse, China is attempting to re-define the relations between major countries in a way compatible with its own narratives of the international system.

China’s perspectives on the international system reflects its ambition to become a dominant actor on the global stage and its attempt to revise international norms. Along with the BRI, the development of other China-led multilateral institutions—including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Silk Road Fund, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation—also reflects China’s attempt to gain greater global institutional power and to influence and shape international norms. It is also argued that this can be referred to as Xi’s ‘Eastphalian order’ as a centralised version of the Westphalian order that puts China in the central position and forms a new regional political order in accordance to its mode (Yu, 2018: 75). In sum, this new order in the Chinese International System Narrative is portrayed as a ‘community of common destiny’ to be achieved by the means of institutions like BRI as well as ‘new types of major power relations’.

Chapter 3. Identity Narrative: China's Perception of Self

As a lens slightly different from the International System Narrative, the Identity Narrative shows assumptions about the country's self-identity by expressing and defining what a country is and its role in the bigger International System Narrative (Miskimmon et al., 2013: 102). To get a clear picture of China's self-identity underlying the formation of its strategic narratives targeting Central and East European countries, the following part will focus how self-identity is represented in China's foreign policies and examine the role that China assigns itself in creating its version of a new world order. Though in the official discourse these concepts may be applied both to the domestic and international stage, given the concern of this research, the following part will only focus on the self-identity that is represented in China's foreign policy.

3.1. Confucian Cultural Heritage: China as Peaceful, Ethical and Responsible Stakeholder

Over the past few decades, Chinese cultural and historical heritage has seen a revival in both political and cultural spheres. During the *National Propaganda and Ideological Work Conference* in August 2013, Xi referred to Chinese traditional culture as 'the nation's outstanding advantage and the deepest cultural soft power', which is also regarded as having strategic importance (Xi, 2013c). The traditional culture, which largely consists of Confucianism, thus functions as the key pillar for China to shape identity narratives of its own.

It is important, though, to mention that within the Confucian thinking, there are also differences between an authoritarian Confucianism and liberal Confucianism. The liberal Confucian strand believe that ethical and moral values will better thrive in a democratic setting, while the latter attaches great importance to harmony and regulation of individual and collective behaviours by the use of rituals, and to the respect for those at the higher end of hierarchy (Jiang and O'Dwyer, 2019). It is argued that with its emphasis on the 'heavenly mandate, the idea of harmony, the use of rituals to regulate

personal desires and interpersonal relationships, and the respect for the educated elite', the current politics aligns more with the authoritarian strand of Confucianism and is slowly marginalising the liberal school (ibid).

In line with the regime's selective interpretations of Confucian thoughts, China's foreign policy discourse portrays itself as being inherently peaceful. As such, the image of China's 'peaceful rise' was referred to in Xi's report to the 19th Party Congress in 2017. Here he describes China as the 'builder of world peace, contributor to global development, upholder of the international order' (Xi, 2017, in Rolland, 2020:56). The notion of 'harmony' and the pursuit of a harmonious world are also frequently mentioned in the foreign policy discourse. This harmonious world is not only an extension of the peaceful value, but it further requires the member states of such a system to behave in a mutually congruent pattern to achieve commonwealth and reciprocity despite their differences and diversity (Shih and Yin, 2013: 67). China's self-identity is thus largely formed of the preaching of this pattern of interactions between states. Underlying this identity is the role of China as the major promoting power of this new norm.

Apart from the values of peace and harmony, the moralistic Confucian views of 'justice' and 'interest' are also represented in the international discourse of China's self-identity. These values require the actor to uphold the principles of justice and fairness and take other people into account while pursuing interests, and sometimes this might even require denouncing self-interests to maintain the justice principle. According to the State Councillor Yang Jiechi (2013), China will seek 'mutual benefit and common development' with other countries both politically and economically, and justice, fairness and morality are considered significantly in China's foreign policy. This further points to the 'great power responsibility' that China ought to take on the international stage that would include provision of foreign aid and public goods. In this discourse, the self-identity narrative of China shows a responsible, generous, and morally superior global stakeholder who 'would never seek hegemony in the world' (Wang, 2013).

With this being so, implicit in China's reference to Confucian moral values is the self-identity of a peaceful, ethical, and responsible player on the international stage actively pursuing international peace and the common development of all countries while becoming a prominent global actor. This role that China assigns to itself totally overlooks the military and political aspects that often appear in the Western securitisation language around the rise of China. It thus can be perceived as the response to the China threat image evoked in this discourse which follows the logic of offensive realism. The total exclusion of any reference to power struggle and the seeking of hegemony marks the depoliticisation and desecuritisation of the offensive rise of China through 'silencing' within China's self-identity narrative.

3.2. Discursive power: China's Use of Strategic Narrative

To be able to efficiently persuade international audiences of its proposed peaceful, harmonious and moralistic narratives around itself and assert influence on the international system, China seeks to promote its 'discursive power' (Hua Yu Quan). This notion of 'discursive power' or 'speaking rights' in the Chinese foreign policy refers to 'the ability to voice ideas, concepts, propositions, and claims that are respected and recognised by others' and can influence how others think and behave in a non-coercive way (Rolland, 2020: 10). It not only relates to the right to speak and to be heard, but, more importantly, it also includes the 'use and embodiment of power through language' (ibid) whilst also emphasising the power to lead and formulate the content of international discourse and further influence and change existing norms.

And so, with its nature of soft power and strategic use, the 'discursive power' mentioned in the Chinese foreign policy is identical with strategic narrative and functions as an instrument to promote its own version of rules, institutions, and norms. More precisely, there is an interdependent and interwoven relationship between China's 'discursive power'/strategic narrative and its international projects: In one sense, embedded in the foreign policy language, the discursive power facilitates the implementation of the international projects; in another sense, international initiations

and projects like BRI, 16/17+1, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation also provide an essential means to exert discursive power. Put into the context of China's confrontation with the China threat narrative, China hopes to promote desecuritised discourse around itself as well as its legitimacy by means of discursive power. Accordingly, desecuritisation strategies that China uses in its 16/17+1 strategic narrative can be recognised as a representation of the discursive power it promotes.

Chapter 4. Issue narrative: China's Desecuritised Strategic Narrative Targeting Central and Eastern Europe

The above discussion of the Western and Chinese version of the International System Narrative and China's Identity Narrative forms a good basis for the understanding of the context in which the Issue Narrative, the China-CEE foreign policy discourse in this case, is formed. An Issue Narrative, according to Miskimmon et al. (2013), shapes a story in a certain context, addresses the actors in the situation and provides resolution of its issues. It also offers justification and legitimisation around the initiated policies and explains why the policy is desirable and needed.

Turning now to focus on the Issue Narrative, the following part aims to identify and analyse China's approaches to the Central and Eastern European countries. Through the analysis of interdiscursivity between the 16/17+1 discourse and China's foreign policy discourse in the wider context as well as the intertextuality within the China-CEE cooperation discourse, different strategies that China employs to improve its soft power will be identified. These include the four desecuritisation strategies of silencing, pre-emptive rebuttal, replacement, and self-identity construction.

This part analyses the strategies in the official discourse, which includes the political speeches and statements of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs targeting CEE audiences at critical discourse moments of important events and summits, as well as the guidelines for cooperation signed between China and the CEE countries. Given the fact that media representation in China is always in line with the stances of the authority, some news reports from China's official media, like Xinhua News Agency, will also be considered.

4.1. Desecuritisation Strategies in the Chinese Official 16/17+1 Discourse

As discussed in the theoretical part, the notion of a 'desecuritising actor' is brought

up by de Wilde (2008: 597) to describe the actors who have the capability to 'acquiesce in, evade, circumvent or indirectly oppose' securitising moves. In this sense, a desecuritising actor can be different and independent from the actor who securitised the issue in the first place, and, as stated above, they can be even the groups external to the original securitisation process which are marginalised and targeted (Aradau, 2003: 20; cited in Coskun, 2009:100). The analysis in this part follows this understanding of desecuritisation and regards China as the desecuritising actor of the China threat narrative in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region.

It is important to note that, like with the process of securitisation, what is happening on the discursive level (the speech-act) is different from the real outcome (the acceptance of audience). Bearing in mind this difference, this part only focuses on China's desecuritising attempts on the discursive level in its foreign policy while the reception of the audience will be examined in the next section. By identifying different desecuritisation strategies that China employs in its foreign policy narratives targeting the CEE countries, this part also empirically explores the connections and compatibilities between (de)securitisation and soft power embedded in strategic narratives.

4.1.1. Pre-emptive Rebuttal against the China Threat Narrative

Despite desecuritisation having always been regarded as the negative response and post hoc event of securitisation, Vuori and Bourbeau (2015) argue that desecuritisation, both in the form of speech acts and practices, can be understood as an active and pre-emptive response to the securitisation discourse with the purpose of preventing exacerbation of a security related situation. It can also be pre-emptive in the sense of formulating a response to anticipated securitisation narratives, prior to the actual formation of them. With this understanding, to confront the China threat discourse and promote China's attractiveness among the CEE countries, the most direct remedy is to rebut the charges of being a threat.

As was mentioned in the International System Narrative section, the China threat

perception in Europe mainly centres around the threats to ontological security, namely the cohesion of European values and the unity within EU, that is posed by China's 'alternative models of governance' (European Commission, 2019). Being a China-promoted sub-regional institution, the 16/17+1 cooperation inevitably touches upon the power dynamics within Europe and thus is easily accused of creating a divide between the core European countries and their eastern periphery.

The Chinese discourse targeting CEE countries is clearly aiming to delegitimise and contradict this point of view. This is apparent as the relationship and cooperation between China and CEE countries is depicted as an integral part of the China-EU relations and 'its expansion will help elevate the scale and quality of China-EU cooperation and promote more comprehensive and balanced growth of China-EU relationship' (Song, 2012). During the 6th China-CEE Summit in Budapest in 2017, the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang emphasised that China 'respects the European countries' choices of their development paths' and that the 16/17+1 cooperation is not attempting to undermine the European institutions, but rather works as an 'incubator for trans-regional practical cooperation' and a stable cooperative platform that responds to 'the uncertainty of the international situation' (Li, 2017). Similar justification can be seen in his speech at the 8th China-CEE Summit two years later stating that the cooperation between China and CEE countries has 'contributed to more balanced development in Europe and European integration' (Li, 2019).

By emphasising that the Sino-CEE cooperation is part of the Sino-EU relations, the language used aims to reassure the West European audiences or the pro-Western audience in the CEE region that the existence of the China-appointed 16/17+1 subregion is not an attempt to put a divide within the EU. Described using terms like 'incubator' and 'practical cooperation', this language further avoids coming across as a threat to norms and identities held in the EU in an ontological sense. It is pre-emptive in the sense that it attempts to prevent the exacerbation of the securitising speech acts around China in the European region and on the level of the European institutions,

which would consequently have negative influences on the employment of China's strategies.

Apart from defending itself against the accusation of harming the ontological security of Europe, China also rebuts against views that it is posing threats to the national security of the individual CEE countries. Of these views, the securitisation around the Chinese telecommunication company Huawei is the most prominent example. After the arrest of the Chief Financial Officer of Huawei in Canada at the end of 2018, there has been a subsequent surge of securitisation around the telecommunication giant and its 5G technology in Europe. Consequently, quite a few European countries have quickly added the presence of the company onto their security agendas and accused the company of conducting espionage activities. These include the arrest of a Chinese Huawei employee in Poland (BBC, 2019), the warning of national security threats the company poses by the national cybersecurity centre in Czechia (NUKIB 2018a), as well as other European countries' consideration to cancel their cooperation with Huawei over 5G infrastructure building.

In the fallout from this incident, the attempt to desecuritise the Huawei issue is obvious and very explicit in the official Chinese discourse. For instance, in response to Poland, the first CEE country to take security actions against Huawei, the Chinese ambassador to Poland, Liu Guangyuan, claimed during an interview with Global Times that 'Huawei poses no risks to Poland, and network security is a technical question, not a political question… over the past 15 years of operation in Poland, Huawei has never seen one security incident occur' (Chen, 2019).

With the subsequent increasing securitisation of Huawei in other European countries, the spokesperson of the Chinese foreign Ministry made a refutation that the European countries are making 'security excuses' and politicising the issues around the Chinese company, which are unfair and unjust (ibid). In another example, a signed article by the Chinese ambassador to Estonia published in the local media in July 2019, the accusations around and securitisation of the Huawei company is described as an act

of ‘economic bullying’ where some countries use national forces and political measures to suppress private Chinese enterprise (Li, 2019). Similarly, when the Czech Security Information Service in 2018 accused the Chinese company of conducting cyberespionage activities in the Czech Republic, the Chinese embassy in Prague published a statement claiming that China has never participated in, nor supported espionage activities, and that these accusations are ‘baseless’ attempts to ‘stigmatise and smear China’ (Chinese Embassy in the Czech Republic, 2018).

Even though the direct rebuttal may seem to be the most straightforward way to defy the constructed security discourse, counterintuitively, this strategy can sometimes have contrary effects. By the lens of constructive security studies, a discourse and normative act encourages the change of a social practice. It is argued that there is always going to be a normative dilemma when writing about security since the process of describing the security includes the ‘reification of security’ (Vuori, 2011: 88). That is to say, the simple existence of any discourse with any reference to security, be the intention is to remove something from the security agenda or not, is contributing to the increased perception of security concerns. If applied to the desecuritisation moves, these desecuritising speech acts could lead to the reproduction of the very threat it aims to contradict. Therefore, even though the rebuttal texts rebuke the China threat discourse and strive to shape an entirely opposite normative image of China, they can inevitably feed and reproduce the China threat narrative. This tendency follows from the fact that the desecuritising discourse, in this case the rebuttal texts, never leaves the China threat discourse which is embedded by securitisation.

4.1.2. Silencing Threats and Promoting Attractiveness

In the face of the normative dilemma of security mentioned above, some scholars argue that the best way to desecuritise an issue is through a lack of speech acts rather than making normative statements to provide the new non-threatening context (see for example, Wæver, 1995; Behnke, 2006: 65). Therefore, the strategy of ‘silencing’, which aims to depoliticise and desecuritise a threat by means of total exclusion of the

issue from the discursive representation around it, is an alternative way to achieve desecuritisation. This strategy is also applied in the Chinese foreign discourse targeting the Central and Eastern European countries.

In line with Wæver's (1989) vision of the international relations in the post-Cold War era, relationships between nation states have become more focused on economic, social, and political exchanges in the context of globalisation in the past few decades, instead of being driven solely by the concerns of traditional national security. This trend of globalisation plays to China's advantage in that it can apply the desecuritisation strategy of 'silencing' and use language which excludes security related issues in its foreign discourse in a more opaque context characterised by diversified national interests and global interdependency and different avenues of investment and growth opportunity.

Reflecting this, one year after the initiation of the 16/17+1 cooperation, in his 2013 speech during the meeting with the heads of governments of CEE countries in Bucharest, Li Keqiang proposed a three-principle strategic framework for multi-lateral cooperation. The principles include 'equality and mutual respect', 'mutual benefit and common development', and 'common progress for China and Europe by moving toward each other'. This, in turn, guides cooperation in six areas covering 'economic cooperation and trade', 'mutual connectivity', 'green cooperation', 'financing channels', 'cooperation at the local level', and 'cultural and people-to-people exchanges' (Li, 2013). This language is clearly depoliticised and omits political or security aspects, and while promoting the cooperation in the fields of economy and culture, China is also trying to divert attention from the norms, international order, or the geopolitical considerations which often serve as the foundation of the China threat narratives in Europe.

Taking a closer look at the mechanism through which the silencing strategy works, the rhetoric of providing economic incentives plays a large part in the process. Under the promotion of 'mutual connectivity', infrastructure building supported by the

Chinese investment in the region is one of the most prominent examples. It is mentioned in the Chinese official discourse that the CEE countries 'are in a crucial stage of infrastructure construction and transformation and the upgrading of industrial systems' and 'have strong demand for construction materials, machinery and other equipment' with which China is willing to help (Li, 2015). As such, it is claimed that Chinese investment in infrastructure building in the areas like transportation, nuclear power and telecommunication will help to 'fend off the impact of the economic crisis', generate local employment, and contribute to the well-being of the people (Li, 2014). By putting emphasis on the economic benefits that China brings with its infrastructure projects in the region, the discourse portrays that the infrastructure cooperation will bring only benefits to the CEE countries.

Even though it is not difficult to understand the Chinese (geo)political considerations and economic motivations behind the proposal, the official discourse avoids mentioning the strategic goals of China and plays it down as reciprocal cooperation. By narrating the project in a way that it is greatly benefiting the local economy and the modernisation of the CEE countries, the discourse is represented in a highly depoliticised way with connotations of altruism and benevolence. Linking back to China's Identity Narrative, this could also be seen as an attempt to project its self-assigned role as a peaceful, benevolent and responsible stakeholder on the international stage. Therefore, by avoiding any reference provoking security concerns and highlighting the claimed economic benevolence, the Chinese narrative attempts to negate the presence of security threats.

Apart from silencing the threats with economic incentives, it is also interesting to look deeper into the cultural domain and into what is termed as 'people-to-people exchange'. This term mainly refers to the exchange and promotion of culture in a broad sense (which may include the areas of art, sports, education and tourism) with the aim of increasing the international publicity of the nation's culture and so further boost its soft power influence (Zhuang, 2017). The cultural and people-to-people exchanges

have been one of the prominent emphasises in every single one of the annual China-CEE Summits. Based on analysis of all eight of the guidelines from the China CEE annual Summits from 2012-2019, the activities and plans under the cultural and people-to-people exchanges mainly include art exchange (e.g. art exhibition, performances, concerts, literature translation etc.), education exchange (e.g. promoting the Confucius Institute in the CEE countries, think-tank cooperation, seminars for sinologists, cooperation between universities etc.), and tourism (setting new tourism promotion centres, arranging direct air connection between China and CEE countries, increasing cooperation in the tourist industry etc.).

The cultural and people-to-people exchange is no doubt, in part, an act of exporting the cultural influence and promoting China's soft power. Yet, in the broader picture, taking the China threat narratives in Europe into account, it can also be seen as an effort to silence the threat perception by means of omitting the exact sources provoking the sense of insecurity. Even though this move is directed and led by the governments, the culture-centred narrative alters the focus from the governmental level to the societal and individual levels, which is much less likely to galvanise national and institutional security concerns.

As shown above, the language in the Chinese 16/17+1 policy follows a largely depoliticised pattern which precisely omits any reference to political, geopolitical, or ideological issues and diverts the audiences' attention to much more benign economic and cultural aspects. From the perspective of desecuritisation, the depoliticised narrative reflects a lack of security discourse around politics and norms, which are often the central arguments and basis of the securitisation of China in the West. This effort is thus aiming to stabilise and desecuritise the China threat discourse.

From a broader perspective, the economy- and culture-centred discourse of 16/17+1 fits into China's general foreign policies in its International System Narratives and Identity Narratives, reflecting the ideas of building a 'community with a shared future for mankind' in depicting China as a peaceful and benevolent actor, as discussed

in the previous part. From the perspective of strategic narratives, soft power is embedded in the economic incentives and cultural attractiveness in the discourse aiming to produce an appealing story around China and improve its image in the CEE countries. Thus, in this case, China's effort of desecuritising its own presence in the CEE countries is a combination of 'silencing' the threat discourse in its foreign narrative and improving its own soft power in the region by offering economic and cultural incentives.

4.1.3. Replacement

Closely related to the silencing of the areas that provoke China threat perception in the discourse, there is also a tendency toward the threat being replaced with other issues with more urgency attached. This relates to the third desecuritisation strategy defined by Hansen (2012) as replacement, which refers to the issue on the security agenda being replaced with a new security threat in the discourse.

As a strong example of this, in its effort to desecuritise its presence in the CEE region, it can be observed that the cooperation platform is sometimes depicted by China to serve as a coping mechanism in the context of an alleged global economic downturn that can prevent its negative ramifications. During his speech at the 7th China-CEEC Summit in Sofia in 2018, Li Keqiang mentioned that the current world is facing many challenges and uncertainties, and that the cooperation between China and CEE countries is being initiated to cope with these difficulties and to 'face the financial crisis collectively' (Li, 2018). Beyond this, the Chinese official media, Xinhua News Agency, also strives to create a narrative in which China's investments are portrayed as having saved local companies. For example, the investment of the Chinese company CEFC in the Prague football club Slavia was said to revitalise and save the club from the edge of bankruptcy and to subsequently 'lead the Czech football team to championship' (Xinhua, 2017). Similarly, Chinese investment was depicted as the rescuer of a Serbian steel plant to consequently save 5,000 local job opportunities (Xinhua, 2019).

Similar replacement can also be identified in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic across the globe at the beginning of 2020. In an article published by the

Xinhua News Agency, ‘a large order’ from China is reported as having saved a Polish handicraft business with more than 400 employees faced with ‘an existential threat in the wake of the pandemic’ (Xinhua, 2020a). In this case, the urgent need for reviving the economy by means of increasing exported products to China is mentioned to justify the headline ‘The demands of the Chinese market help revive Europe’s economy’ (ibid).

This reference to the financial and economic crisis on the national level as well as on the corporate and local levels adds an additional dimension to the depiction of China in its Identity Narrative as a benevolent and generous actor who abides by the moralistic Confucian view of justice. This comes with the attempt to replace the China threat perception with the urgency of other threats, economic in this case, to achieve the goal of desecuritising China’s presence in the CEE region. In this sense, the ‘replacement’ happens when the Chinese discourse highlights the negative outcomes of the economic crisis on the global, national, and local level, intending for this to take the place of the China threat discourse in the security agenda in the CEE region.

Apart from the attempt to replace the China threat with economic threats, the urgency of human security and the threats posed by the COVID-19 pandemic is also addressed in the official Chinese discourse to boost and strengthen the cooperation between China and the CEE region. For example, since the beginning of the global pandemic, a new term, ‘a global community of health’, which was expanded from the notion ‘community with a shared future for mankind’, emerged and has appeared numerous times in the official discourse. Further, under the 16/17+1 framework, there have been video conferences between health officials and experts of China and the CEE countries with the purpose of ‘exchanging information’ and to ‘strengthen collaboration’ in fighting COVID-19. This is described as ‘enriching the content of the 16/17+1 cooperation’ (Xinhua, 2020b). This effort was further illustrated when, on 25th of May, the Chinese ambassador to the Czech Republic, Zhang Jianmin, published a signed article with the title ‘Joint fight against COVID-19 injects fresh energy to China-Czech Friendship’ (Zhang, 2020). Within, it is mentioned that it is the common task for China

and the Czech Republic to jointly overcome the negative influences of the pandemic and together face its novel challenges (ibid).

There is no doubt that the very existence of the global pandemic is closely related to the security of millions of people across the world and is by no means a mere social construction. However, from the point of view of CDA, social power is always embedded and conflated with the representation of a phenomenon (Wodak, 2001). In this case, by examining and analysing the Chinese narratives around the pandemic and how it addresses the actors and the resolutions in the situation, it could be helpful to understand the mechanism of how power is expressed and manipulated to achieve the goal of desecuritising China threat narratives.

Based on this understanding, China's narrative around the pandemic in the CEE region could be seen as another effort to manipulate the security agenda by replacing the China threat perception with more urgent human security concerns. By the same token, China also portrays itself as the one who is making active contributions to the resolution of the newly addressed existential threats to global health. However, despite its discursive effort, the fight against the pandemic is still an ongoing process and China's narrative around this is facing some backlash in the CEE region, which will be further discussed in the reception section. With the ongoing status of the pandemic, the actual outcomes and ramifications of this replacement strategy remain to be seen.

4.1.4. Identity and Desecuritisation: Defining a Common Self-Identity

With the focus on the sense of security of the subjective knowledge of self and the stability and continuity of the existence of the self, studies on ontological security have shown the importance of the self-identity of a nation or a group to the perception of security (Mitzen 2006: 341). In this sense, securitisation is understood as a process of defining the self/other relations where the existence of the self is threatened by others, while desecuritisation is a process of reconfiguring the identities and boundaries of the self and other in which the security concerns around the existential threat of the self is removed (Rumelili, 2011). As such, it is along these lines that, in the Chinese effort to

desecuritise itself in the CEE region, a tactic of creating a common self-identity among China and the 16/17+1 countries can also be identified.

In such efforts, historical rhetoric is one of the important discursive tools to construct a self-identity. Its deployment in an attempt to define a common self-identity was particularly obvious in the China-CEE discourse in 2014 and 2019, as this respectively coincided with the celebration of 65 years and 70 years of China's diplomatic relations with seven CEE countries, namely Albania, Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. China held celebrations in both years and invited representatives from these countries to attend. The bilateral diplomatic ties between China and these countries are described as 'profound and traditional' and the friendships grew stronger with the changes of international environment in the past 70 years (Wang, 2019). There were also numerous other celebrations of 'long-term traditional friendships' with specific countries.

On this level, the discourse largely revolves around the long history of bilateral ties which date back decades to long before the political and economic transitions of these countries (Vangeli, 2018a: 684). In such an effort of referring to the historical legacies and the continuity of the 'traditional' bilateral relations, the Chinese discourse attempts to create a sense of shared past and an in-group identity of a community that shares friendship and ties in the past. This can also, at the same time, be seen as negatively defining the boundary with the out-group, the Western nations, who do not share this commonality.

Besides the official celebrations of diplomatic ties at the governmental level, a prominent representation of promoting the historical ties between China and the CEE countries in practise is the case of the Sino-Czechoslovakia Friendship Farm. When it comes to the rhetoric of Sino-Czech relationship, the farm is often referred to as one of the symbols of the 'traditional friendship' that China claims to have with Czechia. In the rhetoric, the farm was established when then Czechoslovakia 'generously provided agricultural aid' to build the newly established People's Republic of China at the

beginning of 1950s (Xinhua, 2016). Located in Hebei province, the farm is still in use today and has become a frequent venue to hold a series of conferences and meetings centering around Sino-CEE business cooperation. The reference to historical close ties and the symbolic significance China attaches to the farm again shows its effort to form a shared identity of 'traditional' partners between China and 16/17+1 countries.

However, it is interesting to note that any rhetoric referring to 'socialism' or 'communism' in the region is carefully omitted from the discourse. Further, previous close ties between the communist regimes are downplayed as 'traditional friendship' to avoid ideological backlash in the targeted countries. Similar to the scepticism and backlash that may be faced by other desecuritisation moves, this attempt to create a group identity with this specific pattern of historical reference could potentially provoke even more concerns around the ontological security and state identities of the CEE countries. Yet, despite these risks, China is taking the method as a viable means to redefine the precepted boundary between the self and other in the region and to further alter its status of 'otherness' to be accepted as the 'self'.

4.2. Behind the Official Narrative

4.2.1. Contradictions between Narrative and Practice

While China's presence in the 16/17+1 region is described in a desecuritised way as benevolent, friendly, and holding an emphasis on cultural exchange and economic development, it can be observed that there exist certain contradictions and inconsistencies between the normative level and the practical level.

Even though it is depicted that there is no conditionality attached to the Sino-CEE cooperation, there are still certain underlying political conditions that are necessary to access economic inducement brought by the Chinese investment. The most obvious requirement in this regard is that a country must hold a compatible stance around the issues of Tibet and Taiwan with China. Most recently, there have been some turbulences in Sino-Czech relations due to stances around Taiwan's status. This came

as the city council of Prague claimed to amend the article agreeing to the one-China policy in its sister city agreement with Beijing and turn to Taipei to form friendly inter-city ties in 2019. Immediately after, Beijing stated that the 'political prerequisite and foundation' for the relationships between the two cities no longer exists and terminated any official interactions with Prague. Subsequently, Shanghai governance also terminated its friendly city agreement with Prague, and a series of performances by the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra in China were cancelled. Furthermore, the Beijing-Prague and Shanghai-Prague direct flight connections were also suspended (Prague Morning, 2020).

By the same token, China threatened to harm the Czech companies that are stakeholders in mainland China after the announcement of a planned trip to Taiwan by the Czech president of the Senate (Reuters, 2020). The retaliation from the Beijing side for Prague's pro-Taiwan attitude shows that, though not mentioned officially, there are certain underlying political requirements when it comes to China's main interests.

Another discrepancy can be seen as observers also argue that the 16/17+1 platform is more like an 'empty shell' only existing at the policy level due to the lack of real substance in the China-CEE cooperation (Karásková et al., 2020: 11). More precisely represented in the economic aspect, after years since initiation of the cooperation, the actual Chinese investment and bilateral trade in the CEE region is said to have not yet matched the prospects and promises in the official Chinese discourse (Kavalski, 2019: 404). Therefore, the unfulfilled economic promises, in a way, vindicate the argument that economic incentives are used strategically and instrumentally in the Chinese foreign discourse to serve China's own strategic goals behind its narratives.

Another contradiction revolves around the statement that the cooperation contributes to EU unity as well as European integration of the countries on its eastern periphery (Li, 2019). Even though there are straightforward rebuttal texts stating that the 16/17+1 platform is not an attempt to separate Europe, China, by initiating the China-CEE cooperation, is inevitably touching upon the power dynamics within

Europe. During the 2015 China-CEE Summit held in Suzhou (China), the medium-term agenda for cooperation between China and CEE countries was approved offering a blueprint of cooperation in 9 distinctive areas—including economy, connectivity, industrial capacity, finance, agriculture, technology and innovation, culture and education, health, and local cooperation. Since then, from an institutional point of view, the 16/17+1 platform gradually has become a fully-fledged sub-regional organisation on the normative level. The presence of the institution itself creates an institutional border between its member states and the rest of Europe.

Moreover, despite the benign, pragmatic, and depoliticised language in the Chinese discourse, it is a very much a Chinese-controlled process and the move itself bears political and symbolic connotations. For example, it was argued that the Sino-CEE relations are characterised by multi-level cooperation in which sub-regional and local cooperation at national and city level is gradually taking the place of the regional cooperation of the EU level (Zang, 2020). Following the same logic, some scholars argue that the 16/17+1 mechanism is also an attempt to create a new community of countries and contribute to 'regionalisation' within Europe by the social practices of interactions of international actors (Kavalski, 2019:407). The dilemma faced by Bulgaria in 2018 is an example. Back then, a China-CEE summit was planned to take place in July 2018 in Bulgaria, which coincided with Bulgaria's rotating presidency of the EU Council. Consequently, this put the country in between the two competing programmes of Brussels' continental integration and Beijing's China-CEE initiative (ibid: 406).

Another contradiction stems from the reference to the historical friendship between China and the CEE countries. Despite the downplaying of the CEE countries' socialist and communist past in the use of language, the sense of a common 'self' and a shared identity in the 16/17+1 region that China strives to construct is based on the bilateral ties between the communist regimes in the past, which is not a very desirable commonality for some of the CEE countries. While already described above, it is

important to further point out that the levelling the critique of the 'Western Cold-War mentality' in the China threat narrative, the historical references to the cultural and governmental exchanges during the socialist era (though any reference to 'socialism' or 'communism' is carefully avoided) is self-contradicting in the sense that it implicitly follows the exact same logic.

4.2.2. China's Strategic Goals in the CEE Region

While most of the stances regarding the China-CEE cooperation in the Chinese academia are in accordance with the desecuritised language in the official discourse, depicting China as economically pragmatic, friendly, and benevolent, they also expand to the analysis and discussion of the strategic goals embedded in the official language.

In the context of Brexit and the tendency of European fragmentation in the past few years, Chinese analysts also see the situation as both a risk and a potential opportunity for China-CEE cooperation. For example, Liu and Chen (2017) suggest that the increasing nationalist and populist sentiments in Europe could harm the China-CEE cooperation due to the potential trade protectionism that would be provoked. Yet at the same time, it is argued that the situation also shows the declined attractiveness of the Western ideas, which provides an opportunity for China to 'promote the Chinese ideas and voices' that might help China prevail in the 'competition' with the Western system and its ideology (ibid: 35). Therefore, one of the strategic goals is to export the 'China model' of development and the Chinese way of the global governance which resonates with the Chinese blueprint of creating a set of values shared by all countries and promoting a new model of relationship between global actors.

However, as mentioned in the International System Narrative around the China threat, this new model of international relationship and global norms that China strives to promote threaten to provoke anxiety around ontological security in the EU context. Based on this, it is argued that China has taken a 'two-legged policy' when developing its relationship with European countries. In other words, China seeks more to connect to the specific member states of the EU in order to develop the Sino-European relations

rather than relying on the European regional institutions like the EU (Liu and Golik, 2018: 118). In the context of the CEE region, where democracy and the prevailing Western values are relatively young and still not so deep-rooted in the society, the CEE member states' doubts towards the European institutions thus are perceived as an opportunity for China to export its influence and challenge the existing Western values and norms.

From the economic perspective, despite that China is portrayed as the generous benevolent investor in the CEE region, cooperation with the region would potentially bring China long-term economic benefits. As evidence of this potential importance, the 16/17+1 platform is frequently referred to in the Chinese academic discourse as the 'testing field' of China's BRI that is expected to provide experiences of cooperation with other regions in the BRI as well as serve as preparation for Chinese companies and products to enter the markets of Western European countries (Jakimow, 2019: 376). Moreover, infrastructure building, one of the greatest inducements for some of the East European countries, is also of important strategic value for China. For example, the construction of transportation infrastructures would provide China with an alternative route for its products to get to its targeted markets in the CEE region as well as in the Western European countries (Andrijauskas et al., 2020: 48).

In sum, to achieve its geopolitical and economic strategic goals, China seeks to increase its own attractiveness and persuasiveness to increase the engagement of the CEE countries in its 16/17+1 initiative by means of strategic narratives and soft power. Yet, in face of the popular China threat narratives and doubts around China's increasing presence in the CEE region, this requires China to present itself in a way that could alleviate and alter threat perception and outline an apolitical, benign, and pragmatic way of cooperation. With the two aims combined, it seems that the instrumental and strategic use of desecuritised narratives to decrease security concerns and boost its attractiveness in the region is one of the cheapest ways to achieve China's strategic goals.

Chapter 5. Reception of Chinese Narratives in the Visegrád Group Countries

The Visegrád Group, also known as the Visegrád Four (V4), is a cultural and political sub-regional organisation constituted by the four Central European countries Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. The origin of the group dates back to 1991 when the communist regime collapsed in the region and the Central European countries were faced with political and economic transition. In response, political leaders of Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland held a summit in a historic castle in the Hungarian town of Visegrád, and here established the group with the common goal of integrating into Western Europe. Despite that the initial goal of European integration has been achieved and all four countries have become the EU member states since 2004, the group still serves as an important sub-regional organisation with an active presence in the international and European arenas.

After the integration into the EU, the group adjusted its goal to 'strengthen the identity of the Central European region' and promote the EU enlargement and European integration of other countries in the Eastern and South-eastern Europe (Visegrád Group, 2004). Since then, the sub-regional organisation serves as an important mechanism representing the national interests of the four states on the EU level.

With more than one decade of full EU membership and its related social transformation, the V4 countries have seen a great deal of change, not only in terms of politics and economy, but also in shifting prevailing values and norms. However, at the same time, the core-periphery division, as well as gaps in terms of levels of democracy and economic development, still exists (Börzel, Dimitrova and Schimmelfennig, 2017). Given that the V4 countries have the highest levels of European integration among the post-communist states, yet still exhibit some of the socio-cultural differences that characterise countries in the CEE region, they are samples well placed to now examine the reception, resistance, and the counter-narratives of the China's desecuritised

16/17+1 language.

When it comes to the evaluation of the effectiveness of China's normative influence in the CEE region, both desecuritisation and strategic narratives, as processes of political communication, are largely dependent on reception of their audiences. From the perspective of desecuritisation, desecuritising moves are considered effective when an issue is shifted out of a security agenda (Buzan et al., 1998: 4). From the viewpoint of strategic narratives, effectiveness of reception is identified by analysing the audiences' narratives regarding the policy to identify their perceptions of it (Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2014: 79). Ultimately, both efforts are only successful when the presented narratives are convincing enough to the audiences and cause changes in perceptions in accordance to the discourse.

The following chapter examines the reception of the China's desecuritised narrative in each of the Visegrád 4 countries by analysing major government-level events and discourse of the political elites. In every case, the analysis first looks at the receptive discourse towards China's narrative and then examines the rhetoric that shows rejection. In this process, the V4 representation of the prominent hotspot issues in international politics, such as the securitisation of Huawei, are also discussed as repeated features. Even though reception manifests in various layers in a given society, this research only considers the discourse and gestures of the governments and high-ranking political elites due to their influence on the policy-making process as well as their symbolic significance.

5.1. Attitudes towards China on the Governmental Level

5.1.1. Czechia

On the high governmental level, the relations between Czechia and China have warmed up since the initiation of China-CEE cooperation and the inauguration of the Czech president Miloš Zeman in 2013. A signal of this warming could be seen during

the Czech Foreign Minister Lubomír Zaorálek's visit to Beijing in 2014. During this visit there was released a joint statement by the Czech and Chinese foreign ministries with the Czech side claiming to be 'fully aware of the importance and sensitivity of the issue of Tibet … committed to a one-China policy … and [that] the Czech Republic does not support Tibetan independence in any form' (Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014).

Being drastically different from Czechia's human-rights based foreign policy towards China in the previous decades since the administration under Václav Havel, the announcement urged for a 'fresh impetus' in the bilateral relations (ibid). This officialised and institutionalised change of stance towards Tibetan issues is a manifestation of a pragmatic turn in Czech foreign policy. Less driven by value-based motivations, the Czech foreign policy adopts a practical attitude towards China and is more likely to be receptive to economic incentives promoted in the Chinese narrative.

This 'fresh impetus' of bilateral relations was soon followed by a series of interactions of high-level government officials. In such interactions, it is obvious to see the pragmatic economic-focused motivations on the Czech side. The Czech President Miloš Zeman, who is well-known for his pro-Chinese attitude, referred to the Chinese BRI as 'one of the most important infrastructure projects currently in the world' and expressed the wish for Czechia to be the base for China's economic expansion to the EU (Zeman, 2015). Beyond this, similar rhetoric can also be observed with the Prime Minister Bohulav Sobotka. During his visit to Beijing in 2015, the Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka claimed in a press release that the Czech Republic aims to 'become a transport hub and a financial centre of China in Central and Eastern Europe' (Government of the Czech Republic, 2015a). Following the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding under BRI in the same year, he claimed that the Czech Republic is 'interested in being a part of the important economic project [16/17+1]', and is 'ready to create conditions for further compressive cooperation in various sectors' (Government of the Czech Republic, 2015b).

Under this pragmatism-based foreign policy, the Czech-Sino relations reached its highest point in 2016 when Xi paid a national visit to Prague. This was accompanied by the signing of numerous investment contracts with an expected total value of over 12 billion Euros (Prague Castle, 2016a) as well as a bilateral strategic partnership agreement by the heads of state from both sides. Echoing the sentiments of Sobotka a year earlier, the agreement mentioned the potential of bilateral economic cooperation to promote the Czech Republic to become 'a regional financial centre for Central and Eastern Europe' (Prague Castle, 2016b). It could thus be seen in the high-level governmental interactions that the economic incentives promised in the Chinese narrative work as one of the main drivers for the warming up of the Czech-Sino relationship.

Despite the pro-Chinese discourse and acts showing the reception of the Chinese narratives, there has also been considerable opposition to China voiced over the same time frame. Even though in 2014 the bilateral recognition of the 'One China Policy' was formalised at the governmental level, as mentioned above, support for Taiwan and Tibet still constitute a significant part in the anti-China narratives among the Czech political elites. For example, almost coinciding with Xi's national visit to the Czech Republic in March of 2016, the Dalai Lama was invited to visit a few months later in October. When talking about the meeting during an interview, the former Deputy Prime Minister Pavel Bělobrádek said that 'in a free democratic country, it should be possible to meet anyone … even if China is an interesting market, not everything fits in the economic category and we cannot give up certain principles; and we are facing the West' (Bělobrádek, 2016). This emphasis of values of democracy and principles resonates with the human right-centred approach towards China of the previous administrations, which is in line with the mainstream European values of freedom and democracy. Besides, it is also a strong statement of the allegiance to, and even pressure from, the US and the EU. In the context of the EU regarding China as a threat to its ontological values and norms, this is a clear example of confrontation of the value-based counter-narrative to its China-promoted 16/17+1 counterpart.

Besides issues around Tibet, the pro-Taiwan discourse has also seen a drastic increase among Czech political elites. For instance, the Prague mayor Zdeněk Hřib questioned the terms of the 'One-China Policy' in the sister city agreement between Prague and Beijing and referred to the inclusion of the terms as 'unnecessary' and 'a mistake made by predecessors' and consequently terminated the sister city relationship at the end of 2019 (Hřib, 2019). Around the same time, the president of the Czech Senate Jaroslav Kubera planned an official visit to Taiwan, but suddenly died in January 2020 (Kundra, 2020). Despite this, his successor, Miloš Vystrčil, announced that he will officially visit Taiwan. Referring to the trip as a manifestation of 'adherence to principle and values … of sovereignty, independence, rule of law, freedom, and democracy', he claimed it is important to show that 'the Czech Republic cares about democracy and freedom' (Vystrčil, 2020). Evidently, as with the pro-Tibet discourse, the pro-Taiwan gestures are another example of a norm- and value-focused counter-narrative.

Apart from discourse around the need to preserve European values and norms from China's influence, the other prominent narrative revolves around China's threat to national security. Illustrating this, the Czech National Cyber and Information Security Agency (NUKIB) warned against the Chinese telecommunication company Huawei and its products in 2018, accusing the company of 'cooperating in intelligence activities and posing a security threat to the state' (NUKIB, 2018b). The warning was immediately followed by the Prime Minister Andrej Babiš's order for all government employees to stop using portable devices from Huawei (Babiš, 2018). Even though he soon denied the validity of the order and claimed that 'the warning only applies to critical information infrastructure and information systems' (Government of the Czech Republic, 2018), his speech-acts, along with the security warning from the official cybersecurity agency, signal a new wave of securitisation of not only China, but also the presence of Chinese companies and its economic expansion in the country.

Since then the anti-China discourse has become increasingly visible from the

beginning of 2020 when even the President Miloš Zeman, who has been undoubtedly the most important actor driving the pro-China wave in the country over the past few years, to an extent changed his connotations. This was evident when, in response to an invitation for him to attend the '17+1' Summit to Beijing in 2020, he publicly refused to attend and voiced disappointment over Chinese investment by saying that the Chinese side 'has not fulfilled its promises' (Prague Castel, 2020). Even though it was confirmed later in March that he will now attend the Summit (ČTK, 2020), the publicly claimed refusal feeds the anti-Chinese narratives. Moreover, his claim about the disappointment around the Chinese investment has shown that the economic incentives promised by China largely remains only on the strategic and rhetorical level. This is clear as the credibility of the Chinese narratives is questionable even among the pro-Chinese audiences in the region.

Most recently during the coronavirus pandemic, the pro- and anti-China binary among the Czech political elites has been magnified. This comes as the pro-China political elites attempt to construct a narrative in which the successful purchase of medical equipment from China vindicates the close relationship with China over recent years. President Zeman, for instance, despite his expression of disappointment with China's unfulfilled economic promises earlier in the year, claimed during a television speech that 'China is the only country that provides help to the Czech Republic' and expressed criticism towards those in opposition of China (Zeman, 2020). Czech Prime Minister, Babiš, also claimed that it was due to Zeman's contacts with China that the Czech Republic is getting help (Babiš, 2020). However, at the same time, pro-Taiwan politicians condemn China's inefficient responses at the early stage of the pandemic and promote the publicity of Taiwan's medical support to Czechia. As an illustration, the Prague mayor Hřib refers to Taiwan's approach as effective and successful in tackling the pandemic and dismissed that the medical supplies from China is not aid, but rather, is pure trade (Hřib, 2020).

As can be seen, there are mixed opinions around China in the CEE region and its

16/17+1 narrative among the Czech political elites. One group, the pro-China politicians, mainly represented by the Czech president, welcome China's presence in Czechia in a high-profiled and institutionalised way through the signing of bilateral agreements and intergovernmental exchanges, which manifests the reception of the Chinese narratives embedded in the diplomatic communication. Yet another faction, the anti-China political elites, challenge the benign Chinese narratives by upholding the values of democracy and human rights as well as by directly addressing China as a security threat in the context of the Huawei incident.

5.1.2. Poland

The Polish case is very much similar to the situation in Czechia. Since democratisation in 1989, there have been two decades of human rights-centred policy and marginalisation of China in the Polish foreign agenda. Only since 2008 has there been a gradual rapprochement between Warsaw and Beijing in the context of the global financial crisis (Bahulska, 2020: 33). This was followed by a surge of government-to-government level exchanges between Poland and China since the initiation of 16/17+1.

From this opening in cooperation between the two nations, significant development of relations began in 2012, when the then Polish president Bronisław Komorowski welcomed the Chinese premier Wen Jiabao in Poland. Being the very first meeting of state leaders between China and the CEE region, the meeting is regarded as the official beginning of China-CEE cooperation. Later on, intergovernmental cooperation was further consolidated under the administration of Andrzej Duda. This was apparent when, in 2016, a joint declaration was signed between the leaders of the two countries upgrading the bilateral cooperation from 'strategic partnership' (since 2011) to 'comprehensive strategic partnership'. In the joint declaration, apart from merely repeating the 16/17+1 narrative—which aims to intensify bilateral cooperation in areas like economy, education, tourism, and culture—there is also mention of 'political trust' and 'political cooperation' at multiple levels. Moreover, it emphasises the 'One China Policy' stating that 'Poland supports peaceful development of relations

between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait and reaffirms its attachment to the One China policy' (Polish Government, 2016a). On the same occasion, a series of memorandums blueprinting cooperation in industrial development, information communications and investment were also inked.

Economic incentives promised in China's narrative also function as the main driver of the intensification of bilateral relations at the top-level governmental level. During Xi's visit to Poland in 2016, the Polish president Duda expressed his hope for Poland to 'become a gateway to Europe for China, particularly in economic terms' and referred to Xi's visit to Poland as an indication of 'a clear intensification of relations between Poland and China at economic levels' (Polish Government, 2016b). Similar rhetoric has also been made by the Prime Minister Beata Szydło. During her attendance at the China-CEE summit in 2017, she claimed that 'economic cooperation is the core issue of her visit' and that the BRI 'is an important event for which Poland has high hopes' (Polish Government, 2017a). Furthermore, at the same event, she expressed that 'China is a demanding and big partner, but a partner who wants to carry out the economic cooperation in our region' (Polish Government, 2017b). This rhetoric shows her awareness that the partnership with China is not unconditional, yet the economic significance of the cooperation outweighs other issues and serves as the main motivation for the Polish government to participate in the China-promoted projects.

Beside the interactions at the highest level, a noteworthy trend in the Polish-Sino relations is the increasing regional cooperation which has been playing a more and more important role in the development of bilateral relations in the last few years. According to the Polish Foreign Minister Grzegorz Schetyna (2015), the regional level cooperation is 'one of the foundations of Polish-Chinese relations'. This rhetoric is manifested by the large number of regional collaboration projects in practice. In 2018, there were 13 provincial regions and 23 municipal cities in Poland that had developed cooperative ties with their Chinese counterparts in 2018, and, as of the beginning of 2020, there were only 3 out of 16 administrative regions in Poland not involved in local cooperation

with China (Andrijauskas et al., 2020: 36).

It is interesting, though, to note that the 16/17+1 narrative also penetrates the regional and local level in Poland by the same token of providing economic incentives. One of the most significant cases of the regional level collaboration is between the city of Łódź and the Chinese city Chengdu. The two cities established a direct railway connection in 2013, which was accompanied by a series of regional political meetings in Łòdź (Kamiński, 2019: 234). The head of the region, Witold Stępień, expressed his endorsement of the collaboration with the Chinese city and saw this tie as of strategic importance for the economic development of the post-industrial city and the whole region (ibid: 235). The railway connection between the two cities resonates with the urge for an increased connectivity between China and the CEE region in the 16/17+1 narrative and shows the reception of the narrative in the local region. Resonating with his supportive stance towards the bilateral regional cooperation, the Polish Foreign Minister Schetyna (2015) commented on the railway connection saying that 'it is a symbol of connection between not only two cities, but also two countries, two cultures and two worlds'.

Despite that the influence of China's narrative can be seen on multiple levels in Poland, there is also a considerable amount of anti-China sentiment. By way of illustration, Antoni Macierewicz, the Polish defence minister from 2015 to 2018, has expressed concerns over the potential threats that the cooperation with China can bring to the sovereignty and independency of Poland. He referred to the Chinese BRI as 'a part of Chinese expansion' and 'a threat to Poland' (Macierewicz, 2015, cited in Lubina, 2017: 231). His concerns over China's presence in Poland were further reflected in 2017 when he turned down a purchase from Beijing of land belonging to the Military Property Agency in the before mentioned city of Łódź (Ostrowska, 2019: 27).

The defence minister's disapproval shows the potential for discrepancy between the attitudes towards China at the official and normative level with the practical level; it also evidences diversification of the stances of political elites. Even though there are

certain levels of reception of the benign and benevolent Chinese narrative among the politicians of the highest rankings and of the local regions, the securitisation of China is still ongoing in political discourse in the country.

This is true again where, as with Czechia, securitisation can also be seen in the case of Huawei. In January 2019, a Chinese and a Polish Huawei employee in Warsaw were detained on suspicion of conducting espionage activities by Polish police (BBC, 2019) triggering growing normative concerns over the security threats that China and Chinese companies bring to the region. Soon after the arrest, Marek Zagórski, the Minister of Digital Affairs, made a candid security statement that 'Huawei's 5G and national security of Poland are mutually exclusive' (Polish Government, 2019a). As the first European country to take measures against the alleged spying activities of Huawei, Poland is one of the most significant actors contributing to the securitisation of China in the region. Even though the Chinese company has established a strong foothold in Poland, largely based on the intensified bilateral cooperation, it has also become a convenient tool to re-securitise China's presence in the country.

In this sense, it is worth noting the importance of Poland's trans-Atlantic cooperation and the parallel of timings between the Huawei incident in Poland with the US's effort of securitising Huawei and its 5G implications on a global scale. Prior to the arrest in Poland, there had already been a securitisation campaign around Huawei and its 5G network on the international stage. Among others, these securitisation moves included a warning from the Five Eyes—an intelligence alliance comprised of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK , and the US—over Huawei threat, and the arrest of Huawei's Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou in Canada the same year in December (BBC, 2018). These events and security gestures have undoubtedly fed to the China threat narrative in Europe as well as in Poland.

Resonating with this is the Polish government's stressing of the primacy of its trans-Atlantic relations with the US. In November 2018, two months before the arrests took place, the Polish Prime Minister Morawiecki emphasised the importance of the

cooperation with the West in a speech titled ‘A European Perspective for the Future of trans-Atlantic Relations’ (Polish Government, 2018). Referring to Poland as ‘both pro-American and pro-European’ and China as the actor ‘challenging the free world of democracy and the trans-Atlantic alliance’, he urged nations to ‘find a way to maintain the right level of deterrence’ against China (ibid). With its reference to NATO and the use of language with clear implications to security threats (such as ‘deterrence’), this effort could be seen as the securitisation speech acts that aim to justify the later-implemented extraordinary measure of the detainment of the Huawei employees.

Soon after, in 2019, there was a US-Poland joint declaration on 5G signed by the Prime Minister Morawiecki and the US Vice President Pence which stresses the importance of security around the 5G network and aims to strengthen the cooperation between the two countries in this regard (Polish Government, 2019b). Though China, nor Huawei, was mentioned in the declaration, it does mention a requirement for ‘a rigorous evaluation’ of 5G suppliers that are not ‘subject to control by a foreign government’, have ‘transparent ownership structure’ and have ‘a record of ethical corporate behaviour’ (ibid), all of which implicitly and negatively suggests the securitisation around Huawei. The US’s effort to mingle with the issue further illustrates that Poland has become the battlefield of the strategic rivalry between China and the US. The securitising discourse around Huawei could also be seen as another counter-narrative against the desecuritised Chinese narrative in the CEE region.

To conclude, Sino-Polish cooperation and the reception of the Chinese CEE narratives is reflected at the top-governmental level as well as regional levels. However, due to Poland’s primacy of the trans-Atlantic relations in security cooperation, the re-securitisation of China can also take place readily. The Huawei issue in Poland seems to function as the focal point of the competition between the US and China over the implementation of 5G technology, which is of great strategic importance.

5.1.3. Slovakia

Compared with the other V4 countries, the involvement of Slovakia in the 16/17+1 cooperation is rather limited. Slovakia is the only country that has not formed a comprehensive strategic partnership with China in the V4 group. To the degree that it does have connections, these are similar to those of Czechia and Poland in terms of top-level interactions. And so, on the whole, Sino-Slovak cooperation mainly remains at the government-to-government level and functions under the 16/17+1 platform.

With the acceleration of bilateral relations after 2012, there have been various governmental visits on both sides. These include the then prime minister Fico's attendance at the CEE Summits and the then Chinese vice premier Hui Liangyu's visit to Bratislava in 2013 and 2015 respectively. Further, in an act of commercial cooperation, since 2013, the Ministry of Agriculture have sought to boost the export of agricultural products to China. While, in 2017, the Slovak government passed a proposal to develop broader economic relations between Slovakia and China for the period 2017-2020 (Slov-Lex, 2017).

On the sub-national level, the regional governments in Slovakia have established ties with Chinese provinces and cities—including Bratislava Region's ties with Shanghai since 2015, Žilina Region and Zhejiang province since 2012, and Prešov Region with Hebei province since 2016— as well as a variety of further city-level cooperation (Andrijauskas et al., 2020). Yet, even with these ties, most of the cooperation is at the cultural and educational level where implementation is yet to be materialised.

Despite the limited bilateral cooperation, Slovakia has not seemed to securitise Huawei as a national security threat in the past few years. Moreover, faced with the US's global campaign to ban Huawei and its 5G technology, the Slovak Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini announced that the country does not see Huawei as a security threat, and that he perceives the situation around Huawei as 'part of the US-Sino trade war'

(Slovak Government, 2019). Similarly, the deputy Prime Minister Richard Raši announced that it is 'not in Slovakia's interest to discriminate against companies based on their country of origin' and that he believes 'Huawei will prove the transparency of their products' (Raši, 2019). With the reference to the 'trade-war' and the indiscriminate market access, the official rhetoric in Slovakia seems to downplay Huawei as a depoliticised and economic issue to avoid being involved in the international political rivalry.

When it does come to anti-China sentiment among political elites, the counter-narrative focusing on human rights and European values is also used by Slovakia to confront the Chinese narrative. One of the prominent examples is the then president Andrej Kiska's meeting with the Dalai Lama in 2016 (Denník, 2016). Even though there was no participation of any minister in Prime Minister Fico's government, the meeting itself has a powerful symbolic effect demonstrating Slovakia's normative stance that is in line with the core European values. Another example demonstrating Slovakia's stand in terms of values is the new president Zuzana Čaputová's (since 2019) critique over China's human rights issues in 2019. During a meeting with the Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi in Bratislava in 2019, the Slovak president raised her concerns over 'the deteriorating human rights situation, detention of human right lawyers, and the status of ethnic and religious minorities in China', which, she said, are not in line with 'the values of freedom and democracy that Slovakia holds' (Čaputová, 2019).

Generally, Slovakia has remained at the periphery of the 16/17+1 cooperation. Though there is not explicit securitisation around China in Slovakia due to its unwillingness to be involved in a wider political rivalry, there are symbolic and high-profile events demonstrating the country's alignment with EU values that inevitably contribute to the forming of the counter-narrative against the Chinese image in the region. In contrast, reflecting sentiment also visible in the former two countries, there are also government officials trying to be in line with the Chinese narrative out of

pragmatism and economic incentives.

5.1.4. Hungary

Among the V4 countries, Hungary shows the highest level of reception of the Chinese narrative and has demonstrated the most pro-PRC stance. Since the initiation of the China-CEE cooperation, Hungary has been foremost in welcoming China's presence in the region. The Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is the most prominent supporter of China in the country with extremely pro-China rhetoric. In 2016, one year before the Hungarian-Sino strategic partnership was sealed, he delivered a speech titled '*The Time has come for creating a strategic partnership between CEE and China*' at a China-CEE political parties dialogue in Beijing. Referring to China as 'the world's strongest economic power centre', he stated that 'Hungary does not accept restrictions of any kind regarding cooperation between China and the Central-European region' (Orbán, 2016). He has also described the BRI as China's new 'globalisation model' and stated that developing 'excellent relations with China' is in line with Hungary's national interests (Orbán, 2017).

Unlike the previous three cases, Hungary's cooperation with China is not just confined to a discursive and symbolic level of intergovernmental exchanges. The Hungarian political elites also strive to defend the Chinese version of international norms and even co-produce these norms along with China's desecuritised 16/17+1 narrative. In line with his frequent claim of China being Hungary's most important trade partner outside of EU and endorsement of the China-CEE cooperation, the Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó also criticises the view that China's presence in the CEE region is breaking the unity within the EU (Szijjártó, 2019a). He points out that this accusation is a 'hypocrisy' and an act of holding the 'double standards' (ibid). In another statement to public media, he claimed that China's 16/17+1 framework is in the interest of the whole EU, since it provides resources to the infrastructure development of the CEE countries, while the 'EU resources are not open' to the CEE countries (Szijjártó, 2019b). In this narrative, China is not only defended in the EU context, it is depicted as the

partner that could fulfil the national interests that the EU fail to materialise.

This theme is seen again as, in the midst of the recent anti-Huawei waves in Europe, Hungary stands as one of the few countries which openly hold a supportive stance towards Huawei. Despite the security warnings issued by the US and other European countries, like Czechia, in early 2019, Hungary signed a memorandum of understanding in July of the same year with Huawei to strengthen the company's role in the development of infrastructures in Hungary, which was soon followed by the Foreign Minister's announcement confirming Huawei's participation in 5G network building in Hungary (Szijjártó, 2019c). In a context where the securitisation of Huawei has borne a symbolic significance of a country's stance in terms of global norms, Hungary's gesture shows that it is not only receptive towards the China's desecuritised narrative but also voices support for the Chinese foreign policy.

Further exemplifying this support, the Hungarian government's pro-Chinese rhetoric has also been reflected during the coronavirus pandemic. In response to the medical supply from China, the Hungarian government emphasised the 'close relationship and friendship between the two countries' and gave credit to its 'Eastern Opening policy' (Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2020). Moreover, observers argue that the government narrative during the coronavirus pandemic never refers to the medical supplies from China as 'bought' or 'purchased', but intead strives to describe them as aids and assistance from China (Andrijauskas et al., 2020: 48).

Unlike in other V4 countries, the pro-China stance in Hungary is not just confined to the highest governmental interactions and far exceeds merely the normative level. Hungary not only receives the Chinese desecuritised, benevolent and economy-focused 16/17+1 narrative by welcoming the bilateral cooperation on multiple levels, but it also co-produces the Chinese narratives to confront the European counter-narratives by showing support to China internationally when it comes to security concerns. Moreover, it is argued that due to the high level of centralisation of the Hungarian government, there are a very small amount of anti-China sentiments in the political discourse among

the political elites in the country (Matura, 2020). Thus, among the V4 countries, the Chinese 16/17+1 has the most support and reception in Orbán's Hungary.

5.2. Motivations for Reception/Resistance in the V4 Countries

As discussed above, China's desecuritised 16/17+1 narrative meets certain levels of reception at the top-governmental level in all the V4 countries. High-level meetings and signing of various of intergovernmental agreements and cooperation at central, as well as local levels, indicate that the reception of China's desecuritised and benign narrative is very high among the political elites at this level. However, reception and resistance varies across the different countries. Hungary has the most high-profile pro-China stance and presents the least challenges to China's 16/17+1 narrative; furthermore, it is even co-producing the Chinese narrative by defending China on the international stage.

In Czechia and Poland, despite the institutionalised cooperation at the top levels, different voices and attitudes towards China can be observed. This confinement of support is also reflected in that the pro-China stances mainly centre around individual politicians. As for the anti-China attitudes, the counter-narrative is mainly formed on the basis of European normative values of democracy and human rights. When it comes to the national security level, the securitising narrative of China and its 5G technology, this is largely in line with the US-led global securitisation campaign. Lastly, the bilateral cooperation with China is rather limited in Slovakia. Despite a certain level of reception of the Chinese narrative on a normative level, the cooperation is yet to be materialised.

There are, of course, various deeper structural and socio-ideological reasons accounting for the oscillation between the pro-China and anti-China attitudes in different countries of the V4 region. Although these doubtless require further investigation, it is beyond the scope of this research to conduct a comparative study of the factors rooted in societies that contribute to different levels of reception in each

country. However, there are some common drivers to the reception of the Chinese narratives that can be identified in all four cases.

One of them is surely, as has been noted numerous times above, the economic incentives. As can be seen in the discourse of the political elites, the most frequent reasons to justify their pro-China stance is the potential development of economy, access to the huge volume Chinese market, and the construction of local infrastructure. Embedded in the Chinese strategic narrative of the 16/17+1 cooperation, economic benefits are designed as the main mechanism through which the Chinese discourse presents its attractiveness. It can also be observed in the critical rhetoric towards the anti-Chinese politicians that the potential economic and trade ramifications are the highest concern.

Moreover, it is also interesting to point out the repetitive rhetoric of 'becoming a gateway to Europe for China' as in the cases of Czechia and Poland, which shows, at a certain level, a competition for China's economic attention in the region. Experiencing the transition to a market economy only decades ago, the V4 countries, and CEE states in general, still have considerable discrepancy in terms of economic strength with Western Europe. Cooperative ties with China may thus be an alternative way for development in terms of economy and foreign trade. Moreover, as could be seen in the rhetoric of Szijjártó (2019b) around difficulties involved in acquiring EU resources, this need for economic development and the difficulties of getting EU funding and resources also, in a way, justifies their cooperation with China and functions as a political leverage in the EU.

Apart from the potential economic benefits that are embedded and promised in the Chinese narratives in the CEE region, scholars also argue that the V4 countries' approaches towards China are not merely shaped by the Chinese side, but are highly related to V4's relations with the EU (see for example Jakimów, 2019: 380; Kavalski, 2019: 405). As such, it can be observed that after few decades of holding firm human rights principles in the foreign policies towards China, the pro-China turn in the V4

region is coincided not only with the starting of the 16/17+1 cooperation, but also with the V4 countries' change of attitudes towards the EU (Jakimów, 2019: 380).

With populist politicians coming to power (in Czechia since 2013, Poland since 2015, Slovakia from 2012-2018, and Hungary under Orbán), the previous few years, in line with a global trend, have seen a surge of populism and nationalism in the region. Along with the disputes between the V4 countries and the EU over the acceptance of immigrants during the refugee crisis, there is a growing scepticism towards the EU on the governmental levels in the region (Schmidt, 2016). In this context, by providing a new pivot of foreign policy to the V4 countries, the Chinese 16/17+1 narrative works as a vehicle for the countries to articulate their domestic and international roles, as well as to gain more leverage and bargaining power in the EU affairs. Therefore, building ties with Beijing would help the V4 countries to expand their foreign policy outlook beyond the traditional sphere of the US, the EU and Russia, which provides them with a bigger platform to voice and articulate their own interests.

Besides this trend, referring to the lens of prominent cultural values might be useful. Despite the pro-Western values reflected in political and social spheres in V4 countries in the past few decades, there is still a disparity on a general scale with Western Europe. For instance, according to the cultural map of the World Values Survey in 2010, both China and most of the post-communist CEE countries (including the V4) hold 'survival values', referring to the priority of economic and physical security; while the core Western European countries sit at the other end of the spectrum, holding 'self-expression values' with features such as the priority of environmental protection, well-being, gender equality, wider participation in democracy and so forth (Inglehart and Welzel, 2010).

Linking back to securitisation theory, the successful reception of a speech act requires, in addition to 'external facilitating conditions' such as economic incentives, suitable 'internal facilitating conditions' (Buzan et al., 1998: 32). These refer to an audience's intersubjective 'grammar' and shared understanding. In this sense, it is

possible that shared ‘survival values’ focusing on economic security, along with the surge of populism in the CEE region, might condition a shared grammar in the normative environment between China and the CEE region in which the reception of China’s narrative is made more plausible.

Meanwhile, despite a general orientation in the V4 countries to ‘survival values’, the political transitions and the turn to the West in the past few decades have been accompanied by the significant surfacing of ‘self-expression values’ in their mainstream political rhetoric. Mirroring the core European values of democracy and equality, the surge of ‘self-expression values’ in the V4 countries are a manifestation of their co-existing inclination to European identity and subsequently contribute to the rejection of China’s narrative. This means that, in addition to the pressures to adhere to EU, which is what former Czech Deputy Prime Minister Pavel Bělobrádek was partly referring to above when he said ‘we are facing the West’, there are existing and emerging sections of V4 populations that authentically hold such values and have a fundamental opposition or incompatibility that contrasts with the potential commonality described above. Undoubtedly, this polarity is a factor in the mixed reception present in these countries.

Furthermore, it is also important to consider the reception/resistance of China’s narrative in the context of the Sino-US relations where the V4 countries need to balance their engagement with China and the strategic friendship with the US. The re-securitisation of China in some of the countries, especially in Czechia and Poland, demonstrates that the primacy of the trans-Atlantic relations could override the economic incentives in the region. As such, when the V4 countries are involved in the strategic rivalry between China and the US, as in the case of the 5G infrastructures being built in the region, it is likely that the countries would be in line with the US and re-securitise China’s presence. This re-securitisation of China in the CEE region accords with Song’s (2015: 156) vision of the China threat narrative in that it is ‘structurally incorporated into a higher level of security discourse situated among the

“macro-securitising discourses”’ of rival political ideologies. Therefore, the reaction of the V4 countries to China’s normative influence is an embodiment of the broader Sino-US rivalry on the regional level.

Lastly, this possibility of re-securitisation also resonates well with Behnke’s (2006) vision of the impossibility of achieving absolute desecuritisation due to the intrinsic connection of politics and security. That is to say, as long as something is politicised, it is attached with a value of security. In this case, as long as the Chinese international project has political implications—namely expanding the political and geopolitical influence in the region under traditional influence of the US and the EU—it would be very difficult to avoid the perception of posing security threats and to stay off of the security agendas of the countries in the region.

Conclusion

Combining the theoretical frameworks of desecuritisation with strategic narrative, this research utilises Critical Discourse Analysis to analyse China's desecuritised language use in its foreign policy narratives targeting the CEE region and examine the formation and reception of its strategic narrative in the V4 countries.

Through the analysis of the International System Narratives regarding China, it was found that the essence of the realism-based China threat narrative in the West revolves around China's potential to change the existing global power structures. More specifically, the anxiety of the US centres around economy, military, and the structural change of the US-centred world order. While in Europe, the China threat narrative has its roots in the deeper anxiety of ontological security of identities and values.

With this context of a general securitisation of China, China strives to form a counter-narrative that might desecuritise itself to achieve its strategic goals in its foreign policy. With notions like the community with a shared future for mankind and its BRI, China's International System Narrative is picturing a harmonious and connected world in which China sits at the centre of its power structure. This is also further demonstrated in China's self-assigned identity as an ethical, benevolent, and responsible norm-setting actor in its Identity Narrative.

Consequently, China's Issue Narrative, namely its 16/17+1 foreign policy, carries the ideas blueprinted in China's International System Narrative and Identity Narrative and manifests them in a more context-specific way. The analysis of this Issue Narrative shows that, apart from being in line with its broader foreign policy, China is using different desecuritisation strategies of pre-emptive rebuttal, silencing, replacement, and common identity formation to alter the China threat perception and increase its own attractiveness in the region. This activity largely serves towards the achievement of its strategic goals of economic and geopolitical expansion as well as socialising the CEE countries into the China-promoted global norm which is different from the current US-

led one.

Lastly, the research selects the V4 group, constituted by four countries with relatively high levels of European integration in the CEE region, to examine the reception and resistance at the governmental level and among the political elites. The analysis suggests that Hungary welcomes the Chinese narratives the most, Czechia and Poland have mixed opinions domestically regarding China, while China remains at the periphery of the foreign policy agenda in Slovakia. Despite levels of reception in the four countries varying, economic incentives and a means to achieve diversification of their own foreign policies are the common factors contributing to the motivation for reception. Meanwhile, ontological security concerns over European values and identity, as well as the primacy of the trans-Atlantic relationship, lead to re-securitisation of China in the V4 countries.

From here, the findings of the research can be further extracted to the conclusion that China's foreign policy narrative targeting the CEE region is highly desecuritised and strategic in nature: it functions as a tool for China to achieve its economic and geopolitical expansion as well as to challenge and alter the existing US-led world order in the context of the Western China threat narrative. Economic incentives promised by China and political diplomatic considerations of the individual countries contribute to the reception, while ontological security concerns of EU values/identity and the need to keep in line with other prominent international actors like the US lead to concurrent re-securitisation of China. The Sino-CEE relations are thus by no means simply a regional or a bilateral issue, they are better understood as an embodiment of great power struggle on the international stage played out at a regional level.

As identified in the literature review, there is still very little literature that focuses on the 16/17+1 foreign policy analysis and the security consideration of China's normative efforts in the CEE region. By explaining how desecuritisation can work as a way to form narratives for the purpose of achieving strategic goals, this research has shown the compatibility of the two theoretical frameworks as well as contributed to the

empirical understanding of China's 16/17+1 foreign policy and its application in Central and Eastern Europe. With the effort of examining specifically the application in the V4 countries, the study has identified the common factors contributing to the reception and rejection of China's narrative; the findings may also facilitate the understanding of the 16/17+1's influences in the CEE region as a whole.

Also, this research contributes to the existing literature on soft power/strategic narrative studies on Chinese foreign policy by providing a case study of its application in the CEE region. Moreover, contextualising the 16/17+1 framework within China's broader ambition to challenge and alter the existing world order, the research provides a case study of the normative rivalry present at global level and contributes to the understanding of the landscape of great power normative influence in the current world order.

There are also several limitations that need to be held in mind when interpreting the findings of the research. First of all, the analysis of the reception in the V4 countries is only confined to gestures and attitudes at the highest governmental level and of political elites. The reception of the narrative in a wider social context, such as in media representation and public opinion, is not considered. Because this is clearly important, further research taking into account attitudes on the social level would be conducive to a more holistic understanding of the topic. Secondly, the considerations of the geopolitical struggle of the great powers embedded in the CEE region are only limited to the ongoing one between US, the EU, and China. Further study would benefit if other actors with prominent influence in the region, for example, Russia, are also taken into account.

Another limitation of this research is related to the choice of methodology. Critical Discourse Analysis is sometimes criticised as being 'impressionistic' because the analysed texts are small in number and are selected in an unsystematic way (Breeze, 2011: 504). Despite the effort to select discourse in according to the critical diplomatic moments covering the whole course of 16/17+1 initiation, there still might be a risk of

not representing a whole picture of the Chinese as well as V4 discourse.

On a final note, the question raised by this study regards what domestic and international factors lead to the different attitudes towards China in the V4 countries. While the task of analysing factors contributing to different reactions of the narratives' recipients lies beyond the scope of this research, further studies could comparatively explore the deeper structural and socio-ideological reasons that lead to different perceptions and the oscillation of attitudes towards China on different levels in the four countries.

Summary

This thesis is a foreign policy analysis of China's 16/17+1 initiative targeting Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. More specifically, it examines the strategic use of desecuritisation strategies in China's foreign policy facing its CEE audiences. Applying Critical Discourse Analysis to study different levels of narratives, the research argues that China's ambition of forming a new global order is embedded in its foreign policy, and, in practice, that desecuritised languages are used strategically and instrumentally in China's 16/17+1 initiative. Through a closer look at reception and rejection of China's strategic narrative in Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, it is found that economic incentives as well as using cooperation with China as foreign policy leverage, contribute to the reception, while the primacy of the trans-Atlantic relationship with the US and the importance attached to European values lead to the rejection of the Chinese narrative.

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