

The Identity Factor in Chinese Relations with Europe

China and the Barbarian Civilization

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Chapter 8

Boycotts of Europe in Xi Jinping's New Era

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Identity Issues and European Challenges (2010-2016)

China-Europe relations from 2010 to 2016 have been described as a maturing partnership, following the tumultuous divisions that cut short the earlier honeymoon phase.¹ In this 'normalization' of the relationship, however, tensions over issues of identity were still a factor shaping China's relationship with the European continent. Concurrent with Xi Jinping's consolidation of power within the Chinese political system, and the continued growth of Chinese economic and military capabilities in the world, the Chinese main discourses relating to Europe developed towards a further emphasis on how China's successful and separate social model makes it deserve the rights and privileges of a great power. One result of this was an increased readiness by the Chinese government to exert political and economic capital to police European countries' line on Chinese identity issues. This development impacted both the cause of, and the solution to, two recent examples of Sino-European political and diplomatic crises, namely those related to the UK government's decision to meet with the Dalai Lama in 2012, and China's six years boycott of Norway in the aftermath of the Nobel Committee awarding the 2010 Peace Prize to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo.

These two cases demonstrate how a range of political and economic ties were adversely affected by identity-driven policy motivations. As Xi Jinping declared a 'new era' for the People's Republic, these cases demonstrate how a set of Chinese discursive shifts over this period, opened up for a more assertive range of policies. The six-year diplomatic boycott of Norway is a case in point, as Chinese boycotts of European countries were already an established pattern, as detailed in the previous chapter, but never on such a scale and duration. This change in Chinese policies, and their willingness to escalate the issue is arguably representative of a distinct discursive change. In this, the EU was no longer a rising power, with which companionship China could reach their goal of a more multipolar world order, but rather an economically and politically weakened entity. These changing main discourses opened for a number of consequential changes in the derived policy directions. These manifested themselves mainly as an increased drive for securing recognition

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of China's improved status from its European partners, and increasingly assertive demands for recognition of China's perceived rightful global role, and respect for their social, political, and economic model. This assertiveness was now less moderated by the idea of securing European support as an emerging axis of a new multipolar world. The onus was instead increasingly on securing recognition for the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) new discursive constructs of themselves and China's perceived rightful global role. Both in the case of the United Kingdom, as a former empire with particular historical and current ties to China, and Norway, as a small state actor on Europe's northern periphery, these general developments in China's Europe discourses, would bring ontological security into play in the relationship with China in particular ways.

The developments in China's discourses regarding Europe in this period, were intimately linked to a number of broader changes in the Chinese perceptions of themselves and their place in the international system. The following section will give a brief overview of these changes in the Chinese foundational narrative, and related general foreign policy discourse, before linking these developments to the specific discourses regarding the People's Republic's relations with Europe. The delineation of this chapter to the years 2010–2016 implies that the sources analysed derive from both the late years of Hu Jintao's presidency and the early period of Xi Jinping's ascendancy as the most dominant Chinese leader since Deng Xiaoping. Straddling the momentous change in power from Hu to Xi allows for a more succinct analysis of continuities and ruptures with regards to the Chinese main discourses, in the midst of pronounced changes to the country's domestic and foreign policy profiles.

Foundational Narrative: Xi and China's Great Power Narrative

Xi Jinping's ascension to power in 2012/2013, started off with a highly symbolic public statement, when he brought the Politburo's Standing Committee with him to the Chinese National Museum's exhibition on the 'Chinese Road to Rejuvenation,' during which he gave a speech emphasizing his lessons from the visit: "Through more than 170 years of persistent struggle after the Opium War, the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese nation was the bright prospect on the horizon. Now, the goal of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is closer than ever before in our history."² Thus he exemplified one of the key strains of the foundational narrative of the CCP's political project, as a clearly temporally defined narrative arc bending towards CCP-led restoration.³ Closely related to the Great Rejuvenation narrative was his new concept of the China Dream,⁴ that linked to the existing Two Centennial Goals of the CCP, whereby at the 100-year anniversary of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2049, China would be a strong, prosperous developed country that has successfully achieved its revival through adhering to the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics.⁵ In the speech, the continued

relevance of the role of Europe in Chinese political identity narration was put on display, tying into the broader ontological security rationale of the CCP as the guardian of the deliverance from the years of humiliation. As Hagström has summarized this narrative juxtaposition of greatness and disgrace: “Underlying the agenda of ‘national renewal’ is a highly institutionalized narrative of ‘national humiliation,’ according to which China was victimized at the hands of colonial powers in the ninetieth and twentieth centuries.”⁶ Simultaneously the Centennial Goals showcase how material achievements are also a key part of the ontological basis of the current Chinese political project.⁷

It should be noted that this discursive realignment did not involve the abandonment of the peaceful development slogan as a marker of government policies, as this continued to be used by Xi as a key trope in speeches on foreign policy. Similarly, slogans emphasizing China’s inherently peaceful and friendship-seeking nature also persisted.⁸ Rather, it was increasingly taking the back seat in favour of Xi’s own more assertive policy agendas and slogans.⁹ As Xi Jinping pointed out in a 2013 Politburo study session: peaceful development should never come at the expense of core national interests.¹⁰ This is also demonstrated through the content analysis in Figure 8.1. The centrality of Xi’s main international policy project, the ‘One Belt, One Road,’ in diplomatic communications with Europe became increasingly common, as compared to other well-used *tifa*’s, something that both reflects the massive diplomatic offensive undertaken in drumming up international support in favour of the initiative, and also reflects how European countries eventually became regarded as an important constituency for the project.

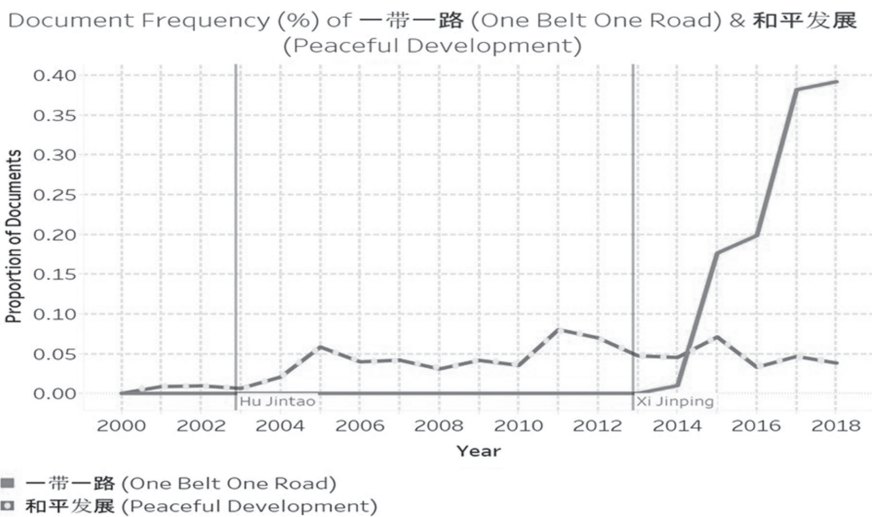


Figure 8.1 Use of the terms ‘One Belt, One Road’ and ‘Peaceful Development’ in FMPRC documents on Europe

The new policy initiatives Xi sought to implement, entered into a domestic political situation hallmarked both by China's rapid rise in international stature, but also a situation where domestic economic, political, and ecologic strains were getting more visible.¹¹ Xi also struggled successfully against oppositional narratives emphasizing constitutionalism over centralized party leadership as a future vision of China.¹² This new range of foreign policy slogans and initiatives does also ring true with one of Xi Jinping's insights, namely that in order to strengthen China internationally, it is important to strengthen the country's soft and discursive power, through seeking to ensure that "the Chinese story is well told."¹³ On this basis, Xi would later also outline two new foreign policy initiatives,¹⁴ namely that of the 'New Type of Great Power Relations' and the 'One Belt, One Road' initiative later renamed to the 'Belt and Road Initiative,' as statements of China's renewed central place in the world.¹⁵ These initiatives are focused on the rejuvenation of China, through increasing the centrality of China as the hub of both its near abroad, and the Eurasian continent more widely. As such, the utilization of the old Silk Road moniker is emblematic both of the aim at re-centring China in the international trade patterns, and the drive to re-embed the glories of old.

Of particular note from the European perspective, when analysing Xi's initiatives, is the extent to which Europe and the EU was a marginal concern in both the initiatives' formulation and implementation. As Zeng and Breslin's comprehensive analysis demonstrated, the new type of great power relations, originally coined by Jiang Zemin as a goal for all of Beijing's relations with larger countries, including Europe, was instead under Xi re-branded into an exercise focusing on US-China relations.¹⁶ This outlook on the global political scene thus left little room for the EU. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was also at its outset meant as a Chinese neighbourhood initiative, to the extent that the programme was not even mentioned in the EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation of 2013, and only became a part of the initiative at around the same time as Africa was also included in the planning the year after, in 2014.¹⁷ In his congratulatory note celebrating 40 years of diplomatic ties with the EU, Xi would still describe their relationship as one of the globe's most important.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the analysis of Chinese academic discourse from 1998 to 2014 by Zeng and Breslin concludes, that in scholarly works on the new type of great power relationship, the EU is very rarely mentioned, and singular European countries even less so. The overwhelming definition of a great power is the United States, and increasingly also China itself.¹⁹ This, then, forms a constituent part of the Chinese foundational narrative structured around the idea of China as an equal and separate civilization-turned-polity. One of the arenas where this readjusted narrative would play out was in Europe, where in the midst of growing economic ties there were dispersed serious diplomatic crises tied to this Chinese identity factor. One of the key developments in the Chinese narrative relevant for its Europe policies in

this period, is thus the gradual reassessment of both their own and the European continent's place in the international system. The simultaneous accrual of economic and political power for the PRC, coupled with repeated European issues in both economic and political areas, is reflected in an increasing Chinese focus on having European countries recognizing China's great power interests.²⁰ As summarized at the time by Michael Cox: "The global image of Europe could not be more different. Thus, whereas China seems to be (and in many respects is) on 'the up', Europe looks to be 'on the way down'."²¹ As such, the foundational narrative with regards to Europe was fairly similar to the narrative traced throughout the previous chapters, but with a substantial increase in the emphasis of China going from being a separate civilization seeking equality and redress, to a civilization not only separate but successfully so. This narrative was embedded in the general developments of China's view of itself and its place in the world, and also with regards to Europe, shaping the discourses of Europe that would bring ontological security into play in the two cases of high-profile diplomatic spats with the United Kingdom and Norway.²²

Main Discourses: Great Power China Reassesses Europe

Based on the foundational Chinese narrative explored above, the four main derived discourses of relevance for the China-Europe relationship, framed the developing relationship in a manner demonstrating both continuities and some consequential shifts from the period investigated in the former chapters (see Figure 8.2). The first main discourse draws upon the co-rising power

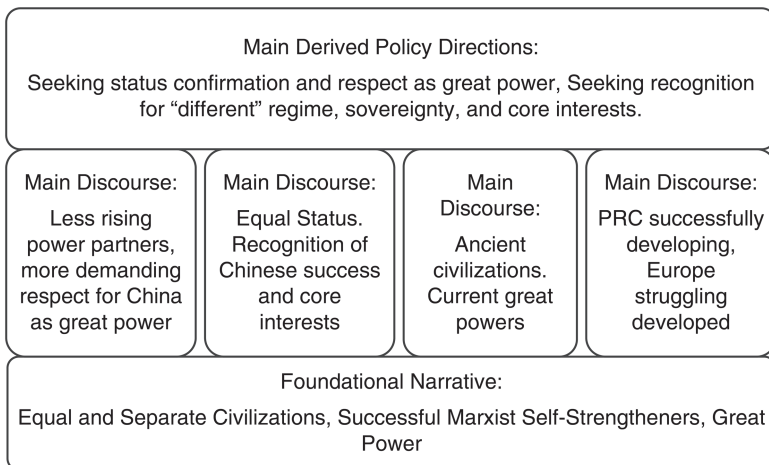


Figure 8.2 Overview of the three-layered China's discursive construct of Europe, 2010–2016

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poles discourse identified in earlier chapters, but with a reassessment of the relative power positions of China and the EU. To a larger extent it now implies China demanding recognition as a great power in its own right, rather than as a co-rising new power pole in the international multipolar landscape. Secondly, this is closely related to an increased emphasis on the importance of external recognition of China's status. The third main discourse emphasizes Europe and China as key civilizations of the East and West, but with an increasingly added focus on how the Chinese Eastern civilization is now on the brink of its great renaissance. Fourth, the discourse branding China and the EU as the largest developing country and the largest developed country, respectively, on an overall similar development trajectory, did increasingly recede in favour of an emphasis on the uniqueness of China's model. The idea of China as politically separate and exceptional thus gave rise to a discourse echoing the *ti/yong* discourse of the ancient self-strengtheners, only with the exception of this time being successful in the endeavour. This trend is also captured quantitatively, as Figure 8.3 demonstrates the increasing prevalence of mentions of socialist ideology in the diplomatic documents during the Xi era. Simultaneously, the key term of the 'Great Rejuvenation' is an important example of how these key discursive trends that started already under former President Hu, increased substantially in discursive importance and frequency during Xi's leadership.

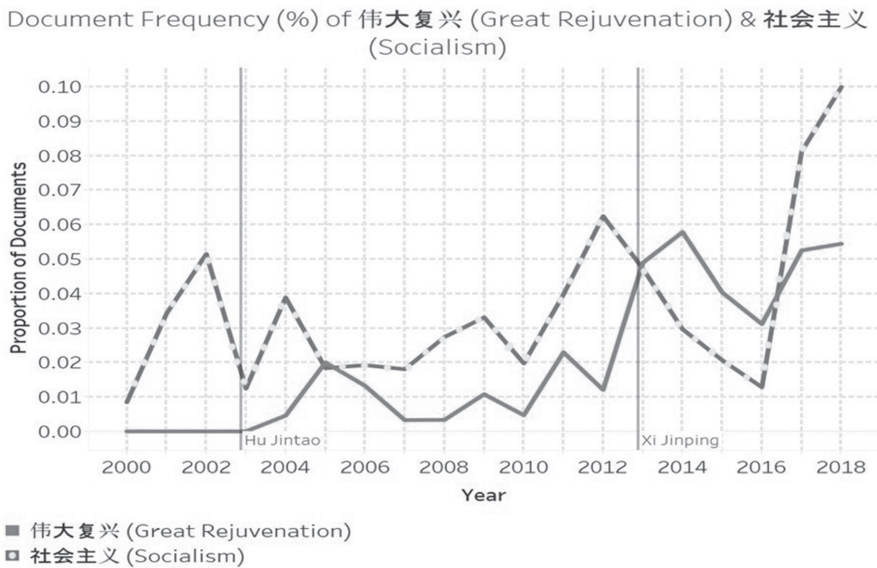


Figure 8.3 Use of the terms 'Great Rejuvenation' and 'Socialism' in FMPRC documents on Europe

Respecting a Great Power's Status

This discourse marks a substantial change from earlier language emphasizing the EU as a co-rising power pole and potential alliance partner. The earlier alliance-partner discourse did increasingly disappear out of use in the key rhetoric, in line with the increased focus on both the fundamental civilizational difference, and the perceived diminishing of the relative power gap between the parties. A case in point with regards to Europe's diminished role, is illustrated through how Xi Jinping would list to a UN summit in Geneva his ambition to create, respectively, a new type of great power relationship with the United States, a comprehensive strategic partnership with Russia, a civilizational partnership with Europe, and stand in solidarity with the BRICS countries.²³ Comparing this with the PRC rhetoric on a potential China-EU axis from a decade earlier, demonstrates the change in quite plain terms. The 2014 Chinese EU Policy Paper thus frames the relationship by emphasizing how the world, China, and the EU have changed during these last 10 years, and emphasizes two main developments: Firstly, that fact that "China's comprehensive national power has been substantially elevated, now playing a critical role in effecting major international and regional issues. But China is still a developing country, with existing prominent questions regarding a development that is uneven, uncoordinated, and unsustainable."²⁴

The second relevant main point in the preamble is that the section on the EU starts out by emphasizing that "The EU because of the influence from the international financial crisis, has encountered its most severe challenge since the Cold War, and need to urgently address a number of deeply rooted structural and systematic issues"²⁵ The economic aspect of this discursive change can be exemplified by Wen's speech to the EU-China Business Summit in Brussels, where he heralded the Chinese support for a struggling European economy:

In the cold winter in January 2009, I visited Europe and brought with me not only the confidence needed to overcome the financial crisis, but also a procurement delegation to place orders to the European countries. The EU is a strategic partner to China, and China did not look on unconcerned when some eurozone countries were in trouble. (...) We will continue to render assistance and tide some countries over their difficulties. China is a friend indeed.²⁶

In other words, China is now in a position of power that allows it to come to aid when the European continent is facing trouble.

One consequence of this changed discourse is China increasingly demanding to be treated as a great power, with all the status and interest recognition that entails. This is further emphasized in the 2014 Chinese White Paper on their EU policies. The language on human rights is, following from the

implied logic of this restatement of civilizational difference, toned down. The additional points thus underline that the EU should in its dialogues, based on mutual respect and non-interference, be paying equal weight to all types of human rights, including the citizens, economic, and cultural privileges, and that the EU should furthermore refrain from using single cases to interfere in China's legal sovereignty and internal politics.²⁷ And as Figure 6.3 of Chapter 6 demonstrated, the focus on Chinese core interests was increasingly prevalent in Beijing's international diplomatic communications with Europe.

This marks yet another step away from the idea of Europe as a relevant actor with regards to political values. Instead, Beijing engages with Europe as an entity with one particular view on human rights, that is different from an equally valid Chinese view of what constitutes human rights. China is thus to a lesser extent willing to remain a norms-taker. This was clearly formulated in the key decision communicated from the 4th Plenum of the 18th CCP Central Committee in 2014, to ensure that China would "vigorously participate in the formulation of international rules and regulations, promote the handling of foreign-related economic and social affairs according to the law, strengthen our country's discourse power (话语权) and influence in international legal affairs."²⁸ The Chinese leadership's main discourse on its relations to Europe was thus increasingly based on the conception of regarding itself as a great power, increasingly confident of an alternative mode of governance. Thus, as a matter of seeking ontological security for this great power status, the Chinese government was increasingly demanding the respect they felt belong to a great power in the world, with political consequences for its ties with European countries.

Equality and Recognition

Secondly, although the discourse propagated through the speeches, policy declarations and communiqués analysed here depicts China and Europe as partners and growing powers that together can contribute to making a fairer and more democratic political system, the discourse of Europe and China as equal but fundamentally different civilizations is still a key representation. As articulated in a typical manner by Hu Jintao: "Our world is abundant with different colours, it is impossible to have only one model. One should agree to recognize the world's diversity, respect each country's history, culture, system of society, and development path."²⁹

This depiction of civilizational equality was further deepened by Xi Jinping, who during a keynote speech in Bruges would extend the equality between Europe and China further through stating that they were both essentially at similar stages of facing socioeconomic challenges. "China and Europe are both in a crucial period of their development, both are facing unprecedented opportunities and challenges (...) China is the world's largest

developing country. China's development has acquired historical progress, the economy has in total already leapt to the second largest in the world."³⁰ Thus, he exemplified again the discursive change from the earlier emphasis on Europe and China as a developed continent and a developing country, respectively. Xi's speech to the UN in Geneva, was a further underlining of the Chinese emphasis on equality and recognition as a great power within the sovereignty doctrine.³¹ Here Xi explicitly drew upon the European heritage of the Peace of Westphalia, and linking this directly to the Chinese 'Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,' thus portraying China as a main protector of the principles fleshed out by the European great powers centuries ago, and which the European countries had increasingly turned their back to: "Throughout the history of modern times, the establishment of a fair and reasonable international order is the goal that mankind is striving for."³²

A Great Civilization, Rejuvenated

Another main discourse predicated on the foundational narrative of the PRC as the representative of a distinct and separate civilization, is the increased focus on the rejuvenation and rebirth of the great Chinese civilization. This altered discourse increasingly emphasizes China not only as a civilization with long historical roots, but one that been preserved in its essence for thousands of years, and is now about to flourish back to its rightful position after being weakened through a century of Western influences. This main discourse was held out by Xi Jinping as one of the key reasons why China needs a new foreign policy, in order to better reflect its new position in the world.³³ In a 2014 speech at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, Xi Jinping further underlined the view of the world as divided into separate and distinct civilizations with deep roots, drawing on the old discursive construct of the Chinese as a civilizational essence (*ti*) as opposed to the applied technology (*yong*) of the West.³⁴ Hence, Xi goes on detailing the various foreign influences on Chinese culture, from painting styles to Buddhism, but emphasizing how even Buddhism ended up as Buddhism 'with Chinese Characteristics,' whilst the Chinese civilization still had staid stable and solid throughout 5,000 years. Thus, "blindly copying other civilizations is like chopping off ones toes to fit into another man's shoes."³⁵ This main discourse also stayed central with regards to the Chinese view of Europe: "China is the Eastern civilization's important representative, whilst Europe is the Western civilization's birthplace. (...) Let China and Europe work hard together, to promote all of mankind's civilizations' flowers to compete and blossom."³⁶

As the 2014 White Paper on the EU summarizes it, China hopes that together with Europe they can bring together the two great civilizations of East and West, "establishing in common a prosperous model for different

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civilizations harmoniously staying different, through pluralism, mutual reflection, and mutual learning.”³⁷ As Xi Jinping would later expound further, in poetic terms, illustrating the incompatibility between the world’s social systems as based on fundamental civilizations differences:

China cannot copy wholesale the other countries’ government systems and development models, not only would it not fit us but it could bring catastrophic consequences. Over 2000 years ago the Chinese people had already come to understand this principle: ‘Tangerine trees grown in the South yield tangerines, whereas grown in the North it yields [sour] trifoliolate oranges, even though the leaves look similar the taste is not the same. How come? Because the water and soil is different.’³⁸

This stronger emphasis on the polity of the PRC as the political embodiment of the Chinese civilization writ large, is a significant intensification of the extant discourses from decades earlier, where this aspect was downplayed in favour of a focus on economic cooperation and convergence.³⁹ This discursive development is also generally reflected in a scholarly fascination for Huntington’s Clash of Civilizations thesis, although in line with the political speeches quoted here, one of the main debates revolves around the degree to which different civilizations predicates a clash, or peaceful co-existence.⁴⁰ As Gries summarizes the political repercussions of this civilizational narrative: “Many Chinese nationalists fear that modernization will lead to ‘peaceful evolution’: cultural convergence or Westernization. By reifying cultural differences, Huntington creates space for a non-Western but modern China.”⁴¹ This latter point, again, ties into the same dilemma of technology and values as the *ti/yong* dilemma the early Chinese reformers were struggling with. As such, Coker has termed China as a prime example of the advent in contemporary international relations of the ‘civilizational state,’ due to the PRC’s increased insistence on embodying an essentially unchanging and self-contained axiomatic cultural essence.⁴²

Successful Marxist-Confucian Self-Strengtheners

Intimately tied to the idea of the rebirth of the unique Chinese civilization to its rightful place in the world, is the increasingly vocal assertion that the Communist Party is the only appropriate vehicle for this 1,000-year-old civilization. Communism and Confucius are thus increasingly brought together to explain the successful Chinese model. One can again trace the echoes of the former Self-Strengthening movement that sought to modernize China without changing the country’s old authoritarian model. Only this time, as the main discourse goes, the CCP actually managed this feat

with great success. As formulated by Xi Jinping at the College of Europe in Bruges:

The Chinese people painfully sought for a road that fit China's national conditions. exploring long and hard for a path that would suit China's national conditions. They experimented with constitutional monarchy, imperial restoration, parliamentarism, multi-party system and presidential government, yet the result was that they all did not work. Finally, China chose the road of socialism (...) The unique traditional culture, the unique historical fate, the unique national spirit, preordained that China would inevitably only follow a development road that suits its own national characteristics. We embarked on such a road, and achieved success.⁴³

There is thus under Xi Jinping a new emphasis on China's development model as being able to successfully modernize, whilst retaining its position as a separate political and ethical system. As Xi Jinping repeatedly has emphasized, "only socialism can save China, only socialism with Chinese characteristics can develop China."⁴⁴ Westernization, on the other hand, had according to Xi only lead to chaos in the developing countries that were forced to undertake it after the Cold War.⁴⁵ This more forceful ideological turn against Westernization mobilizes the increased economic performance legitimacy as part of an accelerating offensive against universal values throughout the party system. This is famously exemplified in the leaked 'Document no. 9' circulated to the CCP cadres warning of the need to redouble efforts at withstanding the threats of Western democracy and universal values.⁴⁶ This narrative of the Chinese nation is one of being unbroken and beholden to same set of traditional values, despite all the tumults, political experimentations and radical changes of China's modern history. It is, of course, easy to spot the inherent tensions in this construct, but creatively rewriting or overlooking these tensions are part of the political struggle over any narrative.

The welding of the Chinese civilization to the CCP, was increasingly taking a more dominant role in the public discourse.⁴⁷ As such, arguably one of the more interesting new elements of the main discourses upon which the CCP seeks to shore up their ontological security, is the aim of transcending what for a century was considered to be the direct conflict between communism and traditional Chinese culture and philosophy, into a CCP-defined synthesis of Chinese civilization. The aim of combining into one both the very much Western-derived socialist values, and the traditional values that the CCP until recently was vehemently against, is well summarized by Xi to a Politburo study session in 2014: "Cultivating and promoting Socialism's core values must be based on China's splendid traditional culture's solid core values."⁴⁸ This welding of the somewhat awkward fit between Marxist dialectics and a Party-approved version of Confucius, is further exemplified by the large-scale

spread of Confucius institutes as the spearhead of Chinese soft-power efforts, or notably when Xi Jinping became the first CCP leader to attend the yearly celebrations marking Confucius' death.⁴⁹

Political Repercussions: Great Power China Reassesses Europe

Political Background

As demonstrated in the earlier sections, China's main discourses of Europe showcased certain significant changes in the years following the 2008 Financial Crisis. In essence, the Chinese leadership propagated a set of discourses centred on the idea that China had taken a substantial status leap, and was now seeking recognition from Europe on a different level than in earlier decades. The ascendance of Xi Jinping as the most dominant Chinese leader since, at least, Deng Xiaoping,⁵⁰ dovetailed with this increasingly assertive set of discourses. These discourses then fed into a derived set of policy directions that sought to bring the relations with the European countries more in line with the recognition sought for China's self-perceived new status in the world. The Chinese scholar Yan Xuetong has summarized the shift from the Deng era's policy of keeping a low profile, to what he terms as Xi's policy of 'Striving for Achievement,' where the goal of the former was economic gains, whilst the focus of the latter is on strengthening political support and recognition from abroad.⁵¹ Arguably, the more assertive identity-recognition drive following from these discursive changes was an important contributing factor to two crises in the relationship between China and European countries, namely the boycott and later embrace of the relationship with the United Kingdom, and the six-year freeze in China's relations with Norway. The following section will briefly present each of these events, before going on to explore how these political imbroglios were shaped by particular Chinese modes of ontological security seeking.

In economic terms, the decade following the financial crises saw one of the fastest periods of development in China-EU trade and investment ties.⁵² This continued deepening of the economic relationship happened on the background of unparalleled economic and political stress for the European Union, and would form the background for later tensions to arise in Europe with regards to both the trade flows and the influx of Chinese FDI.⁵³ The waning European influence after the 2008 Financial Crisis and subsequent European sovereign debt crisis, emphasized the increasing realignment of the two parties' relative power and status. The Euro-crisis and the deep-rooted economic and political challenges within the Union that the crisis laid bare, caused a re-evaluation of the EU that reverberated beyond elite policy circles in China, also to the general Chinese populace.⁵⁴ Thus, the diplomatic conflict between the United Kingdom and China was arguably another example of the Chinese government seeking to impose their view on something constituting a threat to their ontological security and geographical sovereignty.

The 14th Dalai Lama was planning a trip to the United Kingdom, where he was to receive the Templeton Prize for his spiritual work.⁵⁵ When then-UK Prime Minister David Cameron signalled that he wanted to meet with the Dalai Lama during his trip, the Chinese immediately issued stark warnings against such a meeting, signalling their displeasure through cancelling the planned trip of State Councillor Dai Bingguo.⁵⁶ Despite these warnings, David Cameron met with the Dalai Lama in May 2012. In keeping with former Prime Minister Gordon Brown's quite successful strategy of avoiding to antagonize the Chinese, he met with the Dalai Lama not in the PM's official residence, but instead in St. Paul's Cathedral, emphasizing the intention to meet with the Dalai Lama in his function as a religious figure, and not a political leader.⁵⁷ However, this time the strategy was unsuccessful, as the meeting was met with massive Chinese condemnation. The Chinese government ceased all ministerial-level contact, and later forced David Cameron to cancel a planned visit to Beijing, as no Chinese official was ostensibly available to meeting with him.⁵⁸ Immediately after the meeting, the Chinese called the UK ambassador on the carpet and warned that what had transpired constituted a "grave interference in Chinese internal affairs, harmed China's core interests, and hurt the feelings of the Chinese people."⁵⁹

All throughout this period of intense volatility in the United Kingdom-China relationship, Norway was going through a similarly testing time after having been judged by Beijing to transgress against similar Chinese core interests. Unlike the usually year-long Chinese boycotts treated earlier in this book, the Chinese diplomatic freeze towards Norway lasted for a total of more than six years, from 2010 to 2016.⁶⁰ The duration of a Chinese political boycott stretching for more than half a decade, is quite unprecedented in the contemporary history of China-Europe relations, and makes the case of China-Norway ties another salient testing case for the role of ontological security in Chinese policies towards European countries. The boycott of Norway came about as a result of the Norwegian Nobel Committee deciding in October 2010, in spite of intense Chinese lobbying,⁶¹ to award the Nobel Peace Prize to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo for his "long and non-violent struggle for fundamental human rights in China."⁶² With Liu Xiaobo still imprisoned in Chinese jail, where he would later pass away in 2017, the prize was given in absentia. Chinese authorities reacted with fury to Liu Xiaobo's award, and the Norwegian government's customary endorsement of the Nobel Committee's choice. The charge was in line with the one raised towards the United Kingdom, arguing the award constituted serious interference in China's political and legal affairs.⁶³ Beijing submitted protests to Norwegian representatives both in Beijing and Oslo, and sought to pressure other countries not to send representatives to the award ceremony.⁶⁴ In Chinese state media the Dalai Lama's Peace Prize was given renewed emphasis as a proof of the Nobel Committee's continuing intention to westernize, split, and weaken China.⁶⁵ Accordingly, a Chinese political boycott towards Norway was enacted. For more than six years after Liu Xiaobo was awarded the

Nobel Peace Prize, there was no bilateral political contact between Norway and China on the governmental level.⁶⁶ Like in the United Kingdom, the economic repercussions were, however, less severe than was feared.⁶⁷ Although there continued to be contacts between the countries in multilateral settings, the extent and duration of the political boycott was of a rather singular nature, and reflected the determination of Chinese authorities to discourage challenges to the CCP's ontological security.

The Boycotts and the Identity Issue

The main Chinese discourses on their relations with Europe permeated Beijing's policies towards both the United Kingdom and Norway throughout this period. The main discourse of recognition as an equal was clearly on display in both cases. As the joint statement between China and the United Kingdom in 2014, a keystone in the normalization of the relationship after the Chinese boycott, stated as one of the many points:

The two sides are willing to deepen their understanding of each other's development path and enhance political mutual trust. The two sides emphasize the significance of promoting and protecting human rights and the rule of law, and are willing to strengthen human rights dialogue on the basis of equality and mutual respect. As a long-term policy of the British side, the UK recognizes that Tibet is part of the People's Republic of China and does not support 'Tibet independence'.⁶⁸

This example illustrates the balance point between the permissible with regards to the respective actors' ontological security. Human rights are explicitly mentioned in the text, but the universalist notions of human rights are demarcated within the discourse of civilizational equality and coexistence of different social systems. This provides a firewall that in essence entails the message that no other country is in a position to tell China what to do.⁶⁹

The increased Chinese focus on having their new great power status recognized, further accentuated the importance of this issue. It deserves to be noted that Chinese officials keep up the practice of referring to the large European countries, such as the United Kingdom, as great powers. However, a key thing to note is the increasing use of defining China as another one of these great powers. Li Keqiang expressed, for example, to David Cameron, that the two countries should treat each other as equals, and respect each other's core interests, given that "both China and the United Kingdom are great powers with worldwide influence."⁷⁰ Arguably, this 'status upgrade' that China sought recognition of is manifested in the changing Chinese approach to the Dalai Lama visits that triggered the crisis detailed in this chapter. As noted earlier, the Dalai Lama's travels to visit various European countries and their heads of states and governments, is not at all a new phenomenon.

It has been a staple of the exiled Tibetan leader's travel plans for decades.⁷¹ In fact, only four years earlier, then British PM Gordon Brown had met with the Dalai Lama in similar circumstances in 2008. As summarized by Brown and Crossick:

Surprisingly the UK, which in Chinese eyes has been the least favourite European country at least during the long years of negotiations over the hand-back of Hong Kong, avoided similar repercussions when Prime Minister Gordon Brown met the Dalai Lama. This was due to Downing Street's recognition of the sensitive nature of the meeting by hosting it at Lambeth Palace, the home of the Archbishop of Canterbury, and meeting the Dalai Lama solely as a religious leader.⁷²

However, when David Cameron, and his deputy Nick Clegg, sought to apply the very same recipe through meeting the Dalai Lama in St. Paul's Cathedral, they were to find that over the last few years the Chinese position had changed fundamentally, thus throwing the bilateral relationship into another serious crisis.⁷³

This was not only due to an increased Chinese sensitivity over the issue in the aftermath of the 2008 protests in Tibet,⁷⁴ but also because as a general trend in the Chinese world view was driving a range of far more assertive policy directions for its relations with Europe. The Chinese demand for symbolic recognition of their self-perceived new standing in the world, is also brought into light by the symbolically significant act of 2014, when in the planning of then-Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit – an important event meant to demarcate the full normalization of the ties – the Chinese reportedly threatened to cancel the entire trip, unless Li was granted a reception with Queen Elizabeth II.⁷⁵ That the Chinese would seek to be given face through this kind of symbolic recognition, which was out of the ordinary according to the UK diplomatic protocol, since the Queen usually only receives Heads of State and not Heads of Government, and that they would insist on forcing the matter through threatening to cancel this important official visit altogether, speaks volumes of the role of ontological security-seeking in Beijing's relations with European countries. Premier Li did indeed get to meet the Queen at Windsor Castle,⁷⁶ and the UK government would later enact a large-scale charm offensive towards the Chinese government, including a lavish spectacle to welcome Chinese President Xi Jinping on his visit in 2015.⁷⁷

During a year of Chinese boycott of ministerial contact, the Chinese repeatedly insisted that the onus was on the British to take the first step to repair the relations they had transgressed against. At the end of July 2012 Dai Bingguo finally arrived in the United Kingdom to attend the Olympics Opening Ceremony, in place of more senior political figures, and proclaimed the will to overcome the current difficulties in the relationship.⁷⁸ In 2013 David Cameron did bow to the pressure, partly motivated by a need to increase FDI

in the United Kingdom, and declared to the Parliament, in the same vein as the French declaration some years earlier, that the United Kingdom respected China's sovereignty, and did not support Tibetan independence.⁷⁹ Cameron's comments to the British Parliament then led to a phone conversation shortly after, between the UK Foreign Secretary Hague, and his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, that laid out the terms of the reestablishment of normal relations.⁸⁰ As the Chinese transcript of the conversation details, Hague expressed recognition of key strands of the Chinese foundational narrative, by expressing that

the UK welcomes China's strength, prosperity and success (...) respects China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, recognizes that Tibet is a part of China, does not support 'Tibetan independence', fully recognized the sensitivity of Tibet issues, and is willing to properly handle it on the basis of respecting China's deep concerns.⁸¹

As in the case of France some years earlier, this statement of recognition and the implied changes in political practices lead to a normalization of the relationship, that was later to be followed by a rapid accelerating in Sino-United Kingdom ties. The cabinet of David Cameron thus made relations with China in to one of the centrepieces of their foreign policies.⁸² Thus, in September of the same year, Wang Yi declared that after a lot of hard work, the Sino-United Kingdom relationship had overcome the hardship, and entered a new phase. However, he was soon to emphasize the implicit conditions of this new phase in the relationship, namely that "both sides should earnestly respect each other's core interests and important concerns."⁸³

The case of Norwegian efforts at manoeuvring towards normalization with China, also displays how the issue was framed by the Chinese through the same main discursive structures. The solution, similar to the case of the United Kingdom, involved official Norwegian acquiescence to recognize, legitimize, and give face to the CCP's key discourses. This pattern was also recognized by the Norwegian government, who thus sought to model their solutions after the statement that had normalized the Danish-Chinese relationship after their recent diplomatic spat following a reception of the Dalai Lama.⁸⁴ After a number of normalization efforts, one of which reportedly stranded on then-Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg's assessment that the proposed deal would be too much at odds with the Norwegian self-image, and as such Norwegian ontological security, a solution was found after six years.⁸⁵ Notably, part of that process entailed Norway's prime minister breaking custom by not meeting with the Dalai Lama during his 2014 visit to Oslo, an action she described as a "necessary sacrifice to prove to China that being in dialogue with them is important."⁸⁶

The painstakingly negotiated agreement that normalized Norwegian-Chinese relations in late December 2016,⁸⁷ was the "Statement of China and Norway on normalization of bilateral relations."⁸⁸ The official text, with syntax and *tifa* vocabulary showing the Chinese language influence, illustrates

again the Chinese preoccupation with recognition, in declaring that “both sides will develop friendly relations on the basis of mutual respect, equality and mutual benefit.” Point no. 3 on the list resonates with the solutions to diplomatic crises that other European countries have had with China, as covered in this and earlier chapters; namely the explicit recognition of the separateness and the success of the Chinese political model, and explicit praise for the Chinese government’s development efforts.⁸⁹ In addition to this, it also stated the intention of not interfering in Chinese core interests or major concerns again:

The Norwegian Government fully respects China’s development path and social system, and highly commends its historic and unparalleled development that has taken place. The Norwegian Government reiterates its commitment to the one-China policy, fully respects China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, attaches high importance to China’s core interests and major concerns, will not support actions that undermine them, and will do its best to avoid any future damage to the bilateral relations.⁹⁰

This does in itself mark a pronounced change in the discourse of the Norwegian political establishment over the six years of boycott, as exemplified by the Minister of Foreign Affairs’ yearly keynote address to the Norwegian Parliament. In 2011, China was admonished to respect human rights and freedom of speech, two years later this phrase was supplanted by the formulation that Norway respects China’s right to choose its own development path.⁹¹ Norwegian politicians originally thought it enough to keep repeating that the Nobel Committee was separate from the government, and that the congratulatory remarks and the symbolic ties between the official Norway and the Peace Prize in display though the ceremonial setup, was merely the standard procedure. This approach was in essence the same as what had been applied earlier, when the Dalai Lama received the Peace Prize in 1989, or during later visits. However, this time around it became clear that for a more self-assertive China, this approach was no longer enough.⁹² The Chinese rhetoric applied towards Norway in the 1989 case of the Dalai Lama’s Peace Prize, and the rhetoric in the case of Liu Xiaobo 20 years later was not substantially different in terms of its foundational narrative.⁹³ However, the Chinese discursive changes in the intervening years provided political drivers in the direction of far more assertive efforts at pushing European actors to recognize the CCP’s identity narrative.

In sum, our understanding of the Chinese punitive reactions towards the two European countries in question can be better understood through including the identity aspect of a rising power seeking to shore up its ontological security, and as such increasingly demanding respect and recognition as a great power with a separate but equally valid set of political values. European

symbolic recognition of the Dalai Lama and Liu Xiaobo challenged the Communist Party's legitimacy to power amongst an international public. The new willingness to escalate this issue is in part representative of key discursive changes, where the EU was no longer regarded as a co-rising power, in which companionship China could reach their goal of a more multipolar world order. Thus, it was more strategically palatable for China to serve their goal of legitimacy by more assertively policing European nations on what was regarded as key ontological issues for the CCP, such as the Dalai Lama or the recognition of political dissidents. As seen in the preceding chapters, the role of the European continent in the foreign policy debate in China had already changed. The Chinese emphasis on their relationship with the United States over that of Europe was further demonstrated through a number of symbolical matters. As Godement and Vasselier summarized it at the time: "When did China ever cancel a state visit to the United States, as it did with the EU in 2008 over a disagreement about the Dalai Lama? The US-China high level strategic and economic dialogue has never missed a beat. The 'Annual' EU-China high level economic and trade dialogue did not happen in 2011, 2012, and 2014."⁹⁴

The case of Norway and the case of the United Kingdom share two further common denominators of interest. Firstly, both cases involved China spending substantial amounts of political, diplomatic, and economic capital on policing transgressions of the CCP's national narratives tightly linked to their ontological security. This even though the tight Chinese grip of domestic news meant that the effect of the Dalai Lama visit and the Peace Prize, respectively, would have been negligible as far as the domestic political scene goes. As Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Fu Ying admitted to the secretary of the Nobel Committee, in a meeting arranged in order to dissuade any future prize going to a Chinese dissident, when he underlined that the Chinese people would hardly understand the point of such a prize anyway, and the CCP's grip of the media would ensure limited coverage.⁹⁵ However, the Chinese government still went to extremes hardly seen by any country in the history of the Peace Prize since the Second World War. Secondly, the cases' effects were also deeply counterproductive for the Chinese soft power efforts, towards which substantial resources had been spent by the CCP. Luttwak thus summarizes the case of China's boycott towards Norway as, "aside from its particular, almost comical, aspects, this episode is not atypical of China's recent international conduct in being both highly energetic and definitely counterproductive."⁹⁶

These boycotts were enacted by the Chinese government at occasions where they perceived their European partners, the United Kingdom and Norway, did not sufficiently recognize the foundational narrative of the Chinese polity. Hence the solution was closely integrated with ontological security-seeking measures, essentially asking for recognition of Chinese status, and confirming the Chinese narrative as separate, successful, and worthy of great power-deference. In the case of the United Kingdom, the symbolically

important story of Li Keqiang demanding, counter to protocol, audience with the queen as a key Chinese precondition for the normalization of the relationship, is illustrative of the degree to which symbolic recognition of China's status, and granting them face in both the international and domestic social context, took precedence over economic logic in the conduct of Chinese foreign policy towards a key European country. Arguably, this line of symbolic recognition was followed upon by the UK government a few years later, when Xi Jinping received a no-pomp-spared official visit to the United Kingdom, including gilded carriages and military parades through London to Buckingham Palace. "President Xi considers the so-called golden era of UK-China relations are one of his major diplomatic triumphs since he came to power. The Chinese state media have meticulously reported how the UK rolled out the reddest of the red carpets to welcome President Xi."⁹⁷ In the case of Norway, the final communique symbolically included a sentence explicitly expressing Norway's respect for the Chinese political system and praising the CCP's ability to lift people out of poverty. As Neumann has pointed out, this Norwegian recognition demarcated a break with Norwegian foreign policy tradition through explicitly recognizing the virtue of an authoritarian regime.⁹⁸ As such, increased amounts of economic and political capital were spent by the Chinese in order to, in essence, have these European countries kowtowing to the CCP's narrative of Chinese political identity. China was, in effect, insecure enough about its ontological security to strike down on misrecognition of it from abroad, whilst powerful enough to strong-arm these European countries' China policies.

Notes

- 1 Chen and Armstrong 2012; Shambaugh 2013, 92–94; Li et al. 2017; Reilly 2021, 62.
- 2 Xi 2014a.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Callahan 2012; Callahan 2009; Tunsjø 2018; Jiayu Wang 2017, 831; Xi 2013.
- 5 Xi 2014b.
- 6 Hagström 2021, 338.
- 7 Swaine 2015, 4–5; Lu 2016; Pu 2017, 2–3.
- 8 Nordin and Smith 2022.
- 9 Foot 2014; Brown 2016b; Shi 2015; Xuotong Yan 2014; Bekkevold 2018; Ross and Bekkevold 2016; Stenslie and Chen 2016.
- 10 Xi 2014c.
- 11 Fewsmith 2016; Magnus 2018.
- 12 Creemers 2015.
- 13 Xi 2017a, 197–98.
- 14 Zeng and Breslin 2016; Nordin and Weissmann 2018; Ferdinand 2016; Callahan 2016.
- 15 Callahan 2016; Casarini 2016; Atkins et al. 2023.
- 16 Zeng and Breslin 2016.
- 17 Xi 2017b; Zeng 2017; Benabdallah 2020, 81.
- 18 Xi 2017c.

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- 19 Zeng and Breslin 2016, 785.
- 20 Leonard 2021, 155–58.
- 21 Cox 2018, 231.
- 22 Zeng 2017.
- 23 Xi 2017d.
- 24 PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Wen 2010.
- 27 PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014.
- 28 CCP Central Committee 2014.
- 29 Hu 2016.
- 30 Xi 2014f.
- 31 Xi 2017d.
- 32 Xi 2017d.
- 33 Xi 2017e.
- 34 Coker 2019; Bettiza, Bolton, and Lewis 2023.
- 35 Xi 2014d.
- 36 Xi 2014f.
- 37 PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014.
- 38 Xi 2014f.
- 39 Callahan 2012.
- 40 Jisi Wang 2009; Wang Jisi 1995; Callahan 2005; Callahan 2006, 12–14.
- 41 Gries 2004, 41.
- 42 Coker 2019, 30.
- 43 Xi 2014f.
- 44 Xi 2012.
- 45 Xi 2018.
- 46 Central Committee of the CCP's General Office 2013; Tsang and Cheung 2023, 81–86; Buckley 2013.
- 47 de Burgh and Feng 2017.
- 48 Xi 2014e.
- 49 Coker 2019, 105; Zhang 2014; Tsang and Cheung 2023, 86–90.
- 50 Sun 2021, 15.
- 51 Yan 2014, 182–84.
- 52 Godement and Vasselier 2017; Gottwald 2010; EU Commission 2019; ETNC 2018; Wu 2020.
- 53 Farnell and Crookes 2016, 226–29; Casarini 2013; BDI 2019; Economy 2022, 90–92; Shirk 2023, 286–87.
- 54 Chaban, Holland, and Ryan 2009; Zhang 2016; Feng and Huang 2020.
- 55 Branigan 2012.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 BBC News 2012.
- 58 Watt 2013.
- 59 Song 2012.
- 60 Bekkevold 2021; Sverdrup-Thygeson 2017; Tunsjø 2011; Kolstad 2020; Blackwill and Harris 2016.
- 61 Lundestad 2015, 250–60; Xi 2010.
- 62 The Norwegian Nobel Committee 2010.
- 63 China.com.cn 2010.
- 64 Sverdrup-Thygeson 2015, 101–5.
- 65 Yi 2010; Liu 2010.
- 66 Brende 2017; Sverdrup-Thygeson 2017.
- 67 Sverdrup-Thygeson 2015.
- 68 FMPRC 2014.

- 69 BBC News 2011.
- 70 Li 2013.
- 71 Fuchs and Klann 2013; Economy 2022, 60–61.
- 72 Brown and Crossick 2009.
- 73 Brown 2016a, 42–43.
- 74 Barnett 2009; Huang and Fahmy 2013.
- 75 Elliott and Lewis 2014; Stacey 2014.
- 76 Li 2014; In China's English-language coverage of the event, it was pointed out how this entailed being granted the same status as Angela Merkel, who was once granted audience with the queen despite not being Germany's formal Head of State. See Zhang 2014.
- 77 Odell 2015; Yan 2014, 177–78.
- 78 Dai 2012.
- 79 Zhang 2022, 8; Reilly 2017, 177.
- 80 Hope 2013.
- 81 Wang 2013a.
- 82 Odell 2015; Watt 2013.
- 83 Wang 2013b.
- 84 The Danish Parliament 2009; Osbakk 2015.
- 85 Sverdrup-Thygeson 2017, 84–85; Gjerstad and Skard 2016.
- 86 NRK 2014b; NRK 2014a.
- 87 Lohne 2017; Gjerstad, Skard, and Lund 2016; Li 2016; Johnsen 2016; Xi 2017f.
- 88 Government of Norway and Government of PRC 2016; Brende 2017; Sættem, Hedvig, and Svaar 2016.
- 89 FMPRC 2016.
- 90 Government of Norway and Government of PRC 2016.
- 91 See, respectively, Støre 2011; Eide 2013.
- 92 Bekkevold 2021, 78.
- 93 Jerdén 2014.
- 94 Godement and Vasselier 2017, 21.
- 95 Lundestad 2015, 253.
- 96 Luttwak 2012, 212.
- 97 Yu 2016.
- 98 Neumann 2018.

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