

Responsive Securitization: How China's Economic Statecraft Prompted Policy Change in the European Union

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The role of securitization and economic statecraft in the re-configuration of EU–China relations

The evolving dynamics of EU–China (People's Republic of China) relations are increasingly shaped by the twin forces of securitization and economic statecraft. Economic statecraft refers to political influence on macroeconomic and microeconomic processes, which is not primarily intended to shape these processes but merely to use them to pursue multiple policy goals that lie beyond the economy. They are located in intergovernmental interest representation, climate and other geostrategic (security) [interests, etc.](#) (Reilly, 2017; Taube, Carsten & Weil, 2025).

China's economic statecraft is an established instrument in China's foreign policy [toolbox](#) (Aggarwal & Reddie, 2020; Bräutigam & Xiaoyang, 2012; Ikenberry & Lim, 2017; Liou, 2025). To safeguard national interests, the state draws on economic tools rather than merely relying on [military power](#) (Mastanduno, 1998, 2019). This includes formulating economic strategies on the [international stage](#) (Kaplan, 1952). Originally, economic statecraft was primarily associated with military power (Liou, 2025; Mastanduno, 1998), and security has traditionally been defined in terms of military strength (Waltz, 1979). Combining economic, innovation, technological, and other national interests with the forces of securitization implies that the concept of security now encompasses a broader range of policy issues that extend beyond [military strength](#) (Balzacq, 2005; Balzacq, Léonard, & Ruzicka, 2016; Barkawi, 2016; Keohane & Nye, 2000; Léonard & Kaunert, 2021), spanning issues from trade and climate change to migration and [disinformation policies](#) (Bourbeau & Vuori, 2015; Buzan, 2016; Mastanduno, 2019; Weil, 2022).

Arguing that EU–China relations are securitized means that both actors place (supra)national interests at the forefront of their relationship. They increasingly frame a wide range of policy issues as security concerns. This allows them to justify extraordinary measures to regulate or control these domains, aiming to protect their economic competitiveness.

EU–China relations are historically rooted in mutual economic interests. This relationship has undergone significant transformations since establishing diplomatic ties in 1975. Initially marked by optimism, the partnership was challenged following the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. Nonetheless, the late 1990s witnessed renewed cooperation through strategic partnerships, reflecting both parties' recognition of economic interdependence (Michalski & Pan, 2017). In 2003, both sides agreed to establish a 'Strategic Partnership' to broaden and deepen mutual relations. Both sides seemed to develop a joint approach to global politics (Casarini, 2009; Jing; & Balducci, 2010).

Following the honeymoon period of the 2000s and 2010s, conflicts have become more visible, and recent years have seen a marked shift in this dynamic. Under President Xi Jinping, China's assertive foreign policy — coupled with global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine — has heightened the EU's concerns about supply chain vulnerabilities and [strategic dependencies](#) (Steinberg & Wolff, 2024). Consequently, the EU now characterizes China simultaneously as a partner, competitor, and systemic rival (European Commission, 2019), illustrating the complex and often contradictory nature of the contemporary relationship. Both partners are increasingly emphasizing securitization of economic policy in their mutual approach, which means that the EU and China are using economic statecraft as a foreign policy instrument to [securitize trade](#) (Kuang, Orbie, & Blancquaert, 2024). China's introduction of several new laws and policies on national security, innovation, technology, and data privacy shows the growing securitization of Chinese politics (Taube et al., 2025). In March 2019, the European Commission reassessed its relationship with China and described the country as a strategic partner, an economic competitor, and, most notably, a systemic rival (Kuang et al., 2024).

Securitization and economic statecraft

This process of securitization of EU–China relations has become the subject of intensive political and academic debate. Securitization theory, particularly as developed by the [Copenhagen School](#) (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998), provides a valuable framework for analyzing these shifts. As mentioned above, securitization goes beyond military power; rather, it refers to the process by which multiple political issues are framed as existential threats, thereby justifying extraordinary measures beyond normal political procedures (Buzan et al., 1998). In the EU context, collective securitization involves multiple actors and audiences, making the process more nuanced than state-centric models like China (Sperling & Webber, 2020).

In China, securitization operates within an authoritarian framework where legitimacy derives not only from ideological narratives but also from economic performance and national security rhetoric. Xi Jinping's emphasis on integrating economic, technological, and military security reflects a holistic approach to national security, deeply embedded in the country's governance structure (Drinhausen & Lagarda, 2022; Vuori, 2011).

In current diplomatic relations, the EU is accused of prioritizing (economic) security in its dealings with China, thereby abandoning the earlier win–win dynamic (Mitrović, 2022). Given the importance of narratives in politics and academia, mutual securitization in EU–China relations reflects a dynamic between ex-strategic partners. The responsive nature of EU policies highlighting security concerns in their relations with China becomes visible once a second stream of analysis is integrated: China's economic statecraft. Economic statecraft further underscores the strategic recalibration of EU–China relations. Traditional analyses often focus on the effectiveness of sanctions and incentives post-implementation.

The European response to China's security-based economic statecraft

China's foreign economic policies have long combined the strategic element of safeguarding and improving national security even before Xi's concept of comprehensive national security

(Cabestan, 2009; Lanteigne, 2014). Europe has taken considerable time and effort to develop a political response to China's national security approach. Following various crises in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the first Von der Leyen Commission presented itself as a 'geopolitical commission'. Under her presidency and with support from important member states and key actors in the European Parliament, the EU managed to considerably improve the toolbox to deal with economic threats and challenges.

The EU 'de-risking' strategy reflects the various elements of reducing reliance on Chinese technology while maintaining open channels for dialogue (European Commission, 2024). It also aims to stabilize relationships with third-party countries (like-minded or value partners) to counter Chinese economic statecraft and military aggression. This approach seeks to balance economic engagement with national security imperatives, reflecting the EU's broader strategy of managing strategic autonomy without full decoupling. China thus seems to pay a considerable price for its aggressive and comprehensive use of economic statecraft as a strategic tool to improve its national development and security.

In conclusion, the re-configuration of EU–China relations is driven by the interplay of securitization and economic statecraft. Both actors navigate a complex landscape where economic interdependence coexists with strategic competition. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for policymakers aiming to craft resilient and adaptive foreign policies in an increasingly multipolar world.

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