

# Made in EU-China

How the EU's role conception and expectation of its  
external action is shaped by China



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# Abstract

The relationship between the European Union (EU) and China distinguishes itself by its unique nature and place in world affairs. The two distinctive economic giants have over the past two decades developed a structured relationship centred around trade and major economic interests. Growing in both intensity and complexity, EU-China engagements have over the years produced evidence to suggest for the use of different roles by both the EU and China in their interactions with each other. This study aimed to identify the roles of the EU in the context of its relationship with China during the years 2016-2021. This has been achieved by using role theory's conceptual apparatus and a mixed-methods design including a quantitative analysis of the EUR-lex database as well as a qualitative coding of the two major policy documents from the studied period.

The findings seem to confirm the normative role of the European Union as its general role while suggesting that the economic role of the EU appears to be notably prominent in the context of its relationship with China. Moreover, increased occurrence of the EU role representing global action during the years 2020-2021 was identified in the quantitative part of the results. The analysis also shed light on the formation of EU role conception and the influence of China in that process. Indeed, a drastic change in role expectation was identified between the years 2016-2019, pointing to plausible inter- and intra-role conflicts which likely led to a revision of EU role conception by 2019. Through this revision process and less reliance on expectations in its policy formulation, the EU appears to be seeking more confidence in order to respond to a more assertive China.

*Key words:* European Union, China, role conception, role expectation, EUR-lex.

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# List of abbreviations

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CAI	Comprehensive Agreement on Investment
EC	European Commission
EEAS	European External Action Service
EEC	European Economic Community
EU	European Union
HR/VP	High Representative/Vice-President
PRC	People's Republic of China
TEU	Treaty on European Union
USA	United States of America

# 1. Introduction

At the core of the relationship between the European Union and China lies the unprecedented evolution of two distinctive actors. The European Union (EU) has over the past decades emerged as a *sui generis* major economic actor, championing peace and integration on the European continent and abroad. China has on the other hand emerged as a rising power rivalling the United States and as an example of miracle growth, lifting millions of its population out of poverty and becoming the engine of the global economy. For the EU, navigating these rapidly changing and challenging times has required political actions and policy formulation. This process has contributed to the articulation of EU roles, what the EU considers itself to be in the world and in its interactions with others. How this has taken in place in relation to China will be the focus of this study.

By the end of 2021, the EU-China relationship found itself in a stalemate resulting from trade and geopolitical tensions. For the first time in over a decade, the annual EU-China summit supposed to take place by the end of 2021 was postponed to 2022 (Lau 2022). These tensions can be traced back to the deteriorating Human Rights and civil liberties situation in the Xinjiang province and Hong Kong, leading to European sanctions and subsequent countersanctions from Beijing. In turn, the sanctions stalled the ratification of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), a milestone development in the economic relationship between the two actors. Combined with a growing Chinese assertiveness domestically and abroad, this tense climate and the postponing of the summit served as a reminder of the rapidly changing environment in which EU-China engagements take place.

The complex dynamics in EU-China relations is best captured by the European Commission's own words in the 2019 *strategic outlook* describing China as a cooperation partner, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival (EC, EEAS 2019). This description summarizes well the EU position when engaging with an actor that does not share its core values, sees the world as multipolar rather than multilateral all the while promoting vital economic interests. The fascinating set of challenges and opportunities offered by the relationship between the two actors is thus well suited for a constructivist approach such as the one offered by role theory.

As this complex engagement with China will most likely remain of primordial importance for the EU in the future, the study of how the perception of China affects the Union's self-conception is of major interest. For example, labelling China a systemic rival entails that the entirety of European societies and systems may be

under vulnerability of China's assertiveness. How the EU responds to such expectations about China is also of interest to further our understanding about the EU as an international actor. To achieve that, the theoretical focus of this study will be to analyse the identity components of political behaviour of the EU. Role theory will thus be used to identify recent developments in the Union's role conception and to study the extent to which China has affected it.

## 1.1 Research question

Why is it important to study the different elements of EU role conception in relation to China? And what does it say about the European Union as an international actor? This will foremost be a study about the European Union's role perception and role expectation about China in an EU-China relations context and not a study about the components of the structured relationship.

An early overview of the literature and recent developments shows the complexity of the EU-China relationship and the easiness of drawing hasty conclusions regarding the EU's stance on China. Exploring and mapping this complexity will thus add value to the research area of both EU role conception and EU-China relations.

The aim of this thesis is thus to empirically contribute to the understanding of EU role conception, in the context of its perceptions and expectations on China. Reviewing the literature, I identify a knowledge gap regarding the understanding of recent developments in EU role conception between the years 2016-2021, leading to the following research question:

*In what ways has the EU's role conception and role expectation in relation to China evolved between the years 2016 and 2021?*

Role theory's conceptual apparatus is appropriate for the study of topics involving both material and ideological components, such as interactions between two global actors and the implications resulting from it. The theoretical focus of this study is thus to analyse the identity components of political behaviour through role theory. This will be achieved by reviewing the EU role conception and the EU-China literature combined with the mixed-methods approach of analysing the EUR-lex database and key policy documents.

To answer the research question, different areas will be in focus. First and foremost, the distribution of the multiple role elements of the Union will be explored, for example how the balance between the normative and economic role evolved during the studied period. Second, the theoretical framework will be used to study the evolution and interaction of the different identity components of role theory, such as role conception and role expectation. The study of these theoretical components will be of central importance to offer ways in answering related questions of



theoretical character: has the Union's role conception changed because of shifting role expectations regarding China? Finally, has a more assertive China resulted in a change of role conception for the EU? Focusing on these areas will help answer the main research question of how EU role conception vis à vis China has evolved over the period 2016-2021.

## 1.2 Thesis limitations

The studied topic of the EU's role conception in relation to China is both numerous in quantity and extensive in nature. This requires an important work of delimitation at an early stage of the thesis. Before anything else, defining what the "European Union" is in this study seems appropriate at this stage. This work will follow Hodson and Peterson's definition of the EU as the ensemble of "formal and informal political bodies that govern EU policy-making" (2017:3). The EU will thus in this study be treated as a unitary actor.

Member States' own bilateral relation with China will not be included in this study. Consequently, the following work will exclude the institutionalist perspective on dynamics between the Member States and the European institutions in shaping its China policy. Likewise, inter-, and intra-institutional perspectives, how the formulation of policy takes place within a single or several European institutions will not be in focus. The unit of analysis for this study will instead consist of the political output coming from the EU institutions.

The formation of EU role conception is also influenced to a degree by variables that are exogenous to the EU-China relation, most notably the influence exerted by the United States. Yet this element will not be an aim for this study, it will rather be left possible to reveal itself through the studied material should this variable or other exogenous variables exert strong enough influence.

The studied period starting from 2016 to 2021<sup>1</sup> is motivated by the identified knowledge gap. Yet role conceptions do not originate from a vacuum, therefore the study will also provide background information covering the beginnings of the EU-China relationship, starting from 1995.

## 1.3 Thesis outline

The thesis is structured as follows. First, an introductory background is presented on the short history of EU-China engagements as well as the most important

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<sup>1</sup> As the data was collected by the end of 2021, the month of December for the year 2021 is not included in the data.

developments during the studied period. Next, the literature on EU role conception, both within and outside the EU-China context, will be presented. Moving on, the theoretical framework of role theory will be introduced and explained, with the operationalisation of the theory being outlined prior to the introduction of the study's methodology.

Content analysis, both in quantitative and qualitative ways, will be used as the two methods of this study. This mixed-methods design and its implications will be carefully addressed. The chapter will also include a detailed description of both methods, how they fit with the theoretical framework of role theory and how the research question will be studied through the relevant material.

The second part of the thesis will begin by introducing the quantitative analysis of the EUR-lex database. It will then be followed by the qualitative analysis of the two most recent and important documents for the EU's China policy. What the findings mean in relation to the theoretical framework of role theory and ultimately for the research question will be addressed at the end of the analytical chapter. Finally, the main findings will be further discussed in relation to the latest developments of the EU-China relation.

## 2. Previous research

The following chapter will begin with a background on the EU-China relationship as well as the latest developments concurrent with the studied period. Moving on, the literature of EU role conception will be presented. First, with initial works on aspects of EU foreign policy and later in a China context where findings related to previous EU and Chinese role conceptions will be outlined.

### 2.1 An overview of the EU-China relationship

The topic of EU-China relations and interactions has been broadly covered throughout the years and continues to be (Christiansen et.al. 2019; Michalski, Pan 2017a; Zhou 2017; Wang, Song 2016; Farnell, Crookes 2016). The establishment of diplomatic relations between the then European Economic Community (EEC) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) date back to 1975. The second milestone in the relationship was the signing of the "*Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation between the EEC and PRC*" in 1985. Yet the structured relationship between the two actors was launched in 1995 with the European Commission's "*A Long Term Policy for China-Europe Relations*", a policy document mainly focused on economic and trade policies (Jochheim 2021:2).

Since the implementation of the 2003 Strategic Partnership, three documents form the core for the EU-China policy framework as identified by Cornell and Swanström (2020:15). These are the "*EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation*" (2013), the "*Elements for a new EU strategy on China*" (2016) and the recent "*EU-China – A strategic outlook*" (2019). "*Elements for a new EU strategy on China*" is the steering document for the EU's relation to China for the years 2016-2021 (EC 2022). Building upon the 2016 steering document, the 2019 *strategic outlook* corrected the EU's stance, delivering a stronger approach to China that was unprecedentedly blunt in its wording and suggesting a paradigm shift in the EU-China relation (Brattberg, Le Corre 2020).

Today, the EU-China strategic partnership consists of 50 sectorial dialogues, and recurring high political events such as the annual EU-China Summit. The relationship between the two actors is mostly defined by its economic and trade dimension. Today, China is the EU's second most important trading partner, closely behind the United States, while the EU is China's most important trading partner.

Daily trade between the two economic actors is averaging around one billion euros (EC 2022). Over the last year, the trading of goods has created a significant trade deficit of 180.8 €bn for the Union. In terms of services, the trade balance is positive in the EU's favour, with 19.7 €bn (EC 2021a).

The relationship between the two actors is generally interpreted as being complicated and extensive. Although sharing common interests primarily related to peace, growth, sustainable development and multilateralism, the EU and China are separated by their differences in core values (Cornell, Swanström 2020:15).

Since the eruption of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019, China appears to gradually turn inward to answer domestic challenges. This isolationist tendency should be seen in the broader context of the newly established "Dual Circulation" policy, aiming to expand the domestic production while focusing the output to domestic consumers. This turning point towards self-reliance is coming after years of conflict with the USA through trade wars, and with the EU following heavy criticism from China's hostile actions towards human rights, civil liberties, and security in the South China Sea and Taiwan (White, Kynge, & Mitchell 2021).

Today, China's increased engagement in international institutions (both of its own making and already existing ones) is best understood in the context of two areas primordial to Chinese politics: sensitivity in regional security and hypersensitivity in critics of internal affairs (Michalski, Pan 2017b:157). This sensibility has recently been illustrated through China's "wolf warrior diplomacy", a disruptive and aggressive style of public diplomacy often used in response to western criticism (Hille 2020).

From a European standpoint, the balancing act of values versus interests is the defining character of its relationship with China. During the past years, repeated human rights and civil liberties violations have led the EU to address China strongly on the matter. Upholding dialogues and negotiations as channels for criticism has so far not led to many results (Cornell, Swanström 2020:16). Setbacks resulting from liberties crackdown and human rights deterioration is a recurring theme for European engagement with China. The violent repression of the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 isolated the country from the international community and froze the support from the EEC, resulting instead in an arms embargo enforced to this day (Jochheim 2021:2).

A recent example of long-term economic goals clashing with value issues is the suspended adoption of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, an agreement that would create major advancements in EU-China economic relations. The negotiations launched in January 2014 took six years to reach an agreement in principle. The final document included solutions to the many economic hurdles that have characterized the economic relation between the two actors and would have granted European economic actors more protection and fairer conditions to operate on the Chinese market (Jochheim 2021:7).

Yet these economic advancements were quickly overshadowed by the worsening of human rights violations in the Xinjiang region and Hong Kong resulting in EU sanctions against Chinese officials and a state-led entity in March 2021. This was quickly followed by countersanctions from China on several members of the European Parliament and other individuals in Member States. Parliament subsequently issued a resolution stating that any advancements on the CAI will not take place before the lifting of the sanctions by China (ibid).

Indicators of new European global action to address a global China was illustrated by the EU's "Global Gateway" project, presented on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021. This new strategy from the Commission aims to mobilize up to €300 billion in infrastructure and connectivity investments for the period 2021-2027 (EC, EEAS 2021:8). This strategy is put forth with the ambition to increase the EU's geopolitical influence and offer an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative. Here, European democratic values, together with good governance, high standards, transparency, and sustainability aim to tackle the opposing opaqueness of BRI projects which have been criticized of serving as 'debt traps' to recipient countries (Lau et.al. 2021; EC, EEAS 2021:1).

While much attention is given to the rise of China, one should not forget that the European Union has also evolved substantially during the past two decades as illustrated by the integration of its foreign and security policy. With the entry into force of the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS), led by a High Representative for Foreign Policy, merged the external relations managed by the Commission with officials from the Council Secretariat as well as Member States diplomats (Christiansen et.al. 2019:31). Additionally, treaty changes increased the EU's military capabilities with the establishment of institutional bodies such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation, the European Defence Agency as well as the EU Military Staff (ibid:47).

The institutional building of the EU's foreign policy resides on the interaction between supranational and intergovernmental forces (ibid:30). This institutional setup characterized by a strong search for consensus and coordination makes the Union's foreign policy quite resolute once it has been formulated (ibid:44). An additional feature of EU foreign policy is what has been called the *structural foreign policy* of the Union, a characteristic way of conducting foreign policy through formal agreements, strategic partnerships, inter-regional cooperation and institutionalized dialogues (ibid:45).

Finally, the EU-China relationship does not exist in a vacuum but is influenced by other actors and regional dimensions. The most prominent outside influence in this context is undoubtedly the role of the US-China relations and the debatable leadership of the United States in addressing a rising China (Christiansen et.al. 2019:9). The geopolitical implications of this great power rivalry are variables the EU is aware about (EC 2021b).

The Trump presidency reshuffled the conditions for EU-US alignment regarding China, resulting in the EU finding itself amidst a trade war (Kärnfelt 2020). Yet the relationship seems to become more structured under the Biden administration. Towards the end of the Trump presidency, the EU and the US launched the “U.S.-EU Dialogue on China” (EEAS 2020). This format was revitalized in December 2021 with the first formal transatlantic dialogue on China between the US State Department and the EEAS, resulting in an alignment on several policy positions and setting up the next dialogue for the middle of 2022 (DoS, EEAS 2021).

To summarize, an early insight in this topic reveals the complexity of the engagements between the two actors and the many variables at play, creating a rapidly changing structure in which the relationship exists (Christiansen et.al. 2019:180). Moving on, the literature on the studied topic of EU role conception will be introduced.

## 2.2 EU role conception in foreign policy analysis

Studying the European Union as an actor often involves the discussion of what the EU *is* but also of what *role* it plays in an international context. In those cases, the discussion of EU roles often refers to *role* in its broad definition of “*the duty or use that someone or something usually has or is expected to have*” (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.). In other words, one may touch upon the study of EU roles without necessarily employing role theory (Elgström, Smith 2006:4-5; Sjursen 2006:85). These kinds of studies belong to the literature of EU foreign policy, where the concept of actorness is often used (Bretherton and Vogler 2002). Here, attention will instead be given to the specific literature of studying EU role conceptions in its foreign policy.

Aggestam’s (2004) contribution to rethinking the study of foreign policy on a European level launched a movement to apply political-cultural approaches, role theory included, to the study of EU foreign policy. Back then, Aggestam’s use of role conception aimed to explore the extent to which socialisation and collective identity formation shaped the Europeanisation of Member states’ foreign policy. In addition, this approach reaffirmed the role conception of the EU “as an ethical and restrained power” (ibid:97).

A seminal contribution to the application of role theory on the study of EU foreign policy is Elgström and Smith’s (2006) volume on EU roles in international politics. This volume aimed to advance the understanding of the EU as an international actor, in this case through studying its different roles and its impact on international politics. More specifically, contributions to the volume aimed at bringing clarity to the analysis of EU roles, the applicability of role theory for these analyses and how

this approach could contribute to the study of international politics in general (ibid:1-2).

Contributions to the conceptual understanding of EU roles are here in focus. Aggestam (2006) introduced and elaborated an analytical framework for applying role theory on European foreign policy, arguing that this framework may productively be applied to an entity beyond the nation-state, such as the EU. Moreover, Aggestam argues that role theory is well suited to capture shifts from the ascribed general civilian power role of the EU (2006:26). It is on that precise role that most early contribution to studies of EU role conception were concentrated. Whereas Lucarelli (2006) studied the values and principles within the EU's foreign policy, Manners (2006) engages in a study of the symbolic manifestation of the EU normative role in worlds politics.

Oppositely, Sjursen (2006) and Whitman (2006) present different approaches to account for role theory's potential shortcomings. Sjursen argues that the addition of discourse theory and communicative rationality are needed to explore and assess the claims of the EU's ability to shape normality through its foreign policy (2006:98). Exploring the contradicting co-existence of the military and normative roles, Whitman argues that although significant advancements were made within the European Security and Defence Policy as well as the Common Foreign and Security Policy, the role of a civilian power Europe remained primordial for the EU's international identity (2006:114).

Whereas early studies of EU role conception aimed to explain the 'unidentified international actor' that the EU was perceived as, more recent contributions have instead acknowledged the uniqueness of the EU and aimed to study the multiple roles of the Union and how these are perceived by others. Bengtsson and Elgström (2011) have provided an overview of the different roles the EU enacts as an international actor. Identifying the normative role of the EU as its greatest role alongside context-specific ones, they show that the perception of these roles differs depending on which partner country is the beholder (Bengtsson, Elgström 2011:129).

### 2.2.1 EU role elements

Most EU scholars thus tend to agree that the Union's most prominent role, or meta-role, in the international order is that of a normative great power (Manners 2002; Elgström, Smith 2006; Bengtsson, Elgström 2011). Underpinning this role conception are first and foremost the core values of the Union as enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU):

*“The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including*

*the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.”* (Art 2, TEU).

Additional values underpinning the normative role of the Union are found in Article 21.1-2 of the General Provisions on the Union’s External Action: assisting developing countries, eradicating poverty, promoting free international trade, ensuring sustainable development, promoting an international multilateral system based in good global governance, and respecting the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law (TEU, Title V, Chap.1, Art.21.1-2).

The EU creates legitimacy through these *universal* values and aims to influence other actors in the international order. The ‘normative’ element of this role is thus the ability of the EU to shape normality within the structure of the international order (Manners 2002:239). Yet this role may only be successful if two conditions are met: the EU’s sustained effort to shape normality and the tendency of other actors to internalize said normality (Bengtsson, Elgström 2011:115).

This meta-role has over years encountered obstacles, eventually leading to role incoherence (actions contradicting the EU’s normative power role). These contradictions arise either in different policy areas or towards different regions e.g., within trade policy or towards the Union’s Eastern neighbours as identified by Bengtsson and Elgström (2011:129). Particularly relevant to this work is the EU’s role conception in relation to Russia.

The dynamics in this partnership indeed resembles the one it has vis à vis China, a balancing act of normative power versus economic interdependency (ibid:122). The result of this tension is the EU perceived as playing the role of a *normatively aggressive actor*, destabilizing Russian domestic affairs (ibid:123). This can be compared to the successful performance of its normative role vis-à-vis enlargement candidate countries, where the EU is seen as an actor providing security and prosperity (ibid:122).

Similarly, and by including the literature on external perceptions of the EU to the debate of normative power Europe, Larsen (2014) argues that the legitimacy of the EU’s normative role is dependent on both the geographical context and the policy area in which it is exerted. Moreover, Larsen shows that the EU-role of a powerful economic actor is in this context prevalent, leading him to redefine the normative power role as ‘regional normative power’ (2014:908). The discussions on the normative or civilian power role of the EU may also be presented alongside the argument of a ‘market power Europe’ by Damro (2012) where the EU’s economic might is in focus, and the multilateralist role of the Union where an agile and experienced multilateral negotiator is highlighted (Jørgensen 2006; Costa, Jørgensen 2012:1). The different sources of EU identity and roles will be further discussed prior to the presentation of the analytical framework.



In conclusion, more recent contributions to the study of EU role conception have been focused on specific cases, regions and policies which is also true for the following EU-China context that will now be presented.

## 2.3 The EU-China role literature

Gurol's overview (2020) of the conceptual and theoretical variety in EU-China research summarises the complexity of the relationship between the two actors, her main argument being that little research aims to overcome the dichotomy of 'either/or' China is seen as a rival or partner. In the context of security relations between the two actors, she also highlights the lack of research from a constructivist perspective. Role and identity constructions, interactions, structures, and behaviour variables are thus seen as neglected when studying the relationship (Gurol 2020:674). Jørgensen and Wong (2016) share the same argument that a constructivist approach is needed to shed light on the identities, rules and fluctuations making up the relationship and interactions between the two actors.

The EU-China literature is extensive both in scope and in the different perspectives represented. These are often rooted in scholar's different assumptions about the topic. First, the complexity of the relationship is caused by the EU's *sui generis* nature. The EU's relation with China is thus best characterized as a region-to-state relationship. This interpretation paves the way for the divide between research focused on Member States' relations with China, as they argue that the EU and China cannot be seen as counterparts, both in the way their foreign policy is articulated and on their importance in global affairs. The extreme example of this case being the EU's security role in Asia. The main divide remains in the interpretation and implications of China's rise for the EU's values and interests (Gurol 2020:670-71).

Empirically, the relationship has mostly been studied from an economic perspective with areas in focus being trade, investment, intellectual property rights and technology transfer issues (Jørgensen, Wong 2016:53). China's BRI as well as new opportunities for cooperation regarding transnational security issues have over the years added layers of complexity to the relations (Gurol 2020:668). Climate and environment policy is one area where EU-China cooperation is often in focus. Applying a role theoretical analysis on this field, Gurol and Starkmann (2021) identified different critical junctures in climate governance where role change occurred, leading them to the conclusion that cooperation between the two actors intensified when roles became more compatible (ibid:530).

One of the most valuable contributions to the study of EU role conception in relation to China is the analysis of role dynamics within the EU-China Strategic Partnership by Michalski and Pan (2017b). Within the Partnership, they identify the following EU roles as a '*normative power*', a '*champion of multilateralism*', and a '*liberal*

*trade power*' (Michalski, Pan 2017b:617). Mapping these different role conceptions, they argue that the Strategic Partnership serves as an arena for competitive role-playing. Through it, role expectations and other processes of socialisation are at play between the two actors.

Despite being in a competitive environment, Michalski and Pan argue that both actors have learnt to manage the competition resulting from their differing values in order to uphold their partnership (2017b:624). Their analysis reveals the different stages of role-playing, where the EU initially tried to socialise China into the liberal international order and adopt its norms. Non-compatible role expectations combined to both internal and external changes (a stronger China and a weakened EU in the wake of the Eurozone crisis) constrained the EU's role conception in its interactions with China and ultimately affected the EU's role performance (ibid:625).

Although this study is primarily concerned about the EU's role conception, understanding the different roles of the significant "other" is a key feature of role theory. As shown earlier, culture is an intrinsic part of national role conceptions (Breuning 2011:21; Hudson 1999). Scholars studying Chinese foreign policy behaviour identified strong patterns of inspiration from famous episodes in China's history, giving China's foreign policy a dramatic component (Hudson 1999:170). Moreover, references to the historical past are often common in official statements from the Chinese government (Gottwald, Duggan 2011:237). How scholars interpretate China's historical legacy tends to differ, emphasising either the continuity of its imperial legacy or its communist identity. Yet both currents agree upon the importance of Chinese norms and traditional values when interacting with the global community, notably the importance of domestic forces for shaping China's foreign behaviour (ibid).

China's roles are grounded in the guiding 'five principles of peaceful co-existence', a foreign policy coined in the 1950s (Panda 2014). The most important role emanating from these principles is the '*stalwart guardian of national independence*' where values related to non-interference in internal affairs, respect of the national independence and territorial integrity are primordial (Michalski, Pan 2017b:617). Subsequent developments of China's role conceptions coincide with its opening to the global community and the liberalisation of its economy.

The following miracle growth of China and its increased importance in international affairs implied changing role expectations for the Chinese leadership. One of these expectations was whether China would become a responsible actor in world affairs. The negation of liberal conduct within the US-led international order has also shaped the expectation of China as a challenger (Gottwald, Duggan 2011:234). These expectations led to a new role conception of *peaceful development*, this new role being compatible with the traditional Chinese doctrine of the "five principles" (ibid:235). This new role was particularly important for China: maintaining the

status quo, from which the country reaped immense economic benefits from, was only possible by participating in international institutions (ibid:237).

The role of *peaceful development*, or “*benevolent bystander*” (ibid:244), has over the years drastically evolved towards active engagement in global governance. This evolution can be illustrated by certain turning points, such as China’s admission to the World Trade Organization in 2001 and its response to the global financial crisis of 2008 (ibid:245). Analysing this period of ephemeral Chinese proactiveness in global economic governance, Gottwald and Duggan (2011) conclude that the priority to put domestic issues first might hamper growing foreign role expectation on China. Role theory indeed predicts that actors having strong domestic policy networks, whom are later rapidly incorporated in international settings, will be less likely to adopt new roles from this socialization process (Checkel 2005:811). This is precisely what happened to China when the EU tried to socialize it into the international liberal order (Michalski, Pan 2017b:621).

In conclusion, the literature on EU role conception and the sources of these roles has over the years had many fruitful contributions and shown the potential of using the conceptual apparatus of role theory. This framework of analysis has successfully been applied on either specific areas of EU-China engagements (Gurol, Starkmann 2021) or on the general partnership (Michalski, Pan 2017b). Considering the major internal and external developments of the EU-China relationship since 2016, I identify a knowledge gap regarding the understanding of recent developments in EU role conception between the years 2016-2021.

## 3. Theory

This chapter will introduce the theoretical framework of this study, role theory, and the constructivist position it entails. A general summary of the theory's origin and its different components will be presented before moving into the theory's operationalization.

### 3.1 Introduction to role theory

Role theory is a branch of social theory in international relations belonging to the general movement of acquiring an understanding that moves beyond the material imperative of states (Breuning 2011:20). The theory has its roots in the works of George Herbert Mead and his contribution to sociology with his study on how the behaviours of 'others' impact on an individual's self-conception as well as role expectation and the conceptual differences between the 'self' and the 'alter'. These concepts have later been applied by sociologists and psychologists to study various parts of society (Holsti 1970:237). Moreover, it is argued that role theory offers an analytical framework that is productive not only for international relations theory but also for policymakers (Thies, Breuning 2012:3).

The tradition to apply these concepts to foreign policy analysis and the study of state entities has been established by Canadian political scientist Holsti in his 1970's influential article *National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy* (Harnisch et.al. 2011:1). Identity and its different components are thus some of the core concepts of role theory. The breakdown of what forms an actor's identity is key to understand the importance of other actors as well as structures in the conception of roles. Indeed, a tenet of role theory stipulates that role identities may only be enacted through the presence of others. A part of the identity, referred to the 'me' by Mead, is the 'self' seen by others, implying that this component of identity is a variable to account for in the formulation and study of roles (Wendt 1999:227).

The importance assigned to the role of others and structures belongs to the debate around structure-agent. This debate, prominent in social constructivist theory, is intrinsic to the role conception literature, and circles around the interaction between two components of identity, the ego and the alter. This debate has implication for the chain of causality from role conception (agent) to changes in in the international

system (structure). To summarize it, Wendt sees agency and structure as being mutually constitutive whereas Hopf sees the possibility of identity as being entirely domestically driven. Browning holds a middle ground position by arguing that actors need others to be able to construct narratives about themselves (Breuning 2011:21).

Although most role theorists agree with the mutually constitutive side, the debate can be seen in the more empirical light of powerful state formation throughout history. Historical social scientist Peter Turchin has in his research identified a key variable for the emergence of empire-type states: a direct contact, both physical and conceptual, with an opposing 'other', e.g., the function of "barbarians" to Rome. This variable was indeed key to shape the own identity and to strengthen the needed cohesion for most empires to arise and last throughout centuries (Turchin 2007).

A key underlying assumption here is that the international order is constructed by actors, both states and international organizations. These actors take on different kind of roles which in turn feedbacks to the constitution of the own identity and thereby shape decision-making and foreign policy behaviour. These aggregated processes are thus key to shape and sustain the international social order (Harnisch et.al. 2011:252). Role theory is in essence a theory that can be categorized under social constructivism with the aim of explaining the interaction between agent and structure through systemic empirical investigation (Breuning 2011:16). Over the years, another argument for the use of role theory has been its potential to predict changes in foreign policy behaviour (ibid:30).

In an EU-China context, the growing intensity of interactions between the two actors for the past two decades contributes to their respective role constructions and identities, shaping each other's behaviour as well as the international order (Gurol 2020:674). Once socialization and interaction take place, the desired outcome for actors will be role recognition from other actors. This entails an acceptance of norms and visions for the international social order that are in accordance with the actor's own identity. Consequences for the 'accepting actor' may be role stress which in turn may lead to a reinterpretation and adaptation of the own role conception. If internal or/and external changes lead to a role becoming unplayable, the situation may lead as far as chaos and cultural changes (Michalski, Pan 2017b:616; Hudson 1999:771).

## 3.2 Components of role theory

The presentation of role theory will continue by explaining some of its key concepts more in detail. These are *roles*, *role conceptions*, *role expectations* (both ego and alter), the act of *role-playing*, *socialization* as well as the implications of *multiple roles*. Scholars within role theory have over the years aimed at synthesizing the

theoretical literature in various works (Harnisch et.al. 2011; Thies 2010). Most of the following definitions and explanations of key concept are retrieved from them.

Role theorists define *role* as “*a social position constituted by the ego and alter expectations regarding the purpose of an actor in an organized group*” (Harnisch 2011:8). Roles may also refer to what is considered expected or appropriate behaviour within a determined setting (Elgström, Smith 2006:5). Role may also be seen as the vision of a nation’s role in world affairs, anchored in the nation’s deep cultural beliefs. Sources of these beliefs may thus be retrieved from the recent or ancient history of a nation, both from successes and failures (Hudson 1999:769). Within the theoretical framework of role theory, these sources are conceptualized through the elements of role conception and role expectations (Elgström, Smith 2006:5).

*Role conception* is defined as “*the perception of the own position vis à vis others together with the perception of the role expectations of others*” (Harnisch 2011:8). This last central component may also be explained through the original definition of Holsti where national role conception is defined as “*...the ‘image’ of the appropriative orientations or functions of their state toward, or in, the external environment.*” (1970:246). Hudson and Vore (1995:226) argue that as a concept, role conception holds potential to “*... bridge the conceptual gap between the general beliefs held in a society and the beliefs of foreign policy decision makers.*”. This central component of role theory seems thus to hold strong potential for operationalisation.

*Role expectation* is defined as “*the actor’s perception of its position vis à vis others and its perception of others’ role conceptions, as well as the explicit or implicit expectations that another actor places upon it*” (Harnisch 2011:8). Role expectation thus exhibits both an internal and external component, ego and alter (Hudson 1999:769; Gurol, Starkmann 2021:520). An actor is then usually both a receiver and a prescriber of expectations (Aggestam 2006:19). Role expectations may thus vary both in form and scope as well as in the obligations they entail. What is more certain is that they constitute a key part in the construction of roles (Harnisch 2011:8).

The formation of domestic role conception can best be summarized by Breuning’s definition as “*the fashioning of roles in in the international system, navigating between domestic sources of identity and or/cultural heritage, taking advantage of the material resources at their disposal, circumnavigating as best as possible the obstacles imposed by their position in the international structure.*” (Breuning 2011:26). Nevertheless, role conceptions must not be seen as a mechanical process. It is in the power of leaders and elites to define the role conceptions of their state and to translate the historical and cultural heritage into role conceptions (Breuning 2011:29). Likewise, should changes in role conception take place, it would most likely do so in a gradual process where the changes are first interpreted by the decision makers and then adapted to foreign policy (ibid:31). External

developments, positive and negative, also contribute to role conceptions being in a state of steady flux (Acharya 2011:852). Room for actor agency must thus not be underestimated according to role theory (Elgström, Smith 2006:5).

An additional pillar of role theory is the notion of actor holding *multiple roles* and its consequences. This advancement from the traditional focus on single role to the conceptualisation of multiple roles was first established by Holsti (1970:277-8). Not all implications of holding multiple roles are known and Breuning explicitly defines it as an avenue for future empirical research (2011:33). But according to the literature, multiple roles would entail situations where an actor's particular role is gradually emphasised at the expense of secondary ones (Chafetz et.al. 1996).

This mechanism, as well as the possibility to adapt to an entirely new role, are both conceivable according to Breuning (2011:33). Bengtsson and Elgström make the distinction between *meta-roles* and *context-specific roles*, both types belong to role interplaying but where the former would be the governing role of an actor whereas the later would be bound to a specific policy area and/or a geographical region (2011:114). The argument of co-existence of a prominent role alongside secondary ones has been expressed with different terms in the role theory literature. Yet, the implication of this co-existence and eventual conflicts in between them has not been fully explored empirically (Breuning 2019:8). The concept of multiple roles is thus intrinsically linked to the concept of role change and role conflict that will now be presented.

When role conception has taken place and actors are entering a structure, e.g., the international order or a strategic partnership, interaction with other actors' roles or elements of role conception is bound to take place. This situation is also called *role-playing*. In the EU-China setting for example, different situations might lead to role change: socialization, persuasion, and conception-performance gap<sup>2</sup> (Harnisch et.al. 2011:253).

*Socialization* is the process of engaging with other actors, being socialized into the international order, and eventually internalizing behavioural rules established by insiders to the structure (Harnisch 2011:13). This follows a logic of appropriateness rather than a rational one, and if sustained for long enough leads to the internalization of new role conceptions (Checkel 2005:811). *Persuasion* on the other hand, relies on communicative action and the assumption that actors may be persuaded to adopt new role conceptions by being exposed to the 'better argument'. Still, this mechanism is mostly efficient in democratic setting and as a tool for non-governmental organisations (Harnisch et.al. 2011:253). Finally, the *conception-performance gap* illustrates the situation where actual behaviour and ego expectations do not align. This gap may be the source of malaise for actors and

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<sup>2</sup> Other situations, albeit less relevant for this study, where role change arise are *democratization of foreign policy, self-assertive behavior, and crisis*.

affect their self-perception, eventually leading to role change (Harnisch et.al. 2011:254-5; Elgström, Smith 2006:248).

Actors engaged in these types of role-playing competition are faced with their ego, and their alter. The ego dimension is centred on the actor itself whereas the alter concerns an alternative self, conceptualized to reinforce own beliefs. A way for an actor to support its own beliefs is often done using another actor. Gains and recognition of one's role and identity in the international order are key for the ego. On the other hand, an actor may cast upon the alter its own norms and conceptions, an act also referred to as *alter-casting*, thereby making the other actor endorse its own vision and strengthening the own role (Michalski Pan 2017b:625). Already at the early stage of role theory, the process of alter-casting was identified as an established strategy used by states in international relations. Yet the process, as detailed by cognitive role theory, was encouraged to be studied more empirically (Backman 1970:313).

An important distinction between socialization and alter-casting is the setting in which it occurs. Socialization is a process mostly belonging to a group setting where norms are passed on from a group towards a novice. Alter-casting on the other hand, is a process more prone to occur in a bilateral relationship or in a group setting lacking established norms (Harnisch 2011:13). Should both actors engage in this undertaking, the result may be a balancing act where actors try to gain recognition for their role and identity, impose their own values while simultaneously show respect to the other to uphold the relationship and thus the structure for role competition (Michalski Pan 2017b:625).

The implications of holding multiple roles could result in two different types of conflictual situations: intra- and inter-role conflicts. *Intra-role* conflicts arise when internal components of role conceptions clash with each other due to change of internal or external circumstances. Such situation may often lead to a revalidation and revision of domestic role conceptions, a process allowing for more agency from political leadership. On the other hand, *inter-role* conflicts arise from the clashing of role expectations about the self and others. These expectations may also be of domestic and/or international nature. Finally, both concepts are co-constitutive, meaning that an intra-role conflict may likely lead to an inter-role conflict. In extreme cases, such situations may even have implications for the rest of the international order (Harnisch et.al. 2011:256).

To summarize, the most central components of role theory for this thesis will refer to the European Union's role conception, the implications of holding multiple roles, self-perception, and role expectation vis à vis China. Behavioural aspects related to predictions of decision-making in role theory as well as causality mechanisms might be referred to but will not be included in the main theoretical framework.



### 3.3 Operationalising role theory

Having described the main elements of role theory, the operationalising potential of the theory will now be addressed. Although a broad description of role theory has been outlined in the previous sections, not all parts of the theory will be operationalized for the following analysis. Here, the focus will be placed on the first stages of role theory which is concerned with the sources underpinning roles, namely role conception and expectation.

It has now been established that role theory is suited for the study of both material capabilities e.g., the EU's various economic resources, as well as ideational components of human nature, e.g., culture and normative values, that ultimately shapes a state entity's foreign policy (Breuning 2019:1). According to Aggestam (2004:82), the concept of role may thus be used as an operational link between identity constructions and foreign policy behaviour. Empirical research often uses official documents from states to try to establish an actor's role conception. These could be historical document, leader's speeches, and other official policy documents (Breuning 2011:29). Indeed, encouragements have been made for future role theory research to specifically include behavioural and speech practices to study the promotion and pursuit of role change by political entrepreneurs (Harnisch et.al. 2011:261).

Method wise, role theory scholars have over the years used a multitude of ways to study the conception of national roles, ranging from linguistic techniques of the discursive approach by Laclau and Mouffe, to more traditional text analysis, and historical process-tracing techniques (Harnisch 2011:8). Role theory thus seems to best be enabled when used on the study of texts. The researcher's task is then to find the best approach to interpret the above presented elements of the theory and to put them into role theory's conceptual apparatus, offering an understating of actor's role conceptions, agent-structure issues, and of actors' behaviour. Furthermore, previous studies on EU role conceptions may be used as inputs in methodological models, as in the coding frame of content analysis for this study.

Role theory thus dictates the following. The EU as an international actor exerts different roles or sets of roles that could be categorized as meta-role and context specific roles (Bengtsson, Elgström 2011:113; Michalski, Pan 2017b:617). Understanding the formation of roles may be done by applying the constitutive concepts of role conceptions and role expectations. Role conception is essentially about what the actor perceives of itself, both through material capabilities and ideational factors. The alter part for the EU's role conception is the *perception* of China's role expectation of the EU: "China will see us as/we want to be seen by China as". This is complementary to the ego dimension of role expectation where an actor perceives its appropriate behaviour as well as the behaviour expected from other actors in the structure (Breuning 2019:5).

In-between the role expectation of the EU and the alter part of the EU's role conception exist an overlapping area where the action referred as alter-casting may take place (Harnisch 2011:13). This is situations where the EU projects, or alter-casts, expectations on China's behaviour (Michalski, Pan 2017b:616). Rather than explicit demands, this may also take the form of implicit assumptions of an actor's preferred behaviour. Alter-casting preferences may reveal how an actor conceives the other as well as the structure within which they interact (the international order or a bilateral relationship). Studying the occurrences of alter-casting may reveal insights both about the alter-caster (EU) as well as the alter-casted (China). These theoretical constructions and assumptions are the main elements that will be operationalized into the analytical framework through the methods outlined in the following method chapter.

## 4. Method

The following method chapter will present the research design of a mixed-methods approach and its implications. Subsequently, the method of content analysis, both qualitative and quantitative will be presented. The detailed description of this methodology is intended to provide transparency in the steps taken when studying the content of texts. Finally, the constructed analytical tools that will be applied to the material, the EUR-lex search entries and the coding frame for the content analysis of key documents, will be presented.

### 4.1 Research design

The study of ideational variables through role theory entails the respect of certain research criteria. First and foremost, any explicit hypothesis must be formulated. Second, the following research design will be based on thoroughly explained concepts and methods. In the constructivist field, guaranteeing a high degree of transparency is paramount for the replication of studies and thus the advancement of knowledge (Breuning 2011:34).

The following assumption is key for the method that will be used to study the hypothesis. The use of role is bound to leave marks, for example in leader's speeches and statements (Ibid). Following the same logic, one could study these marks in the aggregated data provided by the database EUR-lex, as well as in the coding of key official documents. Thus, a mix of quantitative and qualitative method will be used to answer the research question. The quantitative part of the study will result in an array of descriptive statistics that will be combined to the qualitative findings from coding key documents to strengthen the analytical potential of the results.

From the theoretical review and previous research on role theory, in the context of the EU and China, the following can be asserted. Role theoretical studies have shown that the EU's role conception across time has been challenged by changing expectations and competition with China. The Union's most prominent role of a normative power has at time been incoherent when confronted with clashing interests. As the EU seeks a more global role, non-economic issues regarding China also influence its role conception. The following research design will thus aim to best accommodate to the complex process of role conception by focusing on different areas outlined in the research question.

## 4.2 The mixed-methods approach

The study will be based on a mixed-methods design combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. The use of such design brings with it methodological questions that will later be addressed. Mixed-methods approaches are indeed a topic of debate in social research literature, although having diminished over the years (Ritchie, Ormston 2014:45). While some see each approach bringing its own sets of contradictive ontological and epistemological characteristics, other see the use of both approaches as bringing strength in diversity (Ritchie 2003:38). The later view requires certain research criteria in defining the aims of both approaches. Qualitative and quantitative research vary in the way it approaches objects of study and in the data it generates. Therefore, simply expecting a confirmation of findings by using both approaches is not advised. The strength of this design thus lies in broadening the understanding rather than asserting it (ibid:43).

In practice, the use of the two methods might either precede each other, be done simultaneously or be executed as a follow-up. Each different combination brings its own set of possibilities and limitations (Ritchie, Ormston 2014). Initiating the study through a qualitative approach to prepare a statistical analysis might be useful when the subject is complex and rather unexplored. The initial in-depth analysis could help identify relevant variables, define concepts, and generate the framework for the statistical analysis (Ritchie 2003:40). Yet the studied subject has received scholarly attention for many years, including role theoretical approaches. This in turn diminishes the need for the groundwork needed as advocated by the ‘qualitative first’ approach.

The two remaining alternatives have in common their aim to solve either the complexity or ambiguity of the statistical findings. The ‘simultaneous approach’ might be best suited when the statistical findings fall short in the face of the complexity of the subject studied and where qualitative means are needed to further develop the understanding (ibid:41). The ‘follow-up’ approach is similar in its aim to give findings greater meaning but is better suited when the degree of complexity is lower (ibid:42). The presented approaches have in common the interaction between two sources of information. The most important step in a mixed-methods approach is to, in Ritchie’s words: “*recognise the linkages between the two sources of information and maximise their association.*” (2003:43). Benefiting from a rich literature on EU role conception, the studied subject presents a relatively low degree of complexity and thus seems best suited for the ‘follow-up’ approach.

### 4.2.1 Mixed-methods approach in practice

This research design aims to analyse official EU documents to find textual information that will indicate what the EU's role conception in relation to its perception of China is and how it has evolved under the period 2016-201. The use of quantitative linguistics is thus complementary to the qualitative approach of document analysis that will be performed. The quantitative element of this study is in other words a way to conduct document analysis on large scale by instead performing a frequency analysis through a search-engine.

The quantitative part of the study aims to provide descriptive statistics across time and subject to gain a holistic perspective and explore the latest trends in EU role conception. The use of quantitative linguistics is indeed mostly used to look for patterns and make generalization (Vromen 2010:262). Yet this approach lacks in explanatory power, something the qualitative approach of content analysis aims to fill. Moreover, through this two-step analysis, this design has the potential to either confirm or challenge initial results.

From an ontological perspective, using a mixed-methods approach is compatible with the ontological position of constructivism, of which role theory belongs to. Indeed, from a social constructivist standpoint, reality is not singular, and the conception of the social world are many. In other words, the aim of confirming findings through a multiple method approach is futile, as 'reality' cannot be studied singularly. This holds for epistemological assumptions as well. Each set of methods bring their own assumptions and produce a specific type of data in their outcome. Concordant findings should thus not be expected nor sought after (Ritchie, Ormston 2014).

The ontological and epistemological standpoint of constructivism sees language as an intrinsic part of reality. In this sense, language is created to see the world and shape reality (Boréus, Bengström 2017). This also valid for the ontological and epistemological positions of content analysis. Here, the researcher takes the text for granted and let it 'speak' on its own. The method is thus descriptive in nature rather than critical, raising potential critiques for its 'naivety' (Schreier 2014:181).

## 4.3 Content analysis

Content analysis, the overarching method of this study, can be divided into a quantitative and qualitative approach. Both approaches are used for specific means yet hold much in common. Researchers in the content analysis literature argue that the distinction between the two approaches is only a matter of degree (Schreier 2014:172). In general, quantitative content analysis can be described as a method

for data collection, in contrast to the qualitative approach that is best described as a method for data analysis (ibid:173). The specific characteristics of each approach will now be presented.

### 4.3.1 Quantitative content analysis

This method can broadly be described as quantitative linguistics but could also be specified as quantitative content analysis or frequency analysis. The aim of this method is to provide general information about texts, rather than specified, and to do so across time. Quantitative content analysis is one of the rare methods that has the potential to achieve this (Boréus, Bergström 2017). This method essentially focuses on frequencies of objects occurring in text. A key epistemological assumption is that change in frequencies may be interpreted as holding a meaning of an event occurring outside the text (ibid). For example, a salient issue will be expected to have a higher frequency rate in a document, or a set of documents, compared to an issue holding little salience. In this case, the more occurring some words associated with a role are, the more prominent such role is expected to be.

As the quantitative approach is more oriented towards what is explicit, deductive coding is more appropriate for this part of the study. Therefore, the coding frame applied to the material should here be concept-driven, i.e., based on what is already known (Schreier 2014:176), either from role theoretical contributions or on other relevant information related to the EU-China literature. Quantitative content analysis is thus concerned with the search for explicit, or manifested, meaning (Schreier 2014:173).

Yet, this quantitative method differs from traditional quantitative content analysis as it analyses parts of a vast number of documents through metadata rather than the actual content of the documents per se. This will be further explained in the later description of the material that EUR-lex consists of. In practice, the technicalities of EUR-lex resemble that of a traditional search-engine, supporting the Boolean operators ‘AND’, ‘OR’, and ‘NOT’. The use of these operators and the possible word combinations they offer is central for the quantitative part of this study. Here, the detection of role conception elements in relation to China are targeted. Each deducted role will consist of different words that characterize them. The combination of these words, through the operator ‘AND’, will increase the reliability that the intended role is studied. Each string of words associated to a role will in turn be searched in combined to “China” to ensure that role elements are measured in the proper context.

Finally, this method contains inherent flaws that needs to be addressed. Although precautions may be taken, one cannot exclude the probability for a search to return as a “false positive” result, i.e., documents containing all the search words but

having nothing to do with a role conception in the context of China. Yet the vast number of positive search returns expected over time should diminish this concern. Another weakness of the EUR-lex analysis is that although frequency can be measured as metadata, it cannot do so within the documents. For example, a positive search result could either mean that all words of the search entry are present only once in the document, or that they are present multiple times. In other words, the EUR-lex search engine makes no distinction between documents with high respectively low intra-frequency. This is addressed by the qualitative analysis of key documents to the EU's China policy.

### 4.3.2 Qualitative content analysis

The main assumption underpinning the method of qualitative content analysis is that precise text elements may be an indication of specific occurrences relevant to the studied research question (Boréus, Bergström 2017). Compared to a traditional reading of a text, this method aims to sequence the material with the aim of minimizing possible biases in the interpretation process (Schreier 2014:171). In practice, qualitative content analysis is described by Schreier (2014) as the process of systematically asserting meaning to qualitative data and categorizing parts of the material into a coding frame (2014:170).

The central element of this method is called a *coding frame*, the construction of all the categories and subcategories from which the content analysis is based on. Because the coding frame needs to fit the material (otherwise this method would not make much sense), the frame must partly be created with the help of the material that will later be analysed. Creating the coding frame will be done through a process called *subsumption*. This process involves a systemic reading of a representative portion of the material until relevant concepts are identified. If no (sub)category exists for the classifications of the concept, a new one must be created. The operation is later repeated until all the sample material has been accounted for (Schreier 2014:176).

As this construction is later applied on the entire material, it should follow certain strict requirements for it to be successful and respect the craftsmanship of content analysis. In essence, they are about ensuring that the coding of elements in the material takes place only once and that the creation of categories and subcategories are exhaustive enough to account for all relevant parts of the material (ibid:175). Should these requirements hold, the process of subsumption has been strictly followed.

Once an initial coding frame has been developed, a pilot study must be conducted to account for any flaws in the initial construction. Eventual flaws should be revised to make sure the coding frame is both valid and reliable (ibid:179). With these

requirements in place, the systemic examination of all parts of the material relevant to the research question may take place. This part of the study thus relies on the coding frame and the rules and descriptions governing over the different categories in place. In sum, assigning coding units to the coding sheet is thus a process that is far from arbitrarily. Once the entire material has been coded, it is up to the researcher to present the findings in the best suitable way. Finally, this study's qualitative content analysis will be performed using *NVivo*, a qualitative data analysis software suitable for qualitative research and mixed methods analysis (NVivo n.d.).

## 4.4 Limitations and validity concerns

The assumptions on which this mixed method builds has limitations and can be criticized on various points<sup>3</sup>. First and foremost, frequency doesn't automatically translate into salience, as advocated early by Kracauer (1952). Strong statements need only to be expressed once for it to have effect. An example would be the EU crossing a red line by issuing a paradigm shifting statement about Taiwan. Yet such dramatic act would spur such debate that the word-frequency related to this event would probably not be left unnoticed. An additional weakness of content analysis is its weakness to study implicit elements in text. At times, what is not said belongs to the obvious, either as a generally accepted notion or as an 'elephant in the room' situation. This issue may partly be addressed by developing the coding scheme inductively, or in other words, combining quantitative and qualitative content analysis (Boréus, Bergström 2017).

Content analysis often face validity concerns through different forms. The key concern is whether the method is used to study the texts as intended by the research question, that is, are words taken out of their context? This is particularly important for quantitative analysis where the context is easily more overlooked than in manual qualitative coding. A robust coding scheme that acknowledges the issue may partly address this concern. But the gravity of this issue is debated. Laver and Garry (2000) argue that the importance of context is often underestimated when one looks at the occurrence of certain words, that is, words do not usually appear without reason. Words with vague meaning, such as ones associated with values or attitudes, may be of greater concern. In this case, manual (qualitative) coding is advised to achieve an interpretation that is more in line with the research question. Additionally, the meaning of vague words may change over time, possibly weakening validity should it not be accounted for. An example of this could be whether China is seen as a

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<sup>3</sup> Most of the following points can be further debated. Their purpose here is mostly to create awareness during the execution of the study.



‘partner’. Over the years, ‘partner’ may have been used in a context encompassing most global issues to a few years later only the climate one.

Finally, the issue of interpretation needs to be addressed. The process from which a word or set of words, is identified, and later categorized according to a coding scheme is influenced by the how the researcher approaches the text. The following content analyses will adopt the ‘analyst oriented’ interpretation strategy outlined by Boréus and Bergström (2017), based on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s contribution to hermeneutics. The essential function of this strategy is to put the analyst at the centre and acknowledge the fact that the researcher brings with him his own set of social and historical prejudices when interpreting a text who’s meaning eventually changes over time. This approach also entails to use of specific interpretative purposes when studying a text, in this case related to the identification of role elements. The aim of the analysis is thus to contribute to the knowledge of the EU’s role conception and not about the text producer per se nor of the text consumer.

## 4.5 Material

The guiding light for the collection of material for this study is the assumption that the use of role is bound to leave marks in textual documents from leaders and institutions (Breuning 2011:34). Therefore, EU documentation will serve as the empirical base for this study through the EUR-lex database, and a selection of the most important documents related to the EU’s China policy.

One of the most accessible ways of consulting and researching EU documents is through the EUR-lex portal. This online gateway for all European law and other public documents is run by the Publications Office of the European Union, the interinstitutional office in charge of publishing the institutions documentation and maintaining websites related to this task (Publications Office n.d.). The categories, or collections, of documents used in this study are treaties, legal acts, consolidated texts, case-law, international agreements, preparatory documents, EFTA documents, law-making procedures, and parliamentary questions. Not included are documents related to Member States’ transposition measures. The exclusion is motivated by the study’s focus on the European institutions.

The different documents archived on the EUR-lex website are a form of *static data*, an archived type of data collection that holds long-term validity and is suited for analysis over large time frames. With the database in place, the data may be sorted and filtered to be used for answering the research question (Marotzki et.al. 2014:453). The EUR-lex database is a recent yet rich resource for studying the European Union. In his reviewing article, Blom-Hansen (2019) mapped the different opportunities EUR-lex provides for research in the post-Lisbon era, primarily on the potential for studying power and influence within the Union. By

studying official documentation, the presented research often uses quantitative text analysis. In their research on determining the Regulatory Scrutiny Board’s power, Senninger and Blom-Hansen (2020) used machine learning techniques and other quantitative text analysis as their methodological approach.

Additional presented research concerns institutional power-dynamics under different legislative procedures<sup>4</sup>. EUR-lex’s potential continues to create opportunities for future research. Through linguistics, researchers may access the “EUR-lex corpus” to conduct corpus linguistics (Baisa et.al 2016). In the R statistical environment, a EUR-lex ‘package’ has been developed by Ovádek (2021) to offer multitude avenues for data analysis.

The EU documents that have been selected for the qualitative content analysis are documents that are either central to the EU’s relation to China or to the foreign policy of the Union. A selection criterion for this part of the study is that the documents must originate from the last five years, as it is the possible evolution of role conceptions that is this study’s focus. The many documents structuring the EU-China partnership, and thus important to EU role conception, existing before 2016 are in this study included either as background information or previous studies.

Arguably the most important document of the material is the 2019 *EU-China – A strategic outlook*. The Joint Communication illustrates the new and current EU position on China. No other documents during the studied period stands out as much as this one besides the 2016 Joint Communication *Elements for a new EU strategy on China*. The 2016 document is also central to the EU’s China policy and constitutes a first step in the rethinking of that policy. The document is also still the cornerstone of EU engagements with China, as expressed in the *strategic outlook* (EC, EEAS 2019:1).

Table 1. Selected documents for qualitative content analysis

Document name	Author	Type	Year
“Elements for a new EU strategy on China”	EC/EEAS	Joint Communication	2016
“EU-China – A strategic outlook”	EC/EEAS	Joint Communication	2019

## 4.6 Definition of EUR-lex search terms

As previously established, content analysis recommends the use of both deductive and inductive approaches to develop coding schemes, and in this case a definition a search terms for the EUR-lex analysis. This means that some search terms attributed to different roles will be deductively developed from the literature and role theory. Others will be defined from an initial reading of the texts with a focus on the context, this process being called inductive coding (Boréus, Bergström

<sup>4</sup> See for example Golub (1999), Häge (2008), Kardasheva (2009, 2013), Hagemann and Høyland (2010), Hurka and Steinbech (2021) and, Rauh (2021).

2017). The need to develop the coding scheme partly from an inductive approach can be explained by its probable imperfection at first and the need for further optimization after initial testing (ibid).

Previous research has identified different sets of EU roles that will prove useful in defining search terms for the explorative study in EUR-lex as well as in EU documentation. As previously described, most agree that the EU's most prominent role in international affairs is that of a *normative power* (Manners 2002; Bengtsson and Elgström 2011:115; Michalski, Pan 2017b:617). The promotion of values is a central objective of the EU, as inscribed in Article 3.1 of the Treaty on European Union (Art 3.1, TEU). Defining the search terms related to normative power should encompass the EU values enshrined in Article 2 of the TEU. In addition, search terms related to these values and its promotion may help in identifying the prevalence of this role in the material. Thus, such terms characterizing this role are: 'values', 'human rights', 'democracy', 'rule of law', 'governance', and 'principle'.

A second role identified in the literature is that of the EU being a *pragmatic economic* actor seeking to further its interests. This role aligns to the role of "liberal trade power" described by Michalski and Pan (2017b:617) where the main objective of the EU is to enact and strengthen its status as a major economic power as well as fulfilling the interests of its Member States. Treaty relevance may here be found in Article 3.5, where the EU is set to promote its values and interests with the wider world (Art 3.5, TEU). By *pragmatic* is meant the balancing act of pursuing economic interests with regards to the respect of human rights. This can be illustrated by the following quote in 2019 by Federica Mogherini, HR/VP of the EU between 2014-2019, in the context of deteriorating conditions for the Uighur minority in Xinjiang: "[...] *Passing the clear message that for Europeans, human rights are not less important than economic interests. On the contrary, they are as if not more important than our economic interests.*" (Mogherini 2019). Related search terms to this role are thus: 'interest', 'investment', 'trade', 'pragmatic', 'market', and 'growth'.

A third role may be related to a *global EU*, where the EU wants and is expected to take greater action externally while capitalising on its agility within the multilateral international order. The nature of this role may in fact relate to the role of 'champion of multilateralism' coined by Michalski and Pan (2017b:617) as well as other references to this role (Jørgensen 2006; Costa, Jørgensen 2012:1). Here, the EU draws on its *savoir faire* to take the lead on the international agenda, often in a context of multilateralism. This role has evolved since its initial inception by the Council in the 2003 European Security Strategy (Council of the European Union 2003:28) and gained increased notoriety since the launch of the 2016 Global Strategy but also from the 2019 von der Leyen Commission where "A stronger Europe in the world" was named one of the six priorities of the new Commission (EC, von der Leyen 2019). The vision of a "stronger" Europe has partly been driven

by the demand for a more proactive and stronger EU (EEAS 2016:3). Here, the EU is also promoting multilateralism and a rules-based global order in which it seeks leadership and strength (EC, EEAS 2019; Christiansen et.al. 2019:45). Appropriate search terms for this role are thus: ‘practical’, ‘strong’, ‘multilateral’, ‘strategy’, ‘leader’, ‘global’.

The second part of the quantitative analysis will focus on additional elements contributing to the EU’s role conception in relation to China. Unlike the first stage of the analysis, this stage will focus on role expectations, part of the constitutive process of role conception. The role expectations in focus will be threefold and originate in the 2019 EU phrasing of considering China both a *partner*, *competitor*, and *rival*. The rationality for including this notorious phrasing in the explorative part of the study is that such description may mirror EU role conception, referring to what role theory conceives as the ‘me’, how one appears in the eyes of others. Indeed, by portraying China as a partner, the EU sees itself as China’s partner, by calling China a competitor, competition between the two actors is assumed, and by naming China a rival, the EU acknowledges the existence of rivalry on a systemic level. Exploring the prevalence of these three terms in association with China is thus in line with the main objective of this study.

## 4.7 EUR-lex search entries and coding frame

The following search entries will aim to retrieve predefined information from the EUR-lex database through the EUR-lex search engine. As best suited for quantitative analysis, this part of the study has been deductively formulated from theory and previous research. The aim of the different search entries is to map the presence of three EU roles: that of a *normative power EU*, a *pragmatic economic EU*, and a *global EU*.

The following table compiles the different search entries related to these roles which will be used as input in the EUR-lex search engine.

Table 2. Description of EUR-lex search entries

<b>EU Role</b>	<b>EUR-lex search entry (searched in combination with “China”)</b>
Normative power EU	“values” AND “human rights” AND “democracy” AND “rule of law” AND “governance” AND “principle”.
Pragmatic economic EU	“interest” AND “investment” AND “trade” AND “pragmatic” AND “market” AND “growth”.
Global EU	“practical” AND “strong” AND “multilateral” AND “strategy” AND “leader” AND “global”.

Because of its importance for the EU’s perception of China, the notoriously coined description of China as a simultaneous partner, competitor and rival. This

description will also be explored in EUR-lex through a simple association between each of the three terms with ‘China’.

Once all the data has been collected, the frequencies of words associated with a certain role will be summarized and presented to set the stage for the analysis and comparisons between the different role elements.

The following coding frame has been established through the process of *subsumption* as explained earlier in the methodology chapter. An initial thorough reading of the material was done on a portion of the 2016 “*Elements for a new EU strategy on China*” to establish the needed number of concepts and categories for the upcoming coding<sup>5</sup>. The construction of the coding frame resulted in twelve categories divided under three main categories. These three main categories belong to the parts of role theory that are the most relevant for this study: *role conception* and *role expectation* (both ego and alter). The subcategories covered the thematic aspect of material belonging to *normative*, *economic*, *global*, or *other* dimensions. Thus, the following coding frame enables the study of both theoretical and thematical dimensions.

Table 3. Coding frame for the study of EU role conception and expectation

Role conception				Role expectation (ego)				Role expectation (alter)			
Normative	Economic	Global	Other	Normative	Economic	Global	Other	Normative	Economic	Global	Other

The rules governing what elements of the material are assigned to which categories, the coding, are the following. First, the coding unit, that is either a sentence or a part of a sentence, is classified on its thematic, being either normative, economic, global, or belonging to something else. In cases where the thematic is unclear or disputed between several ones, the main object of the sentence is used as a decider for the classification. Once the thematic has been outlined, the coding unit is assigned under the relevant main category.

For a coding unit to be coded to the normative thematic, the content of that unit must refer to values or the shaping of a normality (e.g., rules of the international system). Belonging to the economic thematic are parts of the material referring to economic interests or other economic dimensions. Under the global thematic are placed coding units referring explicitly or implicitly to a stronger Europe in the world as well as part of the material referring to regions or policies in regions far from the immediate EU neighbourhood.

Once the appropriate thematic has been identified, the coding unit must be placed under the appropriate main category. If a coding unit is formulated as such to either belong to the present or as something *given*, it is to be classified under role

<sup>5</sup> The exact process that led to the following coding frame will later be explained in the analysis as it produced insights that belong to the analytical part of this study.

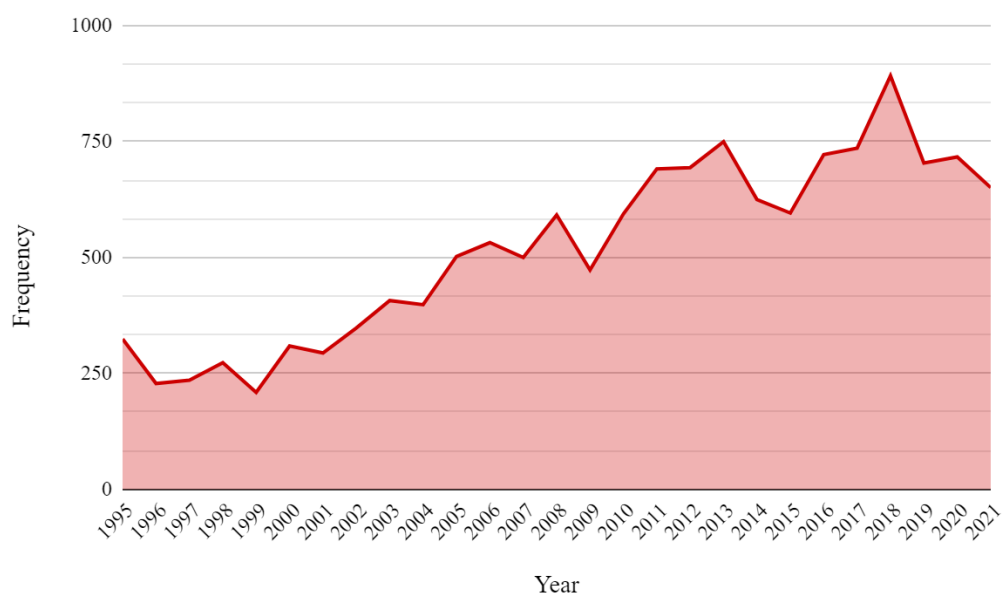
conception. Conversely, if a coding unit is formulated as such to either belong to the future or as a desired outcome, it is to be classified under role expectation. In such cases, if the coding unit refers to an expected or desired behaviour of the European Union, it is to be classified under the ego category whereas being categorised under the alter category if it refers to an expected or desired behaviour of China.

## 5. Analysis

The following results chapter will begin by presenting the quantitative part of the study with findings from the EUR-lex database. Moving on, the findings from the qualitative content analysis of the two most important documents of the period 2016-2021 will be presented. Finally, the results and their possible interpretation will be discussed in relation to role theory.

### 5.1 A quantitative analysis of the EUR-lex database

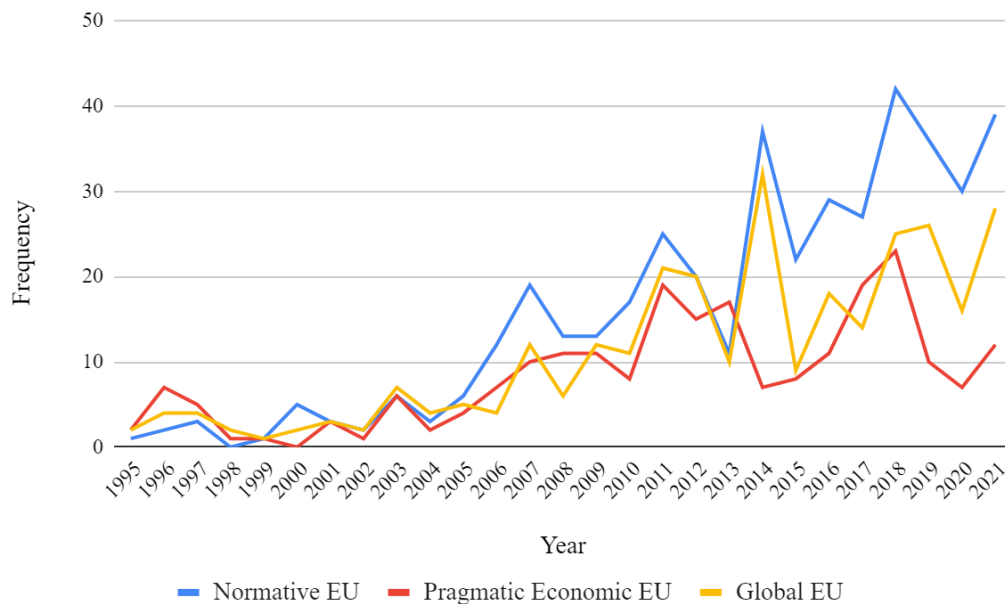
To understand the prevalence of different role conceptions in the aggregated EU documentation, one may first consider how often “China” has been mentioned in official documents since 1995, *figure 1* illustrates this. Because all the studied role conceptions have “China” as a common denominator, most of them are somehow correlated to the frequency of “China” in the material. The increasing numbers of references to China throughout the years can be explained by either the increasing importance of China as well as the expansion of the EU and the subsequent increased documents it produces as a result.



*Figure 1. “China” in EUR-lex (1995-2021)*

Because the frequency of China has mostly increased since 1995, most of the researched role conceptions are expected to show the same general tendency. The

following figure, *figure 2*, illustrates the frequency of the three deducted role conceptions which have been searched according to the search entries described in table 1.



*Figure 2. “Normative EU”, “Pragmatic Economic EU” and “Global EU” in EUR-lex (1995-2021)*

Figure 2 presents many insights regarding the prevalence of the different role conceptions as well as their alignments and divergence throughout the years. As expected, the frequencies somehow follow the same pattern of the general “China” frequency. The pragmatic economic role conception of the EU appears prominent at the beginning of the studied period (although with relative low frequency) coinciding with the first engagements with China. A divergence between the role conceptions seems to appear around 2004. A year earlier, the creation of the “EU-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” altered the dimension of the relationship, both in scope and intensity (EEAS 2013:2). It is thus conceivable that the intensification of the relationship resulted in more nuances from the EU side, illustrated by the first divergences of role conceptions vis à vis China.

Although divergence is characteristic for the remaining years studied, a noteworthy conjunction appears in 2013 where the three different roles conception once again align. This could be the result of the adaptation that year of a milestone document structuring the relationship, the “EU-China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation” (EEAS:2013). In the process of repositioning itself, the different role conceptions of the EU may thus have temporarily aligned.

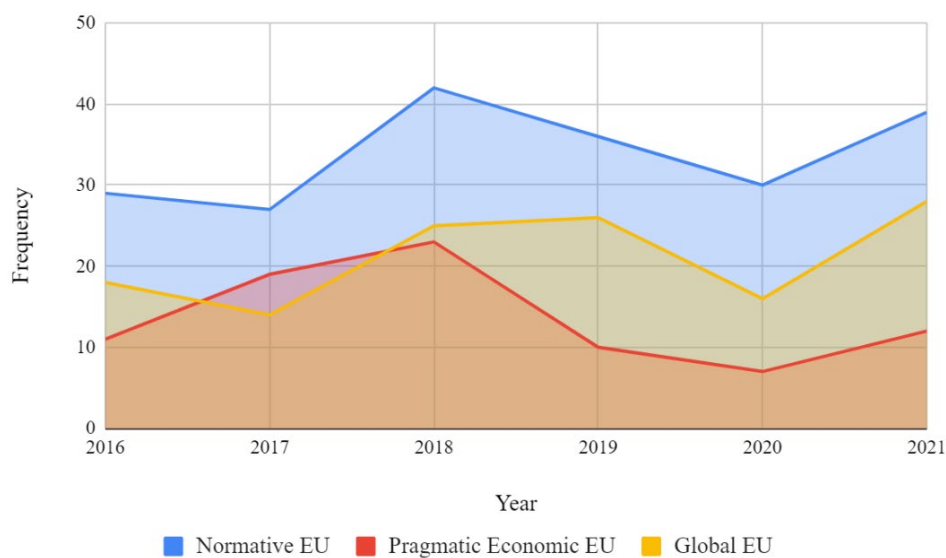
The years following the 2013 alignment were characterized by economic growth as the EU emerged from the Eurozone crisis (Eurostat 2021), possibly explaining the



upward trend of the economic role conception between the years 2014-2018. Yet these years were also characterised by several crises such as the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, the 2015 migration crisis and the 2016 Brexit vote. Altogether, one may suggest that these events have caused some of the fluctuations observed in the studied role conceptions.

The subsequent decline of the three role conceptions occurring from 2018 to 2020 coincide with the end of the Juncker Commission and the beginning of the von der Leyen Commission. A first-glance explanation here may be the end of political initiative from one Commission and the formulation of new political objectives from the new one, as the subsequent increase in the three role conceptions might indicate.

As the aim of this study is to understand EU role conception during the period 2016-2021, the next two figures will show the three operationalized role conceptions during that specific period. *Figure 3* shows the evolution of the three role conceptions whereas *figure 4* shows the distribution of them for each of the individual six years.



*Figure 3. “Normative EU”, “Pragmatic Economic EU” and “Global EU” in EUR-lex (2016-2021)*

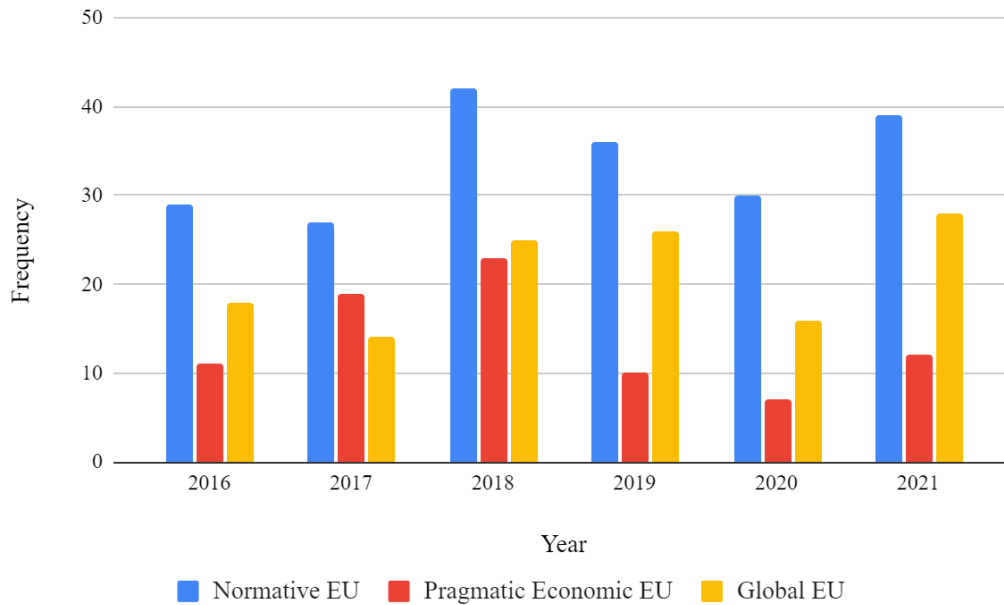


Figure 4. “Normative EU”, “Pragmatic Economic EU” and “Global EU” in EUR-lex (Distribution per year for 2016-2021)

Focusing on the absolute values of the individual years between 2016 and 2021 displayed in figure 4, shows that the “normative” role of the EU seems to be the most prevalent one and is logically occurring the most under the last three years, a period characterized by increasing condemnation of China’s violation of human rights and civil liberties. Looking at the frequencies of the “pragmatic economic” role of the EU during the same period seems to fall in line with the rationale behind the occurrence of the normative role conception. Indeed, from 2016 to 2018, the occurrence of the economic role reached the heights of the period following the financial crises but significantly decreased during the years characterized by human rights and civil liberties violations.

The data shows that the “global” EU role conception increased the most during the years 2016-2021. This development may partially be explained by the ambition of a “geopolitical Commission” by Commission President von der Leyen. The increase could also be a sign that the EU is adapting itself to a more ‘global’ China, exemplified by the BRI. The normative role conception had the second largest increase and remains the most frequent in absolute values, whereas the economic role increased the least. Here too the rationale seems to hold, when the human rights situation is degraded, the normative role conception seems more likely to be adopted rather than the economic one. Finally, the displayed prominence of the normative role in the data seems to confirm this role as the Union’s meta-role.

Moving towards the second part of the quantitative analysis, attention will now be given to the notorious description of China coined in the 2019 *strategic outlook* of simultaneously considering China a cooperation partner, an economic competitor,

and a systemic rival (EC, EEAS 2019). This phrasing gives the following results when studied in EUR-lex.

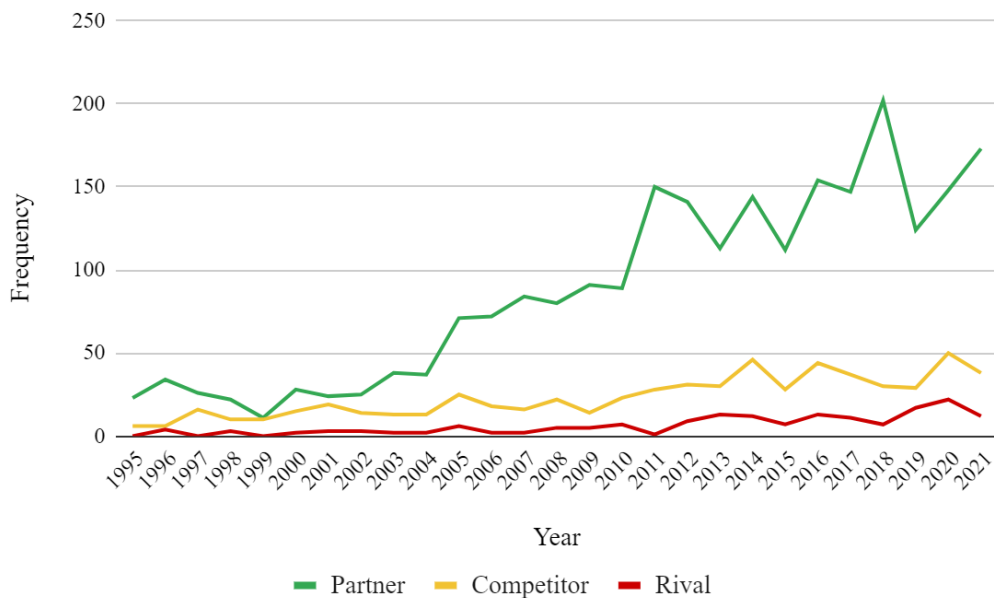


Figure 5 – “Partner”, “Competitor” and “Rival” in EUR-lex (1995-2021)

Figure 5 illustrates the associations of ‘partner’, ‘competitor’, and ‘rival’ with ‘China’ in the EUR-lex database for the period 1995-2021. The main findings detailed by this figure is the prominence of the frequency of “partner” with start from 2004-2005 which may be explained by the deepening of the EU-China relationship following the creation of the Strategic Partnership in 2003. The surge of “partner” occurring in 2009 may be explained by the consequences of the 2007-2008 financial crisis.

Here, the EU may have sought deeper economic links with China to encourage economic recovery. The sudden decrease of the “partner” frequency from 2018 to 2019 thus seems to fall in line with the first declaration of the phrasing in the 2019 *strategic outlook*. One may notice a relatively small increase of the “rival” frequency around the same year. Additional takeaways are the fact that the “competitor” trend seems to have been stable throughout the years, possibly indicating that this notion has always been present in a China context, particularly regarding long-standing trade issues such as subsidies or intellectual property.

Ultimately, these findings should be seen for what they are, a descriptive account of the 2019 phrasing consisting of EUR-lex metadata. A more comprehensive picture of the EU role conception in relation to China may only be obtained through the subsequent contribution of the qualitative analysis.

## 5.2 A qualitative analysis of EU documentation

The first part of the analysis focused on metadata from thousands of documents accessed through the EUR-lex search engine. The second part of the analysis involves the opposite approach by focusing on the two most important documents of the past five years for the EU's China policy and thus the EU's role conception in relation to China. These are the 2016 "*Elements for a new EU strategy on China*" and the 2019 "*EU-China – A strategic outlook*". Both documents have been coded according to the established coding frame presented under chapter 5.7 and resulted in 433 codes, 259 for the 2016 document and 174 for the *strategic outlook* of 2019.

Before presenting the findings, a reminder of the context surrounding these documents should be provided. Both documents were presented during the mandate of the Juncker Commission albeit at two distinctive periods in EU-China relations. The "*Elements for a new EU strategy on China*" was presented on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 2016 at a time of optimism, and on the eve of the Brexit vote. Five months later, the EU would also see its transatlantic link questioned with the election of President Trump. This optimism is palpable in the communication from the Commission surrounding the release of the Joint Communication. From HR/VP Mogherini herself, the 2016 Joint Communication was about fulfilling the clear potential of the EU-China relationship, highlighting the many opportunities for deepening the economic relation and strengthening cooperation on other areas, such as foreign and security policy, climate change and migration. The growing assertiveness of China and its human rights records was only briefly mentioned (EC 2016).

Three years later, the context in which the *strategic outlook* was presented seemed to have changed dramatically. Months before the end of its mandate, the Commission presented its new Joint Communication on China. In March 2019, the EU has for almost three years been dealing with internal turmoil regarding Brexit, and a tumultuous Trump presidency while finding itself amidst a trade war between the United States and China. The change of circumstances surrounding the *strategic outlook* owes much to developments in China under these three years. This time, the communication surrounding the release of the Joint Communication confronted a more assertive China, highlighting a shifting balance in the relationship. If the previous Joint Communication emphasized greater cooperation, the 2019 one envisaged both greater competition and rivalry. The deteriorating human rights situation in Xinjiang raised human rights concerns as one of the EU's top priorities in the document (EC 2019).

### 5.2.1 “Elements for a new EU strategy on China” - 2016

The multiple findings from the first document, the 2016 “*Elements for a new EU strategy on China*”, are presented in the following table.

Table 4. Coding summary of “Elements for a new EU strategy on China” (EC, EEAS 2016)

<b>EU role</b>	Role conception	Role expectation EU (ego)	Role expectation China (alter)	<b>Total</b>
Normative	24	20	31	75
Economic	27	22	19	68
Global	10	28	18	56
Other	6	42	12	60
<b>Total</b>	67	112	80	259

These results provide an insight into both the thematic and theoretical dimensions of the document. First, the most recurring thematic in the 2016 Joint Communication is the normative one, closely followed by the economic, the “other” category and finally the global one. Looking at the theoretical elements, the ego dimension of role expectation is the most prominent, followed by the alter part of role expectation and lastly by the role conception category. Finally, cross reading the table reveals that the most prominent thematic category under role conception was the economic one. For the ego part of role expectation, the most prominent thematic is the “other” category while the normative thematic is most prominent for the alter part of role expectation.

The findings are thus centred around five numbers, the totals for each possible cross reading as well as the total of the thematic and theoretical categories. These numbers are key to understand the process of role conception of the European Union in relation to China. That the most prominent thematic is the normative one seems to coincide with previously established knowledge that the EU’s most prominent role is that of a normative power. That the most prominent thematic under the role conception category is the economic one seems to coincide with EU being first and foremost a global economic actor, as well as with the distinctive economic nature of the EU-China relationship.

Moving on to the more nuanced role expectation, the prominence of the “other” category under the ego dimension of role expectation needs to be addressed. Under this category were placed coding units that did not fit any thematic category but could still be identified as belonging to the main theoretical categories, in this case the ego dimension of role expectation. Out of these 42 coding units, most are behaviour expectation for the European institutions and the Member States regarding future interactions with China, e.g., calling upon European unity or the reassessment of parts of the relation with China. Many coding units also referred to

vague statements such as expected cooperation on non-specified shared interests or common challenges. Other coding units falling into this category relate to expected or desired behaviours in other policy fields, such as climate, energy, migration, cyber or defence policy.

Looking at the alter dimension of role expectation, the expected behaviour of China from the EU perspective, the normative thematic emerges as the most prominent one. In this context, it entails that when the EU assumes, encourages, or explicitly demands a certain behaviour from China it is mostly in the context of the respect of specific values (e.g., the respect of human rights and civil liberties), condemnation of certain practices (e.g., China’s approach to internet governance), or in the process of shaping normativity (e.g., prompting China to assume its responsibilities in the rules-based international order).

Finally, the most prominent theoretical category is by a distinctive margin the ego dimension of role expectation. In other words, the EU mainly shapes its policy towards China by the process of expectation upon itself, setting up goals or encouraging specific behaviours. The 2016 Joint Communication is thus a document mostly anchored in the future, reflecting the EU’s ambition of how it wants to be perceived and how its relationship with China ought to be perceived in a near future.

### 5.2.2 “EU-China – A strategic outlook” - 2019

The multiple findings from the second coded document, the 2019 “EU-China – A strategic outlook”, are presented in the following table.

Table 5. Coding summary of “EU-China – A strategic outlook” (EC, EEAS 2019)

<b>EU role</b>	Role conception	Role expectation EU (ego)	Role expectation China (alter)	<b>Total</b>
Normative	15	8	7	30
Economic	43	23	10	76
Global	12	12	3	27
Other	22	15	4	41
<b>Total</b>	92	58	24	174

Just as for the previous document, the findings provide insights into both the thematical and theoretical dimensions of the EU’s China policy. Additionally, comparison is now possible between these findings and the ones from the 2016 Joint Communication.

At first glance, the results reveal the clear prominence of role conception as the most frequently occurring theoretical category. The use of each thematic category

is mostly occurring through role conception, except for the global thematic that is occurring equally through role conception and the ego dimension of role expectation. The latter follows role conception as the second most occurring theoretical category, with the alter dimension of role expectation placing last. This specific order of occurrence has implications that will be further discussed at a later stage. As for the thematic categories, it is the economic thematic that emerges as the most prominent one by a large margin. It is then followed by the “other” category, the normative one and lastly by the global one.

Because the five thematical categories are mostly present through the theoretical dimension of role conception, the present analysis appears clearer than for the 2016 Joint Communication. As described earlier, the aim of the 2019 *strategic outlook* was to reassess the EU’s China policy in a changing environment, where the balance of challenges and opportunities that China presented seemed to have shifted in China’s favour (EC 2019). The objective of the *strategic outlook* was thus to correct the course on the most pressing issues for the EU. In that sense, it is not surprising that the economic thematic emerged as the most prominent one in the document, as the economic aspect of the EU-China relationship is its defining characteristic.

Moreover, the prominent use of role conception indicates the way in which the EU shaped its China policy in the *strategic outlook*. Whereas the 2016 Joint Communication was anchored in the future through a majoritarian use of ego role expectation, the 2019 *strategic outlook* is anchored in the present, focused on what the EU *is* rather than what it *should* be. Thus, in reassessing its position vis à vis China, the EU seems to draw on role conception, domestic sources of belief about the self, rather than expectation of a future self.

The contrast between the two documents and their respective approach are illustrated through the following comparison of each document’s key sentence. The 2016 “*Elements for a new EU strategy on China*” may best be summarized by the following sentence:

*“The EU’s engagement with China should be principled, practical and pragmatic, staying true to its interests and values. It will continue to be based on a positive agenda of partnership coupled with the constructive management of differences.”* (EC, EEAS 2016:5).

This sentence was coded as belonging to the ego part of EU role expectation. In contrast, one may look upon the now famous sentence of the 2019 *strategic outlook* best describing the document:

*“China is, simultaneously, in different policy areas, a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance.”* (EC, EEAS 2019:1).

In contrast to the 2016 sentence, this sentence was coded as belonging to EU role conception. The coding was done in respect to the coding rules, in this case it was the verb tenses that defined what was a role conception and what was a role expectation (“is” vs “should”). Why such key sentences are coded differently is important for the understanding of EU role constructions in this context. The 2016 sentence is formulated as such to put the expected behaviour into the future, as a goal to aspire to. Three years later, the tone of the formulation is both more serious and conceptualized in the present rather than the future. That this formulation is now part of EU role conception can be illustrated by its use to this day, most recently by European Council President Charles Michel following the European Council of October 2021 (European Council 2021).

### 5.3 EU role conception in a changing environment

The quantitative analysis of the EUR-lex database and the qualitative analysis of the two most important documents of the past five years for the EU’s China policy have provided valuable insights that will now be synthesized. At this stage of the analysis, the results will also be reconnected to the theoretical framework of role theory to answer the research question of how the EU’s role conception and role expectation of China has evolved between the years 2016 and 2021.

The most important findings are the following. The quantitative analysis aimed to explore deduced elements of role conception for the period 2016-2021. Results indicated that the normative element of EU role conception was dominant under the five-year period, followed by the global element and closely by the pragmatic economic one. Although the findings seem to undervalue the importance of the economic element of the relationship, most fluctuations in trends appear to be concordant to past developments within the EU-China relationship as well as giving support to parts of the theoretical findings of this work.

The qualitative analysis of the two Joint Communications revealed two different approaches in which the EU shapes its China policy and the use of China in that process. In its 2016 policy document, the EU shaped its China policy rather equally around the different thematic, with the normative one emerging as slightly superior. Yet the most interesting finding from that year is *how* the EU shaped its policy, namely through what role theory defines as role expectation and more so the ego dimension of role expectation.

Analysing the 2019 *strategic outlook* put forward results centred around role conception and the economic thematic. The results for 2019 are not surprising but to a certain extent expected. Yet, it is through comparing them to the 2016 results that they become interesting. Indeed, in recalculating its positions and responding to a more assertive China, the EU heavily relies on role conception and the ‘self’ to



shape its policy. In that context, the economic aspect of the relationship emerged as dominant.

The above presented findings are sufficient to layout parts of the role conception that takes place for the European Union in its engagement with China. Reintroducing role theory at this stage of the analysis is necessary for both answering the research question but also to explain how certain knowledge gaps that arose during the processing of the material were overcome.

In this case, the pilot phase of the study was conducted on parts of the 2016 “*Elements for a new EU strategy on China*”. As indicated in the method chapter, the pilot study is to be performed to create the coding categories of the coding frame. During that process, certain problems were identified and required theoretical guidance by role theory. Mentioning these problems is of intrinsic value for the analysis.

The qualitative content analysis of key documents aimed to further explore the role conception elements from the quantitative EUR-lex analysis, centred around the three EU roles related to the normative, economic, and global dimensions. These role conceptions, deductively outlined through previous research and background information, are logically present in the inductively studied material. The pilot study revealed the three role conception elements as being predominant in the material.

Yet their presence in that part of the material were more nuanced than in the metadata generated from the EUR-lex database. Indeed, elements of role conception are in the documents either portrayed in a neutral context or in a context of EU or Chinese role expectation. Solving the issues of assigning coding units to the right role theoretical categories contributed to the broader understanding of how EU role conception in relation to China takes place. Simply put, the findings suggested that the EU might either construct its China policy through itself or through role expectation on China or through the process of *alter-casting* on China. In other words, studying role expectation could be done to a much greater extent in the qualitative part of the analysis.

### 5.3.1 Theoretical findings

Role theory aims to study the decision-making behaviour of foreign policy. This study has focused on the elements that constitute actor identity and the sources of behaviour and policy formation. Role theory’s conceptual apparatus also provides an understanding of the function and nature of perception of the self and of the other. One of this study’s main feature has been to measure the occurrence of alter role expectation in the EU’s policy material, i.e., instances where the EU constructs

its desired behaviour of China through assumptions and expectations. Previous studies identified this phenomenon at an early stage of the EU-China relationship when the EU assumed and expected the modernization of China and its adoption of liberal norms and values characteristic of the international order of that time.

The EU's then alter role expectation was ultimately not sustainable and clashed with China's own role conception leading to the partnership almost breaking down (Michalski, Pan 2017b:621). This shows the importance of what sort of role expectation an actor holds towards the other may imply. This study shows that the EU indeed exercised its normative role in a China context both within role conception as well as through alter role expectation, something that drastically changed between the two analysed 2016 and 2019 documents. The change in alter role expectation may thus imply that the EU no longer uses alter-casting to formulate its China policy nor to reach its desired outcomes in its relationship with China. A deeper implication could be that the EU has abandoned its ambitions to socialize China normatively.

An important contribution from role theory relates to the concept of holding multiple roles and the implications of their co-existence. The multiple roles or role elements that might characterize the EU-China relation are predominantly the normative and economic roles of the EU, followed by its global one. Role theory dictates that an actor is bound to exert one dominant or meta-role, followed by context-specific ones. The results of this study seem to confirm previous findings regarding the normative meta-role of the EU. Yet some uncertainties remain regarding the context-specific roles of the Union in its engagements with China. Although prominent in the quantitative analysis, the global role of the EU was less frequent in the key documents structuring the relation with China. Following the opposite logic, the economic role is highly prominent in the key documents signalling that it may well be the second-class role of the EU in this context.

However, the existence of multiple role elements goes beyond the simple distinction between a meta and context-specific role. An actor holding multiple role or role elements will likely face tension and eventually conflictual situations. Internal or external change may thus drive actors towards situations of intra- or inter-role conflicts. The qualitative analysis of the two key documents may present insights about the occurrence of such conflicts and their consequences. The coding of the 2016 Joint Communication revealed a strong reliance of role expectation upon the self (ego dimension) as well as role expectation on the other (alter dimension) when related to the EU's normative meta-role. Ensuing external change in the form of China's increasing assertiveness not to be persuaded or simply not following EU expectations may have caused an inter-role conflict.

As role theory specifies, an inter-role conflict will often lead to an intra-role conflict, i.e., implications for domestic role conceptions. The coding of the 2019 *strategic outlook* seems to confirm this claim. As previously outlined, the document is characterized by the predominance of role conception elements across all

thematic elements. This suggests a process of revalidation and revision of domestic role conceptual elements, a typical outcome of intra-role conflicts. The findings and their theoretical interpretation thus imply that change, driven by external and internal factors, has between the years 2016 and 2019 created role conflicts and driven the EU to a revision of its role conception in the context of its relationship with China. As a result of that process, the economic thematic emerged as the strongest element of its role conception. This suggested role conflict and its implications may also find support in the quantitative analysis, where a downward trend of most role elements occurred between the years 2018 and 2020. These theoretical findings will now be further discussed in the final and conclusive chapter of this study.

## 6. Conclusion

Studying EU role conception in relation to China in this format has been a bold endeavour. On the one hand the European Union, a *sui generis* entity comprised of institutions, a parliament and 27 Member States with their own national parliaments, and on the other hand China, the world's most populous country and second largest economy with a complex political system that is often overshadowed by the simple interpretation of its one-party system. Yet, one may obtain valuable knowledge in ways that accommodate for the complexity of the subject at hand. In a sense, the obstacles that arose in the way soon became the way and helped advance the knowledge of the studied topic. This idea was the guiding light of this study and helped reveal findings relevant to both EU role conception and EU foreign policy towards China.

The research design of this thesis enabled to overcome the difficulties of studying such a grand subject through the rather abstract theoretical framework of role theory. The use of a mixed-methods approach combined the breadth and depth that was needed for this task. The rather innovative quantitative EUR-lex analysis was combined with the more established qualitative method of content analysis. The conceptual apparatus of role theory was operationalized and applied to both methods revealing that the true explanatory potential of the theory was more suited for the qualitative part of the analysis. In harness, the research design, theory and method generated findings that filled the gap of knowledge about the evolution of EU role conception and role expectation in relation to China under the period 2016-2021.

Focusing on the results, the normative, economic, and global role elements of the EU are formed partly from the EU's role conception and partly from the EU's role expectation. The analysis is thus two-fold. First, it indicates the prominence of each role in an EU-China context. Second, it indicates whether the formulation of those roles occurs through role conception or role expectation. In other words, the analysis sheds light on to which degree the EU uses China to formulate its foreign policy towards the country. Additionally, the qualitative analysis of the documents opens the discussion regarding the importance of role expectation in the process of role formation. Indeed, the findings suggest an important occurrence of role expectation in 2016 followed by probable inter- and intra-role conflicts that reshuffled the EU's role conception in 2019.

Most of the produced results from this study seem to be aligned with previous research as well as recent developments within the EU-China relationship. Some of the results were expected, such as the prominence of the normative and economic thematic in both the quantitative and qualitative analyses or the increased element of global role conception during the years 2020-2021. On the other hand, part of the results appeared contradictory, most strikingly with the economic element of role conception being weakly present in the quantitative analysis, compared to the qualitative results of the economic thematic. This anomaly may be explained by the focus laid on the economic element being “pragmatic” in the EUR-lex analysis. Without the pragmatic element, the quantitative results may have portrayed the EU more accurately as the major economic actor that it is.

This study’s most important findings relate to the analysis of the theoretical elements within the policy documents from 2016 and 2019. Coding these documents revealed different theoretical features on the content of these along with their implications. Most insightful is the key difference where the 2016 document is mostly constructed through role expectation whereas the 2019 *strategic outlook* is centred around role conception elements. This specific change in the EU’s China policy may be explained by the clashing of different role expectations ultimately leading to a revision of role conceptions. Seen in the EUR-lex data, the observed downward trend of most studied elements could confirm the revision process of EU role conception. The provided insights regarding inter- and intra-role conflicts and their implication for the EU’s policy formulation towards China could support further encouragement for the use of role theory in foreign policy analysis.

The theoretical findings thus suggest that the EU’s normative role, in a China context, is mostly expressed through role expectation of the ‘self’ as well as the ‘other’, including the process of alter-casting where the EU directly assigns normative expectations on China. The realization of a changed balanced in the relationship seems to have shifted the EU’s role formulation through a greater reliance on role conception. In other words, the shift towards more role conception, a process of revision, may be interpreted as a sign that the EU is indeed adapting to a more assertive China. In this context, the economic role elements emerging as dominant in the 2019 *strategic outlook* may be the consequences of clashing role elements, ultimately leading the EU to rely on its strongest assets in response to a more determined and assertive China.

The shift towards more role conception may also entail that the EU is taking greater responsibility in its relationship with China. In reducing expectations, the EU may also diminish the delusional or uncertain aspect of its policy and instead shift the focus back to a more realistic and stable one. This change may also raise questions regarding the eventual difficulty of exerting a policy formulated through a future ‘self’ or the ‘other’, opposed to a policy focused on the present ‘self’. Is a policy less reliant on role expectation more prone to result in concrete actions, such as more sanctions driven by normative role conceptions? This theoretical question

may pave the way for future research on the sources of roles and the dynamics between role conception and expectation.

## 6.1 Conclusive remarks

Studying the components of the EU's different roles was the central aim of this study. Although role theory aims to study the behaviour of decision-makers, the focus on role conception and role expectation enables a description of the EU's state of being during the period 2016-2021, rather than a prediction of the EU's actions in a near future. Yet the study of these role components may point towards possible trends for the future of the EU-China relation.

Just as observed in this study, the interaction between the EU's values and its economic interests is likely to remain the defining characteristic of its future role conception towards China. Yet this balance of role elements may gain in complexity with the EU's growing ambition to acquire tools to confront an assertive China. Global ambitions of confronting China outside of Europe will also have an impact on the EU's own role expectation and ultimately on the role conception needed to become a global actor. Time will tell whether the EU's role conception vis à vis China will stick to the notorious phrasing of the 2019 *strategic outlook*, but a more realistic approach to engagements with China will likely remain the defining feature of the EU's perception and role conception.

To conclude, this study aimed at exploring and answering the latest developments in the EU's role conception towards China. Along the way emerged questions and reflections that may pave the way for future contributions on the topic. Further research could indeed study the recent EU-China developments through other parts of role theory, namely role performance and role enactment. Research potential may also lie in exploring eventual conception-performance gaps in the different thematic role elements mapped in this study. Another possible avenue for future research is the EUR-lex database and the different opportunities it presents whether in an EU-China context or other. As China will remain of primordial importance to the European Union for the conceivable future, additional research on the two actors and their engagements can only be encouraged.

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## 8. Appendix

### 8.1 EUR-lex detailed search entries

Search entry	Date range	Documents	Date of search	Search language
"China"	01/01/1995 30/11/2021	Treaties, Legal acts, Consolidated texts, Caselaw, International agreements, Preparatory documents, EFTA documents, Law-making procedures, Parliamentary questions	30/11/2021	English
"Rival" AND "China"	01/01/1995 30/11/2021	Treaties, Legal acts, Consolidated texts, Caselaw, International agreements, Preparatory documents, EFTA documents, Law-making procedures, Parliamentary questions	30/11/2021	English
"Competitor" AND "China"	01/01/1995 30/11/2021	Treaties, Legal acts, Consolidated texts, Caselaw, International agreements, Preparatory documents, EFTA documents, Law-making procedures, Parliamentary questions	30/11/2021	English
"Partner" AND "China"	01/01/1995 30/11/2021	Treaties, Legal acts, Consolidated texts, Caselaw, International agreements, Preparatory documents, EFTA documents, Law-making procedures, Parliamentary questions	01/12/2021	English
Normative EU: "values" AND "human rights" AND "democracy" AND "rule of law" AND "governance" AND "principle"	01/01/1995 30/11/2021	Treaties, Legal acts, Consolidated texts, Caselaw, International agreements, Preparatory documents, EFTA documents, Law-making procedures, Parliamentary questions	01/12/2021	English

Pragmatic Economic EU: "interest" AND "investment" AND "trade" AND "pragmatic" AND "market" AND "growth"	01/01/1995 30/11/2021	Treaties, Legal acts, Consolidated texts, Caselaw, International agreements, Preparatory documents, EFTA documents, Law-making procedures, Parliamentary questions	01/12/2021	English
Global EU: "practical" AND "strong" AND "multilateral" AND "strategy" AND "leader" AND "global"	01/01/1995 30/11/2021	Treaties, Legal acts, Consolidated texts, Caselaw, International agreements, Preparatory documents, EFTA documents, Law-making procedures, Parliamentary questions	02/12/2021	English