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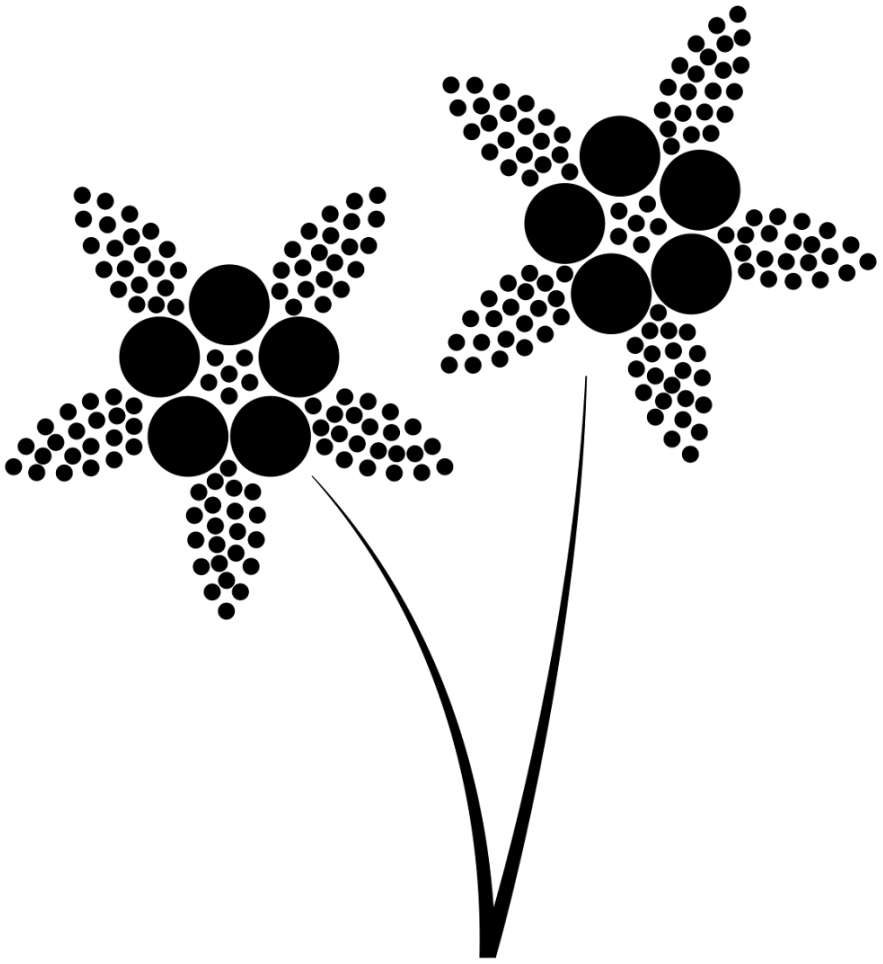
EU Strategic Partnership and Rivalry: Uncovered



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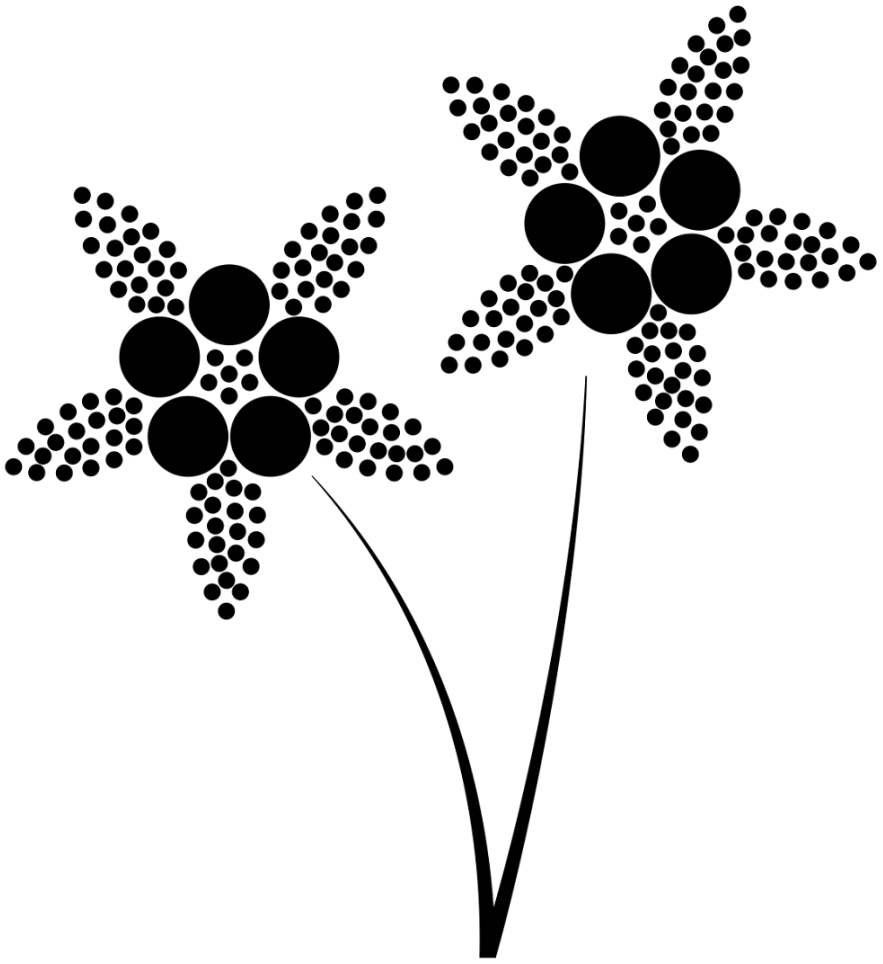

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Abstract

The study explores how the terms “systemic rival” and “strategic partner” are constructed in the EU political discourse through the examples of China and Vietnam. Through applying the theory of constructivism in this case study paired with a qualitative content analysis. It is uncovered that strategic partnership depends on the capability a state shows for reform and which promises it makes and how its aligns itself with the international rules-based order. Vietnam has shown dramatic improvements on its own human rights legislation and especially its judicial system throughout the 30 years of EU-Vietnam relations. For the EU these reforms and even merely the promise to reform itself is crucial; it's what keeps the EU deeply engaged and interested in continuing the relationship. For China it's a bit more complicated. The EU and China have an acknowledged systemic rivalry which is built on a sharp disagreement. China has a state-centric world view where matters such as human rights are internal affairs that no one but them can meddle in. Whereas the EU as a liberal supranational organisation believes that human rights stand above national legislation still both parties have signed the UN charter and have international obligations that must be met.

Keywords

EU, China, Constructivism, Vietnam, systemic rival, strategic partner, rules-based world order.

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I’d like to thank my supervisor for her continued support and great advice. Furthermore I’d like to show appreciation for my girlfriend for her emotional support during a very stressful time.

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1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) as a political actor has seen a sharp increase in its foreign relations and diplomatic commitments as its role has grown and continues to do so as time goes on. Over time as democratic backsliding has incrementally shaken up world politics, authoritarian states have seized more influence and democratic states for the first time since the Cold War have to treat them as equals in some respects. However, what makes this time different from the cold war is the globalised nature of the modern world. States in most cases cannot isolate themselves from each other and every political development has a chance of spreading fast. Through this period of democratic backsliding the EU has had to recalibrate its politics and make cost benefit analyses of which way to move forward. If the values based democratic internationalism should stay or if a pragmatic balance between values based policy and realism should be pursued.

1.1 Problem Statement

The EU has a long history of engaging with authoritarian states. It has named a number of strategic partners across the globe many of whom have been authoritarian states and it has not gone without controversy. Back in 2012 Hans Kundani wrote in an article (Kundani, H., 2012) in the European Council on Foreign Relations. That this strategy of naming strategic partnerships with authoritarian states leads to a decline in normative power. At the time Kundani wrote the article Russia was considered a strategic partner just a year before the annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbass would start. Kundani continues by detailing how this concept of strategic partnership seems to lack a lot of strategy at least from a values-based perspective, because as he points out normative power hinges on values based engagement but naming authoritarian states as partners and cooperating with a leader only to side with his opposition when a revolution comes seems on its face incoherent (Kundani, 2013). This study seeks to explore this puzzle of incoherence.

1.2 Aim and Research Question

The aim of the study is to learn about how the EU constructs its partners and rivals. Hence, a closer look at how this process works and through what mechanisms and forms of rhetoric it occurs is required. Based on this aim the following research question was selected and with the help of constructivism as an International Relations (IR) theory the issue is to be examined.

- How does the European Union have a divergent strategic framing of China as a 'Systemic Rival' and Vietnam as a 'Strategic Partner'?

2. Literature Review

Previous research suggests that the EU has a history of othering. In an article (Zhou, X., Jin, Y., & Wei, F., 2025) that explores the issue and attempts to explain the reasoning behind the systemic rival label through using media companies linked to the EU such as Euronews and EurActiv. Zhou, X., Jin, Y., & Wei, F. (2025) find that European media implies that China's debt diplomacy by saddling some countries with huge debts is actually the use of economic means to colonize. They find many examples of the European media using alarmist, eurocentric and orientalist rhetoric surrounding China and its ambitions. The authors find that the discursive strategies of otherizing China from the European perspective, due to China’s engagement in global governance, is based on the subhistorical background of Europe and the ambivalent nature of China–EU relations. Eurocentrism and Cold War mentality, in combination with the fear of China rising will negatively affect the stability of the EU’s own dominance and internal political and economic cohesion. In its dealings with China, the EU promotes its values and rules system to a Chinese audience. Through this process the EU employs methods such as disparaging Chinese contributions, Chinese ideas, and Chinese solutions to global governance. That is why the EU media defined China as a systematic competitor to promote alternative models of governance. The EU media's narration of China's image is not essentially an interpretation of China, but a need and a manifestation of the EU's self-construction (Zhou, et al 2025). Furthermore the EU has a history of perpetuating a state centric pragmatic world

view in relations with authoritarian states like Belarus (Bosse & Viera, 2023). Eventually this approach in its relations fosters a contradictory approach to building a resilient society in the authoritarian state. Building hard security and stability on the one hand paired with building a transformative values-based approach of modernisation and democratisation on the other hand whilst simultaneously maintaining that EU support should be tailored to empower societies to identify and solve their own problems is contradictory and leads to incoherent foreign policy (Bosse & Viera, 2023.).

Aliaksei Kazharski (2022) writes in his study that dictatorships pose a significant security threat due to their "winner takes all" attitude due to their lack of separation of power in their political systems and that this translates into diplomacy where they become unpredictable. Politics becomes a zero-sum game and rules and institutions transform into a mere fig leaf for the elite power games in the conception of a dictator. Through this perspective what politicians from democratic countries consider consensus-seeking and rational compromise, authoritarian politicians might interpret as weakness and therefore space for further pressure and blackmail. Authoritarian regimes in recent times have also learned how to manipulate the democratic process, utilise bluffs, and blackmail democracy with escalation, in the hope that what they consider weak democratic leaders will back down due to significant pressure they get put under (Kazharski, 2022, p. 3).

There is a significant research gap where many studies focus specifically on economic relations and trade agreements on the EU relations with a state at large like Pietro de Matteis study *EU-China Cooperation In the Field of Energy, Environment and Climate Change* or Damian Wnukowski's study *EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement: Opportunities and Challenges for European Businesses* and the last example of this gap in research Nhung Thi Nguyen and Hai Yen Trin's study *Demystifying the Sustainable Development Chapter in the EU-Vietnam FTA.* There is research about the EU's relations with authoritarian

states but a significant research gap of research on how these relations are constructed and justified.

3. Theory

3.1 Constructivism as a tool for analysis

Constructivism is applied here due to its focus on how politics and ideas are socially constructed. Through the constructivist lens, it is possible to explore how the EU politically enables cooperation with authoritarian states by examining its "framing" of those states and the projection of its own political identity. This is particularly useful for analysing the specific labels in the research question: “systemic rival” and “strategic partner”.

3.2 Political and State Identity

Constructivism is concerned with identity, which is really useful in this regard as political identity is shaped by political systems, global status and ambition. What distinguishes constructivism, its attention to the role of interpretation in action is what makes it a useful theory when answering the research question (Parsons, 2018, p. 78). When examining the EU's political identity and rhetoric surrounding authoritarian states it becomes clear that political identity and state identity are both deeply intertwined. Identity is operationalised in this paper by categorising the EU’s self-ascribed traits in official documents, specifically how the label of “Systemic Rival” functions as a relational identity marker that distinguishes the liberal EU from the 'authoritarian' China. Constructivism is an appropriate theory that can provide this lens in a detailed manner through finding out what constitutes these identity constructions (Parsons, 2018, p. 81).

3.3 Policy as Reaction and Result

This lens is essential for this research because it is well suited to reveal the EU's foreign policy. In order to reveal these correlations it requires the how or what questions that Parsons brings up which Alexander Wendt wrote in Lowndes, V,. et al (2018). These questions can concern static properties like states. Constructivism is equipped for dealing with causality through noting which ideas arise and in turn these ideas lead to new actions while also dealing with constitutive relationships. This works in dealing with political identity because it in turn justifies international actions and strategic framing and therefore who a political actor considers an ally, friend or enemy in the ideological or political sense. Lowndes, V,. et al (2018)

3.4 Politics Identities as Relational and Constitutive

Parsons describes what constructivists call contingency, certain people face an indeterminate amount of real conditions across a range of options and arrive at a specific course of action due to the adoption of certain social constructs. By either creativity or accident, through selecting one of many possible meanings which they then build an interpretation on and constitute one world from many other possible ones (Parsons, 2018, p. 82-83). According to constructivist theory, political identities are not fixed but relational and constitutive; therefore, the EU's political identity exists in opposition to or in favour of another actor. For example, the EU is in favour of the rules-based international order and frames its relations through this. Which leads to the EU finding intersubjective agreement with authoritarian states that are content with the current global system and finding disagreement with states that are not. Identity is treated here as a relational and constitutive category; to apply this, the study examines the EU's ascribed traits in official discourse to the polities concerned. Specifically, the application focuses on the systemic framing by categorising authoritarian states in ways based on its own framing and values based judgements (Barnetts, 2020, p. 195).

3.5 Normative Structure of the Rules-Based International Order as a Social Construct

The research explores the normative structure of the rules-based order as a social constraint. The EU's diplomatic practices, such as the issuance of joint statements or the imposition of systemic labels, reinforce or challenge this structure. The reason why Constructivism is interesting in this case study is that it is a social theory and does not make any substantive claims that generate claims about the contents of international agents and their preferences or constraints. Furthermore, the idealism makes it specifically equipped to answer how this discrepancy presents itself in EU foreign policy, the lens of EU rhetoric as being created through its own ideas of itself and that its policy is shaped socially by these ideas and through that being imposed or acted upon in its policy and statements is fundamental to answering the research question. Other theories do not offer the same focus on interpretation which makes constructivism seem like an appropriate fit. That the balance of power itself is socially constructed is one insight that constructivism informs us about. It cannot be uncovered or discovered; it just is because global actors conceptualise the world in that way, and through that, it becomes socially real (Barnett, 2017, s.195).

The agent-structure problem from the constructivist lens is really important in this regard due to structures and agents being constrained through what constitutes the norms, ideas and institutions shaping their identity and in turn interests. These can share ideas about sovereignty and what defines the state, but the key here is that they are all ideas. Neither state nor structure exists independently of one other; they are in a system of interdependence. This means that behaviour is changeable depending on how ideas change within an agent, and on how other agents behave. The agent-structure problem is addressed by analysing how the EU (the agent) uses the Systemic framing to actively reconstruct the international system (the structure). This mutual constitution means that as the EU rebrands its rivals, it simultaneously alters the constraints of its own future foreign policy as Barnett states (Baylis, J. et al 2017, p. 196-197).

4. Methodology

4.1 Design

In order to address the research question of this case study a qualitative content analysis will be applied. This study seeks to build utilise Constructivism to uncover how China and Vietnam who both possess similar political systems yet one is treated as an enemy or rival and one as a friend or partner. This discrepancy leads to an interesting and worthwhile study. The case study approach is an in depth investigation of a single case that yields analytically representative results. The use of specific rhetoric and labels to challenge or reinforce global norms; these labels, once established, constrain the EU's future policy options. The EU, through these labels, reinforces its own construction of the international system by legitimising or delegitimising other actors through its rhetoric. Furthermore, actors, according to some constructivists, are born with identities and interests, and therefore their interactions with other actors produce constraints on their behaviour depending on what constitutes their respective identities (Barnett 2017, p. 196-197). The actors in this case study are Vietnam and China.

4.2 Case

The case of Vietnam and China. The EU is a liberal-democratic community of states and frames and therefore justifies its international behaviour through this. This ideological understanding is what legitimises its policies and international stances. The framing of the PRC as a systemic rival, not just a geostrategic one, is a political act, and it is the EU taking a stance in opposition to the PRC's political system as discussed above. It's a political performance that justifies all of its

policies, rhetoric, strategy and the limits of its cooperation with the PRC. The political construction here is due to a very different framing and understanding, narratively of China and Vietnam. China is framed more as a system challenger and a power usurper, while Vietnam is more of a limited integrator and a regional actor prioritising regional peace preservation and economic integration in the region through ASEAN (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations). This study aims to explore how the EU constructs this systemic rival and why it is applied, using the examples of China and Vietnam. Most different system designs (MDSD) were used to discern the selection of the cases.

4.2.1 Most different System Designs

Adam Przeworski (1970) writes that in most different system designs, systemic aspects do not receive any specific status among possible predictors in this case, on the behaviour of state and supranational organisations. All the while this assumption of the MDSD is not rejected, the analysis of the issue stays at the intrasystemic level. When the previously mentioned assumption is rejected, systemic aspects will receive consideration. Przeworski continues with explaining that in the MDSD the analysis needs to diverge to systemic aspects whenever formulating legitimate broad statements of the subjects of analysis. This becomes impossible without considering systemic aspects. The case selection follows the logic of an MDSD. Up for analysis are the EU rhetoric surrounding two countries, China and Vietnam. In these cases, the EU applies highly distinct kinds of rhetoric. Meanwhile, both countries share many important similarities. China and Vietnam are two authoritarian regimes, they share roots in communist Marxist-Leninist ideology, and both share some comparable political and institutional systems. V-dem classifies both countries as closed autocracies (Nord et al., 2025, p. 14). This situation forms an interesting analytical puzzle: why does the EU employ different rhetorical framings toward states that share so many structural and ideological similarities? (Przeworski, 1982, p. 34, 35 & 39)

4.2.2 Qualitative Content Analysis

Qualitative content analysis (QCA) is uniquely suited to this study, as it facilitates a deep examination of policy documents and the complex influence of Chinese and Vietnamese leadership models on EU relations. According to Margit Schreier (2012), QCA is the appropriate choice when dealing with "rich data" that requires nuanced interpretation. This study specifically utilizes Schreier's criteria for QCA application, as it involves verbal and sampled data from external documents and digital sources. A primary advantage of this method is its flexibility; it allows for the iterative refinement of the coding frame to incorporate newly discovered aspects during the analysis. While these categories are tailored to the specific research questions, they remain systematic. To ensure methodological rigor, this study follows Schreier's (2013) eight-step framework:

1. Deciding on your research question
2. Selecting your material
3. Building a coding frame
4. Dividing your material into units of coding
5. Trying out your coding frame
6. Evaluating and modifying your coding frame
7. Main analysis
8. Interpreting and presenting your findings

4.3 Material and Timeframe

The material used for analysis are the annual action plans from 2023-2024 and the EU human rights and democracy reports. In total 18 documents were examined. The material was systematically selected from primary sources, which are selected on the basis of authenticity, independence, simultaneity and tendency along with one secondary source the EU human rights reports, they were selected in order to provide more detailed information on the role of human rights.

Furthermore the EU human rights report was selected rather than other options due to it coming from the EU and this study concerns the EU. Authenticity concerns the source being produced in the context of and by the author's claim. Independence is examined through the author's proximity to that which the source concerns, as well as their capacity to verify its narrative on its own. In order to address the risks of post-rationalisation, the rule of simultaneity prioritises sources that are recorded during an event or close to it. Tendency requires a systematic analysis of the political environment and circumstances that might taint the sources (Esaiasson et al., 2012, p. 291, 292, 294 & 295). The timeframe of documents that is to be examined is 2023-2024 (European Union, 2023).

4.4 Coding Frame

The categories/labels were crafted through the operationalisation of constructivist terminology; they are based upon identity and normative structures. This is to ensure that there is a strong and clear link between theory and empirical practical execution of the analysis. The constructivist terminology was translated into being as functional as possible in the material selected; this is to make it as applicable as possible (Schreier, 2023). The labels are based on framing from the constructivist perspective and how the EU projects its own ideals on Vietnam and China.

Constructivist theory means that political identities are relational and constitutive; meaning that political identity exists in opposition to or in favour of another actor. For example, the EU is in favour of the rules-based international order and frames its relations through this. Which leads to the EU finding intersubjective agreement with authoritarian states that are content with the current global system and finding disagreement with states that are not. Identity is treated here as a relational and constitutive category; to apply this, the study examines the EU’s ascribed traits in official discourse to the polities concerned. Specifically, the application focuses on the systemic framing by categorising authoritarian states in ways based on its own framing and values based judgements. The coding frame is constructed through examining what constitutes EU political identity and examining its

application on authoritarian states from a constructivist perspective (Barnetts, 2020, p. 195) (Parsons, 2018, p. 82-83).

Identity/Systemic rival; informs behaviour and framing the EU as labeling China as a systemic rival and mentions systemic rivalry frequently. It is justified by the theory through political identification with rule of law, human rights and democracy which the EU means China is lacking. (Parsons, 2018, p. 81) (Parsons, 2018, p. 82-83).

Normative self projection is justified by a similar process through constructivism; attention to norms and identity. In the material the EU frequently mentions the good it seeks to do and has done, therefore framing itself as "the good guy", which through constructivism can be explained using political identity construction. States see themselves as being good. However, depending on which aspects that constitutes a state's identity, what is considered good differs depending on varying identities. (Barnetts, 2020, p. 195) (Parsons, 2018, p. 82-83)

Othering continues along the same trail. In order to construct a political identity states must be able to distinguish themselves from rivals and other forms of governance, thus they otherise. It is a part of identity construction and assertion. Each time the EU otherises a state it asserts its identity and legitimacy. (Barnetts, 2020, p. 195) (Parsons, 2018, p. 82-83)

Systemic divergence is justified through applying its own ascribed traits on another polity in terms of defending the rules based international world order from a threat. (Barnetts, 2020, p. 195) (Parsons, 2018, p. 82-83)

The label reform concerns how reform capacity influences the construction of a rival or a partner. International engagement is an important dimension which is a core constituent in EU's identity, due to it being core to maintaining the rules-based order requiring democratic leadership from an EU perspective (Barnetts, 2020, p. 195) (Parsons, 2018, p. 82-83).

Liberal principled engagement. The EU being a liberal democratic actor frames its engagement through liberal principles. When engaging with authoritarian states the EU finds intersubjective meaning of where it can align with an authoritarian state through common interests or values (Barnetts, 2020, p. 195) (Parsons, 2018, p. 82-83).

De-legitimisation. A state needs to distinguish its identity from other states in order to create and assert its own identity. This is done through differentiation which in turn leads to de-legitimisation (Barnetts, 2020, p. 195) (Parsons, 2018, p. 82-83).

Regional stability. This label was added due to the emphasis placed on international order reflected in EU political identity, as well as the role of international norms and obligations in the rules-based world order (Barnetts, 2020, p. 195) (Parsons, 2018, p. 82-83).

Historical justifications. Due to norms playing such a big role, what is considered normal is influenced by how long a relationship has lasted, the longer a relationship lasts the easier it is to further develop (Barnetts, 2020, p. 195) .

Constructivist categories	**Code label**	**Rule**	**Discursive indicator**
Identity Construction	Systemic Rivalry	Framing the state as fundamentally different from the EU and its member states	References to a clash of values or other values-based rhetoric
	Normative Self-Projection	The EU frames itself as a force for good or referencing its normative power through human rights rhetoric	Use of phrasing like rules-based world order or European values, as well as promoting EU leadership

	Othering	Using political identity to distance itself from the other state	Referencing the authoritarian political system of the other state
Normative Allignment	Systemic Divergence	Claiming that the other state is attempting to realign or reforge the world order	mentioning reshaping the world order or international architecture, or challenging multilateralism
	Reform	Rhetoric concerning internal reforms in the authoritarian state aligns with EU standards.	References to compliance with liberal values, such as labour standards or capacity building
	Strategic Partner	The EU seeks a partnership in strategic sectors with the state	Mentioning Strategic partnership and cooperation at large, as well as shared strategic ambition
Logic of Appropriateness	Liberal Principled Engagement	EU actions are justified by classifying them as being right rather than profitable	justifying trade through human rights reforms or internal law compliance
	De-legitimisation	Seeking to de-legitimise the authoritarian state	Use of terms like repressive/repression, dictatorship, distorter or threat to democracy
	Regional stability	Framing issues or actions around the promotion of regional stability	Use of language to promote regional stability or the preservation thereof
Relational Context	Historical Justifications	Utilising history to justify the current relationship	Terms like long-term partnership/friendship, to overcome past grievances

			or issues, as well as a shared history of multilateralism

4.5 Validity

In empirical social sciences validity remains a significant challenge due to the issue of having to navigate theoretical language to practical application. Validity is generally defined as the alignment of an indicator and its definition or the absence of systemic errors or simply measuring that which was intended. It is however most effectively understood as two distinct categories, concept validity and result validity. Concept validity refers to the alignment between theoretical abstractions and empirical indicators selected for a study in order to measure abstract theories. First they must be operationalised which occurred in this study in the theory section and coding frame. In order to reach validity there is an established link between the empirical and theoretical parts in the study. Through the operationalisation of the theory and the material which is up for study was gathered systematically in order to ensure the absence of errors (Esaiasson, et al. 2012, p. 57-63).

5. Analysis

5.1 China

5.1. EU-China Relations: a Brief Overview

In the 2023 European Commission's Action Plan the areas of cooperation and contention are clearly laid out. For the EU, China is a partner, competitor and a systemic rival; therefore, the EU pursues a multifaceted policy where maintaining

balance, reciprocity, and mutually beneficial trade is the priority. Thus, the EU is committed to de-risking, not de-coupling like its American ally is pursuing. The EU seeks to achieve a well-balanced systemic rivalry with fair competition through a strengthened unified China policy from all member states of the union. This means that the EU is diversifying its trade relations where necessary, the necessity is measured by how critical its dependency on China is. Issues of market access for European companies and unfair treatment of European business and capital are creating an uneven playing field that needs to be addressed (European Commission, 2023a, p. 4-5). The EU engages China on many global challenges in order to promote its own values, some examples are, engagement with China on global challenges, including climate change and biodiversity conservation, global health and pandemic preparedness, development financing, and debt sustainability also remains crucial. Furthermore the EU is engaging China in order to promote multilateralism and the United Nations (European Commission, 2026).

5.1.1 EU - China Areas of Cooperation

The EU and the Chinese have announced many forms of cooperation, product safety and environmental standards that need to be addressed for deeper economic cooperation to take place. On the other hand, both sides are committed to actually enhancing economic and regulatory cooperation in agricultural policy and rural development (European Commission, 2023a p. 4). The EU maintains that China is a key country to secure cooperation within environmental issues and it has shown historical willingness to do so along with the normative alignment of reform. The EU and China are aligning in the Circular Economy Action Plan, which aims to improve resource conservation and recycling. The EU aims to increase cooperation in fighting water scarcity and combating the trade of illegal wildlife in order for China’s development not to come at the cost of its biodiversity. The EU is therefore aiming to align Chinese policy with its own standards, however incrementally. Which in turn is another example of normative alignment of

reform. The EU considers itself to be a leader on climate change (European Commission, 2023a p. 4-19) and thus its political identity constitutes climate leadership which in turn means that it sees policies through that lens since identity informs policy (Parsons, 2018, p. 81) (Barnett, 2017, s.195,).

The EU maintains high-level digital policy dialogue with China in pursuit of solutions on matters of common or global interests, which are as follows: climate change, environment and global health, all of which are increasingly influenced by digital solutions (European Commission, 2024a, p. 4). The EU seeks to create an Intellectual Property dialogue group with China to cooperate and facilitate technology exchange and align legislation in order to improve Chinese legislation to international standards. Cooperation on climate change intellectual property legislation is especially important as it is part of "matters of common or global interest" along with environmental research and global health and disease control (European Commission, 2024b, p. 4-5). The EU maintains a lot of high level diplomacy with China in search for solutions to what it calls "matters of common or global interests, which are as follows: climate change, environment and global health. This means that the EU through finding middle ground with its rival is searching for what itself calls a well balanced systemic rivalry. This balance is about ensuring competition can exist fairly and that no side amasses too much power (European Commission, 2024b, p. 4-5).

The EU considers this desirable for a multitude of reasons but mainly because it views China as indispensable in many global issues like climate change and environmental issues globally and this indispensability means engagement. This approach is further exemplified by the multifaceted approach to China as explained by Ursula von der Leyen in the 2023 state of the union speech, rivalry and cooperation and the need for de-risking, not decoupling (European Commission, 2024c, p. 4). However, in 2023 at the EU-China Summit, the trade relations were discussed along with global challenges, including continued cooperation on the emission trading system which is a very important climate policy initiative. It aims to be able to cope with greenhouse gas emissions in a

more effective way going forward by helping China meet its Paris Agreement commitments. Aiding China in this way aligns with the EU's interests and the European Green New Deal. This is because the fight against climate change is a shared responsibility and an effective EU-China partnership is key for the future of our planet (European Commission, 2024c, p. 4).

The aforementioned framing of the partnership speaks to liberal principled engagement because of its foundation being built for what the EU considers to be a force for good and its goal of aiding China in these endeavours means that it is based on being right rather than profitable. The EU and China have had a long standing cooperative relationship in the field of labour laws. They have cooperated on this issue since 2008 and share a strong commitment to combat social issues in the field of employment. Both parties have developed structured policy dialogues, including on occupational safety and employment. This means, in turn, that two labels fit here: historical justifications and reform. Reform is further exacerbated by the fact that the European Commission points out that China has introduced several major reforms in the fields of labour laws, social security, pensions, mobility of workers and occupational safety and health. In these fields, the EU is regarded as a world benchmark on which it provides expertise and shared experiences with Chinese leadership in the making of such a policy reform (European Commission, 2024d, p. 3). Whereas historical justifications are only mentioned explicitly.

5.1.2 EU - China Areas of Contention

5.1.2.1 Human Rights

The EU once again maintains that human rights are core to its identity. The supply chain of critical raw materials is no stranger to human rights abuses in both production and extraction. Regarding an actor like China, this becomes problematic; it maintains that human rights are a country's "internal affairs" rather

than an issue concerning the international community. China stands for a state-centric and relativist notion of human rights “with Chinese characteristics”, in which political stability, harmony, subsistence and economic development and growth are at the centre, with human rights being relegated to the sideline, especially rights concerning the civil and political (European Commission, 2024b, p. 8).

Because of this discrepancy the EU seeks to promote European values and interests in its bilateral relations with China, which is supposed to guarantee engagement without China losing its principles (European Commission, 2024d, p. 8). This rhetoric surrounding European values is textbook identity construction through using such rhetoric the EU otherizes China while also engaging in liberal principled engagement due to EU engagement with China being justified through the spreading of values. Furthermore engagement with China remains peculiar for the EU as human rights and women’s rights are fundamental values of the European Union, and China representing a far more state centric worldview it therefore wont come easy for China to align its legal frameworks to the international standards of ratification and implementation of international human rights treaties is of utmost importance for the EU (European Commission, 2024d, p. 8, 11).

As Human rights remain a fundamental part of its identity and thus a normative self projection paired with an othering, occurs through the Chinese perceiving human rights as an internal issue and the EU’s strong disagreement with that notion. For the EU-China relations, these human rights are a core aspect even though they disagree upon whom they concern (Parsons, 2018, p. 82-83) . The EU aims for a human rights-based approach covering every human right to inform its relationship and dealings with China. The point of this is to reduce discrimination in China based on immutable characteristics. Furthermore, activities, including policy dialogue between the EU and China, will aim to strengthen the inclusiveness of policy dialogues as well as an accent on the importance of the rule of law, good governance, transparency and anticorruption. This was

mentioned under the label Democracy (European Commission, 2023a, p. 11) the EU is highly concerned with these issues due to the vast differences in conception of human rights between the EU and China, however, in order to keep engaging with China the EU needs some form of justification which is the liberal principled engagement where the EU actively pushes for legislative reforms within China in order to make its own engagement have any moral bearing in its own worldview due to its identity being constituted of human rights as a liberal principle and therefore engagement with states that disregard these becomes highly problematic without some push for reform in the partner country (European Union, 2024, p. 186) (European Commission, 2023a, p. 11). The EU's means to align the Chinese legal framework with international standards is key in this regard due to the aforementioned reasons. The EU means to shape the dialogue on human rights as universally recognised as a core aspect of China-EU relations. Furthermore, the attainment of human rights, including, rule of law, liberal democracy, peace and conflict prevention, along with resilience and stability in partner countries, even more so in China are key objectives (European Union, 2024, p. 185-186) (European Commission, 2023a, p. 11).

The specific term liberal democracy stands out here as it points to the label systemic rivalry, especially in its context of being paired with the rule of law and peace (European Commission, 2024e, p. 7). Systemic rivalry is exemplified through this differing notion of rights and the role the state should play. Because of the promotion of liberal democracy and human rights, the EU remains firmly committed to the promotion of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in China. Some examples of this commitment and of the liberal principled engagement, as well as the commitment to reform in China, are the following: The EU has sent its delegation to Beijing to address bilaterally with Chinese authorities about the issues. EU attention is also aimed at anniversaries of the Tiananmen Square event and the sentencing of human rights defenders from China who were merely exercising fundamental freedoms. The EU still calls for their unconditional release. Furthermore, EU diplomats have tried to attend human rights defenders trials but have been denied entry into courtrooms. The listing of

four individuals and one entity from China under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime as part of a wider package of listings has been extended for another year on 2 December, until 8 December 2025 and is based on their involvement in serious human rights violations and abuses in Xinjiang (European Union, 2024, 186).

Now one might ask if the EU is so committed to Human rights why do they still even engage with China if all of these flagrant violations take place in the country. It is because there is more to EU identity than human rights and there is more to this relationship than human rights (European Union, 2024, p. 186). The EU states that China does not respect the obligations it has made under international and national law to uphold and protect as well as fulfil human rights and fundamental freedoms. This is a very clear example of de-legitimisation due to its rhetoric concerning the fact that the Chinese state does not meet the obligations it has made paired with the message of repression the EU is sending. This de-legitimisation is demonstrated once more through the mention of the EU remaining concerned about political re-education camps, mass arbitrary detentions, widespread surveillance, tracking and control measures, systemic and severe restrictions on the exercise of fundamental freedoms. Furthermore, this de-legitimisation goes deeper through the EU, mentioning death penalty and forced labour schemes, forced abortion, torture and sterilisation remain large issues. Birth control and family separation policies as well as gender based violence remain especially widespread in Xinjiang, the EU brings up some of the worst human rights abuses China stands accused of committing which serves in addition to delegitimisation, it could also be argued that the EU is othering China. The EU is seeking to differentiate itself as an actor from the kind of actor China is due to the aforementioned state-centric view China has in turn created a situation in which human rights are internal matters (European Commission, 2024b, p. 8). The situation in Tibet remains dire it was also demonstrated by reports about the forced relocation of rural Tibetans, In addition to previous amplifications of the de-legitimisation the EU continues in detailing how investments in hydropower by the Chinese government in Tibet had a detrimental impact on Tibetan cultural

assets, such as monasteries (European Union 2024, p. 185) which serves as amplified de-legitimisation paired with othering in combination with the Chinese government's systematic violation of the right to freedom of religion or belief, notably about the accusation of house churches not registered under the Government of being illegal, and declaring that offerings made to these churches were fraudulent remain as critical issues. The EU therefore others and (European Union 2024, p. 186).

5.1.2.2 International Developments

China's role as a global creditor has arisen with failure to meet international standards set by other global organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the Development Assistance Committee (DAC). This makes impact assessment difficult due to the aforementioned lack of financial credit transparency. China is an important actor in development aid and loans to the global south; however, officially, China does not consider itself to be a donor and therefore does not use the systems of the aforementioned global organisations (European Commission, 2023a, p. 4-5).

The EU maintains that meeting international obligations and standards are paramount to maintain credibility. This criticism levied from the EU fits under the label systemic rivalry due to its nature concerning a great power not meeting the standards the EU considers paramount for great powers to meet. The EU, which maintains its concern with international norms, views any violation of them especially by a great power as a worrying development which threatens the rules based world order, this is because relevant EU identity principles in this regard are international rules and norms and human rights (European Commission, 2024b, p. 8).

There are indicators of the aforementioned grievances fitting with the label systemic divergence due to the EU and China, in this perspective detailed by the European Commission. They share very different priorities on the matter of how the international credit system should be organised. This could be because of the state-centric worldview the EU accuses China of having integrated in its politics. The EU lacks this state-centric perspective because of its focus on multilateralism and an international rules-based perspective. This is because these ideas constitute EU identity (European Commission, 2024b, p. 8).

5.1.2.3 Geopolitics

Recent ambiguous Chinese laws, such as the Foreign Relations Law and Anti-espionage law, create difficulty for European companies operating in China to meet EU due diligence obligations and therefore hamper economic growth for both due to fears of legal issues and fear. Geopolitical tensions surrounding Russia are a major point of contention, as increased Chinese convergence with Russia strains relations. These laws, paired with China's alignment with Russia, strain the relationship and create discord and otherisation through the critique of the laws and their consequences. Furthermore, a sign of systemic divergence is that the EU Commission president has called for China to use its leverage and call for a just peace and end the Russian invasion of Ukraine (European Commission, 2023a, p. 4-5). This signals a clash of values since they have taken very different stances on the war.

Further examples of systemic divergence, rivalry and rhetoric concerning regional stability is the rhetoric surrounding the intensification of the systemic rivalry. Systemic rivalry paired with increased competition due to sanctions and economic coercion against Lithuania as well as heightened tensions in the Taiwan Strait. Furthermore, China’s position on the Russian war against Ukraine continues to make EU unity on its China policy paramount to maintain credibility and leverage in order to keep the systemic rivalry and competition well managed in support of core EU values and interests.

Recalibration of policy is necessary due to the evolving circumstances, including China's own actions and posturing, which further adds to the issue of stability. The EU has its desired way of dealing with geopolitical issues through multilateralism and international obligations, and when these methods, tied to its identity, are disregarded, the stability of the system the EU puts its faith in is at stake. (European Commission, 2023a, p. 4-5).

The EU aims to systematically monitor and analyse Chinese investments in critical raw materials (European Commission, 2024f, page 4) which does not reflect positively on EU-Chinese trade relations in this field. The EU economic strategy aims to de-risk from China due to the EU considering China to be a quasi-monopolistic supplier of critical raw materials. Furthermore, this issue gets tied into human rights due to the EU seeking to develop a digital monitor system to study Chinese investments and Human rights violations (European Commission, 2024f, p. 6). This de-risking fits the systemic rival label as well as the otherisation label due to China by its nature of being a rival and the EU seeking to disentangle itself from China.

In sensitive sectors China gets othered for not being a "normal country". On the other hand China has gained great control over the global supply of critical raw materials in line with its "Two Markets, Two Resources" strategy, which aims at securing foreign markets for its produce while protecting its own market from foreign produce. These policies impact EU economic interests negatively, especially the competitiveness of EU industries due to dependence on China's critical raw materials investments. These policies further demonstrate the complexity of these relations and mainly so in their negative light due to what the EU sees as unfair standards. This is what we call systemic divergence due to both states playing the game by different rules (European Commission, 2024f, p. 6).

The EU seeks to ensure that China delivers on shared international commitments and adheres to international norms and standards. Meanwhile China has its own

standards which it views as legitimate and that international standards can't stand above its own due to its state centric (European Commission, 2024d, p. 8).

5.2 Vietnam

5.2.1 EU-Vietnam Relations a Brief Overview

The EU describes the rule of The Communist Party of Vietnam as a government which maintains a strong hold on power through combining economic development, stringent legislation, direct control of the Vietnamese military and internal security apparatus, and strict control of media and the mechanisms of which to keep civil society in check. The free participation of civil society and the private sector in policy-making processes remains limited due to the increasing bureaucratic controls and restrictions in civil society operations. The EU details the undemocratic Vietnamese political system yet does not de-legitimise it, instead it describes Vietnam as a country wishing to be seen as a reliable actor and partner by promoting the rule of law in its legislation and participating in the multilateral rules-based order when its interest aligns with it. Therefore, the EU appeals to reform and its own normative power through normative self projection paired with liberal principled engagement (European Commission, 2024g, p. 4-5).

5.2.2 Areas of Cooperation

The EU seeks to improve its image in Vietnam by increasing its visibility on the national and local levels of government. The EU considers democracy, human rights, security, sustainability and equality to be shared values which speaks to normative self-projections, regional stability and liberal principled engagement. This is because if from the EU's social construction of Vietnam, the country shares those values, then there is not so much space left for values-based hostility, due to these aforementioned values all being core principles the EU claims to guide its policy (European Commission, 2023b, p. 4-5). Furthermore, the EU frames its engagement on the basis of the international order, and that the EU

seeks alignment with Vietnam and other Asia Pacific states in order to protect the international order and face these global challenges. Furthermore, the EU-Vietnam relationship is from the EU's perspective, conducted through a human rights-based approach where the EU actively seeks to promote good governance, rule of law and human rights. So far it has seen some reforms based on this model. The EU conducts values-driven communications with Vietnam (European Commission, 2023b, p. 6).

Vietnam stands within ASEAN as a significant strategic player in enhancing the EU involvement in the region. It is the country in South East Asia which is party to most agreements with the EU. In the context of an accelerating geopolitical and geostrategic shift in the region, the EU has responded with its Indo-Pacific and Global Gateway Strategies. Furthermore, the EU will deepen its engagement with Vietnam to promote a rules-based international order, a level playing field, and an open and fair environment for trade and investment. Cooperation on tackling climate change and building connectivity with the EU. The rhetoric of Vietnam as a strategic player in enhancing EU involvement and seeking to deepen engagement with in pursuit of the rules-based world order serves to demonstrate the liberal principled engagement (European Commission, 2024h, p. 4).

Vietnam seeks to comply with its international obligations regarding respect for and observing of social, climate, environmental and human rights. Its most recent promise on climate change mitigation was the Vietnamese Prime Minister's announcement of "net-Zero by 2050", made at the 2021 UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow, thus Vietnam is represented as a good partner which cares about reforms and the international rules-based system thus justifying further normative self-projection. The EU and Vietnam are expanding on three decades of partnership; Through the rhetoric of build-ing upon three decades of partnership and positioning itself as a core ally and helping to build a rule-of-law-based Vietnam, three labels are applied once more: historical justifications, normative self-projection and liberal principled engagement (European Commission, 2024i, p. 3).

The EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA), this relationship has surpassed traditional aid into a sophisticated strategic alliance. Through the use of its role as the lead development partner in questions concerning justice reform. The EU is actively advancing Vietnam's alignment of domestic legislation with international human rights standards, specifically targeting the protection of women and children through the Gender Action Plan (GAP III) (European Commission, 2023d, p. 3) which further demonstrates the reform label, liberal principled engagement and normative self projection through the rhetoric of the EU actively pushing for these legislations framing its engagement out of concern for international human rights standards further signify these aforementioned labels (European Commission, 2023d, p. 3).

This EU strategy respects that while Vietnam has made strong economic strides, major challenges remain for Vietnam, particularly in issues of ethnic minorities' rights recognition and the economic situation which represents 70% of Vietnam's poor, paired with the legal restrictions that in many cases prioritise state interests over individual freedoms. These uneven developments in economic standards invites EU liberal principled engagement and normative self-projection through cooperation on a multi-layered dialogue with Vietnam, which includes the European External Action Service (EEAS), national agencies, and civil society. This multi-layered strategy guarantees that reform does not remain a top-down mandate but a process involving a wide range of stakeholders representing society at large through platforms like the Legal Partnership Forum (European Commission, 2023d, p. 3).

5.2.2.1 Legislative Improvement

The EU has on its agenda an institutional reform programme for Vietnam in order to strengthen its governance through empowering the rule of law further in the Vietnamese political system. The EU by its own words have taken the position as Vietnam's primary partner in advancing the Vietnamese justice system. Which

demonstrates a historical justification for reform thus both labels suit this rhetoric as well as normative self projection through the EU framing its engagement as advancing the cause of rule of law (European Commission, 2024j, p. 5)(European Commission 2023d p.4). This entails the EU sharing its expertise with Vietnam in pursuit of justice system reforms. Furthermore the EU claims that they have witnessed a dramatic increase in good governance and rule of law since its market-oriented shift (European Commission, 2023d, p, 4).

These dramatic improvements are what laid the groundworks for the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreements. These developments are textbook examples of the labels reform, liberal principled engagement as well as normative self-projection. Through the liberal principled engagement, the EU promotes reforms and has seen in its own words, dramatic improvements which in turn reinforces its normative self projection where it frames its engagement as a force for good in other countries (European Commission, 2023c, p. 5). Furthermore, when Vietnam adopted its Doi Moi law (the market oriented reforms). Since then, many areas of the judicial and legal praxis have shifted from socialist to Western models. Part of the law on the organisation of the People's Court of 2014, court precedents were formally recognised as sources of law (European Commission, 2023c, p. 5).
The "Decent Work" agenda and the increased professionalisation of the Vietnamese labour market is necessary due to the fact that the majority of Vietnamese workers remain in the informal sector; thus the EU is utilising European expertise through twinning programs for the expansion of the Vietnamese social insurance coverage and strengthening social protection. The EU, through once again positioning itself as the leader lending aid by referring to its expertise performs normative self-projection. This Team Europe initiative aims at the elimination of unacceptable practices that are prevalent in Vietnam, such as child labour and therefore foster an inclusive business environment where the European business community has the possibility to play an active role in Vietnam (European Commission, 2023c, p. 3).

Ultimately, through the emphasis on the why behind its actions, shared values, sustainability, and human development, the EU aims to solidify its reputation as Vietnam's most trusted partner in shaping a stable and prosperous international order (European Commission, 2023c, p. 3). These are prime examples of the EU of the labels reform and liberal principled engagement since the reforms are not focused solely on profit even though the reduction in illicit work would increase tax revenues and thus benefit both Vietnam and the EU in the long run. It is framed as an agenda which seeks to strengthen social protection and insurance which is less about profits and more about what is good, therefore liberal principled engagement works (European Commission, 2023c, p. 3).

5.2.2.2 Human Rights

Vietnam has so far ratified 7 out of 9 fundamental UN human rights conventions as of 2023. It was considering joining the final two, being the convention against enforced disappearance and the protection of migrant workers. Vietnam has shown a willingness for reforms and compliance with improving its human rights situation. Out of 291 recommendations received during its UN universal periodic review mostly regarding civil and political rights it accepted 241 of them (European Commission, 2023d, p. 5-6). This willingness for human rights reforms creates a reciprocal feedback loop in which the Vietnamese keep the Europeans interested in further engagement and backing in return for reforms or promises of reforms (European Commission, 2023d, p. 5-6).

5.2.3 Areas of Contention

Despite the aforementioned dramatic improvements. The Vietnamese economic development has not really led to even development. Issues of minority poverty still remain and the Vietnamese constitution clearly states that democracy and human rights are what the state seeks to uphold. However, an extensive body of

repressive legislation remains, which serves to uphold “the policies and interests of the State” (European Commission, 2023d, p. 5). These issues uneven discriminatory development paired. The Vietnamese legal system, especially in areas such as criminal law and its procedure heavily draws upon socialist legal theory which in turn means that the judiciary is still not independent like a liberal constitutional court. This lack of court independence remains a big issue for the EU due to its reformist agenda, which is propagated in Vietnam, one must keep in mind its a work in progress however the EU is still seeking to carry it out and remaining systemic differences cause contention. Even though these issues persist, such as the political nature of the judicial appointment process, the EU continues its engagement due to the aforementioned dramatic improvements, which foster more liberal principled engagement. However an otherisation occurs where it is mentioned that the political process of which Vietnamese judges are appointed leads to malpractice and corruption (European Commission, 2023d, p. 5).

Furthermore, issues such as the death penalty, freedom of expression and the safety of human rights activists remain significant human rights issues for the country. This adds to the otherisation of and de-legitimisation of Vietnam, due to its different political system, state-centric worldview yet willingness to reform some issues become very hard to reconcile, how does Vietnam continue to pursue reform while maintaining its political system? How much reform is necessary? Many questions arise in this issue. From the EU’s perspective, these issues remain relevant as well due to the necessity for the EU to pursue political reform in Vietnam; it demonstrates a striking willingness to cooperate despite these remaining divisive issues (European Commission, 2023d, p. 6).

The EU-Vietnam relationship has evolved from a trade relationship into a sophisticated, multi-faceted relationship based on dialogue covering sensitive topics such as human rights and rule of law (European Commission, 2023d, p. 6). However, many issues remain, one of which relates to coordinating and monitoring the progress of the recommendations. The lack of a Human Rights Action Plan for reporting under all major UN treaties, which is delegated to one

specific entity. This lack of an action plan and space for reporting efficiently has led to politically sensitive human rights reform recommendations remaining on hold for years. For example, recommendations falling under the Convention Against Torture (CAT), and nine recommendations under UPR on the death penalty, concerning the reduction in the amount of crimes. However, many accepted recommendations received by Vietnam that are related to the category of civil and political rights, such as the right to a fair trial, freedom from torture, equality before the law and due process, remain on hold or are still being discussed. This lack of engagement on promises frustrates the relationship, yet still keeps the EU engaged and feeds into the reciprocal feedback loop of maintaining liberal principled engagement and feeding normative self-projection through the promises actually being made and progress being achieved in other fields rather than sensitive political rights. Because Vietnam has demonstrated in the past that it is open to reform in many areas and this history of positive improvements in the issues of human rights and systemic improvements feeds further engagement (European Commission, 2023d, p. 7-8).

Furthermore, the EU notes a major issue in Vietnamese civil society where as it stood as of 2023, civil society organisations are dominated by government-tied groups and free civil society organisations lack space to operate freely on their own terms due to a restrictive political environment. This framing falls under de-legitimisation through the language of restriction; the rhetoric serves to demonstrate the restrictive, illegitimate action of another state to motivate changes. The EU considers freedom of organisation to be a crucial step for enabling human rights and democratic governance in Vietnam to grow. Which in turn demonstrates the reform label, liberal principled engagement as well as normative self-projection through the EU pursuing reform in Vietnam. It falls under the reform label, paired with liberal principled engagement due to it engaging with Vietnam to further good liberal values and normative self-projection through positioning itself as a leader over a junior partner it aims to help reach the international standard (European Commission, 2023c, p. 8). Despite Vietnam proclaiming itself as an active promoter of peace, security and

human rights in the world, significant challenges remain in the human rights and gender equality agendas. Vietnam has not yet achieved its own targets in relation to women's representation in the Vietnamese communist party's committees (European Commission, 2024k, p. 4). These failures adds creates space for further liberal principled engagement and reform yet through the same feedback loop as mentioned before yet does lead to otherisation because without having the government you push for reforms within already lacking them there is no space for reform and then there is no other just a we (European Commission, 2024k, p. 4).

The "Decent Work" agenda and the increased professionalisation of the Vietnamese labour market is necessary due to the fact that the majority of Vietnamese workers remain in the informal sector; thus the EU is utilising European expertise through twinning programs for the expansion of the Vietnamese social insurance coverage and strengthening social protection. The EU through once again positioning itself as the leader lending aid by referring to its expertise performs normative self-projection. This Team Europe initiative aims at the elimination of unacceptable practices that are prevalent in Vietnam, such as child labour and therefore foster an inclusive business environment where the European business community has the possibility to play an active role in Vietnam. Ultimately, through the emphasis on the why behind its actions, shared values, sustainability, and human development, the EU aims to solidify its reputation as Vietnam's most trusted partner in shaping a stable and prosperous international order (European Commission, 2023, p. 3). These are prime examples of the EU of the labels reform and liberal principled engagement since the reforms are not focused solely on profit, even though the reduction in illicit work would increase tax revenues and thus benefit both Vietnam and the EU in the long run. It is framed as an agenda which seeks to strengthen social protection and insurance, which is less about profits and more about what is good, therefore liberal principled engagement works (European Commission, 2023c, p. 3).

6. Findings

The study aims to examine how the EU constructs authoritarian states as systemic rivals and strategic partners. Through the application of a qualitative content analysis paired with the international relations theory of Constructivism. Conclusions based on the thesis's analysis part will be drawn China first and Vietnam second.

6.1 China: Systemic Rival

The systemic rivalry with China is a complex construction depending on a lot of factors as to how it is constructed. The EU frames its liberal principled engagement with China through attempting to promote its own European values in the country and promote cooperation on certain "matters of common or global interests", which goes to show that certain issues are considered above geopolitical disputes and can be worked on together. Furthermore, normative self projection is conducted in concert with reform through the promotion of international standards and attempting to get China on board on issues where it could adopt reforms in line with international standards. However, The EU and China already see strong cooperation on the "matters of common or global interests" especially in environmental issues, climate change, global health and the historically justified long-standing cooperation on labour laws.

Systemic divergence is mainly applied to the different approaches to trade. The EU favours multilateralism and a level playing field in terms of market access whereas China has its "two markets, two resources" policy which from the EU's perspective, derails market competition into a game of protectionism where free market principles are disregarded away.

Otherisation as a rhetorical technique is frequently used by the EU in the discourse surrounding China; it is applied in order to distance itself from Chinese actions considered that breaks with the self conception of the EU and its

principles. This is mainly utilised concerning human rights or repressive legislation adopted by China. De-legitimisation however is almost exclusively used when discussing human rights due to rhetoric surrounding the failure of China to meet its obligations or the action itself. For example when the EU criticises China for viewing human rights as an internal affair it is an attack on its legitimacy from the perspective of the EU due to its identification with human rights and the international rules-based order which considers human rights legislation not to be merely an internal affair, rather a universal one. Therefore the "systemic" form of this rivalry depends on a combination of factors where the lack of political reforms enacted by China though its relationship discourages the EU from deeper engagement politically (not on matters of common or global interest) paired with the state centric worldview that China propagates internationally through its assertive stance and "two markets, two resources" policy. Therefore the rivalry is systemic in the way that the EU and China share different perspectives on how the international order should look like, that is, if states take precedence over international norms or conventions like those the EU represents through identifying with the rules-based international order.

6.2 Vietnam: Strategic Partner

The EU applies normative self-projection frequently through using international standards of human rights and in rule of law. The EU applies rhetoric of utilising its own expertise in order to help Vietnam reach the standard that the EU wants to reach. Liberal principled engagement is used to justify why the EU stays engaged with Vietnam despite Vietnam being a one-party state. Engagement is therefore justified through political reform and spreading European values rather than simply the relationship bringing a profit-based engagement for cheap labour. The reform label is often applied but as the label says only when discussing reform. However, Vietnam has seen a lot of political reform through its relationship with the EU. The EU has through this history of the Doi Moi reforms to the "decent work" reforms of the modern day paired with the judicial reforms. This creates a lot of space for historical justifications to be used to justify further and deeper

engagement which the EU doesn't shy away from applying. These "three decades of partnership" really have had a deep impact on these relations. The EU even refers to Vietnam as a strategic ally in the Asia Pacific. One could liken it to a reciprocal feedback loop where Vietnam promises reforms to feed the liberal principled engagement to keep the EU invested due to the long history of reforms making the EU feel confident that future even more expansive reforms are possible.

Otherisation is applied when using terminology like "socialist legal theory" and when discussing vast legal differences like the death penalty or corruption in the judiciary, this rhetoric separates the Vietnamese socialist system from the Western one or of the international. De-legitimisation is applied when detailing the Vietnamese political system however it is swiftly paired with liberal principled engagement through shifting the focus away from its repressive state to its history of reforms and the future potential for deeper collaboration and reforms taking place. The strategic partnership with Vietnam is based on the fact that Vietnam has shown commitment and capacity for reforms however incrementally and lacking Vietnam has been on specific commitments for example on freedom of speech. It has promised the EU and shaped its relationship on human rights obligations, judicial reforms, labour reforms and trade. However, Vietnam does share a state centric worldview with China, and has been willing to commit to reforms nonetheless at a much larger scale than China.

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