

Climate Cooperation or Challenge: European Media Perception of China in the Context of Climate Change

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Abstract

The relationship between the European Union and China is increasingly characterized by economic competition and political challenges, leading the EU to frame China as a “systemic rival” (European Commission, 2019). Nevertheless, climate cooperation between the EU and China has become all the more crucial. After the U.S. announced its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in 2017, both parties saw the opportunity to step in and take a leading role in the international climate agenda. On the one hand, both countries recognize the need for cooperation concerning climate change. However, on the other hand, rising economic and political challenges complicate cooperation. Considering this puzzle, it is important to evaluate if Member States’ views on China in the area of climate change have become more negative and dominated by other challenges, or if China is still seen positively in this area. Therefore, the paper aims to answer the following question: How does European media frame China in the context of climate change? To this end, this paper conducts a media analysis by looking at newspaper articles from Germany, Italy, and Poland. The aim is to identify the prevailing framing of China, ranging from a necessary partner in climate change to an economic or political threat. Developing an understanding of these perceptions is critical to examine the prospects of EU-China climate cooperation, whether it will become entangled in escalating economic and political tensions or whether, despite the fraught atmosphere, meaningful cooperation and joint action on climate change can still exist between the two actors. By combining both fields, the findings of the paper will contribute to the study of EU-China relations on climate change, as well as

European perceptions studies towards China.

Keywords: EU-China relations, climate cooperation, European perception, media frame analysis, interdependence, securitization

Introduction

As both China and the European Union have taken on greater roles in global politics, the importance of their relations has grown substantially. Official diplomatic relations started in 1975, initially being exclusively economic (Griese, 2006, p. 545). However, the establishment of political engagement did not take long to follow; the agreement of the EU-China Strategic Partnership was signed in 2003 (Dorussen et al., 2018, p. 288). While trade relations remain the most important strand of the EU-China relationship (Freeman, 2022), the issue of climate change cooperation has become an increasingly important area of cooperation in the last two decades (Gurol, 2022). EU-China climate cooperation was first institutionalized in 2005 with the establishment of the EU-China Partnership on Climate Change (Liu et al., 2019, p. 246). Cooperation on this front particularly gained momentum after the breakthrough of the Paris Agreement in 2015, with the EU presenting itself as a “lead actor” and China acknowledging its role and responsibility in the global climate agenda (Gurol, 2022, p. 118; von Lucke, 2023, p. 3). Cooperation was further advanced with the U.S. announcing its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in 2017 (Gurol & Starkmann, 2021; von Lucke, 2023). In this context, Liu et al. (2019, p. 246) deemed EU-China cooperation a “cornerstone of multilateralism” and a potential “role model for other economies.” Cooperative elements, however, is only one aspect of the EU-China relationship.

Alternatively, as a consequence of globalization,

growing interdependencies, and new emerging security challenges (Gurol, 2022, p. 3), EU-China relations are becoming more strained, making cooperation difficult (Stec, 2022; Feng, 2022). The increasing importance of the technology market leads directly to further economic competition between the EU, the U.S., and China (Aktoudianakis, 2022, p. 14). Moreover, with the deepening U.S.-China rivalry, geopolitical tensions, and the Ukraine war, the EU finds itself in a new position—it has to redefine its role as well as its partnerships with China (Oertel, 2020; German Council on Foreign Relations [DGAP], 2022). This is also reflected in the EU's designation of China as a “cooperation partner”, “economic competitor”, and “systemic rival” (European Commission, 2019, p. 1). This affects EU-China relations, which are shaped by both shared interests and politico-economic challenges (Gurol, 2022). Furthermore, Chen and Gao (2022) observe securitization trends towards China among EU Member States. The challenging atmosphere is also reflected in the last two EU-China summits—both of which are rather unsuccessful and tense (Gurol, 2022, p. 11; Stec, 2022).

Nonetheless, climate cooperation seems to have fallen out of this trend. Lampe et al. (2022, p. 29) argue that “While recognizing the current tensions in the wider EU-China relationship, there is a strong joint interest to collaborate on climate action [between the two parties].” Overall, the partnership on climate change is expected to be shaped by both multilateralism as well as economic interests—it is at the intersection of common goals and ever-increasing economic rivalries. This discrepancy in interests give rise to question regarding the prospects of EU-China climate cooperation. To develop a more in-depth understanding of such dynamics, examining the European perceptions towards China is crucial. Overall, the paper aims to answer the following question: How does European media frame China in the context of

climate change? This study seeks to answer this question by conducting a media analysis of newspaper articles from Germany, Italy, and Poland. The aim is to identify the prevailing framing of China, ranging from a necessary partner in combating climate change to an economic or political threat. The findings will contribute to the discussion of EU-China relations by providing a framework of perception towards China in relation to climate change. This approach not only assess the context of major narratives being present in European media but also identify the prospects of EU-China partnership on climate change. The paper is structured as follows: First, the paper will provide an overview of key debates within EU-China relations and European perceptions on China. Based on the literature review, the paper will develop a framework comprising of different frames of perceptions towards China. Then, this framework will be applied to three different cases, namely discussions in German, Italian, and Polish newspaper articles, to identify their perception of China in the context of climate change. The last section provides a summary of the findings and a discussion of their implications on EU-China climate cooperation.

1. Literature Review

This paper builds on three strands of literature: the broader debate on EU-China relations, EU-China climate cooperation, and European perceptions of China. The following section provides an overview of the relevant literature, with a more detailed discussion of selected contributions.

Previous research agrees that the most important strand of EU-China cooperation is in the realm of economics (Smith, 2016; Michalski & Pan, 2017; Freeman, 2022). Freeman (2022, pp. 245–246) points out that both the EU and China agree on the fact that their relations are important and that the economic aspect is the most dominant one. With economic relations being the starting point of the EU-China relationship, scholars argued that spill-over effects could be observed with cooperation

extending from the economic to the security sector (Dorussen et al., 2018). Currently, EU-China cooperation consists of an economic, a political, and a security pillar (Gurol, 2022, pp. 1–2). While the EU initially see economic relations with China in a mostly positive light, the potential for conflict soon became clear (Freeman, 2022, pp. 250–251). Whereas the EU puts emphasis on economic partnership and opportunities with China, economic imbalances are increasingly noticed (Freeman, 2022, pp. 258–259). Thus, scholars identify a shifting perception of China within the EU shaped by economic competition (Freeman, 2022, p. 257; Lai, 2023).

Gurol (2022, p. 78), however, argues that EU-China relations have evolved beyond trade to becoming potential security partners. In his view, two co-existing yet contrasting visions have emerged in the EU's approach towards China. On the one hand, the EU acknowledges is China's rising global importance and its interdependence with China—the organization between the two actors, perceives China as a “necessary counterpart” (Gurol, 2022, p. 80). On the other hand, Gurol (2022, p. 80) notes that China is simultaneously—and increasingly—seen as a “‘rival’ or ‘competitor’” within the security field. In addition, Kelleher (2022, p. 22) highlights that, in recent years, the partnership between the EU and China has increasingly been perceived as imbalanced, leading the EU to take a more practical approach that aims for fairer cooperation via addressing asymmetries.

Chen and Gao (2022) observe that securitization moves vary across Member States. However, the prevailing view in most Member States is that China poses a security threat in the economic sphere, particularly in the technology sector (Chen and Gao, 2022, p. 207). With respect to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Lai and Cai (2022) note that public perceptions diverge even within Central

and Eastern European countries, despite their shared participation in the 16+1 format. This is also reflected by Turcsanyi's (2017, p. 719) work, who found different perceptions of China among Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic but common interest in Chinese energy investments. In particular, he notes that the frequency of discussions on China's political system and human rights situation vary potentially depending on their moral sensitivity. Moreover, Rühlig et al. (2018, pp. 15–17) argue that policy approaches to China differ due to Member States' historical legacy, economic relations with China, and Chinese pressure.

As for exchanges on climate change, existing research deems it an area where congruences and differences between the two actors coexist: On the one hand, Scott (2009, p. 212) argued that among the many frictions in the EU-China relationship, the environment appears as a “convergent area” where consensus exists. Furthermore, he has pointed to emerging tensions between “[E]uropean commercial interests and environmental concerns” (Scott, 2009, p. 221). In fact, scholars often argue that both the EU and China share the same awareness and perception of the issue of climate change (Gippner, 2014; Bo et al., 2016; Gurol, 2022). Both perceive climate change as a security threat and acknowledge the need for common action and responsibility (Bo et al., 2016, p. 113; Gippner, 2014, p. 19; Gurol, 2022, pp. 120–122). Bo et al. (2016, p. 115) argue that these convergences facilitated climate cooperation between the two actors in its early stages. Institutionalized in 2005 with the EU-China Partnership on Climate Change, climate cooperation between the two actors takes place both globally and bilaterally.

On the other hand, cooperation is not only shaped by successes but also challenges. Here, Liu et al. (2019, p. 243) consider climate cooperation between the EU and China as double-edged. On the one hand, they see it as well-institutionalized, spanning multiple levels, successful in facilitating “exchange and understanding” (Liu et al., 2019, p.

248). However, they also acknowledge that the relationship is characterized by differences and challenges caused by differing political values, increasing competitiveness leading to economic conflicts and hindered technology transfer from the EU to China (Liu et al., 2019, pp. 249–250). Within this contrasting dynamic, Feng (2022, p. 78) claims that the EU hopes for increased cooperation in the matters of trade and climate change despite also being aware of increasing competition in the realm of technology and ideology.

In summary, there seems to have a general consensus among scholars that EU-China relations have become increasingly challenging in recent years. The EU and its Member States no longer see China merely as an economic trading partner, but also an economic and political competitor. Due to the close linkage of the climate change issue with trade, EU-China climate cooperation is affected by these growing tensions. However, the EU continues to have a strong desire to maintain and promote such cooperation, being aware of its necessity despite increasing competition. However, as possibilities for future cooperation become increasingly uncertain, assessing how EU Member States perceive EU-China climate collaboration bares strategic significance. While scholars have conducted studies on EU perception on China in the context of climate change (see Gippner, 2014), there has yet to be an exhaustive analysis at the member state level—such analysis will be crucial to provide further perspectives on EU-China climate cooperation. The paper therefore combines perception studies with the analysis of EU-China climate relations, aiming to assess whether climate change—as a traditionally “convergent area”—is affected by growing political tensions and economic conflicts between the EU and China, or if it remains a space for meaningful cooperation.

2. Theoretical Framework

To understand the current situation and

prospect of EU-China climate cooperation, this paper examines how European Member States frame China in the context of climate change. Analyzing perceptions is crucial, as framing influence policy outputs and are intertwined with them (Mišik, 2013; Freeman, 2022). Lai and Cai (2022, p. 306), drawing from social constructivist theories, argue that perceptions not only affect identity and interests but also policy decisions. Building on the literature on EU-China relations, this paper develops a theoretical framework comprising four different frames—understood as interpretive structures used by political actors, policymakers, and the media to construct meaning around complex phenomena—through which China is perceived in the climate context. The frames are derived from previous research on EU-China relations and their cooperation (see Gurol, 2022). They cover key aspects of the interdependence between the two regions, including both economic and political dimensions. The frames reflect two possible directions for framing China in climate change and shed light on the prospects for EU-China cooperation. On one hand, China may be seen as a necessary partner in climate change (interdependence frame), or as an economic partner offering trade opportunities for Europe (economic opportunity frame). On the other hand, China could also be perceived negatively as an economic or political threat (economic competition frame, securitization frame). The following section will outline each frame and present expectations for the results.

2.1 Interdependence Frame: China is Seen as a Necessary Partner for the EU in the Context of Climate Change

The EU and China has become increasingly aware of their interdependence in terms of trade as well as climate and energy security. As Gurol (2022, p. 125) notes: “a strong sense of ‘having no other choice’ than to cooperate” has emerged on EU side Feng (2022, p. 76) states that European countries have accepted the need for collaboration with China on climate change. Similarly, Liu et al. (2019, p. 248) point to various

initiatives and forms of EU-China climate cooperation that have been established on both the EU as well as national levels, which helps enhance dialogue and understanding. In addition, Liu et al. (2019, p. 251) stress that “cooperation is an optimal choice for both parties”— considering the urgency of climate action, the U.S. withdrawal from global climate governance, and the resulting momentum for the EU and China to position themselves more prominently on the international stage. Therefore, cooperating with China in combating climate change is self-evident for the EU. Such a view help cultivate a positive view on China, further hastening climate cooperation.

2.2 Economic Opportunity Frame: China is Seen as Creating Economic Opportunities for the EU in the Context of Climate Change

It can be argued that climate change and required responses are creating new economic opportunities for the EU. Liu et al. (2019, p. 245) state that China is a “large [...] export market for its [EU] clean energy technologies and services” which is growing further still, thereby creating more and more opportunities for the EU and its Member States. Gurol (2022, p. 128) also note that the “‘economization’ of climate and energy security” creates links between climate cooperation and technological development. In this regard, economic interdependence can be seen as a positive condition that facilitate further cooperation on energy and climate (Gurol, 2022, p. 126), which can help to further foster a positive view on China.

2.3 Economic Competition Frame: China is Seen as an Economic Competitor or Economic Threat in the Context of Climate Change

While some perceive EU-China cooperation on climate change as an economic opportunity, others view it in light of economic competition. Chen and Gao (2022, p. 204) argue that

economic institutions increasingly frame China as a threat, pointing to the dependence on imports such as raw materials, as well as the risk posed to the EU competitiveness in other markets. Freeman (2022, p. 246) states that the EU is troubled by an “unequal and unbalanced” relationship with China (see also Gurol, 2022, p. 51). Economic competition is thereby closely linked with the technology sector, which is particularly critical concerning climate change (Feng, 2022, pp. 78–79). Liu et al. (2019, p. 250) echo that China’s increasing competitiveness has caused tensions between the two actors: the EU is increasingly concerned about intellectual property rights, while limited market access to China curbed benefits for European companies, making cooperation less attractive (Liu et al., 2019, p. 250). Gurol (2022, p. 129) adds that geopolitical tensions are likely to increase energy competition and thus negatively influence EU-Chinese trade relations. With trade and climate being closely interlinked, this competition could shed a negative light on China and broader EU-China climate relations.

2.4 Securitization Frame: China is Seen as a Political Threat to the EU Challenging Climate Change Cooperation

Within this frame, China is increasingly seen as a political threat challenging EU-China climate cooperation. The strategic partnership between the EU and China includes a political dimension, where their political values and norms clash (Maher, 2016). Values such as human rights and democracy are core principles of the EU and are deeply rooted in its foreign policy approach, but they are at odds with China (Maher, 2016, p. 963). In that sense, despite what can be seen as a mutually beneficial climate cooperation, the fact that China is progressively seen as a geopolitical and political challenge by the EU, causes all areas of bilateral cooperation to be seen in a negative light. Chen and Gao (2022) note that there are securitization trends towards China among European Member States. The two scholars note how the EU is framing China as an

“existential threat to its core political values such as human rights, democracy and rule of law” (Chen & Gao, 2022, p. 205). Cooperation on climate change can be increasingly challenging due to the interconnectedness between the political and economic spheres (DGAP, 2022, p. 4). Poggetti and Shi-Kupfer (2018, p. 40) highlight the case of Germany, where among politicians and within the business sector, China is perceived as a challenger of European political values. Additionally, Lamy et al. (2022, p. 8) argue that “geopolitical developments have seriously limited the room for constructive cooperation between the EU and China.” The framing of a (geo-)political threat could affect how China is perceived in the context of climate change, hindering further collaboration in this field.

After presenting the different frameworks, expectations for the results are shared. Apart from potential differences among the countries, it is expected that negative framings—notably securitization and economic competition frames—would have gained importance over the previous years, which aligns with overall trends in the evolving EU-China relations. The economic competition frame is expected to have gained ground due to the interconnected nature of climate cooperation and economic interests, despite the two parties having a shared responsibility and interest in combating climate change. Besides, with the EU being increasingly aware of the geopolitical challenges—connecting trade agreements with politics and political expectations (Maher, 2016, p. 972)—it is expected that such a factor would have an impact on EU-China climate cooperation. Such framing would shed a negative light on China, weaken the prospects of cooperation in the area. Yet, in the long run, it remains to be seen whether there is a sustainable shift toward a more negative image of China, and even if so, whether this completely replaces the perception of China as a necessary

partner—it could also be a complementary view.

3. Methodology

Taking into account data availability and the research scope, the study will concentrate on European perception on China, understanding the increasingly complexed EU-China dynamics from a European perspective. A media frame analysis will be conducted to analyze different existing frames regarding China in the context of climate change. The analysis draws on media discourses in newspaper articles from selected EU Member States, building on previous research on perception of EU-China relations (see Turcsanyi, 2017; Šimalčík, 2021; Lai & Cai, 2022; Lai, 2023). Following Neresini and Lorenzet (2016), media discourses are seen here as proxies of public opinion which is assumed to have a shaping role in policy-making (Burstein, 2003; Oehl et al., 2017). Details on the coding strategy are located in Table 1. The time frame of the analysis spans from 2015, the year of the Paris Agreement, to 2022, capturing the recent evolution of EU-China climate policy cooperation.

Three countries, Germany, Italy, and Poland, are selected for studying member-state-level perception of EU-China climate cooperation, which helps to present a representative picture of European media discourse. The three countries diverge in climate policy direction and their economic relationship with China. As such, they encompass a broad spectrum within the EU. In the overall Climate Change Performance Index 2023, which tracks the performance of European and other countries in the categories GHG Emissions, Renewable Energy, Energy Use and Climate Policy (Burck et al., 2022), Germany ranks 16th as one of the leading countries; Italy ranks 29th in the middle spectrum; while Poland ranks 54th, making it the country with the lowest score in the EU (Burck et al., 2022). As such, the selected countries reflect varying degrees of engagement in addressing climate change.

Their ranking remains consistent across the category of climate policy, which may highlight the perceived importance of climate issues among the public. This perception can, in turn, influence attitudes toward cooperation with China in this domain.

Moreover, the countries' economic interconnectedness with China varies, displaying a wide range of existing attitudes in European countries when engaging with China. Zenglein (2020) argues that the benefits of China's rise are the greatest for Germany. However, this also means that Germany is one of the most export-dependent countries from China (Zenglein, 2020). Hence, climate change has become a vital aspect of German-Chinese cooperation (Poggetti & Shi-Kupfer, 2018, p. 39). Montesano (2019, p. 150) argues that the economic relations are sensitive to normative disagreement due to Germany's strong value-based approach. This is echoed by Rühlig et al. (2018, p. 13) stating that the country's political leadership is active and vocal regarding policy action towards China. Such an approach is reflected by the current German government's decision to classify China as a "partner, competitor and systemic rival", similar to the position of the EU (Feng, 2022, p. 77). Italy also holds important economic relations with China and is the first G7 country to join the Belt and Road Initiative (Chen & Gao, 2022, p. 207). With considerable benefits from, and perhaps necessity for, Chinese investments, Italy has to trade off between maintaining its political values and its trade relations with China (Casarini et al., 2018, p. 52). However, Casarini et al. (2018, p. 53) assert that public opinion in Italy is rather unfavorable towards China which, in turn, supports a rather vocal strand in its China policy. Similarly, Poland's relationship with China is predominantly defined by economic considerations (Rajca, 2022). Poland has close ties to China because of its

participation in the Belt and Road Initiative and the 16+1 format, which was established in Warsaw (Rajca, 2022, p. 8; Montesano, 2019, p. 153). Public opinion was quite unfavorable towards China until stronger relations were established in 2008 (Szcudlik, 2018, p. 68). Recently however, geopolitical tensions between Poland and China have been growing due to Poland's alignment with the U.S. during the pandemic, which was further compounded by its anti-Russian stance on the Ukraine war (Rajca, 2022, pp. 8–10). Based on the outlined methodological and case selection, the analysis is carried out in the following section.

Table 1: Operationalization of Frames

Name of category	Content description	Category application	Examples of application	Delimitations
Interdependence frame	China is seen as a necessary partner for the EU in the context of climate change	multilateralism, China as partner, shared interests, emphasis on dialog and cooperation with China	"vital partner" (Gazeta Wyborcza [GW], 2021a), "essential partner" (Süddeutsche Zeitung [SZ], 2022e), "the fight against climate change is an example for shared interests" (SZ, 2021a)	China framed as necessary partner without reference to climate change
Economic opportunity frame	China is seen as creating economic opportunities for China in the context of climate change	EU-Chinese trade or investments, China creating economic opportunities for national/European companies, establishing companies, Chinese market open for EU	"climate battle actually offers an extraordinary opportunity" (La Corriere della Sera [CS], 2018b), "great business can be done with sun and wind" (SZ, 2018b)	China framed as economic opportunity without reference to climate change
Economic competition frame	China is seen as posing an economic competitor or economic threat to EU in the context of climate change	concerns about competitiveness of EU firms, unfair/imbalanced competition, economic conflict, dependence on China, China overtaking the EU, China taking the lead in economic sector, technological race	"fight for leadership in environmental policies and technologies" (CS, 2020d), "technological race" (GW, 2019a), "China [...] is considered to be Europe's biggest rival" (GW, 2021h)	China framed as economic threat without reference to climate change
Securitization frame	China is seen as a political threat to the EU in the context of climate change	China as systemic rival or political threat	"fight against climate change becomes an element of hegemonic confrontation" (CS, 2021e)	China framed as political threat without reference to climate change

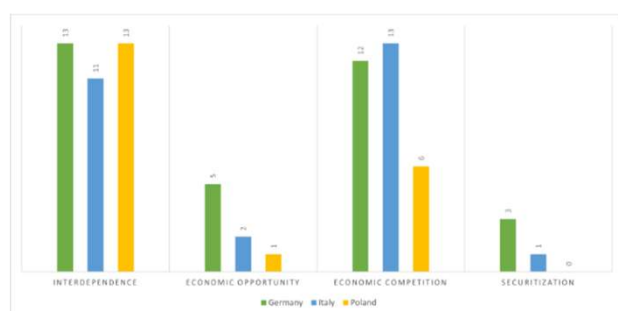
Note. Author's own visualization.

4. Empirical Analysis

The findings are based on the analysis of 67 articles in total include pieces from Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ, Germany), La Corriere della Sera (CS, Italy), and Gazeta Wyborcza (GW, Poland). For each of the selected cases, a national, non-tabloid newspaper was chosen that has the highest circulation and is available on LexisNexis Uni. To find the data, a keyword search was conducted for each newspaper in

the respective language, containing the keywords “climate” and “China.” To further narrow down the search to ensure a comparable number of articles across cases, specific inclusion criteria were applied: the time frame 01/01/2015 to 31/12/2022, a word count of more than 500 (only for Poland), and opinion pieces (only for Germany as including only opinion pieces for Italy and Poland would have resulted in a small n). Within the articles, which represented the unit of analysis, it was examined if one or more of the frames were prevalent. Articles containing none of the frames were excluded. Figure 1 shows the frequency of the frames according to the cases. The results of the analysis for each country are presented below, followed by a summary of the findings.

Figure 1: Frequency of Frames



Note. Author’s own visualization.

4.1 Germany

In the analysis of 23 articles from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), the interdependence (13) and the economic competition frame (12) were the most prevalent. The economic opportunity (5) as well as the securitization frame (3) were rather marginal. In addition, no major difference in the frequency of certain frames over time was visible.

The interdependence frame in the German articles emphasized China as a partner of the West on confronting climate change challenges (SZ, 2016a) and stressed their

shared interest (SZ, 2017c; SZ, 2021a). The similarities in climate action were described as a field of exception among other more fictitious topics (SZ, 2017a). The need for cooperation with China was especially present after the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement in 2017. Around that time, many articles picked up on this and stated the need to ‘stay together’ concerning the Paris Agreement (SZ, 2017b). Emphasis was put on the aspect that the EU and China are standing on the same side, in contrast to the U.S. (SZ, 2018). However, this did not change after the U.S. rejoined the international climate regime. From 2021 on, the analyzed articles called for further cooperation with China to achieve meaningful climate action. Notably, they have stressed collaboration between the U.S. and China, calling China an “essential partner” despite also being a systemic rival (SZ, 2022b; SZ, 2022d; SZ, 2022e). Following the most recent Conference of the Parties in 2022, reporting about China in the context of climate change peaked in German media and calls for the need of cooperation with China were reinforced. The articles championed the necessity of Chinese participation in the international climate regime, arguing that global climate protection measures are impossible without China (SZ, 2022f).

The second most dominant frame among analyzed articles is economic competition. The theme is most apparent when discussing competition for technological innovations and concerns about the German electric car industry. China is seen as a threat to the German car industry not only because it has surpassed Germany in electric vehicle production (SZ, 2015; SZ, 2017d), but also because it is emerging as a strong competitor in renewable energy and technology (SZ, 2017c). This dynamic has fostered economic dependencies and heightened anxieties within Germany regarding its reliance on China. Furthermore, the articles expressed concerns over the possibility that the German car industry has missed out on necessary changes

towards electromobility (SZ, 2017f). In line with this, China is repeatedly described as ‘in the lead’ and ‘overtaking’ Germany and Europe in economic terms (SZ, 2015; SZ, 2019). Furthermore, emphasis was often put on the competition over technologies between the EU, the U.S., and China (SZ, 2017c; SZ, 2021a). An additional dimension of this economic rivalry lies in China’s restrictive policies, especially those that hinder technology transfer (SZ, 2018).

However, China in the context of climate change is not only perceived as creating economic competition. Germany’s car industry can also benefit from China’s enormous market with abundant economic opportunities (SZ, 2019). As a consequence, China is also seen as an attractive investment market (SZ, 2021b). Interestingly, climate change is also framed as an economic opportunity for both China and the EU, which creates incentives to cooperate in connection to the interdependence frame (SZ, 2016b). Meanwhile, the securitization frame is hardly presented in the analyzed newspapers. Even if it appears in the context of climate change, it is strongly connected to the economic competition with China. Although not part of this analysis, China is more often framed as a political threat in the newspaper apart from the context of climate change. This suggests that in relation to climate change, which is closely connected to the economic realm, actors choose to concentrate on the economic consequences and draw a line from the political realm.

The analysis of the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* showed no particular development in the direction of increased economic and political tensions with China regarding climate change. Instead, it demonstrated consistency in perceiving China as a necessary partner in climate change and an economic competitor in the green technology sector.

4.2 Italy

Similar to findings in the German newspaper, the interdependence (11) and economic competition frame (13) are most frequently found in *La Corriere della Sera* (CS). The economic competition frame was identified twice and the securitization frame once. Again contrary to expectations, there are no striking differences in the distribution of frames along the time span.

Although China is rarely framed as a partner in the context of climate change (CS, 2021b), its important role and the need for its contribution is acknowledged (CS, 2017a; CS, 2020a). China is regarded as a driving force for climate action (CS, 2016b). In addition, the Italian newspaper attributes growing importance and influence on China in the context of climate change: “Thanks to Donald Trump, China is now positioned as a world leader also in environmental protection and in defense of the climate agreement” (CS, 2017a). Furthermore, there are strong calls for further engagement of China in climate action, with certain accounts claiming that “without China [fighting climate change] is just a utopia” (CS, 2021d). Such rhetoric mostly addressed joint climate action on the international stage and stressed the need for cooperation between Italy and China (CS, 2017b; CS, 2020c).

Within the economic competition frame, it can be identified that fear exists for the increased economic influence of China—it is even perceived as a threat (CS, 2021a; CS, 2021c, CS, 2021e). Moreover, concerns about economic competition on climate change (technology) between the U.S. and China are expressed (CS, 2020d). It is even referred to as a war for technological dominance between the two (CS, 2018a). It can be stated that the economic competition frame occurs most of the time in the context of solar and other renewable energy technologies (CS, 2017c). The articles express concerns about a “solar race” and a changed balance in the economic renewable sector (CS, 2016a; CS, 2018d). Also, the consequences of

Chinese technology are looked at with concern (CS, 2018c). As a result, emphasis is placed on supporting the growth of the EU battery sector in order to reduce dependence on China (CS, 2020b). In addition, in contrast to the German media debate, the Italian economic competition frame relates more often to EU-China trade relations than between Italy and China. Nevertheless, China is still sometimes framed as a potential threat to the Italian economy (CS, 2021a).

The economic opportunity frame was identified twice, highlighting economic cooperation between the EU and China as well as the opening of the Chinese market for the EU (CS, 2020e). Climate change was further seen as an “extraordinary” strategic and economic opportunity for both actors (CS, 2018b).

Lastly, the securitization frame was only identified once. However, it is interesting that this is the case for the most recent article analyzed (CS, 2021e). Whereas other articles have identified China as a political threat outside the context of climate change, the connection between climate change and geopolitics was made only once. The article noted that “the fight against climate change becomes an element of hegemonic confrontation” (CS, 2021e).

The analysis of the Italian newspapers demonstrates a focus on EU-China trade relations when it comes to the economic competition frame, as well as a strong awareness that Chinese participation is needed for building an effective international climate regime.

4.3 Poland

The analysis of 20 articles from *Gazeta Wyborcza* (GW) showed a clear dominance of the interdependence frame (13), followed by the economic competition frame (6). The

economic opportunity frame was found once, and the securitization frame could not be identified at all. It should be noted that no articles from the years 2015 and 2016 could be found for the analysis. Instead, the selection of articles contains seven articles from 2020 and ten articles from 2021. This factor must be taken into account when considering the results.

Within the interdependence frame, similar to the German and Italian newspapers, the Polish newspaper stressed the shared commitment of the EU and China towards climate action after U.S. withdrawal (GW, 2017). Articles highlighted China’s climate declaration has a positive impact on global climate efforts, citing China’s initial heavy contribution to carbon emissions (GW, 2020b). The need for China to be involved in the global climate regime is expressed clearly: “without their involvement, the system is doomed to failure in the long run” (GW, 2020d). China is further called a “vital partner” (GW, 2021a). The dependency on China in the fight against climate change is also emphasized (GW, 2021e; GW, 2021f): “Without serious emission reductions in China, we will not win the fight against global warming.” (GW, 2021j) In addition, coordinated actions of the EU, China, and the U.S. for meaningful climate actions are seen as crucial (GW, 2020c). It is worth mentioning that in the articles, the interdependence frame is implicitly mentioned by warning from an increased use of coal plants by China (GW, 2020a) and the call for China “to do more” (GW, 2021e). Once again, there is a clear awareness that China must pursue a more climate-neutral path in order for global climate action to be effective.

The economic competition frame was also found in the newspaper, with certain articles framing China as “Europe’s biggest rival” in the hydrogen sector, which is necessary for building climate-neutral economies (GW, 2021h). The articles illustrate a renewable energy technology race between the EU, the U.S., and China (GW, 2019a, GW, 2019b). Lastly,

the climate opportunity frame was linked to portrayals of the EU as a climate power, influencing the technology sector through cooperation with China (GW, 2021i).

Interestingly, most of the references in the Polish newspaper focus on the international level, particularly on U.S.-China relations, while references to EU-China or Poland-China relations within the frames of interdependence and economic competition frame are scarce. The analyzed Polish newspaper articles showed China predominantly framed through the lens of interdependence, portraying it as necessary for global climate efforts, with a special focus on international and U.S. cooperation with China. Within the economic competition frame, the focus was mainly on competition in energy technology among the U.S., the EU, and China.

5. Discussion

The analysis leads to several findings. First, an overall shift towards a more negative framing of China in the context of climate change over time could not be found. According to the findings of this study, China was most often framed as an interdependent climate partner and economic competitor, while portrayals as an economic opportunity or political threat were less common.

Within the economic interdependence frame, China is seen as a necessary partner and ally in the fight against climate change. There is widespread awareness that China must contribute to global climate change. This is especially visible after the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement. Articles clearly expressed that in order to achieve meaningful climate efforts, China is needed in international collaborations. Often, there are calls for deepening cooperation. Consequently, it can be stated that climate cooperation with China is perceived positively, which creates

prospects for more climate cooperation in the future.

Regarding the second, economic competition frame, it can also be concluded that competitiveness plays an important part in the perception of China in the context of climate change. It is important to note that in the media discourse of different countries, the climate change issue is connected to different sectors of the economy. In the German newspaper, concerns mostly focused on the German car industry, the potential of a green transformation and renewable energy-related technologies. While the Italian debate highlights China as a competitor for the EU energy sector, the Polish debate is predominantly about the use and investment of coal in Poland and China. In all cases, the perception of China as a competitor in climate-related economic sectors is present, although with a country-specific focus. Country-specific divergence can potentially be a barrier to climate change cooperation with China if economic incentives and competition outweigh the perceptions of the benefits of climate cooperation with China.

In contrast to discussions on competition, the debate on economic opportunities created by climate change in regard to China has not been as pronounced. Although there is awareness of the economic opportunities created by climate change, these are overshadowed by perceptions of China posing an economic threat to European countries. Furthermore, contrary to the expectations, the securitization frame has not prevailed in the perception of China in the context of climate change. It seems that, unlike the economic sphere, the political relations with China are separated from the cooperation on climate change.

Although some articles showed securitization frames, they were not associated with the climate change debate and could, thus, not be included in the results of this paper. This puts forward the assumption that political realities are treated in a detached manner from the

discussion on climate cooperation.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that the European Union as an actor played a different role in the articles. While the Italian media debate concentrated on the EU's relationship with China, the Polish debate was dominated by a focus on the international level and the U.S.'s relations with China. In Germany, on the other hand, debates focused mostly on the national economy and relations with China as well as the broader EU-China relationship. This highlights the varying significance of the EU in national debates on climate cooperation and perceptions of China across Member States, reflecting differing degrees of European identity and nationally oriented perspectives in public discourse.

Lastly, no shift within the timeframe of certain perceptions of China is identifiable. As noted above, there is no particular change in the frequency of identified frames over time. The proposed assumption that the perception of China in the context of climate change shifted similarly to the general increasingly challenging view of China could not be verified. However, the clear salience of the economic competition frame can be seen as an indicator that there is awareness of the economic difficulties of EU-China climate cooperation.

Conclusion

The paper aimed to answer the question of how European media frames China in the context of climate change. The analysis of newspaper articles from Germany, Italy, and Poland showed that China is dominantly seen as a necessary partner on climate change as well as an economic competitor in particular in the climate-related technology sector. This indicates, firstly, that climate cooperation between the EU and China is based on a solid foundation of public support in European Member States, entails

a positive perception of China in this area, and makes further cooperation likely. Secondly, it shows how interlinked the topics of climate change and economy are and that this interconnectedness also poses challenges to EU-China climate cooperation. It is likely, however, that as long as the awareness of the urgency of the fight against climate change outweighs the economic concerns, EU-China climate cooperation can be enhanced and sustained. In light of recent geopolitical developments particularly in the U.S. it is worth considering whether the EU, amid growing pressure to assert greater strategic autonomy and uphold its sustainability agenda, might increasingly seek pragmatic engagement with China, especially if alignment with U.S. priorities becomes more difficult.

Nevertheless, the findings have to be seen in light of certain limitations. Although the cases were selected to make statements beyond the three cases only, it should be emphasized that this analysis cannot create a full picture of the European media debate on China in the context of climate change. Although it was deliberately decided to look at the national level to anticipate the limitation of treating "the EU as a unitary actor" (Gurol & Starkmann, 2021, p. 530), there are still many more cases, actors, and levels to be analyzed for a holistic picture to be formed. In this sense, it has to be recalled that the contribution of the findings is based on the claim that European media discourses serve as a proxy of public opinion which can eventually affect policy-making towards China. The author is aware of the limitations of this approach, thus further analysis should include additional sources such as government documents and expert interviews to capture more layers of European perceptions of China and their relevance for EU policy-making. Moreover, with the growing importance of newer media environments, future research could also explore social media and other non-traditional outlets, which may offer additional insights into how China is perceived in less formal and more publicly driven contexts.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the Chinese perception of EU-China climate cooperation has received no attention, even though understanding this viewpoint is crucial in order to evaluate the prospects of such collaboration. However, due to limited accessibility, the language barrier, and the scope of this paper, the analysis was confined to the European view on China; nonetheless, further research should be encouraged to address this gap.

To conclude, based on the analyzed perception of China, EU-China climate cooperation seems not to be caught up in geopolitical tensions and has despite certain economic fears on the European side potential for further effective partnership on climate change. The notion that there is no single, uniform image of the EU-China partnership was also emphasized in a recent statement by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (2023). Having examined the current European perceptions of China in the context of climate change, the future direction of EU-China relations remains uncertain. However, despite existing economic challenges, China is likely to continue being viewed as a critical partner in climate change cooperation, making continued collaboration in this area probable.

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Appendix A

ID	Newspaper	Date	Title
GZ, 2017	Gazeta Wyborcza	2017, June 1	USA po raz drugi w historii uciekają od odpowiedzialności za globalne ocieplenie
GZ, 2019a	Gazeta Wyborcza	2019, August 22	Węgiel znika z Europy, ale na świecie ma się dobrze
GZ, 2019b	Gazeta Wyborcza	2019, October 10	Czarna księga PiS
GZ, 2020a	Gazeta Wyborcza	2020, March 26	Za Trumpa USA zamykają więcej węglowych elektrowni niż za Obamą
GZ, 2020b	Gazeta Wyborcza	2020, September 29	Xi Jinping zaskoczył deklaracją ws
GZ, 2020c	Gazeta Wyborcza	2020, October 10	Chiny czempionem w walce ze zmianami klimatu - prawda czy fałsz?
GZ, 2020d	Gazeta Wyborcza	2020, November 10	Joe Biden nie może być drugim Obamą
GZ, 2021a	Gazeta Wyborcza	2021, March 4	Magiczne słowo na "L"
GZ, 2021b	Gazeta Wyborcza	2021, April 22	Szczyt "największych niszczycieli klimatu"
GZ, 2021c	Gazeta Wyborcza	2021, June 2	Budynki odpowiadają aż za 25 proc
GZ, 2021d	Gazeta Wyborcza	2021, July 14	Jak zapobiec zmianie klimatu? Partia Razem popiera pakiet "Fit for 55"
GZ, 2021e	Gazeta Wyborcza	2021, August 3	Trump osłabił "odwęglowanie" Chin
GZ, 2021f	Gazeta Wyborcza	2021, August 15	Klimat nie wytrzymuje
GZ, 2021h	Gazeta Wyborcza	2021, September 22	Rządy na całym świecie stawiają na wodór
GZ, 2021i	Gazeta Wyborcza	2021, October 27	Dlaczego UE jest światową potęgą w dziedzinie klimatu?
GZ, 2021j	Gazeta Wyborcza	2021, October 30	Zieleniejący Xi
GZ, 2022	Gazeta Wyborcza	2022, December 9	MAE: Świat przechodzi z węgla na słońce
CS, 2016a	La Corriere della Sera	2016, March 14	Fotovoltaico E ora tutti al sole Cina in testa nell'anno dei record
CS, 2016b	La Corriere della Sera	2016, November 28	Clima Le aziende Usa a Trump: 'Non tradire Parigi'
CS, 2017a	La Corriere della Sera	2017, January 18	Il nuovo ordine globale e il buonismo di davos
CS, 2017b	La Corriere della Sera	2017, February 25	Mattarella dalla Cina invita al dialogo: 'Stabilità essenziale'
CS, 2017c	La Corriere della Sera	2017, July 17	Il volto della cina ignorato; La potenza hi-tech
CS, 2018a	La Corriere della Sera	2018, January 15,	La Cina colma Il Vuoto lasciato Dagli Stati Uniti
CS, 2018b	La Corriere della Sera	2018, August 24	Come È possibile vincere la battaglia del clima; l'aumento delle temperature globali
CS, 2018c	La Corriere della Sera	2018, October 21	La Cina colma Il La Cina delle invenzioni lunari
CS, 2018d	La Corriere della Sera	2018, December 12	2018, l'anno peggiore dei gas serra



CS, 2020a	La Corriere della Sera	2020, January 13	Clima, l'Italia ha 300 idee Quanto ci costa non attuarle; Finanza Politica emergenze globali
CS, 2020b	La Corriere della Sera	2020, May 20	Alleanza Ue nelle batterie, parte la sfida a Cina e Usa L'Italia con Enel X e Faam
CS, 2020c	La Corriere della Sera	2020, December 14	Un super club del clima per un pianeta sostenibile
CS, 2020d	La Corriere della Sera	2020, December 21	Tra Cina e Russia le sfide inedite di Joe Biden; IL presidente Usa e un 2021 complicato
CS, 2020e	La Corriere della Sera	2020, December 31	Ue-Cina, intesa sugli investimenti Si aprono le porte tra i due mercati
CS, 2021a	La Corriere della Sera	2021, August 8	La svolta verde (e i timori); Il clima, l'economia
CS, 2021b	La Corriere della Sera	2021, August 15	Il futuro del pianeta è adesso; Clima e stili di vita
CS, 2021c	La Corriere della Sera	2021, November 1	'Misure concrete' sul clima: il G20 si impegna (senza data)
CS, 2021d	La Corriere della Sera	2021, November 1	Senza la Cina è solo un'utopia: più della politica, ci potrà aiutare la tecnologia
CS, 2021e	La Corriere della Sera	2021, November 10	Il mondo nuovo (e diviso); Noi, gli Usa e la Cina
SZ, 2015	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2015, December 12	Verkehr; Es stinkt was in Deutschland
SZ, 2016a	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2016, March 21	China; Furcht und Stille überall
SZ, 2016b	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2016, October 8	Klimaschutz, der Vertrag
SZ, 2017a	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2017, March 9	China, geplagte Großmacht
SZ, 2017b	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2017, June 2	Klima, Grotesker Alleingang
SZ, 2017c	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2017, June 2	Klima, Reich an Vernunft

SZ, 2017d	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2017, September 29	China, Peking entscheidet, alle folgen
SZ, 2017f	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2017, November 11	Autoindustrie, ein Sieg, der ihnen noch leid tun wird
SZ, 2018	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2018, May 24	China schwierige Freunde
SZ, 2017a	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2017, March 9	China, geplagte Großmacht
SZ, 2017b	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2017, June 2	Klima, Grotesker Alleingang
SZ, 2017c	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2017, June 2	Klima, Reich an Vernunft
SZ, 2017d	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2017, September 29	China, Peking entscheidet, alle folgen
SZ, 2017f	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2017, November 11	Autoindustrie, ein Sieg, der ihnen noch leid tun wird
SZ, 2018	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2018, May 24	China schwierige Freunde
SZ, 2019	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2019, March 20	Elektromobilität, Boss mit Weitblick
SZ, 2021a	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2021, July 27	China und USA, Nicht um jeden Preis
SZ, 2021b	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2021, November 16	Klimaschutz, Indien braucht Perspektiven
SZ, 2022a	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2022, April 24	Erneuerbare Energien, in Sachsen steht ein Windrad
SZ, 2022b	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2022, June 10	Klimaschutz, Hauptsache behutsam
SZ, 2022c	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2022, August 24	Grüner Wasserstoff, es wird Zeit
SZ, 2022d	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2022, November 12	Klima, das Experiment
SZ, 2022e	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2022, November 15	Handelspolitik, jenseits von China
SZ, 2022f	Süddeutsche Zeitung	2022, November 21	Klimagipfel, weniger als nichts

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