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## **Master thesis**

### **The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative: An analysis of three European Union countries' responses towards the Belt and Road Initiative**

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## **Abstract**

In light of China's global infrastructure project, the Belt and Road Initiative, which was introduced by President Xi Jinping in 2012 has five underlying ground principles. However, since its establishment this project has been controversially discussed by many. Whereas some regard it to be a supportive means to help elevate countries out of their economic setback and poor infrastructure, others refer to it as a tool to create monetary dependencies. Especially amongst the European Union, whose member states are also split in their opinion about the Chinese mega project too. To understand the reason behind the contrasting responses in the EU the thesis conducts a case study of three individual member states to grasp a deeper understanding of their underlying differences in opinions. A qualitative data analysis was carried out based on the data sampled for this research: State documents (press releases, interviews, speeches, and joint statements) released by the respective ministries of foreign affairs of the three chosen countries. Only documents which refer to the Belt and Road Initiative were consulted. Afterwards, through the theoretical framework established by scholars Carolijn van Noort and Thomas Colley, this will highlight the underlying differentiated responses through the lens of the theories of strategic narratives and ontological security and inherently answers the reason to why some states support the initiative and others do not.

Keywords: China, European Union, Case Study, Belt and Road Initiative, Strategic Narratives, Ontological Security, Material Benefit

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## 1 Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (hereinafter referred to as BRI) has been one of the most talked about Chinese projects in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In 2012 Chinese President Xi Jinping first mentioned the BRI during his visit in Kazakhstan at Nazarbayev University, where he gave a speech and said that a “nearby neighbour is better than a distant relative” (Wu & Zhang, 2013), setting the ground for what was going to come in the following years. Together with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Xi mentioned how this initiative was going to reach a mutual understanding of how transportation works in order to enhance “road connectivity” (ibid.). Once an agreement has been achieved, this connection should expand all the way from the Eastern part of Asia to the West and the South (ibid.). Moreover, he says that the initiative is open for whoever wants to join (Cheong, 2019).

Referring to the ancient idea of the silk road, this initiative is set to expand over the entire world to further the cooperation and development among the nations. The reason for the establishment of such a huge project is, to not only strengthen the economic ties of the participating countries, but to create a “community with shared interests, future and responsibility featuring mutual political trust, economic integration and cultural inclusiveness” (Shang, 2019, 2). Moreover, it is based upon five principles which are “policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructure and facilities, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and closer people-to-people ties” (ibid., 3), where emphasis is put upon eight areas, such as a connecting infrastructure, cooperation in the fields of economy and trade as well as energy resources and more. When talking about the BRI’s agenda, it is separated into two main routes. The first is ‘The 21<sup>st</sup> Maritime Silk Road’ and the other one is the overland-based ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ (ibid.).

By looking at its geographical expansion, the growth of the BRI is obvious. As of December 2021, the actively participating countries amount to 145 countries by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (hereinafter referred to as MoU), where the youngest joining country was Argentina in January of 2022, making it 146 (Nedopil, 2022). 42 countries are located in the Sub Sahara, 18 in the Middle East and North Africa, 20 in Latin America and Caribbean, 31 in East and Southeast Asia (Pacific) and 34 in Europe & Central Asia, of which 18 are in the European Union (hereinafter referred to as EU). (ibid.)

## 1.1 Understanding the split opinion on the BRI

Despite the rising numbers of BRI members, in recent years after the implementation of the BRI, criticism around the world has risen and left a split in opinions about the Chinese megaproject, where two major contrasting opinions prevail (Yujun et al., 2019).

On the one hand there are countries, who, until today are of the firm believe that the Chinese BRI is one of the world's biggest support mechanisms. As mentioned above the BRI is an infrastructure project to help developing countries as well as pulling weaker economic states out of poverty. For instance, Helsinki Times has commented and said that the BRI's success is most evident in "smaller-scale but highly targeted investments" (Helsinki Times, 2022), especially amongst the developing countries because their infrastructure is usually not as advanced as in other nations, and has therefore "been winning over the hearts and minds of the populations" (ibid.) of the participating countries. Others similarly say that there has been significant improvement generally in generating a strong infrastructure around the world, where projects in different areas, for example such as building energy pipelines or the railway expansion, inherently also bettered the economic situation of the countries (Jin, n.d.).

The Worldbank estimated that if the BRI were realized completely, it could possibly lift 32 million people worldwide out of poverty and has the power to increase the global trade up to 6.2 percent (Rebello, 2019). Moreover, positive comments about China's BRI were made on the scholarship programs provided. As Carnegie Dowment points out, since the implementation of these programs, Pakistani students studying in China have grown from 5000 in 2013 to 22.000 in 2018 (Yujun et al., 2019).

On the other hand, others in the world are of the belief that the BRI and inherently the Chinese government do not always have the best interest of other countries in mind.

The Center for Strategic & International Studies for example says that the projects conducted through the Chinese BRI were too quick, without previous reflection on how to sustainably hold long-term economic advantages. This is because many of the projects are too dependent on the aid of the governments and policies. Another argument they bring up is that the agents responsible for the implementation of the BRI projects puts China's material benefit, which they generate from these cooperations above the needs of the affected businesses, disregarding the worries of national governments or companies. (Jin, n.d.)

Moreover, Carnegie Dowment has commented that many countries consider China to be "engag(ing) in debt-trap diplomacy" (Yujun et al., 2019), especially with developing countries,

through its infrastructure project and creating a dependence of these countries. Moreover, it is because of this created dependency that China has reached influence in widening its geopolitical impact. Some even go so far and refer to it as the Chinese “Trojan horse” or a “reincarnation of nineteenth-century-style imperialism” (ibid.). The missing transparency of these projects implementations leads to much concern and could possibly end up weakening the governance and attract corruption. (ibid.)

Further many have criticised China for violating human rights abuses along their BRI. Human Rights Watch has commented that “the Chinese government should ensure the projects it finances or engages in under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) respect human rights” (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Others have also said that the BRI has caused massive environmental issues (Teese, 2018).

## 1.2 Problem Formulation

This kind of split opinion can also be seen in Europe, especially amongst the Eastern and Central European Countries (hereinafter referred to as CEE countries) and countries such as Germany or France. After the financial crisis in 2011, the CEE countries felt neglected by the EU and as a reaction turned towards China for help. However, albeit the believe that this partnership, the CEE countries have with China would spill over to the rest of Europe was not the case everywhere (Grieger, 2017). Although being part of the same union, such a split therefore also exists among the EU member states, which leads to the following research question as to *Why do different European Union member states respond differently to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative?*

To better understand the countries’ different attitudes, an in-depth analysis of different EU member countries’ official statements towards the BRI policy will lead to a more thorough understanding of the divergent opinions and therefore can contribute to understand whether there could be any fundamental underlying differences among the chosen countries.

## 2 Literature Review

Below literature will illustrate the research question *Why do different European Union member states respond differently to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative?* from various perspectives. Jason Young sees the reason why some countries do not buy into the BRI in the perspective of liberalism and realism. Yujia Zhao, May Tan-Mullins give suggestions how China could improve the reception of the BRI. Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin and Jinghan Zeng describe different attitudes in the EU and make suggestions for EU policy making.

Jason Young, in his paper *Strategic responses of Advanced Economies to the Belt and Road Initiative*, has identified that many regard the BRI as a measure to not only encourage regional trade but also enhance infrastructure and collaboration through economic and development partnerships. Nevertheless, he states that many have questioned the “strategic implications” (Young, 2018, 382) the BRI carries and how this could have an influence on the “norms and standards underpinning the regional economic and security order” (ibid., 382).

Therefore, his paper concentrates on the responses by “Western multi-party liberal democracies” (Young, 2018, 382) which often refuse the BRI by reasons of liberalism and realism and tries to answer why they respond the way they do. He is of the opinion that without any of these advanced economies, the BRI could potentially in the future be challenged in third markets and also face a growing “strategic competition/ rivalry” (ibid., 383) with the United States. Putting emphasis on these specific countries’ answers can be of advantage to follow their “strategic thinking and potential involvement, the reach and reception of the BRI as a strategic concept, as well as the areas most challenging and most in need of reform from the perspective of today’s advanced economies” (ibid., 383).

As he realises that liberalism and realism are the prominent theories used for these advanced economies his paper as he states focuses on “foreign policy frames” (Baylis et al., 2014; Young, 2018, 383). The reason he chooses to adapt a constructivist approach is because he wants to filter and analyse the prominent existing narratives affiliated with the BRI. After analysing the chosen states, his conclusion is that because the dominant theories such as liberalism and realism are usually used to study the BRI in combination with the universality of “Anglo-American concerns” (Young, 2018, 399) makes it difficult for the BRI to be received in advanced economies. More so, since there is only little representation of answers provided by advanced countries in regards to participation and contribution towards the BRI in connection to the limited knowledge of their responses about whether they perceive the BRI to be upholding “existing norms and standards” (ibid., 399), commentators as he states “have struggled to write themselves into the initiative, leading to critical and slow responses and thus a lack of buy-in from the advanced economies” (ibid., 399).

In their paper, *From the ancient Silk Road to the belt and road initiative: Narratives, signalling and trust-building*, scholars Yujia Zhao, May Tan-Mullins shed light on the international community’s mistrust towards China’s ambition to strengthen cooperation through its BRI. The article wants to answer the question as to “how trust may be bridged across differing



narratives in International Relations (IR), by linking the notion of strategic signalling with the Chinese concept of ‘brightness’” (Zhao & Tan-Mullins, 2021, 281). More so, what are the significant factors to shape the “success of strategic signals of trust-building” (ibid., 281). Trust in a strategic collaboration as the authors say is the outcome of various of signals and education, where “the signal sender’s honesty regarding self-interests and intentions, acts as the conditional factor” (ibid., 281). It demonstrates how building trust is an on-going process of “signalling and knowledge building” (ibid., 292). To create trust, the signal sender needs to make it suit the other party’s knowledge about the signal sender, only then is it possible to have a “good understanding of the sender’s cooperative interests” (ibid., 292) and then the receiver is able to trust the sender. In the case of the BRI, China has promised big infrastructure investments for their participating countries, but as the authors detected, this has not been met by the Chinese side. They say that many know about China’s potential but are not sure of their motives. To minimise this mistrust, China through its BRI needs to articulate what it wants and what its intentions are and continuously send signs of cooperation to support the receiver’s enhancement of knowledge of China and its BRI to further build trust and make the BRI a success. (ibid.)

In their book *One Belt, One Road, One Story? - Towards an EU-China Strategic Narrative*, editors Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, Jinghan Zeng have put together an analysis on the current relationship between China and the European Union, highlighting the Belt and Road Initiative. As they portray it, the world is currently under change not only in terms of world power but also in the areas of the existing political and economic models which have influenced the world since 1945. The book puts emphasis on power and communication, where the chapters focus on the three steps of strategic narratives which is the formation, projection and reception. The individual chapters then deep-dive into different stages “through (the) application to a particular dimension of EU-China relations or particular case study” (Miskimmon et al., 2021, 7).

One chapter which should be highlighted here is the second one by Alister Miskimmon and Ben O’Loughlin, called *The EU’s Struggle for a Strategic Narrative on China*. This chapter argues that the EU in the past has sort of let go of a unified narrative on European integration, holding back their strategic influence. However, their current relations to China could possibly be a new way of doing that. As they state it, “The EU needs a new ‘building block’ narrative based on a turn to greater pragmatism and pluralism to overcome its internal and external challenges” (Miskimmon & O’Loughlin, 2021, 21). Over time and due to its influence in the

past the EU managed to gain many followers and new members, however it is because of this high increase in member states that it has become difficult to uphold its own integrity which was disrupted “by a series of exogenous and endogenous shocks” (ibid., 21), such as Brexit or the Eurozone crisis for example. This has raised the question whether the EU can maintain to be important in the world without a unified strategic narrative. (ibid.)

The current rise of China and the inherent shift in global politics, has the world changing rapidly and going into a “stronger co-constitution of a new emerging order involving more powerful actors demanding a voice” (Miskimmon & O’Loughlin, 2021, 37) Therefore, as already mentioned the EU should potentially use this as a reason to strengthen their relationship with China. It is necessary for the EU to form a new “building block” (ibid., 38) narrative in order to dodge the uncertainty of the past few years and manage to renew their narrative approach to accomplish a “terrain for policy engagement with China and other leading states” (ibid., 38). By doing so this can help create “a sense of purpose and shared risk, forces engagement on matters of disagreement and mistrust, and can slowly create shared expectations about how cooperation can unfold” (ibid., 38) and actually make an EU-China strategic narrative evolve. (ibid.)

### 3 Methodology

This chapter gives an outline to understand how the following research is conducted. This paper’s design is based on a qualitative research approach, as it wants to highlight the different responses of EU member countries towards the BRI. It firstly considers why the theoretical framework chosen for this research is of importance and then uses a case study to conduct this research. As Bryman concludes qualitative data can support in giving a deeper and more structured explanation of the given case (Bryman, 2016, 60). Since this paper wants to examine different nations opinions, the thesis uses a comparative case study design. Hantrais has concluded that this type of research happens

“when individuals or teams set out to examine particular issues or phenomena in two or more countries with the express intention of comparing their manifestations in different socio-cultural settings (institutions, customs, traditions, value systems, life styles, language, thought patterns) [...]. The aim may be to seek explanations for similarities and differences or to gain a greater awareness and a deeper understanding of social reality in different national contexts” (Hantrais, 1996, 13).

The comparative design will reveal the uniqueness of each country and give the best possible insights, as to how the chosen country cases differentiate in their answers towards the Chinese BRI. To support the reveal of the cases, the data sampled is built upon a purposive sampling approach as a means of searching for data related to the country cases and describes this under the usage of a qualitative narrative analysis, as this paper is looking for what is being narrated by the individual countries towards the BRI. The below structure of the thesis will help to get a better grip upon the strategy followed for this research:

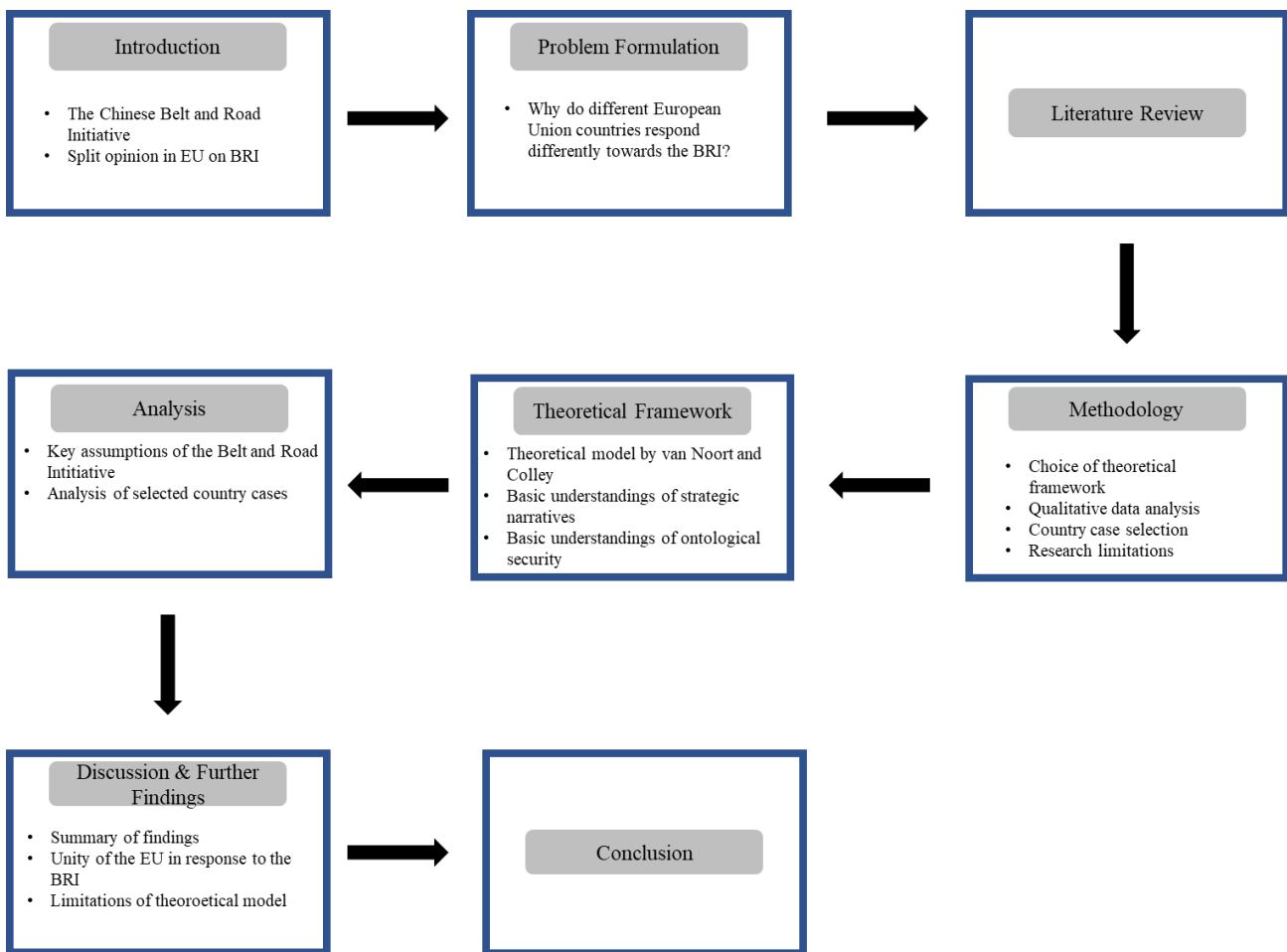


Figure 1: Thesis diagram: own source

### 3.1 Choice of Theoretical Framework and adopted theories: Strategic narratives and ontological security

Since the BRI is mainly and originally an economic cooperation initiative, the most intuitive analysis of the topic would be based on traditional theories such as liberalism or realism, however for this thesis, the referenced theories, which consider having authority over balance

or power while conducting international trade or democracy, in the sphere of international relations (Snyder, n.d.), the latter described theoretical model by the scholars van Noort and Colley is built upon theories derived from constructivism. The applied theories in this model are the strategic narratives heavily influenced by the three scholars Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin and Laura Roselle and ontological security which found a lot of recognition by Brent Steele, which are elements of a constructivist approach.

For a political actor, the goal of its strategic narrative is to influence someone, where the role of persuasion plays a dominant role and follows through a three-step process of formation, projection, and reception (Miskimmon et al., 2013, 2). From a traditional realist perspective, security in International Relations always considers that nation-states seek their own survival when stepping into relations with others and always, in consideration to their foreign policy decisions, have this in mind. Ontological security goes further and explores another aspect (Steele, 2007, 3). Although the physical aspect of security is very crucial for countries, ontological security cannot be disregarded, as it acknowledges the preservation of the self-concepts as the “‘self’ of states is constituted and maintained through a narrative which gives life to routinized foreign policy actions” (ibid., 3).

Where realists argue that the action of a state is only motivated by externally visible material benefits, poststructuralists and constructivists say that state actions are driven “by internally constructed ideas” (Mattern, 2005 as cited in van Noort & Colley, 2021, 46). Both do ultimately demonstrate the same logic, which is that “ideational and material power shape more or less ‘rational’ assessments of policy” (ibid., 46). However, the policy change through the adoption of a new policy is not referenced to as much in research. The following framework will explain how the crossover of both theories in connection to policy change will fill this gap (van Noort & Colley, 2021). More so, it is used to give a more holistic overview of a strategic narrative in a policy adoption act, as it raises the concern of “what aspects of one state’s strategic narratives are *sayable* by another state as the latter seeks to justify policy choices” (ibid., 45).

### 3.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis carried out below is based on empirical data chosen and derived from the respective countries ministries of foreign affairs (state) and are purposively sampled to answer the research question. Since this paper is based on a case study a thorough understanding of which country cases are selected is described below as data is exclusively chosen regarding those cases.

Since this paper aims to identify the responses of the chosen countries to the BRI. The BRI's very own strategic narratives are extracted from a speech given by President Xi Jinping during the 2017 Belt and Road Forum, where he presented the five principles of the BRI (policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructure and facilities, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and closer people-to-people ties), because these can be considered as the underlying goals that represents the core of the initiative. However, this information only serves as support for the actual analysis.

This basis then helps to identify how the three countries respond to the proposed strategic narratives by the BRI. The aspects of material benefit and ontological security are the indicators as to how the states justify the rejection or the acceptance of the BRI narrative. The analysis is conducted as follows. For each country, the statements referring to the Chinese BRI are evaluated through the lens of searching for a reference to 'ontological security' or 'material benefits. Based on the results the countries are clustered into a two-by-two matrix in a model developed by van Noort and Colley, which will be further elaborated in in the theoretical framework section.

### **Data Sampling**

The data used in the following analysis of the three countries is chosen based on the method of purposive sampling. Known to be a non-probability mode, purposive sampling deals with choosing different areas of units, which can be either "people, organizations, documents, departments, and so on" (Bryman, 2016, 408), that relate straight to the given research question in mind and give insights to what components should be selected for the analysis.

Since this thesis is about understanding how the different countries respond to the BRI narrative, the 'units' of analysis, so to say the data source, in this thesis are (state) documents such as press releases, interviews, speeches and joint statements of the chosen countries, which are extracted from the respective ministries of foreign affairs websites.

Documents derived directly from state officials are considered to be a good reference to use. as they are a "great deal of textual material" (Bryman, 2016, 552). In so far, the selected documents can be regarded as "authentic" (Scott, 1990 as cited in Bryman, 2016, 552–553) and therefore contribute much to the research work as they are truly reflecting the individual governments opinions.

## **Narrative Analysis as a specific form of Qualitative Data Analysis**

Since the analysed documents reflect the strategic narrative of the governments, the specific method applied in this thesis is the so-called narrative analysis. Considering that governments do not publish documents only to show their factual decisions but also their motivations and thinking behind certain decisions, it can be argued that those documents are in fact representing the strategic narratives of the respective countries, in this case in respect to the BRI.

A narrative analysis uses

“data that is sensitive to the sense of temporal sequence that people, as providers of accounts (often in the form of stories) about themselves or events by which they are affected, detect in their lives and surrounding episodes and inject into their accounts” (Bryman, 2016, 583).

It further raises the question as to “how do people make sense of what happened and to what effect?” (ibid., 589), because stories are always told with a certain purpose. This in-depth focus is needed to illustrate what the underlying motivations of countries are to adopt the one or other perspective. The deeper analysis will help to understand that there are nuances in perceiving the BRI which go beyond the simple question of, for example, signing an MoU

The present narrative analysis focuses on the one hand on the basic Chinese BRI narratives as formulated during the first Belt and Road Forum in 2017. It will in a concise overview introduce the main elements of the strategic narratives of the BRI, mainly reflected in the five principles. On the other hand, the country analysis will do two things: First it will analyse whether and in how far the countries join the strategic narratives of the BRI or to what aspects the countries agree on with the BRI narratives. On the other hand, in case of rejection it will try to establish in how far own strategic narratives of the countries may be seen in danger and which aspects they reject. In that sense it compares strategic narratives of the BRI with the strategic narratives from the chosen countries and analyses in how far they are motivated by aspects of material benefits and of ontological security.

### **3.3 Selection of country cases**

As mentioned above, this thesis will use a comparative case study, meaning it will compare several country cases. A country comparison carries the advantage that it can reveal the uniqueness of each country and give the best possible insights, as to how the different chosen country cases react towards the Chinese initiative.

For China the Central and Eastern European countries have always played a pivotal role in international trade, as they are considered to be the country’s “entry” (Hong Kong Trade

Development Council, 2016) into Europe and are considered to be “key partners in the Belt and road Initiative” (ibid.) Not least did they sign a cooperation between 16 EU countries and themselves, which is known under the 16+1 (1= China) cooperation. After the financial crisis, which lasted until 2011, the EU had done little to help the CEE countries out of their misfortunate situation. Unlike China, who sprung aside to aid, as they saw an opportunity to not only create a “bridgehead” (Grieger, 2017, 1) into the European markets, but to also use it as a chance to dodge “the EU’s high import duties and anti-dumping tariffs” (ibid., 1). As for the CEE countries they reciprocally opened themselves a door into the East to acquire new investments and opportunities to better their economic situation. Because the EU did not have the funding capacity, it came to the Balkan countries advantage to turn to China as they were also in the lookout for investing into modernising their infrastructure and transportation system as well as advancing their old energy and industrial buildings. These needs were ultimately met by China’s BRI (ibid.).

Hungary was chosen as the representative of the CEE countries. It was the first EU country to ever sign an MoU with China on the BRI and has been the first European country to establish relations with China after 1949. Under the 16+1 format Hungary is the fourth largest recipient in the area of rail and in 2020 China managed to become their largest foreign investor. Further Hungary and China have established many BRI projects but in the last three years have extended another four projects that will gain much in the future (Zhang, 2021). The given facts have made Hungary a rather interesting case to investigate.

Germany on the other side is not only the largest economy of the EU but it is also sharing a long-lasting relationship with China, especially under past chancellor Angela Merkel, Germany had close ties with China. Even more in 2021, for the sixth year in a row China has been the biggest trading partner to the federal Republic. A total of 245.4 billion Euros were exchanged amongst both nations (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2022). Although Germany has not officially signed an MoU or received direct investments by the BRI, it can be said that indirectly Germany has still benefitted from China’s initiative. For example, Duisburg, located in the North-Western part of Germany is considered as the ‘end station’ for the Chinese-Europe Railway, where trade has been flowing through on behalf of the BRI. More so there are several bilateral documents showing that there has been exchange on infrastructure projects, for example the EU-China Connectivity Platform, since 2015. Also, Germany participates in the Asian International Infrastructure Bank (AIIB) – a Chinese led multilateral bank focusing on

development. German companies such as Siemens are engaged in BRI projects and have signed individual MoU's with China (Zhang, 2020). This makes Germany an interesting case as well.

Finally, the stance of Greece is analysed. Greece has joined the EU in 1981 and is therefore a long-standing EU member country (European Union, n.d.). Yet it is interesting to observe Greece's attitude towards China and the BRI. Surprisingly, in 2017, Greece managed to block an EU statement in the United Nations which accused China of violating human rights (Emmot & Koutantou, 2017). Moreover, in 2018 Greece signed an MoU with China on the BRI and further sold the majority of the stake of its Piraeus port to Chinese shipping company COSCO (Martin, 2016; OBOREurope, 2018), making this the third case to be investigated more closely.

### 3.4 Research limitations

This paper is restricted in its time frame. It realizes that the BRI is a project which is not static but evolves and changes over time. Since the Belt and Road Forum in 2017, there were some adjustments towards the BRI during the second forum in April of 2019. Almost a year later in 2020, the Covid-19 crisis hit the world and many projects were put on hold and not continued for the time being. Hence there is only a limited amount of newer data available. Therefore, this thesis refers mainly to the basic principles of the BRI put out by Xi Jinping in 2017 and inherently references documents published by Germany, Hungary, and Greece after 2017 that talk about the initiative.

Further, any statements that happened since the military operation by Russia in the Ukraine at the end of February 2022 are not taken into consideration in this thesis. Certainly, the position of European countries towards China may be affected by these events, hence the stance regarding ontological security may change. Since the developments are very new and still evolving this thesis concentrates on foreign ministry statements from the time before the actual events.

## 4 Theoretical Framework

The following section will first give an introduction of the theoretical model, developed by van Noort and Colley. This model can be used to describe the process of how the BRI's strategic narratives influences the policy decision of Germany, Hungary, and Greece in respect to ontological security and material benefit.

### 4.1 Theoretical Model ('buy-in' framework)

The thesis will put emphasis on the crossing between the strategic narratives and the ontological security theory as they share the same character. They both lack in demonstrating



policy change. Whereas strategic narratives depend on the factor of achieving persuasion by resonating with the existing views, ontological security expects where actors rather stay in their routines, instead of risking of breaking them and undergo ontological insecurity. They both emphasise the importance of continuity. (van Noort & Colley, 2021)

In order to convince a nation of policies it needs insurance in terms of guaranteeing their ontological security, as well as knowing that the policy will provide the state with material benefits. If they feel like, they will not receive either of these two factors, nations are more likely to not accept policies that are being introduced to their country. This can be demonstrated how a nation must firstly propose a strategic narrative “calling for others to change policy in line with its interests” (van Noort & Colley, 2021, 45).

For the present case it would be China. The reacting countries then need to decide whether the strategic narratives have convinced them and considered all the factors that play into creating a policy decision. Here it is important that the country (for this thesis the three chosen countries Germany, Greece and Hungary) makes sure that it communicates everything that is ‘sayable’ about the policy (BRI), as their goal is it to “legitimate it to key audiences” (ibid., 45) and explain the policy in a way where it not only guarantees material benefits but simultaneously also maintains a state’s ontological security. It must be mentioned here that a nations decision making process is not solely based on a strategic narrative, but many factors play into it, such as “domestic considerations, leaders’ preferences, alliance behaviours, regime type, and the media ecology” (van Noort & Colley, 2021, 45), but these are always dependable on the context.

Therefore, when a state’s leader introduces a policy, they can never be assured, if different actors will uphold their promises, or if “exogenous shocks” (Freedman & Michaels, 2012 as cited in van Noort & Colley, 2021, 46) will outweigh the awaited material advances. The decisions they make, will be established narratively, and showcase a storyline or a ‘script’ on how actions in the future will run (van Noort & Colley, 2021). This particular narrative then becomes more interesting and inviting when it assures that material surpluses in the future can be guaranteed and at the same time remain their ontological security (ibid.).

A key assumption is also that ontological security and material benefit can act together in a sense, where material benefit, which sounds attractive to a country, may influence a country’s decision-making process to accept ontological insecurities more easily. To sum it up, it means that if the BRI guarantees either material benefits or ontological security, nations will most likely participate in the policy or decide to partially participate. If a nation realises that the BRI does not bring any material benefit and at the same time shows that the ontological security will be undermined, the policy will most likely be rejected. The stance of each country can hence be depicted in the two-by-two matrix, by van Noort and Colley.

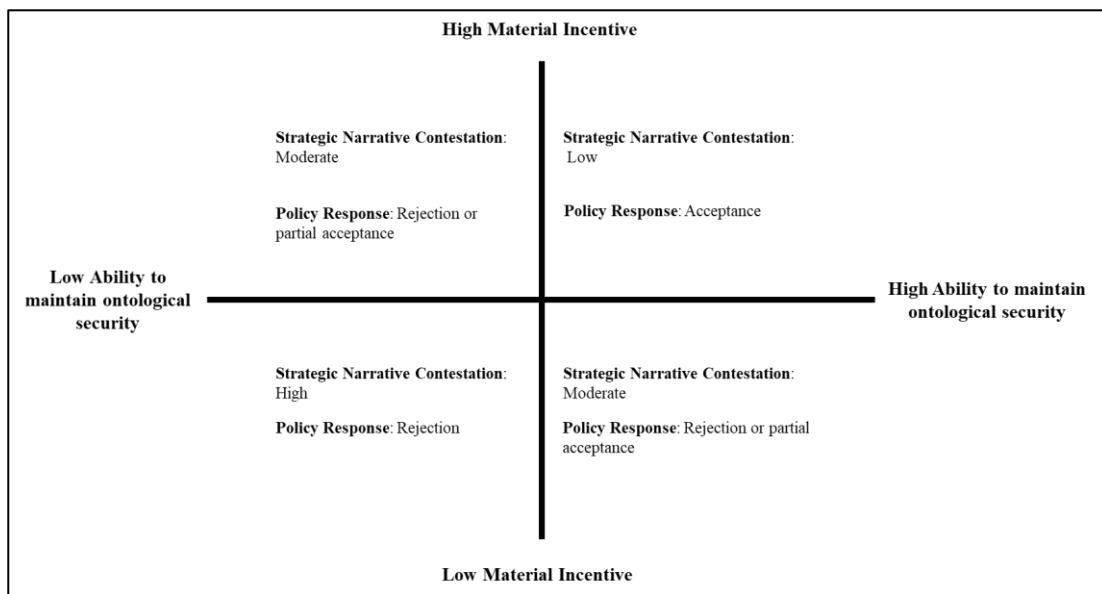


Figure 2: Theoretical model; adapted from: (van Noort & Colley, 2021, 46)

This framework will then be used as a guide to see how European countries respond to – meaning contest against or accept - the BRI’s strategic narratives. If a state has accepted and come to agree with the terms of the BRI, then one can say that the BRI has accomplished a strategic narrative “buy-in” (van Noort & Colley, 2021, 46).

Van Noort and Colley argue that the involvement or the ‘policy change’ in this framework is given once the country is “accepting investment projects and financing through ‘multilateral Cooperation Mechanisms under the BRF framework’, or simply (by) sign(ing) bilateral and multilateral documents containing unenforceable promises of future cooperation” (van Noort and Colley 2021, 46).

Whatever the countries decide on doing, they will have to explain their choice to the domestic and international audience. The problem with any case, which also regards the BRI, a state can never be certain as to how sincere the material benefits coming from the partnership will be,

because the state's leaders will not always have enough "knowledge of China's intentions" (van Noort & Colley, 2021, 47). Countries that are afraid to be affiliated with a nation, of whom they do not know the intention of, can easily reject the strategic narratives as they are worried for their ontological security. On the other hand, they could also narrate it as having "looser economic cooperation" (van Noort & Colley, 2021, 47) and do not call it a BRI project.

To fully understand the framework and moreover support the latter analysis, the theories of strategic narratives, ontological security (with reference to policy change) needs to be highlighted in its basic understandings.

#### 4.2 Basic understanding of strategic narratives

Evolving from the soft power concept of Joseph Nye, strategic narratives are considered to be the "soft power of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (Roselle et al., 2014, 71). According to Roselle, the theory of strategic narratives has supported in creating a comprehensive approach to enhance the measurement of soft power. The soft power aspect only reaches thus far as it "fit[s] within a pre-existing or developing personal narrative" (ibid., 74), the strategic narrative can precisely describe "the formation, projection and diffusion, and reception of ideas in the international system" (ibid., 74).

After realising that in a world where political actors seem to be giving context to various crises, strategic narratives became increasingly apparent in international relations. Miskimmon, O'Laughlin and Roselle define strategic narratives are a way for people in politics to "construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors" (Miskimmon et al., 2013, 2). Furthermore, it acts as a "tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate" (ibid., 2). The goal behind a strategic narrative is to influence someone else's behaviour. As Freedman concludes: "Narratives are designed or nurtured with the intention of structuring the responses of others to developing events" (Freedman, 2006 as cited in Miskimmon et al., 2013, 2). But looking at it from a long term perspective, if one has someone "to buy-in to" (Miskimmon et al., 2013, 2) the strategic narratives, this then has the potential to form what they are interested in, who they are (identity) and their knowledge of how international relations function and in what direction it will be heading in the future.

The process behind the narration can be divided into a three-step process. This process is important as it gives understanding how narratives are being formed, then projected and in

inherently 'persuade' through media ecology, where it is received by the audience. Therefore, actors utilize strategic narratives as tools "to persuade each other" (Miskimmon et al., 2013, 13).

The first step is the formation. Here, narratives are being established, defining what the role of an actor in creating a narrative is, what "institutions and procedures" (Miskimmon et al., 2017, 17) did narratives go through to have gained consent. Here the actors range from political elites all the way the public opinion that can have say in the formation of a strategic narrative or in a way be a part of it. (ibid.)

Projection as second step considers how a narrative is brought across or argued for to the public, especially in times of a growing media ecology (Miskimmon et al., 2017, 9). Furthermore, this has given non-governmental actors the chance as well to exchange faster and give "international events" (Miskimmon et al., 2013, 11) an easier way to be carried out broadly.

Lastly, reception as the name already implies talks about how the narratives are being received by the public. This includes "their reach or saturation as well as how individuals understand and process information" (Miskimmon et al., 2017, 9). Receiving information always happens in a social context, where the displayed narratives are being talked over with others or thought about individually. Depending on the reachability of the media for an individual, reception can be different for everyone, in a sense where media resources are available. (ibid.)

The question now is what makes a narrative a strong narrative? Jones et al. argue strategic narratives need to carry an actor, a plot, and a setting. As long as a narrative carries these elements, it makes it stronger and more persuasive (Jones et al., 2014). They explain how the participating actors and the stage they act on are being assessed and how their participation in certain events is connected with each other.

The more frequent a narrative is being repeated it becomes more difficult to be threatened, which is why when a narrative resonates with a myth the persuasion becomes much stronger. Thereinafter, when mixing "rational, emotional, and moral appeal" (van Noort & Colley, 2021, 43) a forceful strategic narrative becomes more attractive when recommending a policy, but it further needs to excite the targeted audience's "deeply held stories" (ibid., 43), where they explain who they are.

### 4.3 Basic understanding of ontological security (and policy change)

Similar to the theory of strategic narratives, ontological security needs to hold the aspect of having a certain “appeal to ‘rational’ material incentives” (van Noort & Colley, 2021, 43) but at the same time “reflect the myths that constitute collective identities” (ibid., 43). The theory carries that those states do not only wish for physical security but need to have “consistent sense of self over time or ‘security of being’” (Mitzen, 2006, 344). If an actor does not have a stable self, it is impossible for him to apply agency thoroughly as it gives an outline of how to properly act in an ever-changing world (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2018). Moreover, strategic narratives are important for ontological security as they are “narratively constituted” (Subotić, 2013 as cited in van Noort & Colley, 2021, 43), established and kept, preserved through repetition of the explanation of the own story individually or collectively (ibid.).

Like strategic narratives, states express “national biographies” (Berenskoetter, 2014 as cited in van Noort & Colley, 2021, 44), which are stories, that talk about their past, present and the future of their selves and moreover have an actor, a setting and a plot. The state usually plays the role of the **actor**, which commences in doing particular actions (**plot**), in an environment that is created in a certain way (**setting**). (ibid.)

If a state cannot uphold their sense of self, they can “induce shame” (Flockhart, 2016 as cited in van Noort & Colley, 2021, 44) and therefore create ontological insecurity. Ontological security is not merely just the narration of oneself, but in order to uphold it, it must establish “norms and routine behaviours” (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2018 as cited in van Noort & Colley, 2021, 44), which are expressed through the actions of a state (Zarakol, 2010, 3). By expressing these actions and the stories they tell, ontological security is maintained repetitively throughout the time.

Ontological security narratives reflect particular behaviour that shows continuity in the ‘sense of self’ of an actor in a changing environment. By acting out this certain behaviour, this would strengthen the actor’s ontological security, as well as the narrative it is portraying it through (Flockhart, 2016). Therefore, strategic narratives become vital to ontological security, as they help to maintain them. It is important to note, that nations do not only have one single ontological security narrative, but they are “contested continually” (Delehanty & Steele as cited in 2009; van Noort & Colley, 2021, 44).

Since the thesis concerns itself with how the countries react towards the BRI, the focus will be on the “dominant narrative held by the prevailing elites about their country’s national identity

and world role” (Graaf et al., 2015 as cited in van Noort & Colley, 2021, 44) For the analysis below, the chosen narratives are the ones which are published by the governments. It must be noted that foreign policies are not too easy to justify through ontological security, “when they break long-established routines” (van Noort & Colley, 2021, 44) such as participating in projects with states that were seen as a “former adversary” (ibid., 44). This means that ontological insecurity can either come from within a nation’s self or from the expectations others have of them. (ibid.)

One way to describe policy change, Jelena Subotić mentions that it is important to recognise how ontological security has more than one strand or storyline (Subotić, 2015). When facing a ‘crisis’ or a ‘critical juncture’, this is when crucial policy changes are debated, where having more strands can help to safeguard “autobiographical continuity” (Subotić, 2015, 610), and other parts simultaneously change. New incoming policies have the power to adapt to old ontological security narratives, keeping “a sense of routine despite policy change” (ibid., 610).

Scholar Trine Flockhart additionally adds that states can have the power to conquer their ontological insecurity, which derived from fracturing existing routines, when they can fabricate a policy as a success (Flockhart, 2016). This implies how dominant strategic narratives assure “future material gain” (van Noort & Colley, 2021, 45) and to persuade audiences that a change in policy is valuable. Thus, it highlights the importance for strategic narratives to mention both material incentives and the ontological security aspects (ibid.).

## 5 Analysis

### 5.1 Key elements of the strategic narratives of the BRI

To understand how the different countries react towards the BRI, the following excerpt from the speech held by Xi Jinping at the first international Belt and Road Forum in 2017, the basic principles of the BRI are considered to be the strategic narratives of the BRI.

First of all, it must be said that the BRI is an ever-evolving project and not static, which means that factors or certain aspects change and develop over time or are adapted over time by the Chinese government due to responses coming from the international audience. In a globalised world, where external factors such as economy, politics and the environment cannot be foreseen, can influence an initiative such as the BRI. However, when looking at the speeches given by Chinese president Xi Jinping during the Belt and Road Forums in 2017 and 2019, where the BRI had gained momentum, it can be clearly seen that certain factors have

undoubtedly never changed. Therefore, this paper resorts upon these fixed principles and uses them as the strategic narratives of the BRI.

When introducing the five principles of the BRI during his speech, President Xi refers back to the myth of the ancient silk road and how this is reflected in the BRI today and is open for everyone to participate. As he claims: “the pursuit of this initiative is based on extensive consultation and its benefits will be shared by us all” (Xi, 2017). Moreover, the BRI claims to “embody the spirit of peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit” (ibid.). Instead of conducting “geopolitical manoeuvring” (ibid.), the BRI “is a new model of win-win cooperation” (ibid.) and wants to “create [...] a big family of harmonious co-existence” (ibid.).

Firstly, the BRI “**should build the Belt and Road into a road for peace**” (Xi, 2017). The goal of the BRI is to create an environment of peace and stability, where people can exceed partnerships that do not face any sort of confrontation but rather see it as a friendship to gain win-win relations. The people should adhere to “each other's sovereignty, dignity and territorial integrity, each other's development paths and social systems, and each other's core interests and major concerns” (ibid.). Moreover, the BRI should be a means to uphold the security which is split among all and find a solution for problems through politics and do this “in the spirit of justice” (ibid.). Lastly the goals are to erase poverty, social inequality, and backwardness.

The second principle, Xi Jinping mentions in his speech is to “**build the Belt and Road into a road of prosperity**” (Xi, 2017). Prosperity in his eyes contains four main components. The first one is development. Development is “the master key to solving all problems” (ibid.), where the growth of many countries should be enabled and reach cooperation in the areas of development and economy, which will be advantageous for everyone. Secondly, industries in the eyes of the Chinese shapes the base for the economy. Therefore, industrial cooperation should be strengthened, so that the countries’ individual development plans can help support each other. The Chinese say, that in order to strengthen the industrial development amongst other countries, this can be done by initiating large projects and “strengthen international cooperation on production capacity and equipment manufacturing” (ibid.) These indicators strongly show how China wants to resolve an underlying issue and why it is needed. The third component is finance, which is the “lifeblood of modern economy” (ibid.). Only when it is circulating, it has the capacity to evolve. Xi mentions here, that it is important to create a “sustainable financial safeguard system” (ibid.) that stops risks from erupting, establish “new

models of investment and financing” (ibid.), push for “greater cooperation between government and private capital” (ibid.) and construct “diversified financing system and a multi-tiered capital market” (ibid.). The last point made is that “infrastructure connectivity is the foundation of development through cooperation” (ibid.). They want to encourage connectivity in the areas of land, maritime, air and cybersecurity connectivity and emphasise on main “passageways, cities and projects and connect networks of highways, railways and sea ports” (ibid.). Further along the already developed six corridors, they want to build “global energy interconnection and achieve green and low-carbon development” (ibid.). Moreover, they want to better “trans-regional logistics network and promote connectivity of policies, rules and standards so as to provide institutional safeguards for enhancing connectivity” (ibid.).

For the next principle, Xi Jinping wants to “**build the Belt and Road into a road of opening up**” (Xi, 2017). Opening up for a country is of immense importance as it enhances progression, whereas “isolation results in backwardness” (ibid.). The BRI then does not only promote economic growth, but also a steady development. Creating an open stage for cooperation and world economy is the goal. This is done by forming “a fair, equitable and transparent system of international trade and investment rules and boost the orderly flow of production factors, efficient resources allocation and full market integration” (ibid.) together, so together they can create a common ground for shared interests. More so, they say that trade is the “important engine driving growth” (ibid.) and therefore should receive the world with an open-minded spirit, but at the same time to maintain the “multilateral trading regime” (ibid.), strengthen the free trade and keep trade and investment to be easy and liberal. More so, they want to sort out the problems of having “imbalances in development, difficulties in governance, digital divide and income disparity” (ibid.). As a method of resolving these issues and to uphold this they want to “make economic globalization open, inclusive, balanced and beneficial to all” (ibid.).

Fourthly, China wants to “**build the Belt and Road into a road of innovation**” (Xi, 2017). Innovation is an aspect that cannot be disregarded when one wants to strengthen development. The Chinese want to dive into development that is enforced through innovation and therefore pursue cooperation in the fields of “digital economy, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology and quantum computing” (ibid.) and at the same time further develop “big data, cloud computing and smart cities so as to turn them into a digital silk road of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (ibid.). Science and Technology should become a full component of the industry and finance sector and better the “environment for innovation” (ibid.). Moreover, they want to create a platform for youngsters from all over the world to “realize their dreams” (ibid.). Finally, together they



want to work on bettering the safekeeping of the environment and further uphold the goals set by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. (ibid.)

The fifth and last principle is Xi Jinping's wish to **“build the Belt and Road into a road connecting different civilizations”** (Xi, 2017). Through the BRI, the Chinese government promises that when different nations come together “exchange will replace estrangement, mutual learning will replace clashes, and coexistence will replace a sense of superiority” (ibid.). This then has the force to “boost mutual understanding, mutual respect and mutual trust among different countries” (ibid.). This gives particularly good insight into China's values and the role it wants to represent. They want to act as a mediator amongst different nations and create a place of mutuality in the international system. Further they want to make “multi-tiered mechanism for cultural and people-to-people exchanges, build more cooperation platforms and open more cooperation channels” (ibid.). Especially the area of education should be looked at more closely, as well as boosting the exchange amongst students and running schools cooperatively. Furthermore, they want to enhance the “exchanges between parliaments, political parties and non-governmental organizations of different countries as well as between women, youths and people with disabilities with a view to achieving inclusive development” (ibid.) Lastly, the BRI should be a road maintaining “high ethical standards” (ibid.).

Since constitutions reflect the underlying norms and values of a country, it is no surprise that the strategic narratives of the BRI are also closely promoting similar beliefs, as can be found in the Preamble of the Chinese Constitution of 2018, for example the five principles of peaceful co-existence:

“mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence, the path of peaceful development, and the reciprocal opening-up strategy in developing diplomatic relations and economic and cultural exchanges with other countries and prompting the building of a community with a shared future for mankind” (Constitution of China (2018) 宪法, 2018).

## 5.2 Analysis of EU country cases

### Germany

The following analysis of Germany's stance in relation to the BRI is based statements of former foreign ministers Sigmar Gabriel (2017-2018) and Heiko Maas (2018-2021) as well as the state minister of foreign affairs Michael Roth.

Sigmar Gabriel, German foreign minister (2017-2018) commented in 2018 on a speech to the Ost-Ausschusses der Deutschen Wirtschaft (East committee of the German economy) on the BRI as follows: “Many of us still believe, that the Belt and Road Initiative is a sentimental memory towards the silk road by Marco Polo” (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018b, 2018c). This shows that Gabriel is very well aware that the reference to the historic silk road as part of the myth that China propagates is a very strong support for the BRI’s strategic narrative, when introducing it to the world. As China claims that the BRI is built upon the idea of the ancient silk road, however, the words ‘many of us still believe’, indicates in German language that this is not actually the case. And that in fact many people think the BRI shares no similarities with the ancient silk road from the past. The same objection that the historic and mythological silk road has nothing to do with the initiative, was repeated by Gabriel on other occasions for example on the Munich Security Conference (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018c). This could show that Germany does not in any way resonate with the narrative that the BRI proposes today, as they are of the opinion that there is a different agenda behind it. By repeating his statement on various occasions, this can be interpreted as a sign that the German foreign minister wants to uphold Germany’s ontological security.

The above-mentioned differentiated view on the ancient silk road is then enhanced through the following statement as Gabriel says that the BRI is about the “implementation of its *own* Chinese understanding, its *own* interpretation of the rules in international trade” (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018b). This could imply that he is concerned, that the established rules of international trade do not fit to the Chinese ones, which is supported by stressing the word ‘own’, when talking about the Chinese understanding.

Further, this is assisted through the statement where it is mentioned how the BRI “stands for an attempt to establish a comprehensive system for embossing the world in the interests of China” (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018c). Here, on the other hand they do not only call it a Chinese ‘understanding’ but are talking about a ‘system’ that is used to not only influence trade but more to ‘emboss’ the entirety of the entire world. More so:

“It is no longer just about the economy: China is developing an extensive system alternative to the Western one, which is, unlike our model, not based on freedom, democracy, and individual human rights” (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018c).

The extension that it is not only about trade is again strengthened by this statement, where Gabriel says it is ‘no longer just’ about the economy, but it goes beyond that. Then stating how

this has become a 'system alternative' to the Western model catches up with the above 'own' understanding. The tone in this statement has become harsher compared to the one above. This could hint at regarding the BRI as a danger, in terms of the ontological security theory a so-called 'crisis'. Although the BRI in the Chinese narrative references to upholding "high ethical standards" (Xi, 2017) as well as "each other's sovereignty, dignity and territorial integrity, each other's development paths and social systems, and each other's core interests and major concerns" (ibid.), this narrative does not seem to meet Germany's understanding as they clearly are of a different opinion. This could show that there is no shared rhetoric and therefore a high contestation of the Chinese BRI narrative. Gabriel is trying to uphold a 'sense of self', by constantly repeating the narrative that China is trying to influence the world to adopt their point of views.

Gabriel also adds another aspect by mentioning that "China is building a completely new regional order, one with very broadly defined Chinese 'core interests'" (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018d). The interesting factor here is that from 'embossing' the world, they now call out how China is 'building' a new 'regional order', which again enhances the previous defined distinguishing of differences in systems and even accentuate in their own statement, that this has become China's 'core interest', even though the BRI promises otherwise. To summarise this section, Gabriel contests the BRI in three aspects. First, he neglects that the historical reminiscence of the initiative, has any significance. Second, he sees China propagating different values and third he is concerned that the initiative will lead to a new regional order. This shows that he does not resonate with the policies proposed by the BRI. Hence, the way he communicates it could imply that he is proposing that Germany stays firm in its traditions ('routines') and upholds its ontological security.

Having suspected that the Chinese assumingly are trying to influence the world in their own interest and assuming that the BRI is a geostrategic project, Germany also raises the question why there is no similar geostrategic perspective in Europe. This becomes clear through the statement, provided by state minister of foreign affairs Michael Roth (2018), where he says that "China is currently the only actor on the international stage with a truly global, geostrategic idea" (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018a), which on first notice does not connote anything negative, however this statement is extended by adding that this idea "underpins China's claim to leadership" (ibid., 2018a.). The fact that Roth interprets the BRI as a 'claim' coming from China to generate 'leadership' is of course contradicting the narrative proposed by the Chinese, who (as already mentioned above) refer to their project as an initiative that upholds the rights

of “each other’s sovereignty, dignity and territorial integrity each other's development paths and social systems, and each other's core interests and major concerns” (Xi, 2017). This suggests that Germany does not share the same rhetoric as China in terms of their BRI. Interesting enough Michael Roth puts his statement in the context of missing geostrategic orientation of the West under the government of Donald Trump in the United States and hence could point to a further aspect: Roth may see the danger in this dissolving ‘routine’ that countries may opt for the BRI offer. This can also be seen in the following statement:

“At the same time as the US withdrawal propagated by President Donald Trump, President Xi Jinping's foreign policy is strengthening as a vehicle for a "new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics” (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018a).

Foreign minister Gabriel phrased the same concern as follows when he said “we should ask ourselves, or must we be accused, that we don't have our own strategy, at least not one that goes beyond individual countries” (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018d). More so he talks about how “we ourselves are responsible for creating a vacuum that others can step into” (ibid., 2018d). Such a vacuum of course allowed China to utilise this situation to their advantage, and inherently could mean that they blame themselves for not upholding their ontological security.

In a more positive manner, Roth further acknowledges that there have already been investments flowing into European soil, some of them as he says are “partly open, partly hidden” (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018a). Also, he mentions that “the European economy has benefited from the fact that China has massively expanded its economic presence on the continent in recent years” (ibid., 2018a), especially observable was “a massive increase in Chinese direct investments in the EU, not least in infrastructure projects, but also in key technologies” (ibid., 2018a). Hence, Germany, indirectly, has already drawn material benefits from China’s economic engagement in the world. This could show a dilemma in the German policy making. While China already went through all three stages in setting up its BRI strategic narrative: formulation, projection, and reception, meaning that de facto countries already joined or profited from the initiative, Germany and Europe are still in a formulation phase of their own strategic narrative. And as long as the German strategic narrative is not firmly defined the defending of the ontological security mainly consist of the contestation of the BRI. Moreover, this could show that Germany on the one hand has already somehow indirectly ‘bought in’ in the economic advantages but on the other hand fears to possibly induce ‘shame’ and create ontological insecurity (in front of their public), which they want to prevent by saying that they need their ‘own’ strategy.

Roth however adds that “yet the Chinese investments still make up only a fraction of what the EU itself invests in the Central and Eastern European member states” (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018a) and “The impression that China has long since replaced the EU as the main investor is deceptive” (ibid., 2018a). This is insofar interesting since Hungary, as will be shown later, is of a different opinion. Roth is therefore playing down the material benefit that the BRI could bring along. With this argument he tries to strongly uphold ontological security for the EU and avoid ‘shame’ cases by countries joining the BRI. As the state minister explains “economic temptations of China sometimes cause the European foundation of values to shake” (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018a), which could again, as established above, be a sign, that not only does this go beyond the aspect of economics and material benefits but they believe China’s fundamental understanding of economic trade does not align with the European and inherently the German one. The statement continues, where the politician accuses how “some EU partners are even willing to undermine European human rights policy for a lucrative bilateral deal with China” (ibid., 2018a). The fear above, of claiming that the Chinese system is different to the one in Europe is clearly confirmed in this statement, claiming that against the BRI narrative, the project is not upholding “high ethical standards” (Xi, 2017). The ontological security of maintaining their routine behaviour becomes noticeably clear, as they accuse other countries in the EU, who rather ‘undermine’ the shared belief system of the EU as well as their ontological security for material benefits (lucrative deal). The harshness in that undertone as well as the accusation could indicate that Germany fears for the future. If more countries would put material benefit over the community of the EU, this would harm the long-established routines of the entirety of the EU and therefore all the individual countries (here also Germany) and create ontological insecurity.

Sigmar Gabriel’s successor Heiko Maas stipulates that “the EU will therefore present its own ideas on how Europe and Asia can be linked even more closely – a European connectivity strategy” (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018f), to create an alternative to the BRI. And such initiatives should be based on different values. “We have no interest in granting loans to countries in this region, which we will ultimately use to make them vulnerable to blackmail” (Auswärtiges Amt, 2019). This again could be a reference to the BRI principles of a “fair” (Xi, 2017) and “liberal” (ibid.) trading system, which Germany does not see to be fulfilled under the BRI and therefore by establishing their own connectivity strategy can maintain their own ‘norms’ and ‘routines’ which they represent. So instead of buying into the Chinese policy, Germany through the EU wants to offer a European alternative based on their own norms and rules. This is further

enhanced through the comment “on the basis of recognized rules and standards and, above all, geared towards sustainability” (Auswärtiges Amt, 2021). The currently prepared EU Initiative Global Gateway (hereinafter referred to as GG) could be an outflow of such thoughts and will be further explained in the chapter Discussion & Further Findings.

Having in mind the cohesion of the EU towards China, Maas is turning to another strategic initiative, the 16+1 format. Maas points out that “sub-regional formats such as 16+1 [...] must not create economic and political dependencies and thereby split the EU” (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018e) (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018e). Again, the expression Maas is using could show his belief that the BRI – different from its strategic narrative – is not respecting the sovereignty of the participating countries and not safekeeping a “fair” (Xi, 2017) and “liberal” (ibid.) trading system. He fears that Chinese cooperation with the CEE countries could create ‘dependencies’ in the areas of economy and politics and even lead to a ‘split’ in the EU. It is obvious that the cohesion of the EU is also a strategic narrative of Germany, which it sees threatened by China’s strategic initiatives. In this sense already foreign minister Gabriel requested to “call upon ourselves to offer attractive alternatives to Eastern Europe and the Balkans” (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018d). Maas is of the opinion that they are missing a closed community amongst the European countries. To fill this ‘vacuum’, it needs a “common European policy in dealing with China” (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018e), only if this is given “then will China see us as an equal partner” (ibid., 2018e). Should this not happen then “our community is eroded, (and) we will all end up losing” (ibid., 2018e). Part of the ontological security in the German eyes is the cohesion of the EU, hence the BRI which is attractive to parts of the EU countries, particularly the Central and Eastern European ones, poses a threat to this EU ‘routine’.

However, Germany does not only see downsides in the Chinese BRI. As Heiko Maas also stresses “new land and sea connections between China and Europe also offer great opportunities for the German economy” (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018f), which technically is what the BRI constitutes as being a “road for prosperity” (Xi, 2017) and could be seen as agreeing upon the BRI narrative. Also using the word ‘chance’ seems to be more of a positive connotation, as he believes that the BRI could be beneficial in terms of material incentives for the German economy.

However, this is only possible in a “rule-based fair cooperation” (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018d). China needs to “grant competition as well as market access” (ibid., 2018d), have “reciprocity and transparency” (ibid., 2018d) and “adhere to international norms and standards” (ibid.,

2018d). This underlines again that Germany is of the opinion, that China's understanding of international norms may be different from the European ones. However, if both parties could agree to a united understanding, then Germany possibly would at least be more open towards the BRI. Only through 'transparency' and 'reciprocity', especially in the field of 'market accesses' and 'competition' would Germany consider new policies and could still uphold its ontological security narratives.

While Germany talks about 'rule-based fair cooperation' which technically resonates with the Chinese understanding of the BRI, Germany yet still suspects other purposes and a different agenda on the Chinese side.

Although Germany agrees that the BRI has 'chances' and could possibly have a future, this can only be done, when both sides agree upon a mutual understanding and the creation of firmly set rules, where Germany feels, not only for themselves but for the entirety of the EU, secure enough to join. This supports Julia Subotić's idea – as introduced in the theoretical framework – those new incoming policies (here the BRI) have the power to adapt to older ontological security narratives (here would be creating a common understanding of international standards, which would align with Germany's old security narrative) and at therefore keeping "a sense of routine despite policy change" (Subotić, 2015, 610). But for now, Germany is not open the 'full' acceptance of the BRI. Not only is this seen through the language, by saying that the initiative "stands for an attempt to establish a comprehensive system for embossing the world in the interests of China" (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018c) and not upholding "high ethical standards" (Xi, 2017) or the sovereignty and core interests of other countries. Even though, there are current running investments in the EU, this is mostly seen as a 'danger', which is why Germany will never completely 'give up' their ontological security and agree on adapting the whole BRI policy but instead stay in their current 'routines'. Therefore, one can say that Germany has not 'bought in' to the BRI policy and consequently has not signed an MoU. In the two-by-two matrix, Germany can therefore be situated into the top left corner:

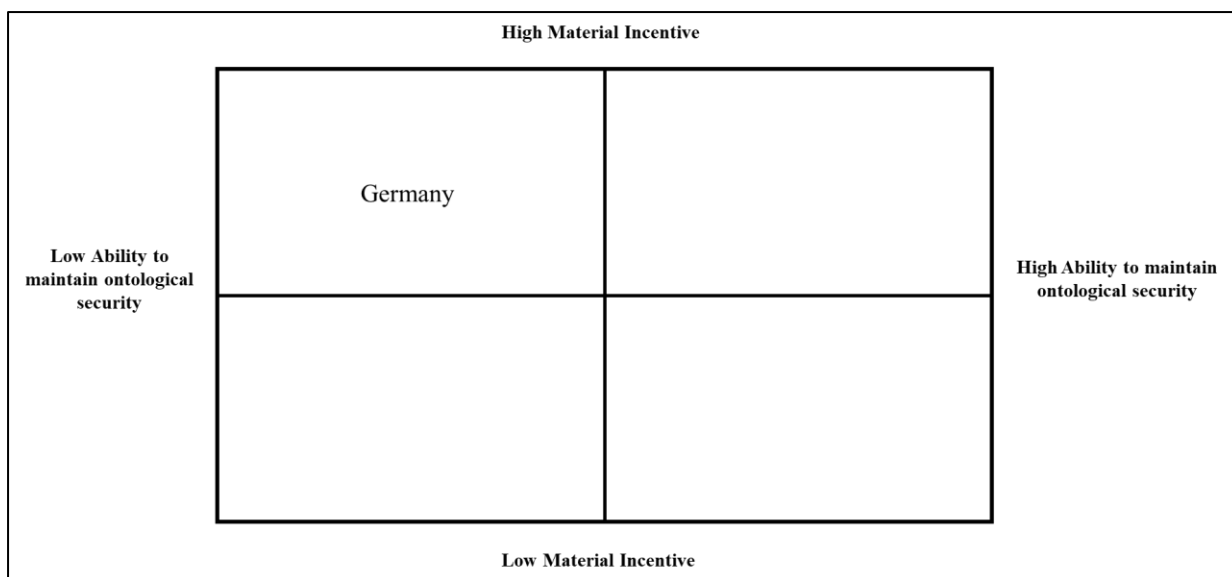


Figure 3: Modified country matrix Germany; adapted from: (van Noort & Colley, 2021, 48)

## Hungary

The next country, which will be evaluated is Hungary. In this chapter statements of prime minister Viktor Orbán and foreign minister Péter Szijjártó are analysed.

Before analysing the detailed attitude of Hungary towards China and with it to the BRI, it is interesting to observe that Hungary on various occasions stresses that the strong relations between both countries lie in the long diplomatic history of both countries. As prime minister Viktor Orbán points out

“Hungary was the first country in Europe to recognise the People’s Republic of China (and) there is a history of cooperation between the two countries going back many decades, and although we’re not a big country, our history is long, and we like to think in terms of history” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017i).

The reference to history (Hungary started diplomatic relations with China in 1949 together with other CEE countries and of course much earlier than for example Germany in 1972) could be an indicator of a ‘myth’, since Hungary has long been interacting with China, as they historically already share a long-standing friendship, and therefore Chinese cooperation does not pose a risk to their sense of ‘self’ as well as the ‘established routines’ and therefore create ontological security. Cooperation with China could be seen as a routine.

To put Hungary’s stance of the BRI into perspective it makes sense to go back to Hungarian statements regarding the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008. In a speech at the financial



summit of the Asia Financial Cooperation Association (AFCA) in November 2017, Orbán states that Hungary unlike other European countries, is of the opinion, that the crisis was one of structural nature, rather than a cyclical one and as he put it forward “extensive reforms were required if we Europeans – Westerners and Central Europeans – wanted to remain competitive in comparison with the emerging new economic powers” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017h). It becomes very clear, that Hungary is not content in the way the EU has handled the situation. This is underlined by the following statement “Hungary was the first country to openly declare this assessment of the situation, and it drew the necessary conclusions” (ibid., 2017g). From this point of view, it could be visible that Hungary is not sharing all the strategic narratives of the EU.

On another occasion Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó states that “competitiveness of the European Union is continuously decreasing, it needs strategies that enable the halting of this process and the regaining of competitiveness” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017j), saying how the EU has lost its stance among the country of being the enabler. The EU no longer has the chance to survive without external help. This Hungary says can only be done by having “the closest possible relations [...] with the world’s most rapidly developing region, the Asian and Southeast Asian region” (ibid., 2017i). This could indicate that Hungary identifies the Asian region (also China) as the core of future development and that by not joining the BRI the future may be in danger. Especially when it comes to material benefits.

Hungary’s Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó further elaborates:

“We must recognise that the situation is no longer that capital flows exclusively from West to East in search of cheap labour, because these days large Asian corporations have become extremely successful on the European market and are buying up increasing numbers of European enterprises” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017j).

Based on this Hungary sees a new form of globalisation arising. Viktor Orbán recognises that “the East has caught up with the West” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017f) and “the global economy’s engine room is no longer in the West, but in the East” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017f), meaning how the economy in the East (also China) is more flourishing than in the West and that “in fact the largest amounts of money have accumulated in Asia (and) are now flowing back towards the West” (ibid., 2017e). Hungary is very clear that the economy in the West is no longer the ‘engine room’, but its Asia and that money is,

unlike in the past, running from the West to the East, now coming from Asia and supporting the West. In addition to that the prime minister referred to this situation by referring to the West as how “the old model for globalisation has become obsolete, and in reality has lost its impetus” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017e) and moreover “the old model of globalisation was built on the assumption that the West is where the money is, where profit is generated and where technological know-how is also based” (ibid., 2017d).

With above statements the Hungarian leadership seems to break the previous ‘routine’ of close cohesion to the EU and rather orientates Hungary towards the East. They further could break with the old narrative that globalisation and capital is coming from the West and rather follow the Chinese strategic narratives of the BRI that globalisation is multilateral and that the East plays a vital role in it. The Chinese narratives refer to it as “maintaining the multilateral trading regime” (Xi, 2017). By doing so they are preparing to convince the Hungarian public that material benefits are no longer coming from the West or the ‘old model’, but put more emphasis into the East, especially Asia, as they see more potential here. Their ontological security here, especially the one they would probably be sharing with the rest of the EU is of less importance. Instead, they say that support from the East is far more valuable and the ‘better’ partner for Hungary.

In this new framework the Hungarian leadership sees and supports the BRI. Orbán recognises:

“Everyone has had enough of this; and of these the Chinese are the strongest – so they’ve launched another direction of movement, which is called “One Belt, One Road”. This is specifically built on mutual acceptance” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017e, 2017f).

This statement is a strong indication for Hungary becoming not only an advocate for China but also a strong supporter of the BRI. The rhetoric of referring to the BRI as an initiative which is “built on mutual acceptance” (Xi, 2017) could mean that they have accepted this BRI narrative into their country without any fear for their ontological security. This is echoed by foreign minister Peter Szijjártó who says, “The success of the initiative is in harmony with Hungary’s national interests and national strategy, which we call the Eastern Opening policy” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2019i). Furthermore, Orbán talks about how the ‘old model’ “divided the world into two halves: teachers and students” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017e). and more so how “it has become increasingly offensive that a few developed countries have been continuously lecturing most of the world on human rights, democracy, development and the market economy” (ibid., 2017d).

Hungary is putting hopes in into the change of the new globalisation set up given by China:

“One of globalisation’s new configurations: one which will no longer divide the world into teachers and students, but which will provide the basis for mutual respect and mutual advantage” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017e).

Unlike its EU partner country Germany who is seeing the BRI as a vehicle of China to promote its political system and therefore connects its perspective on the BRI with questions such as human rights, respecting international standard rules and is therefore afraid for its ontological security, Hungary on the contrary says it is no longer the right of the West to take in the role as a ‘teacher’ and ‘lecturer’ of other nations on certain topics such as democracy and human rights. Hungary here could be following China’s stance on the BRI by seeing the initiative as a ‘basis for mutual respect and mutual advantage’ Not only is there no mention of any sort of fear but instead the word ‘mutual advantage’ (Xi, 2017) could again be a hint towards having a material surplus and agreeing with the BRI narrative, which in Hungary’s eyes is far more precious. Hungary even defends China against criticism:

“It is simply nonsense that they want to force the countries of Central Europe to reduce their own economic interest enforcement capabilities while criticising China for some reason” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2018e).

Another indicator, where material benefit is considered to be more important to Hungary is in the following statements. Even if the “ideological foundations” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2018d) of Hungary and China may not be the same, Hungary considers this as “not important” (ibid., 2018b). Because while the “western half of Europe is learning more slowly than its Central European half, but eventually everyone will realise that we must adopt an approach to China that is free from ideology” (ibid., 2018b). It is interesting to observe that Hungary in a certain way neglects ideological questions. By doing so Hungary can avoid taking a clear position in respect to the ontological security. This could indicate that material benefit is seen as more important. Because as long as this is in the way, it will make economic cooperation rather difficult. This again is enhanced through the comment where they explicitly refer to “we have an economic policy based on common sense rather than ideology” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017i). The word ‘economic’ here can be regarded as material benefit. Hungary even suggests that the EU must give up its ‘routine’ of stressing ideological questions. They assume that participating in the BRI would also be beneficial for other EU countries. In this sense the approach can be interpreted according to Trine Flockhart who stipulates that in times of fractions change in policy is valuable (Flockhart, 2016).

Szijjártó links the economic success of Hungary also to the cooperation with Asia. In a speech dated in 2020 he mentions:

“Ten years ago, Hungary was ranked 28th, in last place, among the member states of the European Union from the perspective of rate of economic growth, but by the end of last year it had moved up to first place” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2020).

And later continues to explain that:

“38 percent of the new workplaces created in Hungary last year were created by Chinese, South Korean and Japanese investments, Bank of China has chosen Budapest as the site of its regional headquarters and Hungary was the first member state of the European Union to join China’s One Belt, One Road global economic infrastructure project, in addition to which Hungary has also joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2020).

In 2019 after the second BRI Forum Orbán even further continues to say how the initiative will continue to receive Hungary’s full support as it is more “an opportunity than a threat” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2019f) and “those who are left out will miss out” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2019d). This is further enhanced by the idea of the foreign minister that there are four major fields that need to be emphasised which are “establishing further links, increasing financial cooperation, achieving unrestricted trade, and reinforcing human relations” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2019e), all of which can also be found in the BRI narrative of having “unimpeded trade” (Xi, 2017) and “people-to-people” (ibid.) connectivity. Again, Orbán here could be challenging the Western countries who continuously call the BRI a ‘threat’ and at the same time convincing his public that it is an opportunity, securing his ontological security and even says that whoever is not participating is losing and therefore at the same time guarantees material benefit.

Another aspect that shows Hungary’s strong interest in material benefit provided through China is when they talk about how a “new world order is taking shape around us – both politically and economically” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017g), where “in this new world order the role of Asia and China has increased significantly, and will continue to increase in the future” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017h). Not only do they refer to a ‘new world order’ which could indicate that the one, especially the Western European one is decreasing, but China is obviously growing. This is exactly the point Germany criticises about the BRI and fears for its ontological security and the cohesion of the EU. In another statement

Orbán describes China as “a fixed star in the period ahead and will be a major player in the world economy for a very long time” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2018c). And he recommends to the rest of the world to understand this. It becomes obvious that Hungary, by following the Chinese narrative of the BRI sees itself well prepared for the future.

Furthermore, Hungary sees the region of the 16+1 (CEE countries which have a close cooperation with China) as the ‘place’ of growth and puts emphasis on the importance of safekeeping and supporting this region. As Orbán says “in terms of economics, the answer is that we sixteen already constitute the European region (which) has become the European Union’s growth engine” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017c, 2017h). This could indicate again, how Hungary is trying to convince its public, that their economic growth is flourishing and even more amongst the whole region, because of the economic ties it shares with China (material benefit) and therefore creating ontological security. The influx of Chinese capital into the Hungarian market is also seen positively, there is no concern about potential downsides such as loss of intellectual property:

“This has resulted in a sharp increase in the number of Hungarian development projects which are now Chinese-owned. This movement of capital is totally different to what we have been used to, and to what we have been taught about the operation of the global economy” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017d),

which is a strong indicator of material benefit. From a growing CEE region, they then take it even further and expand it into “building Eurasia” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2018c) through the BRI. Orbán follows the Chinese narrative calling the cooperation a “win-win situation” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017a; Xi, 2017) and stating that “the Eurasian concept which is the most novel and most attractive from an economic point of view” (ibid., 2017a). Here they talk about how “by rail it may be possible to travel and transport any goods between China and Central Europe in two weeks” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2018c) and create an “economic area” (ibid., 2018a). Now even stronger they refer to the BRI directly and how this connection will become even more important as an economic hub, which again could be an indication for material benefit and another way to prove that by having a ‘faster’ connection line, these material surpluses will be growing even further.

Hungary is definitely supportive of the BRI. Not only does Hungary call China a “friend” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2018b) but further say how they are “interest(ed) in the success of the One Belt, One Road initiative”, which they see as one of the “freest and most

equal world trade network(s)” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2018a). Hungary even uses the same language as the Chinese for their BRI, when talking about the BRI being a “free” (Xi, 2017) and “equal trade network” (ibid.), but it also is another indicator of putting emphasis on the importance of material benefits. In this respect, Hungary lists many profitable projects throughout their published documents. One of the largest would be the Budapest-Belgrade railway, which Hungary refers to be in “harmony” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017b) with the BRI (narrative). Without it, this could mean that “the Budapest-Belgrade railway line development project Hungary could be left behind in the competition for a transport route” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2019c).

Hungary also strives to round up its relations with China in other areas such as tourism, university education and language exchange. For example, as Orbán points out: “China and the Central European region are geographically far from each other, and this adds to the significance of relations between the two” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017h). This has “led us to the common goal of popularising the Chinese language – a prominent role in which is being played by the Central and Eastern European Regional Centre of the Confucius Institute” (ibid., 2017h). Confucius institutes are commonly known to be a Chinese way to enhance “people-to-people connectivity” (Xi, 2017), which again reflect the BRI narratives. Hungary for instance also eased visa restrictions for Chinese citizens (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017h).

However, other educational institutions again are more obviously linked to material benefit. For example, in 2019, the Minister for Innovation and Technology of Hungary together with the President of Fudan University in Shanghai signed an MoU for “the establishment of a campus for the institution in Budapest” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2019b). As the Hungarian Minister concludes that

“Thanks to this university cooperation, Hungary could turn into a regional knowledge hub [...] (and) could promote further Chinese investments, and in particular, the settlement of the research and development centres of Chinese companies in Hungary” (ibid., 2019a).

Obviously, the university partnership could not only be seen as an academic endeavour but also as a tool to grow material benefit. The establishment of a Chinese university campus in Budapest is insofar remarkable as at the same time the George Soros University in Hungary was forced to close (Santora, 2018). It seems that for the aspect of ontological security a

Chinese university is regarded as more favourable by the Hungarian government than a Western invested university.

Having analysed the Hungarian government of being in favour of the BRI, the question remains how Hungary is relating to other EU nations. One incident leading to frictions between Hungary and parts of the EU was the refugee crisis of 2015. Reading through the statements of 2019, the migration issue in Europe has left a negative attitude in Hungary. Reacting on countries like Germany which requested that Hungary should take a fair share of refugees, a deeper difference in opinion when it comes to the handling of this crisis becomes obvious. As Orbán in an interview said about Germany. The “differences in size between countries should not lead to subordination or superordination of one country to another” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2019h), making it quite obvious that they are unsatisfied with the way Germany (or Western Europe) is clearly putting themselves above of Hungary. Moreover, this becomes evident when he says how “the fracturing of political relations was solely due to immigration” (ibid., 2019f) and “Germany ha[s] a different philosophy” (ibid., 2019f). Overall, this emphasises how Hungary’s relationship has been disturbed in the past years with the other Western European nations. More so, Orbán has been very clear that, their affiliations and cooperation with China should not be commented on negatively by Western European nations, where he says, “the real big bucks” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2019d) have been taken by the French and Germans when doing trade with China. Thus, he claims how “I think that Hungary’s government shouldn’t be a dupe, it shouldn’t be foolish, inept or naive; that’s no way to represent the Hungarian people’s interests” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2019g). This could be an indication how Hungary is trying to convince its public by saying that having cooperation with China is nothing unusual, even for those countries, who openly criticise and have been doing it themselves. Therefore, they are not only creating ontological security but at the same time say that material benefits can be guaranteed.

This can be further enhanced through the statement that “We Hungarians need an open world economy” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2019a) wanting to continue their participation in the BRI and “shall not accept any kind of external ideological pressure” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2019a). Here, this could be referred to the EU, as they (especially Germany) have expressed their discontent with Hungarians close relationship to China. The fact that they express how they do not ‘accept’ any ‘external ideological pressure’ could indicate that their ideological understanding already differs from the rest of the EU. They therefore no longer have a common interest in the same ontological security. Instead, they portray to the public

that the EU is considered the ‘bad guy’ and hence need to secure their ‘sense of self’ from the EU, creating new ‘routines’ with China and at the same time enhancing the benefit of China as they promote ‘free trade’ which again is a confirmation for a BRI narrative.

In fact, Hungary is promoting the BRI in Europe: “Europe must not isolate itself now, in particular, when it is facing historic challenges which we can only respond to if we have strong allies” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017a). ‘Historic challenge’ here can be seen the switch in global powers mentioned earlier, where the Asian and South-East Asian regions are gaining momentum and are becoming more competitive. However, it is the fear of which EU nations always talk about that by joining the BRI, this could create ontological insecurity. This is where Hungary steps in and communicates to all its “domestic and foreign partners” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2018b) that the BRI is a

“forward-looking cooperation that is advantageous to everyone [...] (and) nothing is happening here that is at odds with European values, and in fact we are building on European values and Hungarian values and would like to see as many partners as possible involved in this cooperation framework” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2018b).

This is an interesting twist to the previous statements. Actually, Hungary is claiming that the BRI is ‘building on European values’. This ambiguity in Hungary’s messages could be interpreted that they do not want to fully give up their position in the EU and still maintain their ‘sense of self’ (routine) and its shared ontological security, by being an EU member with the EU. Instead, they want them to also join and ‘see as many partners involved’. As a rather recent example how Hungary is aiming to become a spearhead of China cooperation in Europe is the use of Chinese vaccines during the Covid-19 outbreak, while the European medical agency EMA until today has not approved the Chinese vaccines for use. (Kiss, 2021)

To sum it up, Hungary has strongly bought into the BRI narrative. The country focuses very strongly on the material benefits, not only for itself but also for its European partners. Hungary also interprets the initiative as part of a new global order. This order sees China and Asia as the growing and economically potent pole in the world. Hungary, different from Germany does not see a threat for its ontological security by such a new order but would rather become a part of it. The engagement goes beyond the pure economic advantages but also includes academic cooperation. This attitude is also supported by Hungary’s impression to be ‘overruled’ by the European heavyweights such as Germany. It can be observed that the Hungarian strategic narrative, which is very much in line with the BRI strategic narrative is repeated extensively



on several occasions. Yet, interesting enough, Hungary still confirms to be bound to certain European values, despite the rhetoric it shares with China on the BRI.

In this respect it is worthwhile to adjust the model of van Noort and Colley in a way not to situate a country purely in one quadrant of the matrix, but rather indicate its position by a shape indicating the extension scope of a country's stance.

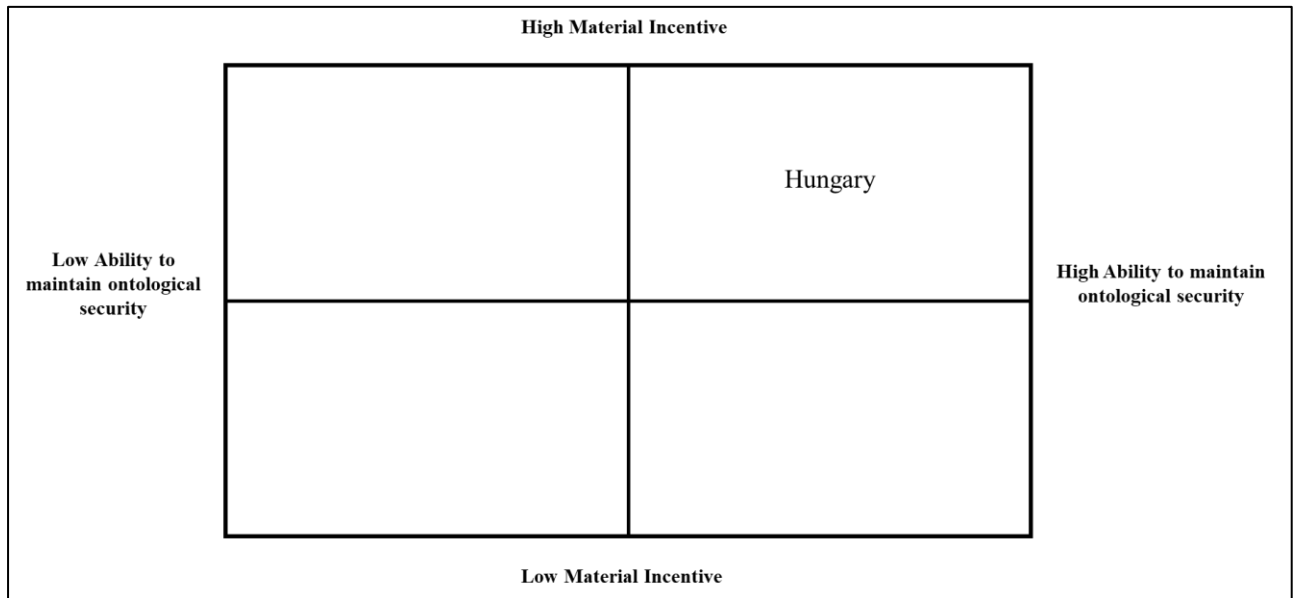


Figure 4: Modified country matrix Hungary; adapted from: (van Noort & Colley, 2021, 48)

## Greece

The third country in this analysis is Greece, which has already shared a long-standing relationship with China before the signing of the MoU in 2018. Foreign minister Kotzias and Alternate Minister of Foreign Affairs Giorgos Katrougalos. The signing took place during the Tsipras government, a period during which the financial crisis in Greece led to deep frictions with the EU and particularly with the German government (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2017).

During a joint statement meeting in 2017, foreign minister Kotzias first and foremost welcomes his Chinese counterpart foreign minister Wang Yi and calls him his “friend” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2017b). He then mentions how “our culture and our relations are based on soft power; on the fact we are two countries who shaped the cultures of our regions” (ibid., 2017b) and more so “China was the centre of the world [...] and influenced the world. Greece was the Acropolis of the western world, and in particular of European civilization” (ibid., 2017b). As he states, that both countries ‘share’ a similar historic experience in ‘influencing’ their respective regions they are in, could be a reference to sharing a similar historic past

(‘myth’), where Greece identifies with China in terms of being equally influential in the past and both shaping one of the largest developed regions known today, namely Europe and Asia. Both countries see themselves and are the birth places of their continents’ cultures. Greece as the ‘inventor’ of democracy in Europe and China as the cultural heart of Asia. This common historic understanding could be an indication for Greece to legitimate to its key audiences that both nations are similarly structured and therefore have created routines and feel ontologically secure. On a more personal comment, Kotzias shares that he has a “weakness for Chinese history” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2017b) and had been teaching Chinese foreign policy for 30 years and says that “I must say that our relations are even better now than when I was teaching about them” (ibid., 2017b). His obvious affiliation with not only Chinese history, but more so teaching experience is raised from a political to a personal level. Foreign minister Kotzias is full of appreciation of the Chinese initiative and sees the benefit for its own country:

“I think, if I would use a Chinese expression, the big Modernizations initiated in 1978 contributed to the creation of a world in harmony with the sky and this was beneficial to Greece. For, when the world is developed in a harmonious way, this is beneficial to countries that love peace and have great civilizations” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2018).

He even follows the thoughts of President Xi Jinping by saying:

“I think that the earth is a unity, the humanity is also a unity, and this is described in the book of President Xi in a highly good way. Our fates are linked and it is only with our cooperation that this planet will survive. We are a human community within a big galaxy. In order to survive we need to develop our cooperation, science, mutual understanding” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2018).

These two strong statements could already show that the Greek government is actually not contesting big parts of the Chinese BRI rhetoric. As Xi claimed the BRI is a “road for peace and stability” (Xi, 2017), as well as “connecting different civilizations” (ibid.) and creating a “big family of harmonious co-existence” (ibid.). This implies that Greece is not only merely trying to convince the public that by joining the BRI Greece is ontologically secure, but that the Chinese narrative is actually a reflection of Greece’s own ontological security.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of August in 2018, Greece signed an MoU to participate in the BRI and became partner in the initiative. During Kotzias state visit in Beijing for the signing of the MoU, he again refers back to the shared history of both having impacted their region. However, this time

he enhances his argument by saying how China and Greece are two “sister countries” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2018) that grew up in parallel and established the civilization of Europe and Asia, respectively and further states

“that there are many common aspects with Greece (and) our civilizations may have developed in parallel, the Chinese one has defined developments in Asia, the Greek one has defined developments in Europe, but still there have been great different achievements; Greece brought about the concept of democracy, China the concept of the modern state” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2018).

By referring to the importance of history for both countries, Kotzias manages to establish a stable ‘sense of self’ with China and implicitly creates a sense of ontological security.

Moreover, on various occasions the Greek rhetoric is referencing very closely to the Chinese strategic narrative “I think this initiative indicates the ability and the willingness of China to contribute to a better world (and) combine the [...] great “Chinese Dream”<sup>1</sup> with the dream of many other countries for development and better life” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2018). This thought is further elaborated by: “This Chinese initiative contributes to the improvement of the living conditions of millions of people, as well as to the connectivity of the most different countries through modern infrastructure” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2018). Also, this statement is rhetorically very close to President Xi’s BRI speech, where he talks about helping to grow many countries and eventually reach “economic integration and interconnected development” (Xi, 2017).

But also, the material benefit is not missed by Kotzias. As he declares “I am here so that we further develop our political relations with China but also that we take advantage of the very good political cooperation in the field of Economy” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2018), which is a direct reference to the material surplus the BRI provides. More so he states that “Greece nowadays is the gate for the Chinese trade to Europe, as COSCO has acquired the big traditional Piraeus port and transfers via this port the products to Europe” (ibid., 2018), again referring how they must enhance cooperation between China and Europe, and how Greece can act as ‘transfer’.

But Greece is also resonating on another aspect of the BRI and says, “China is today a country that is not just on the rise, but that [...] shows that it has a vision and strategic outlook for a

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<sup>1</sup> The “Chinese dream” was put forth by Chinese President Xi Jinping, is to build a moderately prosperous society and realize national rejuvenation. (China Daily, n.d.)

world of stability and peace, which is also what Greece wants” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2017b). This could be seen as a reference of the strategic narratives of the BRI, where Xi calls it a “road for peace” (Xi, 2017).

Core of the cooperation between China and Greece is the takeover of 51 percent of the port of Piraeus by COSCO in 2016 (later in 2021 another 17 percent were taken over) (Spiegel Wirtschaft, 2016). Kotzias underlines the material benefit aspect by saying “we talked about the importance of the Port of Piraeus and the Cosco investments” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2017b). The port of Piraeus is considered to be Greece’s BRI hub and where most of the BRI trade flows through.

Similar to Hungary, Kotzias sees a “need for the European Union to develop its relations with China as well” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2017b). Alternate Minister of Foreign Affairs Giorgos Katrougalos further also said how “Greece supports the Chinese initiative for linking Asia with Europe via the land and sea “silk road” and will be a main gateway for Chinese products to the European continent” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2017a), not only guaranteeing material benefit to Greece but further to the entire region of Europe, which again could be interpreted as an agreement, that the region of Europe is in need of this material incentive coming from China. The foreign minister said that Greece’s role is to

“act as a bridge between Europe, to which it belongs, and China, highlighting their common points which include a commitment to multilateralism in international relations, peaceful relations, and respect of International Law” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2019).

The statement which reflects very much the strategic narrative of the BRI shows that Greece is aiming to function as an ambassador between China and the EU.

However, against the backdrop of Greece’s financial issues, the government also explained to Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi “Greece's view of the region's problems and the actions Greece is taking as a state and country of stability” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2017b). Hence, Kotzias is confirming that he appreciates the material benefits out of the BRI cooperation, particularly during economic challenging times. In an interesting twist this could indicate that Greece here tries to comfort China’s ontological security. In this sense Kotzias also states that “Today we have strategic cooperation that is also expressed in the support Greece gives – small in size, but significant – to the 'One Belt, One Road' policy” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2017b) and former prime minister, Giorgos Tsipras even emphasised that “our country attaches great importance to Chinese investments in Greece, adding that there

is significant room for increasing exports of Greek agricultural products to China” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2017a).

As foreign minister Kotzias elaborates “It isn't just a material plan. It isn't just investments, trains, roads. It is also, at the same time, the desire to link our worlds and our cultures even more closely together” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2017b) as well as “they show that the great ancient civilizations are still alive today and that cultures link people and are also economically productive” (ibid., 2017b). For Greece it could be seen that there definitely is the aspect of having material benefit, but this is not all. Similar to Hungary, the relationship ‘isn't just a material plan’, but to connect their cultures more closer, which can be seen a shared rhetoric with the Chinese strategic BRI, where “people-to-people connectivity” (Xi, 2017) plays a key role.

Besides the material benefit, Greece also stresses the cultural aspects. The foreign minister emphasises here that the relations should expand into “the fields of culture, education, research and young people exchanges should also be enhanced” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2018). He concludes his interview by saying how “China is an ancient nation with great History and with a special relation to time, i.e. patience” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2018), where “patience brings about optimism (and) I have confidence in the abilities of the Chinese people and of its leadership” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2018). In contrary to Germany Greece embraces the Chinese leadership and does in fact not see any risk that China imposes its own system into the world. In this sense. This could indicate that Greece breaks with the European ‘routine’ and establishes even deeper ontological security with China in following the BRI.

In summary it can be observed that among the three analysed states, Greece is the one which is leaning most closely to China and therefore sees no risk in its ontological security, by participating in the BRI. In fact, they even quote President Xi Jinping in a very apprehensive way where the BRI narrative is not contested at all. The material benefit that Greece expects out of the BRI is remarkably high so that they even allowed Chinese shipping company COSCO to hold the majority of the Piraeus port. Similar to Hungary the Greek statements continuously reiterate their strategic narratives which is following closely the one of the BRI. The pure number of similar statements shows the strong commitment for this Chinese initiative. Therefore, it can be said, that Greece has completely ‘bought in’ to the BRI policy.

In the matrix, Greece would be considered in the upper right quadrant:

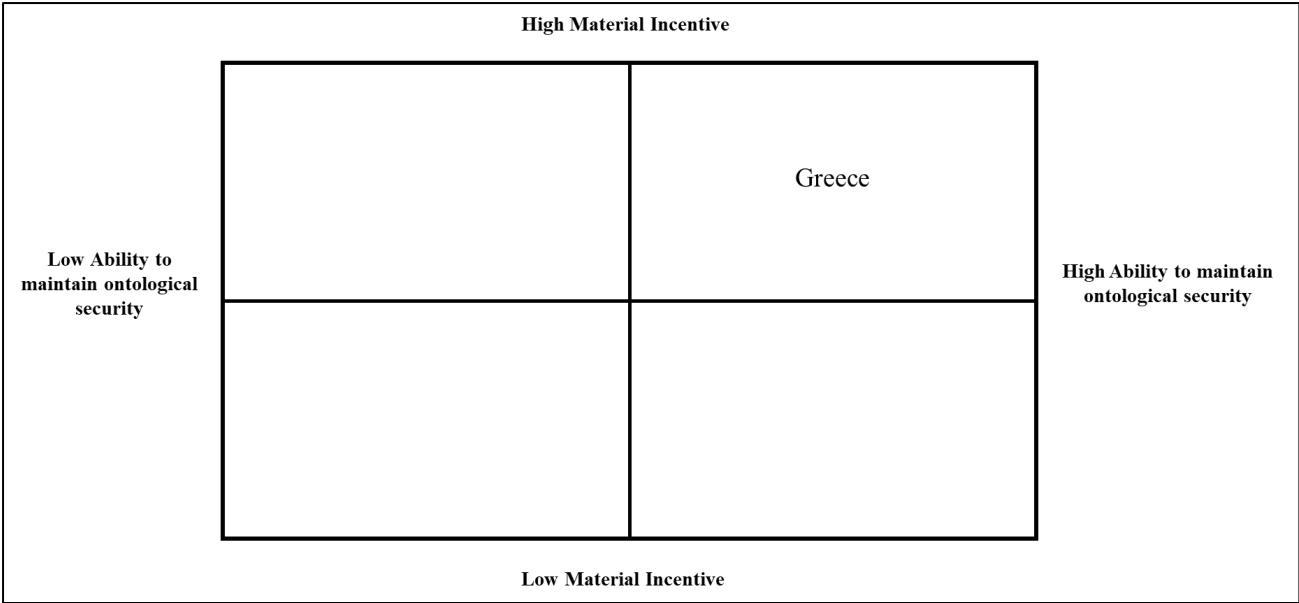


Figure 5: Modified country matrix Greece; adapted from: (van Noort & Colley, 2021, 48)

## 6 Discussion & Further Findings

### Summary of the Analysis

The country analysis conducted above reflects the widespread range of reception of the BRI, by the three EU countries Germany, Hungary, and Greece. All three nations are acknowledging material benefits out of the initiative. However, in respect to ontological security Hungary and Greece do not see any risks, whereas Germany puts a strong focus to uphold its ontological security and also sees risks for the EU in general.

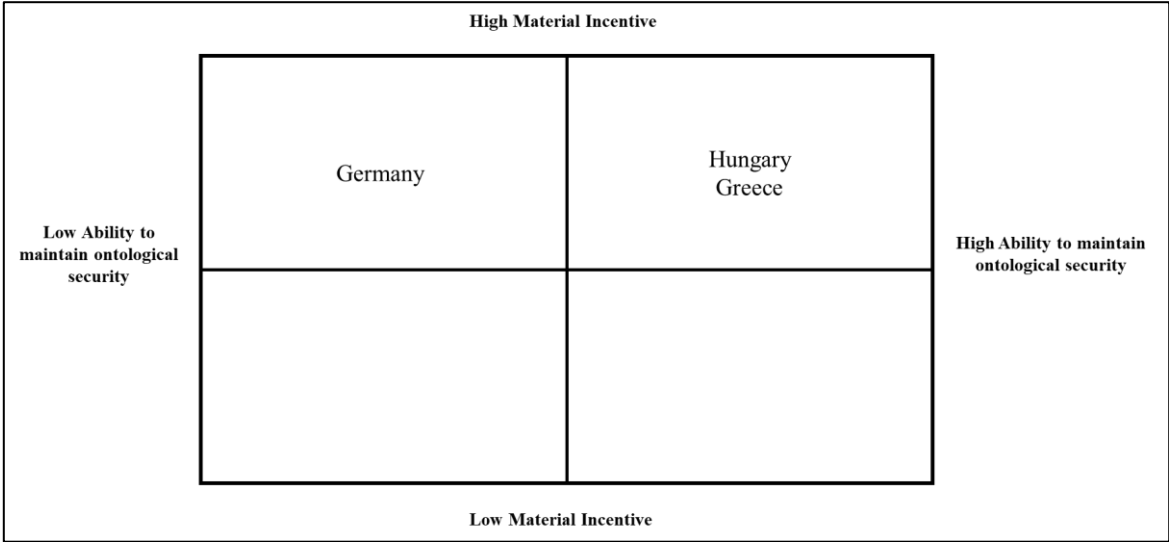


Figure 6: Modified country matrix, source with all three countries; adapted from: (van Noort & Colley, 2021, 48)

Germany's main concern is that the BRI

“is no longer just about the economy: China is developing an extensive system alternative to the Western one, which is, unlike our model, not based on freedom, democracy, and individual human rights” (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018c).

Germany sees core European values at stake and hence its ontological security. Further on Germany is afraid that the joining of the BRI of some EU countries could threaten the EU cohesion.

On the other hand, Hungary as well as Greece feel that countries like Germany have not understood the changes in globalisation. For instance, they realise that the flow of capital changes its direction from East to West. They also see the BRI as a future-oriented endeavour which has the chance to bring countries out of poverty. Both countries echo the BRI narratives quite closely, yet there is still a difference between Hungary and Greece. Hungary proposes to leave ideological questions out of the discussion and hence uphold their ontological security by disconnecting the question of material benefit from the discussion about values. Greece instead closely embraces the Chinese narrative and also interprets the BRI values as proposed by China very positively. Both countries agree that the rest of the EU should join the BRI and that countries like Germany have no right to act “as a teacher” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017e). In fact, Hungary even complains that the big EU countries on the one hand made a lot of money of Chinese business but on the other hand do not want the CEE countries to profit from the BRI.

Zhao and Tan-Mullins have argued that China could improve the acceptance of the BRI by focussing on its communication: “Therefore, China needs to further clarify its interests and intentions and to keep sending cooperative signals that help counterparties develop their knowledge of China and its cooperative interests if trust-building, and by extension the BRI, is to be successful” (Zhao & Tan-Mullins, 2021, 293). However, due to the fundamental ontological security issues by countries like Germany, it still remains questionable, whether this will work out.

### **Unity of the EU in response to the BRI**

The findings of the above analysis support the assumption that the EU also in future will have difficulties to formulate a joint position to the BRI.

It is interesting to see that both sides would welcome a unified EU in questions of the BRI. As former German foreign minister Gabriel criticised “we (must) be accused, that we don't have our own strategy, at least not one that goes beyond individual countries” (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018d). On the other spectrum Hungary encourages Europe to join the BRI: “Europe must not isolate itself now, in particular, when it is facing historic challenges which we can only respond to if we have strong allies” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hungary, 2017a).

However, a unified approach is rather unlikely since the various countries are very far apart in their ontological security; Germany positioned themselves clearly by saying the BRI: “stands for an attempt to establish a comprehensive system for embossing the world in the interests of China” (Auswärtiges Amt, 2018c). Jason Young confirms that “Western multi-party liberal democracies” (Young, 2018, 382) tend to reject the BRI even though he argues – different from the conclusion of this thesis – rather by reasons of liberalism and realism. Greece contrastingly echoes the Chinese strategic narrative which is that “the earth is a unity, the humanity is also a unity, and this is described in the book of President Xi in a highly good way. Our fates are linked and it is only with our cooperation that this planet will survive. We are a human community within a big galaxy. In order to survive we need to develop our cooperation, science, mutual understanding” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Greece, 2018).

Also as already mentioned under the literature review Alister Miskimmon and Ben O’Loughlin even see a chance for further strengthening the EU and demand that “the EU needs a new ‘building block’ narrative based on a turn to greater pragmatism and pluralism to overcome its internal and external challenges” (Miskimmon & O’Loughlin, 2021, 21). As the EU has grown bigger, the internal cohesion has become more difficult. The authors suggest “reinforcing interdependence and sustainable relations with China” (ibid., 38). They recommend to shape “a sense of purpose and shared risk, forces engagement on matters of disagreement and mistrust, and can slowly create shared expectations about how cooperation can unfold” (ibid., 38)

One measure to prevent an ever greater ‘distancing’ amongst the member states and create a new narrative could be seen in the introduction of the Global Gateway strategy by the European Commission. As of December 2021, the EU has introduced a European strategy, similar to the BRI, called Global Gateway and is the EU’s initiative for establishing big investments and a stable infrastructure internationally. Its main goals are



“to forge links and not create dependencies. To invest in projects that can be delivered with high standards, good governance and transparency. To work with host countries, financial institutions and the private sector to scale up infrastructure investment to boost our competitiveness, deliver benefits and protections for our partners, empower local communities and tackle today’s most pressing global challenges - from climate change and sustainable development to health security, gender equality and education systems” (Europäische Kommission, 2021).

The strategic narrative of the GG, which sounds very similar to the BRI, wants to satisfy the needs and help fix any concerns countries may have and at the same time staying true to their EU’s values. By 2027, the EU wants to assemble EUR 300 billion in investments for the above-mentioned challenges. Similar to the BRI, the GG will be financed through a fund out of the EU budget, which will also be supported by private investors. (Meier, 2021)

For now, this project in terms of the strategic narratives theory currently is in the stage of ‘projection’, which then raises the second question of whether this initiative will eventually be successful (reception). Since some EU countries are already closely tied to the BRI it is also not sure that this initiative will be successful, less because it could not attract potential partners, for example in Africa, but mainly because some EU partners already feel bound to the BRI.

### **Limitations of the theoretical model by van Noort and Colley**

In terms of the given framework, there is an aspect that was detected during the writing process of the thesis, which is how far the model of van Noort and Colley is suitable to describe a country’s stance towards an initiative such as the BRI. There are two aspects of the model, which need further discussion.

Firstly, the model is a digital one and clusters countries into fixed quadrants. A possible extension to the model could be to introduce a more gradual and granular model to allow a more precise positioning of the countries. In the current example both countries, Hungary as well as Greece still show somehow differences in the ontological security and most likely also in material benefits. With the strong involvement of Greece by selling the port of Piraeus, it can be expected that the benefits for Greece may be considered as even more important than perhaps in Hungary. On the other hand, the tonality of Greece in following the strategic narrative of the BRI are also slightly more enthusiastic than Hungary’s. By putting these aspects together, the model could be modified as follows:

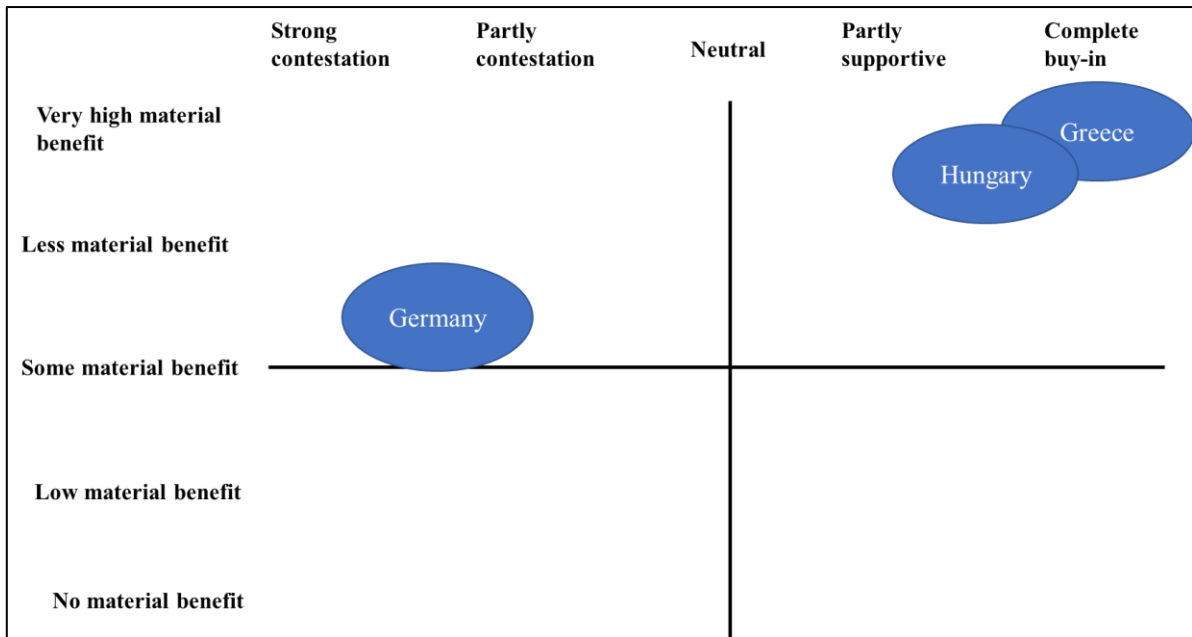


Figure 7: Own model modified of van Noort and Colley model; source: (van Noort & Colley, 2021, 47–48)

This means that this framework is constantly influenced by external and internal changes. For example, if a country faces any sort of crisis (as for example the Covid-19 situation) this could possibly shift a country’s position in the matrix. Or if internally a country perhaps undergoes a government change, then this could also mean that a country moves its position but not necessarily jumps from one quadrant to the other. Therefore, the countries positioned in the matrix are not ‘static’ but can fluctuate. The detailed grading would need to be defined further. This would make the model more dynamic.

## 7 Conclusion

Following the theoretical framework by van Noort and Colley in the previous analysis of the three EU countries were examined in respect to their response to the Chinese BRI. This model combines the three dimensions of strategic narratives, ontological security, and material benefit to later see whether a policy adoption of the BRI took place and then clusters the countries into that pattern. The given research question: *Why do different European Union member states respond differently to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative?* can be answered as follows:

Hungary, and Greece responded very positively. Germany on the other hand is much more cautious and critical. In the analysis it became evident that all three countries do see a material benefit in the BRI, however the extend varies from country to country. What becomes essential as to why the countries take different stances is the aspect of ontological security. In respect to this aspect, and with the question in how far the countries contest or do not contest the set of

values and ideological implications which will come with the spoken support (also referencing to shared historical pasts) or through the signing of an MoU, differentiates very clearly amongst the countries. Whereas Germany is contesting the narrative in respect to ontological security and would only consider talks, when fair and transparent international standards (which also meets their expectations) are given.

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