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**BETWEEN CONCEPTION AND EXPECTATION:
intra-role conflict in China-Brazil relations**

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Supervisor: Dr. Danielly Silva Ramos

Research Line: Government and Foreign Policy

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Master's Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of International Relations in the research line of *Government and Foreign Policy*, within the Graduate Programme of the Institute of International Relations at the University of Brasília.

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*When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests
his observers to take seriously the impression that is
fostered before them.*

— **Erving Goffman.**

The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life(1959).

*Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow.*

— **T. S. Elliot.**

The Hollow Men (1925).

ABSTRACT

The rise of China as a central player in international affairs has compelled Beijing to craft a National Role Conception (NRC) capable of reconciling its great power status with its identity as a developing nation. This duality is crystallised in the "responsible great power" role, through which China projects itself as a partner of the Global South. However, this dissertation identifies an intra-role conflict between ego and alter expectations of Beijing's role, where China's domestic imperatives for economic growth—manifested in the export of industrial overcapacity—clash with the developmental expectations of its partners. Adopting a constructivist-based Role Theory framework grounded in symbolic interactionism, this research analyses how these tensions unfold in the Sino-Brazilian relationship. Specifically, it conducts a qualitative case study on the imposition of trade tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles (EVs) by the Brazilian government in late 2023, along with subsequent developments until 2025. Through an iterative coding analysis of official discourse and policy documents, the study reveals that Brazil did not reject China's role outright. Instead, Brasília employed a strategy of *negotiated dissatisfaction*, filtering domestic sectoral pressures (from Anfavea and ABVE) into a trade policy that tacitly signalled a corrective expectation: that China should transition from an exporter of goods to an investor in local capacity. The findings demonstrate that China successfully underwent a process of role adaptation, accelerating factory installations (BYD and GWM) to align its enactment with Brazil's "green neo-industrialisation" narrative. The dissertation concludes that, despite being increasingly ego-driven, China's role remains susceptible to the agency of strategic partners who possess the capacity to negotiate the terms of their asymmetry.

Keywords: China; Brazil; Foreign Policy Analysis; Role Theory; Electric Vehicles

RESUMO

A ascensão da China como figura central nos assuntos internacionais compeliu Pequim a elaborar uma Concepção de Papel Nacional (NRC) capaz de conciliar seu status de grande potência com sua identidade de nação em desenvolvimento. Essa dualidade cristaliza-se no papel de "grande potência responsável", pelo qual a China se projeta como parceira do Sul Global. No entanto, esta dissertação identifica um conflito intra-papel no qual os imperativos domésticos chineses de crescimento econômico — manifestados na exportação de excesso de capacidade industrial — colidem com as expectativas de desenvolvimento de seus parceiros. Adotando uma abordagem construtivista da Teoria dos Papéis baseada no interacionismo simbólico, esta pesquisa analisa como essas tensões se desenrolam na relação sino-brasileira. Especificamente, conduz-se um estudo de caso qualitativo sobre a imposição de tarifas comerciais aos veículos elétricos (VEs) chineses pelo governo brasileiro no final de 2023, incluindo seus desenvolvimentos até 2025. Por meio de uma análise de codificação iterativa de discursos oficiais e documentos políticos, o estudo revela que o Brasil não rejeitou o papel da China. Em vez disso, Brasília empregou uma estratégia de *insatisfação negociada*, filtrando pressões setoriais domésticas (da Anfavea e ABVE) em uma política comercial que sinalizou tacitamente uma expectativa corretiva: a de que a China deveria transitar de exportadora de bens para investidora na capacidade local. Os resultados demonstram que a China passou por um processo de adaptação de papel, acelerando instalações fabris (BYD e GWM) para alinhar sua atuação à narrativa de "neoindustrialização verde" do Brasil. A dissertação conclui que, apesar de ser cada vez mais orientado pelos fatores ego, o papel da China permanece suscetível à agência de parceiros estratégicos que possuem a capacidade de negociar os termos de sua assimetria.

Palavras-Chave: China; Brasil; Análise de Política Externa; Teoria dos Papéis; Veículos Elétricos

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INTRODUCTION

The present master's dissertation examines contemporary China-Brazil relations (2023-2025) through a constructivist-based Role Theory approach, which here takes the form of symbolic interactionism. More specifically, I establish as the object of inquiry China's international role towards the changing global order and its links to the developing countries, with a focus on Brazil. Applying the concept of intra-role conflict, I propose that China's national role conception (NRC) of a "responsible great power" does not fit neatly with some components of its purported role enactment within the context of Sino-Brazilian bilateral relations. Although an important partner of the country's economy, asymmetric trade relations undermine China's self-projection as a fellow developing nation *vis-à-vis* the expectations of its Brazilian counterparts. I argue this is due to China's ever more ego-oriented process of role conceptualisation, with Chinese leadership finding it increasingly difficult to balance its historical self as a leader of the developing world with newer domestic demands and economic interests. With that in mind, I analyse, as a case study, the imposition of trade barriers on Chinese electric vehicles (EVs) by the Brazilian government, in November 2023, alongside its developments until 2025.

The rise of China is a multifaceted subject that has invited reflections from scholars and policymakers alike, with its implications to the global status quo taking prominence in debates. At first, notions of peaceful coexistence and accommodation to liberal norms took centre stage in defining China's stance towards the global order and its current leader, the United States (US) (Song and Fürst 2022). Then, the rationale was to ask why Beijing would attack the same system that allowed for its rapid economic development. However, with the 2008 financial crisis casting doubt on Western power and Xi Jinping ascending to the Communist Party of China's (CPC) leadership in face of an ever more complex domestic arena, Chinese foreign policy has found new means and reasons to shift towards proactivity¹ (Dessein 2016; Schortgen 2021). Such tendencies

¹ I choose the word *proactivity* instead of *assertiveness*—which has commonly featured in scholarly characterisations of Xi Jinping's effect on Chinese foreign policy—due to a novel political undertone of the latter term, now somewhat

have materialised into worldwide-focused ambitions, mainly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Duarte and Ferreira-Pereira 2021); and new, more confrontational patterns in China's great power relationship with the US (Buzan and Lawson 2020; Tobin 2020; Zhao 2021; Schortgen 2021).

Role Theory, an approach originated from the disciplines of Sociology, Anthropology and Social Psychology (Harnisch 2011); and first translated into International Relations by Kalevi Holsti (1970), has also taken on the debate surrounding China's rise (Harnisch, Bersick and Gottwald 2016). Stemming from the idea that states, as corporate actors, perform social roles in organised groups (Harnisch 2011), some role theorists have echoed the debate around whether China is a status quo or a revisionist power (Chen 2016; Liu 2021). Recent works, however, have concluded that China's international role-taking is more complex than this dichotomy would seem to suggest (Liu 2021). In other words, China is neither a full-on challenger of the global order's status quo, nor is it completely passive towards it. In China's own self-conceptualisation, this stance takes the form of a "responsible great power" role, through which Beijing seeks to take part of the current global order, but responsibly (Shih and Huang 2016; Duggan 2020; Duarte, Gupta and Delvaje 2024), i.e. not inhibited from reshaping norms that it deems contrary to its benefit or that of developing countries.

Consequently, more than simply acknowledging its stance towards the global order, this role conception is idealised by Beijing's decision-makers with a specific audience in mind: the developing world. Majorly influenced by past experiences as a leader of the Cold War-era Third World, Chinese decision-makers still see their country as a peer and helper of developing nations (Duggan 2016, 2020). This is extensively present in China's official discourse towards Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) countries in general, and Brazil in particular (Wintgens 2022; Guo 2023; Zapata 2023; Zuppello 2024). However, how this is translated beyond rhetoric into action is more complicated than what the original role entails.

As the overarching context for recent Sino-Brazilian relations, China's insertion in LAC in the 21st century has been mainly economic (Feng and Zeng 2021). The period saw Beijing become the most important trade partner of many LAC nations, mostly in South America (Giraudó 2020; Larraín and Zhang 2023; Teixeira, Cheng and Jiang 2023). Moreover, the Chinese government, alongside Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs), represents a main source of foreign direct investment (FDI) in the region's infrastructure (Larraín and Zhang 2023; Peters 2024; Salazar-Xirinachs 2024). In 2017, those ties would seem to reach a new level as Xi Jinping

associated with China's confrontational, sometimes violent, stance in international politics. Reasserting that it is not my intention to deny—nor confirm—whether China's foreign policy has become more imposing in recent years, I believe the idea of proactiveness, in the sense of active rather than reactive policymaking, already captures the shift I wish to integrate to my research.

announced the arrival of the BRI to the sub-continent (Jenkins 2021; Teixeira and Azócar 2023). The event was followed by little novelty in terms of general patterns in China-LAC relations (Jenkins 2021; Ferchen 2021). Even if symbolising China's growing ambitions worldwide, the BRI served majorly as a repackaging of existing projects and initiatives under a new, overarching narrative of connectivity (Moreno, Telias and Urdinez 2021). In addition, as of 2024 the region started to see a shifting portfolio of Chinese investments, with an increased focus on high-tech sectors (Closset, Plottier and Kreiter 2023), including electric vehicles and renewables (Lewkowicz 2024).

As I have hinted above, though, China's rising presence in LAC has not been without its challenges. Beijing's growing relevance as a buyer of commodities, combined with its industries' comparative advantage in the global market, consolidated the trend of LAC raw material exports to China in exchange for Chinese industrialised goods (Bernal-Meza 2020; Xing 2020; Chiliatto-Leite 2021). While greatly beneficial for LAC during the 2000s commodity boom, the subsequent recessions in the region's economies since the 2010s led to questions regarding growing asymmetries within economic ties to China (Stallings 2020, 2023).

I use Brazil as the key role partner for my research for it represents a valuable scenario to assess China's role in its interactional dimension, considering it from the developing world perspective. Brazil, as the largest regional economy, has cultivated deep economic ties with China, which has been the Latin American nation's most important trade partner since 2009 (Vieira 2023). Despite its trade surpluses with China, the country also witnessed issues related to trade asymmetries with Beijing (Stallings 2020, 2023; Giraud 2020; Campello and Urdinez 2021; Páez and Bona 2024), which makes questions of conflict with China's role conception latent.

In light of this, this thesis revolves around the following question: *How does China's role enactment shape Brazil's expectations of China's national role conception of a responsible great power?* To which I establish as my main hypothesis that the internal complexities of China's NRC lead to an often inconsistent role enactment, which in turn generates an alter response of conditional acceptance and corrective signalling—what I later term negotiated dissatisfaction².

The main objective of this research is to understand the impacts of the internal complexities of China's "responsible great power" role within the latter's interactional dimension, focusing on Brazil as the role partner for Beijing. I also establish three specific objectives to be attained by this dissertation:

² In this dissertation, "negotiated dissatisfaction" refers to a strategy whereby the Brazilian government, as the alter, expresses discontent with a specific enactment of China's role, while deliberately preserving the broader alignment in their partnership. In the Brazilian EV case, this takes the form of a technical, domestically framed trade policy that signals a corrective expectation—namely, that China should shift from exporter to investor—without escalating into any sort of diplomatic confrontation.

- a. To problematise China's national role conception of a responsible great power in light of shifts purported by Xi Jinping's foreign policy towards developing countries.
- b. To analyse China-Brazil relations through a constructivist-based Role Theory approach, going beyond traditional foreign relations actors, i.e. key decision-makers and diplomatic channels in the applied case of China's role in Brazil's EV sector, especially in the period from 2023 to 2025.
- c. To comprehend the trade-related consequences of China's role in Brazil through a qualitative case study.

The research follows a symbolic interactionist approach to Role Theory. Under the definitions of Hollis and Smith (1990), I abide by an individualist-explanatory theoretical stance, in the sense that I favour the unit-level of analysis (mainly the state) and seek to explore causal mechanisms, focusing on behaviour rather than meaning. Hence, I apply a qualitative case study methodology. My choice is defined by the inability to manipulate the behaviour of my units, the importance context takes in addressing social roles and because my research question is one of "how." More specifically, I conduct a single case study of the instrumental type (Baxter and Jack 2008). It is instrumental because, although I expect to achieve a better understanding of the case through a particular approach, my main interest remains to provide contingent generalisations of my findings bound to classes of events (George and Bennett 2005).

With that in mind, I establish as my case study the imposition of trade tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles (EVs) by the Brazilian Ministry of Development, Industry and Commerce (MDIC) (Brazil 2023), in November 2023, and its consequences until 2025. I consider the case pertinent *vis-à-vis* my research question due to the following reasons: first, it is sufficiently relevant within the context of bilateral relations, since Brazil is a main market for Chinese EVs (Vieira 2023; Andrade 2024) and the sector plays a crucial role for Brazil's plans to advance on decarbonisation of its productive system (Brazil 2023). Second, it reflects an instance in which Brasília was forced to act in opposition to China's purported role due to sectoral dissatisfaction with Beijing's role enactment. And third, it is contemporaneous enough as to allow for an appraisal of the more recent developments of the tensions present in China's process of role conceptualisation. Hence, timeframe for analysis encompasses a) core events starting from the later half of 2023, when tariff discussions began to garner momentum in Brazil, until the official imposition of tariffs on EVs in November 2023; and b) other developments accounted for until August 2025.

I collected data primarily from official documents and contemporary media coverage of the events. This material includes official governmental reports and policy justifications (such as those from the MDIC), as well as public statements and press releases from key actors in the EV sector, including class associations like the National Association of Motorised Vehicles Manufacturers

(Anfavea) and the Brazilian Association of Electric Vehicles (ABVE). Moreover, before I delve into the case study, I also collected a sample of Chinese official documents that allowed me to gain a better understanding of the internal dynamics of China's NRC.

Data analysis, for its part, was conducted through qualitative thematic analysis on these textual sources. Namely, I utilised an iterative coding model proposed by Kalpokaite and Radivojevic (2019), adapting it to concentrate on its deductive elements, due to the nature of my inquiry. The ultimate goal of this process was to systematically identify and interpret the core tropes, arguments, and contested role conceptions present in the discursive externalisation of China's NRC, its localisation efforts vis-à-vis the Brazilian context, and the subsequent responses emanating from the alter's political sphere. Preliminary codes, such as "South-South cooperation" and "promotion of national development," were used to track how China's role is conceptualised, defended, and contested in this specific case.

I develop my main argument through four chapters, beyond this introduction and an overall conclusion. The first chapter holds a contextualisation value, as I appraise the literature regarding China's emergence as a prominent power in international affairs, with a special focus on Beijing's relations with the developing countries, the region of Latin America and the Caribbean and, most importantly, Brazil. In Chapter 2, I delineate the theoretical underpinnings of my research, seeking to frame the intra-role conflict between ego and alter expectations of China's "responsible great power" role. I also propose localised adaptations to my conceptual framework, and present in greater detail my data analysis method.

The third chapter serves to delve into Beijing's NRC, seeking in primary sources the main tropes behind China's careful construction of its role conception as a "responsible great power". Beyond the consistencies present in this discourse, I aim for the tensions underneath it, encompassing all the main factors that account for the process of role conceptualisation. With that in mind, I establish a preliminary understanding that China's role conceptualisation is under the strain of balancing its historical self as a leader of the Cold War-era Third World against its contemporary domestic imperatives and economic interests. However, Beijing has been struggling in this task, since the weight of contemporary drivers make it increasingly difficult to balance older notions of solidarity (Harnisch, Bersick and Gottwald 2016). Hence, an intra-role conflict emerges as Brazil expects Beijing to be a partner in their common development, seeking mutual benefits, which happens to be more convoluted in practice than in discourse.

The last chapter is entirely dedicated to my case study, attending to the following outline: first, I analyse specific pathways through which China localises its overall role conception to the context of Sino-Brazilian relations. Then, I present an overview of said relations since the return of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to the presidency, highlighting the official convergence in expectations

between both nations. Stemming from this perceived harmony, I thus introduce the case study as an apparent break in alignment, with Brazilian authorities imposing tariffs against Chinese EVs. Notably, the MDIC—under its Minister Geraldo Alckmin (2023-)—justified the imposition of tariffs under tropes such as the cruciality of promoting national development in strategic sectors, job creation for Brazilians and sustainable goals for the economy (Brazil 2023). The focus on development, specifically, resonates directly with China’s political discourse for Brazil, which would entail that both sides have divergent expectations towards it.

However, I choose not to limit my analysis of Brazil’s expectations in the EV setting to the policy level alone. Instead, I start by taking a look at the movements and reactions of important stakeholders within the sector, taking note of the voices for and against the imposition of trade barriers. Associations representing local industries, i.e. Anfavea, positioned itself in favour of the tariffs by recurring to the same tropes evoked by the MDIC, in addition to accusing Chinese imports of having an unfair advantage due to subsidised production practices in China (Frontini 2023). Surprisingly, however, representatives which spoke against the policies—such as ABVE—also defended their positions by making reference to national development concerns, job creation in Brazil and the importance of sustainability (Ferreira 2023; Moliterno 2024).

As such, the imposition of tariffs by the Brazilian government has proven to be a layered decision, as authorities had to balance divergent demands and filter the policy’s justification strategically. I posit the outcome has been the signalling of a *negotiated dissatisfaction* with China’s role enactment in the EV case. Since Brazil did not accuse or single out China, the case has not witnessed an official protest by Chinese officials, such as those issued when the United States or the European Union applied similar tariffs (Lo 2024). Notwithstanding, still during negotiations in 2023, Chinese EV manufacturers BYD and GWM announced they would build new facilities in Brazil (BYD 2023; Andrade 2024). Hence, I argue that role enactment changed through role adaptation, as strategies and instruments were adapted in order to circumvent rising tariffs and better reflect China’s role conception.

This dissertation aims to contribute to the literature on China-Brazil relations through the conceptual framework of Role Theory. China’s international roles have been given much attention in their relationships with other great powers or international institutions (Thies 2016; Hurri 2020; Schortgen 2021; Duarte, Gupta and Delvaje 2024). Regarding developing countries, research has focused more on how China projects itself than how external audiences perceive China’s role (Duggan 2016, 2020). Moreover, I posit that China’s increasingly complex and ego-oriented role conception under Xi Jinping is still not fully appreciated by the existing literature dealing with China’s relations with the developing world. Instead, there is a preference for adhering to more historically-based role conceptions, such as that of a “constructive improver” (Chen 2016; Shih and

Huang 2016; Duggan 2016, 2020), in detriment of other sources of China's role conception, especially internal interests expressed through domestic contestation (Harnisch, Bersick and Gottwald 2016; Schortgen 2021; Song and Fürst 2022).

Moreover, I expect to contribute to the existing literature by designing a more nuanced account of China's insertion in Brazil. As in many areas related to China, the specialised academic literature has seen some degree of polarisation. At one side, there are analyses that see Beijing's influence as inherently detrimental to Brazil and LAC countries (Berg 2021) and irrevocably destined to replace the US in the region's power structure (Berg 2021; Roy 2023). On the other side, some works have taken a non-critical, quasi-official stance towards China (Pires and Paulino 2017; Duggan 2020; Guo 2023).

Therefore, my purpose is to avoid this dichotomy and make sense of China-Brazil relations in light of the magnitude of Beijing's presence and of the complexities that entails. Therefore, this research's ethos falls far from radicality: its guiding compass, in the end, is to analytically demonstrate how difficult it would be to expect that Sino-Brazilian relations would avoid all issues in the past 20 years, growing steadily in perfect harmony. Nevertheless, I deem my contribution not to be limited to an update of existing literature, for it comprises a problematisation of China's self—as projected in official discourse—in light of some of the issues detectable in its role enactment, by applying Role Theory concepts and approaches.

CHAPTER 1 — FROM PEACEFUL RISE TO RENEWED PROACTIVITY: CHINA AND THE GLOBAL ORDER IN RETROSPECT

1. Chapter Introduction

This chapter doubles up as a literature review on China's rise as a great power and a broad contextualisation of the topics of interest to this dissertation. It comes divided into three sections. First, I expose scholarly works on China's relationship with the Western-led liberal global order. In it, I seek to resignify the revisionism/conformism dichotomy in light of contemporary reflections on the issue. Second, I conduct a purview of the literature on Beijing's relations with the developing world. That shall be the moment in which I elaborate on academic impressions of China's Global South official rhetoric, its subsequent behaviour when dealing with developing partners, and finally, the latter's perceptions of China's general presence in their countries or regions. The third and final section overviews specific elements of China-Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) relations, focusing on closing up the contextualisation in light of this dissertation's case study, which pertains to Sino-Brazilian relations.

1.1. Between a rock and a hard place: opening up China's ambivalent ties to the liberal global order

The question of how a rising power chooses to engage with the powers that be is a vexing one, both in theoretical and empirical terms. Nevertheless, China's accelerated rise to prominence in international affairs has made such reflections inescapable. Naturally, the phenomenon's complexity has stimulated the formulation of often strict interpretations of how China behaves *vis-à-vis* the existing global order, led by the United States (US). Moreover, as the issue is not only complex but politically charged, simplistically polarised views on the matter proliferate both within academic and policymaking circles. This section aims to evaluate recent (post-2020) scholarly work on China's engagement with the liberal global order³ (Lee *et al.* 2020; Ikenberry 2024; Peter 2024). The key objective here is to understand to what degree has Beijing behaved as a revisionist, i.e. opposing the liberal status quo (Liu 2021); or as a conformist, i.e. collaborating with established powers toward sustaining prevailing rules of the system (Liu 2021). In hindsight, I warn that this revisionist-conformist dichotomy is overly simplistic, a fact that academic literature—even the most biased for one specific side or another—has caught on.

Thereby, the conformist/revisionist binarity is better understood as a spectrum, in which China may occupy different positions depending on a plethora of factors. Key to comprehending this spectrum-shaped account of China's multifaceted engagement with the current *status quo* lies in accepting that China does not consistently conform to, challenge, or reform the liberal international order (LIO), but instead adopts diverse strategies ranging from deep cooperation to deep challenge, depending on the issue-area and institutional context (Heldt and Park 2025). Regardless, interpretations may still denote China's behaviour as more revisionist or conformist-prone—not often for the same reasons.

In general terms, I propose that scholarly work falls into three broad categories: those that see China as more conformist (i.e. Meng and Yao 2024; Yue 2022 and Bahi 2021); those that frame Beijing as more revisionist (i.e. Pisciotta 2023; Pauselli *et al.* 2023; Dunford and Liu 2024; and Ikenberry 2024); and those that advocate for a middle ground between revisionist and conformist, or outright reject these categories (i.e. Weiss and Wallace; Yuan 2022; and Kim 2024). In advance, one notable aspect I have detected is that revisionist-leaning accounts far outnumber conformist-leaning ones. As China consolidates its status as a great power—instead of an emerging actor in the international system—the shift in interpretation is to be expected. Of course, as we

³ Also called the international liberal order (LIO). The LIO is understood as a complex system of rules, arrangements, and institutions established in the aftermath of the Second World War and led primarily by the United States and its Western allies (Lee *et al.* 2020; Ikenberry 2024). It is premised on several fundamental pillars, including a commitment to open multilateralism in trade, international institutions, and the values of liberal democracy (Lee *et al.* 2020; Peter 2024).

shall see below, different authors hold divergent judgements on the benefits of China's increased capacity to contest liberal norms and reshape the current global order: pro and anti-China sentiment—as well as pro and anti-liberal—is a force to be reckoned with both inside and outside of academia. These moral evaluations are not always explicit, or even recognised by their holders; yet, who writes, where and to whom are perennial sources of biases that hold their part in how knowledge about China's rise is constructed globally.

Another preliminary aspect for consideration are found in the *hows* and *whys* different authors ascribe to China's perceived patterns of engagement with the liberal global order. Here, I focus on three pairs of factors that reflect, in general terms, how the collected bibliography frames these *hows* and *whys*: pragmatic (Kim 2024) or contingent (Haimeiri and Jones 2025); domestically bound (Weiss and Wallace 2021) or externally motivated (Lucenti 2024); and material (Adhikari 2021) or symbolic (Hobbs *et al.* 2023). Differently from the revisionist/conformist spectrum, classifications within these pairs of factors reflect specific emphases each work may give to the issue, while not necessarily undermining the existence/importance of the correlated factor. For instance, an article on the role domestic politics play in China's assertiveness abroad does not imply that said article denies the importance of external factors in explaining Beijing's behaviour. Likewise, pieces of literature will seldom reflect on all pairs of factors, as they relate to disparate levels of analysis or to entirely different framings of the matter at hand. Nevertheless, each pair is recurrent enough as to invite explicit demarcation.

Before I continue, I should precise what I mean by these factors⁴. Starting with the first pair, I denote as pragmatic any account that ties China's patterns of behaviour to intentional action, based on articulated policy decision-making or on an implicit grand strategy by Beijing. In contrast, I frame as contingent accounts that tie China's behaviour to unintentional or reactive action. The second pair of factors is more explicit and relates to what are the main motivators of China's behaviour, dividing them between domestically bound explanations—when domestic factors are at play—and externally motivated ones—when international pressures or actions by other actors are the focus of inquiry. Finally, the last pair refers to whether Beijing contests/conforms to the global order on a material basis or on a symbolic one; or even, to which of those dimensions do the reasons for China's actions adhere.

⁴ Furthermore, I should also clarify that these factors and the categories they represent—at least in the terminology I have provided—were not overtly inspired by any existing framework. Instead, their crafting is founded on a combination of specific research concerns and observed patterns of argumentation present in the literature. For instance, the first pairing (pragmatic/contingent) was devised based on a theoretical concern (see Chapter 2) regarding the actual connection between foreign policy decision-making and observable behaviour. The second and third pairings, for their part, were more inductively built, as a notable share of works explicitly emphasise some of these variables. However, they also serve specific research concerns—especially the second pairing (domestically bound/externally motivated), which touches upon issues of domestic role contestation and international interaction as forces behind China's national role conception.

With these preliminary considerations in mind, I conduct my purview of the issue in a sequence of stages. First, to establish a basis for work, I focus on the more balanced references that refrain from giving more importance to China's revisionist or conformist behaviour. Then, I analyse the constellation of ideas within what I have observed to be the most recurrent account of China's engagement with the liberal global order: the revisionist-leaning ones. Finally, I break down the arguments of the more conformist-prone literature. For each stage, I shall structure my considerations based on the aforementioned three pairs of factors, hoping to achieve a more expansive understanding of the *hows* and *whys* for each cluster of the revisionist/conformist spectrum. When valuable, I shall also pinpoint accounts that I deem either particularly hawkish of China, or uncritical of Beijing's global ambitions.

1.1.1. Balanced accounts of Chinese engagement with the liberal global order

A balanced account of China's relationship with the liberal global order does not mean it is a neutral one. Instead, what characterises balanced analyses of Chinese international behaviour is the author's tendency to refrain from giving revisionist or conformist dynamics greater weight than the other. Even so, the piece of literature can be cynical of China's engagement with Western institutions, albeit recognising Beijing's plans are not intrinsically revisionist of the liberal order. Likewise, authors may describe that equilibrium between pro and anti-*status quo* behaviour as intentional pragmatism by Beijing, or a mere product of unarticulated factors that combine to constitute an amorphous whole—which just happens to be better described as a tenuous balance among revisionism and conformism.

In descriptive terms, almost all accounts frame China's engagement with the liberal global order in line with Kim's (2024) characterisation of Chinese ambivalence as conformist in structure and revisionist in values. That is to say, Beijing conforms to the liberal order's architecture—joining the WTO, integrating with global markets, actively participating in UN governance settings—but does so in a way that avoids the liberal order's ideological core—such as the primacy of democracy, human rights, and open market policies. Kim is particularly critical of the narrative that allowing China to integrate with the *status quo* was a liberal idealist error by the US. He argues that this choice was strategically reasoned both in liberal and realist logics (Kim 2024). Tied to the architecture of the current global order through economic interdependence, yet unwilling to converge with liberal principles (both in the political and economic sphere), Beijing finds itself in a middle ground where pragmatic action is the norm (Kim 2024).

Therefore, Kim falls into the category of authors that account China's behaviour as imminently pragmatic. Adhikari (2021) and Yuan (2022) are two other illustrative cases of scholarly

work that develop a majorly balanced comprehension of Chinese engagement with the liberal global order due to pragmatic, intentional behaviour from Beijing. In addition, both authors empirically advance their ideas with a focus on a characteristically liberal institution: peacebuilding. As such, Adhikari (2021) posits that China holds a pragmatic approach to peacebuilding, often engaging with liberal institutions and actors, but rejecting liberal normativity in the peacebuilding process⁵. In a similar vein, Yuan (2022) argues that China does not question the normative basis of liberal peace (i.e. its legitimacy), but challenges its content and implementation, thus promoting a qualitatively different approach to peacebuilding known as the *developmental peace* model.

This strategic embrace of form without full ideological entanglement enables China to contest liberal peace without openly rejecting multilateralism. This mixed strategy reflects China's ideological divergence with liberalism, as well as its functional interests. In other words, it resists liberal prescriptions while proposing alternative models resonant with the Global South (Yuan 2022). While Yuan's (2022) account ascribes Beijing's norm contestation as an objective in itself, Adhikari (2021) also notes that Chinese material interests are a defining element of when China chooses to engage with peacebuilding. For instance, in Myanmar, Chinese engagement meant backing the peace process to protect its investments and regional security interests, even while undermining liberal norms through support of the military and elite-dominated state institutions (Adhikari 2021). Thereby, Adhikari's view on Chinese pragmatism is more mixed than Yuan's. Nevertheless, neither account appears overly critical of the issue. The next work also holds a pragmatic balanced perspective, but with a markedly pessimistic take on Beijing's tactics.

Kalyanpur (2023) posits that the reason why China so openly engages with liberal institutions relates to its ability to manipulate its mechanisms to its own, illiberal interests. Specifically, China uses the openness and predictability of the liberal order, particularly courts in major economic powers like the United States and the United Kingdom, as tools of repression against political opponents and competitors (Kalyanpur 2023). The author focuses on the instrumentality of the global order, arguing that China is first interested in weaponising the system's legal frameworks to its own gain, rather than worrying about contesting or conforming to it. As such, China's pattern of engagement is characteristically pragmatic, with Beijing taking advantage of the relative openness of liberal institutions to reshape their norms to its own ends, namely, domestic repression against political dissent. The difference from previous works lies in the hawkishness of Kalyanpur's (2023) account of China's motivations to do so. Framing the Chinese agenda as *illiberal* is a common trope of analyses that hold a critical view of Beijing's interests—or

⁵ Liberal peacebuilding emphasises democratisation and the promotion of open market policies as primary pathways out of conflict, presuming that a liberal society is inherently predisposed towards peace (Adhikari 2021).

that stem from a particularly pro-Western perspective (see Lim and Ikenberry 2023; Ikenberry 2024).

Usually, these works adhere to a revisionist-leaning approach. Then, what sets Kalyanpur's work apart as balanced in my interpretation? The difference is that the author posits that China's behaviour is not linked to any desire to advance alternatives to liberal normativity. Instead, Chinese actions are instrumental rather than ideological: its rationale transcends any necessity to confront or conform, even if the end product is that of a conformist in structure and a revisionist in values. Henceforth, it is the author's perspective that existing instruments, albeit liberal in principle, happen to be ill-prepared to deal with authoritarian powers—such as China, in his perspective—capable of exploiting their mechanisms to their own gain (Kalyanpur 2023).

As I have previously hinted, a balanced account is not necessarily a neutral one. Neither is there a unified formula for arriving at a balanced conclusion regarding China's patterns of engagement with the liberal global order. So far, I have explored works with a particular pragmatic understanding of the *hows* and *whys* of China's behaviour. However, there are valuable interpretations that note how this balanced pattern of engagement is rather an emergent property, than any purposeful action by Beijing. Here, the second pair of factors—domestically bound and externally imposed—play a more crucial role, for it is often from one of those categories that the reasons for China's balanced engagement emerge.

Works that advance the argument that China's pattern of engagement is externally imposed posit that Chinese behaviour happens to be ambiguous due to outside pressures that crucially shape how confrontational China seems. As such, notions of revisionism are not necessarily inherent to China's international behaviour. For instance, Lucenti (2024) demonstrates how stereotypical representations within North-American academia and government circles play a huge part in framing China as threat to the liberal order, when China's perceived assertiveness is rather a status-sensitive reaction to how liberal narratives portray its behaviour. Likewise, Xue (2023) argues that China is neither a *status quo* power, nor a fully-blown revisionist because its course of action depends on how other actors' behaviour align with Beijing's cultural mandate of saving face.

Lucenti's (2024) and Xue's (2023) articles posit that emotional and symbolic factors matter as much as material interests for explaining foreign policy behaviour. In general, literature focusing on the role of outside framings behind China's perceived ambiguity place considerable emphasis on the symbolic factor, instead of the material one. However, they will not necessarily deny China's capacity for agency and pragmatism. In its defence of realist internationalism (and in its critique of liberal institutionalists like Ikenberry), Lieven (2021) is a key author that emphasises how liberal ideology played a huge part in framing China as an existential threat to the *status quo*. Lieven asserts that liberal internationalism possesses a compulsive need to portray non-liberal systems as

aggressive enemies to justify its own global mission, making use of fabricated dichotomies such as the opposition of democracies and autocracies (Lieven 2021). Instead, Lieven characterises China as a non-ideological (in the sense that it is not bound by liberal ideology), status-seeking power within a pluralistic international system, elements that in turn explain its pragmatism and disdain for liberal pressures to reform (Lieven 2021). Indeed, it is valuable to note that, while external pressures do generate noticeable distortions, one should refrain from believing that China is purely reactive to Western narratives, or that it lacks worldwide ambitions of its own.

Domestically bound explanations also offer valuable insights by shifting the level of analysis from the external to the internal. Notions of reform or conformity often presuppose that China holds a consistent strategy for engaging with the current global order. In contrast, Haimeiri and Jones (2025) argue that Beijing does not have that degree of coherence, with its behaviour deviating from policy guidelines due to bureaucratic competition, commercial self-interest and domestic fiscal constraints. The authors make a substantive statement against essentialising state-level strategy and its effects on global affairs: China is a complex country, with a myriad of interests that seldom converge. In a similar tone, Weiss and Wallace (2021) trace China's selective engagement with the liberal international order back to Chinese domestic politics. They argue that domestic variables such as centrality and heterogeneity define how China engages with international regimes. As such, the more central the issue is to core domestic pillars, the more assertive China will behave. Moreover, its foreign policy reflects internal contestation and pragmatic balancing between disparate domestic actors, rather than some form of ideological dogmatism (Weiss and Wallace 2021). Thus, China's approach is markedly contingent.

This does not mean that all domestically bound analyses lead to contingent framings. Focusing on Chinese public opinion, Pang and Thomas (2022) conducted surveys with Chinese proto-elites (university students in Beijing), which demonstrated some of the domestic ideational context within which the state maneuvers its foreign policy. Namely, perceptions of foreign threats, especially from Western countries, abound, but aggressive responses are largely opposed. This reflects China's option for a selective, pragmatic engagement with the liberal order, as it still values diplomacy and multilateralism as its main tools, but retains the perception of threats to its interests everywhere (Pang and Thomas 2022).

Regardless of its contingent or pragmatic connotation, more often than not, domestic imperatives—such as economic development and regime legitimation—shape China's ambiguous status internationally. Hopewell (2020) touches on that issue as she takes note of the challenges for global economic governance born out of a 'China paradox'—meaning, a country that is both an economic powerhouse and a self-identified developing nation. According to the author, Chinese engagement with the liberal global order is in an institutional deadlock: Beijing opts to integrate

with existing institutions, but its capability to conform to the *status quo* suffers from its reluctance to accept the costs of Western-enforced rules of governance. As per the author, liberal normativity—especially obligations related to transparency, subsidy limits and environmental protection—not only diverges from the purported Chinese model, but also fundamentally hampers Beijing’s domestic developmental objectives (Hopewell 2020)⁶.

Likewise, analyses such as Karmazin’s (2024) emphasise the role of China’s internal priorities in defining when and how to engage with liberal norms, yet with enough degree of pragmatism to seek common ground when possible. In this light, China’s engagement is neither revisionist nor conformist because it needs to balance global ambitions with domestic or regime imperatives. For authors with a more critical take on China’s foreign policy, these contradictions are the reason why Beijing has tried and failed to assume the leadership of the system. Analysing the events of the COVID-19 pandemic, Zhao (2021a) posits that China sought to fill the US-shaped leadership vacuum during that period, but that its rhetoric far outpaced its actions. According to the author, China failed to provide public goods at scale, nor proved capable of articulating an universally appealing alternative to liberal norms.

As a counterpoint, Liu and Yang (2023) look at China’s domestic sphere to see how Beijing internally references itself *vis-à-vis* the global order. They found that China holds a distinct view of the post-Cold War international order to that of its Western counterparts. While the latter focus on ideological and normative aspects of the order, China emphasises its functional part. As such, Chinese official discourse and domestic debates seldom speak of a 'liberal international order', instead opting for descriptions such as 'UN-centred' or 'based on international law'. The article provides a different account of how China integrates with the existing global order: it does so based on its own understanding of the *status quo*, which is pragmatic and functional, instead of fundamentally liberal. However, this gap in perception causes suspicion among Western countries, which understand Beijing to be an adversary of liberal principles (Liu and Yang 2023).

Still within contingent-themed analyses, it is important to note that not all roads lead to Beijing. Working on collective security instruments (mainly the UN peacekeeping efforts), Peter (2024) argues that normative contestation within the liberal order does not stem solely from Chinese revisionism. It has also been an internal process, as typically liberal actors (like the US) have undermined the morality and impartiality of collective security instruments through narrow and politicised applications, such as counterterrorism. Similarly, China has grown sizable enough to become an inertial force in global affairs. The global financial order, for instance, counts on a myriad of private actors and firms, many of which would traditionally be expected to be tools of US

⁶ Of course, this argument is premised in a dichotomous opposition between liberal norms and the Chinese model, which is not necessarily the case. This goes back to Lieven’s (2021) critique of liberal ideology as a secular crusade, which must frame any non-ideological actor as an inherent enemy.

power projection. Instead, those actors actively adjust their operations and norms to accommodate China's state-capitalist model, often at the expense of liberal normativity (Petry 2025). According to Petry (2025), global firms often act as intermediaries for Chinese capital going global, helping to internationalise Chinese investment within parameters set by the state. Moreover, when operating in Chinese soil, these actors are more than willing to comply with capital controls, foreign ownership caps, and extensive market monitoring/surveillance systems that would be unthinkable in Western liberal markets (Petry 2025). Consequently, this perspective adds another layer of complexity to the interface between China and the LIO.

Therefore, we have an order that is already contested despite China's behaviour. In light of this complexity, some researchers understand the equilibrium between revisionism and conformism as the outcome of an emergent hybrid system, in which China's model coexists with existing norms (Lee *et al.* 2020). As Beijing both contests and engages with the US-led world order, it purports a pluralistic view of norms and models, exemplary of a multipolar world (Lee *et al.* 2020). Authors adherent to that interpretation are especially critical of the notion of a single, unified global order, and posit that ideological diversity should be a core tenet of the system (Rodrik and Walt 2021; Lieven 2021).

Be it pragmatic or contingent, domestically bound or externally imposed, material or symbolic, balanced accounts are also the ones that question most frequently the usefulness of categories such as *revisionist* or *conformist*, especially within a complex international system. In general, these works point towards episodes of confrontation or cooperation from Beijing, but choose to frame them under the bigger picture of how each dynamic relates to one another. Here, the pragmatic-contingent divide appeared more consistently, with accounts usually emphasising one of these factors as the reason for China's pattern of behaviour. Domestically bound or externally imposed perspectives appeared more prominently in contingent-leaning works, while appraisals of material or symbolic nature showed up episodically.

1.1.2. Revisionist-leaning accounts of Chinese engagement with the liberal global order

This subsection should start with a disclaimer: it is often difficult to tell apart revisionist-leaning from balanced accounts of China's engagement with the liberal global order. Since most authors refrain from purely revisionist or conformist frameworks, every piece of literature offers some degree of nuance that must be properly recognised. The downside is that, explicitly, there is little separating each category from one another. For instance, the aforementioned characterisation of China's dubious engagement as conformist in structure and revisionist in values

is a recurrent trope in revisionist-leaning analyses, as it were in balanced ones. Furthermore, defining accounts as more hawkish or dovish does little to solve the issue, as I have identified pro and anti-China pieces of literature in both balanced and revisionist-leaning bodies of works.

Nonetheless, I posit there is some logic for separating the extant literature according to their positions within the revisionist/conformist spectrum. Generally speaking, that logic is implicit on how each author frames the issue of China's engagement with the *status quo*. The tendency of balanced accounts was to contextualise competitive or cooperative dynamics of Chinese behaviour in light of the complexities of the current order transition. As such, revisionism always had a conformist undertone, and vice-versa. Revisionist-leaning accounts, on the other hand, usually depart from similar premises, yet choose to focus on how Beijing actively reshapes the global order, or why confrontational patterns of behaviour have been more frequent in China's international affairs.

It is illustrative of the elusiveness of the divide between revisionist-leaning and balanced works that revisionist behaviour does not need to be confrontational. Take, for instance, Pisciotta's (2023) granular approach to revisionism, which categorises China's engagement with the liberal order in a particularly nuanced manner. The author argues that Beijing is indeed revisionist, but of a reformist type, i.e. seeking to subvert the current *status quo* through peaceful and gradual means, without high-risk confrontation. Likewise, looking at UN's development pillar, Baumann *et al.* (2024) conclude that China engages with the liberal global order in a subtle and careful manner, promoting selective and incremental changes to consolidated liberal institutions, reshaping them to better fit China's interests and normative preferences. Albeit far from dramatic, the authors still understand that China's profile is closer to that of a reformer than to one of accommodation.

One issue with this notion is that it can prove hard to pinpoint the boundary between peaceful and non-peaceful ways of order contestation. China may opt out of militaristic tools in the global stage, but regionally its policy is quite more pronounced in terms of aggression (Mattoo 2022). In the end, China's status as the quintessential pragmatist holds such divisions potentially meaningless. Of greater value, in my purview, are analyses that devote attention to the sophistication of China's revisionism. Pauselli *et al.* (2023) analyse how China's membership of the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) has altered voting patterns of other members, who consistently vote against resolutions that China opposes. This is due to Beijing's engagement with institutional engineering, as it changes incentive structures to influence voting patterns without violating formal rules (Pauselli *et al.* 2023). Similarly, Dai and Lu (2025) offer an empirically rich account of how China reshapes, rather than confronts, liberal regimes from within. Focusing on the international human rights regime—and more specifically, the Universal Periodic Review instrument—the authors notice that not only China advances a developmental approach to

human rights, but also that Global South countries recipient of Chinese aid tend to diverge from liberal normativity by following the same pattern of putting social and economic rights ahead of political and civil ones (Dai and Lu 2025).

Certainly, these authors' attempts at delineating the ways through which China sophisticatedly contests the liberal order from within imply that Beijing does so with some level of intent or planning. Furthermore, as revisionism underscores directional action, analyses with revisionist leanings ought to emphasise pragmatism rather than contingency. Apart from the aforementioned works, Haenle and Sher (2023) are a noteworthy example of a pragmatic account of China's revisionism. The authors posit that China's increased proactiveness in reshaping existing global governance structures on ideological and institutional terms can be traced back to some of its more recent foreign policy frameworks—namely the Global Security Initiative (GSI), the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI)—, which demonstrate a nation more willing to explicitly challenge Western consensus on matters of international security, development and cultural plurality (Haenle and Sher 2023). Again, it is a war embedded in the current international system, not an overt attempt to create new structures. Even so, these analyses emphasise that China's push for reform has become more aggressive and explicitly strategised. Other works with a pragmatic undertone include Petry (2023), Dunford and Liu (2024), Ikenberry (2024) and Mattoo (2022).

Notwithstanding revisionism's directional tendency, there are still contingent accounts of a revisionist-leaning nature. For instance, Harris (2022) reframes China's duality towards the global order by shifting the level of analysis from regimes and institutions to the very structure of global capitalism. China is in a hybrid position because it pushes for changes regarding liberal norms while remaining an integral part of the capitalist structure. Therefore, Beijing's growing antagonism towards US hegemony is a consequence of the internal fragmentation of the transnational capitalist class at the hands of globalisation (Harris 2022). In this line of argument, the reason for China's revisionism lies not in Chinese purposeful action, but in overarching structural contradictions.

In addition, just as happened with some balanced accounts, a number of authors explain China's confrontational behaviour as an outcome of domestic factors or external constraints. Regarding the latter, Bettiza *et al.* (2023) argue that China's confrontational stance on ideological/normative/narrative grounds has become clearer as a response to the stigmatisation purported by the civilisational standard implicit in the globalisation of liberalism. Hence, by channeling Confucianism and Socialism with Chinese characteristics, Beijing promotes an alternative to liberal normativity, claiming it to be equally valid (Bettiza *et al.* 2023).

Domestically bound accounts, on the other hand, are more numerous and highlight a greater variety of factors behind China's behaviour. Notably, Loh (2024) provides a rich account of how

everyday diplomatic actions, language, rituals and technologies within China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) help shape the country's "wolf warrior" posture⁷ under Xi Jinping. The author's contribution affirms how domestic actors, especially state bureaucracy, matter in understanding how China challenges the current *status quo*. Miura (2023) likewise ties China's revisionist stance to internal dynamics, rather than grand strategic plans to dismantle the liberal global order. Mainly, she argues Xi Jinping's style of leadership, tied to the nationalistic imagery he has championed, incentivises displays of loyalty among the bureaucracy, thus leading to increasingly more assertive behaviour from China. Specifically, Xi's centralization of power, accompanied by his explicit calls for diplomats to show a "fighting spirit" in their defence of China and hit back against perceived slights, incentivised the bureaucracy to compete to see who was more patriotic and loyal to Xi and the Party (Loh 2024).

Whether this is a result of a top-down change in posture as Miura (2023) posits, or emergent from bottom-up shifts in behaviour as in Loh's (2024) account, remains a topic discussion. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy how ideational elements take the forefront in these accounts. As Zhao (2021b) presents it, China appears more revisionist due to the increased role nationalism⁸ plays in its domestic and foreign policy. In contrast to previous party leaders, Xi Jinping transformed nationalist displays from carefully managed acts of affirmative force into assertive and combative ideology, which is often weaponised as an aggressive form of defence of state narratives. Finally, to give it a new layer of complexity, domestically bound and externally imposed framings can merge to create multidimensional accounts of China's confrontational behaviour. For example, Yuan (2023) posits that China's shift to a 'wolf warrior' diplomacy is a sign of the country's desire to engage in performative revisionism, integrating with the structures of the global order but taking assertive steps to contest its norms and power dynamics. Notably, however, the author argues this transition is a consequence of both domestic factors—Xi Jinping's style of leadership, rising nationalism—and international circumstances—perceived as hostile to Chinese interests (Yuan 2023).

Since most authors view China as primarily revisionist in values, it is no surprise that many revisionist-leaning accounts emphasise the symbolic dimension of order contestation. Bettiza *et al.* (2023) frame Chinese confrontation of Western hegemony as essentially ideological, channelling its civilisational identity as a bulwark against liberal moral intrusiveness. Likewise, Root (2024) argues China is revisionist on civilisational grounds, which means that it promotes an alternative vision of

⁷ The wolf warrior posture refers to a combative, assertive, and high-profile style of international engagement practiced by Chinese diplomacy, which contrasts with the low-profile approach championed by Deng Xiaoping. This posture is characterized by aggressive rhetoric, public confrontations, the use of conspiracy theories, and a willingness to push back stridently against perceived slights, criticisms, or violations of China's core interests (Yuan 2023; Loh 2024; Forsby 2025)

⁸ The particular aspects of China's nationalism and the doctrine of National Rejuvenation will be further explained in Chapter 3.

global order based on national rejuvenation and cultural exceptionalism. Forsby (2025), in particular, is keen to remind us that not all can be traced back to material interests. By focusing on the emotional dimension of Chinese coercive diplomacy, the author notes how China's self-identity shapes public discourse and informs its attitudes vis-à-vis perceived Western moral superiority. His contribution can also be seen as a response to pragmatic accounts: amidst notions of calculated contestation by Beijing, Forsby (2025) posits that China's perceived assertiveness is often emotionally charged, instead of purely rational.

Following on that argument, other works notice how initiatives of a predominantly material nature can also hold symbolic value. Hobbs *et al.* (2023) apply that logic to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), emphasising its role as a tool of symbolic communication, through which China seeks to build positive perceptions of its objectives abroad. However, just as China adopts a more confrontational stance on the ideological/normative side of the liberal global order, so does its public diplomacy appear more assertive, especially to the eyes of Western or Western-aligned countries—often contradicting the official narrative of the BRI (Hobbs *et al.* 2023). Therefore, symbolic communication is not only a space of order contestation, but also a medium for conflict between disparate perspectives of the global order. Similar to the previous account, Yi *et al.* (2024) claim that China often engages as a symbolic counter-hegemon within the existing system, positioning itself as capable of fulfilling traditional roles of liberal powers, such as the one of a supplier of public goods during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, it does so while contesting liberal norms, thus generating suspicions from Western powers, especially from the US (Yi *et al.* 2024).

It warrants mention that increased nationalism within China's domestic polity plays a considerable part in its international symbolic contestation. Zhao (2021b) demonstrates that this new brand of nationalism does not simply reject the liberal international order; it reorients China's engagement with it through a lens of cultural defensiveness, regime legitimacy, and geopolitical assertiveness. While China continues to participate in multilateral institutions, its foreign policy is increasingly shaped by public sentiment, geopolitical grievances, and narratives of Western decline. Assertive patriots, now internalised within the bureaucratic, diplomatic, and digital arms of the state, react aggressively to perceived slights—whether related to Taiwan, Hong Kong, COVID-19, or human rights—often framing criticism as imperialist or anti-China conspiracies. This reframing not only limits the space for normative convergence with the West but also fosters zero-sum interpretations of global governance, where international critique is seen as a threat to China's dignity and sovereignty (Zhao 2021b).

There is one final aspect regarding revisionist-leaning accounts of China's engagement with the liberal global order that I would like to pinpoint. Namely, there is a noticeable number of works with a markedly pro-Western or anti-China bias that earn deeper analysis. I already highlighted

similar works within the balanced ranks of the literature (see Kalyanpur 2023). It is here, nevertheless, that the external observer should expect to find these more hawkish works—after all, as was previously presented, it is a common trope of Western-biased analyses to frame China as a disruptive actor bent on subverting liberal normativity to its own, authoritarian gains. Unsurprisingly, I detect that many of the following accounts adhere to that general description. Lim and Ikenberry (2023), for instance, focus on how Beijing works to construct a new, illiberal hegemonic order within the shell of the old one. The authors directly tie this effort to China's intent of defending its domestic authoritarian rule from liberal normativity. Thus, China indeed proposes an alternative to the existing order, creating parallel structures that reflect its model (such as the BRI), but not in outright confrontation with the existing order. In another work, Ikenberry (2024) develops on that idea by explicitly putting China as a challenger of the US-led liberal order, even if not in classical terms. Rather than a dispute for power, East (China and Russia) and West compete for ideas and models of governance, with each side striving for support from the Global South (Ikenberry 2024).

Comparatively, Ikenberry's arguments are still somewhat moderate, since his position stems more from a pro-liberalism stance than outright cynicism of China (Lieven 2021). Still, his accounts are far closer to the *full revisionist* end of the spectrum. Another path these more critical views of China often take is to shift the focus from the global to the regional stage. Mattoo (2022) argues that, while China may seem reluctant or ambiguous at the global stage, in its regional setting, Beijing is far more decisive in promoting its own supremacy. Its behaviour, often coercitive and assertive, outright contravenes the set of rules it claims to uphold in international institutions/agreements, such as the United Nations or the Non-Proliferation Treaty (Mattoo 2022). Certainly, the more concrete Beijing's interests are—which is often the case when dealing with its strategic surroundings—the more proactive (and divisive) its behaviour becomes.

Concomitantly, cases of Chinese coerciveness at the regional stage—from the South China Sea (Miura 2023) to Taiwan (Pokharna 2022) fuel hawkish accounts of its global ambitions. A common thread in Western accounts of China's desire to supplant the current *status quo* is to point out its informal allegiance to known authoritarian states with a traditional anti-Western stance, such as Russia, Iran and North Korea. Byman and Jones (2025) provide a typical example of such a narrative. From the authors' perspective, Chinese engagement with liberal institutions is part of a larger strategy to counter Western hegemony and reshape the liberal system from within (Byman and Jones 2025). Furthermore, in one of the most hawkish account I have found, Pokharna (2022) highlights China's intent to subvert the international order in a disruptive manner, marking instances in which its assertiveness resembled evidence of a new Cold War—all of them related to China's peripheral relations (Hong Kong, Taiwan, border disputes with India and Japan, the South China

Sea and new engagements with Iran and Afghanistan). A key trope of this type of account is to recall the imagery of the Cold War. I also note that, even here, the author refrains from characterising China as a full-blown revisionist of the liberal order. The author's logic ultimately is: the strategy may seem moderate, but the ambitions are not.

Even so, a counterpoint remains with those authors that frame China's challenge to the liberal *status quo* in favourable terms. Dunford and Liu (2024), for example, resignify China's ambiguous engagement with the current global order in a largely optimistic perspective. For them, Beijing neither confronts nor conforms to liberal norms because it is both a part of the system, and a stabilising power that seeks to address the inequalities of the order and to advocate for developing nations. I still frame their analysis as revisionist-leaning instead of balanced because the authors' understanding of China's rise is crucially linked to Beijing's active role in challenging the unequal and unfair dynamics of the liberal order purported by US hegemony (Dunford and Liu 2024). A similar pro-China perspective can be found in Betizza *et al.* (2023).

1.1.3. Conformist-leaning accounts of Chinese engagement with the liberal global order

Following both balanced and revisionist-leaning accounts of Chinese engagement with the current *status quo*, this last subsection arrives almost as an epilogue. Few works deserved the label of conformist-leaning, and those that did happened to achieve the status for quite different reasons than a naive acceptance of the *Peaceful Rise* narrative. Namely, authors with a conformist-leaning perspective on China's behaviour prefer to highlight the difficulties Beijing has found in actively challenging the *status quo*. More often than not, analyses of that type are characteristically contingent, framing China's conformism as the unexpected result of a failed attempt to reshape the system (Bahi 2022) or as an outcome of the inexorable nature of the larger structures constraining the dynamics of order transition (Yue 2022). Regardless, there are also works that see China's retraction as an intentional move (Meng and Yao 2024).

Yue (2022) proposes a more traditional account of how China's capacity for revisionism has been constrained by its integration to the global order. The author's argument resembles the classic argument against China's rise, claiming Beijing would not challenge the system that had allowed for its rapid development. It is also a markedly structuralist analysis that frames China as a fragile great power, entrapped in semi-peripheral development and structural dependency on the liberal system. Therefore, Yue argues that China is actually trying to survive within the existing order, rather than supplant it. Surprisingly, he evokes the imagery of a new Cold War—a trope more typical of revisionist-leaning accounts—, but gives it a new interpretation by tying it to China's

semi-peripheral status in the system, instead of its economic-technological rise (Yue 2022). That analysis is particularly sceptical of Chinese power, going against the bulk of the literature by downplaying Beijing's capacity for agency. In some aspects, Yue (2022) agrees with Harris (2022) that China can never be a fully fledged revisionist due to its integration with the capitalist system; the difference is that Harris sees in global capitalism's internal contradictions a medium for Chinese contestation, while Yue emphasises that the same structure only serves to trap China in a semi-peripheral status, with its confrontational rhetoric rather a symptom of weakness in face of structural insecurities than a sign of hegemonic ambition (Yue 2022).

Bahi (2021) takes a similar—albeit less sceptical—stance towards China's reluctance to fully challenge the *status quo*. The author argues that, while China's foreign policy holds a revisionist core, its pragmatic approach reflects Beijing's reluctance to transform its new global status into actual leadership, for it does not wish to pay the associated costs. The lack of leadership during the COVID-19 crisis is proof of a scenario in which the expected hegemon—i.e. Donald Trump's United States—does not wish to lead, yet its sole potential replacement refuses to take its place. Chinese ambiguity/reluctance vis-à-vis the global order, thus, can be read not as a matter of Beijing's level of acceptance of liberal rules, but of its unwillingness to assume the costs of a hegemon (Bahi 2021). This line of interpretation, in my purview, resembles a form of *undesired conformity*: China leans towards conformity with the *status quo* not because it faithfully adheres to the norms of the system, but due to the fact that it sees the costs of leadership as greater than the price of conforming to what already exists.

Finally, China may appear conformist-leaning because not all authors assume that Chinese foreign policy has grown increasingly more proactive in the last few years of Xi's presidency. Meng and Yao (2024), for instance, argue that the disappearance of the term 'Period of Strategic Opportunity' in 2022 represents a sign that China's grand strategy has become less optimistic in face of greater rivalry with the US, thus shifting to a more defensive stance and focusing on internal resilience, economic autonomy and calibrated competition with Washington. According to the authors, the so-called Period of Strategic Opportunity has been a recurrent theme of Chinese official strategic thinking since 2002. The fact that it disappeared from public discourse since 2022 points to the possibility that Beijing has reassessed its optimism, once fuelled by domestic confidence, economic capability and favourable external conditions, in order to adapt to a more defensive and uncertain era of international relations (Meng and Yao 2024). As such, China leans towards conformity because, in its strategic thinking, it has entered times for resilience-building and defensive action.

China's engagement with the liberal global order, though complex, represents only one dimension of its expanding influence. In the next section, I focus on the debate surrounding China's equally critical and multifaceted relationship with the Global South.

1.2. China and the Global South⁹: unraveling the debate

In China's perspective, even more pivotal to its international engagement are relations with the developing world. While some authors (see Ikenberry 2024) understand Chinese interest in Global South countries as only a symptom of a larger dispute for global preeminence between East and West—thereby undermining much of the agency those countries may have—a substantive part of the literature recognise China-Global South relations as a multifaceted topic with its own dynamics. Chinese foreign policy frequently addresses issues related to developing nations, and discursive elements of its diplomatic rhetoric are usually sensitive to China's relationship—and perceived belonging—to the Global South. This section conducts a purview of that relationship through three dimensions: how China frames itself *vis-à-vis* developing partners; how China behaves in those partnerships; and how partners regard China in light of its framing and behaviour.

Here, my focus lies on how the existing body of work understands the dynamic exchange of perceptions between China and its partners, with the former's behaviour as a medium. Therefore, I am more interested in how each category relates to one another, than on which elements are replicable for all of them. It is for this reason that, unlike the previous section, I structure the current discussion without reference to any set of preconceived factors I see as recurrently evoked by the literature. Instead, focus falls on the following linkages: how China's behaviour relates to its rhetoric? And how China's behaviour and rhetoric inform Global South nations' perceptions of China? The starting point, however, remains on how China frames itself. As we shall see, Beijing's global image-building is especially tailored for developing world audiences—perhaps even more so than to issues of order contestation.

⁹ The idea of Global South is particularly imprecise. Chinese policymakers, who tend to be fond of correlated concepts such as South-South relations, are especially fluid in their understanding of what encompasses the Global South, frequently reassigning the category to include nations and regions which are open to dialogue and cooperation with Beijing (Kohlenberg and Godhart 2021). Here, I apply the term as a general reference to developing countries—which is also a very imprecise collective. In the spirit of giving the reader some geographical reference, this section mainly contains articles on Chinese relations with African and Southeast Asian countries. Latin American countries, which I also consider as developing nations, are analysed separately in the next section. Regardless, I choose to refrain from giving strict boundaries to the idea of Global South, since I understand the category to operate more as a heuristic tool than a conceptual framework *per se*.

1.2.1. **Great and responsible: Chinese diplomatic rhetoric amid an ambiguous identity**

Although the previous section provided sound evidence that post-2010s China is seen as less conformist than it was in its *peaceful rise* days, Beijing's self-portrait in international affairs has never strayed far from a narrative of reassurance—especially when dealing with minor partners. However, this does not mean that China's image is free from internal tensions, or outright contradictions. The key of the matter is how to balance the aspirations of a rising power turned great, on the one hand, and the peaceful discourse of a responsible partner, on the other. Moreover, Chinese leadership often must walk the thin ice of dealing with Western counter-narratives, without letting its perceived assertiveness contaminate the original self-image they aim to uphold.

Even amidst this constellation of factors pushing and pulling around China's foreign policymaking, the literature explored in this subsection allows us to postulate that Beijing's diplomatic discourse is sufficiently consistent in terms of rhetoric. Since developing countries are the target audience, development cooperation is recurrently identified as the main medium for the establishment of China's image *vis-à-vis* the Global South. For instance, Wang *et al.* (2024) explore a direct link between how China frames itself and how it shapes its development cooperation model. Key features of this connection include: a strong emphasis on state sovereignty and non-interference; a hybrid approach blending aid, trade, and investment; centrally coordinated but flexibly implemented mechanisms; and a discourse of mutual benefit rooted in South–South Cooperation (SSC).

Therefore, the core elements of China's development cooperation model are a reflection of its benevolent, morally grounded understanding of South-South ties. As such, while exploring China's regional relations, Li and Yang (2019) speak extensively of how Beijing portrays itself as a peaceful, inclusive, and benevolent neighbour committed to shared development. Similarly, Lin and Wang (2025) present China as a developmental peer and mentor within the Global South, offering lessons from its own success and advocating a win–win, comparative advantage-based growth model. The metaphor of *China as a mentor* is an important trope of Beijing's claim to leadership among developing nations. In this light, Yu and Due (2021) introduce the concept of “modernisation for the majority” to frame China's narrative of development cooperation—emphasising mutual benefit, inclusivity, and the role of infrastructure, knowledge sharing, and alternative financing mechanisms.

How China deals with its mentor mantle is also unique. For instance, Garlick and Chin (2024) propose that China engages in normative diplomacy through a 'do-as-I-do' paradigm; according to it, China prefers to advertise its development trajectory via discursive

and—mainly—non-discursive practices. China shapes norms through performance, embedded presence, and relational diplomacy. However, the authors note that Chinese non-discursive practices have been far more successful in altering partner behaviour than discursive ones. This analysis is fruitful because it reflects not only on how China, as a self-conceptualised leader, wishes to lead; but also on how its behaviour is shaped by that performative logic in order to better adapt to others.

Moreover, due to their close ties to development cooperation, China also entangles its main global initiatives into this web of meanings. Zhou and Zhang (2018), for instance, are particularly keen on demonstrating how the BRI revitalises South-South cooperation by consolidating Chinese leadership on material and normative grounds, reinforcing mutual benefit, policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, and people-to-people exchanges. They contend that the BRI aligns with SSC principles—non-interference, mutual respect, and shared development—and serves to address key Global South challenges such as underinvestment in infrastructure, limited access to capital, technological inequalities, and fragmentation among developing countries (Zhou and Zhang 2018).

Akin to Zhou and Zhang (2018), Cabrera García and Lo Brutto (2023) articulate China's global initiatives, from the Belt and Road to the GSI, as the instruments of its 'community of shared future' project. Crucially, they emphasise that China's proposal for mutual development without conditionality—especially tailored for China's South-South cooperation model—represents how Beijing projects itself as a credible alternative to Western leadership, thus establishing the first templates of a new hegemony. Highlighting the same spirit behind these initiatives, Kohlenberg and Godhart (2021) present Beijing as a global connector that transcends North–South divides and leads a 'new type' of South–South cooperation. For the authors, this image construction by China aims at normalising a Sinocentric global order under the guise of cooperative development. In other words, by relationally resignifying the concept of Global South, China purports itself not only as a leader of traditionally defined developing countries, but as a leader of all settings open to dialogue and cooperation with Beijing.

These accounts posit that China's focus on mutuality and benevolence does not exempt it from ambitious goals. Instead, it is precisely by emphasising what differs itself from traditional powers—mainly Western ones—that Beijing transforms its narrative of reassurance into a global testament of renewed proactiveness. As Chao (2024) puts it, China is keen to present itself as a legitimate leader of the Global South, while also resisting Western attempts to disqualify its status as a developing country. This dual identity, as a champion of the developing world on the one hand and as a rising power engaging with the West on the other, is not unique to China. Nonetheless, the Chinese have proven to be proficient in balancing that dual identity, even during major crises. Analysing China's digital diplomacy during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, Zhang and Ong'ong'a (2022) offer empirical insight into the self-representations China promotes in the

Global South, particularly during a time of global scrutiny. Even under extenuating circumstances, China still presents itself as a resilient, generous, and morally upright power aligned with the interests of developing countries.

The reason for that may arise from China's long history of attaching developmental meanings to its global aspirations. Yu and Due (2021) argue that China's foreign aid model is rooted in its own development experience and South–South Cooperation philosophy, and represents a distinct alternative to the OECD-DAC¹⁰ model. The article traces China's aid from its ideological foundations in the 1950s, through its transformation during the reform era, to the institutional consolidation represented by the establishment of the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) and the BRI (Yu and Due 2021).

Likewise, Liu (2022) provides a historically grounded, conceptually rich account of China's engagement with the Global South, framing it through the dual lenses of the Bandung legacy and the Belt and Road Initiative. The article argues that China's participation in the 1955 Bandung Conference laid the normative and ideological foundations for its current South–South Cooperation efforts. It illuminates how China frames itself as a historically legitimate and ideologically distinct development partner, projecting a narrative of peaceful modernisation, mutual benefit, and anti-imperial solidarity. Liu also identifies the transformation from ideologically driven partnerships to pragmatic, development-focused economic cooperation via trade, infrastructure, and knowledge transfer—a trend that may indicate the new tensions brought by China's novel status as a great power.

The previous account is reinforced by Liu and Li (2025), who provide a historical take on how China conceptualises its development cooperation framework—and how China's approach has transitioned from one of ideological solidarity towards a blend of strategic diplomacy and economic interests donned with a particularly pragmatic undertone. In terms of behaviour, this has led to a shift from state-led initiatives to market-driven dynamics, with a focus on infrastructure and capacity building. Moreover, the paper provides a good account of how China's self-image is rooted in historical memory and operationalised through rhetoric tropes such as 'development partnerships' and 'win–win cooperation.'

In hindsight, China's attempt to integrate its historical principles with contemporary agendas has found different degrees of success. For Vadell *et al.* (2020), China's South-South cooperation model is turning into a 'Bandung reloaded' vision of the global order, purposefully adapting the principles of the Bandung Conference and Zhou Enlai's *Eight Principles* to modern contexts. This effort positions China not only as a Global South country, but also as a central actor in the world capitalist system. As per the authors, the Chinese model is presented as a response to the failures

¹⁰ The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Development Assistance Committee.

and limitations of traditional North–South Cooperation, offering infrastructure-led, non-conditional, and state-led alternatives. Nevertheless, its combination of pragmatic objectives with historical legitimisation constitutes an ambiguousness that often draws criticism from recipient countries (Vadell *et al.* 2020).

Therefore, China’s experience in balancing its dual identity may not be enough to mask the inherent contradictions of its current global status. Looking at the geopolitical significance of the BRI, Zhao (2024) asserts that, through the initiative, China seeks to portray itself as a leader within the Global South and a promoter of SSC through the BRI, while simultaneously facing identity dilemmas as both a rising power and a developing country. Consequently, Zhao acknowledges that the BRI is a double-edged sword: it enhances China’s global standing but also invites criticism over debt, political influence, and economic dependency. The author recommends that China adjusts its BRI strategy to be more responsive, inclusive, and efficient to maintain influence amid a multipolar global order. This double-edged sword paradigm shall be a main theme of following subsections, as we move from the relatively coherent domains of Chinese discourse into the contradictions of its behaviour and of other countries’ perceptions.

In retrospect, China’s self-image happens to be a carefully constructed narrative that aims to tackle imperatives old and new, which are symbolic of its dual identity. China’s past as a leading developing country, informed by Global South solidarity and anti-imperialist principles, must find common ground with the current realities of a nation which no longer stands on the same level of its historical peers, having achieved the status of a fully-fledged great power with ambitions—and demands—of its own. China’s domestic scene has also grown more complex: how wide a shadow can the principles of old cast over the disparate interests of the new domestic actors that shape China’s engagement with the Global South? In the next subsection, I shall explore what the literature has to say about that issue, by focusing on China’s behaviour and how well it reflects its rhetoric.

1.2.2. Chinese behaviour in South-South relations

The bulk of the literature explored in this section concentrates on the question of how China behaves when dealing with developing countries. The previous discussion on China’s self-image is a crucial anchor for navigating accounts of its international behaviour, since much scholarly work on the subject shall attempt to assess to what degree has Beijing been faithful to its promise of responsible, mutually beneficial partnerships. Consequently, authors disagree dramatically—to a far greater level than, for example, the question of how China engages with the liberal global order. I recall that specific issue for I understand both discussions to be inextricably linked in their

polarisation: whether China acts honestly or not towards the international system's institutionality should relate to how beneficial or self-interested it behaves *vis-à-vis* developing countries. Instead, I have discovered that only a sample of the literature on the former debate deserved the characterisation of being markedly pessimistic or optimistic of China. As for the latter discussion, academic sources often take a clearer critical or favourable stance on Chinese engagement with Global South countries.

Defining possible reasons for that escapes the purpose of this chapter. Nevertheless, I argue this is an indication of how salient the debate on China-Global South relations has become. Moreover, it does not mean that the issue lacks balanced perspectives, which are keen to understand the matter on its own complexity—even if, in the end, they assume a more critical or favourable take on China's foreign policy. It is also imprecise to assume that studies with a more one-sided conclusion lack evidence, as empirically rich analyses can be found in both sides of the debate. Under these caveats, I structure my purview in the following: I start with the more favourable accounts, highlighting the cases where authors emphasise caution despite their optimistic take; then proceed to the more critical examples, repeating the procedure of looking for caveats applied to the first grouping. Lastly, I present some works that do not possess any explicit favourable or critical take on China's behaviour.

On the more optimistic side of the literature, Cheng *et al.* (2025) provide a comprehensive examination of China's expanding role in climate aid to Global South countries, arguing that Beijing has evolved from a marginal player to a pivotal actor in South-South climate cooperation. Crucially, they posit that China has attempted to fill the role of a leader in South-South climate cooperation with a good degree of success. The authors note how China's climate-related assistance in the Global South has served both its image of a responsible leader and its more pragmatic interests, in a strategic behaviour that blends self-interest and solidarity. Stemming from the authors' perspective, one could argue that the dual identity highlighted in the previous subsection does not necessarily present a problem, as Beijing proves capable of combining its interests with its moral principles of international engagement.

Also highly optimistic, Lin and Cui (2024) provide an empirically rich account of China-Africa agriculture cooperation. By detailing its practical, technology-driven engagement with African agriculture, the authors frame China's agricultural aid as effective, empirically grounded, and developmentally beneficial. It is worthy of note that the authors focus solely on the technical aspects of this type of cooperation, assessing the impact of China's Agricultural Technology Demonstration Centers (ATDCs) on African food security, and finding that ATDCs significantly increased harvest areas and crop output for demonstration crops like rice and maize. Other authors that advance a more nuanced account of Chinese engagement with Global South countries also laud

the technical aspects of Chinese cooperation (see Chiyemura *et al.* 2023), but—unlike Lin and Cui (2024)—place these considerations under a greater frame of potential asymmetries between China and its partners.

Still on the empirically rich examples of favourable accounts, Xu and Sun (2022), through an econometric analysis, prove that Chinese aid significantly improves export diversification in recipient African countries. The authors find that Chinese investment in infrastructure improvement and industrial capacity enhancement positively impact recipient country export performance on extensive (diversity of goods) rather than intensive (volume of goods) grounds. Therefore, the article sustains that there is indeed convergence between China's rhetorical projection as a benevolent developmental partner and its actual behaviour. Similar findings are corroborated by Yeung and Huber (2024), who assess whether Chinese foreign direct investment, particularly through the BRI, contributes to economic complexity in recipient countries—again, measured in terms of national capacity to produce and export goods with higher added value. Their work empirically supports the claim that China's BRI-linked FDI contributes to development by facilitating production upgrading and economic diversification in host countries. Moreover, they specifically counter the debt-trap diplomacy argument—common in detrimental analyses of Chinese engagement with developing nations—, highlighting that Chinese FDI flows are better defined by market potential than resource availability in host countries (Yeung and Huber 2024). Nevertheless, their choice to evaluate Chinese FDI impact based on the Economic Complexity Index (ECI), which is designed to infer a country's production capabilities based on international trade data (mainly, the mix of products it exports), marginalises important aspects of economic development, such as job creation and technology transfer.

As was hinted to above, favourable accounts do not necessarily remain silent on possible issues arising from China's relations with developing countries. Exploring the role of China's international scholarship and training programmes in its educational aid under a South–South Cooperation framework, Jiang and Holst (2025) provide evidence that Beijing indeed aims to behave in line with its rhetoric. Based on government documents and interviews with programme stakeholders, the authors demonstrate how China presents its educational programmes as expressions of equality, solidarity, and shared identity with other Global South nations. Furthermore, in terms of behaviour, the article illustrates how the operational logic, institutional structures, and soft power dimensions of its scholarship and training initiatives are shaped by those principles. In spite of that perceived alignment, the authors emphasise the asymmetries that hamper the ideal of horizontality China seems to champion in its cooperation model (Jiang and Holst 2025).

Zhou and Ma's (2022) analysis of China's health cooperation with African countries also denotes that Beijing behaves in alignment to its rhetoric. While positioning China as a benevolent,

responsible global health actor and a cooperative partner in building a healthier, safer world, the authors extensively detail specific activities, partnerships, and policy instruments used to advance health diplomacy in Africa with a high degree of success—especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Akin to Jiang and Holst (2025), they do acknowledge that issues exist, such as fragmented governance, coordination gaps, and limited local capacity. The key difference setting their perspective apart, however, is that they understand these issues as challenges to be overcome rather than problems inherent to China's behaviour.

Zhou (2022), who studies Sino-African relations on its more general aspects, follows the same chain of thought. The article highlights two key trends shaping Sino-African engagement: the localisation of development efforts—prioritising local job creation, skills development, and poverty reduction—and the internationalisation of China's development approach. Similarly to Zhou and Ma's (2022) account, the author frames Chinese behaviour as convergent with official rhetoric. Crucially, existing problems—weak integration of civil society actors, uneven project performance due to governance and absorptive capacity in African states, and increasing geopolitical tension with the West—are not inherent to China's model of engagement, and thus can be overcome.

In hindsight, these articles do make a meaningful statement: not all ailments of China's development cooperation are Beijing's to solve. Domestic characteristics in host countries play a significant part in project implementation and outcome—a fact analysts should not ignore. Ibonye (2022), whose article focuses on China's engagement with the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), provides a rich account of Chinese development aid policies precisely by highlighting issues stemming from both sides of the relationship. While recognising that China's engagement through the FOCAC has evolved significantly—from resource-driven aid to knowledge transfer-driven cooperation—the author is keen to point out that knowledge transfer flows have been suboptimal due to both China's reluctance to share high-value knowledge with its partners; and host countries' low absorptive capacity and lack of strategic planning.

That reflection should be kept in mind as we move from favourable to pessimistic accounts of China's South-South cooperation framework. To attain a better picture of that part of the literature, I start with accounts I have identified as especially critical of Chinese engagement with developing nations. León-Manríquez and Zecua Cruz (2025) offer a typically hawkish picture of how China's behaviour contradicts its rhetorical pledge to foster South-South solidarity. Analysing Chinese technological cooperation with Zimbabwe, the authors argue Beijing's engagement with the African country mainly serves Chinese corporate interests and geopolitical positioning, in addition to providing crucial aid to Zimbabwe's authoritarian regime. In other words, China's true purpose is that of an illiberal actor seeking illiberal ends worldwide. The similarities with hawkish accounts pertaining to the previously explored China-liberal global order debate are notable (see Pokharna

2022; Kalyanpur 2023). These authors' perspective deem China to be a deliberately disruptive actor in international affairs, utilising non-confrontational narratives to mask its more cynical intentions. Moreover, by defining China as an *illiberal* actor, that type of account often assumes a pro-liberal take on international affairs.

Verkhovets and Karaoğuz (2022) also make an incisive critique of how China behaves, offering detailed empirical and theoretical critique of China's economic engagements in South-South cooperation arrangements. Theirs, however, is of another tone than that of León-Manríquez and Zecua Cruz (2025). The article unpacks China's operational logic—centred on infrastructure finance, resource extraction, and export of Chinese services—revealing how these practices mirror neoliberal dynamics rather than depart from them. While China claims to offer a more just, participatory, and non-interventionist model of economic globalisation, the authors argue that actually China's lending, investment, trade, and knowledge transfer practices do not significantly differ from the exploitative tendencies of Western-led neoliberalism. The authors point to issues such as weak technology transfer, sectoral concentration of Chinese FDI, extractive trade patterns, and governance deficits related to Beijing's 'no strings attached' policy. They conclude that unless recipient states have strong institutional capacity, China's presence may reinforce inequalities and underdevelopment, rather than fostering inclusive and sustainable growth.

The impact of that critique comes from the fact that, instead of following the common path of criticising China from a particularly liberal point of view, Verkhovets and Karaoğuz (2022) claim Beijing fails to live to its own standards precisely because it does not differentiate itself enough from neoliberal forms of engagement. From China's perspective, that critique may be even more poignant, as a core tenet of its narrative is that Chinese cooperation models are intrinsically different from Western powers'. Sharing an approximate perspective, Garcia *et al.* (2024) argue that, although China promotes its engagement as part of South–South Cooperation, in practice it reinforces patterns of resource extraction, labour exploitation, and socio-environmental degradation—thus reproducing traditional North-South inequalities under a new guise. The paper critiques the asymmetrical nature of China's relations within BRICS, the opacity of Chinese financing, and the lack of meaningful inclusion of local actors in decision-making. The authors conclude that without a bottom-up, truly participatory development agenda, Chinese investment risks becoming a vehicle for extractive capitalism rather than a path to economic decolonisation.

Another type of critique tackles Chinese relations with Global South countries from an economic perspective. These works can be read as direct answers to Xu and Sun (2022) and Yeung and Huber (2024), whose analyses conclude that China is a positive influence over recipient countries' economies. In contrast to those authors, Sun *et al.* (2025) address how China behaves by providing detailed empirical evidence of the economic rationality underpinning China's debt relief

strategy. It demonstrates that such actions are closely tied to export promotion and the long-term embedding of Chinese goods in African markets. Therefore, the authors point out the contradictions between how China frames itself publicly—as a benevolent development partner committed to win-win cooperation—and how, in practice, it acts as a strategically minded actor maximising national interest. Claudio-Quiroga *et al.* (2022) also provide evidence that China's behaviour does not necessarily adhere to its 'win-win' cooperation rhetoric. Analysing macroeconomic trends of five African countries, the authors fail to identify any significant correlation between Chinese FDI and local development. Auxiliary factors, such as host-country characteristics and the general orientation of FDI—mainly, if it is natural-resource oriented or not—are key to understanding whether Chinese investment indeed creates benefits for developing partners.

The following critiques adopt a more balanced perspective, usually emphasising how China's behaviour comes short of adhering to its rhetoric due to the pervasiveness of competing interests informing its foreign policy. For instance, Chao's (2021) critique of China's engagement with Triangular Development Cooperation (TDC) models particularly emphasises how Beijing's rhetoric, which is supportive of TDC as a tool for South-South cooperation and directly ties it to its image of a respectful and non-intrusive partner, does not reflect its actual behaviour, which the author identifies as risk-averse, limited and inconsistent. In Chao's view, China's pragmatism represents an obstacle to its global projection as a responsible and active leader in development aid.

Likewise, Gong (2025) develops a framework for comprehending Chinese behaviour abroad by mapping its strategic flexibility in using development or security discourses in different scenarios. The author offers a concrete, empirical account of how China calibrates its approach depending on context and interest, demonstrating both pragmatism and ambition. Consequently, Gong (2025) demonstrates that China's behaviour can deviate from official rhetoric when national interests play a crucial role. A classic example of that dynamic can be seen on China-Southeast Asia relations. The persistence of maritime disputes between China and Southeast Asian nations is a reminder that, for developing countries that happen to be neighbours of China in strategic zones, 'South-South' cooperation can be a complex issue. Analysing the case of the BRI's soft power in Vietnam, Dinh *et al.* (2024) argue that Chinese attempts to project an image of a benign leader offering mutual gains through economic cooperation is often hampered by historical grievances and strategic anxieties shared by some of its partners—which are often fed by episodes of assertive behaviour from Beijing.

Henceforth, the security-development nexus is a typical source of disruption for China's supposedly development-oriented approach to Global South relations. Gong's (2025) framework identifies that China selectively 'developmentalises' or 'securitises' South-South cooperation issues based on perceived levels of threat, Beijing's ability to dominate the agenda and the salience of

national interests on the particular matter. For some, that flexibility can work against China's official rhetoric. Lammich (2025) argues that, notwithstanding China's self-image of a responsible great power, its commitment to South-South solidarity has seen competition by economic and strategic interests, which in turn lead China to pursue a more flexible, interest-driven security cooperation with developing countries, as a way to safeguard its interests from local instabilities. Moreover, the author also posits this shift has evolved rather in reactive, cautious terms than in accordance to a coherent strategic vision by Beijing.

That uncertainty over the existence of a Chinese grand strategy—a theme already explored in the previous section—is directly tied to the complexity behind the drivers of China's international rise—which also affects its engagement with developing nations. He (2024) analyses the mechanisms through which Chinese digital firms—underpinned by state finance, diplomacy, and normative guidance—shape digital ecosystems in the Global South. The author notes how China frames itself within that agenda, emphasising its portrayal as a provider of digital public goods and an alternative to Western Big Tech. Most importantly, however, the article shows how entangled China's economic and political objectives are, as well as its public and private drivers for internationalisation. In the end, He (2024) offers a slightly critical take of China's digital expansion, highlighting issues related to perceived digital authoritarianism, data sovereignty and cybersecurity. As such, security concerns are not an exclusivity of the Chinese side. Likewise, Uctu and Şahbaz (2024) argue that China's Digital Silk Road (DSR) has advanced the interests of Chinese corporations abroad, while also fostering technological upgrades in developing countries. Nevertheless, questions remain as to whether China acts as the benevolent digital partner it presents itself, or if its actions have dire consequences in terms of data sovereignty, digital surveillance and geopolitical dependencies.

To finalise discussion on the more pessimistic accounts of China's behaviour, Nitza-Makowska (2025) offers an excellent all-rounded account of China-Global South relations. The article argues that China has sought to enhance its international status by projecting environmental leadership through bilateral environmental diplomacy—coined here as a form of green soft power. Nevertheless, the author identifies significant dissonance between the environmental narrative and the coal-heavy reality of early BRI projects. The study also reveals that China's environmental diplomacy lacks transparency, remains inconsistently applied, and is met with mixed recognition by its partners. Although there has been a post-2022 'green shift,' the article concludes that China's recognition as a green soft power is limited—a fact directly tied to its inconsistent behaviour.

Finally, there are some works that refrain from solely focusing on the dissonances of Chinese behaviour, but that do not advance favourable perspectives on China either. These accounts

often combine elements of the two sets of literature explored so far in this subsection—the more favourable and critical ones—and opt for a fragmented understanding of Chinese engagement with the developing world. Namely, authors who adopt this particularly balanced perspective resonate with the call for including host country conditions in analyses of China's South-South cooperation—a concern raised by some favourable-leaning works that is also found in more moderate critiques of Beijing's patterns of behaviour. In addition they emphasise the multiplicity of drivers informing Chinese initiatives in the Global South, pinpointing that as a key shaper of China's fragmented behaviour.

Chiyemura *et al.* (2023) argue that, although impressive on technical merit and economic ambition, Chinese actors still engage with local partners mainly at project level, with little dialogue in terms of policy or planning. The authors tie it to the institutional fragmentation of China's cooperation mechanisms, heavily influenced by mercantilist values and a principle of non-interference. Without tackling those issues, the authors posit that it will be difficult for China to scale up its engagement with host countries. In a similar vein, Zhang *et al.* (2021) identify that Chinese South-South cooperation holds distinct modes of project ownership, some of which adhere to China's rhetoric of mutual gains (and improve project effectiveness), while others reproduce asymmetries and undermine project sustainability and capacity building.

Otele and Mitullah's (2025) article illustrates how China selectively engages with neoliberal institutional logics in development cooperation, without sacrificing the core tenets of its own aid model. As such, Beijing practices a hybrid form of institutional logics that often clash with recipient countries' contexts. The magnitude of China's initiatives, like the BRI, has also provided a moment of strategic reflection regarding Chinese ties to developing countries. The bigger picture is often complex, with both benefits and asymmetries dividing the spotlight of China's international cooperation dynamics. De Kluiver and Neethling (2022) give great emphasis to that duality while analysing the initiative's role in African development. A key contribution of theirs is to stress the importance of African agency in defining how successful BRI projects shall be in the long-term.

Zhu *et al.* (2024) argue that China's infrastructure diplomacy is characterised by its flexibility, bilateralism, and elite-oriented engagement, which allows it to adapt to different political regimes and governance environments. Likewise, the study finds that recipient agency is decisive: while Southeast Asian countries (e.g., Indonesia, Malaysia) exhibit more strategic negotiation and institutional capacity to shape terms, many Latin American states have shown higher dependence on Chinese capital, resulting in limited leverage and more asymmetrical outcomes. These accounts are a reminder that the nexus between China's rhetoric and action is not the only one of importance for understanding the complex balance of costs and benefits imbued in Chinese ties to the developing world. Just as host country agency plays a crucial role in defining how beneficial China's actions

will be, the perceptions emanating from that other side of relationships is quintessential for comprehending the complexities of China-Global South connections.

1.2.3. China through the eyes of developing countries

Considering the picture being built so far regarding China's engagement with Global South countries, it fails to surprise that partner perceptions of Chinese words and actions are also ambiguous at best. According to the selected literature, perspectives change depending on regional context—Southeast Asian countries are clear outliers, mainly due to historical grievances and disputes over the South China Sea—and even based on what domestic group is under focus. In addition, the topic of Global South perceptions of China has received less attention from scholars when compared to the previous two sets of works—China's self-projection and external behaviour. Usually, research demonstrates primary concern with one of the latter, with considerations regarding partner reception of Chinese initiatives a useful complement rather than a main object of inquiry. Consequently, many works focus precisely on the nexus between China's behaviour and partner perceptions, which strengthens my comprehension of behaviour as a medium.

Moreover, there is substantial emphasis on smaller countries' agency when dealing with China. Authors often make a point to note that China's partners also have interests of their own. Brown (2025), for instance, advances a well-crafted inquiry of how Sub-Saharan countries may hide Chinese-borrowed debt as a strategy of avoiding breaching sustainability rules of institutions like the World Bank and IMF. Therefore, the opaqueness and confidentiality of Chinese deals are preferred not because these developing nations naively fall into China's debt trap, but due to their own, pragmatic reasons. Sometimes, that element of agency operates as a shaper of partner perceptions of China. Huang and Ho (2024) posit that Southeast Asian countries' choice to engage with China based on pragmatic considerations of their own (instead of political or ideological alignment) is a testament that the manner China behaves or frames itself is still contingent on how the other side of the relationship chooses to deal with Beijing.

In the particular case of nations with a hedging strategy for international engagement, the matter of accepting China as a leader or champion of the developing world is a contentious one. Ho and Lee's (2025) survey with Southeast Asian elites also show that China's image is ambiguous: while elites recognise China's growing importance and the benefits of its material contributions (through infrastructure and trade), they resist any notion that China should be considered the legitimate leader of the region. Their engagement is pragmatic and indicates signs of hedging, with members of the elites still seeing the US as an important counter-balance to China's influence. In

other words, perceptions of China may appear contradictory out of a reasoned choice by policymakers in the developing world.

In hindsight, being the less powerful half of an asymmetric relationship is a delicate place to act from. Sometimes, sending mixed signals is the sole way of balancing internal needs and external pressures—especially when the broader domestic polity is not as welcoming of foreign actors as members of the elite. Wen (2023) explores the CPC's party diplomacy in Southeast Asia, providing empirical evidence of how regional elites perceive China. Through its attention to local political dynamics, elite incentives, and backlash (e.g. in Malaysia), the article shows that CPC outreach is variably welcomed, instrumentalised, or contested depending on context. Importantly, party diplomacy is shown to be effective in shaping elite perceptions, but not in reshaping entire political systems, especially where democratic contestation exists.

Despite local agency, Chinese actions still remain a key factor informing partner perceptions of Beijing. To empirically explore the consequences of China's inconsistent behaviour, Otele and Mitullah (2025) focus on the dual nature of developing nations' perspective on China: both with respect for its capability and expertise, and criticism for the lacking standards of some of its operations. Drawing from Afrobarometer data and elite interviews, it shows that African views are ambivalent—China is respected as a major development partner, but criticisms abound over labour relations, environmental practices, and extractive modalities. African states are seen as simultaneously empowered by new options and constrained by their own weak institutional capacity and uneven governance.

Zhang *et al.* (2021) provide a different perspective on the ambivalent reception of Chinese aid amid developing nations, by adding empirical evidence from micro-level project stakeholders in Africa. The authors explore Chinese agricultural aid projects in Mozambique, Tanzania and Ethiopia and argue that African stakeholders' perceptions vary depending on project conditions, especially ownership status. When Chinese actors respect co-ownership agreements with local partners, stakeholder views are more positive. However, cases of de-ownership or forced ownership undermine partner confidence in China's intentions.

Zhu *et al.* (2024) complement the debate from a comparative perspective, juxtaposing two key regions of the Global South—Latin America and Southeast Asia—to understand how regional factors shape China's insertion and subsequent local perspectives on Beijing. Across both regions, infrastructure projects are highly politicised and frequently entangled in domestic debates over debt, transparency, and sovereignty. The authors provide examples of both enthusiastic elite alignment (especially in some Latin American countries) and critical pushback (as seen in parts of Southeast Asia) driven by concerns about debt, transparency, and political autonomy. The authors emphasise that Global South responses are not monolithic, and that variation in domestic institutions, civil

society strength, and political competition crucially mediate how China's infrastructure diplomacy is received.

Some authors prefer to focus on markedly positive or negative perceptions of China in developing countries. For instance, in their analysis of African public perceptions of Chinese economic engagement, An and Feng (2022) identify that Chinese aid and infrastructure projects significantly improve Beijing's image vis-à-vis local countries, with trade and FDI showing lesser impact. Naturally, they also posit that factors such as population size, income levels, economic openness and state of governance in recipient countries also affect how favourable perceptions of China can be. Departing from a similar perspective, el-Shafei and Metawe (2022) analyse whether China-Global South relations reflect neo-colonialist tendencies or mutual benefits. The authors find no evidence of neo-colonialism, claiming it to be mostly rhetoric, with national elites in developing countries being usually receptive of Chinese engagement, despite recognising the occasional risk of imbalance or dependence.

Straying from elite perceptions, Panao (2024) seeks how China is seen in Southeast Asian countries' societies. Focusing on China representations in local news outlets from 2016 to 2020, the study finds that, despite escalating global tensions and China's aggressive posture on some issues, the dominant news sentiment toward China in Southeast Asia remained neutral to slightly positive. The most favourable reporting was found in countries with strong economic interdependence with China, like Cambodia and Laos, while more critical tones were seen in countries with geopolitical friction or US alliances, such as Vietnam and the Philippines. The author concludes that China's economic gravity plays a key role in shaping its media image, even in a context of rising great-power rivalry. Furthermore, the study suggests that China's soft power campaign in the region, though uneven, has made inroads through diplomatic visibility, media engagement, and economic entanglement.

As for works that emphasise negative perceptions in host countries, Dinh *et al.* (2024) argue that the dissonance between Chinese rhetoric and behaviour has fuelled distrust from its smaller partners. For the authors, Vietnam exemplifies this cautious reception: despite geographic proximity and institutional linkages with China, they posit that the Vietnamese government and expert community remain deeply sceptical of China's strategic intentions, particularly in light of historical tensions—including historical domination by China and the country's experience as a victim of great power rivalry in the Cold War—and maritime disputes in the South China Sea (Dinh *et al.* 2024). Nitza-Makowska's (2025) study on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) also concludes that dissonances between China's actions and words indeed have a negative impact on host country perceptions of Chinese engagement. However, the author paints a more ambiguous picture of those perceptions. Drawing from empirical evidence provided by Pakistani stakeholders,

the article concludes that local reception is a mix of cautious admiration, strategic acceptance, and growing concern on specific issues. Nitza-Makowska (2025) work on the CPEC adds an important caveat to visions of China by developing nations: while relational frictions may always exist, they do not exclude Global South stakeholders from viewing Beijing as a leadership and a partner.

On a final note on the matter, I should posit that, albeit the relative lack of interest from specialised literature, outside perceptions of China emanating from developing countries has all the characteristics of a rich topic of inquiry. More often than not, these countries find themselves amid a convoluted ensemble of feelings and interests: their history tells them not to trust foreign actors with overflowing capital and obscure strategic interests. Nevertheless, it is difficult to deny that China sets itself apart from traditional great powers, if not for the mere fact that it does not share the status of a Western nation with a past of colonisation. Whether China is or not a fellow developing country is a complex question that challenges the artificial boundaries constructed around contemporary notions of *developed/developing* or the *North/South* divide.

In retrospect, this chapter section should serve to recognise that tackling China-Global South relations involves accepting those three levels of duality. First, how China frames itself between a responsible partner and a great power with demands of its own. The literature has shown that, despite continued efforts to present itself as a partner of the Global South, Beijing increasingly finds it hard to balance this with the requirements of its new-found status. The second duality lies between how China behaves, both in line and in spite of its official rhetoric. While some authors emphasised slippages—and others chose to marginalise them—the overall picture points towards a behavioural pattern expected of a nation at a crossroads. Finally the third duality encompasses how developing nations make sense of that mix of risks and opportunities. Regardless of whether one outweighs the other, it is important to note that China is capable of providing both—a fact developing nations are increasingly catching up to.

Together, these three dualities represent the complexity and dynamism of China's interface with the developing world. In the next section, I explore those complexities in the context of China-LAC and China-Brazil relations.

1.3. Closing up the context: China, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Brazil

Since this dissertation tackles China-Brazil relations, I close this literature review chapter with a focused look on the subject of China's Global South engagement through a regional perspective. In other words, I conduct a purview of China-Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) relations, highlighting specificities the region brings to scholarly understandings of Beijing's international affairs. Since my focus in this section lies in identifying more contextually-based

themes of China-LAC literature, I opt for a less structured presentation when compared to those of previous sections of this chapter. Instead, I will simply provide an overview of key topics often evoked by the specialised literature. Some of them hold significant parallels with previous discussions; others, however, conceal a particularly regional understanding of the matters at hand. LAC-based authors, for instance, often recur to analytical lenses of a local tradition, the most salient of which is dependency theory. Other issues gain special relevance due to LAC's geographical position—such as the region's proximity and historical alignment with the US. Furthermore, just as LAC contains unique issues when compared to developing countries in general, Brazil is in many aspects an outlier *vis-à-vis* its own neighbours. Therefore, I also add a subsection dedicated exclusively to Sino-Brazilian relations.

1.3.1. Mapping out key themes of China-LAC relations

Barbara Stallings (2020, 2023) analyses China-LAC relations through the lenses of International Political Economy. The author argues that China's entrance into the Latin American commodities market, during the 2000s, helps explain both the economic bonanza of that decade and the subsequent years of recession. The economic model that allowed for expressive growth rates at the beginning of the century proved to be qualitatively questionable, as the competitiveness of LAC countries' national industries decreased internally and externally, leading to higher unemployment rates and to environmental impacts associated with the reprimatization of local economies. Moreover, Stallings (2020) postulates that Chinese-led infrastructure projects in LAC show a disconnection between Chinese interests and Latin American societies' desire for a development model directed at overcoming social inequality and transforming their countries productive structure.

The resemblance between China-LAC relations and core-periphery dynamics is not limited to Stallings' work and is a relevant topic in the literature. Damares Afonso, Suzana Bastos and Fernando Perobelli (2021) test a similar hypothesis by investigating the statistical relevance of the correlation between China's economic growth and LAC exports' reprimarization. Using a quantitative methodology, the authors conclude that China's growth points to a reduction in Latin America's industrial production and to the rise of primary and service sectors. The countries that most diverge from this model—such as Mexico—harbour greater economic ties with the United States, and do not align neatly with the complementarity formula purported by the Chinese government (Afonso, Bastos and Perobelli 2021).

Maria Eugenia Giraudó (2020) goes a step further and explores dependency relations between China and South America using the example of the soybean market, arguing that China

promotes dependent development in the region not only through asymmetries in commercial exchanges, but through active strategies to gain further control of the grain's chain of production and distribution, removing from South American nations their capacity to autonomously decide the terms of their development. Sergio Páez and Leandro Bona (2024), Marcos Chilliato-Leite (2021) and Raúl Bernal-Meza (2020) echo the framing of China-LAC relations through the lens of dependency. Other authors, such as Sophie Wintgens (2022), Yi Feng and Qingjie Bob Zeng (2021) prefer to emphasise the economic asymmetries within China-LAC relations, especially for the regions' manufacturing and industry sectors, without adhering to a core-periphery analysis.

Jie Guo (2023) puts China-LAC relations under another light. Although agreeing with aforementioned authors (see Stallings 2020, 2023) that the end of the commodity cycle represented an inflexion point for China-LAC relations, Guo contrasts dependency-related analyses by positing that the post-cycle paradigm has been one of interdependency and deepening ties for all sides of the relationship. The two main characteristics of the period, he continues, are complementarity and development, both of which justify and incentivise the formation of ties beyond such great geographic distances, under the logic of South-South cooperation (Guo 2023). Guo's article reflects much of China's official discourse for LAC and for the Global South, identified with emerging nations' dual challenge of reform and development.

Other works adopt a similar perspective to Guo's (2023), albeit with a more critical incisiveness regarding Chinese deals with LAC countries. Alessandro Teixeira, Wenying Cheng and Zhenyu Jiang (2023), for instance, also attempt a breakdown of China-LAC trade relations through the paradigms of competition and complementarity. Similar to Guo (2023), the authors posit that there is more evidence for the complementarity argument, suggesting that trade relations fall into the *flying geese* model—in which China's economy pulls along its LAC counterparts through increased trade and investment. Although providing an overall positive retrospect of trade relations, the authors also recognise the risks of some of its patterns to LAC's economic diversification.

Other works fall somewhere in between overly pessimistic or optimistic accounts of China-LAC relations. A recurring theme among that part of the literature is to frame China's growing presence in the region as a source of both risks and opportunities, falling into LAC governments' hands to mitigate the former and potentialise the latter. Alessandro Teixeira and Aaron Schneider (2023); Elias Jabbour, Alexis Dantas and Javier Vadell (2024); and José Salazar-Xirinachs (2024) all work within approximate understandings of this theme. Teixeira and Schneider (2023), for instance, argue that the impact of Chinese engagement with LAC is not predetermined, but rather contingent on how Latin American countries manage the relationship to achieve positive-sum outcomes. Likewise, Jabbour *et al.* (2024) frame the China-LAC relationship not as inherently good or bad, but as a scenario that places the burden of responsibility on local

governments to utilize Chinese engagement for national development. Consequently, these authors also emphasise the room for agency LAC countries still hold, shifting the spotlight away from Beijing.

The appearance of the Belt and Road Initiative in China's incursion into LAC was also given attention by part of the literature. In this sense, Rhys Jenkins (2021) argues that BRI's entrance into Chinese discourse for the region (in 2017) has not changed the patterns of economic relations previously observed. The majority of LAC countries continue to sell commodity goods to China and buy Chinese industrialised products, while Chinese capital remains to pour into local infrastructure projects, especially those related to resource extraction and distribution. The BRI terminology, therefore, has served mainly as a repackaging of existing relations. Regional countries that have signed MoUs with China regarding the initiative tend to have small economies and depend heavily on the Chinese market, such as Guyana, Suriname and small island-nations of the Caribbean (Jenkins 2021). Matt Ferchen (2021), Juan Enrique Moreno, Diego Telias and Francisco Urdinez (2021) follow similar arguments.

Gustavo Oliveira and Margaret Myers (2021), albeit agreeing with the aforementioned depiction of the BRI as a rebranding effort by China, offer a more nuanced account of the initiative's ties to the regional context of LAC. As the authors posit, the BRI's piecemeal implementation has its roots in the fragmented way in which actors—both within and without China—understand, promote and leverage the initiative in accordance to their own interests.

Finally, there is a substantial literature dedicated to analysing China-LAC relations *vis-à-vis* the United States. Although not of direct interest for this research, China's role towards the global order and China-US relations are two interlinked topics of discussion; hence, to make sense of China's presence in LAC compared to the US proves to be a valuable enterprise, even if its contribution is indirect. Under this scope, a similar thread seems to run in the specified literature: that of the growing geopolitical contest between Beijing and Washington. Accounting for what is LAC's role in it and what does China's presence in the Western Hemisphere mean for US hegemony, Kathryn Babineau and Douglas Farah (2019) posit that Chinese foreign policy to LAC is multifaceted and grows in comparison to US efforts in the 21st century.

Ryan Berg (2021) goes further and criticises US foreign policy for being too complacent with its hemispheric allies, which allowed for China's emergence as a main external actor in the region and gave strength to (autocratic) political models contrary to Washington interests, such as the one in Venezuela. Berg's vision converges with many US-based analyses of China's rise in LAC, which see the expansion of Beijing's influence nets in the region as part of a global tendency towards the decline of US hegemony (Roett and Paz 2008). Similar arguments—even if not as

incisive as that of Berg's (2021)—are purported by Gary Prevost (2024), with a specific focus on the Biden administration (2021-2024).

Fabricio Rodríguez and Jürgen Rülland (2021) bring another perspective to the debate by putting Chinese interests under the spotlight. The authors propose that China's relations with LAC are means of building a cooperative strategy geared towards containing US hemispheric hegemony. Using a soft power perspective, they understand China's cooperative multilateral efforts in LAC as a way of facilitating its economic and strategic objectives, using the BRI as a complement to its flexible institutional agenda in order to develop the necessary mechanisms to establish non-coercive capabilities in the US immediate orbit. In a similar vein, Francisco Urdinez (2017) posits that China adopts a strategy of accommodation and reaction in LAC, that creates increasing costs for US hegemony.

The literature on China-LAC relations, akin to the broader China-Global South discussion, has also given some thought to localised perceptions of China. On that front, I start by mentioning Taehook Lee's (2016) article on Latin-American new left governments' perception of China's economic rise since the 2000s. According to Lee, the so-called Latin American pink tide of the early 21st century sought to establish closer ties with China, for they saw Chinese rapid development and growing international relevance as a counterpoint to engagement with the United States and to the Washington Consensus, whose neoliberal-inspired policy recommendations took hold of Latin American politics from the 1990s onwards (Lee 2016).

Apart from Lee's relatively retrospective take, the assembled literature pertaining to LAC perceptions of China or Chinese-related activities, projects and initiatives have shown mixed to negative results. Maria Strabucchi's (2023) work on the representations of China in Latin American literature establishes the cultural subtext from which LAC societies interpret China's presence in their sub-continent. According to her, Chinese migrant communities and Chinatowns spread through the region's main urban centres have been generally fetishised as exotic strangers, which has helped form a shared imaginary of what is China (Strabucchi 2023).

Turning to the impact of China's economic activities in LAC, with a closer look to public perception, Vera Eichenauer, Andreas Fuchs and Lutz Brückner (2021), using repeated cross-sectional survey data from 18 Latin American countries, argue that activities related to China have not significantly affected local attitudes towards Beijing. They have, however, increased the number of polarised opinions, i.e. too positive or too negative stances on China's presence in their countries. It indicates, they conclude, that Chinese economic activities have generated winners and losers (Eichenauer, Fuchs and Brückner 2021).

A last section of authors take a look at the subject from the perspective of China's policies aimed at improving its image in LAC. This includes Zapata's (2023) study on how Beijing uses the

China-CELAC Forum as an instrument of Chinese cultural diplomacy—whose strategy, especially under Xi Jinping, goes beyond mere cultural exchange and tries to reshape global narratives and challenge Western hegemony. In a similar vein, Maria Zuppello (2024) analyses China's strategic communication and soft power tactics in LAC. The author highlights Beijing's dual approach: on one side, it cooperates with local actors, i.e. local media outlets and political parties; and on the other, it promotes the expansion of its own soft power tools in the region, from Confucius Institutes to state media. Together, these instruments allow China to foster a more positive narrative regarding Beijing, thus challenging the region's traditional alignment with the US (Zuppello 2024).

Having established the general trends of China's presence in LAC, the focus must now narrow to Brazil, whose global strategic partnership with Beijing possesses a distinctive set of historical, political, and institutional dynamics when compared to its regional neighbors.

1.3.2. China-Brazil relations

Notwithstanding its status as a LAC country, Brazil's partnership with China holds some specificities when compared to its neighbours—the most important of which is the potential for agency analysts ascribe to Brazil relative to other regional actors. According to Bizzozero Revelez and Raggio's (2020) account of the historical development and political-institutional dynamics of Brazil–China relations, Beijing and Brasília have evolved towards the establishment of a global strategic partnership. Especially during the Lula (2003-2010) and Dilma (2011-2016) administrations, Brazilian cooperation with China has influenced Brasília to shift its strategic orientation to prioritise South-South cooperation and multilateral forms of engagement, which has helped to deepen political and economic links between the two nations. Nonetheless, they identify that growing asymmetries and internal divisions undermine Brazil's capacity to shape that strategic partnership, leading to a fragmented engagement with Beijing. In hindsight, this fragmentation is a key characteristic of domestic disputes over the surge of Chinese EV imports in Brazil, which is the subject of this dissertation's case study.

Therefore, Brazil sets itself apart from other LAC countries thanks to its size and volume of exchanges with China, which imbue it with greater attractiveness from the eyes of the Chinese. Some aspects, however, are common among Brazil and its neighbours—mainly, issues linked to the rapid growth of China's economic presence and a lack of local strategic, long-term thinking when dealing with the Chinese. Moreover, similar to the literature on China-LAC relations, trade and investment are the main concerns of scholarly work on China-Brazil exchanges. Generally, authors highlight China's strategic coherence, contrasting it to Brazil's inconstancy, institutional crises and political swings. Arbache and Condi's (2023) overall purview of Sino-Brazilian relations point

precisely to that characterisation. In the authors' perspective, Brazil has so far failed to leverage China's growth to its own advantage, by pursuing a more integrated and strategic engagement with China. Crucially, the authors posit that bilateral relations maintain vast untapped potential beyond trade. To harness that potential, however, Brazilian policymakers must align its development agenda with the list of opportunities generated by China's structural transformation and global repositioning.

On the topic of Beijing's strategic behaviour, Madhavan and Rawski (2024) analyse the expansion of the State Grid Corporation of China (SGCC) in Brazil. For the authors, the company's rapid expansion in the Brazilian electricity transmission sector is a consequence of China's broader ambitions in advanced infrastructure industries. Through a combination of acquisitions and project bids, SGCC has established a dominant presence in the country, managing over 16,000 km of transmission lines and owning 23 concession companies. The chapter concludes that SGCC's activities reflect not only commercial expansion but also a long-term strategy of industrial upgrading and global leadership in advanced energy technologies. The Brazilian case exemplifies how Chinese firms pair technological capability with learning agility and capital strength to shape infrastructure in the region. Nevertheless, it is important to note that China's expansion perpassed a network of interactions with local actors. Niu (2024), for instance, notes the rising influence of Brazilian subnational actors seeking Chinese investment. The author concludes that, despite its rapid expansion in key sectors, China still adheres to an institutionally cautious, multi-stakeholder approach in its economic engagement with Brazil.

Most accounts recognise that China's engagement with Brazil adhered to a coherent and patient strategy. Søndergaard *et al.* (2022) analyse Chinese FDI in Brazil during the nation's 2015-2018 political turmoil, positing that China's SOEs took advantage of low asset prices and the retreat of weakened Brazilian firms to expand aggressively in the country's energy and infrastructure settings. The authors argue that some characteristics of China's FDI, in particular its state-led, long-term driven nature, allowed it to seize opportunities other actors could not, emphasising its risk tolerance and capital patience. Brazil, on the other hand, profited on the short term from Chinese investments, but the weight of economic, institutional and political crises has diminished its capacity to mitigate asymmetries and plan for developmental autonomy. Becard *et al.* (2020), who focus on the electric energy sector, provide similar reflections. China's SOEs, which have expanded their presence on the Brazilian market due to both strategic and economic reasons, have achieved an economically and politically significant impact on Brazil. However, said impact has increased structural dependencies on Chinese capital, especially during moments of crisis in the country.

Within the topic of FDI, infrastructure is of particular interest. Hiratuka (2024) offers a detailed account of Chinese infrastructure investment in Brazil, highlighting key trends, sectoral distribution and institutional frameworks. Akin to previously mentioned accounts, the author posits that political and financial crises in Brazil allowed for Chinese firms to benefit greatly from emergent opportunities in the country; however, concerns about transparency, local content requirements, and the asymmetric nature of the relationship recurrently tarnish positive gains of capital inflows and project continuity. Likewise, Hiratuka reckons Brazil must demonstrate greater institutional strength and clearer developmental objectives if it is to ensure a mutually beneficial relationship with China.

While studies on Chinese capital already recognise asymmetry issues in Brazil's ties with China, the literature on bilateral trade makes that one of its main objects of inquiry. A key factor to that discussion is the growing dependence of the Brazilian economy on commodity exports—of which China is a main buyer. Romano Schutte and Campos (2022) posit that Brazil's opportunistic response to China's rise has led it to an export-dependent soy extraction model, which has entrenched regressive specialisation and deepened its peripheral role in the global economy. The authors conclude that the so-called complementarity in Sino-Brazilian relations conceals structural asymmetries that limit Brazil's prospects for sustainable development. Their critique, however, echoes previous characterisations of China's engagement as long-term and strategic; and Brazil's as short-term and fragmented.

Consequently, the topic has generated discussions over Brazil's choices for development. For some authors, the case of China exemplifies that opening up the economy for foreign trade does not necessarily bring greater innovation and competitiveness for the Brazilian market. Using a quasi-experimental design and firm-level panel data on the Brazilian manufacturing sector, Moreira *et al.* (2023) find that Chinese import competition had a modest but positive impact on total factor productivity (TFP), supporting earlier literature on trade liberalisation. However, they observe a negative effect on innovation indicators such as product development and R&D inputs, raising doubts about the sustainability of productivity gains. Job losses were also modest overall, though they disproportionately affected low-skilled workers. The article concludes that while trade liberalisation and foreign competition may enhance productivity, they do not necessarily stimulate innovation or broad employment growth.

Even accounts more optimistic on Brazilian trade with China agree on the existence of impactful asymmetries. Zhao *et al.* (2023) analyse the evolution of trade in goods between China and Brazil from 2012 to 2022, focusing on trade competitiveness and complementarity. The authors apply trade indices such as Revealed Comparative Advantage, Trade Competitive Advantage, and Complementarity Indices to evaluate how each country benefits from bilateral trade. Findings

indicate a deep and increasingly diversified trade relationship, with China exporting mainly industrial and high-tech goods, while Brazil exports primary commodities. China maintains a trade deficit with Brazil, underscoring Brazil's advantage in natural resources. Despite evident complementarity, the relationship is marked by significant structural imbalance. The authors conclude that while the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership has enhanced bilateral economic ties, challenges such as trade friction and asymmetry persist. They recommend strengthening policy dialogue, trade facilitation, and financial mechanisms to bolster mutual benefit.

There is also literature on Brazilian perceptions of China's economic engagement. Almeida Ferreira Abrão and Amineh (2024), for instance, explore how Brazilian elites perceive the BRI in light of the country's resistance to join the Chinese initiative, despite substantial bilateral ties between Beijing and Brasília. Based on interviews and survey data from Brazilian government officials, businesspeople, and academics, the study finds that although many stakeholders support deeper cooperation with China, they question the tangible benefits of BRI formalisation. The article concludes that Brazil's substantial economic weight and regulatory stability make it attractive to Chinese investors regardless of BRI status, allowing Brazil to preserve its strategic autonomy while engaging with Chinese capital flows. That is another element that differentiates the Brazilian case from smaller LAC actors: autonomy is an important guideline, with the nation's policymakers often resisting to take part on international initiatives they did not have the chance to shape (Almeida Ferreira Abrão and Amineh 2024). However, as previous accounts argued extensively, strategic autonomy is not an inexorable force in Brazilian decision-making, as moments of institutional weakness and policy swings have proved consequential in terms of bilateral relations with China.

The role of autonomy in shaping Brazilian engagement with China is a topic of interest in other accounts. Amorim and Ferreira-Pereira (2021) compare Brazil's strategic partnerships in Asia—namely, China and Japan—through the lens of autonomy. The authors conclude that, despite its greater impact in terms of trade and global positioning, the strategic partnership with China generated economic dependence and undermined autonomy, in contrast to Japan's, with whom Brazil established a less impactful relationship better aligned with the tenets of autonomy. Likewise, Brun and Covarrubias (2024) apply the concept of autonomy to understand Brazilian reactions to the China-US rivalry. Adopting a comparative analysis with Mexico, their article shows how Brazil's quest for autonomy, although not unique in the Latin American context in terms of objectives, responds to specificities in terms of means, mainly due to its own domestic structures and external constraints. As such, Brazil tends to be more proactive in its strategy for autonomy, but remains sensitive to oscillations tied to different administrations.

The issue of Brazilian perceptions of Chinese economic engagement can also be seen from the micro-level. Daniela Campello and Francisco Urdinez (2021) have analysed the impacts of trade

shocks provoked by Chinese imports in localised economies in Brazil. They argue that when trade shocks occur along geographically clustered sectoral lines, their impacts affect not only those employed directly by the industry that competes with the imports, but also workers of the service sectors that orbit around the geographic constituency's main income generator—the sector's industry. Hence, opinions on international trade and the role of China tend to be localised, as impacted residents transfer their perception on Chinese imports to the governmental arena through legislative representation (Campello and Urdinez 2021).

A key outlier in government perceptions of China came during Jair Bolsonaro's presidency. Brazilian foreign policy, often shaped by pragmatism and autonomy, instead framed China based primarily on ideological concerns, usually tied to increasingly polarised domestic politics. Bessimo and Amorim Neto (2024) argue that Bolsonaro's anti-China rhetoric was rooted in ideological alignment with North-American far-right ideology, especially under Donald Trump's first presidency; and the possibility of electoral gains domestically. The authors conclude that Brazil's extreme right weaponised foreign policy discourse to serve domestic ideological battles, making China a convenient enemy rather than a genuine strategic concern. Similarly, Ramos *et al.* (2024) analyse the role of far-right politics in Bolsonaro's response to the China-US rivalry. Agreeing with Bessimo and Amorim Neto's (2024) perspective on the ideological foundations of Bolsonaro's anti-China rhetoric, the authors nevertheless emphasise how practical economic concerns—especially trade ties with China—forced Bolsonaro's Brazil towards a more pragmatic stance on the China-US divide.

Understanding this comprehensive strategic partnership requires acknowledging the friction points that inevitably arise from a developing country's struggle to manage the trade-offs of global interdependence. As will be demonstrated in the later analysis of the Brazilian trade barriers over Chinese EV imports, this struggle involves a delicate domestic negotiation over China's role as both a partner for global reform and a source of competitive pressure on Brazil's failing industrial sector.

Chapter Conclusion

As a literature review, I expect this chapter to have provided the reader with a broad enough contextualisation of the topics of interest for this research. Although overviewed separately, scholarly debates around China's positioning to the global *status quo*, to the developing world and to LAC appear inextricably connected. How China negotiates its ties with the liberal global order informs and is informed by its relationship with the Global South. Beijing wants to be seen as a reliable partner which combines the right doses of proactivity and responsibility. That means to challenge and support existing structures of the global order, proving itself to be the non-disruptive

new player the increasingly unstable international system sorely needs; and yet, disruptive *enough* as to present itself as a true alternative to the players of old. In the meantime, that trustworthiness must appeal to developing nations, which are invited to see China as both a leader and a peer. LAC hangs on the balance between those two dimensions: it is a region both historically tied to the main proponent of the liberal global order, the United States; and part of the Global South.

A world in transition means that translating China's ideas from discourse to action happens to be as complex as it should be. China is no unitary actor: its *illiberal* political system, as some authors are keen to describe it, does not save Beijing from the mission of finding a balance among bureaucracies, domestic demands, economic actors and narrative forces both old and new. Outside of its borders, moreover, political actors are not idle: Western powers interact with and react to China's shifting postures, and keep a sharp eye to anything they might deem overly assertive. In the Global South, China's partners also have agency and minds of their own; and even when local elites are too enticed by Chinese capital to expose any personal anxiety, societies at large do not share the same constraints, often reacting to China's presence in both positive and negative lights.

From that complexity, we have that China acts and reacts according to a number of dualities: revisionism and conformism; intentional, pragmatic action and contingent, emergent outcomes; domestic and external drivers; symbolic and material; a great power and a developing nation; faithful to its word and dissonant to it; loved and loathed. Nevertheless, no mentioned duality agrees to operate dichotomously: between black and white, China often chooses—or has to deal with—shades of grey. That is a fact many authors still opt to ignore. However, a growing share of the literature explored in this chapter seems to reject simplistic dichotomies and explore the greyish tones of China's international affairs. In the following chapters, I expect to adhere to the same *ethos* set by them.

Far any analytical endeavour to remain centered amidst that plethora of factors, a sound theoretical framework is paramount. The authors evoked in this chapter analyse the subject of China's rise as a global stakeholder through very different perspectives. For my specific purposes, however, I recall the linkages explored in the section about China's relationship with Global South nations: how does China's behaviour relate to its rhetoric? And how outside perceptions react to those factors? My inquiry, in the end, is one of understanding how China and Brazil exchange perceptions with behaviour as a reference and a medium. In the next chapter, I present Role Theory's symbolic interactionist approach as my framework of choice for attaching meaning to that exchange.

CHAPTER 2 — MAKING SENSE OF CHINA'S RISE IN LAC THROUGH A ROLE THEORY APPROACH

2. Chapter introduction

The aim of this chapter is to reflect on the theoretical underpinnings of China's foreign policy for Brazil through a constructivist-based Role Theory approach, which here is equated to symbolic interactionism. In doing so, my main objective is to establish the framework of this research, which is majorly inspired by the works of Sebastian Harnisch (2011, 2016a), Marijke Breuning (2011, 2023), and Juliet Kaarbo and Cristian Cantir (2012, 2016). The chapter is divided into three sections. First, I propose a general discussion about Role Theory, its main concepts and where my approach theoretically stands; second, I discuss some key adaptations to the original conceptual model—including a broadened definition of foreign policy—in order to better align the framework with my subsequent analyses; and third, I take on the debate regarding the methodological issues concerning the application of Role Theory, and how that shapes my empirical strategy for the following chapters.

Through this division, I expect to lay the necessary groundwork for my dissertation. The first two sections are mainly theoretical, and serve to create a comprehensive view of the concepts relevant for the research's question and main hypothesis, highlighting how they correlate within my specific approach. In this endeavour, I also aim to clarify the extent to which my theoretical adaptations converse with and expand on these concepts, hoping to properly justify the former's occurrence and pertinence. Another aspect of this discussion, somewhat adjacent but as important, relates to the definition of my theoretical stance, making clear both my level of analysis and the theoretical tradition to which I adhere. The latter will be of special relevance, since I choose the

slightly unorthodox path of utilising a constructivist framework within an explanatory scope. The last section, which explains my method of analysis, acts as a bridge between the abstract effort of this chapter and the mostly empirical nature of the following two.

2.1. Entailing a constructivist-based Role Theory approach

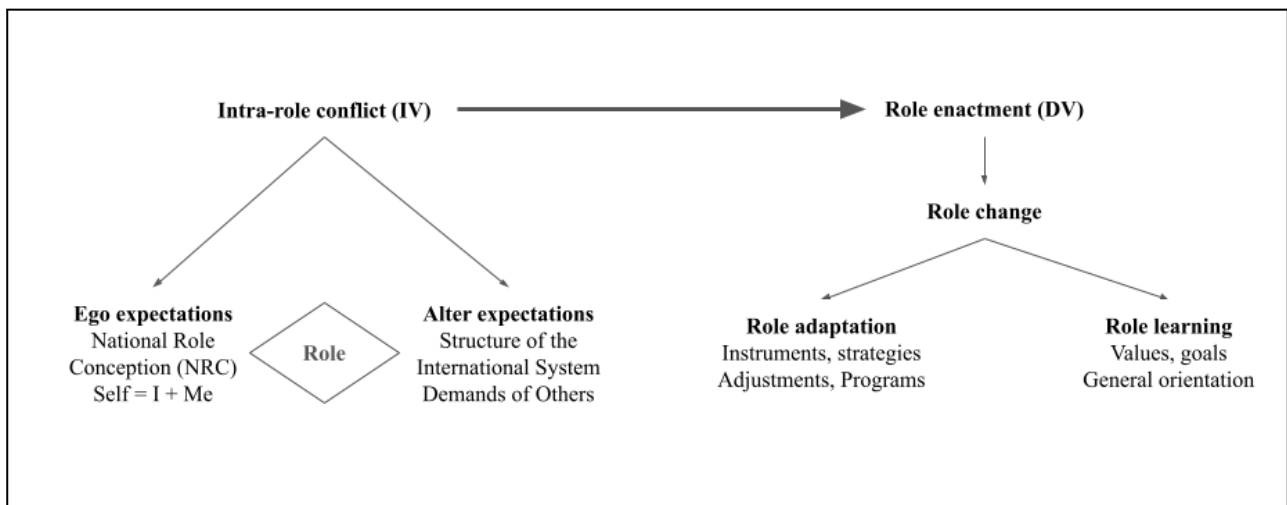
Role Theory is a rich and growing theoretical approach, understood to be either part of the subfield of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) (Harnisch 2011), or a middle path between FPA and International Relations more generally (Thies and Breuning 2012). In this section, I present the main concepts of Role Theory, its complex relationship with Social Constructivism, and what it means to adopt a constructivist-based (or symbolic interactionist) Role Theory approach. Adjacent to it, I seek to define what is my level of analysis and where this research stands in the Explaining/Understanding conundrum (Hollis and Smith 1990).

2.1.1. Role Theory's conceptual framework

Role Theory is understood to have a rich conceptual framework that enables consistent theory-bounded empirical studies of foreign policy (Breuning 2023). However, the common metaphorical use of social roles in Sociology and Political Science demands precision and clarity when attempting role-informed inquiries. In order to properly systematise this expansive framework, I organise the next paragraphs in accordance with my research design—more specifically, the conceptual structure of my main hypothesis¹¹, starting from the independent variable (see Figure 1).

¹¹ Note that my main hypothesis is articulated in the following manner: *Brazil's alter expectations are sectorally defined and send mixed cues regarding China's economic presence; therefore, China's NRC does not change, but when viable, role enactment adapts in order to better reflect the responsible great power role.* Figure 1 is an abstraction of that assertive, whose first half refers to the nature of the purported role conflict between ego and alter expectations, and whose second half characterises role enactment through typologies of role change. What I follow in this chapter is, in other words, the skeleton of that hypothesis, based on the conceptual underpinnings that give it shape.

Figure 2.1 — The conceptual structure of my main hypothesis



Source: elaborated by the author, with data from Harnisch (2011)

Any presentation of Role Theory should begin by defining what a *role* is. In the words of Sebastian Harnisch (2011, 8), roles are “social positions [...] that are constituted by ego and alter expectations regarding the purpose of an actor in an organised group”. Having its origins in the fields of Sociology, Anthropology and Social Psychology (Harnisch 2011), the subject of a role would generally be an individual. However, when applied to International Relations—an attempt first taken by Kalevi Holsti (1970)—, the role beholder is a corporate actor, usually the state (Harnisch 2011). Important to note, a role’s function is temporally contingent and does not exist in a vacuum, depending on the group’s structure and purpose to gain meaning and scope (Harnisch 2011).

Most notably, this general definition is built around the idea of expectation. Harnisch (2011) lists two different kinds relevant to the role’s constitution. Ego expectations relate to the role beholder’s understanding of what the best role is and what it implies, while alter expectations reflect external demands by other actors of the social group. Another important concept is that of role conception (also called national role conception or NRC), which refers to “an actor’s perception of his or her position *vis-à-vis* others (the ego part of a role) and the perception of the role expectations of others (the alter part of a role) as signalled through language and action” (Harnisch 2011, 8).

Although evoking the alter part of a role, the idea of role conception is anchored in its ego part, insofar it deals with an actor’s evolving process of self-identification—a concept taken from George H. Mead’s model of the “Self” (Mead 1934; Harnisch 2016). Mead (1934) postulates that the Self consists of an impulsive, irreducible and creative part, called “I”, and a self-image derived from the anticipation of how others see the actor, referred to as “Me”. The latter, however, does not include the expectations of others *per se*, but merely their reflection through the Self’s eyes

(Harnisch 2016); or, in other words, the perception of the role expectations of others (Harnisch 2011). Hence, role conception deals with the ego expectations of a social role¹², since it relates to how an actor perceives its position (Thies 2014).

Proof of this is that Harnisch's (2011) aforementioned definition of national role conception reflects posterior contributions to Role Theory, mainly the differentiation between ego and alter, championed by social constructivists and discourse theorists in the 1990s (Harnisch 2011; Breuning 2023). Original models of national roles focused solely on its ego part, as conceptualised by the leadership of the state (Harnisch 2011). These distinctions between different generations of role theorists will be picked later on, when I discuss how a constructivist-based approach to Role Theory must pay attention to the social embeddedness of roles and the constraints it creates to agency (Harnisch 2011).

Having defined what a role is and what it is composed of, I can introduce the concept behind my main independent variable: role conflict. Harnisch, Frank and Maull (2011) establish a basic typology of role conflicts by dividing them into two broad categories: inter- and intra-role conflicts. The former conveys conflicts between non-compatible roles and their respective expectations. It converges with Akan Malici and Stephen Walker's (2017, 41-42) definition of role conflict as "[...] the condition when ego or alter is confronted with a conflict between the enactment of two alternative roles." The key condition for framing an inter-role conflict is exclusivity: the enactment of one role cannot be combined with the enactment of another, as their expectations nullify each other¹³ (Malici and Walker 2017).

Intra-role conflicts, on the other hand, stem from the internal complexity of a single role, be it due to overly extensive role conceptions, or to shifting internal and external circumstances (Harnisch, Frank and Maull 2011). A simpler definition—which I intend to follow from now on—categorises intra-role conflict as a conflict between ego conceptions and alter expectations of a role (Harnisch 2011; Cantir and Kaarbo 2016). I delineate an intra-role conflict as my independent variable for I see more room for tension within China's international role than between multiple, mutually exclusive roles. It also leads, as I see, to a more parsimonious argument, removing the need to distinguish multiple roles for China's relations with Brazil.

As of my dependent variable, it revolves around the concept of role enactment. While roles and role conceptions often deal with perceptions and prescriptions¹⁴, role enactment (also called role performance or role behaviour) is Role Theory's specific terminology for foreign policy behaviour

¹² Also called simply as the ego part, in opposition to the alter part/expectations (Harnisch 2011). Or even, as many times will be the case along this text, just ego and alter.

¹³ Thus, it distinguishes itself from similar phenomena, such as role competition (when two roles compete for scarce resources or attention in order to be enacted) and role strain (when role enactment is hampered by increased demand for effort or resources) (Malici and Walker 2017).

¹⁴ They relate more to guides for action than to action *per se*.

(Harnisch 2011; Breuning 2023). As Harnisch (2011) notes, role enactment can differ both from ego/alter expectations of a role and in the constitutive effects it can have for the role beholder and the social group. Therefore, a gap between a role and its enactment does not imply the existence of role conflict. Ego and alter expectations can hypothetically align and yet foreign policy behaviour be lacking due to other factors, such as limited resources or unforeseen policy effects. Hence, an identifiable relationship between role conflict and role enactment depends on a third concept: that of role change.

As noted by Harnisch, Frank and Maull (2011), both inter- and intra-role conflicts can be a source of role change. How roles change is a growing topic of interest among role theorists, even though the assumption of roles as stable elements of a country's sociocultural context (Cantir and Kaarbo 2016)—mainly due to their association with the concept of identity (see below)—can make role change a still secondary subject for Role Theory's standard literature (Nabers 2011). In Sociology, role change is classically defined as a mutation in how the typical role performance or its boundaries is conceptualised and executed (Turner 1990; Nabers 2011). Then, it permits to differentiate purposeful variations in role enactment from other behaviours that are unconnected to the role, which receive the name of role deviance (Nabers 2011).

In Role Theory, role change may apply to both a role or to its enactment, depending on the degree of the shift it implies. These varying degrees reflect on two types of role change: adaptation and learning. The former refers to a change in the strategies and instruments of role performance, without impact on the underlying purpose of the role (Harnisch 2011). It is, in other words, a shallower expression of role change, which demands less pressure—be it internal or external—to happen. Moreover, as adaptation concerns behaviour, it may not necessarily be vocalised. Role learning¹⁵, on the other hand, is a deeper form of change where observation and interpretation of experience by the role beholder alters its beliefs or calls for the development of new ones (Harnisch 2011).

Both Harnisch (2011) and Breuning (2011) further conceptualise the differences between role adaptation and learning by reference to Charles F. Hermann's (1990) levels of foreign policy change. Adaptation, for instance, deals only with the instruments, tactics and strategy levels of the model, representing solely a shift, without reassessment of the actors' values or goals (Harnisch 2011). In a similar line, Breuning (2011) posits that role adaptation encompasses only what Hermann (1990) calls adjustment change (slight quantitative shifts in effort or scope given to recipients of a policy) and program change (a qualitative shift reflected in the usage of new

¹⁵ The term is a direct reference to Jack Levy's (1994) concept of learning—or more specifically, complex learning, i.e. the transformation of the preferences of an actor or of its understanding of the political system within which it operates. Harnisch (2011), however, implies that the original definition is directly consistent only with the behavioural approach to Role Theory.

instruments of statecraft). Hence, they affect solely role enactment. In comparison, the two most fundamental levels of change—goal and international orientation change—can only be harnessed through an alteration of the role itself, and should fall into the role learning category (Breuning 2011).

Table 1 summarises the main concepts present in the role change terminology, their relations with other relevant Role Theory concepts and the respective approximations within Hermann's (1990) four levels of foreign policy change.

Table 2.1 — Role change basic terminology

Types of change	Role adaptation	Role learning
Changes in role enactment?	Yes	Yes
Changes in role conception?	No	Yes
Adjustment change	Yes	Yes
Program change	Yes	Yes
Goal change	No	Yes
International orientation change	No	Yes

Source: elaborated by the author, with data from Harnisch (2011) and Breuning (2011)

Whether the actor's responses to role conflicts lead to adaptation or learning is mainly an empirical inquiry, as role change depends on specific circumstances (Breuning 2011). The key theoretical assumption is that conditions for role learning are harder to achieve than those for role adaptation. Breuning (2011), for instance, suggests that revisions of national role conceptions—i.e. role learning—are most likely to occur under the incidence of policy windows (Gustavsson 1999), a concept adapted from public policy literature that infers the joint coincidence of three factors necessary for fundamental change to foreign policy. These are: changes in fundamental structural conditions, strategic political leadership and a crisis of some sort (Gustavsson 1999). Even so, policy windows do not give decision-makers free range for redefining national role conceptions, as such modifications still must resonate with ego and alter expectations (Breuning 2011).

Feliciano de Sá Guimarães (2021) goes a step further and empirically defines the conditions under which small states can promote role learning for their more powerful counterparts in a

regional setting. The first one is material: “Only interactions marked by some degree of asymmetrical material interdependence between regional and small powers produce the initial conditions for a full role transition to be eventually developed within the regional power role-set” (Guimarães 2021, 5).

The others are ideational and reflect the necessary steps a small state ought to undertake in order to force a regional power to reflect on its belief set and develop new ones. First, the small power must altercast¹⁶ the regional hegemon into a divisive normative situation, utilising an antagonistic narrative capable of sowing internal division within the greater power and stimulating reassessments of its role conception. Second, the small power needs to ally with domestic groups within the hegemon’s domestic political arena, pulling enough pressure onto decision-makers to create a dilemma. And lastly, it must ally with secondary or other small powers of the same region, in a way that destabilises the regional power’s socialisation schemes (Guimarães 2021). Guimarães (2021) emphasises that none of the four conditions alone are sufficient for promoting role learning within his model’s particular setting, and only their combined appearance is capable of overcoming material asymmetries and forcing the regional power to revise its beliefs and develop new ones *vis-à-vis* its role conception.

It is also relevant to note that Guimarães’ conditions only apply to regional settings, that is, between a regional hegemon and the small states connected to its socialisation schemes. Even so, role learning is a difficult process to achieve. It is for this reason that, in my hypothesis, I posit that adaptation of China’s role enactment is the likely outcome of a role conflict between its role conception and Brazil’s alter expectation. Beyond the material asymmetry among the two nations, matters of geographical distance between ego and alter make the change of goals and values a too ambitious proposition to be expected from the alter perspective. Having that settled, my next step, which remains within the boundaries of Role Theory, is to dissect the relationship between Social Constructivism and Role Theory.

2.1.2. Social Constructivism and Role Theory

At the title of this chapter, I established as my purpose to make a *constructivist-based* Role Theory approach to China-Brazil relations. To those accustomed to Role Theory’s assumptions and concepts, that characterisation may seem somewhat redundant. As Breuning (2023, 193) puts it, “[...] role theory is inherently constructivist, in the sense that it accepts that international politics is defined by what states and their decision makers make of it.” In this subsection, I put constructivists

¹⁶ Altercasting is another concept of Role Theory, in which one actor manipulates another’s role conception (Guimarães, 2021). It is commonly used in cognitive Role Theory, and can be an alter source of role change (Harnisch, 2011; Thies 2016).

and role theorists side by side with the intent of distilling what converges between them, while highlighting key nuances that justify the choice of specifying my approach as constructivist-based. In doing so, I also aim to clarify what exactly is my approach, known as symbolic interactionism.

I would start by concurring with Breuning's assertive regarding Role Theory's constructivist *sprit d'être*. The author argues that both Role Theory and Social Constructivism take part in a similar effort to go beyond material, observable factors and to make sense of the ideas, perceptions, identities, norms and images that constitute decision-makers' and normal citizens' interpretation of the social reality to which they belong. National role conceptions, for example, can be defined by decision-makers based on both ideational and material elements that shape a state's position within a group (Breuning 2011). Moreover, constructivists and role theorists alike criticise the fetishisation of material and/or structural explanations for foreign policy behaviour, and agree that agents and structure are mutually constituted (Breuning 2011).

Nevertheless, Role Theory is not a monolithic framework. And while the same statement could be made towards Constructivism in International Relations (even to a higher degree, one could argue), I posit that the complex relationship between one and the other can be better displayed through Role Theory's perspective. I do so by dividing the issue into two intertwined discussions: the development of Role Theory since the 1970s; and Role Theory's place between Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) and International Relations (IR).

A common thread in recollections of Role Theory's development within FPA/IR literature is to divide it into two or three generations (Harnisch 2011; Schafer and Walker 2021; Breuning 2023). As I have previously exposed here, Role Theory has been adapted to IR from Sociology and Social Psychology by Kalevi Holsti in 1970. For the next two decades, a first generation¹⁷ of role theorists built a research agenda that dialogued directly with questions that would also entangle constructivists, of which the most notable was the agent-structure problem (Breuning 2023). Regarding it, the first generation already inherited the different interpretations of sociological role theory and of symbolic interactionism. In a nutshell, the former emphasised the strength of structure over human behaviour, while the latter gave more room to agency. Between these two perspectives, the first generation had a clear preference for structural explanations (Breuning 2023).

Holsti's seminal article illustrates this choice well. Although his focus lay on policymakers' perceptions, Holsti's descriptions of possible national role conceptions were a reflection of the international system's (Cold War) structure (Holsti 1970; Breuning 2023). The enumeration of roles such as *Bloc leader*, *Bloc member/ally*, *Non-aligned*, *Buffer*, and *Protectee* (Holsti 1970, 255) has led some role theorists— such as Breuning (2023)—to describe early Role Theory's understanding

¹⁷ Here, I adhere to Breuning's (2023) division. As the author herself notes, Schafer and Walker (2021) propose a slightly different classification, with metaphorical uses of the concept of role constituting the first generation, while Breuning considers such works as precursors rather than Role Theory *per se*.

of international politics as hierarchical in nature. Even so, Holsti's attention to the variety of roles that the polar view of the world marginalised and his inquiry based on policymakers' perceptions set a remarkably different picture from the structural models dominant in IR scholarship at the time. In addition, one could say, preceded to some degree social constructivists' future inquiries in the discipline.

Harnisch (2011), from a different perspective, notes that early role theorists had a wholefully ego-centered definition of role. As Holsti (1970, 243) would argue, "The component units of the system must rely primarily upon their own definitions of interests as standards for action. The expectations of other governments, international legal norms, or 'world opinion' explain few aspects of national behavior, particularly in conflict situations." This may appear to contradict the assertion that Holsti's and first generation role theorists' answer to the agent-structure problem rested on structural preeminence. Clarification lies in the model itself: ego expectations were the sole shapers of roles, but policymakers' perceptions were heavily determined by their state's position within the structure of the international system (Holsti 1970).

The shift from structure to agency came in the 1990s, as symbolic interactionism gained strength among role theorists. Breuning (2023) cites two reasons for this change: the resurgence of the unit-level of analysis in IR after the end of the Cold War; and the rise to prominence of constructivists in the field. This proved to be decisive, even if many constructivists of the 1990s preferred to develop theories on the systemic level of analysis (Reus-Smit 2005; Breuning 2011). Since then, this second generation of role theorists has explicitly worked in tandem with core constructivist assumptions, emphasising agency within the process of co-constitution. In other words, a greater focus has been given to how agents affect structures, just as these constrain the agents¹⁸ (Breuning 2023).

The rifts between the structural approach and symbolic interactionism also reverberate on the discussion regarding the place of Role Theory between the literatures of FPA and IR. According to Thies and Breuning (2012), Role Theory's roots in FPA and its natural affinity with constructivist IR theory give it a singular position to build bridges between the two fields. The authors note that Constructivism's arrival into role-theoretical debates created a geographical divide, with scholars in the United States privileging a unit-level cognitive FPA approach, while those located in Europe adhering to system-level constructivist research agendas. However, Role Theory has remained majorly a FPA framework, with few constructivists venturing into the concept of role (Thies and

¹⁸ The second generation's preference for agency does not mean that structural analyses have disappeared from Role Theory literature. Michael Grossman, Francis Schortgen and Gordon Friedrichs (2021) propose a role theoretical model in which the main sources of change for foreign policy strategy and behaviour lie in systemic pressures. In a similar line, there are frameworks that strand from constructivist assumptions. For example, Malici and Walker's (2017) *binary role theory* is modelled after Game Theory tenets.

Breuning 2012), despite its great malleability as an intermediate term between agency and structure (Grossman, Schortgen and Friedrichs 2022).

Regarding this debate, I find it important to note that (constructivist) IR theory influence does not mean a shift towards the systemic level of analysis. Two reasons sustain this point. First, as I discussed above, second-generation role theorists—who were highly influenced by Constructivism—consolidated agency and the unit-level of analysis in Role Theory research. Second, constructivist IR theory itself has since departed from efforts like Alexander Wendt’s (1999) system-level grand social theory towards “[...] providing compelling interpretations and explanations of discrete aspects of world politics, going no further than to offer heavily qualified ‘contingent generalizations’” (Reus-Smit 2005, 202). In tandem with this tendency, unit-level and holistic constructivist frameworks have gained ground in IR literature (Reus-Smit 2005), further nuancing the weight of systemic interpretations.

As a result, I posit that links to Constructivism in Role Theory should be framed as an affirmation of the power of agency, but considered within the boundaries of structural constraints. It is under that mindset that this dissertation adheres to the symbolic interactionist approach to Role Theory. Through it, the ego and alter parts of a role are reworked through a process of co-constitution. In other words, as the ego contains the self-identity of an actor (Harnisch 2016a)—reflected in the Meadian concepts of I and Me—; the alter part represents the social group’s construction of the actor’s role, setting the boundaries for a process of “mutual constitution of roles between the self (ego) and the other (alter)” (Wehner 2016, 3).

Nevertheless, there remains one more issue to settle in order to clarify the relationship between Constructivism and Role Theory: that of the approximate definitions of roles and identities. The latter is a main concept in constructivist literature, and major constructivist scholars have drawn upon the same sociological and social-psychological literature as role theorists (Breuning 2011). Notwithstanding, it is crucial not to use both terms interchangeably (Sawicka 2024), as their proximity also marks the slightly different perspectives each tradition has on the agent-structure debate (Thies and Breuning 2012).

In this sense, there has been common ground among some constructivists to understand identity as “[...] something more intrinsic about an actor than a role conception” (Breuning 2011, 21). As compiled by Breuning (2011), Hopf (2002) and Wendt (1999) seem to share this idea, seeing identity as something independent from the actor’s interaction with the environment—although the authors differ as to what extent interaction with others shapes identity¹⁹.

¹⁹ Hopf (2002) believes identity to be solely domestically driven, while Wendt (1999) recognises that agents’ identities do not escape the mutual constitution process with the structure. A similar position is taken by Browning (2007), who posits that identity formation demands the actor to locate itself *vis-à-vis* a particular time, space and in relation to other actors, with whom identities must be intersubjectively negotiated through social interaction. Moreover, Browning merges identity with agency, a move somewhat divergent from other constructivist theorisations.

Regardless, identity appears to be equated to role conception (or the ego), or at least a constituent of it; while agency and role performance (enactment) also act as close equivalents²⁰ (Breuning 2011). Through another lens, a preliminary understanding could be that identities are a source for role conception, which in turn determines role enactment (Breuning 2011).

Nabers (2011), however, emphasises that the connections between roles and identities should not be seen as linear or one-directed. In his opinion, the link between “who we are” and “what role we play” (Hopf 2002) is rather one of co-constitution in itself:

[W]e are probably better advised to call the relationship between roles and identities a two-way process that reflects the reciprocity of agent and structure. An actor operates in choosing behaviors within the confines of the role, while this behavior both is influenced by identities and feeds back on them. Methodologically, the frame of reference for both identities and roles is their meaning transported by discourse, while these meanings are logically identical in a given situation (Nabers 2011, 83).

Monika Sawicka (2024) comes to a similar characterisation of what she calls the identity-role dyad²¹: one’s being (identity) affects one’s doing (role), without excluding the enactment of roles from influencing an actor’s self-understanding (Sawicka 2024). I tend to agree with Nabers’ (2011) and Sawicka’s (2024) argument that roles and identities are to be seen as mutually constituted. However, since my focus lies on roles and not identities, I choose to finalise this discussion by specifying that, although constructivist in spirit, it escapes the scope of my approach (and consequently, of my research) to question the means through which roles reinforce identity. Insofar the priority remains with the co-constitution between ego and alter expectations of the role, my approach is constructivist-based mainly as a way of differentiating from purely ego-centred or structural frameworks of Role Theory. Exactly what this means in terms of my theoretical stance will be the next topic of discussion.

2.1.3. Delineating my theoretical stance

This section so far has discussed Role Theory on its own terms and assumptions. Having established this background, I can now define what is my theoretical stance and how it shall reflect on the empirical effort of the next chapters. My purpose here is to connect the designed framework

²⁰ Breuning notes that both identity and agency have been equated to role conception in some constructivist literature (see Browning, 2007). I take a clear stance to steer away from such equivalences, rather preferring to see identity as a deeper constituent of the ego expectations of a role.

²¹ Sawicka (2024, 21) also proposes that what separates identity from social role is a matter of external validation: “as roles require counterroles and partners that accept the interaction, they entail external validation. Creating a national role conception implies consideration for the external expectations. Such external validation is not applicable in the case of a state’s identity.”

to the larger epistemological debates of IR theory²². I divide this enterprise into two parts: first, I define my level of analysis; and second, I clarify what research tradition I adhere to.

To start, I align with the bulk of second-generation role theorists in favouring the unit level of analysis—mainly the state—but I do not do so in a way that denies key systemic underpinnings. As I have previously hinted to, a constructivist-based approach to Role Theory implies recognising the social embeddedness of roles; or how units, although having agency, are somewhat constrained by what the system entails. As Harnisch (2016a) postulates, a role's function depends on the group's structure and purpose, in a way that there is no role without a respective counter-role.

From this initial position, I must present two further clarifications. One is related to my unit. As I have referred to above, I take the state as my unit, considering it the corporate actor which serves as both the holder of a role and the main source of alter expectations. All the while, to keep the state as a black box would be counter-intuitive, considering my empirical data—that extensively touches on economic sectors, enterprises, bureaucracies and interest groups. To rupture with the state as the unit of analysis, on the other hand, would not be without its issues, since roles are generally ascribed to nations as a whole. My answer to this conundrum lies in an already explored path by some role theorists (Cantir and Karbo 2012, 2016) that actively rescue Role Theory's roots in FPA literature in order to highlight the ways through which foreign policy decision-making depends on factors outside the formal boundaries of governments. I shall return to this issue in section 1.2, where I propose an expansion of these mechanisms beyond the phenomenon of domestic role contestation.

The second caveat relates to the system; more precisely, what is my focus within the large list of possible structural constraints. I differentiate between two key systemic underpinnings in my framework, each serving a slightly different purpose within this research. The first is more direct and refers to the manner through which the structure of the system gives meaning to national role conceptions. Using China as an example, its role *vis-à-vis* the global order—regardless of how ego-oriented it might be—cannot be given meaning or properly communicated through discourse and action if not connected to a socially shared intersubjectivity²³. The second way, on the other hand, relates to the connection between alter *as others* and the system.

²² Note that I refrain from mentioning FPA here, as I have generally done so far. I reason this choice from my belief that, from an epistemological point of view, FPA can be safely inferred as a subfield of IR. In a similar line, Hollis and Smith (1990)—whose book has greatly inspired this subsection—promote a general discussion of IR theory without excluding frameworks and levels of analyses that could easily fall into the FPA bracket.

²³ Following Hollis' and Smith's (1990) ideas about integrating levels of analyses to different scientific traditions, this idea of shared intersubjectivity would fall into the heuristic side of the spectrum. However, as I argue further below, I see my research as more aligned to an explanatory endeavour. To mitigate any claims of contradiction, I should posit that meaning is not the main concern in this research, but rather behaviour. Nevertheless, the intrinsic presence of meaning in any constructivist inquiry necessarily pulls my stance closer to the line dividing Explaining and Understanding.

This latter aspect of Role Theory appears less obvious to those accustomed to a material understanding of systemic constraints, such as that of structural realism (Waltz 2010[1979]; Mearsheimer 2001). The expectations of others can function as systemic underpinnings on role conception because they work—borrowing from the sociological appraisal of roles—akin to how society does to an individual. Thus, social interaction acts as a constraint on agency in a different way than intersubjectivity—which mainly gives a framing for role conception—by establishing feedbacks capable of impacting a role and its enactment²⁴. In light of this, Role Theory applies the idea of significant or generalised others to represent how primary socialising agents exert influence on the ego's role conception (Harnisch 2011). In a nutshell, both meaning through intersubjectivity and feedback through interaction refer to the social embeddedness of roles. I make this differentiation because, while the former appears only indirectly as I discuss China's role conception, the latter will be a core process of my empirical inquiry, featuring more centrally in my research.

Finally, in tandem with Martin Hollis' and Steve Smith's (1990) ideas of Explaining and Understanding, I propose that, although not that distant from the interpretivist mission of understanding how actors give meaning to the world that surrounds them, this research aligns with the tradition of Explaining. In International Relations, Social Constructivism has been a set of theoretical approaches that allow for both postmodern and explanatory endeavours (Burchill and Linklater 2005; Reus-Smit 2005). Some authors (Abdelal, Blyth and Parsons 2020), however, have criticised the idea that constructivist frameworks give away explanatory power in favour of mere description, and proposed that causality and constitutivity are not incompatible, but complementary²⁵. In contrast, Hollis and Smith (1990) make a stark warning that interpretive and explanatory traditions cannot be combined without incurring in contradiction, because each tells an essentially different story.

Whatever the case, this should not mean that explanatory studies should forsake all contributions generated by interpretivists. After all, to adopt a constructivist-based approach only to then sacrifice any notion of constitutiveness would be counterintuitive. To this end, it is useful to posit that the relationship between both traditions is more of a spectrum than a dichotomy (Hollis and Smith 1990). The key takeaway—as I see it—is that no inquiry can sustain itself if it hopes to explain and understand at equal measure: one logic must take precedence. Therefore, my effort is

²⁴ This reflects a radically different understanding of a system's structure to that of realists. Instead of an universal, a-historical structure, a set of systemic constraints emanating from social interactions is markedly non-monolithic in its constitution. Each ego has a different ensemble of alters, with whom it constructs relations localised in a certain manner dependent upon a specific context.

²⁵ This case could be reworked to mean that an academic effort could try to complement explanation with interpretation by telling the same story from two different perspectives and then harnessing the contributions of each without warrant for synthesis. Although a compelling prospect, I reckon such an endeavour quite surpasses the methodological boundaries of a single dissertation.

one of Explaining insofar as the constitutive character of social phenomena is here secondary to the mission of refining causal explanations (Abdelal, Blyth and Parsons 2020).

From this stance, I assume that a) scientific inquiries can infer causality from social phenomena, even if the production of knowledge is not neutral; and b) actors behave according to some form of rationality. With that in mind, my final step is to demonstrate how both assumptions are capable of being integrated into my theoretical approach. For the first statement, I go back to the development of Constructivism in IR theory. As presented by Cristian Reus-Smit (2005), constructivist literature gained ground in the discipline as an outgrowth of Critical Theory, taking much of the latter's critique on traditional ways of theorising in the field, but changing the scope from meta-theoretical writings focused on the the nature of the social world and the purpose of theory towards "[...] conceptual and theoretical illumination through the systematic analysis of empirical puzzles in world politics" (Reus-Smit 2005, 195). The same logic applies to Role Theory, which has been described as a typical mid-level theory, generating knowledge over time through empirical work (Breuning 2023).

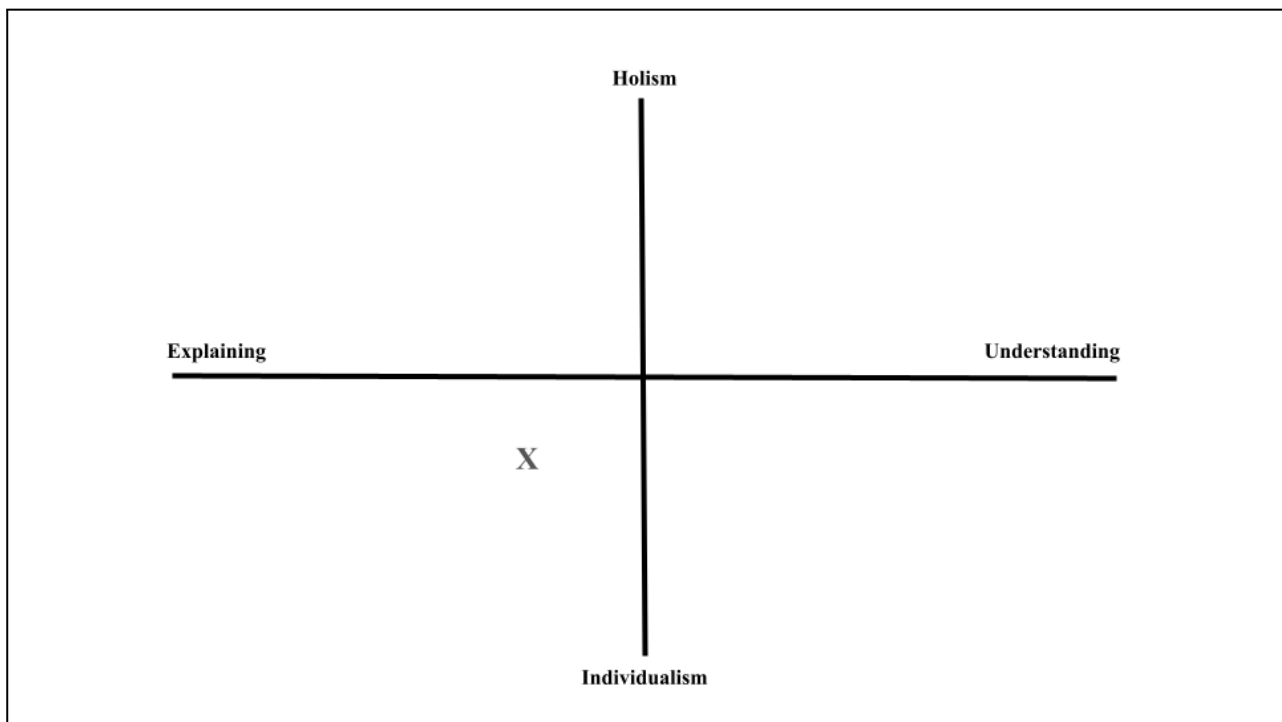
Thus, both Constructivism and Role Theory have given opportunities for careful inquiries into causal mechanisms, although they have shunned away from generalisable hypotheses and large-scale approaches, preferring specific issues and events (Reus-Smit 2005; Breuning 2023). What is more decisive, this has been carried out following a different ontology than that of neo-positivists, inaugurated precisely by the meta-theoretical studies of critical theorists—an ontology that depicts humans as "socially embedded, communicatively constituted and culturally empowered" (Reus-Smit 2005, 195). This leaves room for incorporating causality into this mainly constitutive medium, as long as proper care has been given to the contingency of results²⁶ and to the epistemic power of knowledge production.

In terms of rationality, I steer away from classical notions of instrumental reason and work within the concept of bounded rationality, framing events as dependent upon the actors' subjectivity (Simon 1985). Breuning (2023) notes that this assumption is accepted by both constructivists and role theorists, making the important link between how actors represent their situation (or the information they can access) and what explains their behaviour.

Synthesising the discussions of this subsection, Figure 2 shows a graphic representation, adapted from Hollis and Smith (1990), that summarises my theoretical stances regarding the level of analysis and the Understanding/Explaining dimensions. I position my research in the lower-left quadrant, meaning that I take an individualist (unit-level) explanatory stance.

²⁶ In light of this, much of the work on Role Theory has been done through a qualitative methodological lens, with a predominance of the comparative method and of case-study designs (Breuning 2023).

Figure 2.2 — My theoretical stance



Source: adapted from Hollis and Smith (1990, 5)

Note, however, that I am relatively close to the horizontal dividing line, meaning that I recognize some level of systemic constraint on my units' agency. Concomitantly, I am also not far removed from the vertical line, suggesting that my explanatory endeavour, even if focusing on behaviour and causality, does not depart enough from the Understanding end of the spectrum in order to take every aspect of social reality as observable and predictable.

2.2. Adapting the model

This section builds upon previous discussions with the aim of proposing a set of adaptations to the original conceptual framework of Role Theory. These adaptations emerge from demands of an empirical nature, more specifically, from the particular phenomena analysed in further chapters of this dissertation²⁷. None is meant to be a profound revision (or a critique) of previous concepts, but rather small reworkings which I deem necessary to properly frame my collected data under Role Theory definitions. In such, all my adaptations are crafted within the logic of expanding—not modifying—the application of certain concepts.

I propose two main adaptations, each comprising one subsection. The first relates to the conceptual model of roles, and builds upon established critiques in Role Theory literature that

²⁷ Which I from now on will name as my *empirical puzzles*.

question its implicit assumption of the state as an unitary actor. The second adaptation is semantic in essence and overreaches the boundaries of Role Theory; through it, I attempt to expand the amplitude of phenomena that can be considered part of a country's foreign policy, in order to encompass specific actors relevant for my case study (see Chapter 4) that escape traditional empirical sources in Role Theory writings, such as key decision-makers and diplomatic bureaus. To offer some substance to the latter discussion, I also insert a third subsection, in which I explore the complicated entanglements between the state and corporate actors within the context of China's state capitalism.

2.2.1. Taking role contestation beyond the ego

The borrowing and subsequent formalisation of the concept of role from other social sciences presupposed a jump in the framing of the holder of a role, from the individual to the state as a corporate actor. This process, as to be expected, did not happen without a degree of anthropomorphisation of the state. As pointed out by Cristian Cantir and Juliet Kaarbo (2012, 2016), a symptom of this has been the tendency, among role theorists, to assume that ego expectations are always internally consensual, with its conception being determined by the state without conflict, leading to somewhat stable definitions over time. The authors name this tendency *Role Theory's unitary actor assumption* (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012). A main feature of their critique is the fact that, although inseminated in the literature of FPA, role theorists have been surprisingly reluctant to dialogue with other works in the subfield that have given much thought to domestic sources of foreign policy (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012).

From this, seeking to cross-fertilise the literatures of Role Theory and FPA more generally, the authors propose the concept of *domestic role contestation* as a way to encompass:

[T]he process by which domestic actors with various role conceptions interact in the foreign policymaking process. The agents in our studies are not only states or officials standing in for the state. They can also include political parties, bureaucratic agencies, public opinion, and individual elites, all with potentially different constellations of roles they want their country to enact (Cantir and Kaarbo 2016).

Domestic role contestation represented a novel contribution because the process it referred to could not be assessed through more traditional definitions in Role Theory literature. Intra-role conflict, for instance, presumes at least two actors—the ego and the alter—each with their previously formed expectations. Inter-role conflict, on the other hand, happens between roles already taken by the state or its foreign policy decision-makers. Neither, however, speak of conflict within the process of role conceptualisation.

In their effort of theory-building, Cantir and Kaarbo (2016) also formulate a typology of domestic role contestations, in which there are vertical and horizontal forms of contesting a role. The vertical relates to divergences between elites and masses in defining the most appropriate role for the state. Most notably, the elite-masses nexus—as it is usually called—has allowed for the integration of public opinion as a variable for Role Theory. As for the horizontal form, it references disagreements within the elite group connected to the state. Such disputes could happen between: governing elites and the political opposition; inside multiparty coalitions; in small decision-making groups; and across bureaucratic agencies (Cantir and Kaarbo 2016).

Neither type of domestic role contestation is meant as an assumption, with the authors noting that whether such disagreements matter for role conception is an empirical question (Cantir and Kaarbo 2016). Nevertheless, this basic typology has allowed for an expanded model of understanding role conceptualisation, integrating a larger set of actors that could take part in its process. It also emphasises a new dimension to the correlation between role conception and role enactment: that of the strategic use of roles. As noted by Cantir and Kaarbo (2016, 17) “Elites may use roles instrumentally, as part of a political battle or in response to public opinion pressures, but may have little to no intention of enacting them.”

Therefore, domestic role contestation gives Role Theory a new analytical depth, even if it sacrifices some of the parsimony of role theoretical frameworks. It is, nonetheless, solely preoccupied with the ego. No similar effort has been taken to disaggregate the state in the alter part of the role. Here lies, in short, the adaptation I propose: to take the idea of domestic role contestation and apply it to the alter in a similar manner as the original concept presupposes for the ego. I emphasise this is no endeavour of theory-building from my part, as such purpose would entail a remarkably different scope for this research, with considerably higher methodological demands. It is for this reason that I avoid making any changes to Cantir and Kaarbo’s original typology of role contestation, focusing only in shifting to whom it is applied, with no intent for generalisation.

In hindsight, the contingency of my adaptation does not give it permission to be carried out with no second thought. There leaves the question as to what path exactly domestic contestation within the *alter* can impact the *ego*’s role conception/enactment. In this sense, the original idea of domestic role contestation is far closer to the ego and its impact is undoubtedly clearer and more direct. In comparison, the first thing to note is that domestic contestation in the alter does not relate to a role, but rather to the (alter) expectations of one. However, since roles are composed of ego and alter expectations, domestic contestation inside the alter could be able to impact the role (and its enactment) by proxy. To some extent, this is what Cantir and Kaarbo’s proposal of domestic role contestation does for the ego—it affects *ego expectations*, i.e. national role conception, that in turn take part in constituting the role.

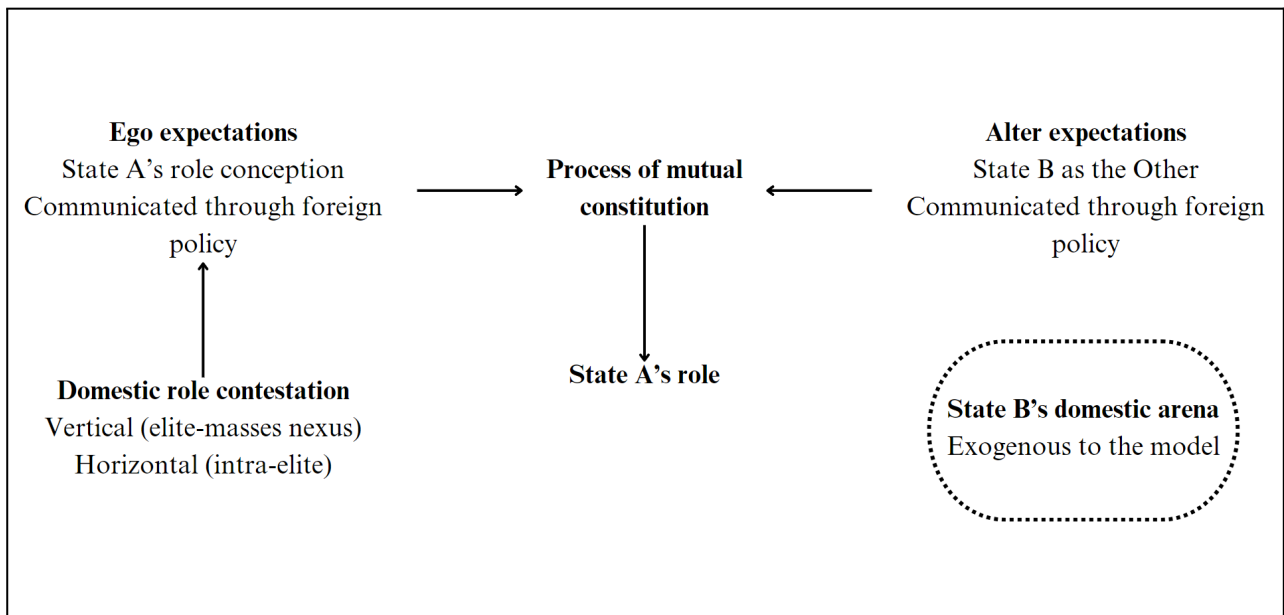
My caveat remains relevant though, for my dependent variable is the ego's role enactment, which is unquestionably further from the alter's domestic arena than it is from the ego's. Hence, the second thing to note is that domestic contestation to the alter's expectations will seldom be as potent as its parallel within the ego. In other words, it would be sensible to assume a difference in intensity between domestic contestation of a country's role, and a similar process but related to a *foreign country's* role. Nevertheless, as I shall attempt to empirically determine in later chapters, there is room for meaningful contestation within the alter's internal sphere as long as relations with the ego hold enough importance domestically. That is the case, I posit, of Brazil's expectations of China's role.

Whether alter's domestic contestation can be considerable enough to matter for the alter expectations of the role is—just as the case of ego's domestic role contestation—an empirical question. Since it impacts the role by proxy, it would face greater barriers to actually promote role change²⁸, especially if it were of the learning type. Nevertheless, for the same reasons Cantir and Kaarbo (2016) propose opening the black box for the ego, I argue it could be fruitful to replicate the logic for the alter. Just as ego expectations are not inherent of the state or perennially stable, alter expectations can shift and provoke role conflicts and role change.

Below, Figure 3 illustrates the original model of domestic role contestation adapted to a symbolic interactionist approach to Role Theory. In it, State A represents the ego, and State B, the alter. Domestic role contestation influences ego expectations, i.e. national role conception, which in turn takes part in the co-constitution of State A's role. Note that State B's domestic arena holds no relation to the other variables of the model.

²⁸ It would be important, for instance, for the alter to be a significant other of the ego. However, as I seek to prove in my case study, this is not a necessary condition. As for the inverse—the ego being a significant other to the alter—, it is safe to assume that, in ordinary instances, it should be the case, at least to the point that the ego is relevant enough to the alter as to provoke some degree of contestation within the latter's domestic sphere.

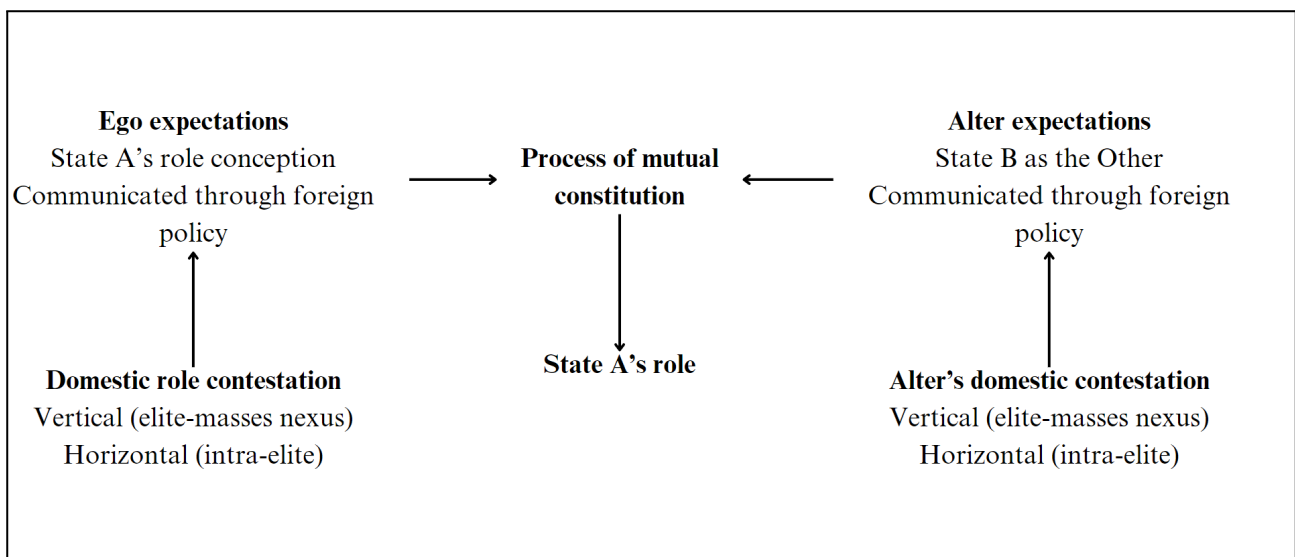
Figure 2.3 — The original domestic role contestation model



Sources: elaborated by the author, with data from Cantir and Kaarbo (2012, 2016)

Now, Figure 4 includes my adaptation to the model. In it, State B's domestic arena is formally integrated through what I refer to as *alter's domestic contestation*.

Figure 2.4 — The adapted model, accounting for alter's domestic contestation



Sources: elaborated by the author, with data from Cantir and Kaarbo (2012, 2016)

As was shown, I intended to keep Figures 3 and 4 as parallel as possible, isolating State B's domestic arena as the only varying element. This was done to emphasise that this adaptation does

not negate other relations within the model, seeking to expand rather than to modify the original framework.

2.2.2. Foreign policy in a globalised world

Unlike the domestic role contestation proposal, my next adaptation should not incur alterations to the theoretical model *per se*. Instead, it will unravel inside one concept in particular: that of foreign policy. My goal is to reach an expanded notion of foreign policy, enough to go beyond the traditional boundaries of Heads of State and their respective Ministries of Foreign Relations. The need for this endeavour emerges from the particularities of my case study, in which a) alter (Brazil's) expectations are voiced through trade policy rather than traditional foreign policy channels, such as diplomacy; and b) the ego's (China) role enactment cannot be neatly isolated from the interests and participation of associated private actors, i.e. Chinese companies. In a nutshell, this conceptual reworking is meant to allow for the combination of Role Theory's analytical tools—which belong to the FPA literature and is mainly directed at typical foreign policy issues—with empirical applications somewhat unorthodox for its framework, whose combination I deem, nevertheless, useful for generating novel interpretations of the phenomena under analysis.

Similar to my previous enterprise, I do not seek to engage in theory-building, but rather to promote bridges with existing literature in order to make my theoretical framework more nuanced and consistent with my data. In light of this, I start by introducing the broader discussions within the FPA literature to which my current conundrum pertains, namely those of *foreign policy as public policy* and of *foreign policy in the age of globalisation*. My next step, then, will be to discuss viable definitions of foreign policy that allow room for my empirical puzzles to be incorporated into the framework. Afterwards, I delineate a suitable integration of this broadened definition of foreign policy to Role Theory, citing the main features that make such an effort justifiable.

According to Howard Lentner (2006), the relative isolation of foreign policy from other public policies—and subsequently, the division between their respective analytical tools—is a reflection of the boundaries placed between domestic and international politics. Recounting James Rosenau (1971), he posits that “[...] foreign policy analysis is pulled in two directions, tugged by general policy analysis concerns on the one hand and international politics concerns on the other” (Lentner 2006, 172). However, even though certain scenarios might thicken this divide—such as international insecurity, which is mostly a foreign policy concern studied majorly by foreign policy analysts—players and processes are approximate in both domestic and foreign affairs, while internal and external policy issues tend to be ever more interconnected (Lentner 2006).

Most important for this research, the one imperative that ties both foreign policy and public policy analysis literatures is that of holism: the interest of inquiry should lie in the *whole* of political systems and their processes (Nelson 1996; Lentner 2006). What happens in other policy domains has an effect to foreign policy, and vice-versa. The Brazilian case is an useful illustration of this, as Itamaraty's historical bureaucratic insulation in matters of foreign policy has given way to an extended set of new actors in the area, both from within and from without the federal government's bureaucracy (Milani 2021). This tendency has been the main force behind an increased demand for frameworks capable of analysing Brazilian foreign policy as a public policy (Milani 2021), although a lack of tradition in FPA studies imposes considerable analytical challenges to such endeavours (Casarões 2018).

The imperative of holism evoked by the tenet that foreign policy should be considered a public policy is further reinforced by the phenomenon of globalisation:

The buzzword globalization refers to increasing connections across international boundaries, particularly in economics and culture but in politics, environmental degradation, tourism, transmission of disease, drug and arms trafficking, and other dimensions of social life as well. As new problems arising from these connections appear on policy agendas, both those concerned with making policy with reference to the external world and those devoted to domestic policy face both new actors and redefined issues in modified policy processes (Lentner 2006, 176-7).

The globalised world has entailed a greater effect than to just make those devoted to domestic politics aware of transnational phenomena. More than ever, non-state actors constitute a part of foreign policy decision-making. This is not novel in FPA literature, which has already developed frameworks and models to integrate domestic interest groups into the decision-making process (Salomón and Pinheiro 2013; Geraldello, 2023). What is new is the increasing overlap of economics and politics in foreign affairs, a phenomenon still underappreciated by foreign policy analysts (Chacko and Jayasuriya 2017). In an illustrative instance, the growing feature of capital demands—public and private—in foreign policy goals has had an impact in diplomatic discourse, with business and economic terms such as *strategic partnerships* taking over more traditional ones, like *alliances* (Chacko and Jayasuriya 2017).

The practice of diplomacy has also seen changes with globalisation, markedly the involvement of large business retinues alongside high-level visits to foreign countries (Chacko and Jayasuriya 2017). In the context of my research, the most important takeaway from these dynamics is the perception that foreign policy has stopped being a monopoly of diplomatic circles. This has not come at the total detriment of traditional actors of foreign policymaking. For example, one aspect that globalisation did not create but accentuated was the use of economic tools to achieve policy objectives in the international arena. In this sense, trade policy has been an often used weapon by traditional foreign policy decision-makers. Exploring the nexus between the European

Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and its Common Commercial Policy (CCP), Andrea Ott and Guillaume Van der Loo (2018) analyse how the EU uses trade restrictions, such as sanctions, and market access negotiations to influence the behaviour of other countries, aligning them with the organisation's foreign policy objectives. Moreover, the politicisation of trade is part of a broader trend where economic instruments are employed to promote objectives related to human rights, democracy and security (Ott and Van der Loo 2018).

Going back to the two elements that compose the empirical puzzle behind the inclusion of this discussion here—trade policy and actions of non-state actors as integral parts of foreign policy—I see reason to argue that the former is the less debatable issue. Notwithstanding the many links between trade and foreign policy presented above, trade policy can fall within the foreign policy bracket with some conceptual ease. As defined by Juliet Kaarbo, Jeffrey Lantis and Ryan Beasley (2013), foreign policy can be sufficiently separated from domestic policies—even in the age of globalisation—by reference to its primary intended target. If it lies outside of the country, in spite of premeditated or incidental consequences for domestic politics, we are dealing with foreign policy. From a general to a specifically trade-related appraisal, we have that “If the intention of new economic policy is to alter the trade balance with another country by placing restrictions on imports, we consider that foreign policy” (Kaarbo, Lantis and Beasley 2013, 3). Some difficulty may arise if the primary target remains ambiguous or if external and internal outcomes are inextricably connected; under such circumstances, the authors posit, a policy can be both domestic and foreign in nature (Kaarbo, Lantis and Beasley 2013).

In turn, the place of non-state actors in foreign policy is not so simple an issue to solve. As also pointed out by Kaarbo, Lantis and Beasley (2013), *policy* is a broad term encompassing many activities and subjects; who makes policies, nonetheless, is a category generally associated with governments, its institutions and officials. Non-state actors may be integrated into foreign policy as stakeholders in the decision-making process, but their role in foreign policy behaviour—as the outcome of the implementation phase of foreign policymaking—is less clear. In reference to my specific dilemma, can we consider non-state actors' actions a part of foreign policy behaviour?

The simpler answer would be that the *policy* aspect in foreign policy analysis ultimately acts as the anchor that makes the state²⁹ an indispensable element of foreign policy in all of its phases. Even if its decision-making is heavily influenced by non-state actors—or, in a hypothetical extreme situation, completely defined by them—the state would still need to figure in the equation, at least

²⁹ I use *state* due to the debates underlying my current conundrum. Regardless, I should note the existence of a growing body of work within FPA and IR literatures that question the state's monopoly on some foreign policy issues by emphasising the roles played by subnational governments in international affairs—a phenomenon framed under the concept of *paradiplomacy* (see Kenealy 2012; Aldecoa and Keating 2013; Liu and Song 2020). The reason why I do not delve into this body of work here reflects the fact that, although questioning a state-centric approach to diplomacy and foreign policy more broadly, paradiplomacy still remains firm within the boundaries of government, while my effort lies in the divide between public and private spheres.

as an intermediary between internal demands and external targets. Expanding the definition of foreign policy beyond the traditional milieu of diplomats and high-ranking officials does little to challenge this. Hence, my dilemma remains; at this stage, it must be noted that the definition of foreign policy is often disputed and, as pointed out by Charles Hermann (1978) and Laura Neack (2008), somewhat neglected by FPA scholars. Regardless, there have been attempts to arrive at a broader notion that gives some room to non-state actors, even if under a supplementary role. Most notably, Deborah Gerner (1995, 18) has defined foreign policy as “the intentions, statements, and actions of an actor—often, but not always, a state—directed toward the external world and the response of other actors to these intentions, statements and actions.”

Still, I feel it would do more harm than good to the analysis if any non-state actor’s intentions, statements or actions were given full entry into the foreign policy umbrella, even more so to the idea of foreign policy behaviour. This has nothing to do, I posit, with the supposition that an understanding of the latter can only be attained by separating what is purposeful action of the state from unintentional consequences—or, in a metaphorical sense, by distilling “music” from ‘noise’. After all, this supposition is misleading, as foreign policy behaviour refers to “The observable artefacts of foreign policy—specific actions and words used to influence others in the realm of foreign policy... [which] may include behaviour that was accidental or unintended by the government, and in addition decisions to do nothing may not leave any behavioural artefact” (Hudson 2016, 14). Instead, I advocate for some criteria in integrating non-state actors because the boundary between actors and environment within the implementation³⁰ phase of foreign policy is often blurry (Brighi and Hill 2016). Context can (and does) produce behaviour through a constant interplay with the actors, but one should not be mistaken by the other.

I further clarify this stance by contrasting two ways non-state actors can influence foreign policy behaviour. First, they can appear as other actors of the implementation environment, reacting to the state’s actions but not integrated into them. This process is unavoidable since “[...] foreign policy is directed towards what lies beyond a given state’s territory” (Baumann and Stengel 2014, 498) or, in other words, beyond its formal control. Second, however, non-state actors can appear

³⁰ Role Theory literature is remarkably silent on the subject of foreign policy implementation—which is odd, considering the potential bridges between the symbolic interactionist proposal of roles as mutually constituted between ego and alter; and Brighi and Hill’s (2016) understanding of the implementation phase as an inherently interactive process between policy-makers and their surrounding context. Equating implementation to foreign policy behaviour would not solve this gap, for the latter is an outcome of implementation. Neither should implementation be confused with the formulation or decision-making phase (Neack 2008). I emphasise this conceptual nuance because of the importance of differentiating between role conception and role enactment in any Role Theory approach. However, although role conception can be understood as formulation and role enactment as behaviour, there remains a vacuum of where implementation ought to fit. This subject calls for further empirical analysis that escapes my current scope; as a contingent solution, I propose an approximation between Brighi and Hill’s (2016) description of foreign policy implementation and symbolic interactionists’ ego-alter interplay. Furthermore, I argue this would also fit under Smith and Clarke’s (1985, 166) delineation of the implementation phase as the gap (or the relationship) between *policy outputs*, i.e. decisions, and *real-world outcomes*.

integrated into state foreign policy action, mainly through delegation of implementation decisions. These instances have been better explored in the cases of international public law subjects, such as international organisations; and of private/transnational entities such as development and conflict-resolution non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or (most notably) private military firms (Baumann and Stengel 2014).

The crux of the issue, therefore, is to determine whether a non-state actor is sufficiently integrated into state action. This rests on the premise that foreign policy implementation, albeit carried out by the state, is not meant to be monopolised by the public sphere. Brighi and Hill (2016, 155) would seem to offer an argument in defence of this premise: “implementation presupposes not only the capacity to pursue goals with effective *means*, but more generally the ability of governments to extract and mobilize resources from their audiences, both material and immaterial, and channel them into the pursuit of given objectives.” These *audience resources*, further developed in the concept of foreign policy instruments, are generally associated with war mobilisation or domestic political consensus as necessary means for projecting foreign policy goals (Brighi and Hill 2016). I argue that, in a similar manner, non-state actors can be harnessed by political entities in order to achieve their foreign policy goals, thus operating akin to instruments.

Therefore, whether non-state actors play a part in producing foreign policy behaviour is a trickier question than first anticipated, and FPA literature has given it less attention when compared to theorisations of non-state actor participation in foreign policy decision-making³¹. What is more, the term “non-state actor” can be imprecise, encompassing entities as different as international organisations, NGOs and multinational companies, each with their own capacity to access governments’ decision-making arenas (Baumann and Stengel 2014). With that in mind, I come to an understanding that non-state actors can be part of foreign policy behaviour, as long as they are integrated into state action to some degree. I expect this caveat allows me to broaden the aforementioned *policy anchor* of foreign policy with some reasonable criteria, even if the notion of *integrated to some degree* still leaves to be desired in terms of precision.

To sum it up, I have adhered to a broadened definition of foreign policy in two basic instances: one, it is not limited to high officials or to the state’s diplomatic channels, but to all policy whose primary intended target (or one of them) lies outside of the country; and two, its implementation—which produces foreign policy behaviour as *real-world outcomes* (Smith and Clarke 1985)—can count on non-state actors, as long as they remain sufficiently integrated into the state’s action. I aim to further clarify these aspects through a brief discussion of three hypothetical scenarios. In each of them, I put companies as key actors of interest, for a) they directly relate to my

³¹ Here understood as its formulation phase.

motivating empirical puzzle; and b) their economic and profit-oriented nature imposes the greatest challenge to my idea of integration into foreign policy implementation.

First, consider the case of a mixed-capital company majorly owned by the government and with extensive operations inside and outside its country of origin. It is liable to private law, explores economic activities and has a number of private shareholders; yet, its board of directors is government-appointed and it would be safe to presume that its activities are somewhat bound to the political objectives of its owning state. If the latter decides to alter its investment policy and expand the company's productive capacity abroad, should it be considered foreign policy—and the company's operations, implementation followed by foreign policy behaviour? In this scenario, the first question is the hardest. The government's majority shares would guarantee a sufficient degree of integration between the enterprise and policy implementation³²; but there remains the issue of defining whether the state's decision is foreign or domestic policymaking. Who is the primary target and where it lies? If the state's goal was to improve relations with foreign counterparts through direct investment, there would be grounds to call it foreign policy; however, if the objective was to maximise dividends and ameliorate its fiscal balance at home, labelling it foreign policy could be a stretch.

Now, consider the scenario of a public policy designed to promote greater international competitiveness for some of the country's best performing private companies within a high value added sector. In it, the government makes clear, through official statements, that one of the policy's main goals is to improve the nation's image abroad, by associating it with quality products—while not neglecting the generation of economic efficiency and trade surpluses at home. In terms of policymaking, it figures as both foreign and domestic policy, with primary targets inside and outside the country. In this case, the hard question is whether the companies' operations would be producing foreign policy behaviour. I argue they feature as long as their actions remain framed within the foreign policy's objective and count on state resources for implementation. If the policy did not bear fruit for the country's image or, in an unfortunate sequence of events, affected it negatively, the companies would still count as part of foreign policy behaviour, albeit a failed one.

For my final hypothetical scenario, I set the case of a state-funded development bank that offers a loan for a private company of the same nationality, which is managing a large project in a neighbouring country. The terms of the loan are connected to the project's completion, but a lack of official statements regarding funding decisions makes it difficult to determine the state's rationale behind them. It is openly discussed, however, that the project would be greatly beneficial for both countries, albeit the bank's operation has been deemed risky by independent agencies.

³² It would even be questionable to call it a *non-state actor*.

What sets this case apart from the others is the general uncertainty that surrounds it—a condition all too common in related real-world scenarios. Firstly, it undermines the analyst’s capability of determining whether the state’s investment policy was domestic or foreign: was it motivated by expected profit, by the project’s outcomes or by both? By what is known, capital return was a liability, while the benefits of the project’s completion were more solid, attending targets both domestic and foreign. This gives some cause for inferring that the policy was foreign in nature, with the chance of also being domestic. Secondly, to what degree was the private company integrated into policy implementation? Again, if the policymakers’ goal lied on the outcomes of the project, the company would help produce foreign policy behaviour as long as its actions remained framed by the state’s goals and dependent on the latter’s resources to be executed.

There are two main issues I would like to highlight from these hypothetical exercises. One, policies can serve more than one objective and count on several intended targets, not always clearly ordered in a scale of primacy for policymakers. Kaarbo, Lantis and Beasley (2013, 3) give an useful example of this tendency: “Ensuring clean air for a country’s domestic population and limited imports from foreign automobile competitors might be equally important in the design of the environmental policy, for example. In such cases, a single policy can be both foreign and domestic.” The other issue is that there is no single manner through which non-state actors can be incorporated into foreign policy implementation. Excluding companies, Baumann and Stengel (2014) provide instances of formalised delegation between state and non-state actors in foreign policy behaviour. Through my hypothetical cases, nevertheless, I sought to demonstrate how private actors could be connected to a state’s implementation apparatus with no need for formal delegation of functions. An important caveat is applicable nonetheless: “[...] this has consequences for governments control over outcomes, as the vagueness of many political decisions gives implementing actors significant leeway that they can use for better or worse” (Baumann and Stengel 2014, 498).

There is a considerable grey area between what constitutes an actor and what already belongs to the environment of foreign policy implementation. Smith and Clarke (1985) implicitly work on this idea as they discuss the notion of implementation coalitions, in which disparate agencies are aggregated to implement policy decisions in a way far more horizontal than the top-down metaphor of a *chain of command* would suggest. Furthermore, as the implementation process moves closer towards the international environment, coalitions become ever more complex and harder to manage, even aggregating organisations not obliged to legally answer to state authority (Smith and Clarke 1985).

In hindsight, the question of who is the policy’s primary target—foreign, domestic or both—and of whether a particular non-state actor participates in a country’s foreign policy implementation remains largely empirical. For this reason, I shall return to these aspects in Chapter

3, where I discuss the intricacies of China's domestic and foreign political demands and the part played by Chinese companies in Beijing's foreign policy implementation and behaviour.

The three scenarios discussed above come far from representing all possibilities related to this enlarged definition of foreign policy. What I hope to have demonstrated is the complexity of defining what is foreign policy and by whom it is executed in the age of globalisation. Boundaries between domestic and foreign political arenas have become porous to an extent that FPA cannot ignore; yet, some conceptual anchors must remain for analysis to be fruitful. Most of all, although FPA literature has started to recognise the change in tone of modern foreign policymaking, I believe Hermann's (1978) diagnosis remains valid, with scholars still neglecting to specify what constitutes foreign policy. In the case of this dissertation, not taking on the task of at least establishing some basic criteria for framing events into the foreign policy bracket would likely undermine the application of Role Theory's vast conceptual framework.

With that in mind, I now return my gaze towards Role Theory and seek to delineate a proper integration of my broadened definition of foreign policy into role theorists' analytical toolkit. As I have noted at the beginning of this subsection, Role Theory has been mainly directed at typical foreign policy phenomena, processes and actors. Holsti (1970), for instance, was exclusively interested in how key decision-makers understood the state's role and, to some degree, treated them as synonymous. Overall, focus still lies on expectations communicated through discourse, or, as Sawicka (2024, 12) posits, the role declarations "expressed overtly in speeches, interviews, declarations, and foreign policy documentation."

Hence, sources and topics of interest have remained tied to traditional foreign policy issues and *milieux*, i.e. bilateral relations, security, multilateral organisations and international crises³³. A possible cause to this tendency is the fact that national role conceptions refer to the general foreign policy orientation of a state (Cantir and Kaarbo 2016), often constructed *vis-à-vis* other states or communities of states, which emphasises its isolation from more internal-oriented policies. The aforementioned conceptual contribution of domestic role contestation (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012, 2016) represented an important advance in breaking the rigid separation between foreign and domestic policy commonly assumed by role theorists. It allowed for public opinion and other members of the elite to participate in role conception, thus permitting new linkages between traditional foreign policymaking and domestic political actors that held stakes in their country's international profile.

³³ This does not mean that Role Theory is completely alien to issues beyond diplomatic exchanges or mere declaratory endeavours. As discussed by Cameron Thies and Leslie Wehner (2019), Role Theory has had a home in International Political Economy even before Constructivism's popularisation among IR scholars in the 1990s. Nevertheless, the authors' main example—that of the 2009 Greek financial crisis—failed to detach the approach from a typical high-level international negotiation.

Nevertheless, those bridges still remain underexplored, especially when it comes to categories beyond national role conception, such as alter expectations and role enactment. Regarding the former, I started this section by discussing extensively on how to adapt the theory's model in order to include the alter's domestic arena; then, my effort was not to question the manner through which the alter communicated its expectations, but rather how they could come to be. As for role enactment, role theorists are consistent in equating it to foreign policy behaviour, but are less specific as to what (or who) constitutes it. Is there room for applying my broadened definition of foreign policy to these two concepts—alter expectations and role enactment—without sacrificing Role Theory's inherent logic? I finish this section by arguing there is.

A key aspect of an approach that depends on social interaction is that actors should be able to communicate with each other through intelligible signals. In the original symbolic interactionist thinking of George H. Mead (1934), society influences the individual's conception of Me through dialogue. In it, gestures become significant as long as they carry definitive meaning—that is, they hold equal meaning for all individuals involved in the dialogue. In addition, he argued only vocal gestures (those mediated by language) could develop into significant ones (Mead 1934). Does this idea translate well from individuals to states? If so, only official statements by decision-makers effectively communicated to a foreign audience would be able to generate expectations regarding a role. Under this interpretation, I agree that both ego and alter expectations must meet the criteria, although signals do not need to be always vocalised, but can encompass discourse and action alike (Harnisch 2011). Decisively, they must come from the state: domestic actors can have a say in how expectations are constructed, but as long as roles apply to nations, official members of government need to take part in their communication.

Nevertheless, I see no reason why this process should be limited to statements by traditional foreign policy elites. Here is where my reworked definition of foreign policy comes into play: as long as containing foreign actors as primary targets, I posit that other policies can act as foreign ones and communicate expectations regarding roles. This could be particularly troublesome in case of role conception, as it deals with the general orientation of a country's foreign policy, an aspect that should remain somewhat consistent among disparate policy formulations (although the notion of domestic role contestation makes a powerful case for the contrary). In regards to alter expectations, this should be less problematic, as they are most of all reactive. In hindsight, as Ministries of Foreign Relations can be highly hierarchical and risk-averse (Garcia 2024), policies adopted by other state bureaucracies may prove capable of externalising expectations that diplomatic channels would avoid—but that still remain significant for social interaction.

As far as role enactment is concerned, I consider that my criteria for non-state actor participation in foreign policy behaviour should be enough for ensuring a minimal level of

connection between the formulations provided by role conception, the implementation decisions taken by the incorporated non-state actors and the subsequent foreign policy behaviour. I deem this move fruitful for a role-informed analysis because the increasingly fluid interconnections between public and private, foreign and domestic dimensions in the age of globalisation are factors relevant not only to the material side of foreign policy analysis, but also to its ideational one, such as roles.

There remains some doubt as to whether decisions taken by private entities could be properly traced back to somewhat abstract guides for action constructed by the state and with the state in mind—as is the case of role conceptions. Two things should be noted regarding that issue. First, the increased lack of government control over policy implementation makes it safe to assume that role enactment would deviate from role conception more often, without it necessarily denoting role conflict or role change. Second, this does not compromise the model: role enactment is always prone to deviation, regardless of government control; the key aspect remains to detect how and why it showed variation. With that in mind, I reckon that my enlarged understanding of foreign policy behaviour makes the task of identifying and explaining role change more difficult, but not unfeasible.

2.2.3. Corporate actors and China's role enactment in the age of globalisation

I finish this section by briefly returning to my discussion regarding the place of non-state actors in foreign policy behaviour, now with a focus on Chinese companies and the part they play in China's role enactment. My aim is to demonstrate how a plethora of public and private Chinese enterprises have been integrated into Beijing's foreign policy goals, not only as stakeholders, but as vehicles. First and foremost, It is important to emphasise that not all Chinese companies are the same. Jie Yu (2012) offers a basic typology of these firms, according to their ties to the government.

The first two categories are composed of public entities: one is the China International Investment Corporation (CIC) and the other are the state-owned enterprises (SOEs). The CIC operates as China's sovereign wealth fund, governing Chinese investments abroad and acting as one of the main tools of the government's economic statecraft; while it may act like a private actor, its ties to the State Council and the CPC are strong (Yu 2012; Duggan 2020). SOEs, on the other hand, are an important part of Beijing's economic presence abroad, dominating the energy, utilities, telecommunications, chemical, transportation and construction sectors in China. Albeit counting with private shareholders among their boards, key decision-makers are all government-appointed, making it unclear whether investment plans are purely commercial decisions or political ones (Yu 2012). Moreover, the SOEs general orientation is tied to governmental decision-making, mainly that of the Finance and Economics Leading Small Group (FELSG) (Duggan 2020).

The last category is of greater interest here, for it accounts for private-owned Chinese enterprises, among the likes of Lenovo and Huawei. Although key decision-making belongs to private individuals, Yu (2012) notes that ties to government institutions can still be considerable. Not only do senior management hold personal contacts with the CPC or the People's Liberation Army (PLA), but also some investment plans must gain approval from the Chinese Ministry of Commerce in order to be carried out overseas. Moreover, Beijing has played a pivotal role in building capacity and increasing the international competitiveness of its national brands through public policies (Yu 2012), which entails a close relationship between private and state actors in China (Duggan 2020).

This general landscape paints a remarkably different picture of state-market relations from those of Western countries. As the links between the firms' decision-making and state policy implementation are more explicit—even for private-owned companies—, my case for integrating Chinese companies into Beijing's foreign policy behaviour is undeniably easier than a similar endeavour set in a free-market economy would be. Nevertheless, I believe there is a tendency among the literature of China's foreign economic policy to assume Chinese companies to be undifferentiated from the state. I would not like to fall for the same trap. Companies—even state-owned—can have their own interests and generally operate under a different logic than the state, i.e. that of profit-maximising. Does that mean government and firms are hermetically sealed from one another? In the Chinese case, definitely not. Most importantly, can they be sufficiently incorporated into state action as to account for constituents of foreign policy behaviour? I argue they can. My caveat is simply to note that this does not mean they have *become* the state.

Take, for instance, the case of the BRI. Although a product of policymaking of the highest order in China, its implementation beyond the country's borders has been carried out extensively by Chinese corporations, mainly SOEs (Ding *et al.* 2021). Not surprisingly therefore, the initiative serves Beijing's long term goals for the geography of the world economy, but also helps sustain profitability and growth prospects of Chinese firms by exporting excess domestic capacity and opening new markets with investment opportunities (Johnston 2018; Ding *et al.* 2021). It is clear that Chinese corporations have been a cornerstone of the BRI's implementation; however, their actions do not seem to come at the expense of their particular interests.

Another useful example can be seen in Beijing's South China Sea Policy. As explored by Xue Gong (2018), Chinese companies have played important roles in both formulation and execution of the state's policy in the area. While some “[...] proactively align their business interests with the country's maritime interests and present themselves as defenders of the national interest” (Gong 2018, 303), other firms only become active as soon as policy incentives emerge. Nevertheless, their actions are seldom one of pure subjugation before the state's designs. Even those

that act simply as political tools for the government's policy in the South China Sea “[...] also take advantage of their policy-taker role to maximize commercial opportunities” (Gong 2018, 303).

These two instances provide a double-insight: first, Chinese enterprises need not be completely subservient to participate in Beijing’s foreign policy behaviour—as its goals are often designed with their interests in mind. And second, for that same reason, a company must not be state-owned to fit into these arrangements. Promoting economic development at home is one of the primary goals of China’s foreign policy; its achievement depends on Chinese companies’ success overseas, state or private-owned. It will be under such terms that I consider these companies to take part in China’s role enactment.

For the final section of this chapter, I shift away from theoretical and conceptual discussions, toward methodological ones. Hence, my next task will be to explain my empirical strategy for exploring China’s role, and how it deals with Role Theory’s perceived methodological poverty.

2.3. Empirical strategies for identifying national role conceptions

This section shifts the focus from the theoretical framework and its conceptual adaptations, which occupied the previous two, to the specific methodological strategy required to operationalise the analysis in the subsequent empirical chapters. The primary goal here is to bridge the conceptual framework of Role Theory, as established in the preceding discussions, with the empirical inquiry that follows. I begin by addressing the perceived methodological limitations within Role Theory scholarship, arguing that its flexibility is an asset rather than a weakness, provided the chosen empirical strategy is systematic and explicitly defined. Subsequently, I introduce and adapt an iterative coding model that blends deductive and inductive logics, detailing how this approach will be used to systematically identify and nuance China’s National Role Conception (NRC) in its foreign policy discourse. This discussion establishes the essential groundwork for Chapter 3, which executes this methodological approach to empirically delineate the ‘responsible great power’ NRC, thereby setting the stage for the full case study analysis in the final chapter.

For all its benefits, Role Theory has traditionally been understood as conceptually rich, but methodologically poor (Breuning 2023). Even if overly unfair, that accusation is not entirely baseless. For once, the framework’s elaborate set of concepts suffers from a general lack of clarity over the precise meaning of each one in particular (Sawicka 2024). That factor, combined with the conflation of “role” with similarly contested terms—such as norms, beliefs and attitudes—blurs analytical boundaries and significantly hinders measurement consistency (Nabers 2011; Sawicka 2024). That critique gains salience when read through more positivist lenses of knowledge production: by lacking in consensus over definitions and failing at consistently providing

comparable measurements of datasets, Role Theory makes it particularly difficult to achieve transparency and replicability in data analysis, thus hindering knowledge accumulation (Breuning 2011).

Many of those critiques, however, are tied to the fact that Role Theory associates itself with some form of methodological eclecticism, employing a wide range of methods, from qualitative textual analysis and discourse analysis to quantitative content analysis, surveys, and case studies (Cantir and Kaarbo 2016). Consequently, the framework's perceived lack of methodological rigour is intrinsically connected to the absence of a well-defined methodological approach proper to Role Theory and to the identification of roles in foreign policy (Thies 2009). While role theorists indeed lack a unified empirical strategy—especially when compared to other, more parsimonious theoretical frameworks (Thies 2009)—some authors contest the notion that its methodological pluralism is inevitably a source of issues. Breuning (2017, 2023), in particular, emphasises that Role Theory's wide range of empirical strategies contribute to understanding and raise further questions that can be tackled by multiple possible angles. Considering Role Theory's ability to span multiple levels of analysis (Thies 2014), as well as symbolic interactionism's desire to account for agents and structure alike, methodological flexibility ought to strengthen—instead of weaken—analysis.

Another argument raised by Breuning (2023) relates to the fact that, despite lacking a methodological approach of its own, most role-informed studies apply a range of methods with considerable proximity from one another. According to the author, the three most prevalent empirical strategies in (second generation) Role Theory are content analysis, interpretive narrative analysis and case study research. Of these, the first two are text- and/or speech-based and seek to identify how roles come to be based on what actors express about them, implicitly or not. They mainly differ in their respective epistemologies, with narrative analysis more aligned with an interpretive paradigm—which reflects on how it engages with sources (see Wehner 2020). Content analysis, on the other hand, is a more flexible methodology (with multiple variations) that generally rely on coding of text, manually or otherwise. Finally, case study designs (single or small-n) are often applied in conjunction to one of the previously mentioned empirical strategies, with the objective of developing hypotheses, exploring causal mechanisms or testing a theory (George and Bennett 2005). Albeit different in tools and scope, “the three most prevalent empirical strategies share commonalities, which means that the methodological diversity of role theory research may be overstated.” (Breuning 2023, 197).

Thus, as far as identifying and describing NRCs go, text-based empirical strategies seem predominant among role theorists. The aforementioned methodological limitations of Role Theory—even if we agree they do not fully represent a lack of methodological rigour—imply some challenges to the applications of those strategies. For instance, no role theoretical approach provides

a clear, unified database of keywords, for content analysis or otherwise, that allows for safe replication of procedures for identifying roles (Cantir and Kaarbo 2016). Consequently, scholars have conducted this task through largely inductive means (Cantir and Kaarbo 2016; Breuning 2019). Although some authors were able to develop robust research on NRCs based on inductive coding of texts—Holsti’s (1970) original piece is a valuable example—other role theorists have highlighted the usefulness of secondary sources to help define and identify roles (Thies 2014; Cantir and Kaarbo 2016).

Like most role theorists, the method I use to analyse China’s NRC is text-based. However, I do not consider my empirical strategy to be fully inductive. Nor do I consider, in my specific case, for that to be warranted. That is so because Role Theory scholarship that was forced to rely heavily on inductive coding was usually tasked with delineating NRCs from scratch³⁴. Here, in contrast, I work upon an already established NRC, in which a robust secondary literature already informs my analysis with somewhat specific inputs. Hence, the empirical strategy I must follow should be, at least, as deductive as it is inductive. To accomplish the task of breaking down China’s NRC accordingly, I base my approach in Kalpokaite and Radivojevic’s (2019) proposed cycles of iterative coding. Their method largely converges with the logic of content analysis, while also embedding some aspects of thematic analysis. It is actively designed to equip the researcher with a toolkit that allows for the exploration of both deductive and inductive logics. Below, I further explain what constitutes their empirical strategy and how I intend to apply it throughout the next chapters.

Kalpokaite and Radivojevic (2019) observe that qualitative data analysis is characterised by a diverse range of methodological traditions, each with distinct emphases and procedures. While this variety enriches the field, it often creates uncertainty for researchers (especially novice ones), who may find it difficult to determine which analytical path to follow. Nonetheless, there are common features that run across approaches, including the iterative involvement of data collection and analysis, the search for themes and patterns, and the systematic use of coding to organise information. The principal differences, they argue, lie in the degree to which methods rely on inductive reasoning—building interpretation from the data itself—or deductive reasoning—testing data against prior theory or conceptual frameworks. Consequently, approaches such as grounded theory provide detailed, prescriptive guidance for coding and analysis, whereas others, like thematic analysis, allow greater flexibility but can leave beginners without sufficient direction.

In response to these challenges, the authors put forward a foundational model of qualitative data analysis designed to integrate established strategies into a structured yet adaptable framework.

³⁴ Apart from Holsti (1970), see Hansel and Möller’s (2015) study of Indian foreign policy decision-makers’ national role conceptions.

This model is explicitly conceived as inductive–deductive: the process begins with an open exploration of the data to encourage the emergence of unanticipated insights, and subsequently incorporates theoretical perspectives to refine, corroborate, or challenge those insights. By blending these two logics, the model avoids confining researchers to a single methodological tradition and instead equips them with a balanced and accessible route through the process of analysing data. Crucially, this foundational model is not intended as a rigid prescription, but as a practical guide to help novice researchers engage with their data systematically while retaining the flexibility to tailor the analysis to their specific research context.

The model unfolds through four iterative cycles: inspection, coding, categorisation, and modelling:

Table 2.2 — Kalpokaite and Radjovetic’s (2019) four iterative cycles

MEMOING: Research diary, methodological memos, and analytical memos	<i>Inspection Cycle</i>
	1. Basic quantitative content analyses
	2. Initial phases of auto-coding
	<i>Coding Cycle</i>
	1. Pre-coding (Saldaña, 2013)
	2. Initial coding (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saldaña, 2013)
	3. Elaborative coding (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña, 2013)
	<i>Categorization Cycle</i>
	1. Revising and grouping codes to elaborate possible categories
	2. Focused coding (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2013)
3. Defining dimensions and relations of categories	
4. Displaying relations among categories in networks	
<i>Modelling Cycle</i>	
1. Elaboration of final conceptual framework	

Source: Kalpokaite and Radjovetic (2019, 49)

The inspection cycle involves familiarisation with the dataset, often through preliminary content analyses or auto-coding, in order to highlight salient concepts. The coding cycle progresses in stages, beginning with pre-coding and open-ended initial coding before moving to elaborative coding that applies concepts derived from existing literature. The categorisation cycle then organises and refines these codes into broader categories or themes, focusing on their interconnections and their relevance to the research questions. Finally, the modelling cycle produces a conceptual framework that synthesises empirical findings with theoretical insights, ensuring that the analysis both reflects the data and situates it within the wider scholarly context. Through this

step-based yet flexible process, the model offers researchers a clear foundation for rigorous and meaningful qualitative analysis.

In adopting the foundational model of qualitative data analysis outlined by Kalpokaite and Radivojevic (2019), I have chosen to adapt its balance of inductive and deductive reasoning in line with the specific context of my study. The original model is deliberately designed to combine both inductive and deductive approaches. The former are used to allow unanticipated insights to emerge from the data, while the latter ensure that findings are situated within a broader conceptual and theoretical framework. However, because my research questions are primarily informed by established theories and literature, my analytic orientation is more deductive than inductive. This does not entail abandoning their structure of cycles; rather, it requires adjusting the emphasis within each stage so that the analysis privileges theory-driven interpretation while still leaving space for novel insights.

The first reason for this adaptation is that my study aims not to generate an entirely new theory, but to probe and refine existing theoretical constructs. A strongly inductive approach, as in grounded theory, would encourage building concepts from the ground up, which would risk diverting the analysis away from the established debates and constructs that are central to my research aims. By contrast, a deductive emphasis allows me to engage critically with the existing literature, testing the applicability and limitations of its concepts against empirical data. In practice, this means that in the inspection and coding cycles, my engagement with the data is guided by discussing concepts derived from prior theory. Instead of beginning from a position of complete openness, I approach the material with provisional analytic lenses that help to focus attention on theoretically relevant features. This ensures that the analysis speaks directly to the conceptual issues that motivate the study.

The adaptations also affect the coding and categorisation cycles, where the model typically alternates between open-ended inductive coding and more deductive elaborative coding. In my study, elaborative coding assumes a more central role. I rely on a “start list” of codes drawn from the theoretical framework, which allows me to examine how these predefined constructs manifest in the data and whether they require refinement. The emphasis thus relies on deductively testing and extending theoretical categories. The categorisation cycle, therefore, focuses less on creating entirely new themes and more on organising data in relation to theoretical dimensions. Codes are grouped and interpreted with explicit reference to their connections with the literature, allowing me to assess where my findings support, nuance, or challenge existing knowledge. In other words, codes and themes are established *a priori*, with inductive, text-based phases of analysis serving to nuance their meanings.

Finally, the modelling cycle culminates not in the construction of a wholly new conceptual framework, but in the refinement of an existing one. The empirical analysis provides an opportunity to assess how well established theories account for the phenomena under study, highlighting both their strengths and their limitations. By iteratively contrasting data with the theoretical framework, I can demonstrate how my findings complement existing explanations. This deductive orientation ensures that the study contributes to theoretical debates rather than diverging into idiosyncratic interpretations. In this way, the adapted model aligns with my research objectives, enabling a systematic and theoretically engaged approach to qualitative data analysis.

Chapter conclusion

The contents of this chapter should have provided the reader with a) the conceptual toolkit necessary for navigating the analyses of the next entries; b) a clear idea of how I frame phenomena from a theoretical standpoint in this research; and c) my empirical strategy for the next chapters. The first two enterprises were carried out in sections 2.1 and 2.2, with the last one encompassed by section 2.3.

As far as my conceptual toolkit is concerned, I aimed to give a comprehensive, yet pertinent account of Role Theory's vast array of analytical tools, properly correlating them within the boundaries of my research. From ego to alter expectations, and from role enactment to role change, section 2.1 sought to provide the conceptual structure of my main hypothesis. From that, I shifted to larger theoretical and epistemological discussions, seeking to properly frame my symbolic interactionist approach within the larger scenes of Role Theory and Social Constructivism, FPA and IR literature, the agent-structure debate, and the traditions of Explaining and Understanding. By the end of it, the reader should be able to distinguish what I mean by my individualist explanatory stance.

Section 2.2, which was entirely about theoretical adaptations contingent to my dissertation, represented the largest detour from the expected pathway of the chapter. As I have mentioned in its introduction, the motivation for its inclusion was born from issues emanating from my data—what I later called my *empirical puzzles*. Yet, its inclusion here obliged it to attain to a conceptual level for the most part: hence, they should become clearer as I bring my data into the fold in further chapters. Section 2.3, for its part, discussed this dissertation's method of analysis, providing a transition from the theoretical framework of Role Theory to the forthcoming empirical chapters. This section addressed the perceived methodological shortcomings of Role Theory by proposing and adapting a systematic empirical strategy: an iterative coding model that blends deductive and inductive logics.

Having established the theoretical and methodological underpinnings in Chapter 2, including the adaptation of Role Theory and the systematic approach to qualitative data analysis, this dissertation now turns to its empirical core. Chapter 3 begins the cultivation of that terrain by applying the iterative coding model to delineate the content and boundaries of China's "responsible great power" NRC as expressed in its official foreign policy discourse. In hindsight, the framework discussed in this chapter yields two implications that guide the empirical analysis that follows. First, if China's national role conception is internally complex and fragmented, its external role enactment is likely to generate mixed reactions from role partners (i.e. alters). And second, such inconsistency generates space for the alter to manage its role expectations without resorting to outright rejection. Therefore, the next chapter turns to China's ego dimension, reconstructing its NRC in order to identify the sources of inconsistency that later shape the Brazilian response in the EV case.

CHAPTER 3 — A RESPONSIBLE GREAT POWER? CHINA'S NATIONAL ROLE CONCEPTION IN ITS NEGOTIATED DIMENSION

3. Chapter Introduction

While Chapter 1 offered the terrain of our discussion and Chapter 2, the tools to work on it, there remains the task of cultivating it. That shall be the mission of this and the next chapter. Here, the focus majorly lies on the ego, i.e. China. First, we must define China's NRC of a "responsible great power", and why it interests us. Second, there remains the task of probing how the aforementioned role conception develops in practice—namely, in China's foreign policy discourse. The present chapter focuses on these two steps. In hindsight, the caveat underpinning the chapter is that the "responsible great power" role is not a monolith. Instead, it is in itself an outcome of a series of pushes and pulls perpetrated by the myriad of factors that constitute it.

Section 3.1, which concerns itself with defining the NRC, highlights three factors that shape and inform the ego part of China's role: domestic contestation, historical self-conceptualisations and international interactions. However, these are notably broad categories. Therefore, to reach a better picture of not only how that NRC develops in practice, but also of how it balances disparate sources of legitimation, section 3.2 will unravel what constitutes each of these categories and analyse specific ways through which they translate into foreign policy discourse. Once these two tasks are completed, the reader should have a picture of what the "responsible great power" national role conception means in Chinese foreign policy practice. This will provide the end of the chapter with the resources necessary to discuss the overall structure of China's role. That picture will be

fundamental to navigate the next chapter, which explores how the “responsible great power” NRC interacts with alter expectations within the Brazilian EV sector case study.

3.1. Identifying and sourcing China’s NRC

The first section of this chapter attempts to rescue the generally abstract discussions of the last chapter and ascribe specific, empirically contingent meanings to them, in light of my research topic. In other words, this section aims to serve as a bridge between the largely conceptual and epistemological contributions of Chapter 2, on one side, and the more empirical nature of the next discussions. I divide this effort into two tasks, each comprehending a subsection. In the first one, the centrepiece is China’s role conception as a “responsible great power,” the main factors that shape it and the shifts seen under Xi Jinping’s foreign policy, in which I also explore how the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) acts as a promoter of China’s novel, more proactive role conception. The second discussion pertains to source selection. Stemming from the premise that there is a considerable amount of primary data relevant to China’s ‘responsible great power’ NRC, some choices must be made in order to sample key documents for composing a suitable dataset.

3.1.1. China as a responsible great power: factors and issues

First and foremost, it is important to note that states always assume more than one role (Holsti 1970). The more mature a state is, the greater the number of roles it achieves (Harnisch 2011), making it possible for decision-makers to hold multiple role conceptions at once (Breuning 2011). The complexity of China’s global presence, as well as of its domestic political arena, entails a constellation of different roles for Beijing’s decision-makers to figure out, which makes it imperative to precise the roles of relevance for this research. I do so by reference to a debate already engaged in Chapter 1: that of the transformation of the current global order.

Although broad in terms of the group’s structure and purpose—for they deal in the greatest scope possible for international relations, that of the international system—the debate surrounding China’s position *vis-à-vis* the US-led liberal global order has found its way into Role Theory (Harnisch 2016a; Chen 2016; Shih and Huang 2016; Liu 2021; Wang 2023). In this sense, role theorists share some outlines observed in the literature explored in section 1.1. Namely, both role theorists and other scholars often question themselves whether China takes a conformist or a revisionist/reformist role regarding the current status quo of the global order. In Chapter 1, I posited that the anti/pro-status quo should not be seen in binary terms, but rather as a spectrum, with some authors proposing revisionist-leaning, conformist-leaning or generally balanced accounts. Here, I

position myself among the first group. I argue that, although China's national role conception does not fit neatly in the revisionist/conformist dichotomy, Xi Jinping's foreign policy—especially through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—has shifted Beijing's position towards a more proactive role relative to the global order.

I would like to further precise the role I am interested in by reference to the ideas of master and auxiliary roles (Wehner 2015; Guimarães 2021; Breuning 2023). A master role represents the country's most salient attribute (Wehner 2015), with all other roles acting as auxiliary ones, commonly tied to geographical or issue-related dispositions (Breuning 2023). In light of its scope and degree of generality, I consider that my research revolves around China's master role. Although a “[...] master role need not be one that mirrors the state's position in a presumed international hierarchy” (Breuning 2023, 193), I posit that China's master role is constructed in direct dialogue with its intended position *vis-à-vis* the global order, not only reflecting where Chinese leadership presumes the country to stand in terms of material capabilities, but also under what conditions Beijing conceives its relations with other actors of the international system. Moreover, when analysing China-Brazil relations, there will be no shift in focus from this master role towards auxiliary ones. The orientations of China's master role already dialogue with the phenomena of interest for this research, regardless of geographical circumscription³⁵. Inserting another role, on the other hand, would add unnecessary complexity to the model.

Having sufficiently precised its point of reference, I now can discuss the contents of China's role conception. The main work underpinning this dissertation's understanding of the “responsible great power” NRC is that of Sebastian Harnisch (2016a). The author proposes that China's international roles emerge from processes of self-identification, domestic role contestation and international interaction. These constitute the three main factors that, in a symbolic interactionist perspective, the ego part depends on. First, an actor's sense of self is constantly being evaluated against experience, or its “former stages in the self-identification process” (Harnisch 2016a, 11), which serves to stabilise the current self by reference to a historical one. Second, the ego part of the international role is open to domestic contestation, even in an authoritarian political regime. And third, China's growing integration into the international system diversifies its role conception and gives new complexity to its role enactment (Harnisch 2016a).

The process of self-identification has not been explicitly accounted for in the last chapter's discussions, which extensively focused on the parts played by domestic and external political dimensions in role conception. It should not, however, be seen as an exogenous element of role conception, but rather a constituent part of the self. Moreover, it is a particularly important process

³⁵ There will be, nonetheless, efforts of localisation. Namely, I intend to filter the components of China's role that are most prominent in its relationship with Brazil, and

in China's role conception due to the Communist Party of China's (CPC) troubled history since its ascension to power in 1949, as well as China's former—pre-1949—historical selves. From a long history as a leading civilisation (Harnisch, Bersick and Gottwald, 2016), to traumas emanating from 19th century humiliation at the hands of Western empires and the split with the Soviet Union in 1959 (Dessein 2016; Harnisch 2016b), early CPC leadership found in the developing world its audience, perfectly exemplified by Mao Zedong's theory of the Three Worlds³⁶ (Chen 2016).

Therefore, the main historical self of Communist China has been that of a leader of the Third World (Duggan 2016, 2020), something that remains important to contemporary Chinese role conception, even if the concepts of the Three Worlds have lost meaning after the Cold War (Chen 2016). Crucially, the idea of South-South cooperation, often evoked by China in its relations with developing countries, has ideological and philosophical foundations in the Bandung Conference (1955) and the non-aligned movement of the Cold War years (Duggan 2016).

Why do these historical selves maintain such a hold on China's contemporary role conception? Harnisch (2016a) sees it as a matter of ontological security: corporate entities—i.e. the state—seek a consistent notion of their current selves, which is achieved by stabilising it in relation to others and to their historical selves. Nevertheless, the author notes that “[...] ontological security may be hard to achieve for a state because of the contested choices as to whether historical memories should inform the current self-identification process and role taking and if so, which historical period should be the reference point” (Harnisch 2016a, 12).

For a start, the relationship between the current and the historical self can be positive or negative, each serving as a point of reference for role conception in its own manner. Positive relationships may entail the continuation of a successful historical self or a renaissance of better days; while negative cases can relate to periods of foreign domination and involve complex dynamics of attribution of responsibility or guilt to foreign actors (Harnisch 2016a). As hinted before, China has both points of reference. While its involvement in the Cold War's non-aligned movement represents a somewhat dominant historical self, negative periods such as the Century of Humiliation, as well as positive ones like the millennia of unique cultural and political achievements are not lost on current Chinese leadership role conception (Schortgen 2021).

The other two processes, namely those of domestic role contestation and international interaction, are intricately connected, having common roots in the economic opening started by China in the late 1970s (Harnisch 2016a). As Harnisch, Bersick and Gottwald (2016, 246) put it, “China's domestic and social stability has become ever more dependent upon economic and

³⁶ In it, Mao proposes a division of nations into three worlds, the first comprised by the two Cold War-era superpowers, the US and the Soviet Union; the second containing developed nations, such as Canada, Australia, Japan and European countries; and the third made by the developing world (Noesselt 2016), of which China was a member and a leader (Chen 2016).

nationalist sources of legitimacy. These in turn rely on an export-driven economy led by a party-state, while economic prosperity also requires integration into a capitalist world economy.” Chinese society is more complex than ever and the country’s integration into the global economy had distributional effects over China’s domestic order (Harnisch, Bersick and Gottwald 2016). In face of increasingly more fractured internal debates, Xi Jinping’s government sought to provide a more coherent role conception capable of dealing not only with external challenges, but also with domestic concerns regarding economic issues and China’s reputation abroad (Harnisch, Bersick and Gottwald 2016).

Another source of role conception through international interaction comes in the form of altercasting, especially between China and the United States. As argued by Cameron Thies (2016, 98), “The US and China have a long history of attempting to force their own self conceived role identities onto each other, which, unsurprisingly, has led to periods of hostility between the two”. A symbolic set of events happened shortly after Deng Xiaoping’s reforms (1979), which prompted US foreign policy to altercast China into two counter-roles: first, the one of a *troubled moderniser*, a pupil who could be taught to become a free-market democracy by the North-Americans; and second, the role of a *failed moderniser*, after the massacre in Tiananmen Square (1989) crushed US expectations that Deng’s modernisation reforms would inevitably lead to a democratic regime (Thies 2016). Chinese leadership, however, were not afraid to retort in kind, seeking “[...] to altercast the US as a hegemonic power attempting to victimize China and prevent it from attaining its rightful role in the international system” (Thies 2016, 105)³⁷.

This plethora of expectations, domestic and external, underpins the ambiguity of China’s relationship with the US-led liberal global order. On one hand, China’s impressive economic development has put the country in a singular position to challenge US hegemony (Chen 2016; Schortgen 2022); on the other hand, the current system is what allowed for China’s rise, which has casted doubt on the reasons CPC leadership would have to change it (Chen 2016; Duarte, Gupta and Delvaje 2024). In China’s own conception, however, its role is not to topple down the current order, but to take part in it responsibly (Shih and Huang 2016; Wang 2023; Duarte, Gupta and Delvaje 2024).

As previously mentioned, this role conception of China receives the name of “responsible great power” (Duggan 2016; Shih and Huang 2016; Schortgen 2021). For developing countries, it means that, while having the capabilities and resources of a great power, China still sees itself as a fellow developing nation supporting its peers for mutual benefit (Duggan 2016). Chih-Yu Shih and

³⁷ Thies (2016) notes the example of the *People’s Daily* promoting articles related to the 90th anniversary of the Boxer Rebellion that emphasised the brutality of the foreign invading armies, shortly after the imposition of sanctions due to the 1989 massacre. As I see it, this shows the profound interconnections of China’s role conception sources not only between domestic contestation and international interaction, but also of those with China’s multiple historical selves.

Chiung-Chiu Huang (2016) posit that this is related to China's interpretation of grand strategy, which does not follow Western—mainly North-American—logic of forcing one preferred order onto others. Instead, China's grand strategy is relationship-based, as it focuses on relational aspects and achieving harmony with its partners. On a similar vein, Chen (2016) defines China's role towards the global order as one of a constructive improver, interested in keeping the stability of the system that has greatly benefited the CPC and Chinese society, while advancing a non-confrontational great power relationship with the US.

All the while, Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping has been ever more proactive, even assertive. Bart Dessein (2016) argues that, with the slowing of the Communist movement worldwide and the faltering of Marxist-Leninist policies at home, the CPC has turned to the older Chinese tradition of Confucianism to provide a new *raison d'être* for the state, domestically and externally. Piling on years of economic success and a perceived decline of Western power since the 2008 financial crisis (Song and Fürst 2022), China's foreign policy has become more robust in its role-taking (Dessein 2016, Schortgen, 2021). With those caveats, Chen's (2016) non-confrontational constructive improver role seems to fit less and less. I end this subsection by assessing China's national role conception shift towards proactiveness since the second half of the 2010s, through what I deem to be its main engine and symbol: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Lina Liu (2021), based on a large database of BRI-related projects and events, builds a comprehensive conceptualisation of the roles China plays through the initiative. According to her, the full scope of the BRI allows for subtly distinct approaches to the global order, beyond the status quo/revisionist dichotomy (Liu 2021). China, therefore, is at the same time a rule taker, a rule reformer, a rule breaker and a rule innovator (Liu 2021). The BRI's complexity, however, does not diminish how much Xi's foreign policy has shifted from hesitant adaptation and strategic uncertainty (Song and Fürst 2022) to a proactive and creative stance, even if the country has not developed into a fully-fledged challenger of the *status quo* just yet. As a hallmark of this foreign policy, the BRI definitely goes beyond passivity, representing “a holistic tool to ensure the country's stability, whilst creating an external environment more favourable for China's reemergence” (Duarte and Ferreira-Pereira 2022, 596). From a role theoretical perspective, the BRI represents the way Chinese leadership found to adjust its role conception to internal and external expectations, being central to China's responsible stakeholder³⁸ international role (Duarte and Ferreira-Pereira 2022).

In sum, even if not going for full ideological confrontation (Liu 2021) *vis-à-vis* the US-led global order, Chinese leadership seems to have accepted that Beijing's role is not one of pure

³⁸ Some authors (Feigenbaum 2020; Duarte and Ferreira-Pereira 2022) prefer to use the word *stakeholder* instead of *great power* to conceptualise China's international role. As we shall explore further in this chapter, this has roots in China's troubled interaction with the United States.

accommodation. From a historical self as an illustrious—even if conflicted—civilisation (Harnisch, Bersick and Gottwald 2016), to an increasingly demanding domestic arena, the CPC under Xi Jinping seeks to build, through the BRI, new opportunities for the country's multiple interests (Harnisch, Bersick and Gottwald 2016). One signal, however, remains clear from China's role conception: it presents itself as a partner—and member—of the developing world, bent on establishing relationships of mutual benefit explicitly different from the pattern replicated by developed nations. Whether or not its partners perceive China's role enactment through these lenses remains a question to be reckoned with further on. For now, the focus shifts to preparing the field for a more in-depth analysis of the “responsible great power” role, in which I start applying the empirical strategy described at the end of the last chapter. Before that, though, there remains the need to discuss which sources will comprise my database for further analysis. I do so by discussing which sources role theorists and scholars in general have used to grasp the main elements of China's foreign policy discourse in Xi Jinping's tenure as leader.

3.1.2. Sourcing a national role conception: key considerations

The identification of national role conceptions relies on analysing various forms of communication by political actors within a state (Thies 2009; Cantir and Kaarbo 2016). The seminal work on NRCs by K. J. Holsti (1970) focused on the perceptions of foreign policymakers, establishing a tradition of using their rhetoric as the core evidence for NRCs. Sources of official rhetoric are thus expected to reflect the policymakers' own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules, and actions suitable to their state. Therefore, in Role Theory's most common and traditional approach, researchers examine speeches and statements from heads of state and government (Brummer and Thies 2015), with major foreign policy speeches being a crucial source for analysis (Grossman, Schortgen and Friedrichs 2021). Of a similar nature and function are government communiqués, official declarations and policy documents.

Regardless of the specific type of source, role theorists are generally looking for what Sawicka (2024) defines as role declarations. These are the external expression of a policymaker's understanding of their state's role in the world, functioning both as a visible articulation of the actor's role conceptions, and as a modality of role enactment. In other words, the role declaration is the observable linguistic act that conveys this internal conception to domestic and international audiences (Sawicka 2024). However, not every public statement by a representative of the state amounts to a role declaration: since NRCs define what the state should do rather than merely listing past actions, researchers must focus their analysis on statements outlining the expressed duties and responsibilities prescribed by the speaker to the state. This framing ensures that researchers capture

the normative and self-ascriptive dimensions of the role, distinguishing the NRC (the idea) from the role enactment (the behaviour) (Sawicka 2024).

Role declarations often target both domestic and international audiences. They are used to justify policies and are frequently the outcome of a collective process involving power struggles, policy disagreements, and partisan infighting. As such, the analysis of role declarations demands proper context over why authorities issue any particular statement, and how their reasons and targeted audiences possibly influence source content. To gain a better picture of how statements and context shape one another, it is useful to recollect how scholars who have analysed China's foreign policy—especially during Xi Jinping's government—selected their sources. I start by seeking out sources selected by authors who explicitly apply Role Theory in their research. Then, I complement this overview with a recounting of sources utilised in non-Role Theory works.

A consistent thread across the literature is the use of grand strategic texts and ideological pronouncements as markers of China's ego under Xi Jinping. Duggan (2020), for instance, relies on speeches at Davos (2017) and earlier Party Congress reports to show how Xi positions China as the “Champion of the Developing World.” Song and Fürst (2022) also highlight Xi's 19th Party Congress report (2017), reading its references to “community with a shared future for mankind” as a key declaration of intent of China's ambition to redefine its *guoji dingwei* (international positioning). Notably, they frame such texts as evidence of domestic role contestation, where self-perception shifts from “hiding and biding” towards explicit claims of international leadership. Similarly, Duarte, Gupta and Delvaje (2024) treat Xi-era white papers such as *China and the World in the New Era* (2019) as central in signalling a recalibration of China's role conception. In each case, authors stress that Party Congress reports and policy white papers constitute privileged sources because they blend ideology with strategy, thereby providing the most direct window into how the leadership in Beijing conceives the nation's transitioning role.

The economic and developmental dimension of China's self-conception is equally central, with scholars framing Xi's speeches and policy documents as evidence of a self-framing of both a great power and an advocate for the developing world. For instance, Duggan (2020) underscores Xi's BRICS (2014) speech, highlighting China's promise to expand the voice of developing states as proof of a conscious embrace of a shared identity that roots Beijing's pledge for South–South solidarity. Similarly, Duarte and Ferreira-Pereira (2022) read Xi's speeches and official BRI documents through a triadic lens of objectives, methods and resources, stressing how soft power became part of China's ego when framed as indispensable to securing regime survival and international influence. In their reading, Xi's economic governance speeches reflect role conceptions that anchor China's identity as a responsible and reformist power, legitimising its bid to reshape global norms. Song and Fürst (2022) reinforce this by interpreting Chinese discourse about

leadership in Central and Eastern Europe as part of a broader global narrative, in which China is rehearsing its leadership ego in a regional setting. In all cases, authors emphasise that Xi's economic and developmental discourse must be read not only as excerpts of pragmatic policymaking, but as identity-based narratives, in which China seeks to project its role conception to international audiences.

Perhaps most prominently, the BRI corpus of speeches and documents appears across the literature as the crystallisation of the ego dimensions of China's role in international affairs. Duarte and Ferreira-Pereira (2022) explicitly frame Xi's Astana (2013) and Jakarta (2013) speeches as turning points where historical imagery of the Silk Road was strategically redeployed to present China as a civilisational connector and agenda-setter. They interpret these speeches and the 2015 BRI Action Plan as deliberate instruments of self-conception, blending historical nostalgia (Silk Road, *Tianxia*) with pragmatism. Song and Fürst (2022) similarly read Xi's 2021 statement linking the 17+1 platform to the BRI as confirmation of ego-driven leadership ambitions. Likewise, Duarte, Gupta and Delvaje (2024) underline that the BRI and its related documents go beyond simple role enactment, revealing crucial dynamics behind China's self-conception. For instance, they argue that, by positioning the BRI as a "project for humankind," Xi reframes China's NRC in ways designed to counter sinophobia and assert normative leadership. Duggan (2020) and Grossman, Friedrichs and Schortgen (2021) also identify the BRI and Xi's keynote addresses at its forums as key evidence of a shift from Deng's cautious posture to a proactive identity as reformer and initiator.

Non-Role Theory literature adheres to similar lines when dealing with Chinese foreign policy discourses and practices during Xi's era, especially when Global South nations are a key target audience. Garlick and Chin (2024), for example, construct a dataset of Xi-era summit speeches delivered across Africa, Central Asia, and multilateral settings, systematically tracing the recurrence of key slogans such as "win-win cooperation" and "community of shared future." Moreover, by treating such elements as official markers of a normative ambition by Beijing, their analysis mirrors the role-theoretical concern with the ego. Similarly, Liu (2022) locates continuity between Xi's speeches at the Asian-African Summit and subsequent UN roundtables and the country's white paper on international development cooperation, showing how these programmatic texts revive Bandung-era expressions to re-legitimise China's great power status. What emerges across these accounts is an indication that ideological and strategic pronouncements—whether speeches or policy reports—form the bedrock of any reconstruction of China's role conception.

A further layer of corroboration comes from studies of China's developmental rhetoric, where analysts curate official documents and speeches precisely because they articulate the principles Beijing claims to uphold in its global engagements. Jiang and Holst (2025), in their

examination of scholarship and training programmes, assemble an extensive set of government reports and aid guidelines, employing software-assisted text mining to demonstrate that terms such as “mutuality” and “cooperation” dominate the official lexicon. Chao (2021), in turn, treats official publications on triangular cooperation as the central evidence for understanding how Chinese authorities conceptualise their role as partner rather than donor. Indeed, it is precisely the reliance on white papers and ministerial statements that allows these scholars to capture how the Party-state deliberately distances itself from traditional donor hierarchies while also asserting its identity as a leader of the Global South.

Finally, the BRI is also touted by non-role theorists as a key ground for identifying discursive patterns of China’s leadership ambitions. Garlick and Chin (2024), for instance, justify their focus on BRI-related speeches precisely on the grounds that they are the sites where Beijing most explicitly teaches foreign audiences how to interpret its rise. Dinh *et al.* (2024) extend this logic to Southeast Asia, showing how Chinese narratives of connectivity circulate through summit declarations and leaders’ addresses, while Chao (2024) highlights the continuity between South–South slogans and BRI-branded rhetoric. Consequently, their reliance on speeches at BRI forums, summits, and associated communiqués aligns neatly with the similar emphasis present in Role Theory analyses, confirming that BRI-related texts are indispensable for tracing China’s ego.

In fact, when read together, role-theoretical and non-role-theoretical accounts point toward a coherent strategy for source selection: ideological set-piece speeches and Party reports for mapping the horizon of self-conception; white papers and aid policy statements for capturing the self-image as developmental partner; and BRI speeches and communiqués for observing how these roles are projected and normalised on the global stage. In hindsight, a methodological intuition seems to bind them, one claiming that China’s role conception is especially visible in the texts where the Party-state narrates its own place in the world.

Building upon this established scholarly practice, this dissertation will henceforth rely on a curated sample of nine primary sources, selected for their salience and representativeness of China’s “responsible great power” national role conception during the Xi Jinping administration. As stated in the beginning of this subsection, these documents are treated as role declarations: the external, linguistic expression of a policymaker’s understanding of their state’s role in the world. As such, they provide direct evidence of China’s ego expectations. The sources, all publicly available in English, are organised according to the three categories previously identified: grand strategic, economic/developmental, and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)-related texts.

- Grand Strategic Documents: this category comprises the most authoritative articulations of the CPC’s contemporary vision for the country. These texts are indispensable for analysing

the nexus between domestic political legitimation, historical narratives, and international posture. It includes the following sources, ordered chronologically:

- Speech at the UN in Geneva, titled “Work Together to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind” (January 2017): This speech represents one of China’s most systematic attempts at global role-making, articulating its vision for a new form of global governance. It is essential for analysing the international interaction dimension of the NRC, where China proposes itself as an architect of a new order. The concept of a “Community of a Shared Future for Mankind” outlines the normative content of China’s desired leadership role, and the speech evokes a peaceful historical self to legitimise this cooperative framework (Xi 2017c).
- The “China’s National Defense in the New Era” White Paper (July 2019): This is a foundational public statement on China’s military philosophy. It empirically grounds the security dimension of the NRC by explicitly rooting its “defensive” posture in China’s historical self—the memory of the Century of Humiliation—and outlines its role in global security governance as a form of international interaction. It allows for a well-grounded analysis of how China narratively constructs its military modernisation as a “responsible” act (China 2019).
- Report to the 20th National Congress of the CPC (October 2022): As a still recent and comprehensive statement of China’s grand strategy, this report represents the cornerstone of the entire sample of sources. It is a key expression of China’s elite-level consensus-building, making it a primary artefact for analysing domestic contestation. Its central theme of pursuing the “great rejuvenation” of the Chinese nation directly links the CPC’s legitimacy to a powerful historical self-conceptualisation, while its framing of foreign policy as a defence against external containment speaks to the dimension of international interaction (Xi 2022).
- Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s Speech at the Munich Security Conference (February 2024): As one of the more recent high-level texts on the matter of international security, this speech offers a timely illustration of the practical articulation of China’s NRC. Wang Yi’s framing of China as a “force for stability” and his direct contestation of Western concepts like “de-risking” provide a crucial snapshot of how China promotes its NRC in contemporary diplomatic arenas (Wang 2024).
- Economic and Developmental Documents: these sources are central to understanding how China projects its economic success as a global public good and as an alternative to the Western-led development paradigm. I include two sources as exemplars of this category:

- Speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos (January 2017): Delivered at a moment of perceived Western retreat from global leadership, this speech positioned China as the new champion of economic globalisation. It is a vital text for demonstrating how China declares its economic responsibility through strategic international interaction, with Xi Jinping using China's own historical self—its experience of “reform and opening-up”—as a lesson in rejecting protectionism (Xi 2017a)
- The “China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era” White Paper (January 2021): This document is the doctrinal core of China's developmental NRC, systematically outlining its foreign aid philosophy. It roots its approach in a historical self of “South-South cooperation” and explicitly contrasts its principles, such as not attaching “political strings”, with traditional Western aid models, thereby defining a more “responsible” conception of great power engagement (China 2021).
- Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Documents: as Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy initiative, the BRI is the most tangible stage for the “responsible great power” NRC. This selection allows for a longitudinal analysis of the initiative's discursive evolution. Key sources include:
 - The Foundational BRI Speech in Kazakhstan (September 2013): this speech is the genesis of BRI-related documents. It is exceptionally rich in historical self-narratives, referring to the imagery of the “ancient Silk Road” as a precedent for a China-centric order based on peaceful exchange and mutual benefit, thereby legitimising a contemporary geopolitical project (Xi 2013).
 - Keynote Speech at the First Belt and Road Forum (May 2017): This speech marked the high point of the BRI's global ambition, elevating it to a comprehensive vision for global governance. By codifying the “Silk Road spirit” and presenting the BRI as a “project of the century”, it represents the most confident declaration of the NRC through international interaction, projecting an ideal-type leadership role (Xi 2017b).
 - Keynote Speech at the Third Belt and Road Forum (October 2023): Marking the initiative's ten-year anniversary, this speech represents a significant recalibration of the role conception. The discursive shift towards “high-quality”, “small and beautiful”, and “green” projects is a direct adaptation to a decade of critical international interaction and the outcome of internal policy debates (domestic contestation), showcasing the dynamic and responsive nature of the NRC (Xi 2023).

Table 3.2 — List of primary sources utilised to probe for China’s “responsible great power” NRC

Source Title	Date	Category
Speech at the UN in Geneva, "Work Together to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind"	January 2017	Grand Strategic
White Paper: "China's National Defense in the New Era"	July 2019	Grand Strategic
Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China	October 2022	Grand Strategic
Speech by Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Munich Security Conference	February 2024	Grand Strategic
Speech at the World Economic Forum, Davos	January 2017	Economic/Developmental
White Paper: "China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era"	January 2021	Economic/Developmental
Foundational BRI Speech (Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan)	September 2013	BRI-Related
Keynote Speech at the First Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation	May 2017	BRI-Related
Keynote Speech at the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation	October 2023	BRI-Related

Source: elaborated by the author

Table 3.2 summarises the primary sources utilised in this chapter. On a final note, I emphasise that, among the possibilities of publicly available sources, the ones selected do not represent a terminative list of documents and speeches reflective of China’s role conceptions. Nonetheless, they are representative as sources of role declarations, and were chosen based on extant practices in the specialised literature and their contexts. Other primary data may prove just as valuable in identifying traits of China’s NRC. Nonetheless, adhering to the basic logic of sampling, the perspectives of the sources not selected should still be sufficiently represented by the ones that were.

3.2. A NRC in movement: tracking the “responsible great power role” in China’s official documents and speeches

As I have posited in the second chapter, Beijing’s “responsible great power” NRC functions as China’s master role. That alone would already put considerable pressure on the role’s components, as far as contestation—internal or external—goes. In addition, we have that Chinese foreign policy-making has reached new levels of complexity under Xi Jinping, which is a natural consequence of the proactive stance the country has increasingly sought in the past decade. This conjunction of facts builds tension within the role, which is constantly beset by the contradictions inherent of a nation trying to navigate multiple—and sometimes disparate—expectations. In hindsight, such contradictions do not mean that China’s foreign policy rhetoric is invariably inconsistent. Instead, these tensions indicate nuances in discourse that co-exist without completely dismantling the overarching narratives of Beijing’s foreign policy.

To detect, interpret and make sense of those nuances inductively, as is often the case with role conceptions, would be a task for an entire thesis. Thankfully, my objectives here are simpler. As was explained in the previous chapter, my empirical strategy is majorly deductive, building upon the paths left by the extant scholarship on China’s national role conceptions, which were explored in the previous section. Therefore, the present section’s structure aligns with the three factors suggested by Harnisch (2016a) as formative of the “responsible great power” role: domestic contestation, international interaction and historical self-conceptualisations. From now on, I interpret these factors as the main pillars sustaining China’s NRC and fueling the latter’s dynamic.

Each subsection focuses on one of the pillars. First, I look at domestic contestation and how it is reshaping China’s self-conception toward proactiveness. Second, I analyse the effects of international interaction on China’s role declarations. And last, I probe for evidence of historical self-conceptualisations in Beijing’s contemporary foreign policy discourse. Before proceeding, a clarification as to the order of presentation is in order. While the natural path would be to start with the historical dimension and then continue to the more recent factors, I have opted to invert this presentation order to emphasise the most dynamic and immediate drivers shaping China’s contemporary role conception. In this sense, domestic contestation and international interaction represent the immediate political pressures underpinning the most significant shifts in China’s foreign policy under Xi Jinping. By contrast, historical self-conceptualisations function less as primary drivers of the shift and more as narrative tools. As we shall explore further below, they represent rhetorical resources that the CPC repurposes to legitimise foreign policy choices demanded by either domestic or international pressures.

3.2.1. Domestic drivers behind China's role

The evolving nature of China's internal political scenario is a key component behind the changes in Chinese foreign policy under Xi Jinping. Domestic imperatives, often mixed with the rise in nationalist sentiment in the country, pushes Beijing's international profile toward proactiveness. As such, despite the increase in political centralisation during Xi's administration (Yuan 2023; Loh 2024), domestic contestation is certainly the element that puts the greatest strain on China's process of role conceptualisation (Harnisch, Bersick and Gottwald 2016). Notably, some accounts will point to that very centralisation of power as the main cause of China's proactive shift (Miura 2023), as it allowed for Xi's specific views on foreign policy to inform bureaucratic behaviour (Loh 2024). Nonetheless, centralisation works less as the original driver and more as an intermediary mechanism, reshaping incentives and venues through which domestic contestation over China's role is officially expressed.

The decisive drivers, therefore, stem from the widening arena of social pressure that increasingly politicises China's role-taking and role-making. Notably, psychocultural expectations anchored in notions of "face" (*mianzi*) have become more salient as China projects itself as a great power. Xue (2023), for instance, argues that China's collective demand for national self-esteem underpins participation in global governance, justifying coercive signalling when Beijing's status is not fully recognised (Xue 2023). Moreover, in Xi-era discourse, pride in institutions and the injunction to "look at the world as an equal" elevate sensitivity to slights. Domestic audiences reward moves that gain face and penalise official restraint, especially against historically contentious counterparts (Xue 2023). The "responsible great power" NRC thus sits on an ambivalent social foundation, being applauded when it secures recognition of China's rising status, and contested when it fails to defend the country's dignity with firmness. The effect is to lower voices for moderation and to narrow the room for compromise, during both conception and enactment.

Against this backdrop, the growing role of nationalism in Chinese politics operates at the level of role conception by filtering which meanings of "responsibility" are admissible in elite discourse and which are not. In drafting speeches, white papers, and leading slogans, policymakers are impelled to encode dignity, parity, and non-humiliation into the very definition of a "responsible great power", privileging formulations that promise status affirmation and sovereignty protection (Grossman, Schortgen and Friedrichs 2021).

These factors constitute the first series of codes covered by the pillar of domestic contestation. Together, they comprise the theme I label as "Assertive Nationalism and Status-Seeking." Its first code is "National Rejuvenation" (NAT-1), which refers to key teleological

aspects of China's foreign policy, mainly its purpose to restore the country to a position of global prominence. It is particularly associated with status-seeking and the demand for national self-esteem. A clear example of it may be found on the following excerpt from the Report to the 20th National Congress of the CPC:

From this day forward, the central task of the Communist Party of China will be to lead the Chinese people of all ethnic groups in a concerted effort to realize the Second Centenary Goal of building China into a great modern socialist country in all respects and to advance the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation on all fronts through a Chinese path to modernization (Xi 2022, 15).

The second code is "Status Recognition" (NAT-2). While NAT-1 ("National Rejuvenation") tracks active status affirmation, NAT-2 encompasses language demanding equal treatment, respect for China's status as a major power, and defensive responses to perceived slights by other actors. Due to the reactive nature of such expressions of China's role, they are notably rare on role declarations not attached to specific disputes with foreign powers. Nonetheless, when addressing domestic audiences, Party leadership may well make general references to their efforts in upholding China's name vis-à-vis external competitors. Take, for instance, the following excerpt:

Confronted with drastic changes in the international landscape, especially external attempts to blackmail, contain, blockade, and exert maximum pressure on China [...] We have shown a fighting spirit and a firm determination to never yield to coercive power. Throughout these efforts, we have safeguarded China's dignity and core interests (Xi 2022, 4).

Expectedly, the theme of "Assertive Nationalism and Status-Seeking" interacts directly with the CPC's quest for political legitimacy. Because regime authority hinges on prosperity, order, and pride, role declarations are often crafted in order to safeguard growth prerogatives, to signal stabilising authority at home and abroad, and to bind expressions of international activism to the aforementioned doctrine of national rejuvenation. Through that particular lens, responsibility is conceptualised less as an altruistic leadership and more as an interest-driven provision of public goods under conditions that preserve Chinese autonomy (Dinh *et al.* 2024; Gong 2025).

These factors inform a second series of codes, comprising the theme of "Regime Legitimation." Two codes fall under said umbrella. The first is labelled as "Linking Foreign Policy to Domestic Success" (LEG-1). It captures statements that directly connect China's international initiatives, diplomatic successes or global standing to tangible benefits for its domestic population. While anchored in domestic drivers, such statements also serve to emphasise to foreign audiences that China's victories are meant to be shared globally. As Xi posited in the 2017 Davos speech, "China's remarkable achievement in poverty reduction has contributed to more inclusive global growth." (Xi 2017a, para. 82).

The second code of this theme is more specific. Namely, LEG-2 codifies "Party Leadership as a Prerequisite," i.e. instances when role declarations refer to the CPC as the natural guide of China's success. Take, for example, the following excerpt, also from the Davos speech: "A right

path leads to a bright future. China has come this far because the Chinese people have, under the leadership of the Communist Party of China, blazed a development path that suits China's actual conditions." (Xi 2017a, para. 80).

The above discussion helps clarify that, beyond status concerns, regime legitimacy also relies on economic performance. Sometimes, developmental priorities may impose a *domestic-first* rationale on China's role conceptualisation. Consequently, declarations from the political elite circumscribe "responsibility" to ways that preserve policy space for China's modernisation and social stability (Chen 2016; Hopewell 2020). Hence, the respective "Developmental Imperative" theme comes in three codes. "Development as Top Priority" (DEV-1) tracks statements that frame development as the primary goal of state action, both domestically and abroad. One of its best illustrations can be found in Xi's Keynote Speech to the First BRI Forum, in 2017:

Development holds the master key to solving all problems. In pursuing the Belt and Road Initiative, we should focus on the fundamental issue of development, release the growth potential of various countries and achieve economic integration and interconnected development and deliver benefits to all (Xi 2017b, 4).

DEV-2, or "Technological Self-Reliance", applies to the strategic necessity of achieving self-sufficiency and strength in science and technology in order to safeguard development—as exemplified by the following excerpt: "We will accelerate efforts to build our self-reliance and strength in science and technology [...] We have grown stronger in basic research and original innovation, made breakthroughs in core technologies in key fields, and boosted emerging strategic industries." (Xi 2022, 7). Finally, DEV-3 focuses on "Modernisation as a National Goal." It tracks framings of Chinese development as a unique and sovereign path towards the modernisation of the country. It is closely attached to NAT-1 ("National Rejuvenation"), as modernising with Chinese characteristics is a primary element of the latter doctrine (Xi 2022).

The primacy of development does not exist alone. Crucially, it is accompanied by internal distributional politics. Since integration into the world economy has produced uneven gains across China's regions and sectors, role declarations pay attention to the needs of constituencies that fear being exposed to external shocks emanating from foreign competition (Harnisch, Bersick and Gottwald 2016). As a result, formulations often emphasise elements such as "protective openness" and "fair development." This does not mean that Beijing does not endorse global public goods and rules. However, it implies that such endorsements are contingent on not compromising domestic development or exacerbating regional inequalities within China. In this framing, CPC leadership calibrates responsibility to fit the respective needs of a great power—which in Beijing's case involves both advancing national rejuvenation and insulating vulnerable stakeholders at home.

These tensions surface most prominently in trade and industrial strategy debates, which highlight how rival domestic coalitions shape competing internal role expectations. On one side,

pro-liberalising currents favour economic openness in order to strengthen competitiveness (Bersick 2016). In contrast, protectionist-oriented currents articulate a sovereignty-centered moderniser role that reserves the right to shield strategic sectors, retaliate against perceived discrimination, and pace the country's exposure to global markets (Bersick 2016)³⁹. For role conceptualisation, the direct consequence of this is a deliberately elastic script in official narratives. It allows China to assume a position of leadership in regimes that support domestic upgrading and export opportunities, while embedding principled exceptions that justify firmer postures when distributional risks become salient (Hopewell 2020). Henceforth, the resulting NRC is crafted to be internally malleable across coalitions: outwardly committed to openness and cooperation, but normatively anchored in the primacy of development and the mitigation of domestic dislocation.

Distributional politics and trade/industrial strategy debates inform another theme within the umbrella of domestic contestation, which I tag as “Economic Security and Distributional Politics.” In it, ECON-1 comprises “Justifying Openness,” relating to statements that argue in favour of economic globalisation, free trade, investment liberalisation, and resisting protectionism. Such statements often frame openness as a crucial lesson from China's own reform and opening-up experience and as a prerequisite for global prosperity. This code becomes more salient depending on the context of the source—especially, of its audience. Such is the case of Xi's speech at Davos (Xi 2017a), in which he championed globalisation and struck back at protectionism (in light of the growing trade war with the US): “Pursuing protectionism is like locking oneself in a dark room. While wind and rain may be kept outside, that dark room will also block light and air. No one will emerge as a winner in a trade war.” (Xi 2017a, 4).

The balancing discourse is captured by ECON-2, “Shielding Strategic Sectors.” It encompasses arguments in favour of defensive economic measures—the likes of which can be common in documents such as the Report to the 20th National Congress of the CPC (Xi 2022)—, but also includes veiled criticism at external actions that compromise China's strategic sectors. Such is the case in the following excerpt, drawn from Xi's speech at the Third BRI Forum, in 2023: “What we stand against are unilateral sanctions, economic coercion, and decoupling and supply chain disruption.” (Xi 2023, 3).

At last, just as it happens with political and economic considerations, security concerns also shape China's “responsible great power” NRC. The crucial aspect of the security dimension stems from the fact that Party texts anchor China's role in non-negotiable core interests—sovereignty, territorial integrity, national reunification, and regime security (Xue 2023)—thereby hard-wiring red

³⁹ Bersick's (2016) inquiry into the role-informed dimensions of early 2010s Sino-European trade disputes over photovoltaics and polysilicon are emblematic of this underlying cleavage. In one instance, a responsible conduct entailed accepting international prevailing disciplines for long-run efficiency gains; in another, it meant actively redefining trade fairness as a strategy to legitimise defensive instruments.

lines into the narrative script of the NRC. This does not automatically license coercion in doctrine. Rather, it stipulates that any responsible posture must be compatible with safeguarding unity and stability (Adhikari 2021). Hence, the language of peaceful coexistence, South–South solidarity and non-interference is coupled to a distinct terminology of peace as order and stability, and to claims of sovereign equality that protect Beijing’s policy autonomy from outside interference (Harnisch 2016; An and Feng 2022; Garlick and Chin 2024).

Security *slippages*, i.e. moments where China breaks from the “responsible great power” role due to core national security concerns—arise more routinely in practice than in rhetoric. Specifically, maritime disputes, the One-China conditionality in external partnerships, and the episodic securitisation of development cooperation lead to moments where China’s actions appear overtly coercive, creating distance from Beijing’s harmony-building discourse (An and Feng 2022; Dinh *et al.* 2024). Yet, these departures do not occur because the NRC has fully abandoned restraint. Instead, the domestic imperatives they reflect, be it the need for legitimacy or to save face—compel role declarations to provide credence to China’s willingness to protect its sovereignty. Ultimately, these security concerns reinforce the channeling of role conceptualisation towards a careful balance. On one side, it appears rhetorically consensual and status-affirming; on the other, it happens to be substantively conditioned by the primacy of territorial integrity and regime security (Weiss and Wallace 2021).

“Core Interest Security” thus constitutes the last theme under the domestic contestation pillar. “Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity” (SEC-1) represents the first code of the theme. It is reserved for explicit assertions of sovereignty over disputed territories and the framing of their defence as a sacred and non-negotiable duty of the Chinese state and its military. As presented in the White Paper *China’s National Defense in a New Era*,

China must be and will be reunited. China has the firm resolve and the ability to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and will never allow the secession of any part of its territory [...] The PLA will resolutely defeat anyone attempting to separate Taiwan from China and safeguard national unity at all costs (China 2019, 8).

Adjacent to SEC-1, the “Opposing External Interference” (SEC-2) code reflects direct warnings against foreign interference in what China defines as its internal affairs—especially the ones covered by SEC-1. In direct continuation of the last quotation, the White Paper illustratively warns: “This is by no means targeted at our compatriots in Taiwan, but at the interference of external forces and the very small number of ‘Taiwan independence’ separatists and their activities.” (China 2019, 8). Balancing the first two codes, SEC-3 encompasses expressions of China’s “Defensive Posture,” such as statements that frame China’s military modernisation and capabilities as being purely defensive in nature, and separate from hegemonic ambitions. They also represent an example of China’s attempt to differ itself from traditional great powers: “History

proves and will continue to prove that China will never follow the beaten track of big powers in seeking hegemony. No matter how it might develop, China will never threaten any other country or seek any sphere of influence." (China 2019, 9).

Together, nationalism, regime legitimation, economic imperatives and security concerns combine in a way that both expands and constrains China's role conceptualisation. As we shall explore in greater detail in further sections, superimposed on these social pressures are enduring ideological and role conflicts that also shape the structure of China's role. The coexistence of "socialist state", "developing country", and "modern great power" identities naturally compels hybridisation. Hence, elite texts fuse domestic-driven imperatives with historical principles of Beijing's foreign policy and interpretations of demands from others.

There is a final element that characterises China's domestic scene during Xi Jinping's government, which is digitalisation. Despite not being a driver of domestic contestation *per se* (and thus, not entering this chapter's codebook), the interconnectedness brought by new technologies has added speed to an already complex political arena. And, regardless of the level of control the Chinese state is capable of exerting over the digital sphere, access to the internet has given voice to a greater number of domestic constituencies, while also compressing political time. Moreover, as much nationalist sentiment among the Chinese public finds its source in social media (Pang and Thomas 2022), Beijing's digital diplomacy has become particularly knowledgeable about the performative elements involved in justifying foreign policies for both domestic and foreign publics.

The coexistence of these internal demands with the shifting nature of the international system creates inherent tension. Consequently, the next subsection explores how China manages external pressures and expectations through the prism of its international interaction pillar.

3.2.2. International interaction and the balancing act of responsibility

Of all three main factors that shape China's NRC, international interaction is the main balancing act of Beijing's self-conceptualisation process. Naturally, as Xi Jinping's China turns ever more ego-oriented in its role conception (Harnisch, Bersick and Gottwald 2016; Song and Fürst 2022), foreign pressures have gradually lost weight over how Chinese leadership present their role expectations. Nonetheless, Beijing remained keen on painting its foreign policy strategy as a dialogue with foreign audiences. The keyword here is the aforementioned concept of relationality. For Shih and Huang (2016), Chinese foreign policy is inherently relationship-based—which leads to constant renegotiations of China's behaviour, identity and, of course, of its "responsible great power" role. This is not necessarily clear-cut. As the authors (Shih and Huang 2016, 60) argue, "In a harmonious world, the relationships between China and other countries are constantly being

negotiated to facilitate the achievement of harmony in any bilateral relationship that will inevitably result in incongruence among all bilateral relationships.” The consequence of this constant negotiation is that China’s NRC does not hold unequivocal meaning: “The approach of China to negotiate constantly with specific parties to accept the country’s relational role thus divides its grand strategy among various sets of bilateral role relationships.” (Shih and Huang 2016, 60).

It remains to be seen whether China’s search for harmony is indeed as relational as that account affirms it to be. Symbolic interactionism, as we have seen in the previous chapter—will posit that every national role conception incorporates some degree of relationality. This lies at the core of what Meadian thought defines as the *Me* part of the Self: the internalisation of others’ expectations, or, to be more precise, the self-image the actor constructs when looking at itself through the eyes of the other (Harnisch 2016a). The crux of the issue, however, is not to ascertain whether China’s role is relational or not—but to reflect on how much its current Self is shaped by outward socialisation. To that end, two key dimensions of China’s international interaction dynamics have gained prominence in the nation’s process of self-conceptualisation—to opposite effects.

On one side, there was the gradual process of integration into the LIO, which has characterised Beijing’s years of peaceful rise, when the country thought necessary to reassure status quo powers—mainly the United States—of the benign intents it still held despite its rising status as a global actor (Hobbs *et al.* 2023, Yuan 2023). This low-profile strategy not only allowed for China to concentrate on domestic development, but also served to stabilise the system it increasingly relied upon in order to grow (Hobbs *et al.* 2023).

Notably, the origins of the “responsible” element in China’s NRC can be traced back to such dynamics of reassurance vis-à-vis other great powers. The US, in particular, sought to altercast China into the role of a “responsible stakeholder” (Schortgen 2016). From Washington’s side, the expectation was that Beijing would continue to restrain itself from actively challenging the Western-led international system. According to Yi *et al.* (2024), the first high-profile mention of this notion happened in the 1990s, when then-president Bill Clinton warned that China’s rise would come with greater responsibilities for the country. However, it would take ten years more for the tenets of Western altercasting to be properly structured and communicated.

In 2005, the US Secretary of State Robert Zoellick built upon Clinton’s message to deliver a call for China to operate as a responsible stakeholder in international affairs. His speech divided US expectations into three cornerstones. First, Beijing was expected to adhere to the rules, norms and institutions of the existing international order (Yue 2022; Yi *et al.* 2024). Second, as China grew in capacity—especially on economic terms—, it was expected to assume responsibilities commensurate with its new status (Hopewell 2020). Crucially, from the US perspective, that meant

Chinese economic actors should undertake greater commitments to open its market and accept disciplines on its use of subsidies (Hopewell 2020). And third, it reflected an entrenched expectation for China to integrate peacefully into the existing system, something that would gradually reshape Beijing's interests and make it a fully-fledged defender of the US-led LIO (Weiss and Wallace 2021).

Responsibility, under those terms, was about strengthening the ILO, since it was quintessential for China's continued success (Schortgen 2021). Much of the US policy during China's peaceful rise years stemmed from the liberal-inspired belief that, by drawing out the Chinese—in contrast to the Cold War policy of fencing in the Soviets—the subsequent integration into the ILO would naturally mold China into the “responsible stakeholder” role (Yue 2022). That was the rationale, for instance, of US support for China's entry into the WTO (Schortgen 2021). Although an optimistic belief, the strength of that argument over US strategy should not be underestimated. As Lim and Ikenberry (2023, 3) summarise it: “The aspiration to shape political systems' trajectories was a distinctive feature of the liberal international order in its prime.” In time, of course, the belief would prove misfounded: “The post–Cold War ‘liberal bet’ that China would integrate into these institutions and slowly liberalize its economy and political system appears to have not worked out.” (Lim and Ikenberry 2023, 3).

In addition, the “responsible stakeholder” altercasting also came as a consequence of the systemic crises that permeated the first decade of the 21st century. This period witnessed the diminishing of Washington's relative power and the expansion of global uncertainty over the future of the liberal order (Grossman, Schortgen and Friedrichs 2021). Thus, beyond the liberal tenets underpinning altercasting attempts on China, there was also a growing sentiment that the US and Western powers were ever more dependent on Beijing's cooperation to keep the system stable (Grossman, Schortgen and Friedrichs 2021). The pivotal moment that crystallised this perception came with the 2008 global financial crisis. During this period, Chinese financial institutions stepped in and helped the US restabilise the faltering international financial system, overtly sharing responsibility with Washington for the order's recovery and health (Bahi 2021). This was reflected in the notion that both countries operated as a G2 inside the G20 (Bahi 2021), in a way that the success of the latter in combating the financial crisis had much to do with the former's willingness to cooperate and assume responsibility as providers of public goods.

Although China still kept a vested interest in maintaining the system's stability, the growing irony of the “responsible stakeholder” altercasting was not lost on Beijing. In a nutshell, Western loss of dominance and China's continued rise meant that the US sought to pressure the Chinese into paying the costs for maintaining a status quo that implicitly cast them behind Washington's primacy. Unsurprisingly, accounts treat the 2008 financial crisis as the tipping point for China's shift towards

proactiveness (Doshi 2021; Petry 2023). In role theoretical terms, that was the moment international interaction decisively lost its strength as a restraint mechanism against Beijing's more contestatory stances (Schortgen 2021). It thus began a period of role transition, in which international pressures by great powers, especially the US, would lose weight on China's role conception to the previously mentioned domestic-centered drivers. The 2008 financial crisis did not, however, mark the end of international interaction as a core factor behind China's role conception. The mere fact that Beijing kept the reference to the "responsible stakeholder" terminology is proof that it does not see its role as separate from the institutionality—and subsequent expectations—of the Western-build LIO. Nonetheless, what Chinese leadership refers to when speaking of responsibility no longer aligns with Western expectations of it. As we have explored in the previous subsection, drivers of domestic contestation allowed China to rework its own responsibility from within, striving for balance between internal and external expectations.

In line with the discussions conducted in the first chapter, while Beijing did not rupture with the system, it did increase its contestation of what it sees as liberal-biased norms (Liu and Yang 2023; Karmazin 2024). Most times, Chinese leadership kept this contestation implicit, favouring practices that reinterpreted the tenets of the LIO according to its own perspective (Haenle and Sher 2023). So as not to draw active retaliation from status quo stakeholders, Beijing often presents those reinterpretations constructively. For instance, Xi Jinping's 2023 *Global Civilization Initiative* (GCI) establishes at its core the promotion of respect for diversity among political systems (Haenle and Sher 2023)—a move which, at first sight, should not be contentious. As Haenle and Sher (2023, 18) put it, "The GCI appeals to 'common' values such as peace, development, equality, mutual learning, dialogue, inclusiveness, justice, democracy and freedom—values that all countries can adhere to regardless of their political system." However, China also implicitly uses its promotion of diversity to contrast it with the universalist logic of liberal normativity (Shih and Huang 2016; Liu and Yang 2023).

The shift from mitigated acceptance of external expectations to a stance of "constructive improvement" (Chen 2016) is remarkably subtle. On one side, China does not cease to present itself as a peaceful actor with the interests of the international order at heart; on the other side, it actively ties the outcomes of outside pressures to foundational aspects of its own foreign policy. This way, Beijing both seems ready to dialogue with international stakeholders, while avoiding sacrifices to its political legitimacy by appearing to bow before foreign interests. The GCI's call for acceptance of a plurality of political systems, for example, serves to cultivate the image of a responsible actor, but it also reinforces China's principle of non-interference—a traditional category of the country's foreign policy (Haenle and Sher 2023).

In essence, China has ressignified the “responsible stakeholder” altercasting. In doing so, it transformed what started as a tool for incorporating China into a Western-led liberal structure, into a mandate for inserting Chinese values, sovereign autonomy, economic influence, and leadership within a shifting, more pluralistic, and less ideologically constrained world order. It did not, however, abandon the need to legitimise itself *vis-à-vis* other global stakeholders—even Western ones. Beijing may have grown bolder in time, but its outward expression of role conception is not wholly free of socialising constraints.

Together, the shifting dynamics of this first dimension of international interaction converge into the theme of “Constructive Engagement and Reform.” Three codes comprise it. INT-1 (“Upholding Multilateralism”) captures expressions of support for the existing international order and its core institutions, such as the United Nations and the WTO. This discourse positions China as a defender of the established multilateral framework, emphasising its commitment to global stability and rules-based governance. Xi’s speech at the UN in Geneva, in 2017, provides the best examples of this code: “China will firmly uphold the international system with the UN as its core [...] the authority and stature of the UN, and its core role in international affairs.” (Xi 2017c, 6). In the same speech, Xi also posits: “We should uphold WTO rules, support an open, transparent, inclusive and non-discriminatory multilateral trading regime and build an open world economy.” (Xi 2017c, 7). Its defence of the WTO is particularly symbolic—considering it acceded to the organisation amid Washington’s pressure for Beijing to play the role of a “responsible stakeholder”.

While INT-1 reflects instances of adaptation to existing norms, INT-2 (“Proposing Chinese Solutions”) tracks moments where China advances its own concepts, initiatives, and frameworks as public goods for global governance. It is a specific ressignification Chinese leadership applied to external calls for their nation to assume commensurate responsibility to its new status. Instead of doing it on imposed terms, China would do it on its own. This includes key concepts like the “Community of a Shared Future for Mankind” (Xi 2017b), as well as the BRI: “The BRI, drawing inspiration from the ancient Silk Road and focusing on enhancing connectivity, aims to [...] inject new impetus into the global economy, create new opportunities for global development, and build a new platform for international economic cooperation.” (Xi 2023, para. 2).

Similar to INT-2, INT-3 (“Redefining Responsibility”) centers on ressignifications of external pressures for China to act as a responsible stakeholder. However, INT-3 focuses on specific reinterpretations of responsibility that express it in terms of South-South cooperation, mutual respect for different development paths, non-interference, and win-win outcomes, seeking a contrast with Western-led models of development and aid. Take, for instance, the following excerpt: “China’s development cooperation is a form of mutual assistance between developing countries. It

falls into the category of South-South cooperation and therefore is essentially different from North-South cooperation." (China 2021, 5).

The first dimension of international interaction focused on pressures that, while carrying implicit criticism of China's behaviour, still allowed for dialogue between Beijing and the West. This is not always the case. The "failed moderniser" case, mentioned in the previous chapter, is a clear example of how external criticism can lock China out of cooperative behaviour. Then, Beijing's response to US altercasting—marked by vehement rejection, victimisation and counter-casting behaviour—shifted dramatically from the response to the pre-Tiananmen "troubled moderniser" altercasting. The latter, much like the "responsible stakeholder" pressure, naturally framed China as a minor partner of the global order, treating it as a pupil of liberal norms (Thies 2016). However, from Beijing's perspective, it did not appear totally dishonorable. Thus, it allowed China to cooperate with Western partners while also saving face.

Assertive external criticism, on the contrary, does not offer that possibility. Its effect is to entrench China into justifying commensurately assertive behaviour, which is done by channelling the appropriate historical selves in order to transform external critique into internal legitimation for the party's rule. As we shall see in the next subsection, this is where the "Century of Humiliation" historical self is often evoked by the Chinese leadership. Namely, the feeling of being wronged by powerful nations that once colonised China contributes to a strong sense of entitlement and exceptionalism in domestic discourse, which fuels China's more assertive elements of its foreign policy (Harnisch 2016a).

From the above scenario, a key complicating factor is that, during Xi Jinping's tenure in office, this second kind of external pressure has increased in frequency, stimulating cycles of accusations and rebuttals between China and Western rivals. Different from the domestic contestation factor, those cycles are seldom of China's sole design. Take, for instance, Beijing's troubled relations with Japan—whose elites, often through acts of historical revisionism, antagonise China into the victim role, pushing the bilateral relationship from one of economic partners towards that of strategic rivals (Schortgen 2021).

As similar cases multiply, China gains reasons to shift away from the role of responsible stakeholder within the Western-led LIO. Now, more than ever, international interaction teaches Beijing that being responsible cannot be separate from acting as a great power, which means meeting its adversaries in equal terms. Again, this facet of international interaction maintains a strong reinforcing bond with domestic contestation. Foreign accusations—especially from US actors—can trigger reputational crises, in which Chinese officials are expected to answer aggressively in order to save face both internationally and domestically (Xue 2023). These moments, which Forsby (2025) define as cases of China's emotional assertiveness, usually happen

after a foreign party crosses a red line—sensitive issues related to some core interest or identity of Beijing (Forsby 2025). In the long term, however, such exchange of accusations lead to a crystallisation of ego-centered elements within China’s role conception. Crucially, Xi’s foreign policy discursive shift towards "striving for achievement" (*fenfa youwei*), is intrinsically tied to the demand to be treated as an equal power commensurate with its growing strength (Forsby 2025).

This second dimension of international interaction, marked by assertive criticism of China by foreign powers, constitutes a separate theme, entitled “Reactive Assertiveness and Counter-Contestation.” The codes under this theme, however, originate at domestic contestation dynamics, namely NAT-2 (“Status Recognition/Face”) and SEC-2 (“Opposing External Interference”). Both codes track reactive elements of China’s role conception, with NAT-2 centering on defensive responses to perceived slights to China’s national dignity, and SEC-2 reflecting explicit rejections of foreign interference in Beijing’s security sphere. This overlap is analytically significant, as it demonstrates that international interaction often acts as a trigger for role declarations that are fundamentally rooted in domestic drivers of status-seeking and core security interests.

Together, China’s complicated history of integration into the LIO, alongside the ever more frequent cycles of assertive criticism with foreign powers, constitute the two sides of the coin of international interaction. While socialising bonds still serve to balance out some ego-centered aspects of China’s role conception, the growing tendency points towards a relationship of reinforcement between domestic and international drivers of the proactive shift in Xi’s foreign policy. Nonetheless, to fully grasp the nature of China’s role, particularly its internal tensions, the analysis must delve into the historical self-conceptualisations that still heavily influence Beijing’s foreign policy today.

3.2.3. Repurposing the past: the role of China’s historical selves

Historical self-conceptualisation completes the triad of pillars structuring China’s “responsible great power” role. However, in contrast to the parts played by domestic contestation and international interaction, historical self-conceptualisation operates less as a driving source of role conception, but rather as a narrative tool justifying specific aspects of China’s role. In this sense, three historical selves have a distinct imprint on the current NRC, each one with its own effect over foreign policy. In chronological order, they are: China’s dynastic history (pre-1912) (Dessein 2016; Liu and Yang 2023); the aforementioned Century of Humiliation (1839-1945) (Harnisch 2016a); and the years of ideological formation of Communist China (1950-1978) (Duggan 2020; Yu and Due 2021; Liu 2022). Together, they constitute an identity basis to Beijing’s

foreign policy, usually being evoked for legitimacy reasons, but more often than not to inspire particular shifts in the nation's role conception.

China's dynastic history, especially its association to the concept of *Tianxia* (All Under Heaven), marks a crucial point of reference for understanding the identity elements of Xi's proactive foreign policy. *Tianxia* is the traditional Chinese holistic worldview of political order, with China and its culture at the center. It is a cultural community, not a geographical one, with boundaries determined by philosophical and moral traditions—particularly Confucianism (Dessein 2016). Scholars such as Zhao Tingyang advance the idea of *Tianxia* as an optimal philosophy for world governance, viewing it as more inclusive than Western ideas (Liu and Yang 2023). Other analyses, however, point to the association of *Tianxia*, alongside the historical period it embodies, with China's push for status recognition and, sometimes, exceptionalism (Dessein 2016). The latter stems from the fact that *Tianxia* is perceived to assume the superiority of the Chinese identity⁴⁰, attaching the harmonious nature of its world order to the peaceful incorporation of foreign peoples (*Yi*) (Harnisch 2016a). Thus, it represents a hierarchical order, with China's natural leadership at its core.

As a historical self, China's ancient glory provides a positive self-conceptualisation of the current state as a successful renaissance of a once unmatched nation. This nostalgia for a long-gone golden era thus frames China as a returning power, instead of a rising one (Schortgen 2021; Duarte, Gupta and Delvaje 2024). Hence, political elites interpret this as a natural obligation to restore the country's past status and ensure that China is globally respected and admired (Duarte and Ferreira-Pereira 2021). Under Xi's tutelage, it has reinforced concepts such as the "China Dream" and the "great renaissance of the Chinese nation" (Schortgen 2021), as well as the doctrine of National Rejuvenation (Lim and Ikenberry 2023). Moreover, the concept of *Tianxia* informs China's attempts at order building, helping shape the "Community of Shared Destiny" discourse (Duarte, Gupta and Delvaje 2024).

This first historical self comprises the theme I label as "Civilisational State." It holds two codes. CIV-1 ("Civilisational Continuity and Rejuvenation") captures statements that frame China's contemporary rise and modernisation as the natural and historically destined culmination of a long, unique, and unbroken civilisational trajectory. It is closely associated with the themes of "Assertive Nationalism and Status-Seeking" (NAT) and "Regime Legitimation" (LEG). A key example is the following: "We have achieved moderate prosperity, the millennia-old dream of the Chinese nation, through persistent hard work. With this, we have elevated China to a higher historical stage of development." (Xi 2022, sec. 6).

⁴⁰ According to Dessein (2016), this universalising and expansionist interpretation of *Tianxia* was particularly notorious during the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644-1911).

CIV-2 (“Benign Historical Advantage”), for its part, captures the deliberate construction of a peaceful, non-hegemonic, and cooperative historical identity for China. This expression of a veiled Chinese moral superiority—especially when compared to Western peers—is clearly visible in excerpts such as this: “Several centuries ago, China was strong and its GDP accounted for 30% of the global total. Even then, China was never engaged in aggression or expansion.” (Xi 2017c, 5).

The second historical self-conceptualisation of interest relates to China’s *Century of Humiliation*. It makes reference to the period between 1839 and 1945, when the country suffered the trauma of unequal treaties and invasions from Western powers and Japan (Harnisch 2016a). It profoundly shapes China’s current NRC by fueling nationalist assertiveness on occasion, and acting as a crucial foundation for the CPC’s political legitimacy. By itself, it is a powerful historical construct often evoked to stabilise China’s identity, due to its strong emotional capacity as a traumatic episode in the country’s still recent trajectory (Harnisch 2016a). According to Schortgen (2021), its memory is a central part of a historical victim self-perception imbued within Beijing’s role conception, which in turn reinforces calls for the nation’s rejuvenation. Adjacent to it, the perennial reference to the trauma of foreign subjugation has helped CPC leadership to devise new legitimacy-bolstering tools in times of weakened influence of communist ideology (Dessein 2016).

The memory of national humiliation under Western hegemony informs key principles of China’s foreign policy, such as anti-interventionism and the primacy of national sovereignty. Due to its historical self-identification as a victim of colonial aggression, said memory also reinforced China’s bond with developing nations, of which Beijing perceived itself as a leader against Western aggression (Duggan 2020). Later, China would expand on this primary connection to position itself as a special sponsor of the South’s development, based on the notion that its past as a colonial victim would separate it from Western actors (Lin and Wang 2025). Alongside the reminiscence of *Tianxia*, the Century of Humiliation constitutes China’s identity of a *pessoptimist* nation (Chen 2016). Albeit their contrasting natures, those memories appear to converge on the same drivers for the “responsible great power” role, with both reinforcing status-seeking movements anchored in a renewed sense of nationalism, while also informing China’s order-building initiatives, especially in the developing world.

Due to the status of victimhood often associated with the aforementioned historical period, its respective theme receives the label of “Victimised State.” Its first code, “Sovereignty as Historical Redress” (VIC-1), tracks explicit links between China’s past traumas and the country’s contemporary commitment to uphold its national sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity. Naturally, it holds solid connections to the themes of “Core Interest Security” (SEC-1) and “Reactive Assertiveness and Counter-Contestation” (NAT-2). Its logic is made clear in the following example: “Since the beginning of modern times, the Chinese people have suffered from

aggressions and wars, and have learned the value of peace and the pressing need for development. Therefore, China will never inflict such sufferings on any other country." (China 2019, 8-9).

As for VIC-2 ("Anti-Hegemony as Moral Identity"), it applies to statements that use China's colonial history as a basis for opposing contemporary power politics by its adversaries. It captures the discursive move of defining China's role as a great power by what it is not—namely, a hegemon in the mold of past and present rivals. As Xi (2022, 9) has put it in his Report to the 20th Congress of the CPC, "We have taken a clear-cut stance against hegemonism and power politics in all their forms, and we have never wavered in our opposition to unilateralism, protectionism, and bullying of any kind." From this narrative construction, its synergies with CIV-2 are notable, confirming the argument that, despite their contrasting natures, both historical selves converge toward the same directions within China's role conception.

The last historical self consists of the years of ideological formation of Communist China during Mao's leadership. Beyond its socialist identity and revolutionary ideology, this historical self remains crucial as the genesis of the guiding principles of China's foreign policy, especially regarding relations with the developing world (Duggan 2020). Zhou Enlai's Five Principles of Co-Existence greatly influenced China's participation in the 1955 Bandung Conference, enshrining mutual respect for sovereignty, non-aggression and non-interference into the nation's foreign policy discourse (Liu 2022). After the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s, the CPC's ideological basis became ever closer to the spirit of Bandung and to "Third World" solidarity—ever since, the Conference became a reference point for Chinese foreign policymaking and served to legitimise China's claim of leadership among developing nations (Duggan 2020; Liu 2022).

Reinforcing the effect of the Century of Humiliation historical self, the formative experiences of the 1950s and 1960s have shaped modern narratives, such as China positioning itself as a strategic partner for development and the leader of South-South Cooperation, thereby framing its cooperation as an alternative to the political conditionalities of the Global North (Zhu *et al.* 2024). Moreover, especially after the Sino-Soviet split, it has solidified China's advocacy for autonomy and anti-hegemony (Harnisch 2016a).

Due to strong ties with developing nations, I have labeled this last historical self-conceptualisation as the "Developing State" theme. The pair of codes comprising the category hold similar functions. On one hand, "Solidarity through Shared Development Identity" (DVS-1) captures moments when China frames international cooperation as an effort of mutual assistance between developing nations, operating as equal partners. It is anchored in the logic of anti-colonial solidarity shaped during the 1950s and 1960s. In the 2021 White Paper for China's International Development Cooperation, the historical self is explicitly mentioned: "From the outset, even though

China was itself short of funds, it started offering assistance to needy countries in support of their fight for national independence and liberation." (China 2021, 3).

DVS-2 ("Alternative Model of Principled Cooperation"), on the other hand, captures the explicit normative contrast drawn between China's model of international cooperation and the perceived Western model. It highlights China's adherence to its foundational foreign policy principles, thus relating its current international strategies to Zhou Enlai and Bandung. In doing so, it carries a veiled challenge to the LIO, creating links to INT-2 ("Proposing Chinese solutions") and INT-3 ("Redefining Responsibility"). As stated in the previously mentioned White Paper, "When cooperating with other countries for development, no country should interfere in their efforts to find a development path suited to their own national conditions, interfere in their internal affairs, impose its own will on them, attach political strings, or pursue political self-interest." (China 2021, 6).

Finally, with all the pillars and their respective themes and codes layed out, the task remains to look at the NRC's structure as a whole. Based on this, I expect to reach a better picture of the dynamics behind the proactive shift of Xi's foreign policy. Then, already with the next chapter in mind, I briefly discuss how the internal tensions of China's "responsible great power" role may generate role conflict situations, even with role partners identified as part of the Global South—such as Brazil.

3.2.4. Modelling the "responsible great power" role

The previous section worked on each composing factor of China's NRC individually, first drawing out a deductive basis for themes and codes, and then giving them meaning through text-based context. For each code, I sought to provide at least one example of how they reflect in practice. I also remarked on some key relations between codes and themes; nonetheless, analysis remained circumscribed by each of the three general pillars that structured the section: domestic contestation, international interaction and historical self-conceptualisations. Now, it is time to account for them holistically, properly structuring relationships between themes and codes in a visual model.

First, for reasons of synthesis and recapitulation, I present Table 3.3, which summarises the finalised codebook with associated keywords and the main sources in which they appear:

Table 3.3 — Codifying China’s “responsible great power” NRC

Code	Theme	Keywords	Main Sources
General Theme/Category: Domestic Contestation			
NAT-1: National Rejuvenation	Assertive Nationalism & Status-Seeking (NAT)	rejuvenation, Chinese Dream, great nation, modern socialist country, Second Centenary Goal	Report to the 20th National Congress of the CCP (2022); Keynote Speech at the Third Belt and Road Forum (2023)
NAT-2: Status Recognition/'Face'	Assertive Nationalism & Status-Seeking (NAT)	dignity, core interests, blackmail, contain, blockade, coercive power, fighting spirit	Report to the 20th National Congress of the CCP (2022); White Paper: "China's National Defense in the New Era" (2019)
LEG-1: Linking Foreign Policy to Domestic Success	Regime Legitimation (LEG)	poverty reduction/alleviation, economic growth, contribution, people's lives, common prosperity, GDP, per capita income	Speech at the World Economic Forum, Davos (2017); Speech at the UN in Geneva (2017); Report to the 20th National Congress of the CCP (2022)
LEG-2: Party Leadership as a Prerequisite	Regime Legitimation (LEG)	leadership of the Communist Party of China, CPC, defining feature, greatest strength, highest political principle	Report to the 20th National Congress of the CCP (2022); Speech at the World Economic Forum, Davos (2017)
DEV-1: Development as Top Priority	Developmental Imperatives (DEV)	development, top priority, master key, prosperity, growth potential	Keynote Speech at the First Belt and Road Forum (2017); Speech at the UN in Geneva (2017)
DEV-2: Technological Self-Reliance	Developmental Imperatives (DEV)	self-reliance, science and technology, innovation, core technologies, breakthroughs, R&D	Report to the 20th National Congress of the CCP (2022); Keynote Speech at the Third Belt and Road Forum (2023)
DEV-3: Modernisation as a National Goal	Developmental Imperatives (DEV)	modernization, Chinese path, modern socialist country	Report to the 20th National Congress of the CCP (2022); Keynote Speech at the Third Belt and Road Forum (2023)

ECON-1: Justifying Openness	Economic Security & Distributional Politics (ECON)	opening-up, free trade, investment, globalization, protectionism, open world economy	Speech at the World Economic Forum, Davos (2017); Speech at the UN in Geneva (2017)
ECON-2: Shielding Strategic Sectors	Economic Security & Distributional Politics (ECON)	strategic sectors, supply chains, development security, unilateral sanctions, economic coercion, decoupling	Report to the 20th National Congress of the CCP (2022); Keynote Speech at the Third Belt and Road Forum (2023)
SEC-1: Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity	Core Interest Security (SEC)	sovereignty, territorial integrity, reunification, Taiwan, South China Sea, Diaoyu Islands	White Paper: "China's National Defense in the New Era" (2019); Report to the 20th National Congress of the CCP (2022)
SEC-2: Opposing External Interference	Core Interest Security (SEC)	external interference, internal affairs, separatism, Taiwan independence	Report to the 20th National Congress of the CCP (2022); White Paper: "China's National Defense in the New Era" (2019)
SEC-3: Defensive Posture	Core Interest Security (SEC)	defensive, self-defense, never seek hegemony, expansion, sphere of influence	White Paper: "China's National Defense in the New Era" (2019); Speech at the UN in Geneva (2017)
General Theme/Category: International Interaction			
INT-1: Upholding Multilateralism	Constructive Engagement and Reform (INT)	Multilateralism, United Nations (UN), UN Charter, World Trade Organization (WTO), international system, international law, rules-based governance, open world economy.	Speech at the UN in Geneva (2017); Speech at the World Economic Forum, Davos (2017); Speech by Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Munich Security Conference (2024).
INT-2: Proposing Chinese Solutions	Constructive Engagement and Reform (INT)	Community of a Shared Future for Mankind, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), Global Development Initiative (GDI), public goods,	Speech at the UN in Geneva (2017); Keynote Speeches at the First (2017) and Third (2023) Belt and Road Forums; Speech by Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Munich Security Conference

		new platform, Chinese way.	(2024).
INT-3: Redefining Responsibility	Constructive Engagement and Reform (INT)	South-South cooperation, mutual assistance, developing countries, win-win, no political strings, universally beneficial, inclusive, different from North-South cooperation.	White Paper: "China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era" (2021); Speech by Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Munich Security Conference (2024); Speech at the UN in Geneva (2017).
NAT-2: Status Recognition/'Face'	Reactive Assertiveness and Counter-Contestation (ACC)	-	-
SEC-2: Opposing External Interference	Reactive Assertiveness and Counter-Contestation (ACC)	-	-
General Theme/Category: Historical Self-Conceptualisations			
CIV-1: Civilisational Continuity and Rejuvenation	Civilisational State (CIV)	rejuvenation, millennia-old dream, lasting greatness, Chinese nation, modernization, civilization	Report to the 20th National Congress of the CCP (2022) ; Speech at the UN in Geneva (2017)
CIV-2: Benign Historical Identity	Civilisational State (CIV)	peace, cooperation, Silk Road, friendly emissaries, no aggression/expansion, no hegemony	Keynote Speech at the First Belt and Road Forum (2017) ; Speech at the UN in Geneva (2017) ; White Paper: "China's National Defense in the New Era" (2019)
VIC-1: Sovereignty as Historical Redress	Victimised State (VIC)	sovereignty, territorial integrity, reunification, aggressions, wars, sufferings, external interference, separatism	White Paper: "China's National Defense in the New Era" (2019) ; Report to the 20th National Congress of the CCP (2022)
VIC-2: Anti-Hegemony as Moral Identity	Victimised State (VIC)	hegemonism, power politics, unilateralism, bullying, coercive power, Cold War	Report to the 20th National Congress of the CCP (2022) ; Keynote Speech at the Third Belt and Road Forum (2023) ;

		mentality	Speech at the UN in Geneva (2017)
DVS-1: Solidarity through Shared Development Identity	Developing State (DVS)	South-South cooperation, mutual assistance, developing countries, common development, shared future, Global South	White Paper: "China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era" (2021) ; Speech by Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Munich Security Conference (2024)
DVS-2: Alternative Model of Principled Cooperation	Developing State (DVS)	non-interference, no political strings, mutual respect, equality, Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, alternative model	White Paper: "China's International Development Cooperation in the New Era" (2021) ; Keynote Speech at the First Belt and Road Forum (2017) ; Report to the 20th National Congress of the CCP (2022)

Source: Elaborated by the author

From the list provided by Table 3.3, some important relationships become apparent. I categorise these into three analytical types⁴¹: reinforcing, tensional, and legitimising. Reinforcing relationships highlight convergences between components of China's NRC. The most prominent example is the *domestic legitimisation triad*, an analytical construct that serves to tie China's foreign policy narratives directly to domestic legitimacy claims for the CPC. This triad contains three codes: NAT-1 ("National Rejuvenation"), DEV-3 ("Modernisation as a National Goal"), and LEG-2 ("Party Leadership as a Prerequisite"). Specifically, NAT-1 and DEV-3 delineate the primary goal of national rejuvenation, with the former encompassing the nationalist basis of the rejuvenation doctrine, and the latter translating it into an inherently Chinese trajectory of modernisation, directly tied to its economic and political model. LEG-2, which states the primacy of the CPC as the guide of China's success, then links the trajectory idealised in NAT-1 and DEV-3 to the indispensable leadership of the Party. This construction ultimately makes the Party's mission ontologically inseparable from the nation's destiny, constituting an overarching narrative that connects China's foreign policy goals to its domestic political legitimacy.

A similar relationship can be found between DEV-1 ("Development as Top Priority"), LEG-1 ("LEG-1: Linking Foreign Policy to Domestic Success" and INT-2 ("Proposing Chinese Solutions"). Closely associated with BRI documents, this cluster focuses on development as the key

⁴¹ It is important to note that these three categories are my original creation, not inspired by any previous theoretical work, and they are used exclusively to demonstrate what kind of relationship exists between codes. Their meaning will be explained along the subsection.

to China's rise and as the main axis of its international initiatives. Thus, it serves purposes both domestic and external, fuelling the reinterpretation of China's role as a provider of common goods. Consequently, it also harbours close ties to INT-3 ("Redefining Responsibility").

Other reinforcing relationships can also be found between themes as a whole. "Assertive Nationalism & Status-Seeking" (NAT), on one side, and "Core Interest Security" (SEC), on the other, share considerable synergies—enough so that their reactive elements, NAT-2 ("Status Recognition/Face") and SEC-2 ("Opposing External Interference"), comprise a theme of their own, "Reactive Assertiveness and Counter-Contestation" (ACC). Other reinforcing relationships include: DEV-2 ("Technological Self-Reliance") and ECON-2("Shielding Strategic Sectors"), since advancing strategic self-reliance and protecting strategic sectors closely align); ECON-1 ("Justifying Openness") and INT-1 ("Upholding Multilateralism"), as both are associated with the more conformist side of China's global insertion; as well as the previously mentioned synergy between CIV-2 ("Benign Historical Identity") and VIC-2 ("Anti-Hegemony as Moral Identity").

Tensional relationships, in contrast, encompass connections that pull China's role conception in divergent directions. For instance, just as ECON-1 ("Justifying Openness") contrasts with ECON-2 ("Shielding Strategic Sectors"), so it also diverges from DEV-2 ("Technological Self-Reliance"), due to the reinforcing link between the latter two. Another crucial tension is present in the *Multilateralism versus Security Dilemma*: on one side, China positions itself as a defender of international rules and institutions (INT-1), and on the other, it staunchly defends its sovereignty on matters it deems impervious to national security—especially territorial disputes (SEC-1 and SEC-2). While the NRC contains discursive elements that attempt to balance such contradictions—such as SEC-3, in which China states its defensive posture on military issues—the dilemma has considerable effects over the country's role enactment.

Finally, legitimising relationships refer to connections in which one code or theme serves to legitimise the elements of another. They are particularly interesting because the links they provide help explain how historical self-conceptualisations integrate into the general structure of China's role. VIC-1 ("Sovereignty as Historical Redress"), for instance, establishes a close legitimising relationship with the codes of the *domestic legitimation triad*, providing them with the historical trajectory to which they belong. Likewise, the entire theme of the "Victimised State" (VIC) serves to legitimise the theme of "Core Interest Security" (SEC)⁴². Similarly, CIV-2 ("Benign Historical Identity") and VIC-2 ("Anti-Hegemony as Moral Identity") help shape a historical narrative of China as a *benign leader*, which is then used to justify Beijing's positioning as a defender of globalisation and of international norms (INT-1 and ECON-1). The theme of "Developing State"

⁴² While VIC-1 linking up with SEC-1 and SEC-2 is the obvious relationship, it is worth noting the close alignment between VIC-2 and SEC-3.

also serves as a powerful legitimising tool, especially to the previously mentioned cluster of DEV-1 (“Development as Top Priority”), LEG-1 (“Linking Foreign Policy to Domestic Success”) and INT-2 (“Proposing Chinese Solutions”), which centers on development as China’s primary goal, source of legitimacy and axis of international cooperation—all of which refer back to the country’s past as a key voice for developing nations.

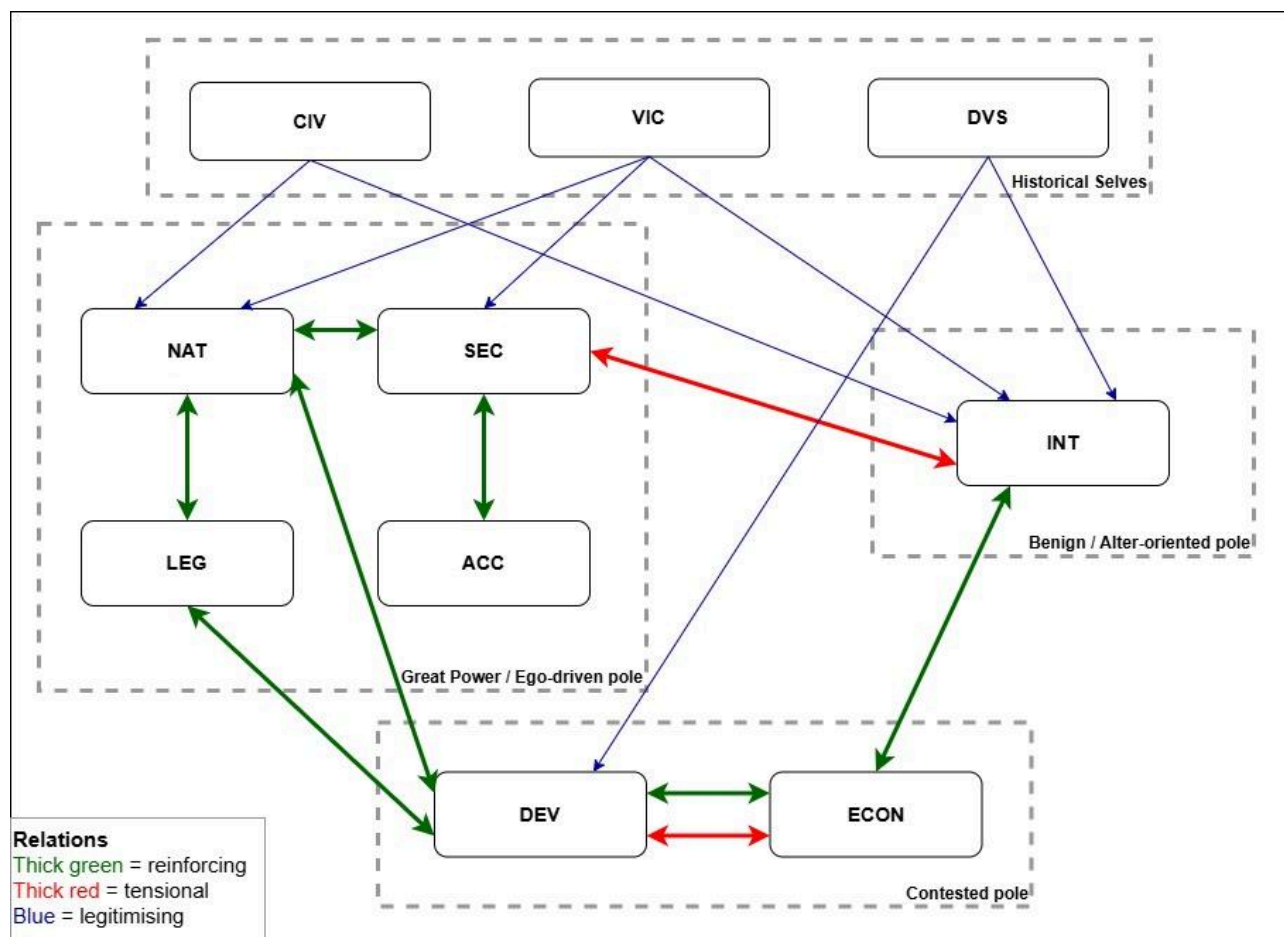
With these three relationship types in mind (reinforcing, tensional and legitimising), we can circle back to the three pillars sustaining the role’s structure (domestic contestation, international interaction and historical self-conceptualisation), and reflect on their general purpose vis-à-vis one another. In this regard, the most important set of relationships develop between the pillars of domestic contestation and international interaction. The preliminary expectation was that international interaction would serve as the balancing act of China’s NRC, refraining the more salient components of its ego-driven shift. While this is in part the case—with key tensional relationships happening between themes of the two pillars—an ever growing dimension of international interaction has the opposite effect on China’s role, reinforcing ego-driven dynamics and justifying assertiveness, in some instances. In short, domestic contestation and international interaction comprise a complex ensemble of demands that do not always converge.

Hence, when the country’s leadership must legitimise specific choices of conduct in detriment of another, the pillar of historical self-conceptualisation enters in action. Analysis proved the legitimising function is the main differential of historical selves in China’s role conception. In general, these legitimisation dynamics are tied to the ego-driven shift of the role, with historical selves such as the “Civilisational State” and the “Victimised State” often fuelling sentiments of unfairness, need for status and even exceptionalism. Nevertheless, narratives involving China’s history are not unequivocal: even negative past experiences can be used to advance constructive elements of the country’s foreign policy. Of course, this constructiveness tends to reflect Beijing’s increased proactiveness in international affairs, i.e. the promotion of its own initiatives and solutions in the global stage, but not so in aggressive terms. The theme of the “Developing State,” as well as the image of a benign leader, converge on stimulating that side of China’s rise. It is worth noting that the key audience for these narratives remain the country’s partners in the Global South (Duggan 2016, 2020). As such, Beijing’s role conception is likely to contain a specific relationality when dealing with developing nations. The next chapter, which revolves around a case study anchored in Sino-Brazilian relations, shall need to look for externalisations of that particularity.

In addition, the analysis of the general structure of the “responsible great power” NRC foregrounds the proactive shift of Xi’s foreign policy. With international interaction losing its capacity to balance out the weight of domestic pressure—frequently serving as a reinforcement to it, instead—, and historical selves acting as rhetorical instruments rather than drivers per se, the

ego-centered dimension of China's role conceptualisation grows ever more prominent underneath the nation's NRC. With that in mind, Figure 3.1 proposes a structural model of China's NRC based on the thematic analysis conducted throughout this chapter.

Figure 3.1 — The “Responsible Great Power” NRC Diagram



Source: Elaborated by the author

The diagram above maps the dynamic interplay and the consequential ego-driven shift that increasingly defines China's role conception under Xi's tutelage. To put greater emphasis on this shift, the model organises themes into four distinct clusters. At the top lies the cluster of historical selves, containing the three historical identities discussed along the chapter: the Victimised, Civilisational, and Developing State. Below it, the core of the diagram illustrates the structural imbalance between two opposing poles. On one side, the ego-driven pole (left) represents a dominant block of themes that prioritise inward-looking goals, such as regime survival, national sovereignty, and status enhancement. These forces collectively exert significant pressure for self-assertion and protectionism.

Conversely, the alter-oriented pole (right) represents China's intent to act as a benign force in international affairs, embodied by the theme "Constructive Engagement and Reform" (INT). This pole reflects Beijing's genuine aspiration to provide global public goods and integrate with the international order. Caught between these opposing pressures lies the contested pole, comprising the themes of "Developmental Imperatives" (DEV) and "Economic Security & Distributional Politics" (ECON). These policy areas are politically ambiguous, simultaneously demanding the openness associated with the benign, alter-oriented pole, while also being increasingly securitised by the demands of the ego-driven block. The dynamics of this structure are visualised through the connections between themes. Blue lines indicate a one-way flow of legitimation from history to the present, connecting the first clusters to the other three. Thicker green lines represent reinforcement links, highlighting positive synergies between themes. And finally, thicker red lines mark the internal tensions where the logics of the different themes and poles collide.

In hindsight, the model presented in Figure 3.1 indicates how the ego-driven pole frequently overrides the benign intentions of its alter-oriented counterpart. Therefore, with Beijing more likely to pay attention to domestic demands instead of the expectations of role partners, the potential for role conflict situations between ego and alter increases proportionately. In the next chapter, we shall see this in practice, focusing on Brazil as an alter.

Chapter Conclusion

Chapter 3 sought to advance the first part of this dissertation's empirical analysis. Its focus has lied solely over the dimension of China's national role conception. Through thematic coding of selected examples of Beijing's role declarations during Xi Jinping's administration, I built upon the preliminary considerations regarding the "responsible great power" role. Through my analysis, the reader should have gained a more complete picture of China's role, beyond the three general factors that comprise it (domestic contestation, international interaction and historical self-conceptualisation). As I have sought to posit throughout the chapter, the internal structure of the NRC is remarkably complex and dynamic, reflecting the foreign policy of a nation whose leadership must balance a wide array of social, economic and political demands.

Still, it is notable how, despite its inherent tensions and contradictions, China manages to maintain a minimally consistent narrative around its role conception. While ego-driven dynamics have become the norm, Beijing strives to frame its quest for status as not only natural, but beneficial for actors both at home and abroad. When the country's leadership acts beyond that logic—for instance, when role declarations turn markedly assertive, as when some red line has been crossed—the Chinese interpretation of "responsibility" still allows room for vindication. Crucially,

antagonising Western counterparts does not break with Beijing's narrative of global harmony-building. From the Party's perspective, the country's past provides enough legitimation for associating responsibility with the assertive defence of sovereignty without incurring in insurmountable contradiction.

Nonetheless, the ego-driven dynamics promoting the shift in China's role conception do not create tensions with Western powers alone. Although different in their vocalisation, conflicts can also appear vis-à-vis developing partners' expectations as well. When dealing with this kind of other, China's interpretation of responsibility is not as permissive of assertiveness as when dealing with Western nations. It lies with the next and final chapter of this dissertation to understand the development of such contradictions in relation to one of China's key developing partners: Brazil. In it, I must analyse particular elements of Beijing's role conception in a geographically circumscribed setting. Even more importantly, the following chapter breaks with the boundaries of ego expectations—moving to an analysis of role enactment and alter expectations through a case study centered on China's insertion in Brazil's EV market.

CHAPTER 4 — CASE STUDY: CHINA, BRAZIL, TRADE BARRIERS AND ELECTRIC VEHICLES

4. Chapter Introduction

As this dissertation comes to a close, our focus both branches out from the boundaries of role conception, and narrows in terms of scope. While the previous chapter concerned itself with the overall structure of China's "responsible great power" role, the present one must condense the latter's findings to a specific relational context—that of bilateral relations between Brazil and China. Hence, the final chapter of this dissertation aims to shed light into this relational context through a case study on the role-informed dynamics of Sino-Brazilian trade relations. More specifically, the case study focuses on the regulation of Chinese electric vehicles' (EVs) imports by Brazilian authorities from 2023 onward.

However, for our analysis to properly shift from the ego to the alter, we must first localise China's NRC vis-à-vis our alter of interest, Brazil. This shall be the mission of the chapter's first section, in which I add new primary sources in order to contextualise the NRC in light of a specific relational dynamic. While this section does not enter the case study per se, it represents a crucial bridging step, which harnesses the previous discussions on role conception towards informing the intra-role conflict argument that anchors the case study.

Then, the chapter finally enters the case study, when I dissect the alter expectations Brazil has signalled regarding China's NRC. This is done by first presenting a general picture of alter expectations during Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's third term in office (2023-), which tend to converge with their ego counterpart. Next, I introduce the imposition of tariffs on Chinese EVs as a situational break with said convergence, in which Brazil cautiously signalled

dissatisfaction with China's role enactment. Once the tariffs have been pictured at the sector and policy level, I end the section with a nuanced view of Brazil's signalled alter expectations, and consequently, of the intra-role conflict argument. The final section centers on role adaptation. In it, I break down how Brazil's choice of signalling dissatisfaction prompted China to adapt its behaviour without actively contradicting its role conception. The chapter then ends in a few concluding remarks.

4.1. Localising China's NRC

This section is tasked with circumscribing the overall tenets of the "responsible great power" NRC to the specific context of Sino-Brazilian relations. In doing so, I am particularly interested in accounting for potential particularities of the aforementioned bilateral engagement under the broader aegis of Beijing's role conception. My expectation is that the main sources and narrative tools of the "responsible great power" NRC do not shift substantially when dealing with a geographically specific context. Nonetheless, the ways through which these factors are operationalised may indeed be contingent on localised dynamics. Moreover, to develop the required sensibility to such dynamics, I take a gradual approach to geographic contextualisation. This means I integrate Chinese documents regarding the LAC in general, alongside with bilateral sources focused solely on Brazil. This gradual approach is also important because many Chinese foreign policy documents understand the LAC region as a whole, making the region a crucial stepping stone for the analysis—even if our inquiry holds no intention of generalising findings for the entire LAC.

In order to achieve the goal of localising China's NRC, the section comes divided as follows: first, just as I did in the previous chapter, I present the selected sources utilised to ground the analysis in empirical data. Second, I engage with code and theme development, adhering to the same deductive strategy applied to study the overall structure of the NRC. However, I do so with a key caveat in mind: unlike in my original codebook, my intention here is not to create completely new codes. As the localised role conception must be connected to the overall NRC, my desired output consists of derived codes, i.e. codes explicitly attached to a code and theme present in the Chapter 3 codebook.

4.1.1. Sampling sources on Chinese relations with LAC and Brazil

In Chapter 3, I anchored source selection on a three-pronged strategy (grand strategic, economic and developmental, and BRI related documents) devised to capture the most salient environments for role declarations of China's role conception. This was carried out due to the wide

array of primary sources that could potentially compose the dataset, which called for source selection to adhere to a consistent logic with proper justification. However, now that the pool has been narrowed to a geographical circumscription, the sampling of primary data does not need to follow equally stringent rules of selection. The only two criteria I have sought to apply here are recency and salience. Namely, I have given preference to sources that are recent relative to the writing of this dissertation. Consequently, sources otherwise older than 5 years were chosen due to their salience, i.e. their particular weight in translating Xi's policies for Brazil or the region as a whole.

With that in mind, I have selected a further five sources dedicated to China's role conception vis-à-vis LAC and Brazil. These documents, comprising official policy papers, high-level speeches, a joint statement, and a signed presidential article, are treated as authoritative role declarations that provide direct evidence of China's ego expectations for the Western Hemisphere. This curated sample allows for a multi-level analysis, examining both the broad, programmatic vision for the entire LAC region and the specific, intensified role conceptions articulated within the Sino-Brazilian partnership.

- General LAC Regional Sources: I have selected three sources to outline the foundational principles and strategic frameworks of China's engagement with the LAC region as a whole:
 - China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean (2016)⁴³: This is the most recent official policy paper on the region and serves as the foundational role declaration for the Xi Jinping era regarding LAC. It programmatically codifies China's ego expectations, officially introducing the goal of building a “community of shared future” with LAC countries. The document is essential for its detailed articulation of the “1+3+6” cooperation framework, which declares the specific functional roles China intends to play: one guiding plan, three driving forces (trade, investment, finance), and six priority cooperation areas.
 - Foreign Minister Wang Yi's Speech at the Second Ministerial Meeting of the China-CELAC Forum (2018): This speech is a pivotal role declaration as it marks the formal extension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to the LAC region. Delivered in Santiago, Chile, it explicitly altercasts Latin America into the BRI's global narrative by evoking a shared history of a “trans-Pacific maritime Silk Road”. Declaring the BRI to be the “golden key” for the region's future, the speech is vital for analysing how China's regional NRC was deliberately fused with its global ambitions, positioning LAC as an integral part of its premier foreign policy project.

⁴³ It should be noted that a more recent White Paper on Latin America has been released on December 10th, 2025, after the period of data collection for this research.

- Keynote Speech by President Xi Jinping at the Fourth Ministerial Meeting of the China-CELAC Forum (2025): it is the most contemporary high-level declaration for the entire LAC region. It reaffirms and updates the central role declaration of building a “China-LAC Community with a Shared Future”. The address is notable for explicitly framing the partnership within a Global South identity. Hence, it provides a concrete vision for the future, making it a crucial source for understanding China’s current ego expectations vis-à-vis the region.
- China-Brazil Bilateral Sources: as to reveal the more specific role conceptualisations China articulates for its relationship with Brazil, I have outlined two primary sources:
 - Joint Statement Between the People’s Republic of China and the Federative Republic of Brazil on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2023): This joint statement is the most comprehensive recent codification of the two countries’ shared role conceptions. It is a powerful role declaration outlining a common vision for global governance, with both sides pledging to “practice true multilateralism” and work for a “more just and equitable international governance system”.
 - Signed Article by President Xi Jinping in the Brazilian Newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo* (2024): As a direct act of public diplomacy, this article explicitly declares China’s ego expectations for a Brazilian audience. Xi reiterates the exceptionalism of the relationship, and strongly declares a shared leadership role for the Global South, thus encapsulating China’s long-term vision for an enduring vanguard partnership with Brazil.

Table 4.1 — List of primary sources utilised to localise China’s NRC relative to Brazil and the region

Source Title	Date	Category
China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean	November 2016	LAC Regional
Speech by Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the Second Ministerial Meeting of the China-CELAC Forum	January 2018	LAC Regional
Keynote Speech by President Xi Jinping at the Fourth Ministerial Meeting of the China-CELAC Forum	May 2025	LAC Regional

Joint Statement Between the People's Republic of China and the Federative Republic of Brazil	April 2023	China-Brazil Bilateral
Signed Article by President Xi Jinping in Brazilian Media	November 2024	China-Brazil Bilateral

Source: Elaborated by the author

4.1.2. China's localised role conception in Brazil and LAC: tailoring a derived codebook for the "responsible great power" role

As was previously mentioned in the section introduction, here I follow the same empirical strategy adopted in Chapter 3. Namely, I start from a deductive standpoint, basing code development on theoretical considerations and existing literature on the subject. Then, I refine codes and themes through inductive means, testing the deductive codebook against the primary sources. Nonetheless, key differences separate the current effort from that of Chapter 3. First, concerning the basis for deductive code development, the original codebook had to rely on extant literature on China's foreign policy. Now, we have the advantage of already possessing a defined codebook for the "responsible great power" NRC. Consequently, as the deductive step of the analysis shall be anchored in the original codebook, I define the output of this subsection as *derived codes*. Each of them operates as a subcode, sharing a specific link to a code and theme of the original codebook. This relationship will be indicated in the labelling of derived codes. For example, a subcode relating to the code "Solidarity through Shared Development Identity" (DVS-1) and its theme of "Developing State" (DVS) will be tagged as DVS-1a. These steps guarantee that the output of Chapter 3 proves capable of informing the current chapter. They also ensure that the localised codes appear consistently tied to the role's general structure.

The second main difference informing the current analysis is that it must be shorter than the Chapter 3 codebook. While the latter was the focus of an entire chapter, the list of derived codes is simply an intermediary step meant to leverage previous analyses for the current chapter's main object: the case study. Therefore, given that the original codebook will serve as the framework for the derived codes list, I alert in advance that not all codes and themes presented in the previous chapter will be covered by a respective subcode. Only the most salient to the effort of localisation remain of interest. In hindsight, this raises the question of what makes a particular theme or code particularly important for localising the NRC. Thus, before I proceed to the derived codes list and their examples, I must first tackle that very question.

The main logic behind the prioritisation of parent themes and codes is that of relational resonance. As this chapter concerns itself with ego-alter dynamics, focus should be on elements most acute to the interplay between China's self-conception and Brazil's position as a role partner. I break down the logic of relational resonance into two filters. The first one makes a distinction between introspective and interactive parent themes. Aspects such as "Assertive Nationalism" (NAT) and "Regime Legitimation" (LEG), while fundamental drivers of China's global foreign policy, primarily address a domestic audience or react to security threats in Beijing's strategic periphery. In the context of bilateral diplomacy with Brazil—a distant, democratic, and culturally distinct partner—China suppresses these inward-facing narratives in favour of outward-facing themes that emphasise connectivity and shared identity. Combining this with the status of Brazil and its region as Global South countries, the first filter gives particular weight to themes such as "Developing State" (DVS) and "International Interaction" (INT).

The second criterion for selection was structural compatibility. Crucially, Brazil represents an outlier when compared to the quintessential Global South partner often imagined in China's developmental rhetoric. As a G20 economy, fellow BRICS founding member and major recipient of Chinese investment (Niu 2024), Brazil's demand is not merely for basic connectivity, but for high-complexity infrastructure and industrial revitalisation (Bizzolero Revelez and Baggio 2020). This leads to the selection of the themes "Developmental Imperatives" (DEV) and "Economic Security" (ECON). While basic infrastructure projects do not disappear from the Brazilian context, China's rhetoric for Brazil expectedly reinterprets these investments as strategic enablers of the country's continued progress, instead of simple means of poverty alleviation (China and Brazil 2023). Moreover, since the topics of deindustrialisation and reindustrialisation are so relevant for Sino-Brazilian relations (Bizzolero Revelez and Baggio 2020), this filter is also meant to highlight discursive interfaces most likely to be objects of role conflict.

Together, these filters and the parent themes they prioritise should also help identify to what degree China differentiates Brazil from the rest of the LAC region in its role conception. The analysis is particularly interested in instances where China creates a "Vanguard" status for Brazil, decoupling it from the broader region by framing it as a co-architect of the Global South's rise. Thus, while in LAC documents China may strive to appear as a leader, in the bilateral rhetoric Beijing should appear more careful in order to paint Brazil as a "Strategic Peer," replacing the language of assistance with the vocabulary of "joint coordination," "global governance," and "strategic partnership."

With these considerations clarified, I now proceed to the presentation of the list of derived codes, starting with its most representative label: "The Vanguard Partnership" (DVS-1a). Its parent code, DVS-1 ("Solidarity through Shared Development Identity"), being rooted in China's

historical self of a “Developing State” (DVS), emphasises horizontal solidarity. Namely, as a developing country, China stands shoulder-to-shoulder with its Global South partners against the injustices of Western hegemony. At its core, it reflects a narrative of sameness, of shared victimhood and struggles. The localisation purported by DVS-1a consists of the introduction of an implicit hierarchy within that solidarity. It serves to acknowledge that Brazil does not wish to be seen as an average developing country, but as a leader among them—a position similar to the one China claims for itself.

Consequently, Beijing shifts the narrative to frame Brazil as a strategic peer, capable of co-designing reforms for the global order. We can detect this shift by comparing excerpts from regional documents and bilateral ones, dedicated to Sino-Brazilian relations. For the LAC region, the discourse tends to be inclusive and egalitarian: China presents itself as a reliable partner to everyone, regardless of size or status, with no country being elevated above its purported “Community of Shared Future.” Take, for instance, the following quote by Xi at the Opening Ceremony of the 4th China-CELAC Forum: “China and LAC countries are important members of the Global South. Independence and autonomy are our glorious tradition. Development and revitalization are our inherent right” (Xi 2025, 4). As regional speech, the subject is plural, and focus lies on shared rights. The logic of sameness is also reverberated in Wang Yi’s speech at the 2018 China-CELAC Forum: “Despite the geographical distance, China and LAC countries are all developing countries, and share the dream of world peace, prosperity and happiness of the people.” (Wang 2018, 1).

Brazil-specific sources, on the other hand, explicitly highlight the country’s status among developing nations. The following excerpt, taken from Xi’s signed article in *Folha de S. Paulo*, serves as a good illustration: “The two countries have a relationship that always stays at the vanguard of relationships between China and developing countries...” (Xi 2024, 2)⁴⁴. In their 2023 joint communiqué, the differentiated status Beijing casts on Brazil becomes more evident: “The Chinese side attaches great importance to Brazil’s influence and role in regional and international affairs, understands and supports Brazil’s aspiration to play an even more prominent role in the UN.” (China and Brazil 2023, 3).

The next code is “The Exemplary South-South Model” (INT-3a). It is very close to DVS-1a. While the latter defines the shared status of the partners, the former implies the normative function of the partnership itself. Its parent code (INT-3, “Redefining Responsibility”) generally involves China proposing alternatives to Western norms. With Brazil in the picture, Beijing thus frames the bilateral relationship as an exemplary model of what it wants to achieve as a superior alternative to

⁴⁴ “Os dois países têm um relacionamento que sempre fica na vanguarda dos relacionamentos entre a China e os países em desenvolvimento... [oferecendo] um exemplo de cooperação ganha-ganha e futuro compartilhado entre dois grandes países em desenvolvimento.”

the Western Model, especially with developing countries. As Xi has stated, “Sino Brazilian relations... have effectively promoted the development of both countries... [and] offered an example of win-win cooperation and shared future between two large developing countries.” (Xi 2024, 2). The LAC region, for its value, serves as a testing ground for the same discourse, which focuses on inviting countries to join the example set by Sino-Brazilian relations: “We need to set a new exemplary model for the South-South cooperation, and bring more certainty and positive energy to world peace, stability and prosperity.” (Wang 2018, 3).

The third derived code is “Synergistic Reindustrialisation” (DEV-1a). Its parent code, “Development as Top Priority” (DEV-1), emphasised development as the key solution for the problems plaguing the Global South. What DEV-1a does is specify what development means in light of the Sino-Brazilian relational context. At its core, it reflects China’s desire to present itself as a partner of Brazil’s modernisation, dialoguing with the latter’s status as a G20 economy suffering from premature deindustrialisation. Thus, Beijing explicitly frames its own initiatives as compatible with and supportive of Brazil’s domestic industrial strategies.

Similar to the dynamic present in DVS-1a (“The Vanguard Partnership”), there is a tacit promotion of horizontality between the parts⁴⁵. As quoted from Xi’s article on *Folha de S. Paulo*, “We will continuously promote the reinforcement of synergies between the Belt and Road Initiative and Brazil’s development strategies, constantly strengthening the strategic, global and creative nature of cooperation...” (Xi 2024, 5)⁴⁶. In it, the adjectives “strategic, global and creative” are key, implying innovation and reinforcing the modernisation narrative. Likewise, in their 2023 joint communiqué, China signalled positively on reducing trade asymmetries with Brazil—a fundamental aspect of the latter’s deindustrialisation anxiety: “They [Brazil and China] pledged to create enabling conditions for more competitive and high value-added products to be part of the bilateral trade.” (Brazil and China 2023, 6).

Regional policy documents, for their part, concentrate their narratives on overcoming infrastructure bottlenecks, with China establishing a relationship of provision with LAC countries. While industrial and technological cooperation are present in these texts, capacity building is framed in more vertical terms, with China helping LAC. The following quote, from Xi’s speech at the 4th China-CELAC Forum, is a useful example of this: “We should foster greater synergy between our development strategies, expand high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, and bolster cooperation in traditional areas such as infrastructure, agriculture and food, and energy and minerals.” While the mention of “synergy” and the pursuit of “high-quality” cooperation mirror the

⁴⁵ “Brazil and China have expressed an interest in examining synergies between Brazil’s development policies and investment programmes, including in South American integration efforts, and China’s development policies and international initiatives, including the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’” (China and Brazil 2023, 5).

⁴⁶ “Vamos promover continuamente o reforço das sinergias entre a Iniciativa Cinturão e Rota e as estratégias de desenvolvimento do Brasil, fortalecer constantemente a natureza estratégica, global e criativa da cooperação...”

approach adopted for Brazil, China immediately links this to “traditional areas” like agriculture and minerals, hinting that its vision remains anchored in primary sectors and basic infrastructure.

A similar logic can be seen in Wang Yi’s 2018 China-CELAC Forum speech, in which he stated: “To break developmental bottlenecks, LAC countries need to foster home-grown pillar industries with a competitive edge. China has the equipment, technology, funding and training opportunities you need.” (Wang 2018, 5). While reinforcing the need for competitive local industries, the Chinese minister would also seek to cast China into the position of the provider of solutions, relating to a vertical model of cooperation. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the issue of deindustrialisation is also tackled at the regional level: “Based on the business-led and market-oriented principles, discussions will be held on the joint construction of industrial parks, logistics parks, high-tech industrial parks, special economic zones and other industrial agglomeration areas, so as to help Latin American and Caribbean countries in their industrial upgrading.” (China 2016, 4).

The last code, “Strategic Technological Integration” (ECON-2a), tackles the issue of strategic autonomy in technological sectors. Its parent code, ECON-2 (“Shielding Strategic Sectors”) was focused on criticising actions that interfered in China’s own supply chains and core technologies. ECON-2a localises that concern by offering partners shared responsibility in building technological autonomy. Similarly to what is seen in code DEV-1a, the caveat from regional documents to bilateral ones revolves around the purported horizontality between the parts. When the LAC region is the audience, China is more likely to present itself as a provider of technologies and technical assistance, with others appearing as consumers. The digital Silk Road initiative is a significant point of inflection in this dynamic (Wang 2018)⁴⁷.

With Brazil, the logic tends to focus on horizontal cooperation, citing specific instances of previous or future collaboration in advanced scientific and technological sectors. This includes space and satellite technology, such as the CBERS-6 (China-Brazil Earth Resources Satellite 6, expected to be launched in 2028) and the BINGO Radio Telescope (Baryon Acoustic Oscillations from Integrated Neutral Gas Observations); particle physics, like the collaboration with the Brazilian Sirius and the Chinese HEPS (High Energy Photon Source); as well as projects in digital infrastructure, energy transition and biotechnology (China and Brazil 2023). Again, this supposed contrast between regional and bilateral framings should be taken with a grain of salt, as China also casts itself as a partner in technological advancement for the whole region⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ “China hopes to enhance coordination between the Belt and Road Science, Technology and Innovation Cooperation Action Plan and the development strategies of LAC countries, and build a China-LAC online Silk Road and a digital Silk Road.” (Wang 2018, 5).

⁴⁸ “China will actively explore the expansion of its cooperation with Latin American and Caribbean countries in high-tech fields such as information industry, civil aviation, civil nuclear energy and new energy, to build more joint laboratories” (China 2016, 4).

In summary, a holistic view of the four derived codes reveals that the localisation of China's NRC operates along two axes. The first one, composed of DVS-1a ("The Vanguard Partnership") and INT-3a ("The Exemplary South-South Model"), is political in nature, designed to validate Brazil's differentiated status as a regional leader, and then utilise the Sino-Brazilian partnership performatively, framing it as an example of South-South cooperation. The second axis is economic, being composed of DEV-1a ("Synergistic Reindustrialisation") and ECON-2a ("Strategic Technological Integration"). Together, they represent two sides of the same approach, tailored to tackle partner's anxieties of dealing with China. Despite some shifts in Beijing's narrative between regional and bilateral documents, both codes are clearly identifiable in all the selected sources, indicating that China seeks to promote guarantees of its cooperation to all regional partners, Brazil included.

Table 4.2 — List of derived codes

Derived Code	Parent Code	Localised Definition	Keywords
DVS-1a: The Vanguard Partnership	DVS-1 (Solidarity through Shared Development Identity)	Elevates the relationship to a status of exceptionalism, framing Brazil as a "strategic peer" and co-architect of the Global South's rise.	vanguard; global strategic partnership; influence; responsibility; history; forerunner; major large developing countries.
INT-3a: The Exemplary South-South Model	INT-3 (Redefining Responsibility)	Frames the Sino-Brazilian relationship as the normative standard ("Exemplary Model") for international relations, validating the "China Solution" by proving its efficacy in the West's sphere.	exemplary model; example; true multilateralism; new era; South-South cooperation; win-win; new form of international relations.
DEV-1a: Synergistic Reindustrialisation	DEV-1 (Development as Top Priority)	Reframes partnership not as aid but as a strategic enabler of Brazil's industrial competitiveness, aligning BRI with national industrial policy.	synergy; industrial investment; development policies; bottlenecks; manufacturing; competitive edge; innovation; high value-added products.
ECON-2a: Strategic Technological Integration	ECON-2 (Shielding Strategic Sectors)	Offers shared strategic security through technological integration, providing alternatives to Western standards in sensitive sectors (Space, 5G).	technology transfer; joint development; CBERS; 5G; electric vehicles; telecommunications; synchrotron; digital economy; deep space.

Source: Elaborated by the author

Above, I summarise the list of derived codes, with their respective parent codes, localised definitions (with a focus on Sino-Brazilian relations) and keywords. With the adapted codes, the chapter can begin moving on to the case study, with a more dedicated view on the alter expectations signalled by Brazil, specifically during Lula da Silva's third term in office (2023-).

4.2. Negotiating role expectations: Brazil as an alter and the EV case

With the previous section establishing the derived codes through which Beijing localises its “responsible great power” role for the Brazilian context, it now remains the task of making sense of the other side of the equation: Brazil's role expectations as an alter to China. The return of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to the presidency, in 2023, heralded the resurgence of the country's active diplomacy (Carvalho 2023; Faleiro 2024). In the economic sphere, its equivalent was represented by the concern over reindustrialising the country's production (Hamatsu and de Souza 2024). Consequently, the period has brought a unique opportunity for resonance between Brazil's policy agendas and China's self-conception as a partner in development and global reform.

However, this resonance is not without contestation. In this section, I intend to explore the alter perspective by moving from the appearance of general diplomatic alignment to the underlying friction exemplified by the case of Chinese EV imports to Brazil. I use this case study to argue that the Brazilian government, especially in the economic sphere, maintains a state of negotiated dissatisfaction regarding China's role enactment. Crucially, Brazil uses its trade policy as a filter, reconciling the clashing demands of domestic stakeholders. On one hand, the National Association of Automotive Vehicle Manufacturers (Anfavea), the representative of traditional automakers in Brazil, frames Chinese imports as a threat to the nation's faltering industry, demanding protectionist barriers (Estigarríbia 2025). On the other hand, defenders of energy transition represented by the Brazilian Association of Electric Vehicles (ABVE) fear that obstacles to trade may cause a technological lag and slow down EV adoption in Brazil (Moliterno 2023).

By analysing the 2023 gradual reinstatement of tariffs on EV imports (Brazil 2023), as well as subsequent (2024-2025) disputes over the implementation schedule and similar barriers against EV assembly kits (Barros and Alves 2025), the case demonstrates how the Brazilian state has signalled its alter expectations through the use of its trade policy. While Brasília proved keen to filter down the more galvanised perspectives voiced by private stakeholders, the policy choice has nonetheless tacitly communicated dissatisfaction with China's role enactment. In the following subsections, I begin by presenting the general state of convergence between Brazilian and Chinese official rhetorics, and then introduce the EV case as a paradigmatic illustration of the underlying role conflict shaping their bilateral ties, mainly in the economic sphere.

4.2.1. China-Brazil relations during Lula da Silva's third term

After four years of institutional hollowing and isolationism under then-President Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022) (De Sousa *et al.* 2023; Faleiro 2024), the inauguration of Lula da Silva's third term in office, in 2023, initiated what Faleiro (2024) has termed a *reconstruction* of the Brazilian state's international presence. In general, this meant a return to the country's traditional foreign policy principles, especially universalism, multilateralism and regional integration (Faleiro 2024). Institutionally, Brazil's Ministry of Foreign Relations—known as Itamaraty—regained its prominence in advising the head of state and coordinating government action abroad. Moreover, in terms of decision-making, the recurrence of traditional figures of Lula's previous terms—such as Celso Amorim (now Chief Advisor to the President) and Mauro Vieira (the current Minister of Foreign Relations)—favoured the continuity of Brazil's “ativa e altiva” (high and lofty) diplomacy, aimed at increasing the nation's profile in international affairs (De Sousa *et al.* 2023; Faleiro 2024).

Thematically, the reconstruction of Brazil's foreign policy has once again prioritised the active engagement with international organisations and forums, mainly the G20, BRICS and the United Nations, where Brazil sought to influence central subjects of the global agenda (Carvalho 2023; Faleiro 2024). However, amid its renewed momentum in international agendas, Brazilian decision-making circles still had to navigate a complex and polarised internal political scene, as “practically all sectoral policies that provide substance to foreign policy needed to be redone. Besides the lack of resources, there were no environmental, cultural, human rights, health, education, science and technology, trade, or industrial policies.” (Faleiro 2024, 7)⁴⁹.

Nonetheless, at the core of the country's domestic policies, Lula's administration set its eyes on the pursuit of neo-industrialisation (Hamatsu and de Souza 2024). The nation's new industrial policy, named *Nova Indústria Brasil* (NIB), emerged as a direct response to Brazil's severe deindustrialisation in previous years, and aligned itself with a global landscape where nations increasingly implement mission-oriented industrial policies aimed at transitioning their economies toward clean technologies (Hamatsu and de Souza 2024). The NIB is structured around six missions, covering areas from sustainable mobility to energy transition. Crucially, the program seeks to leverage the country's relatively clean energy matrix toward a primary competitive advantage for attracting industrial investment and reducing the carbon footprint of Brazil's national production (Hamatsu and de Souza 2024).

⁴⁹ It should be noted that Audo Faleiro serves as the current Deputy Chief Advisor (Assessor-Chefe Adjunto) in the Special Advisory Office to the President of the Republic (Assessoria Especial do Presidente da República). As a public official in active duty, his words should be understood in the appropriate context.

Both of the aforementioned pillars—diplomatic reconstruction and reindustrialisation—converge on the country’s relationship with China. Being Brazil’s main trade partner and a key actor in global reform and international development, Beijing emerges as a fundamental piece in both puzzles. Notwithstanding trade relations still being dominated by a North-South pattern, with Brazil providing commodity goods in exchange for high value-added products from China, the Lula administration has indicated that it perceives the Chinese to be partners both in the country’s productive modernisation, as well as in its push for greater participation in the global landscape (De Sousa *et al.* 2023).

The latter, which reflects China’s appeal for global partnership in codes DVS-1a (“The Vanguard Partnership”) and INT-3a (“The Exemplary South-South Model”), remains the most promising of the two fronts. Notably, both countries have sought to coordinate their positions in key topics of the global agenda. Cooperation under the BRICS group, as well as the presentation of a joint peace proposal for the war in Ukraine (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2024), are some notable examples of salient convergences in the political sphere of their bilateral relationship (De Sousa *et al.* 2023; Faleiro 2024). The elevation of relations to the status of a “China-Brazil community with a shared future for a more just world and a more sustainable planet” (Consulate General of the People’s Republic of China in Erbil 2025, para. 2), celebrated in May 2025 by Lula and Xi on occasion of the 50th anniversary of Sino-Brazilian diplomatic ties, is a good example of the general resonance between Brazil’s alter expectations and China’s NRC on political matters.

The economic front, on the other hand, has demanded a more careful approach from the Brazilian side. As noted by De Sousa *et al.* (2023), due to Brazil’s persistent struggles in diversifying exports to China, the government’s focus has shifted towards courting Chinese investments in critical sectors for the modernisation of its productive capacity, especially in infrastructure, high technology and green energy transition. This posture is particularly welcoming of China’s narrative present in the derived codes DEV-1a (“Synergistic Reindustrialisation”) and ECON-2a (“Strategic Technological Integration”), as it highlights the developmental potential of their partnership. In a press release issued after a visit to Beijing, president Lula emphasised this clearly: “Our relationship with China is strategic. Very strategic. And we want to learn. We want more investment. We want to attract more investment. We want more things in Brazil. We want more railways. We want more underground (metro) lines. We want more technology. We want artificial intelligence.”⁵⁰ (Brazil 2025b, 6).

⁵⁰ “A nossa relação com a China é estratégica. É muito estratégica. E a gente quer aprender. A gente quer mais investimento. A gente quer atrair mais investimento. A gente quer mais coisa no Brasil. A gente quer mais ferrovia. A gente quer mais metrô. A gente quer mais tecnologia. A gente quer inteligência artificial.”

The underlying advantage of focusing on investments is that it takes the scrutiny away from the main issue with current bilateral exchanges, which centers on trade asymmetries. This does not mean Brazilian authorities never address this issue. However, the official rhetoric often downsizes these asymmetries, or even reassigns them as temporary solutions, instead of problems. In his closing speech to the 2025 Brazil-China Business Forum, Lula notably reckoned with the issue of commodities, but chose to advance a counter-argument to the thesis that trading with China is inherently negative for Brazil. As the president has put it: “We have to export agribusiness and use the money that comes into Brazil to invest in education, so that we can be competitive with China in the production of electric cars, in the production of batteries, and in the development of artificial intelligence. Nobody is going to give that to us Brazilians for free.”⁵¹ (Brazil 2025a, 9).

Vice-President Geraldo Alckmin, who is also Minister of Development, Industry and Commerce, has also tackled the lack of diversity in Brazilian exports to China. While leading a delegation of ministers to Beijing in 2024, Alckmin has explicitly called for more variety in the Brazil’s export basket (Brazil 2024), demonstrating a more direct approach than Lula’s. Nevertheless, the Vice-President avoided framing the issue as insurmountable, choosing to present diversification as a likely outcome—especially if China chooses to invest in Brazil’s development: “We’re going to diversify; it [the export basket] is very [concentrated] in soya, oil, iron ore, and now meat is also growing quite a lot. The aim is, on the one hand, to attract investment—reciprocal investments—and a lot of Chinese investment in Brazil, and we want more investment there, including in the industrial sector.” (Ramos 2024, para.9)⁵².

In a nutshell, the expectations Brazil explicitly voices regarding China’s role indicate a considerable degree of resonance between ego and alter. Just as Beijing expertly localises its “responsible great power” NRC in order to detach Brazil from the collective of developing nations, decision-makers in Brasília are keen to welcome China as a partner in their core agendas. While this convergence appears more natural on the political front, with both countries championing reform in global settings, careful coordination in the economic sphere has helped the two nations find common ground despite perennial issues in trade. However, Brazil’s expectations amalgamate pressures from many sides. Next, through the events of my case study, I intend to present how some of these pressures can reshape signalled expectations and break with the logic of convergence I sought to paint above.

⁵¹ “Nós temos que exportar agronegócio, utilizar o dinheiro que entra no Brasil para investir em educação, para a gente poder ser competitivo com a China na produção de carro elétrico, na produção de baterias, na construção de inteligência artificial. Ninguém vai dar isso de graça para nós brasileiros.”

⁵² “Nós vamos diversificar, ele [a cesta de importações] é muito [concentrado] em soja, petróleo, minério de ferro, agora também crescendo bastante carnes. O objetivo é, de um lado, atrair investimento, investimentos recíprocos, e muitos investimentos chineses no Brasil, e nós queremos mais investimentos aí, inclusive na área industrial.”

4.2.2. Negotiating dissatisfaction: the sector level

As we transition away from general diplomatic rhetoric, the complexities of Brazil's position vis-à-vis China start to appear more prominently. The previous subsection sought to emphasise the length to which high officials from Lula's administration strived to highlight the convergences the new government in Brasília shared with Chinese foreign policy. While the narrative of a strategic partnership rooted in common development goals provided enough capital to sustain the purported discursive alignment, the actual enactment underpinning bilateral relations does not share the same degree of control by decision-makers. Crucially, as we shall explore below, just as China's NRC is fundamentally anchored in domestic pressures, so are Brazil's expectations of Beijing's role. Through the case study on Brazil's tariffs over Chinese EV imports, I analyse the straining effect domestic pressure can have over alter expectations of China's role conception.

Analytically, this section operationalises the "alter's domestic contestation" component introduced in Figure 2.4, Chapter 2. Concretely, I treat the intra-sector dispute as the mechanism through which incompatible private expectations are aggregated, selected, and translated into a government-sanctioned signalling of role expectations.

The surge in Chinese EV imports represents a practical instance in which the general resonance between Chinese and Brazilian role expectations gave way to localised friction. In it, the Brazilian government's decision to reimpose trade barriers against Chinese EVs cannot be understood at the policy level alone, for its origins lay at the disputes between domestic stakeholders of the EV sector. Thus, this subsection begins by dissecting the debate at Brazil's domestic level, focusing on the clashing narratives of sector representatives. It explores how established industrial actors and emerging EV advocates advanced divergent demands for China's role enactment. By examining these domestic pressures, I intend to establish the necessary groundwork to understand the next subsection, which details how the Brazilian government filtered these competing interests and instrumentalised them into a negotiated dissatisfaction of China's behaviour on trade matters.

Beforehand, I should present the general context of Chinese EV⁵³ exports to Brazil. In 2023, Chinese manufacturers began to intensify their push into the Brazilian market, led primarily by BYD and GWM. According to data from OBELA (*Observatorio Económico Latinoamericano*), Brazil imported approximately 46,670 electrified vehicles (including BEVs and hybrids) from China in 2023 (OBELA 2024). The next year, these numbers skyrocketed to approximately 138,000 units, a nearly 200% increase compared to 2023 (Vilela 2025). By 2025, with Brazilian import duties gradually increasing, the market shifted from receiving pure importation to a mix of finished

⁵³ It is important to note that, by EV, I am exclusively making reference to cars.

goods and local assembly (Vilela 2025). In the first half of 2025 alone, Brazil imported 134,582 vehicles from China—nearly matching the entire annual total of 2024 in just six months (Lu 2025). Of these, approximately 25,000 were CKD (Completely Knocked Down) and SKD (Semi-Knocked Down) kits (Vilela 2025).

The best way to grasp the core of the debate within Brazil's EV market is to start with the primary agitators of the sector's friction, in the figure of Anfavea. Founded in 1956 (Anfavea n.d.), Anfavea represents the traditional bedrock of Brazil's automotive industry—which has been a historical linchpin of the country's manufacturing capacity. Specifically, Anfavea represents established automakers, usually originating from Western nations, such as global giants Volkswagen, General Motors (GM), Toyota and Stellantis. Thus, Anfavea acts as the primary interlocutor between the bulk of the automotive sector and the federal government, representing a segment responsible for approximately 1.3 million direct and indirect jobs (according to Anfavea's own estimates) and a significant portion of Brazil's ailing manufacturing output (Anfavea n.d.).

Due to its ties to the history of Brazilian developmentalism, the association often frames itself as a guardian of national technological sovereignty and productive capacity (Anfavea n.d.). Therefore, as the volume of Chinese EV imports accelerated over the early 2020s, Anfavea hardened its support for trade barriers against the new competition. In early 2025, then Anfavea president Márcio de Lima Leite (2022-2024) argued that Brazil had become a “dumping ground” (*mercado de desova*) for China's industrial overcapacity (Estigarríbia 2025). His choice of words echoed Anfavea's long held suspicion of unfair commercial practices by Chinese actors (Aragão 2025). In his argument, the representative contended that, while actors such as the US and the EU were choosing to erect barriers, Brazil's lax tariffs offered little resistance to China's surplus production (Estigarríbia 2025).

Ultimately, the government's decision to reinstate import duties on electric and hybrid vehicles in November 2023 (Brazil 2023) did not prove to be enough to dissuade Anfavea's rhetoric. Dissatisfied with Brazilian authorities' decision to reimpose import duties gradually, Anfavea lobbied for an immediate return to the maximum 35% tariff, arguing the domestic market was being “supplied by imports while local production walked sideways” (Reuters 2024, para. 6)⁵⁴, thus threatening existing manufacturing jobs. In 2025, Anfavea escalated their pro-tariff strategy. Under the leadership of Igor Calvet, the association warned that any concessions to newcomers (mainly, BYD's request for lower taxes on partially assembled kits) would force established companies to “re-evaluate” R\$180 billion in planned investments in the country. Alongside this warning, the CEOs of Toyota, Stellantis, Volkswagen and GM signed a joint letter to President Lula,

⁵⁴ “O mercado nacional está sendo abastecido por importados e a produção anda de lado”.

alerting that the accommodation of Chinese companies would lead to a “[...] legacy of unemployment, trade imbalance and technological dependence” (G1 2025, para. 9)⁵⁵.

In general, Anfavea sought to cast Chinese imports as an existential threat to Brazil’s automotive industry, appealing to terms such as “predatory” and “invasion” to represent the Sino-Brazilian trade relationship within a zero-sum logic. Their rhetoric mainly challenged China’s self-conception of a partner in Brazil’s reindustrialisation effort (DEV-1a: “Synergistic Reindustrialisation”), pointing that the government’s industrial policy called for a dose of protectionism in order to thrive. Moreover, their choice of words also casted doubt over the political dimension of Sino-Brazilian relations. By defining China’s behaviour as predatory and threatening to domestic goals, Anfavea implicitly questions Beijing’s willingness to treat Brazilians horizontally (DVS-1a: “The Vanguard Partnership”). Likewise, it challenges China’s capacity to justly promote South-South relations (INT-3a: “The Exemplary South-South Model”).

Opposite to Anfavea and the automaking establishment, there lies the Brazilian Association of Electric Vehicles (ABVE). It represents the diverse and still emerging new energy ecosystem in Brazil, with a membership structure that excludes traditional, combustion-heavy enterprises, instead comprising EV-exclusive importers, charging infrastructure providers, battery manufacturers, among other actors of the EV market (ABVE n.d.). However, for our immediate interests, the crucial characteristic of ABVE is its advocacy for the interests of Chinese EV automakers with a presence in Brazil—mainly, BYD and GWM. Therefore, while Anfavea generally speaks for the automaking establishment, ABVE positions itself as the voice of the newcomers, framing them as a future-oriented industry. As a consequence, ABVE’s arguments tend to focus on the consumer side of green transition and the technological renewal of Brazil’s national fleet (ABVE n.d.).

ABVE has consistently opposed the reinstatement of trade barriers for EVs, standing from the premise that market scale ought to precede the consolidation of a national EV industry (Moliterno 2023). Moreover, likely due to the centrality of green transition and decarbonisation in the government’s agenda, the association has also focused on the environmental consequences implicated by the tariffs. Following the initial announcement of the barrier reinstatement, ABVE president Ricardo Bastos termed the decision a “significant setback” for sustainable transport. The logic was that the return of import duties on EVs would prematurely privilege fossil-fuel vehicles, creating uncertainty for companies already planning investments in the sector (Moliterno 2023). Similarly, as Anfavea pushed for the immediate imposition of the 35% tariff rate, ABVE explicitly condemned any deviation from the original gradual schedule set by the government. Bastos classified Anfavea’s acceleration push as a “break of rules,” warning that the projected regulatory

⁵⁵ “[...] um legado de desemprego, desequilíbrio da balança comercial e dependência tecnológica.”

instability would undermine investor confidence and deter the very capital Brazil sought to attract for its reindustrialisation goals (Amaral 2024).

At its core, ABVE's rhetoric fundamentally opposes Anfavea's "predatory" narrative. The association moves away from the zero-sum logic of traditional protectionism defended by established automakers and, partially mirroring Brazil's official discourse—which also put great emphasis on the expectations of Chinese investment—, highlights the role foreign investment plays in the development equation. For instance, ABVE links market openness to the proper enactment of China's role of a responsible partner in Brazil's development (Zhou 2024). In their perspective, the presence of Chinese players in the Brazilian market stimulates local innovation and infrastructure growth (Zhou 2024), thus benefiting Brazil's industrial goals through competition, rather than insulation.

This argument particularly resonates with DEV-1a ("Synergistic Reindustrialisation"), as well as ECON-2a ("Strategic Technological Integration"), due to the relation it establishes between domestic capacity building and external openness. In addition, it also reinforces the political dimension of China's localised NRC. By framing electromobility as a tool for public health and urban air quality (ABVE n.d.), ABVE aligns Chinese EV imports with INT-3a ("The Exemplary South-South Model"). In this particular view, Beijing proves capable of providing advanced technology to a developing partner for an affordable price, demonstrating greater efficacy than traditional (Western) providers.

Ultimately, ABVE focuses on the same endpoints as Anfavea: the pursuit of national reindustrialisation and the generation of high-quality employment. The difference lies in means, with Anfavea championing insulation as a safeguard to the existing manufacturing base from what it sees as an invasion, while ABVE favours stability and market-oriented principles capable of naturally fostering Brazil's still emerging EV ecosystem. Another difference lies in prioritisation: just as ABVE does not oppose the formation of a native EV industry in Brazil, Anfavea is not against the decarbonisation of the Brazilian vehicle fleet. However, the latter is not willing to accelerate decarbonisation if it means, in their view, the sacrifice of national industries. Likewise, the former does not see the protection of a domestic productive structure to be preferable over the country's immediate green transition goals—nor does it see these processes as mutually exclusive.

In a nutshell, as we move to the analysis of the policy level, it becomes evident that, despite nominal convergences on their justifications, sectoral perspectives implicate diametrically opposed choices. Often, one state decision would generate protest from one side, and celebration from the other. Nonetheless, the Brazilian government was able to synthesise the competing demands of private actors into a calibrated response to China's role enactment that would not jeopardise their broader strategic relationship.

4.2.3. Negotiating dissatisfaction: the policy level

Between Anfavea's protectionist demands and the market-stability requirements of ABVE, Brazil's trade policy on EVs between 2023 and 2025 reflected the government's attempt to operate as an arbitrator. It does not mean, however, that state actors were at the complete mercy of outside pressure. The policy design, as well as the choice of narrative to justify the barriers, demonstrated a good degree of carefulness and sophistication at instrumentalising the divergent domestic demands into a tacit dissatisfaction with China's role enactment. To advance this argument, I divide this subsection into three parts. First, I present the chronology of policy decisions related to the tariffs, between November 2023 and July 2025. Second, I analyse Brazilian policymakers' justification for the tariffs, demonstrating which elements of sector level narratives the government chose to filter. Finally, I translate my findings into Role Theory, discussing how the policy acted as a tacit, corrective signal to China—demanding a shift from exporter to investor—without resorting to explicit targeting of Chinese actors.

The first decision regarding tariffs came in November 2023, when the Executive Management Committee of CAMEX (Brazil's Foreign Trade Chamber) approved the gradual reinstatement of import duties on electric and hybrid vehicles, which until then had enjoyed zero or near-zero tax rates. For it to be gradual, the government established a phased schedule (known in Portuguese as *escadinha*), set to peak at the Mercosul Common External Tariff of 35% by July 2026 (Brazil 2023a)⁵⁶. In December 2023, to further ease the transition, Brazilian authorities also allocated duty-free import quotas per period (MDIC 2023)⁵⁷. These initial decisions already reflect the public actors' desire to achieve a balance between sectoral demands. On one hand, the choice to reinstate tariffs answered Anfavea's pressure over the surge of Chinese imports. On the other hand, the reinstatement mechanism, which was gradual in nature and was later complemented by duty-free quotas, served to reassure ABVE's request for market predictability.

Naturally, the MDIC's decision to look for a middle ground meant it would not fully please either side of the tariffs debate. By the start of 2024, the first tax rates came into effect: 10% for pure electrics, 12% for hybrids, and 15% for plug-in hybrids (Brazil 2023a). By July, when the second tier of the phased schedule started being implemented (18% for pure electrics, 25% for hybrids and 20% for plug-in hybrids), Anfavea officially requested the immediate return to the 35% rate, a move ABVE staunchly opposed. Despite pressures from private stakeholders, the original reinstatement schedule has remained unaltered by the time this dissertation is being written.

⁵⁶ The tariff reinstatement was made public by the GECEX Resolution n°536, of November 20th, 2023.

⁵⁷ The distribution and allocation criteria of quotas were determined by the SECEX Ordinance n°282/2023.

However, as Chinese companies announced new factories in Brazil, the dispute would migrate to the tariffs regime for assembled and partially assembled EVs (CKD/SKD). The import of CKD/SKD can allow for local productive activity, but often with fewer job creation and less local value-added than full manufacturing. By mid-2025, BYD requested a reduction of import duties for assembly kits—5% cut for CKDs and 10% cut for SKDs, for three years (Barros and Alves 2025). According to the company’s logic, should kits be taxed similarly to fully built cars, it may prefer to import finished EVs instead of assembling them in Brazil (Barros and Alves 2025). Unsurprisingly, Anfavea vehemently protested the request, arguing that a long, generous kit regime would undermine reindustrialisation and quality job creation efforts (Barros and Alves 2025).

It was by this point that Anfavea and the companies it represents elevated their rhetoric against EV newcomers—especially BYD—, leading to a charged build-up to the government’s decision. It thus came that, in July 2025, the government partially acquiesced to Anfavea’s request by accelerating the reinstatement schedule for CKD/SKD. By MDIC’s decision, the final 35% hike would be anticipated from July 2028 to January 2027 (MDIC 2025)⁵⁸. Although denying BYD’s request, Brazilian authorities still recognised the importance of Chinese investment in the country, and proposed a temporary compensation, approving an additional US\$463 million import quota for assembly kits, set to last for 6 months (MDIC 2025). Structurally, Brazil’s balancing act sought to keep the country attractive to EV investors, but refused to institutionalise an extended low-tariff regime that could potentially hollow out its reindustrialisation plans.

Once more, the government adopted a compromise between Anfavea’s opposition to tax breaks and the newcomers’ request for incentives. Next, I analyse how the MDIC, mainly in the figure of Geraldo Alckmin, rhetorically justified the trade barriers by incorporating and filtering arguments of both sides of the debate. Fundamentally, the government sought to synthesise ABVE’s call for green transition with Anfavea’s focus on industrial preservation. In the original announcement for the tariff reinstatement, the Ministry claimed the measure aimed to “develop the national automotive chain, accelerate the decarbonisation of the Brazilian fleet and contribute to the neo-industrialisation project of the country” (Brazil 2023, para. 1)⁵⁹. This narrative of “green neo-industrialisation” presented the tariffs as a win-win solution to the issue, embracing the need to protect local industrial development, but emphasising this step as necessary for the country’s green transition.

At its core, government actors accepted the pro-tariffs argument, especially its implicit prioritisation of industry development over quick EV market expansion. However, the official rhetoric actively filtered Anfavea’s aggressive language, refraining from classifying the import

⁵⁸ The alterations to the CKD/SKD schedule were announced by the GECEX Resolution nº774/2025.

⁵⁹ “[...] visa desenvolver a cadeia automotiva nacional, acelerar o processo de descarbonização da frota brasileira e contribuir para o projeto de neointustrialização do país”.

surge as an invasion or as a structural threat to the nation's industry. Instead, it opted for a mostly technical tone, with a focus on predictability (Miyashiro 2023)—a key request of the anti-tariffs faction. In particular, the phased return mechanism was the main object utilised to emphasise the technicality and predictability of the decision (Brazil 2023; Miyashiro 2023), which served to distance it from a punitive measure. Consequently, the official rhetoric strategically decoupled the presence of Chinese technology from the trade imbalance. This is compounded by the fact that at no point did Brazilian government agencies explicitly single out Chinese actors as a liability to Brazil's goals.

In turn, the strategic decoupling of Chinese actors from the issue paved the way for the key message behind the tariffs, both rhetorically and practically: Chinese players were still welcome as partners, provided they shifted their behaviour from exporters to local producers. From the start, the MDIC and Alckmin treated the tariff reinstatement as an incentive for new industries to install themselves in Brazil and start producing locally (Brazil 2023c). No specification was made that these “new industries” should be Chinese, but the overall context of the tariffs—which entered the public agenda due to an import surge almost exclusively originating from China—allows us to safely presume who was the target audience.

Subsequent statements reinforce the thesis that the main objective of the tariffs was to incentivise foreign firms, mainly Chinese, to invest in Brazil. In a press release, Alckmin claimed that “The vehicles [...] will see a gradual increase until 2027. This is so that production happens in Brazil; we want it to be manufactured here and not for the country to be an importer of the product. So install the factory here.” (Miyashiro 2023, para. 3). The Minister and Vice-President also mentioned that the import quotas served the same purpose: “On the other hand, we will have quotas. While you are investing, you do not pay import tax. You will be able to import with zero tax” (Miyashiro 2023, para. 3)⁶⁰.

The active framing of tariffs as an incentive for investment reveals a creative edge to Brazil's trade policy on EVs. It shows that, among efforts to compromise between opposite demands and to synthesise their pleas under a single narrative, the government also sought to instrumentalise domestic pressure according to its own objectives. In this case, it meant sending a signal to external partners, mainly China, of what kind of reaction it expected to receive: more investment, instead of more imports. This is what I previously termed as negotiated dissatisfaction: although an outcome of internal compromise, the final signal was still one of tacit dissatisfaction with China's role enactment. Under the aegis of Brazil's green neo-industrialisation, a responsible great power should not limit itself to the role of an exporter. From the alter perspective, for China to

⁶⁰ Os veículos [...] terão um aumento gradual até 2027. Isso para que se produza no Brasil. Queremos que se fabrique aqui e não que o país seja importador de veículos. Então instale a fábrica aqui [...] Por outro lado, teremos cotas. Enquanto estiver investindo, não paga imposto de importação. Poderá importar com imposto zero.”

appropriately enact its role in the EV context, it should evolve into the position of an investor and strategic partner of Brazil's development.

In hindsight, the negotiated dissatisfaction proved to be a sophisticated move, as the signalling could neither be too soft, under risk of being innocuous; nor too aggressive, which would have sent the wrong message abroad. Both decision and justification had to converge toward nudging Chinese enterprises to behave according to the terms of partnership that sustain the overall convergence of expectations at the diplomatic level of Sino-Brazilian relations. Again, by refraining from making the Chinese a target or condemning their practices as unfair, Brazilian officials were able to avoid spillovers in the form of retaliations or litigations, thus properly isolating its dissatisfaction to the EV sector. Ultimately, Brazil would still accept China's evident technological leadership and be glad for Beijing's cooperation; however, it would reject a relationship based on passive consumption. Due in substantial part to the manner Brazil chose to signal its dissatisfaction, China proved more willing to oblige. How exactly that has come to be shall be the topic of the next section.

4.3. Silent adaptation: breaking down the Chinese reaction to the tariffs

Having established in section 4.2 how the Brazilian state filtered domestic pressures into a policy of negotiated dissatisfaction with China's role enactment, section 4.3 must now examine how these signals were received and acted upon by Chinese actors. Here, I close up the argument that China's response constitutes a form of role adaptation, a process that occurs when an actor shifts its behaviour without abandoning the underlying tenets of the role. In the EV case, I argue this happened as China shifted from a position of a pure exporter to one of an investor in local manufacturing. By doing so, China successfully recalibrated its role enactment in order to meet Brazil's expectations, thus correcting the latent mismatch observed within the ego-alter interplay.

Nevertheless, China's reaction to the tariffs was multifaceted. Consequently, the following subsections aim to break down these reactions by level. In subsection 4.3.1, the focus lies on Chinese state actors, whose silence on the matter invites comparisons with similar cases in other countries, in which Beijing's reaction was notable. Then, in subsection 4.3.2, I analyse the response given by China's non-state actors, particularly its EV companies. Crucially, it was their move to root EV production in Brazil that constitutes the main evidence for role adaptation in this case. However, this fact elicits analytical considerations regarding what constitutes a state's role enactment. The crux of the issue consists of a conundrum already touched upon in Chapter 2: to what degree do the actions of Chinese non-state actors contribute to China's own role enactment? Considering the complex status of Chinese companies amid the public-private divide, as well as the

varied responses they offered along the tariffs' debate, I conclude the section by advancing a contextual view on the issue of non-state participation in role-related foreign policy behaviour.

4.3.1. Chinese state actors' reaction to the tariffs

The first notable observation regarding China's reaction to the tariffs is not born out of any explicit statement or move by Beijing. Quite the opposite, what separates the Brazilian EV tariffs case from similar instances around the globe was the complete lack of a public reaction by Chinese officials. In this subsection, I evaluate what were the main reasons behind the silence. To do so, albeit this dissertation does not aim to conduct any structured comparative analysis, I choose to bring a selected number of similar cases of trade barriers against Chinese EVs, particularly from Western countries, in order to illustrate the particularities of the Brazilian case that may explain the lack of an official response by Beijing.

Therefore, I start this subsection by presenting China's reaction to trade barriers imposed on EVs by the US, the EU and Canada. All three countries established tariffs on the grounds that China had adopted unfair practices on EV manufacturing, potentially leading to influxes of cheaper imports. Beijing, for its part, consistently protested the barriers as protectionist acts, while also seeking WTO litigation and sectoral retaliation in the cases of the EU and Canada.

Chronologically, the first actor to pursue measures against Chinese EVs was the EU. In October 2023, the Europeans launched an *ex officio* anti-subsidy investigation into imports of new battery electric vehicles (BEVs) from China (European Commission 2023). By July 2024, they announced provisional countervailing duties, with specified rates per company (European Commission 2024). By late 2024, the European Commission adopted definitive countervailing duties, applicable for 5 years (European Commission 2024). When justifying the barriers, EU officials argued that China's EVs benefited from unfair government subsidies, thus threatening EU manufacturers and warranting protection under the EU's anti-subsidy law (Blenkinsop 2024). Throughout the process, Beijing publicly protested against the EU's decisions, accusing the bloc of protectionism and vowing to take necessary measures to safeguard its interests (Blenkinsop 2024). Likewise, Chinese officials pressed for a negotiated solution to avoid escalation. In the meantime, however, Beijing triggered consultations at the WTO over the definitive duties, and later pursued a dispute panel track (WTO 2024a, 2024b). Beyond institutional litigation, China also applied retaliatory measures, opening an anti-dumping investigation into EU brandy by October 2024, as well as a similar probe into EU pork and by-products by June of the same year (Cash 2024).

The next country to impose tariffs over Chinese EVs was the US. While the EU did not raise duties beyond 35% (European Commission 2024), the US stated it would quadruple EV tariffs from

25% to 100%. The measure was announced in May 2024, and it was part of a broader package of tariff hikes under the umbrella of a statutory 4-year review of the country's trade policy (Office of the United States Trade Representative 2024). The new rates would take effect by September 2024. Parallel to the EU, US officials justified the modifications as necessary protection against Chinese unfair trade practices and a future flooding of low-priced imports—despite the fact that the US imported few Chinese EVs (Daly 2024). Expectedly, China's Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) strongly opposed the tariff hikes and urged the US to revoke the measures (Zhang and Woo 2024). Beijing also denied using WTO-prohibited EV subsidies (Chen and Orr 2024).

Following Washington's example, by August 2024 Canada announced a 100% surtax on Chinese EVs, to be made effective by October 2024 (Department of Finance Canada 2024). Ottawa framed the decision as a response to unfair trade practices and state-driven overcapacity by Beijing (Department of Finance Canada 2024), explicitly aligning itself with the US and the EU. China's MOFCOM, likewise, protested Canada's actions as protectionist and discriminatory, warning it would harm normal trade and supply chains (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China 2024). As it happened with the EU, China also launched a WTO dispute settlement against Canada (WTO 2024c). Moreover, it escalated the dispute with a domestic investigation against the restrictive measures, which concluded with the imposition of retaliatory tariffs on Canadian agricultural and food products by March 2025 (Cash, Chu and Zhang 2025).

What, then, explains the absence of official protestation or countermeasures by the Chinese in Brazil's case? The preliminary thought goes to the magnitude of the barriers: while the US and Canada quadrupled tariffs on EVs, Brazil capped duties at the 35% rate. However, the EU's countervailing duties were closer to Brazil's than to the 100% surtax applied by the North-Americans—a fact that did not prevent it from suffering Chinese litigation and retaliation. Another hypothesis is that of market share: the aforementioned markets—more specifically the EU, which has imported approximately 580,000 Chinese EVs in 2025 (Zhang 2026)—could represent higher stakes for China's business. While the European market is undoubtedly more established than the Brazilian one, the latter has grown to become the largest individual market for Chinese EVs, and a crucial alternative for China's surplus production (Graham 2025). Under a context of increased barriers against Chinese products in developed countries, newer markets—such as Brazil—turn ever more strategic (Graham 2025). Consequently, despite smaller volumes of imports, the Brazilian case still represents an important piece in the pivoting plans of Chinese EV firms (Graham 2025).

Instead, I propose two other reasons behind China's silence in Brazil's case, when it chose confrontation in others. The first one consists of how the alter's status plays with China's role conception and enactment. Unlike the US, the EU or Canada, Brazil is seen by China as a fellow

Global South nation. Consequently, it is bound by expectations of South-South solidarity and peerage. By the internal logic of its own “responsible great power” NRC, China is especially obliged to foster harmony and peacefulness when dealing with developing countries. In contrast, relations with Western actors are not bound by the same considerations. While Beijing still aims to present itself as being less confrontational than other great powers, we saw in Chapter 3 that China’s notion of “responsibility” not only allows for a harder stance against Western nations, but is increasingly incentivising it.

During its protests against EV tariffs elsewhere, China’s recurrent mentions of the need to defend its own interests, accompanied by the denouncement of Western discrimination, finds reassurance in the ego-driven dimension of its role conception. Nonetheless, this should not lead to the early conclusion that, simply by being a developing country, Brazil would inevitably be spared of Chinese retaliation. After all, Beijing has found itself adopting a harder stance on many Global South peers, especially in its immediate vicinity. This leads to my second proposed reason for China’s silence on Brazil’s EV tariffs: the latter’s design and justification. As seen in the previous section, Brazilian authorities actively worked to reduce the market impact of the measure, adopting a phased schedule of implementation along with import quotas. Even the EU, which negotiated individually with EV companies to reach smaller rates, did not focus as much on alleviating market impact.

However, certainly the most important aspect was Brazil’s choice to decouple China from the justification for the tariffs. While the US, the EU and Canada explicitly accused Beijing of unfair commercial practices as the reason for the barriers, Brazil avoided putting the blame on China. A direct accusation would likely put the Chinese under a normative deadlock, with Beijing having to choose between defending its honour or preserving South-South solidarity, both of which would have put a strain on its role conception. By refraining from following the aggressive tone of Western countries, Brazil gave China the option to remain silent—which was, in terms of congruence with its NRC, the best choice. In exchange, the way remained clear for Chinese actors to comply with Brazil’s cue. Next, I analyse how exactly that compliance has developed, and whether it constitutes an instance of role adaptation.

4.3.2. Chinese non-state actors’ reaction to the tariffs

While the official silence of the Chinese state already offers interesting conclusions about the way Beijing chose to tackle the tariffs, the actions of Chinese corporate actors, especially BYD and GWM, also tell a story of their own. I argue that these actors were the main force behind China’s role adaptation. However, as role adaptation refers to a conscious shift in role enactment,

thus returns the question posed in Chapter 2, regarding whether non-state actors can contribute to foreign policy behaviour, i.e. role enactment. As I have posited then, comprehending non-state action as part of foreign policy behaviour is not only possible, but also a welcome addition for understanding contemporary foreign policymaking.

Nonetheless, it is not every non-state action that implies relevant consequences for foreign policy. In this subsection, I distinguish two types of reactions by Chinese firms regarding the tariffs. One of them, centered at the acceleration of Chinese corporate investment in local factories in Brazil, does contribute to role enactment, and was the main proof of role adaptation in the case study. The other type of reaction, composed of aggressive rebuttals against the sector's pro-tariffs domestic faction, does not comprise role enactment. Hence, beyond presenting each of these reactions accordingly, I must also provide a suitable explanation as to why I have considered one as role adaptation, and not the other.

Beforehand, it would be useful to recollect the arguments I set in previous chapters regarding non-state action and foreign policy behaviour. Ultimately, my point was that non-state actors could contribute to foreign policy behaviour, provided their actions were effectively connected to the state's actions, rather than merely occurring around the state as part of a larger environment. This could happen via a myriad of ways, such as delegation (formal or informal), dependence on state resources (finance, permissions, incentives), or a clear policy framework tying their conduct to state goals. By this framing, instead of questioning whether "did a private actor do something abroad?", the safest alternative would be to ask: "is the actor's external conduct meaningfully connected to, enabled by, or instrumental to state policy objectives directed outward?".

In addition, as I have warned then, these discussions elicit a far more profound discussion than what this dissertation can provide. I limited myself to pointing out some key complications associated with evidencing the tie between non-state and state external conduct—especially in the case of economic actors. For instance, private firms can operate according to profit considerations, and still serve foreign policy goals. Moreover, public-private relationships vary considerably from country to country. Consequently, in China's case, where state-firm boundaries are structurally more porous if compared to liberal market economies, non-state actor's integration into foreign policy behaviour is naturally more likely. However, this does not imply that every Chinese company is an agent of Beijing by default. Certainly, Chinese SOEs play a significant part in the BRI, which is unequivocally an integral part of China's foreign policy. Likewise, companies owned by private Chinese citizens may also exhibit meaningful links to policymaking, from state industrial support to

regulatory approval of foreign investments⁶¹. Still, formal ties do not shape meaningful ones. As such, the same company can contribute to foreign policy behaviour in one instance, and act completely separate from it in another. For this reason, I propose each non-state action should be evaluated under its proper context, if we are to ascertain whether it actively contributed to foreign policy behaviour or not.

With that in mind, I now transition to the analysis of each type of reaction by Chinese EV firms in the case of Brazilian tariffs. Since it represents the backbone of my role adaptation argument, I shall start with the acceleration of Chinese corporate investment in Brazil. First of all, it would be imprecise to claim that Chinese firms' move to install factories in Brazil was a direct reaction to the tariffs' reinstatement. While the trade barriers were made official in November 2023, BYD had already announced it would build an industrial complex in Camaçari in July of the same year (Pulice 2023). Likewise, GWM had already acquired a plant in Iracemópolis in August 2021 (GWM 2021). Therefore, these initial decisions are more likely to be the consequence of market-expansion decisions by these firms, rather than an immediate defensive response to trade barriers. Naturally, what occurred in November 2023 was simply the announcement of the tariffs, with sectoral pressure commencing months earlier—especially from Anfavea (Reuters 2023). Hence, it is probable that BYD's initial decision was shaped by the possibility of new import duties in the near future. However, GWM's purchase of a plant in 2021 remains a clear outlier, and seems to follow its own particular logic.

Regardless of what motivated their initial decisions, evidence sustains that the tariffs clearly shaped the timing and strategy of subsequent corporate decisions. Due to the gradual nature of the tariff reinstatement, companies were incentivised to anticipate imports and switch to kit-based assembly. BYD, for instance, imported large volumes of CKD/SKD ahead of the scheduled July 2025 rate increase (Magalhães 2025). Government management over the trade regime transition also shaped companies' strategies. As assembly kits could potentially develop into a barrier loop-hole—with Chinese firms simply assembling the quasi-finished vehicles locally, instead of investing in deeper manufacturing localisation—Brazilian authorities brought forward the date when CKD/SKD would face the maximum 35% tariff (MDIC 2025). Alongside industrial incentives promoted by the country's new automotive industrial policy (the MOVER program), Brazil was actively nudging Chinese companies toward accelerating their localisation efforts (MDIC 2024), while reducing their reliance on temporary solutions, such as assembly kits.

⁶¹ Bai *et al.* (2021), for instance, argue that Chinese “private” companies almost always fall within a grey zone between state and private ownership. Among the top 1,000 private owners in China, only 13% have no equity ties to the state. Conversely, 65% have direct equity ties with a state owner, and 22% have indirect ties. Moreover, this influences these companies' financial reliance on the Chinese state, as well as on the operational support the latter is capable of providing. As we shall see below, this is the case of Chinese EV firms (Kennedy 2024; Tang 2025).

Consequently, the Brazilian government pushed for faster factory installation, under a model aligned with its own neo-industrialisation objectives.

The EV companies, for their part, largely complied. GWM was the first to inaugurate its local factory, in August 2025. The opening ceremony was attended by key figures of the Brazilian government, including Lula and Alckmin, alongside GWM's global leadership (GWM 2025). In their speeches, Lula welcomed GWM, framing their investment as part of Brazil's industrial recovery agenda, while also tying it to broader Sino-Brazilian partnership themes (Silva 2025). GWM's global CEO, Mu Feng, emphasised the new opportunities in terms of job creation and technology development their new factory would bring (GWM 2025). In terms of its operation, GWM's factory plant contains a complete production base, rather than CKD/SKD-only assembly lines (GWM 2025). This means GWM is already manufacturing with substantial local (in-plant) processes from the outset, albeit deeper localisation of vehicle parts is only expected to increase over the coming years.

BYD, for their part, officially inaugurated their Camaçari factory complex in October 2025, with a ceremony also attended by Brazilian authorities and company executives (Presidência da República 2025). In their speeches, Alckmin explicitly positioned BYD as aligned with the country's neo-industrialisation initiatives, a symbolic mark of renewed convergence in expectations (Presidência da República 2025). BYD, likewise, envisioned potential co-development opportunities of technology with Brazilian actors, signalling their intention to deepen cooperation in the near future (Presidência da República 2025). However, in terms of operations, BYD's factory is still fundamentally assembly-led (CKD/SKD), with deeper manufacturing and higher local content only expected to launch from 2026 onwards (Teixeira 2025).

Based on these facts, what evidence is there that factory installation served as a mechanism of role adaptation? As I have proposed previously, the logic for determining whether non-state action constitutes foreign policy behaviour/role enactment depends on a meaningful connection between non-state and state action. In hindsight, Chinese EV private companies have received considerable support from the Chinese state in their global rise, including direct financial outlays, regulatory advantages, and indirect industrial policy tools. Between 2009 and 2023, cumulative government support is estimated to have reached \$230.9 billion (Kennedy 2024). Notably, beyond operating through direct subsidies, the Chinese state has also provided structural economic advantages to reduce operating costs for manufacturers, from low-cost financing to public investment in research and development (R&D) (Kennedy 2024). Likewise, the government has directed funds toward the broader ecosystem necessary for EVs to thrive, such as raw material extraction, infrastructure and overall supply chains (Kennedy 2024).

This comprehensive support system has allowed companies to counter financial pressures and expand rapidly. For instance, Tang's (2025) research on BYD indicates that government subsidies have positively influenced the company's operational capabilities, inventory turnover, and profitability. Even as direct subsidies showed fluctuations over the years, they have provided a safety net that allowed the firm to expand capacity and engage in price wars to secure market share (Tang 2025). In other words, it is relatively safe to assume a formal connection between private actor and government objectives in the EV case. Crucially, the global success of companies such as BYD and GWM was underpinned by a mature and well implemented industrial policy. However, per the definition I have advanced, a formal link is not enough if it is not meaningful. Hence, the state-private actor connection is still bound by context. Regarding Chinese EV companies, I posit we may ascertain a link to Beijing's role enactment based on who are the main interlocutors of their actions. In the case of factory installation, corporate decisions were largely a reflection of Brazil's signalling of negotiated dissatisfaction. Hence, their behaviour is directly framed by the ego-alter interplay, and thus by China's role conception.

Of course, their moves also reflected their own economic rationales—after all, initial decisions to install factories predate the tariffs. Nonetheless, subsequent implementation of their projects were deeply political, with Brazilian authorities actively incentivising faster—and deeper—production localisation. As such, corporate behaviour served as the key instrument through which China could perform its role as a partner in Brazil's development. The inauguration ceremonies, which counted with the presence of high-level Brazilian officials, as well as the Chinese ambassador (GWM 2025), serve as indication that state actors endorsed these private investments as China's proof of commitment to correcting its role enactment according to Brazil's signalling.

By serving as instruments of role enactment and being actively framed under state objectives, I argue there is enough evidence to claim that, in this instance, non-state action was crucially linked to China's foreign policy behaviour. And, since the *when* and *how* of factory installation was crucially shaped by Brazil's signalling of negotiated dissatisfaction, corporate compliance to the alter's demands can be seen as role adaptation. This point will be further clarified by contrast with the second kind of reaction purported by Chinese EV companies. Specifically, this type of reaction was overtly targeted at the Brazilian private sector, which distanced it from the ego-alter interplay and, consequently, from establishing a meaningful connection to China's role enactment.

Throughout the trade barriers' dispute, Chinese EV firms were forced to defend themselves from accusations levied by pro-tariffs stakeholders. Mostly, they replicated ABVE's rhetoric and avoided any kind of escalation. Nonetheless, one instance of rhetorical rebuttal emerged as a clear

outlier: BYD's July 2025 open letter against the pro-tariffs lobbyists. It came under the context of the previously mentioned controversy over BYD's request for a temporary reduction in import taxes for CKD/SKD (Barros 2025). After Anfavea-represented firms Volkswagen, GM, Toyota and Stellantis sent a letter to Lula opposing the request, BYD published a press statement titled "Why does BYD bother so much?"⁶² (BYD 2025), in which it openly attacks the pro-tariffs section. While the text is built around a simple claim of fairness, it is deliberately wrapped in a combative tone. It portrays established automotive firms as anti-innovation protectionists, framing their lobbying tactics—which focused heavily on suggesting they might withhold future investments in Brazil—as manipulative rather than substantive (BYD 2025; Barros 2025).

The letter also emphasises BYD's role in providing consumer welfare and forcing greater price discipline in the Brazilian EV market, insinuating the latter was the true reason for the opposition's discomfort with the newcomers (BYD 2025). In addition, it defended its tax reduction request as a rational, temporary and pro-industry solution, denying it represented an attempt at circumventing government localisation pressures (BYD 2025). Finally, BYD summarised its message with a notable metaphor, portraying incumbent automakers as "dinosaurs" and presenting itself as the "meteor" which would bring their destruction. The letter ends in an open taunt: "if the dinosaurs are screaming, it means the meteor is working" (BYD 2025, 5).

Despite its incendiary content, BYD's letter only revolves around the government decision. Ultimately, its aim is to delegitimise the private lobby rather than attack the state's authority. In general, the Brazilian government is treated as a legitimate regulator that has authorised a pathway to manufacturing localisation (BYD 2025). At no point the company puts into question Brazil's sovereign right to tax, or challenges the tariffs. It is a response designed for the private sector, with its targets explicitly named. In other words, BYD purposively tailored its behaviour as a private affair, decoupling it from any state action. For these reasons, there is no ground to consider it a constituent of China's role enactment.

In their own way, the Chinese adjusted their answer proportionally to the manner through which Brazil voiced its demands. When Western countries imposed tariffs on Chinese EVs under the direct pretext that they were meant to counter China's unfair trade practices, Beijing responded in kind, defending itself at the official level, and applying what it saw as proportional counter-measures. In contrast, Brazil's decision did not give cause for an official rebuttal. However, when private actors stepped out of line, the Chinese also answered in kind, targeting their opposition at the appropriate level—in the private sphere. By binding its aggressiveness to a specific context isolated from the actual role enactment, BYD's letter did not interfere with China's role adaptation, which remained centered at factory installation and product localisation moves.

⁶² In Portuguese, "Por que a BYD incomoda tanto?"

Chapter conclusion

With the chapter drawing to a close, it becomes pertinent to review its trajectory and findings. Its first section sought to condense the broader discussion of China's "responsible great power" NRC, conducted in Chapter 3, into the specific relational context of Brazil. In doing so, I devised a number of derived codes, which identified specific pathways China has adopted to localise its role conception to the Brazilian audience. In doing so, Beijing projected itself as a strategic peer in Brazil's renewed plight for development. However, as the EV case study has shown, translating ego expectations into role enactment is seldom seamless.

The analysis of the EV trade barriers revealed a complex, multifaceted dynamic of negotiated dissatisfaction. While the official rhetoric between the Lula administration and Beijing indicated a high degree of convergence in expectations, the economic reality at the sectoral level told a different story. Facing contradicting domestic pressures—of protectionism by Anfavea and market openness by ABVE—the Brazilian government sought to synthesise these different demands and instrumentalise them into a trade policy that could act as a tacit signal of dissatisfaction with China's role enactment. By framing tariffs as tools for its project of green neo-industrialisation, Brasília implicitly communicated to external actors, especially China, that it expected them to behave not merely as exporters of goods, but as investors in Brazil's local capacity.

These findings allow us to revisit the general hypothesis established in Chapter 2, particularly regarding the nature of the intra-role conflict between China and Brazil. Specifically, the EV case illustrates that role conflict in Sino-Brazilian relations is often latent. Ultimately, it stems from the tensions between China's outward-facing aspects of its NRC, which emphasise solidarity and mutual gains, and the ego-driven imperatives brought by domestic contestation, which incentivises the export of industrial overcapacity in order to maintain economic performance. While official-level convergence may mask these tensions, the actual enactment of China's role—which often depends on non-state actors, with stakes of their own—is prone to clashes with the developmental anxieties of the alter. As hypothesised, Brazil's expectations were indeed sectorally defined, sending mixed signals that required China to adapt its role enactment.

On the latter aspect, the overall success of role adaptation in this specific conflict highlights the importance of prudent decision-making in the process of role adaptation. Unlike the confrontations seen with the US or the EU, Brazil's choice to decouple China from the justification for the tariffs proved decisive. By not directly accusing Beijing of unfair trade practices, it saved the latter from a normative deadlock, allowing the Chinese state to remain silent while its corporate

actors, such as BYD and GWM, adjusted their strategies by accelerating local manufacturing projects in Brazil.

Henceforth, while this chapter presents a successful instance of conflict resolution, it nonetheless underscores a structural issue in China's engagement with Brazil. The latent role conflict observed here is a symptom of a broader challenge Beijing faces in balancing its historical identity as a developing country, with its contemporary status as a great power. On the other side, it also demonstrates that alter expectations may be vulnerable to domestic pressure just as role conceptions are. Moreover, domestic pressure can fluctuate drastically among different sectors and policy areas. Consequently, role expectations will rarely be unequivocal, which may lead—as was the case in Brazil—to mixed signals and latent role-related issues. Next, this dissertation moves to its general conclusion, where I will discuss in further detail implications such as these.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The rise of China to the status of a central protagonist in international affairs is undoubtedly one of the defining phenomena of the 21st century. As established at the start of this dissertation, behind material shifts in global power distributions, this ascension is underpinned by a complex ideational background regarding China's identity and purpose within a changing global order. For Beijing, the challenge has been to craft a national role conception capable of reconciling the ambitious demands of a great power seeking national rejuvenation, on one side, with the solidarity-based obligations of a fellow developing nation, on the other. Ultimately, I posited this duality is crystallised in China's role conception of a "responsible great power". Through it, China projects its newfound status within the international system, while also attempting to assure the Global South that its rise will not replicate the asymmetries of Western hegemony. Instead, in Beijing's view, its purpose is to combine the status and resources of a great power with the promotion of a "community of shared future", based on mutual benefits and horizontal cooperation.

However, as this research has demonstrated, the translation of rhetoric into consistent foreign policy behaviour—or role enactment—is bound with its own contradictions. The central puzzle underpinning this dissertation was the observation that China's ego-oriented process of role conceptualisation, driven by dominant domestic imperatives for economic growth and regime stability, increasingly overrides the benign, alter-oriented components of the NRC. This internal dissonance became particularly visible in the case of Sino-Brazilian trade relations, where the surge of Chinese EV exports since 2023 threatened to reproduce the very North-South asymmetries Beijing claims to oppose.

In light of this tension, this thesis revolved around the following research question: "How does China's role enactment shape Brazil's expectations of China's national role conception of a responsible great power?" To answer this, I advanced a theoretical framework based on the symbolic interactionist approach to Role Theory, specifically adapting Cantir and Kaarbo's (2012, 2016) model of domestic role contestation to the alter's internal sphere. This allowed for an inquiry

of how Brazil, as a strategic partner of China in the Global South, processes and reacts to the inconsistencies in Beijing's role enactment.

My core argument, substantiated through the analysis of the “responsible great power” NRC in Chapter 3 and the case study of Brazilian EV tariffs in Chapter 4, is that the internal complexities of China's NRC led to an inconsistent role enactment—manifesting as the export of industrial overcapacity—which clashed with Brazil's developmental expectations. However, contrary to the retaliatory patterns observed in the Global North, I found that Brazil did not reject China's role outright. Instead, through a process I called negotiated dissatisfaction, the Brazilian state filtered domestic sectoral pressures into a trade policy that signalled a specific corrective expectation: that China should transition from a mere exporter of goods to an investor in local productive capacity.

This signalling proved decisive. As the analysis in Chapter 4 revealed, the interaction between Brazil's negotiated dissatisfaction and China's desire to maintain its image as a leader of the developing world led to a successful process of role adaptation. By shifting its strategy from pure export promotion to the localisation of manufacturing capabilities (exemplified by the BYD and GWM factories), China was able to align its role enactment with the expectations of its partner, thereby preserving the narrative of a Sino-Brazilian “Vanguard Partnership”. Thus, this dissertation concludes that, although being increasingly ego-driven, China's role remains susceptible to the agency of Global South partners who possess the strategic capacity to hold a mirror to Beijing's rhetoric of “responsibility”.

In the end, this dissertation set out to map the journey of a role. It traced the “responsible great power” NRC from its formulation in Beijing to its reception in Brasília. The empirical chapters have demonstrated that this journey is not linear. Instead, it is defined by internal contradictions, domestic struggles, and complex negotiations. To fully understand the conclusion of this research, we must first reconstruct the origin of the conflict deep within the Chinese political system. As such, the investigation began by looking inward at China. Chapter 3 conducted a thematic analysis of China's official foreign policy discourse under Xi Jinping. Instead of a static monolith, I worked on exploring its developments as a dynamic structure. Hence, I have started with Harnisch's (2016a) proposal that China's role conception is constantly being shaped, and reshaped, by three pillars: domestic contestation, international interaction, and historical self-conceptualisation. As I have pointed out, understanding the interplay between these pillars is essential, as it explains why China's behaviour often appears contradictory to outside observers.

I have identified domestic contestation as the most important pillar of China's NRC, since it is the main driver of the country's proactive shift in foreign policy. My coding of key official documents, especially the domestic-oriented 2022 Report to the 20th National Congress, revealed that domestic imperatives are the primary drivers of China's foreign policy shift under Xi Jinping.

The analysis identified a strong current of “Assertive Nationalism & Status-Seeking” (NAT), which was fueled by the doctrine of “National Rejuvenation” (NAT-1) and its demands for international status recognition (NAT-2). Simultaneously, “Developmental Imperatives” (DEV) remain a central source of regime legitimacy. The Communist Party explicitly links its right to rule (LEG-2) to its ability to deliver continuous economic growth (LEG-1). Consequently, this creates considerable pressure on the foreign policy apparatus to serve domestic economic needs.

The second pillar of international interaction has evolved significantly in the “New Era” of Chinese foreign policymaking. Previously, it acted as a constraint, with China seeking to reassure the West of its peaceful intentions. However, adhering to the logic of a proactive shift as the key dynamic within China’s NRC, I have sought to demonstrate that Beijing has moved from merely “Upholding Multilateralism” (INT-1) to “Proposing Chinese Solutions” (INT-2) and redefining what “responsibility” means (INT-3) on its own terms. Furthermore, when faced with external criticism, this pillar also triggers “Reactive Assertiveness” (ACC), through which China increasingly pushes back against perceived external interference to save face before its domestic audience.

The third pillar of historical self-conceptualisation functions less as a driver and more as a legitimising tool. The analysis highlighted three distinct historical selves. The “Civilisational State” (CIV) frames China’s rise as a return to its natural greatness, anchored in centuries of past glories and civilisational achievements. The “Victimised State” (VIC), for its part, uses the memory of the “Century of Humiliation” (1839-1945) to justify the hardline defence of sovereignty against foreign actors, especially Western powers. Finally, the “Developing State” (DVS) roots China’s identity in the Global South, reminiscing over the years of ideological formation of the CPC under Mao. This historical self distinguishes Beijing from Western powers and provides the moral foundation for its purported leadership in the developing world.

Finally, as these pillars do not operate in isolation, my analysis in Chapter 3 sought to map specific structural relationships between them. First, there are reinforcing relationships, through which positive bindings give strength to particular narratives within the role. For instance, the domestic legitimisation triad connects “National Rejuvenation” (NAT-1) and “Modernisation as a National Goal” (DEV-3) directly to the Party’s leadership (LEG-2), ultimately binding foreign policy success to regime survival. Similarly, “Development as Top Priority” (DEV-1) reinforces the push for “Proposing Chinese Solutions” (INT-2), altering the mechanism through which China promotes its own footprint in international affairs. The Belt and Road Initiative, a key linchpin of Xi’s foreign policy, is the perfect example of this synergy.

In addition, historical self-conceptualisation creates legitimising relationships with the other pillars, by providing the moral cover for contemporary foreign policy actions. The narrative of the “Victimised State” (VIC), for example, legitimises the hardline stance on “Core Interest Security”

(SEC-1), allowing China to frame assertive behaviour not as aggression, but as historical redress. However, these dynamics also create tensional relationships. The most critical tension identified is the “Multilateralism versus Security Dilemma”. On the one hand, China claims to uphold global stability (INT-1). On the other hand, its focus on status recognition (NAT-2) and “Opposing External Interference” (SEC-2) drives it towards friction with foreign partners.

These complex interactions result in a structural imbalance within the NRC. As visualised in the role’s structural model at the end of Chapter 3, the “Ego-driven Pole” of China’s role conceptualisation has become dominant. This pole prioritises domestic stability, regime legitimacy, and economic growth. It is fueled by the reinforcing link between nationalism, national security and development. Conversely, the benign or alter-oriented pole, which values international harmony and upholds multilateralism, remains present but secondary. Under such terms, my analysis confirmed the main argument proposed at this dissertation’s introduction about China’s “responsible great power” NRC: that it suffers from a structural mismatch between its benign self-projection and its new set of demands emanating from the domestic sphere. From there, I posit that this structural imbalance had direct consequences for role enactment. Crucially, the internal imperative to maintain growth—represented through the DEV (“Developmental Imperatives”) theme—can sometimes override the concern for partner stability. Moreover, as China’s domestic economy shows signs of slowing down, the pressure to export industrial overcapacity becomes more intense (de Kluiver and Neethling 2022).

This increases the possibility of intra-role conflicts with alter expectations. On one side, China claimed to be a benevolent partner (the benign pole). Yet, its economic necessities can force it to act as an aggressive exporter (the ego-driven pole), with lesser concern for other countries’ development. In Chapter 4, I showed one instance in which this contradiction travelled across the globe and arrived in Brazil, manifesting as a notable surge in Chinese EV exports to the South-American nation. Beyond an episodic commercial trend, I posited this surge represented a material enactment of China’s ego-driven dynamics. However, when this enactment collided with the Brazilian reality, it did not meet a unified actor. Chapter 4 demonstrated that Brazil’s reception of China’s role, while superficially welcoming, showed signs of contestation at deeper levels. Just as for the ego, the black box of the alter was fractured. Hence, by applying the model domestic role contestation to Brazil, I sought to shed light into a fierce dispute at the sectoral level, which was putting pressure over the communication of alter expectations.

The Brazilian automotive sector was split into two warring camps. On the one hand, the traditional automotive establishment rebelled against the surge in EV imports. This group, represented by Anfavea (National Association of Automotive Vehicle Manufacturers), viewed the influx of Chinese EVs as an existential threat to Brazil’s faltering manufacturing economy. They

framed the imports within a narrative of “predation” and “invasion”. Notably, Anfavea argued that China was using Brazil as a “dumping ground” for its surplus production, with Chinese cars serving as instruments of precocious de-industrialisation. This group demanded immediate and harsh protectionist measures. At its core, they challenged the idea of China as a partner. Instead, they depicted Beijing as a competitor intent on hollowing out Brazil’s industrial base.

On the other hand, the newcomers pushed back. This group was represented by ABVE (Brazilian Association of Electric Vehicles). These actors championed market openness, actively rejecting the “threat” narrative. Instead, they framed Chinese imports as a catalyst for the Brazilian economy. They argued that these vehicles were essential for the country’s “green modernisation”. Consequently, ABVE posited that barriers would create a “technological lag”. They argued that Chinese actors were democratising access to new technologies. For them, the invasion was actually a necessary shock to a stagnant market.

This dichotomy proved to be empirically significant, by justifying a key theoretical adaptation of this thesis. Namely, one cannot understand the alter’s expectations without analysing its domestic politics. In the end, Brazil had two conflicting potential expectations of China’s role. Namely, one expected a predator, while the other expected a moderniser. However, as role expectations cannot be communicated straight from private entities towards state entities, the alter’s public sphere still held an essential part to play in this story. Naturally, the Brazilian state was forced to arbitrate this dispute. On the one hand, the government could not simply accept the imports’ surge, as that would alienate the powerful industrial lobby of Anfavea. However, it could not simply block them, as that would likewise alienate the green energy lobby and the promise of investment by the Chinese newcomers.

The resolution of this conflict was a carefully designed policy. Brazil did not choose active retaliation. It did not adopt the aggressive posture seen in the United States or the European Union against Chinese EVs. Instead, the Brazilian government adopted a strategy I have termed *negotiated dissatisfaction*. Its main executioner, the MDIC, acted as a filter and as a synthesiser of the competing sets of demands. Within this framework, the government ultimately decided to impose import tariffs, thus satisfying the protectionist demands of the traditional sector. However, the government chose for a gradual schedule (“escadinha”) of implementation, while also establishing duty-free quotas for early movers among the foreign companies. This partially answered the newcomers’ need for predictability. Even more crucially, the justification for this policy was also careful. At the core of its message, Brazil actively decoupled Beijing from the problem. Unlike Western powers, Brasília did not accuse China of unfair trade practices, nor did it cite illegal subsidies. Instead, it framed the tariffs under a strictly domestic narrative, tying it to its overall

plans for the “green neo-industrialisation” of the country. Consequently, it advanced a message that appeared technical, instead of punitive.

Yet, it still carried a signal. Through this policy, Brazil implicitly rejected serving as a passive consumer of Chinese surplus production. Instead, it demanded that China act as a strategic investor in Brazil’s national productive capacity. This was the core of the negotiated dissatisfaction mechanism. Through it, Brazil transformed disparate domestic pressures into a clear expectation: for China to maintain its status as a partner of Brazil’s own developmental goals, it had to shift its economic behaviour. Instead of exporting cars, it had to make them domestically. In other words, it had to bring the value chain inside the Brazilian border.

This choice of signalling proved decisive. The empirical analysis of Chapter 4 confirms that Brazil’s policy choices accelerated a process of role adaptation. Because alter expectations were communicated in a way that preserved China’s face, the reaction from the Chinese state was defined by silence. This stands in stark contrast to similar cases. When the EU and Canada imposed tariffs, Beijing retaliated beyond harsh words: it launched investigations into European brandy and Canadian agricultural products, and filed disputes at the WTO. In Brazil’s case, there were no official protests or assertive statements. In other words, Brazil’s refusal to use any kind of anti-China rhetoric allowed Beijing to accept the measure without suffering a loss of status.

Simultaneously, Chinese corporate actors adjusted their strategies. This was the material manifestation of role adaptation. Firms like BYD and GWM accelerated their plans, moving to inaugurate factories in Camaçari and Iracemópolis, respectively. They explicitly shifted from pure export promotion to the gradual localisation of production. This corporate compliance was not accidental, but an integral part of China’s role enactment. It served as a validation of the Sino-Brazilian partnership. By building factories, China aligned its behaviour with Brazil’s developmental narrative. It thus moved from being a competitor (ego-centered pole) to being a contributor and investor (benign pole). This outcome allowed China to maintain its “responsible” image while satisfying the developmental anxieties of the alter. Thus, the case study provided confirmation to my main hypothesis: while the internal complexities and structural imbalances identified in China’s NRC resulted in a role enactment that was perceived as predatory by specific Brazilian domestic sectors, this did not lead to a breakdown of bilateral relations. Instead, it prompted a careful and localised response by the alter, in the form of the negotiated dissatisfaction mechanism.

By filtering sectoral pressures into a technical trade policy, Brasília successfully signalled a corrective expectation that nudged Chinese actors toward role adaptation. In addition, China’s role proved to be malleable, instead of fixed. While driven by ego-oriented goals, it still remains responsive. Thus, when a partner like Brazil utilises its agency, it can reshape the relationship. By

demanding a more mutually beneficial arrangement, Brazil forced China to adapt. In turn, the Chinese shifted its instruments—from trade to investment—to preserve the convergence of expectations between ego and alter.

Moreover, the dynamics observed in the empirical parts of this dissertation offer useful contributions to Role Theory's and FPA's frameworks. Notably, beyond explaining a specific trade dispute, this dissertation sought to help advance the academic debate on foreign policy roles by challenging how we theorise the interaction between role conceptions and foreign policy behaviour/role enactment. The first and perhaps most significant implication concerns the black-boxing of the alter. In my theoretical chapter, I warned that Role Theory often suffers from an "ego bias". Generally, it assumes that counter-roles or roles expectations received by the ego are clear and monolithic. However, my application of the domestic role contestation model—originally designed by Cantir and Kaarbo (2012, 2016) to analyse the ego—to the alter reveals a more complex reality.

Consequently, I have argued that role expectations, both ego and alter, are not static facts, but socially constructed outcomes. The empirical evidence from the Brazilian EV case vindicates this theoretical stance. Crucially, the fierce sectoral clash between the traditional automotive industry (Anfavea) and the emerging green energy sector (ABVE) forced the Brazilian state to internally negotiate its expectations of China's role. By opening the black box of the partner state, this research highlights that the alter is just as fragmented as the ego. A standard systemic analysis might view Brazil's tariff policy simply as a state response to imports. However, my framework has revealed it as a compromise between domestic factions. Moreover, this dissertation also serves to posit that a robust analysis of bilateral relations cannot rely solely on the ego's internal processes. It must fundamentally incorporate the domestic contestation within the alter. Without understanding the internal struggle behind Brazil's negotiated dissatisfaction—along with its victory over divisive narratives, such as the "threat" narrative advanced by pro-tariffs stakeholders—one cannot explain the specific nature of the signal sent to China.

This theoretical expansion leads directly to a second major implication: the reassessment of who enacts foreign policy. Standard Role Theory typically designates the state apparatus—diplomats, ministries, and leaders—as the primary agent of role enactment. Yet, the empirical evidence presented here complicates this boundary. The behaviour that ultimately satisfied Brazil's expectations did not come from Chinese diplomats or public officials. Instead, it came from corporate entities, with the investment decisions by BYD and GWM constituted the core of the role adaptation. In the context of liberal market economies, such corporate moves might have been dismissed as private commercial decisions. However, within the context of China's state capitalism, the distinction blurs.

Ultimately, I proposed these firms operated as functional substitutes for diplomatic action. My analysis suggests that when corporate strategies are explicitly aligned with a state's role conception, the firm becomes an agent of role enactment. Through this prism, Chinese companies were not just exporting cars or investing in local industries. More than that, they were actively shaping Beijing's commitment to a "shared future" with Brazil. Moreover, the proposed conceptual broadening does not limit itself to the grounds of Role Theory. As role enactment acts as an equivalent of foreign policy behaviour, this understanding helps create bridges across the gap between International Political Economy (IPE) and FPA in general. It does so by suggesting that, due to the nature of contemporary international politics, foreign policy analysts must develop a sharper eye for the multiple intricacies between state actors and private economic entities. While the pressures of non-state actors are already a staple of FPA's decision-making frameworks, lesser attention has been given to their post-decision role. In my specific case, the focus lay on the strategic deployment of economic actors who, through their material investments, could stabilise immaterial aspects of the state's foreign policy. However, the possibilities provided by the state-market interface for foreign policy analysis can point to many other directions.

Finally, the case study inserts itself amid a critical nuance to the topic of role change. My analysis was premised by the works of scholars like Harnisch (2011), which explicitly distinguish between adaptation and learning as different modalities of role change. From the outset, I deemed it crucial to categorise China's response to Brazil's expectations accurately within this framework, as to avoid any kind of analytical overreach. Under those terms, the collected evidence allows us to conclude that the transition from exports to investment represents an instance of role adaptation, not complex learning. Notably, the latter would imply a change in values or fundamental goals beneath role conception. It would suggest that the ego has internalised alter expectations into the normative backbone of its NRC, even if only in relation to this specific alter. In other words, if China had undergone role learning, there would have to be evidence of a vocal recognition of Brazil's economic concerns in the EV sector. However, the data only supports a shift in behaviour, not in role conception.

At its core, China did not abandon the ego-driven goal of economic expansion. Instead, the Chinese adjusted the instruments used to achieve these goals. It recognised that the instrument of direct export had become politically contested, creating a point of friction that could spillover to the broader "Vanguard Partnership". Consequently, it swapped it for the instrument of foreign direct investment, an action that both eased frictions between ego and alter, and allowed for Chinese companies to expand their presence in the Brazilian market. This distinction may prove vital for the application of Role Theory to China's foreign policy. It indicates that the "responsible great power" NRC, regardless of its internal contradictions, can be performed pragmatically. Our analysis in

Chapter 3 indicates that it can possess a quite flexible script, depending on the circumstances. Thanks to it, Chinese policymakers can change the method of delivery without touching on the underlying plot. Amid the context of an ever more complex relationship between China and the Global South, this kind of strategic adaptation is likely to grow more frequent. Thus, this dissertation concludes that Role Theory must remain sensitive to the difference between tactical adjustment and normative transformation.

Reflecting a bit further on the research's journey, I also confirm that all research objectives established in the Introduction have been met throughout the dissertation. At the highest level, I proposed as my general objective to understand the impacts of China's internal NRC complexities within its interactional dimension, using Brazil as the primary role partner to observe these dynamics in practice. By advancing the appropriate analytical nuances I required in Chapter 2, and dissecting the internal machinations of the "responsible great power" NRC in Chapter 3, I was then able to tackle the aforementioned interactional dimension of China's role conception in Chapter 4, through the exploration of the EV case. Concomitantly, this general framing also indicates the accomplishment of my specific objectives. Namely, by applying iterative coding to official documents, I have problematised the "responsible great power" role, tracing its shift toward proactiveness and ego-oriented drivers under Xi Jinping (first specific objective). Likewise, my analysis successfully moved beyond traditional diplomatic channels to include corporate actors (BYD, GWM) and sectoral associations (Anfavea, ABVE), providing a multi-layered account of the role-informed aspects of Sino-Brazilian relations (second specific objective). And finally, on the more empirical side, the qualitative case study on EV tariffs provided a concrete appraisal of the trade-related consequences of China's role, identifying how Brazil instrumentalised sectoral dissatisfaction with Chinese imports into a specific trade policy (third specific objective).

Naturally, the scope of inquiry adopted in this dissertation implies important limitations to its results. Of these, perhaps the most significant constraint lies in the singularity of my case study. By focusing exclusively on the EV sector, I was able to provide analysis with a deeper, but inescapably narrow view of Sino-Brazilian relations. In hindsight, the Brazilian automotive sector, with its high visibility and symbolic weight for the country's industrial policy, represents a uniquely sensitive arena for domestic contestation. It is possible that in less politicised sectors, or in areas where Brazil lacks a pre-existing industrial base to protect, the advanced dynamic of negotiated dissatisfaction may not occur with the same clarity or effectiveness. Furthermore, the timeframe of the case study analysis—covering the period from late 2023 to mid-2025—captures a specific moment of renewed Sino-Brazilian political convergence, made possible by the 3rd Lula administration. The fact that the broader diplomatic channel remained open and constructive certainly helped both parties to turn a latent role conflict into a well managed situation. In contrast,

a shift in the political orientation of the Brazilian executive could fundamentally alter the mechanism of signal transmission, potentially transforming manageable frictions into overt diplomatic disputes. Consequently, the findings regarding China's willingness to adapt its role enactment should be understood as contingent on a specific configuration of political variables within the alter, rather than as an immutable law of Chinese foreign policy.

These limitations, however, also point directly toward alternative avenues for future research. If the notion of negotiated dissatisfaction model proved useful to interpret developments in the EV case, it may also be tested across different sectoral contexts. Future inquiries could profitably examine whether similar dynamics of role adaptation occur in other strategic areas of Sino-Brazilian relations, such as the semiconductor industry, renewable energy infrastructure, or agricultural technology. Does China display the same flexibility when the stakes involve core technologies closer to its national security interests? Moreover, the theoretical framework adapted here invites comparative application. It would be analytically valuable to investigate whether other key Global South partners—such as India, South Africa, or Indonesia—utilise similar filtering mechanisms to manage their asymmetries with Beijing. Comparing how different *others* construct and signal their expectations could reveal whether China's responsiveness is a general feature of its Global South strategy or a privilege reserved for a select few "vanguard partners" like Brazil. Additionally, as the BYD and GWM factories in Brazil move from inauguration to full operation (a process that is still likely to go for a couple more years), longitudinal studies will be necessary to verify if the promise of "synergistic reindustrialisation" materialises into genuine technology transfer, or if role adaptation effectively stalled at the level of commercial strategy.

Ultimately, this dissertation concludes that the "responsible great power" NRC is not a static entity, but a relational outcome constantly being negotiated both within and without China. The case of Brazilian EV tariffs demonstrates that developing nations are not passive recipients of China's rise. Crucially, they possess the capacity to hold China's rhetoric true to their word, demanding that the lofty language of win-win cooperation be translated into concrete mutual benefits. China's ability to adapt to these demands—shifting from an exporter of surplus production to a builder of local capacity, for instance—suggests that its claim to leadership in the developing world can be resilient, especially due to its instrumental malleability. Likewise, as the international system moves toward greater fragmentation, the stability of China's global presence will likely depend less on the rigidity of its grand narratives and more on its capacity to heed the demands of its partners. China's status as a great power is already a reality. Whether it shall behave as a responsible one, however, does not lie solely in what China says about itself. Regardless of how ego-driven its role conception has become, roles are still an outcome of ego-alter interplays. As such, Beijing's partners will never be fully out of the equation. The key for successfully navigating the emerging role conflicts is

ultimately in China's hands. However, it also relates to its partners' capacity to send the right messages, in the right manner. How well will such dynamics play in the future remains a question for tomorrow.

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