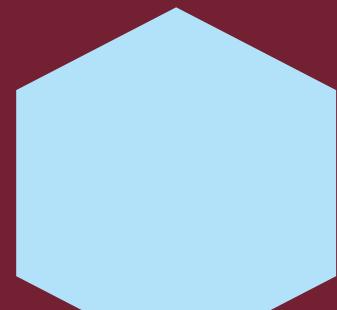


Polish Journal of Political Science

Volume 11 Issue 3 (2025) Thematic Issue



Polish Journal of Political Science
Volume 11 Issue 3 Thematic Issue

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The journal is published by the Interdisciplinary Research Center
of the University of Warsaw "Identity – Dialogue – Security"
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Warsaw 2025

eISSN 2391-3991
Original version: e-book
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Securitisation and the Belt and Road Initiative: Evolving Narratives in Chinese Discourses

DOI: [10.58183/pjps.0203TI2025](https://doi.org/10.58183/pjps.0203TI2025)

Abstract

The 2010s marked a turning point in global politics, as securitization increasingly reshaped interpretations of the post-Cold War order. While the 1990s and 2000s were defined by optimism about globalization and interdependence, the following decade saw renewed great-power rivalry and declining trust in international norms. In this context, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013 to promote connectivity and shared prosperity, provides a revealing case. Western scholarship has often framed the BRI through a security lens, but little attention has been paid to China's own evolving discourse. This study analyses Xi Jinping's speeches at the three Belt and Road Forums (2017, 2019, 2023) to trace discursive shifts. Findings show that security moved from a marginal background condition in 2017 to a principle of governance in 2019, and by 2023 was fully integrated with prosperity in China's global leadership narrative. Critiques of "debt traps," corruption, geopolitical expansion, and coercion were reinterpreted as arguments for transparency, resilience, and legitimacy. Theoretically, the study extends securitization theory beyond Western contexts, introducing the concept of "positive securi-

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Introduction

One of the defining themes of the 2010s was the rise of securitization, a trend that fundamentally reshaped how the international community thinks about the post–Cold War order.¹ In the two decades following the Cold War, the dominant feature of global politics was the deepening of interconnections among individuals, societies, and states. The expansion of cross-border trade, investment, technology transfers, and cultural exchange nurtured the belief in the emergence of a truly global community. International discourse largely captured this process through the concept of globalization, and it was widely assumed that states that embraced globalization and pursued policies to foster openness and interconnectedness would thrive in the evolving order.

By the 2010s, however, this optimistic understanding of the world had begun to fracture.² The U.S.-centric world order that had underpinned globalization showed signs of erosion, giving way once more to overt great-power competition. International norms and institutions came under strain, casting doubt on the universality of the values they were presumed to embody.³ Trust, a cornerstone of globalization, weakened significantly, and securitization once again became a central lens through which states interpreted their environment. Political elites frame issues as existential threats through *speech acts*, thereby legitimizing extraordinary measures.⁴ In this context, interconnectedness – once celebrated as the foundation of prosperity – began to appear as a source of vulnerability. These dynamics have fueled debates about a “crisis of globalization” or even a transition toward de-globalization.⁵

“ization,” which links stability with development rather than existential threat. The BRI is thus portrayed by the Chinese elite as both an engine of growth and a stabilizing platform in an uncertain global order.

Keywords

securitisation, Belt and Road Initiative, positive securitisation, discourse, China

1. T. Balzacq (ed.), *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve*, Routledge 2010.

2. D. Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox*, Oxford University Press 2011.

3. M. Zürn, *A Theory of Global Governance*, Oxford University Press 2018.

4. B. Buzan, O. Wæver, J. de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Lynne Rienner Publishers 1998, p. 25.

5. H. James, *Deglobalization as a Global Challenge*, “CIGI Papers”, 2017, No. 135, pp. 1–11.

The People's Republic of China offers a particularly revealing case. China is widely regarded as the principal beneficiary of globalization, its economic rise closely tied to the post-Cold War environment that granted access to global capital, technologies, and markets. The centrality of connectivity in its development was later institutionalized in its first comprehensive global grand strategy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁶ Introduced in 2013, the BRI (previously known as "One Belt, One Road") sought to foster shared growth through the reconnection of major regions. The very architecture of the initiative reflects China's conviction that prosperity is built upon connectivity.⁷ Yet Western scholarship has increasingly framed the BRI through a securitization lens, often portraying it as a geo-economic or geopolitical instrument, or even a threat to the existing order.⁸ Far less attention, however, has been devoted to examining whether and how securitization appears in China's own discourse surrounding the BRI. This gap is where the present study intervenes. At the same time, China has not been immune to the global backlash against interdependence. Official rhetoric insists that "economic globalization is the trend of the times. Though counter currents are sure to exist in a river, none could stop it from flowing to the sea."⁹ This underscores Beijing's view that current disruptions are temporary. Yet such statements should not obscure the fact that Chinese leaders take the dynamics of securitization seriously and have sought to adapt their strategies. The tension between China's rhetorical commitment to globalization and the pressure of securitization is visible in the evolution of the BRI.

This study therefore asks: to what extent, and in what ways, does securitization appear in the strategic framing of the BRI? Previous literature mainly adopts three approaches in this context. The first group focuses on Western,¹⁰ particularly U.S. framings and securitization narratives towards the BRI,¹¹ with some special focus on the digital BRI.¹² The second approach examines the Chinese economic perspective, primarily through BRI corridor development, but does not address securitization discourse.¹³ The third approach analyzes regional security implications and geo-economic shifts, highlighting the BRI's security dimensions without considering the internal evolution of China's narrative.¹⁴

In contrast, our study traces the internal evolution of China's securitization narratives. To address this, the research employs a design grounded in securitization theory and narrative analysis. The hypothesis is that while the BRI was initially framed as a narrative of prosperity and mutual development (2013–2017), subsequent shifts in the international environment – U.S.–China rivalry, the spread of the "debt-trap" narrative, European criticisms, and broader geopolitical crises – have increasingly infused Chinese discourse with security-oriented themes.

6. V. Eszterhai, *The Geopolitical Strategy of China: The Belt and Road Initiative as a Geoeconomic Umbrella*, in: *Geopolitics in the Twenty-First Century: Territories, Identities, and Foreign Policies*, ed. N. Morgado, Nova Science Publishers 2021, pp. 57–84.

7. *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*, National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China 2015, <https://2017beltandroadforum.org/english/n100/2017/0410/c22-45.html>, (access 06.09.2025).

8. A.R. Shah, *Revisiting China Threat: The US' Securitization of the 'Belt and Road Initiative'*, "Chinese Political Science Review", 2023, Vol. 8, pp. 84–104, DOI: [10.1007/s41111-021-00179-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-021-00179-0);

W.A. Callahan, *China's "Asia Dream": The Belt Road Initiative and the new regional order*, "Asian Journal of Comparative Politics", 2016, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 226–243, DOI: [10.1177/2057891116647806](https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891116647806).

9. No "countercurrents" could stop trend of economic globalization: Xi, People's Daily Online 2022, <https://en.people.cn/n3/2022/0117/c90000-9945940.html>, (access 06.09.2025).

10. L. Wu, *Diverging China Strategies in the West: Securitization and the Overlooked Role of Business Interests*, "Global Studies Quarterly", 2024, Vol. 4,

The analysis will draw on primary sources, including Xi Jinping's keynote speeches at the three Belt and Road Forums (2017, 2019, 2023). These texts will be coded to identify prosperity-oriented narratives (growth, efficiency, win-win cooperation) alongside securitization-oriented ones (resilience, stability, national security, supply chain security). By tracing changes over time (2013–2023), the study expects to demonstrate a gradual yet discernible shift toward securitization in China's grand strategy, reflecting both external pressures and internal adaptation, with significant implications for Beijing's future approach to global connectivity. In doing so, the study not only fills a gap in the existing literature but also broadens the scope of securitization theory by applying it to a non-Western case and highlighting its interactive dimension.

Securitization and the Role of External Pressure

Since the 1990s, the Copenhagen School has played a decisive role in introducing the concept of securitization into the study of international relations and security. Securitization can be defined as the process by which state or non-state actors transform subjects into matters of "security" through speech acts and discursive framing, presenting an issue as an existential threat requiring extraordinary measures.¹⁵ In their formulation, securitization is not simply about identifying objective threats that inherently endanger a community, but rather about understanding security as a discursive process.¹⁶ A given issue becomes a "security question" not because of its inherent qualities, but because political actors frame it as such and an audience accepts this framing. In this sense, securitization highlights the intersubjective dimension of security: it is constructed through communication, persuasion, and recognition.¹⁷

Traditionally, the Copenhagen School has examined securitization through the notion of the speech act.¹⁸ Security emerges when a political leader, government institution, or other authoritative actor publicly declares that a particular phenomenon constitutes an existential threat to the survival of a referent object. Once the audience accepts this declaration – be it society, parliament, or the international community – the issue is elevated beyond the realm of ordinary politics. Topics such as migration, climate change, or cyberattacks all illustrate this process: they only become securitized when political elites successfully frame them as urgent threats requiring extraordinary measures.¹⁹

While this model emphasizes domestic political processes, one of the less explored dimensions of securitization theory is the role of external pressure as a source of securitization. In the classical Copenhagen School framework, the focus lies on a securitizing actor within a state who at-

Issue 3, pp. 1–13, DOI: [10.1093/isagsq/kxae082](https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/kxae082).

11. A.R. Shah, *Revisiting China Threat...*, op. cit., pp. 84–104.

12. C. Heidbrink, C. Becker, *Framing the Digital Silk Road's (De)Securitisation*, "Journal of Current Chinese Affairs", 2022, Vol. 52, Issue 2, pp. 311–333, DOI: [10.1177/1868102622117567](https://doi.org/10.1177/1868102622117567).

13. T. Wijaya, C. Camba, *The (Geo) politics of the Belt and Road Initiative: economic corridors in Indonesia and the Philippines*, "Eurasian Geography and Economics", 2025, pp. 1–28, DOI: [10.1080/15387216.2025.2534559](https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2025.2534559).

14. A. Dhaka, *The Geoeconomic Simulacrum of BRI and the South Asian Regional Security Complex*, "Peace Review", 2023, Vol. 35, No. 4, pp. 638–651, DOI: [10.1080/10402659.2023.2268040](https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2023.2268040).

15. T. Balzacq (ed.), *Securitization Theory: How...*, op. cit.; H. Stritzel, *Towards a Theory of Securitization: Copenhagen and Beyond*, "European Journal of International Relations", 2007, Vol. 13, Issue 3, pp. 357–383, DOI: [10.1177/1354066107080128](https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066107080128); B. Buzan, O. Wæver, J. de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework...*, op. cit.; J. Huysmans, *Security! What do you mean? From concept to thick signifier*, "European Journal of International Relations", 1998, Vol. 4, Issue 2, pp. 226–255, DOI: [10.1177/1354066198004002004](https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066198004002004); O. Wæver, *Securitization and Desecu-*

tempts to construct a threat, and on the domestic audience whose acceptance determines the success of the process. Yet securitization can also be projected across borders.²⁰ A country may not initially perceive a phenomenon as a threat, but the constant framing of the issue as a security matter by international organizations (such as the United Nations), regional institutions, or neighboring states can generate pressure on domestic politics (risks of international isolation, reputational decline, etc.).²¹

As a result, states often internalize securitization under external pressure.²² They may adopt the language and framing introduced by international actors, but they rarely do so passively. Instead, the external narrative is incorporated into the domestic discourse in a way that aligns with national interests, political culture, and legitimizing strategies. In other words, the state translates and reshapes the securitizing move to fit its own context. For example, a government may accept the international framing of an issue – such as terrorism or climate change – but reinterpret it in a way that strengthens its domestic authority or serves broader geopolitical goals.²³

The literature has referred to this phenomenon as “interactive securitization” or “second-order securitization.”²⁴ These concepts emphasize that securitization is not determined solely by a state’s internal elite but can also be imposed or encouraged by external actors. The process is therefore dual in nature: it consists of external pressure, often manifested as international expectations or normative frameworks, and internal re-narration, where the state adapts the securitizing discourse to its own legitimacy structures. This dynamic highlights the multi-layered character of securitization in a globalized world, where national security agendas are increasingly shaped not only by domestic concerns but also by the interplay of international discourses and pressures.

While a few studies have applied securitization theory to Chinese cases, these focus primarily on domestic securitization logics within an authoritarian context.²⁵ Much less attention has been paid to how China’s discourse adapts and re-narrates external securitizing pressures. This is striking because China is the most significant rising power challenging the U.S.-led international order. It is therefore of considerable interest to examine how external pressures influence domestic discourses in the Chinese case. Empirically, this constitutes a rarely investigated and underrepresented dimension. Scholarly attention has primarily focused on terrorism, particularly in the context of China’s reaction to the U.S.-led War on Terror. Yet it is equally important to consider how external securitizing pressures affect China’s BRI, as this grand strategic umbrella concept structures much of its foreign policy activity. In this context, it is particularly important to consider concepts that are officially

ritization, in: *On Security*, ed. R. Lipschutz, Columbia University Press 1995, pp. 46–86.

16. O. Wæver, *Securitization and Desecuritization*, op. cit., pp. 46–86.

17. H. Stritzel, S.C. Chang, *Securitization and Counter-Securitization in Afghanistan*, “Security Dialogue”, 2015, Vol. 46, Issue 6, pp. 548–567, DOI: [10.1177/0967010615588725](https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010615588725); J. Huysmans, *Security! What do...*, op. cit., pp. 226–255.

18. T. Balzacq (ed.), *Securitization Theory: How...*, op. cit.; B. Buzan, O. Wæver, J. de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework...*, op. cit.; O. Wæver, *Securitization and Desecuritization*, op. cit., pp. 46–86.

19. R. Floyd, *Security and the Environment: Securitisation Theory and Environmental Security*, Cambridge University Press 2010; B. Buzan, O. Wæver, J. de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework...*, op. cit.

20. H. Stritzel, *Towards a Theory...*, op. cit., pp. 357–383.

21. T. Balzacq (ed.), *Securitization Theory: How...*, op. cit.

22. H. Stritzel, *Towards a Theory...*, op. cit., pp. 357–383.

23. T. Balzacq (ed.), *Securitization Theory: How...*, op. cit.; R. Floyd, *Security and the...*, op. cit.

regarded as core goals of China's BRI narrative, such as prosperity, which can be defined as the narrative of mutual economic growth, infrastructure development, and regional connectivity promoted by China under the BRI framework.²⁶ While these narratives primarily focus on development, they can carry implicit security implications by promoting stability and cooperative frameworks, though these are treated here descriptively rather than as a formalized concept.

Existing studies have often analyzed the securitization of the BRI in Western elite discourse, showing how U.S. policy toward the initiative was largely shaped by a securitization approach.²⁷ However, far less attention has been paid to the Chinese response and its role in shaping China's own narrative. Although some works have examined Chinese discourse, they do not directly address the internalization of external narratives.²⁸ Other studies likewise emphasize Beijing's effort to contrast its positive self-representation with critical Western narratives, but they also stop short of examining the internalization of external securitizing pressures.²⁹ In addition, no empirical study has examined how China integrates external securitization discourses into its own narrative. This lack of empirical inquiry underscores the novelty and importance of studying the interplay between external pressures and domestic discursive adaptation in the Chinese context. Although the concept of integrity, which refers to the coherence between China's domestic and international discourse and ensures that the narrative aligns with national interests while responding to external pressures, has not been the direct focus of this study, it provides important context for understanding China's BRI discourse.³⁰

Building on this gap, the present study asks: to what extent, and in what ways, does China's discourse absorb and re-narrate external securitizing pressures in the context of the BRI? The working hypothesis is that while the BRI was initially conceptualized as a narrative of prosperity and mutual development, subsequent external pressures – particularly U.S. securitization, European criticism, and broader geopolitical tensions – have propelled Chinese discourse toward a more security-oriented framing.

This theoretical framing directly informs the methodological approach, as the subsequent content analysis is designed to capture both internal Chinese narratives and the internalization of external securitizing pressures.

24. T. Balzacq (ed.), *Securitization Theory: How...*, op. cit.; H. Stritzel, S.C. Chang, *Securitization and Counter-Securitization...*, op. cit., pp. 548–567.

25. J. Zeng, *Securitization of Artificial Intelligence in China*, "The Chinese Journal of International Politics", 2021, Vol. 14, Issue 3, pp. 417–444, DOI: [10.1093/cjip/poab005](https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poab005); J. Nyman, J. Zeng, *Securitization in Chinese Climate and Energy Politics*, "WIREs Climate Change", 2016, Vol. 7, Issue 2, pp. 301–313, DOI: [10.1002/wcc.387](https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.387).

26. S. Weil, *China's Discourse on the Belt and Road Initiative: A Hidden Threat to European Security Logic?*, "Journal of Contemporary European Studies", 2023, Vol. 31, Issue 4, pp. 1147–1163, DOI: [10.1080/14782804.2022.2068516](https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2022.2068516).

27. A.R. Shah, *Revisiting China Threat...*, op. cit., pp. 84–104.

28. J.A. Vuori, *Chinese Macrosecuritization: China's Alignment in Global Security Discourses*, Routledge 2024

29. J.Q. Lin, *Destabilising the "China Threat" paradigm: Analysing the Western discourse around China's "Belt and Road Initiative" with critical geopolitics*, "LSE Journal of Geography and Environment", 2024, Vol. 2, Issue 1, pp. 1–9.

30. S. Weil, *China's Discourse on...*, op. cit., pp. 1147–1163.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative content analysis of three speeches delivered by Xi Jinping at the Belt and Road Forums for International Cooperation in 2017, 2019, and 2023. Building on the theoretical framework outlined above, this methodological section operationalizes the concepts of interactive and second-order securitization in practice. The focus is on Xi Jinping because he is the primary spokesperson of the BRI, ensuring that the selected speeches reflect the official policy and strategic priorities. These speeches directly address the goals, priorities, and implementation of the BRI, making them highly relevant for understanding the evolution of China's policy and international engagement in this context, as well as shifts in rhetoric. The chosen speeches are the following:

- Xi's Opening Remarks at the Roundtable Summit of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (2017),³¹
- Xi's Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (2019),³²
- Xi's Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (2023).³³

For the 2019 and 2023 Belt and Road Forums, the keynote speeches at the Opening Ceremonies were available and selected for analysis. These speeches are particularly relevant because they provide detailed insights into policy priorities, practical cooperation, and strategic directions of the BRI. For the 2017 Forum, however, no keynote speech at the Opening Ceremony was available. Therefore, we selected Xi's speech at the Leaders' Roundtable Summit, which is more relevant for our analysis than the 2017 Opening Ceremony speech, as it addresses policy and cooperation issues, making it the best available source for that year. The speeches were chosen because they represent key moments in the development of the BRI: its launch and initial framing (2017), the consolidation of its governance and international outreach (2019), and the ten-year anniversary marking its achievements and evolving strategic discourse (2023).

Two of the speeches (2019 and 2023) are originally available in both English and Chinese, while the 2017 speech is only available in Chinese. We carefully compared the English and Chinese versions of the 2019 and 2023 speeches and found no substantive differences that would affect the

31. *Full Text of Xi Jinping's Opening Remarks at the Roundtable Summit of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation* [习近平在“一带一路”国际合作高峰论坛圆桌峰会上的开幕辞 (全文)], Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People's Republic of China 2017, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zyjh_674906/201705/t20170515_9870064.shtml, (access 10.09.2025).

32. *Xi's keynote speech at the opening ceremony of the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation*, Belt and Road Portal 2019, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/88232.html>, (access 11.09.2025).

33. *Building an Open, Inclusive and Interconnected World for Common Development*, The Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation 2023, <http://www.beltandroadforum.org/english/n101/2023/1018/c124-1175.html>, (access 10.09.2025).

analysis. Therefore, the English texts are presented here for ease of reference, while the 2017 speech findings are drawn directly from the original Chinese.

To operationalize the analysis, the study identifies two main narrative clusters – prosperity-oriented and securitization-oriented – and develops coding categories for each. This approach builds on securitization theory³⁴ and narrative approaches in international relations.³⁵ Both explicit terms and implicit framings were coded. Following Thierry Balzacq, the analysis considers not only frequency but also the contextual role of security language, whether it appears as a secondary enabling condition for prosperity or as a central organizing principle.³⁶ The coding framework was designed to capture instances of interactive or second-order securitization, reflecting the internalization of external pressures described in the previous section.

Text segmentation for coding followed a thematic approach, where each paragraph or discourse unit expressing a coherent idea was treated as one segment, allowing detailed and consistent coding across speeches. Coding reliability was ensured through independent coding by two researchers, iterative cross-checking, and consensus-building to maximize intersubjective validity. This study situates the analysis within critical debates in securitization and narrative theory, highlighting the discursive construction of security and the interplay between international and domestic narratives.³⁷

Each narrative segment was coded according to predefined categories, which were further divided into subcategories. Prosperity-oriented subcategories include infrastructure development, connectivity, trade, economic growth, sustainable development, and shared benefits. Securitization-oriented subcategories include stability, governance, risk management, corruption, geopolitical risks, and protection measures. Coding was applied to both explicit mentions (directly stated keywords) and implicit framing (contextual or discursive cues). If a segment contained elements of both prosperity and securitization, both categories were applied. Examples of operationalization for each category are provided in the Appendix, illustrating how specific keywords and context were interpreted.

By explicitly linking the coding framework to the theoretical concepts outlined in Section 1, the methodology ensures a coherent translation of theory into empirical practice.

- Prosperity-oriented narratives highlight economic growth, infrastructure development, trade, connectivity, modernization, sustainable development, and shared benefits.

34. T. Balzacq (ed.), *Securitization Theory: How...*, op. cit.; H. Stritzel, *Towards a Theory...*, op. cit., pp. 357–383; B. Buzan, O. Wæver, J. de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework...*, op. cit.

35. A. Miskimmon, B. O'Loughlin, L. Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, Routledge 2013.

36. T. Balzacq, *The Three Faces of Securitization: Political Agency, Audience and Context*, "European Journal of International Relations", 2005, Vol. 11, Issue 2, pp. 171–201, DOI: [10.1177/1354066105052960](https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066105052960).

37. T. Balzacq (ed.), *Securitization Theory: How...*, op. cit.; H. Stritzel, *Towards a Theory...*, op. cit.

- Securitization-oriented narratives emphasize threats, vulnerabilities, and the need for stability and protection. Indicators include explicit and implicit mentions of stability, governance, resilience, risk management, protection of projects and personnel, transparency, integrity, corruption, and broader geopolitical concerns.

Since this study also examines how Chinese narratives evolve in response to external securitizing pressures, it was necessary to identify the core Western discourses on the BRI. Existing literature highlights three dominant framings:

- Geostrategic threat narrative – the BRI as a tool of geopolitical expansion and a challenge to the liberal order.³⁸
- Debt-trap diplomacy narrative – the claim that China uses infrastructure finance to entrap countries in unsustainable debt.³⁹
- Geoeconomic coercion narrative – The idea that the BRI undermines fair competition, global standards, and supply chain security.⁴⁰

Coding was conducted manually by the authors, who independently analyzed the speeches according to the predefined categories. Each speech was divided into thematic segments, which were independently coded by two researchers. Ambiguities were resolved through discussion and consensus, ensuring consistency and intersubjective validity of the coding. The coding process was iterative: initial rounds of coding were followed by cross-checking and refinement of categories to ensure comprehensive coverage of both explicit and implicit narrative elements. No software was used, as the research team manually analyzed and discussed all segments. The full coding table, including original texts, is provided in the Appendix to facilitate transparency and replication of the analysis.

As Western critiques of the BRI frequently establish a correlation between debt sustainability and corruption, alongside opaque governance practices, references to corruption and integrity were consequently incorporated into the coding framework. These Western securitization discourses serve as a reference framework against which the Chinese speeches are analyzed. The aim is to assess whether, and to what extent, Chinese discourse absorbs, reframes, or resists these external narratives.

38. N. Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century. Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative*, The National Bureau of Asian Research 2017; T. Fallon, *The New Silk Road: Xi Jinping's Grand Strategy for Eurasia, "American Foreign Policy Interests"*, 2015, Vol. 37, Issue 3, pp. 140–147, DOI: [10.1080/10803920.2015.1056682](https://doi.org/10.1080/10803920.2015.1056682).

39. D. Brautigam, *A Critical Look at Chinese 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy': The Rise of a Meme*, "Area Development and Policy", 2019, Vol. 5, Issue 1, pp. 1–14, DOI: [10.1080/23792949.2019.1689828](https://doi.org/10.1080/23792949.2019.1689828); A. Kratz, A. Feng, *New Data on the "Debt Trap" Question*, Rhodium Group 2019, <https://rhg.com/research/new-data-on-the-debt-trap-question/>, (access 11.09.2025).

40. V. Eszterhai, *The Geopolitical Strategy...*, op. cit., pp. 57–84; *EU–China Strategic Outlook*, European Commission 2019, <https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2019-03/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>, (access 11.09.2025); J. Hillman, *The Emperor's New Road: China and the Project of the Century*, Yale University Press 2018.

The analysis is guided by the Copenhagen School's understanding of securitization as a discursive construct rather than an objective category. This allows the study to trace how prosperity-oriented and security-oriented narratives interact over time, and how securitization increasingly becomes embedded within development discourse. This coding framework enables the study not only to document occurrences of prosperity- and security-oriented language but also to interpret how external pressures are internalized and reframed within China's BRI discourse, providing a theoretical lens for the Findings section.

This qualitative content analysis allows for a detailed examination of how narratives evolve across multiple temporal points and how external securitizing pressures are internalized or resisted. By combining thematic segmentation, detailed operational definitions, explicit examples of coded text, and iterative consensus coding, this methodology enhances analytical rigor, supports replicability, and directly addresses critical debates in securitization and narrative theory. Furthermore, it clearly situates the analysis within both internal Chinese and external Western discourse, bridging empirical observation with theoretical interpretation.

Findings

The following Findings section deliberately includes extended textual excerpts to demonstrate how Xi Jinping's rhetoric on the BRI evolves over time. These examples are not merely illustrative but serve to convey the innovative dynamics of the argumentation, particularly regarding the operationalization of positive securitization in practice.

This section presents the findings related to the following two questions: (1) Does securitization become more prevalent in Xi Jinping's speeches on the BRI over time?; and (2) Do these speeches address external criticisms, especially those in Western narratives? The analysis draws on the Copenhagen School's conceptualization of securitization as a discursive process in which speech acts reframe issues as existential threats, as well as subsequent extensions emphasizing interactive securitization, wherein external pressures shape domestic discourse. Furthermore, the analysis situates the findings within broader debates on positive securitization, framing security as a constructive mechanism that supports cooperation and development rather than merely signaling threat. This positions the BRI as a case of proactive, developmental securitization, extending the conceptual literature on security narratives.

The Growing Role of Securitization in the BRI Discourse

The three speeches of Xi Jinping (2017, 2019, 2023) reveal a gradual but significant shift from a discourse dominated by prosperity to the integration of governance and risk management language, and finally to a hybrid narrative in which prosperity and security are fused. Beyond content, security also functions strategically as a rhetorical tool for persuasion, mobilization, and legitimization.

In 2017, prosperity was the overwhelming focus. Xi emphasized the BRI as a developmental project built on connectivity and mutual benefit. He stressed the need to “promote infrastructure development and connectivity, align the policies and development strategies of various countries, deepen practical cooperation, foster coordinated and interconnected development, and achieve common prosperity.” Prosperity was depicted as the natural outcome of cooperation: “peace, development, cooperation, and win-win outcomes have become the trend of the times.” Security, meanwhile, appeared mainly as a background condition: “the construction of the Belt and Road requires a peaceful and stable environment.” Yet it was also used rhetorically, with Xi urging countries to “resolve differences through dialogue” and “jointly maintain regional security and stability,” thereby presenting the BRI as a platform that could generate stability. Here, security is not operationalized as a threat but rather as a facilitating condition for prosperity, anticipating the later development of positive securitization in 2019 and 2023.

By 2019, securitization had become more explicit and multidimensional. Although prosperity still dominated through connectivity, sustainable development, and “high-quality cooperation,” security entered the discourse as governance. Xi declared that the BRI is about “jointly meeting various challenges and risks confronting mankind and delivering win-win outcomes and common development.” He emphasized that “rules and credibility underpin the effective functioning of the international governance system” and, most notably, pledged “zero tolerance for corruption.” This represents a clear case of positive securitization, where security language is framed constructively to support institutional integrity and mutual development rather than to signal existential threat. Prosperity was reframed as requiring secure governance and transparency. At the same time, China’s role was redefined: Xi insisted that China’s domestic opening-up was not only about national development but also “contributes to world peace, stability, and development.” Security thus functions simultaneously as a legitimizing tool and as a proactive mechanism that reinforces China’s stabilizing role in global governance. A critical observation here is that the framing

of security is explicitly developmental, extending securitization theory into non-military, cooperative domains.

By 2023, prosperity and security had become fully integrated. Xi catalogued achievements, such as “blueprints have been turned into real projects” and “signature projects and ‘small yet smart’ people-centered programs have been launched,” to demonstrate that prosperity has not only been promised but also delivered. However, security became more prominent than ever. Xi pledged to “step up joint efforts to ensure the safety of BRI projects and personnel” and called for “secure AI development in the world.” He also drew an explicit geopolitical line: “What we stand against are unilateral sanctions, economic coercion and decoupling and supply chain disruption.” Unlike in 2017, security was woven into the prosperity narrative, appearing in supply chains, digitalization, and clean governance. It was also framed as a collective good: “We should jointly address various global risks and challenges, and deliver a bright future of peace, development, cooperation and mutual benefit for future generations.” Security is no longer merely a condition for prosperity; it is a proactive instrument that legitimizes China’s role and stabilizes global cooperation. Most importantly, China’s role was elevated to that of guarantor of global prosperity and stability, encapsulated in Xi’s statement: “China can only do well when the world is doing well. When China does well, the world will get even better.” This longitudinal evolution demonstrates a move from conditional security discourse to positive securitization, operationalized as developmental and legitimizing rhetoric.

The findings indicate that securitization became increasingly integral to the BRI narrative over time. In 2017, security measures were considered adequate but lacked formal institutionalization. By 2019, these measures had been formally established through governance frameworks, enhanced transparency, and the implementation of risk management protocols. By 2023, security had become fully integrated into the global landscape, functioning not only as a protective mechanism but also as a shared global value. Security was not merely an objective but rather a multifaceted strategy employed rhetorically to incentivize cooperation, legitimize China’s leadership role, and present the BRI as a stabilizing platform in a turbulent global environment. Overall, the trajectory from conditional to proactive and positive securitization illustrates a developmental approach to security that extends the conceptual boundaries of securitization theory.

Do the Speeches Reflect and Respond to External Criticisms?

The findings also reveal that the BRI's securitization is interactive: it does not arise solely from internal sources but rather emerges as a consequence of external pressures. As demonstrated by Xi's speeches, Chinese discourse internalizes Western securitizing frames, including concepts such as debt trap, corruption, coercion, and geopolitical expansion. These frames are then selectively transformed to reinforce China's developmental and normative goals, illustrating the adaptive nature of securitization in an interactive international context.

Western accusations of "debt-trap diplomacy" were consistently countered with the rhetoric of integrity and transparency. In his 2019 speech, Xi pledged "zero tolerance for corruption" and underscored the "strong commitment to transparency and clean governance." By the 2023 speech, these themes expanded with references to "promoting integrity in cooperation" and "High-Level Principles on Belt and Road Integrity Building." These discursive maneuvers exemplify positive securitization in practice, as challenges are reframed as opportunities for legitimacy and institutional enhancement rather than solely as threats.

Furthermore, it was observed that Western critiques of debt sustainability were frequently associated with allegations of corruption, suggesting that Chinese loans may have contributed to the emergence of opaque dealings and rent-seeking activities. By conceptualizing corruption as a threat to stability and trust, Xi's discourse has effectively transformed governance standards into a form of security guarantee, rather than merely defending against external critique. Such discourse exemplifies positive securitization in practice.

Criticism of geoeconomic coercion and supply chain insecurity was directly addressed in the 2023 speech. Xi's declaration – "What we stand against are unilateral sanctions, economic coercion and decoupling and supply chain disruption" – was not just a defensive rebuttal but an active securitizing move. The inversion of the Western narrative was evident: coercion was presented as a Western practice that threatened openness and interdependence, while the BRI was portrayed as the safeguard of resilience and inclusive prosperity. In this instance, security functioned as a rhetorical counterattack, serving to delegitimize external securitization while concurrently legitimizing the BRI.

The persistent accusation of geostrategic expansion was countered by presenting the BRI as a collective good. In the 2017 speech, Xi framed it as “an open and inclusive platform for cooperation, and a global public good jointly created by all parties.” In his 2019 speech, he claimed that China’s reform path “contributes to world peace, stability, and development.” In the 2023 speech, this became a historical narrative of interdependence: “China can only do well when the world is doing well. When China does well, the world will get even better.” The strategy reframes accusations of expansion to highlight China’s indispensability to global stability. Security functions as a legitimizing narrative, portraying China’s rise not as a threat but as a source of collective peace and prosperity. Prosperity and security are integrated in a normative frame, presenting China’s ascent as beneficial rather than menacing.

Taken together, the findings confirm that the BRI’s securitization is interactive. Western criticisms – such as debt, corruption, coercion, and expansion – are not rejected outright but rather internalized and reframed as arguments for the BRI’s necessity. Security emerges as a tool that enables governance, reinforces collective prosperity, and legitimizes China’s global leadership role, demonstrating the innovative application of positive securitization in a major empirical context. The findings illustrate how positive securitization extends securitization theory beyond threat-centric models into cooperative, developmental domains.

Discussion

The findings of the study clearly illustrate the nature of securitization, as conceptualized by the Copenhagen School, which can be interpreted in the context of China’s BRI. According to the theory, securitization is not just about recognizing threats but also involves political actors framing a phenomenon as a security issue through discourse. In the 2017 speech, the discourse was prosperity-focused, with security appearing only as a 1) background condition necessary to enable economic cooperation and growth, or 2) a connecting force, reformulated within the context of shared challenges. This supports the theoretical claim that securitization is context-dependent and primarily shaped by political narratives.

A key contribution of this study is the explicit operationalization of positive securitization. By identifying concrete narrative mechanisms – such as governance standards, anti-corruption measures, supply-chain resilience, and collective stability rhetoric – the analysis demonstrates how security can function as a constructive and developmental resource rather than a response to existential threat. This shifts the findings beyond descriptive mapping and anchors them in theoretical debates

on how securitization can legitimize cooperation and institutional strengthening. The analysis also underlines the role of external pressures in shaping China's discourse. By 2019 and 2023, security elements had become more prominent and multidimensional. Security was no longer merely a precondition for stability or a connecting force but was also integrated into governance, transparency, and institutional integrity, serving as a safeguard for the BRI's long-term functioning. This aligns with the concepts of "interactive" or "second-order securitization": external narratives, criticisms, and international expectations are internalized into the Chinese discourse, while China actively adapts and reshapes these narratives to serve its own legitimacy and geopolitical objectives. Situating this within the wider literature on cross-border narrative diffusion demonstrates how securitizing frames do not remain confined to their original political environments but evolve through iterative reinterpretation. The changing prosperity-security ratio in the three speeches illustrates the cyclical nature of securitization. Rather than functioning solely as a defensive mechanism, security evolves into a proactive, developmental tool, demonstrating how securitization can be constructively linked with prosperity and governance. This highlights the potential of positive securitization to extend the theoretical boundaries of the Copenhagen School beyond threat-centric frameworks. By portraying the BRI as both an economic opportunity and a stabilizing instrument for the international system, the speeches encourage participation while framing security as a collective, constructive good rather than a source of fear. This counters Western securitization narratives and enhances China's appeal in development-oriented states.

The BRI discourse also reflects the evolution of China's international role. In 2017, the initiative was framed as a global public good and a tool for international cooperation. By 2019, emphasis shifted to the global benefits of China's domestic reforms. By 2023, the narrative was broader, pointing to the intertwined destinies of China and the world, suggesting that the BRI functions not only as a foreign policy tool but also as an expression of China's identity, international image, and global role. This demonstrates that securitization not only shapes threat perception but also actively constructs international identity and legitimizes role projection, thereby linking security discourse to broader IR theories of soft power, image, and normative leadership.

In summary, the findings highlight three key contributions to securitization theory:

- Positive securitization can operate without dramatic existential threat claims, instead linking security with prosperity, governance, legitimacy, and the management of collective risks.

- Interactive securitization demonstrates how external pressures are internalized and re-narrated, extending the understanding of cross-border diffusion and adaptation of securitizing narratives.
- Security discourse plays an important role in identity formation and international role enactment, illustrating how rising powers use security language to articulate normative leadership and soft-power claims.

Conclusion

The present study has examined the evolution of Chinese discourse on the BRI across three speeches delivered by Xi Jinping at the Belt and Road Forum (2017, 2019, 2023). The analysis has demonstrated that securitization has become increasingly prominent within the BRI's strategic framing. In the 2017 speech, the emphasis was overwhelmingly placed on prosperity, with security merely mentioned in passing as a background condition. In contrast, the 2019 address saw security integrated as a component of governance and institutional integrity. By 2023, the interweaving of security and prosperity had reached a point of complete integration. Security was no longer considered secondary; rather, it was presented as an enabling principle and a global value. This notion was expressed through themes such as supply chain resilience, safe innovation, and clean governance.

Moreover, the findings underscore the importance of interactive securitization. Western criticisms regarding debt, corruption, coercion, and expansion are not simply rejected but are internalized and reframed in a way that supports China's domestic and international legitimacy. This illustrates how securitization travels across borders, adapts to new political contexts, and becomes embedded within competing strategic narratives, providing a concrete example of second-order securitization.

The implications are significant for both scholarship and practice:

- The BRI emerges as a stabilizing platform that integrates development, governance, and security, reflecting a proactive approach to international risk management.
- Positive securitization provides a model for understanding how rising powers leverage security narratives constructively, influencing global governance and normative discourses.

- Future research could strengthen comparative insights by examining how other major powers employ positive or interactive securitization within their own development initiatives, enabling cross-case theorization.

Overall, the Chinese case illustrates that securitization need not be fear-driven. Security can function as a constructive, legitimacy-enhancing, and development-supporting mechanism, broadening the conceptual scope of securitization theory and revealing how rising powers actively reshape global security narratives. The findings therefore underline the need to move beyond Western-centric models and to recognize the diverse ways in which security is articulated in contemporary international politics.

Appendix List of Primary Sources

The empirical analysis is based on three keynote speeches delivered by Xi Jinping at the Belt and Road Forum (BRF):

Xi Jinping (2017) – Opening Remarks at the Leaders' Roundtable of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.

Xi Jinping (2019) – Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.

Xi Jinping (2023) – Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.

All excerpts quoted and coded in the analysis are taken directly from these three speeches.

Coding Scheme

The coding framework distinguishes two main narrative clusters, each divided into subcategories. Coding was applied to explicit keywords and implicit discursive framings.

Prosperity-Oriented Narrative Categories

Category	Operational definition	Typical indicators
Connectivity	References to physical, digital, financial or institutional linkages	infrastructure, corridors, ports, highways, “connectivity network”
Economic Growth & Development	Claims about growth, modernization, new opportunities	“new drivers of growth”, “shared prosperity”, “economic corridors”
Win-Win / Shared Benefits	Expressions of mutual gain, inclusiveness, collective development	“win-win”, “mutual benefit”, “shared future”, “benefit all”
Sustainable / Green Development	Environmental or long-term developmental framing	green energy, sustainability, low-carbon, resilience
People-to-People Exchanges	Cooperation in education, culture, youth, NGOs	“people-centered”, exchanges, human resource development

Securitisation-Oriented Narrative Categories

Category	Operational definition	Typical indicators
Stability & Peace	Security as a precondition for cooperation	“peaceful and stable environment”, “resolve disputes through dialogue”
Governance & Integrity	Anti-corruption, transparency, clean governance	“zero tolerance for corruption”, “integrity”, “rules and credibility”
Risk Management / Resilience	Managing threats, risks, crises	global risks, supply chain stability, “resilience”, “safety”
Protection / Security of Projects	Explicit protection of BRI infrastructure or personnel	“ensure the safety of BRI projects and personnel”
Geopolitical Rebuttals	Responses to Western criticism; re-framing threats	“oppose unilateral sanctions”, “economic coercion”, “decoupling”

Methodological Notes

- **Coding Approach:** Both explicit keywords and implicit discursive framings were coded.

- **Positive vs Interactive Securitisation:**
 - **Positive securitisation:** Security language enabling development (e.g., integrity, safe innovation).
 - **Interactive securitisation:** Security language responding to external Western framings (e.g., debt traps, sanctions).
- **Reliability:** Coding was cross-checked for consistency across speeches.

Illustrative Coding Table

Xi Jinping Speech, 2017 BRF Roundtable

Source: 2017 speech

Original Text (excerpt)	Prosperity Code(s)	Securitisation Code(s)
“Promote infrastructure development and connectivity... achieve common prosperity.”	Connectivity; Economic growth	–
“The Belt and Road requires a peaceful and stable environment... jointly maintain regional security and stability.”	–	Stability & peace
“Complementing each other’s strengths and pursuing mutual benefit and win-win outcomes.”	Win-win	–
“Resolve differences through dialogue, settle disputes through consultation.”	–	Stability; conflict management

Note: “–” indicates that no code from the given category applies to the excerpt.

Xi Jinping Speech, 2019 BRF Opening Ceremony (Extracts)

Source: 2019 speech

Original Text (excerpt)	Prosperity Code(s)	Securitisation Code(s)
“Promote green investment, green financing... sustainable development.”	Sustainable development	–
“Everything should be done in a transparent way; we should have zero tolerance for corruption.”	–	Governance & integrity

Original Text (excerpt)	Prosperity Code(s)	Securitisation Code(s)
“Jointly meeting various challenges and risks confronting mankind.”	–	Risk management
“We may launch high-quality, sustainable, resilient, affordable, inclusive infrastructure projects.”	Connectivity; Long-term development	Resilience (implicit)
“Rules and credibility underpin the effective functioning of the international governance system.”	–	Governance / international norms

Note: “–” indicates that no code from the given category applies to the excerpt.

Xi Jinping Speech, 2023 BRF Opening Ceremony (Extracts)

Source: 2023 speech

Original Text (excerpt)	Prosperity Code(s)	Securitisation Code(s)
“Blueprints have been turned into real projects... created new growth drivers.”	Development; Connectivity	–
“What we stand against are unilateral sanctions, economic coercion and decoupling and supply chain disruption.”	–	Geopolitical rebuttal; supply-chain security
“We will step up joint efforts to ensure the safety of BRI projects and personnel.”	–	Protection of projects/ personnel
“We should jointly address various global risks and challenges.”	–	Global risk framing
“Secure AI development in the world.”	–	Technology governance / security
“China can only do well when the world is doing well...”	Mutual benefit; interdependence narrative	–

Note: “–” indicates that no code from the given category applies to the excerpt.

Explanation of Positive and Interactive Securitisation (as used in coding)

- **Positive securitisation** was operationalised as security language used to *enable*, not hinder, development (e.g. integrity, safe innovation, supply-chain stability).
- **Interactive securitisation** was identified when Xi's speeches indirectly or explicitly responded to external (Western) framings such as debt traps, coercion, expansion or corruption.

These theoretical concepts informed code assignment in Sections A4.2 and A4.3.

Full Text Repository

The full texts of all three speeches

1. Xi Jinping (2017) – Opening Remarks at the Leaders' Roundtable of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.
[Original Chinese text.](#)

2. Xi Jinping (2019) – Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.
[English version.](#)

3. Xi Jinping (2023) – Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.
[English version.](#)

The full texts of all three speeches, as used for coding, are provided in the supplementary files:

- [2017 speech](#)
- [2019 speech](#)
- [2023 speech](#)

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