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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Heidbrink, C., & Becker, C. (2023). Framing the Digital Silk Road's (de)securitisation. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 52(2), 311-333. <https://doi.org/10.1177/18681026221117567>

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# Framing the Digital Silk Road's (De)Securitisation

Journal of Current Chinese Affairs  
2023, Vol. 52(2) 311–333  
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sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/18681026221117567  
journals.sagepub.com/home/cca



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## Abstract

China's Digital Belt and Road (DBAR) is sending the offer of a technological upgrade around the world. Foreign perceptions of the DBAR pave the way to success through a cooperative attitude or to failure through resistance and confrontation. The United States of America (USA), in particular, plays a prominent role. The power rivalry between Washington and Beijing also affects foreign initiatives such as the DBAR. However, it remains underresearched, how the DBAR is perceived in the USA. The article fills this gap by analysing documents issued by US state bodies as well as three non-partisan think tanks between 2016 and mid-2021. Since no previous study has examined both securitised and desecuritised DBAR frames, we present a new research framework. The results show that negative perceptions of the DBAR prevail among think tanks and political elites. This suggests hardened fronts in the heated technological competition due to confrontational attitudes.

Manuscript received 8 December 2021; accepted 18 July 2022

## Keywords

Digital Belt and Road (DBAR), China, USA, securitisation

## Introduction

When Xi Jinping first announced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, he laid the foundation for China's most comprehensive foreign policy initiative. Simply speaking, the BRI builds infrastructure in two dimensions: by land under the Silk Road Economic Belt and

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by sea under the Maritime Silk Road. The overarching role of digital infrastructure is yet often neglected despite its integral role in transportation, communication, and trade. In order to promote unimpeded trade or enhance monetary circulation – which are just two issues President Xi called for in his 2013 Astana speech – the technological backbone must first be installed. Despite the digital necessities of modern infrastructure, Digital Belt and Road (DBAR) was not officially addressed until 2015 (Ambalov and Heim, 2020). Realisation has been growing that both hard and soft infrastructure was needed in BRI target countries. The technological backbone had to be built up, but so does technical expertise as well as an amicable international atmosphere (Fung et al., 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic further stressed the importance of the digital sphere and accelerated the DBAR (Lo, 2021).

While the DBAR was on the rise, scientific and public attention remained at a low level. Due to a profound research gap, the question is how the DBAR is perceived internationally. This concerns the all-encompassing competition between the USA and China. Competition can be traced in intertwined normative, political, economic, and military spheres, but has not yet been systematically studied. We fill this lacuna by analysing to what extent and how US state authorities and think tanks frame the DBAR in (de-)securitised terms.

Therefore, the securitisation approach by Buzan et al. (1998) is applied to distinguish between securitised and desecuritised views. Securitisation involves the framing of an existential threat against which emergency measures need to be taken. Desecuritisation does not involve extraordinary policies, but a normal bargaining process. Buzan et al. (1998) differentiated sectors in the policy-making process encompassing distinct threat assessments and countermeasures. We advance their concept by using qualitative framing studies so that a novel typology of (de)securitising framing functions is developed. While previous studies focused only on securitisation, our approach presents a more balanced access to political debates. We demonstrate this by examining US think tank and official administrative documents. The selection of these documents is borrowed from the seminal study by Rogelja and Tsimonis (2020) on European discourses. Consistent with these authors, we note a strong convergence between policy advisory and decision-making institutions by constructing “China threat”-narratives. Misgivings about Chinese activities are based on a fundamental normative dichotomy between the US self-image as a democracy and China’s description as an authoritarian regime. Both target countries as well as Chinese actors are commonly deprived of agency. This stems from linking the DBAR to state interests, as regarding China’s National Intelligence Law, rather than recognising stakeholders’ self-interests. Thus, we document parallels between US perceptions and European discourses according to Rogelja and Tsimonis (2020: 112–119, 123–128). Our refined model indicates that argumentation patterns cross the dimensional framing boundaries, thereby amplifying the sense of threat. Our dual approach towards (de)securitisation yet indicates that there are differences between US think tanks and administrative bodies. These differences in the definition of the DBAR and associated action plans are only revealed by our integrative typology, uncovering a shortcoming of Rogelja and Tsimoni’s research design. We demonstrate that almost exclusively think tanks warn – albeit rarely – against misperceptions and

exaggerations of the DBAR. Meanwhile, the higher code density of federal authority documents underscores an overall stronger framing, particularly in their elaboration on military concerns.

To substantiate this, the article is structured as follows: first, we review the evolution of the DBAR and the related literature landscape. Thereafter, the research methodology is outlined to address the identified knowledge gaps. Following, we present our results by first shedding light on the few, but existing, positive and neutral US frames of the DBAR. Subsequently, the abundant negative frames are discussed. Although we describe the normative, political, economic, and military dimensions separately, we will show the connections between the dimensions. Finally, recommendations for further research on the (Digital) Silk Road are given.

### **China's Digital Silk Road: Ideas and Current State of Research**

The 2015 launching document issued by the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce called for creating an Information Silk Road – a synonym for the DBAR. Anyone reading the “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road” document will get an idea of the multifaceted nature of digital components in the BRI. It envisions greater IT application, promoting information technology cooperation, constructing cross-border optical cables, enhanced satellite systems, international e-commerce, energy technology, biotechnology, financial technology, an Asian credit information system, epidemic information sharing, and using the Internet to foster public support for the BRI. While this deluge of issues stresses the complexity of the DBAR, it is still an incomplete list of its whole range.

This is underpinned by academic literature about the DBAR. Illustrated by the Web of Science database, scientific interest in the DBAR is located in various disciplines including communication, geosciences, economics, and environmental sciences. Compared to the umbrella term of BRI, the Digital Silk Road seems to be a rather underresearched topic. For the term “Digital Belt and Road” 243 publications are listed, whereas for “Belt and Road [Initiative]” 2830 entries are recorded as of 16 March 2022 (Clarivate, 2022). Both Ly (2020) and Vila Seoane (2020) validated the view that there is still a prominent research gap on the DBAR. A closer look at the evolution of the research landscape shows that research interest has increased since 2018. This is temporally related to the expanding institutionalisation of DBAR, as several research articles state (Brown and Burjanadze, 2020; Guo, 2018; Guo et al., 2018; Hong and Harwit, 2020; Ly, 2020; Shen, 2018). Despite its early inclusion in the BRI framework, the DBAR officially took off in December 2016 with the first official DBAR Meeting in Beijing. The following DBAR conferences in Hong Kong 2017, Tenchong 2018, and Shenzhen 2019 refined the agenda, key challenges, and objectives. The DBAR Program Science Plan, released in December 2017 at the Second DBAR Conference, is a major milestone in this regard (Ghiasy and Krishnamurthy, 2020). The Science Plan underlines that the DBAR targets knowledge gaps, the digital divide in infrastructure among BRI countries, and interoperability issues. Accordingly, the DBAR is promoted as an indispensable

component for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, which is reflected in the literature (Guo, 2018; Guo et al., 2018; Seele et al., 2019). These reflections are complemented by analyses of the DBAR's economic prospects (Fung et al., 2018), strategic implications (Ghiasi and Krishnamurthy, 2020; Nouwens et al., 2021), country case studies (Ambalov and Heim, 2020; Van Der Lugt, 2021), and China–Europe relations (Brown and Burjanadze, 2020; Paulo, 2018).

A constant fulcrum in nearly every article is the preeminent role of the USA in the global digital economy. The DBAR is perceived as a challenge to the current US-dominated geopolitical and economic landscape. China's economic rise in information and communication technology (ICT), in standardisation bodies, and in companies such as Huawei or Alibaba is cited as evidence (Tang, 2020; Vila Seoane, 2020; Zhao, 2020). A worst-case scenario predicts the division of the world into two digital ecosystems (Nouwens et al., 2021: 4). Despite the extensive ramifications of the digital rivalry, Zhao (2020) provided the only thorough analysis of US perceptions and responses towards the DBAR. However, Zhao does not conduct a systematic document analysis to substantiate that the United States is seeking to counterbalance the DBAR. To the best of our knowledge, such an analysis has not been published before, so we fill this research gap on the range of US perceptions.

Currently, US think tanks are leading the scientific and political discourse on the DBAR. This provides us with empirical data to determine how the DBAR is discussed. Grauvogel and Diez (2014: 217–218) observed that securitisations are often articulated by think tanks before being taken up by political elites. The approach is hence premised on the assumption that think tanks are key policy constituents. They inform decision-makers and shape the political environment in a country (Ji, 2020: 5; Wu, 2018: 31). Rogelja and Tsimonis (2020: 108) even found significant congruence between “China threat”-portrayals by think tanks and European leaders calling for a review in the context of the United States. The BRI securitisation study by Shah (2021) confirms a comprehensive threat narrative framed by the Trump administration, although it does not specifically focus on the DBAR. So far, research has been insufficient to draw firm conclusions about how the DBAR is viewed and addressed in the United States. By providing a systematisation of DBAR frames, we fill this void with an integrative framework.

## **A Novel Typology of (De)Securitising Framing Functions**

In order to capture the multi-layered DBAR discourses, we base the investigation on the securitisation concept of the so-called Copenhagen School according to Buzan et al. (1998). Securitisation, in short, is a process by which an issue is elevated to the security agenda as an existential threat. Securitising actors activate the process with speech acts characterised by negatively connoted language. Through audience acceptance, securitisation mobilises state resources to avert danger, reduces the scope for negotiation, and intensifies enemy images. While securitisation emphasises the urgency of action, desecuritisation devalues a sense of emergency. If no exceptional measures are demanded,

ordinary political–legal procedures apply. Within the normal political system – the realm of politicisation instead of securitisation – there is more room for negotiation and cooperation. Furthermore, various types and effects of (de)securitisation are being researched that go beyond the scope of this article (Vuori, 2018: 119–122).

The link between framing and securitisation has already been highlighted as insightful and policy-relevant in a number of studies (Grauvogel and Diez, 2014; Rychnovská, 2014; Stritzel, 2012; Watson, 2012). The literature testifies that the static concept of the Copenhagen School can be empirically and analytically enriched in terms of causal mechanisms emanating from different frames. In this context, securitisation is disproportionately the focus of interest, while the counterpart of desecuritisation is analytically neglected as a secondary accessory.

Both sides of the coin can be captured with an integrative frame analysis. Thus, we apply a combined approach of securitising speech acts as presented by Stritzel (2012) adapted from Vuori (2008) and Entman (1993). The scholars identify specific typologies of securitisation and frames that can be merged into one typology of (de)securitising framing functions. This is innovative because the approach does not only include negative speech acts of securitisation, but also neutral and positive representations that may perform a desecuritising function. Despite their closeness, the two concepts have hitherto hardly been juxtaposed to systematise securitisations and desecuritisations according to higher-level categories. This reveals the whole spectrum of framing functions, whereas Vuori (2008) and Stritzel (2012) concentrate only on securitising speech acts. Both authors propose four generic speech acts that perform a securitising function: claims, warnings, demands, and propositional content. Stritzel (2012) rephrased Vuori's typology and added empirical contextualisation to the four securitisation moves. Entman (1993), on the other hand, identified four functions of media frames: define problems, make moral judgements, suggest remedies, and diagnose causes. These four functions do not have to be fully presented in a text, although they might be uttered in one sentence. Neither typology reconciled framing and securitisation theory, which our combined approach does.

By reviewing the typologies, the categories seem to overlap, so we merged them and created joint definitions as shown in Table 1. It offers an overview of speech act types aimed at invoking a (de)securitised frame for a topic. First, claims as defined by

**Table 1.** A Typology of (De)Securitising Framing Functions.

Speech Act	(De)Securitising Function
Claim	Defines an issue as dangerous, beneficial or insignificant
Judgement	Evaluates the issue's effects as a consequence of inaction as a warning or all-clear signal
Demand	Presents adequate treatments for the issue as part of an action plan
Reasoning	Identifies the forces creating the potential effects by presenting proof and/or reasons

Source: Own adaption of Stritzel (2012), Vuori (2008), and Entman (1993).

Stritzel and Vuori describe the nature of the issue, which is consistent with the definition of problems proposed by Entman. The latter definition includes costs and benefits, which means that an issue may not only be defined in terms of an existential threat. Stritzel and Vuori's second speech act, the "warning" can be merged with Entman's "moral judgement" function as both functions emphasise the consequences of actions and agents. As the term "warning" is negatively connoted, we labelled the category "judgement," in order to include positive signals as well. In contrast, we keep Stritzel and Vuori's third speech act designation "demand," as it describes a plan for action. Similarly, Entman's normative category "suggest remedies" points out adequate treatments of an issue. Ultimately, we organised Stritzel and Vuori's "propositional content" and Entman's "diagnose causes" functions under the new headline "reasoning." Both categories reason the assessment of the issue by providing supporting content, which justifies the combined headline for these speech act functions.

## **Methodology**

Our novel typology of (de)securitising framing functions is applied to identify how narratives of the DBAR are presented. The concept draws on Rogelja and Tsimonis (2020), who examined think tank documents on Chinese investments and related them to decision-makers responses. Our approach, however, is specifically designed to reveal which speech act functions exactly form congruent or dissonant (de)securitised frames between think tank and state authority publications.

For this reason, our text corpus consists of official documents released by US state authorities and publications of three non-partisan US think tanks concerning the People's Republic of China (PRC). Since many renowned think tanks are based in the United States, we initially selected four organisations for our sample, consisting of the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP), the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), and the RAND Corporation, based on their prominent reputations in foreign policy issues. Since RAND lacked publications on the Digital Silk Road, we had to exclude this think tank.

In the first step, we reviewed all official state and think tank documents that refer to China's BRI in general. With the idea of a Digital Silk Road first voiced in 2015 and officially included in China's Thirteenth Five-Year Plan of 2016, the period of study covers releases from 1 January 2016 to 1 June 2021 (Shen, 2018). Documents remained in the corpus if they directly addressed the DBAR or contained its keywords such as cyber, digital, internet, communication, or e-commerce and made a contextual assessment. If documents mentioned the DBAR only as a marginal note without evaluation, they were discarded due to their lack of analytical value.

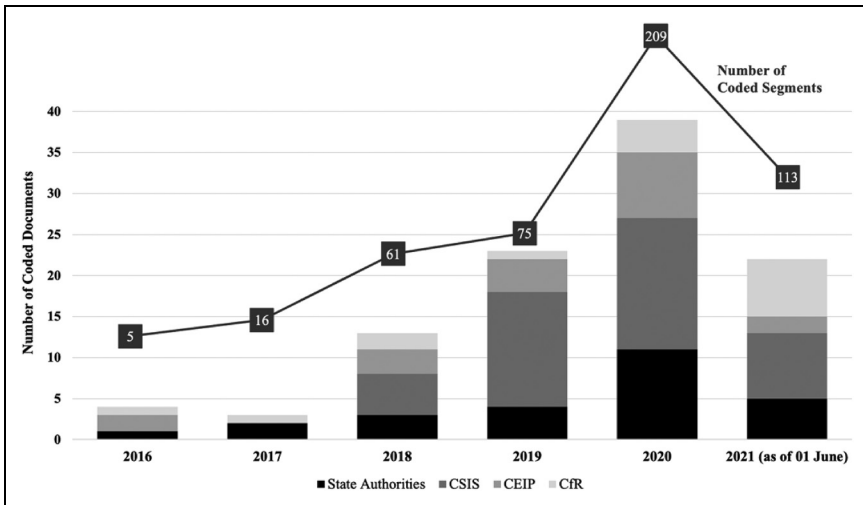
Further selection criteria had to be involved to derive a solid data set: media other than written was excluded. This concerns transcripts of lectures or testimonies due to their original non-written presentation. These criteria also apply to the releases by US state authorities. Free official publications from all three branches of the federal government

were accessed via the website govinfo.gov run by the US Government Publishing Office. Subsequently, key institutions in bilateral relations, such as the White House, the Department of Defense, and the US–China Economic and Security Review Commission, were checked for further publications. We excluded testimonies, press releases, or speeches, as these do not have the same status in federal authorities. They could be redundant in nature, as such documents are often published as announcements or statements to official strategy reports and policy releases.

We derive a corpus of 104 documents in total. The complete, numbered list of the documents analysed can be found in the Appendix. Key text passages are referred to in this list by way of example. For the coding of the data corpus with MAXQDA, our method is inspired by Turcsyani and Kachlikova (2020) who analysed BRI media frames in Europe. Following Gaspers and Lang (2016), the scholars coded media outlets regarding positive, neutral, or negative attitudes, which we adopted for administrative and think tank documents. In contrast to Turcsyani and Kachlikova, our codes fall into four instead of six categories: normative, political, economic, and military. “Normative” codes offer ideas of ethical, social, political, economic, or judicial directives. These directives shape the judgements of legitimate and illegitimate action and the process of norm making. The political and economic coding categories correspond to those of Turcsyani and Kachlikova. The code “political” is concerned with the decision-making, representation, governance, and authority of a political entity at home and abroad. The “economic” label is devoted to the production and consumption of goods and services, including questions of trade and investment. “Military” speech acts relate to the capability to conduct warfare, which includes both offensive and defensive capabilities. We did not code “security” separately because security linkages underlie all four categories of interest by applying the typology of (de)securing framing functions.

To obtain a higher degree of intercoder reliability, the dataset was examined accordingly by both authors of this study. Taking a closer look at the data set, the pool consists of twenty-six official administrative releases and a total of seventy-eight think tank publications, forty-three of these from CSIS, nineteen from CEIP and sixteen from CFR. A breakdown of the publications per year and originator is presented in Figure 1. The figure illustrates that the number of publications has been increasing since 2017, peaking in 2020. As only half of 2021 was analysed due to time constraints, it remains to be seen whether this trend will continue. Nevertheless, the figure indicates growing attention to the DBAR, which is likewise evidenced by the coded segments within the documents. In total, we coded 479 text passages. The number of coded segments increases steadily between 2016 and 2020, reinforcing the impression of a qualitatively more detailed engagement with the DBAR. Although we have about three times as many think tanks as state authority documents in our text corpus, the latter qualitatively relate much more densely to the DBAR, giving us a similar number of coded segments for both document types (266 and 213, respectively). These numbers encourage further disaggregation to identify patterns of convergence and dissonance in US perceptions.





**Figure 1.** Number of coded documents and coded segments.

Source: Own figure.

## US Digital Silk Road Publications: Little Positive to Report

Analysing the patterns of DBAR assessments, the negative statements in both US think tank and state authority documents far outweigh the positive and neutral ones. Around 82 per cent of all coded think tank remarks reveal a negative attitude, compared to almost 99 per cent of coded administrative statements. Conversely, think tank reports contain significantly more positive (twenty-six segments, 10 per cent) and neutral (twenty-two segments, 8 per cent) evaluations. In administrative documents, positive (two segments, 1 per cent) or neutral (one segment, 0.5 per cent) remarks are virtually non-existent. These preliminary findings suggest that in contrast to the European context as examined by Turcsyani and Kachlikova (2020), attitudes in the United States are significantly more negative. We can also support Zhao's (2020) observation that the DBAR is perceived as a major challenge in the United States. Having said that, the neutral and positive statements deserve special attention to present a balanced account of the collected US perceptions. Consequently, this section investigates the desecuritized remarks to identify cooperation opportunities and juxtapose them with the dominating threat frames below. Due to the overall low occurrence of neutral and positive statements in the corpus, the frames remain on a general and incomplete level in relation to the four code categories. We therefore aggregated these frames on a content basis, so that three dominant desecuritized frames could be identified: the first frame describes that the DBAR meets development needs; the second warns that the DBAR is exaggerated, and the third normalises the DBAR on the basis of self-reflection.

The first frame asserts that DBAR has positive effects on development needs. The literature often discusses this under the catchphrase of bridging the digital divide between developing and developed countries (Guo et al., 2018; Ly, 2020). This frame is the most sophisticated among the three frames identified and evident both in think tank and state documents. The remarks largely relate to the economic category as financial benefits offered to the target nations are described. These benefits include direct investments and infrastructural upgrades (see 14, 26, 60, 86, and 104 in the Appendix). In contrast to state authorities, think tanks highlight positive effects more broadly for governments, economies, and societies in developing countries. The DBAR might facilitate knowledge transfer, access to modern financial services and overall, more efficient digital services (see 58 and 60 in the Appendix). The lower prices of Chinese technological solutions are emphasised as an attractive option for the host nations (see 19, 56, and 60 in the Appendix). In view of these benefits, the CFR stressed that many target countries such as Argentina welcomed the Chinese offers (see 58, 60, and 67 in the Appendix). Here, the DBAR is framed as a business idea spurred by local demand rather than a supply-driven, centrally controlled master plan (see 32 in the Appendix). Projects from Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Europe (see 19, 26, 54, and 60 in the Appendix) serve as examples. Previous research findings report that countries such as Hungary, Iran, Cambodia, and the United Arab Emirates welcomed the DBAR for both economic and development reasons (Creemers et al., 2021; Nouwens et al., 2021).

The frame thus acknowledges “a number of legitimate applications” (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission 2020: 155). Such expressions of positive impact on engineering smart cities, economic growth, and sustainable energy use contrast with the prevailing threat frames described below. Although positive frames are scarce, they still indicate competing interpretations of the DBAR and therefore frame-contestation within the United States.

The second frame desecuritisises the DBAR by claiming that the project is overstated. This assessment is exclusively put forward in think tank documents. Exaggerations are seen in several respects: regarding Beijing’s political intention to export its government model with the BRI (see 30 and 32 in the Appendix); increased Chinese influence (see 4 in the Appendix); and the initiative’s actual implementation (see 42, 43, 44, and 46 in the Appendix). Even in 2021, it is claimed that the DBAR “is still in its infancy” (Malena, 2021: 14). Both internal and external hurdles are cited as reasons for these assessments. As the DBAR alone exhibits the complexity of the BRI, its expansion across diverse policy fields and geographical spaces involves an increase in actors and interest groups (see 41 and 43 in the Appendix). Diverging infrastructures, development levels, laws and regulations within countries and across borders further complicate the DBAR’s implementation – as visible in Latin America according to Malena (2021). More support for this frame is found in reporting on Safe City projects in Islamabad, Mombasa, and Nairobi based on Huawei technology that fell short of expectations (see 51 in the Appendix). This second frame asks for more rational assessments of the DBAR and demands balanced US political reactions, which is loosely connected to the third frame of normalising the DBAR.

The third frame is the least developed one of the three presented in this section. It desecuritisises the DBAR by normalising Chinese actions as standard practices and calling for self-reflection. The reasoning goes in two directions: first, it is stated that China is selling its technologies and advancing the DBAR in both liberal and authoritarian countries, which refutes the narrative of building an authoritarian block. Second, democratic states also export surveillance and other technologies to authoritarian states and to some extent use these technologies at home as well (see 28 and 60 in the Appendix). According to Lew et al. (2021: 44): “Chinese firms are hardly the only surveillance technology providers: many companies headquartered in liberal democracies are both offering similar products or enabling Chinese companies to field their technologies.”

This third frame warns against one’s own hypocrisy and demands to review one’s own laws and practices. Still, the principle of rule of law and the role of civil society are described as more advanced in the United States and Europe than in the PRC (see 58 and 60 in the Appendix). Although this frame lacks further depth, it carries far-reaching policy relevance because it calls on the USA to put its own house in order, both in domestic and foreign policy.

In essence, all neutral and positive statements in the three DBAR frames, the acknowledgement of meeting development needs, the warning against exaggeration, and the self-critical normalisation, share the message that the DBAR does “not necessarily represent a national security concern” (U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (SFRC, 2020a: 23–24). While this shifts the DBAR from securitisation to politicisation, it does not present an all-clear signal. Concerns about economic competition, political consequences of inaction or normative warnings often follow on their heels, whereas the military component is not considered in these DBAR assessments. In so doing, positive or neutral statements may reinforce negative impressions and fuel suspicion that positive effects through the DBAR are mere propaganda. All three desecuritisised frames share the call for strategically calculated, realistic, and occasionally even collaborative policy planning. This call for balanced US policy, and also the DBAR’s ambivalence, is aptly illustrated by the statement by Hillman (2019) of CSIS:

In some cases, Chinese investment and technology must be contested and prevented. But in others, it should be welcomed as promoting growth and development. Distinguishing between the two will be essential, not only for helping the United States and its allies deploy resources strategically but also for the developing countries caught in the middle.

## **Four Digital Silk Road Threat Frames**

As already stated, negative statements outweigh the positive and neutral statements of both the US think tank and the state authorities. We identified four major securitising DBAR threat frames (see Table 2): the “dominating digital standards”-frame in the normative area; the political “curtailing US supremacy”-frame, the economic frame “building business barriers,” and the military frame “creating cyber vulnerabilities.”

**Table 2.** Dominant Negative US Digital Silk Road Frames.

Speech Act	Normative Dominating Digital Standards	Political Curtailing US Supremacy	Economic Building Business Barriers	Military Creating Cyber Vulnerabilities
Claim	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ The DBAR spreads unilaterally defined authoritarian technology standards.</li> <li>■ The DBAR undermines human rights by propagating China's governance model.</li> <li>■ Participate more in standard-setting and other multilateral forums.</li> <li>■ Invest and promote higher standard technologies.</li> <li>■ China's growing role in global standard setting.</li> <li>■ Assumed influence in Venezuela and Uganda.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ The DBAR shifts geopolitical power in Beijing's favour.</li> <li>■ The DBAR diminishes US political influence on and in other countries.</li> <li>■ Increase support for developing countries.</li> <li>■ Use overseas embassies to promote US interests abroad.</li> <li>■ Assumed influence in Africa and other developing regions.</li> <li>■ Alleged data extraction from African Union headquarters.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ The DBAR creates new barriers to US trade and investment in BRI-targeted markets.</li> <li>■ The DBAR causes an international market distortion with Chinese characteristics.</li> <li>■ Invest in tech companies and R&amp;D.</li> <li>■ Foster multilateral free trade agreements.</li> <li>■ Telecommunications competition.</li> <li>■ Push for data localisation in Southeast Asia.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ The DBAR strengthens China's military cyber power.</li> <li>■ The DBAR creates security exploits due to dual-use technologies.</li> <li>■ Monitor China's foreign defence activities.</li> <li>■ Strengthen US military cooperation and cybersecurity resilience.</li> <li>■ Chinese national security laws.</li> <li>■ Cooperation with authoritarian states</li> <li>■ Cyberattacks.</li> </ul>
Judgement				
Demand				
Reasoning				

Note. BRI = Belt and Road Initiative; DBAR = Digital Belt and Road.

The following sections take a closer look at each frame. In doing so, we will highlight the conversion of threat assessments between think tanks and administrative elites.

### **Normative: Dominating Digital Standards**

The normative frame is the most prevalent of the four identified frames with 170 out of 428 negatively coded segments. This frame asserts that China is pursuing to dominate global digital standards through the DBAR. The DBAR is claimed to proliferate unilaterally defined authoritarian technology standards. In both think tank and state documents, the frame is coined by the buzzword of “digital authoritarianism” (see 12, 15, 53, 58, 60, 66, 70, 92, 97, and 98 in the Appendix). In our corpus, the warning of “digital authoritarianism” first appears in 2019 (see 29 in the Appendix). When tracing this phrase in our data, the mutual influence of think tanks and federal authorities proves hard to disentangle: The former cite the latter (see 12, 29, and 60 in the Appendix) and vice versa (see 92 and 98 in the Appendix). Drawing on the entire range of interaction between think tanks and state authorities, future studies could track the “ground zero” and evolution of such catchphrases (Wu, 2018: 33–34). Appearing ninety-three times in six administrative and eighteen times in nine think tank documents, “digital authoritarianism” is framed more strongly by state authorities. The term expresses deep concern over a clash of values. It implies inherent othering of the PRC in contrast to the US self-perception as a digital democracy. Rhetorically, this goes hand in hand with the silencing of regulatory flaws and criticism in the United States itself.

The associated judgements warn of the consequences of digital authoritarianism: “These models subvert civil liberties such as the rights to privacy and free expression, undermine the rule of law, and enable social oppression” (Runde et al., 2021: 2). The quote demonstrates two of the three identified main judgements of the normative threat frame. Firstly, the DBAR is perceived as a tool to undermine freedom of expression and other human rights (see 15 and 104 in the Appendix). Secondly, the DBAR is feared to promote the Chinese system of surveillance and censorship (see 9, 28, 64, 74, and 98 in the Appendix). Thirdly, the DBAR is seen as a propagator of norms and values serving the PRC’s governance model (see 32, 33, 37, 76, 80, and 96 in the Appendix). All judgements are linked to fears of a new Internet model that would run counter to the “Western” idea of the Internet (see 21, 76, and 101 in the Appendix).

Apart from the consistency in judgements, think tanks and state authorities share some of the same examples in their reasoning. Both types of documents cite the example of Venezuela. A national identification system is being built there by ZTE. Further surveillance systems have reportedly been installed to censor and control citizens and critics (see 30, 60, and 98 in the Appendix).

Moreover, Chinese DBAR activities in Africa provide a frequent point of reference. In think tank documents, the keyword “Africa” was found 295 times in forty-four out of seventy-eight documents. In eighteen out of twenty-six administrative documents, the keyword was even used 2,043 times. This underscores that African countries are diplomatic linchpins for the United States. With regard to Chinese DBAR activities, the

documents denounce surveillance and repression in states such as Uganda, where cybersecurity laws have been implemented (see 30 and 104 in the Appendix). In terms of reasoning, the African continent is mentioned in all categories analysed, which highlights it as a political field of action and as a link between the frames.

Furthermore, reference is made to China's growing influence not only in a geographical sense, but with regard to multilateral bodies. For example, the International Telecommunication Union is identified as an important standard-setting body in which the PRC is gaining influence. Such bodies are seen as normative vehicles for DBAR projects, for which the new Internet Protocol is cited as a threat to US standards (see 22, 32, and 98 in the Appendix). Here we note a similarity between think tanks and administrative elites in terms of argumentation, as well as in terms of lacking evidence. Instead of providing a solid basis for evidence-based policy-making, unspecific assertions and danger scenarios provide room for speculation and misguided resource planning. In fact, this pattern of lacking evidence can be observed for all four frames.

To address the dynamics of the normative DBAR danger scenarios, the think tanks and political constituencies propose several measures that complete the securitisation frame: the growing Chinese influence in standard-setting bodies and the dissemination of surveillance technology should be contested by US engagement in multilateral forums and diplomatic engagement (see 9, 37, and 94 in the Appendix). Washington should foster a "liberal democratic alternative to China's surveillance model" (Brattberg, 2020: 12). For this democratic alternative model, the private sector is given a key role. It is called for supporting the private economy, both politically and through more investment (see 39 and 94 in the Appendix). These measures are intended to ensure the leading role of the USA in future technologies such as 6G or smart cities (see 58, 75, and 97 in the Appendix).

## **Political: Curtailing US Supremacy**

Closely connected to the normative dimension is the political threat frame. It asserts that the DBAR is curtailing the United States' leading position in world politics by shifting geopolitical power in Beijing's favour. In return, the DBAR would reduce US influence over and in other countries (see 14, 16, 31, 97, 98, and 104 in the Appendix). This effect is suspected behind DBAR financing, which increases economic dependence on China. Economic dependence leads to market pressures that induce countries to comply with Beijing's political wishes and implement favourable policies (see 48, 66, 78, 79, 94, and 98 in the Appendix). Countries could do China's bidding for fear of infrastructure seizure (see 75 and 77 in the Appendix). The behaviour of Greece and Hungary, both of which are beneficiaries of Chinese investments, serves as a support for the warning. In this respect, the EU blockade of Greece and Hungary against China's condemnation in the UN Human Rights Council is cited as an indication that China is using its economic weight as a political instrument (see 58 in the Appendix).

In extreme cases, dependence opens up the classic hard power option for blackmail. This can be read behind the warnings that the DBAR enables China to coerce and manipulate political elites to do Beijing's bidding (see 28, 58, and 99 in the Appendix). As in other

frames, the warning is linked to the assumption that the DBAR will enable to influence African governments (see 99 and 104 in the Appendix). Both political bodies and think tanks worry about the dwindling power of the United States on the African continent (see 1, 31, 99, and 104 in the Appendix). The declining influence is linked to the DBAR allowing Beijing to “recruit intelligence assets at senior levels of African governments” (SFRC, 2020b: 103). An example cited is the claimed intelligence penetration by Chinese-built ICT equipment at the African Union headquarters, which was revealed in 2018. In this case, both the state authorities (see 98, 99, and 104 in the Appendix) and the think tanks (see 45, 48, and 58 in the Appendix) refer to the journalistic article by Kadiri and Tilouine (2018) or media reports quoting it. The discovery points to the importance of the media in shaping political framing, as already underlined by Entman (1993). Other espionage capabilities are attributed to Huawei. Its technology not only helps authoritarian governments to spy on opponents, but ultimately jeopardises US intelligence and operations (see 58, 78, and 99 in the Appendix). The DBAR could thus “reinforce authoritarian tendencies” (Goodman, 2019). To counter these trends, there are calls for more investment in Africa and greater assistance to developing countries in shaping their policies (see 26, 39, 58, and 69 in the Appendix).

Not only at the local level, but also at the international level, US supremacy is challenged by the DBAR. As in the normative framework, both think tank and state documents fear that US leadership in international forums could be compromised (see 21, 27, 98, and 99 in the Appendix). In addition, the US dollar could be weakened as an international reserve currency. DBAR technologies in the financial sector could help spread the Chinese renminbi as a financial asset (see 3 and 103 in the Appendix). These new financial structures are seen as posing the risk of facilitating the circumvention of US sanctions (see 3, 47, 73, and 103 in the Appendix). In particular, the Cross-Interbank Payment System (CIPS) is mentioned. CIPS is a Chinese alternative to the Belgium-based Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT). SWIFT represents the standard in international banking. It allows financial transfers from sanctioned individuals or organisations to be stopped, which is a tool that has been used by the West (see 32, 47, and 103 in the Appendix).

As part of the political West, Europe is mentioned in think tank documents. As a partner of the United States, Europe is affected if joint operations, shared values, and political influence along the DBAR could be reduced (see 10 and 18 in the Appendix). Europe is yet characterised as a place, where US power itself could be diminished (see 3, 31, and 40 in the Appendix). Consequently, the perceived threats prompt demands for strengthening diplomatic partnerships (see 58, 94, and 98 in the Appendix). These soft power measures are supported by the call for greater use of embassies to promote opportunities in the United States and US interests abroad (see 58 in the Appendix).

### **Economic: Building Business Barriers**

According to the “Vision and Actions”-roadmap the BRI is designed “to improve investment and trade facilitation, and remove investment and trade barriers for the creation of a

sound business environment within the region and in all related countries” (National Development and Reform Commission et al., 2015). The third threat frame, we encountered, clearly counters this narrative. The documents claim that the DBAR will create new barriers to US trade and investment in BRI target countries. The main consequence of China’s activities is warned to be a shift in economic dependencies that complicate trade (see 14, 58, and 99 in the Appendix). Such shifts are feared especially in the technological business and similarly voiced by think tanks and the administration: In the e-commerce sector, the examined documents see US dominance at risk. Tech giants such as Amazon face Chinese competition like Alibaba in tapping into new markets (see 38, 60, and 102 in the Appendix).

Dependence on Chinese companies will increase as they build new telecom networks in DBAR countries. By creating path dependencies, it is more likely that Chinese rather than US firms will continue to be selected for interoperable technologies in the future. In this context, there is concern that Chinese standards will impede a subsequent change in the system. This would not only give Chinese companies a key competitive advantage, but reorder global value chains and close off part of the market (see 32, 57, 58, 59, and 79 in the Appendix). US firms would be effectively barred from market access (see 38, 75, and 102 in the Appendix). The comprised trade relations could mean revenue losses for the United States for “potentially decades” (Sacks, 2021).

An example is Huawei’s thrust into emerging markets and perceived exclusion of the United States and European competitors (see 99 and 104 in the Appendix). Huawei has become one of the main carriers for the expansion of the telecommunication network in Africa (see 45 and 104 in the Appendix). It is also a key player in providing subsea cables. The cable network is cited as a striking area of concern that also stands out in the military frame.

The judgement drawn is that the DBAR benefits from a “‘China-centric’ digital transformation” (SFRC, 2020b: 90). In this view, technological progress and economic growth are developing at the expense of the United States (see 58, 60, and 104 in the Appendix). Due to subsidies at home, inefficient tech companies are able to offer digital transformation abroad at low prices. US firms cannot compete with these prices and operate cost-effectively at the same time. This was already observed in Southeast Asia, where China pushed for data localisation (see 8 and 37 in the Appendix). In addition, competition in target countries or participation in BRI is complicated by non-transparent procurement and bidding processes (see 94 in the Appendix).

The DBAR is consequently perceived to cause international market distortions with political, normative, and military implications (see 48, 59, 83, and 95 in the Appendix). Economic shifts radiate as a central node to the concerns about future domination, governance, and warfare. However, this nodal function has for too long been seen as a self-evident first-mover advantage of the United States and Europe due to their long-standing technological supremacy. Therefore, it is demanded to create its own “Go out” policies: incentives should be created for own companies to invest more in riskier emerging markets (see 45 in the Appendix). A favourable external environment is also needed, so the US government is urged to participate more strongly in multilateral trade institutions and to conclude trade



agreements (see 39, 58, and 70 in the Appendix). Greater US engagement should counter corruption, opaque business practices, and unsustainable debt for the sake of global macro-economic stability (see 58 in the Appendix). The bottom line is that these countermeasures are based on conflicting conceptions between the Chinese state-led top-down economic model and the US bottom-up model of “organic industry-led innovation” (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020: 3).

## **Military: Creating Cyber Vulnerabilities**

Finally, the DBAR is seen as posing military challenges, as it may create new vulnerabilities in the cyber domain. Both think tank and administrative documents claim that these cyber vulnerabilities arise from close ties between the Chinese government and Chinese technology firms (see 37, 52, 58, 68, 75, 83, and 88 in the Appendix). Under the headline of military–civil fusion, the DBAR is perceived as a dangerous boost to China’s military cyber power (see 80, 88, and 104 in the Appendix).

A major reason for this is seen in the Chinese National Intelligence Law (see 58, 88, and 104 in the Appendix). Passed in 2017, the law compels Chinese firms to cooperate with the government. Specifically, the authorisation of Chinese security agencies to collect and process information by Chinese companies about foreign entities and individuals is criticised (see 58, 75, and 83 in the Appendix). The DBAR is criticised as a means of strengthening intelligence collection capabilities abroad: “Prior actions taken by the Chinese government, such as installing backdoors in encryption technology, suggest that it will take similar actions when laying down fibre optic cables in other countries” (Patrick and Feng, 2018).

Chinese ICT compromises target states and jeopardises US security cooperation (see 90 and 91 in the Appendix). The SFRC Democratic Staff Report “The New Big Brother” of July 2020 illustrates this concern via the aforementioned African Union intelligence collection (SFRC, 2020a). The same example is given in a later SFRC Republican Staff report of November 2020. It explicitly warns that “PRC penetration into Africa’s sensitive government, information and communications technology infrastructure poses direct threats to both U.S. and European interest” (SFRC, 2020b: 110). The wording expresses the highest possible threat level. As already stated, these threats include Chinese influence campaigns, intelligence recruitment into African governments, and insights into US counterterrorism missions or joint exercises with allies. Economic advantage-taking is likewise addressed in this passage. If an example like this serves several threat frames, they reinforce each other. Mutual reinforcement occurs both along “hard” infrastructure projects, as in the case of submarine cables, and along “soft” targets, such as abstract narratives concerning “digital authoritarianism.” Cause and effect transcend the boundaries of frames. All these examples convey the story, technology exports promote Chinese norms and values, which in turn create economic barriers, political manipulation, and military threats. This again underscores that the threat frames are interconnected and fit into a larger China threat narrative (see 99 in the Appendix).

The coded segments indicate how frequently and closely military threat perceptions are based on the judgement that the DBAR exports dual-use technology (see 55, 99, 102, and 104 in the Appendix). Chinese technology, which can be used for civilian as well as military purposes, fuels fears of potential cyber disruptions and attacks (see 58, 60, and 70 in the Appendix). Ortega (2019) from CSIS explains this with reference to Spain: Chinese-built ICT infrastructure like 5G is linked to high rates of cyberattacks from China on Spanish ministries and companies in 2018.

While cyber disruptions and surveillance are named in both administrative and think tank documents, the SFRC (2020b) issued a detailed account of the maritime threat potential of Chinese technology. The construction of an underwater network of cables, sensors, and observation vehicles serves not only civilian purposes such as environmental monitoring, but also military purposes such as submarine tracking and detection. The laying of undersea cables under the heading of DBAR is perceived as merely a smokescreen for PRC military purposes to create a Great Undersea Wall (see 99 in the Appendix).

Another divergence between state entities and think tanks is that the former warns more clearly about the potential infrastructural benefits for the military. These benefits for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) are associated with the Chinese base in Djibouti, space or underwater capabilities (see 7, 99, and 104 in the Appendix). Think tanks, by contrast, point in a generic way to the PLA's upgrading (see 13 and 64 in the Appendix). In addition, they warn that DBAR infrastructure projects could provide benefits to countries, which could be detrimental to US interests. This includes, for instance, agreements on arms sales and the modernisation of railroads, ports and telecommunications networks in Iran – contrary to US sanctions policy (see 23 in the Appendix). In the case of Pakistan, there are fears that cooperation with China “could tip the balance against India in a future conflict” (Markey, 2020: 9). The USA would then be affected because of its close security partnerships with India. Conversely, close security partners such as India, Japan, the United Kingdom, and Australia echo Washington's opposition to the DBAR in recognising these risks (Creemers et al., 2021; Nouwens et al., 2021).

Overall, US state entities and think tanks agree that the DBAR is a major security threat. To address military vulnerabilities and strengthen cybersecurity resilience, there are calls to exclude Chinese technologies from strategically important networks (see 58, 89, and 94 in the Appendix). Further demands include investing in its own capabilities and cyber defence (see 52 and 58 in the Appendix), strengthening the military and cyber cooperation between the United States and its partners (see 58, 93, 98, and 99 in the Appendix), and improving monitoring capabilities including homegrown China expertise (see 62, 84, and 85 in the Appendix).

## **Conclusion and Implications for Future Research**

Our main objective was to examine how the DBAR is perceived and framed in the USA. Following the study by Rogelja and Tsimonis (2020), we narrowed down the perceptions under study to state authorities as represented in administrative documents and think tanks as key civil institutions. Similar to Rogelja and Tsimonis's findings in the

European context, we found significant congruence between the think tanks and the political administration. The congruence is higher among the threat frames than in the positive or neutral portrayals of the DBAR. Among the three positive and neutral frames, state authorities and think tanks only agree that DBAR investments meet the development needs to build digital infrastructure and economies in developing countries. The view that the statements about the DBAR are exaggerated was only presented by think tanks. Think tanks were also more concerned with normalising Chinese actions under DBAR and putting forward a critical self-reflection of US actions abroad. Despite their low occurrence in the data corpus, these desecuritized frames provide ideas for a more balanced great power policy, which have been neglected in previous studies. Their inclusion enables researchers to identify shifts between securitisation and desecuritisation without disregarding one or the other. Only a combined approach of the entire securitisation spectrum can answer whether the confrontation between Washington and Beijing has reached the point of no return.

Indeed, the vast majority of coded statements convey a threat message, which corroborates the findings of Shah (2021) and Zhao (2020). We identified four dominant threat frames: within the normative category, it is warned that the DBAR spreads Chinese digital standards, which will lead to a spread of an authoritarian governance model. This is closely related to the political fear that the DBAR will shift geopolitical power in Beijing's favour. In the economic sphere, higher trade barriers are predicted as a consequence of DBAR. Ultimately, Chinese technology creates vulnerabilities with military relevance in cyberspace. Concerning these four threat frames, we found significant convergence between think tank and administrative documents as well as linkages and overlaps between the arguments submitted. These linkages are visible in all examined securitising framing functions, which we have combined into a typology following Stritzel (2012), Vuori (2008), and Entman (1993). From a broader perspective, our analysis of DBAR statements along this typology provides strong evidence for a China threat master narrative that is widespread in the United States.

The analysis confirmed Rogelja and Tsimonis's (2020: 114, 120) observation that platitudes, unsubstantiated claims, and missing evidence contribute to the securitisation of a China threat. Similar patterns of argumentation exist in the United States and Europe, as the parallels in BRI threat perceptions to Gaspers and Lang (2016) demonstrate. On the other hand, Turcsyani and Kachlikova (2020) found an initial positive resonance of BRI in Europe that took a negative turn around 2017. These findings call for a more comprehensive examination of European and US perceptions of the BRI and the DBAR to identify strategic commonalities or divergences. Europe's relevance was also revealed in our research: the analysed documents clearly defined Europe as a strategic partner and ally, while Asian and African countries were predominantly attributed to the role of targets of the DBAR. In the context of these target countries, it could be investigated to what extent the perceptions of danger can be found in the DBAR discourse. Additionally, other BRI sub-projects could be examined with our analytical model. The Space Silk Road, the Health Silk Road, or the Green BRI could be studied to paint a nuanced picture of the dangers and opportunities for cooperation.

This study contributed to the research landscape in several ways: first, we conducted the first in-depth analysis of DBAR (de)securitisation frames based on the US think tanks and administrative documents. Our study design theoretically advances current research on the narrative construction of (de)securitisation frames. It provides innovative and balanced empirical insights into US perceptions of the DBAR, which enriches the overarching debate on power shifts and great power competition. Our study draws attention to the congruence and dissonance of think tanks and state authority affiliates, prompting further research on their functional connection and mutual influence. Future research may thus concentrate on these relationships within and outside the USA. It is possible to expand the research framework in terms of both the data sample and categories of analysis. The former could apply our analytical framework to other sources such as political speeches, social media representations or additional think tanks such as the Asia Society Policy Institute. The second could add further categories of analysis, such as the ecological dimension, in order to gain a more fine-grained understanding of perceptions around the globe. By extending the time frame of analysis, one could concentrate on frame transformation, as Grauvogel and Diez (2014) did, to test potential shifts in perceptions and probe causal mechanisms for frame emergence and change. In this way, as in our study, research expands knowledge about international threat perceptions that can inhibit inter-state cooperation.


### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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### **Supplemental Material**

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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## Author Biographies

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