

# Critical Raw Materials and Rare Earths: a Study of the EU and China's Strategic Narratives

Pacôme DUCORAIL

## Key Takeaways

1. The EU and China have pushed contrasting and often opposing Strategic Narratives around their policies on Rare Earth Materials (REEs), Critical Raw Materials (CRMs) and Green Minerals.
2. The EU argues that the scarcity of CRMs, combined with their crucial need for the green and digital transitions, makes China's near-monopoly on them dangerous. De-risking and diversification are presented as logical solutions to address vulnerabilities that can and will be exploited.
3. China argues that as a responsible actor, it has the right to restrict its exports of REEs to prevent military use and to protect world peace, and that trade defence mechanism and diversification by the EU are unfair responses to its own policies.
4. Both Strategic Narratives suffer from inner tensions and mutual misperceptions, that ultimately damage EU-China relations by misrepresenting the intentions and policies of each other.
5. Strategic Narratives and their analysis are useful to understand the EU's and China's vision of the world, the role they play in it and the justifications they give for their respective policies towards CRMs and REEs. EU-China relations would however gain from more accurate mutual characterisation.

## I. Introduction

“Today, China dominates the global market for rare earth permanent magnets.”, “No single country should control 80 to 90% of the market for essential raw materials”, “This pattern of dominance, dependency and blackmail continues today.”<sup>1</sup>

These statements come from European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen at a working lunch of the G7 in June of 2025. What they illustrate well is a larger trend of the European Union (EU) having a well-established narrative on Critical Raw Materials (CRMs), Rare Earth Elements (REEs) or green minerals and the role China plays on these topics. This narrative is coherent with policies and initiatives undertaken by the European institutions in recent months: meeting with “like-minded” partners such as the USA to try and forge partnerships on critical minerals,<sup>2</sup> alerting about the quasi-monopoly of China’s consequences for energy transition,<sup>3</sup> reinforcing its trade defence tools,<sup>4</sup> launching the ReSourceEU programme strategy to lower dependencies and accelerate “de-risking”,<sup>5</sup> and going as far as hinting at using the Anti-Coercion Instrument (ACI) or “trade bazooka” to protect its economy.<sup>6</sup>

China on the other hand has argued through its foreign ministry and state media that the EU’s de-risking strategy dangerous for global trade,<sup>7</sup> expressed strong dissatisfaction with the reaction of member of the European Parliament (MEPs) to its raw materials exports’ restrictions,<sup>8</sup> and called de-risking just a “disguised form of decoupling the West uses to contain China”.<sup>9</sup> It also defended its exports’ restrictions, justifying them with matters of international security, denounced an attack on its development by Western powers and expressed its strong attachment to international rules and institutions to address the related disputes. Policy-wise, China has moved in recent years to ensure its own self-sufficiency when it comes to REEs and CRMs,<sup>10</sup> and to protect its industry from external shocks that

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<sup>1</sup> Eur. Comm. - Eur. Comm., ‘Statement by President von der Leyen at Session II - working lunch of the G7’.

<sup>2</sup> EUobserver, ‘EU Pushes for Partnership with US at Rubio-Hosted Critical Minerals Summit to Counter China’.

<sup>3</sup> Euronews, ‘EU’s Climate Goals at Risk without China’s Raw Materials, Auditors Say’.

<sup>4</sup> Blenkinsop, ‘EU Aims to Improve Defences against Economic Threats, Such as China Export Curbs’.

<sup>5</sup> O’Carroll and correspondent, ‘EU Looks at Legally Forcing Industries to Reduce Purchases from China’.

<sup>6</sup> Euractiv, ‘Von Der Leyen Hints at “Trade Bazooka” against China’s Rare Earth Chokehold’.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun’s Regular Press Conference on October 28, 2025\_Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China’.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Spokesperson of the Chinese Mission to the EU Speaks on a Question Concerning a China-Related Resolution Adopted by the European Parliament’.

<sup>9</sup> CGTN, ‘De-Risking Disguised Form of Decoupling the West Uses to Contain China’.

<sup>10</sup> Ghiretti and Ellis, *Old Priorities, New Contexts*.

could come from the trade wars with the USA.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond policies that come increasingly at odds with each other, we can thus clearly observe a competition of Strategic Narratives employed by China and the EU when it comes to CRMs and REEs. Both entities are moving to impose their framing of the issue, with actors, setting, conflict, behaviour and resolution formulated in two very contrasting ways. Strategic Narratives are what Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle describe in their seminal work on narratives in International Relations (IR). They do so by analysing the discourse and communication held by actors such as states and by formalising the sequential and causal elements in narratives formed, both projected and received.<sup>12</sup>

In order to investigate which Strategic Narratives the EU and China have been pushing since 2023 surrounding critical materials, rare earths and green minerals, this paper uses qualitative Narrative Analysis of official documents, speeches and statements of EU and Chinese institutions, to identify both entities’ Strategic Narratives used from 2023 to February 2026.

After a brief overview of what REEs and CRMs are, their strategic relevance and their recent securitisation, the theoretical framework and methodology used for the analysis will be presented, before delving into the findings of the research undertaken and the links with the existing literature on the topic.

## REEs and CRMs’ geopolitical significance and recent securitisation

REEs include 17 elements of soft metals, classified into light and heavy categories. They are essential for technologies used in digital appliances, the defence industry, renewable energy pieces of equipment, and in objects as widespread as phones, processors, and glass products found in camera lenses for example.<sup>13</sup> This ubiquity in demand, combined with little geological knowledge on how to find new reserves and thus limited offer, has created a set of circumstances where only a few actors have the capacity both for effective extraction and processing.<sup>14</sup> While the demand will rise dramatically in coming years (by six by 2030 in the EU<sup>15</sup>) to sustain both the digital and green transition, the offer is limited to a quasi-monopoly by China, which accounted for “an estimated 70 per cent of global production in 2022. Far behind were the USA with 14.3 per cent and Australia with 6.0 per cent.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Wu, ‘China’s Role Conflict in Norm Contestations’.

<sup>12</sup> Miskimmon et al., *Forging the World*.

<sup>13</sup> Martins, ‘RARE EARTH GEOPOLITICS’.

<sup>14</sup> Andrews-Speed and Hove, *China’s Rare Earths Dominance and Policy Responses*.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Critical Raw Materials Act - Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs’.

<sup>16</sup> Andrews-Speed and Hove, *China’s Rare Earths Dominance and Policy Responses*, 2.

These numbers were compounded by the brutal realisation in 2025 of the fragility of existing supply chains following unprecedented Chinese licensing requirements on REEs and other elements<sup>17</sup> with quasi-immediate shortages in key industrial sectors.<sup>18</sup> And while these restrictions were officially delayed by a year and licences have started to be issued for specific companies, the renewed sense of urgency has remained.<sup>19</sup>

In response, the EU had already released in 2023 a draft for a Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA), with targets and benchmarks for the year 2030 on extraction, procession, recycling.<sup>20</sup> To define which materials are critical (and thus do not only include REEs but also key elements such as Cobalt, Bauxite, Graphite, Nickel, Lithium)<sup>21</sup> the EU regularly conducts criticality assessments which zooms in on both how economically useful those materials are, and the supply risks they have. The RESourceEU Action Plan launched in 2025 builds on the CRMA with new policies (Critical Raw Materials Centre, stockpiling and better coordination mechanisms) and financing tools (~EUR 3 bn mobilised in the next year).<sup>22</sup>

This is not the first time that other powers have been worried about the market share of REEs: in 2010 and following a maritime incident between China and Japan, strong disruptions to REEs' exports to Japan were reported, and while these have never been confirmed by the Chinese state, this example is used to this day by Western powers to justify the recent securitisation of REEs and CRMs' access.

Securitisation, according to the Copenhagen School, is a way to create and justify a strong sense of urgency that legitimates exceptional measures to solve specific issues that have been labelled as security ones by credible authors.<sup>23</sup> In the case of REEs and CRMs, this can be seen both in the justification for the exports' restrictions by China (as will be explored below) and by the EU for de-risking its economy and using trade defence tools to reduce its dependencies.

By analysing the Strategic Narratives put forward by the EU and China surrounding CRMs and REEs, this paper aims to provide a better understanding of each entities' perceptions of the situation and their proposed resolution.

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<sup>17</sup> 'Announcement No.18 of 2025 of The Ministry of Commerce and The General Administration of Customs of The People's Republic of China Announcing the Decision to Implement Export Control on Some Medium and Heavy Rare Earth Related Items'.

<sup>18</sup> Ghiretti and Ellis, *Old Priorities, New Contexts*.

<sup>19</sup> Epthinktank, 'China's Rare-Earth Export Restrictions'.

<sup>20</sup> Eur. Comm. - Eur. Comm., 'European Critical Raw Materials Act'.

<sup>21</sup> Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL Establishing a Framework for Ensuring a Secure and Sustainable Supply of Critical Raw Materials and Amending Regulations (EU) 168/2013, (EU) 2018/858, 2018/1724 and (EU) 2019/1020.

<sup>22</sup> Eur. Comm. - Eur. Comm., 'Factsheet'.

<sup>23</sup> Wæver, 'Securitization and Desecuritization.'

## II. Methodology

### A. Theoretical Framework

#### 1. Strategic Narratives

For Miskimmon et al., “Political actors attempt to create a shared understanding of the world, of other political actors, and of policy through the use of strategic narratives”.<sup>24</sup> The definition of Strategic Narratives then is a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors”.<sup>25</sup> International actors such as states can thus use narratives as just another tool within their strategies, including in cases of conflicts. But conflict is not the only time when such an operational concept can be used to study an entity’s external communication, and it can instead be used to study a myriad of international relations’ issues. Policy and strategy documents usually make the bulk of the primary sources used to derive such narratives in analysis, in order to understand how actors try to persuade others of their point of view.<sup>26</sup>

A key part of the construction of a Strategic Narrative is through the autobiographical cherry-picking of historical elements to project a specific Identity Narrative that is supposed to be coherent throughout time.<sup>27</sup> This cherry-picking also allows to better construct a lauded ingroup and a marginalised outgroup, which helps to better clarify the “characters” of the narrative.<sup>28</sup> When it comes to the main elements of Strategic Narratives, Miskimmon et al. classify them as “character or actors (agent), setting/environment/space (scene), conflict or action (act), tools/behaviour (agency), resolution/or suggested resolution/goal (purpose)”.<sup>29</sup> Narratives themselves come into three main types: “system, identity, and issue narratives”.<sup>30</sup> System narratives are focused on the structure in which actors evolve, and their place within it, identity deals with self-perception and values, and finally issue narratives are the ones used to describe what goals or policies should be implemented as resolution to the issue at hand. The narratives have to be curated to their audiences through careful formation, projection and reception, each level being a possible avenue for analysis.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Miskimmon et al., *Forging the World*, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Roselle et al., ‘Strategic Narrative’; Snyder, ‘Dueling Security Stories’.

<sup>27</sup> White, ‘The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory’.

<sup>28</sup> Kinnvall and Nesbitt-Larking, ‘The Political Psychology of (De)Securitization’.

<sup>29</sup> Miskimmon et al., *Forging the World*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Miskimmon et al., *Forging the World*, 8.

<sup>31</sup> Riessman, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*.

Narratives have stronger chances to be accepted by audiences if they fit with existing master narratives, which this paper will now address.

## 2. Existing Master Narratives found in the EU and China

The EU's Master Narrative's core is the belief that cooperation beyond national borders has allowed for peace and prosperity on the continent, that it is a normative and ethical power at heart, and that security is to be understood in humanitarian terms.<sup>32</sup> This seemingly simple narrative is however complicated to project coherently and in a unified manner, as the very nature of the EU as a *sui generis* entity with a 3-level structure, inevitably brings about discordant voices and limited reception, especially in times of crises.<sup>33</sup> This lack of homogeneity has not stopped the EU from trying to portray itself as "a security provider, as a democratizer and spreader of 'good' norms, as a good neighbour, as a contributor to global peace and as a contributor to the well-being of peoples around the world".<sup>34</sup>

Peace, prosperity, human security, fighting terrorism are all arguments and key parts in the narratives that the EU has been putting forward to obtain supplementary resources. By constantly championing itself as the guarantor of these positively associated values and policies, the EU has justified its need for increased development.<sup>35</sup> Bergner also adds that the EU has strong elements of social justice, human rights and global health donor role at the core of its projected identity and Strategic Narratives,<sup>36</sup> while Heinrichs insists on the intergenerational "debt" that current generations owe to the previous ones for having built the European project, something that Seixas also notes.<sup>37</sup> Both System and Identity narratives are therefore already present in this collection of master-narratives, which can be easily mobilised for Issue Narratives as when the EU requires supplementary resources to attain the goals in line with its values.

System and Identity Narratives are identifiable in the existing master-narratives of China. Indeed, a large part of how Chinese official statements depict the world, its place in it, and the rules which should be adopted is to be found in the selected pieces of history "emplotted" by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since the creation of the People's Republic of China (PRC).<sup>38</sup> Both the century of humiliation linked to the traumatic memory of the Opium Wars and to the Japanese invasion are key to understand how China

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<sup>32</sup> Miskimmon, 'Finding a Unified Voice?'

<sup>33</sup> Manfredi-Sánchez and Smith, 'Public Diplomacy in an Age of Perpetual Crisis'.

<sup>34</sup> Moral, 'Restoring Reputation through Digital Diplomacy', 243.

<sup>35</sup> Cachia and DeBattista, 'Political Narrative, Collective EU Security and the State of the Union'.

<sup>36</sup> Bergner, 'The Role of the European Union in Global Health'.

<sup>37</sup> Heinrichs, 'The Strategic Narration of Future Identity during Times of Crises'; Castro Seixas, 'War Metaphors in Political Communication on COVID-19'.

<sup>38</sup> Liao, 'The Power of Strategic Narratives'.

portrays itself, as a country bullied both by the West and by Japan.<sup>39</sup>

This is complemented by the Chinese Dream introduced by President Xi Jinping in 2012, a notion that encompasses the goal of China to be a great power once again, in line with its National Rejuvenation narrative. This constant dichotomy between the bullying and the glorification is made coherent by the temporal aspect of it, as the bullying lies (most of the time) in the past and can be regularly reinvoked to justify a “never again” mentality, while the eventual rise to great power is supposed to occur in the future.<sup>40</sup> This rise is however often described as “peaceful” and respectful, as China wants to be seen as an “alternative provider”, breaking with Cold War classical understanding of International Relations, instead focusing on state-centric multilateralism.<sup>41</sup> This, in turn, is often a way to subtly delegitimise countries such as the United States and its allies, in a denigration of the Other by comparison to the lauded Self. According to Song et al., this also relies on a “version of communitarianism largely derived from traditional Confucian values”.<sup>42</sup> This appeal to stability partly explains why China values non-intervention, UN rules and multilateralism.

## B. Selection of the corpora and analysis method

### 1. Timeframe

This paper focuses on the period of 2023 to present, to include the 2023 draft of the CRMA. This start date was chosen because it is when the EU officially formalised its Strategic Narrative on CRMs and applied it through policy. By including official European institutions’ documents up to February of 2026, both the RESourceEU Action Plan’s communication can be discussed, as well as the most recent exports’ restrictions from China, their official justifications, and the reaction of China to both the EU’s de-risking strategy when it comes to CRMs and REEs, and their own strategic narratives when it comes to REEs and so-called green minerals.

### 2. Sources

For the EU’s Strategic Narratives, online sources range from the European Commission’s press releases, speeches from President von der Leyen, the European Parliament, the Council, the European Union, External Action Service, official comments made in the press and the EU delegation in China. Keywords for research were Critical Raw Materials, Rare Earth Elements and Green Minerals. Only relevant documents were kept, and the full list can be found in the bibliography of this paper.

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<sup>39</sup> Yang, ‘China’s Strategic Narratives in Global Governance Reform under Xi Jinping’.

<sup>40</sup> Tsai, ‘The Chinese Dream’.

<sup>41</sup> Moral and Marco, ‘Assembling Stories Tweet by Tweet’.

<sup>42</sup> Song et al., ‘Twitter Diplomacy and China’s Strategic Narrative during the Early COVID-19 Crisis’, 697.

For China, the online sources used were the websites of the Mission of the PRC to the EU, the State Council, the State Council Information Office, Xi Jinping's speeches, Xinhua, CGTN, Global Times. Keywords for research were Critical Raw Materials, Rare Earth Elements and Green Minerals. Only relevant documents were kept, and the full list can be found in the bibliography of this paper.

Once identified, the sources were qualitatively analysed using Qualitative Narrative Analysis as described by Colley and van Noort's methodology, classifying the main themes found in System, Issue and Identity Strategic Narratives, and identifying the overall "components of plot, actor and setting".<sup>43</sup>

### 3. Limitations

Because this paper focuses on the projection of the Strategic Narratives of China to its Western counterparts, only speeches and statements in English were selected from the different official websites, which limits the number of documents that could be analysed. Further analysis that would compare whether the documents written in Chinese project the same narratives to domestic audiences than they do to foreign ones would certainly add to this research undertaking.

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<sup>43</sup> Colley and van Noort, 'China's COVID-19 Strategic Narratives in 2020 and How States Responded to Them', 19.

### III. Narrative analysis of the data

#### A. EU

##### 1. System Narratives

What transpired most acutely while analysing the EU's official statements on CRMs is the shift in its vision of the world order. In the past, optimism that rivalled China's outlook in official documents could be found. In the documents analysed, however, the EU institutions described a return to world competition, *realpolitik* and risk of dependencies that can and will be exploited by other states.

“Europe cannot do things the same way anymore. We learned this lesson painfully with energy; we will not repeat it with critical materials”<sup>44</sup>

“The supply of many critical raw materials is highly concentrated. For example, China provides 100 % of the EU's supply of heavy rare earth elements (REE), Turkey provides 99% of the EU's supply of boron, and South Africa provides 71% of the EU's needs for platinum and an even higher share of the platinum group metals iridium, rhodium, and ruthenium. The risks associated with the concentration of production are in many cases compounded by low substitution and low recycling rates.”<sup>45</sup>

The EU thus securitises CRMs and REEs, much like China, but by pointing out the dependency on others (and especially China) as the main threat, rather than at the potential military use of REEs. The memory of the Russian invasion is also reactivated to justify taking the threat seriously before it is too late.

There is further securitisation of the export' restrictions and the unprecedented legal reach they would give to China if enforced, as they would have theoretically allowed for controls of manufactured products outside of its territory before their temporary suspension.

“Export controls of CRMs, with presumption of denial for military end use, including extraterritorial controls of defence equipment containing CRMs by third countries, represent a clear and present threat to the EU's security and defence.”<sup>46</sup>

This stark return to Realist thinking in IR is also visible in a renewed Us Vs Them

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<sup>44</sup> Euractiv, ‘Von Der Leyen Hints at “Trade Bazooka” against China's Rare Earth Chokehold’.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Critical Raw Materials - Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs’.

<sup>46</sup> ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - European Commission’.

mentality. Indeed, foreign entities (often understood to be China, although not always directly named) are seen as potential threats, which justifies in turn friend-shoring and privileging “like-minded” partners.

“China is using this quasi-monopoly not only as a bargaining chip but also weaponizing it to undermine competitors in key industries. We all witnessed the cost and consequences of China's coercion through export restrictions. Even if there are signals that China may loosen its restrictions – the threat remains. As China's economy slows down, Beijing floods global markets with subsidized overcapacity that its own market cannot absorb.”<sup>47</sup>

“History has shown that with sufficient ambition and the right tools, the EU is capable of reducing even deep-seated dependencies. This was demonstrated with REPowerEU (1), which reshaped our energy landscape including the phase-out of Russian gas imports. Today, the Commission adopts the RESourceEU Action Plan, applying a similar logic of derisking and diversification to critical raw materials.”

Again, selected autobiographical details about the EU are reactivated to justify friend-shoring and to convince its audience that the world has become a dangerous, zero-sum game, where securing CRMs and REEs is of existential importance. Existing master System Narratives are therefore not fully represented in this case study: the EU used to try and project the values that guaranteed its prosperity: open trade, human security, economic development. While security remains, the EU now looks much more inward than it usually did, in order to protect those values, but within its borders only.

## 2. Identity Narratives

Similarly to how China often portrays the West and especially the USA as a bully, China is a threat and the EU becomes the victim in the EU's Identity Narrative.

“Or as President Xi put it bluntly a few years ago: ‘China must tighten international production chains' dependence on China to form a powerful countermeasure and deterrent capability'. This is especially true when it comes to critical raw materials like lithium or cobalt. President Xi told the Chinese people to prepare for struggle. It is no coincidence that he used in his opening speech the words ‘douzheng' and ‘fendou' repeatedly – which both can be translated as struggle. This is indicative of a world view shaped by a sense of mission for the Chinese nation. Which brings me to the third conclusion. And that is that the Chinese Communist Party's clear goal is a systemic change of the international order with China at its centre.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Eur. Comm. - Eur. Comm., ‘Statement by President von der Leyen at Session II - working lunch of the G7’.

<sup>48</sup> Eur. Comm. - Eur. Comm., ‘Speech by the President on EU-China Relations’.

“In addition, over the past three years, China has adopted a series of export control measures. Their suspension by a year offers only a temporary and partial relief. This risks leading to production shutdowns and eventually to plants’ closure and lay-offs, while undermining the EU’s economic security, long-term competitiveness and transitions objectives. Critical dependencies for certain CRMs also risk hampering the EU’s ability to deliver on its 2030 defence readiness objectives and to support militarily Ukraine, thereby posing a direct security risk”<sup>49</sup>

But just as China tampers its victim status by underlining its resilience in the face of international challenges, the EU also stresses in its Identity Narrative its capacity to withstand external shocks thanks to its capacities:

“European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said on Saturday that Brussels is ready to use all available means to counter Beijing’s damaging export restrictions on rare earths”<sup>50</sup>

“The European Critical Raw Materials Act is a comprehensive response to these challenges. Building on the strength of the single market, the Act will ensure that the EU can rely on strong, resilient, and sustainable value chains for critical raw materials.”<sup>51</sup>

### 3. Issue Narratives

To face this uncertain world where dependencies are weaponised, the EU narrates its policies as the logical solution to a supply and security risk that can only be addressed with diversification, re-shoring, friend-shoring and trade defence mechanisms against actors like China.

“This is why we have put forward the Critical Raw Materials Act to help diversify and secure our supply. And we need to think about this right across our Single Market to strengthen our resilience on cyber and maritime, space and digital, defence and innovation.”  
“This can only be based on stress-testing our relationship to see where the greatest threats lie concerning our resilience, long-term prosperity and security. The aim is to be able to produce at least 40% of the clean tech that we need for the green transition – such as solar, onshore and offshore wind, renewable energy in the broadest sense, batteries and storage, heat pumps and grid technologies. But to achieve this goal we will also need more independence and diversity when it comes to the key inputs needed for our competitiveness.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - European Commission’.

<sup>50</sup> Euractiv, ‘Von Der Leyen Hints at “Trade Bazooka” against China’s Rare Earth Chokehold’.

<sup>51</sup> Consilium, ‘Critical Raw Materials Act’.

<sup>52</sup> Eur. Comm. - Eur. Comm., ‘Speech by the President on EU-China Relations’.

Similarly, and building on the CRMA, RESourceEU with its “coordinated approach to stockpiling critical raw materials”, its joint purchases, and “defence against hostile interference” to “reduce dependencies by up to 50% by 2029”<sup>53</sup> is formulated as a logical resolution in the plot put forward by the EU.

Interestingly, the EU goes as far as considering lowering regulations surrounding the environment and health to facilitate extraction and recycling of CRMs, thereby foregoing some of its key identity narratives’ characteristics: a champion in the fight against pollution and climate change, and a protector of human security.

“The Commission will in Q1 2026 issue a guidance document to enable a simpler and more harmonised implementation in Member States of the EU law on environmental permitting, including aspects relating to the mining sector.”

“The Commission will also consider the specific operational realities of the extractive, recycling and processing sectors in the announced revision of the Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH) Regulation and in the current implementation and possible future revisions of the Carcinogens, Mutagens and Reprotoxic Substances (CMRD) Directive, while fully upholding the highest level of protection for workers, health and the environment (20) (21).”<sup>54</sup>

Here again we observe a tension on this Issue Narrative which puts economic security and defence security before other goals of pollution reduction and human security. This lowered priority for “green” matters comes at odds with the other key justification of policies such as the CRMA and the RESourceEU Action plan, namely the energy transition:

“The Critical Raw Material Act is part of the Green Deal Industrial Plan. Presented in parallel with the EU’s Net Zero Industry Act, the Critical Raw Materials Act will help to scale up the EU manufacture of key carbon neutral or ‘net-zero’ technologies to ensure a secure, sustainable and competitive supply chain for clean energy to reach the EU’s climate and energy ambitions.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Eur. Comm. - Eur. Comm., ‘Commission Adopts RESourceEU to Secure Raw Materials, Reduce Dependencies and Boost Competitiveness’.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - European Commission’.

<sup>55</sup> Consilium, ‘Critical Raw Materials Act’.

## B. China

### 1. System Narratives

When looking at China's System Narratives in the selected sources, key elements aligned with the master narratives evoked above were found: China sees the international stage as the opportunity for win-win trade relations, with other countries described as equal partners and collaborators. This can be seen in the following quotes:

“China-EU economic and trade relations are shaped by their mutual complementarity and are win-win in nature.”<sup>56</sup>

“China will continue introducing more actions to support the industrialization process in African countries based on respect for the wishes of African countries, and it will work collaboratively to build an all-weather China-Africa community with a shared future for the new era, He said.”<sup>57</sup>

But this System Narrative can also be used to underline the failures of other actors:

“The U.S. actions have severely harmed China's interests and undermined the atmosphere of bilateral economic and trade talks, and China is resolutely opposed to them. Willful [sic] threats of high tariffs are not the right way to get along with China. China's position on the trade war is consistent: we do not want it, but we are not afraid of it. U.S. practice severely violates the WTO rules and breaches the principle of equality and mutual benefit of the China-U.S. Maritime Transport Agreement, and is a typical act of unilateralism.”<sup>58</sup>

What is illustrated in this example is the use of international laws and institutions to showcase the unilateralism of other actors, while at the same time reinforcing the message that China abides by those institutions and laws by contrast. This is also a way to condemn trade defence mechanisms:

“Instead, the EU needs to properly address trade differences through dialogue and consultation, provide an open, transparent and non-discriminatory environment for businesses from all countries, and take concrete actions to uphold the principles of market economy and WTO rules.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> ‘Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Guo Jiakun's Regular Press Conference on October 28, 2025\_Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China’.

<sup>57</sup> ‘China Welcomes More Countries, Int'l Organizations to Join Green Mining, Minerals Cooperation Initiative: Ministry’.

<sup>58</sup> ‘MOFCOM Spokesperson's Remarks on China's Recent Economic and Trade Policies and Measures’.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Spokesperson of the Chinese Mission to the EU Speaks on a Question Concerning a China-Related Resolution Adopted by the European Parliament’.

The resulting call-out thus sounds more subtle and adapts to the Master Narratives of the EU: attachment to international institutions, multilateralism and open and free trade.

Overall, the System Narratives pushed by China in its official statements surrounding REEs and Green Minerals is one where international trade should be in accordance with international law, respect the principles of open and free trade, and not cross into protectionism or unilateralism, lest it harm the rule-based system China supposedly abides by.

## 2. Identity Narratives

When it comes to Identity Narratives, China pushes the idea that it is unjustly targeted:

“China expresses strong dissatisfaction with and firm opposition to the relevant resolution of the European Parliament. We urge the European Parliament to stop politicizing and over-securitizing economic and trade issues, and to stop applying double standards on export control matters. Rare earth exports have never been and should never be an issue between China and the European Union. As long as export control regulations are observed and necessary procedures are followed, the normal demands of European companies will be guaranteed. The relevant Chinese authorities have also established a “fast track” for European companies to better meet their normal demands.”<sup>60</sup>

“At the same time, we strongly oppose any attempt that undermines China’s right to development.”<sup>61</sup>

Here, the quotes encapsulate several key recurring aspects of China’s Identity Narratives, including Western bullying, the idea that China is responsible and transparent while other players are hypocrites and impeding the world order by threatening exports and global trade. China also positions itself as a developing country, which reinforces the supposed unjust aspect of its bullying.

In general, China as a responsible key actor in the green transition is a major theme present in Chinese official statements on REEs and green minerals:

“China is willing to strengthen communication and coordination with the UN Conference on Trade and Development, focusing on expanding cooperation on green minerals, the

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<sup>60</sup> ‘Spokesperson of the Chinese Mission to the EU Speaks on a Question Concerning a China-Related Resolution Adopted by the European Parliament’.

<sup>61</sup> ‘Spokesperson of the Chinese Mission to the EU Speaks on a Question Concerning a China-Related Resolution Adopted by the European Parliament’.

digital economy, artificial intelligence and low-carbon transition, the premier said.”<sup>62</sup>

“China encourages the active participation of all parties in the International Economic and Trade Cooperation Initiative on Green Mining and Minerals.”<sup>63</sup>

“China has always been an active participant and promoter of the global green transition. Through the initiative, China and related parties promote the creation of a new type of mineral-resources partnership -- one that is open, win-win, fair and reasonable”.<sup>64</sup>

To summarise, these elements are coherent with usual Strategic Narratives put forward by the Chinese official institutions as they alternatively underline the respectability of the country or its bullying by Western powers.

### 3. Issue Narratives

Issue Narrative wise, China pushes several solutions to the issues surrounding REEs and so-called green minerals. But first it is important to note that the official issues that China has with these topics vary greatly from the European usual narratives.

Externally, the focus is on the threat of dual-use REEs, that could be used by recipients of Chinese exports for military applications. Moreover, the Western powers’ tariffs and de-coupling/de-risking are a threat to the Chinese economy:

“Rare earths and related are dual-use items that can serve both civilian and military purposes. It is a sovereign right and international responsibility for China to impose necessary regulations on dual-use items according to the law. China’s policy is in line with international practices and contributes to safeguarding world peace and stability.”<sup>65</sup>

REEs are here securitised and attention is drawn to the danger they represent for world peace. This helps justify exports’ restrictions thanks to the urgency that is allowed by securitisation, while preserving the legitimacy of what could be seen as a protectionist move. Across the documents analysed, China repeatedly tries to prevent accusations of protectionism by trying to underline its licencing streamlining efforts:

“China has approved a certain number of compliant applications in accordance with the law

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<sup>62</sup> ‘China to Continue Opening up Its Mega-Market to World: Premier’.

<sup>63</sup> ‘Chinese Premier Urges G20 to Strive for Broader Global Cooperation for Development’.

<sup>64</sup> ‘China Welcomes More Countries, Int’l Organizations to Join Green Mining, Minerals Cooperation Initiative: Ministry’.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Spokesperson of the Chinese Mission to the EU Speaks on a Question Concerning a China-Related Resolution Adopted by the European Parliament’.

and will continue to strengthen the review and approval of such applications”<sup>66</sup>.

When it comes to the tariffs imposed by the USA and the trade wars in general, they are denounced by China, but the official narrative is one of resilience, where the bullying is acknowledged but supposedly not enough to harm China’s economy:

“In response to a media query on the additional U.S. tariffs posing possible impacts on the Chinese economy, Liu said that the Chinese economy has shown stronger resilience and potential, which will help offset the implications from external shocks.”<sup>67</sup>

Internally, the focus is China’s own minerals’ reserves, domestic self-sufficiency and environmental protection, that need to be addressed by national laws and trade protection:

“Mineral Resources Law, which requires action to increase reserves of strategic minerals and boost production capacity.

It also demands efforts to promote the development and utilization of mineral resources in a reasonable manner, and to strengthen the protection of mineral resources and the environment.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> ‘China to Expedite Review of Rare Earth-Related Export License Applications: Commerce Ministry’.

<sup>67</sup> ‘Latest Indicators Reveal China’s Economic Recovery Gathering Steam’.

<sup>68</sup> ‘China Passes Law to Boost Reserves, Production of Strategic Minerals’.

## IV. Discussion and conclusion

### A. Narrative tensions

Several tensions and incoherences in the respective European and Chinese Strategic Narratives bear mentioning. Indeed, they tend to impede each entity's coherence when trying to project their vision of CRMs and REEs and what should be done about those resources. Addressing those tensions and limits would not only allow for better domestic buy-in of their policies but would also reduce the risk of a securitisation dilemma and counter-productive policy orientations in EU-China relations.

#### **The potential limits of de-risking**

As Thakur-Weigold and Miroudot argue, the very risk of interdependency often invoked by EU institutions to justify using trade defence tools and imposing a European preference around CRMs and REEs, or at the very least, a preference for like-minded partners and friend-shoring with diversification and stockpiling, could be put into question. They make the case that deglobalisation as is currently being touted and in reaction to market shocks such as COVID and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, is not an ideal solution. According to them, the literature on global supply chains shows that increasing resilience is not necessarily a result of having bigger inventories, more suppliers, and less lean management. On the contrary, companies that applied Just in Time management styles such as Toyota are the ones that best reacted to the COVID crisis, and that their efficiency better adapted to turbulences in global supply chains.<sup>69</sup>

De-risking therefore also bears certain risks, and the limits in the associated narrative can have strong policy implications. If resilience is to be understood simply in terms of stockpiling and multiplying suppliers, there is a counter-intuitive possibility of fragilizing supply chains and further damaging international partnerships and exchanges, including with China.

#### **Tension between call-out of De-Risking and Dual Circulation at home**

While the analysis found in this paper confirmed the propensity of China to strongly reject the European de-risking strategy, authors such as Lunting Wu show how complicated navigating this narrative can be since China has put in place very similar policy and justifications when introducing its Dual Circulation Strategy in 2020. Indeed, the latter was supposed to protect the Chinese economy following the trade wars with the USA and export restrictions on computer chips.

This incoherence was already underlined by President von der Leyen in December 2023: "China is well familiar with de-risking, because I think the measures you took to increase your self-reliance in your economy are similar to that. Now, the European Union is taking

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<sup>69</sup> Thakur-Weigold and Miroudot, 'Supply Chain Myths in the Resilience and Deglobalization Narrative'.

steps to increase its own resilience against potential shocks”.<sup>70</sup> Here we see that having internal incoherences within one’s narrative can be used as a tool by external actors to undermine said narrative and reactions to policies deemed incoherent.

### **Tensions on the “green” aspect of CRMs and REEs mining and uses in Strategic Narratives.**

While the full consequences of REEs’ extraction are not known yet, early reports by international NGOs such as Global Witness highlight the environmental and health hazards they could represent in a case study in Myanmar.<sup>71</sup> As a result, the High Representative for the EEAS and the Heinrich Böll Stiftung (affiliated to the Greens Party in the EP and Germany) have denounced the mining’s heavy humanitarian and environmental outcomes in the country.<sup>72</sup><sup>73</sup> Both the latter and Global Witness have also made explicit links between China’s imports and Myanmar’s mining. This bears mentioning as both China and the EU often use the “green” label when mentioning CRMs and REEs to portray themselves as environmental champions, as such materials are preponderantly used in renewable energy tech.<sup>74</sup> While further research on this specific topic is needed, the perceived inner tensions in those narratives thus have the potential to be exploited and impact EU-China relations.

## **B. Mutual misperceptions**

### **Misperceptions of China by the EU**

Within the Strategic Narratives identified within this paper, several misperceptions of China by the EU also hampered the coherence of its narrative. To think that China’s governance is fully top-to-bottom is a simplification of reality for example, and while simplification is inevitable within any narrative, it can also lead to distortions and reduce the efficiency of the EU’s narrative on China.<sup>75</sup> The 2010 REEs crisis with Japan for example has disputed origins among academics and experts. Authors like John Seaman argue that the responsibility for reduced exports to Japan was largely attributable to local port workers and officials rather than to central decision-making.<sup>76</sup> This example was however still used by President von der Leyen in her speech on CRMs to reactivate a memory that justifies further securitisation of REEs’ access.

Overall, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin warn against the pitfalls of the EU’s identity characterisation as “wise old Europe, rich new China”,<sup>77</sup> as it might impede further

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<sup>70</sup> Wu, ‘China’s Role Conflict in Norm Contestations’.

<sup>71</sup> Global Witness, *Heavy Rare Earths Supply Chain Risks*.

<sup>72</sup> Consilium, ‘Myanmar’.

<sup>73</sup> ‘Fractured Authority and Resource Politics in Myanmar’.

<sup>74</sup> Brown et al., ‘Critical Minerals and Rare Earth Elements in a Planetary Just Transition’.

<sup>75</sup> Rogelja and Tsimonis, ‘Narrating the China Threat’.

<sup>76</sup> Seaman, *Rare Earths and China*.

<sup>77</sup> Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, ‘The EU’s Struggle for a Strategic Narrative on China’, 37.

cooperation between the two blocs by over-accentuating the tendency within any Identity Narrative to self-laud and denigrate the Other, in this case China. Better understanding and characterisation will instead lead to more accurate narratives that have more chance of guaranteeing domestic buy-in and convincing external partners.

### **Misperceptions of the EU by China**

Conversely, while China often labels the EU's de-risking strategy as practically equivalent to American de-coupling, there is a clear difference in their respective approach, grounded in the EU's opposition to directly alienate China. The focus is on prioritising "the building of more diverse and resilient global supply chains, without directly opposing or excluding the PRC."<sup>78</sup> The narrative pushed by China in response to the EU's CRMA and general strategy of de-risking is therefore also a simplification of reality meant to provide a clear storyline.

Accusing the EU of securitising trade issues can also lead to what Wu calls a securitisation dilemma and a chain reaction, prompting the EU and China to keep on responding to each other with further de-risking mechanisms, which will ultimately harm both entities' economies.<sup>79</sup> Again, misperceptions can lead to inaccurate narratives that are unlikely to convince partners and can have policy implications with each side further securitising the same issue in response to the other accusing them of doing so.

## **C. Conclusion**

This paper aimed to identify the Strategic Narratives projected by the EU and China surrounding REEs, CRMs and Green Minerals since 2023.

In line with previous research in this field, the data analysis showed that the EU now pushes a System Narrative of a world gone uncertain and dangerous, where dependencies can and will be exploited by bad actors. In order to protect its values, commitment to the dual transitions, and security, the EU argues in Identity Narrative that it is being unfairly bullied by China, which uses its monopoly over resources to exploit and weaponize dependencies. The Issue Narrative thus presents policies such as the CRMA and the REsourceEU Action Plan as logical solutions, with plans for diversifying supplies, increasing stockpiling, protecting supply chains and turning to like-minded partners to ensure the supply of strategic assets.

By contrast, China presents the world stage in its System Narrative as a partnership of equals, where disputes can and should be addressed by international laws, multilateralism and international organisations rather than with trade defence mechanisms and unilateral

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<sup>78</sup> Kalantzakos et al., 'Decarbonisation and Critical Materials in the Context of Freight Geopolitics', 5.

<sup>79</sup> Wu, *How Is China Countering "Decoupling" from the Western World? An Analysis of China's "Anti-Decoupling" Strategies*.

policies. Identity-wise, it presents itself as a responsible great power, a victim of bullying by Western powers willing to securitise “neutral” trade issues, a leader of developing nations, a champion of the ecological civilisation, and a guarantor of prosperity and world peace both domestically and internationally. In its Issue Narrative, China officially justifies its restrictions on exports by appealing to the risk of military use of REEs in dual-use technologies, that tariffs and trade defence mechanism risk hurting both its economy and the world’s and that internal capacities for green minerals should be boosted.

However, as pointed out in the last part of this paper, both Strategic Narratives from the EU and China suffer from incoherences and tensions that undercut their efficiency, partly due to their oversimplification of certain aspects, and partly due to their deliberate obfuscation of events and elements that do not support the plot of the narrative they put forward. This makes them both more likely to be criticised and reduces the potential for policy buy-in and to impose their discourse internationally.

To address those shortcomings, this paper suggests:

- Clarifying what measures work best to limit the risks of supply shocks and backing those up with the current literature on global supply chains’ best practices would raise the discursive power of European de-risking Strategic Narratives in particular.
- Denouncing the limits of de-risking based on known limitations such as the ones mentioned in the relevant literature (stockpiling and suppliers’ multiplication being counter-productive), rather than altogether rejecting policies that are very similar to the ones applied domestically (Dual Circulation) would allow for better persuasion and negotiation leverage in the Chinese Strategic Narratives.
- Similarly, equating de-risking with de-coupling could instead be nuanced and specific opposition to de-risking could be developed within the Chinese Strategic Narratives to better argue against it and to recognise the specificities of such a foreign policy. Targeted opposition would contribute to a better calibrated narrative and would be better received by European counterparts than a comparison to the USA.
- Finally, better characterisation of China within European Strategic Narratives, especially when it comes to the complex nature of its governance model, would render the narratives more nuanced and more likely to persuade domestic and international audiences.

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## Author

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Pacôme DUCORAIL is a research assistant at ICES. He interned as a Blue Book at the European Commission in 2025 in DG INTPA, working with the South and South-East Asia Team.

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Rond-point Robert  
Schuman 6,  
1040 Brussels  
+32 (0) 2 234 6397  
info@ices-eu.org  
<https://ices-eu.org/>

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