

EU-CHINA RELATIONS IN AN EVOLVING MULTIPOLAR INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF NEO-CLASSICAL REALISM AND NEO-REALISM*

Emre ERDEMİR**

Abstract

The EU and China have been competing great powers with their capacities and capabilities at a time when the international system has evolved into multipolarity. In the current conjuncture, the demise of US unipolarity may have an easing effect on EU-China relations. The main research question of this article is: “How can neo-classical realism explain EU-China relations in comparison with neo-realism?”. The claim that the multipolar international system leads to great power rivalry is the major reason why the neo-classical realist perspective constitutes the major theoretical framework of this article. This article argues that “EU-China relations can be better understood by utilising the explanatory and predictive power of neo-classical realism when compared to neo-realism”. The article evaluates EU-China relations with the help of three case examples to support its argument. The study first presents an overview of the major claims and general scope of neo-realism and identifies this theory’s limitations in explaining EU-China relations. Then, the weaknesses of neo-realism in explaining the international system are analysed with the help of neo-classical realism in order to demonstrate why neoclassical realism offers a more explanatory framework in analysing EU-China relations.

Keywords: *EU, China, Neo-Realism, Neo-Classical Realism.*

* This article is based on a part of the author’s PhD dissertation titled “The Effects of EU-China Energy Security Policies on the Balance of Power in the Transforming International System”.

** Marmara University Institute of European Studies, Department of European Union Politics and International Relations, e-mail: emreerdemir55@gmail.com, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5410-4302.

ÇOK KUTUPLULUĞA EVRİLEN ULUSLARARASI SİSTEMDE AB-ÇİN İLİŞKİLERİ: NEO-KLASİK REALİZM İLE NEO-REALİZMİN KARŞILAŞTIRMALI ANALİZİ

Öz

AB ve Çin, uluslararası sistemin çok kutupluluğa evrildiği bir dönemde, kapasite ve kabiliyetleriyle büyük güçlerle rekabet etmektedir. Mevcut konjonktürde ABD'nin tek kutupluluğunun sona ermesi AB-Çin ilişkilerini anlamada kolaylaştırıcı bir etki yaratabilir. Bu makalenin temel araştırma sorusu şudur: "Neo-klasik realizm, AB-Çin ilişkilerini neo-realizm ile karşılaştırıldığında nasıl açıklayabilir?" Çok kutuplu uluslararası sistemin büyük güç rekabetine yol açtığı iddiası, neo-klasik realist bakış açısının bu makalenin temel teorik çerçevesini oluşturmasının ana nedenidir. Makale, "AB-Çin ilişkilerinin, neo-klasik realizmin neo-realizme kıyasla açıklayıcı ve öngörücü gücünden yararlanılarak daha iyi anlaşılabilceğini" ileri sürmektedir. Makale, AB-Çin ilişkilerini, iddiasını destekleyecek şekilde, üç örnek olayla değerlendirmektedir. Çalışma öncelikle neo-realizmin argümanlarına genel bir bakış sunmakta ve bu teorinin AB-Çin ilişkilerini açıklamadaki sınırlılıklarını belirlemektedir. Sonrasında çalışma, AB-Çin ilişkilerinin analizinde neo-klasik realizmin neden daha açıklayıcı bir çerçeveye sunduğunu göstermek için neo-realizmin zayıf yönlerini göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: AB, Çin, Neo-Realizm, Neo-Klasik Realizm.

Introduction

As the 20th century entered its last decade, developments that would create ruptures in world history began to occur one after the other: The fall of the Berlin Wall, the unification of the two Germanies, and the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). These developments in a short period heralded a new era in international relations. Since 1945, the division of the international system between the United States of America (USA) and the USSR ended. In other words, the bipolar international system became a thing of the past. The success of the international system built by the US on liberal codes was confirmed. The ideology of communism and the state structure based on the roots of this ideology collapsed. The rapid adoption of fundamental political rights and freedoms and the transition to a market economy by the countries that broke away from the USSR and its influence clearly showed who was the winner. A political picture emerged in which the US was the sole pole, and its dominant power was not even up for discussion. During this period, Russia, the successor of the USSR, tried to ensure its domestic sovereignty. It

started to take steps to implement one reform after another to adapt to the new era. In the same period, the European Union (EU), as a supranational organization trying to bring economic integration into the political sphere, deepened and widened the dimensions of integration with the Maastricht Treaty.

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States were a significant development in the second year of the 21st century. The fact that the unipolar United States's security was threatened revealed that the world would also be affected. As expected, the direct intervention of the US in Iraq and Afghanistan created the necessary power parameter for the unipolar international system. However, the "end of history" (Fukuyama, 1989: 4) has not arrived. While the United States reached its peak position in the Middle East, potential great power candidates continued to remain in the existing system structure. Under Vladimir Putin, Russia has made great strides in resolving/suppressing its internal problems while specializing in using energy resources as a political tool. The EU started to undergo change and transformation with the accession of Central and Eastern European countries. EU member states have also become more influential in international relations with their separate political agendas. While these developments took place in Europe, China emerged in Asia as a country quietly advancing in the context of a unipolar international system. China had been regarded as a country that did not enter into disputes with the bipolar system during the Cold War years. With the revolution, which founding leader Mao Zedong described as "an act of violence, not an act of kindness" (Gunday, 2021: 66), China joined modern international relations in the middle of the 20th century. Although the revolution's success is debatable, China, which followed the changes in international politics well, made great strides in the economic sphere. Thanks to this breakthrough, China aimed to transfer the gains of its economic power to the political sphere.

Signs that the unipolarity of the international system was coming to an end became more palpable with the outbreak of the global financial crisis in 2008-2009. The crisis that started in the US led to the deterioration of the country's economy and also had repercussions in the political sphere. The "Pivot Asia" strategy announced by the US to prevent the loss of its economic sphere of influence (Clinton, 2011) also confirms the above explanation. Although these US steps aimed to contain China's rise, they were unsuccessful, and the reality of a more assertive China emerged from the global financial crisis. This also manifested that the US political power was declining in the political sphere as well.

China is not the only threat to US unipolarity. Russia has also been directly involved in the extraordinary power competition, starting with its intervention

in Georgia in the mid-2000s, expanding with its annexation of Crimea in 2014, and finally turning to Ukraine in 2022. It can also be argued that the EU and its member states have been striving to produce a more original policy by leaving behind the US-influenced policies of the Cold War years. All these explanations demonstrate that in international relations, a system in which bilateral relations between countries, rather than alliances, are on the agenda has begun to emerge. China's Belt and Road Initiative of 2013, Russia's involvement in the Syrian Civil War in 2015 and its active engagement in the Middle East and Africa showed that the international system has been turning to multipolarity. Finally, with the US withdrawal from Afghanistan on January 30, 2021, after Iraq (the decision of which was taken in 2009 and the process of which was formally completed in December 2011), discussions on the international system's multipolarization has increased further (Ashford and Cooper, 2023).

In 1959, Kenneth Waltz's book "Man, the State and War" developed "levels of analysis"¹ to make international politics understandable. Although Waltz questioned the causes of war in his book, he tried to explain international politics at a deeper level. He emphasized the necessity of "images" in identifying the root causes of international political outcomes (Waltz, 2001: ix). Since Waltz, images have been used to understand international politics and grasp the nature of the international system as a political environment in which states interact (Ripsman, 2017). According to Waltz (2001: ix), international politics could not be explained without images as some analysis points would be overshadowed. To give an analytical framework to this hypothesis, he evaluated the nature of international politics through three images: The first image is the individual, the second is the state and the third is the system. According to the first image, wars are determined by human nature and behaviour (Waltz, 2001: 16). The second image refers to the political structures of states (Waltz, 2001: 81). In Waltz's view, explanations of the first and second images – the nature of man and the nature of the state – left some points incomplete. Based on human nature, the individual level could not explain why wars always occur. The state level could not explain why countries with different political structures could not exhibit the same behaviour under similar conditions (Ripsman, 2017).

The inadequacies at the individual and state levels, in a sense, necessitated the emergence of the third image. All three images are interconnected. Waltz's logic is based on this: People create states, and states create people. In other

¹ Waltz, stated that he used the term image for what he called levels of analysis in his book. Image is a more accurate expression according to him. Because when it comes to levels, there may be a prejudice that one of them is more appropriate. In order to evaluate international politics from a broader perspective, Waltz preferred an approach in which all images would be visible (Waltz, 2001: ix).

words, the first and second images are close to being intertwined. However, there is a limited transition between the images. It is the third image, the system, that removes this limitation. The anarchical nature of the international system shapes individuals and states (Waltz, 2001: 231). Waltz (2001) sees the origin of war through the third image due to the absence of a higher authority than the state in the international system, which he refers to as anarchy. The anarchical nature of the international system drive states to war (Waltz, 2001: 188). While the individual and state levels cannot answer the underlying causes of wars, the system's answer is clear. "Wars occur because there is nothing to prevent them" (Waltz, 2001: 232).

The bipolar international structure of the Cold War years and the foreign policy logic based on the balance of power increased the explanatory value of the third image (Waltz, 1979: 119; Wohlforth, 1993: 19). In this period, the second image was only partially important. The definition of friend and foe and the interests of states were at the forefront. The perceptions of the elites within the state were not considered. Almost no value was attributed to the first image during these years. Following the end of the Cold War, the international system has become unipolar. Characteristic features of the new era, such as accelerated communication channels and democratization processes, have made individuals more visible. Likewise, intra-state groups, previously in the background, began to make their presence felt. Thus, the effectiveness of the individual and state levels has increased. This change was instrumental in developing neo-classical realism in the theoretical debate. This is because every point that the first and third images leave out has revealed the limitations of classical realism and neo-realism.

The individual level shows the assumptions of classical realism, and the system level constitutes the major focus of neo-realist theory. Nevertheless, the states' capacities, geopolitical characteristics and position in the system also guide their foreign policies. Neo-classical realism has thus come up with the argument that the three images can act together without distinguishing between the individual, the state, and the system. By utilizing the unity of these three images, this article argues that EU-China relations can be better explained through the explanatory and predictive power of neo-classical realism when compared to neo-realism. The study first provides an overview of the claims and general features of neo-realism and attempts to identify this theory's limitations in explaining EU-China relations. Then, it discusses how neo-classical realism represents a better framework for the analysis of international relations. Finally, through three selected case studies, the article demonstrates how neo-classical realist perspective is more explanatory in analysing EU-China relations when compared to neo-realism. The methodology applied here is to test the relevance of two theories with regard to a specific case (EU-China

relations) in a comparative manner. The article uses three specific and recent examples from EU-China relations to prove its arguments. Thus, no historical and all-encompassing analysis of EU-China relations is provided here. Instead, the article only gives the examples of the impact of COVID19 pandemic on EU-China relations, Chinese attempt to tie some Central and Eastern countries in an economic relationship of dependency, and, the impact of the rift in the Transatlantic relationship on China-EU relations and the subsequent start of negotiations between the two actors to reach a Comprehensive Investment Agreement. These three examples are specifically chosen as they are representative of how leader behaviour and state-level factors such as public opinion, national interests and geopolitical considerations have been effective in the determination of foreign policies of the EU and China towards each other, besides the impact of systemic factors.

Neo-Realism and its Limitations

Neo-realism's mode of analysis, which asserts that states behave similarly in the international system, has limitations in many respects. First, Rose (1998: 145) argues that "neo-realists ignore the fact that each state may set different policy priorities". Henrikson (2002: 438) added that "states must also recognize the inextricably close web of relationships between domestic and foreign policy". This definition, which constitutes the second limitation of the neo-realist explanation, emphasizes that states' decisions cannot be separated from the social structure to which they belong. Another factor revealing the limits of neo-realism is given by Hobden and Hobson (2001), who criticize the theory's argument that "the international system is fixed". According to them, neo-realists have denied the dynamic nature of the international system (p. 5). Walker (1987), contrary to the neo-realists, stated that history does not repeat itself and that different results can be achieved with other times and actors.

The fundamental criticism directed at neo-realism is about how it views the struggle between great powers. This is why the theoretical debate has focused on balancing. Waltz (1997), the initiator of the discussion, believed that "balancing options other than the balance of power are incapable of explaining the international system". In response, some neo-realists have expressed reservations about seeing the balancing needs of states as based solely on power. In his book "The Origins of Alliances", Stephen Walt (1987) introduced the balance of threat as an improved version of Waltz's balance of power. Walt, too, found that states generally move towards establishing equilibrium in the international system. However, unlike Waltz, Walt (1987: 265) argued that the balancing strategy against the aggressive state in the system may fail. According to Walt (1987: 265), other states may find other means to guarantee security. For Walt (1988), threat is a way to mobilize the existing capabilities of states and can apply when a state poses a serious risk to other states. In a sense,

states that feel threatened can create a state of instability in the international environment. In a state of imbalance, states may necessarily enter into an alliance relationship (Vasquez, 1999: 256). However, this alliance relationship may also require taking refuge behind the more robust state, in other words, “tagging along” (Walt, 1988: 282).

Walt’s theory helped explain states’ balancing behaviour with variables other than the balance of power. However, there have also been publications in the literature criticizing Walt’s balance of threat.² Randall Schweller has taken the most concrete step towards this. Schweller (1994) opposed the threat balance “because it excludes interest-oriented alliances by placing security at the top”. According to Schweller (1994: 81), interests, which the balance of threat ignores, have become the primary motivating factors for states. States initially enter alliances based on the changes in the power capacities of other states. Still, they can maintain alliance relations through their interests (Schweller, 1994: 82). Schweller (1994: 106) believed that international states have historically pursued a policy that does not prioritize their interests.

Schweller found some points in Walt’s theory wrong and summarized it as follows: “States enter alliances not because of threat but because of the promise of reward. States enter the alliance system expecting their security demands to be met. The main problem here is that the distinction between balancing and pursuit is not made correctly” (Schweller, 2004: 80). Waltz (1979), who saw pursuit as “joining the stronger coalition” and balancing as “allying with the weaker party”, described these two concepts as opposites. Walt (1987) followed his predecessor and placed pursuit and balancing at different poles. From Walt’s (1987: 17) perspective, “pursuit is considered as a kind of “surrender” or “submission” behaviour. Schweller (1994: 93), who dismissed this assessment as meaningless, made a clear distinction between balancing and pursuit: “While balancing emphasizes providing security, the pursuit strategy emphasizes gains—balancing aims to prevent systemic imbalance or to restore equilibrium when deterrence fails”.

Finally, the threat balance has consistently considered external attacks (Walt, 1988: 281). This approach implies that states do not care about possible internal risks. For this reason, Schweller specifically criticized this pursuit in two ways: “First, the pursuit strategy is confused with submission. Second, explaining the pursuit strategy regarding the determinants of power and threat (cf. Waltz and Walt) eliminates interest-driven attempts to gain. For powers satisfied with the international system will join the status quo coalition, and dissatisfied revisionists, motivated by profit rather than security, will follow

² For other criticisms of Walt’s threat balance, see (David, 1991: 233-256; Levy and Barnett, 1992: 19-40).

suit” (1997: 88). Schweller (1997) proposed a balance of interests theory to understand the transformations of states within the international system correctly. He took the field of application of his theory one step beyond realism and neo-realism and placed it in three separate frameworks of analysis: individual, state and system level (Schweller, 1997: 929). Thus, Schweller created a new theoretical explanation: Neo-classical realism.

Neo-Classical Realism

It may be surprising to see the first examples of neo-classical realism in Thucydides’ “History of the Peloponnesian War”. However, neo-classical realism can provide a meaningful explanation for the hypothesis that the cause of the Peloponnesian War was “the increase in Athenian power and the alarm it aroused in Sparta”. Tellis (1995: 12) argues that “it was the international repercussions of domestic power transformations that led to changes in the foreign policies of various Greek city-states”. As can be seen, it is possible to find traces of neo-classical realism in the past.

In modern times, neo-classical realism aims to fill the gaps left by the realist paradigm without excluding its main lines (Rathbun, 2008: 313). Because of this aim, there has been a tendency to see neo-classical realism as a translation of neorealism’s system readings into foreign policy analysis (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, 2016: 9). However, it is not correct to reduce neo-classical realism only to foreign policy analysis. First and foremost, the theory deals with the behaviour of leaders who are the decision-makers of states. Secondly, it included the state’s political structure in its analysis (Rose, 1998: 146). Apart from these, it considers the views of the elites that influence the formulation of a country’s domestic and foreign policy. Finally, all the dynamics in domestic politics were not left out at a level that goes down to individuals (Rose, 1998: 147).

After a brief introduction to neo-classical realism, the question is: Why is neo-classical realism needed? Finding the answer(s) to this question in Waltz’s theory of international politics can prove how neo-classical realism has been influenced by the school from which it emerged. Waltz (1979: 71-72) explains international politics as embodying the general assumptions of state behaviour as follows:

“A theory of international politics ... can describe the range of possible outcomes of the actions and interactions of states within a given system and show how the range of expectations changes as systems change. It can tell us what pressures are exerted and what possibilities are opened by systems of different structures. Still, it cannot tell us how and how effectively the units of a system will respond to those pressures and possibilities... [but in general] a theory of international politics, while

based on the foreign policies of nations, claims to explain only certain aspects of them.”

In addition to the above paragraph in which he outlines the framework of international political theory, Waltz (1996: 55) states in another work that “neo-realism, as a theory, explains very little in international relations; much of the rest is included in the analysis”. The part “included in the analysis” in Waltz’s sentence proves the major assumptions of neo-classical realism. Neo-classical realism penetrated through the openings of the balance of power and its extended version, the balance of threat, which Waltz introduced into the literature. In his article “Neo-Classical Realism and Foreign Policy Theories”, which is considered to be the constituting work of neo-classical realism, Gideon Rose (1998: 146) outlines the principles of the new theory as follows:

“Neo-classical realism explicitly combines internal and external variables and updates and systematizes some of the vistas drawn from classical realist thought. The theory holds that the scope and purpose of a country’s foreign policy are determined above all by its place in the international system and by its relative material power capabilities. It is, therefore, realist. However, it argues that the influence of power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level. This, too, is neo-classical.”

It is clear from Rose’s thinking that neo-classical realism also respects the concept of power. However, the theory, like the realists and neo-realists, opposes putting power in a privileged comfort zone (Strassler, 1998: 352). What matters is who uses power and how it is distributed (Rose, 1998: 157). For neo-classical realists, the leaders who hold the authority to govern the state for a certain period determine how power is evaluated and utilized. Those in this decision-making position prioritize national interests and manage a country’s foreign policy to the extent of its available material resources (Stanzel, 2018: 20). However, since looking only between the “two lips” of leaders can lead to certain risks, different structures such as state institutions, capital/lobby groups and civil society/public opinion also influence decision-making processes. For example, Zakaria (1998) focuses on the strength of a country’s state apparatus and its relationship with the surrounding society, while Christensen (1996) emphasizes the importance of citizens’ ability to direct governments.

Neo-classical realism establishes the link between power and politics on the premise that “the sources of foreign policy exist in domestic politics” (Levy, 1988: 655). The theory, therefore, challenges the neo-realist assumption that states behave similarly within the international structure. It is believed that the unit level should also be included in the analysis (Hagan, 1994: 188). For all these reasons, neo-classical realism closely examines domestic and foreign

policy in establishing the link between power and the system (Thelen and Steinmo, 2010: 11). According to neo-classical realists, a good theory of international relations should “discuss the influence of the international system on national behaviour while at the same time showing the role of domestic factors in external developments” (Schweller, 1998: 7-11). The empirical prediction of the theory is not to assume that states seek security. It aims to show that they need to control their internal and external environment against the uncertainties of international anarchy (Rose, 1998: 152).

Apart from arguments such as the power-policy relationship and the intersection of domestic and foreign policy, the theory has also dealt with balancing options. In addition to the balance of power and threats, Schweller (1997: 929) introduced the “balance of interests” as a third option, again reading it in terms of states. First, he categorized states into three according to their interests: Some states want more than what they have, some are satisfied with their position, and finally, the rest give up what they dream of in order not to lose what is theirs (Schweller, 1994: 100). Following this distinction, Schweller (1994) argued that the balance of interests alone is not decisive for understanding the international system. Even though interests are vital, ultimately, the states make decisions. In other words, it is essential to determine the objectives for which the capabilities of states will be used. Schweller emphasized that a state must first decide what to do about two issues: “Will it use its power to manage the system or to destroy it? Will it use its power to threaten other states or to make them feel safe?” (Schweller, 1994: 104). According to him, the system’s stability depends on the balance of the status quo and revisionist states. The system will stabilize when status quo states are much stronger than revisionist ones. When a revisionist state or coalition is stronger than the defenders of the status quo, the system will eventually change (Schweller, 1994: 104). Ultimately, Schweller did not repeat the mistakes in the balance of power and balance of threat. Contrary to what Waltz and Walt did, he did not put the balance of interests before everything else. The balance of interests was utilized by him to explain international politics by considering the different preferences of status quo and revisionist powers.

Schweller, who objected to the fact that the balance of power and threat was primarily concerned with foreign policy, also thought of adding a new perspective to the field. Joining his theoretical arguments, Aaron Friedberg (1988), Jack Snyder (1991), Wohlforth (1993), Christensen (1996), and Zakaria (1998) also proposed the use of states’ internal structures to understand foreign policy. Unlike other theorists, Schweller (2004) tried to unravel the link between balancing behaviour in domestic and foreign policy, arguing that states’ willingness to suspend is determined in domestic politics, where national decisions are made (Schweller, 2004: 166). In his view, if states have the

intention and ability to balance, they may be influenced by domestic concerns (Schweller, 2004: 167). Listing four variables (elite consensus, government or regime fragility, social cohesion, and elite cohesion) that can trigger local concerns, Schweller (2004) argued that their consistent use would increase the ability of states to balance. Thus, and finally, it can be said that neo-classical realism fills the void left open by the solely international system-based and deterministic approach of neo-realism by bringing the individual- and state-level factors into the debate about international relations.

EU-China Relations from a Neo-Classical Realist Perspective and a Comparison with Neo-Realism

In the literature, EU-China relations have mainly been analysed through relations between great powers, alliance systems and balancing behaviours (Li and He, 2022: 441; Holslag, 2011: 294). These modes of interpretation, which reflect the neo-realist perception of the international system, can make it challenging to understand the relationship between the parties (Raymond and Kegley, 1990: 10). However, in recent years, there has been an increase in the number of publications examining the development of China's foreign policy from a neo-classical realist perspective (Sørensen, 2013; Rosa, 2018; Ye, 2019). These publications have provided guidance for making China's policies understandable with a different theoretical framework other than neo-realism. Because, as mentioned above, neo-classical realism attaches importance to the inclusion of unit-level variables (perceptions of decision-makers, the internal structure of the state and the relationship of the state with society) in the analysis as well as systemic pressure. Due to the supranational character of the EU, it is possible to apply the arguments of neo-classical realism for member states. In the analysis of EU-China relations, neo-classical realism fills this gap in neo-realism by considering endogenous factors (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, 2016: 19). This is because the multipolar international system is no longer characterized by alliances but by interests (Ripsman, Taliaferro and Lobell, 2016: 20).

The transformation of EU-China relations from a “strategic partnership” to a “systemic competitor” in recent years (The European External Action Service, 2020a: 1) also indicates that the interests of the parties have intersected. The following three case studies attempt to concretize the function of neo-classical realism and the balance of interests. First, in March 2020, when the coronavirus (COVID-19), which was deemed a “pandemic” by the World Health Organization, was at the top of the international agenda, the number of narratives that China caused the disease increased (Li and He, 2022: 446). According to Albertoni and Wise, these narratives may have been used primarily by US media outlets to cast a shadow on China's rise (Albertoni and Wise, 2020: 17). The US perception has led to an increase in old normative

values-based criticism of China by the EU and its member states (The European External Action Service, 2020b). This chaotic environment, which China tried to balance with “mask diplomacy”³, guided the EU’s retreat from the position of cooperation and negotiating partner. China responded to this step from the EU front with “wolf warrior diplomacy”⁴ (Kowalski, 2021: 210). This political shift, heightened since Xi Jinping became General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012, symbolizes that the country can return to its traditional codes when its interests require it. It can be said that EU member states have also turned to China as a justification for their societies’ increased reactions to the pandemic. This example shows how internal/domestic factors affected the relations between China and the EU. Public concerns in Europe led to different reactions to China at the level of the member states and the EU, some of which were inevitable due to the impact of the pandemic which originated from China. China’s reaction, its utilization of mask diplomacy as well as wolf warrior diplomacy, was also very much the consequence of the elaborations at the level of the governmental elites in China. Thus, rather than systemic factors, public opinion, national interests and elite considerations had been effective in the change of the course of relations between the EU and China. This is why neo-classical realism can provide a better analytical framework to assess their relations when compared to neorealism.

The second example is China’s pursuance of initiatives to shift the balance of relations with the EU in its favour. The most well-known of these initiatives is the 17+1⁵ mechanism, officially called “Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries”. The mechanism’s primary goal is for China to develop cooperation with European countries in infrastructure, transportation, logistics, trade and investment through the Belt and Road Initiative⁶ (Szunomár, 2017). Although an optimistic goal was put forward on

³ Mask diplomacy has defined China’s support for medical aid, equipment, and supplies, especially masks, to other countries in the fight against the coronavirus.

⁴ Wolf warrior diplomacy described an aggressive style of coercive diplomacy adopted by Chinese diplomats in the 21st century. The term is derived from the Chinese action movie *Wolf Warrior 2* (Reuters, 2020).

⁵ The countries involved in the initiative are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Greece. The first investment and trade summit between China and the countries of the region was held in Budapest in 2011. The leaders of China and the other 16 countries held the first 16+1 summit in Warsaw in 2012. In 2019, Greece joined the Dubrovnik Summit, and the initiative became known as 17+1 (Uncel and Guner, 2021: 50). In February 2021, the Lithuanian Parliament left the 17+1 format (Sytas, 2021).

⁶ It is a global infrastructure development strategy adopted by the Chinese government in 2013 to invest in nearly 70 countries and international organizations (The World Bank, 2018).

paper, the major concern was that China could/might have had a hidden goal (Zuokui, 2018). In other words, there were concerns that China had been trying to create a divide between the EU and its member states through the Belt and Road Initiative (Brattberg and Soula, 2018). The EU also opposed China's approach to this initiative. China preferred only bilateral negotiations with member states without establishing dialogue mechanisms with EU institutions (Millán, 2020). China may have sought to erode the EU's unique structure to realize its economic and political interests. Thus, the prioritization of interests in this relationship can easily be explained through the balance of interests approach of neo-classical realism. On the other hand, this case also shows the importance of the state level and the importance of bilateral relations rather than systemic factors in the foreign policy choices and actions of both China and certain EU member states. Furthermore, the focus on the Belt and Road initiative also revealed that geopolitical considerations were prioritized in their relationship. Thus, neo-classical realism which does not leave out state-level considerations, national interests and geopolitical factors from its analysis can explain this situation better than neo-realist theory.

As a third and final example, it can be argued that China turned the swings in the traditional Transatlantic alliance during Donald Trump's tenure as US President (January 2017-21) into an advantage for itself (Rato, 2021: 19). Trump has attempted to destabilize the Western Hemisphere's most crucial defence alliance- not by a hostile power, but by the alliance's most powerful state (Schnauffer II, 2021). Other developments during Trump's presidency have also helped China assess the disruptions in the Transatlantic alliance. For example, the US froze the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership⁷ negotiations with the EU, withdrew from international agreements such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action⁸ (May 2018) and the Paris Climate Agreement⁹ (June 2017), and blamed other members of the North Atlantic

⁷ The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership is the name of a planned agreement between the EU and the US to promote multilateral economic growth. Negotiations stalled after the inauguration of then US President Trump. The negotiations, which resumed in July 2018, were inconclusive according to the European Commission's statement on April 15, 2019 (European Commission, 2019; Council of the European Union, 2019).

⁸ The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or commonly referred to as the Iran nuclear deal, refers to the agreement reached in Vienna on July 14, 2015, between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) - China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, plus Germany and the European Union). The text of this agreement excludes Iran's uranium enrichment activities and the provision of materials, equipment, and other support for these activities from the scope of sanctions (The European Council, 2022).

⁹ The Paris Climate Agreement is a legally binding international agreement on climate change. It was adopted by 196 state parties at the 21st UN Climate Change Conference in Paris on December 12, 2015, and entered into force on November 4, 2016. Its aim is to limit

Treaty Organization (NATO) for not contributing adequately to defence spending¹⁰ (Birnbaum, 2018). Taking advantage of the listed negativities of the US-EU relations, China has increased its presence on the continent through various steps: Expansion of 5G technology and Huawei's infrastructure (Doffman, 2020) and port acquisitions in some member states (Small, 2020). It has not gone unnoticed that China's strategic moves have been watched with concern by the EU's major powers (Germany, France, Spain, and Italy) (Knight, 2019; Sabbagh, 2020). The then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who prevented the EU-wide crisis from escalating further, played the role of a mediator to maintain the balance of interests (Brattberg, 2021). In this way, China did not lose its gains by concluding in principle the negotiations for a Comprehensive Investment Agreement¹¹ with the EU on December 30, 2020, without allowing the Transatlantic alliance to fully return to its old days (Silva, 2022). The example of the impact of the negative turn in Transatlantic relations on EU-China relations during the Trump Administration and the conclusion of the negotiations for reaching a Comprehensive Investment Agreement between the Union and China also show the impact of national leaders in the conduct of foreign policy. The special role that the then German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Chinese President Xi Jinping played in the signing of the Agreement shows the importance of leadership in international relations. Similarly, President Trump's actions which eroded the image of the US as a credible ally for European countries and shook the foundation of the Transatlantic alliance can be seen as a facilitating factor in the initiation of the negotiations between the EU and China that led to the Comprehensive Investment Agreement. This also testifies to this article's argument that neo-classical realism explains EU-China relations in a better way than neo-realism.

global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius, preferably 1.5 degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial levels (United Nations Climate Change, 2022).

¹⁰ In 2016, NATO Defence Ministers agreed that member states should allocate at least 2% of their gross domestic product to defence spending to continue to ensure the Alliance's military readiness. This rule is also intended to serve a country's political will to contribute to NATO's common defence effort. This is because the defence capacity of each member depends on the overall perception of the Alliance's credibility as a politico-military organization (NATO, 2021).

¹¹ The agreement gives EU investors greater access to the Chinese market. In the agreement, China commits to provide fairer treatment to EU companies, allowing them to compete on a more level playing field. These commitments cover state-owned enterprises, transparency of subsidies and rules against forced technology transfer. China also accepts sustainable development provisions, including climate and forced labour commitments. Both sides agreed to continue negotiations on investment protection and investment dispute settlement, to be completed within two years of the signing of the agreement (European Commission, 2021).

Conclusion

This study has shown that the arguments of neo-classical realist theory can explain EU-China relations in the international system evolving towards multipolarity in a better way than neo-realism. The study has first evaluated how neo-realism perceives the international system. After identifying the limitations of neo-realism, neo-classical realism has been explained. This article has found that neo-classical realism constitutes a suitable theoretical framework to explain how considerations at the state level (such as internal factors, geopolitical considerations, national interests, and public opinion) as well as leader behaviour affect the foreign policies of states. Inferences have been made that various internal factors and leaders can influence the foreign policy behaviour of a country. This study has attempted to explain EU-China relations with the help of neo-classical realism through three recent examples, based on these inferences.

All three examples have shown that the EU, its member states, and China's perceptions of interests in domestic politics can also affect their behaviour in the international arena. During the pandemic, countries' attitudes towards ensuring their security at home have increased. The negative perceptions created by the pandemic spreading from China to the whole world have damaged the country's interests in the international arena. China, severely criticized by EU member states, tried to minimize the reactions by providing masks and other equipment to the continent. However, the need to protect its interests has led China to respond to Western countries, such as the EU and the US, on issues concerning its security. Likewise, China's initiative with some Central and Eastern European nations to sustain its economic growth has caused both positive and negative reactions in the EU. China has overtly tried to develop its interests with member states and establish a relationship based on dependency with those countries rather than cooperating with the EU. Finally, it can be argued that China has benefited from the deterioration in the transatlantic alliance between the US and the EU. China developed bilateral relations with some EU member states that wanted to act independently and share its technology with the continent. On the other hand, the great powers of the EU opposed this and did not want their interests to be damaged so they came up with the initiative of the Comprehensive Investment Agreement. In all of these developments, rather than systemic factors, leader behaviour and state-level factors such as national interests and geopolitical considerations as well as public opinion have been effective in the determination of the foreign policies of both China and the EU towards each other. In conclusion, explaining EU-China relations with neo-classical realism constitutes a more appropriate approach when compared to neo-realism. It can be said that the EU and China can take part in great power competition at a time when the ability and capacity

of the US to steer international relations has started to decline, this can be regarded as a systemic factor that has an impact on the EU-China relationship. On the other hand, the EU's organic ties with its member states as a supranational organization facilitate the use of neo-classical realism. In China, on the other hand, the dominant role of decision-makers in directing domestic and foreign policy can be considered to create a suitable field for neo-classical realism. All three examples given here to reflect on the case of EU-China relations have testified to the main argument and major neo-classical realist assumptions of this article. It can be concluded that the effects of change and transformation in the political structures of states, leader behaviour, and the system are felt in EU-China relations.

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