



Strategies towards a great power: small states positions to China's core interests.

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Abstract

The rise of China has significantly influenced worldwide, particularly concerning how states position themselves to this growing power. Scholarly analysis often highlights factors that shape government stances, encompassing economic relations, ideas and norms, international politics, and domestic political considerations. For China, its economic leverage has been pivotal in understanding patterns. Still, the existing literature presents inconclusive findings regarding the primacy of economic factors, suggesting that domestic and international political dynamics also play critical roles. With this puzzle in mind, this paper investigates the responses of the governments of Small States to China's core interests, focusing on the approaches governments took regarding Chinese participation in 5G bidding processes, responses to human rights allegations, and issues related to Chinese sovereignty. This study employs a comparative analysis of pairs of countries—Chile and Uruguay in Latin America and the Czech Republic and Hungary in Central Europe to understand the factors that impact those positions. This most similar case comparison controls for crucial explanatory variables in the literature and, with official documents and interviews, assesses governmental positions on issues central to China's interests. The paper argues that trade dependence and aspirations for enhanced economic relations emerge as critical factors in dependency with China, motivating positive and neutral stances. However, positions could shift under U.S. pressure. On the other side, domestic politics is the most important factor influencing positions toward China's core interests in the context of nondependent small countries' economies. Ultimately, this study advances theoretical frameworks for understanding the diverse positions of governments of small countries, offering valuable insights into the interplay between domestic influences and international strategic considerations in the context of China's global ascent.

Keywords: China, Latin America, Central Europe, Dependency

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1. INTRODUCTION

Why have some governments prohibited Chinese companies from participating in 5G bidding processes? Why have certain governments criticized the policies implemented by China in Hong Kong and Xinjiang? The conventional thinking about how countries position towards China suggests that the extensive economic ties developed with China influence those stances. This idea has led to the question of whether economic links with China foster a favorable positioning toward this country in terms of foreign policy. Is China's economic weight enough to explain the political alignment of governments? What other factors influence these positions?

The growing literature on this topic has reached divergent conclusions. Some studies find evidence of a positive relationship between existing economic ties between countries and China and a convergence in foreign policy (Flores-Macías and Kreps 2013), suggesting that the more economic links there are, the greater the probability of a favorable position toward China. However, other analyses demonstrate that economic factors are not always the most significant (Kastner 2016; Ross 2019; Strüver 2016; Wang, Kastner, and Pearson 2023). These opposing conclusions are due to different aspects, such as how political alignment is measured, the cases analyzed, or the theoretical approach adopted. These contradictions in the results create an opportunity to contribute to this discussion, which is not only relevant in terms of political alignment with China per se but also frames a broader question about how governments position themselves, challenge, or align with great powers (K. Williams, Lobell, and Jesse 2012).

What this article proposes is to understand the reasons behind government positions toward a great power. What factors motivate a particular strategy or positioning regarding China's core interests? To this end, a comparative case study design is proposed, analyzing governments of countries that are similar in the key explanations put forth by the literature to explore alternative explanations, as well as understanding the weight of the main factors identified by key authors in this debate. The study also examines cases of small countries, understanding relational weakness as the primary characteristic of small states (Long 2017), given the lack of analysis on these countries.

From this research, it is concluded that economic ties, specifically the fear of economic retaliation and the hope for greater links, are fundamental for understanding the positioning of small countries toward China under certain conditions. In the cases of countries that are economically dependent on China, decision-makers have internalized the idea that China is essential for the country's development. The fear of losing the benefits of this economic connection and the hope of further increasing these ties leads to favorable or neutral positions regarding China's core interests. However, decision-makers also consider the expected reaction of the other great power in the international system, the United States, when determining their positioning. This means that the position may change when a conflict of material interests arises between the United States and China's core interests, despite the existing economic relationship with China. Like a glow from the hegemon, the interests of the established power, the United States, remain essential to understanding positions toward China.

In the cases of countries that are not economically dependent on China, the hope of gaining further benefits from ties with China and the expectation of the other great power's reaction—namely the United States—influence positioning, but they are not the fundamental factors explaining positions. In countries where the economies are not closely tied to China, domestic political factors such as the government's ideology, interest groups, and the political psychology of the leader are critical factors for understanding their positions toward China. In other words, the range of explanations broadens when there is no economic dependency. This breadth is not present under dependency conditions, as there is a homogeneous political mindset regarding China's importance for the country's economy and development.

This article is structured as follows. The next section discusses how governments position themselves toward a power like China has been addressed so far, as well as the limitations of this literature. The third section presents the argument of this article, which aims to propose the conditions under which countries respond in a certain way toward China, while the fourth section outlines the research design. Subsequently, the fifth section presents the article's analysis, followed by a brief conclusion.

2. GOVERNMENT POSITIONS TOWARDS CHINA: EXPLANATORY FACTORS AND LIMITATIONS IN THE LITERATURE

The growing body of literature exploring how countries position themselves towards China reveals a complex landscape of explanations for why certain states align with or oppose the Chinese government (Acharya 2003; Chan 2010; Goh 2016; Johnston and Ross 1999; Kang 2003; Medeiros et al. 2008; Roy 2007). Early studies on alignment primarily focused on military threats posed by China, particularly in the Asian context, but the literature has evolved to incorporate a much broader set of factors (Flores-Macías and Kreps 2013; Ross 2019; Strüver 2016; Tan 2012; Wang, Kastner, and Pearson 2023). Central to this debate is the argument that China's economic power plays a crucial role in shaping countries' foreign policies and diplomatic stances. In contrast, other factors, including military power, domestic politics, and shared ideational values, have been recognized as key explanatory variables. This paper will explore these various factors and the limitations of the current literature, which still lacks a definitive explanation for the alignment patterns regarding China.

2.1. Different Explanatory Factors

A key argument in the current literature is the significant role of China's economic power in determining the foreign policy alignments of other countries. The idea that economic interdependence fosters political alignment is widely discussed in international relations. This view posits that countries with an economy linked with China are more likely to support Beijing's political and strategic objectives as they seek to avoid jeopardizing their economic ties with this rising global power. Early studies on this issue, such as those by Kirshner (2008) or Medeiros et al. (2008), emphasized the importance of trade relations and China's growing role as a consumer and investor and how this influences positions. As China's economy continued to expand, its economic influence became a critical factor in explaining the alignment patterns of countries across different regions.

Kirshner (2008) argued that in East Asia, China's rapid economic growth would inevitably translate into more significant political influence over time. Countries with significant trade relations with China were more likely to support Beijing on political issues because of the material benefits associated with these economic ties and the implicit pressure China could exert through its economic leverage. Medeiros et al. (2008), also analyzing East Asian countries, further argued that those benefiting economically from China were more likely to support Beijing's broader political and strategic initiatives, even on non-commercial issues such as regional security and diplomatic cooperation. In this context, economic dependence is seen as a tool of Chinese statecraft, fostering alignment through the promise of continued economic benefits.

This argument is supported by studies of China's economic engagement with regions beyond Asia, particularly in Africa and Latin America. For instance, Flores-Macias and Kreps (2013) conducted a significant study examining the relationship between trade dependency on China and voting behavior in the United Nations. They found that countries with strong trade ties to China were more likely to vote in favor of Beijing's interests, particularly on sensitive issues like human rights, where China is known to be particularly protective of its policies. Flores-Macias and Kreps (2013) concluded that economic linkage with China leads to a higher probability of political convergence, as these countries seek to maintain their economic ties and avoid upsetting Beijing over issues it considers critical. This finding supports the theory that economic interdependence influences countries' political decisions, particularly when these decisions could potentially harm the economic relationship with China.

While economic explanations have dominated much of the discourse, the literature also highlights the importance of military power and security concerns as factors influencing countries' positioning toward China. Scholars have argued that economic interdependence is not the sole determinant of foreign policy alignment, especially when a state's security interests are at stake. Ross (2006, 2019) argues that military power and security considerations significantly shape alignment patterns, emphasizing that countries near China are more likely to align with Beijing's interests due to security threats posed by China's growing military power. He contends that the geographical proximity of smaller states to China increases their vulnerability to military threats, which drives these countries to adjust their foreign policies to avoid conflict and ensure their security.

This perspective underscores the idea that economic factors alone are insufficient to explain alignment decisions, as countries must also consider their military vulnerabilities and the strategic calculations involved in balancing power dynamics in their regions (Ross 2019). Beyond material factors like economic and military power, ideational factors and domestic political considerations have also been identified as essential determinants of countries' alignment decisions. Some studies have suggested that countries with similar political ideologies, values, or norms may be more inclined to align with China, especially regarding foreign policy behavior. Strüver (2014) explored this idea by examining how shared norms and values related to sovereignty, non-intervention, and global governance have driven alignment between China and certain countries, particularly those in the Global South. He argued that many developing countries, including those in Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia, share China's commitment to principles such as non-intervention

in domestic affairs, respect for sovereignty, and the reform of international institutions help to explain why many countries in the Global South have aligned with China, as they perceive Beijing as a champion of their interests in the international system (Strüver 2014).

In a similar vein, Kelemen and Turcsányi (2019), who examined the foreign policy responses of Muslim-majority countries to China's human rights practices, particularly the issue of the Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, found that although economic factors were often cited as a reason for these countries' reluctance to criticize China, domestic political dynamics and strategic calculations played a more significant role. The authors suggest that the domestic political landscape, including the role of public opinion and elite preferences, influences how governments respond to some issues related to China.

2.2. Literature Limitation and Research Question

The academic debate on how countries position themselves toward a rising power like China is a central theme in International Relations. The rise of China as a global power over the past few decades has reignited these debates, putting traditional explanations such as military and economic power to the test and with a significant focus on Asian countries. However, less attention has been paid to smaller states outside this region. This paper aims to bridge this gap by exploring the positioning of smaller countries towards China and analyzing the underlying factors that drive these decisions.

As mentioned, literature has long emphasized economic power as a critical determinant of countries' alignment behaviors. Scholars have argued that more robust economic ties with China often lead to favorable political alignments (Flores-Macías and Kreps 2013; Kirshner 2008). However, as we see, this economic explanation has been critiqued by those who argue that military power and security concerns may be even more decisive in shaping countries' foreign policy decisions (Ross 2019) and those who argue that while economic ties are significant, they are not always the most decisive factor in determining alignment (Wang, Kastner, and Pearson 2023).

Moreover, much of the existing research relies on quantitative analyses (Flores-Macías and Kreps 2013; Wang, Kastner, and Pearson 2023), which, while offering broad insights into the relationship between economic linkage and political alignment, do not provide an in-depth understanding of the causal mechanisms that shape these decisions. These studies often show a correlation between economic ties and political alignment but fail to explore how these relationships unfold. As Kastner (2016) points out, while quantitative research can identify patterns, it does not explain how these factors interact on a case-by-case basis. Case studies offer greater depth but are often limited in their ability to generalize beyond specific contexts or regions. This variability highlights the need for more context-specific research to account for regional and domestic differences in decision-making. Additionally, most studies treat countries as unitary actors, focusing on national-level factors such as economic dependence or military capabilities while overlooking internal political dynamics. While national-level studies provide valuable insights, they do not fully account for how domestic politics—such as regime type, political ideology, or public opinion—affect foreign policy choices. Given these limitations, there is a clear need for further research that addresses the specific conditions under which smaller states decide

to align with or oppose China. This article focuses on understanding the factors that lead governments in smaller states to take positions on China's core interests.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH DESIGN: DEPENDENT AND NON-DEPENDENT COUNTRIES TOWARD CHINA

In a seminal work on alignment in international relations, Williams et al (2012) pose the crucial question of why countries align with great powers due to external security threats, coercion by the hegemon, shared values, or domestic political factors. These explanations have been theoretically developed to understand the motivations behind foreign policy decisions regarding great powers. However, this paper extends these ideas by proposing a more nuanced theory that accounts for the conditions under which these different explanatory factors operate while also deepening our understanding of the causal mechanisms that connect these factors to the foreign policy alignment of smaller states vis-à-vis great powers, particularly China.

One of this paper's key contributions lies in its focus shift. While much of the existing literature on economic coercion and foreign policy alignment has concentrated on the great powers themselves, this research highlights small states' role in shaping the dynamics of international alignments. Cooper et al. (1991) suggest that alignment with a hegemon is not always the result of coercion alone; often, it involves reciprocal exchanges between the hegemon and the smaller states. So, in this paper, it is considered that we need to focus more on the agenda of small states.

3.1. Argument

As Patey (2021) states, the world faces a paradox with China's growth, as many countries have political values and positions that conflict with this country. However, despite this, they are eager to reap the economic benefits of the relationship, finding it difficult to resist the immediate economic attraction that China generates. The existing economic ties with China have frequently been mentioned as one of the most essential factors in understanding positions towards this power. However, it is vital to understand the mechanism that connects China's economic weight with the positioning of smaller countries towards the core interests of this power, as well as to understand under what conditions this economic weight assumes a relevant role.

This paper argues that the elites' fear of damaging existing ties with China explains the positions adopted by small countries with economic dependence on this country, understanding dependency as a close link between their economy and the great power (Dos Santos 1970). This fear among decision-makers stems not only from coercion by great powers or domestic pressures from interest groups but also from something more diffuse, rooted in the considerations of elites who deem it essential for the national interest and development of the country to maintain and secure economic ties with the power. Decision-makers intuitively consider that economic ties with China are crucial for the country's development and should not be jeopardized by certain positions on its core interests, given the anticipated effect this could have on its economy and development.

Considering that, in governments of small countries where economic ties with China are essential for their economy, the positions of decision-makers are favorable or neutral towards China. This economic dependence on China means that domestic political factors, such as government ideology or pressure groups, do not influence the strategy adopted by governments of countries with these characteristics. This is because decision-makers have a consensus regarding the importance of China's economic weight for the country's economy and development. In this sense, this paper demonstrates that China's economic weight, whether through the fear of breaking these ties or the hope of furthering them, is crucial to understanding the positioning towards the core interests of China in the economically dependent on China countries.

The positions towards China of governments in countries economically dependent on China are favorable or neutral, except when a material conflict of interest exists with the other dominant power in the international system: the United States. The expected reaction from the other great powers is a relevant explanatory factor even in countries economically dependent on China. As if it were a “glow from the hegemon”, decision-makers consider that the interests of the hegemonic power may conflict with those of China, pushing them towards more neutral or unfavorable positions towards China's core interests. Thus, China's economic weight (regarding the fear of reprisals and the hope of more significant ties) and the material conflict of interest with the United States are the main factors in understanding the governments' positions in small countries economically dependent on China. Furthermore, understanding the positions of small countries economically dependent on China is complemented by other influential factors that explain nuances, such as the historical legacy of foreign policy.

On the other hand, this paper argues that for governments of small countries where economic ties with China are not essential for the economy—i.e., where there is no economic dependence—the range of factors explaining the positions expands, and domestic politics plays a central role in understanding these positions. The government's ideology, pressure groups, and the leader's thinking, aspects absent in the economically dependent countries, are fundamental to understanding governments' positions in these small countries towards China's core interests. In these countries, there is no high degree of consensus regarding China; therefore, domestic political divergences are reflected in the positions. In this way, the political game between different actors becomes crucial, and aspects related to China's economic weight (the hope of establishing more significant economic ties) or the material conflict of interests with the United States play a role through the lens of domestic politics.

This argument complements the literature on the association between existing economic ties with China and favorable positions (Flores-Macías and Kreps 2013; Kastner 2016; Strüver 2016), as it delves into the causal mechanism and shows that it is not only existing ties that may impact positions towards China's core interests but also the hope of achieving them. In summary, this paper argues that when observing small economic weight is fundamental to understanding favorable positions toward China, both due to existing dependence and the potential economic ties that may be obtained. However, the conflict of material interests with the other power in the system, the United States, can reverse these positions. In economically dependent countries, these two aspects are crucial to

understanding the positions of governments. However, in contexts where there is no economic dependence on China, domestic politics takes a predominant role in understanding the positions of small countries (Table 1).

Table 1. Argument

Cases	Dependency	Main factors	Influent factors	Result
Small Countries with high level of development	Economically Dependent	Economic	Historical Legacy	Positions on China's Core Interest
		United States		
	Not Economically Dependent	Domestic Politics	Economic and Historical Legacy	
		United States		

3.2. Research Design: A Comparative Approach to Understanding Governmental Alignment With China's Core Interests.

This research adopts a comparative case study methodology to analyze the varying alignments of governments toward China's core interests. The comparative method deals with a limited number of cases, such as two pairs of countries, allowing for systematic control and in-depth analysis of each case (Lijphart 1971). As Fearon (1991) argues, when experimental control is unfeasible, researchers may identify similar cases except in the presumed causal variable. This approach is precious in exploring why some countries align with China on critical issues while others diverge despite having similar backgrounds. The goal is to identify and compare similar cases across significant factors but yield different outcomes (Gerring and Cojocar 2016). The use of a controlled comparison is grounded in the belief that such studies remain crucial in political science (Slater and Ziblatt 2013). This methodological framework is relevant for understanding how similar countries with comparable military and economic power dynamics with Beijing's position towards China's core interests.

The scope of this paper includes small countries with high levels of development because it wants to maintain constant two main explanations posed in the literature: level of development and national capabilities. The level of development plays a significant role in the existing literature as an explanation of the factors that impact positions toward China (Putz 2019; Tiezzi 2020; Wang, Kastner, and Pearson 2023). This paper compares pairs of small countries from different regions, ensuring constant geographical proximity and other critical variables for the literature, such as development levels, economic dependence on China, and national capabilities. Table 2 summarizes the selected countries, highlighting

their geographical distance from China, level of development, economic ties with China, and national capacities.

Table 2. Case studies

Country	Region	IDH 2020 (UN)	% China Total Trade	CINC 6.0
Chile	Latin America	0,851	30,75	0,249%
Uruguay	Latin America	0,817	30,49	0,051%
Czech Republic	Central Europe	0,9	4,63	0,171%
Hungary	Central Europe	0,854	4,25	0,109%

The first pair is Chile and Uruguay, small Latin American countries with a high human development index. They share a geographical distance from China, and both countries rely heavily on trade with China, constituting about 30% of their total trade. This commercial dependence makes them relevant cases for understanding the political positioning of small states economically dependent on China. The second pair is Hungary and the Czech Republic, two small European countries with high levels of human development. These countries are also geographically distant from China. However, their economic ties with China are relatively weak, with only about 4% of their total trade involving China. This pair contrasts Chile and Uruguay, as these European countries are non-economically dependent on China, which could lead to a different positioning in terms of foreign policy.

The design of this comparative analysis involves three levels of comparison: between governments within a country, between governments of two countries with shared similarities, and between governments of countries from two regions with similarities and differences in terms of the explanatory variables. The goal is to identify patterns and differences across these levels, allowing a more comprehensive understanding of how small, highly developed countries position towards China.

Dependent Variable and Sources

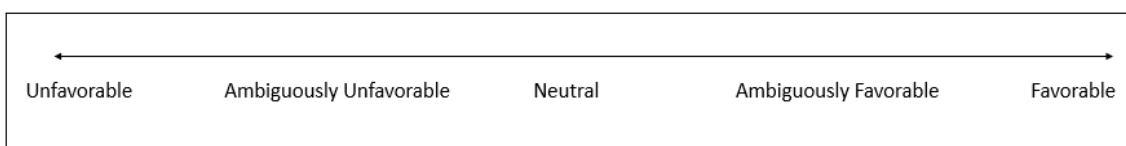
The research design proposed in this paper compares government positions toward China over ten years (2013 to 2023). This period of study is justified by the rise to power of Xi Jinping, marking a moment of consolidation for China as a significant international actor in the global system (Pu 2017). Specifically, it compares the positioning of governments of small countries toward China's core interests (the dependent variable). Historically, China's core interests have been associated with three "Ts": Tibet, Taiwan, and Tiananmen (Volodzko 2015). However, in recent years, new sensitive issues have emerged, such as the protests in Hong Kong, human rights abuses in Xinjiang, the South China Sea disputes, 5G technology, and China's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. To analyze the positioning of governments, this study will focus on three key aspects of China's core interests: national security, territorial integrity, and economic and social development based on the concept proposed by Swaine (2011). Following this concept, and to examine the strategies of countries towards these issues, this paper analyzes the positioning towards the protests and events in Hong Kong (sovereignty), the situation in Xinjiang (national security), and the

technological investments of Chinese companies abroad (economic and social development).

This methodology addresses a challenge the literature seeks to understand positions towards China ((Flores-Macías and Kreps 2013; Fuchs et al. 2020; Putz 2020; Sverdrup-Thygeson 2015). The analysis proposed in this paper provides alternatives for measuring political alignment beyond the commonly used United Nations voting similarity index, an indicator that has been questioned in the literature (Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten 2017). Thus, this research contrasts with others in measuring political alignment toward core interests and follows the trend of other research (Flores-Macías and Kreps 2013; Kastner 2016) in looking at positions concerning issues that directly affect China and about which Beijing cares deeply rather than looking only at votes at the United Nations.

Quantitative studies and situational analyses that address positioning on the issues mentioned above typically categorize positions into three: in favor of China, against China, and a neutral position. This research considers that five positions can be differentiated for China’s core interests, adding two ambiguous and intermediate positions that lean either in favor or against China (Figure 1). Identifying these requires detailed attention, which only case studies can provide This refers to how a government (president, foreign ministry, and leading figures) positions itself on the abovementioned issues.

Figure 1. Positions towards China’s core interests



As part of the methodological strategy, no aggregation will be made regarding positions on the different topics. Although it would be expected that countries fall into the same category for each of the core interests studied, the possibility is that a given country may have reacted one way to the situation in Xinjiang and differently regarding technological investments. Kastner (2016) observes this exact situation when studying reactions to issues related to Taiwan, Tibet, and economic matters (support for China as a market economy). This implies that domestic factors (interest groups) may influence more or less depending on the topic. Additionally, there may be situations where a country chooses the most important issues to react negatively to while not reacting to other issues.

To collect information on the positioning of countries towards the three core interests of China, online searches were conducted to identify official documents and press statements from the countries' foreign ministries and their officials, as well as from heads of state/government. In addition to these searches, the websites of the foreign ministries of the analyzed cases were consulted, along with the portals of the heads of state/government and the countries' representations at the United Nations, including their interventions in the sessions of the Human Rights Council and the third committee of the UN General Assembly. Based on these searches and interviews with experts and key actors, the positions towards these three core interests of China were categorized as mentioned earlier.

To observe the determinants of government positions toward China's core interests, a detailed analysis of the most relevant decisions was conducted to understand the arguments behind them—the factors that explain a particular position. Through in-depth interviews with individuals who have information on the decision-making process, such as academics specialized in the relationship between the case and China and the foreign policy of the country in question, the elements that explain the positioning towards China were identified. Interviews were also conducted with those directly involved in the decision-making process of the governments, including officials from the foreign ministry, offices of heads of state/government, other relevant ministries, and country representatives in international organizations. As Lynch (2013) suggests, interviews will be used as data sources to test hypotheses and strengthen the validity and reliability of what we measure. These interviews generated open and latent content, providing access to information unavailable in public documents (Lynch 2013).

4. ANALYSIS: GOVERNMENTAL ALIGNMENTS AND EXPLANATORY FACTORS FOR SMALL, HIGHLY DEVELOPED COUNTRIES

This section of the paper aims to compare the positioning of governments in response to China's core interests and the explanatory factors influencing those positions. First, it will compare positions in dependent countries (Chile and Uruguay), and then it will compare positions in non-dependent countries (Hungary and Czech Republic). Finally, it will make a comparison that could provide conclusions regarding how small developed countries position themselves towards China.

4.1. Comparison in Dependent Countries: Analysis of Governmental Positioning towards China: Uruguay and Chile (2013-2023)

The comparison of the positions taken by the governments of Uruguay and Chile toward China between 2013 and 2023 reveals significant similarities, both within each country and between them. These are two small, highly developed countries geographically distant from China yet economically dependent on the Asian giant. Across the various governments in both nations, there is a remarkable consistency in the factors that explain their positioning toward China's core interests. These explanations primarily center on economic factors, with the weight of China's economic power being a critical driver. Both countries are cautious about jeopardizing their economic relations with China, as they see China as a significant partner in their continued development. The fear of losing existing ties with China and the hope of increasing economic benefits from the relationship play a key role in how the three governments in Chile (Bachelet, Piñera and Boric) and in Uruguay (Mujica, Vázquez, Lacalle Pou) position toward China core interests. These Governments internalized the idea that China is indispensable for their economic growth, which has shaped their positions on various central issues. Usually, these positions have been neutral or favorable toward China's core interests.

However, a crucial factor that could alter these generally favorable or neutral stances is the presence of competing interests, particularly the material interests of the United States. This is especially relevant in cases where China's actions directly conflict with U.S.

interests, such as in areas related to technological investments. This dynamic has led both countries to occasionally take a more cautious approach toward China, significantly when China's actions threaten to disrupt relations with the U.S. As this paper argues, political domestic factors do not appear to be as crucial in shaping Chile's and Uruguay's foreign policies toward China. Despite changes in government and political ideologies—ranging from left-wing administrations to right-wing ones—the overall positioning toward China has remained consistent. Whether a government is left-leaning (such as Bachelet's in Chile or Mujica's in Uruguay) or right-leaning (such as Piñera's or Lacalle Pou's), the positioning toward China's core interests has been relatively uniform.

This consistency suggests that domestic political considerations, such as party ideologies or the influence of political lobbies, have not played a central role in shaping their foreign policies regarding China. Instead, as we mention the primary explanatory factors are economic dependency on China and the conflict of interest with the United States. While the domestic political context does provide nuance to these positions, the primary determinants are the economic relationships with China and the pressure from the United States.

Chile's governments positions

In Chile, the governments of Michelle Bachelet (Bachelet II), Sebastián Piñera (Piñera II), and Gabriel Boric have demonstrated a consistent pattern in their positioning toward China's core interests. Across all three administrations, Chile maintained a generally neutral stance on China's policies toward Hong Kong and Xinjiang. However, the approach to Chinese technology investments has varied.

During Bachelet's second term (2014-2018), Chile was particularly open to Chinese investments, especially in technology. This positive outlook was driven by the belief that deeper economic ties with China could benefit Chile significantly, particularly in trade and technological advancements. The political elite at the time viewed China as an economic partner and a growing global power with whom Chile could strengthen its economic and geopolitical position. In that sense, it positions favorably toward investments and neutral regarding Xinjiang and Hong Kong.

Under Piñera's second government (2018-2022), Chile adopted a more cautious approach. While the economic dependency on China remained central, Piñera's government expressed more ambivalence on Chinese investments in technology. The growing tension between the United States and China primarily drove this shift. The government became more wary of aligning too closely with Chinese technological initiatives, as doing so could jeopardize Chile's relations with the U.S. The ambiguity in Chile's approach during this period was a direct reflection of the geopolitical competition between the two superpowers, and we see that regarding the possibility of a technological submarine cable connecting to China and a tender for passports in which a Chinese company participated but was not able to gain the tender.

Under President Gabriel Boric (2022 – 2025), Chile's stance toward China's core interests has primarily remained neutral. Like his predecessors, Boric's government has been careful

not to take strong positions on contentious issues like Hong Kong or Xinjiang. However, Boric has emphasized balancing relations with China while considering the broader geopolitical context, especially Chile's relationship with the United States.

The consistency in Chile's approach can be attributed to several key factors—first, the economic dependency. Chile's economic ties with China are fundamental because is one of Chile's most important trading partners, particularly in the export of copper and other natural resources. The economic relationship with China creates a strong incentive for Chile to maintain a neutral or favorable stance on China's central interests, as disrupting this relationship could have significant economic consequences. As this paper argues, for the political elites, China's importance for the country's development has been internalized. Second, the geopolitical dynamics.

The increasing rivalry between the U.S. and China has shaped Chile's approach to Chinese interests. For example, Chile's positioning on technological investments shifted due to U.S. concerns over Chinese technology companies. The fear of alienating the U.S. was an essential consideration during Piñera's government, and it continues to influence Chile's stance today under Boric. Finally, the historical legacy explains some nuances. Chile's relationship with China has been pragmatic, with a long-standing tradition of non-interference in internal matters. This approach has led to general neutrality on issues such as Hong Kong and Xinjiang and does not involve actively supporting or opposing China's positions towards these issues (Table 3).

Table 3. Positions of Governments in Chile

Cases	Explanatory factor	Explanation	Explanatory strength	Position towards China core interest
Bachelet (2014 – 2018)	Economy	Trade dependence and hope for greater ties	Primary	Neutral (Xinjiang), Neutral (Hong Kong), Favorable (Investments)
	Historical Legacy	Bilateral pragmatism	Influential	
Piñera (2018 – 2022)	Economy	Trade dependence and hope for greater ties	Primary	Neutral (Xinjiang), Neutral (Hong Kong), Ambiguously Unfavorable (Investments)
	United States	Interest of the other dominant power	Primary	
	Historical Legacy	Bilateral pragmatism	Influential	
Boric (2022 -)	Economy	Trade dependence and hope for greater ties	Primary	Neutral (Xinjiang), Neutral (Hong Kong), Neutral (Investments)
	United States	Interest of the other dominant power	Primary	
	Historical Legacy	Bilateral Pragmatism	Influential	

Uruguayan government positions

Uruguay, like Chile, has demonstrated a continuity in its positioning toward China over the past decade. The governments of José Mujica (2010-2015), Tabaré Vázquez (2015-2020), and Luis Lacalle Pou (2020-present) have maintained a relatively consistent approach toward China, particularly regarding Hong Kong and Xinjiang with neutral positions, while some nuances could be seen in China's technology investments.

Under President Mujica (2010-2015), Uruguay adopted a favorable approach toward Chinese investments. Uruguay sought to deepen its economic ties with China, reflecting a broader interest in diversifying its trade relationships. At this stage, the government focused on expanding Uruguay's trade portfolio, and China was a key player in that effort. In that sense, it maintains neutral stances towards issues like Hong Kong and Xinjiang to not jeopardize the economic relation.

Like Mujica, the second Vázquez government (2015 – 2020) continued to support Chinese investments, especially in infrastructure and technology. Uruguay's government proactively sought Chinese involvement in various economic sectors. The country's dependence on Chinese markets for agricultural exports reinforced the need to maintain a favorable relationship with China and motivate neutral stances on national security and sovereignty issues and favorable in terms of technology investments.

Under the presidency of Lacalle Pou (2020-2025), Uruguay's approach to Chinese investments became more neutral, particularly regarding Chinese technology. While Uruguay continued to rely on China as a critical trade partner, the Lacalle Pou government was more cautious about Chinese technological involvement, reflecting broader global concerns about the geopolitical rivalry between the U.S. and China.

As in Chile, Uruguay's approach to China is primarily driven by economic factors. The country's dependence on China for trade, particularly agricultural exports, has made it essential to maintain stable and favorable relations and to not position negatively toward China's core interests. The political elites fear that any significant disruption in its relationship with China could have negative consequences for its economy and the country's development.

However, the geopolitical dynamics, especially the competition between China and the U.S., have influenced Uruguay's positioning on Chinese technological investments, motivating neutral stances towards Chinese investments during Lacalle Pou. As in Chile, Uruguay has been cautious about in which areas allow Chinese companies to invest. Finally, the historical legacy of Uruguay's foreign policy, which a non-interventionist stance has long characterized, has influenced its approach to China in some nuances. The non-interference principle in other countries' internal affairs has led to Uruguay adopting a generally neutral stance on issues like Hong Kong and Xinjiang (Table 4).

Table 4. Positions of Governments in Uruguay

Cases	Explanatory factor	Explanation	Explanatory strength	Position towards China core interest
Mujica (2010 – 2015)	Economy	Trade dependence and hope for greater ties	Primary	Neutral (Xinjiang), Neutral (Hong Kong), Favorable (Investments)
	Historical Legacy	Non-intervention	Influential	
Vázquez (2015 – 2020)	Economy	Trade dependence and hope for greater ties	Primary	Neutral (Xinjiang), Neutral (Hong Kong), Favorable (Investments)
	Historical Legacy	Non-intervention	Influential	
Lacalle Pou (2020 - 2025)	Economy	Trade dependence and hope for greater ties	Primary	Neutral (Xinjiang), Neutral (Hong Kong), Neutral (Investments)
	United States	Interest of the other dominant power	Primary	
	Historical Legacy	Non-intervention	Influential	

5.2. Comparison in non-dependent Countries: Analysis of Governmental Positioning towards China: Czech Republic and Hungary (2013-2023)

The comparison of the positioning of the Czech Republic and Hungary toward China from 2013 to 2023 reveals significant differences within each country and between them. These small and highly developed countries do not have a significant economic dependence on China, and their positions on China’s core interests—such as Hong Kong, the Xinjiang region, and technological investments—vary considerably. Domestic politics primarily explain these differences, which are crucial in contexts without direct economic dependency.

In the case of the Czech Republic and Hungary, the reasons behind their positions are complex and multifaceted. While economic factors may be the primary explanatory variable in other countries, internal political factors play a central role in these two Central European countries. The ideologies of the governments, pressures from interest groups, the personalities of the leaders, and domestic political dynamics are key elements in understanding their positions toward China's core interests. In that sense, the range of explanations for their positions is broader, including domestic politics, economic hopes, and competition with the United States.

The Czech Republic’s Government Positions

The positioning of the Czech Republic toward China over the three government periods under review—Sobotka (2014-2017), Babis (2017-2021), and Fiala (2021-2024)—varied

significantly. These differences reflect the central role of domestic political factors, as the country does not have a substantial economic dependency on China.

During the Sobotka Government (2014-2017), the Czech Republic adopted a neutral stance toward China's situation with Hong Kong to promote better economic relations with China and be cautious about intervening in China's domestic affairs, hoping for a better relationship. At the same time, Sobotka's government was open to Chinese investment, particularly in infrastructure and other economic projects, reflecting the hope of greater economic engagement with China and favorable positions toward technology investments. However, the historical legacy of the human rights foreign policy provokes ambiguously stances towards issues like Xinjiang.

The Babis Government's (2017-2021) stance toward China shifted slightly, reflecting ambiguity in all stances. Babis maintained this unfavorable ambiguity outlook toward Chinese investments, especially in high-tech sectors. This shift can be attributed to domestic political factors, such as Babis not prioritizing foreign policy, so the pressure of some bureaucratic groups affected the decision.

With Fiala Government (2021-present), the Czech Republic's position toward China became notably more critical to China in those core interests. This government adopted an increasingly unfavorable stance on Chinese matters. This shift is primarily explained by the heightened influence of domestic political dynamics, with a government with an anticommunist ideology. Mainly, the historical legacy of human rights activism linked to the Czech foreign policy, which harkens back to the era of President Václav Havel, is very present in this government and shaped a more critical view of China's human rights record, especially in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, and also influenced the negative stance toward Chinese technological investments. Furthermore, the growing geopolitical rivalry between the U.S. and China pushed the Czech Republic to align more closely with Western allies.

In summary, the Czech Republic's positioning of China reflects the importance of domestic political factors in the absence of economic dependence. The ideological leanings of the ruling parties, the influence of political leaders, and the historical legacy of human rights advocacy significantly shaped the country's stance on China's core interests. Furthermore, the growing rivalry between China and the U.S. added complexity, pushing the Czech Republic to adopt more critical positions, particularly to Chinese technological investments (Table 5).

Table 5. Positions of Governments in the Czech Republic

Cases	Explanatory factor	Explanation	Explanatory strength	Position towards China's core interest
Bohumil Sobotka (2014-2017)	Domestic Politics	Ideology of the government and lobby groups	Primary	Neutral (Hong Kong), Ambiguity unfavorable (Xinjiang), Favorable (Investments)
	Economy	Hope for greater ties	Influential	
	Historical Legacy	Legacy of Human Rights Policy	Influential	
Andrej Babiš (2017-2021)	Domestic Politics	Ideology of the government and individual level	Primary	Ambiguity unfavorable (Hong Kong), Ambiguity unfavorable (Xinjiang), Ambiguity unfavorable (Investments)
	United States	The interest of the other dominant power	Influential	
	Historical Legacy	Legacy of Human Rights Policy	Influential	
Petr Fiala (2021-)	Domestic Politics	Ideology of the government	Primary	Unfavorable (Hong Kong), Unfavorable (Xinjiang), Unfavorable (Investments))
	United States	The interest of the other dominant power	Influential	
	Historical Legacy	Legacy of Human Rights Policy	Influential	

Hungary's government positions

In contrast to the Czech Republic, Hungary has maintained a more consistent pro-China stance under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who has been in power for the period under review. Hungary's approach to China has been shaped by domestic political factors, the country's desire for economic development, and a shifting geopolitical context.

In the First Orbán Government (2010-2014), Hungary adopted a generally neutral stance toward China's sovereignty over Hong Kong and even favorable ambiguous positions toward the politics of China in Xinjiang. Also, it was particularly favorable toward Chinese investments, especially in the technological sector. The Hungarian government's economic interests drove this favorable position, and the hope was that increased engagement with China would bring much-needed foreign investment to Hungary, particularly after the 2008 financial crisis. Hungary's economic vulnerability post-crisis made it more open to seeking alternative sources of investment. With this objective, China appeared to be an attractive partner and made favorable positions toward China.

The Second and Third Orbán Government (2014-2023) further deepened Hungary's ties with China. His government became more outspoken in supporting Chinese initiatives,

such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It continued to favor Chinese investments, particularly in infrastructure and high-tech industries. Orbán’s government also remained relatively favorable ambiguous on issues related to Hong Kong, which set Hungary apart from other EU countries that were increasingly critical of China’s actions in these regions. However, in the case of Xinjiang, it maintains an ambiguous position but with critical stances in terms of Xinjiang.

The domestic political factors influencing Hungary’s approach to China are similar to those seen in the Czech Republic but with some notable differences. Orbán’s government has been characterized by a highly centralized political structure, with the prime minister personally driving foreign policy decisions. This centralization allows Orbán to maintain a consistent pro-China stance, as he has had relatively few domestic challenges to this policy. Hungary’s positioning toward China reflects a broader desire to balance its relations with the European Union and other global powers. While Hungary has remained aligned mainly with China on economic matters, it has also faced pressure from the United States and the EU regarding issues such as Chinese technological investments and human rights. Nevertheless, Orbán’s government has prioritized economic ties with China, leading to Hungary maintaining a more favorable stance toward Beijing than other EU member states (Table 6).

Table 6. Positions of Governments in Hungary

Cases	Explanatory factor	Explanation	Explanatory strength	Position towards China's core interest
Viktor Orbán (2010 - 2014)	Domestic Politics	Ideology of the government, individual level, and lobby groups	Primary	Neutral (Hong Kong), Ambiguity Favorable (Xinjiang), Favorable (Investments)
	Economy	Hope for greater ties	Influential	
	Domestic Politics	Ideology of the government and individual level	Primary	Ambiguity Favorable (Hong Kong), Ambiguity Unfavorable (Xinjiang), Ambiguity Favorable (Investments)
Viktor Orbán (2014 – 2022)	United States	The interest of the other dominant power	Influential	
	Economic	Hope for greater ties	Influential	

4.3. Positions Towards China in Small Developed Countries

The comparison of Chile and Uruguay’s positioning toward China reveals a substantial similarity in the factors influencing their foreign policies. Both countries’ positions have been primarily shaped by their economic dependence on China, which strongly emphasizes maintaining and deepening economic ties. The key factor driving their neutral or favorable stances toward China is the fear of losing the economic benefits that China provides. In both countries, domestic political factors do not play a role in shaping their

policies, with the ideological leaning of the government (left or right) not significantly altering their positions toward China's core interests. Instead, the primary drivers have been economic interests and the broader geopolitical context, especially the competition between China and the U.S. for the position of China's technology investments.

The positioning of both the Czech Republic and Hungary toward China reveals the pivotal role of domestic politics in shaping foreign policy, especially in the absence of significant economic dependency. In the Czech case, government changes led to policy shifts, with each new administration adapting its stance based on the ideological orientation of the ruling party, the influence of interest groups, and the historical legacy of the country's human rights-oriented foreign policy. In Hungary, on the other hand, the consistency of Viktor Orbán's leadership, combined with Hungary's desire to diversify its foreign alliances and attract investment, has led to a continued pro-China stance, particularly in positions related to Chinese investments.

The comparison of different pairs of cases brings some conclusions. The first is the temporal similarity between the governments of Chile and Uruguay regarding their positions and the factors that influence the explanation of these decisions. Beyond ideological changes in government, the positions toward China are very similar between the governments of the countries and between the countries in the same period due to the economic weight of China in these economies. As argued, the decision-makers fear of potential reprisals and the internalization of China's importance as fundamental for the country's development are crucial for understanding the positions. This implies that it is not domestic pressure groups or explicit pressure from China that sway the positions in favor of the power, but rather the decision-makers recognition of China's importance for the country's development.

A second aspect arising from the comparison is the observation of significant divergences between the Czech Republic's and Hungary's governments, which are mainly explained by domestic differences. Unlike Latin American countries with strong economic ties to China, the fear of losing existing connections does not explain their positions due to the limited economic links. However, there is hope for stronger ties with China regarding how this relationship might incentivize the country's development. In the absence of economic dependence, aspects of domestic politics play a crucial role in understanding the positions: pressure groups, government ideology, and the leader's personality shape international decisions. The internal struggle between domestic groups shapes the possibilities and the specific positions toward China. Thus, other factors that can influence positions are channeled through this domestic dispute concerning China.

The third aspect to conclude from this analysis is the role played by the other dominant power, the United States, in shaping these positions. The literature analyzing positions toward China often emphasizes the influence and impact of China's economic weight on these positions. However, it does not theoretically delve deeply into the role of the established power when positions involve a material conflict of interest with the United States (Kastner et al. 2022; Wang, Kastner, and Pearson 2023). Although the United States has lost importance in certain aspects due to China's logic of substituting goods, it still plays a relevant role in leaders' decision-making, especially in those positions deemed

essential for their interests. Like a lingering glow from the hegemon, the importance of U.S. military power and the values transmitted over the decades are considered by the decision-makers of these small countries when positioning themselves toward China, particularly in areas with a conflict of material interests.

5. CONCLUSION

This article aimed to understand the factors influencing the positions of small countries toward great powers. Specifically, it examines the role of the primary explanations proposed in the literature regarding alignment with the core interests of a power such as China. Seeking not only to categorize behavior but to explore the explanations in depth, this research engages with a broad body of literature that has sought to understand why governments support or challenge a great power (Amorim Neto and Malamud 2015; Barnett and Levy 1991; Fearon 1998; Forsythe 2006; Goldstein and Keohane 1993; Gvalia et al. 2013; Merke and Pauselli 2013; K. Williams, Lobell, and Jesse 2012).

This article found that China's economic weight, specifically the elites' fear of economic reprisals and the hope of establishing closer ties, is crucial for understanding the positioning of small countries toward this power, particularly in countries economically dependent on China. Decision-makers recognize China's importance for their country's economy and development and adopt favorable or neutral positions toward China's core interests. However, China's economic weight is not the only relevant factor in determining positions in these contexts of dependence.

The expectation of a reaction from the other great power in the international system, the United States, especially when conflicts of interest arise between the great powers, is also a relevant explanation for understanding these positions. Like a lingering glow from the hegemon, the interests of the United States remain significant in the decision-maker's considerations. Furthermore, this thesis shows that in countries where the economy is not closely linked to China, the critical factor influencing positions is domestic politics: ideology, pressure groups, and the role of the leader. These explanations are essential for understanding positions in countries without an economic dependency context with China.

By addressing how countries position toward China, this research aims to contribute to the broader literature on alignment behavior in international relations. It will provide a more nuanced understanding of how smaller states navigate China's growing influence in the 21st century. One key question left open by this paper is whether these findings hold for other small, developed countries. Specifically, does economic dependence on China sometimes minimize the relevance of domestic political factors? Conversely, does the range of explanatory factors expand in countries with less economic dependence on China?

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