



The Environmental Diplomacy of the Belt and Road Initiative: Going Green to Meet External Expectations

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Abstract

This article examines China’s environmental diplomacy through the Green Silk Road (GSR), a relatively recent yet strategically significant aspect of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While existing literature has extensively analysed the economic and geopolitical dimensions of the BRI, the environmental narrative remains underexplored, especially concerning China’s international role. Drawing on Role Theory and Moral Realism, this study investigates how China’s efforts to “green” the BRI serve as a mechanism of role adjustment, aligning its self-perception with changing international expectations of responsible power conduct. Using a primarily qualitative methodology that combines content analysis, expert interviews, and a targeted online survey, the article explores the GSR’s impact on China’s global image and its positioning as an emerging environmental leader. Focusing on three regions—Central Asia, Latin America, and Europe—the analysis shows how environmental projects influence perceptions of China’s legitimacy and leadership. Although the GSR seems to enhance China’s international image, scepticism remains about the sincerity of its environmental commitments. The study argues that the GSR marks both a strategic and normative shift in China’s foreign policy, with consequences for global environmental governance and the changing political landscape in the Asia–Pacific and beyond.

Keywords Belt and road initiative · Environmental diplomacy · External expectations · Green silk road · Moral realism · Global governance

1 Introduction

Since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, a substantial body of literature has emerged on the subject (Khanal & Zhang 2024). Some studies examine the BRI in broader terms, considering its

international impacts and effects, as well as its contribution to China's development and its assertion on the global stage (An & Wang 2024; Du 2025; Hu 2025; Wong & Downes 2024). Others focus on issues of bilateral or regional cooperation within the BRI framework (Morales Ruvalcaba 2025; Ullah & Xinlei 2025).

Regarding its corridors, the majority of the literature concentrates on the Silk Road Economic Belt (Chen et al. 2021; Dave & Kobayashi 2018; Duarte et al. 2023), the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (Billé et al. 2022; Ferreira-Pereira et al. 2024; Yang et al. 2023), and, since 2015, the Digital Silk Road (Parzyan 2021; Sahakyan 2024; Silva & Duarte 2025). The Green Silk Road (GSR), launched in 2017, has received less attention in academic literature. The exceptions include the works of Ferguson (2021), Mardell (2023), Nitza-Makowska, Longhurst, and Skiert-Andrzejuk (2024).

From the very beginning of the BRI, scholars have voiced concerns about its environmental implications. Ascensão et al. (2018) warned that the expansion of transportation networks would likely result in habitat loss, resource overexploitation, and landscape degradation. Echoing these concerns, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in 2017 found that BRI corridors could potentially impact all protected areas they cover, signalling a clear risk of severe negative environmental impacts from infrastructure development. Many scholars remained sceptical of China's real environmental motives even after the launch of the Green BRI, arguing that the initiative still prioritises economic growth over ecological preservation, particularly in regions with weak environmental regulations (Nurgozhayeva 2024; Vidal 2022; Zhou et al. 2018). The director of the Centre for Tropical Environmental and Sustainability Science at James Cook University, William Laurance, emphasised that 'BRI will still have a major impact on ecosystems: China has said that it will be low-carbon, green and sustainable, but it is anything but that' (Vidal 2022). His opinion is supported by Lihuan Zhou et al. (2018) recalling the Chinese government initial promises to embed environmentally sustainable, or green, strategies within the BRI, but his analysis revealed that between 2014 and 2017, the bulk of bank loans and cross-border investments in the energy and transportation sectors were primarily directed towards fossil fuel projects. In this context, Qingge Geng and Kevin Lo (2023) noticed that the Green BRI holds a symbolic function, especially in defending its reputation as a sustainable, win-win project, which currently outweighs its practical contribution to environmental protection. On the other hand, several scholars find positive environmental dynamics in China's GSR (Chin et al. 2022; Liu et al. 2022; Xu 2023), empirically highlighting that the BRI has effectively promoted the progress of green technology in the host countries, which contributes to the development of a green economy (Liu et al. 2022).

Hence, while existing literature on the Green BRI predominantly focuses on its (im)practical implementation, the present paper will not assess the rhetoric or core practices of the initiative. Instead, it will examine how setting the goal of sustainability and 'going green' regardless of its effectiveness or alignment with official green objectives—has influenced the conception of China's international role. Through this article, we argue that, after decades of massive pollution, China has recognised that the traditional role conception of achieving progress at any cost to nature has proven disastrous, thus leading to a role adjustment. Through its green projects,

China engages in a process of role adjustment, not only meeting but also redefining international expectations of what a major power's role should entail in the global fight against climate change. This approach suggests that the GSR is less about unilateral role imposition and more about a multilateral process where China attempts to establish itself as a 'Green Great Power' by legitimising and reinforcing its position through mutual recognition and cooperation with other states. The analysis covers the period from the launch of the GSR in 2017 to China's second white paper on 'Green Development in the New Era', published in 2023. As such, the research will be guided by the following question: To what extent does the GSR contribute to (re) adjusting China's role conception to better meet international expectations?

While addressing China's domestic environmental degradation, this paper identifies three main motives underlying China's shift towards 'greening': the intention to become a 'Green Great Power' (Yeophantong & Goh 2022) and the need to counter external criticism of being a major polluter. Additionally, this paper examines how the GSR contributes to China's international image, focusing particularly on Central Asia, Latin America, and Europe as case studies. The present paper identifies a gap in the literature which presents an opportunity for further research. Existing studies have focused on the renewable energy dependencies that China creates in various regions (Bertram 2023; Ferguson 2021; Mardell 2023; Rodenbiker 2023; Sharifli 2024). However, they have overlooked the significance of the GSR in enhancing the conception of China's role as an environmental leader, except Hilton (2024).

To support our argument and answer the research question, we have developed an eclectic theoretical framework based on the premises of Role Theory and Moral Realism, while also incorporating elements related to Environmental Diplomacy and Global Governance. Role Theory (Duarte et al. 2024; Harnisch et al. 2011) posits that social systems are structured around and guided by roles. This perspective helps us understand the evolution and adjustments in China's international role. However, to justify our argument that the GSR results from a role adjustment driven by Beijing's perception that, to assert itself as a major power, it would need to align with international environmental expectations, we must adopt a broader framework. This is where Moral Realism (Yan 2016, 2019) comes into play, a theoretical lens which holds that a leading power—and any state aspiring to such status—must demonstrate responsibility and meet the demands of other international actors. Environmental Diplomacy (Ali & Vladich 2016; Broadhurst & Ledgerwood 1998; Orsini 2020), in turn, acts as the connector, underpinning the premise that the role adjustment, driven by external expectations and international demands, led to the creation of the GSR. This initiative serves as a tool of environmental diplomacy, aiming to project China as a responsible environmental power. In doing so, it enhances China's prominence in global governance and paves the way for its emergence as a leading power.

Regarding the methodological framework, this article employs a qualitative methodology. This choice is driven by the need to analyse complex dynamics composed of various variables, as well as our aim to interpret them through an established theoretical framework. Regarding data collection and analysis techniques, this article employs a literature review and interpretative textual analysis. The data includes secondary sources, such as reports from think tanks and key academic literature, as well as primary sources, with a focus on official Chinese government documents,

news articles, and semi-structured, pre-selected interviews. Additionally, an online survey (see Sects. [Research Methods](#) and [Results and Analysis of Survey Data](#)) will be used to measure the impact of China's GSR on external perceptions of China.

The present paper is divided as follows. The first section connects role theory, environmental diplomacy, and the BRI. After introducing and explaining these concepts, the subsequent sections provide information on the research methods and the rationale for the 'greening' of the BRI. They also analyse the impacts of its projects on international perceptions of China. The conclusion summarises the main findings.

2 Connecting the Dots: Intersecting Role Theory, Moral Realism, and Environmental Diplomacy in the Study of the BRI

To analyse how the evolution of the BRI and the integration of a green corridor translate into an adaptation of the conception of China's international role, we must first establish a robust theoretical framework. This section undertakes that task by proposing a framework that integrates role theory, moral realism, and environmental diplomacy. While role theory allows us to interpret the adaptation of China's foreign policy (encapsulated in the maxim 'going green'), Environmental Diplomacy and Moral Realism enable us to explain how this adaptation reflects the perception, on the Chinese agency's part, that the environmental responsibility demands from the international community must be adhered to for China to become a leading power.

The choice of role theory as a conceptual lens is due to its potential to explain why China embarked on the 'greening' of the BRI and pursued proactive environmental diplomacy. Specifically, China's role adaptation from a heavy polluter to a 'Green Great Power' in the making will be assessed using the main variables of role theory: role conception, role performance, role expectations, and role adaptation (Duarte et al. [2024](#); Harnisch et al. [2011](#)). In this sense, role conception can be defined as an actor's perception of their position in the international system vis-à-vis others (ibid.). Xi Jinping's China perceives itself as a great power engaged in 'peaceful development', wherein environmental sustainability and economic growth must be in strict harmony (Duarte et al. [2024](#); Wehner & Thies [2021](#)).

Another component of role theory is role expectation, defined as the 'appropriate behaviour' that an audience anticipates from a specific actor. In this case, it can be argued that the international community has encouraged China to gradually adopt a more responsible role in global governance, particularly concerning environmental issues. This indeed corresponds to another component of role theory: role adaptation, which encompasses 'the changes of strategies and instruments in performing a role' (Harnisch et al. [2011](#)). In this context, China's proactive environmental diplomacy, alongside the GSR as its instrument, can be viewed as China's response to the role expectations established by both its domestic audience and the international community. These entities have urged Beijing to assume a more active and responsible role in global environmental initiatives. The final component of the role theory is the role performance, meaning the actual state behaviour. As noticed by the Chinese political scientist Yan Xuetong

(2014), Beijing's stance has evolved from 'keeping a low profile to striving for achievement' (pp. 154–155). As demonstrated later in the text, China's environmental policy further corroborates this overarching shift in both its domestic and foreign policy.

The pertinence of applying role theory to the study of BRI is connected to its unique approach to roles. Since the BRI is Xi Jinping's signature project, it is an extraordinary domestic and foreign policy tool that reflects the Chinese leader's conception of China's role within global governance. Now, the gap between the kind of player that China would like to become in the green field (role conception) and the actual behaviour (role performance) that Beijing exhibits on the ground may not always coincide with the projected goals. This is the case, as later evidenced by the reduced outputs that have so far emerged from the GSR. Nevertheless, one should acknowledge that Chinese endeavours in going green show a will of role adaptation, from a bystander actor to a more dynamic one in terms of adopting more sustainable policies. Role theory seems, again, to be an interesting approach to analyse that shift, as it conceptually cares about adaptation whenever the means/policies no longer seem to be effective in achieving one's goals. This is why China realised that turning green would not only prove to benefit the country and the global environment, it would simultaneously help improve China's image abroad.

This shift in Chinese international behaviour is better understood when the theoretical framework is expanded to include some elements of Moral Realism. Moral Realism is a theoretical approach within the field of International Relations proposed by the Chinese scholar Yan Xuetong. This approach is based on realist premises, namely that the international system is inherently anarchic and that states act according to their national interest in a logic of competition and power struggle (Yan 2016; Zhang 2012).

However, by reintroducing the moral dimension often overlooked by many realists, Yan (2016, 2019) argues that states' behaviour, particularly major powers, should be analysed through the lens of morality, considering it a crucial factor in a state's rise and decline within the international system (Yan 2016).

Moral Realism also highlights the role of political leadership and leaders' perceptions, similarly to role theory. However, for Moral Realism perceptions matter not in the sense that they redefine the national interest, but rather in that they influence the chosen means through which those interests are achieved (Yan 2016).

In practice, Moral Realism suggests that for a state to rise and establish itself as a leading power, it must possess international credibility, which, in turn, depends on morality—that is, its ability to act benevolently and responsibly (Silva 2025; Yan 2019; Zhang 2012). A leading power is thus expected to act responsibly and 'lead by example'; however, when it abandons this moral action, it risks losing credibility, thereby undermining its status within the international system (Yan 2016, 2019).

Moral Realism thus enables a broader perspective on China's role adaptation. Recognising that its credibility increasingly depended on aligning with the environmental demands and expectations of the international community—and acting as a responsible power—China was compelled to adapt or risk seeing its international status undermined. At the same time, by undertaking this adaptation, China reinforces its credibility, strengthening its prospects of assuming a leading power

position, particularly at a time when the United States appears to be wavering in its international agenda.

While role theory and moral realism provide essential frameworks for understanding and interpreting the motivations and objectives underlying the GSR—particularly the argument concerning the adaptation of China’s international role—environmental diplomacy, on the one hand, clarifies how this role adaptation materialises in practice and, on the other, illustrates how environmental awareness contributes to enhancing China’s global image. In this context, it is pertinent to introduce the concept of the Green Great Power (or Environmental Great Power).

This concept is closely linked to the notion of environmental power—that is, a state’s capacity to influence the environment and international relations within the environmental domain, whether positively or negatively (Buzan & Falkner 2022). In this sense, a Green Great Power refers to a state that occupies a dominant environmental position and possesses an enhanced capacity to shape the international environmental agenda (Buzan & Falkner 2022).

Environmental diplomacy, in turn, is a form of diplomacy associated with negotiations between international actors on issues related to the environment and environmental governance (Ali & Vladich 2016; Broadhurst & Ledgerwood 1998). As Orsini (2020) clarifies, although it is traditionally understood as diplomacy dealing exclusively with environmental matters, in practice, environmental diplomacy also encompasses issues ranging from trade to security.

The fundamental pillars of international environmental regulations include (1) the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) of 1992, which distinguishes obligations between developed and developing nations; (2) the Kyoto Protocol of 1997, recognised as the first legally binding climate change agreement; (3) the Copenhagen Accord of 2009, which resulted in non-binding political statements; and (4) the 2015 Paris Agreement, known as the world’s first global climate pact with legally binding commitments for all participating countries.

Thus, environmental diplomacy and its connections with climate governance are, essential to understand China’s moves. In fact, China is a latecomer in global environmental governance. Until the Copenhagen Summit in 2009, China participated in climate change negotiations through the Group of 77 (also called G77).¹ Within this coalition, China promoted a unified negotiating position, arguing that much of the environmental degradation stemmed from human activities in developed nations (UN Environment Programme, 2019). As a result, developed countries should bear greater responsibility for addressing these challenges (Xinhua 2023b). In the aftermath of the Copenhagen Summit, China also became a founding member of BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China), a coalition of rapidly developing countries aimed at enhancing their influence on global environmental issues.

Notwithstanding, China’s rapid modernisation heightened international pressure and public concerns regarding Beijing’s limited role in environmental issues.

¹ The Group of 77 (G-77) was established on June 15, 1964, by 77 developing countries that signed the “Joint Declaration of the Seventy-Seven Developing Countries” issued at the end of the first session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in Geneva.

Consequently, the international community expected China to adapt (role adaptation) to the role of a ‘responsible stakeholder’ (role expectation). Beijing’s behaviour (role performance) in environmental forums was increasingly seen as incompatible with its self-perception (role conception) as a great power.

In attempts to adapt to the expected ‘responsible stakeholder’ role (Nitza-Makowska et al. 2024, p. 21), the Chinese government unveiled its first-ever global warming initiative with the release of the National Climate Change Program in 2007 (National Development and Reform Commission of the PRC 2007). This programme outlined strategies aimed at curtailing greenhouse gas emissions and adopting a flexible approach to address climate change. Subsequently, by 2012, the Chinese Communist Party incorporated ‘the establishment of an ecological civilization’ as a constitutional target (Sun 2016, p. 47). Additionally, Beijing began to establish its own ‘environmental diplomacy’ as an element of its soft power strategy (Karlsson et al. 2012; Nitza-Makowska et al. 2024). According to Haigh (2023) and Shoaib (2024), Environmental Diplomacy is often viewed as a form of soft power, and in this realm, China has achieved notable success (Duarte & Ferreira-Pereira 2022; Shoaib 2024). Not surprisingly, China has improved its international perception as indicated by the Soft Power 30 surveys from 2015 to 2019 (the latest year available in the survey), in which its score rose from 30 positions in 2015 to 25 in 2017, and then in 2019 China reached its highest ever score of 24.

China’s move from the role conception of a discreet player to the one of agenda-setters in global environmental politics has been predominantly boosted by the BRI launched in September 2013 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC 2013). To align the international community’s role expectations towards the BRI, which initially perceived it as the most carbon-emitting project (Chaudhury 2023; Chiu 2022), Brazilian scholar Diego Pautasso² informs that ‘Beijing understood the need to adopt an environmentally-friendly approach’.³ Therefore, since 2015, when 195 UN member states adopted the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, Beijing seized the opportunity to incorporate the Sustainable Development Goals into the BRI to cope with the external criticism whilst attempting to increase the attractiveness of the BRI (Duarte & Ferreira-Pereira 2022; Eurasian Rail Alliance Index 2023; Nitza-Makowska et al. 2024; D. Pautasso, personal communication, 19 April 2024). Unsurprisingly, the green and low-carbon developments were articulated in the BRI road map 2015 (He 2020). Furthermore, China’s President Xi Jinping conceptualised the ‘greening’ of the BRI by announcing the launch of the Green Belt and Road Initiative in 2017 during the first Belt and Road Forum on May 14–15, 2024 (SCO Environment Information Sharing Platform 2017). In this regard, the Joint Communiqué of the Leaders’ Roundtable of the Belt and Road Forum in 2017 emphasised the importance of both ‘environmental sustainability of projects’ and ‘promoting high environmental standards’ (ibid.).

Later, at the Second BRI Forum in 2019, greater attention was directed towards environmental concerns. Participants at the roundtable pledged to foster ‘open,

² Diego Pautasso is Professor of Geography at the Military College of Porto Alegre, Brazil.

³ Diego Pautasso, interviewed by the authors, April 19, 2024.

green, and clean' collaboration and committed to advancing sustainability within the BRI framework (Goodman & Hillman 2019; Nitza-Makowska et al. 2024). However, this came after a massive outcry of environmental NGOs and scholars that denounced the significant increase of coal power plant construction across the world, mainly because of Chinese companies going out as part of the BRI. The outcomes of the Second BRI Forum encompassed the ongoing GSR Envoys Programme, a training initiative for environmental officials from BRI nations, the launch of the BRI Environmental Big Data Platform as well as the establishment of Belt and Road Initiative International Green Development Coalition (Ministry of Ecology and Environment of the PRC 2019). The latter is a voluntary international network that is open and inclusive, aiming to unite the environmental expertise of all participants (UNEP Portal, 2019). In its turn, the Third Belt and Road Forum, on October 17–18, 2023, featured a prominent 'GSR for Harmony with Nature' thematic forum. Participants at this forum endorsed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and other environmental agreements. Moreover, they expressed support for collaborative efforts in building a GSR to achieve harmony between humanity and nature (Belt and Road Forum 2023).

3 Research Methods

This section outlines the research design adopted throughout our analysis. In doing so, we seek to make explicit the methodology employed, as well as the techniques used for data collection and analysis, which enabled us to reach our findings and address the research question.

This study adopts a predominantly qualitative methodology. This choice is justified by the need to examine complex dynamics, comprising multiple variables, which require a subjective and interpretative approach. Moreover, the interpretative nature of the study, dictated by the selected theoretical framework, necessitates this type of analysis. Accordingly, a qualitative approach allows us to explore and interpret the phenomenon under investigation in ways that a quantitative approach would not permit.

The study is structured in three stages. In the first stage, we conduct a qualitative analysis and interpretation of the phenomenon in question. To this end, we draw on primary sources, such as official Chinese government documents and newspaper articles, as well as secondary sources, including think tank reports and key academic literature. These materials are analysed through interpretative textual analysis, without the application of formal coding procedures. Building on this, the study examines practical cases that empirically demonstrate the aforementioned role adaptation and analyses political narratives which, in line with the works of Shenhav (2006) and Miskimmon et al. (2013), are considered a political practice in their own right.

Additionally, and in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the effects of the GSR on China's international image, this analysis is complemented by semi-structured interviews. In total, 5 interviews were conducted with experts from Europe, Central Asia, and Latin America. The interviewees were selected on the

basis of their academic expertise and research focus, with the aim of gathering the perspectives of specialists in the BRI and global environmental governance.

Despite our efforts to include a representative from Africa and East Asia, we were not successful. Nonetheless, this limitation should be nuanced as these parts of the world have generally been criticised for actually placing China's BRI investments over environmental concerns (Gallagher et al. 2021; Gu 2024; C. Liu et al. 2023; Tritto 2021). Our preference for scholars instead of ordinary people or diplomats has to do with the fact that common citizens are usually not acquainted with China's green initiatives worldwide, while diplomats are, in turn, too cautious in their words as they represent rather their state's view instead of their personal opinions. The advantage of picking scholars is that they often provide more balanced and accurate insights, stemming both from their expertise on the topic, but also from their freedom to criticise policies and actors, with relative impartiality.

This being said, we opted to interview Brazilian scholars Diego Pautasso, Professor of Geography at the Military College of Porto Alegre, Ana Barros-Platiau, Professor at the Institute of International Relations at the University of Brasília, as well as Sabrina Medeiros, who is currently teaching at Lusophone University in Portugal. Besides, Portuguese expert António Queirós, from the University of Lisbon, has considerable knowledge on China-related initiatives in the green sector in addition to providing a European perspective on the issue. Finally, Berna Kirkulak-Uludag, from Dokuz Eylul University (Turkey), Jildiz Nicharapova, from American University of Central Asia in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan), and Kevin Lo from Hong Kong Baptist University (China), seem to offer an interesting outlook regarding China's green initiatives, respectively, in the Middle East and Central Asia. All the interviewees provided written informed consent to participate in this study.

Some interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees, while others were conducted via e-mail. Thus, with the exception of Brazilian scholar Sabrina Medeiros, who opted for recorded interview, the rest of the experts preferred to answer questions previously sent by e-mail which consisted of the following four major questions: 1. How does Europe/Central Asia/Latin America⁴ perceive China's effort in building its GSR?; 2. Do you see China's efforts in going green an attempt to shape international perceptions on China?; 3. Which important projects would you like to highlight regarding the GSR in Central Asia/ Middle East/Latin America?; 4. Can the environmental commitment of an emerging power like China redefine global governance, especially in light of the hesitancy of the US to lead sustainable agendas?

The data obtained through the interviews were analysed using an interpretative textual analysis, and, for the sake of flexibility, no formal coding procedure was adopted.

To complement the interviews, we have elaborated an online survey composed of six questions, as listed below and attached to this paper (annex 1). With this, our intention is not to adopt a mixed-methods approach in which a quantitative component would serve to corroborate a preceding qualitative analysis. Rather, we aim to

⁴ The region would vary according to the provenance of the respective interviewee.

complement our study by employing a quantitative instrument to provide additional support and to gain insight into the general public's perception of China. In this way, we seek to determine whether China's image among the public has improved as a result of the GSR.

The first three questions aimed to understand 1) the geographical provenance, 2) the level of studies, and 3) the degree of familiarity of the respondents with China's GSR. The remaining questions focused on 4) how respondents assessed the impact of the GSR on China's international image, 5) which direction of Green BRI projects respondents believed would influence China's international perception the most, and 6) the primary motivations for China's shift towards the 'greening' of the BRI.

The request for participation in the survey was sent to six different groups, composed by members from different continents, namely to: (i) the working group 1 of the China in Europe Relations Network (CHERN) COST Action; (ii) The China-Eurasia WeChat Group⁵; (iii) the members of the Portuguese think tank New Silk Road Friends Association; (iv) the members of the China Observatory; (v) Portugal-China Friendship League; (vi) and Lusoglobe, totalling approximately 340 people. We chose these groups because they are networks of academics and policymakers that are either experts in China's BRI (which is the case of the CHERN and the China-Eurasia WeChat Group, formed by, respectively, 52 members and 104 members) or at least acquainted with the Initiative (the case of the remaining groups above mentioned).

The data obtained through this survey were analysed interpretatively, without recourse to formal coding techniques, following a critical approach based on interpretative textual analysis. In doing so, we sought to identify the underlying political and discursive meanings within the responses, determine their significance within the framework of our analysis, and examine how they support the arguments previously developed. Thus, the survey results were used as complementary data, reinforcing our overall analysis and findings.

Potential limitations to our study are the fact that there are no exclusive Green BRI experts, as the GSR is a relatively new corridor that China decided to add in 2017 to the already existent land, sea, digital, and health corridors that compose the BRI. Moreover, although we acknowledge the reduced sample, we strove nonetheless to diversify both the number of groups (as stated above) and the geographical origin of their members since most of them are constituted by members from different continents, as graphs show in terms of percentage. Unfortunately, we cannot provide an exact count of how many individuals officially received the survey request. As previously noted, the survey was distributed through specific academic groups whose membership fluctuates daily.

Among the 54 responses received (54 in total as shown in annex 2), 14.8 per cent originated from experts on China's GSR, while 53.7 per cent were from respondents with a good understanding of the GSR. Meanwhile, 31.5 per cent were slightly

⁵ Established by the help of VI edition of Eurasian Research on Modern China and Eurasia Conference. Approximately 95 per cent of its members hold doctoral degrees in international relations, economics, while others are PhD students or practitioners.

familiar with the topic. A majority of respondents are scholars on China–Europe relations. The majority (61.1 per cent) of respondents were from Europe. Latin America and Asia–Pacific share the same 11.1 per cent of respondents. Similarly, Africa and Central Asia each contributed with a share of 3.7 per cent of respondents. Finally, 9.3 per cent of respondents were from other regions, including the Middle East, South Caucasus, and North America.

4 The Greening of the BRI

After decades of significant pollution, China recognised that the traditional role conception of progress at any cost to nature has proven disastrous. In a world increasingly threatened by climate change, where both states and individuals demand more concrete measures for environmental protection, Beijing acknowledged that, in order to gain greater international influence and assume a future leadership role, it must adapt to contemporary demands and expectations. Consequently, the conception of China's role has gradually shifted away from pollution-oriented growth towards Hu Jintao's narrative of Scientific Development (China.org.cn 2012) and the ongoing Green BRI under Xi Jinping. This evolution in China's understanding of nature and its role in protecting it has resulted in a role adaptation to align with both domestic and international expectations for a more responsible China in global environmental governance. In doing so, China seeks to reinforce and legitimise its status as a great power in all dimensions.

In this regard, the BRI can be considered an effective environmental policy instrument for China. The announcement of the GSR by Xi Jinping, in 2017, sparked an academic debate on why China decided to switch to the 'greening' of the BRI, thereby positioning itself as a 'Green Great Power' (Ferguson 2021; Khanal & Zhang 2024; Mardell 2023; Nitza-Makowska et al. 2024; Rodenbiker 2023). Thus, drawing on the current state of the art, we will now analyse the 3 primary reasons underlying the green shift of the BRI.

To begin with, China faces urgent domestic environmental degradation issues that require substantial efforts to mitigate their consequences. For example, according to Swiss IQAir data from 2023, China ranks as the 19th country with the poorest air quality globally, with an Air Quality Index (AQI) of 94. In 2023, the average PM⁶ 2.5 concentration in China's air was 6.5 times above the World Health Organisation's recommended levels (IQAir 2023). Water pollution and scarcity have also emerged as critical issues in the country. Many rivers and lakes endure industrial discharge and agricultural runoff (Mardell 2023). Moreover, in the past 20 years, approximately 28,000 rivers have ceased to flow (Ferreira-Pereira et al. 2024; Tan & Lam 2022; K. Yan 2013). This situation is particularly significant for China, which has about 2,075 cubic metres of water per person. This figure is considerably below the global median of 3,776 cubic metres and roughly one-fifth of the per capita

⁶ In the Air Quality Index (AQI), "PM" stands for "particulate matter", which refers to tiny particles or droplets in the air that can be harmful when inhaled.

levels in the United States. Consequently, China faces a medium–high level of water stress (China Power 2023).

Soil contamination by heavy metals and chemical pollutants has adversely affected agricultural productivity and food safety (Ashraf 2023). According to research by the Council on Foreign Relations in 2021, more than 25 per cent of China's arable land is transitioning into desert due to factors such as water scarcity, irresponsible farming methods, overgrazing, and climate change. Each year, desertification expands by approximately 1,000 square miles (Maizland 2021). Given this deteriorating environmental landscape in China, the GSR has become the so-called 'eco-certification' of the Chinese government, as described by Yixian Sun (2022). This eco-certification requires the adoption of good practices for social, environmental, and economic sustainability, both domestically and internationally, by specifying rules for production (*ibid.*).

Secondly, according to Portuguese scholar António Queirós,⁷ 'the GSR fits well in the ongoing sustainable development agenda prioritised by the international community, and particularly under the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.'⁸ The Green BRI also empowers China to achieve its aim of carbon neutrality by 2060 (Xinhua 2023a).

Historically, these investments were centred on fossil fuel projects, sparking concerns⁹ that the BRI participant states would adopt China's high-emission development model (Luthra & Gupta 2023). Nevertheless, during the UN General Assembly, in September 2021, President Xi Jinping declared that China would cease investing in the construction of coal-fired power plants overseas (BBC 2021). Additionally, he promised to enhance assistance for green and low-carbon energy initiatives to other developing nations (*ibid.*). The Chinese President's commitment appears in the Global Development Initiative Concept Paper 2021. This document highlights the BRI's role in promoting sustainable development, particularly its environmental dimension (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2021).

Finally, as the BRI was facing harsh criticism from the West as an environment-unfriendly project, António Queirós stresses that 'the GSR came to cope with the intensifying international concerns and to improve the global acceptance of the BRI'.¹⁰ The Green BRI aligns closely with global efforts to advance clean energy. Given China's considerable potential to become the main clean energy power, the GSR strengthens Beijing's capacity to assume a leadership role in global environmental governance while simultaneously enhancing its international image.

In fact, as per the International Energy Agency, China currently possesses a significant share of the global wind power sector. It holds one-third of the world's wind

⁷ António Queirós is Professor and Researcher at the Centre of Philosophy at University of Lisbon, Portugal.

⁸ António Queirós, interviewed by the authors, June 25, 2024.

⁹ Indonesia and Pakistan can be seen as exceptions as they put BRI investment above environmental concerns (Gallagher et al. 2021; Gu 2024; C. Liu et al. 2023; Tritto 2021).

¹⁰ António Queirós, *op. cit.*, June 25, 2024.

power capacity and dominates in 4 of the top ten wind turbine manufacturers (International Renewable Energy Agency 2022b, a). Additionally, Baxter (2023) recently referred to China as a ‘Solar King’. China boasts 6 of the top ten solar panel producers and accounts for a quarter of the world’s solar energy capacity (International Renewable Energy Agency 2022b, a). With an estimated 50 per cent of the world’s energy potentially originating from solar and wind sources, China is positioned to lead as the world’s first clean energy superpower. According to China Energy Outlook 2050, by 2050, China will produce up to 80 per cent of its energy from renewable sources (CNPC Economics & Technology Research Institute, 2017).

Furthermore, in its second white paper on environmental matters, titled ‘China’s Green Development in the New Era’, China bridges innovative technologies with green development (Xinhua 2023a). The paper encourages enterprises and financial institutions to support innovative green technologies. This effort includes tax incentives and new ‘green technology banks’ (ibid.). Stephen Ndegwa (2023) notes that China’s green development white paper highlights the impact of innovation on the new environmentally sensitive and sustainable culture. The government is leveraging innovations in big data, and artificial intelligence to tackle challenges such as pollution and climate change.

Hence, the following section will focus on China’s renewable energy projects in three main regions: Central Asia, Latin America, and Europe. This analysis aims to reveal how China’s access to these regions’ clean energy infrastructure is perceived.

5 Chinese Renewable Energy Projects and its New Role Conception

Under the BRI, energy projects receive the largest share of investments. Yet, the Green Finance and Development Center’s official data show that China’s green energy investments have steadily risen, ultimately surpassing coal investments between 2017–2022 individually, however, they have not overtaken the overall investments in fossil fuels (see Table 1).

According to the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air Analysis, in 2023, the clean energy investment sector served as the sole contributor of the growth of China’s economic investments, while investments in other sectors declined. China invested approximately 6.3 trillion yuan (\$890 billion) in clean energy sectors, an increase from 4.6 trillion yuan in 2022, marking a 1.7 trillion yuan (40 per cent) year-on-year rise (Myllyvirta 2024). Overall, clean energy accounted for 13 per cent of the total investment in fixed assets in China in 2023, an increase from nine per cent compared to the previous year (ibid.).

Moreover, the International Energy Agency (IEA) released an assessment of China’s commitment to tripling global renewable energy capacity by 2030. The report highlighted that a 50 per cent surge in global renewable installations in 2023 resulted predominantly from China’s efforts. In 2022, China installed nearly as much solar photovoltaic capacity as the rest of the world combined (Cozzi et al. 2023). In 2023, the country doubled its new solar installations, increased new wind capacity by 66 per cent, and nearly quadrupled the additions of energy storage (ibid.). Given the unmatched speed and scale of expansion in China’s installed renewable capacity,

Isabel Hilton (2024), the founder and former editor of China Dialogue, argues that China, not the United States, undoubtedly leads the renewable energy transition of the world. Following the statistical information on China's renewable energy investment, this section will cover its clean energy share in different regions, highlighting its impact on China's international image.

Starting with Central Asia, this region has always served as the primary focus of BRI investments due to its geographical and cultural proximity to China. In this context, China's clean energy projects in Central Asia gained new relevance, particularly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. However, Moscow increased the pressure on Central Asian countries to purchase more gas from Russia (Sharifli 2024). During our interview with Jildiz Nicharapova,¹¹ this scholar endorsed the view that China's renewable energy projects in Central Asia play a crucial role in mitigating the region's dependence on Russian gas and improving energy security.¹² In this regard, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are becoming major players in the region's transition to renewable energy, particularly focusing on solar and wind power initiatives (Tanbaev 2024). As both countries plan to satisfy about 50 per cent of their energy consumption from renewable energy sources, Dr Nicharapova claims that China's GSR interests the Central Asian republics.¹³

China's investment in renewable energy in Central Asia is divided into two distinct phases. During the first phase (1990s–2018), alongside traditional energy initiatives, China primarily focused on large hydropower projects (HPPs) in the region. This effort particularly aided downstream countries, such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, in exploiting their hydropower potential (Sharifli 2024). Chinese companies engaged in these projects mainly through debt financing from institutions such as the China Exim Bank (CEB) and the China Development Bank (CDB). From 2018 onwards, China shifted its focus in the Central Asian renewable energy market from large HPPs to wind and solar projects (Zhou et al. 2022).

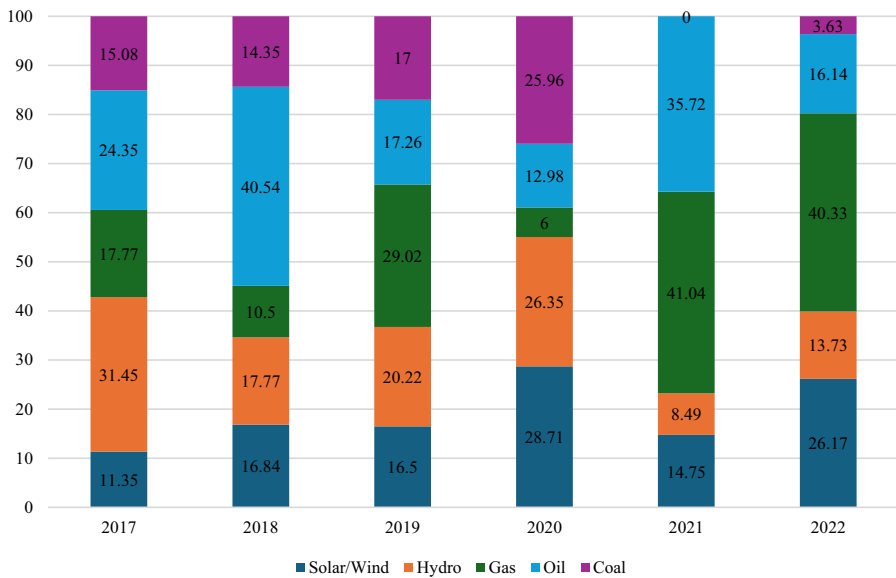
This transition included a change in financing strategies. Since 2018, Chinese renewable energy companies have shifted towards equity financing and increased collaboration with local development banks, replacing their earlier reliance on debt financing from Chinese banks (International Renewable Energy Agency 2023). This evolution in China's corporate involvement aligns with the changing preferences of local governments in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which are increasingly prioritising wind and solar projects due to the decreasing costs of these technologies compared to large-scale hydropower plants (HPPs) and the negative impacts of climate change on hydro resources. However, Dr Nicharapova highlights the adverse implications of China's involvement in Central Asia's renewable energy infrastructure, suggesting that Russian fossil fuel dependency may be replaced by Chinese renewable energy sources (J. Nicharapova, personal communication, 24 May 2024).

¹¹ Jildiz Nicharapova is Associate Professor at the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

¹² Jildiz Nicharapova, interviewed by the authors, May 24, 2024.

¹³ Ibid.

Table 1 China's energy investment trends as part of the belt and road initiative (2017–2022) [%]
Source: Authors based on Green Finance & Development Center (2023)



Another key geopolitical region for China's GSR is Latin America. As noted by Carlos Saint James, the former president of Argentina's Renewable Energies Chamber (CADER), 'initially China secured the food sector, then natural resources, and now it is going after energy' (In China Dialogue, 2024). Diego Pautasso contends that 'infrastructure deficit and energy transition issues in Latin American countries provided a fertile ground for warm acceptance of the GSRs in the region'.¹⁴ Since 2017, China has been actively financing renewable energy projects across Latin America. As the study by Brazil's Institute for Applied Economic Research (2023) unfolds, Foreign Direct Investment by Chinese companies in clean energy has tripled since the end of 2018 in Latin America, rising from US\$960 million to US\$3.8 billion in 2022. Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Colombia, and Argentina have received significant amounts of Chinese investment in solar and wind energy projects.

The Annual Energy Outlook 2023 (U.S. Energy Information Administration 2023) indicates that China ranks highest in installed solar energy capacity in Latin American countries. Approximately 90 per cent of all installed wind and solar technologies in Latin America come from Chinese companies (Zaremba 2023). Brazil illustrates China's active engagement in energy transition, evidenced by Sino-Brazilian endeavours to address climate change and preserve the environment.¹⁵ China's Development Bank has significantly financed key solar and wind projects in the

¹⁴ Diego Pautasso, op. cit., April 19, 2024.

¹⁵ Sabrina Medeiros, interviewed by the authors, June 1, 2024.

region, including Latin America's largest solar plant, Cauchari in Argentina, and the Punta Sierra wind farm in Chile (Bertram 2023).

China's increasing solar exports present significant opportunities and challenges for Latin America. Affordable solar panels help the region reduce emissions, lower electricity costs, and enhance grid resilience, particularly during hot weather. Notwithstanding, reliance on Chinese-made finished products may limit Latin America's ability to gain value within the solar supply chain. The risks are heightened if Chinese companies dominate the electricity sector, covering generation, transmission, and retail (Webster & Tobin 2024). China dominates Latin American electricity markets as it is a key investor in the region's generation, transmission, and distribution sectors. It maintains a near-monopoly on solar panels globally and plays a significant role in Latin America's wind energy markets. Additionally, China seeks to secure a foothold in Argentina's nuclear power plant industry (Kotz 2024).

China succeeded in penetrating the clean energy infrastructure of both developing and developed countries, with particular relevance to the EU. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU aimed to reduce and eventually abolish its dependence on Russian fossil fuels by 2027, as outlined in the REPowerEU Plan 2022. Currently, the EU Revised Renewable Energy Directive sets a target of 32 per cent clean energy in the EU's gross final energy consumption by 2030 (European Commission 2023). Surprisingly, China overtook the EU, which used to lead in renewable energy sources, back in 2018, causing losses for key clean energy players, including Denmark's Vestas and German-owned Siemens Gamesa (POLITICO 2024).

Chinese companies hold a substantial stake of around 10 per cent of the total installed wind energy capacity in the EU (Global Wind Energy Council 2024). More alarming for Brussels, China dominates the European solar panel market, supplying around 80 per cent of the solar panels used in Europe (International Renewable Energy Agency 2022a). The EU has 'acute reliance on China' regarding renewable energy sources, making it unable to 'go green without China', at least for now, according to the European Union Institute for Security Studies (2024, p.2). This is corroborated by the EU's former climate chief Wopke Hoekstra, who stated, 'we are [the EU] getting more dependent on China in our quest to become greener, which is problematic' (Simon 2024).

This evidence demonstrates China's considerable efforts to invest in green projects across various regions, supporting our argument that China has been adapting its international role through the GSR. Indeed, China's growing commitment to, and success in, green investment in regions such as Central Asia and Latin America have significant potential to enhance its international image both regionally and globally. By capitalising on structural needs and development gaps—particularly in green and sustainable development—China pursues a strategy that reflects an adaptation of its role performance in line with regional and international demands and expectations. In this way, China presents itself as a responsible power, attentive to regional needs and the future of humanity, thereby promoting a more attractive international image aligned with its interests. Through this strategy, Beijing seeks to secure recognition of its legitimacy to assume leadership in global environmental governance, while simultaneously strengthening its material capabilities to do so.

6 Results and Analysis of Survey Data

In order to help us understand whether China's new role conception as a responsible stakeholder in environmental issues is, in fact, corroborated by the international community's perceptions of the GSR's performance, we will now discuss the main inputs resulting from the applied survey.

Regarding the question of how the GSR impacts China's international image, the majority of respondents (64.8 per cent) indicated a 'positive' impact. Additionally, 31.5 per cent reported that the GSR has a 'moderate' impact on China's international perception. Only 3.7 per cent believed that the GSR has 'no impact' on China's image, as illustrated in Fig. 1.

Regarding the inquiry on which specific direction of GSR projects respondents find most influential on China's international perception, 'Renewable Energy Projects' received the highest favourability at 48.1 per cent. Meanwhile, 'Green Infrastructure Projects' and 'Innovative Green Technology Projects' received 27.8 per cent and 20.4 per cent of the votes, respectively, as Fig. 2 indicates.

Finally, while addressing the primary motives for China's shift to the 'greening' of the BRI, a larger share of respondents identified 'China's positioning as a Green Great Power' as the key motive (46.3 per cent). Slightly fewer respondents (44.4 per cent) considered 'coping with Western criticism of the BRI and improving its global acceptance' as the main reason for the launch of the GSR. Additionally, 9.3 per cent of survey participants think that the domestic environmental degradation of China is responsible for Beijing's green shift (Fig. 3).

Overall, the survey data indicates a strong alignment between China's current role conception about environmental issues and the international community's role expectations. The positive impact of the GSR on China's international image, the significance of renewable energy projects, and the motives behind the greening of the BRI all suggest that China is perceived by our respondents as moving towards being a responsible stakeholder in environmental matters. Such a view is supported by Ana Barros-Platiau,¹⁶ who contributes (or proposes/posits) that by positioning itself as a responsible environmental power, China demonstrates its willingness to occupy the spaces left vacant by the US, which could have implications for global governance.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the close percentage split between viewing China as positioning itself as a Green Great Power and coping with Western criticism suggests that some scepticism remains about the authenticity of China's environmental commitment. This dual perception portrays the complex interaction between genuine (authentic or legitimate) environmental stewardship and strategic image management in China's approach to global environmental issues. Such scepticism is also corroborated by Turkish scholar Berna Kirkulak-Uludag,¹⁸ according to whom 'particularly developed countries are not convinced about [the GSR]', while 'less

¹⁶ Professor at the Institute of International Relations at the University of Brasília, Brazil.

¹⁷ Ana Barros-Platiau, interviewed by the authors, April 2, 2025.

¹⁸ Professor at Dokuz Eylül University, Faculty of Business, International Trade and Business Department. Buca, İzmir, Türkiye.

How do you assess the impact of the Green Silk Road on China's international image?

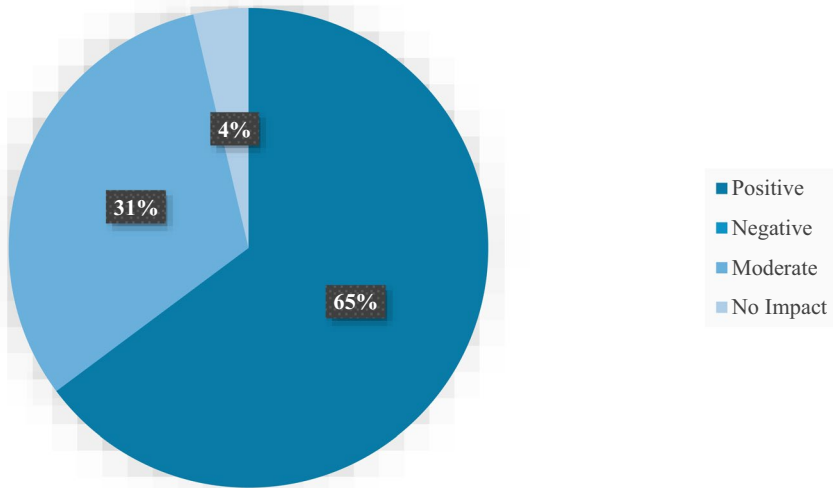


Fig. 1 The Impacts of the GSR. *Source:* Survey data collected by the authors

What direction of Green BRI's projects do you think has the most influence on China's international perception?

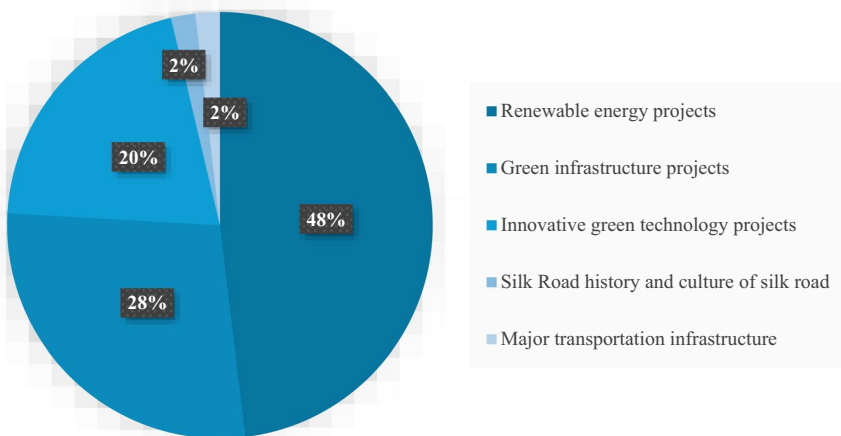


Fig. 2 The GSR Projects. *Source:* Survey data collected by the authors

Which of the following reasons do you consider the primary motivation for China's shift towards te "greening" of the Belt and Road Initiative?

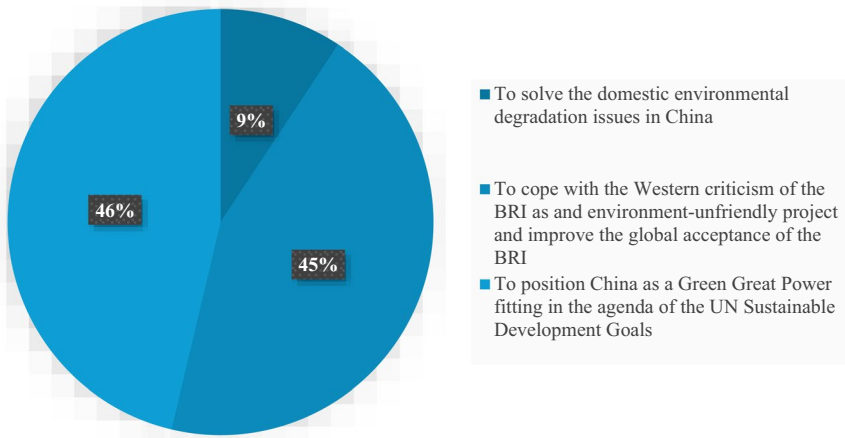


Fig. 3 Motives underlying the 'greening' of the BRI. *Source:* Survey data collected by the authors

developed countries are not very concerned about environmental issues'.¹⁹ Alternatively, Kevin Lo²⁰ argues that China's international image 'is mainly constructed by Western media'.²¹ Therefore, it is neither accurate to speak of a 'global scepticism,' nor does its shift towards sustainability play a decisive role in shaping this image.²² Furthermore, Kevin Lo also asserts that the GSR is unlikely to redefine global governance; rather, it appears to 'follow/support the existing structure of global governance'.²³ This demonstrates that not all experts interviewed by us believe in the existence of a global image; rather, they argue that it is primarily a Western-constructed image that shapes perceptions in other parts of the world.

7 Conclusion

Drawing on an existing gap in the literature that has overlooked the significance of the GSR in improving the conception of China's international role as an environmental leader, this paper has attempted to answer the previously stated research question: To what extent does the GSR contribute to (re)adjust China's role conception to better meet international expectations? By applying the role theory, we have arrived at the following conclusions.

¹⁹ Berna Kirkulak-Uludag, interviewed by the authors, May 15, 2024.

²⁰ Professor of Geography at the Hong Kong Baptist University, People's Republic of China.

²¹ Kevin Lo, interviewed by the authors, April 2, 2025.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

As a first major finding, this study concludes that environmental issues are no longer indifferent to Beijing, both domestically and internationally. Although environmental concerns were long neglected in favour of unrestrained progress, China's current role conception and role performance have adjusted in order to meet the expectations of the international community, which has been urging China to assume the role of a more responsible stakeholder in global environmental issues. In line with the tenets of Moral Realism, we also understand that by aligning itself with the expectations and demands of the international community, China seeks to present itself as a responsible, exemplary power. In doing so, China can strengthen its international credibility, enhance its status, and thus, present itself as ready to fill the vacancies left by the United States.

When adopting its new role as a sustainable and environment-friendly power, China has three main motives underlying the 'greening' of the BRI: addressing domestic environmental degradation issues, positioning itself as a 'Green Great Power' by aligning with the UN Sustainable Development Agenda 2030, and coping with Western criticism to improve global acceptance of the BRI. In this role adaptation, renewable energy projects receive most of the credit. China currently accounts for a quarter of the world's solar energy capacity and one-third of the world's wind power output. Given that approximately 50 per cent of the world's energy could potentially come from solar and wind sources, China is poised to become the leading global superpower in clean energy. Yet, despite China's push towards greening the BRI, the initiative's dual commitment to both renewable and carbon-intensive energy sources present a complex scenario for future green energy development. An analytical approach reveals a tension between short-term economic gains from fossil fuels and the long-term sustainability goals. As such, the environmental integrity of the BRI will depend on China's ability to enforce stringent environmental regulations across all BRI projects, potentially requiring a re-evaluation of its lending practices to favour sustainability over speed and cost. This shift could reduce the carbon footprint of the BRI, however it requires a recalibration of China's energy strategy that prioritises long-term ecological health over short-term geopolitical and economic advantages.

Another important conclusion lies in the fact that China's green initiatives are considered to be win-win for Central Asia and Latin America, because of these regions' infrastructure deficit and energy transition problems. In contrast, China's increasing involvement in the EU's clean energy infrastructure is predominantly perceived as a zero-sum game, because the EU used to be the leader in the renewable energy sector, while in 2018 China surprisingly overtook the EU's leadership triggering the competition. Possessing around 90 per cent of all installed wind and solar technologies in Latin America as well as supplying around 80 per cent of the solar panels used in Europe and approximately 30 per cent of solar and wind sources each in Central Asia, China's role adjustment through GSR projects seems to be successful. This fruitful role adjustment through the GSR projects links to our next finding.

Our survey confirms that the GSR, as an expression of significant role adaptation, receives support from the majority of respondents, who believe the Initiative has positive impacts on China's international image. Overall, China's role performance as a 'Green Great Power' largely meets external expectations for a more

responsible and proactive China in environmental matters. Nevertheless, our data also indicates the need for caution, as scepticism exists regarding the authenticity of China's environmental commitment. This scepticism arises from the complex interplay between genuine environmental stewardship and strategic image management in China's approach to global environmental issues. Besides, it should be stressed that despite China's commendable initiatives to go green, the country remains the world's biggest emitter of carbon dioxide. In other words, there is yet a considerable gap between the top green power that China would like to become and the current on-the-ground role performance. Undoubtedly, the GSR still has significant progress to make considering that it will most likely take several years, perhaps decades, to produce more impactful outcomes.

Given the significance of the topic and its ongoing developments, future studies should remain attentive to these dynamics. In particular, researchers should continue to monitor China's green initiatives, assessing whether they will further strengthen China's international image or, conversely, whether they may ultimately prove detrimental. In this regard, it would be worthwhile to examine these dynamics more closely by exploring the interplay between China's green projects and the concept of greenwashing—a term, primarily used in economics and business that describes the practice of presenting positive environmental claims more as a marketing strategy than as a genuine commitment to sustainability. In any case, careful scrutiny of these dynamics will remain essential for understanding the international political agenda in environmental terms, as well as for shaping the future of geopolitics and global governance.

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Data Availability This study generated original data through a survey. The survey results are available in the electronic supplementary material provided with the manuscript.

Code Availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Ethical Approval All the interviewees provided written informed consent to participate in this study.

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