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## Threat Perceptions from China in the West: Impact on Support for Military Aggression and the Mediating Roles of Collective Narcissism and Intergroup Conspiracy Beliefs

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*European Masters in the Psychology of Global Mobility, Inclusion, and Diversity in Society*

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## Resumo

A postura global cada vez mais assertiva da China deu origem a percepções de ameaça em muitos países ocidentais, como a Alemanha. Isto também se reflete nos meios de comunicação social, que têm cada vez mais retratado a China como um rival ameaçador para o Ocidente. No entanto, o impacto das percepções de ameaça induzidas pelos meios de comunicação social nas atitudes de política externa em relação à China no Ocidente continua por explorar. Este estudo visa colmatar esta lacuna, examinando o efeito das percepções de ameaça intergrupais induzidas pelos media no apoio à agressão militar contra a China, utilizando uma amostra de 222 participantes alemães. Os participantes receberam um artigo noticioso neutro ou ameaçador sobre a China, partindo da hipótese de que a cobertura ameaçadora conduziria a percepções de ameaça intergrupais mais fortes do que a cobertura neutra. De acordo com um modelo de mediação em série, também colocámos a hipótese de que o aumento das percepções de ameaça intergrupais aumentaria o apoio à agressão militar contra a China, mediado sequencialmente pelo narcisismo coletivo e pelas crenças de conspiração intergrupais. Os nossos resultados sugerem que os participantes expostos a uma cobertura mediática ameaçadora não mostraram percepções de ameaça intergrupais significativamente mais fortes do que os expostos a uma cobertura neutra. No entanto, a investigação existente que contradiz estes resultados aponta para limitações na nossa conceção experimental. No entanto, o nosso estudo fornece provas sólidas de uma relação direta, significativa e positiva entre a percepção de ameaça intergrupais por parte da China e o aumento do apoio à agressão militar contra a China. Além disso, encontramos um efeito de mediação sequencial significativo do narcisismo coletivo e das crenças de conspiração intergrupais nesta relação. Estas conclusões têm implicações importantes para atenuar a intensificação do conflito entre a China e o Ocidente.

*Palavras-chave:* China, Ocidente, percepção de ameaça intergrupais, narcisismo coletivo, crenças de conspiração intergrupais

## **Abstract**

China's increasingly assertive global posture has led to threat perceptions in many Western countries, such as in Germany. This is also reflected in the media, which have increasingly portrayed China as a threatening rival to the West. However, the impact of media-induced threat perceptions on foreign policy attitudes towards China in the West remains unexplored. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the effect of media-induced intergroup threat perceptions on support for military aggression against China using a sample of 222 German participants. We primed participants with either a threatening or a neutral news article about China, hypothesising that threatening coverage would lead to stronger intergroup threat perceptions than neutral coverage. Following a serial mediation model, we further hypothesized that increased intergroup threat perceptions would increase support for military aggression against China, sequentially mediated by collective narcissism and intergroup conspiracy beliefs. Our results suggest that participants exposed to threatening media coverage did not show significantly stronger intergroup threat perceptions than those exposed to neutral coverage. However, existing research that contradicts these findings points to limitations in our experimental design. Nevertheless, our study provides robust evidence of a direct, significant, and positive relationship between perceived intergroup threat from China and increased support for military aggression against China. In addition, we found a significant sequential mediation effect of collective narcissism and intergroup conspiracy beliefs on this relationship. These findings point to avenues for de-escalating the intensifying conflict between China and the West.

*Keywords:* China, West, perceived intergroup threat, collective narcissism, intergroup conspiracy beliefs

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## **Glossary of Acronyms**

ARD	Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland/ Association of Public Broadcasting Corporations in the Federal Republic of Germany
ChatGPT	Chat Generative Pre-trained Transformer
CTT	China Threat Theory
EU	European Union
Covid-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
ISCTE	Instituto Universitário de Lisboa/ University Institute of Lisbon
ITT	Intergroup Threat Theory
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SIT	Social Identity Theory
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States

## Introduction

In recent years, China has attracted considerable negative international attention: On the one hand, it has been accused by the UN and numerous NGOs of human rights violations within its own borders, such as the systematic oppression of the Uighur minority (OHCHR, 2022) or the arbitrary detention of human rights defenders (David, 2021). On the other hand, there has been international criticism for China's actions beyond its borders. These include accusations by the US and other countries of violating international trade rules (United States Trade Representative, 2024), as well as allegations of cyber espionage (Yerushalmy, 2024). Further, China's new position as the world's leading debt collector has raised concerns, especially as many of its major debtors are struggling with liquidity or insolvency, fostering a dependency dynamic (Hawkins, 2023). As a result, feelings of threat towards China are growing in neighbouring East Asian countries as well as in many Western<sup>1</sup> countries (International Republican Institute, 2022; Kafura, 2023; Beshay, 2024).

Yet the general perception of China as a threat in the West is not new, but has deep historical roots dating back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. During this period, Western countries frequently portrayed China as a danger, often with racist undertones – a perception that continues to shape Western representations of China to this day (Han & Marwecki, 2023). This becomes particularly evident looking at the Western media's portrayal of China. In Germany, for example, shortly after the start of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, the centre-left news magazine *Der Spiegel* ran the headline: “Coronavirus: Made in China. When globalisation becomes a deadly danger” (Der Spiegel, 2020, translated by author). Indeed, analyses of media coverage in Germany reveal a tendency to portray China as a rising, threatening rival to the West, focusing on issues of conflict and violence, and relying on simplistic, stereotypical representations of the country (Richter & Gebauer, 2010; Liu et al., 2021; Hufnagel et al., 2022; Han & Marwecki, 2023). This is of concern as media coverage has been shown to have a significant impact on perceptions and behaviour towards different social groups (Harwood & Roy, 2005; Mastro & Seate, 2012; Seate & Mastro, 2015; Harwood, 2020).

This research project aims to investigate whether media-induced threat perceptions about a country lead to biased beliefs about one's own and other cultural groups, potentially fostering support for aggressive political attitudes towards the outgroup. We propose that threatening media coverage of China may invoke intergroup threat perceptions of China

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, we use the terms "West", "Western" and "Western world" in accordance with the concept of the "Latin West", which is defined solely by cultural parameters rather than geographical boundaries. This includes "all of the countries of Western Europe, as well as those countries influenced by Western European culture" (World Population Review, 2024). However, we have chosen to follow the narrowest interpretation of this concept, which includes most of the countries of the EU, as well as the UK, Norway, Iceland, Switzerland, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

among individuals from Western countries. Focusing specifically on Germany, we aim to examine the effects of this intergroup threat. We propose that perceived intergroup threat from China, as portrayed in the German media, leads to more support for military aggression against China among Western, German participants. Furthermore, in line with a serial mediation model, we propose that this effect is serially mediated by collective narcissism (the belief that the ingroup is exceptional and entitled to privileged treatment, combined with the feeling that others do not adequately acknowledge it), and by intergroup conspiracy beliefs, which raise the issue of a Chinese conspiracy against the West.

## **Theoretical Background**

### **2.1 Western threat perceptions of China**

The perception of China as a threat in the West can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Back in the 19th century, China was referred to as "Yellow Peril", a term based on the racist assumption of the superiority of the "White race" over ethnic groups considered as "Yellow" regarding their skin colour. The term was characterised by the perception of China as a moral, political, economic and military threat to the West (Yang, 2017). After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Western discourse intertwined the concept of the "Yellow Peril" with fears of communism, referred to as "Red Menace," symbolised by the colour red in its flag. The dangers of Chinese communism in the face of the Cold War were increasingly emphasised, as well as the potential threat that the rise of China could pose to Western democratic values. Yang (2017) framed the blending of these two threat images as "Red Peril". China's rapid economic growth in the late 20th century further fuelled the perception of China as a threat in the West (Broomfield, 2003).

Emma Broomfield (2003) characterised this Western perception of China as the China Threat Theory (CTT). She categorised the perceived threat from China into military, economic and ideological dimensions. While military threats stem from the modernisation of the Chinese military and its assertive stance in the Asian region, economic threats stem from China's rapid economic growth and its increasingly important status as a global economic power. The ideological threat refers to China as an uprising rival to the US in the East-West conflict and as a "new ideological leader of what is left of communism" (Broomfield, 2003, p. 268), challenging Western values of freedom and democracy. Some proponents of the CTT (Broomfield, 2003), especially realists who see international relations as an anarchic system driven by power maximisation, argue that China is using its economic resources to build a military force that could potentially turn against the US (e.g., Mearsheimer, 2006).

As described above, the widespread perception of China as a threat in Western societies has deep historical roots and persists to this day. Not least during Trump's presidency and subsequent re-election campaign, the notion of China as a threat became increasingly popular as he repeatedly utilised this rhetoric to capitalise on an already existing public sentiment directed against China (Frauen, 2021). However, while the worsening of Chinese-Western relations often focuses on the US and China, the perception of China as a threat is also popular in many other Western countries, such as in Australia (Goodman, 2017), and in many European countries (Grzywacz, 2019; International Republican Institute, 2022). The sense of threat from China has also grown in Germany in recent years: according to a survey on behalf of the German public broadcaster *ARD*, 63 % (19 % definitely, 44 % rather yes) of the German participants considered China to be a threat to global security at the time of the survey in 2022 (Ehni, 2022).

## **2.2 The Perception of China as a threat in the German media**

The increasing attention paid to China's rise in Germany is not least reflected in the continuously growing number of media reports on China over the past two decades (Hufnagel et al., 2022). In the following section, we will look at the nature of media coverage of China in Germany. We believe that Western media coverage significantly shapes the perception of China in the West, as media exposure contributes significantly to the shaping and maintenance of social identities and influences intergroup dynamics in society (Harwood & Roy, 2005; Mastro & Seate, 2012; Seate & Mastro, 2015; Harwood, 2020).

In 2008, the Heinrich Böll Foundation carried out a media analysis of a total of 8766 articles relating to China (Richter & Gebauer, 2010). The media analysis revealed that coverage was primarily focused on economic issues. Just over half of the analysed articles mentioned China in the form of simplified, stereotype-based depictions of the country. Alongside positive stereotypes, which were primarily related to the economic sector, such as "attractive growth market" or "interesting production location", the media image was characterised by negative stereotypes, such as the image of China as a "supporter of rogue states", a "climate sinner", a "cheap producer" or a country with an insatiable "hunger for raw materials". In addition, a "conflict- and violence-centred core agenda" (Richter & Gebauer, 2010, p. 11, translated by author) dominated the reporting on China. Reporting on Chinese domestic politics, for example, was dominated by the debate surrounding the Tibet conflict, while reporting on international relations was dominated by China's relations with so-called "rogue states" or by China's frequently criticised actions in international organisations or in Africa (Richter & Gebauer, 2010).

Hufnagel et al. (2022) found similar results. In a longitudinal study, they analysed 55,893 German newspaper articles from 2000 to 2019 to examine the development of German media coverage of China and its framing over the last two decades. They used a sequential mixed-methods design, starting with a frequency analysis of the data, followed by a computational analysis to identify the main themes of China coverage in Germany. Semi-standardised interviews were then conducted with three former and three current China correspondents from German quality newspapers to test the robustness and validity of the quantitative results. The frequency analysis revealed that media attention to China has increased between 2000 and 2019, suggesting that China is playing an increasingly important role in international economic and political relations. The computational analysis found that economic issues were the most prominent, while other aspects were largely neglected. This was interpreted by the authors as reflecting the predominantly economic nature of Chinese-German relations. Furthermore, the computational analysis and the expert interviews revealed that the "partnership" frame, which portrayed China as a valuable economic partner, was

gradually replaced after 2016 and 2017 by a "rivalry" frame, which portrays China as a growing economic threat to Germany.

A recent study by Han and Marwecki (2023) focuses on the role that racist narratives play in the portrayal of China in the German media. The authors used the German media landscape to analyse how racist prejudices in the West form at least part of the ideological basis for perceptions of China's rise, and how such racist prejudices to some extent inflate people's threat perceptions and hinder acceptance of the increasing power of China in the global order. The authors used a small sample of five German bestsellers on China's rise and ten cover stories from the weekly magazine *Der Spiegel*, from 2004 to 2014. The analysis revealed only an occasional, explicit use of the racist terminology of the "Yellow Peril". However, according to the authors, all the elements that make up the perception of the "Yellow Peril" are preserved, albeit in a more subtle way (Han & Marwecki, 2023).

What is more, there is evidence that the portrayal of China as a threat in the German media became increasingly undifferentiated and stereotypical with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. In an analysis of a total of 747 German media reports, Liu and colleagues (2021) found that colonial-era clichés and stereotypes were increasingly being reused. Even though overt racist resentment against Chinese people and Asians were not much used in the media, they were subtly integrated into other clichés, such as the "disgusting" nature of eating wild animals or the revival of the "Yellow Peril" motive. In addition to the coverage of the coronavirus event itself, which dominated the media, Chinese domestic issues such as the one-party state, propaganda, censorship and the events around the suppression of political rights and civil liberties in Hong Kong were covered, as well as economic issues, China's international relations and the geopolitical implications of the crisis. Apart from the initial phase of the coronavirus outbreak, the media coverage about China was largely determined by the perspective of German interests. The systemic competition between the authoritarian-repressive one-party state of China on the one hand and Western liberal democracy on the other was a common and repeating theme. Threat scenarios from colonial and anti-communist contexts were revisited – for example, the concept of the "Cold War", now referred to as the "New Cold War", was revived (Liu et al., 2021).

To summarise, analyses of German media coverage of China reflect the increasing threat perception of China in the West. Studies show a predominant focus on economic issues, often to the neglect of other aspects (Richter & Gebauer, 2010; Hufnagel et al., 2022). Media coverage of China is characterised by a rather undifferentiated portrayal of the country and a significant use of simplified stereotypes (Richter & Gebauer, 2010; Liu et al., 2021). Furthermore, media coverage of China often emphasises conflict and violence in China's domestic and international affairs (Richter & Gebauer, 2010). Recent analyses highlight a shift from frames of partnership to frames of rivalry and competition between China and the West

(Liu et al., 2022; Hufnagel et al., 2022). Racial narratives subtly influence media representations of China in Germany (Liu et al., 2021; Han & Marwecki, 2023).

### **2.3 Perceived intergroup threat and support for military aggression**

The correspondence between the content of the China Threat Theory (CTT; Broomfield, 2003) and media coverage of China in Germany raises the question of its influence on Western-Chinese intergroup dynamics. Viewing the CTT (Broomfield, 2003) through a social psychological lens may shed light on the potential consequences of the perception of China as a threat in the West, including its impact on foreign policy attitudes towards China.

According to social psychologists, we all belong to various social groups that shape our identity. These groups include some people as ingroup members and exclude others as outgroup members. Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) proposes that members of a social group strive to maintain a positive social identity by favouring their ingroup over outgroups. When an outgroup appears capable of harming the ingroup, this triggers a sense of threat in the ingroup. Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT, Stephan et al., 2009) examines the antecedents and consequences of perceived intergroup threat. Importantly, this theory focuses on feelings of threat as they are subjectively perceived and emphasises that these perceptions, whether accurate or not, have actual consequences. ITT (Stephan et al., 2009) distinguishes between two types of intergroup threat: realistic threat, which involves concerns about physical harm or loss of resources, and symbolic threat, which challenges the integrity or validity of the ingroup's meaning system, including its religion, values, belief system, ideology, philosophy, morality or worldview.

We are not aware of any study that links the ITT (Stephan et al., 2009) to the CTT (Broomfield, 2003). However, the ITT (Stephan et al., 2009) is well suited to examining the social psychological consequences of the CTT as a persistent threat rhetoric in the West. This is for two reasons: First, the CTT portrays China from a Western perspective. Thus, in line with the ITT (Stephan et al., 2009), it refers to feelings that are perceived from a subjective perspective and which, whether accurate or not, have real consequences. Second, according to Broomfield (2003), the CTT refers to both the realistic threat dimension, in the form of military and economic threats, and the symbolic threat dimension, in the form of an ideological threat to Western values of freedom and democracy.

Stephan and colleagues (2009) emphasise the detrimental effects of intergroup threat on intergroup relations, including increased intergroup hostility, prejudice or aggression. Although not explicitly addressed in their theory, numerous studies have shown that threatened ingroup members often adopt more aggressive foreign policy stances towards outgroups as a result of intergroup threat. Studies on terrorism in particular confirm this link. For example, a study by Huddy et al. (2005) found that the majority of US-Americans who perceived a high threat of future terrorist attacks in the US supported the Bush administration's antiterrorism

policies abroad. Merolla & Zechmeister (2009) showed that both in the US and in the UK an aggressive foreign policy after 9/11 was supported. A large majority of Americans supported the Bush administration's military action in Afghanistan and initially supported the war in Iraq, although support waned due to instability in Iraq and rising US casualties. Even five years after 9/11, more than half of British citizens felt the need for a more aggressive response to terrorism.

Gadarian (2010) extended the general effect of perceived threat on foreign policy attitudes by including the role of the media. She found that threatening information combined with evocative images of the 9/11 terrorist attack in the media led to the adoption of more hawkish foreign policy views among US-Americans. Outside the context of terrorism research, Kupatadze and Zeitzoff (2019) investigated how exposure to conflict and memories of aggression affect foreign policy attitudes in the context of the Georgian-Russian conflict. A direct link was found between perceived threat and foreign policy attitudes: Exposure to violence in connection with the Georgian-Russian conflict increased support for hardline policies among Georgians via increased threat perceptions.

To the best of our knowledge, no research has been conducted yet on how the China threat discourse in the media may affect foreign policy attitudes of Western citizens. However, a recent study conducted by Wu (2023) in China shows an association between the increasing prevalence of the US threat discourse in China and the adoption of more hawkish attitudes towards the US among Chinese citizens. Analysing the social media posts of 2,061,504 microbloggers on Weibo (China's equivalent of Twitter) from January to December 2020, Wu (2023) found that sentiments of national rejuvenation and the historical backdrop of the “hundred years of humiliation” – characterised by colonial oppression, opium wars and Western hegemony – together with growing resentment against perceived aggressive competition and coercion from the US, have significantly reinforced the US threat discourse. As a result, this has contributed to an increased hawkish foreign policy stance towards the US among the Chinese population.

In our study, we would like to use a German sample to analyse the extent to which perceived intergroup threat from China induced by the media influences foreign policy attitudes towards China in Western countries such as Germany. Consistent with the ITT (Stephan et al., 2009), we suggest that perceived intergroup threat leads to an increase in hostile foreign policy attitudes towards China expressed through support for military aggression against the country. However, the interplay between media consumption and intergroup dynamics complicates the study of this relationship: People select and interpret media based on their group membership, which shapes their views of other groups. In turn, media portrayals of other groups influence how these groups are perceived by others (Harwood, 2020). This cyclical relationship makes it difficult to look solely at the causal effect of media coverage on outgroup perceptions. In



order to isolate the causal effect of media exposure on outgroup perceptions, we used a threat manipulation experimental design.

We proceeded in two steps. First, we assessed how threatening media coverage influences intergroup threat perceptions by priming participants with a threatening newspaper article about China, a method that has been used successfully in previous research (e.g., Mashuri & Zaduqisti, 2015). Second, we examined how intergroup threat perceptions influenced support for military aggression against China. Our approach involved testing two sub-hypotheses: one assessing the effectiveness of our threat manipulation, and the other examining the effect of perceived intergroup threat on support for military aggression.

**H1.1:** Threatening media coverage of China increases intergroup threat perceptions among Western, German participants. (manipulation check)

**H1.2:** Perceived intergroup threat from China leads to more support for military aggression against China among Western, German participants.

## **2.4 The mediating role of collective narcissism**

One possible explanation for why intergroup dynamics lead to hostile outgroup attitudes is collective narcissism. Recently, there has been an increasing emphasis on collective narcissism as a concept for understanding the processes of social identity construction and ingroup identification (Golec De Zavala, 2023). Collective narcissism refers to the belief that one's ingroup is unique, exceptional and entitled to privileged treatment, combined with a feeling that the ingroup's exceptionalism is inadequately recognised by others (Golec de Zavala, 2009). There is evidence of a link between perceived intergroup threat and collective narcissism, as well as a link between collective narcissism and foreign policy attitudes towards outgroups, suggesting a mediating role of collective narcissism.

### **2.4.1 Perceived intergroup threat and collective narcissism**

In their threat-identification model, Schmid and Muldoon (2015) confirm that perceived intergroup threat is related to increased ingroup identification, providing a basis for a hypothesised link between intergroup threat and collective narcissism. Their model argues that higher levels of perceived intergroup threat on the one hand negatively affect psychological well-being. On the other hand, perceived intergroup threat also has a positive indirect effect on psychological well-being through increased social identification. This indirect mediation effect varies with the level of exposure to political conflict. Although ingroup identification and collective narcissism are distinct constructs, evidence links collective narcissism to a specific aspect of ingroup identification known as self-investment (Jaworska, 2016; Jaworska et al., 2018; as cited in Golec de Zavala et al., 2019). Self-investment includes positive feelings about

ingroup membership, a strong attachment to the ingroup, and a sense of the importance of ingroup membership (Leach et al., 2008, p. 148). Meta-analytical evidence further suggests that intergroup hostility arises from ingroup identification only when it overlaps with collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala et al., 2019).

To date, perceived intergroup threat has mainly been investigated as a result of collective narcissism (e.g., Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; Golec De Zavala et al., 2017; Golec De Zavala et al., 2022). Guerra and colleagues (2020) were the first to examine perceived intergroup threat as a predictor of collective narcissism. The authors hypothesised that perceived intergroup threat would positively predict both national collective narcissism and national ingroup satisfaction. However, they hypothesised that only national collective narcissism would predict negative emotions and hostile behavioural intentions towards threatening outgroups. Their study was conducted in Germany, Greece, Portugal and the UK, using different threatening outgroups for each country. For all four countries, the hypothesised link between perceived intergroup threat and outgroup hostility via collective narcissism was supported.

#### **2.4.2 Collective narcissism and support for military aggression**

There is a considerable body of research suggesting that collective narcissism leads to the endorsement and justification of intergroup hostility. For example, a meta-analysis by Golec de Zavala and colleagues (2019) found a moderate association between collective narcissism and outgroup hostility, taking into account the results of 38 studies. Further, Jasko and colleagues' (2020) definition of "quest for collective significance" is equivalent to collective narcissism. Their research found that ethnic collective narcissism is a strong predictor of political extremism and acceptance of terrorist violence, particularly in radical social settings. So far, only a few studies have examined the link between collective narcissism and support for military aggression against an outgroup in particular. One study by Golec de Zavala et al. (2009) found that US students who scored higher on collective narcissism were more supportive of the military actions of the US in Iraq in 2003. In addition, Cai & Gries (2013) examined the relationship between national narcissism and political attitudes towards China in the US. They examined whether US Americans' national collective narcissism correlated with increased prejudice against Chinese people, negative attitudes towards the Chinese government, and a preference for a tougher China policy. Using a representative sample of 279 US Americans, the authors found that higher national narcissism was associated with more prejudice against Chinese individuals, more negative views of the Chinese government, and a preference for a tougher China policy.

Research on collective narcissism has focused to a large extent on national narcissism. To our knowledge, this study is the first to examine whether collective narcissism extends across national borders to the global East-West divide, focusing on the conflictual relationship

between China and the West in the context of increasing threat perceptions from China in many Western countries (International Republican Institute, 2022; Kafura, 2023; Beshay, 2024). We propose that the effect of perceived intergroup threat from China on support for military aggression against China is mediated by collective narcissism. Herein we define the threatened ingroup as the West and the threatening outgroup as China.

**H2:** Collective narcissism mediates the positive relationship between perceived intergroup threat from China and support for military aggression against China among Western, German participants.

## **2.5 The mediating role of intergroup conspiracy beliefs**

Conspiracy beliefs are beliefs in conspiracy theories, which refer to "attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors" (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 4). At the intergroup level, conspiracy theories are based on the categorisation of an ingroup and an outgroup: While the ingroup takes on the role of the conspiracy believers, the outgroup is assigned the role of the actors of the conspiracy theory. In this sense, intergroup conspiracy theories portray the outgroup as a "collective enemy" that is trying to dominate the ingroup through secret activities (Kofta & Sedek, 2005). In the field of intergroup conspiracy theories, studies have shown that, on the one hand, perceived intergroup threat can act as a predictor of intergroup conspiracy beliefs and, on the other hand, intergroup conspiracy beliefs can enhance the adoption of more hawkish foreign policy stances towards an outgroup.

### **2.5.1 Perceived threat and belief in conspiracy theories**

Van Prooijen and van Vugt (2018) suggest that the tendency to believe in conspiracy theories is an evolved predisposition designed to be vigilant and protect against hostile outgroups. Therefore, in their Adaptive Conspiracism Hypothesis (Van Prooijen & Van Vugt, 2018), they propose that conspiracy beliefs have evolved to help deal with significant outgroup threats. Several studies support this theory. Mashuri and Zaduqisti (2015) investigated how perceived intergroup threat, social identity and collective angst influence Indonesian Muslims' belief in a conspiracy by Western countries to create terrorism in Indonesia. Their results showed that increased intergroup threat led to stronger conspiracy beliefs, especially when the participants' Muslim identity was emphasised. Collective angst mediated this effect. Mashuri and colleagues (2016) also published another study using the same case to examine how intergroup threat, dejection-agitation, and perceived identity subversion shape conspiracy beliefs among Indonesian Muslims. Dejection-agitation is defined as a combination of negative emotions such as disappointment, sadness, apprehension, and unease towards the outgroup (Sani, 2005). The study found that increases in both symbolic and realistic threat positively

predicted conspiracy beliefs, mediated by dejection-agitation. Identity subversion moderated dejection-agitation in mediating the effect.

### **2.5.2 Belief in conspiracy theories and support for military aggression**

In contrast to its predictors, there has been less research on the consequences of conspiracy beliefs. Nevertheless, there is evidence that intergroup conspiracy beliefs contribute to prejudice and discrimination against the outgroup and to the deterioration of intergroup relations. A study conducted by Golec de Zavala & Cichocka (2011) found that siege beliefs and conspiracy stereotypes mediate the relationship between collective narcissism and antisemitism. The study therefore confirmed a link between conspiracy stereotypes and antisemitism as one form of discrimination. Further, Bilewicz and colleagues (2013) examined contemporary antisemitic ideology in Poland and its ability to predict discriminatory intentions and behaviours toward Jews. Their research showed that endorsing the idea of a Jewish conspiracy served as a predictor of holding antisemitic beliefs and engaging in discriminatory behaviours. These included intentions to discriminate, prejudice regarding restitution, the anti-voting bias, and a preference for maintaining social distance from Jewish people. In addition, Jolley et al. (2019) conducted a series of three studies to examine the impact of exposure to intergroup conspiracy theories on fostering prejudice and discrimination in the form of the anti-voting bias against immigrants and Jews. They also examined whether prejudice resulting from exposure to conspiracy theories could extend beyond the targeted outgroup to secondary outgroups. Their findings revealed both a relationship between exposure to conspiracy theories and prejudice against the targeted outgroup, and a secondary effect whereby discrimination extended to unaffected outgroups. Although there are no studies directly linking intergroup conspiracy beliefs to support for military aggression, the aforementioned research suggests that intergroup conspiracy beliefs influence hostile attitudes towards outgroups, therefore suggesting a possible link.

After the Covid-19 outbreak, various conspiracy theories emerged, many of which suggested that China was responsible for the origin of the virus, or even that China was involved in its creation. Bolsen et al. (2020) investigated the effect of exposure to fake articles on the origin of Covid-19. They found that participants exposed to an article suggesting that the Chinese government created the virus were more likely to support financial penalties against China for the pandemic's consequences. Conversely, those exposed to an article attributing the origin of the virus to natural zoonotic transmission were more likely to support increased funding for biomedical research into harmful coronaviruses. To our knowledge, no research has directly examined the relationship between conspiracy beliefs about a country and support for military aggression against that country. However, the studies referenced above strongly suggest a possible link, given the clear association between intergroup conspiracy theories and hostile political attitudes towards the targeted outgroup.

Consequently, we suggest that the effect of perceived intergroup threat from China on support for military aggression against China may be mediated by intergroup conspiracy beliefs.

**H3:** Intergroup conspiracy beliefs mediate the positive relationship between perceived intergroup threat from China and support for military aggression against China among Western, German participants.

## **2.6 Collective narcissism and intergroup conspiracy beliefs**

A significant body of research suggests that collective narcissism is a robust predictor of conspiracy beliefs. For example, Douglas and colleagues (2019) conducted a literature review to examine the factors that influence conspiracy beliefs, their communication, and the social implications associated with them. Specifically, their review provides evidence from several studies that conspiracy beliefs tend to spread among groups that feel undervalued, which is captured by the concept of collective narcissism. A literature review by Van Prooijen (2021) aimed to explore the nature of conspiracy theories and suggested that they serve as explanatory narratives with embedded judgments of justice, often evoking feelings of injustice. Two mechanisms were proposed to drive the belief in conspiracy theories: an alternative perception of reality due to perceived existential threat, and group allegiances that shape perceptions and evaluations of competing outgroups. In support of his hypotheses, van Prooijen (2021) drew on the repeatedly demonstrated relationship between collective narcissism and conspiracy beliefs, characterised by increased ingroup favouritism and sensitivity to perceived threat to the ingroup. Golec de Zavala (2020) also drew a link between national collective narcissism and conspiracy beliefs in her book chapter on populism and conspiratorial thinking. She suggested that when perceptions of a national group's exceptionalism are persistently threatened by a perceived lack of recognition from other groups, individuals are driven to seek explanations for this lack of recognition. Conspiracy theories provide external explanations for why the nation's exceptional status is being questioned by others. Further, a literature review by Golec de Zavala et al. (2022) provides additional meta-analytical evidence for an association between collective narcissism and conspiracy beliefs and demonstrates that the relationship is moderated by the content of the respective conspiracy theory. The strongest association between collective narcissism and conspiracy beliefs is found for beliefs in conspiracies of specific outgroups, because they provide the best explanation for why the exceptional ingroup is not sufficiently recognised and justify an attitude of intergroup hostility. However, there is also an association, albeit a smaller one, between collective narcissism and generic conspiratorial thinking, when no threatening events are salient.

Based on the literature presented above, we expect a robust relationship between collective narcissism and conspiracy beliefs, especially since in the case of our study we are dealing with conspiracy theories specifically directed at China. Therefore, we propose that our first mediator variable, collective narcissism, has a positive effect on our second mediator variable, conspiracy beliefs.

**H4:** Collective narcissism and intergroup conspiracy beliefs sequentially mediate the positive relationship between perceived intergroup threat and support for military aggression against China among Western, German participants.

## **2.6 The present study**

Research has shown that Western perceptions of China are largely shaped by a sense of threat (Broomfield, 2003). In addition, studies have shed light on the role of the media, which often rely on threat stereotypes to portray China as a threatening “other”, distinct from the West (Richter & Gebauer, 2010; Liu et al., 2021; Han & Marwecki, 2023). However, to our knowledge, media-induced threat perceptions from China and their implications have not been examined from a social psychological perspective. In particular, there is a lack of research that examines how media-induced intergroup threat perceptions of China affect Western citizens' foreign policy attitudes towards China. Also, to our knowledge, the potential influence of collective narcissism and intergroup conspiracy beliefs on this association has not been explored. The role of collective narcissism in hostile political attitudes towards China has only been examined in studies that focus on national narcissism (e.g., Cai & Gries, 2013).

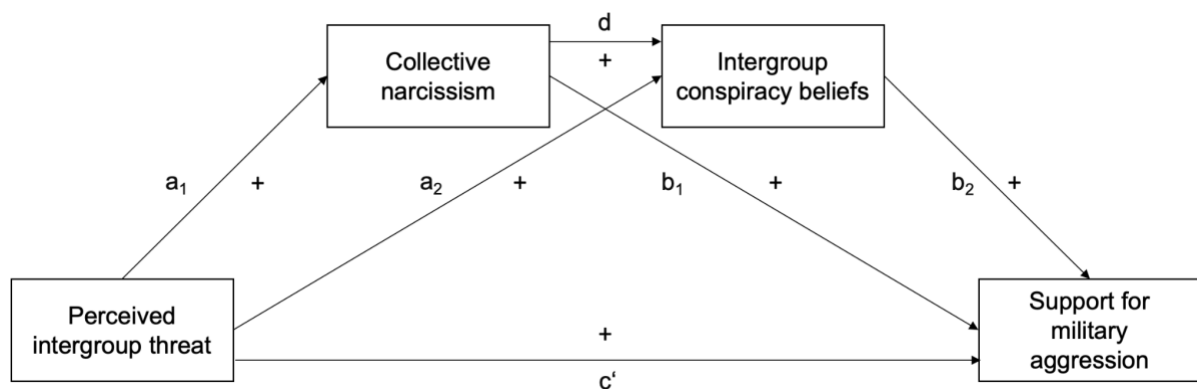
Drawing on theories from social psychology, we aim to examine the consequences of portraying China as a threat in the Western media regarding the impact on support for military aggression against China in the West. Both conspiracy theories and collective narcissism have moved from the political fringes to the mainstream (Golec de Zavala et al., 2022) and may explain why perceived intergroup threat increases support for military aggression. Therefore, we aim to examine the mediating role of collective narcissism and intergroup conspiracy theories. Since the CTT (Broomfield, 2003) is often framed in the Western media in terms of the East-West conflict, we aim to examine intergroup dynamics based on this division, focusing on participants' identification as Western and their perceived threats to their Western identity. We chose Germany for data collection because of its central political and economic position in Europe. Germany is also clearly part of the West, fitting definitions such as the “Latin West”, the “Cold War West”, the “rich West” and “Western Europe” (World Population Review, 2024).

Finally, this study has four objectives. The first objective is to assess the impact of threatening media coverage of China in the West influences intergroup threat perceptions among German participants (1.1), and how perceived intergroup threat from China (X) in turn

influences support for military aggression against China (Y) in Germany as a Western country (1.2). The second objective (2) is to examine whether collective narcissism (M1), with China as the outgroup and the West as the ingroup, significantly mediates the relationship between intergroup threat and support for military aggression. The third objective (3) is to examine whether intergroup conspiracy beliefs (M2), with China as the outgroup and the West as the ingroup, significantly mediate the relationship between intergroup threat and support for military aggression. In accordance with the proposal of a serial mediation model, our fourth objective (4) is to test whether collective narcissism and intergroup conspiracy beliefs sequentially mediate support for military aggression among Western, German participants (see Figure 1).

**Figure 2.1**

*Proposed conceptual model to illustrate the impact of the serial mediation effect of intergroup threat on hawkish foreign policy views via collective narcissism and intergroup conspiracy beliefs.*



## Methods

### 3.1 Participants

We determined the required sample size for our model based on Monte Carlo confidence intervals, using a calculation tool developed by Schoemann et al. (2017) specifically for power and sample size determination of simple and complex mediation models. Based on the results of previous studies (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; Mashiri & Zaduqisti, 2015; Bolson et al., 2020; Guerra et al., 2020; Kupatadze & Zeitzoff, 2021; Golec de Zavala et al., 2022), we expected the indirect path ( $a_1db_2$ ) of our model to have an average moderate effect of  $b = .33$ , whereas we expected the direct path ( $c'$ ) to have a small effect of  $b = .20$ . Given an  $\alpha$  of .05 and a power of .80, we calculated a recommended sample size of  $N = 132$ . With a sample size of  $N = 222$ , we exceeded the recommended sample size to achieve adequate power to detect the expected effects for our calculated models.

Three hundred and thirty four participants completed the anonymous online survey. Participants took part between 4th May and 29th May 2024. Participants had to be 1) at least 18 years old and 2) residents in Germany in order to participate in this study. All participants met these inclusion criteria. However, 111 participants were excluded because they did not respond to more than 90 percent of the scales included in this analysis. Additionally, one person was excluded from the analysis because they indicated that they did not complete the questionnaire carefully due to being distracted. The final sample therefore consisted of  $N = 222$  participants. For the initial analysis of the threat manipulation (H1.1), 20 participants were also excluded because they had not read the article carefully, as evidenced by a self-report item asking whether they had read the article carefully, resulting in a sample size of 201 participants for this specific analysis. These 20 participants were later re-included in further analyses, as the threat manipulation was not effective and condition was not used as a variable. The final sample for further analyses consisted of  $N = 222$  participants.

The majority of participants were German (97.3%,  $n = 216$ ). Of these, 13 participants (5.9%) had another citizenship in addition to the German one. Participants without German citizenship (2.7%,  $n = 6$ ) had lived in Germany for at least two years. The age of the participants ranged between 18 and 80 years with a mean age of 37 years ( $SD = 16.56$ ,  $Mdn = 30$ ). One person did not report their age. Notably, the age distribution deviated from normality, characterised by a noticeable gap in the number of participants between the ages of 40 and 50. 62.2% of participants ( $n = 138$ ) were women and 35.1% ( $n = 78$ ) were men, while 2.7% ( $n = 6$ ) identified as diverse. Information about participants' highest level of education can be seen in Table 3.1. At the time of the survey, 63.1% of participants had attained tertiary education or higher, suggesting that our sample does not accurately reflect the educational composition of the German population.



**Table 3.1***Distribution of participants' highest level of education*

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
1	Primary or lower secondary education (Hauptschulabschluss, Realschulabschluss)	6	2.7	2.7
2	Upper secondary education (Fachhochschulreife, Allgemeine Hochschulreife)	52	23.4	26.1
3	Post-secondary non-tertiary education (Apprenticeship)	19	8.6	34.7
4	Tertiary education, first stage (Bachelor, 1. Staatsexamen)	66	29.7	64.4
5	Tertiary education, second stage (Master, 2. Staatsexamen)	61	27.5	91.9
6	Doctorate	13	5.9	97.8
7	Other responses	5	2.2	100.0

*Note.*  $N = 222$ .

On a political spectrum ranging from left (1) to centre (4) to right (7), participants identified themselves on average as centre-left, with a mean of 2.86 ( $SD = 1.11$ ,  $Mdn = 3$ ). The distribution of political orientation was approximately symmetrical (skewness = 0.389). However, there was a noticeable floor effect, with a significant number of respondents clustered at the lower (political left) end of the spectrum, indicating a non-representative sample in terms of political orientation. In addition, participants were asked what they think of the most prominent German political parties on a 7-point Likert scale (from 1 = "nothing at all" to 7 = "very much"). On average, the participants gave the highest rating to the German Green Party (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen;  $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ,  $Mdn = 5$ ), followed by the Social Democratic Party of Germany (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands or SPD;  $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ,  $Mdn = 4$ ), the German Left Party (Die Linke;  $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ,  $Mdn = 4$ ), the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (Christlich-Demokratische Union or CDU;  $M = 2.87$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ,  $Mdn = 3$ ), the Free Democratic Party of Germany (Freie Demokratische Partei or FDP;  $M = 2.66$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ,  $Mdn = 3$ ) and the Christian Social Union of Bavaria (Christlich-Soziale Union or CSU;  $M = 2.23$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ,  $Mdn = 2$ ). The right-extremist party Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland or AfD;  $M = 1.40$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ,  $Mdn = 1$ ) received the lowest ratings, with the majority of participants expressing a strong dislike for it. These ratings

broadly correspond to the participants' self-placement on the political spectrum from left to right.

### **3.2 Procedure**

Our study received ethical approval from the ISCTE Ethics Committee (approval number 53/2024). Personal contacts and social media platforms such as Instagram, LinkedIn, messaging apps (e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram) and Discord were used to recruit participants. They were invited to participate in an online survey conducted via Qualtrics. To encourage participation, respondents completing the questionnaire could take part in a draw for a €50 voucher, redeemable at either the German grocery store *REWE* or the German electronics store *Media Markt*. Prior to participation, the participants had to give their informed consent and they were assured of the anonymity of their responses (see Appendix A). In the beginning of the survey, participants were instructed to carefully read one of two articles designed to manipulate their perceptions of media-induced threat. Participants were equally and randomly divided into two groups. Those in the threat condition read an article about China's growing influence in the West, Western Europe and Germany. In contrast, the control group read an article about dragon boat racing, which focused on German-Chinese relations within the area of sport. Afterwards, both experimental and control groups completed the same questionnaire. On average, participants spent 14 minutes and 47 seconds completing the survey ( $M = 14.79$ ,  $SD = 6.33$ ,  $Mdn = 12.83$ ). After the study, participants were debriefed and thanked, and the focus of the study was explained in more detail (see Appendix C). During the debriefing, participants were also informed about the manipulation of threat perception and the conspiracy theories presented earlier were debunked. In addition, participants were provided with additional resources for further information on the topic of the study. They were also provided with the contact details of the principal investigator in case they had any questions or needed further clarification.

### **3.3 Materials and measures**

All study materials and instructions were presented in German. Scales in English were translated into German by the authors, who are fluent in both English and German. Subsequently, the translations were back-translated into English. The back-translated version was carefully compared with the original questionnaire and discussed in the research team in order to correct any disparities or inconsistencies. To improve clarity and ease of response, the response format for all survey questions was standardised to a 7-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree"). This harmonisation aimed to reduce cognitive load and ensure consistency across the survey. The questionnaire presented the scales in a consistent order for all participants, which is maintained in the following description of the materials and measures included in this study.

### 3.3.1 Manipulation of media-induced threat

Before starting the questionnaire, participants were instructed to carefully read one of two articles in order to manipulate their media-induced threat perceptions (see Appendix B). In the threat condition, participants were exposed to an article about China's growing influence in the West, Western Europe and Germany, originally published in the German newspaper *Die Welt* (see Kwong, 2023). We adapted the article to address our target ingroup (the West), but also secondary ingroups (Western Europe and Germany), in order to ensure participants' engagement with the content of the article. In the control condition, participants were exposed to an article about Chinese-German relations in dragon boat racing, originally published by the German international broadcaster *Deutsche Welle* (see Cui, 2004). We ensured that both articles were of similar length by shortening them (threat condition: 177 words, control condition: 183 words). To assess participants' attention while reading the articles, they responded to the following item after reading: "I read the article carefully". Furthermore, in order to determine the participants' evaluation of the articles in terms of trustworthiness, reflection of reality and commonness in the German media, the participants rated the articles on the basis of three items. The items and their mean ratings are shown in Table 3.2. While there was no significant difference between the two articles in terms of their trustworthiness, the article in the threat condition was rated as significantly more reflective of reality and significantly more comparable to articles about China in the German media.

**Table 3.2**

*Evaluation of threat manipulation cues*

	Condition	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Two-sided p</i>
"The article is trustworthy."	Threat	4.06	1.21	0.12	2.83	.094	-0.76	199	.451
	Control	4.18	1.03	0.11					
"In my opinion, the article reflects reality."	Threat	4.50	1.26	0.12	3.78	.053	2.44	199	.015
	Control	4.08	1.12	0.11					
"When I read about China in the German media, I often come across articles similar to this one."	Threat	4.34	1.21	0.12	0.01	.922	7.41	199	<.001
	Control	3.09	1.18	0.12					

*Note.*  $N_{Threat} = 105$ ,  $N_{Control} = 96$ , *M* = Mean; *SD* = standard deviation, *SE* = standard error, *F* = F-statistic, *Sig.* = significance

### 3.3.2 Manipulation check

To test the effectiveness of our threat manipulation, participants were next asked about their perceived intergroup threat. For this purpose, we used two scales measuring perceived realistic and symbolic threat originally developed by Stephan et al. (2002). Both scales have been used in previous research examining intergroup threat (e.g., Stephan et al., 2002; Aberson & Gaffney, 2008; Myers et al., 2013). A potential criticism of the two measures is their high correlation with each other, which may raise problems of multicollinearity (e.g., Stephan et al., 2002; Tausch et al., 2006). However, we consider this concern to be of minimal relevance to our research interest, as we are interested in the impact of the combined effect of realistic and symbolic threat as intergroup threat, rather than their separate effects.

Due to the differences between our application of the scales and that of Stephan et al. (2002), item adjustments were necessary. A key challenge arose from the different contextual conditions of both studies: Stephan et al. (2002) aimed to assess the perceived threat from an outgroup (Black people) to an ingroup (White people) within the same country (the US) and within the same legal framework, as expressed in items such as "The tax system favours Blacks". Such items are not suitable for our case, given our focus on measuring perceived threat from an outgroup (China and its inhabitants) that our ingroup (Western study participants) typically does not share the same geographical location or daily life with. As a result, seven of the original 11 items were removed from the realistic threat scale. Simultaneously, in order to fully and equally address the two dimensions of realistic threat (military and economic) described in the China Threat Theory (CTT; Broomfield, 2003), three new items were added ("China dominates the economies of Western countries more than it should", "China's military power dominates Western countries more than it should", and "China has more military power in Western countries than it should"). This brings the total number of items in our revised realistic threat scale to seven.

For the above mentioned reason of the applicability to our case, we also found it necessary to remove two items from the original symbolic threat scale [e.g., "Blacks do not value the rights granted by the Constitution (life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness) as much as Whites do"]. At the same time, we added two new items in order to align the scale more closely with the CTT (2003). One item focuses on human rights ("Chinese values in relation to human rights differ from those of Westerners"), reflecting Broomfield's (2003) observation that human rights violations are interpreted by CTT proponents as attacks on Western cultural principles. The other item focuses on democratic values ("People from China do not attach as much importance to democratic values as people from the West"), given that China's rise is seen by CTT proponents as a challenge to Western democracies (Broomfield, 2003). This brings the total item number of our revised symbolic threat scale to twelve.

In the past, the realistic threat scale has shown excellent internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .93 to .95 (Stephan et al., 2002). In our sample, the realistic threat scale has an excellent internal consistency with a Chronbach's alpha of .90. The symbolic threat scale has previously shown good internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .87 to .89 (Stephan et al., 2002). In our sample, the symbolic threat scale has a good internal consistency with a Chronbach's alpha of .80. Both scales taken together result in a good internal consistency as intergroup threat scale with a Chronbach's alpha of .88. The scales can be viewed in Appendix B in the German version as well as in the back-translated English version in comparison to the original items of Stephan et al. (2002).

### **3.3.3 Ingroup identification**

Identification plays an important role in the variables examined in our research model. First, there is evidence that collective narcissism is related to self-investment as one dimension of ingroup identification (Jaworska, 2016; Jaworska et al., 2018; as cited in Golec de Zavala et al., 2019). Second, meta-analytical evidence by Golec de Zavala et al. (2019) suggests that ingroup identification is associated with intergroup hostility, but only when it overlaps with collective narcissism. Third, there is evidence that ingroup identification increases the belief in intergroup conspiracy theories (Chayinska & Minescu, 2018). Therefore, we included ingroup identification in our survey to explore its relationship with our main variables, with the aim of better understanding how identification with certain ingroups (the West, Europe, Germany) relates to these variables.

Past studies asked Germans about their identification with Germany and Europe (e.g., European Commission, 2021). To the best of our knowledge, however, no study to date has examined Germans' social identification with the West. Since the West is our target ingroup, it seemed particularly important to assess this form of ingroup identification, especially considering Germany's historical division into East and West, which may influence whether people identify as Western. To test ingroup identification with Germany, Europe and the West, we used the single-item measure of social identification (SISI; Postmes et al., 2012), which has good convergent and divergent validity as well as adequate test-retest reliability. Accordingly, our three items were "I identify with Germany", "I identify with Europe" and "I identify with the West".

### **3.3.4 Collective narcissism**

To measure collective narcissism, we used the German version of the Collective Narcissism Scale (CNS; Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). The scale consists of 9 items. One example item of the original scale is "I wish other groups would more quickly recognize the authority of my group". We replaced the term "my group" in each item with our target ingroup "the West". In addition, a pilot run of our questionnaire ( $n = 4$ ) showed that the instructions of the German

version of the CNS (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009) caused confusion, which is why we slightly adapted the instructions.

In the past, the CNS (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009) has shown divergent validity (compared to personal self-esteem), convergent validity (compared to national group identification, blind patriotism and constructive patriotism) and predictive validity (compared to national group identification, patriotism, right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation). In addition, the scale showed acceptable to good internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .74 to .86 (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). In our sample, the CNS (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009) has a good internal consistency with a Chronbach's alpha of .87. Our adapted version of the scale can be seen in Appendix B in comparison with the original German version of the CNS (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009).

### **3.3.5 Intergroup conspiracy beliefs**

To measure beliefs in intergroup conspiracy theories, we developed five items and one control item with the help of artificial intelligence using the open access chatbot *ChatGPT* (OpenAI, 2024). We entered the following command into the chatbot:

Invent five conspiracy theories about the People's Republic of China. The theories must include that China is planning to infiltrate, harm or attack the West. The theories must be clearly refutable. Here is an example: "China has abandoned their one-child policy in 2016 to be able to increase their manpower in the military force in the future".

To further specify our command, we added "It should be theories that nobody knows yet". After regenerating *ChatGPT*'s (OpenAI, 2024) answer several times, the chatbot finally gave us a total of 14 suggestions, from which we selected four conspiracy theories in addition to our own example, which we mentioned in the instruction. The chat history with *ChatGPT* (OpenAI, 2024) can be seen in Appendix D. We then reformulated the conspiracy theories into five short statements. One example item is "The Chinese Silk Road Initiative conceals a network of submarines under the newly built harbour infrastructure, which secretly transport Chinese troops and weapons along the routes and threaten Western interests." The participants had to indicate on how credible they thought the respective statement was. To test the effectiveness of our threat manipulation, we also developed a control item with a conspiracy theory related to another outgroup (influential companies). We expected that the experimental condition (threat or control) would have a stronger effect on the China-specific intergroup conspiracy theories than with the control item. The five China-specific items showed good internal consistency with a Chronbach's alpha of .86. Our measure for Intergroup Conspiracy Beliefs can be seen in Appendix B.

### **3.3.6 Support for military aggression**

To assess support for military aggression, we developed a 5-item scale based on a measure developed by Golec de Zavala et al. (2009) in the context of the US war against Iraq. The original scale included a total of 10 items. The scale showed good internal consistency with a Chronbach's alpha of .89 (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). As the scale was largely tailored to the issue of the US war in Iraq, we used only three items from the scale, which we adapted to the context of the China Threat Theory (CTT; Broomfield, 2003). One example item is "Military strength is more important than economic strength in dealing with China." We also added two items that we developed ourselves ("I support the idea that the West should take violent measures to assert its interests against China" and "It is justified to use political force to ensure the security of the West against threats from China"). Participants were asked to indicate how strongly they supported each statement. Our measure showed acceptable internal consistency with a Chronbach's alpha of .79. The scale can be seen in Appendix B in comparison with the original items by Golec de Zavala et al. (2009).

### **3.3.7 Demographics**

We used self-report measures to assess the following socio-demographic information: Gender, age, nationality, duration of residence in Germany (only for non-German citizens), highest level of education, attitudes towards prominent German political parties, political orientation (from left to right), satisfaction with household income and the importance of religion in daily life. All items can be seen in Appendix B.

### **3.3.8 Survey validity**

To ensure data quality and response validity, we included two attention control items in the study. The first item addressed a different topic and instructed participants to select a specific response option ("Brushing your teeth is a very important habit. When answering the following question, please select 'Strongly disagree'. Daily tooth brushing contributes to oral hygiene and oral health"). However, response behaviour and feedback from participants indicated that this item caused confusion and was not well understood. Therefore, we decided not to screen participants based on these items.

Our second attention control item was placed at the end of the questionnaire: "Do you think we should use your data from this survey? Please note: Regardless of which answer you choose, you will have the opportunity to enter the draw". Participants could choose either "Yes" or "No". If participants chose "No", they were asked to provide a reason in a free response field. If the reason indicated a lack of attention while completing the survey, these participants were excluded from the data analysis. Twelve participants indicated that their data should not be used. Of these, three indicated a lack of knowledge about the subject of the study, two expressed concerns about the trustworthiness of the study, six did not give specific reasons, and one indicated that they did not complete the questionnaire carefully because they were

distracted. This last participant was excluded from further data analysis, as already mentioned in section 3.1, resulting in a total sample size of  $N = 222$ . Both attention control items can be seen in Appendix B.

### **3.4 Control variables**

Research literature points to a link between political orientation and the willingness to support military aggression abroad. A systematic empirical analysis of political parties in 31 countries, almost all of them European, by Haesebrouck and Mello (2020) demonstrated that the relationship between political orientation and support for military operations abroad is curvilinear: centrist and centre-right parties showed the highest levels of support for military operations, while parties at either end of the political spectrum showed significantly less support. We therefore included political orientation as a control variable in our data analysis.

In addition, there is empirical evidence that gender influences attitudes towards the use of military force abroad, although gender differences are not constant and predictable, but vary considerably depending on the respective society and international conflict. Eichenberg (2010) found this in a cross-national analysis of gender differences in relation to support for the use of military force in 37 countries. These findings suggest that gender could potentially confound our statistical model, which is why we controlled for this variable in our analysis.

Age and education also appear to influence attitudes towards the use of military force abroad, although these trends do not appear to follow a uniform and consistent pattern. For example, Gribble et al. (2014) analysed data from the 2011 British Social Attitudes survey and found that in the UK, support for military missions in Iraq and Afghanistan was higher among men, those with educational qualifications and younger age groups. Conversely, Eichenberg and Stoll (2013) found different results. They examined factors influencing war acceptance and military defence spending in 14 democracies from 2004 to 2012. While political ideology and gender were the main predictors, age also played a role. However, age trends varied: increasing age had a positive effect on war acceptance in some countries (e.g. Turkey), a negative effect in others (e.g. the US, Eastern Europe), and little or no effect in others (e.g. Western Europe). Furthermore, Eichenberg and Stoll (2013) found that educational attainment only sporadically had a positive effect on war acceptance. Despite the less clear results regarding the influence of age and education level on support for military aggression, we decided to include both variables as control variables in our analysis.

### **3.5 Data analytic plan**

We tested our hypotheses by analysing our data using SPSS version 29.0.0.0 (IBM Corp., 2023). First, we assessed the effectiveness of our threat manipulation (H1.1) by conducting an independent samples t-test. This analysis used a between-subjects design, with the condition (threat or control) as the independent variable and perceived intergroup threat as the dependent variable. Second, we conducted a serial mediation analysis to assess the direct



effect of perceived intergroup threat on support for military aggression (H1.2), as well as the indirect mediation effects of collective narcissism (H2) and intergroup conspiracy beliefs (H3), and the combined indirect serial mediation effect of both mediators (H4). For this purpose, we used Model 6 of the SPSS macro PROCESS (Hayes, 2013). The serial mediation analysis was conducted using 10,000 bootstrap resampling and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals to determine the significance of the effects. Significant effects were identified when the confidence intervals for the direct and indirect effects did not include zero.

Depending on the significance of H1.1 in the first step, we adjusted our approach for testing the subsequent hypotheses in the second step. If the threat manipulation was found to be effective and H1.1 was supported, we proceeded with the condition as the independent variable in the mediation analysis to examine the effect of the manipulated media-induced threat. Conversely, if the threat manipulation was ineffective and H1.1 was rejected, we used perceived intergroup threat as the independent variable to determine whether increased perceived intergroup threat in general influenced support for military aggression via collective narcissism and intergroup conspiracy beliefs.

## **Results**

### **4.1 Preliminary results**

A summary of means, standard deviations, variable range, internal consistency and intercorrelations for the main study variables, control variables, and ingroup identification variables is provided in Table 4.1. Significant correlations were found between the main variables of the hypothesised model. Furthermore, correlations could be found between the main variables of the hypothesised model and all control variables except for the variable highest level of education, which did not correlate significantly with any of the main variables. Identification with the West showed significant correlations with all of our main variables, with one exception: our measure of intergroup conspiracy beliefs did not correlate significantly with identification with the West, nor with Germany or Europe.

**Table 4.1***Descriptives and bivariate correlations among main study variables*

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>	$\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Perceived intergroup threat	4.18	0.81	1.14-6.47	.88		.58**	.47**	.49**	.18**	.28**	-.02	.20**	.08	.25***
2 Collective narcissism	2.75	1.03	1.00-6.44	.87			.41**	.52**	.22**	.48**	-.09	.36**	.22***	.35***
3 Intergroup conspiracy beliefs	2.71	1.11	1.00-7.00	.86				.44**	.29**	.18**	-.08	.07	-.02	.07
4 Support for military aggression	2.48	1.00	1.00-6.00	.79					.18**	.35**	.08	.17*	.04	.06*
5 Age	37.48	16.56	18-80	-						.20**	.04	.11	.08	.15*
6 Political orientation from left (1) to right (2)	2.86	1.11	1-7	-							-.05	.36***	.16*	.26***
7 Highest level of education	6.80	1.61	2-10	-								.03	.10	.05
8 Ingroup Identification (Germany)	4.93	1.43	1-7	-									.55***	.53***
9 Ingroup Identification (Europe)	5.62	1.22	1-7	-										.64***
10 Ingroup Identification (West)	5.06	1.38	1-7	-										

*Note.* *N* = 222, *M* = Mean; *SD* = standard deviation,  $\alpha$  = Cronbach's alpha. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

## 4.2 Threat manipulation

As mentioned in section 3.1, we excluded 20 participants from our analysis because they indicated that they had not read the article carefully before analysing the effectiveness of the threat manipulation. Specifically, we excluded participants who responded “strongly disagree” (1), “disagree” (2) or “somewhat disagree” (3) to the question “I read the article carefully” to the statement “I have read the article carefully”, resulting in a total sample size of 201 participants for the analysis of H1.1. Of these, 96 participants (59.4% female, 36.5% male, 4.2% diverse,  $M_{\text{Age}} = 37$  years) received the article from the control condition and 106 participants (66% female, 32.1% male, 1.9% diverse,  $M_{\text{Age}} = 39$ ) received the article from the threat condition.

Before conducting the t-test, an outlier analysis was performed. Using a criterion of z-score  $> 3$ , one significant outlier (z-score = -3.73) was identified in the threat condition. Substantively, the exclusion of this case is reasonable, as the individual showed an unusually low level of perceived intergroup threat (on a scale from 1 to 7, this case showed a score of 1.14) despite being in the threat condition. As this response deviates from the expected pattern for the threat condition, we excluded it from further analysis. A one-sided independent samples t-test was then conducted to test H1.1. It was hypothesised that participants in the threat condition would score higher on perceived intergroup threat than participants in the control condition. A Levene's test for equality of variances was performed to assess homogeneity of variances. The test indicated that the assumption of equal variances was met,  $F(1, 199) = 1.948$ ,  $p = .164$ . The results of the t-test are shown in Table 4.2.

**Table 4.2**

*T-test results comparing participants in threat and control conditions on perceived intergroup threat*

Condition	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>One-sided p</i>
Threat	105	4.23	0.73	0.07	0.23	199	.409
Control	96	4.21	0.84	0.09			

*Note.* *n* = subsample size, *M* = Mean; *SD* = standard deviation, *SE* = standard error

The mean test score for the threat condition ( $M = 4.23$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ) was slightly higher than the mean test score for the control condition ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ). However, the t-test showed no significant difference between the groups,  $t(199) = 0.23$ ,  $p = .409$ , indicating that the threat manipulation did not significantly increase intergroup threat perceptions in our participants, therefore rejecting H1.1.

Given this rejection, we conducted additional analyses to explore what separate effects our threat manipulation had on the main variables of our model and what potential confounds

may have influenced our threat manipulation. First, we conducted three independent samples t-tests to assess the individual effects of the manipulation condition on collective narcissism, intergroup conspiracy beliefs, and support for military aggression. This was done to ensure the appropriateness of our adapted versions of the realistic and symbolic threat scales by Stephan et al. (2002) for the manipulation check. The t-test results, as presented in Table 4.3, showed no significant effects of the threat manipulation on the main variables, confirming our manipulation check results.

**Table 4.3**

*T-test results comparing participants in threat and control conditions on main study variables*

	Condition	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>One-sided p</i>
Collective narcissism	Threat	2.81	1.06	0.10	.00	.970	.99	199	.163
	Control	2.67	0.97	0.10					
Intergroup conspiracy beliefs	Threat	2.81	1.13	0.11	1.25	.264	.82	199	.207
	Control	2.68	1.05	0.11					
Support for military aggression	Threat	2.42	0.96	0.09	1.34	.248	-.81	199	.210
	Control	2.53	1.05	0.11					

*Note.*  $N_{Threat} = 105$ ,  $N_{Control} = 96$ , *M* = Mean; *SD* = standard deviation, *SE* = standard error, *F* = F-statistic, *Sig.* = significance

Second, we examined correlations between perceived intergroup threat and three potential confounds: perceived article trustworthiness, perceived reflection of reality regarding article content, and perceived commonness of similar articles in the German media. Correlations were calculated separately for the threat and control conditions (see Table 4.4).

**Table 4.4***Bivariate correlations between perceived intergroup threat and potential confounds*

Condition			1	2	3
Control	1	Trustworthiness			
	2	Reflection of reality	.62***		
	3	Commonness	-.05	.01	
	4	Perceived intergroup threat	-.03	-.18	.15
Threat	1	Trustworthiness			
	2	Reflection of reality	.58***		
	3	Commonness	-.01	.05	
	4	Perceived intergroup threat	.34***	.41***	.02

*Note.*  $N = 222$ . \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

In the threat condition, Pearson correlation coefficients revealed significant positive associations between perceived intergroup threat and both article trustworthiness ( $r = .34$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and perceived reflection of reality ( $r = .41$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Conversely, perceived commonness of similar articles in the German media showed a negligible correlation with perceived intergroup threat ( $r = .02$ ,  $p = .846$ ). No significant correlations between perceived intergroup threat and the potential confounds were observed in the control condition. These findings suggest that participants' intergroup threat perceptions in the threat condition may have been influenced by their perceptions of the trustworthiness of the articles and the perceived reflection of reality of the article content.

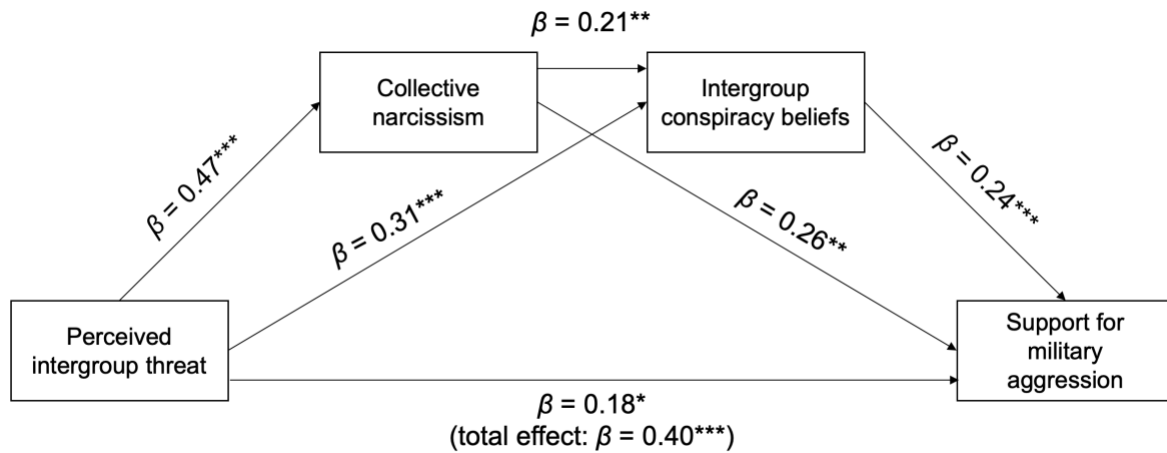
Consistent with our data analytic plan, we continued testing the subsequent hypotheses with perceived intergroup threat as the independent variable. Therefore, it was not considered necessary to exclude the 20 participants who had not read the article carefully from further analyses, as their careful reading of the article no longer affected the overall analysis. This adjustment allowed us to retain a larger sample size of  $N = 222$ .

#### **4.3 Perceived intergroup threat and support for military aggression**

To test H1.2 to H4, we calculated a serial mediation analysis using Model 6 of the SPSS macro PROCESS (Hayes, 2013). We entered political orientation, gender, age and highest level of education as covariates in all our analysis. Due to listwise deletion in PROCESS, the serial mediation analysis was finally conducted with a sample size of  $N = 216$ . Table 4.3 shows the unstandardised total, direct and indirect effects. The standardised coefficients of the analysis are shown in Figure 2.

#### **Figure 4.1**

### Standardised effects of the proposed serial mediation model



Note.  $N = 222$ .  $^*p < 0.05$ ,  $^{**}p < .01$ ,  $^{***}p < .001$

In order to verify H1.2, we examined the total effect (c) in the serial mediation model when taking into account the above mentioned covariates. We found that perceived intergroup threat was significantly related to support for military aggression,  $B = 0.51$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ , 95%  $CI$  [0.35, 0.66], therefore supporting H1.2.

#### 4.4 The mediating role of collective narcissism

To confirm H2, we tested collective narcissism as a mediator of the relationship between perceived intergroup threat and support for military aggression. The effect of perceived intergroup threat on collective narcissism ( $a_1$ ) was significant,  $B = 0.61$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ , 95%  $CI$  [0.47, 0.75], indicating that higher levels of perceived intergroup threat were associated with increased collective narcissism. Further, the effect of collective narcissism on support for military aggression ( $b_1$ ) was also significant,  $B = 0.25$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ , 95%  $CI$  [0.11, 0.40], suggesting that greater collective narcissism is associated with greater support for military aggression. There was a significant indirect effect ( $a_1b_1$ ) of perceived intergroup threat on support for military aggression through collective narcissism,  $B = 0.15$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ , 95%  $CI$  [0.03, 0.31], suggesting that collective narcissism serves as a significant mediator in the relationship between perceived intergroup threat and support for military aggression, supporting H2.

#### 4.5 The mediating role of intergroup conspiracy theories

To confirm H3, we examined intergroup conspiracy beliefs as a mediator of the relationship between perceived intergroup threat and support for military aggression. The effect of perceived intergroup threat on intergroup conspiracy beliefs ( $a_2$ ) was significant,  $B = 0.43$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ , 95%  $CI$  [0.23, 0.63], indicating that higher levels of perceived intergroup threat were associated with increased intergroup conspiracy beliefs. The effect of intergroup conspiracy

beliefs on support for military aggression ( $b_2$ ) was also significant,  $B = 0.21$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ , 95%  $CI [0.10, 0.33]$ , suggesting that an increase in intergroup conspiracy beliefs is associated with greater support for military aggression. Additionally, the analysis revealed a significant indirect effect ( $a_2b_2$ ) of perceived intergroup threat on support for military aggression through intergroup conspiracy beliefs,  $B = 0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ , 95%  $CI [0.02, 0.18]$ . These results support the hypothesis that intergroup conspiracy beliefs play a significant mediating role in the association between perceived intergroup threat and support for military aggression, thereby confirming H3.

#### **4.6 The serial mediation effect of collective narcissism and intergroup conspiracy beliefs**

For H4, we examined the indirect serial mediation effect of perceived intergroup threat on support for military aggression through collective narcissism and intergroup conspiracy beliefs. Perceived intergroup threat had a significant direct effect ( $c'$ ) on support for military aggression after controlling for the mediators,  $B = 0.23$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ , 95%  $CI [0.06, 0.41]$ . Furthermore, besides the significant effects of perceived intergroup threat on collective narcissism ( $a_1$ ) and the effect of intergroup conspiracy beliefs on support for military aggression ( $b_2$ ), we also found a significant effect of collective narcissism on intergroup conspiracy beliefs ( $d$ ),  $B = 0.22$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ , 95%  $CI [0.06, 0.39]$ . The indirect serial mediation effect was significant, indicating that the influence of perceived intergroup threat on support for military aggression ( $a_1db_2$ ) is sequentially mediated by collective narcissism and intergroup conspiracy beliefs,  $B = 0.03$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ , 95%  $CI [0.00, 0.07]$ . These results support H4.

It is worth noting, however, that the magnitude of some effects are relatively weak, given that for some effects, the confidence interval barely exceeds zero. While the direct effect of perceived intergroup threat on support for military aggression (H1.2) is substantial, the mediating effects through collective narcissism (H2) and intergroup conspiracy beliefs (H3) are also significant, but smaller. The serial mediation pathway through both collective narcissism and intergroup conspiracy beliefs (H4) has the smallest effect, indicating that it is the least robust.



**Table 4.5**

*Total, direct and indirect effects of perceived intergroup threat on support for military aggression via collective narcissism and intergroup conspiracy beliefs*

	Collective narcissism (M1)			Intergroup conspiracy beliefs (M2)			Support for military aggression (Y)		
	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Boot CI</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Boot CI</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Boot CI</i>
Covariate (Age)	0.00	0.00	[-0.00, 0.01]	<b>0.01**</b>	0.00	[0.01, 0.02]	0.00	0.00	[-0.01, 0.01]
Covariate (Gender)	-0.08	0.10	[-0.28, 0.13]	<b>0.38**</b>	0.12	[0.14, 0.62]	-0.04	0.11	[-0.25, 0.18]
Covariate (Political orientation)	0.29	0.05	[-0.19, 0.39]	-0.03	0.07	[-0.16, 0.11]	<b>0.12*</b>	0.06	[0.00, 0.23]
Covariate (Highest level of education)	-0.05	0.04	[-0.13, 0.02]	-0.03	0.04	[-0.12, 0.05]	<b>0.09*</b>	0.04	[0.01, 0.16]
X (Perceived intergroup threat)	<b>0.61***</b>	0.07	[0.47, 0.75]	<b>0.43***</b>	0.10	[0.23, 0.63]	<b>0.23*</b>	0.09	[0.06, 0.41]
M1 (Collective narcissism)	-	-	-	-	-	-	<b>0.25**</b>	0.07	[0.11, 0.40]
M2 (Intergroup conspiracy beliefs)	-	-	-	-	-	-	<b>0.21***</b>	0.06	[0.10, 0.33]
Constant	-0.32	0.43	[-1.18, 0.54]	-0.58	0.53	[-1.62, 0.46]	-0.58	0.45	[-1.48, 0.31]
F	34.81***			16.02***			17.99***		
	(5, 210)			(6, 209)			(7, 208)		
R <sup>2</sup>	.453			.315			.377		
Total, direct, and indirect effects of X on Y									
	Support for military aggression (Y)								
	<i>Boot effect</i>	<i>Boot SE</i>	<i>Boot CI</i>						
Total effect of X on Y	<b>0.51</b>	0.08	[0.35, 0.66]						
Direct effect of X on Y	<b>0.23</b>	0.09	[0.06, 0.41]						
Indirect effect of X on Y through collective narcissism	<b>0.15</b>	0.07	[0.03, 0.31]						
Indirect effect of X on Y through intergroup conspiracy beliefs	<b>0.09</b>	0.04	[0.02, 0.18]						
Indirect effect of X on Y through collective narcissism and intergroup conspiracy beliefs	<b>0.02</b>	0.02	[0.00, 0.07]						

*Note.*  $N = 216$ . X = Independent variable; Y = Dependent variable, M = Mediator; SE = Standard error; CI = Confidence interval. CIs not containing zero are interpreted as significant. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. Results are based on 10,000 bootstrap samples. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

#### **4.7 Additional analyses**

A post-hoc sample size calculation was performed using the calculation tool developed by Schoemann et al. (2017) to determine the achieved power of the study, given that the observed effects in our model were smaller than initially expected in our optimal sample size calculation. In the calculation tool, we entered the standardised coefficients of our serial mediation model obtained from our analysis. The post-hoc analysis showed that with our sample size of  $N = 222$ , the achieved power was 0.73, 95% CI [0.69, 0.76]. Therefore, our sample size was not sufficient to achieve the desired power of 0.80. In order to achieve a power of 0.80, a sample size of at least 245 participants would have been necessary.

## Discussion

This study aimed to contribute to the literature by examining the impact of perceived intergroup threat from China, as induced by the German media, on support for military aggression against China among Western, German participants. In addition, the sequential mediating roles of collective narcissism and intergroup conspiracy beliefs, in which China is perceived as a conspirator against the West, were examined.

Based on the China Threat Theory (CTT; Broomfield, 2003), it was expected that German, Western participants would perceive economic, military and ideological threats from China. Applying the Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT; Stephan et al., 2009), this study examined the consequences of perceived realistic (economic and military) and symbolic (ideological) threat on support for military aggression against China among Western, German participants. An experimental design was used to investigate the causal effect of threatening media coverage of China on intergroup threat perceptions. Participants were primed with either a threatening (threat condition) or a neutral news article about China (control condition). First, we hypothesised that threatening media coverage of China would increase intergroup threat perceptions among Western, German participants (H1.1). Second, we proposed that perceived intergroup threat from China would lead to greater support for military aggression against China among Western, German participants (H1.2). Building on recent literature on collective narcissism (Golec de Zavala, 2009, 2023; Guerra et al., 2020), it was further hypothesised that collective narcissism would mediate the relationship between perceived intergroup threat and foreign policy attitudes. Additionally, drawing on the Adaptive Conspiracism Hypothesis (Van Prooijen & Van Vugt, 2018), it was hypothesised that intergroup conspiracy beliefs would serve as a second mediator of this relationship. Finally, a sequential mediation effect of collective narcissism and intergroup conspiracy beliefs was hypothesised based on recent literature linking collective narcissism and intergroup conspiracy beliefs (Golec de Zavala et al., 2022).

Our results indicate that participants exposed to threatening news articles about China did not significantly increase their intergroup threat perceptions compared to those exposed to neutral articles. However, existing research that contradicts these findings points to the ineffectiveness of our threat manipulation due to limitations in our experimental design. Nevertheless, our study provides compelling evidence for a direct, significant, and positive relationship between perceived intergroup threat from China and increased support for military aggression against China among Western, German participants. In addition, a significant sequential mediation effect of collective narcissism and intergroup conspiracy beliefs on this relationship was found. These findings have important implications for the de-escalation of the increasingly heated conflict between China and the West.

## 5.1 Manipulating media-induced threat

One aim of this study was to determine the causal effect of threatening media coverage of China on perceived intergroup threat from China in the West using a threat manipulation. However, our results indicate that threatening media coverage did not significantly increase participants' intergroup threat perceptions compared to neutral media coverage. This finding raises the possibility that media coverage of particular groups does not significantly influence perceptions of those groups. However, this seems unlikely given the substantial evidence supporting such an influence (Harwood & Roy, 2005; Gadarian, 2010; Mastro & Seate, 2012; Seate & Mastro, 2015; Harwood, 2020). Instead, it is more likely that our threat manipulation was ineffective for one of the following reasons.

First, our threat manipulation may not have been strong enough to evoke intergroup threat perceptions. For example, there is evidence that perceived intergroup threat is triggered by emotional cues delivered through visual cues, rather than by threatening information alone (Gadarian, 2017). However, previous studies have also successfully manipulated intergroup threat using threatening newspaper articles without visual material, arguing against this explanation (e.g., Mashuri & Zaduqisti, 2015).

Second, the content of the article may not have been perceived as realistic or comparable to the actual media landscape in Germany. This explanation seems plausible, as our additional analysis revealed that the level of perceived intergroup threat among the participants in the threat condition, but not in the control condition, correlated with how realistic and common in the German media they thought the article was.

A third possible reason could be measurement issues. On the one hand, Stephan and colleagues' (2002) realistic and symbolic threat scales may not be appropriate for capturing manipulated threat perceptions. For example, the scales could be a measure of already existing prejudice rather than a measure of threat perception. However, Makashvili and colleagues (2018) refuted this concern by successfully manipulating and measuring perceived realistic and symbolic threat from fictional outgroups against which there could be no prior prejudice. Furthermore, our additional analyses showed that our threat manipulation had no significant effect on any of the main variables in our model. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the symbolic and realistic threat scales by Stephan and colleagues (2002) are unsuitable for assessing manipulated threat.

On the other hand, measurement problems could have arisen because our articles were not suitable for activating realistic and symbolic threat. To maintain ecological validity, we used articles from real German newspapers as manipulation cues, which we modified slightly. This approach may have resulted in insufficient internal validity due to the lack of standardisation of the experimental manipulation. For example, the articles in both conditions differed considerably in content. In addition, the article in the threat condition was not tailored

to address all aspects of realistic and symbolic threat as defined by our adapted versions of the scales by Stephan and colleagues (2002). The article addressed political influence as a realistic threat ("China's covert financing of think tanks, academic institutions, and non-profit organisations"), rather than economic and military threats from China, which, according to the CCT (Broomfield, 2003), are central sources of threat to the West. Regarding symbolic threat, the article addressed threats to Western democratic values posed by China ("The acute danger of a creeping infiltration of democratic processes and European and Western interests cannot be dismissed..."), but neglected to address divergent Western-Chinese human rights perspectives or the perceived threat from Chinese communist ideals. We assumed that addressing several aspects of realistic and symbolic threat would be enough to activate a range of threatening stereotypes about China, but this may not have been the case.

Finally, the ineffectiveness of our threat manipulation may be due to the need for long-term exposure to media coverage to influence attitudes. It is possible that only the cumulative effect of repeated threatening media exposure has a significant impact on shaping public perceptions and attitudes about China. In our study, we examined the effect of a single media report, which may not have been sufficient to change attitudes in a meaningful way. This suggests that future research should consider the impact of sustained media coverage over time using longitudinal studies to better understand its influence on public opinion and foreign policy attitudes.

## **5.2 Implications about a specific form of intergroup threat in relation to China**

Furthermore, our results revealed a robust and significant positive effect of perceived intergroup threat from China on support for military aggression against China, supporting H1.2. These findings are consistent with a substantial body of previous research that confirm a significant effect of perceived intergroup threat on more aggressive foreign policy attitudes (Huddy et al., 2005; Merolla & Zechmeister, 2009; Gadarian, 2010; Kupatadze & Zeitzoff, 2019; Wu, 2023). Further, they are consistent with research demonstrating that the more threatened people feel, the more their policy choices tend to perpetuate or intensify conflict (Gordon & Arian, 2001). In particular, this research project adds to existing research in this field as it is the first study to specifically examine the relationship between perceived intergroup threat from China and foreign policy attitudes towards China among Westerners. Our findings highlight the powerful influence of perceived intergroup threat on foreign policy attitudes and conflict escalation. Moreover, they provide valuable evidence that perceived threat can foster more aggressive foreign policy views in Western countries such as Germany not only to national identity, but also to Western identity, as a supranational construct.

Moreover, our results revealed that collective narcissism significantly mediates the positive relationship between perceived intergroup threat from China and support for military aggression against China among Western, German participants, therefore supporting H2.

These findings confirm those of Guerra et al. (2020), who found perceived intergroup threat to be a predictor of collective narcissism. They are also in line with and complement studies that have identified collective narcissism as a predictor of outgroup hostility (Golec de Zavala et al., 2019), political extremism and acceptance of terrorist violence (Jasko et al., 2020), support for military aggression (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009), and support for a tougher foreign policy (Cai & Gries, 2013). Our findings imply that the perceived exceptionalism of the West and the simultaneous feeling that this exceptionalism is not sufficiently recognised by other groups may explain why perceived threats from China lead to support for military aggression against China.

Furthermore, our results demonstrate that intergroup conspiracy beliefs significantly mediate the positive relationship between perceived intergroup threat from China and support for military aggression against China among Western, German participants, supporting H3. These findings are consistent with research demonstrating that perceived intergroup threat is a predictor of belief in intergroup conspiracy theories (Mashuri & Zaduqisti, 2015; Mashuri et al., 2016). Furthermore, these findings are consistent with and complement study findings that demonstrate the impact of intergroup conspiracy beliefs on discrimination forms such as antisemitism (Golec de Zavala & Cichocka, 2011), preference for maintaining social distance, anti-voting bias (Bilewicz et al., 2013; Jolly et al., 2019), and support for financial sanctions against China as a conspirator (Bolsen et al., 2020). Our findings suggest that perceived intergroup threat creates fertile ground for the spread of, and susceptibility to, conspiracy beliefs. Perceived intergroup threat from China may contribute to the emotion-driven and uncritical acceptance of misinformation in the form of conspiracy beliefs that feed the image of China as a threat. Conspiracy beliefs, in turn, may provide further legitimacy for support of military aggression against China.

Finally, our results suggest that collective narcissism and intergroup conspiracy beliefs sequentially mediate the positive relationship between perceived intergroup threat and support for military aggression against China among Western, German participants, supporting H4. It should be noted, however, that this significant effect was weak and not very robust. However, our findings are consistent with research supporting the separate mediation effects of collective narcissism (see section 5.2) and intergroup conspiracy beliefs (see section 5.3), as well as studies confirming a positive effect of collective narcissism on intergroup conspiracy beliefs (Douglas et al., 2019; Van Prooijen, 2021; Golec de Zavala, 2020; Golec de Zavala et al., 2022).

Our final model provides a possible explanation for why increased perceptions of threat from China in the West lead to greater support for military aggression against China. Individuals who perceive higher levels of threat from China to their Western identity tend to show higher levels of collective narcissism. That is, they believe that Western culture and values are exceptional and deserve special treatment, but they also feel that this perceived

exceptionalism is not adequately recognised by others. Western individuals with higher levels of collective narcissism are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories about China plotting secret activities against the West. One reason for this could be that conspiracy beliefs may provide a way to explain why China's rise challenges Western exceptionalism (see Golec de Zavala et al., 2022). Another may be that conspiracy theories tend to evoke feelings of injustice (see Van Prooijen, 2021), which in turn may foster the conviction that military actions against China are justified to protect the West.

### **5.3 Limitations**

In the following, we would like to point out some limitations of our study. First, our results should be treated with caution in terms of their generalisability due to some shortcomings in the size and composition of the sample studied. A post-hoc sample size analysis revealed that our sample of  $N = 222$  may not have provided sufficient statistical power. This could have affected the robustness of our results, as reflected by weaker findings in the two separate mediation effects and significantly less robust results in the sequential mediation model. In addition, this may have resulted in less precise and more variable effect sizes. Further, our sample composition is not representative of the German population in terms of age, level of education and political orientation. Compared to the general German population, our sample lacks people between the ages of 40 and 50, people with primary or lower secondary education, and people who are at the conservative to right-wing end of the political spectrum. Future research should attempt to obtain a larger and more representative sample to improve the robustness and generalisability of the findings.

Second, it is not yet possible to generalise our findings to all Western countries, as our study was conducted exclusively in Germany. Future studies should replicate this research in other Western countries to determine whether there are national differences within the West in perceptions and attitudes towards China.

Third, our study has some limitations regarding its design. It is likely that our threat manipulation was ineffective due to flaws in its conceptualisation. Future research should thoroughly investigate whether the articles presented are both realistic and trustworthy, and whether they sufficiently address both realistic and symbolic threat. Given that our threat manipulation, which consisted of real newspaper articles, may not have been effective, we recommend that follow-up studies on this topic design highly standardised articles for the threat and control conditions. In addition, we tested participants' attention to the articles with two items which showed low measurement quality. One item that we designed to test participants' attention while answering the survey ("Brushing your teeth is a very important habit. When answering the following question, please select 'Strongly disagree'. Daily tooth brushing contributes to oral hygiene and oral health") appeared to be confusing in its wording, which is why we excluded it from our analysis. In addition, another item we used to test participants'

attention while reading the article in the beginning of the survey (“I read the article carefully”) was susceptible to biased response behaviour. Participants may have agreed with the statement due to social desirability bias, even if they did not actually read the article carefully. A more thorough and efficient method would be to ask participants about content-related aspects of the articles, in order to verify their careful reading. Furthermore, our self-developed intergroup conspiracy beliefs scale raised concerns about its construct validity, as it did not correlate with any of our ingroup identification items (identification as German, European or Western). Follow-up studies could therefore use alternative measures to better capture intergroup conspiracy beliefs with China as the conspirator against the West.

Finally, as our threat manipulation was not significant, our study does not allow us to make any assumptions about the causality of the relationship between perceived intergroup threat and support for military aggression against China. Our attempt to manipulate threat using media articles was unsuccessful, limiting our ability to make causal claims. Instead, we were only able to measure perceived intergroup threat that was already present in our participants. Therefore, our findings should be interpreted with caution, and further research using effective threat manipulations is needed to verify causality.

#### **5.4 Future perspectives**

Despite these limitations, the current study advances the literature by providing valuable insights into the role of collective narcissism and intergroup conspiracy beliefs in the positive relationship between perceived intergroup threat from China and support for military aggression against China in Germany. Our findings have several implications for practical interventions aimed at de-escalating the increasingly heated conflict between China and the West. First, our findings suggest that the adoption of a less emotionally charged framing in media coverage of China is crucial for preventing the escalation of the Chinese-Western conflict. Therefore, media producers and policymakers should present information about China in a differentiated and rational manner. This approach can mitigate initial feelings of threat in Western audiences when processing information about China. Second, interventions that prevent or reduce collective narcissism may also be effective in de-escalating conflict. For example, mindful gratitude practices, as demonstrated in a recent study by Golec de Zavala et al. (2024), may serve as a promising intervention technique. These two preventive strategies may both be effective ways of reducing susceptibility to China-related conspiracy theories and support for military aggression against China in Western countries. Particularly with regard to the susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs, preventive interventions that foster an analytical mindset and critical thinking skills have shown to be more effective than approaches that provide counterarguments after exposure to such theories (O'Mahony et al., 2023). Future research could further investigate the long-term effectiveness and scalability of these intervention strategies. Longitudinal studies could track changes in public attitudes and



behaviour following the implementation of these interventions, providing a deeper understanding of their impact over time. Finally, comparative studies across Western countries could shed light on the unique national dynamics that influence perceptions of threat from China, and inform tailored intervention strategies.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

This study contributes to the existing literature by highlighting the social psychological consequences of China's growing threat to the West. Further, it is the first study to examine perceived threat from China not only to national identity, but also to Western identity as a supranational construct. Regardless of the actual threat that China poses to Western culture and life, our research shows that subjective feelings of threat from China in the West activate psychological processes that further catalyse conflict between China and the West. Via increased collective narcissism and susceptibility to conspiracy beliefs, feelings of threat from China lead to political attitudes that favour military conflict. Our findings highlight the important responsibility of the media in its coverage. By conveying a threatening, emotionally charged, and conflict-centred image of China, the media contribute to further fueling the conflict between China and the West. At the same time, our findings suggest a way out of the intensifying conflict spiral: through more differentiated and rational media coverage and intervention strategies that mitigate collective narcissism and prevent or debunk the spread of conspiracy theories about China as a collective enemy of the West.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A – Briefing and informed consent

German version used in the survey	English translation
<p><b>Darum geht's:</b></p> <p>Diese Umfrage ist Teil eines Forschungsprojekts, ausgeführt von Leonie Ludwig (llgee@iscte-iul.pt), Studentin des Europäischen Master Programmes Global-MINDS (<a href="http://www.global-minds.eu">www.global-minds.eu</a>), und betreut von Dr. Christin-Melanie Vauclair, an der Universität ISCTE-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, in Lissabon, Portugal. Bitte beachten Sie, dass Sie mindestens 18 Jahre alt sein und derzeit in Deutschland leben müssen, um an der Umfrage teilnehmen zu können!</p> <p>Ziel der Studie ist es, mehr über die politischen Einstellungen und allgemeinen Ansichten in Teilen der deutschen Bevölkerung in Bezug auf andere Länder und deren Beziehungen zu Deutschland zu erfahren. Ihre Teilnahme an der Studie liegt uns sehr am Herzen, da sie zum Verständnis dieses Forschungsgebietes beiträgt. Sie wird ca. 10-15 Minuten dauern und aus verschiedenen Teilen bestehen mit Fragen zu ihrer Einstellung hinsichtlich Fragen der Demokratie und internationalen Beziehungen.</p> <p>Die Teilnahme an der Studie ist absolut freiwillig: Sie können frei entscheiden, ob Sie teilnehmen möchten oder nicht. Wenn Sie sich für eine Teilnahme entschieden haben, können Sie diese jederzeit ohne Angabe von Gründen beenden. Neben der Freiwilligkeit ist Ihre Teilnahme anonym und vertraulich. Die erhobenen Daten werden ausschließlich statistisch ausgewertet und keine der Antworten wird individuell analysiert oder ausgewertet. An keiner Stelle der Studie werden Sie aufgefordert, sich zu identifizieren.</p> <p><b>Freiwillige Teilnahme am Gewinnspiel:</b></p> <p>Nach der Teilnahme an der Studie haben Sie die Möglichkeit, an einem Gewinnspiel teilzunehmen. Dabei haben Sie die Chance,</p>	<p><b>What it's about:</b></p> <p>This survey is part of a research project carried out by Leonie Ludwig (llgee@iscte-iul.pt), student of the European Master Programme Global-MINDS (<a href="http://www.global-minds.eu">www.global-minds.eu</a>), and supervised by Dr. Christin-Melanie Vauclair, at the ISCTE-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, in Lisbon, Portugal. Please note that you must be at least 18 years old and currently living in Germany to take part in the survey!</p> <p>The aim of the study is to find out more about the political attitudes and general views of parts of the German population with regard to other countries and their relations with Germany. Your participation in the study is very important to us as it will help us to understand this area of research. It will take about 10-15 minutes and will consist of different parts with questions about their attitudes towards democracy and international relations.</p> <p>The participation in the study is completely voluntary: you are free to decide whether you want to participate or not. If you have decided to participate, you can withdraw at any time without giving reasons. In addition to being voluntary, your participation is anonymous and confidential. The data collected will only be evaluated statistically and none of the responses will be analysed or evaluated individually. At no point in the study will you be asked to identify yourself.</p> <p><b>Voluntary participation in the draw:</b></p> <p>After participating in the study, you have the opportunity to take part in a draw. This gives you the chance to win a shopping voucher from REWE or Media Markt worth 50 euros. In order to take part in the draw, you must provide us with personal data in the form of your e-mail address. This data is collected and stored separately from the survey data. Even if you take part in the</p>

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einen Einkaufsgutschein von REWE oder Media Markt im Wert von 50 Euro zu gewinnen. Um am Gewinnspiel teilnehmen zu können, müssen Sie uns persönliche Daten in Form Ihrer E-Mail-Adresse zur Verfügung stellen. Diese Daten werden getrennt von den Umfragedaten gesammelt und gespeichert. Auch wenn Sie am Gewinnspiel teilnehmen, lassen sich Ihre Umfragedaten daher nicht mit Ihrer Person in Verbindung bringen. Ihre E-Mail-Adresse wird nur von befugtem Personal verwaltet, das zur Geheimhaltung und Vertraulichkeit verpflichtet ist. ISCTE verpflichtet sich, angemessene technische, organisatorische und sicherheitstechnische Maßnahmen zu ergreifen, um Ihre persönlichen Daten zu schützen. Alle Forschenden sind verpflichtet, die Vertraulichkeit Ihrer persönlichen Daten zu wahren. ISCTE hat einen Datenschutzbeauftragten, der unter der E-Mail-Adresse dpo@iscte-iul.pt erreichbar ist. Wenn Sie es für notwendig halten, haben Sie auch das Recht, sich bei der portugiesischen Datenschutzbehörde (CNDP) zu beschweren. Ihre E-Mail-Adresse wird für die Dauer des Gewinnspiels gespeichert. Danach wird sie automatisch gelöscht.

**Wenn Sie auf "Weiter" klicken, erklären Sie sich mit den Bedingungen einverstanden:**

Mit dem Klick auf "Weiter" erklären Sie,

- dass Sie die Ziele dieser Studie, wie sie Ihnen in diesem Briefing beschrieben wurden, verstanden haben
- dass Sie verstanden haben, dass Sie die Möglichkeit haben, Fragen zu dieser Studie zu stellen,
- und dass Sie mit der Teilnahme an dieser Studie einverstanden sind.

Wenn Sie nach Abschluss der Umfrage am Gewinnspiel teilnehmen, erklären Sie sich damit einverstanden, dass Ihre E-Mail-Adresse gemäß den Informationen, die Sie in diesem Briefing erhalten haben, verwendet wird.

draw, your survey data cannot therefore be linked to you personally. Your e-mail address will only be managed by authorised personnel who are bound to secrecy and confidentiality. ISCTE is committed to taking appropriate technical, organisational and security measures to protect your personal data. All researchers are obliged to respect the confidentiality of your personal data. ISCTE has a Data Protection Officer who can be contacted at the e-mail address dpo@iscte-iul.pt. If you deem it necessary, you also have the right to lodge a complaint with the Portuguese Data Protection Authority (CNDP). Your e-mail address will be stored for the duration of the competition. It will then be automatically deleted.

**By clicking on "Continue", you agree to the terms and conditions:**

By clicking "Continue" you declare,

- that you have understood the aims of this study as described in this briefing
- that you understand that you have the opportunity to ask questions about this study,
- and that you agree to participate in this study.

If you participate in the draw after completing the survey, you agree that your email address will be used in accordance with the information you have received in this briefing.



## Appendix B – Survey

### 1. Threat manipulation

#### 1.1 Instruction

German version used in the survey	English translation
Bitte lesen Sie zunächst den folgenden Artikel aufmerksam durch.	Please read the following article carefully.

#### 1.2 Threat condition

German version used in the survey	English translation
<b>Chinas Einfluss auf die EU wächst</b> Deutschland kann es sich nicht mehr leisten, die wachsende Einflussnahme Chinas zu ignorieren. Wie Ivana Karaskova von der tschechischen Denkfabrik AMO in einem Bericht aufgezeigt hat, nimmt die Macht Chinas im Westen rapide zu. Die akute Gefahr einer schleichenden Unterwanderung demokratischer Prozesse und europäischer wie westlicher Interessen ist angesichts der verdeckten Finanzierung von Think Tanks, akademischen Einrichtungen und Non-Profit-Organisationen durch China nicht von der Hand zu weisen. Dennoch scheinen Deutschland und andere westeuropäische Länder davor die Augen zu verschließen. Dies ist nicht nur realitätsfern, sondern stellt auch eine erhebliche Gefahr für die Demokratie und die Interessen Europas dar. Als wirtschaftliches Zugpferd der EU und wichtiger Akteur auf internationalem Parkett hat die Bundesrepublik die Verantwortung, sich aktiv mit der Frage des chinesischen Einflusses auseinanderzusetzen. Passivität und Gleichgültigkeit spielen China in die Hände, den europäischen Diskurs zu beeinflussen und die transatlantische Geschlossenheit zu untergraben. Wenn Deutschland das Problem anerkennt, kann es eine dringend nötige Diskussion innerhalb der EU anstoßen und an effektiven Lösungen arbeiten. Berlin muss	<b>China's influence on the EU is growing</b> Germany can no longer afford to ignore China's growing influence. As Ivana Karaskova from the Czech think tank AMO has pointed out in a report, China's power in the West is increasing rapidly. The acute danger of a creeping infiltration of democratic processes and European and Western interests cannot be dismissed in view of China's covert financing of think tanks, academic institutions and non-profit organisations. Nevertheless, Germany and other Western European countries seem to be turning a blind eye to this. This is not only unrealistic, but also poses a considerable threat to democracy and Europe's interests. As the EU's economic driving force and an important player on the international stage, Germany has a responsibility to actively address the issue of Chinese influence. Passivity and indifference play into China's hands, influencing the European discourse and undermining transatlantic unity. If Germany recognises the problem, it can initiate an urgently needed discussion within the EU and work on effective solutions. Berlin must educate the other EU members about the extent and covert tactics of Chinese influence peddling.

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die anderen EU-Mitglieder über das Ausmaß und die verdeckten Taktiken chinesischer Einflussnahme aufklären.

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### 1.3 Control condition

German version used in the survey	English translation
<b>Fahr doch mit dem Drachenboot</b> Viele Legenden ranken sich um den Ursprung der Drachenboot-Festivals. Sie alle sind mit dem Tod des Staatsmannes und Poeten Qu Yuan verbunden, der vor über 2000 Jahren im alten China lebte. Vergeblich waren Fischer noch mit ihren langen Booten hinausgefahren und hatten versucht, den Ertrinkenden zu retten. Seit jenem Tag werden in China zum Gedenken an Qu Yuan an jedem 5. Tag des 5. Mondes (im Juni) Drachenbootrennen veranstaltet. Als Geburtsstunde des Drachenboot-Sports in Deutschland gilt der 800. Hamburger Hafengeburtstag im Mai 1989. Die engen wirtschaftlichen Beziehungen der Hansestadt mit China machten es möglich, mehrere der traditionell chinesischen hölzernen Boote zu importieren. Im Vordergrund stehen beim Drachenboot nicht die Ergebnisse, sondern einfach der Spaß am Sport. Die deutsche Mannschaft "Preußen-Drache" zahlt die Reise zur WM und alle Kosten vor Ort aus eigener Tasche. In Shanghai treffen sich mehr als 19 Mannschaften mit rund 2000 Teilnehmenden zur 5. Drachenboot-WM am Dianshan-See, um den alten Qu Yuan zu würdigen. Der Dichter Qu Yuan würde sich wahrscheinlich freuen, dass über 2000 Jahre nach seinem Tod die Tradition der Drachenboote auch in der westlichen Welt weitergepflegt wird.	<b>Why not take a trip in a dragon boat</b> Many legends surround the origin of dragon boat festivals. They are all linked to the death of the statesman and poet Qu Yuan, who lived over 2000 years ago in ancient China. Fishermen had gone out in their long boats in a vain attempt to save the drowning man. Since that day, dragon boat races have been organised in China every 5th day of the 5th moon (in June) to commemorate Qu Yuan. The 800th Hamburg harbour birthday in May 1989 is regarded as the birth of dragon boating in Germany, as the Hanseatic city's close economic ties with China made it possible to import several of the traditional Chinese wooden boats. The focus of dragon boating is not on results, but simply on the fun of the sport. The German team 'Preußen-Drache' is paying for the trip to the World Championships and all local costs out of its own pocket. More than 19 teams with around 2000 participants will meet in Shanghai for the 5th Dragon Boat World Championships on Dianshan Lake to honour the ancient Qu Yuan. The poet Qu Yuan would probably be delighted that over 2000 years after his death, the tradition of dragon boats is being kept alive in the western world.

## 1.4 Article evaluation

	German version used in the survey	English translation
1	Ich habe den Artikel aufmerksam gelesen.	I read the article carefully.
2	Der Artikel ist vertrauenswürdig.	The article is trustworthy.
3	Der Artikel spiegelt meiner Meinung nach die Realität wider.	In my opinion, the article reflects reality.
4	Wenn ich mich in den deutschen Medien über China informiere, stoße ich oft auf Artikel wie diesen.	When I read about China in the German media, I often come across articles similar to this one.

## 2. Perceived intergroup threat

### 2.1 Realistic threat

	German version used in the survey	Back-translation	Original (Stephen et al., 2002)
	Bitte geben Sie an, inwieweit Sie den folgenden Aussagen über China zustimmen.	Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements about China.	Use the scale printed below each item to indicate your agreement with each of the following statements concerning Blacks.
1	China hat zu viel Macht und Verantwortung in den westlichen Ländern.	China has too much power and responsibility in Western countries.	Blacks hold too many positions of power and responsibility in this country.
2	China dominiert die Politik in den westlichen Ländern mehr als es sollte.	China dominates politics in Western countries more than it should.	Blacks dominate American politics more than they should.
3	China dominiert die Wirtschaft in den westlichen Ländern mehr als es sollte.	China dominates the economies of Western countries more than it should.	
4	Chinas Militärmacht dominiert die westlichen Länder mehr als sie sollte.	China's military power dominates Western countries more than it should.	
5	China hat mehr politische Macht in den westlichen Ländern, als ihm zusteht.	China has more political power in Western countries than it deserves.	Blacks have more political power than they deserve in this country.
6	China hat mehr wirtschaftliche Macht in den	China has more economic power in Western countries than it deserves.	Blacks have more economic power than they deserve in this country.

	westlichen Ländern, als ihm zusteht.	
7	China hat mehr militärische Macht in den westlichen Ländern, als ihm zusteht.	China has more military power in Western countries than it is entitled to.
		<p>When Blacks are in positions of authority, they discriminate against Whites when making hiring decisions.</p> <p>Too much money is spent on educational programs that benefit Blacks.</p> <p>Too much money per student is spent on education for Blacks.</p> <p>The tax system favors Blacks.</p> <p>Many companies hire less qualified Blacks over more qualified Whites.</p> <p>Public service agencies favor Blacks over Whites.</p> <p>The legal system is more lenient on Blacks than on Whites.</p>

## 2.2 Symbolic threat

	German version used in the survey	Back-translation	Original (Stephen et al., 2002)
	Bitte geben Sie an, inwieweit Sie den folgenden Aussagen über China zustimmen.	Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements about China.	Use the scale printed below each item to indicate your agreement with each of the following statements concerning Blacks.
1	Menschen aus China und Menschen aus dem Westen haben sehr unterschiedliche Werte.	People from China and people from the West have very different values.	Whites and Blacks have very different values.

2	Menschen aus China haben kein Recht zu glauben, dass sie bessere Werte haben als Menschen aus dem Westen.	People from China have no right to believe that they have better values than people from the West.	Blacks have no right to think they have better values than Whites.
3	Menschen aus China verstehen nicht, wie Menschen aus dem Westen die Welt sehen.	People from China do not understand how people from the West see the world.	Blacks don't understand the way Whites view the world.
4	Menschen aus China und Menschen aus dem Westen haben unterschiedliche Werte in Bezug auf die Familie.	People from China and people from the West have different values in relation to the family.	Blacks and Whites have different family values.
5	Menschen aus China legen nicht so viel Wert auf die Traditionen ihrer Gruppe wie Menschen aus dem Westen.	People from China do not attach as much importance to the traditions of their group as people from the West.	Blacks don't value the traditions of their group as much as Whites do.
6	Menschen aus China halten sich für moralisch überlegen gegenüber Menschen aus dem Westen.	People from China consider themselves morally superior to people from the West.	Blacks regard themselves as morally superior to Whites.
7	Die chinesischen Werte in Bezug auf Arbeit unterscheiden sich von denen der Menschen aus dem Westen.	Chinese values in relation to work differ from those of Westerners.	The values of Blacks regarding work are different from those of Whites.
8	Die meisten Menschen aus China werden nie verstehen, wie Menschen aus dem Westen sind.	Most people from China will never understand what people from the West are like.	Most Blacks will never understand what Whites are like.
9	China sollte nicht versuchen, der westlichen Welt seine Werte aufzudrängen.	China should not try to impose its values on the Western world.	Blacks should not try to impose their values on Whites.
10	Der Westen wird von China nicht so sehr respektiert, wie es ihm zusteht.	The West is not respected by China as much as it deserves.	Whites do not get as much respect from Blacks as they deserve.

11	Die chinesischen Werte in Bezug auf Menschenrechte unterscheiden sich von denen der Menschen aus dem Westen.	Chinese values in relation to human rights differ from those of Westerners.	
12	Menschen aus China legen nicht so viel Wert auf demokratische Werte wie Menschen aus dem Westen.	People from China do not attach as much importance to democratic values as people from the West.	Blacks want their rights to be put ahead of the rights of Whites.  Blacks do not value the rights granted by the Constitution (life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness) as much as Whites do.

### 3. Ingroup Identification

	German version used in the survey	Back-translation	Original (Postmes et al., 2012)
	Wir alle gehören verschiedenen Gruppen an. Bitte geben Sie an, inwieweit Sie sich mit den folgenden Gruppen identifizieren.	We all belong to different groups. Please indicate to what extent you identify with the following groups.	
1	Ich identifiziere mich mit Deutschland.	I identify with Germany.	I identify with [my group]
2	Ich identifiziere mich mit Europa.	I identify with Europe.	
3	Ich identifiziere mich mit dem Westen.	I identify with the West.	

#### 4. Collective narcissism

	German version used in the survey	English translation	Original (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; German version)
	Gegenüber vielen Gruppen haben wir bestimmte Gefühle und Einstellungen. Beschreiben Sie bitte Ihre Gefühle und Gedanken in Bezug auf den Westen. Bitte lesen Sie jede Aussage sorgfältig durch und überlegen Sie, inwieweit sie Ihre Meinung widerspiegelt.	We have certain feelings and attitudes towards many groups. Please describe your feelings and thoughts about the West. Please read each statement carefully and consider to what extent it reflects your opinion.	Jeder von uns gehört verschiedenen Gruppen an. Wir haben bestimmte Gefühle und Einstellungen gegenüber vielen Gruppen. Bitte beschreiben Sie Ihre Gefühle und Gedanken über den Schaden der polnischen Nation die folgenden Aussagen. Bitte aufmerksam lesen jede Aussage und überlegen Sie, inwieweit sie Ihre Meinung widerspiegelt.
1	Ich wünschte mir, andere Gruppen würden die Autorität des Westens schneller anerkennen.	I wish other groups would recognise the authority of the West more quickly.	Ich wünschte mir, andere Gruppen würde die Autorität meiner Gruppe schneller anerkennen.
2	Der Westen verdient es, besonders behandelt zu werden.	The West deserves special treatment.	Meine Gruppe verdient es, besonders behandelt zu werden.
3	Nicht allzu viele Menschen scheinen die Wichtigkeit des Westens voll zu verstehen.	Not too many people seem to fully understand the importance of the West.	Nicht allzu viele Menschen scheinen die Wichtigkeit meiner Gruppe voll zu verstehen.
4	Ich bestehe darauf, dass der Westen den Respekt bekommt, den er verdient.	I insist that the West gets the respect it deserves.	Ich bestehe darauf, dass meine Gruppe den Respekt bekommt, den sie verdient.
5	Es macht mich wirklich wütend, wenn andere den Westen kritisieren.	It really makes me angry when others criticise the West.	Es macht mich wirklich wütend, wenn andere meine Gruppe kritisieren.
6	Wenn der Westen viel in der Welt zu sagen hätte, wäre die Welt ein besserer Ort.	If the West had much to say in the world, the world would be a better place.	Wenn meine Gruppe viel in der Welt zu sagen hätte, wäre die Welt ein sehr viel besserer Ort.

7	Es regt mich nicht besonders auf, wenn Menschen die Errungenschaften des Westens nicht zur Kenntnis nehmen.	It doesn't particularly upset me when people don't recognise the achievements of the West.	Es regt mich nicht besonders auf, wenn Menschen die Errungenschaften meiner Gruppe nicht zur Kenntnis nehmen. (reverse coded)
8	Der wahre Wert des Westens wird häufig missverstanden.	The true value of the West is often misunderstood.	Der wahre Wert meiner Gruppe wird häufig missverstanden.
9	Ich bin niemals ganz zufrieden, bis der Westen die Anerkennung erhält, die er verdient.	I will never be completely satisfied until the West receives the recognition it deserves.	Ich bin niemals ganz zufrieden, bis meine Gruppe die Anerkennung erhält, die sie verdient.

## 4. Intergroup conspiracy beliefs

### 4.1 Test items

	German version used in the survey	English translation
	Bitte lesen Sie die folgenden Aussagen über China und sein Verhältnis zum Westen aufmerksam durch und bewerten Sie, für wie wahrscheinlich zutreffend sie diese Aussagen halten.	Please read the following statements about China and its relationship with the West carefully and rate how likely you think these statements are to be true.
1	Die chinesische Seidenstraßen-Initiative verbirgt unter der neu errichteten Hafeninfrastruktur ein Netzwerk von U-Booten, die im Verborgenen chinesische Truppen und Waffen entlang der Routen transportieren und westliche Interessen bedrohen.	The Chinese Silk Road Initiative conceals a network of submarines under the newly built harbour infrastructure, which secretly transport Chinese troops and weapons along the routes and threaten Western interests.
2	Chinas ehrgeizige Pläne für die Raumfahrt zielen darauf ab, eine geheime Militärbasis auf dem Mond zu errichten, um von dort aus strategische Vorteile zu erlangen und westliche Raumfahrt- und Satellitensysteme zu bedrohen.	China's ambitious space plans aim to establish a secret military base on the moon to gain strategic advantage and threaten Western space and satellite systems.
3	China ermutigt seine Bürgerinnen und Bürger zu Tourismusreisen, um westliche Länder auszuspionieren, kritische Infrastrukturen zu identifizieren und sich auf künftige Angriffe vorzubereiten.	China encourages its citizens to go on tourist trips to spy on Western countries, identify critical infrastructure and prepare for future attacks.



4	China hat im Jahr 2016 seine Ein-Kind-Politik aufgegeben, um in Zukunft seine militärische Macht durch eine stärkere Rekrutierung von Nachwuchs zu stärken.	China abandoned its one-child policy in 2016 in order to strengthen its military power in future by recruiting more young people.
5	Chinesische "Geisterstädte", riesige, aber weitgehend unbewohnte Stadtgebiete, dienen dem chinesischen Militär als verborgenes Übungsgelände, um sich auf Infiltrationsmissionen in den Westen vorzubereiten.	Chinese "ghost towns", huge but largely uninhabited urban areas, serve as hidden training grounds for the Chinese military to prepare for infiltration missions into the West.

#### 4.2 Manipulation check item

	German version used in the survey	English translation
6	Einflussreiche Unternehmen wie Google und Facebook treiben die Erforschung und Entwicklung künstlicher Intelligenz gezielt voran, um die Kontrolle über menschliche Entscheidungen und Verhaltensweisen zu erlangen.	Influential companies such as Google and Facebook are systematically driving forward the research and development of artificial intelligence in order to gain control over human decisions and behaviour.

#### 5. Support for military aggression

	German version used in the survey	Back-translation	Original (Golec De Zavala et al., 2009)
1	Militärische Stärke ist wichtiger als diplomatischer Respekt gegenüber China.	Military strength is more important than diplomatic respect towards China.	Military strength is more important than respect abroad
2	Die Verteidigungsausgaben des Westens sollten erhöht werden, um China zu kontrollieren.	Western military defense spending should be increased in order to control China.	U.S. military spending should be increased
3	Militärische Stärke ist wichtiger als wirtschaftliche Stärke im Umgang mit China.	Military strength is more important than economic strength in dealing with China.	Military strength is more important than economic strength
4	Ich unterstütze die Idee, dass der Westen gewaltsame Maßnahmen ergreifen sollte, um seine Interessen gegenüber China durchzusetzen.	I support the idea that the West should take violent measures to assert its interests against China.	

5	Es ist gerechtfertigt, politische Gewalt anzuwenden, um die Sicherheit des Westens vor Bedrohungen aus China zu gewährleisten.	It is justified to use political force to ensure the security of the West against threats from China.	
			<p>I supported going to war against Iraq</p> <p>U.S. made the right decision going to war with Iraq</p> <p>The situation in Iraq is improving</p> <p>Most Iraqis want the U.S. to leave</p> <p>Iraq gave support to Al Qaeda</p> <p>U.S. military has tried to avoid civilian casualties in Iraq</p> <p>President Bush should have built more international support for war in Iraq</p>

## 6. Demographics

### 6.1 Attitudes towards prominent German political parties

	German version used in the survey	English translation	Original (Schmitt-Beck et al., 2009)
	Was halten Sie ganz allgemein von den folgenden politischen Parteien in Deutschland?	What do you generally think of the following political parties in Germany?	Und nun zu den politischen Parteien. Was halten Sie ganz allgemein von den politischen Parteien? Bitte beschreiben Sie dies mit einer Skala von -5 bis +5.
1	AFD	AFD	
2	CDU	CDU	CDU
3	FDP	FDP	FDP

4	CSU	CSU	CSU
5	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen
6	SPD	SPD	SPD
7	Die Linke	Die Linke	Die Linke

## 6.2 Political orientation

	German version used in the survey	English translation	Original (Döbele et al., 2023)
1	Wo würden Sie sich selbst einordnen auf einer Skala von 1 bis 7, wenn 1 „links“ und 7 „rechts“ bedeutet und 4 genau in der Mitte ist?	Where would you place yourself on a scale of 1 to 7, if 1 means "left" and 7 means "right" and 4 is right in the middle?	Und wo würden Sie sich selbst einordnen auf einer Skala von 0 bis 10, wenn 0 „links“ und 10 „rechts“ bedeutet und 5 genau in der Mitte ist?

## 6.3 Satisfaction with household income

	German version used in the survey	English translation	Original (Statistik Austria, n.d.)
1	Wie zufrieden sind Sie mit der finanziellen Situation Ihres Haushalts?	How satisfied are you with the financial situation of your household?	Wie zufrieden sind Sie mit der finanziellen Situation Ihres Haushalts?

## 6.4 Nationality

	German version used in the survey	English translation	Original (RatSWD, 2023)
1	Haben Sie die deutsche Staatsangehörigkeit?	Do you have German citizenship?	Haben Sie die deutsche Staatsangehörigkeit?
2	Seit wie vielen Jahren leben Sie in Deutschland?	How many years have you lived in Germany?	
3	Welche Staatsangehörigkeit haben Sie?	What is your nationality?	Welche Staatsangehörigkeit haben Sie?
4	Haben Sie zusätzlich eine andere Staatsangehörigkeit?	Do you also have another nationality?	Haben Sie zusätzlich eine andere Staatsangehörigkeit?
5	Welche ist Ihre zweite Staatsangehörigkeit?	What is your second nationality?	Welche ist Ihre zweite Staatsangehörigkeit?

## 6.5 Age

	German version used in the survey	English translation
1	Wie alt sind Sie?	How old are you?

## 6.6 Gender

	German version used in the survey	English translation
1	Welches Geschlecht haben Sie?	What is your gender?

## 6.7 Highest level of education

	German version used in the survey	English translation
1	Was ist Ihr höchster Bildungsabschluss?	What is your highest level of education?

## 6.8 Importance of religion in daily life

	German version used in the survey	English translation
1	Wie wichtig ist Religion in Ihrem Alltag?	How important is religion in your everyday life?

## 6.9 Survey validity

	German version used in the survey	English translation
1	Zähneputzen ist eine sehr wichtige Gewohnheit. Wenn Sie die folgende Frage beantworten, wählen Sie bitte "Stimme absolut nicht zu". Tägliches Zähneputzen trägt zur Mundhygiene und Mundgesundheit bei.	Brushing your teeth is a very important habit. When answering the following question, please select "Strongly disagree". Brushing your teeth every day contributes to oral hygiene and oral health.

	German version used in the survey	English translation
2	Sollten wir Ihrer Meinung nach Ihre Daten aus dieser Umfrage verwenden? Bitte beachten Sie: Unabhängig davon, welche Antwort Sie wählen, haben Sie die Gelegenheit, sich für das Gewinnspiel anzumelden.	Do you think we should use your data from this survey? Please note: Regardless of which answer you choose, you will have the opportunity to enter the draw.
	Warum sollten wir Ihre Daten nicht verwenden?	Why should we not use your data?

## Appendix C – Debriefing

German version used in the survey	English translation
<b>Vielen Dank dafür, dass Sie an dieser Studie teilgenommen haben.</b>	<b>Thank you for taking part in this study.</b>
<b>Darum ging es (Detaillierte Erklärung):</b>	<b>This is what it was about (detailed explanation):</b>
Wie Sie zu Beginn Ihrer Teilnahme erfahren haben, geht es in dieser Studie darum, mehr über politische Standpunkte und allgemeine Ansichten in Teilen der Bevölkerung Deutschlands zu erfahren. Konkret geht es darum, die deutsche Medienberichterstattung über China und ihre Folgen zu untersuchen, d.h. welche Folgen es hat, wenn die China-Berichterstattung ein Gefühl der Bedrohung in uns auslöst - denn in vielen Medien heißt es, China bedrohe den Westen und seine Stellung in der Weltordnung. Insbesondere gehen wir den Fragen nach, ob ein solches Bedrohungsgefühl den Glauben an Verschwörungstheorien begünstigt oder ob Menschen eher bereit sind, den Einsatz von Gewalt gegen China als gerechtfertigt anzusehen - und welche Gründe das haben könnte. Unsere Hypothese ist, dass ein Grund hierfür "kollektiver Narzissmus" ist - so wird der Glaube beschrieben, dass die eigene Gruppe (in diesem Fall der Westen) außergewöhnlich ist und besondere Anerkennung verdient, aber von anderen nicht angemessen anerkannt wird.	As you learnt at the beginning of your participation, this study is about finding out more about political viewpoints and general opinions in parts of the German population regarding other countries and their relations with Germany. Specifically, it is about finding out about German media coverage of China and its consequences, i.e. what consequences it has when China coverage triggers a feeling of threat in us - because many media say that China threatens the West and its position in the world order. In particular, we are investigating whether such a sense of threat favours belief in conspiracy theories or whether people are more willing to see the use of force against China as justified (so-called "authoritarian aggression") - and what the reasons for this might be. Our hypothesis is that one reason for this is "collective narcissism" - the belief that one's own group (in this case the West) is exceptional and deserves special recognition, but is not adequately recognised by others.
<b>Das sollten Sie unbedingt über unsere Studie wissen:</b>	<b>You should definitely know this about our study:</b>
<b>Möglicherweise haben wir bei Ihnen ein Gefühl der Bedrohung ausgelöst:</b> Während der Teilnahme an unserer Studie haben Sie einen von zwei Artikeln gelesen. Je nachdem, welchen der beiden Artikel Sie zugewiesen bekommen haben, sollte entweder ein Bedrohungsgefühl hinsichtlich China als Weltmacht in Ihnen ausgelöst werden oder nicht. Diese Artikel wurden tatsächlich in den deutschen Medien publiziert, aber von uns leicht verschärft. Sollten Sie Fragen oder Anmerkungen zu den Artikeln und deren Einfluss auf Sie haben, kontaktieren	<b>We may have triggered a feeling of threat in you:</b> While participating in our study, you read one of two articles. Depending on which of the two articles you were assigned, either a sense of threat regarding China as a world power should have been triggered in you or not. These articles were actually published in the German media, but were slightly exacerbated by us in order to trigger a sense of threat. If you have any questions or comments about the articles and their impact on you, please contact us.
	<b>We have included conspiracy theories in this study:</b>

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Sie uns bitte.

**Wir haben Verschwörungstheorien in dieser Studie aufgeführt: Zu**

Forschungszwecken haben wir uns im Rahmen dieser Studie sechs Verschwörungstheorien mit der Hilfe von KI (Künstlicher Intelligenz) ausgedacht. Diese sind REIN FIKTIV. Es handelt sich um folgende Aussagen aus der Studie:

- "Die chinesische Seidenstraßen-Initiative verbirgt unter der neu errichteten Hafeninfrastruktur ein Netzwerk von U-Booten, die im Verborgenen chinesische Truppen und Waffen entlang der Routen transportieren und westliche Interessen bedrohen." Das ist FALSCH! Es gibt keine Beweise oder verlässlichen Quellen, die die Existenz eines solchen U-Boot-Netzwerks untermauern.
- "Chinas ehrgeizige Pläne für die Raumfahrt zielen darauf ab, eine geheime Militärbasis auf dem Mond zu errichten, um von dort aus strategische Vorteile zu erlangen und westliche Raumfahrt- und Satellitensysteme zu bedrohen." Das ist FALSCH! Es gibt keine Beweise dafür, dass China derzeit Pläne für eine geheime Militärbasis auf dem Mond verfolgt.
- "China ermutigt seine Bürgerinnen und Bürger zu Tourismusreisen, um westliche Länder auszuspionieren, kritische Infrastrukturen zu identifizieren und sich auf künftige Angriffe vorzubereiten." Das ist FALSCH! Es gibt keine Beweise für ein systematisches Spionageprogramm unter chinesischen Touristinnen und Touristen.
- "China hat im Jahr 2016 seine Ein-Kind-Politik aufgegeben, um in Zukunft seine militärische Macht durch eine stärkere Rekrutierung von Nachwuchs zu stärken." Das ist FALSCH! Es gibt keine Hinweise, dass die Abschaffung der Ein-Kind-Politik militärische Motive hatte.
- "Chinesische 'Geisterstädte', riesige, aber weitgehend unbewohnte Stadtgebiete, dienen dem chinesischen Militär als verborgenes Übungsgelände, um sich auf Infiltrationsmissionen in den Westen

For research purposes, we have come up with six conspiracy theories using AI (Artificial Intelligence) as part of this study. These are purely FICTIVE. These are the following statements from the study:

- "The Chinese Silk Road initiative hides a network of submarines under the newly built port infrastructure, which secretly transport Chinese troops and weapons along the routes and threaten Western interests." This is FALSE! There is no evidence or reliable sources to support the existence of such a submarine network.
- "China's ambitious space plans aim to establish a secret military base on the moon to gain strategic advantage and threaten Western space and satellite systems." FALSE! There is no evidence that China is currently pursuing plans for a secret military base on the moon.
- "China encourages its citizens to go on tourism trips to spy on Western countries, identify critical infrastructure and prepare for future attacks." FALSE! There is no evidence of a systematic espionage programme among Chinese tourists.
- "China abandoned its one-child policy in 2016 in order to strengthen its military power in the future by recruiting more young people." FALSE! There is no evidence that the abolition of the one-child policy had military motives.
- "Chinese 'ghost cities', vast but largely uninhabited urban areas, serve as hidden training grounds for the Chinese military to prepare for infiltration missions into the West." FALSE! There is no evidence that ghost towns in China are used by the Chinese military as training grounds for infiltration missions. The existence of ghost towns in China is mainly due to urban planning mistakes, property bubbles and economic overcapacity.
- "Influential companies such as Google and Facebook are specifically driving forward

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vorzubereiten." Das ist FALSCH! Es gibt keine Beweise dafür, dass Geisterstädte in China dem chinesischen Militär als Übungsgelände für Infiltrationsmissionen dienen. Die Existenz von Geisterstädten in China ist hauptsächlich auf städtebauliche Planungsfehler, Immobilienblasen und wirtschaftliche Überkapazitäten zurückzuführen.

- "Einflussreiche Unternehmen wie Google und Facebook treiben die Erforschung und Entwicklung künstlicher Intelligenz gezielt voran, um die Kontrolle über menschliche Entscheidungen und Verhaltensweisen zu erlangen." Das ist FALSCH! Es gibt keine Beweise dafür, dass Unternehmen wie Google und Facebook künstliche Intelligenz entwickeln, um die Kontrolle über menschliche Entscheidungen zu erlangen.

**Bitte kontaktieren Sie uns bei Fragen oder Anliegen:**

Wir möchten Sie daran erinnern, dass Sie die folgenden Kontaktdaten nutzen können, um Fragen zu stellen, Kommentare abzugeben oder Ihr Interesse an Informationen über die wichtigsten Ergebnisse und Schlussfolgerungen der Studie zu bekunden. Melden Sie sich hierzu bitte bei uns unter der E-Mail-Adresse [llgee@iscte-iul.pt](mailto:llgee@iscte-iul.pt).

**So nehmen Sie am Gewinnspiel teil:**

Mit der Teilnahme an dieser Studie haben Sie die Möglichkeit, an unserem Gewinnspiel teilzunehmen. Sie haben die Chance, einen Einkaufsgutschein von REWE oder Media Markt im Wert von 50 Euro zu gewinnen. Um am Gewinnspiel teilzunehmen, kopieren Sie bitte folgenden Satz:

"Hiermit bestätige ich meine Teilnahme an der Verlosung eines 50 Euro REWE/Media Markt Einkaufsgutscheins" und senden Sie ihn mit dem Betreff "Gewinnspiel" an die E-Mail-Adresse [llgee@iscte-iul.pt](mailto:llgee@iscte-iul.pt). Wir werden Sie bis spätestens 30. Juni 2024 kontaktieren, falls Sie gewonnen haben. Danach wird Ihre E-Mail-Adresse automatisch gelöscht.

the research and development of artificial intelligence in order to gain control over human decisions and behaviour."

FALSE! There is no evidence that companies like Google and Facebook are developing artificial intelligence to gain control over human decisions.

**Please contact us if you have any questions or concerns:**

We would like to remind you that you can use the following contact details to ask questions, make comments or express your interest in receiving information about the key findings and conclusions of the study. To do so, please contact Leonie Ludwig ([llgee@iscte-iul.pt](mailto:llgee@iscte-iul.pt)).

**How to take part in the draw:**

By participating in this study, you have the opportunity to take part in our draw. You have the chance to win a shopping voucher from REWE or Media Markt worth 50 euros. To take part in the draw, please copy the following sentence: "I hereby confirm my participation in the draw for a 50 euro REWE/Media Markt shopping voucher" and send it to the e-mail address [llgee@iscte-iul.pt](mailto:llgee@iscte-iul.pt) with the subject "Draw". We will contact you by 30 June 2024 at the latest if you have won. Your e-mail address will then be automatically deleted.

**Further information on our field of research:**

If you would like more information on the topic of the study, you can also consult the following sources:

- [China Threat Theory](#)
- [Collective Narcissism](#)
- [Authoritarian Aggression](#)
- [Intergroup Emotion Theory](#)
- [Adaptive Conspiracism Hypothesis](#)

**Thank you again for your participation.**

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**Weitere Informationen zu unserem****Forschungsgebiet:**

Wenn Sie weitere Informationen über das Thema der Studie wünschen, können Sie auch die folgenden Quellen konsultieren:

- [China Threat Theory](#)
- [Collective Narcissism](#)
- [Intergroup Threat Theory](#)
- [Adaptive Conspiracism Hypothesis](#)

**Nochmals vielen Dank für Ihre Teilnahme.**

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**Appendix D – Chat history with ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2024) for item generation**

**Command:** Invent five conspiracy theories about the People's Republic of China. The theories must include that China is planning to infiltrate, harm or attack the West. The theories must be clearly refutable. Here is an example: "China has abandoned their one-child policy in 2016 to be able to increase their manpower in the military force in the future"

**Answer:**

1. **The Great Firewall of China is a Trojan Horse:** This theory suggests that China's internet censorship, known as the Great Firewall, is not just about controlling information within China but is actually a covert operation to infiltrate Western networks. The theory claims that embedded within the Great Firewall's infrastructure are backdoors and malware designed to steal sensitive information from Western countries. However, this theory is refutable because the Great Firewall primarily operates through IP blocking, DNS filtering, and other standard censorship techniques rather than sophisticated hacking methods.
2. **Chinese Medicine is a Bioweapon:** Some conspiracy theorists claim that traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) is not just about healing but is a cover for a sophisticated bioweapons program. They argue that Chinese herbal remedies and treatments contain hidden toxins or pathogens designed to weaken the health of Western populations over time. However, this theory is easily refutable as TCM has been practiced for thousands of years and there is no credible evidence to suggest it is being used as a bioweapon.
3. **China's Belt and Road Initiative is a Military Expansion Plan:** This theory posits that China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aimed at building infrastructure and expanding trade routes across Asia, Africa, and Europe, is actually a guise for military expansion. It suggests that the infrastructure projects funded by China, such as ports and roads, are strategically positioned to facilitate future military operations against Western powers. However, this theory is refutable because the BRI primarily



focuses on economic development and increasing China's influence through trade, rather than military objectives.

4. **Chinese Investment in Western Tech Companies is a Trojan Horse:** Some conspiracy theorists claim that China's significant investments in Western technology companies are part of a larger plan to sabotage or control critical infrastructure in the West. They argue that by investing in companies involved in telecommunications, artificial intelligence, and other cutting-edge technologies, China aims to gain access to sensitive data and compromise Western security. However, this theory is refutable because investments in technology companies are driven by economic motives rather than a coordinated effort to harm the West.
5. **Chinese Space Program is Building Orbital Weapons:** This theory suggests that China's advancements in space exploration, including its development of space stations and lunar missions, are actually a cover for the development of orbital weapons aimed at threatening Western countries. Proponents of this theory claim that China intends to deploy weapons platforms in space capable of targeting satellites and conducting precision strikes on Earth. However, this theory is refutable because China's space program is primarily focused on scientific research, exploration, and advancing its capabilities in space technology, rather than militarization. Additionally, the Outer Space Treaty prohibits the deployment of weapons of mass destruction in space.

**Command:** It should be theories that nobody knows yet

**Answer:** Got it, here are five original conspiracy theories about the People's Republic of China:

1. **Chinese cloning project to infiltrate Western leadership:** Some conspiracy theorists claim that China is secretly conducting a massive cloning project to create duplicates of Western leaders and then install them in key positions to destabilise the Western world from within. This theory claims that by cloning politicians, business leaders and military officers, China may be able to gather confidential information and manipulate decision-making processes in the West. However, this is easily refuted as the technological and ethical hurdles for such a cloning project would be enormous and there is no credible evidence to support it.
2. **The Chinese Silk Road is a gigantic submarine network:** This theory claims that the Chinese Silk Road initiative not only aims to establish trade routes, but also to hide a secret network of submarines under the newly built harbour infrastructures. The submarines are to be used to secretly transport Chinese troops and weapons to strategically important positions along the trade routes in order to threaten Western interests in the event of a conflict. However, this theory is refutable, as the construction

and utilisation of submarines would represent an immense logistical challenge and there is no evidence of such a covert submarine network.

3. **Chinese social media platforms as surveillance tools for the West:** This theory states that popular Chinese social media platforms such as WeChat and TikTok are not only used to disseminate content, but also act as sophisticated surveillance tools used by the Chinese government to spy on and influence Western citizens. Theorists claim that through the mass use of these platforms in the West, China is able to collect personal data, manipulate political opinions and track down potential dissidents. However, this theory can be refuted as most of these platforms are subject to strict data protection regulations and there is no evidence of a large-scale espionage operation.
4. **Chinese spaceflight is aimed at creating a military base on the moon:** This theory claims that China's ambitious plans for spaceflight, including building its own space station and sending missions to the moon, are actually aimed at establishing a secret military base on the moon. Theorists argue that China intends to gain strategic advantage from the moon to threaten Western space and satellite systems in the event of a conflict. However, this theory is easily refuted, as the construction and maintenance of such a base would require enormous resources and there is no evidence that China is currently pursuing such plans.
5. **Chinese tourists as covert agents for espionage operations in the West:** This theory states that the increasing number of Chinese tourists visiting the West is not only for tourism, but is also used to infiltrate covert agents and spies to gather secret information and carry out subversive activities. Theorists claim that China encourages its citizens to travel as tourists to spy on Western countries, identify critical infrastructure and prepare for future attacks. However, this theory is easily refuted as most Chinese tourists have peaceful intentions and there is no evidence of systematic infiltration by Chinese spies.

**Command:** More

**Answer:** Of course, here are a few more:

1. **China's "cloud cities" as camouflage for secret military bases:** This theory suggests that the mysterious "cloud cities" in China, huge skyscrapers built in remote areas with no recognisable population, are actually camouflage for secret military bases. Theorists argue that these skyscrapers harbour hidden military facilities beneath the earth's surface, from which China can monitor and attack the West from afar. However, this theory is disprovable as there is no evidence of such hidden military bases and the "cloud cities" are mainly built for civilian purposes.
2. **Chinese space debris as targeted attacks on Western satellites:** Some conspiracy theorists claim that the increasing amount of space debris left behind by Chinese space

missions are not simply waste products, but are purposefully used to attack and destroy Western satellites. They argue that China is deliberately creating debris in orbit to disrupt Western satellite communications and gain geopolitical advantage. However, this theory is refutable as there is no concrete evidence that China is deliberately creating space debris and the majority of debris comes from accidents or uncontrolled space missions.

3. **Chinese "ghost cities" as training grounds for infiltration into the West:** Some conspiracy theorists believe that the infamous "ghost cities" in China, vast but largely unpopulated urban areas, actually serve as training grounds for Chinese spies to prepare for infiltration missions into the West. They argue that these ghost towns provide realistic environments in which Chinese agents can learn to move and operate in Western cities in order to jeopardise national security. However, this theory is disprovable as the ghost towns were created mainly for economic reasons and there is no evidence of such use.
4. **Chinese cryptocurrencies as a means of economic sabotage:** Some conspiracy theorists claim that China's efforts to introduce its own cryptocurrencies are not only aimed at strengthening its financial sovereignty, but also serve as a means of economic sabotage of the West. They argue that China is planning to use its cryptocurrencies specifically to destabilise Western financial markets and influence the global economy. However, this theory is refutable, as China's interest in cryptocurrencies is mainly aimed at modernising the financial system and promoting digitalisation, without pursuing a specific agenda of economic sabotage.