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Reconstructing the Silk Road: Norm Contestation in Sino-European Relations in Times of the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract

This paper analyses EU and member-state responses to the Belt and Road Initiative and addresses norm contestation in Sino-European discourse regarding the primary institutions of Sovereignty, International Law, and Market Economy. The paper combines the toolset of the English School with norm contestation theory in its discourse analysis. The findings show evidence for contestation and increasing tension in Sino-European discourse and relations since the beginning of Xi's presidency. Moreover, that the BRI, while at first a projection screen for substantive disagreements and contestation, eventually became subject to contestation itself. Based on these findings, the paper advances three arguments. First, that the BRI increasingly presented a challenge to EU cohesion and unity, especially in member states' foreign policy vis-à-vis China. Second, that substantive disagreements between China and the EU, Germany, and Italy were based in a clash of pluralist and liberal-solidarist interpretations of Sovereignty, International Law, and the Market Economy. Third, that in contesting liberal-solidarist interpretations of PIs, China is resisting European solidarisation and arguably proposing a pluralist alternative to a liberal-solidarist order.

Keywords

Belt and Road Initiative, Sino-European Relations, Discourse Analysis, Norm Contestation, English School, Regional International Society

Introduction¹

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become a household name for interaction with China in many different spheres since its inception in 2013. In short, it is part of China's contemporary foreign policy framework under Xi Jinping for further developing the transport and trade connections along the ancient Silk Road, and beyond, through bilateral agreements and investments in infrastructure. Scholarly dealing with it has been focused on both realist and liberal approaches to analyse a variety of global and regional settings and investigate questions of geopolitical, economic and financial impact (Mayer 2017; Erslev Andersen et al. 2017; Yu Cheng, Lilei Song & Lihe Huang 2018). Some scholars have criticised this emphasis on realist and liberal theory and have adopted a constructivist perspective in their research (Callahan 2016; Fierke & Antonio-Alfonso 2018). Their critique of the state-of-the-art provides grounds for investigating, paraphrasing Fierke and Antonio-Alfonso, how China is possibly reconfiguring the normative fabric of global politics through the BRI. Within IR, the English School (ES), with its central concepts of international society as "a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values" (Bull 1977, p.13) and primary institutions (PIs) as these "patterned practices, ideas and norms/rules" (Schouenborg 2012, p.45), offers a framework focused very much on this normative fabric (Buzan 2014; Buzan & Schouenborg 2018; Knudsen & Navari 2019).

This paper aims to contribute to the diversification of theoretical approaches to the study of the BRI and its global impact, and within the ES to the study of further regions and regional international societies (RISs) in the context of the BRI. In that sense, the paper contributes to the regional turn of the ES (Hurrell 2007; Schouenborg 2012; Karmazin et al. 2014; Stivachtis 2015) when addressing Sino-European relations in times of the BRI. It analyses (norm) contestation regarding differing interpretations and practices of certain PIs between statespersons representing the respective governments of Germany, Italy, China, and the European Union (EU) as a global actor. In doing so, this paper highlights promising synergies between constructivist norm research and the ES. Further, it contributes to the emerging field of BRI studies in asking for the initiative's role in Sino-European relations. The selection of Germany and Italy is reasoned for with their particular relevance for the BRI – Germany marks the nodal point for the Silk Road Economic Belt, and Italy as the occidental end of the historic Silk Road marks the nodal point for the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Moreover, they represent different places on an economic spectrum in terms of, e.g. current account balance, public debt, and unemployment rate among EU member states and thus allow for an EU north-south perspective in the enquiry regarding the BRI. The chosen actors are also from distinct regions for which RIS has been

¹ This paper expands on, and reproduces parts of, the author's Master's thesis defended in May 2019 when at Roskilde University. An earlier version of this paper was part of EISAPEC19.

addressed within recent ES studies. The EU, Germany, and Italy represent a European RIS (ERIS) (Diez, Manners & Whitman 2011; Ahrens & Diez 2015; Ahrens 2019), while China is located in East Asia and an arguably prominent, possibly dominant, member within an East Asia RIS (EARIS) (Buzan & Zhang 2014; Costa Buranelli 2015; Zhang 2015). The PIs under investigation are Sovereignty and International Law as the pillars of international society (Jackson 2003; Holsti 2004; Costa Buranelli 2015), and the Market Economy as an institution bearing high relevance to the BRI itself and being the one that China in recent decades has arguably embraced above all. This allows addressing the puzzle of what happens to the normative fabric of global politics when (actors from different) RISs meet. To that end, the paper poses the below research questions:

Which contesting or rivalling interpretations of Sovereignty, International Law, and the Market Economy are statespersons representing China and the EU, Germany, and Italy promoting, and what role does the BRI have for Sino-European relations and contestation?

The theoretical framework draws on the notion of polysemous PIs, i.e. that the interpretations and practices of PIs are regional-context dependent (Kacowicz 2005; Costa Buranelli 2015), and that interpretations and related practices of PIs differ from other regions' and from liberal interpretations to various degrees (Buzan & Zhang 2014; Karmazin et al. 2014; Costa Buranelli 2014). The understanding of norm contestation in the context of PIs between actors from different RIS is aligned with the Theory of Contestation, i.e. as a social practice with normative, or norm-generative, dimensions (Wiener 2014, pp.1–7). The analysis focuses on norm contestation in the sense of the actors promoting differing interpretations of PIs or opposing the respectively other's interpretations or related practices (Buzan & Zhang 2014, p.7; Wiener 2018, p.217). The paper deploys a variation of discourse tracing (DT)² to capture the chronologic unfolding of Sino-European discourse, identify defining themes of contestation and substantive disagreements, and analyse the role of the BRI in relation to contestation.

The findings indicate that Sino-European relations can be divided into four phases between 2013–2019, each characterised by different defining themes and changing receptions of the BRI. Contestation is identified in differing forms and around different themes in all phases. This paper argues that, firstly, the BRI increasingly presented a challenge to EU cohesion and unity, especially in member state foreign policy vis-à-vis China – the relations between China and the EU, and Germany became increasingly contested throughout the phases, while Sino-Italian relations developed amicably. Secondly, that substantive disagreements between China and the EU, Germany, and Italy were based in a clash of plural-

² See LeGreco and Tracy (2009) and Spandler (2019) for further considerations.

ist and liberal-solidarist interpretations of Sovereignty, International Law, and the Market Economy, and differing related practices. Thirdly, that in contesting liberal-solidarist interpretations of PIs, China is resisting solidarising tendencies of members of ERIS and arguably proposing an alternative, pluralist order to a (European) liberal-solidarist one.

The paper is structured into six sections. The following one outlines the theoretical framework for this work and introduces core concepts. The third section clarifies the methodologic pathway and research design. Section four and five present the findings regarding the BRI in Sino-European discourse and respective contestations of Sovereignty, International Law, and the Market Economy between 2013 and 2019. The last section provides a conclusion and discusses implications for both IR as a discipline and international relations in practice.

The English School and Contestation of Norms

The contestation of norms in the context of this paper means contestation of interpretations and related practices of the ES's PIs.³ This becomes clearer when recalling that PIs are “patterned practices, ideas and norms/rules” (Schouenborg 2012, p.45) which represent “the institutionalisation of mutual interest and identity among states” (Buzan 2014, p.12). The original set of PIs includes Balance of Power, International Law, Diplomacy, War and Great Power Management (Bull 1977). It has since then been extended in an extensive ongoing debate – summarised in-depth by Buzan (2014) – to also include the notions Sovereignty, Nationalism, Human Equality and the Market (Wight 1978; James 1986, 1999; Mayall 1990, 2000; Holsti 2002, 2004; Jackson 2003; Buzan 2004; Schouenborg 2011). Not all ES scholars are in agreement regarding what counts as an institution, Terradas (2018), for example, traces the arguable anthropological roots of Hedley Bull’s work and argues for adherence to the classical five institutions, while making a case for Trade as a sixth PI of international society.⁴ Environmental Stewardship (Falkner & Buzan 2019) and International Sanctions (Wilson & Yao 2019) as the latest propositions illustrate that the debate on PIs is still evolving. It is these institutions that are considered a cornerstone of the ES by both the classical writers and following generations of scholars (Knudsen 2019). Within this paper, the emphasis is on Sovereignty, International Law, and the Market Economy. The former two are, as pillars of international society (Jackson 2003; Holsti 2004; Costa Buranelli 2015), considered crucial to analysing what happens when actors from different RIS meet, while Market Economy is seen as

³ All three types of norms distinguished by Wiener (2014, 36-37) – “fundamental norms”, “organising principles”, and “standardised procedures” – are referred to and considered included in the concept of PIs.

⁴ See Wilson (2012) and Schouenborg (2011, 2017) for two different perspectives on the proliferation of institutions within the ES.

especially relevant in the context of the BRI and Sino-European relations. Considering them “deep and relatively durable social practices” (Buzan 2014, p.16) aids in understanding what is then understood by ‘contestation of PIs’: substantial disagreement regarding the meaning of an institution and its (wilful) reinterpretation in discourse. This can take shape as, e.g. promoting differing interpretations or opposition to a specific interpretation or related practice. The presented framing of contestation is closely aligned with what Wiener (2014, 2018) defines as contestation of norms – namely, an “interactive social practice [which] may be performed either explicitly ... or implicitly” (2014, p.2). In a way, this paper poses a variation of the question “Whose Practices Count” (Wiener 2018, p.1) – a variation as it addresses (regional) international society and its actors, and not civil society with respectively different actors. Drawing on Wittgenstein (1958), Costa Buranelli (2015) explicates the relevance of polysemy for the study of PIs in regional contexts. Namely, that PIs are different and contested in their meaning both within a region and inter-regionally, they are under “constant renegotiation, redefinition and reformulation” (p.500).

The differentiation between solidarist and pluralist interpretations of PIs is utilised as a further analytical tool in the study of Sino-European contestation in discourse (Ahrens 2019; Knudsen 2019). There is a long-standing debate within the ES between solidarist and pluralist shadings of international society (Bull 1966; Buzan 2014; Bain 2014; Knudsen 2019). The salient difference is, concisely put, that “[a] pluralist international society builds on a rather thin and weak basis of shared norms and values” (Ahrens 2019, p.266) and that “a thicker basis of shared norms and values underpins a solidarist international society, in which the universalisation of ideas beyond national borders becomes possible and desirable” (ibid.). In a pluralist international society, the norms of non-intervention and respect for national (internal/domestic) Sovereignty are paramount, bearers of rights and duties are states alone, and humanitarian intervention and universal human rights consequently regarded problematic (Knudsen 2019, p.177). In contradistinction to that, a liberal-solidarist conception of international society ascribes rights and duties related to International Law also to individuals, and Sovereignty is more relational to, e.g. global governance in the sense of the UN (ibid.). This differentiation impacts not only the perception and practice of PIs by states and in RISs. It also plays into interstate relations when actors promote contesting interpretations of PIs: “solidarisation implies a reinterpretation of national sovereignty in terms of a distinct and more far-reaching definition of responsibilities and duties of states towards each other and vis-à-vis individuals inside and outside their own territories” (Ahrens 2019, p.266). The notion of solidarisation of international society, and its limitations, in the sense of promoting the aforementioned interpretation of Sovereignty and related practices, is skilfully captured by Ahrens and Diez (2015) on the example of the EU.

The differences between solidarist and pluralist framings aid also in analysing different interpretations of PIs: Sovereignty as the “defining quality of states” (Buzan 2004, p.178) refers to the notion that states do not accept a higher authority in conducting their affairs, it also represents a fundamental attribute to determine membership in (regional) international society (Costa Buranelli 2015). Moreover, Human Rights (HR) and individuals as holders of rights and duties are a focal point of liberal-solidarist conceptions of Sovereignty, and the promotion of global, universal HR – solidarisation – is a central practice related to liberal-solidarist interpretations of Sovereignty (Ahrens 2019; Ahrens & Diez 2015). In contrast, a pluralist conception of Sovereignty emphasises the adherence to practices of non-intervention, territorial integrity and self-determination (Knudsen 2019).

International Law is “the bedrock institution on which the idea of international society stands or falls” (Mayall 2000, p.94). It is the ‘Volume of Sacred Law’ of the international society in the sense that within International Law, the agreed-upon norms and rules are codified so that they can serve as the reference for determining legitimate state behaviour and legitimacy in international relations for all members. The UN Charter and the UNSC are central to this codification of common institutions on a global level (Schmidt 2019). There exist further treaties and secondary organisations related to International Law such as in the (solidarist) European legal system and the ECJ on a sub-global level (Lasmar, Zahreddine & Gribel Lage 2015).

The Market Economy is the economic part of an operating system of contemporary international society which, with the help of international organisations like the WTO and the IMF, governs hegemonic stability and the liberalisation of international trade and finance globally (Buzan 2004, 2014). Historically, it is considered a PI of the Western core, but in times of modernity and globalisation, it has also been adopted in regions formerly governed by mercantilist or state socialist approaches to economy and trade (Buzan & Lawson 2014; Buzan 2014).

In short, the theoretical framework combines ES theory with the Theory of Contestation to study contestation regarding polysemous PIs in discourse between actors from different RISs. The following section outlines the methodological pathway in more depth.

Norm Contestation and Primary Institutions in Discourse

This paper deploys a variation of DT outlined by LeGreco and Tracy (2009). The method has also been used in an ES context by Spandler (2019), who fittingly summarised DT as “[an] approach [emphasising] the chronological sequence of discursive interventions” (p.41). Similarly to Spandler’s use of DT, the investigation at hand focuses on the chronological unfolding of discourse. To that end, DT

suggests a stepwise approach for selecting relevant primary sources and collecting data from them (LeGreco & Tracy 2009, p.1523). In the following, first source selection and then data collection, i.e. ‘reading PIs’, is described.

Selection of Sources

In a first step, data sources were collected from macro- and meso-levels of discourse, and then ordered chronologically providing a general timeline of discourse between China, and the EU, Germany and Italy. One conscious delimitation to make the scope of the analysis realisable in the available time and considering the difficulty of access is made regarding the degree of depth on a micro-level of discourse.⁵ The macro-level is understood in the sense of Fairhurst and Putnam (2004) as “broader social narratives and systems of enduring thought” (as cited in LeGreco & Tracy 2009, p.1519), and the meso level of discourse is understood as the sphere “between local experiences and larger structures” (p.1520, sic). For this work, the main sources for empirical evidence are official documents and speeches in a variety of forms that capture the discourse between China, the EU, Germany, and Italy in times of the BRI – from 2013 to 2019. These sources range from core strategic papers, reports and speeches issued unilaterally – e.g. China’s policy on the EU and vice-versa (FMPRC 2014a; EC & Mogherini 2016; EC 2019) – to joint communications or declarations, issued bi- or multilaterally – e.g. proceedings of consultations between China and Italy, Germany and the EU (FMITA & FMPRC 2013; GER & PRC 2014; EC & PRC 2015).

Regarding the EU specifically, preference was given to sources originating from the EU’s executive branch and its foreign policy framework – i.e. the EC, the HR/VP, and the EEAS – since these arguably represent the EU’s position as a global actor. As opposed to, e.g. the European Foreign Affairs Council or the European Council (EUCO), which are staffed with ranking statespersons of the EU27 arguably bringing in elements of their member-state interest. This EU-internal contestation is not part of the research; hence the argued for delimitation in sources. Statements made by the (office of the) President of the EUCO are taken into account, considering them not holding a national office in the EU27 and being the general representative of the European Union.⁶ This first step of DT allowed for simmering down a collection of approximately 1,500 different sources to 350 deemed relevant for the enquiry at hand. Of these 350 sources, 103 sources were selected as the relevant empirical basis for analysing both the BRI and contestation of PIs in Sino-European discourse.

⁵ The general approach to the investigation would, however, benefit from such a micro-level analysis, as it allowed gaining insight into the subjective views of individual statespersons; a ‘look behind the scenes’ as Brasch-Kristensen (2016) and Costa Buranelli (2015) demonstrate.

⁶ See Article 15 of the Lisbon Treaty (EU 2007).

Data Collection

The second step consisted of an initial exploratory reading of the selected primary source in the established chronological order, followed by a close reading of the same (LeGreco & Tracy 2009, p.1529). This was done to (1) identify key events or turning points in discourse and relations, (2) uncover defining themes and changes in language, and (3) shed light on the role of and responses to the BRI. It is the search for turning points which provided the basis for finding phases in Sino-European relations and set up the further, and deeper, analysis of primary sources. Both the explorative and the close readings were supported by qualitative coding in NVivo, which allowed to trace and store relevant themes and quotes consistently. In its study of PIs within the sources – i.e. in ‘reading PIs’ – the analysis recognises “the importance of empirical research as opposed to grand theorizing” (Navari 2014, p.213) and followed the methodological emphasis of the ES. Namely, that researchers immerse themselves in “diplomatic records, memoirs and newspapers” (p.213) and analyse of statements and actions by civil servants or statespersons, to uncover “the self-conceptions of the actors who are participating in the processes that constitute international life” (p.213). These actors are the representatives of states, which are here referred to as ‘statespersons’ (Jackson 2003; Navari 2014). In other words, the data sources were analysed for empirical data points in the form of, e.g. phrases, formulations, or entire passages that evince differing interpretations, or respective contestation, of Sovereignty, International Law, and the Market Economy, and their related differing practices. And further, regarding the role and implications of the BRI in Sino-European relations in that period. This procedure allows “to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge” (Bowen 2009, p.27) regarding question at hand. Spandler (2019), for example, draws on the statement of an Indonesian political leader to evince that they “promoted a pluralist understanding of international society” (p.69):

When I say internationalism, I do not mean cosmopolitanism, which does not want the existence of nationalism [...]. Internationalism cannot flourish if it is not rooted in the soil of nationalism. (as cited in Spandler 2019, p. 69)

In alignment with Spandler’s usage of DT, this work thus combines insights on the PIs under investigation from the theoretical framework with empirical findings generated by the research itself in step one and two, which Spandler (2019) refers to as “functional heuristics” (p.39). It is here where the interpretivist approach of this work comes into play as the elicitation of meaning regarding PIs “inevitably involves a degree of subjective judgement” (p.39).

European Responses to the BRI

In this section, the findings regarding the BRI in Sino-European discourse are briefly presented and put in context to recent bilateral developments between EU27 member states and China. The chronological analysis of empirical material yielded three distinct phases of Sino-European relations between 2013-2019, with fourth one commencing in late-2019. These phases are termed: *Anno BRI: Xi Era Begins* (2013-2015), Chinese and European Strategic Currents (2015-2016), Facing Variegated European Winds (2016-2019), and *A Japanese-European BRI Alternative* (from late 2019). They are characterised by a differing role of the BRI in Sino-European discourse and increasingly diverging responses from EU27 member-states. The findings point to the BRI presenting a challenge to cohesion in EU foreign policy and adherence to guiding principles set forth by the EC for EU27 member-states to consider in their national foreign policy strategies.

During *Anno BRI: Xi Era Begins*, the BRI arguably arrived in Sino-European discourse at the occasion of Xi's visit to Europe in 2014 when he met with EU27 President Van Rompuy and EC President Barroso:

In view of the great potential to improve their transport relations, both sides decided to develop synergies between China's "Silk Road Economic Belt" initiative and EU policies and jointly to explore common initiatives along these lines. (Xi, Van Rompuy & Barroso 2014)

This first mention of the BRI in (Sino-)EU discourse came at a timely point as the BRI physically reached the EU with the opening of the YuXinOu freight train connection from China to Germany in this time. In this first phase, the dominant theme in Sino-European discourse was the beginning of negotiations for an investment agreement between China and the EU, i.e. economic cooperation, and the BRI was not part of contestation regarding interpretations of PIs. In 2015, China provided a clear outline of its conception and perception of the BRI and its role in contemporary Chinese foreign policy (NDRC, FMPRC & MCPRC 2015). It arguably marked the beginning of a second phase, *Chinese and European Strategic Currents*, in Sino-European relations:

The Initiative is harmonious and inclusive. It advocates tolerance among civilizations, respects the paths and modes of development chosen by different countries, and supports dialogues among different civilizations on the principles of seeking common ground while shelving differences and drawing on each other's strengths, so that all countries can coexist in peace for common prosperity. (ibid. 2015)

It is important to read this statement with the distinction between solidarist and pluralist frames in mind. That is to say, the relevant message here is arguably the emphasis on respect for sovereign choices of countries in their domestic matters.

Moreover, the reference to the inclusiveness of the BRI is not unconditional as China also put forward ‘terms of affiliation’:

They [countries along the Belt and Road] should promote policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bonds as their five major goals [...]. (ibid.)

Despite the BRI being described as “open to all countries, and international and regional organisations”(ibid.) with the overall aim of “[promoting] the connectivity of Asian, European and African continents and their adjacent seas”(ibid.), the five mentioned pillars have to be understood not through a Western-liberal or liberal-solidarist frame, but from a Chinese pluralist one. The BRI arguably became a projection screen for the disagreements over, e.g. reciprocity in FDI regulations and foreign companies’ access to the Chinese market within the EC’s strategy paper on China towards the end of *Chinese and European Strategic Currents*:

Co-operation with China on its ‘One Belt, One Road’ initiative should be dependent on China fulfilling its declared aim of making it an open platform which adheres to market rules and international norms in order to deliver benefits for all. (EC & Mogherini 2016, p.10)

An open letter in February 2017, signed by Germany, Italy, and France, calling for an FDI screening mechanism for the EU is considered as the second turning point in Sino-European relations at the time and as the beginning of *Facing Variegated European Winds* (Zypries, Sapin & Calenda 2017). The respective responses to the BRI changed yet again in this third phase, with the EC reiterating the conditions for cooperation and detailing the meaning of ‘adhering to international norms’ as “EU and international requirements, and [complementing] EU policies and projects” (EC & EEAS 2017). Xi Jinping hosted the first Belt and Road Forum in May 2017. At the occasion, no EU representative co-signed the Leaders’ Roundtable joint communique as the EU’s requirements and concerns were addressed in the document (Xi et al. 2017). German Economy Minister Zypries reportedly commented in a press briefing at the summit that “so far the demands of the EU countries in areas such as free trade, setting a level playing field and equal conditions have not been met” (as cited in Mistreanu & Petring 2017) and that “therefore we say at the moment, if that does not happen, then we cannot sign”(ibid.). The Italian Premier Gentiloni, who in contrast to Zypries did sign the joint communication, boiled the Italian response to the BRI down to its essence:

I would say that the fact that the Chinese President has confirmed their intention to include Italian ports among the ports on which to invest in this gigantic investment program as Silk Road terminals is important.

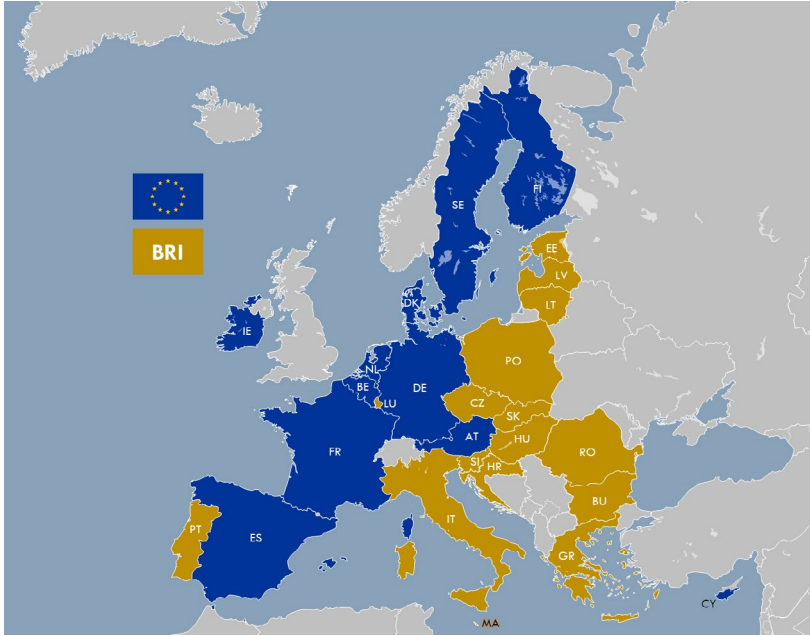
In particular, we are talking about the expansion of the ports of Trieste and Genoa, connected as they are to the railway and highway system that reaches the rich heart of Europe. (Gentiloni 2017)

These developments arguably demonstrated two things. Firstly, that the BRI had become subject to contestation itself – that is from the EU and Germany. Secondly, that Sino-Italian relations and were developing juxtaposed to relations between the EU and Germany, and China. This argument is underlined by Italy's responses to the BRI in discourse throughout the three phases and formally affiliating with the BRI framework in March 2019 (ITA & PRC 2019a).

The implications of a European founding member going against the majority within the EUCO and the EC's proposed foreign policy guidelines for EU member states are manifold. The German foreign minister (FM) Heiko Maas commented that “a single country must not have the opportunity always to block all others” (Welt am Sonntag 2019) which arguably gave expression to the challenge that the Italian position and presumably voting in the EUCO regarding a joint EU position and policy on the BRI, presented to the bloc. FM Maas found frank words concerning EU unity vis-à-vis China:

In a world with giants like China, Russia, or our partner the US, we can only persist when, as EU, we are unified. And if some countries believe one can do clever business with the Chinese people, they will be surprised and eventually wake up in dependencies. Short-term lucrative offers get a bitter aftertaste faster than expected. China is not a liberal democracy. (Welt am Sonntag 2019)

Looking beyond Brussels, Berlin, and Rome, it becomes apparent that the Italian response to the BRI is not a singular occurrence. Until YE2019, 16 of the 27 EU member states had signed agreements with Beijing for cooperation under the BRI framework. (Cosentino et al. 2018; Lu et al. 2018; PRC 2018a; FM/PRC 2019; PT & PRC 2018) The resulting division among EU member states regarding the BRI is striking and further underlines the challenge which China has, arguably successfully, laid out for the bloc's cohesion in its external relations.

Figure 1: EU27-China cooperation under the BRI framework (YE2019)⁷

Bearing in mind the rules of unanimity within both the EUCO and the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC), it becomes clear that a unified response from the bloc to the BRI seems unlikely at this point. However, the EC as an organisational actor has far-reaching competencies within EU foreign policy and in negotiating foreign relations and agreements. An exemplary case in response to the BRI is the 2018 ‘Economic Partnership Agreement’ and the 2019 ‘Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure’ between the EU and Japan (EUCO 2018; Juncker, Abe & EC 2019). The language used by both Juncker and Abe, and within the agreement itself bears a striking resemblance to that of China and the BRI but with a liberal-solidarist framing of PIs. The BRI framework speaks of respect for different chosen development paths, civilisational differences, and of “seeking common ground while shelving differences”(NDRC, FMPCRC & MCPCRC 2015). The EU-Japan framework copies the BRI’s five pillars and adds that cooperation also with other countries will “fully [take] into account partners’ needs and demands and paying the utmost attention to their fiscal capacity and debt-sustainability”(Juncker, Abe & EC 2019). This is arguably a reiteration of the bloc’s critique of dependency and exploitation regarding the BRI. In the agreement, the EU and Japan also expressed their desire to “to promote openness, transparency, inclusiveness and a level playing field for those concerned, including investors and businesses in connectivity”(ibid.) and in doing so reiterate the aforementioned points of critique regarding the BRI. Moreover, the reference to

⁷ Own illustration. Map adapted from (maix 2007)/CC BY-SA.

“free, open, rules-based, fair, non-discriminatory [...] trade and investment, transparent procurement practices, the ensuring of debt sustainability and the high standards of [...] environmental sustainability”(ibid.) gives expression to liberal-solidarist interpretations of PIs. In a press conference, Japanese PM Abe refers to “common values and principles”(Shinzo Abe 2019) between the EU and Japan that underpin their relation and subsequently names ‘democracy’, ‘the rule of law’, ‘human rights’, and ‘freedoms’ as these common values. While neither China nor the BRI was directly invoked, EC president Juncker made clear that the EU and Japan were pitching to the world an alternative to the BRI framework and possible future dependency on China:

Connectivity must also be financially sustainable. It is about handing down to future generations a more interconnected world, a cleaner environment and not mountains of debt. It is also about creating more interconnections between all countries around the world, not more dependence on one country. (Juncker 2019, emphasis added)

The changing role of the BRI in Sino-European discourse is considered emblematic of Sino-European relations becoming more confrontative between 2013 and 2019. The BRI had become subject to contestation itself due to fundamental disagreements regarding values and principles – PIs – between the EU, certain member states, and China. At the same time, the responses by EU member states towards the BRI increasingly diverged. By the end of 2019, as many as 16 of the EU27 had affiliated with China’s framework while, e.g. Germany and France, and the EC had openly opposed the initiative proposing an alternative in line with European-liberal values and principles. Moreover, this paper argues that the BRI illuminates the caveats of partial integration of the bloc and increasingly presented, and presents, a challenge to EU cohesion and unity especially regarding member state foreign policy vis-à-vis China.

Table 1: Four Phases of Sino-European Discourse&Relations (2013-2019)

Phases and Turning Points	Defining Themes	Role of BRI
Anno BRI: Xi Era Begins (2013-2015)	China’s extensive reform plans, civilisation-difference argument and HR, Sino-European cooperation	BRI as opportunity BRI plays a minor role in Sino-European discourse and contestation
<i>EU-China joint strategy & BRI whitepaper</i>		
Chinese and European Strategic Currents (2015-2016)	Strategic partners for long run, steel overcapacity, state subsidies, reciprocity regarding FDI	BRI as projection screen of contestation China publishes BRI ‘terms of affiliation’, EU & Germany point to substantial disagreements, Italy open to cooperation
<i>KUKA takeover & EU triumvirate letter</i>		

Phases and Turning Points	Defining Themes	Role of BRI
Facing Variegated European Winds (2017-2019)	FDI screening mechanism, protection of critical infrastructure, Sharp language “systemic rivalry”	BRI as subject of contestation China reiterates pluralist nature of BRI framework. EU & Germany openly contest BRI, while Italy signs MoU
<i>EU-Japan Connectivity Agreement</i>		
A Japanese-European BRI Alternative (from late 2019)	Counter initiative complying with liberal-solidarist interpretations of Sovereignty, International Law, and Market Economy	BRI as competitor EU and Japan agree on alternative Eurasian connectivity initiative that emphasises liberal values

Recalling the question of whether China might be reconfiguring the normative fabric of global politics, a look beyond the BRI as a framework for cooperation and infrastructure development is in order. Thus, if it is values and principles that are at the core of fundamental disagreements between China and the EU, its member states, and also Japan, then the differences of values and principles require special attention. The following section investigates the differing frames, ideas, and values that underpin the self-conceptions of statespersons on both the Chinese and European side and analyses how these differences are woven into Sino-European discourse.

Contestation in Sino-European Discourse

An analysis of Sino-European discourse from 2013–2019 showed that there is substantial disagreement regarding the PIs of Sovereignty, International Law, and the Market Economy and that statespersons were contesting the respectively other’s interpretation in their discourse. The following three sub-sections provide relevant examples of this interpretation-based contestation and capture the defining themes that contestation manifested around. Moreover, the differences in (European) liberal-solidarist and (Chinese) pluralist interpretations and frames of PIs are highlighted.

Sovereignty

At the beginning of his presidency, Xi Jinping outlined China’s interpretation of Sovereignty as absolute both in internal and foreign affairs at the G20 summit:

We respect the development paths and domestic and foreign policies chosen independently by the people of every country. We will in no circumstances interfere in the internal affairs of Central Asian countries. We do not seek to dominate regional affairs or establish any sphere of influence. (Xi 2013)

The emphasis on self-determination in relation to also the choice of development path and non-interference in other countries’ internal affairs is considered

as pluralist interpretation and practice of Sovereignty (Costa Buranelli 2015; Zhang 2015). The contrast in interpretation and practice of Sovereignty arguably becomes clear from EU CO President Van Rompuy's statement at the 2013 EU-China Summit:

The protection of human rights and fundamental freedom is at the core of the existence of the EU itself and constitutes an important part of our exchange with all our partners. There is no doubt that through lifting millions of people from poverty China has made key contributions in this field. [...] We discussed today questions related to the protection of minorities and freedom of expression especially on defenders of human rights and I expressed our concerns. (Van Rompuy 2013)

This expression of the EU's self-conception as a protector of fundamental, or universal, HR and the voiced criticism towards China, demonstrates substantive disagreement with Chinese practice. In the context of styling the EU as a 'protector of HR', such open contestation of China's domestic HR situation can, with reference to Ahrens and Diez (2015), arguably be seen as an example of solidarising tendencies in the EU's approach to China. Furthermore, further, while Xi consistently reiterated that it "will never seek hegemony or expansion" (Xi 2014a), he made it clear that "[at] the same time, China will firmly uphold its sovereignty, security, and development interests. No country should expect China to swallow the bitter fruit that undermines its sovereignty, security and development interests" (ibid.). This positioning arguably strengthens the argument that non-interference is of paramount importance within EAS (Buzan & Zhang 2014; Costa Buranelli 2015). Moreover, it provides further proof that "the practice [of Sovereignty] in ASEAN seems to go beyond international standards" (Tay (2008) as cited in Costa Buranelli 2015, p.506) in the sense that "[commenting] on or what another state does within what the latter considers to be domestic jurisdiction" (ibid.) is seen as illegitimate.

Speaking at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, Xi provided insights to the reasoning behind China's perception of Sovereignty – namely that "civilizations have come in different colors" (Xi 2014b), that "all human civilizations are equal in terms of value" (ibid.), and thus "no one civilization can be judged superior to another" (ibid.). The final point he made is their inclusiveness in the sense that "copying other civilizations mechanically or blindly is like cutting one's toes just to fit his shoes, which is not only impossible but also highly detrimental" (ibid.). This paper terms this discursive practice as the *civilisation-difference argument*. It is shown to be a recurring way of contesting or resisting solidarising tendencies on the part of China.

The understanding and practice of Sovereignty within EAS differ from the Chinese reading: Internally, member states are pooling their respective State Sover-

eignty (Diez, Manners & Whitman 2011; Ahrens 2019). The EU's policy on China adopted in 2016 arguably demonstrated this (internal) reading of Sovereignty in making it clear that “the EU must project a strong, clear and unified voice in its approach to China” (EC and Mogherini 2016b, 4), and that “Member States should reinforce agreed EU positions in their bilateral relations with China, while the Commission and the EEAS should ensure that Member States are made aware when EU interests need to be safeguarded” (ibid., 17).⁸ The call for with the call for “EU coherence and cohesiveness is vital on the big policy choices and on the maintenance of the rules-based international order” (ibid., 17) vis-à-vis China further illustrated the practice of pooled Sovereignty also in a foreign policy context. The discourse surrounding the condition of HR in Xinjiang province, specifically the internment of Uyghurs in re-education camps, provides an example for substantive disagreements related to the interpretation of Sovereignty. Following a debate in the German Bundestag on the matter, the Chinese embassy issued a serious demarche, i.e. strong formal diplomatic protest, insisting that “[the] Bundestag’s arbitrary allegations, [...] constitute a blatant intrusion into domestic affairs and a gross violation of China’s sovereignty” (PRC 2018b). China’s invocation of the civilisational-difference argument – “Germany and China have a very different history and culture, and the understanding of Human Rights is not the same” (ibid.) – in the context of “[defending] itself against the politicisation and instrumentalisation of Human Rights [...]” (ibid.) arguably provides an example for resistance to or contestation of solidarising efforts on part of Germany, and the EU. Substantive disagreements regarding the interpretation and practice of Sovereignty could not be identified in Sino-Italian discourse. Given the different approach Italy has shown vis-à-vis the BRI and China under Xi Jinping, this is not surprising and considered in line with the practice of Sovereignty common within EARIS. The absence of outspoken disagreement regarding practices and interpretation of Sovereignty arguably shows a further departure from EU cohesion in foreign relations with China on the part of Italy.

International Law

The friction between Chinese and European conceptions of International Law found expression in China’s position paper for the 69th Session of the UNGA:

It is the goal of all countries to achieve the rule of law at the national and international levels. At the national level, countries are entitled to independently choose the models of rule of law that suit their national conditions. Countries with different models of rule of law should learn from each other and seek common development in a spirit of mutual respect and inclusiveness. (FMPRC 2014b)

⁸ The EC released the ‘Elements for a new EU strategy on China’ in June (EC & Mogherini 2016), which was adopted as the policy framework for the EU on China in July (Council 2016).

Recalling the third point of the *civilisation-difference argument*, i.e. inclusiveness, reveals that the same was deployed here when China stated that there were different models of the rule of law in different countries. This is in line with a pluralist interpretation of International Law and strongly relates to the previously explicated Chinese practice of Sovereignty on the national level. Looking at the international level, China stated, similar to the definition found in the joint declaration between President Xi and Chancellor Merkel (GER & PRC 2014), that “it is necessary to uphold the authority of the UN Charter, and strictly abide by universally recognized principles of international law such as sovereign equality and non-interference in others’ affairs” (FMPRC 2014b). To understand the meaning of this repeated reference to the UN Charter, it is necessary to look at the respectively differing interpretations – for the reference to the UN Charter itself is subject to the same notion of polysemy as, following Costa Buranelli (2015), PIs in regional contexts:

In international legislation, it is important to reflect countries’ concerns in a balanced manner and to resist the attempt to make the rules of certain countries as ‘international rules’, and their standards ‘international standards’. (Wang 2014)

This arguably relates to earlier indicated resistance to, or contestation of, solidarising tendencies in Sino-European relations. And further, the EU and its member states’ persistence regarding the promotion of universal HR as well as a specific criticism of the (domestic) Market regime in China at the time. In that regard, the respective statements at the UNSC 7389th session on the rule of law highlighted the core of contestation between China, the EU, and member states in relation to International Law. Foreign Minister (FM) Wang Yi opened the debate by putting forward China’s reading of the content and role of the UN Charter, and how it defined the UN:

*The UN Charter affirms the strong determination of the international community to **prevent war and maintain lasting peace**. At the outset, the Charter defines **the purposes of the United Nations as maintaining international peace and security**, which embodies the world’s deep reflection over the two world wars and the great yearning of all countries to be free of war, fear and want. (Wang 2015, emphasis added)*

The EU representative’s response made clear that the EU had a different reading of the preamble and the UN Charter:

*But preventing future wars was not the only undertaking of the signatories of the Charter 70 years ago. The very same preambular passage of the Charter also stresses their determination to **reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights**, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and wom-*

en and of nations large and small; [...]. In its very first paragraphs, the Charter thus defined the three pillars of this Organization: peace and security, human rights, and development. (Mayr-Harting 2015, emphasis added)

This represented an open contestation vis-à-vis China's reading of the UN Charter and the one-dimensional role of the UNSC, as "the European Union also believes that the Security Council has its own specific responsibilities with regard to the other two pillars" (Mayr-Harting 2015), i.e. HR and development. The German Envoy backed the EU position and made a case for universal HR when stating that "[t]here is also a growing understanding that human rights should know no borders and that those responsible for the most egregious violations must be held accountable" (Braun 2015). In contrast, the Italian Envoy, while, like the German one, stating that "Italy aligns itself with the statement made by the European Union" (Lambertini 2015), also made use of the points of the *civilisation-difference argument* highlighted earlier:

In the same spirit, Italy promotes respect for human rights – a key priority of our foreign policy – with an inclusive and balanced approach, taking into account all of the different positions. (Lambertini 2015, emphasis added)

The Italian response can arguably be viewed as a deviation from a cohesive line in European foreign policy vis-à-vis China. This cohesive line found expression in the EU's strategy on China in 2016, with the purpose of the strategy expressed as, among other factors, to "promote respect for the rule of law and human rights within China and internationally" (EC & Mogherini 2016, p.3). It also defined the EU's understanding of a "rules-based international order [being] based on respect for international law, including international humanitarian and human rights law, [...]" (ibid., 15). Furthermore, that "the EU should work with China to promote universal advancement of human rights, in particular compliance with international human rights standards at home and abroad" (ibid.). With reference to the theoretical framework, the literal reference to promoting universal HR is considered further evidence for solidarising efforts on the EU's and Germany's part regarding interpretations of both Sovereignty and International Law (Ahrens & Diez 2015; Ahrens 2019). The differing Italian response highlights the absence of European unity or cohesion in discursive interaction with China and gives expression to the status quo of only limited European integration within the spheres of foreign policy and external relations. Moreover, statements provide insights on the contested and polysemous phrase of "rules-based international order" (EC & Mogherini 2016, p.15). Within ERIS, such an order includes "international humanitarian and human rights law" (ibid.). Recalling FM Wang's statement – i.e. "to resist the attempt to make the rules of certain countries as 'international rules'" (Wang 2014) – demonstrates that the Chinese interpretation of international order is strictly pluralist, and thus arguably contests the European

reading.

Market Economy

China's domestic interpretation of the Market can be perceived from Xi's statement outlining internal reforms at the 2013 G20 summit:

China will strengthen the market system construction, advance the structural reform on macroeconomic regulation and control, taxation, finance, investment, administrative system and other fields, and give full play to the basic role of the market in resource allocation. (FMPRC 2013, emphasis added)

At the 2013 World Economic Forum, Premier Li Keqiang, made further remarks regarding the reform of China's economic system, stating that China had "endeavoured to develop a mixed economy, relaxed market access [...], encouraged more investment of the non-public sector, and provided greater space for business of various ownerships" (Li 2013). The joint communique following the EU-China Summit explicated that the parties agreed to foster "their trade and investment relationship towards 2020 in a spirit of mutual benefit, by promoting open, transparent markets and a level-playing field" (EC & PRC 2013, p.5). However, even though it is a joint communique, that does not mean there was agreement in the interpretation or practice of terms such as "open, transparent markets and a level-playing field" (EC & PRC 2013, p.5).

On the contrary, as the findings show, there is disagreement on them: China, on the one hand, had pointed out it had chosen what it termed "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Xi 2014c) – or "a mixed economy" (Li 2013) – as its (economic) development path. While this included "[giving] full play to the basic role of the market in resource allocation" (FMPRC 2013, emphasis added), it also included "the visible hand" (Xi 2014a, 128), i.e. governmental involvement in the economy. On the other hand, as Barroso (2013) put it: "in Europe we are reforming our social market economy". Or differently, a liberal market economy with less involvement of the state in the economy and different Market-related practices regarding private operators. Thus, a 'level playing field' needs to be seen before a backdrop of fundamentally different economic systems.

The news of a bid by China's Midea for the German KUKA corporation, technology leader in robotics, made landfall in mid-2016. Midea eventually acquired a 94.5% stake. The outspokenness by German Economy Minister Sigmar Gabriel, arguably an intervention, stood in stark contrast to the Italian response regarding ChemChina's acquisition of Pirelli in spring 2015. At the time of bidding, the Italian Economy Minister Federica Guidi made a statement in which she welcomed the investment:

The entry into the share capital of Pirelli by China Chemical is an operation that concerns a private company and, therefore, the Government is not entitled to intervene. That said, any transaction that aims to consolidate and render even more national industrial competitive excellence is absolutely acceptable, just as is the case with Pirelli. (MISE 2015)

When questioned about KUKA at a press conference in May 2016, Gabriel responded by clarifying that it was important not to make the debate about nationality, i.e. China, but about unequal practices regarding know-how transfer, and added:

And of course, I would find it appropriate if there was at least an alternative offer from Germany, or Europe. So that it can then be decided by the owners which of the offers is – for the companies that have the intent of disposition, but also for the future of the German industrial base – the ultimately better one. (BMW 2016a)

Acknowledging that there was some concern on the part of the German government regarding targeted bids for leading German companies, and substantive disagreements with China over the manner of know-how transfers, he stated that “[one] cannot declare a state-led economy [Staatswirtschaft] to be a market economy. Those are the areas of conflict we have (ibid.). In June 2016, Gabriel voiced the question of how Europe as, in his words, one of the most open market economies was competing with state-subsidised companies from non-open market economies and that “the game is not protectionist versus market, but rather the game is open market versus state-capitalist intervention” (BMW 2016b). He concluded that the debate was about “the contradiction between and open market economy [offene Volkswirtschaft] and a state-capitalist intervention economy [Interventionswirtschaft]” (ibid.). During a meeting with German Chancellor Merkel, Premier Li made China’s position regarding its status as (non-) market economy and obligations under WTO agreements clear when he stated that “China has fully implemented its commitment upon the entry of the WTO, and the EU and relevant parties should also fulfil their commitments” (FMPRC 2016). The presented evidence highlights the striking differences in Italian and German discourse on Chinese investment and contestation of Market-related practices.

A further example of contestation regarding the issue of reciprocity of foreign investment opportunities and the change in language – i.e. the introduction of terms like ‘security’, ‘defending strategic interests’, ‘critical technologies and infrastructure’ – can arguably be perceived from Juncker’s State of the Union speech in September 2017:

Let me say once and for all: we are not naïve free traders. Europe must always

defend its strategic interests.

This is why today we are proposing a new EU framework for investment screening. If a foreign, state-owned, company wants to purchase a European harbour, part of our energy infrastructure or a defence technology firm, this should only happen in transparency, with scrutiny and debate. It is a political responsibility to know what is going on in our own backyard so that we can protect our collective security if needed. (Juncker 2017)

And also, from the EC's report accompanying the policy proposal for an FDI screening mechanism:⁹

In this context, there is a risk that in individual cases foreign investors may seek to acquire control of or influence in European undertakings whose activities have repercussions on critical technologies, infrastructure, inputs, or sensitive information. This risk arises especially but not only when foreign investors are state owned or controlled, including through financing or other means of direction. Such acquisitions may allow the States in question to use these assets to the detriment not only of the EU's technological edge but also its security and public order. (EC 2017)

On 12 March 2019, the EC provided a review of EU-China relations in preparation for the EUCO meeting later the same month. In it, the EC postulated that "China can no longer be regarded as a developing country" (EC 2019), and, while systemic differences had been acknowledged by both the EU and China before, the classification of China as "systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance" (ibid.) marked a sharp turn in EU discourse and language:

China is, ..., a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance. (ibid., emphasis added)

The EUCO meeting in the same month provided no immediate insights on the Italy-BRI matter. On March 23, Italy and China signed the MoU formalising Sino-Italian cooperation regarding the BRI – Italy's 'affiliation' with the BRI framework (ITA & PRC 2019a, 2019b). The following day, German FM Maas offered a German perspective on the matter. In the earlier-mentioned interview titled *Europe: We must move away from unanimity in foreign policy* he stated that "a single country must not have the opportunity always to block all others" (Welt am Sonntag 2019) which arguably pointed to a progression of (internal) solidari-

⁹ The Regulation 2019/452 was ratified on 19 March 2019 (EP & Council 2019).

sation against its limits pointed out by Ahrens and Diez (2015). That is to say, continued integration concerning member-states' foreign policies, i.e. strengthening of the EC's competencies in representing the EU as a global actor in light of the BRI and China.

Conclusion and Implications

With respect to the previously discussed findings regarding the changing role of the BRI in Sino-European relations and norm contestation regarding Sovereignty, International Law, and Market Economy, this paper advances three arguments.

First, that the BRI framework, as the arguable cornerstone of contemporary Chinese bilateral cooperation, perceivably presents a challenge to EU unity and cohesion especially in member states' foreign policy vis-à-vis China and their respective positioning towards the BRI. The findings further demonstrate how the BRI framework became both the projection screen and direct subject to contestation. Moreover, this highlights the challenges of only partial EU-integration and required unanimity in EUCO decisions despite the ECs efforts to create an alternative to the BRI in line with European/liberal values. The relations between China and the EU, and Germany were characterised by an increasing degree of substantive disagreements regarding all three PIs. Examples are the mentioned demarche on the part of China, and the labelling of China as "a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance" (EC 2019) part of the EU. Sino-Italian relations and discourse were shown to be less confrontative and Italy more open to both the BRI and Chinese inbound investment.

Second, that norm contestation of Sovereignty, International Law, and the Market in Sino-European discourse primarily stems from differing interpretations and related practices of these PIs. That is to say, the EU, Germany, and Italy – as members of ERIS – a solidarist understanding and practice of these three institutions, while China – as member of a narrow EARIS – interprets the institutions from a pluralist perspective. These fundamental differences are visible in discourse as solidarist and pluralist frames for Sovereignty, International Law, and the Market Economy. Thematically, the contestation could be summarised as universal HR vs non-interference, and 'social market economy' vs 'state-capitalist economy'.

Table 2: Solidarist and Pluralist Frames for Primary Institutions

	European liberal-solidarist frames	Chinese pluralist frames
Sovereignty	relational sovereignty: universal HR and humanitarian rights, adherence to liberal principles and values	Absolute sovereignty: non-interference, self-determination, civilisational-difference argument

	European liberal-solidarist frames	Chinese pluralist frames
International Law	Reference for national legislation - solidarisation UN Charter with three pillars: "peace and security, human rights, and development" (Mayr-Harting 2015)	Not to become national legislation - contestation of solidarisation. UN Charta emphasis on one pillar: "prevent war and maintain lasting peace" (Wang 2015)
Market Economy	Open market economy, reciprocity in FDI regulation, comparatively reduced role of state and government	Visible and invisible hand, i.e. active role of state and government

And third, this paper argues that the findings do indeed point to China contesting solidarist interpretations of PIs, i.e. resisting solidarisation, in its exchanges with the EU, Germany, and Italy respectively – and vice versa. As to whether China is actually reconfiguring the normative fabric of global politics, and in doing so would challenge a Western-liberal order – an answer depends on the respective understanding of 'hegemony'. This concept appears to be polysemous, similar to PIs, which becomes apparent when looking at China's insistence on non-interference, HR as a domestic matter, and also the different choice of an economic system. In that regard, one could argue that in contesting these practices, i.e. rejecting solidarisation, and the underlying liberal-solidarist framing, which ultimately stands for a Western-liberal order, China is proposing an alternative, pluralist order. Whether this alternative order will succeed to reconfigure the normative fabric global politics – provided such is the purpose – remains to be seen.

Reflecting on the implications of both findings and arguments, several points can be made: The ES with its concept of RIS and polysemous PIs evidently adds to the understanding of the normative impact and implications of contemporary Chinese foreign policy generally, and the BRI in particular. Moreover, with China steadily expanding the geographic scope of the BRI over the past years, the emerging field of BRI studies proves promising for furthering the regional agenda of the ES and addressing the puzzle of what happens when actors from different RIS meet – especially when comparing Western regional orders with non-Western ones.

Further, by drawing on the Theory of Contestation (Wiener 2014, 2018), this paper shows how permeable and receptive of this scholarship the ES is – a connection which has been surprisingly neglected so far. Thus, exploring evident synergies between constructivist norm research and the ES appears promising for furthering the regional, and discursive, turn of the ES. Also, deploying a variation of DT as the methodologic pathway for this investigation in conjunction with the ES as a theoretical framework showed to be a robust research design for identifying contestation of PIs in discourse. Moreover, the identified *civilisation-difference argument* might open up to further research on how non-Western statespersons'

perspectives inform their state behaviour and practice of PIs in relation to the debate on the standard of civilisation, culture, and international society (Gong 1984; Reus-Smit 2017, 2018; Phillips & Reus-Smit 2020).

Concerning policy relevance, the findings and arguments demonstrate the importance and benefit of going beyond realist or liberal theory when analysing contemporary Chinese foreign policy and the implications of the BRI for global and regional orders. This paper shows that the fundamental disagreements and friction between the EU, its member states, and China, are rooted in fundamentally differing values and principles. Thus, to fully grasp the ramifications of the BRI, experts working in security and foreign affairs need to utilise analytical tools that allow for a focus on precisely these differences of values, norms, and principles. The international society approach – ES theory – with its concept of polysemous PIs and the distinction between solidarist and pluralist frames can demonstrably deliver such. It can educate experts and practitioners in the field of international relations in their understanding of fundamental, value-based disagreements between states, governments, and statespersons. And lastly, considering the discovery of different solidarist and pluralist frames in Sino-European discourse, cognitive linguistics – i.e. metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 1999; Lakoff 1996) and political framing (Lakoff & Wehling 2016; Wehling 2016, 2017) – might provide a useful further analytical and explanatory tool to be added to the toolset of the ES.

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