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“Contingent power extension” and regional (dis) integration: China’s Belt and Road Initiative and its consequences for the EU

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a case of “Contingent Power Extension” (CPE) towards the European Union (EU), assessing its implications for regional (dis)integration in the latter. CPE is a conceptual prism that interprets the BRI as a polymorphous, dynamic, and context-specific mechanism through which Chinese foreign policy elites intend to convey, amplify, and legitimize the regime’s power-reach into other regions, including the EU. Along two examples—the 14 + 1 Cooperation Forum and the Port of Genoa in Italy—we examine the power dynamics of the BRI by tracing (a) the processual impact of power extension towards the EU and (b) the (un)intended consequences for the EU in terms of (dis)integration. The findings of our analysis provide an insight into the multi-causal relations between the BRI and European (dis)integration not as a static outcome but rather as a contested process of struggle. The article concludes by discussing whether and how the EU can strengthen its own institutional foundations and use its systemic leverage to respond to the BRI while enhancing regional integration in the process.

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has opened up a new chapter of strategic challenges for the European Union (EU). Since its launching in 2013, the BRI has sparked scholarly and policy debates about the effects of China’s infrastructural

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megaproject(s) on EU (dis)integration. Officially, the BRI is aimed at expanding and diversifying China's relations of trade, investment, technological cooperation, and people-to-people exchanges with other world regions (NDRC, MFA and Ministry of Commerce 2015). Yet, current research on China-EU relations has not yet delivered an encompassing conceptual framework to elucidate on the largely unacquainted dynamics of the BRI in terms of its geopolitical implications for Europe (exceptions include Minghao 2016). This article regards the BRI as a vector of Chinese foreign policy, which epitomizes the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) ambition to restore China's glorious past of "wealth and power" (*fuqiang* 富强), thus holding the potential to nurture new relations of cooperation and conflict across and beyond Eurasia. Thus, we draw on International Relations and Political Geography perspectives to explore the BRI and its operational logics towards the EU.

We argue that the BRI is a case of "contingent power extension" (CPE)—a multi-dimensional mechanism through which Chinese party-state decision-makers expect to convey and reinforce the economic, political, and technological capabilities of a globally invigorated nation pursuing an increasingly influential presence in Europe. We further understand CPE as a conceptual prism that illuminates the (otherwise overlooked) dimensions of systemic, institutional, normative-discursive, and commercial power informing BRI interventions. By using CPE to study how the BRI operates in different territorial settings, we highlight the non-linear, context-specific, and ambivalent effects that China's flagship policy is having in different sectors and on different scales within the EU.

We devote particular attention to the question of how the BRI affects EU (dis) integration, since the loss of regional unity (in political terms) alongside a growing sense of economic and technological dependency from China represents a source of anxiety for institutions, businesses, and citizens in different parts of Europe. However, the lack of knowledge in this area can foster political opportunism and conflict escalation in both China and Europe as well as in China-EU relations. Our analysis seeks to ease such tension by providing a theory-guided and empirically grounded analysis.

To accordingly advance the notion of CPE, we examine the implications of the BRI for EU (dis)integration along the cases of the 14+1 cooperation format as a sub-regional multilateral forum and the Port of Genoa as an example of maritime infrastructure development. The contrasting analysis of these two diverse cases (Gerring 2007) helps us understand the context-sensitive and place-based "contingency" of the BRI as well as the multiple, albeit ambivalent consequences Chinese power carries for European (dis)integration. In terms of data, we use Chinese and European policy documents that EU and Chinese officials as well as business stakeholders resort to in their interactions. These empirical sources add to understanding inter-elite communications in EU-China relations along the BRI, providing us with a reliable point of departure to interpret the role positions, political narratives, and worldviews of the involved decision-makers. The analysis is further enriched, contextualized, and validated with statistical data, media reports, and secondary literature.

The article is structured as follows. In Sect. 2, we present and discuss the concept of CPE. In Sect. 3, we use CPE to examine the 14+1 format and the Port of Genoa.

The empirical analysis is guided by the question of how the BRI affects (dis)integration dynamics in this two distinct territorial and institutional settings of the EU. In Sect. 4, we conclude the article by summarizing the main outcomes of our analysis and by providing ideas for future research.

Conceptual framework: “contingent power extension” (CPE)

Discussions about EU (dis)integration are not new. Most studies focus on the fundamentally uneven political landscape of regional integration (Webber 2019), on the role and limits of liberal values as distinctive sources of EU power (Diez 2014) or on the procedural and institutional challenges of multilevel governance, while some studies have pointed to core-periphery relations at work in the integration process (Weissenbacher 2015). With the exception of the latter, which draws on Latin American dependency theories to analyze EU integration dynamics, these studies have grown mostly out of the EU’s self-referential experiences with regionalism. However, they oftentimes fall analytically short in understanding the impacts of non-European, non-Western foreign policies on European processes of regional (dis)integration.

As China’s presence in the EU becomes more and more visible, the BRI induces conflicting positions among the EU member states that call for new research avenues (Grimmel and Gurol 2021). While half of EU member states have already signed BRI-related agreements, and many different European companies are participating in the BRI, on an EU level, skepticism and criticism vis-à-vis these dynamics are rising. Being one of the primary destinations of the BRI, the EU is the key to Chinese power extension. Although not all Chinese investments in the EU and UK are connected to the BRI, these have grown from less than €1 billion in 2008 to a record of €44 billion in 2016, showing decreasing tendencies after the COVID-pandemic (Kratz et al. 2021). Simultaneously, the Chinese market has become *conditio sine qua non* for economic growth in the EU. Indeed, many European manufacturers fear that import dependencies from China, and its one-party state-led economy could be detrimental to their survival in the long term. In contrast, Chinese officials and businesses see the homeland moving from a disadvantaged towards a significantly more balanced position in relation to Europe. As a result, the EU now officially refers to China as “an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance” (European Commission 2019: 1).

This statement already alludes to the diverse roles China plays for the EU as well as to the multidimensional effects, the BRI can have on EU (dis)integration. However, it would be misleading to characterize these as a “one-way-street” in the sense that the PRC and its BRI induces certain changes within the EU in an asymmetric manner. Rather, most of the effects of the BRI unfold as a result of both competition and cooperation between European and Chinese stakeholders. Hence, we develop the concept of CPE, which offers a more nuanced and comprehensive perspective to understanding Chinese power and its effects on the EU.

How to conceptualize “power” is one of the oldest and most contested debates in International Relations (IR). The basic assumption about power, regardless of whether understood as the control over certain resources (Waltz 1975; Nye 2004),

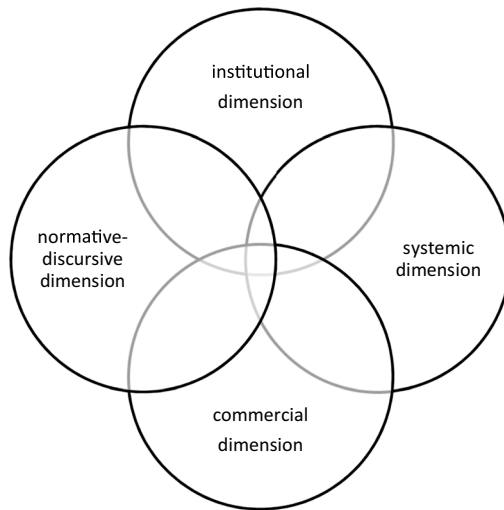


Fig. 1 Overlapping dimensions of CPE

control over structures (Shapiro 2006), or framed in a relational sense (Baldwin 1979), is that power is the capacity to influence others. We conceptualize power as a relational phenomenon that is not only statically bound to the specific attributes, capabilities, or social positions of actors but also shaped by the intersubjective understandings of self and other that in turn shape how actors conceive of the world and their aspired place in it (Barnett and Duvall 2005). Drawing on the above-stated premise, we define CPE as a way of gradually advancing foreign policy goals through the space-based and context-specific configurations and junctures of cooperative engagement and struggle between social actors. As an analytical prism, CPE focuses on the interacting dynamics as well as conglomerate effects of four (analytically) distinct and (ontologically) interrelated forms of power extension: (1) *systemic*, (2) *institutional*, (3) *normative-discursive*, and (4) *commercial* (see Fig. 1).

The *systemic* dimension of CPE understands the rise of China as part of a historical shift in the reconfiguration of systemic relations via global economic and technological restructuring. The extension of power can be furthermore *institutional* if it is exerted via binding rules and politics in a specific territory. The *normative-discursive* dimension of power pertains the discourses and norms, which shape actors' perceptions of the "self" and the respective "other" as well as the meaning-making processes to which actors' beliefs and behaviors are subjected. Finally, CPE has a *commercial* dimension in that business and investment cultures play a key role at the level of firms, including the way state bureaucracies and private enterprises relate to each other with the objective of fostering profit-driven operations in unfamiliar places.

While one could argue that power is always contingent, i.e., dependent on specific territorial contexts and historical junctures, our main motivation is to understand the precise ways, in which the BRI functions as an adaptive mechanism of

power extension towards Eastern and Southern Europe. Through the prism of CPE, we aspire to gain a better understanding of how the BRI is shaping (and constraining) China’s capacities to advance foreign policy goals through infrastructure building in Europe while affecting EU (dis)integration in the process.

The four dimensions of CPE

The concept of CPE draws on pre-existing conceptualizations of power in international relations (Barnett and Duvall 2005), but its construction is more than just an addition or extrapolation of already existing analytical categories. Instead of regarding the extension of power in a political and geographical vacuum, CPE also covers the interaction dynamics between the involved actors in specific historical junctures and places by drawing on political geography perspectives (Flint and Taylor 2018). In the following, we will explain the four dimensions of CPE and discuss how they relate to each other in analytical terms.

The *systemic dimension* of CPE understands the social relations between different actors as constitutive of the hierarchical structure of power in the global system (Zarakol 2017). This dimension focuses on the unequal conditions of economic exchange characterizing capitalist relations across and within world regions. It highlights how some geographical spaces concentrate higher levels of industrial production and techno-cultural dominance and how these processes build on the extraction of resources, energy, and labor from the global peripheries (Wallerstein 1979). China is probably an exceptional case, having gone from a so-called “developing country” to a global economic “center” within few decades. Hence, contrary to the neo-realist premise that the lack of a central authority forces states to distrust each other and compete for power (Mearsheimer 2010), we see the systemic dynamics of CPE as rooted in global capitalism, as well as in the history and culture of strategic thinking in China. As previous studies have shown, CCP leaders have a longstanding tradition of embracing “cultural realism” (Johnston 1995; see Rodríguez and Rüländ 2022, p. 481). This power-sensitive posture comes not only as a response to realism’s pre-eminence in US foreign policy to balance Chinese power in Asia. It is also linked to the memory of adverse historical experiences with Western interventionism leading to the “semi-colonization” of China in the nineteenth century (Wang 2012). Hence, the systemic dimension of the BRI involves no less than a structural reconfiguration of global hierarchies of trade, investment, and finance with the aim of boosting China’s economic, technological, and military prospects in a multipolar order away from US hegemony.

The *institutional dimension* of CPE focuses on the principles shaping bilateral and multilateral formats. As a potential driver of a “Sino-centric” globalization, the BRI does not necessarily operate within Western-led architectures of global governance but rather promotes alternative norms and codes of conduct for multilateral or bilateral institutions to better respond to the party-state’s geostrategic interests. One of them is to extend its power reach into the EU and its diverse political and geographic arenas without having to rely upon Western financial facilities for that matter. To support BRI projects, instead, the CCP establishes new multilateral

schemes while connecting these with its national policy banks. Examples are the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) or the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB), which also have important ties to China Development Bank (CDB) and China Exim Bank. These arrangements not only detach the BRI from the institutional requirements of Western institutions (and civil society) but they also position Beijing as its spatial and (geo)political center of gravity (Levy and Révész 2022). Regarding the BRI, the institutional dimension of CPE raises the question whether China creates new multilateral fora to take more responsibility for global problems or whether the institutional underpinning of the BRI underscores primarily the realization of China's nationalist projects instead.

The *normative-discursive* element of CPE focuses on the subtle and dispersed ways in which political narratives of the BRI affect the norms and values and hence the political, social, and economic absorption of BRI projects in the regions *en route* of the initiative. In this reading, China's BRI can be understood as an expression of discursive power that is "contingent" upon the recipient audiences (Jakimów 2019) where the CCP expects normative-discursive changes in line with its quest for power extension. Hence, the normative-discursive element of CPE addresses the BRI as a meta-narrative and problematizes the diffusion of values and norms that build on the contested promises of the liberal world order to create more visibility for China. The dominating discursive elements of the BRI, framed by the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,¹ are integrated in the BRI action plan. Furthermore, they are a frequent reference in official and unofficial statements. Key narratives around the BRI emphasize its cooperative nature, putting forward mutual prosperity and growth as the main objective (Zhao 2016: 551). Official statements further deny that the BRI serves an expansion of Chinese spheres of influence (Shi 2015). Yet, there is a widening gap between this pacifying Chinese rhetoric and China's increasingly assertive foreign policy. While China officially promotes an inclusive and cooperative discourse, strategies of confrontational expansionism on land and sea are enacted whenever the party-state deems it necessary. Moreover, CCP leaders acknowledge the "Western discursive hegemony" (西方话语霸权) as a central challenge, emphasizing that the BRI shall support the extension of Chinese discursive power as a balancing response (Fan and Zhou 2016). The question with regard to disintegration is whether the Chinese pragmatic reading of multilateralism (Grimmel and Gurol 2021; Gurol 2022) results in discursive shifts within EU member states and ultimately to a further disregard of EU norms.

The *commercial dimension* of CPE focuses on the way Chinese stakeholders interact with their negotiating partners in the EU at the level of firms and in different sub-regional, i.e., cultural contexts. If culture is defined as an intersubjective deliberation process of interpreting social meanings, then the plurality of Chinese

¹ The Five Principles of Mutual Coexistence were formulated in the 1954 "Agreement on Trade and Intercourse" between the Tibet region of China and India and have become basic norms by now, shaping China's relations with other states. The five principles are (1) mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, (2) mutual non-aggression, (3) mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, (4) equality and cooperation for mutual benefit, and (5) peaceful coexistence (MFA 1954).

firms and respective international counterparts must navigate many complex and challenging settings to find a profitable place in global circuits of trade, finance, and logistics. The relationship between the Chinese state and firms abroad is of central importance in this regard. On the one hand, the Chinese leadership depends on the stability of the economic growth of the PRC. On the other hand, Chinese firms are faced with rising international competition as well as the political risks of unknown markets. This results in a synergy between the centralistic party apparatus of China and the profit-oriented network of state-owned and private Chinese firms operating in other world regions (Gonzalez-Vicente 2019, p. 4). While the CCP grants financial backing and political support to its partners along the BRI, China's firms are active in culturally most heterogeneous segments of the global economy. How will this situation affect the business culture of European firms and the dynamics of cooperation among them both with regard to competition and collaboration with Chinese firms?

In sum, CPE makes these four dimensions of power extension analytically distinct but it does not suggest their ontological disconnection. In fact, the four dimensions of CPE never stand for themselves empirically but we can rather see different combinations and overlaps between these when studying EU-China interactions. In particular, we expect the BRI to produce a series of conglomerate effects that can be analyzed systematically and traced back to specific configurations of power in particular contexts and places. Following our relational understanding of power, the BRI's performativity (the ways in which power extension is performed) and effectiveness are not located solely in the hands of the Chinese party state. Instead, they are further "contingent" upon the (in)actions, dismissals, and engagements of EU actors. Thus, we expect case-specific constellations of CPE to shape the agencies, circumstances, and environments of the involved actors. In this equation, (dis)integration is understood as an aggregate consequence that the BRI has on the EU's capacities to articulate a coherent response to this very same challenge, connecting the notion of disintegration with tendencies of political dissent and spatial fragmentation. In temporal terms, CPE allows us to understand (dis)integration not just as a fixed outcome of power extension but as a contested process of struggle that can be re-shaped and influenced through political action, depending on constantly changing historical circumstances.

Explaining EU (dis)integration through the prism of CPE

In the following, we apply CPE to China's interactions with the EU, focusing on two empirical examples—the 14 + 1 Cooperation Forum between China and Central/Eastern European States (CEEC) and the BRI infrastructure project at the Port of Genoa. We illustrate how China's contingent power extension is inextricably linked to (dis)integration within the EU. The first case is notable due to the significant changes in the institutional set-up of the format, with two Baltic countries, namely, Estonia and Latvia, leaving this trade group, following Lithuania's earlier exit in 2021. Thereby, the cooperation format was reduced from 17 + 1 to 14 + 1 in less than two years' time. The second case addresses the PRC's attempt to advance the BRI

in an EU founding member state and G7 country for the first time, highlighting the symbolic value and systemic limits to this endeavor. Now, what does this tell us about (dis)integration tendencies within the EU?

“Divide and rule” or “divide and unite”? From 17 + 1 to 14 + 1 in China-CEE relations

To understand the most recent dynamics within 14 + 1, it is necessary to understand how the initial 16 + 1 format of cooperation between the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) and China has evolved. China’s EU policy has, for the past two decades, primarily focused on gaining access to the European market from a new systemic position of comparative and growing strength in manufacturing, technological innovation, and investment capacities. Within this overall aim, the CEEC long played a crucial role as the party-state believed it to bear the potential for a strong pro Chinese Lobby (CEEC Summit 2017). In the aftermath of the financial crisis that hit Europe harder than China in 2008, the economic development of the CEEC became heavily dependent upon the attraction of foreign capital. Based on the remarkable trade deficit with China as well as their structurally disadvantaged position within the EU, many CEEC sought Chinese investments and fostered trade relations with China.

Through its nature of being a quasi-multilateral forum, 14 + 1 already entails an institutional element of power (Mierzejewski et al. 2022). For the Chinese party state, it constitutes an ideal institutional stage to not only foster bilateral trade relationships but also to gain more negotiation leverage towards the EU. In particular, the financing of infrastructure projects thereby serves as an economic incentive for the CEEC. Between Belgrade and Budapest, for example, a 336-km-long high-speed railroad line is to be built, the “showcase project” of the then 16 + 1 format (Góralczyk 2017, p. 155). It is largely financed through loans from the Chinese Exim Bank. And in 2016, a Chinese state enterprise bought the operator of the international airport in Albania’s capital Tirana. Thereby, also a systemic change takes place, luring the participating CEEC closer to China’s sphere of influence and causing patterns of spatial reconfiguration away from the EU’s exclusive domain. Despite the enormous structural leverage of the EU single market with an annual trade volume of approximately US\$19 trillion, these changes result in a diminished coherence of the EU’s negotiation capacities vis-à-vis China, reduced competitiveness, while exposing the lack of common rules and standards.

From early onwards, 14 + 1 arouse mixed feelings in Brussels based on the fact that China combines positive economic statecraft with the cultivation of soft power to increase its economic and political influence in the CEEC (Pacheco Pardo 2018; Song 2019; Jakimów 2019; Fan and Zhou 2016; Zhao 2016). In some cases, this went so far that 14 + 1 members even changed their official discourse and voting behavior in favor of the PRC, despite initial criticism. For instance, in the Czech Republic a major investment flow coming from China changed the political discourse on Tibet (Hórnat 2016), suddenly reinforcing Chinese official narratives and rhetoric about an autonomous territory that the PRC regards as its own province.

This can be interpreted as a strategic use of economic leverage on behalf of China to “buy” political favors from EU states, shaping existing discourses to its advantage (Kavalski 2019; Kachlikova and Turcsanyi 2020). In a similar vein, Hungary prevented a united EU statement in 2016 after a court case over Beijing’s territorial claims in the South China Sea. This reveals the overlap and mutual reinforcement of the commercial, the institutional, and the normative-discursive dimensions of CPE.

What does that mean for (dis)integrative tendencies within the EU? Here, we can clearly see temporally contingent patterns. Initially, what has begun as 16+1 has certainly pushed the CEEC closer towards China, fostering one-sided dependencies while enabling a stronger Chinese foothold in the region. Economic investments have not only given China a political foot in the door of the EU while making it increasingly difficult for the EU to speak with one voice in its China policy, especially against the backdrop of the billionaire ties China has developed with the 16+1 countries. Through the institutional reconfigurations and systemic shifts, China has further genuinely developed what Caffarena and Gabusi (2019) call a “trans-EU political space in the EU neighborhood.” This refers to the changing political and economic structures in the CEEC that reveal two clashing (sub-)regionalization and integration tendencies (European Commission 2015; 2017a; 2017b)—the European regionalism that hinges upon pooling sovereignty from the different EU member states, seeding authority to the EU level, and the Chinese approach that puts the sovereignty and power of the Chinese party-state to the forefront (MFA 2017).

Further disintegrative tendencies are evoked through China’s application of normative-discursive power. In particular, it seems to socialize the CEEC into its own worldview by exposing them to Chinese narratives of mutual benefits and win–win (Vangeli 2019). In that regard, it can also be concluded that Chinese investments in 14+1 could indeed offer an alternative to EU capital and also more political room for national policies to detach themselves from supra-national positions and regulations. This case shows that China is capable of using its economic leverage to align distinct countries and even sub-regions in the EU with its political views and strategic objectives. According to the German Economy Corporation (BDI), this bears the risk of a “division of the EU through formats like 16+1” if the member states fail to develop a common position on China. A similar observation could be made regarding Lithuania’s decision to leave the cooperation format in 2021: “The 16+1 format [...] is not useful for Europe, it is dividing Europe, because some countries have a different opinion on China than others” (EURACTIV 2021). In a similar vein, six other Baltic states have shown Xi Jinping a cold shoulder at the 2021 China-CEEC summit by not showing up, making 16+1 look like an “impoverished” 11+1. The decision of Estonia and Latvia to exit in 2022 has emphasized this tendency even further.

This series of events shows that the disintegrative tendencies are causing increased political debate among the formerly enthusiastic countries and thereby creating a momentum for re-integration. As the constantly changing discourses show, the initial enthusiasm of the CEEC states for China is not given over the long term, but actually closing the window of opportunity for China to get a political foot in Eastern and Central Europe. Simultaneously, Chinese attempts to extend the regime’s power towards the CEEC constitute a wake-up call for the EU and has

acted as a booster to efforts of finding a joint, cohesive, and strategic long-term position on China, which can be interpreted as an act of integration.

Hence, China's contingent power extension towards the CEEC has added yet another layer to the already highly complex Sino-European relationship and has accelerated ongoing intra-European debates around the historical struggle of the EU to speak with one voice on external relations, in particular when it comes to its China policy. Hence, 14+1 partly constitutes a litmus test for the EU's internal cohesion and ability to find a common position among its member states. The analysis has clearly indicated evidence for both disintegration as well as integrative tendencies. The CEEC and also the other EU member states pursue different China policies, based on different interests, needs, and ideas about the kind of regional and global order that best suits their national development pathways. In that regard, China's contingent power extension towards the EU's Eastern region has acted as a booster for processes that predated the formal set-up of 14+1 but add a challenge to the EU's already fragmented internal cohesion.

The Port of Genoa and China-Italy relations: (dis)integration by persuasion?

A key question concerning how the BRI affects European integration is whether EU member states will develop a common framework to engage with Chinese investments in infrastructure. The case of Italy endorsing the BRI in March 2019 is the key in this conundrum, since it was the first EU founding member and G7 country to formally join the BRI. One of the first projects to advance was the replenishment of some areas of the Italian Port of Genoa. Shortly after the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between China and Italy, the state-owned China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) signed a cooperation agreement with the Commissioner for the Reconstruction of Genoa and the Port Authority of Genoa. This project is part of the Chinese government's vision to include European ports into the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which is expected to use the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean to link China's ports with Europe, and to further enhance China's maritime connectivity with the South Pacific (NDRC et al. 2015).

Historically, the capacity to control port infrastructures has been associated with the power to coordinate labor movements, trade flows, and logistic transactions across distant geographies. For those on the receiving end, having to cede a country's ports is often equivalent to the loss of territorial sovereignty. In fact, the occupation of China's ports on behalf of Western powers throughout the nineteenth century continues to shape the collective memory and intergenerational rejection of external interventions associated with "national humiliation" (Wang 2012). Perhaps due to Europe's own expansionist history, China's BRI projects in maritime infrastructure have elicited controversial discussions in the EU. Given these conflicting circumstances, Chinese and Italian stakeholders with an interest in the promotion of Chinese investments have both emphasized that these interventions are actually intended to support to the Italian government in its efforts to enhance the quality and integration of European infrastructure networks. Arguably, these endeavors simultaneously match the BRI objective of establishing new trading routes along the

ports of Piraeus (Greece), Marsaxlokk (Malta), Marseille (France) Valencia (Spain), Koper (Slovenia), and Rijeka (Croatia), where Chinese state-owned companies have made investments and established commercial nodes.

Yet, Chinese operations in the Ligurian region are subject to national and European regulations that secure the conditions for the Port Authority of Genoa to set the rules of the game vis-à-vis large investors. Hence, in this case, Chinese investments have remained limited to the Vado Gateway, which is a deep-sea container terminal in the Port of Vado Ligure. In fact, the Chinese and Italian governments had been discussing joint efforts in this project before the signing of the BRI (Ghiretti 2021). The Vado gateway works under a 50-year concession in the hands of a consortium in which the Italian company APM Terminals is the largest stakeholder (50.1%), together with the Chinese companies Cosco Shipping (40%) and Qingdao Port International (9.9%).² The establishment of port operations in Genoa certainly holds symbolic value in terms of the BRI making small but important steps to extend China's new position of systemic power into the EU. However, these investments still play a marginal role, since Western companies can still participate effectively in public bids. Indeed, to this date, further investments in the Port of Genoa have included enterprises from Europe, while Chinese SOEs have failed to win additional contracts.

Despite these challenges at the local scale, the BRI has nevertheless elicited fears of China contributing to European disintegration at the regional scale, mostly in the institutional dimension of CPE. While EU leaders gathered in Brussels in March 2019 to discuss the contours of a common China policy, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte held a bilateral meeting in Rome to formalize the BRI agreement. Chinese analysts interpreted the MoU as a "milestone" of Chinese-European cooperation (Meng 2019), while media outlets referred to the China-Italy agreement as a proof of Beijing's commitment to multilateralism.³ In Italy and the EU, by contrast, the MoU sparked divided opinions pointing to tendencies of disintegration. Just a few days before its signing, the European Commission (EC) issued a statement cautioning that "the EU and its Member States can achieve their aims concerning China only in full unity" (EC 2019). These statements reveal that EU officials perceived Italy's single-handed decision to join the BRI called the EU's institutional power as an internally coherent, supra-national instance of foreign policy making into question.

Given the discontent among EU institutions, both the regional government of Liguria and the national government of Italy have defended their cooperation with China by virtue of a pragmatic and "commerce-oriented" discourse. In this light, actors from Italy's shipping industry as well as local authorities have been quoted by Chinese media suggesting that the attraction of BRI investments is customary commercial transactions that help address Italy's infrastructural needs and reinforce

² Ports of Genoa, n.d. Available at: <https://www.portsofgenoa.com/it/terminal-merci/terminal-container/container-vl/container-apm-vl.html>. Accessed 5 April 2021.

³ Xinhuanet, 24 March 2019. Available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-03/24/c_137918586.htm. Accessed 5 April 2021.

rather than question European values premised upon free market competition.⁴ For many, doing business with Chinese investors is hardly different from their transactions with companies from other Western or Asian countries, evidencing the commercial power that Chinese enterprises are developing in this area of Europe. However, the construction of a new breakwater in the Port of Genoa had been listed in the EU-China Connectivity Platform in 2018, which the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) of China as well as the European Commission agreed upon—under a loose institutionalized format that set a precedent for the BRI agreement to come into being a year after.

The expansive commercial record of Chinese companies investing in Italy is in fact significant but constituted a pre-condition *for*, not necessarily a result *of* the BRI and its thin institutional foundations. Chinese businesses have built their presence in many important sectors of the economy over the last few decades. They include strategic as well as culturally significant sectors such as energy, the automotive industry, real estate, gastronomy, fashion, and soccer. The dynamism of these commercial linkages is quite remarkable, having become increasingly tangible in the Port of Genoa as well. In 2018, the port had a turnover of 2.6 million standard containers that is equivalent to US\$ 50 billion (*ibid.*), three quarters of which left the coast of Liguria to meet China's demand for products "Made in Italy." In addition, Chinese investments in port design and automatic transport technologies have enabled the Vado Gateway to triple its container capacity, thereby ensuring that China's largest container vessels enjoy safe and physically adequate conditions to access one of the largest hubs for refrigerated food products coming from Africa or Latin America that China can now transport more easily to its own ports. Hence, many manufacturers and enterprises in Northern Italy see Chinese capitals and port equipping technologies as a positive development in the light of Italy's critical bottlenecks in infrastructure, which provides evidence for the conglomerate effects of China's systemic and commercial power in maritime trade and infrastructure. In August 2018, for instance, the Polcevera Viaduct collapsed unexpectedly, killing 43 people and interrupting the land route between the Port of Genoa and Italy's mainland. The freight traffic at the Port of Genoa suffered significant losses, so that local and national authorities came under serious pressure to do something against this situation. The announcement of BRI investments in the Port of Genoa thus came in at a critical moment for Liguria, and a suitable one for Chinese investment.

What, then, does this case portray in terms of the BRI's effects on EU integration and disintegration? The case of Genoa confirms that the BRI is a case of power extension, albeit one with ambivalent to limited effects on regional (dis)integration. The Sino-Italian MoU has provided the BRI with a slim layer of institutional power, mainly because the diplomatic symbolism of this agreement has helped the Chinese media apparatus propagate the notion that Chinese investments are well received in the West. This means that, from a BRI perspective, the strategic value

⁴ Xinhua, 30 August 2019. Available at: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201908/30/WS5d69047c310cf3e35568e15.html>. Accessed 5 April 2021. New China TV, 29 August 2019. Available at: <https://youtu.be/FVKf2VqxtII>. Accessed 5 April 2021.

of this agreement lies both in the normative-discursive and commercial dimensions of CPE. The Port of Genoa has allowed the CCP to foster the image of a respected international actor that is not only supportive of economic globalization but actually gaining systemic influence in the world's commercial maritime networks, even though the intensity and breadth of investments has not yet materialized as expected. At the same time, a new common-sense of unified strategic involvement in regional infrastructure may be (re-)emerging among European port authorities and companies—pointing to tendencies of integration. For example, China's dream of having its state-owned companies extend BRI investments to the twin port of Trieste, as initially envisioned in the BRI bilateral agreement, has progressively vanished. Here, Italian businesses and policy-makers have been rather apprehensive of Chinese capital, while German companies like Hamburger Hafen und Logistik AG (HHLA) have won key tenders. The analysis shows that the high-level bilateral launching of the BRI elicited clear sentiments of disintegration at the regional scale. However, Chinese interventions in the Port of Genoa have also induced a salient sense of global competitiveness among European firms and called for a regional learning process among European ports in need for foreign investment in infrastructure development.

Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to develop an encompassing framework for a better analytical assessment of the BRI regarding EU (dis)integration. Building on existing literatures from International Relations and Political Geography, we developed the concept of "contingent power extension" (CPE) along four analytically distinct and ontologically interrelated elements of power extension: *systemic*, *institutional*, *normative-discursive*, and *commercial*. Subsequently, we applied CPE to the analysis of two empirical examples, namely, 14 + 1 and the Port of Genoa. In doing so, we discussed the BRI's performativity by applying the lens of CPE to two different cases of Chinese interventions in the EU. One of the main findings of the analysis is that the BRI's power dynamics are highly context-sensitive and have both integrative and disintegrative implications for the EU. The PRC has certainly attained a considerable level of systemic power to conduct negotiations with and make important investments in single EU states and very different sub-regions. However, the workings and effects of Chinese power extension in the EU are neither linear nor static; these are contingent upon the political conditions of a territory, i.e., on the multi-scalar dynamics of intra-EU interactions, including conflicts, (un)fulfilled expectations, tensions, and negotiations between subnational and supranational entities as well as between private and public actors involved in particular projects. For instance, the BRI is embedded in Chinese discourses of "peaceful co-existence" and "mutual benefit," which are broad and positive enough for different European actors to justify the attraction of Chinese capital according to a wide canon of political and commercial agendas. Sometimes, these are but do not have to be consistent with the EU's expectations as a supranational entity facing political and economic competition from a third party vis-à-vis its own member states and sub-regions. Hence, one of the strategic characteristics of the BRI, which CPE illuminates in our empirical

analysis, is its capacity to advance “infrastructuring” (Tyfield and Rodríguez 2022; Gurol and Schuetze 2022) measures by adapting its institutional, normative-discursive, and commercial logics to these complexity of factors. As a consequence, the BRI and the kind of power extension it embodies creates a new reality that the EU needs to consider in terms of the fundamentally “unfinished” character of its regional integration process as well in terms of the shifting historical landscape in which such integration takes place.

Given the complexity of the topic, this article can only offer one different conceptual reaction to the manifold analytical challenges the BRI poses - one that shifts away from treating China in terms of compartmentalized categories of both “partner” and “rival.” We thereby hope to offer an alternative and systematic interpretation of the BRI as a multidimensional tool of power extension that actually invites the EU to rethink its own logics of transregional and bilateral interactions with a new and rapidly changing China.

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