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To cite this article: Catherine Jones (2021): Understanding the Belt and Road in EU-China relations, Journal of European Integration, DOI: [10.1080/07036337.2021.1985764](https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2021.1985764)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2021.1985764>



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Published online: 09 Nov 2021.



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Understanding the Belt and Road in EU-China relations

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Review of three books

- 1. Books, Clive Hamilton and Mareike Ohlberg. 2021.** *Hidden Hand: How the Chinese Communist Party is reshaping the World*, Oneworld: London.
- 2. Guiseppe Martinico and Xueyan Wu. 2021.** *A Legal Analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative: Towards a New Silk Road?* Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke.
- 3. Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Jinghan Zeng. 2021.** *One Belt, One Road, One Story? Towards an EU-China Strategic Narrative*, Palgrave Macmillan: Switzerland.
- 4. Vassilis Ntousas and Stephen Minas. Eds. 2021.** *The European Union and China's Belt and Road*, Routledge, Abingdon. *Hidden Hand: How the Chinese Communist Party is reshaping the World*, Oneworld: London.

ABSTRACT

China has a strategic narrative for its engagement with the EU. But the EU has neither a strategy nor a common narrative for its relations with China. This asymmetry of approach opens up opportunities for China to expose and utilise differences between EU member states, their interests and their preferences, and EU institutions, in order to present a challenge to the current liberal international order. However, although some authors see this loop-sided relationship as a clear and unambiguous challenge, it does continue to present a multitude of challenges for China in implementing its approach. More fundamentally, it reveals the lack of coherence in their current construction and understanding of the international order.

These books and collected works make it clear that China has an EU strategy, but the EU does not have a China strategy (to abuse and re-use my colleague Ian Taylor's claim about Africa and China relations) (MOFA 2006; Taylor 2011, 94). This summation is true despite the challenges China faces in implementing its approach. As Feng and Huang note, China has developed some narratives of Europe to characterise its strategy (2021, 139), but the complicated institutional set up and diffuse competencies within the EU and between member states present challenges for China's engagement and understanding.

Nonetheless, however difficult the challenges on China's side in developing a cogent strategy and corresponding narrative, as these texts reveal, the EU does not have a strategy towards China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Shi and Trigkas 2021, 69).

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Instead, the EU as an institution and all of its member states have shifting narratives of their engagement with the BRI. Some of these narratives reflect the EU's and member states shifting narratives on China more generally. These books adopt different views of the coherence of EU approaches towards the BRI and China more generally, yet three key themes and areas for consideration emerge: (1) Different views of China across the EU and between member states; (2) Different visions of what the BRI is and its strategic significance; (3) whether China through the BRI presents a challenge to global order.

Different views of China across the EU and between member states

In 2019, the EU Commission published a joint strategic outlook report on EU-China relations (EU Commission 2019). In this report, it is clear that in its relations with China, the EU's focus is on maintaining the international rules-based order, pursuing global sustainable development, seeking regional approaches to peace and security. In pursuing these objectives, the EU also appreciates there are increasing challenges in engaging with China. These challenges include concerns over China's investments, its approaches to some elements within the rules-based order, and how China engages at the regional level with states but also with non-state actors. This report and specifically this quote then features as key point of analysis for all of these books.

"China is, simultaneously, in different policy areas, 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. This requires a flexible and pragmatic whole-of-EU approach enabling a principled defence of interests and values." (Ntousas and Minas, 2021,4; EU Commission, 2019)

From this quote and the report more generally, Ntousas and Minas (2021, 4), identify and develop the argument that the approach of the EU towards China and the BRI varies based on different policy spaces. In terms of climate change China is an essential partner, whereas in terms of telecommunications and increasingly in industry it appears to be a strategic rival. Within the Ntousas and Minas book, Men (2021, 31) elegantly points out that the EU's positions (even within policy arenas) have also shifted to become more concerned about China's investment. But this shift in position has led to an absence of a consistent approach from within the EU and between its member states (Men 2021, 32). This absence of consistency is exacerbated because, although the EU has authority in some areas (for example trade), some mechanisms that the EU has put in place – for example, scrutiny over foreign direct investment (FDI) – rely on member states for implementation.

Considering the legal foundations and provisions in BRI contracts also adds yet another layer of difficulty here. As noted across these texts the EU has approved processes for vetting FDI investments that take place within Europe. These projects need to comply with EU law particularly in relation to procurement rules. However, if a dispute arises, where should this be settled? The EU has a preference for this to take place within the World Trade Organisation, however, China has created two places of arbitration through the Chinese

courts system, which is where China would prefer arbitration to take place (Petersmann 2021, 65). As a result, the EU as an institution needs to manage different approaches both upstream and downstream in seeking to develop a strategy and narrative.

The member state level adds complexity here. EU member states appear to also have radically different approaches towards China (see chapters 10–14 in Ntousas and Minas). France is in a strong diplomatic position in relation to China through its permanent seat on the UN Security Council (Nicolas 2021, 154), yet it is in an economically weak position (Nicolas, 2021:155), politically it had hopes of democratic or at least some liberal reforms in China that have recently been dashed (Nicolas 2021, 156). As a result of these difficulties for France vis-a-vis China, it has sought a ‘whole of Europe approach’ (Nicolas 2021, 157), yet this is highly problematic. Germany is in a weaker diplomatic position but a much stronger economic position in relation to China. This was until China in 2015 released a 10-year economic plan for state-led industrial development called ‘Made in China 2025’ (McBride and Chatzky 2019). In this plan, it stated that China sought to rapidly develop 10 high-tech industries including telecommunications, greener cars running on new forms of energy, and electrical engineering. These are industries where Germany has typically had a commercial edge. As a result, Germany can increasingly see economic competition emerging in its relations with China, especially as a result of the Made in China 2025 agenda (Mair and Schaff 2021, 174).

The view from Southern Europe appears to be a little different, Italy’s signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on the BRI with China, shocked some Western governments and raised concerns about the potential consequences as the first NATO member state to sign such an agreement (Amighini 2021, 212). Furthermore, concerns were raised because it seemed to signal that Italy was willing to switch sides from the EU sceptics of China and its global actions (including the BRI) to the supporters, whereas France and Germany seemed to be adopting positions moving towards greater concern. Yet, according to the argument in this chapter, ‘what might prove true in the future is that the MoU could turn out to be more a misstep than a milestone in China’s EU strategy.’ (Amighini 2021, 213). From this argument, I understand that China could have miscalculated the influence of Italy within the wider EU context – which may also have been reduced by becoming more supportive of China’s economic overtures. Hence, although China does have an EU strategy it may not be flawless in its implementation, because of the disarray on the EU side.

These different approaches towards China and the BRI are echoed and developed in the Liu’s (2021:45-66) chapter in *One Belt, One Road, One Story*. In this, the author outlines that knowing and understanding the different views within the EU member states forms a part of the emerging narrative and strategy of China about the BRI within the group. This is also expanded in the chapter by Shi and Trigkas, where they discuss the different approaches of Eastern and Western member states and the potential to use these differences to nudge towards more positive narratives in Europe of the BRI (Shi and Trigkas 2021, 71), an approach that could also be fostered by utilising the different approaches of the industrialists within member states (Shi and Trigkas 2021, 69).

Along these lines Hamilton and Ohlberg’s argument becomes an interesting provocation. They highlight that ‘One of the biggest challenges in dealing with China is precisely this political illiteracy of foreign interlocutors . . .’ (2021, 14). If this argument is applied in

the context of mixed approaches within the EU then it would imply that across the EU landscape (within and between the EU's institutions, member states, and civilians and business leaders) it would suggest that there are varying levels of 'illiteracy'. Indeed, taking the details of the books edited by Miskimmon et al. and Ntousas and Minas, it would seem there is reducing illiteracy in some populaces and in the Commission but there remain absences in knowledge in member states. More importantly, Hamilton and Ohlberg, highlight that there are specific campaigns of 'grooming' of political elites in Europe (2021, 54) and this approach was instrumental in explaining the signing of the MoU on the BRI by Italy (2021, 67) and in continuing to develop and maintain friendships on both sides of the German political landscape (2021, 75–79).

Taken together these works present an interesting picture of the complexity of China's engagement with the EU and search to develop a clear coherent strategic narrative to explain the BRI, yet, China also differentiates this narrative to suit multiple audiences in very different polities. On the one hand, the development of these narratives and approaches can be seen as subversive and highly problematic (Hamilton and Ohlberg 2021). On the other hand, they can be seen as trying to develop a sustainable long-term relationship (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Zeng, 2021a).

There is one element that is yet to be developed from these arguments, which is highlighted by Bergsen (2021) in a recent piece for Chatham House, in which he highlights that – for example – Italy signing the MoU on the BRI could be seen as contributing to Italy's argument within the EU to gain more EU allocated funds for projects and development. Similarly, Greece's closeness to Chinese financing and concerns this raises for other members, acts as a good point of leverage for asking for more funds to come from the EU instead. Hence, it is possible that China is seeking to exacerbate existing differences within the grouping, but China does not control the effects of its actions. This argument is hinted at in the consideration of differences between narrator and audience in Ma's chapter, yet there is more work that could be done here.

A dialectic of China and the BRI: different visions of the Belt and Road

At the same time as the EU has a shifting position of its own understanding the link between the EU and the BRI is connected to, and further complicated by, its own shifting assessment of what the BRI is, and how it privileges many different and often competing interpretations of what China's strategy is, either towards the EU as a collective block or towards individual members. Miskimmon et al., develop a sophisticated analysis of these strategic narratives on both sides of the relationship (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, 2021:19–44). The authors adopt different levels of analysis, different sectors of engagement, and different uses of frames in developing their arguments to aid understanding here. These different approaches allow for nuance to develop over the chapters, including – for example – Shi and Trigkas demonstrating the growing scepticism of China by the EU as a central body, yet the growing differences in views between Eastern and Western European countries (Shi and Trigkas 2021, 68).

According to Snyder, this can be visualised as a 'Kaleidoscope' with the 'BRI as the centre of a kaleidoscope and Europe as being comprised of several perspectives on the centre' (Synder, 2021, 42). This is a good image to understand these different perspectives and it is helpful in understanding how these different views connect, creating new

impressions of China that are more than a collection of disparate parts. However, perhaps a more appropriate image is to suggest that the different parts of the EU represent different positions looking into a fractured mirror. It is not only the perspective of the viewer that matters but also the lack of cohesion of the BRI itself.

In *A Legal Analysis*, different approaches and understandings of the BRI are fundamental because, as Anderson (2021, 103) succinctly puts it, ‘the question is whether the vague institutional and constitutional design of the BRI creates rule of law gaps to the detriment of international businesses and international trade.’ The presence of new Chinese processes of arbitration (and mediation, discussed further in Liu’s chapter) may fill some of these emerging gaps, but there remain problems of the disadvantageous position this legal framework could have for European businesses (Anderson 2021, 127).

In this approach, the problem of a lack of clarity about the BRI is not just concerned with the overarching strategic objective but rather could cause unintended legal problems. Hence, whether China is a *mens rea*, seeking to use the BRI as a (subversive) tool to pursue an alternative global order is only one of several concerns that it presents. It is instead important to consider the practices that are being developed and the legal consequences whether or not this is a strategic plan by China. This seems to be a vital contribution of these texts and one that should demand greater attention.

Challenge to a current global order?

These books also share in contributing to a central IR question of whether China will or does challenge the current international order. Although all four books present slightly different views as to what they see is being challenged and in what ways. Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Zeng, develop an argument that although challenging the current order may be a long-term objective, they argue ‘there is no global alternative to the current system’ (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, Zeng, 2021a:2). As they, and their contributors, develop this argument they also introduce some nuance, for example, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin demonstrate that China is willing to disobey existing rules and institutions (2021, 35), and Ma highlights that although China may be seeking to push its own narrative it is aware that its ‘investments and funds cannot change political trends or institutions of its partners.’ (2021, 105), Zhang notes that the ‘British media argue that China may not change the existing system but that it is reshaping the economic and political order in the Asian region.’ (2021, 127). These and other cogent arguments developed in the volume present a view that China’s behaviour challenges specific elements within the current global order, but these do not constitute a systemic threat to global systems or institutions – at the moment.

A significant contribution to this element can be found in Martinico and Wu, in the chapter by Zucca. Among all the books, this chapter stands out as it tries to conceptualise the existing order. Zucca sets out two (potentially) competing approaches to understanding the current global order as either a normative or an institutional formation (2021, 22). This enables a much more nuanced argument on this point, as Zucca indicates there are (at least) five scenarios to be explored in relation to whether China challenges global order (2021, 39) Although there are undoubtedly weaknesses with this overview and the subsequent analysis, this discussion offers a significant anchor for the other chapters to leverage in developing their arguments. In a similarly nuanced approach in

Petersmann's chapter, we also see a discussion of 'reconciling' China's approach with that of existing international law (2021, 49), again this takes the debate forwards towards a discussion of different types of conceptual challenge that may emerge towards different elements within international order.

These volumes complement and add depth and detailed examples to a broad argument in the wider literature that China does challenge specific rules, approaches, and practices, but not the whole edifice of order. However, within all of them they tread a balance between providing detailed empirical examples and evidence. All four texts take a different approach to this balance. I would suggest that three of them would have benefitted from a greater exegesis of what their combined view of the holistic order is, which would have allowed the authors to develop more analytical depth and cohesion between the chapters. Whereas, Martinico and Wu makes a significant contribution in terms of conceptual frames and its narrower focus on legal analysis makes it a highly coherent work, yet some of the broader points that are relevant to a significant swathe of scholars may be missed exactly because of this narrower empirical focus.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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