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Abbreviation

ACCWS - Academy of Contemporary China and World Studies

AIIB – Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank

ANSO – The Alliance of International Science Organisations

BRF – The Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation

BRI – Belt and Road Initiative

CATL – China Academy of Translation

CDB – China Development Bank

CGS – Chinese Government Scholarship

China SCIO – The State Council Information Office of The People's Republic of China

CIIE – China International Import Expo

CIPG – China International Publishing Group

CR Express – China-Europe Railway Express

CPC – the Communist Party of China

ESCAP – The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific

FDI – foreign direct investment

FIE – foreign invested enterprise

FTA – free trade agreement

GVC – Global Value Chain

IO – international organisations

IR – international relations

PRC – People's Republic of China

MFA – Ministry of Foreign Affairs (of the People's Republic of China)

MoU – Memorandum of understanding

MNE – multinational enterprise

MOFCOM – Ministry of Commerce (of the People’s Republic of China)

NDRC – National Development and Reform Commission (of the People’s Republic of China)

NGO – Non-governmental Organization

OFDI – outward foreign direct investment

RCEP – the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership

RMB – *Renminbi*, China *Yuan*

SRF – Silk Road Fund

UNEP – United Nations Environment Programme

Introduction

In light of profound transformations within the global political and economic landscape, the rapid ascension of China as a global power represents one of the most significant phenomena of the 21st century. Following the reform and opening-up policies initiated in the 1980s, China has experienced swift economic growth, positioning itself as the second-largest economy in the world by leveraging global developments through trade and investment. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the nation has concurrently achieved remarkable advancements not only in economic, technological, and military spheres but also in institutional development, discourse shaping, and the expansion of relational networks.

The achievements of China have rendered its power growth a focal topic in the realm of international relations studies. Since the previous century, particularly in the aftermath of the Cold War, scholars have examined China's power dynamics from various perspectives. As a gradually emerging major global player, China's foreign policies and actions not only exhibit its preferences but also undeniably impact other actors and international institutions, thereby augmenting its power. Nevertheless, China has consistently refrained from officially utilising the term 'power,' instead positioning itself as a major country rather than a hegemonic great power, thereby emphasising its pursuit of a peaceful and benign rise, which contrasts with the trajectories of previous hegemons. However, the growth of China's power is an indisputable fact for scholars of international relations, as it has both resulted from and influenced its array of foreign practices.

Within this context, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has emerged as a prominent platform for China's foreign engagement and international collaboration. Proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013, the initiative has extended to over 140 countries and international organisations, encompassing a diverse range of sectors related to development and connectivity, including infrastructure development, trade, investment,

cultural exchanges, and financial cooperation, among others. Through the implementation of the BRI, China has intensified its interactions and cooperation with partners, establishing a pragmatic platform for promoting its vision of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind. It is important to recognise that China's policy preferences, developmental models, institutional frameworks, and international discourse have significantly and profoundly influenced its partners and the international community through the execution of the initiative. In summary, beyond the sharing of developmental benefits, China's power is growing and expanding across multiple dimensions via the BRI, as it enhances its capacity to guide and shape the behaviours of other actors.

Hence, this thesis aims to study China's power dynamics from the perspective of China's foreign policies, more specifically, the Belt and Road Initiative. Further, the BRI has undoubtedly increased China's power at various levels, but what specific types of power has China acquired through the initiative, and what are the mechanisms and logic behind this dynamic?

To address these inquiries, subsequent chapters will employ both theoretical construction and empirical analysis to systematically examine how the BRI contributes to the multifaceted growth of China's power. On one hand, despite the considerable amount of research the BRI has incited since its proposal in 2013, there remains a deficiency in systematic discussions regarding its impact on power. The existing literature predominantly concentrates on the policy drivers, domestic repercussions, economic returns, geostrategic intentions, and implementation risks associated with the BRI. However, few articles offer a comprehensive analysis of how it shapes China's power in relation to other actors within the international system, often confining their focus to specific dimensions. On the other hand, as a pivotal concept in IR, the definitions, categorizations, and measurements of power continue to be subjects of controversy. Current theories encompass realist emphasis on material capabilities and structural advantages, liberal focuses on institutions, and constructivist attentions to

norms and ideas; however, these frameworks frequently fail to effectively capture the dynamics inherent in China's foreign practices and their power consequences. Consequently, the prevailing framework has not yet fully elucidated how the BRI, as a holistic platform, enables China to enhance its influence through material benefits, agenda-setting, rule-making, value dissemination, and relational networks.

Thus, by commencing with a review of the theory of power in IR and constructing a systematic and adaptive analytical framework, this article aspires to provide an innovative approach for discussing China's power dynamics and foreign practices, thereby bridging the gap between theoretical integration and practical analysis within existing research. Drawing upon the seminal works of prior literature on power—particularly those focused on the induction and classification of power in International Political Economy (IPE) by Susan Strange, as well as the contributions of Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall in global governance, alongside the achievements of the Chinese School—this thesis proposes a six-dimensional power taxonomy as a theoretical framework that incorporates interactional and constitutional, material and intangible, as well as direct and diffuse influences of both state and non-state actors, namely substantial power, judgmental power, institutional power, positional power, conceptual power, and relational power. This framework aims not only to represent power in a more comprehensive manner but also to align with China's distinctive external logic of fostering peace and development through cooperation and communication. Empirically, based on the antecedent practices of the BRI, this research analyses policy documents, statistical data, and case studies to examine how the initiative has facilitated China's economic growth, institutional engagement, structural centrality, discourse dissemination, and relationship construction. This analysis reveals the various dimensions through which China has acquired power.

The structure of this thesis is organised as follows: Following a review of preceding power theories within the framework of the four dimensions of power, which are derived from the classical definition of power, this thesis will initially propose a

taxonomy of six types of power that will serve as the theoretical framework. In conjunction with this, Chapter 1 will examine the trajectory of China's foreign policy and practices, alongside its emergence in global affairs, which together provide the historical context for the BRI, as well as demonstrate the initiative's position within the overarching diplomatic framework of China and its accomplishments to date. Subsequently, Chapter 2 will analyse the role of the BRI in enhancing China's substantial power via trade, investment, and industrial transformation. Chapter 3 will scrutinise China's institutional and positional power as evidenced by its increasing participation and leadership within both established and emerging institutions, along with the structure of the Global Value Chain (GVC). Chapter 4 will investigate how China expands its judgmental and conceptual power through the construction and global dissemination of international discourse characterised by Chinese attributes. Chapter 5 will evaluate China's relational power, utilising indicators from the social network perspective across regional and transnational contexts. Finally, the conclusion will synthesise the key theoretical and practical findings of this discourse and briefly provide a normative assessment of the justice surrounding the growth of China's power as a result of the BRI.

Chapter 1: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Initially, the following chapter will first present a taxonomy of power based on a previous review to provide a theoretical framework for subsequent comprehensive analyses.

1.1 Literature Review

Power is one of the most important key concepts in International Relations. It is a basic question of this discipline, even for all social sciences. Since E. H. Carr devastatingly criticised idealists and founded the school of realism, scholars have studied this concept for decades. As Carr claimed, power is the core for realists, other scholars can't avoid discussing the idea of power when challenging or modifying realism and developing new theories. Thus, there exist various definitions of power, which is one of the most controversial and divisive issues in International Relations. In turn, before classifying power and analysing how BRI has grown China's power in different areas, it's necessary to elucidate the definition used herein and build a theoretical framework based on a brief review of previous classification of power.

The fact that power is an “essentially contested concept”, according to W. B. Gallie,¹ owes not only to the scholars' desire to make their own contributions but also to their awareness that power functions in various forms with various expressions, thus it's hard to be captured by a single narrow formulation. Whereas, Max Weber's classic definition has remained the starting point for many sociologists, including IR scholars. According to him, power is “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests”.² Further, four critical dimensions generate different understandings of power: Who has power? Which kinds of social relationship does

1 'Essentially Contested Concepts', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1955): 167–98.

2 Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, ed. (Berkeley London: University of California Press, 1978).

power operate within? What is the basis of power? How power is expressed? Different answers to different questions could generate different categorisations of power.

To answer the first question, we should analyse the actor's objectives and outcomes. But before identifying those who have power in a relationship, it's necessary to define the actors who participate. Traditionally, the nation-state is the main focused actor in international relations. Although some international organisations such as the UN had functioned after WWII, the periods before the 21st century were still dominated by nation-states, particularly great powers with their military might. States continue to matter and act prominently in most global issues after the end of the Cold War, but various new actors have been emerging actively in the global arena with the growing of international society and deepening cross-border connections, including international organisations, multinational enterprises, parties, groups, medias and individuals. Especially with the development of internet and international social media, internet celebrities and ordinary individuals are easier to participate in international political agendas through the low-cost accessible platforms of communication. In general, diversification of international actors leads to the shift from inter-state to trans-national or across-states in IR studies.³ And back to the subject here, diverse Chinese actors have participated in the BRI, not only China as a nation-state but also China-led and China-based IOs, CPC and other groups, public-owned and private Chinese MNEs, Chinese leaders, entrepreneurs and celebrities as individuals and even ordinary people including web users and overseas labours, etc. However, the analysis framework here is not separate or distinctive levels, like the representative three-layer framework of the individual, the state and the international system by Kenneth Waltz.⁴ As the BRI is an ongoing and progressive international project, the theoretical framework below prefers regarding China's power's growing as a process instead. It not barely influences the

3 Carmen Gebhard, 'One World, Many Actors', in *International Relations*, by Stephen McGlinchey (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2016), 7–8.

4 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

wealth or reputation of the state, but is also relevant to other organizations, companies and even individuals. This approach, in turn, emphasizes China's holistic interaction with other relevant actors, which refers to China's external actions of its government, companies, individuals, groups and organizations, and interconnects different levels and aspects of its power dynamic as opposed to explicit division of the actions of different actors.⁵

In order to identify the presence and direction of power, while all the actors from the state to individuals of China could be considered as the subjects of power, and all their gains could be considered as China's power growth, there remains a need to clarify the subject and object of power among all the countries involved in the BRI. As mentioned before, if China achieves something regardless any other's unwillingness, we could conclude China has power and other do not. Both the objectives and outcomes are significant here. This further implies that power is related not only to resources and capabilities of the powerful, but also the outcome that if those resources may achieve their objectives or not.⁶

The second question is about different levels of social relationship where the actors gain and use their power. According to Barnett and Duvall, there are two positions on this question. One emphasizes the social relations of interaction while the other is the social relations of constitution.⁷ Interaction or behavioural relation is the action of an actor toward any other, while constitution is the pre-existed structures or backgrounds producing and constituting actors as particular social beings. Through interactions, power is an attribute of an actor who use it as a resource to control the actions and/or the circumstances of actions of others; while through constitution, power has a social nature and affects the actor's social identity and social-empowered capacities and

5 Gebhard, 'One World, Many Actors', 6.

6 Susan Strange, 'Who Governs? Networks of Power in World Society', *Hitotsubashi Journal of Law and Politics Special Issue*, June 1994, 9.

7 Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, *Power in Global Governance* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 9.

practices. In general, this classification highlights the different effects of power. The effects of interactive power mainly in the actions of the objects, whereas the effects of constitutive power primarily in terms of the actors' social identities. Noteworthy, as the actions and identities of actors are mutually influence and construct each other, this distinction doesn't deny the ability of interactive power to shape actors' subjectivities and constitutive power's ability to shape their behaviour as well.⁸

Barnett and Duvall argue that the distinction between interactional power and constitutional power is similar to the classic distinction of *power over* and *power to*. Power through interaction is related to the former which is "exercising control over others". In contrast, power through constitution is linked to the latter which is "defining who are the actors and what are the capacities and practices they are socially empowered to undertake".⁹ These two ideas can be put in a different way which indicates two essentially contrasting views of power: power as *domination* and power as *empowerment*, according to Haugaard.¹⁰

The four dimensions of power by Haugaard, in addition, could relate to the third question: the sources of power.¹¹ Traditionally, power is about war forces. In the beginning, E. H. Carr divides power in IR into military power, economic power and power over opinion.¹² Morgenthau stresses the impact of political power derives from "the expectation of benefits, the fear of disadvantages, the respect or love for men or institutions".¹³ Waltz's definition of power is related to capability, that he argues "power is estimated by comparing the capabilities of a number of units"; while

8 Barnett and Duvall, 9–10; Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, 'Power in International Politics', *International Organization* 59, no. 1 (January 2005): 45–47, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818305050010>.

9 Barnett and Duvall, *Power in Global Governance*, 10.

10 'Rethinking the Four Dimensions of Power: Domination and Empowerment', *Journal of Political Power* 5, no. 1 (1 April 2012): 33, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2158379X.2012.660810>.

11 See Haugaard, 'Rethinking the Four Dimensions of Power'; Mark Haugaard, 'The Four Dimensions of Power: Conflict and Democracy', in *Essays on Evolutions in the Study of Political Power* (Routledge, 2021).

12 Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (London: Macmillan & co. ltd, 1946), 108.

13 Hans Joachim Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, ed. Kenneth W. Thompson, 6. ed (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 32.

capability includes the economic, military and other capabilities of the nation.¹⁴ In general, although earlier scholars like Carr and Morgenthau put their sight on intangible factors like opinion or morale, analysts after Waltz mainly use material indicators to measure power, with an emphasis on military forces, as “in anarchy, security is the highest end”.¹⁵

With the end of the Cold War and the emergence of the new dimension of states’ security and development, more power sources have been discovered. Thomas Christensen regards domestic political support behind policies as a resource as important as other material factors, which generate national political power.¹⁶ Joseph Nye indicates a broader range of power resources, including material resources and intangible aspects, such as interdependence as well as culture, ideology, institutions, knowledge, and agenda and structure setting, which generate “soft power” in his definition.¹⁷ Susan Strange summarises two types of power: relational power and structural power;¹⁸ the former derives in the physical and material capabilities that can be measured and estimated, while the latter emerges across linkages among global structures of security, production, finance and knowledge, and shapes frameworks within actors’ relation through the direct influence of agenda or indirect affection of structure.¹⁹

14 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Addison-Wesley Series in Political Science (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 97–98, 131.

15 Waltz, 126; Mazen Faris Rasheed, ‘The Concept of Power in International Relations’, *Pakistan Horizon* 48, no. 1 (1995): 95–99.

16 Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1996), 11–31.

17 Joseph S. Nye, ‘Soft Power’, *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (1990): 153–71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>; Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, 1st ed. (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

18 Strange, ‘Who Governs? Networks of Power in World Society’, 9–10.

19 Strange, ‘Who Governs? Networks of Power in World Society’; Christopher May, ‘Strange Fruit: Susan Strange’s Theory of Structural Power in the International Political Economy’, *Global Society* 10, no. 2 (1 May 1996): 167–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600829608443105>; Ronen Palan, ‘Susan Strange 1923-1998: A Great International Relations Theorist’, *Review of International Political Economy* 6, no. 2 (1999): 121–32.

Here comes the third question: how power is expressed? As indicated by the two different ways how Strange's structural power functions, the subjects of power achieve their goals and generate expected outcomes through different mechanisms. Barnett and Duvall conclude that this dimension concerns the specificity, or directness, of social relations through which power operates.²⁰ According to them, specific power entails a generally immediate and tangible connection between actors, and thus implies mechanistic, direct and necessary connections between actors in physical, temporal or social-positional proximity, whose closeness is directly proportional to the prominence and intelligibility of the power.²¹ On the other hand, diffuse power is indirect, detached and mediated, or works at a distance, whether physical, temporal or social; this kind of power often operates in institutions.²²

Thus, there's no doubt that a categorisation of power could answer not only one of the four questions above. These questions are the four bases for the classification of power, which are the subjects, the levels, the resources and the approaches. The answers to each do not conflict with each other and can be combined to produce additional categorisation criteria. In other words, a taxonomy of power can be generated from the combination of two or more different dimensions. In the review above, Strange's division of relational and structural power is regarded as an answer to the sources of power. But it can also be viewed as different approaches through which power operates, that relational power is exercised mainly by direct coercion or bribery, and structural power could be exercised indirectly by influencing the structure to settle outcomes.²³ Barnett and Duval further develop a fourfold taxonomy of power based on the dimensions of level and approach, and elaborate them with the division of their resources:

Compulsory power exists in the direct control by one actor over the conditions of existence and/or the actions of another. Institutional power

20 Barnett and Duvall, *Power in Global Governance*, 11.

21 Barnett and Duvall, 11.

22 Barnett and Duvall, 12.

23 Strange, 'Who Governs? Networks of Power in World Society', 9–10.

exists in actors' indirect control over the conditions of action of socially distant others. Structural power operates as the constitutive relations of a direct and specific, hence mutually constituting, kind. And productive power works through diffuse constitutive relations to produce the situated subjectivities of actors.²⁴

To sum up, the four dimensions of power could be concluded as the subjects, the levels, the resources and the approaches. When analysing power, one of the discipline's most important but complicated conceptions, IR scholars have generated various taxonomies based on the different choices of one or more of the four dimensions – power belongs to state or non-state actors, influences interaction or constitution, derives from material sources or intangible sources, and/or operates through direct or diffuse approaches. Table 1.1 below summarises these classifications. With the categorisation of power, there will be a clear criterion for classification and generalisation when discovering China's growing power through the BRI, allowing for a more accurate and comprehensive analysis of the full range of impacts of the initiative.

24 Barnett and Duvall, *Power in Global Governance*, 12.

Dimension	Classification	Explanation	Representation
Subject (Who)	State only	Nation States are the only subjects of power	Morgenthau, Waltz
	State and non-state	Other actors, including IOs, MNEs, individuals and other political entities are also subjects of power	Gebhard
Level (Where)	Interaction	Actors use <i>power over</i> others to control their actions in the social relation of interaction	Barnett & Duvall
	Constitution	Actors use <i>power to</i> others to affect their identities and social-empowered capacities in the social relation of constitution	Barnett & Duvall
Source (What)	Material	Power derives from material resources, such as military and economy	Waltz
	Intangible	Power derives from intangible resources, such as culture, morale, and knowledge	Nye, Christensen, Strange
Approach (How)	Direct	Power operates through specific, tangible, immediate, necessary and proximate connections between actors	Barnett & Duvall
	Diffuse	Power operates through indirect, detached and mediated relations at a distance with actors	Nye, Strange

Table 1.1 The Dimensions of Power Classification

1.2 Theoretical Framework

Although there have already been a plenty of taxonomies of power, but a new but reasonable classification is still useful when analysing novel phenomenon in new eras. As Strange points out, traditional perspective may be old-fashioned and myopic and a more broadly based may be worth developing and being adopted.²⁵ Comparing with past decades, considering several current regional conflicts, the topics of war and peace are still an indispensable part of IR studies, but cooperation and development has become the primary concerns of some developing countries, including China. Needless to say, the necessity and urgency of global governance is emerging. In addition, even the confrontation between major states, namely the US and China, is getting fiercer after Washington regarded Beijing as “strategic competitor” (together with Moscow) or even “the only competitor”,²⁶ such Sino-US competition is completely different in character with previous competitions among major states or between an established power and a rising power. Although geopolitical contest is still a significant aspect, the competition is mainly centred on economy, ideology, technology and international influence rather than military confrontation due to the existence of nuclear weapons. Last, there’s no doubt that while temporary IR theories and studies are mostly stem from Western practices since the Westphalian System, China has developed its unique model of mindset and logics of action combining its long history, principles of Marxism and practices of the Party and the people since modern times. Therefore, understanding China’s power dynamic through traditional theories is outdated and one-sided.

Thus, based on previous literature, particularly Strange’s taxonomy of power, a new classification of power is developed below and adopted later in analysis. In order

²⁵ Strange, ‘Who Governs? Networks of Power in World Society’, 5.

²⁶ The White House, ‘National Security Strategy of the United States of America’, Historical Office of the Secretary of Defense, December 2017, 45–47, <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/NSS2017.pdf?ver=CnFwURrw09pJ0q5EogFpwg%3d%3d>; The White House, ‘National Security Strategy’, Archived Biden White House Website, 22 October 2022, 23–25, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

to analyse an initiative concerned on development and global governance, this classification is inspired mostly by Strange's theory of power in IPE and Barnett and Duvall's theory of power in global governance. Table 1.2 represents different conceptual type and their location in the four dimensions above. The classification here adopts a mixed approach. In other words, each type of power has at least an implicit view of the four dimensions of power, and none simply reflects one perspective entirely to the neglect of others.

Classification	Who	Where	What	How
Substantial Power	State (and non-state)	Interaction	Material	Direct
Judgemental power	State and non-state	Interaction	Intangible	Direct
Institutional power	State and non-state	Interaction	Intangible	Diffuse
Positional power	State and non-state	Constitution	Intangible	Direct
Conceptual power	State and non-state	Constitution	Intangible	Diffuse
Relational power	State and non-state	Process of social relations	Intangible	Diffuse

Table 1.2 The Classification of Power

The first type of power derives from a traditional understanding of power, that the state could use their material strength to shape circumstance or control the actions of another directly. The subject here is extended, that not only states but also other kinds of international agents could possess and exercise this kind of power. For example, international financial institutions could influence the development policies and

priorities of target countries through lending money to members in need.²⁷ The commercial activities of MNE could also shape state's economic policies and even intervene state's political process.²⁸ In turn, the sources of this power aren't limited in territory, population, natural resources and military forces which generally (but not definitely) specific to state, but also include capacities of trade, productivity, investment, constructure and technology. Thus, it suggests that this kind of power is exercise through direct influence on other's actions, by threaten against the violation or reward for the compliance.

The second type of power operates also on interactional level through direct approach but derives from intangible sources. Judgemental power is the power to evaluate or judge actor's actions based on international norms, laws, customs or morals. Although there's no judicial courts in international society as those in domestic legal system, actors' evaluations and judgements could still constrain somehow other's actions. These evaluations are based on constitutive standards like common knowledge and moral structure but exist and operate on interactional level themselves as a set of discursive practices. Except actors' critiques, declarations and announcements, which may be more influential in the era of social media and public opinion,²⁹ several international judicial bodies exercise this kind of power more notably, even they lack judiciary comparing to domestic courts on internal affairs. For example, the actions of EU and its members was judged as invalid and refused directly by ECJ in the case of

²⁷ Jan Klabbers, *An Introduction to International Organizations Law*, 4th ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 118, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108899789>.

²⁸ Jeffrey A. Hart and Joan Edelman Spero, *The Politics of International Economic Relations*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 109–19, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315006154>.

²⁹ Kimberly Hutchings, 'The Possibility of Judgement: Moralizing and Theorizing in International Relations', *Review of International Studies* 18, no. 1 (1992): 51–62; Naomi Head, 'Bringing Reflective Judgement into International Relations: Exploring the Rwandan Genocide', *Journal of Global Ethics* 6, no. 2 (1 August 2010): 191–204, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2010.494365>.

Kadi and Al Barakaat v Council and Commission based on *jus cogens* and customs of protection of human rights.³⁰

The following three types of power are relevant to Strange's structural power, while the former is related to her relational power. The structural aspect of international relation is concluded as the structures of the global political economy or international system according to Strange, within which other states, political institutions, economic enterprises and individual must operate, and which provides a framework for these actors to decide their roles, understand the elements of international decisions and regulate their relations.³¹ In her opinion, there exist four major separate but interrelated global structures: structure of security controlling over people from violence; structure of production goods and services; structure of finance and credit by which it is possible to acquire purchasing power without having either to work or trade for it; structure of knowledge whether technical, religious or leadership in ideas.³²

However, her categorisation of international structure fails to encapsulate new phenomenon and the level where Strange's structural power functions is a bit blur. First, with the development of new technologies and internet, the technological gaps among countries are widening, and the public opinion is more accessible and influential through the rapid-developing social media. Thus, the last aspect of Strange's structures should be modified as the structure of knowledge, in which actors distribute technology, education and culture, and the structure of discourse, in which actors strive for more attention and compete for whose understanding is right and thus generating ontological meaning. Second, her level of power suggests more than the power to set agenda of discussion or to design the international regime of rules and customs, but also to influence the ideas and even ideology of the objects who would believe the validity of

³⁰ Yassin Abdullah Kadi and Al Barakaat International Foundation v Council of the European Union and Commission of the European Communities, No. Joined cases C-402/05 P and C-415/05 P (ECJ 3 September 2008).

³¹ Susan Strange, 'The Legend of Lost Hegemony', *International Relations* 1987, no. 84 (1987): 29, https://doi.org/10.11375/kokusaiseiji1957.84_L17; Palan, 'Susan Strange 1923-1998', 128.

³² Strange, 'The Legend of Lost Hegemony', 29–30.

the subject's value-judgments.³³ According to our dimension above, this refers to both social relation of interaction and constitution.

Thus, the third type of power is clarified as institutional power. International institutions are the product of international structures and are structural elements of international societies.³⁴ Although such institutions could form actors' identity as norms or values and have constitutive nature, actors use this type of power to guide or constrain other's actions and their circumstance through the rules and procedures of these institutions.³⁵ The capacity of the actor to control or dominate in an institution may derives from its leading position in substantive fields like economy or technology, but the institution is the platform where and the necessary intermediary through which these material resources operate. In other words, institutional power is diffuse rather than direct, and intangible rather than material in nature. As mentioned above, the ability to influence the agenda-setting process is one of the mechanisms of institutional power, through which the actor could manage other's focus of policies and actions, limit other's choices and add or omit issues into decision.³⁶ The institution itself as a system of exchange, dependence and interdependence generates other possible mechanisms.³⁷ In addition, actors' power operates when they create and change the principles and rules of the institutions, and their ability to use the institutions also affects their actions and rewards.³⁸ Needless to say, some actors may be more powerful in some institutions

³³ Strange, 29; Strange, 'Who Governs? Networks of Power in World Society', 10.

³⁴ Christian Reus-Smit, 'The Constitutional Structure of International Society and the Nature of Fundamental Institutions', *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (October 1997): 555, <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550456>; Scott Cooper et al., 'Yielding Sovereignty to International Institutions: Bringing System Structure Back In1', *International Studies Review* 10, no. 3 (1 September 2008): 503, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2486.2008.00802.x>.

³⁵ Barnett and Duvall, *Power in Global Governance*, 15.

³⁶ Stephen D. Krasner, *Structural Conflict : The Third World against Global Liberalism* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1985), <http://archive.org/details/structuralconfli00kras>.

³⁷ David A. Baldwin, 'Interdependence and Power: A Conceptual Analysis', *International Organization* 34, no. 4 (1980): 471–506; Dale C. Copeland, 'Economic Interdependence and War: A Theory of Trade Expectations', *International Security* 20, no. 4 (1 April 1996): 5–41, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.20.4.5>; Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence*, 4th ed., Longman Classics in Political Science (Glenview: Pearson, 2012).

³⁸ Stephen D. Krasner, 'Global Communications and National Power: Life on the Pareto Frontier', *World Politics* 43, no. 3 (1991): 336–66, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010398>.

than others, for example the veto power of permanent members of UNSC and differentiated voting power of members in IMF decided by their quotas. Such advantages may have impacts on relevant decisions, by which actors are supposed to be bound.

Whereas institutional power is actor's indirect control of other's actions, the next two kinds concern the constitutive structure of actors and generate influence on other's identities. More precisely, while institutional power influences or constrains actors' actions with agendas, rules or decisions, these two types focus how actors' capacities, identities, ideas, interests and preferences, which underlie and dispose actions, are modified. Thus, they operate on the constitutive level, but as Barnett and Duvall elucidate, there are still differences in approaches.

First, positional power refers to that the position or the status of actors in a structure would have direct influence on its and other's actions. The capacities, subjectivities and interests of actors are directly shaped by the social positions or status that they occupy.³⁹ Such position has both substantive and abstract connotations and mechanism. On the one hand, the position in some structures would lead to different divisions of labour with different capacities and advantages, typically in international production structure or the structure of global capitalism which determines actors' capacities and resources.⁴⁰ On the other hand, as an recognition requiring social validation, status relates to a distinctive identity and would generate influence on others' perceptions and some explicit or tacit disparities and advantages for actors.⁴¹

Second, conceptual power, the power to create and modify international knowledge, ideas and concepts, refers to more diffuse approaches and mechanisms. It

³⁹ Barnett and Duvall, *Power in Global Governance*, 18.

⁴⁰ Robert W. Cox, 'Multilateralism and World Order', *Review of International Studies* 18, no. 2 (1992): 161–80.

⁴¹ Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, 'Status Seekers : Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy', *International Security* 34, no. 4 (2010): 63–95; Ziyuan Wang, 'The Political Logic of Status Competition: Leaders, Status Tradeoffs, and Beijing's Vietnam Policy, 1949–1965', *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 14, no. 4 (31 December 2021): 554–86.

relates more to Strange's structure of knowledge, whereas the positional power is more relevant to the structure of security, production and finance. Thus, its constitutive impacts are mainly felt in actors' identities, while the former could be also found in capacities realm. The structure of knowledge and discourses produces meanings, decides righteous and situate practices. In turn, it's important to note that conceptual power is relevant to the judgemental power above, but it operates on a more fundamental and background level. This kind of power works by making certain structural acts appear reasonable as natural order and makes others willingly reproduce certain reasonable and beneficial structures.⁴² Further, it could create some kind of truth and lead to a moral imperative of actions that transcends consequentialist calculations.⁴³ Briefly, at the risk of gross simplification, conceptual power labels actors and issues and impact actors' identity, preference, and actions in turn. For example, some states are identified as "autocratic" country which would impede their cooperation with "democracies". The label of "non-European" and "outsider" of some EU neighbours leads to fierce debate and final decision on EU enlargement.⁴⁴ And similarly, whether an issue is of security decides whether it could be discussed in UNSC and generates following actions.⁴⁵

The last type of power derives from a Chinese perspective of international relations, or the so-called Chinese School. Stem from traditional Confucious philosophy, Chinese scholars argue that international society is a whole network of interrelatedness being composed of continuous events and ongoing relations (*guanxi*), and thus the identities of actors, who only act within the relational network as actors-in-relations, are shaped by different social relations and produced by processes, which are defined

⁴² Haugaard, 'Rethinking the Four Dimensions of Power', 18–22.

⁴³ Haugaard, 23.

⁴⁴ Karen Smith, 'The Outsiders: The European Neighbourhood Policy', *International Affairs* 81, no. 4 (1 July 2005): 757–73, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2005.00483.x>; Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, 'Geostrategies of the European Neighbourhood Policy', *European Journal of International Relations* 14, no. 3 (1 September 2008): 519–51, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066108092311>.

⁴⁵ Ole Wæver, 'Securitization and Desecuritization', in *On Security*, by Ronnie D. Lipschutz (Columbia: Columbia Univ Pr, 1995).

in terms of relations in motion.⁴⁶ In turn, actors base their behaviours on the logic of relationality, that an actor tends to make decisions according to the degree of intimacy and importance of its relationships to others with the totality of its concentric relational circles as the context, of which the actor is at the centre and have different degrees of intimacy with who locates on different layer of circle. Such relational context shapes and is shaped by, and constrains and is constrained by actors therein.⁴⁷ Indeed, this perspective echoes not only Chinese philosophy. Some Western sociologists have also developed arguments that examine how society is shaped by the network of interactions and relations, and regard relations as the trajectories of interactions.⁴⁸

Therefore, relational power indicates that power derives from relations, or simply, relations are power. According to the theory above, the level of relational power is not basic interaction nor constitution, but the process social relation that influences both actor's actions and identities. An actor is powerful if it has developed more and larger relational circles with more intimate and important others which generating more social prestige.⁴⁹ More specifically, the bases of relational power are the degree, methods and frequency of connectivity and interaction in the relational network, and are produced in continuous processes.⁵⁰ Although these sources are undoubtedly intangible and somehow abstract, scholars further develop several indicators to measure such power inspired by Social Network Analysis (SNA), which indicates its mechanism. Generally, through direct bilateral relations generating the capacity for resources and influence, indirect linkages reaching and influencing all the global actors and the entire network,

⁴⁶ Yaqing Qin, 'A Relational Theory of World Politics', *International Studies Review* 18, no. 1 (1 March 2016): 35–37, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viv031>.

⁴⁷ Qin, 37–38.

⁴⁸ Nick Crossley, *Towards Relational Sociology* (London: Routledge, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203887066>.

⁴⁹ Qin, 'A Relational Theory of World Politics', 41–42.

⁵⁰ Jun Ma, 'Power Issue in International Relations: From the Perspective of the Relational View of Power', *The Journal of International Studies*, no. 4 (2007): 146–56; Xun Pang and Jiayun Quan, 'Return to Relational Context of Power: Network Analysis and Measurement of National Social Power', *World Economics and Politics*, no. 6 (2015): 41–44; He Dong, 'Relations and Power: ASEAN Centrality in the Network Perspective', *World Economics and Politics*, no. 8 (2017): 88–105; Qiqian Li, 'Relational Power, Preventative Action and Power Transition', *Journal of Contemporary Asia-Pacific Studies*, no. 3 (2023): 4–36, 166.

controlling flows of resources and information as a key intermediary, and/or derivate influence through linkage to core nodes, actors could gain different kinds of relational power.⁵¹ In short, relational power operates diffusely through how actors manage and manipulate their relational circles and network to their advantage.⁵²

In general, after reviewing classical taxonomy of power, based on the synthesization of power theory of IPE, global governance and Chinese perspective, this chapter establish a multidimensional classification of power to address the complexities of contemporary world and the specific of China's practices. The proposed classification categorizes power into six types defined by four dimensions: substantial, judgemental, institutional, positional, conceptual and relational. All of these could be operated by states or non-state actors, which is in accordance with the perspective argued above that regards diverse actors of China as a whole while analysing China's foreign interaction. Whereas each type locates differently on other dimensions. Consequently, this framework not only bridges different dimensions of power but also provides a versatile tool to analyse the comprehensive influence of BRI with the consideration of China's uniqueness to the West. Before going into empirical analysis, next chapter will first review previous China's foreign policies from the perspective of their power consequence to form a general understanding of China's preferences and verify the utility of the perspective. Thereafter, it will briefly introduce the BRI and its fruits as a preparation for case studies.

⁵¹ In SNA, actors are called "nodes" or "vertices" and their relations are defined as "ties" or "edge". The indicators to measure these relations and network are called "network centrality", including degree centrality, closeness centrality, betweenness centrality and eigenvector centrality. IR scholars match them to four kinds of relational power including direct power, reaching power, betweenness power and club power, whose meanings are summarized here. See Pang and Quan, 'Return to Relational Context of Powe', 42–63; Li, 'Relational Power, Preventative Action and Power Transition', 12–14.

⁵² Qin, 'A Relational Theory of World Politics', 42.

Chapter 2: China's Foreign Policy and the BRI

2.1 China's Previous Foreign Policy from the Perspective of Power

Although China avoids using the concept of power officially to show its moderateness, scholars have discussed its emerging power for years, especially after China became the world's second-largest economy. Whereas China's power dynamic is not only related to its economic development but also influenced by its foreign policies and other processes. In turn, the perspective of power is a significant approach to reviewing China's previous foreign policies, as the literature has done.

Several pieces of literature focus on the situations when China participated in the Cold War as a significant regional power and how its policies affected its power dynamics during those ages. As mentioned above, some specific classifications of power are used in these studies. For instance, Christensen uses his idea of national political power, which has been referred to before, when studying China's strategy in Sino-American conflicts during the 1950s. In his later chapter, he argues that China's firm and proactive foreign policies towards the US and reunification actions towards the authority in Taiwan during the Second Cross-Strait Crisis, including shelling Jinmen and skirmishing against the US and Taiwan Authority, had increased China's power, in particular its national political power. According to him, while China's grand strategy, namely the Great Leap Forward, was facing hurdles, its proactive reunification signals, firm attitudes towards imperialism and high-profile but manageable military operations against foreign enemies stirred up domestic opinion, leadership unity and public emotions.⁵³ Thus, China's ability to mobilize the domestic public and resources behind its strategy is rising, which means the growth of China's national political power, according to Christensen's definition.⁵⁴ In general, although he aims to build a model to study foreign policy, Christensen comprehensively analyses the objectives and

53 Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*, 194–241.

54 Christensen, 11.

outcomes of China's policy as well as its power growth afterwards with his categorisation of power. His conclusion also raises further concerns about the intangible power of China. However, as the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union was still the dominant structure half of a century after WWII, IR scholars put few sights on China's power dynamic at that time, although much Chinese literature defines China's relation with the two superpowers as the "Great Triangle"(大三角). But this definition also reflects China's power growth as it could influence the policies and behaviours of the two superpowers, neglect or change their previous willingness, for instance, America's détente and engaging with China, and the changing of its attitudes on the Taiwan question.⁵⁵

After the collapse of the USSR, the transition of power has been a key perspective in the discussion of China's power growth. Introduced by A. F. K. Organski, this theory challenges the balance of power perspective by suggesting that the distribution of power determines the stability of the international order, and that the risk of war increases when a rising power dissatisfied with the existing order approaches power parity with a dominant one. With its Reform and Opening-up Policy, China has achieved rapid economic growth since the 1980s and has been the second-largest economy in the world since 2010. This economic success has led to China's comprehensive development and the growth of its military power through increased military spending and technology enhancements, which raises concerns about the China threat. Some scholars emphasise China's intangible power and suggest that its international influence could rival that of

55 The Great Triangle or "the Strategic Triangle" (战略三角) is a widely used definition in China's study of the history of international relations. Several western literature about that mainly uses the term of "the Great Power Triangle", but some believe this is used to describe the relationship among the US, USSR and Japan. See G. W. Choudhury, 'The Great Powers Triangle', *Worldview* 21, no. 5 (May 1978): 46–49, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0084255900030527>; Gerald Segal, 'China and the Great Power Triangle', *The China Quarterly* 83 (September 1980): 490–509, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741000012935>; Chao Fan, 'Confrontational Diplomacy, Strategic Framework Shift and the Formation of the Great Triangle between China, the United States and the Soviet Union: Centred on the Negotiation of U.S.–PRC Joint Communique, August 17, 1982', *Foreign Affairs Review*, no. 5 (2016): 55–80, <https://doi.org/10.13569/j.cnki.far.2016.05.055>; Xiumin He, 'Changes in the Basis and Implications of the Strategic Triangle between China, the United States, and the Soviet Union', *World Economics and Politics*, no. 2 (1990).

the US as it becomes more confident and active, projects a benign national image, promotes an alternative successful development model, and develops more international partnerships.

On the contrary, however, some argue that China's emergence has changed the global power structure but will lead to cooperation and peace rather than war and disorder.⁵⁶ In the first decades of the 21st century, China implemented open and friendly foreign policies and took modest actions under the guidance of its development path of peaceful rise. Xin Li and Verner Worm analyse how China's peaceful rise builds its power, particularly in terms of soft power. They argue that China's soft power growth is relevant to six fields of resources: promoting Chinese culture overseas, continuing reform and supporting international political values, offering a new successful development model, participating actively in international institutions, improving international image as a responsible great nation and increasing global economic temptation.⁵⁷

To sum it up, pieces of literature have studied China's power growth since the last century. Whether the Thucydides Trap is destiny or not, there's no doubt that China's power has increased comprehensively in the past few decades. Some of the literature focuses on how China's previous foreign policies have enhanced its power in different dimensions. However, as Li and Worm imply in their article, China's strategy in the last decade was inadequate, and a new overall foreign policy is still needed to mobilise its resources fully and harmonise different aspects of its power. Meanwhile, the international circumstances and the external environment for China's development have changed in recent years, driven by the shift of the international power structure and emerging global challenges.

56 Yue Chen, "Chinese Threat" and China's Peaceful Rising: An Interpretation Based on Level-of-Analysis', *Foreign Affairs Review*, no. 3 (2005): 93–99; Richard Rosecrance, 'Power and International Relations: The Rise of China and Its Effects', *International Studies Perspectives* 7, no. 1 (1 February 2006): 31–35, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1528-3577.2006.00227.x>.

57 Xin Li and Verner Worm, 'Building China's Soft Power for a Peaceful Rise', *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 16, no. 1 (1 March 2011): 69–89, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-010-9130-2>.

2.2 Contemporary China's Foreign Policy and the BRI

In this context, President Xi Jinping announced the BRI in 2013, which has been one of China's most essential practices in achieving its foreign policy purposes, namely, achieving the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, maintaining world peace, promoting common development and, ultimately, building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind, according to a policy paper titled with *China's Foreign Policy*, released by the MFA of the PRC in 2024.⁵⁸

The rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has been regarded as the greatest dream of the Chinese people since the beginning of modern times, which is also called the Chinese Dream. In an official guidebook, it is explained as a dream of prosperity, national renewal and happiness, and is fundamentally a dream of the people yearning for a better life and a brighter future.⁵⁹ The rejuvenation is a dream of peace, development, cooperation and prosperity for all, and thus also benefits the rest of the world.

Hence, it's related to other goals aiming world's peace and development, and more importantly, building a Community with a Shared Future. It represents China's preferences on its external environment and responsibility as a major country. It requires countries working together to create a peaceful, secure, prosperous, inclusive and beautiful world on the one hand, and promoting a new model of international relations based on mutual respect, fairness, justice, and mutually beneficial cooperation on the other. In his speech at the general debate of the 70th session of the UNGA, President Xi defined the connotation of the Community as follows:

We should build partnerships in which countries treat each other as equals, engage in mutual consultation and show mutual understanding.
We should create a security architecture featuring fairness, justice, joint contribution and shared benefits.

⁵⁸ MFA, 'China's Foreign Policy', 28 March 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zcwj_674915/200608/t20060824_9868937.shtml, original in Chinese, translated by the author.

⁵⁹ CIPG and CATL, *Keywords to Understand China*, trans. Qingyue Han, Mingqiang Xu, and Lijian Cai, First edition (Beijing: New World Press, 2016), 3.

We should promote open, innovative and inclusive development that benefits all.

We should increase inter-civilisation exchanges to promote harmony, inclusiveness and respect for differences.

We should build an ecosystem that puts Mother Nature and green development first.⁶⁰

To achieve these goals, since 2018, China has formulated its grand foreign strategy based on Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy (XJTD). As the guidance of contemporary China's external actions derived from the refinement and summary of its past practices, XJTD consists of 10 persistent efforts as an overall framework and core principle, including the leadership, objectives, ideology, practices, preferences and methodology.

⁶⁰ Xi Jinping, 'Working Together to Forge a New Partnership of Win-Win Cooperation and Create a Community of Shared Future for Mankind', China Daily, 28 September 2015, <https://language.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201509/30/WS5b209f72a31001b825720968.html>.

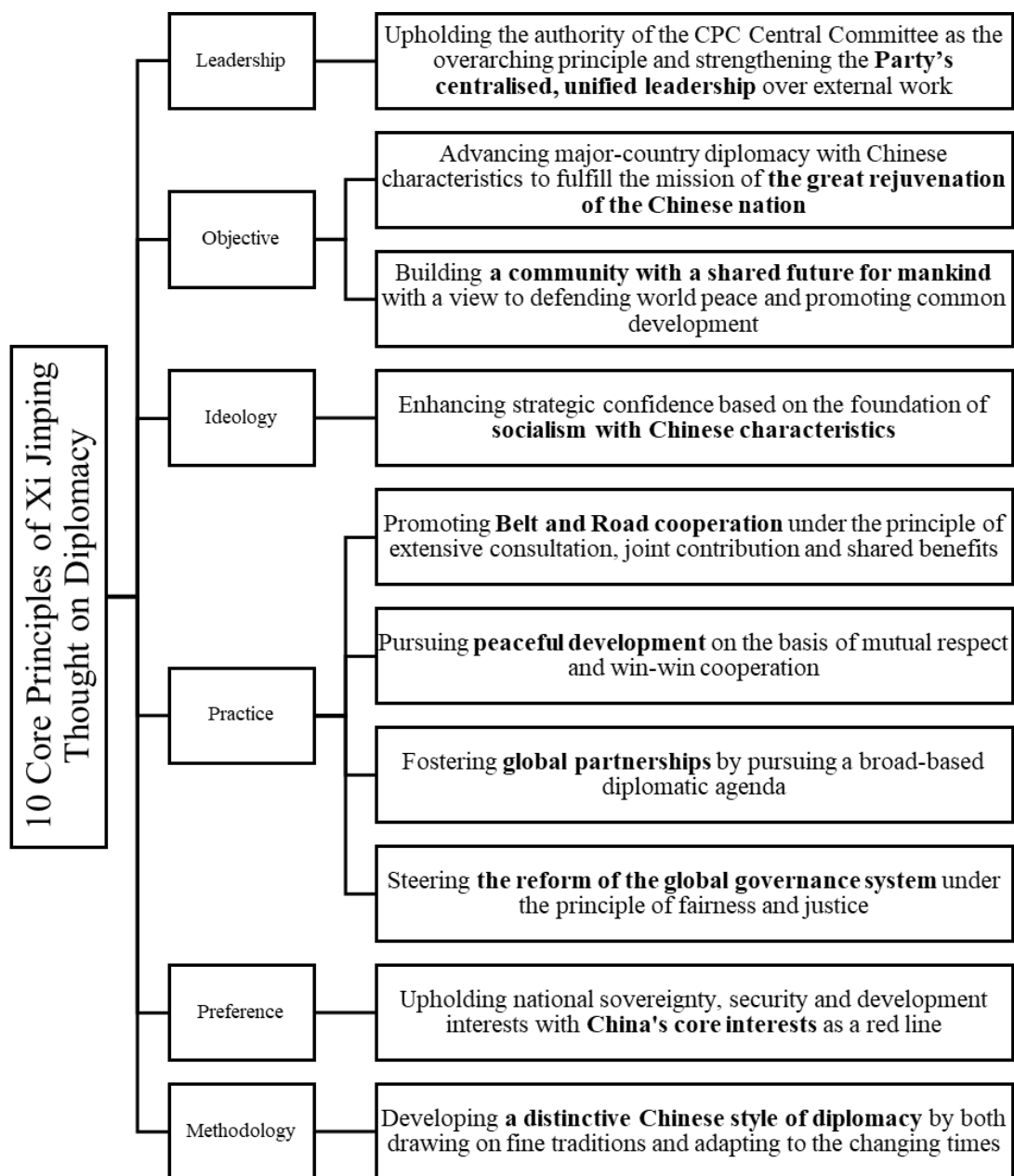


Figure 2.1 Ten Core Principles of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy⁶¹

It is evident that the BRI constitutes a pivotal element of contemporary Chinese foreign policy and is regarded as the primary practice to persist in the future, as asserted by the XJTD. As articulated by Yang Jiechi, the former member of the Political Bureau and Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the CPC Central

⁶¹ Qiushi, 'Ten Core Principles of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy', Website of CPC Central Committee Bimonthly, 16 July 2021, http://en.qstheory.cn/2021-07/16/c_643502.htm, the category is made by the author.

Committee, the promotion of the BRI epitomises the overarching framework for China's opening-up and international cooperation, which is anticipated to persist for a considerable duration in the future. Furthermore, it serves as a crucial platform for the realisation of the concept of a community with a shared future.⁶² In a prior publication, summarising the achievements of China's diplomacy during Xi's first term before the 19th National Congress of the CPC, Yang identified the promotion of the BRI as the second of four historic achievements that have contributed to the peaceful development of both China and the global community.⁶³ Thus, the BRI has ascended to become one of the foremost agendas, foundational platforms, and essential focal points of China's foreign endeavours, particularly within the realms of opening-up, exchanges, international cooperation, and global governance.

Therefore, the BRI is not only pivotal in understanding China's foreign actions and its rise as a major power but is expected to remain a significant perspective in this regard. Undoubtedly, this high-level and comprehensive cooperative initiative will exert influence over China's power dynamics across various dimensions and alter the global distribution of power, even if such a shift is not the primary objective of China. Prior to analysing how the BRI contributes to China's power dynamics, the subsequent section will provide a brief overview of the implementation of the BRI over the past decades.

2.3 The Review of BRI

The Belt and Road Initiative, short for China's proposal to build a Silk Road Economic Belt and a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road in cooperation with related countries, was unveiled by Chinese President Xi Jinping during his visits to Central and Southeast Asia in 2013. It stems from ancient practices of communication between China and foreign countries. The Silk Road first emerged more than 2100 years ago

⁶² Jiechi Yang, 'Following the Guidance of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy to Advance Diplomatic Work in the New Era', *Qiushi*, 1 August 2018.

⁶³ Yang.

during the Han Dynasty after China's envoy Zhang Qian (164-114 BC) twice visited Central Asia. It became a bridge between East and West and opening a door to friendly engagement between different civilizations for two millennia. Similarly, formed during the Qin and Han Dynasties (221 BC – AD 220), the Maritime Silk Road has always played an important role in economic and cultural exchanges and integration between East and West.⁶⁴

The white paper entitled *Joining Hands to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt and a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road – Vision and Actions* issued jointly by NDRC, MFA and MOCOM of China with the authorization of the State Council in 2015 explains the background, principles, objectives and areas and mechanisms for cooperation of the BRI. According to the document, the initiative needs joint efforts through consultation to bring benefits to all. It emphasizes five principles for implementing the initiative. First, it is in line with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter and upholds the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Second, it is open for cooperation. Third, it is harmonious and inclusive, advocating tolerance and respects among civilizations and nations. Fourth, it follows market operation and international norms, letting the governments perform their due functions while insisting the decisive role of the market. Fifth, it seeks mutual benefit and accommodates the concerns of all.⁶⁵

The content of the initiative focuses on promoting policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructure and facilities, unimpeded trade, financial integration and closer people-to-people ties through a consultative process and joint efforts, with the goal of bringing benefits to all. Through this five-pronged approach and major goals of connectivity, the initiative aims to build a community of shared interests, responsibility

⁶⁴ CIPG, ACCWS, and CATL, *Keywords to Understand China: The Belt and Road Initiative* (Beijing: New World Press, 2019), 6–9.

⁶⁵ Linggui Wang, Jinbo Wang, and Laihui Xie, eds., *A Brief Introduction to the Belt and Road Initiative*, trans. Feng Chen and Guohua Chang (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2019), 48–49, <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/91462644-a-brief-introduction-to-the-belt-and-road-initiative>; NDRC, MFA, and MOFCOM, 'Joining Hands to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt and a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road – Vision and Actions', *People's Daily*, 29 March 2015.

and future.⁶⁶ In addition, facing the increasingly volatile international situation and the arising global issues in some new frontiers, especially pandemic, artificial intelligence and climate change, the BRI also focuses on building the Silk Road to Green Development, the Silk Road to Health Cooperation, the Silk Road to Innovation and the Silk Road to Peace with countries concerned as new driven forces of cooperation.⁶⁷

The main framework of the initiative is concluded as “six corridors, six roads, multiple countries and multiple ports” in China’s *14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) for National Economic and Social Development*, the nation’s most important action plan and blueprint clarifying its strategic intentions and priorities for the period.⁶⁸ The six corridors refer to six international cooperation economic corridors, including the China-Mongolia-Russia, New Eurasian Land Bridge, China-Central Asia-West Asia, China-Indochina Peninsula, China-Pakistan and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar economic corridors. The six roads refer to key contents of infrastructure connectivity including railway, highway, shipping, aviation, pipeline and space comprehensive information network. Multiple countries mean a group of countries that work with China at early stage, and multiple ports refers to a number of cooperation ports that guarantee the security and smooth operation of major maritime transport routes.⁶⁹

Covering primarily Asia and Central and Eastern Europe, it reflects a convergence of interests and an increasing need for regional and global cooperation and has been enthusiastic responded by countries along the proposed Belt and Road. It has driven new advances in China’s opening up. On Oct. 10, 2023, China’s State Council Information Office released a whit paper titled *The Belt Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of*

⁶⁶ CIPG, ACCWS, and CATL, *Keywords to Understand China: The Belt and Road Initiative*, 2-5+22-23.

⁶⁷ Wang, Wang, and Xie, *A Brief Introduction to the Belt and Road Initiative*, 49.

⁶⁸ China SCIO, ‘The Outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) for National Economic and Social Development and Vision 2035 of the People’s Republic of China’, trans. ACCWS, Translation and Publication Portal for Chinese Key Terms and Expressions, 4 August 2021, http://tpckte.org.cn/2021-08/04/content_77671903.html.

⁶⁹ Wang, Wang, and Xie, *A Brief Introduction to the Belt and Road Initiative*, 49.

the Global Community of Shared Future presenting the achievements of the initiative during the past decade.⁷⁰

Under the goal of policy coordination, first, the strategy and coordination of the BRI had expanded in scope at global, regional and bilateral level, and had signed more than 200 BRI cooperation agreements with more than 150 countries and 30 IOs. Second, long-term multilevel mechanisms for policy coordination between heads of state, governments and enterprises had been largely in place, represented by several participatory and fruitful BRF hosted by China. Third, multilateral cooperation had been driving forward by new dialogue and cooperation mechanisms in various domains under the BRI framework and existed major platforms such as China-ASEAN (10+1) Cooperation. Fourth, rules and standards had been coordinated intergovernmental that China had signed over 100 standardization documents with foreign bodies and set up information platform for relative countries.

Under the goal of connectivity of infrastructure, first, the construction of economic corridors and international routes has made substantial progress along different corridors including the China-Laos Railway that connecting China and the Hungary-Serbia Railway benefits other regions. Second, maritime connectivity had steadily improved with the operation of new ports and the expand of cargo routes titled with the Silk Road Maritime, China's international cargo brand, to over 110 ports. Third, the aviation routes had expanded rapidly as well that China had signed bilateral air transport agreements with over 100 partners, participated in civil aviation infrastructure cooperation and contributed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fourth, international inter-modality transport channels had developed stably, particularly the CR Express reaching more than 200 Eurasian cities.

⁷⁰ China SCIO, 'The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future', trans. CATL, Bilingual Official Document, accessed 11 April 2025, http://www.catl.org.cn/2024-01/04/content_116919823.html.

As for trade and investment, first, their scale had expanded steadily, leading to the US\$19.1 trillion cumulative value of imports and exports in the decade between China and BRI partners. Second, the liberalization and facilitation of trade and investment had improved, represented by 21 FTAs between China and partners and the RCEP complementing with the BRI. Third, the role of platforms had been growing, especially the annual CIIE with a cumulative intended turnover of nearly US\$350 billion. Fourth, industrial cooperation had deepened in various traditional and emerging industries, for example agreements on industrial capacity cooperation with more than 40 countries had been signed and over 70 overseas industrial parks had been built cooperatively.

In term of financial integration, first, the financial cooperation mechanisms had matured, promoted by CDB, the globalisation of Chinese-funded banks and the internationalization of RMB through over 20 bilateral currency swap agreements. Second, the channels and platforms for investment and financing had expanded, with the participation in existing financing agreements, establishment of international funds and the foundation of SRF and AIIB and their total investment of about US\$22 billion and US\$43.6 billion. Third, innovative investment and financing methods had explored, by the growing RMB-denominated bonds with a total issues value over RMB200 billion. Fourth, debt sustainability had continued to improve based on *Guiding Principles on Financing the Development of the Belt and Road* and *Debt Sustainability Framework for Participating Countries of the BRI* issued by partners.

On the topic of people-to-people ties, first, cooperation on culture and tourism was rich, that China had signed cooperation documents with 144 BRI partners in the decade, created cooperation platforms like the Silk Road International Museum Alliance and launched various cultural events. Second, educational exchanges and cooperation was profound, supported by agreements on the mutual recognition of higher education degrees with 45 partners, the Silk Road Program under the CGS and cooperation program including over 300 Confucius Institutes. Third, media and think tank cooperation was fruitful, marked by the mechanisms as the Media Cooperation Forum

on Belt and Road, the Belt and Road News Network and the Advisory Council of the BRF, with the participation of 233 media outlets and 122 think tanks. Fourth, people-to-people exchanges had expanded, leading to a Silk Road NGO Cooperation Network with over 350 participants and more than 1000 pairs of friendly cities formed between Chinese cities and the partners.

Last, in the new cooperation areas, notable achievements had been made in health cooperation, including an MoU with the WHO on health cooperation in BRI partner countries and agreements with more than 160 countries, particularly China's assistance to more than 120 partners during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, remarkable progress had been achieved in green development including also an MoU with the UNEP on building a green Belt and Road and agreements with more than 30 parties. Third, cooperation in scientific and technological innovation was gathering speed that China had signed intergovernmental agreements on scientific and technological cooperation with more than 80 partners and 58 members had joined the ANSO. Fourth, Digital Silk Road cooperation presented numerous highlights, including MoUs on the Digital Silk Road, e-commerce and digital investment with over 30 partners and oversea digital infrastructure building project.

Area of focus	Achievements	Examples
Policy coordination	The strategy and coordination of the BRI has expanded in scope at all levels	More than 200 cooperation agreements with more than 150 countries and 30 organisations
	Long-term multilevel high-layer mechanisms for policy coordination has been in place	BRF hosted by China
	Multilateral cooperation has been driving forward by new dialogue and cooperation mechanisms in various domains	China-ASEAN (10+1) Cooperation
	Rules and standards have been coordinated intergovernmental	Over 100 standardization documents
Connectivity of infrastructure and facilities	Construction of economic corridors and international routes has made substantial progress	China-Laos Railway; Hungary-Serbia Railway
	Maritime connectivity has steadily improved	Cargo routes to over 110 ports
	Aviation routes have expanded rapidly	Bilateral agreements with over 100 partners
	International inter-modality transport channels have developed stably	CR Express reaching more than 200 Eurasian cities
Unimpeded trade and investment	The scale has expanded steadily	US\$19.1 trillion cumulative value of imports and exports
	The liberalisation and facilitation of trade and investment have improved	21 FTAs between China and partners; RCEP

Area of focus	Achievements	Examples
	The role of platforms has been growing	Annual CIIE
	Industrial cooperation has deepened	Over 70 overseas industrial parks
Financial integration	The financial cooperation mechanisms have matured	The internationalization of RMB
	The channels and platforms for investment and financing have expanded	SRF and AIIB
	Innovative investment and financing methods have explored	RMB-denominated bonds with a total issues value over RMB200 billion
	Debt sustainability has continued to improve	Guiding Principles on Financing the Development of the Belt and Road
Closer people-to-people ties	Cooperation on culture and tourism has been rich	Cooperation documents with 144 BRI partners
	Educational exchanges and cooperation have been profound	Silk Road Program; over 300 Confucius Institutes
	Media and think tank cooperation has been fruitful	Media Cooperation Forum on Belt and Road; Advisory Council of the BRF
	People-to-people exchanges have expanded	Silk Road NGO Cooperation Network; friendly cities
New cooperation	Notable achievements have been made in health cooperation	MoU with the WHO; assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic
	Remarkable progress has been achieved in green development	MoU with the UNEP; agreements with more than 30 parties

Area of focus	Achievements	Examples
	Cooperation in scientific and technological innovation has gathered speed	Intergovernmental agreements with more than 80 partners; 58 members had joined the ANSO
	Digital Silk Road cooperation has presented numerous highlights	Overseas digital infrastructure building project

Table 2.1 The Achievements of the BRI since 2013

In conclusion, the BRI has experienced significant achievements over the past decade. This initiative has yielded tangible benefits for participating countries, particularly in relation to development issues, and has invigorated economic globalisation. Furthermore, it has provided innovative solutions for China to enhance global governance, thereby contributing to the advancement of human civilisation. The BRI has not only propelled China's development but also benefited the global community. Consequently, apart from the stakeholders involved in the initiative, the international community has responded favourably. Both the UNGA and the UNSC have referenced the initiative in several of their resolutions. For example, General Assembly resolution 2344 urged the international community to enhance regional economic cooperation through the BRI.

Hence, the following chapters will link these outcomes to China's power growth based on the framework above. The achievements and additional effects of the initiative are supposed to enhance China's power in all dimensions. As each type of power has different measurements and mechanisms, and the space here doesn't permit an exhaustive analysis, the chapters below will select several cases for different types of power to prove how the BRI influence China's power dynamic. On the other hand, some types of power have some aspects in common; for example, judgmental power and conceptual power have similar and related sources. Thus, some types of power are organised in the same chapter with the same case.

In general, Chapter 2 will focus on China's trade and income and its substantial power. Chapter 3 will use the BRI-related organisations and institutions, particularly AIIB and the financial institutions, to analyse China's institutional and structural power. Chapter 4 will concentrate on China's judgmental and conceptual power growth and the cultural and discursive outcome of the BRI. Last, Chapter 5 will measure China's relational power based on the programs of connectivity of the initiative.

Chapter 3: Substantial Power

3.1 Substantial Power and Economic Indicators

Substantial power has been considered the most important and basic aspect of power since the subject's establishment, especially after the rise of realism. However, the traditional military bases of national power have been fundamentally transformed with the arrival of post-industrial society.⁷¹ Although the Soviet Union had one of the most powerful military capacities in that period, it collapsed otherwise. On the one hand, wealth and innovation are the critical resources of military effectiveness and the changes in the economic sphere are seen as creating the foundations for new forms of military power; on the other hand, the roots of national power contemporarily no doubt derive from a country's ability to dominate the leading sectors of the global economy that being able to dominate makes attaining and maintaining hegemony possible.⁷² The economic strength allows actors to have more leverage in coercing others and to offer more material rewards for compliance. In addition, economic development brings about a subsequent surge in political and military power. In other words, the economic development of large countries can propel them to the status of major countries.⁷³ Subsequently, the economy and productivity are considered when assessing national power.

The development of China is widely acknowledged as the primary catalyst for its gradual emergence as a superpower, as noted in various scholarly literature.⁷⁴ The nation's rapid economic advancement over the past few decades has been remarkable,

⁷¹ Ashley J. Tellis et al., 'Measuring National Power in the Postindustrial Age' (RAND Corporation, 1 January 2000), xi, https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1110.html.

⁷² Tellis et al., 39–44.

⁷³ Emilio Casetti, 'Power Shifts and Economic Development: When Will China Overtake the USA?', *Journal of Peace Research* 40, no. 6 (1 November 2003): 661–75.

⁷⁴ E.g., C. Goodhart and C. Xu, 'The Rise of China as an Economic Power', *National Institute Economic Review* 155 (February 1996): 56–80; Casetti, 'Power Shifts and Economic Development'; Alexander L. Vuving, 'The Future of China's Rise: How China's Economic Growth Will Shift the Sino-U.S. Balance of Power, 2010–2040', *Asian Politics & Policy* 4, no. 3 (2012): 401–23; Junie T. Tong and John McManus, 'China's Economic Growth and Future Prosperity', *Strategic Change* 26, no. 3 (2017): 281–85.

establishing it as the world's second-largest economy. Numerous indices classify China as the second most formidable power among major nations experiencing rapid growth, highlighting its crucial contributions to global trade, investment, and substantial economic output as key strengths that facilitate its positioning. China is projected to be nearing parity with the United States as the largest economy, characterised by a robust growth rate; it is also recognised as the foremost exporter and trading partner globally.⁷⁵

Traditionally, aggregate product measures such as GDP or GNP are regarded as among the most reliable indicators of a nation's economic strength, particularly for modelling long-term power dynamics during periods of development. These measures are straightforward and direct, as the capacity of a country to produce goods and services underpins its military, economic, cultural, and political endeavours in the pursuit of its objectives.⁷⁶ Furthermore, with the increasing significance of science and technology in economic advancement, productivity, defined as the efficiency with which inputs are transformed into economic outputs, also referred to as innovation or technology, has been identified as a critical factor in generating a state's power.⁷⁷ Consequently, economists often combine multifactor productivity and GDP per capita, which is closely correlated with productivity, with GDP when assessing economic power.⁷⁸ Additionally, some scholars opt for a singular organic indicator, such as the output of the knowledge-intensive and high-technology sectors, acknowledging that wealth and productivity are indeed intertwined within a particular economy.⁷⁹

Generally, economic indicators can be utilised to assess the growth of actors' substantial power within a specific realm, if not universally, and this methodology has been extensively employed in the discourse surrounding China's power dynamic. Consequently, the pertinent inquiry is whether the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has

⁷⁵ Ray Dalio, 'The Great Powers Index: 2024', 11 April 2024, 18.

⁷⁶ Casetti, 'Power Shifts and Economic Development', 663.

⁷⁷ Vuving, 'The Future of China's Rise', 404.

⁷⁸ Luigi Marattin and Simone Salotti, 'Productivity and per Capita GDP Growth: The Role of the Forgotten Factors', *Economic Modelling* 28, no. 3 (1 May 2011): 1219–25.

⁷⁹ Vuving, 'The Future of China's Rise', 404–5.

played a role in China's economic growth, as evidenced by the increase in these indicators.

3.2 The BRI and China's Economic Growth

After the rapid economic blooming since the Reform and Opening-up policy, China entered a turning period and suffered from diminishing competitiveness in low-wage manufactured exports and slowing economic growth for several years.⁸⁰ In addition, China's high economic growth rate involves a high degree of investment, consumption and pollution, leading to developmental quality issues, such as low productivity, low resource utilisation and environmental pollution.⁸¹ Thus, the BRI has aimed at fostering China's sustainable development and improving the quality of economic growth rather than seeking political or military influence at the outset.

Overall, although it has appeared slower than before, China's economy has continued to grow. Based on the data from the World Bank, China's GDP almost doubled over a decade from US\$9.62 trillion in 2013 to \$17.18 trillion in 2023, and its GDP per capita has increased by 70% from US\$7056.4 to \$12175.2.⁸² Besides, as shown in the figure below, although the growth rate is still decreasing, the speed of reduction in China's annual growth rate of GDP per capita has decelerated since 2013.

The point is to what extent this growth can be attributed to the BRI. Conventionally, China officially refers to consumption, exports and investment as China's troika of

⁸⁰ Lauren A. Johnston, 'The Belt and Road Initiative: What Is in It for China?', *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 6, no. 1 (2019): 40–58, <https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.265>.

⁸¹ Qunxi Kong et al., 'Has the Belt and Road Initiative Improved the Quality of Economic Growth in China's Cities?', *International Review of Economics & Finance* 76 (1 November 2021): 870–83; Qunxi Kong et al., 'How Factor Market Distortions Affect OFDI: An Explanation Based on Investment Propensity and Productivity Effects', *International Review of Economics & Finance* 73 (1 May 2021): 459–72; Dongyang Zhang and Samuel A. Vigne, 'The Causal Effect on Firm Performance of China's Financing–Pollution Emission Reduction Policy: Firm-Level Evidence', *Journal of Environmental Management* 279 (1 February 2021): 111609.

⁸² World Bank, 'GDP (Constant 2015 US\$) - China' (World Bank Open Data), accessed 27 April 2025, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD?contextual=default&locations=CN&most_recent_value_desc=true&start=1978; World Bank, 'GDP per Capita (Constant 2015 US\$) - China' (World Bank Open Data), accessed 27 April 2025, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.KD?locations=CN&start=1978>.

growth drivers.⁸³ After the Central Economic Work Conference of the CPC at the end of 2014, developing new growth points has been on the country's agenda.⁸⁴ Scholars find that manufacturing and productive services have been the main drivers of growth among all industries, with the contribution of over 60%; from the perspective of factor contribution, the scale of new capital that invests in digital industries, research and development has expanded, and the improvement of TFP in various industries has picked its contribution up in the past decade.⁸⁵



Figure 3.1 GDP per capita growth (annual%) – China from 2003 to 2023⁸⁶

As a development initiative, the BRI focuses on trade and investment. From 2013 to 2022, China's total imports and exports with the BRI partners totalled US\$19.1 trillion, with an average annual growth rate of 6.4%.⁸⁷ In 2023, its trade with these

⁸³ CGTN, 'MoC: China's "troika" of Growth Drivers Boost the Economy', CGTN, 26 October 2017, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3359544e31597a6333566d54/index.html>.

⁸⁴ Xiuhong Liu, 'Five Focuses of the Central Economic Work Conference', China Daily Language Tips, 12 December 2014, https://language.chinadaily.com.cn/2014-12/12/content_19074071.htm.

⁸⁵ Menggen Chen and Yuanyuan Hou, 'Evolution of Drivers of China's Economic Growth: 2000-2019', *Economic Research Journal*, no. 1 (2024): 53–71.

⁸⁶ World Bank, 'GDP per Capita Growth (Annual %) - China' (World Bank Open Data), accessed 27 April 2025, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.KD.ZG?locations=CN&start=2003>.

⁸⁷ China SCIO, 'The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future'.

partners accounted for 46.6% of China's total foreign trade value for the year, with a volume of over \$2.74 trillion.⁸⁸ As for investment, the cumulative two-way bilateral investment between China and the BRI partners reached \$380 billion until 2022, including \$240 billion Chinese OFDI.⁸⁹ In 2023, Chinese enterprise invested \$40.7 billion directly to the BRI partners, accounting for 23% of annual OFDI.⁹⁰ Additionally, in 2023, new FIEs established by investors from the BRI partners accounted for 25.5% of the total, and realized FDI from these countries was \$18.3 billion, accounting for 11.2 of the total.⁹¹ Generally, considering the contribution of trade and investment for China's economy, the initiative can be regarded successful as a major driver of China's opening up and development.

However, as argued above, promoting productivity has been a strong driver of economic development while China is entering the post-industrialisation era and pursuing modernisation. Similarly, in September 2023, President Xi put forward the concept of new quality productive forces, or new quality productivity, as the intrinsic requirement and focus of promoting high-quality development, referring to a substantial increase in TFP emerging from technological breakthroughs, innovative reallocation and industrial transformation.⁹² This trend and governmental agenda can be found in data above, that the scale of new capital has expanded and contributed to the improvement of China's TFP. Besides, according to the official communiqué, added value of high-tech manufacturing increased by 8.9% in 2024, accounting for 16.3% of added value of industry, and investment in high-tech industries and in technological

⁸⁸ China SCIO, 'China's Trade with BRI Countries Booms in 2023', The State Council Information Office of The People's Republic of China, 12 January 2024, http://english.scio.gov.cn/m/pressroom/2024-01/12/content_116937407.htm.

⁸⁹ China SCIO, 'The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future'.

⁹⁰ MOFCOM, National Bureau of Statistics, and State Administration of Foreign Exchange, eds., *2023 Statistical Bulletin of China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment* (Beijing: China Commerce and Trade Press, 2024), 14.

⁹¹ MOFCOM, 'Statistical Bulletin of FDI in China 2024' (Beijing: MOFCOM, July 2024), 13.

⁹² China Daily, 'Daily Concept - New Quality Productive Forces', China Daily Language Tips, 12 March 2024, <https://language.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202403/12/WS65efe901a31082fc043bc2a4.html>.

transformation of manufacturing industries both increased 8% over the previous year, nearly three times faster than the growth of total investment.⁹³

The BRI benefits China's productivity growth in three approaches. First, the product structure and technological level of China's exports to the BRI partners have been upgraded continuously, which has deepened China's trade and the ensuing supply-side manufacturing transformation and upgrading. Traditionally, China's export dominance is concentrated in low-end manufacturing and original equipment manufacturing, benefiting from the abundance of cheap labour. However, in recent years, the upgrading of China's industrial chain, the development of high-tech manufacturing and the rising demand for overseas orders complement each other. In 2023, high-value-added electromechanical commodities accounted for 58.6% of the total value of exports. The increasing exports of high-tech products have driven both China's economy and productivity development.⁹⁴

Second, mineral cooperation and trade under the BRI framework have ensured resource security for China's transformation and upgrading of manufacturing. Several major resource countries under the BRI are rich in mineral resources that are important for China's industrial upgrading. The initiative could enhance the stability of the supply of these key scarce raw materials on the one hand, and could drive up the quality of these materials through promoting the level of mining and processing in material countries with technical investment and assistance on the other.

Thus, third, the investment under the initiative's framework could bring more fiscal support for industrial transformation, direct the focus of governmental attention and let resources and technology flow to the high-tech sector. In addition, the

⁹³ National Bureau of Statistics, 'Statistical Communiqué of the People's Republic of China on the 2024 National Economic and Social Development', The State Council of The People's Republic of China, 28 February 2025, https://www.gov.cn/lianbo/bumen/202502/content_7008605.htm.

⁹⁴ General Administration of Customs, 'The Exportation of the New Trio Exceeded the Trillion-yuan Mark for the First Time', General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China, 15 January 2024, <http://gdfs.customs.gov.cn/customs/xwfb34/mtjj35/5627494/index.html>. The new trio refers to electric vehicles, lithium-ion batteries and photovoltaic products

investment and consequential projects could offer employment opportunities in the BRI partners and in turn, raise the income level of the population, together with trade, expand their demand for goods in addition to the necessities, and finally enhance the diversification of products of the exporter, namely, China.⁹⁵

Lastly, as the BRI has moved forward with higher quality requirements, it has proposed or implemented more stringent international standards and industrial regulations, which require Chinese companies and other relevant actors to continuously innovate and improve productivity. In 2022, the NDRC and relevant departments issued a guideline, putting forward higher requirements that encouraging enterprises to follow international or higher domestic standards during trade, investment and construction.⁹⁶

3.3 The BRI and China's Trade and Investment

Other than elevating China's substantial power more essentially by enhancing its productivity and economic volume, the BRI also reflects how China displays its economic dominance to influence others directly, which is, in other words, the use of its substantial power. Through trade and investment, China has gained leverage to change others' policies and actions.

As a global major exporter and a large market with 1.4 billion, China and its companies are vital trade partners to other countries and companies. Since 2013, China has been the world's top goods trader, the top three trade partners of 114 of the BRI collaborators, and the largest trade partner of 68 of them.⁹⁷ Obviously, the BRI has reduced trade costs between China and the BRI partners, increased trade potential

⁹⁵ Yonghui Han, Siyi Li, and Hao Cheng, 'Two-Way Empowerment of Developing New Quality Productive Forces and Building the "Belt and Road": Logic, Theoretical Framework and Practice', *Journal of Strategy and Decision-Making*, no. 3 (2024): 10–13.

⁹⁶ NDRC et al., 'Guideline on Promoting the Green Development of the Belt and Road Initiative', Pub. L. No. (2022) 408 (2022), https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2022-03/29/content_5682210.htm.

⁹⁷ National Bureau of Statistics, 'Remarkable Achievements in Opening-up and Higher Level Economic and Trade Cooperation: Report No. 11 of a Series on the Achievements of Economic and Social Development on the 75th Anniversary of P.R.C.', The State Council of The People's Republic of China, 18 September 2024, https://www.gov.cn/lianbo/bumen/202409/content_6975153.htm.

between them, created job opportunities, improved income and welfare for trading parties, and generally benefited the economic development of partners.⁹⁸

Such economic benefits also spill over into political and other realms. On the one hand, the states and companies have and benefit from increased trade interdependence with China are more likely to take an accommodating stance on China-related issues that support China's presence, for instance voting favour on international issues relevant to China's preferences in the UNGA, and modify their policies, such as Philippines' strategic preference shifted to development requirements and promoted China-Philippines economic and trade cooperation, especially with the support from the agriculture sector as China has been a major agricultural export destination for the Philippines.⁹⁹

On the other hand, Chinese investment, including FDI and contractual projects, promotes technology transfer and job opportunities for the BRI partners, which affects their economic development, develops economic relations and leads to their policy modification to support China as a result.¹⁰⁰ The case of the Philippines reflects how China's investment and projects intensify its preference for peace and development in the bilateral relations.¹⁰¹ In addition, the realignment of China's investment priorities could also directly change the focus of foreign partners. As mentioned above, the green development of the BRI also includes green-oriented investments. China's growing

⁹⁸ Hong Yu, 'Motivation behind China's "One Belt, One Road" Initiatives and Establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank', *Journal of Contemporary China*, 4 May 2017, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10670564.2016.1245894>; Jing Wang and Xi and Tian, 'Impacts of the Belt and Road Initiative on China's Bilateral Trade', *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy* 27, no. 3 (26 July 2022): 400–424, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13547860.2022.2042110>.

⁹⁹ Guigui Xi and Shengli Ling, 'Security Perception, Development Requirement, and the Adjustment of Philippines' China Policy', *Southeast Asian Studies*, no. 5 (2019): 138–152+158; Wen Zha, 'Beyond the President: An Analysis of the Changes and Continuities in the Philippines' China Policy and Their Causes', *Pacific Journal* 32, no. 10 (2024): 84–104, <https://doi.org/10.14015/j.cnki.1004-8049.2024.10.007>; Jingjing An and Yanzhen Wang, 'The Impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on Chinese International Political Influence: An Empirical Study Using a Difference-in-Differences Approach', *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 29, no. 2 (1 June 2024): 257–81, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-023-09860-4>.

¹⁰⁰ An and Wang, 'The Impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on Chinese International Political Influence'.

¹⁰¹ Xi and Ling, 'Security Perception, Development Requirement, and the Adjustment of Philippines' China Policy'; Zha, 'Beyond the President'.

investments in renewable energy, sustainable urban planning and green technology have successfully driven the transformation of environmental regulations in the BRI partners such as Vietnam and Thailand, and have strengthened the green development of Arab countries.¹⁰² However, these investments and their influence have drawn criticism and smears. Western critics and politicians have labelled the BRI as “China’s debt-trap diplomacy”, arguing China’s loans to the BRI partners let them be saddled with debt and more firmly under China’s control, and as a result, some countries are forced to sell their stakes to China, contract for additional projects or hand over their management of several projects or strategic facilities to China.¹⁰³ These criticisms, in fact, mischaracterise the risks of the BRI. In most of the BRI partners, non-Chinese lenders still held the majority of the debt, and China’s loans didn’t drive borrowers above the IMF’s debt-sustainability thresholds.¹⁰⁴ In other words, China’s financing is significant for the BRI partners and could influence their actions directly, but fears that China is preying on them in need deliberately are unfounded.

In summary, the BRI, as an economic endeavour, has significantly contributed to China’s economic growth and development by enhancing trade and investment flows, promoting productivity for high-quality development, and exerting direct influence on the actions and strategies of its partners. This influence stems from the economic and developmental significance derived from vast market volumes, commodity supply, and capital availability. Consequently, China has experienced substantial power development over the past decade in conjunction with the progression of the BRI.

¹⁰² Zhang Jing, ‘Environmental and Green Investment Regulations: The Impact of China’s Belt and Green Road Initiative in Southeast Asia’, August 2024, <https://repositori.uma.ac.id/handle/123456789/26379>; Ceren Ergenc, ‘China’s Green Investment in the BRI Countries: The Case of Turkey’ (Middle East Institute, 14 January 2020), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-green-investment-bri-countries-case-turkey>.

¹⁰³ Brahma Chellaney, ‘China’s Debt-Trap Diplomacy’, Project Syndicate, 23 January 2017, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-one-belt-one-road-loans-debt-by-brahma-chellaney-2017-01>; Teuku Riefky and Mohamad Dian Revindo, ‘Has China’s \$1 Trillion Foreign Investment Paid Off?’, 3 June 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/06/has-chinas-1-trillion-foreign-investment-paid-off/>.

¹⁰⁴ Deborah Brautigam, ‘Is China the World’s Loan Shark?’, *The New York Times*, 26 April 2019, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/26/opinion/china-belt-road-initiative.html>.

Chapter 4 Institutional and Positional Power

4.1 International Institutions and Structure

Although operating at distinct levels and in various capacities, institutional power and positional power exhibit certain commonalities. In essence, institutional power pertains to the ability to indirectly influence the actions of others through established institutions and regulations, whereas positional power signifies the capacity to directly shape both one's own actions and those of others based on an individual's structural status or positional identity. Clearly, both forms of power depend upon the non-material institutional and structural frameworks of the international system as resources. Furthermore, institutions and positions mutually reinforce one another. International institutions are products of structure and their antecedent context.¹⁰⁵ Institutions confer legitimacy upon structural positions, while advantages associated with these positions catalyse institutional transformation. Essentially, institutional power can enhance and elevate positional advantages; conversely, positional power may establish the structural foundation for institutional power. This correlation enables an analysis within this chapter of how the BRI has influenced China's institutional and positional dynamics.

To identify the structural and institutional consequences of the BRI, it's necessary to clarify the concept of and the connection between international institutions and structures. As the central focus of IR scholarship and policymakers, literature has seen successful efforts to describe and explain international institutions and structures, paralleling their development and growing importance over the decades. In his review, John Duffield classifies four categories of the conceptions of international institutions based on different IR theories.¹⁰⁶ Traditionally, international institutions simply refer to formal international organisations. From a sociological perspective, institutions are

¹⁰⁵ Robert O. Keohane, 'International Institutions: Two Approaches', *International Studies Quarterly* 32 (1988): 388; Cooper et al., 'Yielding Sovereignty to International Institutions', 503.

¹⁰⁶ John Duffield, 'What Are International Institutions?', *International Studies Review* 9, no. 1 (2007): 2–7.

conceptualised as social institutions, which are recognised patterns of behaviour or practice, governing the activities of the members of international society. Later, rationalists regard institutions as sets of more or less formal rules consciously constructed by actors meant to govern and constrain international behaviour for the purpose of interests, while constructivists argue institutions are the consisting of regulative or constitutive norms or sets of norms, which are socially shared expectations, understandings or behavioural standards. Duffield further concludes a comprehensive definition that international institutions are “relatively stable sets of related constitutive, regulative and procedural norms and rules that pertain to the international system, the actors in the system (including states as well as nonstate entities), and their activities”, although any institution needn’t contain all these elements and the relatively stability and relatedness are subjective.¹⁰⁷

Similarly, international structure is also a long-standing and widely studied concept in the discipline, particularly during the Cold War and the following polarisation period. As the representative who has introduced structure into IR studies, Kenneth Waltz defines international structure as a composition of the international system that determines its arrangement of actors and institutions, by the ordering principles, the character of the units and the distribution of capabilities, namely the distribution of capacities among states under anarchy.¹⁰⁸ With the evolution of the situation and the development of the subject, scholars have developed this concept by expanding the scope of the units to include state groups and non-state actors or considering the order and the strategic relations among states other than the distribution of capacities. In particular, Chinese scholars and officials have developed the concept of international *geju*, which is similar to the idea of international structure that emphasises the distribution of capabilities.¹⁰⁹ From another perspective, some scholars

¹⁰⁷ Duffield, 7–8.

¹⁰⁸ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 79–101.

¹⁰⁹ Song Wei, ‘International Structure and Guoji Geju: Comparisons of Core Concepts and Their Implications’, *The Journal of International Studies*, no. 4 (2014): 17–23.

understand the international structure through the Marxist theory, with which most Chinese scholars and policy makers share a common Marxist worldview, even though they rarely cite it. Based on Marxism and structuralism, Jeffrey Isaac illustrates international structures as economy-centred, which create the inherent potential and limits for the exercise of power.¹¹⁰ This approach also relates to the Dependency Theory and World System theory, which regard the capitalist international system as determined by the concentric structure defined by economic position and labour division of actors.¹¹¹ Further, constructivists expand the distribution of material capabilities to the distribution of understandings, namely, the systematic beliefs about the attributes of others.¹¹² In general, international structure is a differential, if not hierarchical, distribution of actors' capabilities and knowledge within a specific system, whose position in it could *a priori* construct and constrain their actions and identities.

Thus, the question here is what institutions and structures the BRI involves, as well as how it changes China's position in such structures and uses or sets the rules or norms for others.

4.2 The BRI and International Institutions

As the review above, the participation, coordination and reform of the existing organisations and the establishment of new institutions have been the top agendas for the initiative. Apart from cooperation agreements with states, another significant objective of promoting policy coordination, one of the BRI's five areas of focus, is the institutions. In addition, the BRI institutions have functioned as platforms for concrete cooperation and implementation in other focus areas, like promoting unimpeded trade and investment.

¹¹⁰ Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Power and Marxist Theory: A Realist View* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1987).

¹¹¹ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (University of California Press, 2011).

¹¹² Cooper et al., 'Yielding Sovereignty to International Institutions', 511.

First, the coordination with other IOs under the initiative has deepened China's participation in the existing international institutions and promotion the reform of them. Until 2023, China had signed BRI cooperation agreements with 32 IOs. In 2016, as the first cooperation document on the BRI with IO, MFA of China signed a letter of intent with ESCAP, as the representative of the UN, on advancing regional connectivity and the BRI.¹¹³ Later in the same year, Chinese government and the UNDP signed the first MoU on cooperation on the BRI between China and an IO regarding promotion of the initiative.¹¹⁴ As such, the UN became the first IO joining the initiative. Thereafter, China had signed cooperation documents with various subsidiary organs of the UN and other IOs including the World Bank, International Criminal Police Organization and World Intellectual Property Organization, reflecting the deepening of promotion of the initiative into various areas.

Chinese scholars and government believe that most of current international institutions were established and have been maintained by Western countries after the WWII with their occupation of overwhelmingly dominant position in the international structure. Thus, the arrangement and regulations of these institutions mainly reflect the interests, preferences and values of the West. Therefore, to reduce the constraints imposed by such arrangements on China's growing concern and the conflict with its perceptions, China needs to promote the reform of these institutions. The policy coordination under the BRI has enabled China to participate more actively in the global actions of these organisations and bring their rules and guidelines more in line with the Chinese concept behind the initiative, as reflected in the coordination between the BRI and the UN's 2030 Agenda. In addition, some organisations' areas of action have been expanded by its coordination with the BRI. For instance, by including the promotion of

¹¹³ Xinhua, 'China-UNESCAP Deal to Boost Belt and Road Initiative Cooperation', The State Council of The People's Republic of China, 13 April 2016, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/international_exchanges/2016/04/13/content_281475326504190.htm.

¹¹⁴ People's Daily, 'First MOU Signed between China and an International Organization on Promoting the Belt and Road', People's Daily Online, 20 September 2016, <https://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0920/c90000-91171119.html>.

the BRI into its future focus, the SCO has transformed from a security institution to an all-round organization of security, economy and culture.¹¹⁵ As such, China has successfully influenced the focuses and actions of these organisations and their member states.

Second, the initiative has created significant practices in China's innovation and development of international institutions. These include new cooperation mechanisms established by China and other actors and new organisations, platforms and regulations promoted by China under the initiative.

On the one hand, China has established coordination channels with other actors to support cooperation and development with the promotion of the initiative. Such mechanisms could direct and shape other's action through information-sharing, capacity-building and strategy-guiding. For example, in 2019, the Ministry of Finance of China and several multilateral development banks including the ADB, AIIB, the European Investment Bank and the World Bank Group signed a MoU committing to establish the Multilateral Cooperation Centre for Development Finance (MCDF) to promote concrete actions and cooperation in supporting infrastructure and connectivity in relation to the BRI, which later endorsed by 12 leading international development banks worldwide.¹¹⁶

On the other hand, China has actively promoted the physical and non-physical institutions including the establishment of new organisations, comprising platforms, and the settlement of rules under the initiative, which enable China to program and regulate other's actions as well as contribute to the institutionalisation of the BRI. The most representative among which is the AIIB and relevant standards, as the complement of traditional multilateral development banks, that guide actors' policies and behaviours

¹¹⁵ Siyu Jiang and Zhengqing Yuan, 'The Belt and Road Initiative and Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Concept and Practice', *Russian, East European & Central Asian Studies*, no. 4 (2023): 1–22, 162, <https://doi.org/10.20018/j.cnki.reecas.2023.04.001>.

¹¹⁶ Bin Gu, 'MCDF: A Multilateral Fund Administered by the AIIB', in *Chinese Multilateralism in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)*, ed. Bin Gu (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2024), 75–98, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-1219-9_4.

through investment priorities and requirements. For instance, since 2019, the AIIB published, and has amended three times so far, its Environmental and Social Framework (ESF) as a system that supports it and its clients, namely investment targets, in achieving environmentally and socially sustainable development outcomes by integrating proper international practice and management into the process of decision-making, preparation and implementation of the Bank supported projects.¹¹⁷ In other words, as the largest stockholder, China could frame the recipients actions and policies through the regulations and requirements reflecting China's preferences of the AIIB for them to receive the bank's financing.

Third, the global acceptance of the initiative allows China to influence international agenda. Apart from the cooperation documents which affirm the significance of the BRI to various international issues, the promotion of the initiative has been written into documents of several international and regional organizations. In 2016, the UNSC quoted the BRI for the first time in Resolution 2274 while calling for strengthening the process of regional cooperation related to Afghanistan.¹¹⁸ Thereafter, international organizations and platforms including the UN, G20 and regional institutions including SCO and APEC increasingly bring the BRI into the discussion. This represents the BRI has become a Chinese action plan for global issues that accepted by these global actors.

As a development initiative, such acceptance enables China to add its own ideas and preferences for action to existing international or regional agendas, even shifting their focus from confrontation to development and communication. For example, on global level, the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as a guiding document for global development and cooperation is highly compatible with the BRI. The

¹¹⁷ AIIB, 'Environmental and Social Framework - Framework Agreements', AIIB, February 2016, <https://www.aiib.org/en/policies-strategies/framework-agreements/environmental-social-framework.html>.

¹¹⁸ UNSC, 'Resolution 2274 (2016)', Pub. L. No. S/RES/2274(2016) (2016), <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n16/070/83/pdf/n1607083.pdf>.

connectivity goals of the initiative are directly or indirectly correlated with the UN's SDG, as such, the UN has engaged with China around sustainable development.¹¹⁹ In 2018, China held the High-level Seminar on the BRI Promoting Sustainable Development Goals with several UN organs discussing how to formulate policies to promote the mutual achievement of the BRI and 2030 Agenda. Likewise, in a 2017 resolution concerning Asia-Pacific integration and sustainable development, the ESCAP requested the organization continue to cooperate with members to support projects associated with the BRI.¹²⁰ In a word, the organization's endorsement of and participation in the BRI reflect China's idea has constituted or complemented IO's guidelines of action, which further influence the policy and action of other members.

In conclusion, by coordinating with other international organisations, promoting new institutions, and obtaining endorsements, the BRI has enabled China to engage in and influence international agendas and action guidelines in alignment with its preferences and perceptions, thereby generating institutional power.

4.3 The BRI and International Structure

The institutions, particularly the regulations established by the initiative, have exerted regulative and procedural influence on the actions of others, as demonstrated in the previous section. However, they also possess normative functions that shape the identities of the involved parties. Furthermore, while the assertion that China's ascendant power creates positional leverage for the nation could be perceived as circular reasoning, the initiative has indeed modified China's capabilities within international manufacturing, trade, finance, technology, and other systems, as analysed

¹¹⁹ Liang Dong, Xiaohua Yang, and Hongtao Li, 'The Belt and Road Initiative and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: Seeking Linkages for Global Environmental Governance', *Chinese Journal of Population Resources and Environment* 16, no. 3 (3 July 2018): 203–10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10042857.2018.1487745>.

¹²⁰ UNESCAP, 'Advancing Integrated and Seamless Connectivity for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific', Pub. L. No. E/ESCAP/RES/73, § 73/3 (2017).

in Chapter 3. In summary, the BRI has engaged with various international frameworks and elevated China's stature therein by affecting the distribution of capacities.

One of the most significant structural impacts of the BRI is on trade. While scholars defined the global trade and economic system as a concentric structure, the current transformation in the international trade structure since the end of the last century has given rise to the focus on Global Value Chain (GVC).¹²¹ In its significant report, the World Bank defines GVC as the production process where firms specialise in a specific task rather than producing the whole product.¹²² It's believed that the dynamics and distribution of GVC formed the basic structure of globalisation.¹²³ Compared to the concentric structure, GVC represents the situation of trade and labour division in the age of globalisation better. On the other hand, the perspective of GVC succeeds the previous Marxist literature that GVC is the main component of the global economic base as it embodies the current form of production, division of labour, distribution and consumption.¹²⁴

As above, scholars have argued how GVC generates positional power. An actor's position in the structure of GVC depends on its economic and commercial size, division of labour, degree of participation in production, the size of its import or export of added value of products, control of critical technology or resource nodes, and the control of technology or knowledge systems.¹²⁵ Because the products, technologies or knowledge of the actors occupying the key positions in the structure are hard or too costly to substitute, their policies and actions are overwhelmingly influential on others in

¹²¹ Pol Antràs and Davin Chor, 'Global Value Chains', in *Handbook of International Economics*, ed. Gita Gopinath, Elhanan Helpman, and Kenneth Rogoff, vol. 5, *Handbook of International Economics: International Trade*, Volume 5 (Elsevier, 2022), 297–376, <https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.hesint.2022.02.005>.

¹²² 'World Development Report 2020: Trading for Development in the Age of Global Value Chains' (Washington, D.C: World Bank, 2020), xxii.

¹²³ Xun Pang and Qingqian He, 'Structural Power and the Evolution of the International System in Global Value Chains', *Social Sciences in China*, no. 9 (2021): 26–46, 204–5.

¹²⁴ Nanping Yu, 'The Shaping and Influence of the Global Value Chain on International Power', *Social Sciences in China*, no. 12 (2022): 120–37, 202.

¹²⁵ Pang and He, 'Structural Power and the Evolution of the International System in Global Value Chains'; Yu, 'The Shaping and Influence of the Global Value Chain on International Power'.

secondary or associated positions. Such positions further create identities, including material providers, property owners, producers, processors, consumers, etc.

With the implementation of the BRI, China's position in GVC has obviously elevated in the past years. Quantitative analysis has already proved that the BRI has strengthened China at the GVC level.¹²⁶ Regarding the detailed mechanisms, first, as previously argued, the economic size and trade volume of China have increased significantly. Thus, its position as one of the central hubs has been reinforced. Second, China's technological development has enabled it to serve as a technology provider, design developer, and standard setter, as exemplified by the cases of electric vehicles and 5G infrastructure. Third, China's role in the global division of labour has progressed from low-end to high-end manufacturing. Notably, this initiative has facilitated the growth of China's intermediate products trade, which refers to the value-adding process from raw materials and primary products to final consumer goods. On one hand, the BRI has enhanced China's productivity and empowered its industrial transformation. On the other hand, the emphasis on the connectivity of infrastructure and facilities has established a logistical foundation for China's imports of primary products and exports of processed goods.

Overall, the BRI has established China as one of the central hubs, as well as a pivotal intermediary and regulatory node within the framework. Furthermore, its significance continues to expand in tandem with advancements in technology and industry. In addition to its role in GVC, China's positioning in various sectors, including finance, monetary policy, investment, and technology, has also been enhanced by this initiative, thereby creating positional power.

¹²⁶ Fernanda Ilhéu, 'The Global Value Chains and the Evolution of Chinese Economic Model', *International Relations and Diplomacy* 8, no. 4 (28 April 2020), <https://doi.org/10.17265/2328-2134/2020.04.002>; Xiang Dai and Jie Song, 'Global Value Chain Optimization Effect of the Belt and Road Initiative—Based on the Perspective of Improving the GVC Position of Participating Countries along the Belt and Road', *China Industrial Economics*, no. 6 (2021): 99–117; Joanna Wolszczak-Derlacz and Yuxin Lu, 'The Role of the One-Belt One-Road Initiative in China's Exports and Global Value Chains', *Equilibrium. Quarterly Journal of Economics and Economic Policy* 17, no. 2 (2022): 317–41.

Chapter 5: Judgmental and Conceptual Power

5.1 Judgmental, Conceptual and China's International Discourse Power

The previous two chapters concentrated on the BRI's commercial and economic aspects, although the institutions and structural positions also have normative and identical impacts on actors. However, the initiative is more than a development program. On the one hand, various rules and standards elaborate on China's efforts to complete and reform international norms that regulate actions. On the other hand, as shown by its focus on closer people-to-people ties, China has worked on sharing its concepts, knowledge and values with the rest of the world.

These goals fall in the realm of judgmental and conceptual power. In short, judgmental power is the power to evaluate or judge others' actions according to norms, laws, customs or values, while conceptual power enables an actor to create and modify international common knowledge. Briefly, conceptual power is the power to set constitutive knowledge, and judgmental power is the power to practice such knowledge with derived regulations.

Judgmental and conceptual power could be linked to what China calls the international discourse power. After the 18th CPC National Congress in 2012, the Chinese government and scholars have regarded discourse power as an important goal and practice in China's foreign relations. Officially, international discourse power is related to international communication capacity and cultural soft power that decides if China's voice and narrative in international discourse are true, panoramic, persuasive and attractive, and whether they match its national strength and international status.¹²⁷ Whereas based on the philosophical and social study of discourse represented by Michel Foucault's contributions, the IR academic definitions of international discourse

¹²⁷ China Daily, 'Build up International Communication Capacity', China Daily Language Tips, 9 September 2019, <https://language.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201909/09/WS5d75a3c7a310cf3e3556a64e.html>; China Daily, 'International Communication Capacity', China Daily Language Tips, 2 June 2021, <https://language.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202106/02/WS60b74893a31024ad0bac32c6.html>.

power could be concluded as an actor's right and ability to freely express, explain and let other actors accept and identify its narratives and propositions on international affairs, which contain certain culture, values and ideologies through diplomacy, institutions, communications and people-to-people exchanges; it is the right and power to define, regulate, interpret and judge international phenomenon and practices, and thus to shape others' identities.¹²⁸ Apparently, China's use of international discourse power includes the dual meaning of the right to speak and the power of speech. As this article aims to discuss China's power growth, it will omit the aspect of rights and concentrate on China's international communication capability and its influence on others' actions.

Therefore, the concepts of judgmental and conceptual power clearly have some aspects in common with discourse power. On the one hand, China's seek for discourse power is about explaining and evaluating actions of itself and other actors with fair and unbiased constitutive standards that benefit or at least have no harm to its interests and preferences, because the current mainstream judgments are considered to be Western-dominated and lack understanding of Chinese culture. On the other hand, the emergence of Chinese discourse is to add Chinese concepts into the international knowledge system so that it could modify and diversify the Western-dominated system. As a meaningful product of the process of social interaction, discourse not only represents information but also has constructive functions on social factors and actors' identities.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ See Jianping Ruan, 'Discourse Power and the Construction of International Order', *Contemporary International Relations*, no. 5 (2003): 31–37, 59; Liang, 'International Discourse Power and China's New Approaches to Develop', *Contemporary World and Socialism*, no. 3 (2009): 110–13; Xiao Wang, 'International Discourse Power and the Shaping of China's International Image', *Journal of University of International Relations*, no. 6 (2010): 58–65; Jisheng Sun, 'China's Approach to Shape and Improve Its International Discursive Power: Diplomatic Practice Since the 18th Party Congress as an Example', *World Economics and Politics*, no. 3 (2019): 19–43, 156; Wenshan Jia, 'China's Exploration of Comprehensively Improving International Discourse Power', *People's Tribune*, no. 29 (2021): 14–19. Original texts are in Chinese and translate by the author.

¹²⁹ Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777–95; Seumas Miller, 'Foucault on Discourse and Power', *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, no. 76 (1990): 115–25; Sun, 'China's Approach to Shape and Improve Its International Discursive Power: Diplomatic Practice Since the 18th Party Congress as an Example'.

Chinese scholars and officials have developed several approaches to build China's international discourse power.¹³⁰ First, the content of publication, illustration and narrative should be improved, and stories about China should be told well to correctly and comprehensively reflect China's preferences, Chinese wisdom and common values. Second, the channels and concepts of external publicity should be expanded from official dominance to multi-actor participation and omni-media integration. Third, the international rules and norms regulating international behaviour should be formulated and used considering Chinese ideas and international common values rather than biased Western values.

Thus, the question is whether and how the BRI amplifies China's international discourse and implements relevant actions as above, which enforces its power to judge and the ability to construct identity.

5.2 The BRI and China's International Discourse

As a significant Chinese external practice under the leadership of President Xi, the BRI constitutes a vital aspect of effectively conveying China's narratives. Firstly, the initiative embodies the distinct elements of Chinese traditional culture, the Communist spirit, and a global perspective. Originating from the ancient Chinese interactions along this route with diverse cultural and civilizational backgrounds, the initiative's principles of peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning, and mutual benefit align closely with the illustrious and esteemed Chinese tradition.¹³¹ Furthermore, the concept of mutual benefit and common development represents not only a traditional aspiration but also a Communist ideal. Additionally, the initiative

¹³⁰ Qiubin Wang and Tinghe Cui, 'Thoughts on Strengthening the Establishment of the Belt and Road Initiative to Have China's Voice Heard in the World', *Public Diplomacy Quarterly*, no. 4 (2015): 60–66, 126; Jingtai Tang, Chen Xing, and Jingwen Gao, 'On the Improvement of International Discourse Right on the Belt and Road: Social Network Analysis of Twitter Data of the First BRF', *Journalism Bimonthly*, no. 5 (2018): 56–65, 148–49, <https://doi.org/10.20050/j.cnki.xwdx.2018.05.010>; Sun, 'China's Approach to Shape and Improve Its International Discursive Power: Diplomatic Practice Since the 18th Party Congress as an Example'.

¹³¹ China.org.cn, 'The Spirit of the Silk Road', China Keywords, 19 January 2020, http://www.china.org.cn/english/china_key_words/2020-01/19/content_75629655.html.

demonstrates to the global community, particularly developing nations, the Chinese approach to modernisation, which emphasises openness, connectivity, and communal development, ultimately encouraging countries to adopt a developmental model that is compatible with their specific circumstances. Overall, the narrative presented by the BRI intertwines Chinese tradition, the Marxist objective of liberating humanity to foster a better world, and the practices of the CPC designed for development.

These contents, second, are inherently connected with other Chinese international discourses. After the 18th Congress of the CPC, China has attached great significance to the International Discourse System with Chinese Characteristics, which is the sum of the ideological and knowledge system guided by Marxism with Chinese characteristics elaborating and interpreting China's practice and wisdom with Chinese concepts and terminology to the rest of the world.¹³² Together with other concepts, including the Community with a Shared Future for Mankind and the three Global Initiatives, the BRI forms part of the discourse of external actions and cooperation in the system.¹³³ Meanwhile, the policies and actions that have been taken to promote the initiative in the past decade represent that the BRI has evolved from ideas into reality and provided a practical platform for other Chinese concepts. As shown in Figure 5.1, the introduction of Chinese media to the BRI highlights not only the economic focus of the initiative but also China's emphasis on connectivity and the community with a shared future. For the partners who do not share a common knowledge background with China, its abstract and obscure international discourse has become concrete and easier to feel and understand through their coordination with and participation in the BRI.

¹³² Anjiang Hu, 'International Discourse System with Chinese Characteristics: Research Review and Its Future Exploration', *Journal of Beijing International Studies University* 42, no. 5 (2020): 4.

¹³³ Jia, 'China's Exploration of Comprehensively Improving International Discourse Power'.

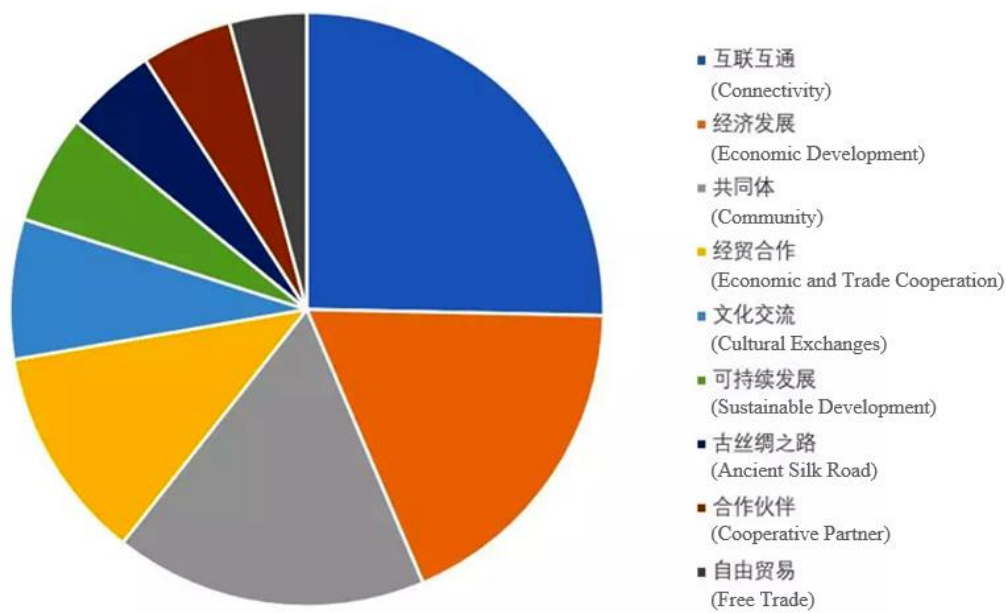


Figure 5.1 High-frequency Words in Chinese Media Reports on the BRI, until 2018¹³⁴

Therefore, the initiative effectively refuted the Western erroneous judgments and perceptions of China and shaped the correct and positive image of China for other actors. On the one hand, modernisation and globalisation used to be a Western-centred process. The promotion and the success of the BRI provide a substitute channel for international cooperation and an alternative approach for national development, breaking the Western monopoly on this process and the myth of the Western model. On the other hand, since the last century, the emergence of China has been labelled as a threat to international security and order, and blamed for international problems such as pollution and resource scarcity due to China's rapid development.¹³⁵ The initiative,

¹³⁴ Belt and Road Portal, 'Chinese Media Reports on the BRI over the Past Six Years: Connectivity is the Most Frequent Word', yidaiyilu, 30 April 2019, <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/88971.html>, original in Chinese, translated by the author.

¹³⁵ Chen, "Chinese Threat" and China's Peaceful Rising: An Interpretation Based on Level-of-Analysis'; James Scott, 'China Threat? Evidence from the WTO', *Journal of World Trade* 47, no. 4 (1 August 2013), <https://kluwerlawonline.com/api/Product/CitationPDFURL?file=Journals\TRAD\TRAD2013025.pdf>; Eleanor Albert and Xu Beina, 'China's Environmental Crisis' (Council on Foreign Relations, 12 February 2015), <https://www.cfr.org/background/chinas-environmental-crisis>; Debasish Sarmah, 'To What Extent Is China a "Security Threat"? (Institute for Security & Development Policy, 17 June 2024).

however, reflects China's consistent concern for peaceful development, contributes to the world economy by sharing the benefits of its development and provides more public goods to the international community. It indicates China's emergence is an opportunity rather than a threat or challenge for the world.¹³⁶ Further, the clear benefits of the projects under the initiative for its partners enable Chinese officials and media to refute the Western smear and even to comment and judge that several Western countries are hyping up de-globalisation, holding geopolitical instead of cooperative logic.¹³⁷ In general, the initiative denies Western judgments and labels that view China as a threat, and enforces its identity as a responsible major country pursuing peaceful development. Actually, as shown in Figure 5.2, with the achievements of the initiative, the relevant reports in the West are turning positive and focusing on China's contribution to international development and global governance.



Figure 5.2 Word Cloud of Keywords from Report on the BRI in the Western Media
within one Week after the 3rd BRF in 2023¹³⁸

¹³⁶ China SCIO, 'China and the World in the New Era', White Paper published by China SCIO, 28 September 2019, http://english.scio.gov.cn/2019-09/28/content_75252746_3.htm.

¹³⁷ Global Times, 'BRI Benefits Increasingly Clear, despite Western Smears', Global Times, 16 January 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202307/1294440.shtml>.

¹³⁸ Xinhua News Agency, 'The BRI has Made Remarkable Achievements and Broken the Filter of Western Media', Belt and Road Portal, 30 October 2023, <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/097M42ON.html>

5.3 The BRI and China's International Communication Channels

In this process, in addition to its content, the BRI has also broadened the channels and mechanisms for enhancing China's discourse power. On the one hand, the BRI has promoted and supplemented the development of China's public diplomacy. With the growing international public society, the importance of public diplomacy, which is led by the government and involves multiple actors aiming to shape a good national image in the mind of overseas public as audiences through information dissemination and cultural exchanges, in a country's foreign policy is constantly rising. The diverse participants of the initiative make China's public diplomacy more multi-dimensional and comprehensive.

First, Chinese enterprises going global along the BRI have conducted exemplary exploration of public diplomacy in efforts to fulfil social responsibilities abroad. In the Joint Communique of the Leaders' Roundtable of the 2nd BRF, the participants called on all market players in the BRI cooperation to fulfil their corporate social responsibility on sustainable development and local development.¹³⁹ These efforts are not only in line with China's economic transition, but also the representatives of China shouldering China's responsibility as a major country and sharing the benefits of its development.¹⁴⁰

Second, China's social organisations, namely China's NGOs, have committed themselves to serving as messengers of people-to-people friendship, creating favourable public opinion in partners and undertaking the task of introducing China to participating countries. During the first BRF in 2017, over 90 Chinese NGOs jointly

¹³⁹ Xinhua News Agency, 'Belt and Road Cooperation: Shaping a Brighter Shared Future Joint Communique of the Leaders' Roundtable of the 2nd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation', China Daily, 27 April 2019, <https://language.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201904/28/WS5cc4fc84a3104842260b8d0a.html>

¹⁴⁰ Yongquan Xu and Xun Wang, 'Reflections on the "Going Global" Strategy of Chinese Enterprises in the Course of Building the "Belt and Road" and Implementation of Public Diplomacy', *Public Diplomacy Quarterly*, no. 4 (2014): 37–42, 125–26.

launched the Chinese Social Organisations' Action Plan for Stronger People-to-People Connectivity along the Belt and Road and set up the Silk Road NGO Cooperation Network. The action plan listed Chinese NGOs' commitment to promoting socioeconomic development in and strengthening cultural and scientific communication with the BRI partners.¹⁴¹ Generally, Chinese NGOs have advantages in their important role of promoting the BRI public diplomacy and becoming a bridge for the spread of China's discourse.

Third, Chinese cities are beginning to lead international discursive trends in some areas and become the source of global governance, international innovation and cultural activities. In 2013, 24 cities along the Silk Road agreed on the Urumqi Consensus at the Silk Road Economic Belt Cities Cooperation and Development Forum to enhance exchanges among cities, establish friendly relations and learn from each other on urban construction and management.¹⁴² Consequently, the interconnection and interworking of the cities along the BRI have enriched the channels to express Chinese culture and model of development and governance.¹⁴³

On the other hand, the BRI has built platforms for extensive cultural exchanges and international communications. The initiative has brought various opportunities for human cooperation in numerous fields such as education, academia, science and technology, culture, archaeology and tourism among parties from different regions and civilisations. China continues to implement the Silk Road Program under the CGS, establish China Cultural Centres (CCC) and Confucius Institutes in the BRI partners, promote overseas education, establish international innovation cooperation platforms and hold various cultural activities at home and abroad. Until 2019, before the COVID

¹⁴¹ China NGO Network for International Exchanges, 'Chinese Social Organisations' Action Plan for Stronger People-to-People Connectivity along the Belt and Road (2017-2020)', Silk Road NGO Cooperation Network, 2 November 2017, https://sironet.cnice.org.cn/cnie_cn/xxfb_203/201711/t20171102_93023.html.

¹⁴² Xinhua News Agency, 'Cities Ink Silk Road Economic Belt Agreement', Global Times, 29 November 2013, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/828693.shtml>.

¹⁴³ Wei Tang, 'The "One Belt, One Road" Initiative and City Diplomacy', *Journal of International Relations*, no. 4 (2015): 59–68, 154.

pandemic, China had set up 16 CCCs in the BRI partners, held relevant over 1600 cultural activities, established international alliances of museums, theatres, libraries and galleries, built nearly 30 international culture and tourism brands and held influential comprehensive activities such as the Silk Road International Arts Festival.¹⁴⁴

Meanwhile, relevant forums, events, and major activities around the initiative have empowered the integration of China's omni-media with platforms and opportunities. Media cooperation is a significant part of the BRI cooperation, supported by several high-level activities and arrangements such as the Media Cooperation Forum on Belt and Road, the Belt and Road News Network and Silk Road Global News Awards. China's media at all levels, from national to local, are continuously improving their international communication capabilities through joint reporting, series tracking, special programs and activity on social media.

In addition, as argued in the previous chapter, the global acceptance of the BRI in IOs has strengthened China's involvement in the practice, development and reform of these organisations. It generates an impact beyond the institutional level, that it enables China to influence the formulation and innovation of international discourse and norms. As above, international organisations are inherently the creators and disseminators of international discourse and norms. The attention of the BRI by IOs has enhanced the exposure and dissemination of the Chinese discourse, and the presence of the initiative in the agenda and documents of the organisations also proves the degree of acceptance of Chinese words by the organisations and their members. For example, from 2015 to 2021, the UN News had 68 reports on the BRI in both Chinese and English. The topics of these reports are generally positive, highlighting the themes of SDGs, economic development and UN affairs. The focus of these reports had shifted from economic development to the Global South and then to global governance and cultural exchange.

¹⁴⁴ Juan Deng, '2019 Silk Road Economic Belt Cultural Exchange Development Report', in *Silk Road Economic Belt Development Report (2020)*, Blue Books of the Silk Road (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2020), 84–85.

Thus, the concepts and expressions originating from China have supplemented and constructed UN agendas and spread China's global perspective and discourse system.¹⁴⁵

Overall, through the amplification of China's international discourse by promoting accurate and distinctive Chinese expressions and ideas regarding development, cooperation, and global governance via an increasingly comprehensive and multifaceted international communication system, the BRI has enhanced China's judgmental and conceptual power, enabling it to counter criticism, offer commentary, and shape the identity of a community with a shared future.

¹⁴⁵ Ting Zhou and Zhaorui Meng, 'Analysis of the Discourse Practice of the United Nations' BRI-Related News', *Media*, no. 7 (2024): 91–93.

Chapter 6: Relational Power

6.1 Relational Power and Its Mechanisms

Earlier chapters elucidate how the BRI contributes to China's growth in power on both levels of interaction and its constitution. Nevertheless, Western sociologists and scholars from the Chinese School have formulated a novel perspective that examines the relation (*guanxi*) itself, in which actors construct their identities and base their behaviours. Consequently, relationships can be regarded as an actor's capacity to manage and manipulate the degree, methods, and frequency of connectivity and ongoing interaction within their relational circles and networks.

However, as a new approach, few scholars apply relational power to analyse international power dynamics. The little literature links the theory to the strategy of ASEAN or the international structure and the great power competition. On the one hand, as a concept derived from Eastern Asian philosophy, relational power explains how ASEAN plays a central and leading role in regional cooperation through the regional relation network it has built, despite its weakness regarding material power.¹⁴⁶ On the other hand, based on a logic distinct from interactional or constitutional power, the transition of and struggle for relational power explain the rise and fall of America and its policies and actions in the competition with China and other regional actors.¹⁴⁷

Although there is little existing research and almost no studies on the BRI, the indicators and framework inspired by SNA to measure relational power can also provide practical approaches for analysing detailed mechanisms of how the BRI

¹⁴⁶ Ling Wei, 'Balance of Relations: ASEAN Centrality and the Evolving Regional Order', *World Economics and Politics*, no. 7 (2017): 38–64, 155–56; Shihui Tian and Xianwu Zheng, 'Relational Power and the Construction of ASEAN Centrality in Asia-Pacific Maritime Cooperation', *Journal of Contemporary Asia-Pacific Studies*, no. 6 (2022): 98–133, 166–67.

¹⁴⁷ Yue Xing, Zhao Liu, and Xin Chang, 'Relational Power and the Rise and Fall of the U.S. Leadership', *Foreign Affairs Review*, no. 4 (2022): 52–86, 5–6; Li, 'Relational Power, Preventative Action and Power Transition'; Xiangdong Jin, 'The Power Logic of the Rise of Minilateral Cooperations in Asia-Pacific: The Combination of Relational Power and Multinodal Structure', *Journal of Xiamen University (Arts & Social Sciences)*, no. 3 (2024): 91–103.

benefits China's relational power growth. As above, relational power could be attributed to four kinds of mechanisms.¹⁴⁸

First, direct bilateral relations possessed by the actors could generate the capacity for actions, resources and influence. The more and closer direct relations an actor has, more likely and reliable it is to gain resources from and implement actions towards others.

Second, as resources for and influence of an actor are not limited to its direct relations but also available through indirect relational circles, the relational power of the actor is also dependent on its connections with all other indirectly connected actors in the international network. The actor is more powerful if it can reach others in the network with fewer intermediate steps.

Third, while the first kind measures an actor's bilateral influence and the second measures its impacts on all the actors and the entire global network, the actors could influence the chains of relationships as well. When other actors interact and communicate with each other, if the actor is a key node that is difficult to bypass for the transportation of materials, the flow of information or the maintenance of relationships, it would possess the power to promote the cooperation of others or prevent their approach. If an actor's betweenness in the interactions of others could function as a key intermediary that their cooperations, conflicts or communications need its participation and coordination, the actor is able to influence or control the results of such interactions.

Last, other than the quantity of relations and the position in the network, the quality of connected actors also implies the measurement of power. An actor could more easily obtain resources and exert influence if it has reliable relations with core nodes in the relation network, and in turn, is able to leverage that network. In other words, an actor is powerful by making friends with the powerful. Therefore, this aspect reflects the actor's status in the relational network as well.

¹⁴⁸ Pang and Quan, 'Return to Relational Context of Powe'.

Hence, the question here is whether the BRI can enhance China's relational power and influence the policies and actions of others by increasing the number of direct close relations, streamlining the steps of connecting the entire relation network, occupying more pivot relation channels as a key intermediary and strengthening the connection with key actors in the network.

6.2 The BRI and China's Direct Relations

Undoubtedly, as an initiative aimed at enhancing connectivity and coordination, the BRI inherently involves the establishment and development of China's relations with various actors. Firstly, the direct relations between China and these actors are cultivated and strengthened through the initiative. As outlined in Chapter 2, China has signed more than 200 cooperation agreements with more than 150 countries and 30 international organisations. On one hand, the cooperation associated with this initiative serves as a significant impetus for expanding China's network of relations. As illustrated in Table 6.1, since 2013, 11 countries have established or reestablished diplomatic relations with China. Notably, eight of these countries signed MoUs concerning Belt and Road cooperation with China within six months of establishing their diplomatic relations. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that since 2013, no country has severed diplomatic ties with China. In contrast, from 2003 to 2013, although nine countries established or reestablished bilateral relations, three countries did rupture their ties with China. It can be asserted that the BRI has augmented the allure of establishing relations with China. The appeal of this initiative is further evidenced by the statements made by various leaders. For instance, during an interview following the establishment of relations, Roberto Lorenzana, the Secretary of Communications for the President, indicated that the BRI was highly attractive to El Salvador and expressed

anticipation regarding their participation in the initiative and their engagement in cooperative efforts to promote trade and investment.¹⁴⁹

Country	Establishment or Reestablishment of Diplomatic Relations	MoU on the BRI
Gambia	17/03/2016	06/09/2018
Sao Tome and Príncipe	26/12/2016	09/12/2021
Panama	13/06/2017	17/11/2017
Dominican Republic	01/05/2018	02/11/2018
Burkina Faso	26/05/2018	17/11/2021
El Salvador	21/08/2018	01/11/2018
Solomon Islands	21/09/2019	09/10/2019
Kiribati	27/09/2019	06/01/2020
Nicaragua	10/12/2021	14/01/2022
Honduras	26/03/2023	13/06/2023
Nauru	24/01/2024	25/03/2024

Table 6.1 Timetable of The Countries Establishing or Reestablishing Diplomatic Relations and Signing MoUs on the BRI With China after 2013¹⁵⁰

The attraction is not confined to nations that have not previously established diplomatic relations with China. Conversely, the BRI has the potential to enhance relations between China and its partner countries. As a framework for development cooperation, the BRI may facilitate commercial exchanges and augment the economic benefits for participating member states. This, in turn, is likely to create incentives for nations to endorse amicable diplomatic and political relations, which could mitigate political tensions that might jeopardise mutually beneficial economic cooperation. A

¹⁴⁹ Xinhua News Agency, 'Salvadoran Official: El Salvador Looks Forward to Participating in the BRI', Xinhuanet, 26 August 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2018-08/26/c_1123329840.htm.

¹⁵⁰ Compiled by the author based on the data from China's MFA website, see https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/2193_674977/200812/t20081221_9284708.shtml

study evaluates the relational impact of the BRI utilising difference-in-difference analysis.¹⁵¹ It indicates that, since the implementation of the initiative, China's high-level interactions with its partners have risen substantially. BRI partner countries, particularly those classified as developing nations, exhibit a higher frequency of political engagements with China compared to non-participating nations. In summary, the BRI fosters closer bilateral relations between China and its partners.

The comprehensive mechanism is manifested in three key aspects. Firstly, the BRI aligns seamlessly with the developmental strategies and aspirations of various stakeholders, signifying that collaboration with China can yield benefits for these stakeholders and offer opportunities to partake in the advantages derived from China's development. For instance, Qatar introduced the Qatar National Vision 2030 in 2008 as a long-term transformative framework aimed at achieving sustained knowledge-based socio-economic prosperity. The Vision encompasses Qatar's developmental objectives through four interconnected pillars: human, social, economic, and environmental advancement. It is evident that the Vision aligns with the principles of the BRI. Consequently, in 2014, merely one year following the announcement of the initiative, Qatar formalised a strategic partnership with China and underscored its involvement in the BRI in the joint declaration.¹⁵²

Second, the BRI bolsters relations by strengthening economic and personnel ties with partners through economic cooperation and developmental projects. As demonstrated in the article above, the initiative has increased China's trade with partners and deepened commercial dependence, prompting the partners to avoid conflicts and disputes with China to ensure their interests. Meanwhile, China's

¹⁵¹ Yue Lu, Wei Gu, and Ka Zeng, 'Does the Belt and Road Initiative Promote Bilateral Political Relations?', *China & World Economy* 29, no. 5 (2021): 57–83.

¹⁵² MFA, 'China-Qatar Joint Statement on Building a Strategic Partnership', 3 November 2014, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/1206_676596/1207_676608/201411/t20141103_9295983.shtml; Government Communications Office, 'Qatar National Vision 2030: A Roadmap for Transformation', GCO of Qatar, <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/state-of-qatar/qatar-national-vision-2030/our-story/>.

investment and contracting construction projects in the BRI partners have promoted personnel exchanges, capital flows and technical cooperation, which has strengthened their ties. Such cooperation has also given rise to domestic interest groups that support bilateral relations. For example, local businesses in Southeast Asian countries, who rely on Chinese investment, lobby their governments to maintain friendly policies toward China.¹⁵³

6.3 The BRI and China's Connection with and Position in the Relation Network

Other than economic and developmental functions, the BRI's purpose of enhancing connectivity contributes to China's connection with the rest of the world. Thus, the second mechanism is that the BRI reduces the steps for China to connect other actors in the relation network. Nonetheless, enhancing connectivity not only builds new transport and communication channels but also influences China's position in the network. Therefore, the third mechanism is that the BRI enables China to occupy pivot channels as a key intermediary.

The increasing interconnectedness of policies, infrastructure, trade, and investment has led to a reduction in costs, simplification of procedures, and enhancement of interactions. Firstly, the initiative has enabled China to gain improved access to resources. As a significant developing economy, China relies heavily on imports for the natural resources essential to its growth, particularly energy resources such as oil and natural gas. The BRI has facilitated the collaboration of major energy importers, encompassing nations such as Russia, as well as countries in Central Asia, South America, and the Middle East. The infrastructure and construction projects associated with this initiative align with China's energy requirements. For instance, in addition to land-based pipelines for the transport of natural gas, maritime routes have

¹⁵³ Lu, Gu, and Zeng, 'Does the Belt and Road Initiative Promote Bilateral Political Relations?', 74–76.

also been established, which include the construction, collaboration, and implementation of overseas port projects. Additionally, China's overseas petroleum and gas cooperation has expanded across the entire industry chain, incorporating refining, pipeline construction, and engineering technologies. These initiatives have reinforced China's relationships with the exporters engaged in the initiative.¹⁵⁴

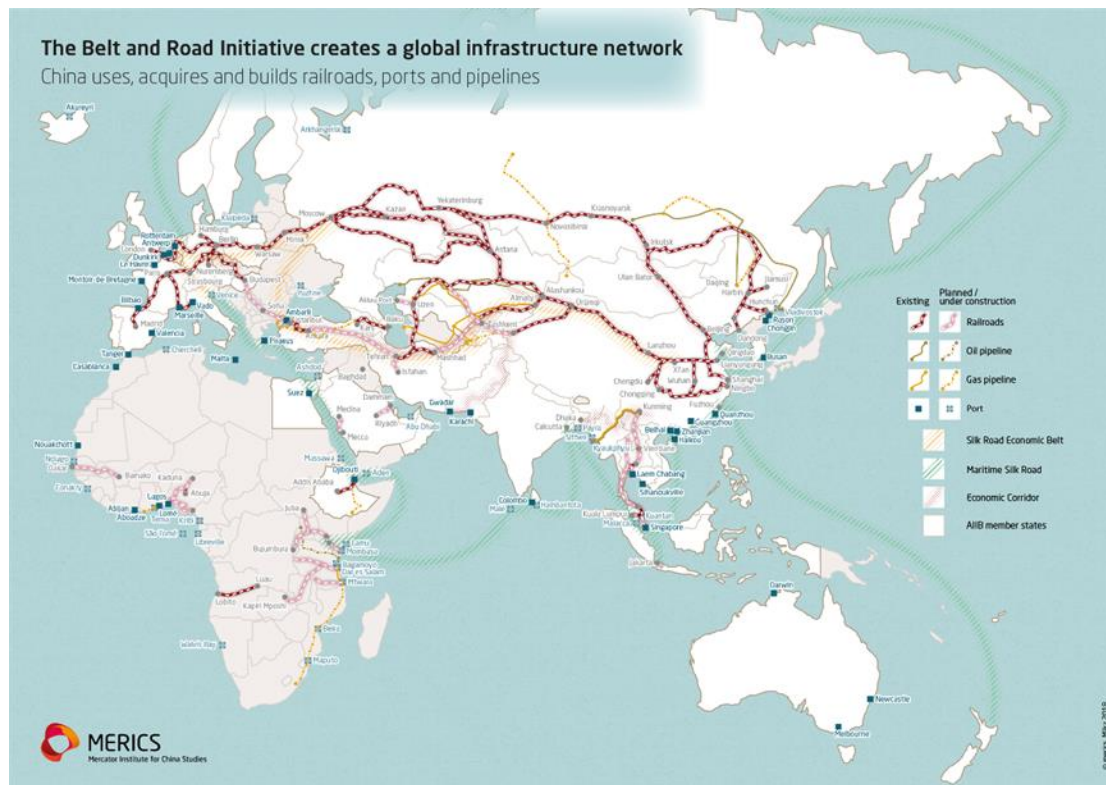


Figure 6.1 Infrastructure Projects of The BRI until 2017¹⁵⁵

Secondly, the BRI has facilitated trade and investment, enhancing the smooth flow of goods, capital, and people. Through the construction and implementation of various

¹⁵⁴ Jianchao Hou, Che Wang, and Pingkuo Liu, 'How to Improve the Competitiveness of Natural Gas in China with Energy Internet and "The Belt and Road Initiative"', *International Journal of Energy Research* 42, no. 15 (2018): 4562–83; Wu Hao et al., 'The Impact of Energy Cooperation and the Role of the One Belt and Road Initiative in Revolutionizing the Geopolitics of Energy among Regional Economic Powers: An Analysis of Infrastructure Development and Project Management', *Complexity* 2020, no. 1 (2020): 8820021, <https://doi.org/10.1155/2020/8820021>.

¹⁵⁵ MERICS, 'Mapping the Belt and Road Initiative: This is Where We Stand' (Mercator Institute for China Studies, 7 June 2018), <https://merics.org/en/tracker/mapping-belt-and-road-initiative-where-we-stand>.

land corridors, aviation routes, maritime pathways, and ports, stable international intermodal transport channels have been established. Consequently, the infrastructure projects associated with the BRI have offered a superior alternative to the comparatively inadequate logistical conditions presently in place, thus enhancing accessibility among partners. As a result, the initiative promotes the seamless movement of productive factors and diminishes associated costs.¹⁵⁶ In addition to infrastructure improvements, the BRI facilitates an overall enhancement across numerous indicators, including market access, customs conditions, e-commerce opportunities, monetary frameworks, and governmental factors, all propelled by streamlined approval processes, standardised protocols, and free trade agreements. Studies indicate that the level of trade facilitation among BRI partners has been progressively increasing, with a gradual reduction in spatial imbalances observed since 2013, particularly within Asia, as well as Central and Eastern Europe.¹⁵⁷

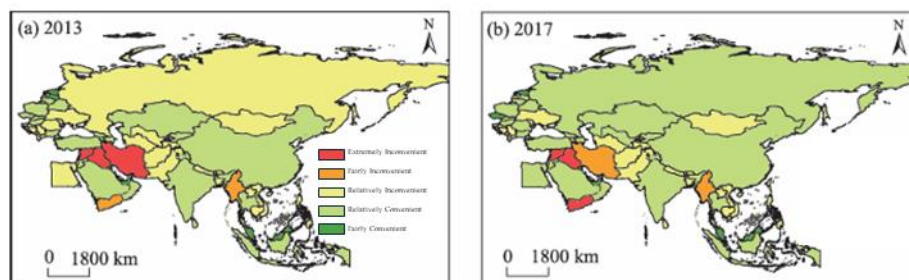


Figure 6.2 Space Pattern of Trade Facilitation along the BRI¹⁵⁸

It seems that China has always been an exporter or importer and stands at either end of the trade relations rather than in the middle, due to its large market and manufacturing sector. However, the infrastructure projects of the BRI have strengthened China's intermediary position, which could influence or occupy pivot

¹⁵⁶ Longcan Zou et al., 'What Is the Rationale behind China's Infrastructure Investment under the Belt and Road Initiative', *Journal of Economic Surveys* 36, no. 3 (2022): 605–33, <https://doi.org/10.1111/joes.12427>.

¹⁵⁷ Zhouying Song and Yang Yu, 'Development Pattern of Trade Facilitation of the Countries along the Belt and Road', *Progress in Geography* 39, no. 3 (2020): 355–66.

¹⁵⁸ Song and Yu, 360, original in Chinese, translated by the author.

relation channels. Although China never lays claim to every port facility in the world, it still has enough influence over many of these key facilities around every ocean through state-led or private investment, construction and mortgages.¹⁵⁹ In addition, corridors and routes under the initiative are well connected with other transport channels of the BRI partners, particularly those that occupy the traffic hub. For example, the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), also called the Middle Corridor, is a multimodal transport route that begins at China and runs through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia and on to European countries. After the Ukraine Crisis, it has become a vital artery for transporting goods from Southeast Asia and China to Europe. In 2024, China launched connectivity projects with Kazakhstan that opened road transport routes to the port of TITR. These projects have complemented China's CR Express and established a comprehensive and multi-dimensional network integrating road, rail, pipeline and maritime transportation. Right now, three of the six international cooperation economic corridors of the BRI have been connected with the TITR, enabling China to wield influence on the crossroads of Asia.¹⁶⁰

In addition to its infrastructure, the BRI has also positioned China as a crucial intermediary within the international supply chain. As elaborated in Chapter 3, this initiative has significantly contributed to the expansion of China's trade in intermediate products. The transformation of its manufacturing sector has enabled China to enhance the value of goods and products markedly, indicating that trade with China encompasses not only domestically produced items but also a substantial volume of international

¹⁵⁹ Clark Banach and Jacob Gunter, 'Mapping China's Global Port Network: On the Backfoot in 2024, but Still Well Entrenched' (Mercator Institute for China Studies, 7 November 2024), <https://merics.org/en/comment/mapping-chinas-global-port-network-backfoot-2024-still-well-entrenched>.

¹⁶⁰ Xinhua News Agency, 'China, Kazakhstan launch new connectivity projects to boost bilateral, regional cooperation', China SCIO, 4 July 2024, http://english.scio.gov.cn/topnews/2024-07/04/content_117290846.htm.

goods that are processed within its borders. Consequently, China's influence on the global network of trade relations has intensified.

6.4 The BRI and China's Relations with Other Key Actors

Despite the fact that China has already established itself as a significant participant in the international system, it continues to confront challenges in managing its relationships with other principal actors at both global and regional levels. At the global level, aside from traditional superpowers or major nations such as the United States and Russia, various IOs also assume crucial roles within the international framework. For example, as the largest comprehensive international intergovernmental organisation, the UN possesses considerable information and resources in the realms of international peacekeeping, constitution-making, public opinion, and global governance. It is capable of setting international agendas, providing public goods and influencing the behaviour of various actors. At the regional level, while it remains challenging for emerging countries to exert substantial influence on a global scale, they are pivotal in the distribution of regional resources, information, and agenda-setting- examples include nations such as India, Saudi Arabia, and Brazil. Furthermore, regional organisations like the ASEAN are instrumental in resource allocation, dispute resolution, and the initiation and advancement of projects. Consequently, even though the United States, the current preeminent superpower, has not engaged in the initiative, the BRI has fortified China's connections with key actors in the intricate web of global and regional relations through its collaboration with international and regional organisations as well as significant regional players.

On the one hand, the participation of international and regional organisations in the BRI not only brings institutional power for China, but also allows China to use their platforms and capacities to promote its own policies, obtain the resources or information it needs and expand its influence. While adding its preferences for action to existing international or regional agendas, referring to the growth of institutional

power, organisations' acceptance of the initiative is conducive to transforming the cooperation projects, concepts and principles into practices, norms and principles generally recognised by the international or regional community. For example, while there is no absolutely prominent regional power in Southeast Asia, ASEAN plays a central role in the region. It is the pivotal actor in coordinating conflicts among parties, maintaining overall regional peace, promoting regional economic integration and organising cultural exchanges. The China-ASEAN (10+1) Cooperation Mechanism has played a significant role in promoting closer ties between China and ASEAN members since its establishment in 1997. The coordination of the BRI with ASEAN further enables the high-quality promotion of the initiative in the region. In 2019, during the China-ASEAN Summit, the two parties signed the China-ASEAN Joint Statement on Synergising the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 and the BRI. The statement encourages China to actively support the development and financing of infrastructure projects in ASEAN member states, expand cooperation in various areas and support the cooperation under existing sub-regional mechanisms.¹⁶¹ In turn, the synergising of the BRI and ASEAN sets guidelines and requests for cooperation between China and regional actors, and enhances China's presence and influence in the regional relations network.

On the other hand, the collaboration between the BRI and regional powers has augmented China's attractiveness, influence, and appeal in these areas. Through the pivotal roles played by regional powers, China facilitates the implementation of the initiative across various regions, transitioning from localised efforts to broader applications. This strategy not only strengthens China's relations with these regional powers but also generates a ripple effect of influence on surrounding entities. These entities demonstrate a keen interest in participating in the initiative. For instance,

¹⁶¹ 'ASEAN-China Joint Statement on Synergising the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025 and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)', 3 November 2019, <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Final-ASEAN-China-Joint-Statement-Synergising-the-MPAC-2025-and-the-BRI.pdf>.

Turkey became the first nation to sign the MoU on cooperation regarding the BRI with China; thirteen of the G20 nations, encompassing G7 members such as the United Kingdom, Germany, and France, as well as emerging economies like Brazil, India, and Saudi Arabia, are founding members of the AIIB; the cooperation under this initiative has furthered the internationalisation of RMB within Middle Eastern powers, including Saudi Arabia. Regional powers frequently serve as developmental models, the central hubs for trade and financial flows, vital transportation and logistics centres, and representatives of culture and civilisation within their respective regions. These collaborations empower China to leverage the strategic positions of regional powers within the networks of regional political, economic, communicative, and cultural relations.¹⁶²

Overall, the BRI has increased and deepened China's bilateral direct relations, reduced the steps and costs for it to connect with the entire network, become an indispensable intermediary, and leverage the regional or international relations through influencing key actors. This has contributed to the growth of China's relational power.

¹⁶² Project team at the Institute of Latin American Studies, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations and Shouguo Yang, 'Strategic Thinking on Promoting China—Latin American Cooperation from the Perspective of the "Belt and Road" Initiative', *Journal of Latin American Studies* 40, no. 3 (2018): 1–19, 154; Gong Ding, 'High-Quality Joint Construction of the Belt and Road Initiative with Medium-Sized Countries as the Pivots: Urgency and Feasibility', *Journal of Eurasian Economy*, no. 5 (2023): 90–106, 126.

Conclusion

Power represents a perpetual pursuit for all actors within the international system and constitutes an indispensable topic in IR research. However, in contrast to previous centuries, the power pursued by the contemporary international community transcends mere force and material resources. Consequently, the study of power has become more comprehensive and nuanced. The exploration and understanding of power in modern IR literature have evolved from the material strength emphasised in classical realism, to the structural dimensions addressed by neorealism, to the institutional and economic influences identified by neoliberalism, and subsequently to the discourse and knowledge examined by constructivism. Nevertheless, prior research has often concentrated on a singular dimension and lacks a thorough consideration of the multiple levels of power, as well as an examination of the diverse types of actors in today's international society. In response, contemporary scholars are employing a multi-dimensional network perspective to reintegrate power, the fundamental concept of this discipline, into IR studies in the context of globalisation.

Traditionally, power is defined as the probability that an actor within a social relationship will be able to impose its own will despite opposition, irrespective of the underlying basis. This definition facilitates a four-dimensional understanding of power: Who possesses power? Within which Types of social relationships does power operate? What underlies the foundation of power? How is power expressed? In essence, existing research can be reclassified according to the dimensions of subject, level, source, and approach. Power may be exclusive to state actors or possessed by non- state actors; it can be utilised to control the actions of others in interactions or to influence the identities of others in their constitution; it may be material or intangible; and it can be exerted directly or diffusely.

However, as situations continue to develop in this era, emergent phenomena necessitate a more comprehensive understanding of power. Drawing upon Susan

Strange's classification of power in IPE and the categorization of power in global governance as presented by Barnett and Duvall, alongside the distinctive perspective of the Chinese School, this paper formulates a new taxonomy featuring six types of power, which correspond to the four levels of power.

Firstly, substantial power refers to the material strength derived from sources such as population, military forces, economy, and technology. Secondly, judgmental power highlights the capacity to evaluate or judge the actions of other actors based on the guidance and interpretation of international discourse and norms. Thirdly, institutional power pertains to an actor's capabilities to control or dominate the agenda or rule-making processes within institutions. Fourthly, positional power concerns the position or status of actors within the international structure. Fifthly, conceptual power reflects the ability to create and modify international knowledge, ideas, and concepts, thus facilitating the dissemination of ideology and values. Lastly, relational power indicates that an actor is deemed powerful if it has developed broader and deeper relational circles and network connections with more significant and influential entities.

Overall, this framework considers both state and non-state actors, material and intangible resources, interactional and constitutional relations, as well as direct and diffuse influences. Consequently, it provides a panoramic perspective for analysing international phenomena. The rise of China is one of the most influential processes in international relations in recent years. Following decades of development, China's emergence in comprehensive strength serves as the primary driving force behind the current power shift among nations. The aforementioned framework presents a viable approach for an exhaustive analysis of China's emergence.

However, it remains essential to adopt a specific perspective. Despite the rise of China being a broad process, its achievements in economic development are particularly noteworthy. Since the 1980s, domestic reforms and external opening-up have catapulted China to become the second-largest economy. In recent years, confronted with challenges both domestically and internationally, the government

under President Xi has undertaken a series of measures to mitigate the decline in China's growth. Among these measures, the BRI stands out as the overarching framework for China's contemporary opening-up and international cooperation. Over the past decade, despite facing criticism and obstacles, the BRI has proven to be successful and productive for China. Beyond its domestic benefits, it continues to drive China's economic growth, fuelled by opening-up, trade, and investment, while simultaneously promoting the transformation and upgrading of China's manufacturing sector. Moreover, the initiative has notably influenced China's presence within the international system, including from the perspective of power.

Based on the framework established in this article, the initiative provides a pragmatic platform for the multidimensional development of China's power. First, through infrastructure projects, as well as trade, foreign investment, and industrial cooperation, the BRI has increased the trade volume and investment scale between China and participating partners, thereby laying a robust foundation for economic growth and productivity enhancement, thus augmenting its substantive power. Second, China has actively exported institutional rules and agendas through emerging multilateral mechanisms pertinent to the BRI, as well as through its active participation in existing international organisations and their reform, thereby strengthening its institutional power. Third, in the transformation of the GVC, the BRI has enabled China to gradually evolve from being a major producer to occupying a core position within the structure, thereby reinforcing its structural position and amplifying its positional power. Fourth, China has promoted its cultural, developmental, and cooperative concepts through international platforms, successfully countering criticism and slander while simultaneously influencing the policies and agenda-setting of other actors, thereby enhancing its judgmental power. Fifth, by relying on multilevel public diplomacy, cultural exchanges, and media cooperation, the BRI has bolstered the global dissemination of Chinese discourse and values, which may influence the identity of other actors, thereby shaping a new understanding of China's discourse power and thus

reinforcing its conceptual power. Finally, through a multilevel relational network comprising bilateral, regional, and international cooperation, China has established extensive and stable relations with partners involved in the BRI, thus enhancing its relational power.

However, as China's power expands, so do the criticisms and concerns. China's ambitious initiative has been perceived as a tangible manifestation of its threat, as it seeks to utilise infrastructure, investment, trade controls, and cultural penetration to augment its influence in various regions. Conversely, China's ascent to power is viewed as benign and presents opportunities to the world rather than a challenge to hegemony. This perspective aligns not only with China's historical assertions but also with several International Relations indicators and theories. Haugaard introduced an indicator for normatively evaluating and assessing power, wherein he reconsiders the four dimensions of power, asserting that the normative legitimacy of power is determined by whether it operates as positive-sum and mutually empowering rather than zero-sum and exploitative.¹⁶³ According to this criterion, in summary, China's power growth through the BRI across all dimensions reflects a positive-sum logic and is undoubtedly normatively justified. Firstly, the initiative emphasises co-construction, sharing, mutual benefit, and win-win outcomes, promotes long-term coordination of developmental needs, and subsequently enhances China's capability for empowerment on a global scale. Secondly, within the cooperative framework established by the initiative, the principles of consultation, equality, and empowerment are generally adhered to in order to prevent the instrumentalization of other actors as resources or vassals. Simultaneously, China has endeavoured to establish a relatively inclusive global governance institution and structure, seeks to institutionalise and normalise developmental dividends, and provides a viable pathway to universal justice.

¹⁶³ Haugaard, 'Rethinking the Four Dimensions of Power'.

In summary, the BRI, as China's primary platform for foreign engagement today, has facilitated the enhancement of China's power across all dimensions and illustrates its attempt to achieve a benevolent transformation from material power to normative power. With the ongoing evolution of global governance challenges and shifts in power dynamics, further quantification of the contributions from each type of power growth, along with a comparative analysis from the perspective of the BRI partners, will enhance the understanding of how the initiative influences China's power dynamics, refine and improve the taxonomy of power presented in this article, and offer both theoretical and practical references for constructing a more equitable and sustainable international order.

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