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## **The Belt and Road Initiative as a Public Diplomacy Project and the EU**

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# MASTER THESIS PROJECT

## The Belt and Road Initiative as a Public Diplomacy Project and the EU

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>	2
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b>	3
<b>1. Introduction</b>	4
<b>2. China, Europe and the modern day Silk Road</b>	7
2.1 The Chinese position	7
2.2 The Belt and Road Initiative	9
2.3 Manifestation of BRI on the European continent	11
2.4 European Response	12
<b>3. Theoretical Framework</b>	13
3.1 Public Diplomacy as a concept	14
3.2 The Pathways of Connection	18
3.3 Theoretical foundations	19
Table 1 Overview of the Pathways	19
3.4 Public opinion	19
3.4.1 Rooted in Realism	19
3.4.2 Attraction	20
3.4.3 Benefit of the Doubt	21
3.5 Relationship Dynamics	21
3.5.1 Rooted in Liberalism	22
3.5.2 Socialization	23
3.5.3 Direct Influence	24
3.6 Public debates	25
3.6.1 Rooted in Constructivism	25
3.6.2 Agenda Setting	26
3.6.3 Framing	28
3.7 Conclusion	28
<b>4. Methodology</b>	30
4.1 Research design and methodological approach	31
4.2 Data Collection	34
4.3 Operationalization of Concepts Pathways of Connection	35
4.3.1 Public opinion	35
Attraction	35
Benefit of the Doubt	36
4.3.2 Relationship Dynamics	36

Socialization	36
Direct Influence	37
4.3.3 Public debates	37
Agenda Setting	37
Framing	37
Table 2 Operationalization and Procedure (Sevin, 2017, p. 66)	38
4.4 Data Analysis	39
4.5 Conclusion	39
<b>5. The impact of the BRI in the EU</b>	<b>40</b>
Table 3 Explanations for BRI	40
5.1 Public opinion	41
5.1.1 Attraction	41
5.1.2 Benefit of the Doubt	43
5.2 Relationship Dynamics	44
5.2.1 Socialization	44
5.2.2 Direct Influence	45
5.3 Public debates	46
5.3.1 Agenda Setting	46
5.3.2 Framing	47
5.4 Conclusion	47
<b>6. Conclusion</b>	<b>49</b>
6.1 Research Summary	49
6.2 Target audience	50
6.3 Limitations	50
6.4 Recommendations for future research	51
<b>7. REFERENCES</b>	<b>51</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Overview of the Pathways	19
Table 2. Operationalization and Procedure (Sevin, 2017, p. 66)	38
Table 3. Explanations for BRI	40

## 1. Introduction

How does the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a vessel for public diplomacy affect the European Union's (EU) implementation of its foreign policy? This thesis investigates the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a public diplomacy project on the Sino-EU relationship, by looking into the effects of the BRI on EU foreign policy, using the *Pathways of Connection framework* introduced by Sevin (2015).

The BRI is an initiative spearheaded by China, aiming to establish a global infrastructural network connecting China and Europe, among others. The scale and the depths of this project imply far reaching consequences for populations in countries hosting activities or enterprises functioning within the BRI network. For the EU, this implies an externally initiated attempt to integrate the Chinese and European markets, opening pathways for larger scale exchanges of goods, services and peoples. Due to the opportunities and competences possessed by the EU to be involved in the shaping of the realisation of the BRI, it becomes interesting to observe the extent to which domestic publics are responsive to the ambitions set out by the BRI. It has been observed that China's strategy in nurturing EU cooperation has been a bottom up approach where bilateral agreements have been made with respective European countries. Historically, Sino-European relations have been exposed to friction due to what has been perceived as incompatible political differences.

Scholarship additionally shows that these differences have been a source of turbulence in the Sino-EU relation for the last decades. According to some, the BRI offers China opportunities to use more coercive methods of representation of their interests, and are therefore an additional cause for concern for the EU, who speak of debt-diplomacy. Debt-diplomacy refers to the practice of countries that loan money to receiving countries to then use that loan as leverage in negotiations in order to pursue their interests. The relationship between China and the EU is therefore complex, intricate and multidimensional (Fox & Godement, 2009, p. 1). It is popular food for thought of politicians, the corporate world and academics. For over half a century, a variety of scholarly disciplines have offered insights into the Sino-European relationship. This contribution respectfully leans on existing knowledge presented by scholars of Political Science, Public Administration and Diplomacy Studies, aiming to further the academic dialogue in aspiration of knowledge that these fields are engaging in. Diplomacy scholars like Nye, Melissen, Zaharna and Sevin have made valuable contributions to the academic debate relating to the importance of studying public diplomacy with an emphasis on diplomatic practice rather than political theory. Though this approach comes with

many theoretical complications and challenges, as it tries to ‘observe the unobservable’, these scholars remain committed to the ability of such approaches to capture what conventional theoretical lenses may overlook, thereby yielding precious new insights (Sevin, 2015). Academic interest in the impacts of the BRI is gaining momentum as the project continues taking steps expanding and realising its ambitions. Whilst economic, logistical and political impacts continue to be studied using more conventional approaches, most of these works focus primarily on either political or corporate actors and look upon the impact in terms of tangible consequences. Public diplomacy is described as a tool to influence the actions of political actors (Sevin, 2015, p.). Previous studies largely leave open the question of how the BRI impacts the EU and its member-states in terms of public diplomatic relations with China.

Narrowing down the object of study within the boundaries of the BRI allows for a singular relevant case study with the potential of offering meaningful insights on the continuously transforming (public) diplomatic relationship between China and the EU. Research approaching the BRI as a public diplomacy project is in its infancy, and stands to benefit from a broad approach casting a big net, offering preliminary perspectives with suggestions for future inquiries. This thesis will make a considerable effort to address the aforementioned research question by applying the *Pathways of Connections Framework* using process tracing as a method. The theory has been coined by Efe Sevin (2015) in a paper on the difficulties of measuring the impact of Public Diplomacy within social sciences (p. 562). In a book titled *Public Diplomacy and The Implementation of Foreign Policy in the US, Sweden and Turkey* Sevin (2017) further proceeds to elaborate on the framework, applying it in three different case studies involving the US, Sweden and Turkey. Chapter three dedicates itself to further stipulation of the specificities of this framework and the concepts relevant to its execution. The framework offers a broad scale approach that allows to document the impact of public diplomacy projects in diverse yet relevant areas, attempting to ‘observe the unobservable’ through the creation of an “inclusive framework that situates public diplomacy in a political and international environment by connecting its communication aspect with plausible impacts on foreign policy” (Sevin, 2015, pp. 262-263). Sevin’s framework is based on four assumptions relevant to this research. The first is the ‘logic of practice’ (Qin, 2020, p. 166; Sevin, 2017, p. 68). It implies that to understand the impact of a public diplomacy project, approaching it through the lens of practitioners is crucial (Sevin, 2017, p. 68). Second, the framework assumes a causal mechanism between public diplomacy practice and the success of public diplomacy projects (Sevin, 2017, p. 68). The third assumption is that the causal mechanism can be observed through the application of the framework (Sevin, 2017, p. 68). The

final assumption is that of the ‘relevance of the context in which public diplomacy is practised for the analysis, the structure and the outcome of public diplomacy projects’ (Sevin, 2017, p. 68).

After a brief introductory section into the topic and the research question, relevant contextual information will be presented in chapter two on the background of Chinese foreign policy, the BRI and the positioning of the EU within that context. The chapter begins by elaborating on the development of Chinese doctrine in the past decades, the impact of the coming to power of Xi Jinping and the platform for change he introduced. Following that is an introductory section on the Belt and Road Initiative as a whole with a concise illumination of the mission and vision driving the initiative. The chapter proceeds by narrowing down to the European context and informing the reader on the manifestation of the BRI on the European continent with EU members. The chapter closes with a section on the dynamic created by the BRI and the European response to it.

Chapter three will establish a robust theoretical framework through which the findings of this research will be interpreted. It will present a concise yet detailed literature review on diplomacy scholarship in order to further justify the interpretation of public diplomacy, as it is understood within the context of this thesis. In the second subsection of the second chapter, the pathways of connection framework will be briefly elaborated on, after which a justification for the choice will follow.

Chapter four is fully dedicated to the methodology that is holding this academic work together and aims to justify the use of research techniques and operationalize the relevant concepts that have been elaborated on in the theoretical framework. It also establishes the methods of data collection, units of analysis and speaks about relevant elements of validity and reliability in the context of this research design.

Chapter five is dedicated to the application of the theoretical framework on the case study of the BRI in the EU and presents the results of this application. Every separate element of the Pathways of Connection framework is discussed separately, presenting the findings in each subcategory of the three main branches through which the framework assesses the impact of public diplomacy efforts. After, the chapter continues with observations through a relational perspective in order to establish the dual approach that was intended in the theoretical framework. A separate section holistically discusses the findings that were presented in Chapter five, with attention for the implications and some comments on how the findings relate to existing literature as well.

The seventh final chapter initiates with a brief summary of the thesis, revisiting key

elements and findings prior to drawing some conclusions that derive from the analysis. It identifies the target audience of the work, discusses limitations and concludes with recommendations for future academic work.

## **2. China, Europe and the modern day Silk Road**

The following chapter provides background information relevant for the context within which to place the substance of this research. An effort has been made to incorporate and remain sensitive to the substantial differences in culture, political climate and the prominent value and belief frameworks between China and Europe as these differences are deemed to significantly contribute to the trajectory of the Sino-European diplomatic relations. As western society is relatively unfamiliar with the drivers of Chinese governing, this chapter initiates with a subsection on the philosophy inspiring Chinese foreign policy choices. Subsequently the substance, proportions and bounds of the BRI in its entirety is discussed to promote a deeper acquaintance of the reader with the initiative. The chapter then proceeds to introduce the manifestations of the BRI in the European context, which is finalized by a section discussing implications of the Chinese presence in the EU.

### 2.1 The Chinese position

Consistency in international relations is an elusive concept. Rarely do big powers maintain their status long enough for consistency to be achieved internally, let alone externally (Corbetta, Volgy & Rhamey, 2013, p. 304). This enigmatic task is further complicated by the addition of bilateral and multilateral relations. Dyads are put to the test as the low likelihood of them experiencing one event the same way varies their willingness and own opportunity to act. Yet, since the end of the Cold War, “China has commanded more status recognition than its capabilities would warrant” (Corbetta, Volgy & Rhamey, 2013, p. 297). This achievement is greatly attributed to Xi Jinping’s commitment to foreign policy consistency, which has awarded China with notable esteem among allies and adversaries, big powers and small powers, and democracies and authoritarian regimes alike.

The 1990s were a decisive and transformative period for Chinese foreign policy. The United Nations (UN) failed to act definitively in the Rwandan civil war and in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the breakup of Yugoslavia, resulting in horrific crimes against humanity.



After these failures, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) went to the UN Security Council and proposed a military intervention in Yugoslavia. China and Russia vetoed NATO's proposal. NATO intervened regardless with cluster munitions, ignoring the absence of approval (International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, n.d.). This was a pivotal moment for the Eurasian divergence from the West. Moscow remembers the unilateral bombing campaign as a dismissal of Yugoslav sovereignty led by US geopolitical interests under the guise of humanitarian intervention. Beijing recalls the NATO bomb that hit the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, killing three Chinese citizens. To China, the moral of the story was clear: some are more equal than others. The Chinese leadership learned to distrust the international order and fear partisan Western retribution.

Remembering the dramatic events of Tiananmen Square in 1989, Deng Xiaoping left future Chinese leaders with the admonition that China should adhere to the *Tao Guang Yang Hui* doctrine (Ferdinand, 2016, p.941). In other words, China should keep a low profile, or as the direct translation advises: 'hide one's light and nourish oneself out of sight' (Zhongying, 2020, p.3). Consequently, the use of No's, or *bu's* (不), guided much of Chinese foreign policy, resulting in a norm of non-interference and non-intervention (Zhongying, 2020, p.5). Deng's *Tao Guang Yang Hui* guided Hu Jintao throughout the early 2000s; the only noteworthy divergence being a more visible assertiveness as a global economic power through Hu's implementation of the 'peaceful rise' narrative (Zhongying, 2020, p.8).

With the arrival of Xi Jinping as the President of China, 2012 marked a new era in Chinese foreign policy. The *Xin Xing* (新型), or 'new type', doctrine unofficially replaced *Tao Guang Yang Hui* by substituting the prefix *no* with *new* and posturing the most important foreign policy principle of all: "a community with a shared future for mankind" (Zhongying, 2020, p.11). Put simply, this principle contends that considering the interdependence and interconnectedness of the world, all countries should work together on initiatives that will bring about mutual and personal benefit. The most obvious and commonly cited example of this is the Belt and Road Initiative, which China hopes will foster cooperation, peace, and development.

China is implementing its *Xin Xing* doctrine to foster bilateral economic cooperation on a global scale. The EU is promoting institutional, societal and economic reform to propagate its liberal and democratic values. Though both bring their respective governments greater spheres of influence, there is an important distinction to be recognized: the EU's economic cooperation is conditional while China's is not. The EU and its member states will not engage

in economic partnership with states deemed unethical, primarily as it relates to human rights. However, China's offer of economic cooperation is not bound to any value-based contingencies, making it an attractive offer for (semi) non-democratic regimes.

## 2.2 The Belt and Road Initiative

The previous section has provided a substantive cultural, historical and doctrinal base making the foundation for contemporary Chinese attitudes towards foreign policy and their strategic choices in relation to the Western establishment and the EU. The following paragraphs aim to briefly yet sufficiently introduce the Belt and Road Initiative and its implications to further build the contextual framework at the foundation of this thesis.

In 2013, during a visit to the Nazarbayev University of Astana in Kazakhstan, president Xi Jinping introduced the ‘‘Silk Road Economic Belt’’. Merely a month later, at the Economic Leaders Meeting of the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC), ambitions for establishing a ‘‘Maritime Silk Road’’ were revealed, unveiling the full scale of the project otherwise known as ‘‘One Belt, One Road’’, or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Leandro & Duarte, 2020, pp. xi - xii; Rolland, 2019; Yang, 2018, p. 497-498). The BRI introduces the aforementioned Chinese doctrine of *Xin Xing*, revealing renewed attitudes towards their economic and political approaches to regions relevant to Chinese interests (Yang, 2018, p. 498; Yu, 2018, p. 223). From a diplomacy perspective the BRI has been described by scholars as ‘‘an assemblage of constantly changing policy settings that accommodates various economic and political interests’’ (Jiang, 2022). Apart from diplomatically reaching out to government actors in Europe, Chinese actors have also made considerable efforts to engage with foreign publics in order to promote their national interests in the world (Jia & Li, 2020). The BRI is a large-scale policy project that has far-reaching consequences for host countries that partake in it, by shaping tangible elements like infrastructures and employment opportunities, in addition to shaping domestic policy to a certain degree (Rolland, 2019). The realisation of this initiative is dependent on host country cooperation in addition to collaboration efforts with domestic companies. Therefore, for the BRI to be welcomed, support from and cooperation by the domestic populations of host countries are not a soft requirement. This requirement reiterates the importance of successful public diplomacy, as it may make the difference between a cooperative attitude and one of distrust.

The BRI aims to increase the collaborative and infrastructural interconnectivity and

integration between countries and peoples by nurturing economic cooperation and improving both maritime and overland infrastructures between several parts of the world (Nordin & Weissmann, 2018; Skala-Kuhmann, 2019, p. 144; Yu, 2018, p. 224-225). The initiative aims to improve the movement of goods, services, financial means, information, technology and people by lowering obstructive thresholds and improving or enabling improvement of relevant infrastructures (Rolland, 2019). Loosely inspired by the historical silk road, the scale of the BRI encompasses the Asian, African, European and South American continents and surrounding waterways, crossing the Chinese Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean and relevant domestic waterways such as the Suez Canal (Rolland, 2019). In the strife for realisation of this project, China committed to making vast investments in a network of foreign ports, railroads, roads and pipelines (Nordin & Weissman, 2018). For example, China has aided in the funding and construction of the Angren-Pap railway in Uzbekistan, and aided in the construction of central Asia's longest railway tunnel, the Kamchik Tunnel (Barrow, 2016; *Belt and Road Initiative - Project Overview*, n.d.). China has additionally had part in the construction of national and transnational railroads in Bangladesh, Kenya, Thailand, Nigeria and many other Asian and African countries (*Belt and Road Initiative - Project Overview*, n.d.).

The BRI has been met ambivalently by the international community, the EU in particular (Jiang, 2022; Rolland, 2019). While some countries embrace the opportunities presented by foreign investments, others tend to view the initiative with suspicion, anticipating far reaching domestic policy demands by China in return (Grieger, 2018; Jiang, 2022; Skala-Kuhmann, 2019, 147). Therefore the willingness to commit to the BRI and engage in deep economic cooperation and integration varies greatly as it is perceived to imply a substantial growth of China's influence in the Eurasian and African regions (Gabusi, 2019, p. 96; Rolland, 2019). The primary concern of challenging entities is that the ability of China to offer Chinese solutions to regional and global problems challenges the international political structure and is cause for concern as the influence of other powers within those regions falls in decline through the creation of a 'sino-centric order' (Rolland, 2019; Skala-Kuhmann, 2019, 147).

The Belt and Road Initiative has outgrown the realm of ambitious projects as it has become an umbrella term encompassing an enormous undertaking. To ensure the provision of a clearly delineated academic inquiry and safeguard the quality of the intended contribution the following section will further elaborate on aspects of the BRI that are deemed of explanatory value to this research project. Due to the incredible scale of this project it has been deemed appropriate to narrow the focus to the elements of the BRI that hold relevance to the

Sino-EU public diplomatic relationship. More specifically, the following section will elaborate upon BRI activities in Europe and the reception these activities received.

### 2.3 Manifestation of BRI on the European continent

Previous sections have established that the coming to presidency of Xi Jinping was accompanied by a doctrinal change in Chinese attitudes to foreign policy. The new *Xin Xing* doctrine allowed for more externally oriented foreign policy and offered opportunities for deepened cooperation efforts with countries within the Chinese spheres of interest. The doctrinal changes crystallized and manifested in the development of the Belt and Road Initiative, perceived by some as an opportunity, and by others as a threat. As mentioned before, the ambitious project stretches over many continents, including Europe. This section informs more deeply on the manifestation of the BRI on the European continent and the invoked responses of the EU as the local power within whose spheres of influence this region falls.

The 16+1 forum was launched in 2012 as a “cross-regional cooperation platform based on traditional friendship and shared desire of all the participants for win-win cooperation and common development” (Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, 2021). This platform has strengthened bilateral relations between China and Eastern European participants. Cooperation covers “economy and trade, culture, education, youth exchange, agriculture, tourism, science and technology, health, think-tank exchange, and sub-national cooperation” (Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, 2021).

China’s increasingly active presence in central and eastern Europe is representative of its *Xin Xing* doctrine. China holds annual summits with eleven EU member states and five Balkan states to increase mutual cooperation on infrastructure, advanced technologies, and green technologies (Hillman & McCalpin, 2019). These summits are called the 16+1 format, or the China-CEEC (Central and Eastern European Countries), and allow China to make bilateral agreements with participating states in the format of a multilateral forum.

The EU has deemed this initiative “highly competitive in nature”, noting Central and Eastern European Countries’ (CEEC) exports to China are significantly less than Chinese exports to CEECs (European Parliament, 2018). However, in 2014 Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang stated CEEC exports to China have grown much faster than Chinese exports to CEECs (Pepermans, 2018, p.185). The European Parliament (2018) highlighted that some Chinese

infrastructure initiatives have been set back by the EU's strict norms and regulations. The 2008 Eurozone debt crisis forced all CEECs to look outside the EU for economic stability in the form of financial investment (Pepermans, 2018, p.185). China claims to offer exactly that. The diplomatic implications of the BRI and 16+1 are an improved Chinese reputation through cultural events and diplomatic summit dialogue with cooperating officials (Pepermans, 2018, p.198). China has successfully combined economic statecraft and soft power to achieve its goals of bilateral partnership, while simultaneously circumventing the rigid regulations of multilateral cooperation with the EU. The following section discusses the implications of the presence of an international economic initiative spearheaded by China on European soil.

#### 2.4 European Response

After the introduction of the intentions and the contemporary crystallization of the BRI, attention shall be brought onto the narrower element that is the Sino-European (diplomatic) relationship and the impacts of the BRI thereupon. Taking into account existing preconceptions of the actors involved towards one another is important for the aforementioned reasons that the understanding of their nature ought to significantly contribute to our understanding of the BRI and its implications as it tries to find its way into Europe.

As altruistic as the goals of BRI may sound, the European Union's (EU) reception of China's *Xin Xing* doctrine is not so certain. The EU was founded as an economic union after the Second World War, with the hope that economic interdependence might mitigate the likelihood of future conflict. Modern EU institutions and competences were legitimised throughout the 1990s, as European powers turned inward to transform their economic union into a supranational global power. Once operational, the EU directed its foreign and security policy largely at the Balkan region, replacing NATO units in former Yugoslavia with EU peacekeeping operations (European Union, n.d.). One year later in 2004, the EU grew by 10 new countries, mostly from Central and Eastern Europe, in a second phase of enlargement. To become a member state of the EU, states must meet strict economic, institutional, humanitarian, sustainability, and policy benchmarks (European Securities and Markets Authorities, n.d.). The EU has heavily invested in developing these capacities in the Western Balkans, with Albania, the Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia granted candidate country status as of 2022 (European Commission, n.d.). Under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the EU instils missions and operations to "promote peace and security where needed,

providing stability and building resilience in fragile environments” throughout Europe, Africa, and Asia (European External Action Service, n.d.).

Europe is vital to China in the context of the BRI as the initiative aims to connect the markets of Asia and Europe by establishing a consolidated and solidified, multidimensional infrastructural network. Considerable efforts have been made by both parties to this relationship to establish friendlier relations, nurturing a foundation for the BRI to flourish in. China has many pre-existing bilateral partnerships with European countries, both those that possess EU- membership, and those who do not, establishing bona fide relations offering potential for further cooperation (Grieger, 2018; Skala-Kuhmann, 2019, p. 145-147). The EU heavily criticizes the Chinese approach of reaching out to individual Member States they have pre-existing relations with, accusing Beijing of using a ‘divide and conquer’ strategy by not approaching the EU directly (Gabusi, 2019, p. 100-101).

It is apparent that the EU struggled issuing a unified response to the commencement of the BRI. Many European countries appear suspicious of Chinese intentions, describing the initiative as a ‘geopolitical strategy aimed at achieving global dominance and rewriting global rules’ (Skala-Kuhmann, 2019, p. 147). The BRI would be a ‘direct threat to Europe’ because China gained ownership of a considerable amount of immovable goods such as ports and companies within European countries. Increased Chinese influence in neighbouring countries such as Turkey and Egypt is similarly perceived as problematic by Brussels, whilst non engagement with these parties seems off the table, potentially leading to economically undesirable outcomes.

As China builds bilateral relations with eastern EU member states, the EU faces a challenging dilemma involving ethics and competition. Now that it has been established that China and the EU are bumping foreign policy elbows, the following chapter concerns itself with the theoretical map used in the attempt to answer the central research question concerning the impact of the BRI as a public diplomacy project on EU foreign policy

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

This chapter further elaborates on key concepts within the theoretical framework coined by Sevin (2015), the *pathways of connections*. This thesis does not engage in theory building, it rather views the theoretical approach as a tool to generate inferences offering a broader understanding of the BRI as a public diplomacy project and the impact it has on the Sino-EU

diplomatic relations. First, conceptualizations of the concepts *public diplomacy*, *relational public diplomacy*, *impacts* and *practice* are provided in order to clearly narrow down which phenomenon is being studied through the case study of the BRI. This section is followed by the conceptualisation of the *Pathways of Connection* framework by going over the different areas and their corresponding indicators identified by Sevin (2015), *Public Opinion*, *Attraction*, *benefit of the doubt*, *relationship dynamics*, *socialisation*, *direct influence*, *public debates*, *agenda setting*, and *framing*.

### 3.1 Public Diplomacy as a concept

The inception of the term *public diplomacy* can be traced to the Cold War. The term was used to describe the efforts made by the United States and the Soviet Union domestically and abroad to convince populations of the ideological superiority of each superpower (Hunt, 2016, p. 18). Nevertheless, an overwhelming majority of scholarly contributions towards the academic debate surrounding public diplomacy took place in recent decades, as the concept and practice gained momentum (Sevin, 2017, p.19). The active adaptation of public diplomacy strategies by countries in the pursuit of representation of national interests is increasing, indicating that such public diplomacy projects do pay off (Sevin, 2017, p. 8).

A universal definition or description of public diplomacy does not exist (Sevin, 2017, p. 19 ). One stands to wonder whether the concept would benefit from a universal definition, as a variety of scholarly disciplines tend to offer different perspectives highlighting different elements encompassed within public diplomacy. It is therefore important scholars clearly define their interpretation of the term prior to engaging with the topic (Hunt, 2016, pp. 18-19; Sevin, 2017, p. 19-21).

In a world of modern communication technologies increasing the opportunity for individual actors to participate in public diplomacy activities, it stands to reason that public diplomacy becomes increasingly important (Hunt, 2016; Sevin, 2017, p. 22). Recent scholarly contributions argue that public diplomacy activities do not have to originate from state actors alone, but also include non-government actors such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) and corporations (Hunt, 2016, pp. 19; Sevin, 2017, p. 21). Scholars such as Nye (2008) additionally emphasise that in order for foreign policy projects to be well received, public opinion, allowing actors to explain the ways in which recipients of the foreign policy benefit from embracing it, is important (p. 101-103).

Within communication studies public diplomacy is narrowly tied with the attempt of public diplomats to control a certain narrative by engaging with the media and presenting a frame of understanding beneficial for the agency the diplomat represents (Frenley & Michaud, 2006, p.218-219). Therefore, communication studies claim that there is a struggle by public diplomats to take control over the framing of an issue (Entman, 2008, p. 100). For these reasons a trend to study social media platforms can be identified within the field of public diplomacy studies. Alternatively, the study of face-to-face public diplomacy in which representatives speak directly to foreign publics in their respective countries is also identified as a very effective public diplomacy strategy by communication scholars (Smyth, 2001, p. 428). Public Diplomacy is seen as a tool through which actors project their interests onto an international platform (Castells, 2008). Public Relations (PR) scholars make the observation that there is a convergent trend between public diplomacy and public relations scholarship and practice, as both fields use similar methods and pursue similar outcomes (Signitzer & Coombs, 1992, p. 139/146). This trend invites further study into public diplomacy by the field of PR scholarship as well. Further contributions isolate image cultivation as an important goal of public diplomacy, as well as the effective management of relationships in pursuit of the establishment of beneficial networks (Sevin, 2017, p. 24; Yang et al., 2012, pp. 662-663). PR scholarship has a tendency to approach public diplomacy as a marketing tool used by states in a similar fashion as by corporations, for image cultivation, or branding (Sevin, 2017, p. 25).

Yet Diplomacy scholarship is also a field within its own right. The field emerged as a response to practitioners not resonating with theoretical models founded on IR grand theories, often criticizing IR for straying too far from the empirical world in their work by failing to grasp the practice of diplomacy. Adler-Nissen (2015) argues in her article about this discrepancy between IR scholarship and diplomatic practice that IR is too focused on substantialism, causing it to neglect the importance of relations (p. 284). To compensate for this shortcoming, the field of diplomatic studies has a tendency to solely focus on interstate relations, as diplomacy is seen as ‘‘ the art of negotiating agreements between sovereign states’’ by means of a regulatory tool, making diplomacy in whichever format a crucial component of International Relations (Nicolson, 1963; Watson, 1991). Classic diplomacy scholars such as Nicolson (1963) and Watson (1991) view diplomacy as strictly a state function where diplomats engage in the monitoring of developments abroad and the representation of domestic state interests. More modern academics within the field of diplomacy studies have embraced that diplomacy has surpassed the business of state to state communication, and stresses the fragmentation of responsibilities as diplomacy becomes a decentralised practice in which



relations are maintained across state and non-state actors (Kelley, 2010).

Nevertheless it is important to review IR perceptions of public diplomacy as well. Prior to the 1990s, diplomacy as a practice was largely ignored or left out of consideration due to a perceived irrelevance until Joseph Nye started publishing extensively about the benefits and importance of soft power (Sevin, 2017, p. 27). The end of the Cold War necessitated a shift of focus away from hard power tactics towards soft powers associated with persuasion (Nye, 1990, p. 154-155). IR theories such as realism, liberalism and constructivism hold interpretations of power that are difficult to juxtapose with the study of diplomacy (Sevin, 2017, p.27). Realist conceptions of power focus primarily on hard power mechanisms involving tangible resources enjoying primacy in their status as contributory elements in the security of national interests (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). A valuable contribution to the field of public diplomacy is the conceptualization effort assigning public diplomacy as a behaviour inherent to state actors trying to communicate to actors outside of their domestic realm to mobilise foreign resources in the pursuit of their interest representation (Nye, 2008, 95).

Engaging in activities where an entity seeks direct contact with foreign publics in an attempt to advance its own agenda is also referred to as *new public diplomacy*. New public diplomacy takes into account the adjustments that practitioners had to undergo in the new millennium. The decline of public trust in media outlets required a more hands on approach, stipulating the necessity for actors engaging in public diplomacy to have conversations with recipient publics abroad in order to accomplish its foreign policy objectives (Melissen, 2005, pp. 17-18 ; Zaharna, 2007). The primary difference between 'new' and 'old' diplomacy is the direction of communication. Whereas in the past it was common for public diplomats to convey messages towards a certain public using the means at their disposal, the nurture of dialogue appears to have gained a more prominent position within the activities of practitioners. Public Diplomacy requires a two way street, where recipients in turn have access to the diplomatic actor issuing the message (Sevin, 2017, pp. 33-34). Additionally, another significant change is the inclusion of non-state actors as producers of public diplomacy projects. It has become accepted within the literature and practice that non-state actors also engage in public diplomacy and share an important function in the propagation of national interests in the contemporary world (Cull, 2008). Public Diplomacy has grown beyond the simple communication function and in contemporary times also encompasses the task to establish and maintain relationships with foreign publics (Melissen, 2005). Apart from the change of function from broadcasting to a relational role, the consequences of globalisation must also be borne in mind. As mentioned before, there is a significant increase in actors as well as states engaging in public diplomacy.

It can be observed that for example China is actively trying to change its image in foreign lands by rebranding itself as a benevolent and cooperative nation seeking mutually beneficial opportunities and cooperation (Kurlantzick, 2007, p.1-11). Noteworthy is that scholarship additionally reiterates that the nature of public diplomacy of small and middle powers differentiates from that of big powers (Batora, 2006).

This research investigates the impact of the BRI as a public diplomacy project on the European Union. For the purposes of this academic contribution a working definition is required that takes into account the changes public diplomacy has undergone in recent decades. Therefore, the starting point is that public diplomacy is a communicative tool for governments and non-state actors to engage with publics in foreign states (Plavsak, 2002). It identifies the goal of public diplomacy to be the transformation of smart communication into influence through soft power and good relations (Nye, 2008, p. 94/103-104). Additionally, public diplomacy aspires to foster a certain degree of mutual understanding between the receiving country and the domestic population (Entman, 2008, p. 100; Signitzer & Coombs, 1992, p. 137). This work acknowledges that public diplomacy activities have significantly broadened beyond the classic frame of public diplomacy being a one-sided broadcasting function (Sevin, 2017).

This thesis makes an effort to take a relational approach to resonate with practitioners in the diplomatic field. Additionally, relational public diplomacy allows for a broad horizon due to its inclusivity, increasing the permissible scope of projects to subjugate to research. And finally, relational public diplomacy resonates with the Chinese efforts to re-establish relations and rebrand these relations in accordance with a new Chinese image and doctrine (Kurlantzick, 2007).

Studying public diplomacy using multi-disciplinary approaches is broadly encouraged throughout academia by scholars such as Hayden (2009) and Gilboa(2002). Other scholars argue that new public diplomacy is an interdisciplinary practice at its foundation, relating to marketing, PR and politics (Sun, 2008). A multi-disciplinary approach in terms of theoretical framework is therefore deemed appropriate to accommodate an inquiry into the broader scales of the impact of the BRI on EU foreign policy when interpreting the BRI as a public diplomacy project. Sevin (2017) even deems a multi-disciplinary approach necessary in order to appropriately analyse a concept that ‘‘expands over a variety of disciplines’’ in order to accommodate the answering of research questions and the activities they address without depending on scopes and depths presented by the reach of a discipline (p. 36). Taking into

consideration the aforementioned, this research will use the working definition that is proposed by Sevin in order to maximize compatibility with the theoretical framework (2017, p. 37).

Public Diplomacy within the context of this thesis refers to

*‘The communication-based activities of states and state-sanctioned actors aimed at non-state groups in other countries with the expectation of helping to achieve foreign policy goals and objectives’ (Sevin, 2017, p. 37).*

Now that the interpretation of *public diplomacy* as one of the core concepts of this research has been established, this chapter will further elaborate on the *Pathways of Connection* framework that was designed for the purpose of studying the impacts of public diplomacy projects.

### 3.2 The Pathways of Connection

The *Pathways of Connection* framework proposes a conceptual framework enabling a large-scale inquiry into the impact of public diplomacy projects on foreign policy of recipients (Sevin, 2017). The framework aims to provide a theoretical infrastructure through which scholars can address questions pertaining to causal mechanisms between public diplomacy projects and foreign policy outcomes (Sevin, 2017, p. 51). The framework identifies three ‘areas of plausible impact’ on the basis of the three IR theories: realism, liberalism and constructivism, thereby attempting to marry a relational public diplomacy approach with IR grand theory. Subsequently, within each area, two pathways, differing in scope, are identified. Each pathway establishes a set of expectations, adherence to which establishes a degree of explanatory power of activities in this pathway. By positioning the framework within the context of grand theories of IR, the designer of this framework aims to demonstrate the scope and the explanatory potential of the framework. This befits the aspiration of the author of this thesis to take a multi-disciplinary approach in search of a (partial) answer to the question central to this inquiry. The following subsections shall discuss each pathway, their connection to IR theory and how they contribute to achieving foreign policy goals.

### 3.3 Theoretical foundations

Assumptions pertaining to the foundational functioning of politics are required to tackle a related research problem. To fulfil this requirement, the *Pathways of Connection* framework presents three areas of impact, each of which is inspired by a grand theory in IR. These areas are operationalized by the identification of two distinct pathways within each ‘area of impact’ and the distinction of criteria to consider activity within each branch as having passed the threshold of ‘impactful’. Table 2.1 visually represents all elements of the conceptual framework. The following three subsections further elaborate on the pathways, public opinion, relationship dynamics and public debates, all of which are deemed relevant in contemporary public diplomacy.

*Table 1 Overview of the Pathways*

<i>Area of Impact</i>	<i>Broad Impact Pathway</i>	<i>Narrow Impact Pathway</i>
Public Opinion	Attraction	Benefit of the Doubt
Relationship Dynamics	Socialization	Direct Influence
Public Debates	Agenda-Setting	Framing

### 3.4 Public opinion

#### *3.4.1 Rooted in Realism*

Realism embodies one of the most prominent schools of thought within IR theory. The primary assumption within all subcategories of realism is that the international system is characterized by anarchy, as above the state there is no authority and the state system possesses no order (Mearsheimer, 2016, p. 60). Realism additionally assumes a permanent level of distrust and hostility between states, as the absence of authority requires states to maximise their power to be able to protect their existence and interests through relative dominance (Mearsheimer, 2016, pp. 61-63). The assumption that states require relative dominance over their neighbours implies that every agreement becomes a zero-sum game, where benefits for another party come to the detriment of the yielding party. This leads to states being fundamentally self-interested, and afraid of each other (Mearsheimer, 2016, pp. 61-62).

A realist lens does not allow public diplomacy to target foreign audiences because

individuals are not acknowledged as relevant actors within world politics. Realist scholars have established a role for the public within the context of foreign policy on the basis of the Almond-Lippman consensus (Holsti, 1992). Rather than pursuing the exercise of influence of the public as a goal, the public is instead merely seen as a tool through which to influence the behaviour of the state (Holsti, 1992; Sevin, 2017, p. 53).

The ‘nation brand’ concept coined by Simon Anholt (1998) additionally establishes that the reputation of a state has far reaching impacts on the international performance of companies native to that state. Therefore, following the insights offered by realist scholarship, it can be inferred that increasing the degree to which a state is liked improves its relative power position by increasing competitive capacities of the economy. This makes it easier for states to achieve foreign policy goals as states are influenced by their publics to act a certain way. This theoretical debate leads to the first area of impact, *public opinion* (Sevin, 2017). The most important understanding within the context of public opinion is deemed to be favorable opinion. This can be accomplished by the manifestation of one of two situations discussed in the following subsections, creating two pathways to favourable opinion (Sevin, 2017, p. 56).

### 3.4.2 *Attraction*

The first pathway refers to the pathway of *Attraction*. This pathway discusses the situation where a foreign public may be impressed by or drawn to a practitioner country by its appealing features, such as ‘culture, domestic values, and foreign policy’ (Nye, 1991). These three concepts, labelled ‘soft power assets’ by Nye (1991), make up the three sources of attraction in Sevin’s (2017) framework (p.57). The general purpose of these soft power assets is to reach foreign policy goals through attraction and persuasion (Nye, 1991).

The first cultural asset refers to foreign publics being impressed by cultural elements of practitioner countries (Sevin, 2017, p. 57). An example is the increased global popularity of the output of the Korean entertainment industry (Sevin, 2017, p. 57). The transformative success of this industry fosters recognition of Korean cultural assets on an international platform, improves public opinion and has even led to observable cases of increased bilateral economic and social relations, as in the case of Malaysia (Cho, 2010, pp. 9-13). The second asset known as ‘domestic values’ identifies a causal mechanism for favourable foreign public opinion as a manifestation of established respect for past international policy choices or achievements. An example would be the EU being able to leave centuries of war behind and reshape itself into a pillar of international cooperation and integration (Sevin, 2017, p.57).

### 3.4.3 *Benefit of the Doubt*

The second pathway to favourable opinion is the *benefit of the doubt pathway*, or ‘public diplomacy as a trust building exercise (Sevin, 2017, p.58). This pathway relates to a strategy aiming to achieve a more favourable public opinion by emphasising the goodwill between states while stipulating overlapping interests. The aforementioned is done to nourish trust by fostering mutual understanding and the feeling of being in the same boat (Sevin, 2017, p.58). The goal of generating such sentiments is to increase the likelihood the practitioner country is given the benefit of the doubt by the public of the country receiving the public diplomacy engagement on the basis of precedent (Sevin, 2017, p. 58). An example is mentioned by Entman (2008), who argues that in the context of U.S. foreign interventions, the U.S. enjoys the benefit of the doubt concerning its intentions on the domestic front, yet lacks it in the countries on the receiving end of U.S. foreign interventions.

The difference between attraction and the benefit of the doubt as sources that may influence the behaviour of states is in the scope they represent. When speaking about the pathway of attraction, a broader positive impression is invoked through larger mechanisms such as respect for one's cultural heritage or foreign policy. Alternatively, when activities are placed within the pathway of the benefit of the doubt, one often speaks of a narrower fluctuation with the goal of achieving a slight improvement in the public opinion tipping the scales in favour of the practitioner country.

## 3.5 Relationship Dynamics

In the previous subsection it has been established that the pathway of attraction leans on the realist school of thought, acknowledging the manipulation of foreign publics to gain their approval as a power tool capable of aiding states in the representation of their foreign policy interests. The pathway identifies two mechanisms through which to achieve favourable public opinion in foreign lands. In the broader sense favourable public opinion is reached by appealing to soft power assets such as the prominence of one's cultural heritage. In the narrower sense favourable opinion is reached by tipping the scales using overlapping interests and shared experiences to create a sense of camaraderie and receive the benefit of the doubt. The second

area of impact concerns itself with relationship dynamics and is rooted in Liberalism, offering two additional pathways to reach foreign policy goals, *socialization and direct influence*.

### 3.5.1 *Rooted in Liberalism*

Although Realism possesses certain dominance in academic thought on international relations, Liberalism is a strong contender for an alternative approach to world politics. The school of thought gained momentum in the 1990s, in light of the fall of the Soviet Union and differentiated from Realism by its belief in progress through pacifism and cooperation (Doyle, 2016, p. 82). Liberalism therefore argues states can forego their zero-sum position when they believe that cooperation can create more value (Doyle, 2016). Nye and Keohane considerably contribute to the liberalist school by, in contrast to realists, acknowledging the contributory importance of non-state actors to international relations, referring to them as transnational actors participating in transnational relations (Keohane et al., 2014).

Transnational actors can for example be corporations, NGO's or churches, organizations possessing spheres of influence transcending borders. This however, does not suggest a decline in the primacy of the state as an actor on the international forum as Liberalism is in agreement with Realism about states being the most important actors in international relations (Keohane et al., 2014; Sevin, 2017, pp. 54-55). Acknowledging the relevance of transnational actors gives rise to new obligations, as it becomes necessary to communicate, negotiate and coordinate policy efforts with them (Sevin, 2017, pp. 52-55). A Liberalist lens sees public diplomacy as an activity rooted in communication between practitioners of public diplomacy and selected transnational actors in possession of spheres of influence deemed relevant for the foreign policy agendas under the care of the diplomacy practitioner (Sevin, 2017, p. 55).

Furthermore, acknowledging the relevance of transnational actors translates into two new responsibilities for public diplomats. The first being the necessity to build relations with transnational actors and the second is to allow for a degree of mutuality in these relations in the form of mutual collaborative efforts and two-way communication (Zaharna, 2007). Public diplomacy then transforms from a tool to manipulate the actions of foreign states through public opinion to a tool aiming to establish valuable relationships and networks involving both state and non-state actors, aiding in the achievement of foreign policy goals (Sevin, 2017, p. 55). This theoretical foundation provides the breeding ground for the second area of impact,

*Relationship Dynamics* (Sevin, 2017).

Relationship dynamics respond to the liberalist expansion of actorship within the context of international relations beyond that of state actors to include non-state actors such as individuals, civil society and corporations (Sevin, 2017, p. 59). To enable documentation of the way public diplomacy projects influence relationship dynamics, the two pathways introduced in the following two subsections have been developed, *socialization* and *direct influence* (Sevin, 2017, 59). Similar to the previous area of impact concerning favourable public opinion, the two pathways to reaching foreign policy goals differentiate in the scope of activity they address.

### 3.5.2 *Socialization*

The *socialization* pathway to reaching foreign policy goals focuses on the management of relationships. The pathway stipulates that increased interactions in a variety of platforms can lead to an improvement in the relationship between practitioner country and host country. It argues that engaging in public diplomacy can cause both increased moments of communication and change the general perception at the foundation of the relationship (Sevin, 2017, p. 59).

Theoretically, the socialisation pathway is broadly inspired by social network analysis and relational public diplomacy as it emphasises the importance of approaching public diplomacy practice through a relational lens, rather than substantive as is common in political science. By this it is meant that rather than simply focusing on the product of relationships, the relationship itself is also seen as a valuable output worthy of studying as relationships between international actors are what shapes the international environment in the first place (Adler-Nissen, 2015, p. 285; Sevin, 2017, p. 59). The sustenance and construction of relationships, therefore describes another function of ‘new’ public diplomacy (Melissen, 2007; Zaharna, 2010).

Broadly speaking, this pathway refers to public diplomacy efforts that describe joint activities through which people and parties can come together and interact, which offers opportunities to employ strategies towards these relations in favor of foreign policy goals (Sevin, 2017, p. 59). An example would be the Erasmus project, where students from all over the world visit each other on exchanges that are organized through a collaborative network, allowing for the building of transnational relationships by fostering ties between organisations, knowledge and people. The socialization pathway aims to achieve foreign policy goals with



the broad approach of further intertwining the relations between foreign peoples through joint endeavors and activities. By increasing the platforms offering possibilities for foreign populations to communicate and build positive relationships, a bridge can be built towards a more favourable relationship between states due to increased familiarity. This pathway, similar to the pathway of attraction, casts a wide net attempting to involve as many actors as possible in the construct of a communication exchange framework. The alternative pathway within the area of impact concerning itself with relationship dynamics, namely direct influence, differentiates from socialization in the both directionality and scope of the public diplomacy activities. The following section will elaborate on this pathway, discussing the selection of and appeal to specific actors for their access to decision making facilities or their resources.

### *3.5.3 Direct Influence*

*Direct influence* refers to the activity of forming ties with elites within a host country, to mobilize that connection in the pursuit of foreign policy goals. A common strategy within this pathway would for example be lobbying activities towards powerful actors (Graham & Kelley, 2009). Apart from separating itself from the pathway of socialization by its differences in directionality and scope, this pathway differentiates from the others in the framework by targeting specific groups individuals as recipients of public diplomacy rather than civil society (Sevin, 2017, p. 60). There is an ongoing debate within scholarly contributions on whether or not lobbying efforts can be considered public diplomacy given its focus on policy-makers (Melissen, 2005). This pathway reiterates that maintaining good relations with relevant elites is also a strategy to achieve foreign policy goals (Sevin, 2017, 60).

This subsection has established that relationship dynamics, rooted in the grand political theory of Liberalism, acknowledge non-state actors or transnational actors as relevant participants in the manifestation of international politics and international relations. It is therefore necessary for practitioners of public diplomacy to cast a wider net and actively occupy themselves with relationship building and management in pursuit of their foreign policy agendas. This area of impact introduces two strategies to achieve foreign policy goals, socialization and direct influence. Socialization concerns activities where practitioners aim to improve the relations between peoples as a whole or larger groups within societies through public diplomacy projects increasing opportunities for communication exchanges. The alternative pathway to achieve foreign policy goals is through the direct influence of relevant actors using for example lobbying strategies by approaching and building relations with

decision-making elites. The following section introduces the reader to the third and final area of impact after public opinion and relationship dynamics, namely public debates. This final area of impact is rooted in the third pillar of political theory, constructivism and addresses attempts to achieve foreign policy goals by influencing what foreign publics speak about and the prominent perspectives on such issues.

### 3.6 Public debates

Having elaborated on the pathways to achieve foreign policy goals rooted in the areas of impact of public opinion and relationship dynamics, what remains is the area of impact concerning itself with public debates. Living in a world that is undergoing a rapid technological revolution, information is available at the press of a button. The overwhelming availability of information and the access of actors to the public has never before exceeded its contemporary scale and complexity. This contemporary reality presents states with both challenges and opportunities, as it shall be demonstrated that access to information, and the way in which this information is presented, matters.

#### *3.6.1 Rooted in Constructivism*

Constructivism is founded on the assumption that the organization of the world and international relations is socially constructed (Wendt, 2016, p. 93). Wendt (2016), a prominent constructivist scholar, disagrees with realist and liberalist scholarship who consider it self-evident that international relations is rooted in a condition of anarchy. Instead, Wendt argues that the actors in international relations have agency in the interpretation of the international condition by ascribing meaning to it, and that by doing these actors themselves construct precedent and create the appropriate ways to act in given situations (Wendt, 2016, pp. 109-110).

Constructivism rests on the primary assumption that realities within international relations are not determined by tangible resources and power-dynamics, but are dependent on the meaning that is assigned to them within the international forum. Norms, values and identities are seen as social constructs, very much contingent on the eye of the beholder (van Ham , 2010). We have seen that Realists see public diplomacy as a tool to manipulate states using their populations, whereas liberalists approach public diplomacy as a relationship

building tool. Public diplomacy within the context of constructivist thought can be seen as a tool through which social constructs can be interpreted and new interpretations can be communicated. Through the manipulation of meaning, practitioners can foster public debate within host countries and alter conventional narratives to better fit and promote the practitioner countries' foreign policy goals (Gilboa, 2008).

The area of impact rooted in public debates focuses on prominent narratives fostered through framing and the manipulation of issues reaching public agendas. This focus is accommodated by assumptions rooted in constructivist thought, primarily that social realities are socially constructed. The implications are that control over the information output generated by a variety of mediums and the context these mediums choose to provide in relation to an issue, influence the construction of norms and values of civil society (Sevin, 2017, p. 61). Two pathways enabling the achievement of foreign policy goals are identified to enable the study of this area of impact. *Agenda setting*, an activity describing an exercise of control concerning the selection of issues that are deemed relevant by civil society, and *framing*, the activity of manipulating the meanings and associations in connection to an issue present on the agenda of civil society. Whereas the previous areas of impact (public opinion and relationship dynamics) concerned itself with the 'who' to address and involve in the process of representing foreign policy interests, this area primarily concerns itself with the mechanisms at the foundation of the 'how' to address and involve actors in the process of representing foreign policy interests.

### 3.6.2 *Agenda Setting*

Agenda setting as a subject of study carries one central assumption related to a phenomenon commonly known as bounded rationality. Bounded rationality describes the cognitive capacities to grant attention to issues as a limited resource impeded by conditions of uncertainty, the finite nature of time and incomplete information (Zahariadis, 2016, p. 88; Kingdon, 1984, pp 90-92). Bounded rationality forces us to prioritise issues on an importance scale, favouring the issues higher on the established list of priorities (Zahariadis, 2016).

Classical agenda-setting scholarship in an international context has a tendency to focus on political agendas of decision makers, largely ignoring the role of the public agenda as their influence on international organizations is deemed too limited. Alternatively within the context of public diplomacy, the target audiences find themselves within the bounds of their respective

states and possess the capacity to, to a certain degree, influence the political agenda in these respective states by allowing the public agenda to shift the priorities in the political agendas of decision makers. Therefore, agenda setting in the context of this framework assumes that media platforms have an impact on public debates, as has been demonstrated by McCombs and Shaw (1972) who showed a high correlation between the issues that received attention in the media and the issues common in public discussions amongst voters. This culminates in the underlying expectation that issues that receive more attention in the media, will be considered more important by the larger public (Gilboa, 2008, p. 21).

Public diplomacy projects have different strategies for goal-achievement within this pathway. For example, international media platforms offering information favouring the practitioner states can be set up in accessible languages to broadcast alternative narratives in host countries. Alternatively, more local events can be organized with the goal to draw the attention of local media outlets instead. Furthermore, a non-mediated and more direct approach can be employed by for example introducing topics in conversations, at public speaking opportunities or during events (Sevin, 2017, p. 61). To provide a more concrete example, A practitioner country could organize a public debate on the importance of global economic cooperation in their respective embassies in host countries to foster the salience of the topic within the local community.

Agenda Setting describes the activity of states where the perceived importance of issues is manipulated through means of either mediated or unmediated communication in order to increase the influence and prominence of this issue within the public debates of foreign countries (Sevin, 2017, pp. 61-62). However, merely generating salience for an issue and leaving it at that, leaves the risk of the public interpreting these issues in a manner unfavourable to the practitioner country on the basis of for example pre-existing impressions fed by prominent local narratives. For this reason, agenda setting as a broad scale activity is often accompanied by the narrower activity of framing, which is the alternative pathway in this area of impact. Framing encompasses the ability of practitioner countries to present their favoured interpretation of an issue to a public, so that the salience achieved by agenda setting extends itself to the preferred narrative of practitioner countries. Yet, as shall be elaborated further upon in the next subsection, framing can also be employed to already salient topics within public debates, by offering alternative interpretations of facts.

### 3.6.3 Framing

Whereas *agenda-setting* concerns itself with drawing attention to certain issues with the goal of generating discussion, *framing* occupies itself with the lens through which an issue that already enjoys a certain level of priority is to be seen by the public. In short, agenda setting addresses the ‘what’, framing addresses the ‘how’ by manipulating the pieces of information that are relevant to the perception publics have of an issue to control the way it is received (Entman, 1993). The impression of an issue that is drawn by information outlets through the selective representation of facts influences the way in which recipients of that information will be inclined to view it (Sevin, 2017, p. 62). Examples of successful framing of issues includes the American frames of the ‘War on Terror’ and the ‘War on Drugs’, that were used to successfully ascribe legitimacy in the minds of Western publics to the American interventions in a multitude of countries. The presented narrative led them to the understanding that the US was simply eliminating an illegitimate threat to Western societies (Sevin, 2017, p.62).

As mentioned before, it is important to understand that agenda-setting and framing describe different processes that can follow each other but are not necessarily mutually inclusive. Issues being on the public agenda imply that there is media attention directed towards them, whereas the question about framing asks in what kind of light an issue is portrayed. Public diplomacy in this area of impact occupies itself with manipulating the respective lens through which an issue is shown when presented for public debate (Sevin, 2017, p. 63). The pathways in this area of impact have the capacity to change foreign policy by influencing the salience of issues relevant to practitioners in host countries, indirectly pushing policy-makers to respond to this salience (Sevin, 2017, 61-63).

## 3.7 Conclusion

This chapter offered a relatively concise discussion of the relevant theoretical concepts and the way in which these concepts are interrelated. The complexity of the theoretical framework warranted elaboration and clarification of a large quantity of separate elements. After the provision of theoretical context, public diplomacy within the context of this academic contribution has been established to be the communication-based activities of states and state-sanctioned actors aimed at non-state groups in other countries with the expectation of helping to achieve foreign policy goals and objectives (Sevin, 2017, p. 37). Thereafter, a theoretical

framework incorporating assumptions rooted in Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism has been presented to substantiate the theoretical approach selected for this thesis. Consequently, this chapter proceeded to enter into more detail identifying the three areas of impact within which activities take place with the aim to influence the behaviour of recipient countries.

Within the area of public opinion, two pathways were distinguished by which foreign policy interests can be represented. Rooted in Realism, this area aims to use the public opinion in host countries as a tool to affect their respective states. The first pathway to foreign policy change is the pathway of attraction, where practitioner countries aim to appeal to host countries using their soft power assets such as cultural heritage, domestic values and foreign policy. The second pathway within this area of impact is narrower in nature and encompasses an appeal to the population of host countries with the goal of receiving the benefit of the doubt by their publics.

The second area of relationship dynamics on its turn distinguishes two pathways offering possibilities to represent practitioner state foreign policy interests. This area is rooted in Liberalism, and expands the realist understanding of actorhood by applying it to non-state actors (transnational actors) with relevant spheres of influence that often stretch beyond the borders of the state (ex. churches). Liberalism further acknowledges the importance of nourishing and maintaining relationships with such actors, as they hold a degree of contributory power in the establishment of the condition of the international order. The first pathway within this area is the pathway of socialization, discussing activities aimed at increasing the interconnectivity between publics in practitioner and host countries, thereby affecting the existing relationship. The second pathway within this area is the pathway of direct influence. Whereas in the pathway of socialization, entire populations are included in the scope of the activities, the pathway of direct influence entrenches its focus on actors within host countries that possess relevant competences or present access to decision making institutions.

The final and third area of public debates, in contrast to the previous two areas, focuses on the generation of meaning through the manipulation of host country public agendas and the way in which the respective populations in these countries view issues deemed relevant by practitioner countries. Rooted in constructivism, the central assumption within this area is that social realities are socially constructed by the meanings the actors involved ascribe to certain phenomena, circumstances, events or issues. The first pathway in this area concerns itself with agenda setting, that is, the manipulation of the topics that enjoy a high degree of priority within public debates and therefore get a lot of attention by the public. The second pathway concerns itself with framing, which describes efforts by practitioner countries to influence the

understanding of an issue by foreign publics, impacting the narrative that will be promulgated within public debate.

The following chapter will elaborate on the methodological approaches relevant to this contribution, as the scale and depth of the theoretical framework warrant a disciplined and structural approach.

#### **4. Methodology**

This thesis started by introducing the topic of this research and stating the ambition to investigate the impact of the BRI as a public diplomacy project on EU foreign policy. The introduction was followed by a brief provision of relevant background information, placing the issue at the centre of this inquiry in a broader contextual framework in chapter two. After, chapter three introduced the theoretical lens through which the research question will be approached by offering an introduction to Sevin's *Pathways of Connection* framework by providing a map through the conceptual framework. All that rests prior to engaging with data is an illumination of the methodological approach guiding the research process as methodological choices complimenting the theoretical approach need to be presented and sufficiently justified.

Due to their extensive differences, China and the EU both make for interesting analytical objects with an important role in international relations and the global order. The EU's ambition to present a unitary foreign policy position with all its member-states poses an interesting challenge with regards to the Sino-EU question. The goal of this work is to establish whether a (partial) causal mechanism between China's public diplomacy and EU foreign policy exists. This thesis treats Chinese public diplomacy as the independent variable and EU foreign policy as the dependent variable, but as such is a qualitative work performing an extensive within-case analysis of a single case. In the following paragraphs the analytical means that will be used to address the research question will be elaborated upon.

Some challenges can be identified in measuring the impacts of public diplomacy efforts as no consensus exists on indicators of their success-rate. Scholars seem to be unable to come to an agreement on what to measure and how to measure it in order to present sound outcomes (Sevin, 2017, p.37). Within the frame of the working definition the measurement standard will be narrowly tied with the ability of a project, the BRI in this case, to establish demonstrable foreign policy effects. Such an approach will yield tangible evidence going beyond the mere

output produced directly by the project (Sevin, 2017, p. 38). This is relevant to the case study subjugated to research in this work, as the BRI could arguably be deemed successful due to the projects making up the BRI becoming realised and growing roots within the borders of the EU.

#### 4.1 Research design and methodological approach

Throughout the application of the framework on the case study of the BRI, the method of *process tracing* shall be employed using a qualitative explanatory research design. To further substantiate the use of this method, a brief literature review is presented elaborating on the functions and possibilities offered by it.

We are interested in generating a deeper understanding of a sequence of events that has been manifested by the proliferation of the BRI into the European region. The research relates at its core to the unique phenomenon that is the BRI, warranting within-case analysis as it is impossible to find comparable phenomena accommodating cross-case research. This unicity makes process tracing an appropriate method as it offers possibilities to provide evidence that is otherwise difficult to consider in cross-case situations due to their incomparability (Lowndes et al., 2018, p. 286).

Process tracing is a qualitative tool often used to study qualitative data, fitting for a qualitative case study (Collier, 2011, p.823). In order to keep the scope of the research manageable, the scope of the research is set on developments taking place in the years 2016 - 2021. Given the unknown impact and consequences of contemporary events significantly impacting the world such as the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and other destabilizing events taking place in the world, 2022 remains excluded.

As demonstrated by the designer of the *Pathways of Connections* framework, process tracing presents opportunities to use archival documents such as EU communications or press releases in order to establish whether or not the BRI elicited a response from its EU partner or not (Sevin, 2017, p. 38). Though process tracing is often strongly associated with constructivism, it is simply a combination of tools enabling the identification of evidence of ‘the pressures, incentives, motivations and decision-making calculus in any given instance of action’ in a single-case research design (Beach & Pederson, 2013, p. 2-3; Bennet & Checkel, 2015; Lowndes et al., 2018, p. 88). Process tracing aims to establish a causal mechanism between causes and effects to enable the drawing of inferences about said mechanisms. The method is designed to go beyond the mere establishment of ‘whether or not a relationship exists between



independent and dependent variables’, and is ought to produce evidence offering insights about ‘how’ certain causal mechanisms are brought about (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 1). It allows us to investigate how certain causes bring about certain outcomes, as each step of the alleged ‘causal process’ can be identified and put to scrutiny in terms of its value as evidence of the existence of a causal mechanism (Beach, 2016, p. 463).

Furthermore, scholars have moved to distinguish three variants of process tracing within social science, contingent upon the purpose they serve (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 3). Process tracing can be used as a theory-testing tool in which an existing theory is deduced from the literature and thereafter checks whether a hypothesised causal mechanism is actually represented within the cases it is allegedly identified in (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, pp. 14 - 16). Theory-building process tracing is a tool aiming to construct theories with implied causal mechanisms on the basis of facts present within a selected case (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, pp. 16 - 18). The final variant, which is applicable to this research, relates to process tracing aiming to explain certain outcomes called explaining-outcome process tracing. This variant aims to provide minimally sufficient evidence to explain the occurrence of the phenomenon under study. This variant significantly differentiates from the previous two as the focus does not lie on theory because the approach is appropriately more centred around the case (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, pp. 18 - 21).

Though the research method presents many tools for the aggregation of in depth data pertaining to an investigated phenomenon, it has been on the receiving end of considerable criticism (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 2). In particular, the lack of methodological development translates to the absence of thresholds for valid inferences and the lack of guidelines for appropriate application of process tracing. Additionally, research methods tend to be prone to a set of biases. Therefore, recent scholarship has attempted to further develop the method to ensure it is capable of reaching its full academic potential (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 2). Process tracing aims to eliminate bias in the assessment of evidence by providing standard tests and increase the reliability of the research (Marsh et al., 2018, p. 286). Formal communications, ad verbum or in writing, are deemed to provide insights with regards to the response of the receiving party on the activities of the actor engaging, therefore making them eligible to use as sources of evidence (Marsh et al., 2018 ).

As this thesis inquires about a causal relationship between the BRI as a public diplomacy project and EU foreign policy, process tracing is considered a suitable method to evaluate in depth within-case studies of a single case (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p. 154; Marsh et al., 2018, p.235). As mentioned before, this contribution employs the explaining-outcome

variant of process tracing, as identified by Beach & Pedersen (2013). The aim is to identify evidence specific to the case of the BRI that can explain the policy outcomes of the EU. To achieve this outcome, historical methodology is more or less applied as evidence is sought in available sources, working backwards more or less, attempting to uncover a plausible and sufficient causal mechanism responsible for producing the outcome (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, pp. 169 - 170).

As this method more heavily rests on the choices of the researcher in the search for evidence, further precautions have been taken to prevent bias. This thesis employs (some of the) tests presented by Van Evera (1997) to assess whether or not evidence is valuable for explaining the outcome unique to this case, The *Straw in the wind test*, the *hoop*, *smoking gun* and *doubly decisive test* (pp. 30-32). Beach and Pedersen (2013) identify hoop tests and doubly decisive tests as most appropriate for explaining-outcome process tracing (pp. 123 - 124). These tests determine whether evidence is necessary and/or sufficient in order to contribute as confirmatory evidence for the existence of a causal relationship (Van Evera, 1997, pp. 30-32). The tests determine the levels of uniqueness and certitude of evidence. Due to the general weakness of *Straw in the Wind* tests, it shall be excluded as their primary function is only to affirm broad relevance, but passing this test does not mean evidence is either sufficient or necessary for accepting or rejecting the causal mechanism (Van Evera, 1997, p. 32).

The *Hoop Test* concerns evidence that is necessary to establish a causal mechanism, yet not sufficient on its own. A failed hoop test eliminates the entire plausibility of there being a causal mechanism at work, but a passed hoop test does not provide sufficient support to confirm the existence (Marsh et al., 2018, p. 287; Van Evera, 1997, p. 31). *Smoking Gun Tests* provide sufficient evidence of a causal mechanism being present, but unlike with the hoop test, failing this test does not prove that a causal mechanism is absent either, meaning that the evidence is sufficient but is not necessary (Marsh et al., 2018, p. 287; Van Evera, 1997, pp. 31-32). The final test yields the most powerful outcomes as passing it categorises evidence as both unique and of a high degree of certitude, and that is the *doubly decisive test*. This additionally indicates that flunking it writes off the proposed causal mechanism entirely (Marsh et al., 2018, p. 287; Van Evera, 1997, p. 32).

Another source of criticism towards process tracing is often aimed at the problematic validity of small-N research and, as mentioned before, the researcher playing too important a role in selection of evidence, becoming the independent variable as it were (Peters, 2013, p. 169). This research aims to overcome these challenges by attempting to standardize the process of evidence selection and introducing evidentiary thresholds for the establishment of

explanatory value. Additionally, the strict guidance by theory increases the ability of scholars to reproduce the research and/or apply it to different cases pertaining to the same topic or type of question.

The full potential of process tracing as a tool for research is still very much being explored by academia. The method is undergoing a transformation process whilst its being further delineated and developed by scholars in relevant fields. Though in some ways one may view this method as in its infancy, this does not take away that it has proved to produce valuable insights within social sciences as well as other scientific fields (Marsh et al., 2018, p.287). Alternatively, it adds to the body of existing knowledge through the provision of field jargon through which to approach research problems and enables comparison through application to different cases (Marsh et al., 2018. p. 287).

This subsection aimed to introduce the reader to process tracing as a method, narrow down the specificities of the variant of process tracing used when attempting to answer the research question and to provide a substantive justification for the selection of process tracing. This thesis will employ explaining-outcome process tracing as interpreted and explained by Beach and Pedersen (2013). It does so as the method particularly fits single case studies employing a within-case design with a focus on the case rather than theory. To accommodate the appropriate answering of the research question, a qualitative explanatory research design is used. To generate robust evidence, this research remains guided by the theoretical framework, seeking evidence to establish whether or not respective thresholds are met to indicate the presence of activities that can be categorized under one of the *Pathways of Connection*. The aforementioned serves to increase the ability of other scholars to reproduce the efforts set forth by this contribution. To further eliminate bias, this research employs some of the tests presented by Van Evera (1997), in particular hoop and doubly decisive tests as those are deemed appropriate for the variant of process tracing used for this research (Beach & Pedersen, 2013).

#### 4.2 Data Collection

The collection of observations/data did not proceed randomly, as the process was guided by needs set forth by the extensive theoretical framework central to this research, the *Pathways of Connection*. In the sections above we have established that explaining-outcome process tracing centred on the case of the BRI will be used, increasing the emphasis on the explanatory value of evidence. The scientific principles guiding the data collection process have been narrowed

down to the attempt of identifying the presence of evidence that fits within the theoretical categories that have been distinguished in chapter three. This implies that the research process focused on establishing whether or not the expected evidence that is necessary to establish the presence of the six pathways exists. To stipulate even further and more explicitly, this work is not an exercise of locating supportive evidence. Data collection proceeded through the use of primary sources from accessible archives, such as the archives of EU institutions and Chinese Government websites available in English, that contain documents pertaining to policy responses, communications, press releases etc.

An attempt has been made to avoid the use of secondary sources, nevertheless in some cases the contributions of such sources were justified in terms of access they provided to valuable information, such as for example a large scale measure of public opinion on a related matter. Primary sources additionally enable careful chronological study of a phenomenon and its workings due to careful documentation and the presence of timestamps or incorporated texts providing chronological context. As the EU is identified as the host region for Chinese Public Diplomacy in this academic presentation, primary sources such as EU documents are deemed the most appropriate. In addition, due to the popularity of EU developments within the media, information originating from media sources shall also be inferred to. Table 1 schematically laying out the operationalization of the pathways and the analysis procedure.

### 4.3 Operationalization of Concepts Pathways of Connection

Now that the substantive methodological approaches have been discussed and the modus operandi has been established, offering a framework for operation, this section aims to further crystallize the mechanics of this research by presenting the operationalised concepts relevant for the application of the theoretical framework. The purpose of operationalized concepts is to better inform the reader of the types of information that are observed when in search of evidence to establish whether or not this causal mechanism is present.

#### *4.3.1 Public opinion*

##### *Attraction*

The pathway of attraction is operationalized by looking at the changes in domestic public opinion in host countries concerning the practitioner country. It aims to measure the effects of

soft power mechanisms by seeking out the presence of the aforementioned soft power assets, such as appreciation for culture of the practitioner country, domestic values and/or foreign policy in relation to the practitioner state. Activities within this pathway aim to attract foreign publics to the practitioner country by appealing to them through practitioner state cultural selling points, proliferation of respected practitioner state domestic values or turning attention to respected foreign policy achievements. In order to meet the threshold for evidence, changes in public opinion must be identified by efforts initiated by the practitioner state to come in direct contact with foreign publics or to alternatively reach large parts of host country populations. If China chooses to reach out to populations over mass media rather than reaching out to the population, no further evidence is considered.

#### *Benefit of the Doubt*

The benefit of the doubt pathway seeks to affect the policy outcomes of host countries by appealing to the public in ways that allows for the population to grant the practitioner country the benefit of the doubt. This strategy is mostly deemed appropriate in circumstances where the image of the practitioner country within the host country is rather ambiguous and questioned by the domestic public. Indicators of the presence of this strategy would for example be an attempt to change the framing with which China communicates its interests, suddenly applying emphasis to elements drawing on host - practitioner similarities and positive precedent. This emphasis on mutuality and reciprocity is incorporated in the evidence threshold, therefore if practitioner countries engage in other means of advocacy to achieve their foreign policy goals, that evidence is not put up for further consideration in this pathway.

### *4.3.2 Relationship Dynamics*

#### *Socialization*

Socialization aims to measure whether or not the practitioner country seeks to redefine its role through the creation and maintenance of positive relations with publics in host countries. Examples would be efforts to organize activities within the host country to establish or improve a relationship. The goal of socialization is to achieve increased acceptance and integration by familiarizing the host country populations with the practitioner country and emphasising positive aspects of the relationship. Examples of evidence for activity within the pathway

would be the coming into existence of new objectives or activities within host countries by practitioner countries, broadening the relational efforts. An absence of increased activity within this pathway will exclude the ‘status quo’ activity levels of being considered as having met the evidence threshold.

#### *Direct Influence*

Due to the narrow nature of the direct influence pathway, it can be identified by overt or (semi)covert attempts by practitioners to create and maintain relations with relevant elites that either possess or provide access to decision-making competences or other resources deemed relevant for the pursuit of foreign policy goals of the practitioner country. The evidence threshold within this pathway lies with the identities and positions of the actors with which a relationship is established or maintained, as the focus should be on actors such as policy makers or CEO’s of companies prominent in the targeted regions. Evidence fails to meet the threshold if the target audience of the activities it pertains to is the population as a whole. Exclusivity of approached actors is therefore the particular indicator relevant in this pathway.

### 4.3.3 *Public debates*

#### *Agenda Setting*

Agenda setting describes strategies where practitioner countries attempt to determine, at least to a certain extent, the issues enjoying prevalence in the host countries’ public debates. When in search of evidence, an attempt shall be made to identify the presence or absence of tactics aimed at increasing the priority status of issues considered relevant to the practitioner country to forward their respective foreign policy agendas. The aforementioned can be achieved by clear attempts of injecting new issues into the host region that would otherwise not enjoy any degree of public attention. In the case that a practitioner country chooses to function within the already established public agenda in the region, it shall be considered that the evidence threshold is not met.

#### *Framing*

Framing refers to activities aiming to change the understanding the publics of host countries share due to the dominant narrative in their country by introducing alternative perspectives

through manipulations or introduction of public debates. For evidence within this pathway to meet the evidence threshold, if clear attempts to introduce alternative narratives (or frames) on an issue and foster their prominence can be identified within host countries by practitioner states. It is considered that the evidence threshold within this pathway is not met if the observations in host countries indicate that practitioner countries are comfortable working within the existing narratives and frames pertaining to issues deemed as being of importance to these states.

*Table 2 Operationalization and Procedure (Sevin, 2017, p. 66)*

<i>Pathways</i>	<i>Assumption Contribution to foreign policy change is achieved by changing</i>	<i>Further evidence is looked for if Public diplomacy practitioners prefer to</i>	<i>Further evidence is not considered if Public diplomacy practitioners prefer to</i>
<b>Attraction</b> Public diplomacy projects increase the favorable public opinion towards the practitioner country in the host country	Changing domestic public opinion	Reach large parts of the population	Work in the last three feet over mass media
<b>Benefit of the Doubt</b> Public diplomacy projects change the way the practitioner country's foreign policy goals and objectives are received in the host country	Changing the perception of practitioner country's interests	Focus on mutual interest	Engage in advocacy, promotion, or other self-serving purposes
<b>Socialization</b> Public diplomacy projects redefine the roles of the practitioner country and/or the practitioners	Creating relations and tasks carried out by the host country	Bring new objectives, types of events, and tasks to the country	Continue existing functions, which do not create a new portfolio
<b>Direct Influence</b> Public diplomacy projects communicate with policy elites directly and influence their thinking	Creating access to decision-makers	Establish relations with policy-makers	Reach ordinary people
<b>Agenda-Setting</b> Public diplomacy projects change the issues covered in media and/or discussed in the host country	Influencing issue salience	Introduce new subjects	Work with existing issues/nonissues
<b>Framing</b> Public diplomacy projects change the media coverage of the practitioner country's foreign policy in the host country	Influencing issue discussions	Introduce new ways to look at existing issues	Work with new issues/non-issues

#### 4.4 Data Analysis

Sevins' theoretical framework is rather large in scope, incorporating a multi-disciplinary approach attempting to satisfy requirements set out by three IR grand theories. To objectively analyse data that are subjective in nature, a structured approach to analysis is deemed necessary (Sevin, 2017, p. 63). Sevin attempts to overcome this challenge by suggesting the mechanisms embodied by *context*, *practice* and *theory* to try and standardize the treatment of qualitative data beyond the precautionary measures taken to avoid conventional researcher biases. As has been suggested on several occasions earlier in this work, historical precedent and/or *context*, at least in part, narrate the behaviours of both practitioners and recipients of public diplomacy. *Practice* isolates the actual actions undertaken by both practitioner countries and recipient states, whereas *theory* continues to place the generated information within the previous two mechanisms in the context of the theoretical framework.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

Chapter one provided a brief introduction into the topic and introduced the reader to the research question this study attempts to answer, whereas chapter two provided relevant background information in both a broad and narrower sense in relation to China and the EU. Chapter three provided a concise yet detailed overview of the conceptual framework guiding the search for an answer to the research question and identified the relevant conceptualisations of the concepts.

This chapter offered a concise roadmap of the methodological construction upon which this contribution leans. Section 4.1 introduced the reader to the internal mechanics of the application of the theoretical framework by elaborating on the qualitative explanatory research design, identifying explaining-outcome process tracing as the variant deemed appropriate in combination with a within-case study and elaborating on precautionary measures to avoid biases and increase the validity of this contribution, addressing common criticisms towards process tracing as a method. Section 4.2 elaborated on the employed data collection methods and the identification of appropriate sources, stating that though the focus remained on primary sources the use of secondary sources was not shied away from when yielding valuable evidence establishing the existence of activity within respective pathways. Section 4.3 carefully operationalized all the areas of impact native to the theoretical framework, identifying what constitutes as evidence for activity within the isolated pathways of connections as established in chapter three. Finally, section 4.4 introduced the logic applied to the analysis of information



prior to categorizing the data within the framework, elaborating on the roles of *context*, *practice* and *theory*.

Relevant contextual information pertaining to instances that are to be placed within theoretical context shall briefly be elaborated on in the analysis. The following chapter will present the analysis of the application of the framework to the Sino-EU case. The analysis further includes an assessment of the performance of the BRI as a public diplomacy project within the narrative of all six pathways, after which a holistic discussion ensues tying the explanatory arguments the analysis yields together.

## 5. The impact of the BRI in the EU

The BRI is a very large multi-faceted project that includes various (public) diplomatic spheres. The initiative forwards five foreign policy goals in the forms of intergovernmental policy coordination, improvement of facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and the creation of people-to-people bonds (*Aims of the Belt and Road Initiative*, n.d.). The BRI aims to influence the policy decisions that are made in the countries and regions that host BRI activities and encourage them to further engage in integration practices directed towards Chinese markets (*Aims of the Belt and Road Initiative*, n.d.).

*Table 3 Explanations for BRI*

	<i>Pathway</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
<i>Public Opinion</i>	Attraction	China aims to turn EU public opinion more favourable towards the BRI by reaching out to large parts of the population.
	Benefit of the Doubt	China aims to get the benefit of the doubt from EU populations by shifting the focus towards mutual, rather than national, interests.
<i>Relationship Dynamics</i>	Socialization	China aims to innovatively reach out to EU publics by engaging in new integrative activities allowing for the expenditure of time together.
	Direct Influence	China aims to target and befriend EU decision-making actors in order to

		influence them to take a more favourable stance.
<i>Public Debates</i>	Agenda Setting	China aims to introduce new issues to the public agenda in order to increase their salience and change the issues that are covered in the media.
	Framing	China is trying to change the lens through which the BRI is viewed in the EU by influencing issue discussions and contending alternative ways to look at the issue

## 5.1 Public opinion

### *5.1.1 Attraction*

It has been established that for activities to be categorized within the pathway of attraction, the BRI as a diplomacy project should use public diplomacy to project Chinese soft power assets abroad, to convince local publics to request or accept deepened collaboration with China. Public diplomacy is used to attract by presenting attractive cultural assets, domestic values and foreign policy.

The appreciation of European publics for China, and in particular towards China's foreign policy achievements, is steadily increasing and shows the European public to be more receptive for economic cooperation and deeper integration, despite certain problems with perceptions of China's domestic values (Tucsanyi et al., 2021).

By making serious efforts within the spheres of foreign policies associated with the BRI, China is projecting itself as a responsible power by realising a large quantity of collaborative projects across borders. It established six major corridors for economic cooperation: The New Eurasian land Bridge, the China-Mongolia-Russia, China-Central Asia-West Asia, China-Indochina Peninsula, China- Pakistan and the Bangladesh - China - India - Myanmar economic corridors. The aim of these large-scale projects is to increase the connectivity between the Asian and European Economic Circle (*The Belt and Road Initiative: Progress, Contributions and Prospects*, n.d.).

The reason for China to stimulate the development of infrastructure is, according to

China, the removal of the bottleneck to economic prosperity that is caused by lacking investments in infrastructure (*The Belt and Road Initiative: Progress, Contributions and Prospects*, n.d.). Additionally, as part of its foreign policy ambitions, China has built a variety of transnational railroads in Asia and in Europe to enable easier transport and cooperation (*Belt and Road Initiative - Project Overview*, n.d.). A large quantity of projects successfully manifesting in terms of the construction of railways, roads, ports, air transport, energy facilities and communication facilities can be observed (*The Belt and Road Initiative: Progress, Contributions and Prospect*, n.d.).

Nevertheless, in a large-scale opinion poll (N = 19.673) conducted by the *Central European Institute of Asian Studies* it can observe that the general perceptions of China are overall negative. There are noteworthy differences contingent on characteristics such as native country of the respondents within the sample, as the most negative views are those of Western and Northern European countries, with Southern and and Central European countries holding the middle, and the Eastern European countries being positive about China and the BRI (Turcánti et al., 2021, p. 2). Another observation flowing from the large scale opinion poll is that most general public sentiments towards China have worsened in the past three years. In spite of the aforementioned, the views on trade with China have remained positive, and there are fewer negative sentiments towards China in association to the BRI, in particular in Eastern European countries. The poll concludes that China's soft power in the EU on the basis of their information appears to be very limited.

The poll additionally suggests that though the degree of positive views on China is low overall, the trust in Chinese activities is much higher (Turcánti et al., 2021, 4). The distribution of views between the regions in the EU aligns with BRI activities and suggests a certain level of efficacy of BRI and the 16+1 initiative in improving the public opinion on China in those respective countries. In a briefing to the European Parliament, Gisela Grieger (2021) paints a rather grim EU response to the BRI, she suggests that in this platform China is currently outcompeting the EU, and speaks about the formation of a western alternative to the BRI in response to what she deems to be a fundamentally undermining financial model containing high risks of debt diplomacy and Chinese aspirations to change the structure of regional and international relations (p. 2).

In sum, we can observe that though significant efforts are made by China to achieve a more favourable public opinion through the BRI in terms of promoting soft power assets, the attempts are ill received by EU institutions and Western and Northern European publics. Eastern and Central European regions are the most responsive to the efforts of China, whereas

Southern European countries remain somewhere in the middle. It appears that the domestic values as perceived by the populations of EU countries pose a problem for the Chinese effort to forward their public diplomacy effort in the EU.

### 5.1.2 *Benefit of the Doubt*

The benefit of the doubt pathway suggests that the BRI as a diplomacy project should promote the narrative that China and the EU have similar interests, which can be satisfied through closer cooperation (Sevin, 2017). If public diplomacy efforts signal towards a shared future or mutual interests, benefit of the doubt is applicable to link the public diplomacy to foreign policy.

In the case of China and the BRI there is a clear use of the benefit of the doubt pathway present. In communications, Chinese public diplomacy practitioners refer to the BRI as ‘Originating in China, but belonging to the world’, being ‘oriented to the future and ‘open to all partners’, regardless of cultural heritage or religious belonging (*The Belt and Road Initiative: Progress, Contributions and Prospects*, n.d.). The continuous reference to the BRI being a cooperative alliance with the aim of being low-threshold and indiscriminate in its scope of inclusion builds confidence in this pathway. Additionally, when speaking about the principles of the BRI, reference is made to upholding ‘extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits’. More evidence can be found in speeches by president Xi Jinping, who, for example, during the symposium in 2018 marking the fifth anniversary of the BRI, spoke of ‘bringing benefits to the people’, ‘building a global community’ and ‘a shared future’ (Cultural Exchange Organization of Presenting China to the World, 2018).

Chinese public diplomacy through the BRI appears to be widely signalling the importance of collaboration and equal and extensive negotiation for the purposes of furthering economic cooperation, because of mutual interests towards economic growth and prosperity. Therefore we can conclude that BRI activities experience degrees of success due to the willingness of states and foreign publics to give China the benefit of the doubt. In a factsheet about Sino-EU relations issued by the diplomatic service of the EU, a statement committing to the necessity of economic cooperation and the search for solutions in areas of friction is issued (European Union External Action, 2022). The EU reiterates the importance of collaboration with China due to its role in dealing with global and regional problems (European Union External Action, 2022). Additionally, both the EU and China address the urgent need to deal with global health threats through cooperation on the international platform, echoing the

existence of mutual interests (European Union External Action, 2022; *The Belt and Road Initiative: Progress, Contributions and Prospects*, n.d.).

From these pieces of evidence we can observe that there is a high degree of activity in this pathway, as China's role as a global actor convinces the host countries of the BRI to foster economic relations and give China the benefit of the doubt. The mutual admissions of both the practitioner country, China, and the hosting region, the EU, of the necessity to further cooperation efforts and address global issues together is a strong indicator in support of this pathway as well.

## 5.2 Relationship Dynamics

### *5.2.1 Socialization*

The socialization pathway should see an increasing number of projects initiated by practitioners of public diplomacy in host countries to promote its national interests through the maintenance and creation of a relationship between the actors involved (Sevin, 2017). The pathway makes observations about the efforts of practitioner countries to experiment in their methods of engagement with foreign publics (Sevin, 2017, 165).

A stipulated element of the BRI contains efforts to foster cultural exchanges. China has established many organizations who are tasked with widening the scope of inclusion of these efforts, with limited success in the EU as Greece has hosted BRI cultural exchange events already (*The Belt and Road Initiative: Progress, Contributions and Prospects*, n.d.). Examples include but are not limited to: The Silk Road International League of Theatres, Silk Road International Museum Alliance, Network of Silk Road Arts Festivals, Silk Road International Library Alliance, and Silk Road International Alliance of Art Museums and Galleries.

Additionally, efforts in the realm of education can be identified, as over 200 Confucius Institutes have been established in the EU alone (*The Belt and Road Initiative: Progress, Contributions and Prospects*, n.d.; de Man, 2020). Partially successful efforts are also being made in establishing the mutual recognition of educational degrees (*China-EU Cooperation in Academic Credential Recognition*, 2016). Other efforts in the field of education include the offering of Chinese scholarships for students to attract visits to China. Furthermore, China participates in the EU Erasmus projects fostering student exchange (European Commission, 2018). Increased efforts can also be identified in the tourism sector, cleverly using the attraction

of the historical silk road as a means of promotion (*The Belt and Road Initiative: Progress, Contributions and Prospects*, n.d.).

It becomes clear that there is a large-scale Chinese effort to engage with foreign publics culturally and position themselves as an advocate and organizer of widespread cultural exchange to familiarize foreign publics with China and improve the Chinese standing in host countries. China has made an effort to proliferate Chinese education, culture and tourism by broadening its function as a public diplomacy agent and embracing diverse methods of interaction across fields. China positions itself as a cultivator of cultural exchange through the BRI, thereby attempting to foster and create a broad scale of relationships with foreign publics.

### 5.2.2 Direct Influence

The Direct Influence pathway operationalizes activities associated with the creation of beneficial relationships with state officials in order to promote their national interest through lobbying activities (Sevin, 2017). It is also possible to pursue foreign policy goals by directly approaching key individual actors involved in policy-making (Sevin, 2017, p. 166).

The BRI gives China ample opportunity to come in contact with policy makers of the EU. Not only do the partners hold regular summits to discuss important matters, the involvement of China and the EU on the international forum is deeply integrated, increasing the accessibility of key policy makers in host countries (*China | International Partnerships*, n.d.; *The Belt and Road Initiative: Progress, Contributions and Prospects*, n.d.; Tiezzi & Strangio, 2022).

China's broad search for institutionalized legitimacy of the BRI can be derived from its deep integration with the existing framework of international organizations, whose approval has mostly been received. Additionally, given the economic prosperity of contemporary China, they can afford to hire lobbying firms such as ChinaEU, with the appropriate connections to represent their interests on a more permanent basis (*Corporate Europe Observatory*, 2019).

ChinaEU, situated in Brussels, occupies itself with the representation of the BRI towards EU institutions, in relation to, among others, the digital single market, investment negotiations, as well as the annual China-EU summits (*ChinaEU*, n.d.).

The Chinese lobbying effort additionally reaches policy-makers through the establishment or financing of think tanks such as the Europe-China Forum, the 16+1 Think Tank Network or the Silk Road Think Tank Networks (*Corporate Europe Observatory*, 2019).

Another point of access of the BRI to the EU policy-makers is through consultancy firms, or established Chinese corporations such as Huawei, where professionals with connections in the field can propagate the public diplomacy interests of the BRI (*Corporate Europe Observatory*).

Given the size, scope and scale of the BRI and its financial resources, China has multiple points of access to policy-makers in the EU to establish an agreement on the representation of its interest. Therefore, China incorporates the targeting of individuals in its public diplomacy through the BRI in order to influence policy-makers in the EU in their positioning towards BRI objectives. The extensive use of lobbying networks to establish regularly recurring communication opportunities between policy makers representing the BRI and the EU demonstrates the ability of China and the BRI to exert influence on the host region, the EU. Given the large availability of experts in interest representation with lines to people within the EU establishment, using this pathway is relatively easy for an actor as China due to its nearly endless resources and connections.

### 5.3 Public debates

#### *5.3.1 Agenda Setting*

The agenda setting pathway argues that public diplomacy projects attempt to introduce new topics to the salient public debates through media. By changing the public agenda, foreign policy objectives might be reached (Sevin, 2017). In the case of the BRI this pathway proves important, as particularly through engagement in media platforms, the establishment of new media platforms and through cultural exchanges attempts to influence the public agenda can be identified. China has for example launched the One Belt One Road Europe, part of the global Belt and Road News Alliance, trying to represent the Belt and Road Initiative through news delivery within the EU (*The Belt and Road News Alliance, 2017*). The emphasis of the BRI on people-to-people contacts and the proliferation of cultural exchanges also offers a clue towards their intentions with regards to agenda-setting (*EU-CHINA, TOWARDS A CHINESE WIN, n.d.*). Another observable sign for Chinese efforts to introduce topics to foreign audiences is the increasing accessibility of information about Chinese policy efforts or political activities in a more broadly accessible language like English (*The Belt and Road Initiative: Progress, Contributions and Prospects, n.d.*).

China clearly has vested interests in this pathway, by introducing new topics for

discussion to foreign publics, it uses this pathway by making its own media outlets more accessible by offering information in more accessible languages, but China also engages in the establishment of Chinese information sources within EU territory in order to actively reach out to European publics.

### 5.3.2 Framing

The framing pathway argues it could achieve its foreign policy goals by aspiring to manipulate existing narratives by providing new frames for interpretation (Sevin, 2017). So unlike the agenda setting pathway, the goal is not to introduce new topics but rather present new perspectives on existing narratives pertaining to issues of interest. Similar evidence as in the previous section, namely the proliferation of Chinese culture and the making of Chinese media and narratives more accessible through adaptations in language and the establishment of China oriented News outlets in the EU, such as the Belt and Road News alliance and in particular, one Belt one Road Europe (OBOREurope), is useful for the establishment of this pathway.

In ‘*an introduction to News Alliance*’, the media outlet suggests its goal is to share developments, news and activities in relation to the BRI. It additionally states that the aim of the media network is to increase the visibility of the BRI, by encouraging public debate on the topic. In a section called ‘The European Experience’, OBOREurope emphasises the prominent role of European media networks in the proliferation of the news alliance. (*The Belt and Road News Alliance*, 2017).

Through their public diplomacy activities in the area of impact concerning itself with public debates, the importance of agenda setting and framing for the BRI becomes apparent. China therefore takes a multi-dimensional approach in the pursuit of foreign policy by mobilizing lobbying networks and establishing a network of news platforms propagating the Chinese narrative of the BRI.

## 5.4 Conclusion

Through the application of the *Pathways of Connection framework* the true scale and scope of the BRI as a public diplomacy project becomes clear as activities within all pathways of connection can be identified. Within the area of impact of public opinion, the pathway of



attraction is used by attempting to build cultural bridges, but primarily leaning upon the performance of the BRI in terms of successful foreign policy and the realisation of a plurality of foreign policy projects abroad. This has ensured the willingness of EU publics to cooperate within economic dimensions, in particular countries in Central and Eastern Europe view China and the BRI positively and actively participate. Therefore it can be observed that relational public diplomacy is based on foreign policy assets the BRI is associated with. Within the benefit of the doubt pathway we can observe a considerable effort of China to propagate the existence of common interests for the EU and China within the realisation of the BRI. In addition the rhetoric of the creation of a shared future, the existence of a shared responsibility and the wide potential for achieving shared objectives through the BRI is widely present.

The relationship dynamics area of impact, the pathway of Socialization is perhaps most extensively used through the designing of elaborate cultural exchange projects, furthering Sino-EU cultural integration. Though the BRI as a vessel and China as a practitioner of public diplomacy appears to be more active in the global field, significant effort is also put towards broadening its presence within the EU. Within the context of the EU as a hosting region, efforts within academia and the establishment of knowledge and people exchange is more prominent than cultural activities. The pathway of Direct Influence appears to be the second most prominent pathway that is mobilized in the achievement of foreign policy goals through public diplomacy. Primarily due to the extensive availability of contacts and resources with well-connected networks of interest representation established within the bounds of the EU, ample opportunity is created for direct access to EU policy-makers. The use of lobbying firms in order to reach into the walls of Brussels and its EU establishments, has been observed by many observational actors as well, reporting on continuous efforts to improve this relationship.

In the area of impact of public debates we see growing efforts of China to get footing on EU soil. In both the pathways of Agenda Setting and Framing we see efforts to increase the accessibility of information resources such as news networks and government websites by offering an increasing amount of materials in English. Additionally, projects establishing news networks accommodating strictly a European public, such as OBOREurope, and their emphasis on engaging European news outlets in the sharing of news and developments surrounding the BRI, show substantial developments in this area of impact.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 Research Summary

This thesis asked the question:

*How does the BRI as a vessel for public diplomacy affect the EU's implementation of its foreign policy?*

This academic contribution started with the introduction of the research question, its justification and its relevance. After, a solid contextual framework was provided within the bounds of which to interpret the phenomenon put under scrutiny. To address the research question central to this work, it applied the extensive multidisciplinary approach taking into account realist, liberalist and constructivist assumptions about the workings of international relations and public diplomacy. This thesis applied the framework designed by Sevin (2015), introducing three areas of impact which in turn were elaborated upon through two distinct pathways of connection within each area. By assessing the BRI through the lens of six different pathways of connection; attraction, benefit of the doubt, socialization, direct influence, agenda setting and framing, inferences could be made pertaining to the research question. In chapter four of this research the methodological foundations providing the academic robustness of this thesis were established and elaborated upon, after which the an application of the theoretical framework using the selected method was attempted in the analysis section, offering valuable inferences and insights in the subsection containing concluding remarks.

The BRI affects the EU through all pathways in the proliferation of its own public diplomacy interests and agendas. The BRI attempts to impact public opinion, relationship dynamics and public debates in order to create a more favourable situation for the proliferation of the project within the EU. So far it can be observed that though there is consensus within the EU on the necessities of Sino-EU cooperation within the economic dimension, the SINO-EU relationship is damaged heavily due to perceptions the EU publics and policy makers possess of Chinese domestic politics. This leads to distrust from primarily Northern and Western EU countries. Though China is working extensively to foster a beneficial public opinion to convince the EU to give them the benefit of the doubt, their success rate so far is primarily due to Chinese performance within spheres of foreign policy and the precedent created by successful BRI projects. The current EU relationship experiences a lot of tension despite

extensive efforts on the part of China to improve the Sino-EU relationship through cultural exchange programs and educational collaboration. China additionally tries to reach EU policy makers directly by engaging in extensive efforts to nourish direct contact. We additionally see increasing activity within the media platforms as Chinese efforts to access the EU public agenda and increase its ability to introduce frames beneficial for BRI foreign policy goals increase through the creation of News Networks and sources specifically engaging with a European audience.

### 6.2 Target audience

BRI and 16+1 are in full force. The bilateral agreements China has established with states across the world, including EU member states, link Chinese foreign policy intrinsically with the economic prosperity of host states. The *Xin Xing* doctrine promises prosperity in a shared future. Bilateral cooperation forces foreign publics and state economies to depend on the continued stability of Chinese leadership. Thus, this thesis is written for the publics of states engaged in BRI and/or 16+1, to better estimate the long term cultural, societal, political, and economic effects these projects will have on domestic environments. While multilateral cooperation was the norm of the late 20th century, Chinese bilateral partnership may come to dominate the coming decades of the 21st century. The scale at which BRI and 16+1 are being carried out is unprecedented, and consequences unknown.

### 6.3 Limitations

The primary limitation in this research is the conclusions made pertain to specific social phenomena and thus have low transferability, or applicability, to other contexts (Bryman, 2016, p.44). Additionally, the relational approach utilised is vulnerable to researcher bias as investigations are built upon existing research, which threatens conclusions' credibility and confirmability (Bryman, 2016, p.580). Finally, this relational multidisciplinary approach is limited in that its case study foundation inherently limits its transferability (Bryman, 2016, p.62).

#### 6.4 Recommendations for future research

This thesis serves as a baseline for understanding the diplomatic impacts of EU responses to Chinese public diplomacy as exemplified through the BRI and 16+1. Future research could build upon these findings by looking at Chinese digital public diplomacy. Digital public diplomacy, or state communications with foreign audiences through digital mediums, has come to dominate the conduct of public diplomacy since the spread of COVID-19 in 2020. Looking into Chinese-run social media platforms, such as Tik Tok, could provide valuable insight into how the Chinese government utilises its digital monopoly to purport its various influences. Considering the EU's strict digital and cyber regulations, policies might be assessed to better prepare for the digitalization of diplomacy in the 21st century.

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