

Europe and China's Competing Ideas in the Belt and Road Initiative

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China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is widely debated as China's foreign policy project on infrastructure and trade. Yet it also serves as a vehicle for China's ideational power and a platform to promote its political ideas. Political ideas discussed in an international discourse hold agency and [shape political agendas](#) (Béland & Cox, 2024). Rather than reflecting factual events, ideational battles construct narratives that lead [to political action](#) (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998; Léonard & Kaunert, 2010). China's political ideas, such as 'mutual benefit' and a 'new model of cooperation', can be interpreted very differently depending [on the audience](#) (Aitzhanova, Weil, & Kaunert).

China is not alone in exercising ideational power; [the EU does so too](#) (Kuang, Orbie, & Blancquaert, 2024). The concept of [Normative Power Europe \(NPE\)](#) (Manners, 2002) defines the EU's ability to shape international norms and values. While the EU focuses on promoting its own ideas, it underestimates [China's ideational power](#) (Weil & Munteanu, 2020). This results in mutual [misunderstanding](#) (Breslin, 2013).

This tension is most visible in Central and Eastern Europe (CEEC), a region caught between China's influence and the EU's struggle to balance the interests of member states, non-member states, and candidate countries within the framework of EU enlargement. In countries such as Serbia and Hungary, which play the EU and Chinese interests off against each other, China's ideational power falls on fertile ground.

China frames its political ideas of 'cooperation' (合作), 'mutual benefit and win-win cooperation' (互利共赢), and 'new globalization model' (新型全球化模式) in the context of the BRI as serving all Eastern European stakeholders. In this ideational battle, the EU interprets this differently, arguing that Chinese BRI investments create divisions between the EU and its Central and [Eastern European member states](#) (Belder, 2018). Both sides engage in a battle of ideas, each shaping the meaning of key concepts according to their own perspective. It is crucial to recognize these ideational battles because if China wins, it will give momentum to its political agency.

Interviews with European government officials show that it is often difficult to fully understand what the Chinese side refers to with its ideas (X. Weil, April 3, 2018). First introduced in 2005, Beijing argues that its approach to 'mutual benefit' aligns with its peaceful development and is a sign of China's [rising international power](#) (The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2005). Whereas China links the idea of 'mutual benefit' to its narrative of rising power, the EU interprets the same political ideas in a more critical way. Chinese investments are not perceived as beneficial but as a threat to Europe's critical assets, [technology, and infrastructure](#) (European Commission - Press release, March 12, 2019). The EU argues that BRI investments target European countries such as Hungary in an attempt to undermine [democratic norms](#) (European Parliament, 2022; Ping, 2025).

China has created a new instrument of ideational power by establishing international think tanks that operate globally. These institutions present China as a facilitator and partner while portraying the EU in a [negative light](#) (Weil & Munteanu, 2020). The EU responds by explaining its universal values on an [international level](#) (European Commission, 2019). Yet it needs to step up in this battle of political ideas as China's think tanks are effective vehicles in this [ideational battle](#) (Weil, 2022).

Chinese ideational power operates in ways that increasingly challenge the EU's normative power. China mobilizes the framing of ideas effectively, presenting investment as mutual benefit and portraying the EU as neglectful of Eastern European concerns. The EU's reliance on its normative power and universalist vocabulary of norms leads to misunderstanding: the EU reaffirms its own narratives rather than interpreting China's political ideas.

By framing its political ideas as self-evident and universally shared, the EU overlooks the fact that these values are interpreted differently by non-democratic actors such as China (Weil, 2022). As [Manners argues](#) (Manners, 2002, p. 252), 'the most important factor shaping the international role of the EU is not what it does or what it says, but what it is'. From this perspective, power is exercised through ideational processes that shape [political outcomes](#) (Béland, 2010). In order to influence China's political ideas, the EU has to engage in a balanced discourse with China. To achieve this, it has to comprehend Chinese ideas. At present, the EU remains preoccupied with ideational battles over defense, universal values, and its peace-actor identity. In these inward-looking (yet crucial) debates, the EU loses its ability to employ discourse as a vehicle for influencing and comprehending Chinese political ideas.

None of this suggests that the EU should abandon its values. Democracy, human rights, and the rule of law remain crucial to the EU's identity and are the foundation of its [resilience](#) (Kaunert, Bosse, & Vieira, 2023). The EU needs instruments to interpret and respond to Chinese political ideas in the way China defines them, clarifying where ideas such as 'cooperation' and 'mutual benefit' overlap with EU interests and where they stand in conflict. This means being aware of China's ideational power and having the ability to understand the underlying meaning of its political ideas. It also requires engaging in an informed dialogue that acknowledges the existence of contradictory interpretations of the [same terms](#) (Pan, 2012). Otherwise, the EU risks leaving agenda-setting to China in international forums, where BRI political ideas show robustness and resonate strongly with some EU member states.

Taken together, Chinese ideas injected inter alia into the BRI reveal a battle between China's ideational power and the EU's normative power. China's narratives emphasize shared development, while the EU emphasizes universal rules such as democracy and human rights. The EU must find new ways to communicate with China, and both actors should engage in dialogue that seeks to understand the underlying meaning of each other's political ideas.

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