Spin nematics correlations in bilinear-biquadratic $S=1$ spin chains

Andreas Läuchli,1,* Guido Schmid,2,† and Simon Trebst3

1Institut Romand de Recherche Numérique en Physique des Matériaux (IRRMA), PPH-Ecublens, CH-1015 Lausanne, Switzerland
2Theoretische Physik, ETH Hönggerberg, CH-8093 Zürich, Switzerland
3Microsoft Research and Kavli Institute for Theoretical Physics, University of California, Santa Barbara, California 93106, USA

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We present an extensive numerical study of spin quadrupolar correlations in single and coupled bilinear-biquadratic spin one chains, using several methods such as exact diagonalization, density matrix renormalization group, and strong coupling series expansions. For the single chain, we clarify the dominant correlation function in the enigmatic gapless period-three phase for $\theta \in (\pi/4, \pi/2)$, which is of spin quadrupolar nature with a period three spatial structure. Then we revisit the open problem of the possible existence of a ferroquadrupolar phase between the dimerized and the ferromagnetic phases. Although an extended critical region is in principle compatible with the numerical results, a scenario with a huge crossover scale is more plausible. Finally we study the fate of the dimerized phase upon coupling two chains in a ladder geometry. The dimerized phase rapidly vanishes and an extended gapped phase takes over. This gapped phase presumably has dominant short-ranged ferroquadrupolar correlations for $\theta \in (-3\pi/4, -\pi/2)$ and—surprisingly—seems to be adiabatically connected to the plaqeette single solid phase of the Heisenberg $S=1$ ladder and therefore also with the Haldane phase of isolated chains.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The recent experimental demonstration1 of the transition from a superfluid state to a Mott insulating state of atoms in an optical lattice has opened the way to novel realizations of effective quantum lattice models with widely tunable control parameters. Quantum magnetic systems can be realized by spinor atoms in an optical lattice, e.g., $^{23}$Na with a total $S=1$ moment. Confining $S=1$ atoms to an optical lattice there are two scattering channels for identical atoms with total spin $S=0,2$ which can be mapped to an effective bilinear and biquadratic spin interaction2–4

$$
H = \sum_{\langle i,j \rangle} [J_{bl}(\mathbf{S}_i \cdot \mathbf{S}_j) + J_{bq}(\mathbf{S}_i \cdot \mathbf{S}_j)^2],
$$

where we adopt the standard parametrization $J_{bl}=\cos \theta$ and $J_{bq}=\sin \theta$. In one dimension, the bilinear-biquadratic spin-one model has a rich phase diagram (see Fig. 1) with some well established phases: the Haldane gap phase,5 a dimerized phase,6 a ferromagnetic phase and some less well understood phases: a critical phase with period three correlations,7 which we will characterize as having dominant spin nematic correlations, and possibly a gapped spin nematic phase between the dimerized and ferromagnetic phase,8 which, however, remains controversial.

On the square and the simple cubic lattice, the bilinear-biquadratic spin-one model is well understood for the case $J_{bq} \leq 0$. It exhibits a ferroquadrupolar spin nematic phase for $\theta \in (-3\pi/4, -\pi/2)$.9,10 Adjacent to it are an antiferromagnetic Néel phase and a ferromagnetic phase.9,10 The region of purely antiferromagnetic couplings $J_{bl},J_{bq} \geq 0$ remains to be understood, and could possibly contain a spin liquid region.12 Recently the Hamiltonian (1) on the triangular lattice attracted some interest,13–15 as a possible explanation of the unconventional magnetism of NiGa$_2$S$_4$.16

For a single chain Chubukov8 suggested the existence of a gapped, nondimerized phase showing dominant spin nematic correlations close to the ferromagnetic region of the phase diagram. Subsequent numerical work17 could, however, not substantiate this claim and it was therefore believed for a while that the dimerized phase would extend up to the ferromagnetic phase boundary. Recent quantum Monte Carlo calculations18 and field theoretical work19 suggest that this picture might need to be reconsidered, especially in the light of possible experimental verifications in Bose-Einstein condensate systems.2,4 In the meantime there has been a considerable number of publications in favor or against a spin nematic phase close to $\theta = -3\pi/4$20,24 but leaving the final answer still open.

![FIG. 1. Phase diagram of the bilinear-biquadratic spin-one chain. The firmly established phases are the Haldane, the ferromagnetic and the dimerized phase. We characterize the extended gapless phase $\pi/4 \leq \theta \leq \pi/2$ by having dominant $k = \pm 2\pi/3$ spin quadrupolar correlations. The possible occurrence of a spin nematic like phase close to $-3\pi/4$ is investigated and critically discussed.](image)

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The aim of the present paper is twofold. First we give a characterization in terms of the dominant correlation function for the extended gapless critical phase, whose mere existence is well established. We find in this case that the predominant correlations are of spin quadrupolar nature, with a wave vector of $\pm 2\pi/3$. The second aim is to shed some more light on the region $\theta \in [-3\pi/4, -\pi/2]$ of the single chain. We present extensive numerical simulation results based on different numerical methods and discuss possible interpretations. Due to the difficulty in obtaining a firm conclusion regarding the spin nematic phase, we have also studied bilinear-biquadratic ladders. In this case the dimerized phase plays only a minor role in the phase diagram and we report an extended gapped spin nematic phase, very close in spirit to the proposal by Chubukov$^8$ for the single chain. Surprisingly this phase seems to be adiabatically connected to the well known Haldane phase of the isolated chain.

The outline of the paper is the following. In Sec. II we show that the established gapless phase $\theta \in (+\pi/4, \pi/2)$ has dominating spin quadrupolar correlations, a characterization which was lacking before. We then move on to the region $\theta \in [-3\pi/4, -\pi/2]$ and discuss the possible existence of a spin nematic intermediate phase between the dimerized and the ferromagnetic phase. We report several anomalous physical properties encountered upon approaching $\theta \rightarrow -3\pi/4$, which could be interpreted as a phase transition to a spin nematic state. However, due to numerical limitations it has remained elusive to pinpoint such a phase transition, and an alternative scenario where a very large crossover scale emerges as one approaches the SU(3) point at $-3\pi/4$ becomes more plausible. In Sec. IV we introduce an extension of the single chain model by coupling two chains to form a ladder. We show that the dimerized phase gives very rapidly way to an extended gapped phase. This short-ranged ordered phase encompasses the Haldane phase at $\theta=0$ as well as its ladder extension, the so-called “plaquette singlet solid” state.$^{25}$ and crosses over to a gapped spin nematic state close to $\theta \rightarrow -3\pi/4$.

II. THE ENIGMATIC PERIOD THREE PHASE

The existence of an extended critical phase in the interval $\theta \in [\pi/4, \pi/2]$ was first discussed in Ref. 7. Later work in Refs. 26–30 agreed on the gapless nature of the phase due to soft modes at $k=0, \pm 2\pi/3$. The special point $\theta=+\pi/4$ has an enlarged SU(3) symmetry and is solvable by Bethe ansatz$^{31–33}$ (Umim-Lai-Sutherland model), proving the existence of soft modes at $k=0, \pm 2\pi/3$ as a rigorous result.

Despite the consensus on the presence of an extended gapless phase, the nature of the dominant correlations in this phase has not been clearly worked out. Initially Xiang$^26$ proposed an almost “trimerized” ground state, with dominant singlet correlations involving three consecutive spins. Although models can be constructed which have exactly trimerized ground states,$^{34}$ in the present model these are not the dominant fluctuations, as shown earlier in Ref. 30.

Here we show that the dominant correlations are not of singlet, but of spin nematic, i.e., quadrupolar, character. We build upon the field theoretical work of Itoi and Kato$^{29}$ in which they showed that throughout the critical region there are three fields with spin $S=0, 1, 2$ whose scaling dimensions are all equal to $x=2/3$. However, apart from $\theta=\pi/4$ it is the $S=2$ mode at $k=\pm 2\pi/3$—which is subject to correlation-enhancing logarithmic corrections—which will show the dominant correlations. Note that this is consistent with the observation$^7$ that the lowest energy level at $k=\pm 2\pi/3$ on finite chains carries $S=2$.

In order to work out the correlation content of this $S=2$ mode we note that this mode will only show up in a dynamical correlation function if it is targeted with an $S=2$ operator. A natural operator is the irreducible quadrupolar part of the rank two tensor $S^i_i S^j_j$. In order to test this conjecture, we calculate a component of the static spin quadrupolar structure factor

$$Q(k) = \langle (S_i^2)(-k)(S_j^2)(k) \rangle$$

(2)

and similar for the static spin structure factor

$$S(k) = \langle (S_i^2)(-k)(S_j^2)(k) \rangle$$

(3)

both at the wave vector $k=2\pi/3$. The results shown in the upper plot of Fig. 2 for system sizes up to $L=18$ display nicely that the quadrupolar correlations indeed become more important than the spin-spin correlations when one moves beyond the SU(3) symmetric point at $\theta=\pi/4$. Although all correlation exponents (dimer, spin, quadrupolar) are equal to $\eta=2x=4/3$, logarithmic corrections$^{29}$ render the quadrupolar correlations clearly dominant in this phase. Note that our notion of a dominant correlation function in this case is analogous to the $S=1/2$ antiferromagnetic Heisenberg chain, where both staggered spin and staggered dimer correlations have equal correlation exponent $\eta=1$, but the logarithmic corrections enhance the spin-spin correlations and then decay more slowly. Hence, in the same spirit as one argues that the dominant correlations of the Heisenberg chain are the spin correlations, the dominant correlations of the bilinear-biquadratic spin-one chain for $\theta \in (+\pi/4, \pi/2)$ are of spin quadrupolar nature with wave vector $\pm 2\pi/3$.

For completeness we show selected parameters of this critical region in the lower panel of Fig. 2. The results are in good agreement with field theoretical predictions$^{29}$ ($c=2$ and $x_q=2/3$), exact results$^{33} [\nu(\theta=\pi/4)=2\pi/3 \sqrt{2}]$, and previous numerical work.$^7$ The numerical estimate of the scaling dimension $x_q$ is slightly smaller than the expected value of $2/3$, due to the presence of logarithmic corrections.

To close this section we note that the occurrence of dominant period-three quadrupolar correlations on a single chain calls for a fully ordered three sublattice structure when the chains are coupled in an appropriate two-dimensional fashion. The triangular lattice perfectly fulfills this prerequisite, and indeed recent works$^{13,14}$ reported analytical and numerical evidence for a three sublattice quadrupolar ordered phase in the region $\theta \in (\pi/4, \pi/2)$.

III. FROM THE DIMERIZED TO THE FERROMAGNETIC PHASE

After having elucidated the nature of the dominant correlations in the extended critical region beyond the Haldane...
critical possibility in the following. We note that this point
charge, the excitation velocity and the scaling dimension of the
quadrupolar correlations are enhanced. Lower plot: the central
two correlation functions are related by symmetry. By going deeper
down the existence of an intermediate phase. Presently it
seems most likely that the gapped nematic phase in its origi-

Chubukov suggested the existence of an intermediate
phase which was supposed to be completely gapped and to

We track the evolution of the energy gap to the first mag-
netic excitation using density matrix renormalization group
(DMRG) calculations on long open chains of up to 512
spins and retaining up to 1000 states. A phase transition is
signaled by the closing of the gap. The lowest excited state
on open chains carries spin two for \( \theta \in (-3\pi/4, -3\pi/2) \). Our results shown in Fig. 3 are clearly consistent with a
finite gap of the \( S=2 \) excitation for \( \theta \approx -0.65\pi \). However, for \( \theta \leq -0.65\pi \) the extrapolated gap becomes very small (of the order of \( 10^{-3} \) for \( \theta = -0.7\pi \)) which could suggest the exis-
tence of a phase transition around \(-0.67\pi\) below which the
gap is zero. The data shows no evidence for a reopening of
the \( S=2 \) gap in the interval \( \theta \in (-3\pi/4, -0.67\pi) \), at variance with the initial proposal.

In order to investigate the possible closing of the gap by
different means we have calculated strong coupling series
expansions of the \( S=2 \) single particle gap starting from the
dimerized limit up to 10th order in the interdimer coupling \(\lambda \)
for fixed \( \theta \). A direct evaluation of the quintuplet gap shows a
closing of the gap around \( \theta = -0.67\pi \) which is illustrated in
the left panel of Fig. 4. Using DLog Padé approximants we
have determined the critical interdimer coupling \( \lambda_c(\theta) \) where
the gap closes, see upper right panel of Fig. 4. Consistent with previous estimates by Chubukov these extrapolations suggest that the gap closes for the uniformly coupled \( (\lambda = 1) \) chain around \( \theta = -0.67\pi \).

As a further indication for the possible closure of the gap
around \( \theta = -0.67\pi \), we now consider the existence of a gen-
eralized BKT phase transition. To determine the critical point
we use phenomenological level spectroscopy. We calculate
the level crossing \( \theta_c \) of the lowest singlet excitation at \( k = \pi \) with the lowest spin-2 level at \( k = 0 \) for different system
sizes \( L \) with ED and extrapolate \( L \rightarrow \infty \). The results are
shown in Fig. 5. The extrapolation is performed with \( 1/L \)
and \( 1L^2 \) corrections, fitting only the largest four system
sizes. The extrapolated critical point is \( \theta_c = (-0.67 \pm 0.02)\pi \),
in good agreement with estimates obtained by other tech-
The coefficient of the $1/L$ correction is small, and fitting without this term yields slightly larger values $\theta_c > -0.67\pi$.

### B. Dimerization and quadrupolar correlations

Dimerization in the phase diagram of the spin-one chain has been firmly established by exact results obtained for the $\theta = -\pi/2$ point.\(^6\) It should be noted that although the system is dimerized, it is rather poorly described by a simple product wavefunction of alternating singlets, as can be seen from the small gap and the large correlation length over the whole dimerized phase. The dimerization operator considered here is

$$D(k) = \frac{1}{\sqrt{L}} \sum_j e^{ikr_j} (S_j \cdot S_{j+1})$$

with $k = \pi$. The second kind of correlations expected to be important in this region of the phase diagram\(^9,10\) are the ferroquadrupolar spin fluctuations

$$Q(k) = \frac{1}{\sqrt{L}} \sum_j e^{ikr_j} [(S_j^z)^2 - 2/3]$$

with $k=0$. Note that we considered similar fluctuations with $k=2\pi/3$ in Sec. II.

Based on these fluctuation operators we have calculated the standard static structure factor (SF)

$$C_{\text{SF}}(k) = \|C(k)|0\|^2$$

and the generalized nonlinear susceptibility (i.e., the real part of the dynamical correlation function at zero frequency)

$$C_{\text{GNS}}(k) = \text{Re} \lim_{\eta \to 0^+} \langle 0|C(-k) - \frac{1}{H - E_0 + i\eta} C(k)|0\rangle$$

for both kinds of correlations ($C=D, Q$). The nonlinear susceptibility quantifies the perturbative response of the system upon explicitly coupling the symmetry breaking operator to the Hamiltonian.\(^38\)

We present ED results concerning the dimerization in the left panel of Fig. 6. The SF and the GNS both diverge as $L$.
where we focus again on the dimerization and the ferroquadrupolar correlations. The plots discussed below show the normalized intensity for a given $\theta$. The overall weight can be obtained by multiplying with the structure factors displayed in Fig. 6.

The results for the dimerization shown in the upper panel of Fig. 7 are very interesting. They show a strong crossover with a redistribution of spectral weight on the way from $\theta = -\pi/2$ to $-3\pi/4$. While there is a single state (the lowest energy singlet) exhausting almost all of the $k = \pi$ dimer weight around $\theta = -\pi/2$ (as expected in a truly dimer ordered phase), the weight in this state entirely fades out and is transferred to a higher energy state at $\omega \to \sqrt{2}$ as $\theta \to -3\pi/4$.

The results for the dynamical ferroquadrupolar correlations don’t show such a crossover but show a steady lowering of the finite size $S=2$ gap upon approaching $-3\pi/4$, accompanied by an accumulation of all the weight in that single state. This is a manifestation of the continuity of the finite size ground state wave function as one approaches the fully ferroquadrupolar ordered state at $\theta = -3\pi/4$. We return to the special behavior of the spin-two gap in Sec. III C 2.

We believe that it is this strong crossover seen in the dynamical dimer correlations which renders numerical calculations very difficult. On finite size systems sufficiently close to $\theta = -3\pi/4$ the system looks basically similar to a ferroquadrupolar ordered system, even in one dimension, due to the very strong influence of the SU(3) point $-3\pi/4$. As a consequence a crossover scale seems to emerge, which rapidly grows close to $-3\pi/4$, and one has to go to huge systems in order for the dimerization to win, i.e., for the lowest singlet at $k = \pi$ to collapse onto the ground state, while the lowest $S=2$ excitation at $k=0$ should remain gapped. This scenario would then imply that the curve in Fig. 5 finally would have to bend down for large systems and touch the y axis only at $\theta = -3\pi/4$.

\[ C(k, \omega) = \frac{1}{\pi} \text{Im} \lim_{\eta \to 0^+} \langle 0 | C(-k) \frac{1}{\omega - (H - E_0) + i \eta} C(k) | 0 \rangle, \]

FIG. 7. ED dynamical correlation results on a $L=16$ chain. Upper panel: dynamical staggered dimer correlation function $C(q = \pi, \omega)$ plotted for a range of values of $\theta$. There is an important transfer of spectral weight upon lowering $\theta$ from a low energy level—collapsing to the ground state as a function of system size—to a level which will converge to the energy $\sqrt{2}$ at $\theta = -3\pi/4$. Lower panel: dynamical ferroquadrupolar correlations $C(q = 0, \omega)$ for $\theta \in (0.75, 0.60] \pi$.

C. Critical phase versus crossover

1. Parameters of a hypothetical critical theory

In order to discriminate between potential conformal theories describing the phase transition and the extended gapless region, we calculate relevant field theory parameters, i.e., the scaling dimensions (SD) $x$ of several fields and the central charge $c$ (Fig. 8). The calculation of these parameters has been performed with ED and relies on finite size scaling properties of ground state and excited states energies. Leading logarithmic corrections have been taken into account. The SD of the $k = \pi$ singlet field ($x_\pi$) and the $k = 0$ quintuplet field ($x_q$) are both close to $3/8$ at the onset of criticality near $\theta = -0.67\pi$. $x_q$ significantly increases, while $x_\pi$ decreases and seems to approach $0$ as $\theta \to -3\pi/4$, compatible with quadrupolar long range order precisely at $\theta = -3\pi/4$. Our results for the effective central charge are unexpected. The central charge $c$ does not seem to be constant throughout the potentially critical region. The smallest value is found at the onset ($c = 3/2$), and then seems to increase monotonously. While this behavior can not directly be ruled out on field theoretical grounds, it is rather uncommon. It remains to be understood whether $c$ is really continuously increasing or whether we are facing a crossover phenomenon. The hypothetical critical theory at $\theta = -0.67\pi$ is, how-
the absence of a gap. (i) The denominator diverges as a function of systems size, while the numerator diverges more slowly or stays finite. This is the conventional situation for systems which are critical or exhibit spontaneous symmetry breaking in the thermodynamic limit. In this case the diverging static structure factors drives the gap to zero, but only for the infinite system. (ii) The numerator vanishes, while the denominator does not vanish. A sufficient condition for the numerator to vanish is if the structure factor operator $O(k)$ commutes with the Hamiltonian.

If we now choose for the operator $O(k)$ the spin quadrupolar structure factor at zero momentum: i.e., $Q(0) = 1/\sqrt{J} \sum_i (S_i^2)^2 - 2/3$ we realize scenario (ii) at the special SU(3) point $\theta = -3\pi/4$. For this specific value $Q(0)$ commutes with the Hamiltonian and therefore the numerator is zero. Numerically we find that the denominator is different from zero. This means that there is at least a level with $S = 2$ which is degenerate with the ground state already on finite size samples.17 The reason which makes the numerical analysis for $\theta > -3\pi/4$ so difficult is that there is a continuity in the wave function as a function of $\theta$ when approaching the SU(3) point from above. On one hand we know that the commutator $[Q(0), H(\theta)]$ will vanish continuously as we approach $-3\pi/4^+$, on the other hand we find numerically that the denominator (the ferroquadrupolar structure factor) grows rapidly as a function of the accessible system sizes, see the full symbols in the right panel of Fig. 6. So these two factors cooperate in giving an anomalously small SMA energy $\omega_c$, which is an upper bound to the measured gap.

IV. TWO COUPLED CHAINS

We have seen considerable difficulty in the preceding section to actually decide whether the dimerization vanishes before reaching $\theta = -3\pi/4$. One potential way of circumventing the spontaneous dimerization of a single chain is to consider two coupled chains in a ladder geometry. It seems rather natural to assume that the dimerization of a single chain disappears once the coupling on the rung is sufficiently strong. We will substantiate this claim using numerical simulations below. The ladder model is also a first step towards a realistic setup of spin-1 bosonic atoms in optical lattices, where a finite interchain coupling can easily be generated. The ladder Hamiltonian is given as follows:

$$H = J \sum_{i,n} \cos(\theta(S_{i,n} \cdot S_{i+1,n}) + \sin(\theta(S_{i,n} \cdot S_{i+1,n})^2 + K \sum_i \cos(\theta(S_{i,1} \cdot S_{i,2}) + \sin(\theta(S_{i,1} \cdot S_{i,2})^2, \quad (12)$$

where $S_{i,n}$ denotes a spin-one operator at position $i$ on chain $n \in \{1,2\}$. In the following we choose $K,J > 0$ and vary $\theta$ as well as $K/J > 0$, where the limit $K/J = 0$ corresponds to decoupled chains and $J/K = 0$ to decoupled rung dimers.

For $\theta = 0$ the Hamiltonian (12) describes a conventional $S=1$ Heisenberg spin ladder.25 Interestingly, for this special case Todo et al.25 have shown numerically that the finite gap of the single chain does not close for any $K/J$, i.e., two points on the $K/J$ axis can be reached without any second

![Figure 8](image-url)
order quantum phase transition in between. They also generalized the string order parameter of a single chain to a more complicated nonlocal operator which is nonzero for any finite value of $K/J$, therefore showing that this phase is also topologically ordered.\cite{25} In the following we will show that this gapped spin liquid state at $\theta=0$ extends deeply into the region $\theta\leq0$, and for sufficiently large $K/J$ even to $-3\pi/4$. While the ground state is always protected by a finite gap, the nature of the lowest excitation changes as a function of $\theta$. For $\theta\in[-\pi/2,0]$ the lowest excitation carries $S=1$, while for $\theta\in[-3\pi/4,-\pi/2]$ it carries $S=2$. In the absence of dimerization such a state on the ladder where the lowest excitation is of ferroquadrupolar nature, is very close in spirit to the long-sought gapped nematic phase initially proposed by Chubukov\cite{8} for the single chain. The phase diagram of two coupled chains with $\theta\in[-\pi,0]$ and $K/J\in[0,1]$ is shown in Fig. 9. We expect the extended gapped phase to continue up to the rung dimer limit $J/K=0$, similar to the results for $\theta=0$.\cite{25,40}

Let us now describe the simulation results which lead to the phase diagram presented in Fig. 9. First we discuss the behavior of the dimerization of the single chain upon coupling two chains. To this end we performed DMRG calculations on ladder systems of sizes up to $2\times256$ sites. We have determined the boundary of the dimerized phase using finite size extrapolations of the remnant dimerization in the middle of a chain,\cite{41} assuming a columnar dimer arrangement on the two chains.\cite{42,44} An example for such finite size data is shown for $\theta=-\pi/2$ in Fig. 10. We expect the dimerization in the middle of the chain to converge to a finite value for $1/L\rightarrow0$ in a dimerized phase, and to exhibit an exponential drop upon reaching the correlation length of a disordered phase. These two distinct behaviors can be seen in Fig. 10 for the values $K/J=0.0, 0.1, 0.125$ and $K/J=0.15, 0.175, 0.2, 0.3$, respectively. This leads us to the conclusion of a critical ratio $(K/J)_c=0.1375\pm0.0125$ at $\theta=-\pi/2$, below which the ladder is still dimerized. The evolution of the values of $(K/J)_c$ with $\theta$ is shown in Fig. 9. The dimerized phase is most stable close to $\theta=-\pi/2$, and seems to vanish linearly upon approaching the BT point at $-\pi/4$, similar to the case of explicit dimerization for a single chain.\cite{43} On the other side, however, the dimerization boundary drops rapidly and becomes very small once $\theta\leq-0.7\pi$. Similar to the single chain case it is very difficult to decide whether the dimerized phase ceases to exist before $-3\pi/4$ or not. In the ladder case, however, this implies that for a finite—but very small—interchain coupling the spontaneous dimerization (if any) of a single chain vanishes.

Next we investigate the behavior of the spin gap in the nondimerized phase. We performed DMRG calculations for a fixed value of $K/J=1$. The results for the gap to the lowest $S'=1$ state are plotted in Fig. 11 for system sizes $2\times L$ with $L=32, 64, 128$. Starting at $\theta=0$ where we find good agreement with the high-precision QMC gap from Ref. 25, the gap grows monotonously until reaching the bipartite SU(3) point at $\theta=-\pi/2$. There we observe a level crossing, and the gap decreases for $\theta<\pi/2$. Note that at this special point the total spin quantum number of the lowest level changes.
While it is a $S=1$ state for $\theta>\pi/2$, the lowest levels carries $S=2$ for $\theta<\pi/2$. Similar to the single chain case discussed in Sec. III A, we detect a very small gap for $\theta$ close to $-3\pi/4$. This anomalously small $S=2$ gap can again be understood using a single mode approximation argument, along the lines of Sec. III C 2, the extension of the argument to the ladder case being straightforward. We take this dichotomy of the gap as a first indication that the SU(3) line ($\theta=-\pi/2$) constitutes a crossover line inside the extended gapped phase, where the spin-spin correlations dominate for $\theta \geq -\pi/2$, while we expect dominant short-ranged spin-nematic ferroquadrupolar correlations for $\theta \leq -\pi/2$. Our gap results give evidence that the ground state for $\theta$ close to $-3\pi/4$ adiabatically connects to the “plaquette singlet solid” phase, which is itself connected to the Haldane phase of the isolated chains. This would also imply that the whole phase is characterized by a finite nonlocal order parameter. It would be interesting to investigate this order in a future work.

V. CONCLUSIONS

To summarize, we have shown that spin nematic correlations in the form of quadrupolar correlations play an important role in the phase diagram of single or coupled $S=1$ bilinear-biquadratic chains. We first addressed the long-standing question of the nature of the dominant correlations in the gapless period-three phase, where we uncovered the spin quadrupolar correlations at $k=\pm 2\pi/3$ as the leading ones. We critically discussed the phase diagram close to the SU(3) point at $\theta=-3\pi/4$ and by assembling several numerical and analytical results concluded that an unconventional crossover phenomenon is at the heart of the considerable difficulty in settling the issue on the existence or absence of the gapped nematic phase put forward by Chubukov. Finally we studied two coupled bilinear-biquadratic chains in a ladder geometry and found an extended gapped phase which is surprising in two respects: first it realizes a variant of Chubukov’s nematic phase, i.e., a gapped, nondimerized phase with dominant spin-nematic correlations for $\theta \leq -\pi/2$, and second, this phase is adiabatically connected to the standard $S=1$ Heisenberg ($\theta=0$) ladder, and therefore also connected to the Haldane phase of single chains, as shown by Todo et al. 25

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*Electronic address: laeuchli@comp-phys.org
†Present address: Supercomputing Systems AG, Technoparkstrasse 1, CH-8005 Zürich, Switzerland.
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44 This seems to be a reasonable assumption, given the fact that SU(N) spin models on the square lattice dimerize this way for N>4 (Ref. 42), while our model at θ=−π/2 corresponds to N=3.