

# The Triple Pillar of Sino–MENA Relations in the Age of Neoliberalism

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## 1.1 Introduction

The current US–China rivalry and the geopolitical competition over the future of global order maybe characterised as a new Cold War, that is, ‘Cold War Two’ (Kolodko, 2020, p. 5), or a Cold Peace. While President Xi Jinping celebrated the seventieth anniversary of the People’s Republic of China with the largest military parade in the Beijing history in 2019, the US threatened to launch a new trade and tariff war against China (Osnos, 2020; Venard, 2019). In April 2020, the US Congress introduced a bill to deter China’s ‘threat’ by ‘allocating more than \$6 billion for air and missile defence systems and new military construction in partner countries’ (Gould, 2020). The cyberwarfare, the campaign against the Chinese telecommunications company of Huawei and specifically its 5G technologies, the tension over the outbreak of COVID-19 global pandemic, and the trade and tariff war between the US and China demonstrate a larger crisis in the neoliberal global order and a decline in the American global hegemony. Using Antonio Gramsci’s analogy, such competition and crisis indicate that while ‘the old is dying’, the new order has yet to be born (Gramsci, 1971, p. 276; Babic, 2020). China, an emerging global power and the second largest world economy, is playing a profound role in this global interregnum, shaping the new global order. Interestingly, the rise of China and the ‘new Asian age’ is a result of a neoliberal global order under US hegemony in which China’s enormous cheap labour boosted Beijing’s economic and political power (Arrighi, 2008).

While it is true that President Xi Jinping’s signature foreign policy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), provides a structural and material base for the consolidation of Chinese rising power under President Xi, or ‘Xiism’ (Mulvad, 2019), the BRI, or the New Silk Road initiative should be examined in the larger context of the emerging ‘multiplex world’, a concept coined by Amitav Acharya (2020; 2019) to describe ‘a world without the hegemony of a single power or a single set of values’, in which multiple regions and new actors play a much greater role in the global order (Acharya, 2019, p. 12). Hence, Chinese

relations with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) should be viewed in 'the emerging webs of relations as a coevolution of multiple megaregions in the making' (Bianchi, 2019, p. 2). This chapter examines the dynamics and new developments in Sino–MENA relations in the context of the global and regional competitions between the old and new major powers in the current neoliberal order.

The perception that the Chinese leadership has of the world involves China at the centre ringed by four concentric circles of the 'innermost ring' (territories controlled or claimed by China, waters in the East China and South China seas, Taiwan), the second ring (neighbouring countries from Russia to Vietnam), and the third ring (six regions of Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Oceania, and, Northeast Asia). The rest of the world including the MENA region, Africa, Europe, and America belongs to farthest fourth ring which China has become concerned with mainly since the late 1990s in pursuit of power and influence but particularly for markets and investment opportunities and energy resources, among other things (Nathan & Scobell, 2012, pp. 3–7).

More recently, however, a gradual shift in US foreign policy from the Middle East towards the Far East has reinforced Sino–MENA relations. While China increasingly needs MENA resources to secure its future hegemonic position, the MENA may need China as an alternative global partner. Visits by President Xi Jinping to Pakistan, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, and Beijing's 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' agreements with major MENA states such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt should be examined in this context.

Equally important is the rise of right-wing populism and protectionist de-globalisation trends in the West, which will likely increase China's economic, political, and military presence in the MENA region and could have a twofold impact on MENA societies. First, China's increasing presence in the region could benefit MENA at the following fronts: (a) providing a counterbalance for a long-standing US political hegemony by strengthening a 'multiplex' world order, empowering the BRICS, and building mutual relations along the BRI track; (b) offering an alternative and/or complementary role to the Western-dominated international financial institutions through institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB); (c) fostering an innovative 'knowledge economy'; and (d) improving the renewable and clean energy in the region. Second, China's increasing presence, however, could contribute to the deterioration of civil rights and democratic movements in the MENA region. More specifically, the real or perceived discourse of the 'Beijing consensus' or the 'Chinese model of development', which has been employed by

some MENA autocratic regimes, might consolidate the state of ‘neoliberalism without democracy’ and autocratic capitalism in the region.

The ‘Chinese model of development’ or the ‘Beijing consensus’ is often celebrated for being a pragmatic alternative path to the neoliberal Washington consensus in the region. It is also known for giving priority to economic development over political democracy. However, the China example, it is argued, reintroduces neoliberalism with a new face to the MENA region and is being welcomed by some MENA autocratic states. The real question, therefore, is to what extent will the Chinese economic and political paradigm reinforce a neoliberal economy, social inequality, and authoritarianism in the region? To what degree could China contribute to a sustainable and just development in the MENA region?

## 1.2 The Chinese ‘Cat Theory’: Beyond Sinophilia and Sinophobia

China is more than a country or civilisation. It is an *idea*, a – real or perceived – discourse, a pathway. This idea has been introduced in at least two different ways: The first approach introduces the idea of China as a higher and/or alternative model of development and progress to the Western paradigm of the Enlightenment. Drawing from the tradition of Voltaire (1694–1778), Leibniz (1646–1716), Christian Wolff (1679–1754), and Francois Quesnay (1694–1774), contemporary scholars such as Daniel Bell (2008), among others admire China’s Confucianist tradition as a potential pathway to remedy our moral and political decay and to lessen the worldwide massive economic inequality. The Confucian social hierarchy, it is argued, may *contribute* to economic equality. In today’s China, Bell argues, ‘new Confucianism’ offers a compelling alternative to Western liberalism.

The second approach to the idea of China has some roots in the tradition of Montesquieu (1689–1755), and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), among others. One of the contemporary advocates of this Sinophobic tradition is Samuel Huntington, whose work, *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996), presents China and Confucianism as antithetical – and *inferior* – to the Western higher values and institutions of liberalism, democracy, and human rights. This chapter suggests that neither of the two approaches of Sinophilia and Sinophobia could capture the complexity and reality of today’s China. The *real* China, I argue, is somewhere between the two poles. *Pragmatism* signifies today’s China, and Deng Xiaoping’s famous ‘cat theory’ best represents contemporary China. Chinese reformist leader Deng Xiaoping (r. 1978–1989) once argued: ‘It doesn’t matter if a cat is black or white; as long as it catches

mice, it's a good cat' ('In quotes: Deng Xiaoping', 2014). The theory essentially suggests that the ultimate policy goal for China is development, and it does not matter if it can be achieved by planned or market economics. This theory, I argue, has a much broader implication for the study of what China represents today, and sheds light on Sino–MENA relations. More specifically, Sino–MENA relations should be understood in the light of Chinese pragmatism. This approach challenges both a romanticised illusionary idea of China as a universal and superior alternative to the dominant economic-political neoliberal order, and a Sinophobic discourse, which demonises, essentialises, and denounces China as *the* beacon of autocracy, hierarchy, and nothing else. There has been a long and rich history of interactions between China as a great civilisation and other MENA civilisations, which cannot be reduced to either Sinophilia or Sinophobia.

Although China is a relatively new major economic partner and political actor in the postcolonial MENA region, China and today's MENA nations have been great partners for several centuries (Olimat, 2013). The current BRI, known as the New Silk Road, is named after the four thousand mile Silk Road that existed from 130 BCE to 1453 CE and which linked the MENA region and China, and is just one clear example of such a long history of economic and cultural interactions between the two regions.

While some scholars have argued that Chinese foreign policy under President Xi's leadership has shifted from *taoguang yanghui* (maintaining a low profile) to *fenfa youwei* (striving for achievement) (Fravel, 2012), others view his initiatives as an extension of 'the peaceful developments foreign policies' embraced by his predecessors (Ferchen, 2016). Yet, there is no doubt that the BRI, launched in 2013 aiming at connecting major Eurasian economies, through the Silk Road Economic Belt, overland routes and the twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road is Xi's signature foreign policy initiative. It seeks to promote connectivity mainly through the development of transportation infrastructure that supports the increased exchange of goods and services, an attempt to revive the pre-modern Silk Road. It boosts China's economic, political, and geostrategic goals including its soft power.

What does MENA mean for today's China as a major economic and political power? Although 'Beijing essentially remains a regional power with a global presence' (Scobell & Nader, 2016, p. 9), China and MENA are not 'strange bed-fellows' (Hayoun, 2013, p. 89), and economic and political ties between the two are growing in the emerging multiplex world. In the following section, I propose that Deng's pragmatic 'cat theory' may be extended and applied to China's MENA policy. The chapter problematises and sheds light on the three pillars of Sino–MENA relations in light of Chinese pragmatism.

### 1.3 Sino–MENA Today: A Triple-Pillar Relationship

Pragmatism is a keyword to describe Chinese domestic and foreign policy post-1978 and remains a guiding principle to examine contemporary Sino–MENA relations. This ‘new pragmatism with Chinese characteristics’, or ‘New Silk Road instead of exporting revolution’ (Kolodko, 2020), are based on three major pillars: the first pillar pertains to a broad category of ‘energy, trade, investment, arms deal, security and geostrategic significance’. The second pillar is centred around the Chinese policy of ‘non-intervention’, respecting sovereignty of the MENA states. The third pillar is pertinent to the so-called ‘Chinese model of development’ and what it means for the MENA states and civil societies.

As for the first pillar, China was oil self-sufficient until 1993. However, with Chinese economic modernisation policy and the growth of the Chinese middle class, the country needed more energy for industrialisation. Guided by a new strategy of ‘going out’ and a ‘peaceful rise’ or ‘peaceful development’ – the official policy of Chinese President Hu Jintao (2002–2012) – China strengthened its economic ties with the MENA region. The strategy of a ‘peaceful rise’ compelled China to diversify its energy sources and to reinforce its economic ties, trades, and investment plans with the oil-producing countries in the MENA region.

China’s never-ending economic growth has led to an increasing thirst for petroleum and natural gas, making the MENA region’s energy resources the country’s top foreign and security concern. For Beijing, both Central Asia and the MENA region are geostrategic crossroads of the world with a significant strategic depth and vast national resources. Hence, China has secured cordial relations with its immediate Central Asian neighbours, established the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001, and initiated the BRI in 2013. Equally important is how MENA is viewed as a strategic extension of China’s homeland and peripheries. Fearful of growing sympathy and possible cooperation between Chinese Muslim Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region and MENA Muslims, Beijing’s pragmatism explains strong Sino–MENA relations to serve China’s security and to prevent MENA sympathy and support for Muslim Uyghurs (Scobell, 2017, pp. 9–23).

China has managed to maintain friendly relations with all MENA states. Pragmatism has helped China to make business and expand trade with competing MENA states, maintaining a unique position as the largest economic partner. The MENA region has been the largest oil supplier to China since the mid-1990s. China currently imports some 44 per cent of its crude oil and 33 per cent of its natural gas from the Middle East, and this may reach to 70 per cent over the next few years. China remains the largest partner and importer of Saudi

Arabia's and Iran's crude oil. President Xi Jinping made a two-day visit to Saudi Arabia in January 2016, stressing that 'Saudi Arabia stands at a key junction along the Belt and Road Initiative' ('Lifting China–Saudi ties to comprehensive strategic partnership an irresistible trend', 2016, para. 4). King Salman of Saudi Arabia met with President Xi Jinping in China in May 2017, signing US \$65 billion investment deals (Wong, 2017). Likewise, after President Xi's visit to Iran in 2016, the two countries planned to expand their trade to \$600 billion over the next ten years (Wyke, 2016). China also ranks as the largest trading partner of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Yemen (European Commission on Trade, 2018). Furthermore, China's export to the region is expanding. In 2014, for example, China's export to the Middle East reached \$300 billion. Moreover, China has increased its direct foreign investment as well as building infrastructures in the region. For instance, China spent \$11 billion in a highway project in Algiers, Algeria. In fact, 'Algeria has served as the bridge to further Chinese ties with Africa' (Olimat, 2014, p. 35).

The China–Iran partnership, argue Ehteshami and Horesh (2020), remains 'a marriage of convenience glued by pragmatic interests'. Given Iran–US hostility including the comprehensive economic sanctions against Iran, and the China–US global rivalry, current Sino–Iran relations seem particularly important. 'Of all the major powers in Asia', argues Garver (2016, p. 182), 'Iran offers the best prospect of being a partner with China in the construction of a new international order in Asia when the era of multi-polarity arrives and the US role in Asia is much reduced'. Iran's 'Look East' policy and Beijing's view of Iran as a major regional power has brought these two states closer. The March 2021 twenty-five year Iran–China Strategic Partnership agreement highlights the mutual – although unequal – partnership between Tehran and Beijing. Given its strategic location connecting Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East, Calabrese argues that Iran is an indispensable part of China's BRI. Moreover, Beijing's 'Going Out Policy' of encouraging Chinese companies to invest overseas coupled with US pressure on Western firms to abandon their energy investments in Iran contributed to China's emergence as the primary foreign player in Iran's oil sector. China Petroleum and Chemical Corp (Sinopec) signed a contract to develop the Yadavaran oilfield, and China National Petroleum Corp (CNPC) signed contracts for Azadegan oil fields. Moreover, Iran's geostrategic location also impacts China's energy security, as Iran straddles the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf – two of the world's richest oil and gas zones – and has the Strait of Hormuz under its control, which impacts the free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf suppliers to Asian markets. Other examples of Sino–Iranian economic partnerships include the expansion of Iran's maritime shipping capacity by China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation (CSIC) and China

State Shipbuilding Corporation (CSSC) and the construction and expansion of the Tehran underground subway system by CITIC Group Corporation, China North Industries Corporation (NORINCO), and Changchun Railway Vehicles Corporation (CRV). Hence, 'China's relations with Iran, are driven primarily by economic and strategic considerations. The cornerstone of the economic partnership between China and Iran is energy trade' (Calabrese, 2017, pp. 174–191). Moreover, for China, Iran counterbalances excessive American influence and is in support of China's expanding interests in the region (Garver, 2011, p. 77). Iran is seen as bridgehead safeguarding the security of China's western frontier, serving as China's first 'firewall' against potential Western expansion (Wenmu, 2013, pp. 33–34). Furthermore, Iran's unique location as the only East–West and North–South intersection for Central Asian trade, and the most convenient non-Russian access route to open water makes it a nodal point in the BRI and a major long-term independent source of energy for China. This is evident in the remarks of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei during his meeting with President Xi in January 2016: 'Iran is the most reliable country in the region for energy since its energy policies will never be affected by foreigners' (quoted from Ching & Gallo, 2016).

The MENA energy sources, in sum, remain the main driving force for China's pragmatist policy towards the region. The investment and other forms of trades are largely in the service of Chinese energy policy. Nonetheless, the MENA region could benefit from the BRI in general and the Chinese investment policy through such institutions as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and Chinese support for improving renewable and clean energy in the region. For example, Cole (2016) sheds some lights on the complexity of Sino–MENA green energy investment and solar power, which is one avenue through which China has created a new relationship with MENA. China under President Xi Jinping has pursued a 'Go out!' policy in which Chinese firms create factories abroad to 'benefit from cheap labor and from local low-tariff trade blocs' in such countries as the UAE and Morocco. This has changed 'China's relationship to the region from being one of buying hydrocarbons to a much more intensive set of interactions, including acting as employer for local labor' (Cole, 2016, pp. 59–60).

The second pillar of China's MENA policy is respecting the political status quo, stability, and state sovereignty through the doctrine of 'non-interventionism'. This pillar, too, should be understood in light of the Chinese pragmatist doctrine of 'peaceful rise' and a political strategy of 'offend no one'. The implementation of this pillar involves cooperation with competing regional powers and parties such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Palestine, Syria, and Turkey. It led to China abstaining in the UN Security Council vote on the Libyan no-fly zone

resolution in 2011, but it also led China to continue its arms trade with Saudi Arabia in spite of Saudi's intervention and war crimes in Yemen. China has pursued the same non-interventionist policy in the civil (proxy) war in Syria, recognising the Syrian regime's sovereignty and undermining the regime's massive crimes against humanity.

China has demonstrated a more proactive policy by vetoing a UN Security Council resolution to impose sanctions on Syria. The Chinese arms trade with the MENA states, the recent presence of Chinese naval warships in the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea, and a gradual shift from a traditional 'anti-piracy' operation in Somalia towards a more proactive presence in the region are indicative of growing Chinese military and political presence in the region. It is important to note that 'Chinese military spending is merely a third of US expenditure, ca. 230 billion dollars a year' (Kolodko, 2020, p. 7), but it is growing quickly.

Nonetheless, recent Chinese activities do not indicate a shift in China's non-interventionist policy. While Beijing still remains a regional power and cautiously pursues its pragmatic doctrine of 'non-interventionism', the failure of the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the post-invasion crisis in Libya in 2011, and the Syrian catastrophe provided a context and an opportunity for China to become more active in the MENA region. Furthermore, China's lack of colonial history in MENA has contributed to its greater presence in the region. In fact, all MENA states welcome the Chinese non-intervention policy for their own particular reasons. MENA's unique geostrategic location – a trade hub linking three continents – is of great interest to China, and a respect for state sovereignty and the non-intervention policy seem to work for both sides.

The third pillar of Sino–MENA relations is particularly important. It projects China as an 'idea', a discourse, a model, or a pathway to development. What does today's China as a model, a path, or a paradigm offer to the MENA region? 'The Chinese model of development' is a contested concept, which has been defined and problematised in multiple ways: first, the Chinese model of development has been described as 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics', referring to Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, which incorporated elements of market economy into the Chinese socialist system. This is the Chinese official account of the Chinese model of development, echoed by the current President Xi, among other top Chinese leaders. Interestingly, the official Chinese discourse has never declared the Chinese 'path' as a universal model for other countries. It has been introduced and theorised as a distinct path suited to the Chinese condition.



The second interpretation of the Chinese model of development was introduced by Joshua Cooper Ramo, who coined a new concept of the ‘Beijing consensus’ in 2004 to theorise the Chinese model as an alternative to the ‘Washington consensus’, a neoliberal, market-oriented system promoted by the West. The Beijing consensus, Ramo (2004) argued, is a pragmatic and particularly Chinese economic path, which holds several characteristics (Elen, 2016). It promotes and facilitates constant innovation, focusses more on sustainability and equality and less on a country’s GDP, and finally, it is neither power hungry nor hegemonic; it is a research and value-oriented economic system.

The last, and probably the most controversial, characterisation of the Chinese model of development is introduced by David Harvey. In a sharp contrast from the official account of Chinese authorities, Harvey characterises the Chinese model as ‘neoliberalism “with Chinese characteristics”’ (Harvey, 2005, pp. 120–151). This model refers to the post-1978 economic reform under Deng Xiaoping, in which China has constructed ‘a particular kind of market economy that increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralised control’ (Harvey, 2005, p. 120). In his reference to the massacre of students in Tiananmen Square in 1989, Harvey argues that this model ‘clearly indicated that neoliberalization in the economy was not to be accompanied by any progress in the fields of human, civil, or democratic rights’ (Harvey, 2005, p. 123). China did not take the “shock therapy” path of instant privatization’ endorsed by the IMF and the World Bank to ‘avert the economic disasters’ of Russia and Central Europe in the 1990s. China took its own particular path towards ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ or ‘privatization with Chinese characteristics’, constructed a form of ‘state-manipulated market economy that delivered spectacular economic growth (averaging close to 10 per cent a year) and rising standards of living for a significant proportion of the population for more than twenty years’. Harvey then reminds us that this path also ‘led to environmental degradation, social inequality, and eventually something that looks uncomfortably like the reconstitution of capitalist class power’ (Harvey, 2005, p. 122).

Almost two decades after his analysis, Harvey’s critical observation seems valid and relevant in today’s context. He argues,

In so far as neoliberalism requires a large, easily exploited, and relatively powerless labour force, then China certainly qualifies as a neoliberal economy, albeit ‘with Chinese characteristics’. The accumulation of wealth seems to have proceeded in part via a combination of corruption, hidden

ruses, and overt appropriation of rights and assets that were once held in common.

HARVEY, 2005, p. 144<sup>1</sup>

He then continues,

While there are several aspects of Communist Party policy that were designed to frustrate capitalist class formation, the party has also acceded to the massive proletarianization of China's workforce, the breaking of the 'iron rice bowl', the evisceration of social protections, the imposition of user fees, the creation of a flexible labour market regime, and the privatization of assets formerly held in common. It has created a social system where capitalist enterprises can both form and function freely.

HARVEY, 2005, p. 150

China, in sum, 'has definitely moved towards neoliberalization and the reconstitution of class power, albeit "with distinctly Chinese characteristics"' (Harvey, 2005, p. 151).

In his short 2020 article, titled 'Anti-Capitalist Politics in the Time of COVID-19', Harvey seems to remain critical on China's neoliberalism, arguing that China as the world's second largest economy has 'effectively bailed out global capitalism in the aftermath of [the] 2007-8' economic crisis. In reference to the global pandemic, he then adds that 'COVID-19 is Nature's revenge for over forty years of Nature's gross and abusive mistreatment at the hands of a violent and unregulated *neo-liberal* extractivism' (Harvey, 2020).

While it is vital to clearly and categorically condemn Sinophobia and racial categorisation of Chinese culture which appeared in increased targeting of hundreds of Asian-Americans for the global pandemic, or in the comments of former US president Donald Trump and his Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, labelling the global pandemic as the 'China virus' and the 'Wuhan virus' ('Trump defends calling coronavirus the "Chinese virus"', 2020), it is equally

1 For Harvey, 'the gap between rural and urban incomes has been increasing rapidly. While affluent urban dwellers drive BMWs, rural farmers are lucky to eat meat once a week. Even more emphatic has been the increasing inequality *within* both the rural and the urban sectors. Regional inequalities have also deepened' (Harvey, 2005, p. 145).

Another source for amassing wealth arises out of the super exploitation of labour power, particularly of young women migrants from rural areas. Wage levels in China are extremely low, and conditions of labour are sufficiently unregulated, despotic, and exploitative. Even worse, 'much of the capital accumulated by private and foreign firms comes from unpaid labour' (Harvey, 2005, p. 148).

important to acknowledge that such a mega global crisis is partly rooted in the systemic abuse of the environment and the ‘economicalisation’ of nature by implementing market-driven neoliberal policies. The global pandemic largely depends upon the ‘cracks and vulnerabilities’ in the neoliberal ‘hegemonic economic model’ (Harvey, 2020).

The Chinese path to development therefore represents a particular form of a capitalist economy, or ‘Sino-capitalism’ (McNally, 2012).<sup>2</sup> What soared after 1989 in China was another kind of ‘state capitalism’ as ‘what collapsed in 1989 was Soviet State capitalism, not socialism’. More specifically, China’s development strategy represents a ‘hybrid state capitalism’ not socialism. It embraces ‘a state-supervised mix of state and private capitalism focused on exports’. It deals ‘with global capitalists, providing cheap labor, government support, and a growing domestic market. In exchange, foreign capitalists would partner with Chinese state or private capitalists, share technology, and integrate Chinese output into global wholesale and retail trade systems’. What is missing in this hybrid state capitalism seems a ‘democratization of workplace’ to materialise a more just and humane society in the twenty-first century. (Wolff, 2020; 2019).

The Chinese model of development, in sum, is an amalgamation of neoliberalism with elements of mercantilism, authoritarianism, and planned economy. It has managed to offer development without democracy. This particular feature seems to be welcomed by autocratic regimes in the MENA region who are interested in the political stability of their regimes and pursuing a neoliberal autocratic model of development. Although the Chinese authorities never claimed that their economic path is universal, the MENA autocracies have constantly looked into the Chinese ‘model’ to consolidate their neoliberal autocracy.

#### 1.4 Whither the MENA Paths of Development? A Civil Society Approach

What is China’s vision for a new world order and does its vision help MENA’s sustainable development and democracy? The intellectual foundations or ideological underpinnings of China’s vision for a new world order, argues Rolland, are inspired by ‘traditional Chinese thought and past historical experiences’, and reflect a desire for ‘partial hegemony, loosely exercised over large portions of the “Global South” – a space that would be free from Western influence and

<sup>2</sup> According to Klein (2014, p. 351), ‘what has changed in China in recent years – and what is of paramount concern to the ruling party – is that the country’s elites, the wealthy winners in China’s embrace of full-throttle capitalism, are distressed by the costs of industrialization’.

purged of liberal ideals' (Rolland, 2020, p. 2). Since the 1990s, and more forcefully after 2013, Beijing has developed and employed the concept of *Huayuquan*, or *guoji huayuquan*, meaning 'speaking rights/international speaking rights', or 'discourse power/international discourse power' to reflect China's desires to have the right to speak, influence, and shape the global norms and order.

Beijing's growing material power has been complemented by its discursive power represented in several concepts or slogans to promote China's *huayuquan*. These slogans include Deng Xiaoping's idea of 'Five principles of peaceful coexistence' in 1988; Jiang Zemin's concept of 'good neighbourliness' in 1989; the idea of 'win-win cooperation', which was passed at the 16th CCP Central Committee in 2005; the 'common interests/harmonious world' introduced to the 17th CCP Congress in 2007; the 'China's story/China's voice' in 2012; and numerous slogans introduced by President Xi Jinping's in 2013. Examples of Xi's slogans encapsulate a four-part approach to guide diplomacy towards small and medium powers: 'amity, sincerity, mutual benefits, and inclusiveness'; a 'community of common destiny/community of shared future for mankind', or 'four virtues: speak in good faith, value comradeship, raise justice, cultivate righteousness'. In 2014, Xi introduced slogans such as 'common, comprehensive, cooperative, sustainable', 'China path', 'China wisdom', and 'Cultural self-confidence'. In 2015, President Xi's idea of 'two guides' suggested that China should guide the international community to shape a more 'just' and 'secure' global order. At the 18th CCP Central Committee in 2015 he introduced ideas of 'innovation, coordination, green development, openness, and sharing'; in 2017 he came with concepts of 'building world peace, contributor to global development, protector of international order'; in 2018 his keywords were 'equality, mutual understanding, dialogue, and tolerance', and in 2019 he introduced ideas of 'frank consultation, sincere communication, in-depth exchange, mutual learning' (Rolland, 2020, pp. 15–16, 60–64). Evidently, China under President Xi has profoundly enhanced its discursive power, providing its own 'alternative' vision of a more 'reasonable' international order.

Nonetheless, the key question is to what extent the Chinese vision of the global order differs radically from the exiting neoliberal one where China is actively involved. Moreover, it is unclear how a neoliberal order with Chinese characteristics would serve justice, peace, inclusiveness, and mutual cooperation. For example, contemporary China's neoliberal path to development seems to contradict Beijing's official discourse of 'peaceful rise' or 'peaceful development' as the neoliberal model represents a form of *structural violence* to the environment and to the dignity of domestic and global subalterns. Also, as shown in the 26 April 2021 report of the Stockholm International Peace

Research Institute (SIPRI), Beijing's boost in its military budget does not seem to represent a new emerging peaceful order. 'China's military expenditure, the second highest in the world, is estimated to have totalled \$252 billion in 2020. This represents an increase of 1.9 per cent over 2019 and 76 per cent over the decade 2011–20'. The report suggests that China's military spending 'has risen for 26 consecutive years, the longest series of uninterrupted increases by any country in the SIPRI Military Expenditure Database' ('World military spending rises to almost \$2 trillion in 2020', 2021).

Beijing's current treatment of Muslim Uyghurs which violates their cultural and political rights, and its repression of the 2019–20 pro-democracy uprisings in Hong Kong hardly represents inclusiveness, dialogue, and mutual benefits. Moreover, Beijing's discourse of 'Chinese exceptionalism' has helped the ruling elites to justify the rule of the one-party system in the name of promoting 'a hierarchical, virtuous, harmonious domestic order' at home, and the claim of 'inherent peacefulness' to consolidate Beijing's global power. Is Beijing's 'hierarchical order promoted domestically', one might ask, 'the preferred model for the new international order'? (Rolland, 2020, pp. 25–26) Does this model facilitate creating a more just and democratic sociopolitical order in the MENA region? The Global South in general, and the MENA and Asia regions in particular, need to invent their own indigenous inclusive, democratic and egalitarian models of development and democracy while remaining wide open to learn from China and others in this emerging multiplex world order.

Theoretically, Sino–MENA relations could be approached in three distinct ways. First, a 'Sino-centred approach' always underlines China's economic and political interests in the region. In this approach, China as an idea and/or a perceived model is often romanticised, and the MENA region remains the residual category – the 'other' – and a passive recipient of material and ideal charities. The second approach, represented by the MENA autocratic regimes is a 'MENA state-centred approach', which constructs and *manipulates* the 'Chinese model of development' to promote and justify the idea of development without democracy, or neoliberal authoritarianism. The third approach, I suggest, takes a civil society perspective that considers the long-term interests of MENA social forces. The first two approaches are state-centric, undermining the interests of civil society, and overlooking the pitfalls and problems of the Chinese model of development. More specifically, the Chinese model of development and its vision for a new order entail multiple shortcomings. First, and foremost, is the autocratic nature of Chinese top-down modernisation. This is evident in several cases including state-sponsored cultural domination, forced assimilation, and autocratic nation-building of the Muslim minority Uyghurs in Xinjiang region, undermining their ethno-cultural identity and forcefully integrating

them into a top-down state-sponsored homogenous Chinese national identity (Mauk, 2021; Bovington, 2010; Scott, 1985).

Several features of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, or 'Eastern Turkestan' as it is called by most Uyghurs, make it vital to China's economic and political security. The region possesses almost one-third of China's natural gas and oil, and substantial deposits of gold, uranium, and other metals. Moreover, given its favourable climate, the region is viewed as a 'cotton basket', that is, as highly attractive for cotton cultivation. The vast uninhabited land of the region also offers a potential solution to overpopulation in the heart of China. And its geopolitical location makes it a 'strategic gateway' to the markets of Central Asia and the Middle East (Downs, 2004). Hence, Beijing has viewed Uyghur unrest and protest in Xinjiang as a major national security concern, especially in the post-9/11 era when the Chinese official narrative of the Uyghur's 'counter-revolution' became replaced by 'war on terrorism and religious extremism' (Rodríguez-Merino, 2019).

Uyghurs are forced to study the Chinese language and the official Han Chinese doctrine as part of political 're-education', argues Roberts (2020), in mass detention centres or what are officially called 'vocational education and training centres'. Moreover, under the 'transformation' programme of China's rural Uyghur population, thousands of Uyghur workers are relocated to new residential factories, depopulating rural towns which were once overwhelmingly Uyghur.

Most Muslim-majority states including the MENA autocratic states have remained silent over the gross violation of human rights of Uyghurs, mostly because of strong economic ties and political support that Beijing can offer on the international stage. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation along with several Muslim-majority states even blocked a Western motion at the UN in 2019 calling for China to allow journalists access to Xinjiang province.<sup>3</sup> In 2019 during a visit to China, Mohammed Bin Salman, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia and the de facto ruler of the kingdom, appeared to publically back his hosts over their treatment of the Uyghurs. Likewise, Iran has remained largely silent about China's policy towards the Uyghurs mainly because Beijing

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3 In 2019 twenty-two mostly Western countries in a joint statement to the High Commissioner of the UN Human Rights Council criticised China for what they defined as 'disturbing reports of large-scale arbitrary detentions' and 'widespread surveillance and restrictions', a day later thirty-seven other countries, nearly half of them were Muslim-majority nations, including Pakistan, Qatar, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia jumped to Beijing's defence.

remains Tehran's major trading partner during the US imposition of harsh economic sanctions against Iran.

Beijing's autocratic policy towards the Uyghurs does not offer an inclusive and pluralistic model of coexistence for the MENA societies where there are multiple religious and ethnic minorities in several MENA nations. Moreover, the MENA autocratic regimes welcome Beijing's restricted policy in cyberspace and domestic internet industry as it would serve the policy of autocratic modernisation and advanced technology without political freedom. For example, Yalla, (lit., 'let's go' in Arabic) is a Chinese-founded app with headquarters in Dubai, it is among the most popular chat and gaming apps in the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf region, Egypt, Jordan, and Algeria, but also supports seven other regional languages such as Urdu and Turkish. What is interesting is that 'the basic rule for the platform is known as "PRP": no politics, no religion, no porn' and violating this rule means 'losing one's account' (Yang & Kerr, 2021). The critical point here is that the depoliticisation of civil society is welcomed by modernising autocrats. But as Sen (1999) shows, sociopolitical freedom, pluralism, and democracy are central to the success of sustainable and just development in the Global South.

In this context we may understand why some sections of Iranian civil society and pro-democracy forces hold a relatively negative perception of China's growing influence in Iran. The public was not very enthusiastic about Iran joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) after its full membership was approved in September 2021. Some even reacted against the 2021 Sino–Iran twenty-five year strategic partnership agreement (Ma Hastim, 2020). In their view, while there is not much transparency about the scope of China's influence in Iran, the hardliner faction of the regime advocates the 'Look East' policy at the expense of balanced relations with both the West (US) and the East (China) to consolidate its autocratic power. The recent history of MENA, however, has shown the unsustainability of autocratic and top-down modernisation, secularisation, or nation-building in MENA societies. The 1979 Iranian revolution, the 2009 pro-democracy Green Movement in Iran, the 2010–2011 Arab Spring and the aftermath, and the 2013 Gezi Park Movement in Turkey have all demonstrated MENA civil society's resistance and strong reaction to the idea and policy of 'economic development without democracy' (Mahdavi, 2019).

The second and related shortcoming of Beijing's model concerns how today's China has responded to people's democratic demands and basic rights. Beijing's policy towards the 2019–2020 pro-democracy demonstrations in Hong Kong and its cosy and complex relations with the Myanmar junta and the February 2021 anti-democratic military coup in the country offer little to

no lesson to build a more inclusive and democratic MENA region. The 2019–2020 Hong Kong protests, which were triggered by a controversial extradition bill endorsed by Beijing, set off a chain of protests in February 2019 opposing the bill as an infringement of civil liberties in Hong Kong and its judicial sovereignty and for exposing its citizens to the legal system of mainland China. The proposed bill was viewed as a violation of liberty, and the counter-hegemonic protest and resistance came amid growing concerns about the future of democracy and the rule of law in Hong Kong (Garrett, 2014).

The case of Myanmar is equally important. When Myanmar was under pressure by several countries over its genocidal treatment of the Muslim Rohingya minority in Rakhine, Beijing backed the military regime and the de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi's narrative that the genocidal allegations and the gross violation of the Muslim Rohingya's human rights were 'overblown and the authorities were responding to a terrorist threat' (McLaughlin, 2021). More recently, Beijing also did block the UN Security Council resolution against the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar (Myanmar coup, 2021). While these so-called 'pragmatic' policies driven by Beijing's economic and security concerns are welcomed by the MENA autocratic regimes, the MENA social forces and civil societies will suffer if, or when, their states pursue the same model.

The third shortcoming pertains to Beijing's neoliberal model of development. Neoliberalism produces extreme social inequality, reduces human agents into 'market actors', and empowers capital, not citizens (Brown, 2015b). Brown argues that 'neoliberalism, is a particular form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms and is quietly undoing basic elements of democracy. These elements include vocabularies and principles of justice, political cultures, habits of citizenship, practices of rule, and above all, democratic imaginaries' (2015a, p. 17). The catastrophe is 'normative economization of political life' (2015a, p. 201).

Social inequality results in a gradual decline of democratic aspirations in civil society; it gives rise to populist authoritarian trends and pushes democratic ideas and institutions at bay (Mahdavi, 2017, p. 284). While the MENA region needs an active, inclusive and empowered civil society to build a just, inclusive, and sustainable development and democracy, the neoliberal model of development undermines social justice, societal empowerment, and a sustainable and inclusive model of development.

We may now ask whether MENA civil societies can benefit from the Sino–MENA relations and if so how? Drawing from a civil society approach, I suggest a threefold remark to draw this section to a close. First, China is neither the saviour of the MENA from the ill effects of the postcolonial order, nor is it an evil force. The real China today pursues Deng's pragmatist 'cat theory'



in domestic and foreign policy. Chinese pragmatism explains the triple pillar of Sino–MENA relations. China needs energy from the MENA region and is actively involved in trade and investment. However, should the MENA states act proactively and strategically, the MENA civil society could benefit from China's New Silk Road or the BRI, China's relatively low interest loans and investment plans, and Chinese interest in fostering an innovative 'knowledge economy' and improving renewable and clean energy in the region.

More specifically, both China and most MENA states as well as some MENA economic sectors welcome Chinese economic involvement in the region. However, the export of Chinese cheap products to the region sometimes works to the detriment of local MENA industries and products, and MENA civil society may suffer from such trade and economic ties. Chinese impact on MENA is complex and requires active involvement and interactions of the MENA civil societies with the Chinese government and Chinese companies. The MENA states should rely on their civil society forces and use their negotiation skills to protect the interests of their local industries.

Second, China is neither a decisive counter-hegemonic force, nor yet a world hegemon. Nonetheless, Chinese participation in the MENA region, along with other members of the BRICS, could consolidate a multipolar and multiplex world system and challenge the US hegemony and its unilateral interventionism. This may well benefit the MENA social forces to pursue their home-grown progressive sociopolitical changes. In this context, Chinese respect for state sovereignty and stability and their 'non-interventionist' policy are particularly important in the age of neoliberal interventionism. It is clear that MENA autocratic regimes welcome Chinese support of existing status quos. Nonetheless, this policy has more or less benefited the MENA civil societies. The Western NATO-sponsored wars, interventions, and crippling economic sanctions have ruined a number of MENA civil societies. It is true that China's non-interventionist policy may benefit the autocratic regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, or that close Chinese ties with Saudi Arabia may contribute to the Saudi's military intervention in Yemen but it is also true that MENA civil societies suffered from Western-sponsored military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya and from economic sanctions in Iraq and Iran. Chinese pro-stability is a pragmatist policy in the service of Chinese economic interest but it may also protect MENA civil societies from the American unilateral militarism. MENA civil societies need peace and prosperity in order to challenge their autocratic regimes from *within*.

Third, the real or perceived and constructed 'Chinese model of development' could have mixed results for the future prosperity of MENA civil societies. This discourse has been clearly employed and manipulated by the

MENA autocratic states, consolidating the state of 'neoliberalism without democracy', economic development without democracy, and autocratic capitalism in the region. The solution to MENA problems, I argue, is neither neoliberalism of the 'Washington consensus' nor neoliberalism of the 'Beijing consensus', as they may represent two sides of the same coin! The MENA region needs its own distinct path to development and democracy: a path that requires an active citizenry, a civil society engagement, and a socio-economic model ensuring social justice and political freedom. MENA countries should certainly learn lessons from China and the West, but in the end, they should produce their own distinct paths to a just, comprehensive, and sustainable development. The MENA quest for a just and inclusive development is not an invitation for isolation and/or regressive and reactionary particularism. As Gramsci reminds us, 'it is one thing to be particular, another thing to preach particularism' (1975, p. 6).

## 1.5 Conclusion

'How would you characterise China's current Middle East policy?' asked a reporter of China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi on 24 March 2021. In his response, Wang Yi argued that,

[...] for the region to emerge from chaos and enjoy stability, it must break free from the shadows of big-power geopolitical rivalry and *independently* explore development paths *suited to its regional realities*. It must stay impervious to external pressure and interference, and follow an inclusive and reconciliatory approach to build a security architecture that accommodates the legitimate concerns of all sides.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021; emphasis added

Wang Yi then proposed a 'five-point initiative' on achieving security and stability in the Middle East. The first point is 'advocating mutual respect', which entails looking at the Middle East countries as 'partners for cooperation, development and peace, instead of perceiving the region through the lens of geo-competition'. It also requires respecting and supporting the 'Middle East countries in exploring their own paths of development', their own plans in pursuing regional political settlements and promoting 'dialogue among civilizations to achieve peaceful coexistence'. Second is 'upholding equity and justice', in cases such as the Palestinian question by reaffirming the two-state solution at the UN Security Council and welcoming 'Palestinian and Israeli

representatives to China for direct negotiations'. Third is 'achieving non-proliferation' in the Iranian nuclear issue by resuming compliance with the JCPOA, lifting the US unilateral sanctions on Iran, and resuming Iran's reciprocal compliance with its nuclear commitments. Furthermore, 'the international community should support efforts by regional countries in establishing a Middle East zone free of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction'. Fourth, 'jointly fostering collective security' by promoting regional security and stability, encouraging equal dialogue and consultation, and combating terrorism to ensure 'the safety of oil facilities and shipping lanes, and building step by step a framework for a collective, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security in the Middle East'. The fifth and final point is 'accelerating development cooperation' as enduring peace and security 'requires development, cooperation, and integration'. This includes defeating the COVID-19, rebuilding post-conflict countries, and supporting greater diversity in the economic growth of oil-producing countries by hosting the China–Arab Reform and Development Forum and the Middle East Security Forum. ('Wang Yi proposes a five-point initiative on achieving security and stability in the Middle East', 2021).

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's remarks are complemented by the remarks of Zhong Jianhua, China's Special Representative on African Affairs, arguing that 'China is neither bad nor good. China is a combination of these things' (Africa Research Institute, 2013, p. 34). It is the MENA countries that need to interact and engage actively with China and other BRICS countries and at the same time pursue their own independent paths to development and democracy.

It is equally important to note that while the asymmetrical economic power relations between China and the MENA region may well lead to Chinese economic supremacy, the MENA region could benefit from its economic ties with China if it acts proactively and plans strategically. Countries pursue their own interests and the more powerful they are, the better they impose their agendas. China is no exception. The MENA region should also pursue its own interest. The West as well as the BRICS countries actively pursue their own interests and MENA should do the same. One practical solution to pursue such a path maybe to take a position of 'negative equilibrium' towards all major powers including the US and China in order to prevent new forms of colonialism and dependency. In the new and emerging era of the 'multiplex world', a post-Cold War and a post-American order, a new and novel form of negative equilibrium requires for MENA to proactively maintain its relations with both the East and the West, benefiting from the global experiences and achievements and at the same time develop its own independent paths of democratic development. Drawing from

the dependency theory and/or the world system theory, Ian Taylor (2015; 2014) argues that Sino–African relations may lead to ‘diversifying dependency’ or ‘dependency redux’ in which China and other emerging non-Western powers such as the BRICS countries may reproduce the state of dependency and under-development in Africa. The same can be argued about Sino–MENA relations. While MENA countries could certainly benefit from China’s investment and other economic projects, China’s economic and political partnership with the region does not automatically lead to MENA development. What MENA can learn from China is to do what China did, that is, to independently explore development paths suited to its own regional realities. MENA is not a single, homogeneous region and thus there will and should be multiple MENA paths suited to the socio-cultural and political realities of each MENA nation towards a just and inclusive development.

In other words, a civil society approach to development implies that MENA societies need to discover new ways, indigenous approaches, and ‘alternative modernities’ that are attentive to local traditions and global (American, Chinese, etc.) development models. The MENA region needs to discover ‘a third way’ or a ‘glocal’ approach. Such a bottom-up approach benefits from both global and local experiences and yet maintains its ‘decolonial horizons’, to use Mingolo’s (2015) concept, that is, to develop models of sustainable, inclusive, and egalitarian development and democracy. In the existing neoliberal global structure, the MENA region in particular, and the Global South in general, need to exercise an ‘epistemic disobedience’ (Mingolo, 2015), delinking from the hegemonic order without falling into a trap of regressive nativism. Such authentic grass-roots models of development require thinking and acting independently. It also requires greater inclusion of ordinary people into politics by adopting a more egalitarian, pro-social justice discourse in the age of neoliberal hegemony.

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