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Red Capitalism and Neoliberal Authoritarianism

Revisiting Sino-MENA Relations

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Abstract

The rise of the BRICS block has contributed to the emergence of a “multiplex world”. This shift in power dynamics has revealed the crisis of the existing liberal international order, a relative decline in the U.S. power, and a gradual transition towards a post-American order. This article examines the dynamics of Sino-MENA relations in a “multiplex world” where both the U.S. and the MENA states have chosen “The Look East” policy. The U.S.-China geopolitical rivalry explains a shift in the U.S. foreign policy from the Middle East toward the Far East. The Middle East’s “Look East Policy”, however, is largely due to the needs for an alternative global partner. This article examines three pillars of the Sino-MENA relations: 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 no military intervention and respecting the state sovereignty. The third pillar is pertinent to the “Chinese Model of Development” and what it means for the MENA. It examines whether such relations might consolidate autocratic capitalism and neoliberalism without democracy and, or benefit MENA civil societies’ quest for a grassroots and egalitarian development and democracy.

Keywords

Sino-MENA relations – “multiplex world” – red capitalism – the Chinese model of development – “neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics” – cat theory

Introduction

In their annual summit held in South Africa in August 2023, the BRICS countries (comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) extended invitations to six new members to join their economic and political alliance. Notably, four of these new members are situated in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region: Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Given China's significant role as the second largest global economy within the BRICS bloc, the inclusion of these four major MENA states is expected to have geopolitical impacts and implication. The rise of the BRICS block, a club of major non-Western global actors, has contributed to the emergence of a 'multiplex world'. This shift in power dynamics has revealed the crisis of the existing liberal international order, a relative decline in the U.S. hard and soft powers, and a gradual transition towards a post-American order (Acharya 2020; Acharya 2019: 11–14).

What do Sino-MENA relations look like in a 'multiplex world'? There is nothing new about China's dissatisfaction about a western-centric world order. Nonetheless, we must keep in mind that it is in the current neoliberal global order that China has become 'the world's largest economy, if measuring production output with purchasing power', or at least the second largest economy soon to become the first (Kolodko 2020: 3). China neither intends to terminate the existing global order nor does it plan to rule the world. However, as declared in Chinese President Xi Jinping's remarks at the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, Beijing is determined to reinforce its 'national strength' and 'international influence'. Such policy has reflected in President Xi's signature foreign policy of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or the New Silk Road. Beijing has signed documents on Belt and Road cooperation with nineteen MENA countries, has established a regional technological cooperation, or a 'Digital Silk Road', as well as Health Silk Road (HSR) project to strengthen China's soft power and its regional and global economic and political influence. Moreover, Chinese Hanban Institutes have opened and financed Confucius Institutions in Turkey, Israel, Iran, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Jordan, the UAE, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Morocco. Such institutions facilitate Chinese cultural and language classes, serving as Beijing's soft power in MENA.

Beijing has signed 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships' with major MENA states including Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt. President Xi Jinping has visited Pakistan, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE, making China one of the largest economic and trade partners with these countries. Furthermore, Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's visit to China in February 2019 highlights China's increasing demand for energy resources, and its desire for

a security partnership with Saudi Arabia. This is also evident in the Sino–Iran relationship, as exemplified by Tehran’s joining the Shanghai Cooperation Pact (SCP) during the group’s virtual summit on 4 July 2023, as well as former President Rouhani’s visit to China in 2018 and the signing of a twenty-five-year Iran–China strategic partnership agreement in Tehran in March 2021. Equally significant is Beijing’s diplomatic initiative in March 2023 aimed at fostering a reconciliation between Iran–Saudi Arabia, following years of tension. This marks a fresh phase in Sino–MENA relations, underscores the MENA states’ ‘Look East Policy’, and China’s ‘Look West Policy’ towards the MENA region, which challenges the U.S. superior role in the region.

This article examines the dynamics of Sino–MENA relations in a ‘multiplex world’ where both the U.S. and the MENA states, although for different reasons, have chosen ‘The Look East’ policy. The U.S.–China geopolitical rivalry, or the ‘Cold-War Two’ explains a slight shift in the U.S. foreign policy from the Middle East toward the Far East. The Middle East’s ‘Look East’ policy, however, is largely due to the MENA states’ needs for an alternative global partner. While China needs the MENA resources to secure its future hegemony, MENA needs the East and particularly China to diversify its global partners in a ‘multiplex world’. More specifically, this article critically examines three pillars of the Sino–MENA relations: 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 no military intervention, respecting the state sovereignty and preserving the political status quo. The third pillar is pertinent to the so-called ‘Chinese Model of Development’ and what it means for the MENA states and social forces in civil societies. It examines whether such relations might consolidate the state of neoliberalism without democracy and autocratic capitalism, or benefit MENA civil society forces in their quest for a grassroots development and social democracy.

Chinese ‘Cat Theory’, or the ‘New Pragmatism with Chinese Characteristics’: Sino–MENA Triple-Pillar Relationship

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’ (China Daily 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.

What significance does MENA hold for contemporary China, a prominent player in the global economic and political landscape? To gain a clearer perspective on Sino–MENA relations, it is crucial to consider Chinese *pragmatism*. This approach opposes the Sinophilic idea that China is a universal and superior alternative to the dominant neoliberal economic-political order. It also challenges the Sinophobic discourse that demonizes and denounces China solely as a beacon of autocracy and hierarchy. The history of interactions between China, a great civilization, and other MENA civilizations is extensive and diverse, and it should not 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 contemporary MENA nations have been great partners for several centuries (Olimat 2013). The present-day BRI, known as the New Silk Road, takes its name from the historic Silk Road, a sprawling trade network that spanned four-thousand-miles and operated between 130 BCE and 1453 CE. This ancient route connected the MENA region with China, serving as a prominent illustration of the enduring legacy of economic and cultural exchange between these two regions. While ‘Beijing essentially remains a regional power with a global presence’ (Scobell and Nader 2016: 9), China and MENA are not ‘strange bedfellows’ (Hayoun 2013: 89). In fact, their economic and political ties are flourishing in the emerging multiplex world. In this context, I suggest that Deng Xiaoping’s pragmatic ‘cat theory’ can be extended and applied to China’s MENA policy. This argument will delve into and illuminate the three pillars of Sino–MENA relations in the context of Chinese pragmatism.

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 covers a wide range of aspects, including ‘energy, trade, investment, arms deal, security and geostrategic significance’. The second pillar revolves around China’s ‘non-intervention’ policy and its commitment to respecting the sovereignty of the MENA states. The third pillar relates to the ‘Chinese model of development’ and its implications for both MENA states and their civil societies.

Regarding the first pillar, China was self-sufficient in oil until 1993. However, as a result of the Chinese economic modernization policy and the expansion of the Chinese middle class, the country found itself in need of more energy to support its industrialization. Under the guidance of a new strategies of ‘going out’ and a ‘peaceful rise’ or ‘peaceful development’, which were the

official policy of Chinese President Hu Jintao (2002–2012), China bolstered its economic ties with the MENA region. The strategy of a ‘peaceful rise’ compelled China to diversify its energy sources and strengthen its economic ties, trades, partnerships and investment plans with the oil-producing countries in the MENA region.

China’s 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 neighbors, established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (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: 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 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 in the near future. 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’ (Xinhuanet 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 2018). Furthermore, China’s export to the region is expanding and reached \$300 billion in the last decade. Beijing has increased its direct foreign investment and 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: 35).

The China–Iran partnership remains ‘a marriage of convenience glued by pragmatic interests. (Ehteshami and Niv 2020). Given Iran–US hostility including the comprehensive economic sanctions against Iran, and the China–U.S. global rivalry, current Sino–Iran relations seem particularly important. Iran’s ‘Look East’ policy and Beijing’s view of Iran as a 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, Iran is an essential part of China’s BRI. Moreover, Beijing’s ‘Going Out Policy’ of encouraging Chinese companies to invest overseas coupled with U.S. 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: 174–191). Moreover, for Beijing, Tehran counterbalances excessive American influence and is in support of China’s expanding interests in the region (Garver 2011: 77). Iran is seen as bridgehead safeguarding the security of China’s western frontier, serving as China’s ‘firewall’ against potential Western expansion (Wenmu 2013: 33–34). Furthermore, Iran’s location as the East–West and North–South intersection for Central Asian trade, and a 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 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’ (Ching, and Gallo 2016).

Beijing's MENA policy is to ensure that its interests do not conflict with America's. 'China's economic investment and US military investment can complement each other.' For instance, the infrastructure construction of the major U.S. military bases in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE 'is not done by American workers, but by Chinese workers' and labors from South and Southeast Asian countries (Goldman 2023). Beijing's business with the region, however, is growing in trade, infrastructure and high-tech investment: 'China has displaced the U.S. and Europe as the leading supplier of industrial goods to Saudi Arabia, including telecom infrastructure, solar power, mass transit and other high-tech items.' In 2022–23 China's annual rate of export to Saudi Arabia doubled the pre-pandemic era and reached about US\$45 billion, whereas U.S. exports of \$19 billion in 2015 fell to \$11.5 billion, and European Union exports decreased from \$45 to \$33. Equally important is the surge in China's economic relationship with Turkey and Central Asia. The exports have nearly rippled from pre-pandemic era; building railroads and pipelines across Asia remain a key component of such relationships (Goldman 2023). Moreover, China's Huawei's AI-controlled solar cell with enhanced efficiency and its fully automated Tianjin Port management technology are very attractive to the MENA states.

China's policy towards Israel-Palestine as well as Afghanistan under the Taliban are guided by its pragmatism and economic interests. 'China has no strategic interest in the Palestinian issue. Its offer to mediate an Israeli-Palestinian peace is a diplomatic fishing expedition. The proposal puts pressure on Israel at no cost to China, and may build Chinese bargaining chips in future negotiations with Israel.' This is evident in Beijing's official pragmatic position toward the Israel-Gaza war of October 2023 in which Beijing simply called for an immediate ceasefire, 'calm and restraint' (Zhou 2023). Similarly, Beijing's policy towards the Taliban regime is to fill the gap left by the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, do business with the Taliban to benefit from the country's rich natural resources and contain the threat of radicalism to China and the region (Goldman 2023).

China's military presence in the MENA region is minimal and does not challenge the U.S. military domination in the region (Goldman 2023). Nonetheless, China's huge arms deals with major MENA countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, two American allies in the region, demonstrates a slight shift in geopolitics of the MENA region. The MENA states have already started diversifying their arms suppliers from the West and look to the East. China North Industries Group Corporation (Norinco) is negotiating with the Saudis to sell drones, cruises and air defenses. Similarly, Egypt is interested in purchasing the Chinese advanced electronic warfare and radar systems, especially after Obama administration froze some arms sales to Cairo in

post-2013 coup, and after the poor performance of Russian weapons in the current Russia-Ukraine war (Honrada 2023). Beijing's military presence in MENA, however, still remains small. Even China's commitment to a joint maritime force with Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE, and Oman does not include ships to the project (Goldman 2023).

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. Beijing's pragmatism, its *soft and quiet encroachment* towards the MENA region are carefully crafted to secure the stability of its energy providers through arms deal, and to advance China's new silk road – the BRI initiative. The rationale for such policy is that Beijing does not want to provoke the U.S. because it needs stability to pursue its policies, and, more importantly, is fully integrated into a global neoliberal order dominated by the American dollar.

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, as Cole 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 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: 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, recognizing the Syrian regime's sovereignty and undermining the regime's massive crimes against humanity.

China demonstrated a more proactive policy by vetoing a UN Security Council resolution to impose sanctions on Syria. Similarly, 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 active presence in the region are all indicative of Beijing's greater military and political presence in the region. It is, however, important to note that 'Chinese military spending is merely a third of U.S. expenditure, ca. 230 billion dollars a year' but it is growing quickly (Kolodko 2020). 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 contemporary 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 problematized in multiple ways: first, the Chinese model of development has been labeled as 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics', a term stemming from Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms. These reforms incorporated elements of market economy into the Chinese socialist system. This perspective represents the official Chinese stance on the Chinese model of development, a view echoed by the present 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 theorized as a distinct path suited to the Chinese condition.

The second interpretation of the Chinese model of development was introduced by Joshua Cooper Ramo in 2004. Ramo introduced the concept of the 'Beijing consensus', in which he proposed the Chinese model as a viable alternative to the 'Washington consensus', which is Western-promoted neoliberal, market-oriented system. The Beijing consensus, Ramo argued, is a pragmatic and particularly Chinese economic path, which holds several characteristics (Ramo 2004). 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 (Elen 2016).

The last, and probably the most controversial, characterization of the Chinese model of development is introduced by David Harvey. In a sharp contrast from the official account of Chinese authorities, Harvey conceptualizes the Chinese model as 'neoliberalism "with Chinese characteristics"' (Harvey 2005: 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 centralized control' (Harvey 2005:120). 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: 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. Beijing 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: 122). For Harvey,

In so far as neoliberalism requires a large, easily exploited, and relatively powerless labor 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: 144.

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 labor 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: 150.

China, in sum, 'has definitely moved towards neoliberalization and the reconstitution of class power, albeit "with distinctly Chinese characteristics"' (Harvey 2005: 151). In his short article, titled 'Anti-Capitalist Politics in the Time of COVID-19', Harvey (2020) seems to support his earlier argument, suggesting that China 'effectively bailed out global capitalism in the aftermath of [the] 2007–8' economic crisis.' Regarding the global pandemic, he incorporates China into his critique of how neoliberalism systematically exploits the environment: '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 *neoliberal* extractivism.'

Moreover, because China holds large chunks of U.S. government debt, and grabs lands in Africa and Latin America, argues Harvey, it is worth examining whether 'China is the new imperialist power' (Harvey 2018).

This is a contested issue and requires rigorous theoretical inquiry; A more practical question, I argue, is whether China holds main characteristics of neoliberalism. Contemporary China represents a particular form of neoliberalism, a *red capitalism* with elements of *authoritarianism*. The Chinese path to development therefore represents a particular form of a capitalist economy, or 'Sino-capitalism' (McNally 2012). 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 materialize a more just and humane society in the twenty-first century (Wolff 2020).

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.

The Limits of Red Capitalism; Exploring Egalitarian Alternative Paths in MENA

What is China's vision for a new world order and does its vision help MENA's sustainable egalitarian development and social democracy? To what extent the Chinese perspective of the global order significantly differs from the prevailing neoliberal order in which China is actively engaged. Does a neoliberal order with Chinese characteristics would serve justice, peace, inclusiveness, and mutual cooperation? To answer such complex questions, we need to understand that, argues Li, 'in the neoliberal era, Chinese capitalism has functioned as a crucial pillar for the global capitalist economy by transferring surplus value produced by tens of millions of workers to the imperialist countries.' Moreover, it 'has established exploitative relations with nearly half of the world population' in Asia, Africa, Latin America to import their raw materials. Nonetheless, 'China continues to transfer a greater amount of surplus value to the core countries in the capitalist world system than it receives from the periphery.' For this reason, China is still a 'semi-peripheral country in the capitalist world system.' If China succeeds to completely join the core of the capitalist system the total energy demands by China and the current core countries, the global pollutions, and the greenhouse gas emissions will cause a major environmental crisis and a permeant damage to 'human civilization.' (Li 2021). Hence, while a semi-periphery, contemporary China remains an integral part of the neoliberal order.

China's neoliberal path to development appears to contradict Beijing's official discourse of 'peaceful rise' or 'peaceful development'. This is due to the fact that the neoliberal model embodies a form of *structural violence* inflicted upon both the environment and 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 appear to represent a new emerging peaceful order. 'China's military expenditure, the second highest in the world, is estimated to have totaled \$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' (SIPRI 2021). Beijing's current treatment of Muslim Uyghurs which violates their cultural and political rights,

and its involvement in the repression of the 2019–20 pro-democracy uprisings in Hong Kong hardly represent an inclusive, dialogical and egalitarian model. 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: 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 region 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-centered approach', which underlines Beijing's economic and political interests in the MENA region. In this approach, China as an idea and/or a perceived model is often being romanticized, and the MENA region, as the *other*, remains the residual category and a passive recipient of material and ideal charities. The second approach, as exemplified by the autocratic regimes in MENA, can be described as the 'MENA state-centered approach'. This approach involves the construction and *manipulation* of the 'Chinese model of development' to advocate and legitimize the idea of development without democracy, or neoliberal authoritarianism. It entails the enthusiastic adoption of China's *red capitalism* within the predominantly Muslim settings of the MENA region, ultimately transforming it into a form of *green capitalism*! The third approach, I propose, takes a civil society and subaltern perspective, which considers the long-term interests of the MENA ordinary peoples and progressive social forces. The first two approaches are state-centric, undermine interests of MENA civil societies, overlook pitfalls and problems of Chinese red capitalism, and reinforces neoliberal authoritarianism in the MENA region.

More specifically, the Chinese model of development and its vision for a new world order entail multiple shortcomings. First and foremost is the autocratic nature of Chinese top-down modernization. This is evident in several cases including the state-sponsored cultural domination, forced assimilation, and autocratic nation-building of the Muslim minority Uyghurs in Xinjiang region, which undermine Uyghurs' ethno-cultural identity, and forcefully integrate them into a top-down state-sponsored homogenous Chinese national identity (Mauk 2021).

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 interests. 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 favorable 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: 21–41). 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' in mass detention centers, or what are officially called 'vocational education and training centers. (Roberts 2020). Furthermore, under the 'transformation' program of China's rural Uyghur population, thousands of Uyghur workers are relocated to new residential factories, depopulating rural towns which were once overwhelmingly Uyghur.

Many Muslim-majority states, including the MENA autocratic states, have refrained from condemning the gross violation of human rights against the Uyghurs. This reluctance can be attributed to the significant economic interests and political support that Beijing provides on the global stage. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) 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. During his visit to China in 2019, Mohammed Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia appeared to publicly back his hosts over their treatment of the Uyghurs. Likewise, Iran has largely remained silent about China's policy towards the Uyghurs because Beijing has been Tehran's major trading partner during the U.S. imposition of harsh economic sanctions against Iran. Beijing's autocratic policy towards the Uyghurs fails to present an inclusive, equitable, and pluralistic model of coexistence in the MENA societies, where numerous religious and ethnic minorities reside across several nations.

The MENA autocratic regimes welcome Beijing's restricted policy in cyberspace and domestic internet industry, seeing it as means to promote autocratic modernization and advanced technology, while suppressing political freedom. For instance, *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 and Kerr 2021). The critical point here is that contemporary modernizing autocrats favor the de-politicization of civil society. However, as demonstrated by Amartya Sen, the presence of sociopolitical freedom, pluralism, and democracy play a central role in achieving sustainable and equitable development in the Global South (Sen 1999). In this context, it becomes apparent why certain segments of Iranian civil society and pro-democracy advocates harbor a rather unfavorable perception of China’s increasing influence in Iran. The general public exhibited a lack of enthusiasm when Iran gained full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in September 2021. Some individuals even opposed the 2021 Sino–Iran twenty-five-year strategic partnership agreement (Hastim 2020). In their view, China’s involvement in Iran lacks transparency, and they view the hardliner faction within the state as prioritizing the ‘Look East’ policy over a well-balanced foreign policy to consolidate their power. Nonetheless, the recent history of MENA has underscored the unsustainability of autocratic and top-down approaches to modernization, secularization, or nation-building in these societies. Events such as the 1979 Iranian revolution, the 2009 pro-democracy Green Movement and the 2022 Woman-Life-Freedom movement in Iran, the 2010–2011 Arab Spring and the aftermath, and the 2013 Gezi Park Movement in Turkey have all demonstrated the resilience of MENA civil societies and their firm opposition to the idea and policy of ‘economic development without democracy’ (Mahdavi 2019).

The second and related shortcoming of Beijing’s red capitalism concerns how contemporary 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 cozy 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, triggered by the controversial extradition bill endorsed by Beijing, set off a chain of protests in February 2019. These protests were in opposition to the bill, which was seen as a violation of civil liberties in Hong Kong, a threat to its judicial sovereignty, and a concern for subjecting its citizens to the legal jurisdiction of mainland China (Garrett 2014). The case of Myanmar carries equal significance. During the international pressure on Myanmar due to its genocidal treatment of the Muslim Rohingya minority in Rakhine, Beijing backed the military regime and endorsed the narrative of the de facto leader Aung San Suu Kyi 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). Beijing

also blocked the UN Security Council resolution against the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021 (BBC 2021). While these actions are often described as ‘pragmatic’ policies driven by Beijing’s economic and security concerns, they are welcomed by the MENA autocratic regimes. However, it is important to note that if/when MENA states adopt a similar approach, it certainly has adverse consequences for progressive and grassroots social forces within their civil societies.

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). Wendy 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 (Brown 2015a:17). The catastrophe is ‘*normative economization of political life*’ (Brown 2015a: 201). Moreover, 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 2017:284). While the MENA region needs an active, inclusive and empowered civil society to build a just, inclusive, and sustainable development and social democracy, the neoliberal model of development undermines social justice, societal empowerment, and sustainable and inclusive models of development.

We may now ask whether MENA civil societies can benefit from the Sino–MENA relations, and if they can, in what ways? Utilizing a civil society approach, I propose a threefold remark to conclude this section. First, China is neither the savior 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 engaged in trade and investment. However, should the MENA states act proactively and strategically, the MENA civil societies could benefit from China’s New Silk Road or the BRI, China’s investment plans, and Chinese interest in fostering an innovative ‘knowledge economy’ and improving renewable and clean energy in the region.

Beijing, along with states in the MENA region and certain neoliberal economic sectors, embraces Chinese economic engagement in the MENA region. Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that the influx of cheap Chinese products into the region can sometimes harm local MENA industries and products, potentially affecting the well-being of civil society forces,

including working and middle classes. The Chinese impact on the MENA region is multifaceted, necessitating proactive engagements and exchanges between civil societies, the Chinese government, and the Chinese companies. MENA states should lean on their civil society forces and utilize their negotiation skills to safeguard the interests of their domestic industries.

Second, China is neither a decisive counter-hegemonic force, nor yet a world hegemon. Nonetheless, Beijing's 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, Beijing's commitment to a 'non-interventionist' policy and its emphasis on upholding state sovereignty and stability within this region carry significant weight in an era marked by neoliberal interventionism. It is evident that autocratic regimes in the MENA region appreciate Chinese support for maintaining the unjust status quos. Nonetheless, this policy has, to some extent, benefited the MENA civil societies.

It is true that China's non-interventionist policy benefited the autocratic regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and the close relationship with Saudi Arabia has contributed to the Saudi's military intervention in Yemen, but it is equally true that MENA civil societies suffered significantly from Western-sponsored military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, as well as economic sanctions imposed on Iraq and Iran. The NATO-sponsored wars, interventions, and crippling economic sanctions have ruined a number of MENA civil societies. Chinese prioritization of stability is primarily driven by pragmatic economic interests, but it may also serve as a shield safeguarding MENA civil societies from American and NATO-driven unilateral militarism. MENA civil societies urgently need peace and prosperity in order to challenge their autocratic regimes from *within*.

Third, the concept of the 'Chinese model of development', whether real or perceived and deliberately crafted, yields mixed outcomes concerning the future prosperity of MENA civil societies. Evidently, MENA autocratic states have employed and manipulated this discourse to solidify a state of neoliberalism without democracy and promote autocratic capitalism within the region. The solution to the challenges faced by MENA, I contend, is not to embrace either the 'Washington consensus' form of neoliberalism or neoliberalism of the 'Beijing consensus'. In truth, these two approaches are essentially two sides of the same coin!

Instead, MENA societies should chart their own distinct paths toward sustainable development and social democracy. This journey necessitates

the active involvement of citizens, engagement from civil society, and the adoption of a socio-economic model that guarantees both *social justice and political freedom*. MENA countries can undoubtedly draw valuable lessons from the experiences of both China and the West. However, in the end, they must craft their own distinct paths toward a just, comprehensive, and sustainable development. The MENA quest for equitable and inclusive development is not an endorsement of isolationism and/or regressive and reactionary particularism. There is a substantial distinction between pursuing one's unique path and advocating for narrow particularism. As Gramsci aptly reminds us, 'it is one thing to be particular, another thing to preach particularism' (Gramsci 1975/1996).

Conclusions

A pronounced geopolitical rivalry between the U.S. and China concerning the future of global order is evident, and the MENA region is not insulated from this competition. The cyberwarfare, the campaign against the Chinese telecommunications company of Huawei and specifically its 5G technologies, and the trade and tariff war between the U.S. and China demonstrate a larger crisis in the neoliberal global order and a decline in the American global hegemony. Using Antonio's Gramsci's analogy, such competition and crisis indicate that while 'the old is dying', the new order has yet to be born (Gramsci 1971: 276 quoted in 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, however, the rise of China and the 'new Asian age' is a result of a neoliberal global order under U.S. hegemony in which China's enormous cheap labor 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, the BRI, or the New Silk Road initiative should be examined in the larger context of the emerging 'multiplex world' – '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: 12). Hence, China's relations with MENA should be viewed in 'the emerging webs of relations as a coevolution of multiple megaregions in the making' (Bianchi 2019: 2), as well as the global and regional competitions between the old and new major powers in the present neoliberal order.

This emerging 'multiplex world' is characterized by 'decentering of power and authority: a world without the hegemony of a single power or a single set of values'. It holds different layers of global, regional, and local governance with 'the growing importance of regions' and 'a growing voice for the new actors.' While there is no 'necessary correlation between multiplexity and greater justice and equality', the rise of a multiplex world can create circumstances in which 'the fate of human rights and democracy will be driven more by domestic than international factors'. Additionally, it has the potential to foster increased collaboration among multiple actors to resolve 'common transnational challenges, such as climate change'. This could lead to a more shared form of leadership and 'complex forms of global governance' that includes new regional players and institutions, such as the African Union, the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI) – a multilateral currency swap arrangement among the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) – and China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), among others. Furthermore, in a multiplex world, rather than the old form of non-alignment during the Cold War, we may witness 'multi-alignment or cross-cutting alignments' among the Global South, protecting the collective interests of the regions and the world, and not taking 'sides in great power competition, such as that between the US and China' (Acharya 2019). These characteristics of the evolving global order could potentially offer advantages to the MENA nations as they strive to achieve justice and democracy.

Beijing's geostrategic and geopolitical interests in the MENA region are guided by free flow of oil, the BRI, exporting its high-tech industry, and containing Uighurs and 'Muslim radicalism' at home. In other words, China, the world's largest importer of oil from MENA, is committed to the stability of the region to pursue its economic interest, the expansion of the BRI, the market for its high-tech industry, and containing the Chinese Uighur Muslim community for which it seeks support from the Muslim world (Goldman 2023). Put differently, Guided by the pragmatist policy of giving priority to trade and investment, China's MENA strategy, in sum, consists of the following elements: it maintains good relations with all of the region's major countries who are often in conflict and rivalry. Also, Beijing has avoided direct provocation and major challenge to U.S. interests in the MENA region. Beijing's military presence in the region is 'from a position of offshore, and preferably without attracting unnecessary attention.' Beijing essentially prefers 'economic leverage to military force as a means of securing influence (Hiim and Stenslie 2019:158–161).

Within this complex global context, the MENA countries must *actively* foster connection and collaboration with China and other BRICS countries. Simultaneously, they should chart their independent paths towards sustainable

development and social democracy. While the asymmetrical economic power dynamics between China and the MENA region may result in Chinese economic supremacy, proactive engagement and strategic planning by the MENA region could yield significant benefits from economic partnerships with China. Nations actively pursue their self-interests, and the more influential they become, the more effectively can advance their own agendas. China is no exception in this regard. The MENA nations should similarly prioritize their own interests. One practical approach to pursue this path could be adopting a stance of '*negative equilibrium*' towards all major powers, including the U.S. and China. This approach aims to prevent new forms of colonialism and dependency. In this emerging era of the 'multiplex world', a post-Cold War and a post-American order, MENA must establish new and novel forms of negative equilibrium. This means establishing '*cross-cutting alignments*' and maintaining proactive relationships with both the East and the West, which allow MENA to benefit from global experiences and achievements while simultaneously forging its own independent paths towards democratic development. While MENA countries may indeed gain advantages from China's investment and economic initiatives, it is important to recognize that China's economic and political partnership with the region does not automatically lead to MENA development. 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, embracing a civil society approach to development implies that MENA societies must explore new ways, indigenous approaches, and 'alternative modernities'. These approaches are rooted in their local traditions and global models while also upholding the principles of social justice and democracy. The MENA region should strive to find 'a third path' or a '*glocal*' approach, one that combines the best of global and local experiences while preserving its 'decolonial horizons' (Mignolo 2015: viii–xiii).

This approach aims to shape sustainable, inclusive, and egalitarian models for 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', (Mignolo 2015: viii–xiii), delinking from the hegemonic order without falling into a trap of regressive nativism and cultural exceptionalism (Mahdavi 2023). Such authentic grassroots 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. Chinese red capitalism and its neoliberal authoritarianism do not provide a

sustainable, egalitarian, and inclusive social democracy. MENA nations need their own distinct egalitarian paths.

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