

Introduction

Mojtaba Mahdavi and Tugrul Keskin

0.1 Background

The rise of multiple non-Western global actors, including the so-called 'BRICS' countries, and particularly China, have contributed to the emergence of a 'multiplex world'. This term was coined by Acharya (2020; 2019) to showcase the crisis of the liberal international order and to highlight a relative decline in the US hard and soft powers and a gradual shift towards a post-American order (Acharya, 2018). The 'multiplex world' refers to 'decentering of power and authority: a world without the hegemony of a single power or a single set of values', as well as different layers of global, regional, and local governance, 'the growing importance of regions' and 'a growing voice for the new actors' (Acharya, 2019, p. 12).

The US has not always defended 'liberal multilateralism' and the West has been 'selective and self-serving' in democracy promotion around the world. The liberal international order has often functioned as a 'club of the West, rather than a provider of universal public goods'. It is, however, equally significant to note that not all the new emerging state and non-state actors/powers are committed to greater justice and 'progressive values'. In other words, there is no 'necessary correlation between multiplexity and greater justice and equality' as some of the rising powers in the emerging multiplex world are 'parochial in defending their interests and values' (Acharya, 2019, p. 13).

Nonetheless, a positive consequence of the emergence of a multiplex world and a decline in the liberal international order might mean that 'the fate of human rights and democracy will be driven more by domestic than international factors'. Moreover, a multiplex world may facilitate greater cooperation among multiple actors to resolve 'common transnational challenges, such as climate change' and could provide a greater possibility for a shared leadership, fragmented and 'complex forms of global governance' where new regional actors and institutions are involved. This includes 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 states, protecting the collective interests of the regions and the world. And yet, one relevant legacy and lasting lesson of the non-alignment norm for the Global South 'is not to take sides in great power competition, such as that between the US and China' (Acharya, 2019, pp. 13–14).

The key question is therefore what do China, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and Asia relations look like in a multiplex world? The current China–MENA–Asia relations should be examined in a larger context of China's vision of the global order. There is nothing new about China's dissatisfaction about the current world order. In his report to the 16th Party Congress in November 2002, then president Jiang Zemin argued 'old international political and economic order is unfair and has to be changed fundamentally' ('Jiang Zemin delivers report to the 16th CPC National Congress', 2002). Similarly, President Xi Jinping's remarks at the 19th Party Congress in October 2017 made it clear that China is determined to reinforce its 'national strength' and 'international influence' ('CPC opens 19th National Congress', 2017). Nonetheless, we must keep in mind that 'the Chinese phenomenon became possible thanks to globalization'. 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, p. 3). Hence, China neither intends to overthrow the existing global order nor does it plan to rule the world. Beijing, as Rolland (2020, p. 6) suggests, would be fine with 'subverting portions' of the current system, and realising a 'partial, loose and malleable hegemony' of the world.

The rise of the neoliberal economy since the early 1980s has led to the emergence of a vibrant and sizable middle class in China. This new demographic of 350 to 400 million people, which began to consume more and demand more resources, continues to shape Chinese foreign policy towards oil-producing countries in the MENA region. One of the first signs of these changes can be seen in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or the New Silk Road introduced by current President Xi Jinping. As shown by Bianchi (2019), the New Silk Road continues to transform the global politics in general, and the MENA and Asian politics in particular.

Over the past few years China has played an even more active role in the MENA region by forging 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships' with major MENA states including Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt. President Xi Jinping visited Pakistan, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE, making China one of the largest economic and trade partners with these MENA countries. Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's visit to China in February

2019 speaks to China's growing need for energy resources as well as to its need for a security partnership with Saudi Arabia as a special partner in the MENA region. The same is true of the Sino–Iran relationship represented in President Rouhani's visit to China in 2018, and more importantly, a twenty-five year Iran–China strategic partnership agreement, signed in March 2021 in Tehran.

China has signed documents on Belt and Road cooperation with nineteen MENA countries, has established a regional technological cooperation, or a 'Digital Silk Road' as part of the BRI, and is working with the MENA countries in fighting the global pandemic and deploying vaccines ('Wang Yi proposes a five-point initiative on achieving security and stability in the Middle East', 2021). Moreover, China's Health Silk Road (HSR) project, which was proposed to the World Health Organization in 2017, aims at improving public health governance and may improve the BRI and strengthen China's soft power and its regional and global economic and political influence.

Additionally, Chinese social and cultural activities began to appear more visibly within MENA universities and educational institutions. Chinese Hanban Institutes, for example, have opened and financed Confucius Institutes in Turkey, Israel, Iran, Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Jordan, the UAE, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Morocco. Such institutions facilitate Chinese cultural and language classes, promoting mutual understanding between China and the MENA region. International publics, however, seem quite divided about the success of China's soft power, and the effectiveness of its public and cultural diplomacy in MENA and Asia (Nye, 2019; Wike, 2018). For example, while the twenty-five year Iran–China strategic partnership agreement could be 'a game-changer' in the region and boost bilateral trade to \$600 billion (Saikal, 2021), it did not appeal to the Iranian public. Some sections of Iran's civil society reacted against the Tehran–Beijing agreement, expressing grave concern over the nature and scope of such relations between the two governments and a greater Chinese influence in the MENA region (Ma Hastim, 2020).

In sum, the contemporary Sino–MENA–Asia relations and the New Silk Road/BRI in an emerging multiplex world are in the making with no clear-cut trajectory or conclusion. However, 'two matters seem clear already'. First, the Muslim public and MENA–Asia civil society forces 'will reject any appearance of tutelage from China just as vigorously as they resisted earlier efforts of domination' by other colonial/external powers. Secondly, 'China's leaders will have to fashion a patchwork of loose and pragmatic arrangements with foreign partners in all directions. An expansive imperial or tributary system is beyond Beijing's capabilities' (Bianchi, 2019, p. 3).

0.2 The Structure of the Book

This edited volume critically examines a complex, multi-dimensional, and a Janus-faced relationship between China, the MENA region, and Asia in a 'multiplex world'. It problematises what the MENA region and Asia means to China in the age of neoliberalism. It challenges both extremes of 'Sinophobia' and 'Sinophilia' by examining the real 'pragmatist' China, or 'New pragmatism with Chinese characteristics' (Kolodko, 2020). It explores what are the real or perceived pillars of Sino–MENA relations. It also sheds light on how MENA can benefit from its relations with China while keeping a clear distance from the harms of neoliberal authoritarianism. This book, in sum, examines the changing dynamics of modern and contemporary relations between China, MENA, and Asia since 1978.

This edited volume comprises a foreword and thirteen chapters in four parts. Manochehr Dorraj in his foreword examines opportunities and challenges associated with China's BRI in the MENA region and beyond. It argues the way the BRI, as a principal pillar of Chinese rise, is implemented will reveal much about the new world order in general and the future state of Sino–MENA–Asia relations.

More specifically, Dorraj argues that China faces unprecedented opportunities and formidable challenges in the twenty-first century. Its mercurial economic rise in the last forty years culminating in its ambitious global Belt and Road Initiative has provided it with a great venue to expand its economic and trade ties globally. But the spread of the COVID-19 virus, a trade war with, and 'decoupling' from, the United States, and the spectre of a new Cold War has presented it with new challenges. He analyses both the magnitude of opportunities and the challenges that the BRI faces and expounds its potential transformative impact globally.

The first part of this edited volume examines 'China–MENA Relations at Large' and includes two chapters. In Chapter 1, titled 'The Triple Pillar of Sino–MENA Relations in the Age of Neoliberalism', Mojtava Mahdavi problematises the idea of China as a 'model of development' for the Middle East and North African countries. The chapter critically examines three pillars of Sino–Middle East relations: 'energy, trade, and investment', China's 'non-interventionist policy/maintaining stability' in the MENA region, and the discourse of the 'Chinese Model of Development' and/or the 'Beijing Consensus' in Sino–Middle East relations. The chapter concludes that 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: paths

that require an active citizenry, an engaged civil society, and a socio-economic model that ensures social justice and political freedom.

Chapter 2 is titled 'China's Mental Maps of the Middle East and North Africa: Critical Discourse Analysis of the Contemporary PRC Leadership's Geopolitical Images'. In this chapter Jordi Quero Arias argues that current China–MENA relations are marked by how Beijing conceptualises the limits and idiosyncrasy of the MENA region. He problematises China's geopolitical imaginaries/cartographies and discursive constructions of the Middle East and North Africa and explores the following four geopolitical mental maps of the MENA region manifested in the speeches and analyses of the Chinese leadership: the 'Arab countries' (stressing the idea of cooperation and friendship), the 'Middle East' (signalling a securitised region), the 'Eurasian continent' (highlighting collective revitalisation and common history), and 'developing countries' (underscoring shared non-colonial identities). The chapter explores two possible explanations that might delineate the reasons for privileging one mental map over the rest, and sheds light on how these geopolitical imaginaries translate into a pragmatist policy under President Xi Jinping.

The second part, titled 'The Belt and Road Initiative: Challenges and Opportunities' comprises of three chapters. Chapter 3, authored by Dara Conduit and titled 'Is Growing the Iran–China Relationship as Easy as Building a Belt and Road?', problematises China's BRI project in the particular case of Iran. She asks whether the BRI's new economic imperatives will be sufficient to significantly expand the Iran–China relationship. The chapter demonstrates the complexity of the Sino–Iran bilateral relationship and Central Asian geopolitical dynamics as well as the two states' divergent tactics in international politics. As such, she argues that while Sino–Iran relations may enjoy a geographic advantage, the relationship contains many historical, political, and geographical barriers that could prevent the bilateral relationship from reaching its full potential. The most significant of these barriers is China's relationship with the United States.

In Chapter 4, titled 'The Belt and Road Initiative: Central Asia, the Middle East and South Asia', Mahesh Ranjan Debata explores the inconsistency in China's grand strategy on three regions of Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia since the BRI was started. The chapter suggests that the BRI's dream run in Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia has slowed down and may continue to do so, due to the shift in US Middle East policy under President Trump and the rise of an assertive India that refused to be part of the BRI.

In Chapter 5, titled 'The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor: Building National Consensus, Curbing Terrorism, and Managing Regional Rivalries in Balochistan', Saeed Shafqat explores opportunities and challenges for

maintaining and improving sustainable economic relations between China and Pakistan. He sheds light on Pakistan's domestic politics, security threats, the historical and politico-cultural dynamics of Indo–Pakistan relations, and the impact of the CPEC on regional state rivalries and geostrategic contestation.

The third part of this volume, which includes four chapters is titled 'China's Soft Power and Hard Power in the MENA Region'. In Chapter 6, Habibul Haque Khondker problematises Confucianism as China's soft power in the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf region. In 'Confucius in the UAE: Chinese Soft Power in the GCC', Khondker explores the deployment of China's soft power in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region through the spread of the Confucius Institute and other softer aspects of the Chinese culture such as promotion of Chinese popular culture and celebration of the Chinese New Year in the region. The chapter examines the possibilities and the limitations of such state-driven initiatives in promoting soft power.

Xiaoyue Li in Chapter 7, titled 'China–Egypt Relations: Constructing Images and Perceptions in the Belt and Road Initiative', explores the grassroots level of power operation and perception in people's everyday lives. Through media coverage and interview, the author focuses on the two way cultural traffic between Chinese and Egyptians. The chapter suggests that national images are less determined by policymakers, as commonly understood in studies of international relations, but more significantly, they are shaped by multiple actors who live and witness within the changing conditions and practices of political and economic partnership.

Chapter 8, co-authored by Sari Hanafi and Rigas Arvanitis, is titled 'Smoothing the Waters: Science and Research Collaboration between China and the Arab World'. The authors make a case for science and research collaboration as another aspect of soft power. Based on bibliometric data and literature review, they argue that in spite of the increasing number of publications co-authored by Chinese and Arab scholars, scientific collaboration between the two regions is low. Neither China nor Arab countries have initiated common projects, and most co-authored research projects are funded by European and American partners.

In Chapter 9, titled 'China and the MENA Region in a Decentred World', Andrea Ghiselli highlights some elements of hard power in China's foreign policy in the evolving decentred world. He looks at Chinese military operations, peacekeeping, and anti-piracy operations in the MENA region to demonstrate the recent shift in China's approach to regional security dynamics since the 2011 NATO military operation in Libya.

In the fourth and final part, titled 'Sino–Middle East Regional Dynamics: Energy and Beyond', four chapters examine the place of energy

and other factors in Sino–MENA relations. Chapter 10, co-authored by Michael McCall and Tugrul Keskin, is titled ‘Sino–Turkish Relations in the New Era: From Political Conflict to Economic Cooperation’. The chapter examines the extent to which Sino–Turkey relations fall into a category of a ‘strategic cooperative relationship’, that is, they remain contentious where national interests on both sides collide. It sheds light on the complexity of Sino–Turkey relations towards the Middle East, Central Asia, the status of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and the Taiwan dilemma. It also problematises their bilateral military relations, economy and trade, and the BRI. The chapter, in sum, demonstrates the willingness of elites for further cooperation as well as some structural obstacles to expand their bilateral relations.

In Chapter 11, titled ‘Sino–Egyptian Relations and the New Regional Dynamics of the Middle East’, Yossra M. Taha examines the new regional dynamics in the Middle East after the Arab Spring and how these changes reflect on Sino–Egyptian relations. The chapter analyses two major treaties concluded between China and Egypt in order to help assess the nature of current Sino–Egyptian relations. The chapter also sheds light on future prospects for the development of Sino–Egyptian relations.

In Chapter 12, titled ‘China’s Policy on the Iranian Nuclear Issue: Cooperation and Disagreements with Russia and the United States’, Mher Sahakyan provides a historical background to Sino–Iran nuclear cooperation, followed by contextualising China’s policy towards Iran’s nuclear issue in the UN Security Council. The chapter suggests that China’s policy of preventing nuclear proliferation in the Middle East serves its grand strategy of maintaining stability in the MENA region, which is the main source of energy for the Chinese economy.

Chapter 13 is titled ‘Chinese Engagement with the MENA Region: Exploring Sino–MENA Event Data’. Based on dyadic event data, Michael McCall demonstrates that the role of energy production alone appears to have little significance as a determining factor in China’s Middle East policy. Other variables, like total trade values, serve as better predictors. A closer look at event data suggests that outlier cases like Iran may provide a better insight into the current and future foreign policy priorities of China in the Middle East.

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