



Middle Kingdom Enters Middle East

A World-Systems Analysis of Peripheralization along the Maritime Silk Road Initiative

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Abstract

Through the lens of world-systems analysis, this research argues that Beijing is creating a miniature world-system overlapping with the United States-led world-system via its Belt Road Initiative (BRI). Although China has not yet become a core power, its BRI seems to possess the qualities of a new world-system in the making, within which China enjoys hegemonic traits such as economic and military might and capable alternative institutions. This BRI-bound world-system consists of BRI participant states whose areas and processes are being molded to better fit China as core and hegemon; a phenomenon known as peripheralization. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) appears to be peripheralizing Arab states into this BRI-bound world-system through China's growing economic dominance of the region and promotion of new modi operandi. After arguing the emergence of the BRI-bound world-system and establishing China's peripheralization capacity, Lebanon is taken as a case study of a peripheral MENA state to illustrate how predominant Western hegemony can hamper China's peripheralization apparatus, forcing it to choose areas/processes of the highest immediate relevance for focused peripheralization efforts.

Keywords: *China, BRI, MSRI, Hegemony, Lebanon*



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China is entering the eighth year of embarking on what has been called the largest infrastructure project of the century: The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Ma 2019). Prior to announcing this grand scheme in 2013, the Chinese government had gradually been increasing its overseas foreign direct investment (FDI) and penetration into new markets, propelled by domestic growth and orchestrated by government policies (Shirali 2015).

The BRI is composed of two components: The “Belt” refers to the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), a railway from China that passes through Asia Minor and Russia before reaching Western Europe. The “Road” refers to the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) which stretches from southern China to Venice by way of Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, and the Mediterranean. If implemented successfully, the BRI “will connect 65 countries that represent 55 percent of the world’s GDP, 70 percent of global population, and 75 per cent of known energy reserves” (Hong 2016: 6). To date, 138 countries have signed memorandums of understanding (MoUs) with the Chinese government and/or the Belt and Road agency itself (green-bri.org N.d.).

For participant states, their cooperation with China is based on five principles: financial integration, unimpeded trade, exchange of ideas, promoting policy coordination, and facilitating connectivity (Zhang 2017). Despite this, and China promoting the BRI as strictly economic, the project carries political and military implications, most obvious of which is extending Beijing’s power and influence (Shirali 2015; Hong 2016; Blanchard and Flint, 2017; Blanchard, 2017; Harding 2019). Certain points along the BRI are able to accommodate militaristic ends, such as Pakistan’s Gwadar port being “potentially earmarked as a temporary naval base [and creating] potential tensions between China and India” (Harding 2019). Meanwhile, the BRI’s political consequences include the enmeshing of new territories and markets into China’s commodity chains in an unprecedentedly direct way that may see “weaker” countries pulled from the hegemonic influence of established world powers—such as France in North and West Africa and the United States globally—and closer into the orbit of Beijing.

Currently a semi-peripheral state, China is arguably pushing itself into the core with the BRI as its battering ram. This is occurring through the BRI incorporating external areas/processes into its network in what world-systems analysis terms peripheralization, whereby “capitalists [pursue] further accumulation by seeking low-cost production operations for supplies and/or high-return markets for products [and] states seek allies and/or resources to further or to attain competitive advantage” (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1986: 13). Indeed, incorporation through FDI can entail peripheralization, as the United States did to southern European states such as Greece when conditioning needed aid on import subsidies and infrastructure contracts (Papadantonakis 1985), and thus constructing this infrastructure under American conditions and through American firms; which bears a striking resemblance to China commissioning its own companies and even blue-collar laborers (Russel and Berger 2019), as per contracts stipulating the use of its own financial and legal institutions for BRI-related projects (Quero 2020).

However, both realism and world-systems analysis argue that core states will not simply watch as their peripheral areas (and established networks of capital accumulation) are being encroached on by a rising competitor (Gowan 2004). For the Middle East and North Africa

(MENA), the MSRI is shaping up to be more impactful than its land-based counterpart since it will connect ports along the Arab Gulf (Oman, Dubai) and the Red Sea (Djibouti, Egypt) (Zhang 2017). The question this article seeks to address, then, is: Does China's BRI constitute a de facto new world-system, and if so, how thoroughly can it peripheralize the MENA region?

To answer this question, the MSRI's entry into the MENA region is analyzed in order to evaluate the capacity of the BRI-bound world-system to peripheralize states into a new interstate system centered around China. From here, Lebanon is examined as a case study of this phenomenon, with particular focus on the port city, Tripoli. The BRI-bound world-system here is defined as the group of areas and economic processes within states that have signed MoUs with China's Belt and Road agency. That is to say, the future member states of the BRI, which will be influenced by China as core and hegemon, and which will become periphery and semi-periphery with respect to China in this world-system.

This article opens by explaining the adequacy of world-systems analysis in examining the BRI, followed by an overview of world-systems scholarship analyzing it. Following this, China's evolving relationship with the MENA region is surveyed. From there, the BRI in the MENA region is examined, with a focus on the MSRI. In this section, the characteristics of a hegemon according to world-systems analysis are used to show China's progress towards, and capacity of, achieving that status with respect to states in this region, almost all of which are set to be BRI participants. The integration capacity of this world-system will then be applied to the case of Lebanon, with data from personnel involved at various stages of economic diplomacy between China and Lebanon presented in order to reveal the obstacles for, and progress toward, Chinese peripheralization.

On methodology, a review of relevant research was conducted, and the findings were supplemented with fieldwork data obtained through key informant interviews with aforementioned Chinese and Lebanese personnel; including then-Chinese Chamber of Commerce focal point for Lebanon, henceforth referred to as Focal Point, the manager of the port of Tripoli Dr. Ahmad Tamer, as well as staff at the embassy of Lebanon in Beijing.

Scholarship on the BRI

World-Systems Analysis

Why world-systems analysis? Before surveying world-systems scholarship on the BRI and Chinese FDI in general, it is important to first indicate the shortcomings of international relations (henceforth IR) theories in analyzing the BRI and thereafter argue the adequacy and, arguably, the primacy of this framework for the task.

Susan Strange (1984) has criticized IR approaches as based on a realist conception of power, one measured by military strength within zero-sum games. Other facets of power merit consideration from the economic and political, to the social and cultural. Moreover, IR theories generally tend to focus on states' material power in bilateral/dyadic contexts as the most consequential factor and this applies mostly to realism and neo-realism. This focus may be too

narrow to contain “the relational nature of power” whereby “a dyadic focus limits the scope of the relations to bilateral connections that do not illuminate the complexity of international politics” (Flint and Xiaotong 2017: 298). China’s BRI-related interactions with Bangladesh, for example, do not occur in vacuum but are influenced by both nations’ relations with other south Asian states, notably India but also smaller players such as Myanmar. Subsequently, these relations can be understood only as part of the sum of interactions that occur in the formation of the BRI. Even IR approaches that incorporate network analyses seem to be based on dyadic relationships (Flint and Xiaotong 2017)

More specifically, in analyzing the BRI, liberal and realist theories of international relations fall short of explaining—and indeed, predicting—the impact of Chinese FDI (Zhang 2017). Realism frames China as the latest incarnation of a historical phenomenon: hegemony swinging between rising and falling powers. In this case, China is portrayed as discontent with the order of the hegemonic United States and sets out to challenge it (Mearsheimer 2010). Several scholars have argued, however, that China’s actions do not yet amount to a usurping of U.S. hegemony in the world and are merely business interests being pursued by a growing power to expand its economic network and satisfy consumer demand (Shirali 2015; Flint and Xiatong 2019), and that it is in China’s best interests that the status quo is preserved (Karatasli and Kumral 2017). Further, if these steps do translate into more than just economic gain, then they would be leading China toward what Blanchard and Flint term “reluctant hegemony” (Karatasli and Kumral 2017: 35).

Meanwhile, liberal IR theory tends to characterize U.S. hegemony as so entrenched in China—and the world—that it would be extremely difficult for China to successfully break from the liberal world order (Ikenberry 2014), yet with states like Pakistan owing more money to China—loans tied neither to democratic reforms nor austerity measures—than the IMF (Mangi 2019), this world order seems neither omnipotent nor omnipresent and has dents that other actors can fill. In these ways, both camps tend to frame global structural changes as functions of changes in major countries’ economic/military power and rarely consider that the merits of defining the state as the “basic unit” of the international system may have significantly changed; in other words, neglecting factors such as the rise of the multi-national corporation, cultural hegemony, and trans-national actors. As a result, such excessively structural/systemic explanations of China’s evolving external affairs, including the MSRI, are lacking (Zhang 2017). Finally, theories of economic development, such as the classical Eclectic/OLI Paradigm, have been deemed incapable of this task in China’s case. Athreye and Kapur (2009), for example, found that the above paradigm fails to apply to China’s FDI patterns as the country skipped several stages of development vis-à-vis import substitution to develop its base of industry.

Second, on the question of adequacy, Flint and Xiaotong (2017) argue that world-systems analysis allows for an understanding of China’s foreign policy decisions that takes into account the nature of geopolitical contexts by combining territorial, political, and economic factors. As an example, they state that the combination of territorial and economic factors in the BRI shows the various actors involved in the decision-making stage, from The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

and state-owned enterprises, to provinces, and cities in China and participant states (Flint and Xiaotong 2017).

For the MENA region especially, Shirali (2015: 92) argues, after similarly critiquing IR theories, that China's ability to undermine the core and rewire the MENA's political-economic circuitry to benefit itself through FDI would be suitable for a world-systems analysis as it can "provide an important school of thought in addressing the root causes and/or consequences of Chinese FDI from a contending point of view."

World-Systems Analyses of the BRI. World-systems analysis posits the "capitalist world order" as comprised of "core", "periphery" and "semi-periphery". This categorical scheme is based on dependency theory, which argues that post-colonial developing states were in a perpetually unbalanced economic relationship with the developed former colonial powers (Halperin 2018). One of the major differences is that in world-systems analysis, the above labels are not used to describe states; rather, they describe economic processes and areas—present within any given state in varying concentrations—whereby core processes yield higher profits and require higher skills (such as smartphones) whereas "peripheral" processes are low-skilled and yield low returns (such as mining ore for those smartphones) (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1982). However, it is the prevalence of the types of processes in a given state which determines its status and strength in the world order: "Strong states, in relation both to their internal regions and to other strong states, develop core processes; weak states [relative to internal regions and to contending states] develop, or rather have developed for them, peripheral processes," (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1982: 13). This latter phenomenon is part of peripheralization, whereby a state becomes bound to a peripheral industry within it in order to satisfy the core's demand, and in so doing remain subjugated by the core. This concept will be returned to when looking closely at the MENA region.

Despite the BRI being a strictly development-oriented endeavor, its massive overhaul of much of the developing world's infrastructure could bend the existing capitalist world order enough to usher in a new geopolitical era, as Blanchard and Flint note: "[c]onnectivity, including infrastructure projects, have long been recognized as an integral element of global political and economic change as well as a reflection of new political and economic realities" (Blanchard and Flint 2017: 223). There is, however, a divide within scholarship over the outcome of the BRI: some view it as China's ticket to the core which would create a bi-polarized U.S.-China world-system, while others argue that U.S. hegemony would remain supreme but that the BRI will carve into it a smaller world-system where China is also a core and hegemon.

In the first camp, Shirali (2015: 92) argues that "world-systems theory may hypothesize that Chinese FDI is creating a new core-periphery relationship with China as a new entrant to the core that is causing a shift in relations from the periphery." Moreover, in "Adam Smith in Beijing," Arrighi (2007) argues the formation of an East Asian-centered world market contrary to the current capitalist world-economy; a seismic change brought about by China replacing Japan as East Asia's center of gravity, and the waning of U.S. geopolitical dominance. The end of Pax Americana was even argued by Wallerstein (1991) himself shortly after the fall of the USSR.

Gowan (2004), meanwhile, counters the first camp after arguing the dominant status of U.S. hegemony by pointing to measures taken in the 1970s and 1990s to successfully and durably reign in rising competitors such as Germany and Japan:

When faced with serious challenges to its dominance in capital intensive sectors...the U.S. has a very wide range of instruments essentially derived from its structural power over the inter-state system of the core with which to strike back at competitors. These instruments have been largely ignored or downplayed by mainstream [world-systems theory]. And even Arrighi, who stresses them more than others still remains wedded to the thesis of precipitate U.S. hegemonic decline. (Gowan 2004: 481)

These measures are arguably being used in the current U.S.-China trade war to hamper China's pursuit of high-grossing core industries such as 5G technology (Kapustina et al. 2020) and economic competition with the United States resulting from the BRI (Chance and Mafinezam 2016). From these facts, other scholars in this second camp argue that China's alternative international institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Shanghai Cooperation Council are not meant to replace the dominant Western-led institutions, but rather to gradually "route around" the existing international order (Zhang 2017: 325). Zhang (2017: 325) identifies this as the cautious tactic of a Chinese state slowly swelling in influence under the rules of world politics through the creation of "inside-out parallel worlds" to circumvent the dominant international institutions of liberal capitalism. In concurrence with this point, Stuenkel (2016) explicitly argues that not only institutions but an entire China-led order will arise and overlap with the current United States-led order but will not replace it.

In the interests of minimalizing prognosis, suffice it to argue that presently both camps overlap on China etching its influence into the world-system through the BRI. The future may indeed see the BRI empower China enough to elevate it into the core but without (unwisely) forging an economic commodity network exclusive of its biggest trading partner, the United States, as was the case with the cotton industries of the United States and USSR (Quark and Slez 2014). To propel this ascension, China must first forge a future periphery and tailor itself a global capital-accumulation system, which I argue is the BRI. This article, then, seeks to primarily add to the second camp's body of literature as I argue that on its way to reaching core status in the greater world-system, China is working towards establishing itself as a hegemon within a BRI-bound world-system which will be a part of, and not exclusive to, the greater world-system. In reconciliation with the first camp, I agree with Arrighi and Silver (1999) on the current period being one of hegemonic rivalry; as evidenced, for example, by Russia's role in the Syrian civil war, which for several years ran counter to the calls from the United States as supposedly sole-hegemon for the removal of the Assad regime, to the point where the United States no longer wants him to step down per se (Daily Sabah 2020). It is this waning hegemony which arguably gave China the leeway to include Iran in the BRI under the assumption that the country would be stable enough to conduct business in, and have one of the main arteries of China's project run through it (CEIAS 2020). This brings us to the MENA region where the United States projects influence

militarily as well as economically, and which is set to be the bridge linking the MSRI from Asia to Europe.

China and the MENA Region

Harris (1993) documents the four phases of relations between China and Middle East, which began with Chinese political assistance in the region's colonial struggles in the 1950s leading up to vitalizing economic ties and increased trade, arguing that in the post-Cold War era, China's goals in the region are more economic than political. Adding structure to these economic goals, Pigato's (2009) work finds that Chinese increasing FDI to the MENA region has been mostly targeting the oil-rich Arab Gulf, noting an interest by China to transform the MENA region into a major service hub and trade bridge between Asia, Africa, and Europe.¹ Kemp (2010) expands on this growing interest after illustrating how the rise of China, as with other emerging Asian economies, led to greater demand for securing energy resources necessary for long-term growth through increasing trade and economic ties. He argues that despite a clear disadvantage to Western European and American counterparts in terms of quality products and proximity, China's advantages were significant: just as in sub-Saharan Africa, China has no bitter history with the former French and British mandates of the Middle East, and does not tie aid/business to human rights progress, democratization, and/or environmental considerations, as was the case with the West. Further, China is a strict adherent to non-interventionism, preferring not to side with any regional rivals (Iran-Saudi Arabia, Palestine-Israel), thus currying favor with the region's bulwarks.

On U.S. dominance, Kemp (2010) believes that China is content, for the time being at least, with the American security umbrella stabilizing the region as China continues to benefit economically. However, he argues the gradual waning of U.S. hegemony as a function of the growing economic interdependence between the Middle East and other rising Asian powers such as India, and warns of the inevitability of a U.S.-China clash if and when the limits of Chinese soft power interfere with its economic goals.

Olimat (2012) points to the strategic diversification of the China-MENA relationship from one confined to energy, trade, and arms sales to cultural relations and political cooperation, and, as with Kemp (2010), predicts that Chinese involvement will increase as its interests in MENA grow. He concurs with Harris (1993) in stressing that for China, development rests on a stability mainly achieved through economic progress rather than democracy or human rights.

Most recently, Dorsey (2019) argues that despite the MENA region becoming increasingly complementary with China's economy, China will not be allowed free rein there as the great powers (including Russia) aim to ensure it does not secure a dominant role. Conversely, he argues that China has no intention to usurp U.S. dominance in the region (nor Russian/Iranian dominance in Syria), and concurs with Kemp (2010) that China is content with conducting business underneath America's security umbrella. However, this increasing economic activity and investment in the region make stability in MENA even more important to China to protect not only

¹ Arguably an important impetus for creating the MSRI.

investments but also Chinese nationals, citing examples of violent resistance to Chinese projects in Sudan and Pakistan. This is where purely economic interests must confront political realities and engage with them on political terms, heralding a new era of Chinese political influence in the region.

While the above scholarship proves increasing Chinese engagement in the MENA region and the outlines some political outcomes of this engagement, there is a dearth of research examining non-oil-exporting MENA states, and the interplay between the growing Chinese presence and non-state actors operating in the region. Dorsey, for example, mentions the Iran-backed militias such as Hezbollah only briefly despite the group's heavy influence in Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. Further, while there is extensive scholarship discussing the geopolitics of the BRI and MSRI, including world-systems analyses, no case has been made so far for how the BRI can constitute a *de facto* world-system, and the obstacles to peripheralization by this world-system.

It is hoped that this article adds to scholarship not only on the effects of Chinese FDI, but also on China's evolving relationship with, and the MSRI's impact on, the MENA region, which despite China's reach being substantial, "is not as well understood as, for example, the [impact on the Asian region]," but with great potential to trigger tensions between decades-old enemies (Harding 2019). Additionally, it is hoped this article adds to scholarship on periods of hegemonic rivalry.

The BRI as a World-System

This section will outline the argument of the BRI/MSRI as a world-system with China as core and hegemon. Wallerstein (2004: 94) adds Grasmci's consideration of culture and ideology as part of hegemony and lays out its definition in world-systems analysis as one state achieving "economic, political, and financial superiority over other strong states, and therefore has both military and cultural leadership as well. Hegemonic powers define the rules of the game." A hegemony, then, enjoys economic dominance, defines the rules of the game by promoting new *modi operandi*, can exercise political force underlined by a powerful military (among other tools), and has cultural impact on its periphery. It follows, then, that a hegemony's effectiveness relative to other strong states translates into how well it can integrate peripheries into its orbit.

The BRI and the MENA Region

Since the launch of the BRI, Chinese FDI has been increasing; and in 2018, Chinese FDI decreased around the world except to the MENA region, where it spiked significantly (Molavi 2019). Combined with the above scholarship, this shows a trend of increasing interest and Chinese capital flows toward the MENA region, which are a prerequisite to China's rewiring of local capital-accumulation circuitry to power the BRI and China's journey to the core. Indeed, all countries in the MENA region (except Syria) have signed MoUs with China's BRI agency (Wang N.d.).

China has been increasingly anchoring itself in the Mediterranean "by acquiring, building, modernizing, expanding, and operating the most important Mediterranean ports and terminals in

Greece, Egypt, Algeria, Turkey” (Chaziza 2018: par. 3). In particular, Chinese firms seek hosts in the MENA region which moderately restrict civil liberties and political rights in order to establish an atmosphere sufficiently stable for their investment (Shirali 2015). To illustrate how China, through the BRI, is establishing a new world-system within the greater world-system, we focus on the MSRI in the MENA region as it will be affecting the MENA region more than its land-based counterpart (the Silk Road Economic Belt). Following this, the components of a world-system, core/hegemon and periphery, are laid out to show whether China is satisfying these characteristics *vis-à-vis* the MENA region through the MSRI.

The MSRI

Presently the BRI is in its second “planning” phase, which involves establishing BRI participant countries and which ends in 2021. As such, the MSRI’s trajectory has yet to be finalized (Hong 2016). Nonetheless, its execution will involve constructing vast stretches of hard infrastructure (high-speed railways, oil and gas pipelines, air/seaports, and others), special economic zones (SEZs), large industrial parks, manufacturing plants within signatory states, “and other structures that facilitate and support economic activity along the entire breadth of the MSRI” (Blanchard and Flint 2017: 227).

The MSRI, as part of the BRI, presents solutions to internal and external issues otherwise hampering China’s growth. Internally, the MSRI is a solution to China’s economy becoming exhausted by declining returns on capital coupled with excessive dependence on investment, a surplus production of goods, and rising wages (Zhang 2017; Islam 2019; Pathak 2020). Construction of BRI-related infrastructure abroad would make use of the surplus coal and steel production China is otherwise burdened with (Islam 2019). Similarly, curbing losses from rising Chinese wages would be done by outsourcing certain production processes to BRI partner states such as Cambodia and Laos (Islam 2019). Further, the MSRI would help China unload some of its massive foreign currency through funding-related projects abroad (Blanchard and Flint 2017). Finally, the MSRI is expected to boost internal development, strengthen economic coordination, and catalyze national integration at the city and provincial level, thus advancing China’s “Go West” initiative focusing on its less prosperous western provinces to reduce its internal wealth gap (Blanchard and Flint 2017; Islam 2019). The external effects of the BRI which would also benefit China would be the result of participant countries’ development and include a boost in demand for Chinese exports supported not only by capital gains from Chinese MSRI/BRI investment but also by returns from enhanced competitiveness that this better infrastructure allows (Islam 2019).

More broadly, after surveying literature on the MSRI to explain the dynamics of its economic and political factors at different levels (from sub-national to multilateral actors), Blanchard (2017) argues that the MSRI should be viewed as transformative of the global geopolitical landscape, with multi-level interactions and linkages of politics and economics. We turn now to what makes the MSRI an emergent world-system.

Hegemonic Features of the MSRI

While China has indeed managed to penetrate even European markets, with notable takeovers of European businesses (Komlosy 2016), it remains a developing semi-peripheral country on the global stage. However, this does not disregard its towering strength within the BRI-bound world-system. Although temporality is by no means a sufficient argument, for Blanchard and Flint (2017: 234) it remains “tempting to situate the development of the MSRI, and the U.S. reaction, within the temporal sequence of hegemonic cycles” whereby hegemony shifts from one actor (the United States) to another and is now being transferred to China. For more concrete argumentation, we examine qualities that hegemonic powers possess which give them power over the periphery and even other core states. These are economic dominance, the creation of new *modi operandi*, and cultural impact. This hegemony can be tested through integration of other areas into the new BRI-bound world-system through peripheralization.

Economic dominance. The importance of economic dominance is highlighted extensively in world-systems scholarship. Hopkins and Wallerstein (1986: 59) argue that the capitalist world-system assigns different modes of production to different actors/areas, and these productions are not equally remunerated, i.e., “complementarity goes along with inequality.” Further, a key feature of the core is specializing in “comparatively highly mechanized, high-profit, high-wage, highly skilled labor activities...against the peripheral comparative opposite (originally largely agricultural and mining activities)” (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1986: 59), despite the shifts in production specializations over time. Specifically, for hegemons, a key feature that separates them from other core states is achieving “dominance in [the most sophisticated and desirable capital-intensive products] thus positioning themselves at the top of the international division of labor, penetrating the markets of other core states, gaining the largest streams of surplus value” (Gowan 2004: 473). Blanchard and Flint (2017: 234) concur that “world-systems theorists frame the rise to hegemonic power through the ability to project economic advantage through trade and investment.”

Adapting this to China’s position *vis-a-vis* the MENA region within the BRI-bound world-system, according to Wallerstein ([1983] 2011) there are three indicators of a core state achieving economic dominance over all others:

1. **Productivity dominance:** Achieved when a country sells products of a quality higher than the periphery and at a cheaper price than the competition. China satisfies this trait in the MENA region, as it has been exporting high-profit products to this region for years, including solar technology (Dusek and Kayrouz 2017) and globally competitive AI surveillance technology,² exclusively used in some MENA states for its “ease-of-access, cost, and increased foreign direct investment (FDI) from the BRI” (Harsono 2020). Further, the feasibility of the MSRI rests on Chinese infrastructure exports being fiercely competitive in the global market in addition to sustained FDI flows. These exports remain

² An industry which is predicted to be worth \$733B by 2027 (Grand View Research 2020).

dominant in the global market partly due to lack of competition from core states, as World Bank Senior Economist David Dollar explains: “[The West has] by and large, gotten out of ‘hard’ infrastructure sectors,” (quoted in Devonshire-Ellis and Solstad 2013). This is evidenced by more Chinese FDI funneled toward infrastructure projects in the MENA region, while that for other regions has significantly dropped (Molavi 2019). In the BRI-bound world-system, then, China is achieving hegemony as according to world-systems theory, “each hegemon establishes an international regime of accumulation suited to its dominance in a particular set of capital-intensive commodities” (Gowan 2004: 476), with infrastructure generally and AI, and solar energy additionally applying to its hegemonic posturing vis-à-vis the MENA region.

2. Trade dominance, resulting from production dominance, achieved when the preponderant state enjoys a favorable balance of trade since more countries are buying its products than the preponderant state is buying from them. While MENA as a bloc appears to be a formidable front to dominate in this way, being divided into 22 states has left spacious room for Chinese goods to flood the markets. China has achieved trade dominance by being among the top five export destinations of most MENA states—number one for Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and the UAE—while no MENA state has even reached the top 10 of China’s import sources (Chinamed.com N.d.)
3. This trade dominance then leads to financial dominance whereby more money is entering the country than leaving it and the banks of the dominant state tend to obtain greater control of the world’s (or BRI-bound world-system’s) financial resources. The first requirement is satisfied as, according to the World Bank, the above-mentioned trade imbalance favoring China translates into net MENA exports to China totaling roughly \$32B between 2014-2018, whereas net MENA imports from China in that same period totaled \$105B, meaning a trade profit of \$73 billion flowed into China from the MENA region (wits.worldbank.org N.d.).³ The second requirement is being fulfilled through financial institutions such as the AIIB and the pursuit of *yuanization*⁴ within the BRI framework, highly impactful on the MENA region due to the establishment of yuan-denominated oil futures contracts, and the creation of an alternative lender to the IMF for the BRI-bound world-system (Quero 2020). These new institutions and their operation align in the second feature of a hegemon: The creation of new *modi operandi*.

New modi operandi. Hegemonic power, as world-systems theorists argue, is not only wielded economically, but also through creating new ways of acting and thinking (Taylor 1999). These, as Blanchard and Flint (2017: 234) point out, can arguably manifest “in the form of soft infrastructure, [which] the MSRI is promoting.” On the BRI’s role in this, international business arbitration expert

³ Interestingly, during the same period, the MENA region trade deficit with the United States was less, at roughly \$40B.

⁴ The phenomenon of the Chinese Renminbi or Yuan being increasingly used for transactions outside China’s borders.

Shen Wei argues that the BRI's goal is not limited to facilitating trade, but its wider effect is the socialization of participating states under new codes of conduct within and with respect to the BRI (Backer 2017).

Quero (2020: 88) localizes this in the MENA region by arguing that China is creating alternative “norms and institutions to those that currently define the global liberal order [that] could trigger shifts in the MENA normative environment.” He does so by highlighting three ways in which China is creating and propagating new *modi operandi* not only directly through the BRI, but also indirectly through setting precedents for deviating against the established liberal world-system. In so doing, China would be manifesting alternative, or—to return to the second camp—parallel institutions and norms which affect the MENA region's obedience to the core's *modi operandi*, thus triggering shifts at the normative level.

Of particular relevance to the MENA region is how China's new *modi operandi* may impact three significant elements of the dominant Bretton Woods economic order, namely: “the post-international financial institutions and their lending policies; the 1945 post-gold dollar standard of the international monetary system; and the global mechanisms for settling trade and investment disputes” (Quero 2020: 90). Further, *yuanization* would be facilitated by these alternative institutions such as the Shanghai Gold Exchange where gold is transacted in yuan (Canally 2016). The significance of these new alternative institutions is not only in facilitating BRI-related operations, but in MENA states finding them to be more permissive sources of aid that are less contingent on liberal and interventionist ideals (Quero 2020).

Beyond financial institutions, an alternative legal framework is also being established in the BRI-bound world-system as all BRI-related contracts stipulate that litigation in any form must be conducted by Chinese courts, thus extending China's jurisprudence into the BRI-bound world-system and imposing a new legal hegemony (Hillman and Goodman 2018). Moreover, China's dissatisfaction with the Law of the Sea, as evidenced by its persistent claim to most of the South China Sea, found resonance with several MENA states, for whom “the current status of the global set of norms and customs governing maritime spaces has never been satisfactory” (Quero 2020: 95), meaning there is consensus to apply China's alternative legal framework in the Arab Gulf's waters through the MSRI.

Cultural Impact. Dorsey (2018) lays out the triumphs and failures of China's attempts to project cultural soft power into the MENA region. Ironically, China benefits not only from the U.S. military presence in the MENA region that further secures its investments, but also from the U.S. academic presence due to American institutes being facilitators of Chinese studies. Confucious institutes across MENA are also instruments of soft power propagation and have branches in several states. The Chinese government also holds festivals meant to familiarize locals with Chinese products, language, and culture and is a large exporter of halal meat, a staple in Muslim diets. However, Chinese soft power propagation efforts have been criticized by Nye (2015) who notes that China acts on the incorrect notion that government is the main instrument of soft power, as opposed to civil society or individuals. This typical top-down formula China regularly exercises

at home may not prove effective abroad. Citizens in MENA as in other regions have sufficient access to information but to capture their attention is another challenge, one that depends on credibility, something Chinese government “propaganda” lacks. However, despite China not having a significant cultural allure to Arabs (yet), it is pursuing education as a soft power tool, in addition to promoting the Chinese development model for MENA states, which has proven more effective (Haddad-Fonda 2017).

A noteworthy factor in China’s increasing ties to the Middle East is its relationship to the Muslim community; whereby, in theory, public opinion would dissuade Muslim-majority Arab states from pursuing deeper ties to a China engaged in large-scale and systemic oppression of Xinjiang’s Muslim Uyghurs. Muslim heavyweights Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia at first criticized the Chinese government but added little substantive policy measures in order to balance religious solidarity and business pragmatism, meaning this obstacle was paved over with infrastructural investment and generous trade agreements (Dorsey 2019). In fact, Saudi Arabia and other Arabs states became among 37 nations to express support for China’s Xinjiang policy (Miles 2019). China continues to curry favor with the Muslim community after a Chinese company successfully build the Mecca Light Railway, carrying millions Hajj pilgrims between holiest sites in Saudi Arabia (Bhaya 2018).

After providing evidence for China’s emergent hegemonic status within the MSRI through production dominance, creating new *modi operandi*, and progress on cultural hegemony, we now examine how effectively the BRI-bound world-system can integrate external areas/processes into itself.

Integration. The MSRI is being officially promoted as a way to revitalize the ancient Silk Road into a modern hyper-connective route linking Asia, Africa and Europe. Zhang (2017: 310) argues that this will facilitate “the formation of a China-led reorganized world economy, operating under open and equal participation, possibly leading to common development for all countries involved,” i.e., a BRI-bound world-system incorporating new areas and processes into it through integration. Indeed, as a China Exim Bank spokesperson acknowledged, “the MSRI is intended to create a unified regional market and industrial value chains,” (China.org 2016). This unification would be within the BRI-bound world-system, which seems to be already happening in the MENA region.

Pigato (2009: xx) highlights that “there are signs...of MENA’s increasing integration with Chinese...production networks for goods destined for [the West].” According to her, a major obstacle to this, besides MENA’s instability, is the distance to China spiking the costs of trade due to lack of infrastructure. These and similar infrastructural shortcomings in parts of the future BRI arguably created a need for China to streamline its shipping costs through building “sea routes with faster connectivity to increase trade” (Chaziza 2018: 1), then combining the separate maritime trade routes into a major oceanic expressway via the MSRI.

Another significant obstacle this section will explore is that the MENA region represents the core's soft underbelly. Not only is it in close proximity to Europe, but historically has been deeply entrenched in the core's capital-accumulation networks. This has occurred in three ways:

1. Direct imperialism, as in the case of former French colonies of the Maghreb, former French post-WW2 mandates Lebanon and Syria, and former British mandates Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt, Palestine, and Iraq;
2. Geostrategic partnerships such as U.S. allies/dependents Saudi Arabia and Israel;
3. Maintaining historic and cultural influence, as in Francophone Lebanon and the Maghreb.
4. Hopkins and Wallerstein illustrate the physics of a rising contender to hegemony:

In periods of hegemony, the periphery as a whole will tend to reorient its trade relations away from other core states to the hegemonic power; in periods of reemergence of competition among core states, the individual states of the periphery will tend to be included in a particular zone of influence or a 'tariff zone'. (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1986: 64)

This zone of influence could be the MSRI; however, this is no guarantee of its success, as throughout history, "would-be hegemon collided with a counter-hegemonic coalition of states unwilling to be manipulated or conquered" (Kelly 2014). Here we pivot to Lebanon as a case of Chinese influence being blocked.

These Cedars Have Thorns: China's Efforts to Peripheralize Lebanon

Background

Lebanon is a developing middle-income country known for its multilingual, skilled work force. Its economy is service-oriented, with services making up roughly 75% of total GDP (Plecher 2020). It also enjoys a friendly climate for investment, a strategic location between Syria and the Mediterranean, and a free economy. A former French protectorate, Lebanon remains influenced by France and the United States (Crowe 2020) in addition to regional powers Saudi Arabia and Iran. According to the government, "Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows to Lebanon jumped by 14% to USD 2.88 billion in 2018 compared to USD 2.52 billion in 2017, highlighting the continuous confidence of investors in the Lebanese economy" (investinlebanon.gov.lb N.d.). In comparison with other states in the region, "Lebanon was still among the top five FDI recipients in West Asia and ranked second among non-oil economies" (investinlebanon.gov.lb N.d.).

Signs of Peripheralization

Due to the above-mentioned qualities, Lebanon was chosen by China in 2018 to serve as the Middle East and North Africa regional headquarters for the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (Xin 2018). As a non-oil country, the interests of the Chinese government and investors in Lebanon have mainly focused on infrastructure projects such as railroads, ports, and power plants. For the MSRI, Lebanon is seen as an important candidate due to its strategic position

near Syria as “investors recently showed interest in the establishment of an airport in the Lebanese region of Koleiat, as well as in developing the port of Beirut” (Abou Mrad and Caluori 2018). For Lebanon to become a periphery in China’s BRI-bound world-system, China arguably must satisfy the requirements of a hegemon with respect to Lebanon: economic dominance, the adoption of China’s *modi operandi*, and cultural hegemony.

In addition to efforts in the MENA region as a whole, the propagation of cultural hegemony by China in Lebanon remains limited to academic institutions such as the Institute Confucius in Lebanon’s Saint Joseph University, ironically capsuled within French cultural hegemony, and Chinese government scholarships for Lebanese students to pursue graduate studies in China.

In economic dominance, China passed the EU to become Lebanon’s number one source of imports in 2016 (Xinhua 2018), estimated at \$2 billion annually and accounting for 40% of all of Lebanon’s imports. These include not only relatively more advanced core products such as electrical appliances, industrial equipment, and cellphones, but also competitive periphery products such as candies and foodstuffs. Meanwhile, Lebanon’s annual exports to China amount to no more than \$60 million as of 2020 (Houssairi 2020) and comprise mainly cosmetics produced in Lebanon and foodstuffs such as wine and Patchi chocolates (Embassy of Lebanon in China employee, personal correspondence). Further, Lebanon’s acceptance of China’s Union Pay credit card in 2015 can be interpreted as the beginning of financial dominance, but certainly not a powerful one, as this card operates in Lebanese pounds and U.S. dollars, and remains an alternative to other credit cards (Abou Mrad and Caluori 2018). Further, China has not taken steps aimed at transferring technology, supporting high-yield industries, nor introducing them into Lebanon, instead supporting/maintaining Lebanon’s peripheral agriculture industry exemplified by a recent loan to be repaid through Lebanese agro-food products, with the goal of introducing Lebanese goods to Chinese markets (Abou Mrad and Caluori 2018).

China’s economic dominance therefore remains limited, as although China has approved Lebanon’s membership application as the 87th country to join the AIIB, it is not yet a fully-fledged member, having not completed the enrollment procedures which include depositing capital into the bank (AIIB.org 2018), thus blocking an alternative path to adopting Chinese *modi operandi*. Moreover, for any BRI-related legal clauses to begin tangibly influencing Lebanon and enforcing China’s *modi operandi*, it must first host a BRI project.

Lebanon is regarded by China as a potential MSRI member and has signed MoUs with China’s BRI agency in this regard (Devonshire-Ellis 2019). The Federation of Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture in Lebanon also signed MoUs with the China Council for Promotion of International Trade in April 2019 (Belt and Road News 2019). Despite all the promise the MSRI shows Lebanon, including but not limited to a proposal by the Silk Road Chamber for International Commerce to grant \$2 billion to Lebanon in low interest loans to build new roads (Abou Mrad and Caluori 2018), very few projects have so far materialized, such as a music conservatory funded by the BRI agency. This low FDI stymies integration into the BRI-bound world-system, among other issues.

Lebanon repulsion factors. Focal Point explains that factors such as instability deter Chinese investment in the country, wherein one set of negotiations with the government risks being a waste of time if this government abruptly changes due to unrest or political infighting, forcing a new round of negotiations. Lebanon's notoriously high corruption is another deterrent, as bribes cannot be paid from Chinese government money through the state-owned companies executing the MSRI. More importantly, she cites external factors as further deterrents: competition from the EU via historic ties to the country and lower-interest loans, too many state and non-state actors interfering in Lebanon's affairs, and the option of other countries able to fulfill China's needs (Author, personal correspondence).

Lebanon is in dire need of infrastructure as even after having received billions of dollars in aid the state is still unable, for example, to provide 24 hours of electricity per day. In the energy sector, as in all others, corruption pushes aid packages into ineffectiveness (Al-Jack 2018). Indeed, despite Lebanon's need and China's offers to build infrastructure, "the offers have not been approved, and China is forbidden from entering Lebanon in such ways," according to Dr. Massoud Daher, head of the Chinese-Lebanese Friendship and Cooperation Committee (quoted in Houssairi 2020).

This incapacity is due to the multilayered nature of hegemony as not being solely dependent on relative economic capacities, as Hopkins and Wallerstein (1986: 52) state: "Hegemony is distinguished from imperium in that it operates primarily through the market—but certainly not exclusively, since there are always politico-military and cultural components." It is these components that the United States-as-hegemon is wielding to guard Lebanon from deeper integration with Beijing, as Gowan (2004: 475) explains: "The U.S. has the ability to control, through its military-political reach, the regional peripheries of its major allies. In the West European case, the U.S. has long controlled the Mediterranean area."

Therefore, Lebanon is arguably on the border between the BRI-bound world-system, and the (struggling) U.S.-led capitalist world order. But this does not mean Chinese penetration is impossible. Indeed, just as Lebanon's many players can deter Chinese investment, some of those players may encourage or even facilitate it, beyond the reach of even the United States. Following the events of the October 2019 revolution which called for the fall of the Lebanese ruling class, the Secretary General of Hezbollah, a powerful Iran-backed militia, stated in a televised speech that China is needed to help Lebanon escape its current crisis. He went so far as to claim that the country's troubles are the fault of America's sanctions on Iran and its trade war with China, which otherwise could have extended capital repairs to Lebanon: "[the Secretary General] is proposing that Lebanon, China, Russia and Iran enter into a partnership in politics first and in economy second to face the challenges from a U.S.-led conspiracy to cripple Lebanon economically" (quoted in Khbeiz 2019). In so doing, he politicized China, or rather, exposed the politics of proximity to China as an alternative (indeed, a counter) to the United States, despite China's commitment to non-interference and to fostering favorable ties with all actors in the region. This arguably has given China the impetus to pursue one peripheralization route through a northern port.

Lebanon Attraction Factors: Tripoli. In December 2018, the Chinese state-owned shipping company, COSCO, docked in Tripoli, inaugurating a new maritime route linking China to the Mediterranean. Located less than 30 kilometers from Syria, Tripoli benefits from a strategic location for investors looking for ease of access to Syria's war-damaged cities (De Stone and Suber 2019) and Lebanon is seen as having the potential of serving as a platform for reconstruction efforts of Syria and Iraq (Lin 2019). Indeed, Syria's reconstruction promises lucrative and sustained revenue for any company capable of securing contracts there (Cornish, 2019; Khushnam 2020), and the Syrian port of Latakia is not large enough to import all of Syria's reconstruction needs, making the task shareable with Tripoli if that port is seen as a competent target for investment, according to the manager of the port of Tripoli, Dr. Ahmad Tamer (Tamer, personal correspondence). The political red carpet has been rolled out for China as it has diplomatically supported Assad in Syria (Taylor 2017; Khushnam 2020), and thus is the top candidate among his limited circle of allies to undertake this reconstruction, possessing more resources and infrastructure construction expertise than Russia or Iran.

Tripoli also benefitted from expansion and rehabilitation work by China Harbor and other Chinese companies, equipping it to not only receive all types of large ships, but also creating a berth to receive containers set up with Chinese cranes capable of transporting and lifting more than 480,000 containers per year (Xinhua 2020).

In addition, Chinese state officials have expressed interest in investing in Lebanon's northern areas (Yang 2019), seeing promise in a special economic zone planned to equip the port of Tripoli to partake in Syria's post-war reconstruction (Issa 2017). Further, Tripoli is being considered as an important location for Mediterranean shipping since most Muslim nations would refuse goods shipped via China's other option: Tel Aviv (Cornish 2019). "China is testing Tripoli as a potential location for investment," says Dr. Tamer (Tamer, personal correspondence). After securing a loan for \$86 million from the Islamic Development Bank, Tripoli is preparing to transform into a special economic zone (De Stone and Suber 2019). The Tripoli Special Economic Zone (TSEZ) will be a tax-free area providing industrial, logistics, tech, and digital services, set to begin operation in 2022. The industries which the TSEZ will be hosting include agro-food, paper products, metallurgy, low to medium-grade manufacturing, and others. With this investment, Tripoli has been attracting worldwide attention after decades in the shadow of Beirut. To counter the Chamber of Commerce key informant's cynicism about Lebanon's economic impenetrability, Dr. Tamer argued that cheap labor and government-owned companies give China an edge over the EU. Indeed, a European business lobbying group had urged the EU to recognize China's arsenal of giant state-backed companies which benefit from extra government financing to best their European competition (Reuters Staff 2020).

Further, Tripoli possesses unique qualities that may tempt China enough to see it undertake this challenge to the core. Tripoli's value to China is as a potential participant in the MSRI wherein it can act as "a logistical hub for land trade routes connecting the Mediterranean to Central Asia, a corridor Beijing needs to reduce transport times and avoid having to transit through the Suez

Canal” (De Stone and Suber 2019). These examples of financing and motivations, as well as mutual visits made by Chinese delegates to Tripoli’s Special Economic Zone (TSEZ staff, personal correspondence), indicate that Beijing is strongly considering that port for MSRI inclusion.

Tripoli in the BRI-Bound World-System

Zooming in from inter-continental projects to port towns is part a of world-systems analysis which allows for the deconstruction of states and regions into economic processes within geographic areas and hegemonic cycles. In this regard, Flint and Xiaotong (2017: 304) point out that “Cities...are key sites in the rhythm of economic activity that underpins hegemonic cycles.”

Blanchard and Flint (2017: 233) state that the goal of the MSRI is to connect “different places...that are an important part of the web of relations because of...their relative geographic location...such as an accessible port with an economically relevant hinterland,” which aptly applies to Tripoli with Syria as said hinterland. To counter Focal Point again, despite there being other options to fulfill Tripoli’s would-be role, Lattakia and Tartus in Syria are under Russian and Iranian control, with concession to China for commercial purposes unlikely (Hury 2020). Current crossfire between Syria and Turkey arguably disqualifies the entire Turkish coast from being the gateway to Syrian reconstruction. Tripoli remains the MSRI’s top candidate and this has translated into an investment of \$60 million by China to aid in the port’s expansion (The Business Year 2019; Tamer, personal correspondence).

Hopkins and Wallerstein (1986: 20) explain that the integration of a periphery into the core is not limited to one classical arrangement, as “the integration may be effected...by bi or multilateral barter-like agreements.” A tenet of world-systems analysis is the illusory nature of states and the reality of periphery and core processes within areas. It follows, then, that parts and processes within states may be core or peripheral. Coupling this with the emergence of a BRI-bound world-system means this system will be comprised of peripheral, semi-peripheral, and core areas/processes, but this does *not* necessitate the entry of whole states into the BRI-bound world-system, only certain areas/processes they host. Tripoli, then, may be peripheralized into the BRI-bound world-system apart from the rest of Lebanon; as evidenced by U.S. hegemony preventing BRI-related infrastructure contracts and aid from China, imposing sanctions on Hezbollah-supporting politicians (Khodr 2020), executing the Caesar Act, and being critical to the success of a recent French effort to reshuffle the Lebanese government after the Beirut explosion in August 2020 (Rose and Perry 2020). Moreover, the BRI is viewed by many American officials as “a deliberate attempt to economically marginalize the United States, to create a Eurasian sphere of influence, or as a pretext for expanding China’s overseas military presence” (Chance and Mafinezam 2016: 1), thus creating impetus for limiting its expansion *vis-a-vis* peripheralization of states such as Lebanon.

Tripoli would be a periphery to the BRI-bound world-system because its role thus far is tied to the simple transport of products from China into Syria without the need for high-yielding industries. While small in scale, this dent in U.S. hegemony carries significant consequences, as Shirali (2015: 92) notes: “structural changes in the international system [and] sub-systemic actions

have [catalyzed] regional alterations. Therefore, China's position as a rising superpower...allows it to capitalize on its status by using hegemony to transform sub-systemic relations in the Middle East." However, "Beijing's overseas initiatives are heavily dependent on the politics and interests of its partners, even if they are all smaller and less powerful than China" (Markey 2020).

Conclusion

This article illustrated how China's BRI satisfies the characteristics of an emerging hegemon in the case of the MENA region, effectively launching a challenge to predominant hegemonic structures within the area through establishing institutions buttressing its economic dominance and propagating its alternative *modi operandi* while strengthening cultural links. After showing China's capability in establishing this BRI-bound world-system, we find it has limitations in the case of Lebanon, as it remains a market-based hegemony. This is partly due to China not actively deploying military/political force in the region to underline its economic dominance, at least not as effectively as has the United States or the EU. As Wallerstein (1984) notes, military-political capacity provides support for economic dominance, shielding the core economy against external attack and removing barriers to its capital accumulation from the periphery. To answer the questions posed, then, we find that the BRI does constitute a *de facto* new world-system, equipped with capable and binding institutions save for a political-military framework necessary for China to become a hegemon; and which effectively hampers the full integration of would-be peripheral MENA states into the BRI-bound world-system. However, China's focus on key sites such as Tripoli may see it seizing a prize worth the effort: another pearl along the MSRI. Indeed, although a BRI-bound world-system is being etched into the current world order, it may not shape up to be a coalition of whole states, but rather, states and key areas of singular interest to China, pulled from the grip of the reigning, yet waning, core.

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