

## Shades of Red

### Assessing China's Hegemony in the Belt and Road Initiative

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#### Abstract

*To address literature on U.S.-China hegemonic competition, this paper examines the properties of China among select Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) states which pertain to the features of hegemony per world-systems analysis and how it compares to the United States and regional powers Brazil and South Africa. I demonstrate that Beijing has made significant progress propagating its modus operandi by way of greater yuan use and imposing its legal code on examined BRI states, economic dominance through besting competitors in exports to these states, achieving an overall trade surplus as well as setting up free-trade zones to maintain and enhance this, and establishing a stream of revenue from examined states via high-interest, short-term loans, income from projects, and trade surpluses. In military dominance, China has made gains in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and Pakistan. Meanwhile, Washington remains dominant in Peru, and, with Paris, more culturally dominant in SSA.*

**Keywords:** China, Belt and Road Initiative, Hegemonic Rivalry



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China has entered the tenth year of implementing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and over 150 countries and territories have signed memorandums of understanding (MoUs) with Beijing, which has been sending record foreign direct investment (FDI) since 2013. Scholarship points to the potential of China to resume elevating its currently semi-peripheral status if it successfully tailors itself a global capital-accumulation system from peripheral states (Li and Zhang 2018; Flint and Zhang 2019). I have argued in my previous work that this global accumulation system may be the BRI (Sarieddine 2021), and expand here that whereas Chinese FDI towards developing BRI states has yielded extra-economic effects—branching out into the institutional, military, and cultural—these have been increasingly resonating with the features of hegemony per world-systems analysis. Indeed, as the current Ukraine war and Saudi-Iranian detente adds to portrayals of China as an emerging counterbalance to the Western global order, and as discussions on the BRI focus on its capacity to empower Beijing and usurp Washington, the objective of this paper is to address these concerns by assessing China's progress, if any, towards achieving hegemony among BRI states, and in so doing illustrate the potential path of development promised by Beijing. This paper will resume with literature on hegemonic rivalry and an examination of China's recent FDI trajectories. Subsequently, the parallels between China's achievements and structural advantages within the BRI and the features of hegemony per world-systems analysis will be explored to render conclusions about Beijing's growing influence on selected participants. Moreover, as semi-peripheries also wield influence in their respective locales, part of my inquiry includes a comparison not only with the (arguably) hegemonic United States but also regional semi-peripheries. The cases of Pakistan, Peru, and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) will be used to assess China's capacity among BRI states in three different regions and versus regional semi-peripheries such as Brazil and South Africa, defined as such by Wallerstein (World Population Review n.d.) in addition to the United States. I hope that this paper adds to literature on Chinese foreign policy, periods of hegemonic rivalry, and the effects of the BRI on developing states.

### **Literature Review on Chinese Hegemony**

At one end of scholarship on China-U.S. hegemonic rivalry is multipolarity argued by Stuenkel's (2016) miniature parallel worlds thesis, achievable multipolarity posed by Yongnian and Gore (2015), and Acharya's (2019) thesis on Western-centric institutions among others. On the other is scholarship on how unipolar U.S. hegemony will remain intact due to built-in monetary and security safeguards (Gowan 2004; Nye 2015), China's economic slowdown (Krasilshchikov 2014), and China's unwillingness to alter the status quo (Karatasli and Kumral 2017; Flint and Xiaotong 2019) with some Chinese scholars such as Yang supporting this position based on the wariness of weaker states about damaging their relationship with the United States (Larson 2015). Overlapping between these extremes is scholarship illustrating various models of dual hegemony exercised by China and the United States, such as a splitting of hegemonic functions between the two powers into a bifurcate order (Arrighi 2007; Ikenberry 2016; Jackson 2016) and interdependent hegemony (Li and Zhang 2018).

Yongnian and Gore (2015) note Chinese scholars who believe the United States is in decline and Chinese ascent will lead to the formation of a multi-polar world precipitating through the BRI's "regional integration that promotes Chinese political and economic influence" (Flint and Zhu 2019: 98). Acharya (2018), meanwhile, attributes Western hegemony's existential challenge to the Western-centric, coercive, and asymmetrical institutions, creating demand for a multipolar world as non-Western states acquire strength. Stuenkel (2016) similarly attributes institutions as the starting point of multipolarity through those catering to, and established by, rising regional powers such as China.

In the second camp, Gowan (2004) argues the bulletproof status of U.S. global hegemony by outlining measures taken to reign in rising competitors Japan and Germany in the 1970s and 1990s (Gowan 2004). Such measures arguably include the Biden administration's recent embargo on semi-conductor exports to China, which it needs for high-yielding technology production and export (Schuman 2022). Nye (2015) adds that the United States has the capacity to, if not reign in rising competitors, direct their growth in a manner complimentary with its interests, especially since China remains a developing state whose economy is slowing down at a rate below which it can wield hegemonic or hegemony-crushing force (Krasilshchikov 2014). Scholars in this camp also argue that Chinese international institutions such as Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) are not meant to replace the West's dominant international institutions but rather to enable China to gradually "route around" this existing order (Zhang 2017), in essence rendering multipolarity as an accommodation of regional powers under, rather than a seismic rupture of, U.S. hegemony. Karatasli and Kumral (2017), meanwhile, attribute Washington's enduring unipolarity to the wariness by Beijing of disrupting the current status quo. Within Chinese academic circles, scholars like Yan also do not anticipate that China, despite the BRI's promise, will attain "sufficient power to alter existing international norms" (Larson 2015: 185) due to BRI states' wariness of losing U.S. protection, a view echoed by Farley (2018), who finds most Asian states to be cautious about adopting Beijing's designs for the world, despite conceding that U.S. hegemony in East Asia may be waning.

In responding to Farley and Yan on the caution of weaker states as obstructive of Chinese hegemony, Ikenberry (2016) argues that this caution is not an obstacle to hegemony, but rather a facet of an emerging bifurcated order in Asia; whereby despite Beijing's dominance of the economic hierarchy, Washington's dominance of the security hierarchy can still equip it to fulfil the hegemonic role of protector and security guarantor to check Beijing's reach. However, there are no specific states mentioned in Ikenberry's (2016) arguments and the recent fall of Kabul exposes the limits of sustaining Washington's security umbrella.

Major and Luo (2019) counter bifurcationists by finding no evidence of Washington actively dissociating its economic relationships from its political-military apparatus as both have been expanding. This is further evidenced by the BRI incorporating its own military-industrial complex (Nakazawa 2018).

This research seeks to add to the above debate by illustrating how China has made hegemonic progress towards bipolarity and where it has fallen short of besting Washington.

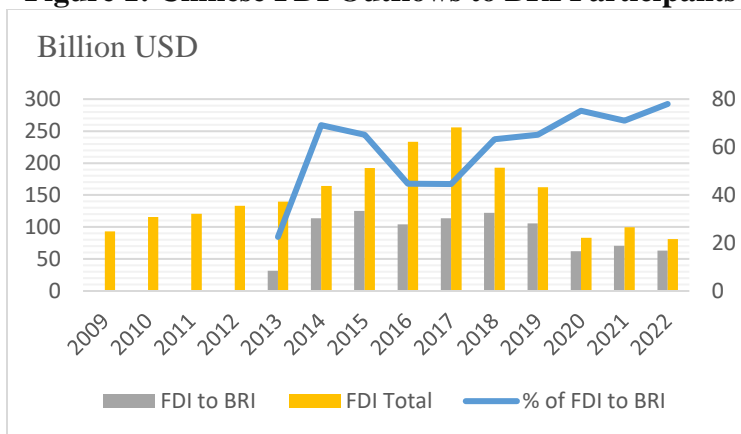
### Background: China’s BRI and FDI

With its first phase concluding in 2021 and its full realization set for 2049, the BRI is an interconnected network of land and maritime routes, combining hard and soft (digital) infrastructure, clustering around free trade zones and industrial hubs before forming one large economic corridor for the Eurasian common market (Maçães 2019). BRI countries’ collaboration with China is founded on five principles: financial integration, unrestricted trade, idea exchange, policy coordination, and connectivity (Zhang 2017). While infrastructure improvement may be a measure according with these principles and a step toward economic development, this would also necessitate BRI states’ policy coordination to reduce commercial barriers, as before it can host economic hubs, the geographic space being developed must be sufficiently connected in order to streamline trade and nurture developing cities (Maçães 2019), rendering extra-economic manifestations of its impact not only an inevitable outcome but also a requirement. Indeed, despite China’s promotion of the BRI as purely developmental, it could see the (increased) rewiring of areas’ production processes into China’s economic circuitry (Blanchard and Flint 2017; Flint and Zhu 2019). In this regard, roads and railways are neither the sole nor the most important manifestation of what connectivity entails, as maintaining physical links may require security coordination and enhancing them may necessitate cultural appeal.

A hegemon projecting influence onto weaker ones through FDI has precedent in post-World War II when the United States conditioned needed aid and investment to southern Europe on American terms, using American products and labor (Papadantonakis 1985). In similarity with the BRI scheme, FDI and concessional loans comprise the vast majority of BRI financing and Beijing mostly commissions its own firms and laborers to work on BRI projects (Maçães 2019). The contracts of these projects, furthermore, stipulate the use of Chinese legal and financial institutions for BRI-related affairs, creating what has been called an inside-out parallel world of alternative institutions seducing relatively illiberal developing states (Stuenkel 2016; Quero 2020).

Turning to FDI, while these as a whole have been increasing from China since the 2000s, flows to BRI states began in 2013 when the project was announced, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Chinese FDI Outflows to BRI Participants**



(data from American Enterprise Institute, n.d.)

As illustrated, FDI outflows have been concentrating further into BRI participant states, reaching 77 percent of the total outflow in 2022 and reflecting their primacy for Beijing.

### **Hegemonic Features of the Belt and Road Initiative**

On hegemony and its features, Wallerstein (2004) concurs with Gramsci's recognition of cultural factors as part of hegemony and argues that what made core states hegemonic during their reign was that:

[T]hey were able to establish the rules of the game in the interstate system, to dominate the world-economy (in production, commerce, and finance), to get their way politically with a minimal use of military force (which however they had in goodly strength), and to formulate the cultural language with which one discussed the world. (Wallerstein 2004: 58).

The above features will be further explored below as the components of hegemony: propagating a new *modus operandi* via law, currency, and institutions; achieving economic dominance via powerful exports rendering high returns; promoting the hegemon's language, ideology, and education system; and having a military capable of securing trade routes and protecting allies.

### **New *Modi Operandi***

An emergent hegemon is characterized by propagating its own, and impressing on other states, relatively new ways of thinking and acting, that is, new modes of operation (Taylor 1999). In the case of the BRI, these have been Chinese norms.

First is the BRI's broader effect of socializing participant states under new rules of conduct branching out from trade and into other fields such as security and education (Backer 2017). Second, the BRI is executed by respective state governments as opposed to their private sector, promoting China's model of centralization which allocates the state control over strategic sectors and supervises the manner in which the economy interacts with global markets (Maçães 2019). A third feature different from, and thus disruptive of, Western norms while propagating China's is arguably the infrastructure lacing the BRI. Indeed, as China developed and is successfully exporting its own high-speed rail technology and technical standards, it not only avoids licensing fees for Western infrastructure designs but also establishes streams of revenue from BRI states (Devonshire-Ellis and Solstad 2013; Polk 2018). With regards to ideology, the fifth general difference may be how China's relatively stronger position on the world stage has allowed it to challenge several of the liberal order's core values. China's economic power vis-a-vis the EU, for example, has allowed Beijing to block human rights contingencies in the pair's trade deals (Quero 2020).

Meanwhile, Beijing has muffled Western calls for democratic ideals in SSA, as its sizable export and transfers of digital technologies have allowed autocratic regimes therein to facilitate

targeted repression, digital surveillance, and internet shutdowns; thus keeping their modes of governance closer to Beijing's model as opposed to a Western democracy's (Carter and Carter 2022). Moreover, China has been blamed for Pakistan's government reverting to hybrid-martial governance despite successive democratic elections (Siddiqi 2019).

Supplanting the above norm-setting are three sub-features of *modus operandi*: alternative institutions, "yuanization," and law.

*Alternative Institutions.* Flint and Zhang (2019) localize the BRI as occurring within the latest Kondratieff A phase, which enables China's growth as it recalibrates its economy to concentrate more core processes within its borders and raises its status from semi-periphery to core, an endeavor which "requires ...the institutions to enable a new China-centric regime of investment and free trade" (Flint and Zhang 2019: 323). In this regard, China establishing the AIIB as a multilateral bank has not only spread its economic agency across Asia, but, by financing infrastructure projects in particular, it also advances China's ambition of regional integration (Flint and Zhu 2019). In addition to the AIIB, China-led institutions serve here as preliminary apparatuses through which Beijing begins wielding "norm-setting and rule-making leadership in global governance on the world stage," turning it from "rule-taker to a rule-maker in the international system" (Li and Zhang 2018: 166). The effectiveness of these institutions lies not only in their capacity but also their attractiveness. Indeed, whereas the Bretton Woods institutions encourage loan recipients to liberalize their economies in various ways, one aspect of China's norm-setting is the relative leniency with which China's establishments loan credit; independent of human rights records or other values of Western financial institutions, except on the recognition of Taiwan and only occasionally so (Reilly 2015; Quero 2020); arguably the fiscal equivalent of its non-interference policy. These Chinese financial institutions such as the Shanghai Gold Exchange, where gold is transacted in yuan, have attracted depositors from BRI participants (Canally 2016), furthering what will be termed "yuanization" and expanded upon below.

Military institutions also have been established to support China within the BRI and give Beijing an increased role in security provision, which has been Washington's competency, such as regional defense agreements which also can facilitate political and economic agendas (Major and Luo 2019). These include the Forum of China-Africa Defense and Security Cooperation, meant to protect members in the event of an attack (Han and Paul 2020). Moreover, Beijing's alternative to cultural institutes such as the UK's British Council are Confucius Institutes, which will be expanded upon for their role in propagating Beijing's education system and Mandarin below (Reilly 2015).

Stuenkel (2016) calls such institutions part of an overlapping parallel world China is constructing. Indeed, while the BRI will abide by international norms and market rules (Mações 2019), based on China's alternative values the BRI can further establish new governance models and rules for trade, investment, and monetary policies among participants (Quero 2020).

*Yuanization.* Within the BRI, the yuan's propagation seems not only inevitable but also necessary for China, as economic theories such as the Modern Money Theory hold that it is more optimal to use the renminbi as the BRI's main investment vehicle currency (Liang 2020).

To date, China has used U.S. dollars to fund BRI projects, but this is becoming unsustainable due to the growing list of countries under U.S. sanctions which are also BRI states—notably Russia, Syria, and Iran, in addition to Beijing's need to outsource industrial projects to mitigate domestic pollution (Choyleva and McMahon 2022).

Moreover, as Chinese enterprises increase their overseas investment, part of this will be denominated in renminbi, as will the majority of the funding required for the BRI. This would occur by pushing companies to utilize the yuan for cash management and cross-border trade. Indeed, according to the People's Bank of China, Beijing's renminbi settlements with BRI countries totaled 5.42 trillion yuan (US\$763.4 billion) in 2021, up 19.6 percent year on year (Silk Road Briefing 2022). The Bank also stated that China has inked bilateral currency swap agreements with 22 BRI states (Silk Road Briefing 2022).

Furthering yuanization would be Beijing's ability to pay for imported crude oil in yuan rather than USD. As oil is the most traded commodity in the world, and China its top importer, the move would further spread yuan into foreign markets, causing ripple effects in other product payments (Maçães 2019). Despite skepticism around this, the recent Saudi-China agreement (Dahan and Yaakoubi 2022) arguably debunks the unipolarity camp's claim of China not intending to alter the status quo as well as claims such as those by Choyleva and McMahon (2022) of a petroyuan being untenable.

*Law.* The BRI is arguably also creating new legal *modi operandi* and impressing Beijing's through means such as China's "Blue Book on Dispute Resolution;" an alternative set of conflict resolution and arbitration measures under the BRI, including "a code of conduct and a set of transparency rules" (Dahlan 2018: 90–91). Furthermore, as part of its alternative institutions, China has also established a new international court to resolve disputes between BRI-related enterprises called the China International Commercial Court (CICC): a body of legal institutions using Mandarin in official proceedings. By transferring BRI and China-related dispute resolutions to Beijing, the CICC would reduce legal risks to Chinese firms (Pham and Chuwen Dai 2021). Further, as all BRI-related contracts (will) require that all litigation be handled by Chinese courts, China's legal jurisdiction thus extends into BRI-participant states, imposing a new legal *modus operandi*, which some even call a new legal hegemony (Hillman and Goodman 2018). However, the impression of BRI-related legal codes onto member states may not spread further into their civil codes; the BRI has not brought with it any direct impetus for abolishing the illegality of homosexuality, for example, otherwise rooted in France's Napoleonic Code which it had impressed onto former colonies and mandates (Human Dignity Trust 2023). This renders any legal impact as strictly bound to the execution of the BRI at present and unable to gain further ground into, for instance, the control of births per household.

## Economic Dominance

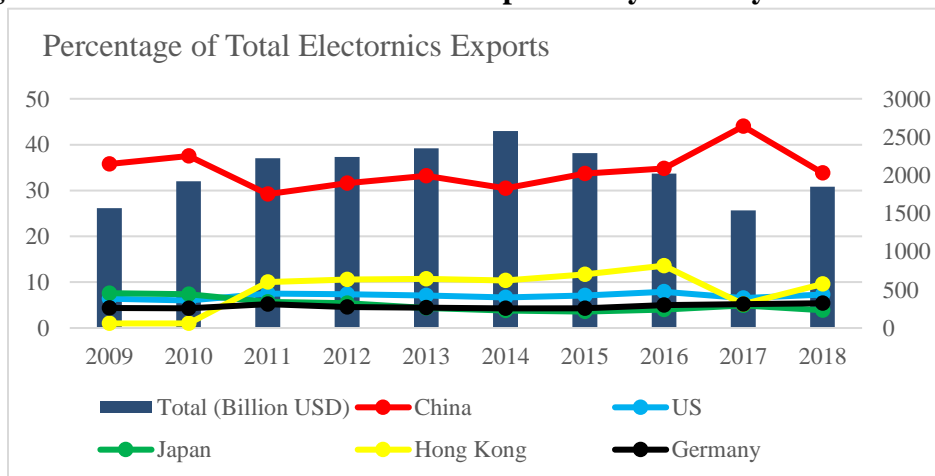
According to Wallerstein, this feature of hegemony is achieved when a core state reaches production, trade, and subsequently financial dominance in peripheries with respect to other core states (2004); and in our case, the United States as the most powerful core state as well as semi-peripheries South Africa and Brazil.

*Production Dominance.* Achieved when a state exports products at a cheaper price than (core or periphery state) competition and of a quality higher than the periphery's production processes (Wallerstein 1984). In this regard, China is actively competing in the high-yielding AI sector, surpassing the United States in data acquisition through advantages such as a wider pool of technology testers from BRI states such as Zimbabwe (Maçães 2019), even though the United States retains an overall lead (Castro and McLaughlin 2021). More concretely, China enjoys a large market share of the electronics sector, which is high-yielding having reached a net worth of over \$1 trillion (Consumer Electronics n.d.), accounting for over 30 percent of total exports period as Figure 2 shows.

A second component here is that core states have traditionally enjoyed a quasi-monopoly on high-yielding products (Wallerstein 2004) as does Washington over the \$531 billion arms industry (BBC 2021; von Hein 2021), and core states over the automobile industry.

Within the BRI, in addition to electronics, infrastructure could be regarded as one of China's monopolies as Beijing has shown a strong ambition to export high-speed railways, a technology that exemplifies the country's rapid technical advancement whereby several BRI states have seen freight rail linkages established, rebuilt, or expanded (Maçães 2019). Indeed, the BRI rests on China's quasi-monopoly over hard infrastructure, due not only to its own advances in the field but also to core states not deeming them lucrative enough. As a World Bank spokesman explains, the West has completely abandoned the hard infrastructure sector (Devonshire-Ellis and Solstad 2013).

**Figure 2: Share of Global Electronic Exporters by Country from 2009–2018**



(source: The Observatory of Economic Complexity, n.d.)

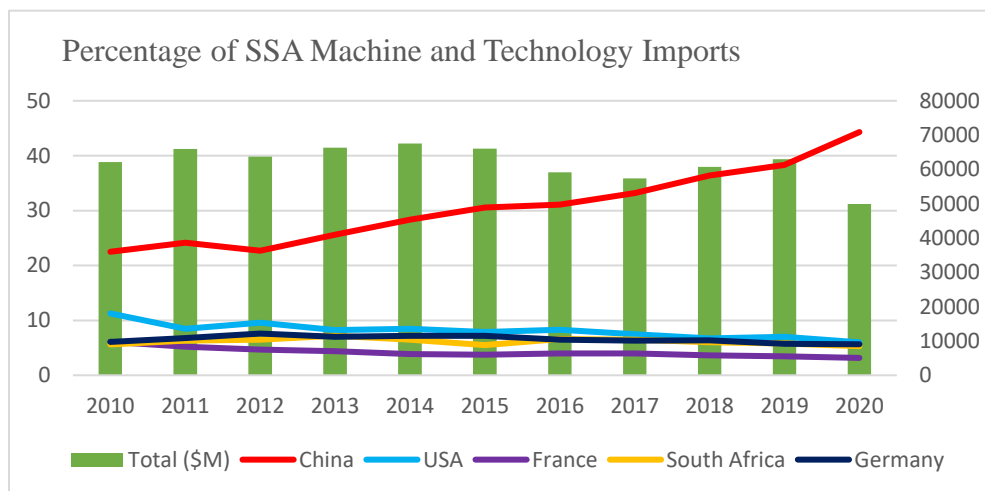


Moreover, a recent report by the International Energy Agency (IEA) has stated that the world is nearing a dangerously heavy reliance on China's solar photovoltaic manufacturing industry after production capacity shifted to China over the past decade from Japan, the United States, and Europe, giving Beijing an excess of 80 percent market share in every stage of panel production thanks to Chinese innovation lowering production costs against rivals India and the United States, and rendering it a trade surplus of \$30 billion (IEA 2022). The above developments add credence to the view of the BRI being an instance of Chinese capitalists establishing monopolies across numerous economic sectors, writ large (Flint and Zhu 2019).

In a sign of these and other production advancements threatening the core, many German industrialists realize that the time when the two economies benefited from suitable complementarity expected of core-semi-periphery has passed. In fact, the strategic industries China seems keen on dominating are just those that Germany chose: automated vehicles, robotics, AI, and aerospace. Moreover, whereas previously Berlin could export its machinery to Beijing believing that no Chinese firm could replicate its sophisticated technology, Chinese firms are now competing in the same sectors after copying these technologies, prompting Berlin to ban the recent sale of a German firm to a Chinese enterprise (Thomas 2018).

The case of SSA's imports of machines and technology from China in Figure 3 exemplifies how the BRI has increased its lead over core competitors such as former colonial power France and regional semi-periphery South Africa, furthering Beijing's production dominance therein.

**Figure 3: Sub-Saharan Africa's Machine and Technology Import Sources 2010–2020**

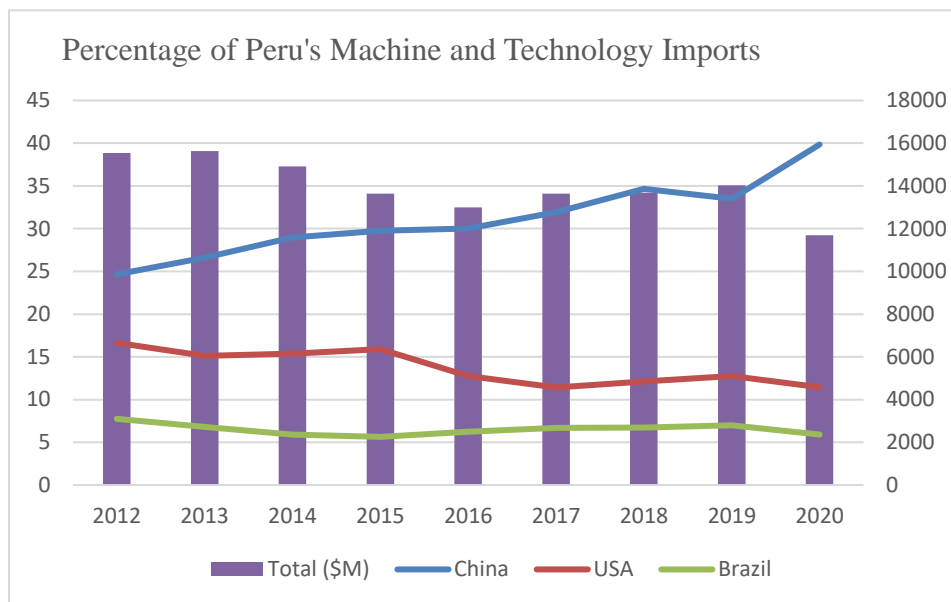


(source: World Integrated Trade Solution n.d.).

The above casts doubt over theses of multipolarity such as that offered by Steunkel (2016) who holds that regional semi-peripheries will become regional hegemonies, as Beijing is clearly besting Johannesburg in the latter's purported periphery of SSA.

As this finding may be circumstantial, we examine the case of Peru as a state that imported a considerable amount of its machines and technological goods from the United States, yet has been increasingly sourcing them from China in Figure 4.

**Figure 4: Peru’s Machine and Technology Import Sources 2010–2020**



(source: World Integrated Trade Solution. n.d.).

Thus, China can be said to have achieved a salient degree of production dominance within many BRI states due to its dominance in the electronics sector generally, the solar sector specifically, as well as in high-yielding technology exports to numerous BRI states.

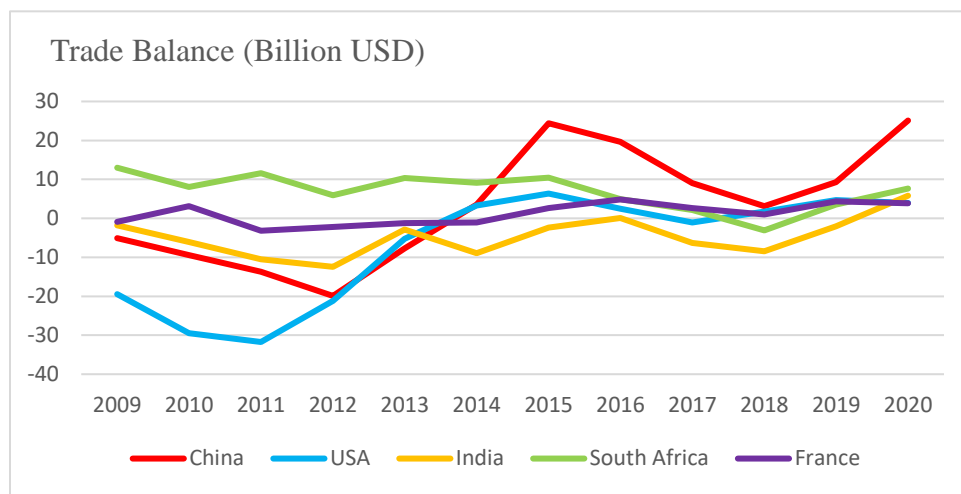
*Trade Dominance.* Trade dominance follows production dominance, and occurs when the preponderant hegemon secures a favorable trade balance with its precipitating peripheries as more peripheral states buy its relatively core products than it imports from any of them (Wallerstein 2004). China is the world’s top exporter by value, with shipments totaling over \$2 trillion in 2018 per the International Trade Center (Workman n.d.), making it more than well-positioned to best the United States in this sub-category. In correspondence to the feature’s components, not only is China displacing core states as the top source of imports around the world, but Mações also predicts that within the BRI, “[S]ome states will be more dependent on China than China is on them” (Mações 2019: 35).

Indeed, despite exports from BRI member states increasing significantly to China, particularly metals, minerals, and energy, China remains a net exporter with goods always in foreign demand. According to *Qiushi*, the Communist Party of China’s official bimonthly publication, trade between China and BRI participant states has grown in volume to reach a cumulative \$10.4 trillion in 2021 after the volume of China-BRI trade increased 4.1 percent per year since 2013, owing not only to increasing appetite for products on both sides but also the BRI

providing cost-curbing transport infrastructure (Haitao and Shanshan 2021). Indeed, the BRI's infrastructure projects alone would cut export shipment time between China and participants between 1.7–3.2 percent and their overall trade costs by 1.5–2.8 percent (De Soyres, Mulabdic, and Ruta 2019). *The Economist* further details how China's trade surplus with BRI member states had been fluctuating but remained above \$25 billion every quarter since 2013 except for a sharp pandemic-caused slump in the first quarter of 2020 before recovering to a record \$70 billion in fourth quarter of that year (Economist Intelligence Unit 2021).

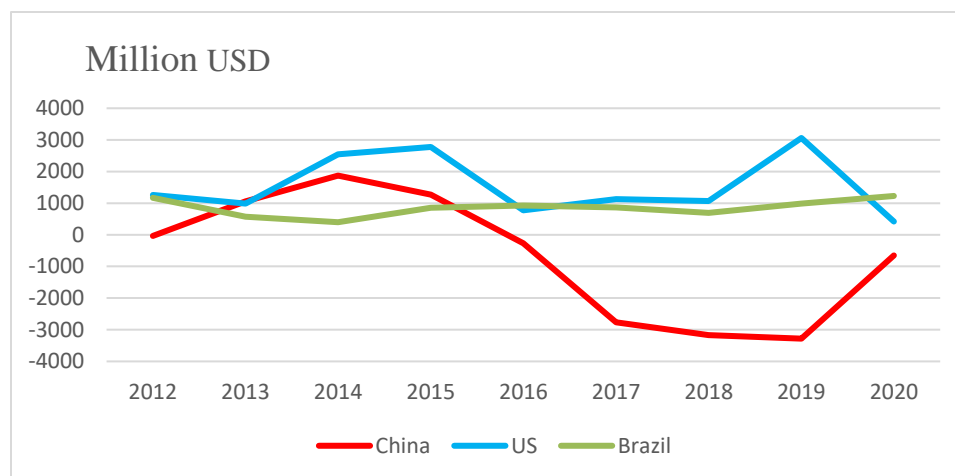
More broadly, while China has secured a sizable overall trade surplus of \$84.54 billion in 2021 (Bloomberg News 2021), the United States traded at a deficit of \$678.7 billion in 2020 (Reuters Staff 2021), meaning that China may have secured trade dominance from the current hegemon—and the core states—in numerous countries. The case of SSA in Figure 5 is illustrative once again as an economic battlefield China has dominated, wherein its trade surplus is higher with respect to the hegemonic United States, former colonizer France, regional semi-periphery South Africa, and rival BRICS member India.

**Figure 5: Balance of Trade Between sub-Saharan Africa States and China, the United States, France, South Africa, and India.**



(source: World Integrated Trade Solution. N.d.).

Noteworthy is that China recorded its first trade surplus of the last decade with SSA shortly after the BRI's unfold in 2014, overtaking regional power and semi-peripheral South Africa, despite fluctuations. This distinguishes China from other semi-peripheries in that it not only holds clout in its own region of East Asia, but also in a farther market thanks to the attractiveness of its exports and in spite of its growing appetite for SSA's raw materials. The case of Peru in Figure 6 meanwhile, illustrates that, despite China's production dominance over rivals Brazil and the United States, Lima's massive energy imports from Washington render a trade deficit with the hegemon and Brazil's relatively low appetite for Peruvian products also renders it a favorable balance of trade.

**Figure 6: Trade Balance of China, the United States and Brazil with Peru**

(source: World Integrated Trade Solution. n.d.)

Thus, despite its production dominance in Lima, Beijing seems to have failed in securing trade dominance therein, rendering its overall economic dominance and hegemony in the BRI as a whole as dependent not only on satisfying needs beyond core products to render a trade surplus, but also diversifying its sources of copper, its main import from Peru.

The second qualification of trade dominance is the establishment of zones of influence or tariff zones facilitating the reorientation of trade of peripheries from competing cores and towards the aspiring hegemon (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1982). In resonance, Beijing has established free trade agreements with 13 BRI members including Pakistan (Haitao and Shanshan 2021) which serve to lock in existing and to facilitate future trade dominance. However, Washington enjoys a free-trade deal with SSA via the African Growth and Opportunity Program, a core facet of U.S.-Africa economic relations which can benefit the latter upon satisfactory adoption of the former's *modus operandi*, expressed as establishing a market-based economy, the promotion of political pluralism and safeguarding human rights (African Growth and Opportunity Act n.d.). While this is meant to increase U.S.-Africa trade, China remains the continent's largest trading partner, with the newly formed African Continental Free Trade Area argued to favor Beijing by streamlining its infrastructure provision, cutting trade costs, and further increasing trade volume (Munemo 2021).

*Financial dominance.* Resulting from trade dominance, financial dominance is achieved when more capital is entering the hegemon than leaving it and its banks seize greater control of the world's financial resources (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1982). In addition to China's trade dominance within the BRI manifesting a trade surplus of \$199.2 billion in 2020 even after the pandemic's impact in the same year, revenue from completed BRI projects overseas has reached \$13.2 billion (Economist Intelligence Unit 2021).

In addition, the financing scheme of BRI loans have been shown to have higher interest loans on average (4.2 percent) and a shorter repayment period (under 10 years) than loans from an OECD

member (1.1 percent in 28 years), and thus seemingly designed to outperform the core in the collection of revenue from periphery borrowers. This interest is effective on the overwhelming majority of the \$843 billion in BRI financing to date as it is comprised of loans and grants with a 31–1 ratio (Malik et. al 2021), adding tens of billions to China’s annual revenue from BRI states.

However, China remains unwilling to dictate fiscal policy internally, even to Pakistan which ranked first in states influenced by China, leaving Islamabad to receive instructions by the Western-influenced IMF and World Bank.

Overall, then, while China has made significant strides towards production dominance over BRI states, its trade dominance has not been uniform, nor has it achieved institutional financial dominance that Washington and the EU enjoy.

### **Military Dominance**

Wallerstein (1984) holds that military power supports hegemony by protecting the core against attack and by removing obstacles to its capital accumulation from the peripheries. The point of military dominance is not necessarily in offense, but mainly to secure investments and honor pacts that fortify a (rising) hegemon’s reputation and reliability as a security guarantor and maintain its economic dominance through securing the channels of trade revenue. Further, I argue that military dominance entails that a security-guaranteeing hegemon’s military standards become those most desired worldwide; an extension of its *modi operandi*.

This requirement to achieving superpower status is thoroughly discussed within Chinese policy circles which “emphasize ‘comprehensive national power’—having superiority in a variety of domains—political, military, economy, and culture. While relying on economic means to achieve great power status, the Chinese leadership is not neglecting the military dimension” (Larson 2015: 169). Indeed, while China preaches the doctrine of non-intervention in the context of its “peaceful rise” strategy (Han and Paul 2020), it has made important adjustments to its military structure, cutting its land forces to increase its naval capacities (Flint and Zhu 2019), another shift echoing former hegemons UK, the United Provinces, and the currently hegemonic United States, whose sea power was instrumental to their rise (Wallerstein 1984).

Over the past two decades, China has gone from being a modest to a big actor in UN peacekeeping operations. With more personnel committed and a continuously increasing presence spreading to new areas, Beijing’s involvement has grown in number and capacity, becoming the largest troop contributor and second largest financier of UN peacekeeping operations among the Security Council’s five permanent members (Devermont 2020).

The relationship between the BRI and military dominance is symbiotic: the first gives reason (and capital) for the development of the second, as more Chinese expats establishing themselves along, and executing, the BRI translates into an increasing need to protect nationals overseas, thus requiring a ready network for emergency evacuation as well as security provision during their stay (Lindley 2021).

China has been increasing its participation in transnational military cooperation, frequently assuming leadership duties in UN Peacekeeping missions, proving its capacity and willingness to

lead on the global military level (Major and Luo 2019). In Africa, Chinese troop contributions to UN peacekeeping missions have grown in SSA from low hundreds in the 2000s to over 2,000 at present (Devermont 2020). China also has increased support to the African Union's (AU) security apparatus, delivering \$25 million to the AU logistics base in Cameroon (Eom et al. 2018). China has intensified bilateral partnerships on the continent, extending its formal presence in African capitals, engaging in military drills, increasing professional training, expanding high-level visits, and taking part in medical and humanitarian missions (Devermont 2020). Moreover, China has helped secure trade routes through counter-piracy operations in East Africa in order to secure commercial navigation routes therein and project a positive image (Xinhua 2018). China also established a military base Djibouti's Doraleh Port, a move signaling its plans to enforce the security its burgeoning trade with Africa and the Arab Gulf will require (Dutton, Kardon, and Kennedy 2020).

Moreover, Washington's recent withdrawal from Afghanistan has created a power vacuum and an impetus for Beijing to protect its investments around central Asia, such as in Pakistan (Wolf 2020). However, Southeast Asian states bearing witness to Beijing's aggression in the South China Sea are concurring with U.S. analysts in regarding the BRI as Chinese expansionism with a thinly veiled military component, as China constructs dual-use ports to accommodate its cargo ships as well as military vessels while overseas outposts proliferate in Djibouti, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (Maçães 2019; Wolf 2020). These developments put Beijing in conflict with Washington, which has traditionally assumed the role of protecting the commons, due to the BRI furnishing Beijing with the ability to block necessary logistical support to Washington in case of a need to support an ally (Lindley 2021), thus refuting the above thesis on bifurcation.

Further, as aforementioned, I argue that in addition to being a security guarantor, a hegemon's military standards become those most desired worldwide. Among BRI states, these would be Chinese military technologies and training, which have been received, for example, by the new generation of Pakistan's army (Findlay 2020). In technology, China has recently turned from an importer of drones to an exporter, with recent sales to BRI members Nigeria, Thailand, and Pakistan (Rajagopalan 2021). Beijing's military standards have also found eager patrons in SSA as, in 2019, China supplied 19 percent of the region's arms imports, second only to Russia (Wezeman et al. 2020).

Since the war in Ukraine, moreover, sanctions as well as combat requirements have seen Moscow's arms exports plummeting. Yet, Beijing does not appear capable of besting its ally in this regard. Indeed, China's share of arms exports to SSA have dropped to 19 percent in 2018 from 28 percent in 2022, while Moscow's rose to 26 percent over the same period (Douet 2023). China's arms exports have also been in decline overall (di Valerio 2023).

In west Asia, meanwhile, despite increasing military collaboration between Islamabad and Beijing, a growing presence by the latter to safeguard CPEC, and refusing Washington a military base in Pakistan (Kanwal 2018; Islamuddin 2021), Islamabad's top brass seems unable to relinquish the need for Washington's superior military equipment, especially as the latter grows closer to New Delhi (Siddiq 2021).

In underpinning its alternative institutions, China has also taken steps to facilitate security cooperation through establishing the Forum of China-Africa Defense and Security Cooperation, the Asia-Pacific Chief of Defense Conference (CHOD), and joining the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), all of which are meant to protect China in the event of an attack. Additionally, to prevent an emerging coalition in the Indo-Pacific from (hard or soft power) balancing, Beijing uses the BRI as an economic incentive, rendering beneficiary states unlikely to join such an endeavor against it (Han and Paul 2020).

Thus, China has taken considerable steps to bolster its own—and furnish BRI states with—security apparatuses, yet remains currently unable to replace Moscow and Washington as the primary source of arms and training among BRI states.

### **Cultural Hegemony/Geoculture**

As China's grander *modi operandi* socialize BRI areas and processes at the state and interstate levels, cultural hegemony would compliment this by socializing individuals/communities not only to ensure that policy and public opinion are as compatible as necessary for the efficient execution of (asymmetric) bilateral agreements, but also by adding cultural appeal (and demand) to its exports (Gelis-Filho 2019). This latter would enhance Chinese products' competitiveness against local and core state alternatives, reinforcing its economic dominance. Thus, boycotts and international appeal can mean the difference between successful market penetration and gathering dust.

As geoculture must be intentionally constructed by a preponderant hegemon (Wallerstein 2004), this section will highlight how China has expanded its geoculture into the BRI via ideology, education, and language, thereby paving the way for cultural hegemony. The sub-features of cultural hegemony are the adoption of the hegemon's ideology and standards in education, and the hegemon's language becoming the lingua franca of the world-system (Wallerstein 1991).

*Ideology.* Propagated through media outlets will be the ideology of the hegemon, its views on global affairs as well as how it interprets its own; either formally through news channels, or through informal, more creative channels, such as movies. Indeed, through providing images and narratives with which audiences can identify and emulate, media has been argued as possessing "important socializing and enculturating effects" (Hilde and Kellner 1996: 240).

Blanchard and Flint (2017) highlight the importance of representation regarding the BRI, finding that the ability of China to propagate its rosier interpretation of it (as a set of investment and trade practices) as correlated to the rate of its completion, "hence, geopolitical practices and representations are essential and related parts of [the BRI]" (Blanchard and Flint 2017: 232). Indeed, in tandem with infrastructure development, China has been establishing media outlets in BRI states, staffed with journalists trained in Beijing to adhere to China's standards in reporting (Benabdallah 2019). China seems cognizant of the potency of Western cultural imperialism and has begun experimenting with embellishing local outlets with Chinese values in order to compete at the level of cultural appeal (Mações 2019). The propagation of China's worldview using its

media outlets abroad, Benabdallah (2019) argues, is “central to promoting attractiveness” as “Beijing’s rhetoric of mutual benefits, equal partners, shared history of struggles against Western hegemony, and common future aspirations” (Benabdallah 2019: 508) resonates with developing countries BRI states, otherwise poorly represented in Western media outlets.

Such Chinese efforts, however, have been nascent on the world stage, and so remain weak compared to the West in their capacity to shape international minds and make their domestic media palatable to an international audience (Stuenkel 2016). However, China has been developing this capacity and its film industry has released movies encouraging ties with BRI member states, such as *Wolf Warrior 2*, which depicts a Chinese military agent who rescues his countrymen as well as locals from unrest in a developing African country (Kuo 2017). Similar initiatives include a Sino-Pak romance in Pakistan’s movie theatres: *Chalay Thay Saath (They Went Together)*, a 2017 romance which depicts how a Pakistani doctor and a Chinese backpacker are brought to each other’s lives during a group-tour trip and fall in love unexpectedly, facing hardships of the families rejecting their union at first but gradually accepting it (Guo 2018).

In news reporting, China’s media campaigns in Pakistan have seen China’s Xinhua News Agency, for example, work alongside local Pakistani outlets to “localize information dissemination and shape Pakistani public opinion on important international issues in ways that are in sync with Beijing’s worldview” (Safdar 2021). Meanwhile, think tanks are being commissioned by both nations to counter “fake news” and negative perceptions of China and CPEC, such as the Rapid Response Initiative System jointly run by the Pakistan China Institute and China Economic Net; Islamabad and Beijing-based entities respectively. The drive behind these efforts, according to a Chinese coordinator for the state-run China Radio International, is that it is now time “for the world to understand China” (Nadeem 2019). In Peru, meanwhile, growing media collaboration has also seen Chinese reports published in leading local publications and televised media, in addition to journalism training and an embassy actively working to debunk information on the origins of COVID-19. Despite these efforts, local scandals involving Chinese companies have raised skepticism towards Beijing’s actions and intentions (Young 2022).

Pillaring this ideological bridge are Chinese training programs for journalists meant to enhance their understanding of Chinese values and imbue their future reporting with it. These programs are hosted by agencies such as the China Asia Pacific Press Communication Centre; another alternative institution, in addition to its capacity to project its standards in education (Yuan and Zhang 2016; Young 2022).

*Education.* China has been attracting increasing numbers of foreign students at least since 2006, growing at 10 percent every year but especially after 2010, with 85 percent growth between 2010 and 2017, becoming a top five study-abroad destination (ICEF Monitor 2019).

In fact, as China attracted 492,185 foreign students in 2018, it has surpassed the UK to become the world’s second largest destination of foreign students after the United States (Qi 2021). Most of these students hail from BRI developing countries, where China has been extending education support and streamlining inbound educational migration through scholarships,



vocational training programs, and Mandarin study trips (Reilly 2015). While more than 16 percent of foreign students studying in China are from South Korea, nationals from BRI states comprise a large student population (China Admissions n.d.). With regards to the BRI, Chinese stakeholders have made two-way connections: as international collaboration in China's higher education bodies and science and technology institutes are used to promote the BRI, the BRI itself is used to promote China's higher education bodies and science and technology institutes' agendas (d'Hooghe 2021). Further, upon returning to their respective countries, these students may serve as a balance to local pro-Western elites, becoming leaders whose status elevates as China's investments rise, helping pioneer its expanding reach through BRI-related job opportunities they have been equipped to fill, and translating these positive sentiments into new a political direction (Safdar 2021).

Information on China's own Ministry of Education is scarce regarding international students; however, it has published statistics for the year 2018. According to its website, out of the almost 450,000 international students hosted in China, only around 63,000 received Chinese government scholarships, roughly 13 percent (Ministry of Education 2019). Scholarships offered by China include the Silk Road Scholarship Program which funds 10,000 international students annually, the Great Wall Fellowship, ASEAN scholarships as well as other scholarships by the China Scholarship Council (CSC) for university education. While this cost Beijing a total of \$525 million, what China spends on scholarships is dwarfed by how much it gains from self-funded students who pay more than Chinese nationals (Reilly 2015; Zhou 2021).

Qi (2021) points to changes in China's policies toward education, such as upgrading quality and offering more scholarships to BRI states, as causing this surge in international students, localizing it as part of a broader BRI strategy to bring Chinese education to the world stage. This would culminate in China becoming a net education exporter after it had been a net importer prior to the BRI. While the United States has seen a modest increase in the number of Pakistani students enrolled in its universities at over 8,000, China now hosts over 28,000, becoming the top destination for Pakistani students and outdoing the United States in this regard (Jamshaid 2018); as well as other top destinations such as the UK and Australia since 2017 (Safdar 2021). In the case of SSA, meanwhile, France, followed by the United States, continues to receive the highest number of students, with China not in the top three destination for studying abroad due in part to SSA nationals' preferred medium of instruction to be French or English (Campus France n.d.).

Indeed, while the above scholarships cover tuition, healthcare, and living expenses, most programs require Mandarin, or at least its study, to be part of the program, thus prompting students down a path more frequently taken in BRI participant states: learning Mandarin (Reilly 2015).

*Language.* In 2016, China's Ministry of Education (MOE) published an Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative, an aim of which is to overcome language barriers among BRI countries. As China is the BRI's primary investor and planner, this Action Plan would also facilitate the teaching of Mandarin in participant states in order to develop Mandarin as the *lingua franca* of the BRI complete with plans to hire more Mandarin teachers (Gao 2020). The teaching of Mandarin is not only for molding human resources to man the BRI across participant states, but

beyond this, BRI language planning intends to strengthen Chinese discourse power and establish a Silk Road discourse system, ultimately aiming to achieve a global balance of ideological and political dominance. Indeed, in a challenge to Western European (core) languages spreading worldwide over the past centuries, the language planning apparatus of the BRI strengthens the Chinese discourse system's international influence (Gao 2020), in so doing completing the apparatus of ideological impression. The proliferation of Mandarin among BRI member states also carries economic benefit as when a host country uses the investment country's language for foreign language instruction, it becomes more appealing for capital inflow and investment (Gao 2020). Confucius Institutes in particular are instrumental in Beijing's soft power and promotion of Mandarin, bridging the cultural gap between their localities and China (Gui and Arif 2016).

The benefit of bridging this cultural gap, as Jung and colleagues (2020) argue, is that it is positively correlated with increased returns on mergers between Chinese and foreign firms as opposed to mergers with firms in states of significant cultural distance. They conclude that Confucius Institutes have positively impacted these returns, meaning that in order for Chinese firms to optimize merger and acquisition feasibility, effort should be taken to bridge cultural and institutional distances and Confucius Institutes can participate in mitigating the former while the BRI as a whole can help mitigate institutional differences.

Research has also shown that the BRI has enhanced mutual cultural understanding, especially of institutional protocol, between BRI participant states and China, leading to increased economic exchange, as Liu and colleagues (2018) find that cultural distance and institutional distance inhibiting Chinese bilateral trade with BRI countries can be remedied through cultural exchanges executed through BRI channels.

Moreover, Confucius Institutes have been instrumental in mitigating the negative impact of said cultural distance through the expansion of instruction in Chinese languages and culture in the host countries, thereby raising the level of familiarity with Chinese culture and lowering the transaction costs brought on by cultural differences (Lien et al. 2012). Additionally, Confucius Institutes organize a variety of business events in host nations to improve China's long-term cooperative relationships with them. These events include information sharing on trade, the development of exchange platforms, and the mitigation of issues that arise from cultural differences such as information asymmetry (Lein et al. 2012). The Confucius Institute has thus encouraged commercial and trade cooperation while carrying out its primary goal as an organization that disseminates Chinese culture around the world (Paradise 2009), arguably adding substance to the importance of a unified geoculture as an apparatus enveloping different peoples in a world-system and mitigating losses (to the hegemon) stemming from cultural distance.

Mandarin has been promoted and encouraged in Pakistan at all levels, from Senate motions to the military to elementary schools (Safdar 2021), and it is spreading as an optional language in the high schools of SSA states which host four of the seven non-Chinese countries with Mandarin speakers (Eke 2021). Despite Confucius Institutes' efforts therein to further promote Mandarin; English, French, and Arabic remain more sought after according to polling from several African countries (Nyabage 2020), rendering the continued acquisition of Mandarin dependent on the

continued success and economic opportunities presented by the BRI and commercial Sino-African ties (Eke 2021).

Overall, then, Beijing has been embellishing its cultural hegemony and propagating cultural appeal and while China has achieved some success in promoting its educational standards and has arguably laid the foundation for the dissemination of its ideals and language, it remains culturally bested by the United States and the core states such as France in large swaths of the BRI.

### Discussion

The above results add credence to scholarship on U.S. hegemonic decline with Beijing besting Washington's production dominance via higher exports to most states examined, as well as providing more arms to SSA. In regions where competitors have a considerable geographic advantage, however, Beijing's exports are made less impactful arguably due to increased shipping costs rendering either higher prices or lower returns, thus keeping Lima more influenced by Washington and Brasilia via trade surpluses, while SSA trades at a higher deficit with Beijing than New Delhi and Johannesburg. Indeed, in SSA and Pakistan, China is closer to achieving *economic dominance* especially as it has a free-trade agreement with the latter and despite not having one with the former. My findings, however, counter Stuenkel's 2016 thesis on emerging multipolarity as Beijing has been shown to best Johannesburg economically within the latter's purported periphery of SSA, thus possibly supporting scholarship on emerging Sino-U.S. bipolarity with China economically towering above other BRICS rivals in large areas of the periphery, especially as what little economic clout Moscow once wielded over central Asia has been declawed via sanctions. In addressing bifurcation, however, I further concur with Major and Luo (2019) on Beijing not neglecting its military capacities but weaving them into its BRI expansion through military institutions and shifting to sea power; possibly setting the stage for more pronounced armed assertiveness as has been witnessed on the African continent, its UN operations, and Pakistan (Wolf 2020). Moreover, along with the connectivity of markets and land through the BRI comes the connectivity between minds as media outlets proliferate across BRI participant-states run by Beijing-trained journalists, with Beijing attracting growing numbers of foreign states overwhelmingly from BRI participatory states, and weaving Mandarin into the BRI as its *lingua franca*. While Pakistan has shown an appetite for Mandarin and Chinese educational institutes, this has not been shared by SSA nor Peru.

### Conclusion

This paper has sought to highlight the heretofore neglected parallels between the achievements of, and structural advantages afforded to, China within the BRI and the features of a hegemon according to world-systems analysis. I find China well-equipped for economic dominance via a monopoly on electronics, photovoltaics, and infrastructure; increasing free-trade agreements; and a stream of revenue from BRI states via a trade surplus, interest on loans, and revenue from

completed projects. Beijing has also created channels for promoting its education system which would create loyal and educated citizens within BRI members, counterbalancing Western-influenced nationals. China has not, however, been able to achieve trade and economic dominance in all BRI states such as Peru where the United States and Brazil maintain an overall lead, thus limiting where China enjoys such dominance; nor has Beijing been able to lure sub-Saharan students to its universities and language as its budding cultural appeal remains outclassed by Paris and Washington. Beijing has also failed to completely detach Islamabad's military from Washington's garrisons. However, and unsurprisingly, Pakistan ranking as the top countries influenced by China in 2022 (Standish 2022) demonstrates an acute responsiveness to Beijing and the capacity of the BRI to achieve similar results which could ripen to hegemony as the project resumes its unfold and Washington its arguable decline.

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**Disclosure Statement:** Any conflicts of interest are reported in the acknowledgments section of the article's text. Otherwise, authors have indicated that they have no conflict of interests upon submission of the article to the journal.

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