



A Tale of Rice and Copper

A World-Systems
Analysis of Chinese
Hegemony in Pakistan

Toufic Saredine

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ACRONYMS

AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist party
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
CSC	Chinese Scholarship Council
NCDA	National Coastal Development Authority
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SREB	Silk Road Economic Belt
WSA	World-Systems Analysis

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Introduction

1.1 PAKISTAN: BETWEEN DEVELOPMENT AND DEMOCRACY

Pakistan, a country of over 230 million people, is reeling from recent elections which saw violent riots and resulted in a fragmented government where no sole party secured enough votes to constitute a full majority. Imran Khan, the athlete-turned politician, defied expectations and broke through government-enacted internet censorship, the removal of his party's symbol from election ballots, and a 10-year jail sentence in absentia by the Supreme Court, to emerge victorious as an independent with the most votes for his Tahreek-e-Insaf Party (PTI).

Despite its most difficult election now behind it, Pakistan now stands at a critical juncture, grappling with the urgent need for reconciliation amid soaring political polarization. Islamabad's challenges extend beyond its political landscape, encompassing economic hardships and geopolitical tensions. A substantial percentage of the population lives below the poverty line, the government has defaulted on numerous loans, and the country has faced crises ranging from natural disasters to confrontations with neighboring countries. The expectations from any incoming government are immense, but in the backdrop of these developments remains Islamabad's steadfast commitment to its powerful neighbor to the East and the transformative infrastructure project hoped to see it victorious over its challenges.

1.2 THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: BEYOND DEVELOPMENT

After a meteoric rise in the 2000s, Beijing found itself perched right under Washington as the world's second largest economy, overlooking the vast, poorly connected stretches of a developing world underinvested. Its foreign direct investment (FDI) outflows would begin to significantly rise in all directions, ushering in a new era of development fashioned in the red halls of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): *Yīdài Yīlù* (一带一路), or, as the Anglophone world calls it, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Unfolding with the BRI in 2013 have been other China-related developments around the world, such as Chinese trawlers routinely and illegally encroaching on Pakistani fishermen's waters (Khan, 2020),¹ the commencement of a new round of journalism training for African students in China for future employment in one of several Chinese news channels proliferating across Africa and Asia (Benabdallah, 2019), the recent military pact signed between China and Iran (Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2020), the meeting of China's Foreign Minister with Afghanistan's new Taliban regime in Qatar (Krishnan, 2021),² and the expansion of the BRICS bloc (Plessis et al., 2023).

With its first phase concluding in 2021 and its full realization set for 2049, the BRI is of two components: The "Belt" refers to the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB); six economic corridors connecting China to various parts of the Eurasian landmass. The "Road" refers to the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), three oceanic routes which stretch from ports in southern China to Europe, southeast Asia, Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, the Mediterranean, and even around the Arctic (Maçães, 2019). If successfully implemented, the BRI will link areas "that represent 55% of the world's GDP, 70% of global population, and 75% of known energy reserves" (Hong, 2016, p. 6). Beyond a series of roads and railways, the BRI is an interconnected network of hard (transport and energy systems) and soft (digital) infrastructure, gradually shaping into free trade zones

¹ Accessed April 11th 2020 from: <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-chinas-involvement-in-deep-sea-fishing-angers-local-fishermen/a-55274723>.

² Accessed April 2nd 2020 from: <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/20170731-china-pakistan-relations-implication-for-india-cpec-obor-1025308-2017-07-21>.

and industrial clusters before forming one large economic corridor for the Eurasian common market, complete with the industries of logistics, construction, energy, manufacturing, tourism, and agriculture (Mações, 2019). To date, 148 countries and territories have signed memorandums of understanding (MoU's) with the Chinese government to join the BRI in the hopes of benefitting from its promise of development.

Participating countries' collaboration with China is founded on five principles: financial integration, unrestricted trade, idea exchange, policy coordination, and connectivity (Zhang, 2017). Despite China's promotion of the BRI as purely developmental, the initiative contains political and military elements folded beneath its diplomatic soundbites and development rhetoric, most evidently the expansion of Beijing's power and influence (Blanchard & Flint, 2017; Flint & Zhu, 2019; Shirali, 2015; Harding, 2019; Hong, 2016; Wolf, 2020). Certain points along the BRI, for instance, are being designed to dually accommodate military functions, such as Gwadar port in Pakistan (Harding, 2019).³ Moreover, as the BRI will involve the rewiring of new areas and production processes into China's economic workings (Blanchard & Flint, 2017), a political effect that may emerge is peripheral states pulled from the (hegemonic) gravity of world powers—the United States globally and France in West Africa—and closer into the orbit of Beijing. Indeed, given the impossibility of military action against Taiwan since 1949 due to the protection extended by the United States, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has strategically relied on foreign aid as a cornerstone of its efforts to diminish Taipei's formal diplomatic relations with developing countries and secure global political recognition. Thus, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has consistently viewed economic assistance as a pivotal element in China's foreign relations strategy (Williamson, 2023).

Reflecting this view, scholarship has pointed to the workings of the BRI as constituting the basis for transforming the political and economic geography of, at least, the entirety of Asia (Flint & Zhu, 2019). Indeed, infrastructure cooperation might be a first step toward improving investment, trade, and economic development in China and other nations, but it would also necessitate BRI states' policy coordination and domestic initiatives to reduce commercial barriers, as before it can host flourishing areas of economic activity, the geographic space being developed must be

³ Accessed January 25th 2020 from: <https://internationalbanker.com/finance/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-and-its-impact-on-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/>.

sufficiently connected, with industrial parks along infrastructure routes gradually integrated to streamline trade and nurture developing cities. Indeed, roads and railways are neither the sole nor the most important manifestation of what connectivity truly means (Mações, 2019).

Concurring with the BRI has been China's continued rise. While China has successfully penetrated even European markets, with noteworthy takeovers of European enterprises (Komlosy, 2016), according to world-systems analysis (WSA), it remains a developing semi-peripheral state: an area whose production processes do not—on average—yield as much revenue as those of core states such as the US and Japan, but also yield more than those of peripheral states such as Pakistan and Lebanon. As a semi-periphery, it acts as a bridge between core and periphery, providing (relatively) low-yielding goods to the former and high-yielding goods to the latter. However, this may not stop it from potentially towering above developing BRI participant states.

Scholarship has grappled with the consequences of China's rise, with some asserting the resilience of US hegemony, and predicting the imminent failure of China's usurpation effort or its absence altogether (Gowan, 2004; Karatasli & Kumral, 2017; Nye, 2015) to those arguing the emergence of a multipolar hegemonic order (Acharya, 2018; Stuenkel, 2016; Yongnian & Gore, 2014), and literature in between theorizing various modes of dual hegemony (Arrighi, 2007; Ikenberry, 2016; Jackson, 2016; Li & Zhang, 2018). Notable among the latter is the theory of bifurcation which predicts that, contrary to former episodes of hegemonic transition, US hegemony will unravel as China's economic clout expands, allowing Beijing to seize the economic dominance once wielded by a hegemon, while Washington retains the other half of hegemony: military dominance and the role of security guarantor (Arrighi, 2007; Ikenberry, 2016; Jackson, 2016). Another model of dual hegemony which will be addressed is of interdependence, whereby both the US and rising China complement each other through "mutual challenge, mutual constraint, mutual need, and mutual accommodation" (Li & Zhang, 2018, p. 164) over a given geographic area, which seems to be expanding.

Indeed, rivalry has been escalating between China and the US wherein, as Howard French notes, East Asia and the Western Pacific are increasingly resembling the world briefly dominated by China from the late 12th to the early sixteenth centuries and less like a region configured for the needs and ends of the West (2017). China is already the largest trading partner of nearly every country in those regions, in addition to the Middle

East, and its military is spreading throughout, short of armed conflict with the US.

In addition to East Asia, Pakistan has been singular in the intensity of Chinese influence since hosting the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) under which it has been receiving billions of dollars in investments and loans mainly targeting its agriculture, energy, and transport sectors (CPEC Authority, n.d.)⁴. Concurring with CPEC have been a marked increase in imports from China coupled with a decrease of those from the US and Europe (Trend Economy, 2021)⁵, a de-industrialization in certain local products due to competition from these imports (Sareen, 2019), China securing the second rank in Pakistan's export destinations (Trend Economy, 2021), increased educational migration to Chinese institutes and the nation-wide promotion and teaching of Mandarin among Pakistanis (Safdar, 2021),⁶ more frequent and comprehensive military cooperation with the People's Liberation Army (PLA) while refusing Washington a military base (Rajagopalan, 2021; Wolf, 2020), an unprecedented and sustained spike in Pakistani refined copper output as well as its export to Beijing (OEC, 2022),⁷ and Beijing acquiring a 40% stake in Pakistan's stock exchange granting it the capacity to assign posts therein (Khan, 2021).⁸

Per world-systems analysis (WSA), these developments and others resonate with the features of peripheralization whereby weaker states become the peripheries of a rising hegemon whose "capitalists [pursue] further accumulation by seeking low-cost production operations for supplies and/or high-return markets for products [and...] seek allies and/or resources to further or to attain competitive advantage" (Hopkins & Wallerstein, 1982, p. 13).

⁴ Accessed May 4th 2021 from: <http://cpec.gov.pk/long-term-plan-cpec>.

⁵ Accessed February 20th 2021 from: https://trendeconomy.com/data/h2?commodity=TOTAL&reporter=Pakistan&trade_flow=Export,Import&partner=World&indicator=NW,TQ,TV.

⁶ Accessed June 2nd 2021 from: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/02/local-roots-of-chinese-engagement-in-pakistan-pub-84668>.

⁷ Accessed March 5th 2022 from: <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-product/refined-copper/reporter/chn?redirect=true&yearExportSelector=exportYear1>.

⁸ Accessed December 20th 2021 from: <https://www.dw.com/en/china-pakistan-investment-ties/a-58734281>.

Indeed, as China's economic development has been dependent on its export capacity, Beijing is keen on maintaining and bolstering demand for its exports overseas in order to further propel its growth. In this regard, the BRI has been increasingly taking on the semblance of an apparatus for China to maintain its global rise into prominence: a channel through which to extract revenue from developing states by making them more in tune with its economy, as well as address issues in its supply mechanisms as necessary to invigorate its recently slowing growth (Flint & Xiaotong, 2019; Li & Zhang, 2018; Lin et al., 2016).

Meanwhile, the cartography of the BRI reveals not only economic pragmatism in Chinese policy circles, but an underlying set of ideals, as “[T]he metropolitan dots connected by lines—market integration—are inscribed not against a plain white background, but typically by superimposing that illustration of market networks on a standard map of national territories” (Maçães, 2019, p. 41). This transcendence of national barriers before commercial networks and the breakdown of countries into areas and processes resonates with WSA which takes the world-system as a unit of analysis. Indeed, as Maçães notes, the ideals of the CCP in the BRI rest on the Chinese tradition of *Tanxia* (天下); a paradigm which places the world as its focus rather than an individual state, subsequently reinforced with Western Marxist thought, whereby:

From Lenin's theory of imperialism to Wallerstein's world-systems theory, a range of Marxist writers have insisted that the unit of social reality within which we operate, whose rules constrain us, is for the most part the world economy. In Beijing, these writers have been and remain in vogue. (2019, p. 79)

1.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: WORLD-SYSTEMS ANALYSIS

Developed in the 1970s by renowned political scientist Immanuel Wallerstein, WSA is regarded as “the best unit of analysis for studying social change on a global level” (Chase-Dunn & Grimes, 1995, p. 414), and has been used to examine a plethora of international phenomena with a particular emphasis on the historic transitions of hegemony especially as it relates to the resurgence of East Asia, and the analysis of global commodity chains (Kiely, 2010).