

The Red Persian Carpet: Iran as Semi-Periphery in China's Belt and Road Initiative-Bound World-System

Authors : Toufic Sarieddine

Abstract : As the belt and road Initiative (henceforth, BRI) enters its 9th year, Iran and China are forging stronger ties on economic and military fronts, a development which has not only caused alarm in Washington but also risks staining China's relationships with the oil-rich Gulf monarchies. World-systems theory has been used to examine the impact of the BRI on the current world order, with scholarship split on the capacity of China to emerge as a hegemon contending with the US or even usurping it. This paper argues the emergence of a new China-centered world-system comprised of states/areas and processes participating in the BRI and overlapping with the global world-system under (shaky) US hegemony. This world-system centers around China as core and hegemon via economic domination, capable new institutions (Shanghai Cooperation Council), legal modi operandi, the common goal of infrastructure development to rally support among developing states, and other indicators of hegemony outlined in world-systems theory. In this regard, while states like Pakistan could become peripheries to China in the BRI-bound world-system via large-scale projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Iran has greater capacities and influence in the Middle East, making it superior to a periphery. This paper thus argues that the increasing proximity between Iran and China sees the former becoming a semi-periphery with respect to China within the BRI-bound world-system, having economic dependence on its new core and hegemon while simultaneously wielding political and military influence on weaker states such as Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Syria. The indicators for peripheralization as well as the characteristics of a semi-periphery outlined in world-systems theory are used to examine the current economic, political, and militaristic dimensions of Iran and China's growing relationship, as well as the trajectory of these dimensions as part of the BRI-bound world-system.

Keywords : belt and road initiative, China, China-Middle East relations, Iran, world-systems analysis

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