China and Middle East Conflicts by Guy Burton (London: Routledge, 2020). 270 pp. Hardcover $155.00, eBook $51.26.

China's Middle East Diplomacy: The Belt and Road Strategic Partnership by Mordechai Chaziza (Brighton-Chicago-Toronto: Sussex Academic Press, 2020). 246 pp. Hardcover $84.95

Scholars of the Middle East are moving quickly to chronicle and interpret China's rise in world affairs, particularly in light of the grand aspirations of the New Silk Road, officially known as the Belt and Road initiative. As the China Dream unfolds across Eurasia and Africa, area specialists are pondering the profound implications for transforming the Middle East as they know it, for enriching transregional exchanges, and for scrambling power relations between continents and hemispheres.

The growing literature in this field has made many strides in a short period. In addition to highlighting the magnitude and ramifications of the New Silk Road, it has compiled a rich base of data and commentary on specific projects and countries. Many writers have traced the twists and turns of official relations and some are investigating the conflicting social and popular responses across the region. At a broader level, there is more focused speculation about new possibilities for diplomatic and geopolitical maneuvering in a post-American world where China and other non-Western countries will exert greater influence.

The recent books of Guy Burton and Mordechai Chaziza exemplify these achievements—and their limits. Burton explores China's shifting attitudes over several decades toward conflicts involving Egypt, Algeria, Palestine, the Horn of Africa and Arabia, the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf Wars, ISIS, and Sudan. He explicitly addresses China's influence on the systemic aspects of international politics, pointing to signs of change in norms and expectations about great power rivalries and spheres of influence. With clarity and balance, he weighs the multiple roles Beijing has played over time—disrupter, bystander, patron, mediator, and, most consistently, patient opportunist.

Chaziza lays out a series of country snapshots that recapitulates much of the reporting on China's bilateral relations in the Middle East. He tries to cover Turkey, Israel, Iran, and eleven Arab nations, one after another, in just over 230 pages. He expresses an open-minded curiosity about China's long-term impact on economic competition in the Middle East and beyond, suggesting that Silk Road investments give Beijing's diplomacy an advantage that competitors are unlikely to match. Together, these volumes reflect the mixed efforts of Middle East specialists to integrate empirical and theoretical concerns while tackling rapidly changing relations between state and society as well as between regional and global actors.

Building upon the advances in this field, it might be helpful to consider some of the more challenging questions that researchers can address in the future, realizing that agendas will vary depending on scholarly tastes and political predispositions. The current conversations are highly skewed toward security studies and speculation about China's long-term intentions—official and unspoken. The result is a stream of repetitive policy papers and opinion pieces from specialists in think tanks and consultancies, reflecting anxieties over the meltdown of American dominance and a looming Cold War with China.

Unfortunately, the Great Game approach to Middle East studies neither enlists or promotes the kind of interdisciplinary imagination that is inspiring

scholarship across the social sciences, humanities, and life sciences. Ironically, many studies of Sino-Middle East relations still stress the Middle East's presumed uniqueness and exceptionalism—even though all of the conventional geographic zones are enmeshed in global networks that struggle to meet common dangers none can manage alone.

China's ascendance casts the Middle East in a new light as part of a wider world that is changing in ways we barely understand and cannot control. Many writers grapple with this uncertainty by portraying China as a unitary body with a fixed will. In fact, Chinese people in and out of government are constantly debating the proper course of relations with societies in the Middle East and all other regions. Their disagreements reflect persistent rivalries between factions and interest groups pursuing divergent aims and aspirations. Chinese nationalism is as diverse as Chinese society and every government tries to adjust to the constant push and pull of public sentiments even while pretending to guide them.

Of course, understanding these debates requires access to Chinese-language sources which seldom appear in security-minded studies of the Belt and Road. If China is central to the Middle East's future, then a time may come when we start to think of Chinese as a Middle Eastern language comparable to English, French, and Urdu. If students in Turkish and Iranian universities are reading and speaking Chinese, why shouldn't Western specialists in Middle East affairs follow their lead, especially those writing about the New Silk Road?

Middle Eastern languages hardly fare better than Chinese in the works reviewed here or in other recent studies on the topic. Nor do European languages. Burton and Chaziza provide long lists of sources, but they only contain English-language materials. It would be most helpful to see similar attention devoted to the great volume of writings in the languages of the region itself. Rich coverage of Sino-Middle East relations also appears in the most widely-read European languages. Little of this literature is cited in these and similar works on China's engagement with the Middle East.

The New Silk Road gives scholars of the Middle East countless incentives to step out of their usual comfort zones. They can draw on and contribute to theoretical discussions in global history, world systems analysis, transnational social movements, and ethical conversations between Western and non-Western civilizations. There are new opportunities to develop the rich legacy of cross-disciplinary exchange in Middle Eastern scholarship crafted by pioneers such as Janet Abu Lughod, Marshall Hodgson, Jacques Berque, John Voll, Albert Hourani, Şerif Mardin, Ira Lapidus, Joseph Fletcher, S.A.M. Adshead, Richard Frye, L. Carl Brown, and others.

Only faint echoes of these voices inspire current political writings on the New Silk Road. In time, more trans-civilizational perspectives might re-emerge to illuminate a Middle East connected to an increasingly pluralistic world where neither America nor China nor any other would-be hegemon holds sway. Hopefully, those insights will arise in time to promote wiser policy making and greater power sharing.

So far, hegemonic visions of the international system remain well entrenched in strategic studies of the Belt and Road. In most accounts, China and the United States exercise real agency, sparring over spheres of influence while the small fry ponders the hard choices of balancing or hedging, of forming quasi-alliances or relying on self-help with no partners at all. Proxy wars and market failures portend a need for new thinking about international cooperation, particularly while the Middle East itself radiates turmoil felt around the world. Nonetheless, Middle East political

analysts who discuss China tend to focus on rescuing the wobbly architecture of global power instead of redesigning it. They look to the future with far more dread than promise—a turbulent world filled with power vacuums that invite Chinese mischief.

These anxieties concentrate attention on short-term security questions: whether it is better to accommodate the Chinese or to confront them on a particular issue or in a certain disputed zone. This mindset obscures the larger picture both historically and politically. Too often, in responding to a troubled status quo, urgent care is prescribed to save an endangered limb—a military alliance with Turkey, a pro-Western federation in the Persian Gulf, a lop-sided peace deal for Israel—without knowing if there is any pulse left in the body.

Against this backdrop, most commentary on the New Silk Road asks if China will undermine the tottering Pax Americana or whether a post-Trump team can patch up the damage before it's too late. Like Chaziza, writers who stress the sundry stumbling blocks of the Belt and Road suggest that China might undercut itself because of sheer hubris and imperial overreach. More hardline commentators wonder out loud about the benefits of actively thwarting the New Silk Road by launching competing projects or by destabilizing land and sea routes in contested zones, including the Middle East and its neighbors.

A wider perspective on both China and the Middle East could envision a future shaped by the peoples—and not merely the governments—of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The world is teeming with young and talented citizens determined to create more just societies and transnational exchanges. Shoring up existing arrangements is the last thing on their minds regardless of what experts and ruling elites prefer. Students of global politics are debating many stimulating approaches to reimagining the planet and Middle East specialists should exploit them all.

To cite just a few examples, Morton Kaplan showed that comparative history and systems theory can generate a repertoire of workable models beyond contemporary practice. Hedley Bull inspired a path-breaking turn toward constructivist thinking by contemplating the emergence of international society and its continuous reinvention in diverse cultures—a prospect of political learning and mutual socialization with enormous relevance for transregional relations across every continent. In the field of comparative religion, Robert Bellah stressed the intimate connection between increasing inequality and moral revolutions in the Axial Age, suggesting that similar upheavals are brewing in our own time. Political scientists such as Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink and sociologists such as Manuel Castells highlight the dramatic rise of global civil society and its challenges to all forms of authority—political, patriarchal, and spiritual.

Many scholars of non-Western societies are documenting connectivity in overlapping megaregions that straddle the national and the global. Some leading examples are R. Bin Wong, Gungwu Wang, Eric Tagliacozzo, Richard Eaton, Engseng Ho, Barbara Andaya, Thomas Barfield, Morris Rossabi, Philippe Beaujard, Michael Feener, Christopher Chase-Dunn, and Christopher Beckwith. They combine global history, world systems analysis, and network theory to chart the ongoing coevolution of civilizations, contributing to current debates over globalization and its discontents. All of them are sensitive to Middle Eastern and Islamic experiences as crossroads in a grand tableau of transcontinental exchanges that have endured through the succession of city states, centralizing kingdoms, multiethnic empires, and modern nations with partial and fictional sovereignty. At a time of pervasive rebellion in the Middle East and around the world—when legitimacy is waning and

waits to be reborn in the hearts of ordinary citizens—these perspectives are more important than ever.

Students of Middle East politics seldom appreciate that societies in this region are influencing China at least as much as China affects them. The paradox of Chinese rulers simultaneously opening up to the world while crushing dissent at home is no coincidence. Their fears are deep and well-founded—and fallout from Middle Eastern entanglements triggers frequent nightmares in Beijing. Tumult in Tunis and Istanbul quickly reverberates from Xinjiang to Hong Kong and everywhere in between. No matter how formidable the Great Firewall appears on the outside, China's rulers know it can never insulate them from internal attacks or from the irrepressible viruses of factional infighting and provincial rivalry.

The Belt and Road is a two-way street and Beijing struggles to cope with mounting feedback—much of it negative—from global citizens everywhere seeping through more leaky holes than any censor can hope to plug. Since Mao's passing, Chinese party and state bureaucrats have renounced revolution many times over. But, these days, they worry that their overseas ambitions—particularly in the Middle East—might make them unwitting subversives who undermine would-be partners abroad and jeopardize their prized monopoly of power in China itself.

Historical perspective, holistic analysis, and imagining multiple futures—these are the key ingredients of transregional thinking, particularly as living geography is being redrawn in ways that are sure to upend power relations in and between societies everywhere for decades to come. Fernand Braudel's distinction between geological time, social time, and political time may be collapsing before our eyes. On all three dimensions, changes are converging and accelerating as environmental and medical calamities batter the house of cards we call global governance and capitalist democracy.

In this context, Middle East political studies are bound to head in more global and multidisciplinary directions. The New Silk Road adds a welcome gust to the gathering winds already carrying us on that course.

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