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Globalized Authoritarianism: The Expansion of the Chinese Surveillance Apparatus

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ADRIAN KREUTZ, APR 3 2020

In recent debates on the globalization of authoritarianism, China is considered one of the central, if not *the* single most important actor. Paradigmatic for this view is the European Commission's Strategy Paper (2019:1) of March 2019, in which China is portrayed as the "systemic rival" propagating an "alternative governance-model". A recent GPPI report (2018:1) goes as far as announcing that "China's rapidly increasing political influencing efforts in Europe and the self-confident promotion of its authoritarian ideals pose a significant challenge to liberal democracy (...)." Many scholars (cf. Huotari et al., 2017; Chun, 2018; Starrs, 2018) have put forward the hypothesis that Chinese authoritarianism is, perhaps through transitions in global hegemony (cf. Arrighi, 2007; Robinson, 2011), beginning to expand around the world—to semi-periphery countries, in particular. This is the hypothesis I wish to put under scrutiny in this essay. I call it, the *expansion-hypothesis*. While all of the above-mentioned seminal studies focus on the foreign financial investments of Chinese companies and government, I propose that a more robust indicator for this hypothesis can be found: the expansion of Chinese surveillance technology outside of mainland China.

The essay is structured as follows: I shall first, and very briefly, discuss the theoretical background on which I take the expansion-hypothesis to test. I will then criticise contemporary studies for their lack of robustness. I argue that the material expansion of authoritarian means, such as surveillance technology, is a more reliable indicator than financial transactions. To provide the necessary theoretical background, I will discuss why surveillance technology is a potential means of authoritarian abuse, calling on Bigo (2006, 2016). Subsequently, I look at *where*, *how*, and *why* Chinese security technology is implemented outside of China. I will conclude that, taking the expansion of the Chinese security apparatus into account, the expansion-hypothesis can be affirmed.

Chinese Authoritarianism: The BRI and the MSRI

Domestic authoritarian practice is indisputably a persistent phenomenon within today's confines of China (cf. Chen, 2012). That China exerts physical, material and symbolical power beyond its own borders is, by now, also a truism (cf. *inter alia*, Huotari et al., 2017; Chun, 2018). Indeed, several recent conflicts can be traced back to Chinese influence. The Thai military coup of 2014, for example, has been supported by investments of the Chinese government (cf. ISEAS, 2019). With the China-CEEC agreement (Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries), China is even trying to extend its influence in Europe, especially through investments in Hungary, says Kavalski (2019).

What those two examples have in common – not to mention the annexation of Tibet in 1949/50– is that they, in some way or other, are connected to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which pursues the re-vitalisation of the economic belt associated with the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), which seeks to re-establish trade along the "historical" silk road. The initiative's self-proclaimed objective is to establish a "hyper-connectivity" between Europe, Africa, Asia and China which will, according to predictions of the Chinese Government, be the leader of the world economy by 2049 (cf. Chinese Government, 2015).

The BRI is based on four principles jointly building the foundation for the cooperation between China and the countries along the silk road. These are: coordinated policy making, heightened connectivity, financial integration into

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China's monetary system, and unimpeded trade. Where those principles have been implemented, a statistically significant increase of authoritarian tendencies within liberal regimes took/takes place (cf. GPPI, 2018). In Myanmar, for example, the backlash of democratization which started in 2012 is, according to Sun (2012), directly linked to the economic corridor created by the BRI. According to a GPPI report (ibid.), the process of de-democratization in countries immediately affected by the BRI, and the simultaneous expansion of Chinese authoritarianism, mutually enforce each other.

Some definitional clarity is in order. The level of analysis on which the above-mentioned studies assess "authoritarianism" is usually the level of state-governance. My own proposal will think of authoritarianism less as a regime type and more in terms of "patterns of action that sabotage accountability to people over whom a political actor exerts control, or their representatives, by means of secrecy, disinformation and disabling voice (...) and organized infringements of individual autonomy and dignity" (Glasius, 2018:4)—in other words, as authoritarian and illiberal practices. I will *not* draw a sharp distinction between illiberal and authoritarian practices, though. The expository nature of this paper allows for some definitional leeway.

The Chinese form of authoritarianism is sometimes referred to with the term 'neo-authoritarianism' (cf. Sautman, 1992; Moody, 2007). Recently, a new definition was infused into the literature: pragmatic authoritarianism. When Lai (2016) describes China's governance-model as 'pragmatic authoritarianism', he refers to the government's ability to rapidly transform itself and the economy in crisis, the recent improvements in social welfare and gradual introduction of intra-party democracy. The pragmatism is nicely captured by the practice-approach to authoritarianism. Conceptually, the practice-approach allows for the Chinese government to combine authoritarian with democratic practices, without *prima facie* determining whether the Chinese government is *per se* a democratic or authoritarian institution.

Hegemony and the Expansion-Hypothesis

What does it take for China to, as the expansion-hypothesis predicts, expand its governance model around the globe? Undeniably, a certain hegemonic position in the global order seems to be a necessary condition. How to conceptualize transformations of hegemony, and whether there are any indicators for a transformation towards a China-centred global order, is thus a pressing question.

To assess this question, I refer to Arrighi's "Adam Smith in Beijing" (2007). Arrighi is building on Wallerstein's (1979, 2004) World System Theory – a broadly Marxist theoretical approach to the study of global power structures that has once blossomed in IR and sociology, but has by now largely fallen out of favour. It is nevertheless still a profound way to conceptualize shifts in global hegemony – and thus to assess the recent position of China *vis-à-vis* the global order – in simple terms.

World System Theory rests on the idea that, strictly speaking, national economies do not exist but are indivisible parts of the global economy. The world economy is characterized by a tripartite division of labour, split into different zones: the *core*, the *semi-peripheral*, and the *peripheral*. National economies are distinguishable by their location in either of those zones. According to Wallerstein (ibid.) (the) core country(ies) – the hegemonic actor – is that country which dominates all others and is *not* dominated by any other. Correspondingly, countries in the semi-periphery are dominated and do dominate, and countries in the periphery are dominated and do *not* dominate.

What counts as dominance in this framework is determined on the basis of purely economic concerns. In detail, the dominance of the core country(ies) is grounded in its higher-level productivity – the production of goods with greater quality, in less time, and thus to a cheaper price compared to other countries. *Ceteris paribus*, this dominance in productivity leads to a dominance in trade, which inevitably produces a trade imbalance in favour of the dominant country. This trade imbalance effectively leads to financial dominance, understood as the control of the world's financial resources by banks of the core country(ies). Productivity dominance, trade dominance, and financial dominance are thus the necessary and sufficient conditions for global hegemony.

The expansion-hypothesis rests on the premise that, right now, we witness a transition from 'Pax Americana' to 'Pax

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Sinica' (cf. The Economist, 2014). In other words, only if China becomes the leading core country – i.e. the global hegemon – will the Chinese governance-mode expand with it. The underlying idea is an orthodox Marxist one: The superstructure always follows the economic base. Thus, for the expansion-hypothesis to be true, the Chinese economy – the economic base – would have to be at a point at which a 'spatial fix' (cf. Harvey, 1985, 2001) – i.e. the resolution of an inner capitalist crisis by geographical expansion of the economic sphere – is inevitable.

According to Arrighi (2007:24), the Maoist revolution had the side-effect of creating a comparably skilled workforce (compared to other semi-periphery countries in Asia) which produces products of comparably high standard and for comparably low wages. The productive dominance within Asia enabled China to create a market system that is grounded in skilled labour – therefore, China was able to generate trade dominance within Asia. On top of that, Zhang (2017) argues that the Chinese economy has recently shown signs of over-accumulation which would indeed indicate that for China the phase of financial dominance (the third phase on the road to global hegemony) has begun. Of course, constant over-accumulation leads to the 'spatial fix'. With the MSRI, China might plausibly be interpreted as seeking a 'spatial fix' through extending its economy to the countries along the silk road. This narrative would seem to verify the expansion-hypothesis.

But is financial dominance enough to validate the assertion that the Chinese governance-mode is expanding – hence, that the Chinese superstructure strictly follows its economic base? Not quite! Looking at it from a quantitative angle, I have to admit that even after intense research I wasn't able to find strong empirical evidence which links the transition towards Chinese economic hegemony to an expansion of the Chinese governance-mode. The expansion-hypothesis rests on the idea that the hegemonic superstructure – the Chinese governance-mode – necessarily follows the hegemonic base – the economic dominance of China in the global economy. But this idea is, assessed from a positivist angle, simply lacking a proposition that is falsifiable through quantitative data.

While, as I have mentioned, some authors have observed statistically significant domestic transformation – acting increasingly illiberal – in countries affected by the MSRI, there is neither evidence for that the economic dominance of China is *alone* responsible for those transformations, nor that China attaches political conditions (except on those policies that potentially have a direct impact on the stability of China, such as the support of activist groups, (cf. GPPI, 2018)) to its economic cooperation. The latest Human Rights Watch report (2017:3) testifies that China "seeks to exert economic and political pressure on countries to obtain its goals", but that alone is not proof for the hypothesis that China pursues a politics of expansion for its own governance model. A genuine verification of the expansion-hypothesis thus asks for more robust and overt evidence.

Security Practice = Authoritarian Practice?

What could such a robust and overt indicator be? I want to propose that the expansion of authoritarian practices in form of security and surveillance mechanisms are robust and overt evidence on the basis of which the expansion-hypothesis may indeed be verified.

In this section, I argue that security and surveillance mechanisms are major opportunities for authoritarian abuse. In other words, security and surveillance practices can be highly illiberal and authoritarian practices. To see why security and surveillance mechanisms are means of authoritarian abuse, I think it is necessary to examine the value-system that underlies debates on security measures. What I call the *paradox of security* provides a principal access point:

According to Bigo (2006, 2016), a line of argument in favour of a large security apparatus is grounded in the conviction that democracy can only ever exist – and be well-functioning – when the political structure is able to respond to internal or external threat. This call for "response-ability" legitimizes *prima facie* illiberal practices, such as digital surveillance or the retention of communication data. Hence, there is a sense in which security protects the stability of democracy (or, in already authoritarian regimes, the stability of the authoritarian structure). Stability of the political system also translates to an individual-level political value, which is the protection of the individual. On the other hand, critical security scholars such as Bigo (ibid.) have rightly noted that security measures, if they go beyond the rule of law and normal politics, are infringements of a second individual-level political value, namely personal

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liberty. The systematic infringement of personal liberties within a liberal democratic structure is obviously an infringement of liberal democracy itself. Hence the paradox: Security practices are (or, may be) both democracy enhancing and democracy eroding.

A pivotal point of this discussion is certainly the question of ‘who determines what is the right balance between personal liberty and protection?’ Bigo’s (ibid.) answer is that balancing ‘protection’ and ‘liberty’ is usually a joint-venture project of states and private security corporations. This joint-venture is necessary because of mutual dependencies: The state depends on technological innovation, and the security industry depends on the state for making their products profitable and, first and foremost, *legal*. The balancing process is thus already far from democratic: (Allegedly) liberal and blatantly illiberal regimes are in the position to deem certain security measures necessary, legitimize them by reference to a narrative of threat to protection and stability, and implement them at their own discretion. The *de facto* implementation of security measures is thus a highly illiberal practice, regardless of whether the particular security measure is an unjustified infringement of personal liberties, or not.

Still a greater threat to liberal democracy lies in the process of *normalization* and *accumulation* of singular (and in themselves potentially far from severe) infringements of personal liberty in the form of security practices. The process by which illiberal practices are normalized has come to be associated with the ‘politics of unease’ (cf. Bigo, 2006), which describes a form of politics which, by means of a *narrative of constant threat* to the values of protection and stability, justifies permanent infringements of personal liberties. Those permanent infringements normalize and accumulate over time. In this process of normalization and accumulation lies the real threat to liberal democracy. With every newly added illiberal practice the democratic space is shrinking a bit further, if only marginally. But, a lot of grains make a heap. This is why security and surveillance mechanisms are major opportunities for authoritarian abuse.

The Chinese Surveillance Model is Expanding...

Scholars of the Chinese security apparatus univocally affirm that the MSRI has led to modifications of the global security-architecture (cf. Ghiasy et al, 2018). The GPPI report on that issue (2018:3) says that “China’s political model is based on an authoritarian regime intent on strengthening a deeply illiberal surveillance state at home while also exporting (...) its (...) model abroad.” The Chinese surveillance-apparatus, sometimes referred to as the ‘Great Firewall of China’, is indeed expanding to the scenes of the silk road initiative, as well as to illiberal regimes beyond the BRI. According to Plyakova & Meserole (2019:1), China has exported surveillance and monitoring systems to at least 18 countries, as of 2019. To pick an example, in the context of the pipeline investments in Thailand the Chinese government invested US\$53 million together with *Alibaba* and *Huawei* in the ‘smart city project’ which digitalises Bangkok’s transportation system and, by means of the latter, Bangkok’s security structure, too (cf. Schmidt & Natnicha, 2019). Even more severe is China’s impact on Ethiopia, where the China-led *Information Network Security Agency* (INSA) monopolized the surveillance of the country’s entire telecommunication system (cf. Gagliardone, 2014). Both projects, in Bangkok and Ethiopia, are connected to the BRI. Beyond the silk road, illiberal regimes consult China’s security experts as well: The Maduro regime in Venezuela, for instance, has consolidated the INSA to create a “fatherland database” that tracks monetary transactions of individuals beside other personal data (cf. Playakova & Meserole, ibid.). Hence, there is no doubt that China’s security model is expanding alongside the “spatial fix” in the form of the MSRI, and beyond.

Conclusion

The expansion hypothesis says that China seeks to expand its authoritarian governance mode around the globe. I have scrutinised this proposition. I have provided a theoretical fundament from which to assess whether or not we witness a shift in global hegemony towards a *Pax Sinica*, which I take to be a necessary condition for the truth of the expansion hypothesis. According to the cited authors, a transformation of global hegemony is indeed observable. I have argued that any support for the expansion hypothesis which rests on the factor of economic dominance alone lacks robustness. Material expansion of an authoritarian means, such as surveillance technology, on the other hand, is a far more robust indicator than dominance in financial transactions. Indeed, I take it that the expansion hypothesis can be verified by reference to the expansion of the Chinese surveillance technology, which is, through cycles of

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accumulation of illiberal practices, a direct threat to liberal democracy. "What is so troubling..." say Plyakova & Meserole (2019:5) "...is not just the tech-driven mass detentions and human rights violations. It's the prospect that Beijing will sell the technologies it has pioneered (...) abroad."

This article is based on work for a Master's degree at University of Amsterdam.

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