Shifting Hegemony: China's Challenge to U.S. Hegemony During COVID-19
Written by Lior Hamovitz

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The novel coronavirus' outbreak in late December of 2019 can almost unanimously be deemed one of the most consequential events in modern history. With a death toll of over 3 million people, and more than 150 million infections,[1] the COVID-19 quickly demanded leading states to rise to the domestic and international challenges it posed. It was surprising, then, that the United States (US), whose status as the sole hegemon in the world remained practically unchallenged since the end of the Cold War, was one of the countries who struggled most with meeting the multifaceted demands of the pandemic. As the COVID-19's ramifications became increasingly indisputable, forcing states to shut down schools, places of employment and even borders, it seemed self-evident that the pandemic needs to be addressed globally, rapidly and competently. The US's lack of clear-headed plan to combat the virus nationally therefore underscored its inability to prioritize the country's international role in times of crisis, and put into question the liberal democratic model it champions as a whole.[2] Simultaneously, China, whose city of Wuhan was the locus of eruption, proved more than ever before its rise as a global superpower and a possible threat to the longstanding hegemony of the US. Through its relatively quick response to the pandemic's spread and the measures it took to contain it, China has been able to portray its governance model as especially adept at managing national and global crises. Despite having initially been criticized by the international community for not disclosing information regarding the outbreak, China arguably managed to recover from these condemnations by adopting a benevolent and collaborative approach which contrasted heavily with America's response.[3]

This paper engages with the period of the pandemic, contextualized by the Trump presidency (2017-2021), in order to better understand the ways in which China had been able to challenge American hegemony in the international system. Moreover, the paper will examine the meanings of this challenge for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA, interchangeably referred to as Middle East) in the post-pandemic era. For decades now, the regional order in the Middle East has been both controlled and designed by the US, divided by alliances and rivalries in relation to the American hegemon. A fragmentation in this order, precipitated by Chinese involvement, can therefore signify the declining ability of the US to hold onto its hegemonic position, and serve as a valuable case-study for examining the changing relationship between the two great powers.[4]

The arguments of this article are threefold. First, the paper will introduce a literature review, meant to place this discussion within the field of International Relations (IR). It will claim that while many have come to acknowledge China's rising power status, they neglect to attribute its success to the specific appeal of its model of governance and leadership style. The literature review will further assert that the scholarly attention given to China's economic ties with the MENA often disregards the ideological and historical relationship between the two, and the role these may have in shaping regional hegemonic dynamics in the coming years.

Second, the paper will set out a theoretical framework that defines hegemony as relying on the pillars of leadership and legitimacy, and regards them as pertinent for understanding how hegemony shifts. Importantly, this project makes an express use of Yan Xuetong's theory of moral realism, and works produced by Asian thinkers, to highlight the significance of understanding China's rise from the perspective of the Chinese School of IR (CS). While this school of thought is often criticized for not being able to contribute to mainstream IR, in part due to its inherent attempt to hegemonize China, this paper's use of Chinese literature aims to demonstrate the valuable insight the CS

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has to offer for a post-Western body of work.[5] Yan's model is applied here to underscore the value of using non-Western perspectives in conceptualizing contemporary global political events. It is refined through the work of Ian Clark, a prominent English School figure, to connect the CS and Western IR and illustrate the applicability of Chinese scholarship for understanding great power dynamics.

Third, the paper will employ Yan's theory on leadership, and its refinement through Clark's focus on legitimacy, to answer the question: *in which ways has China challenged the US's hegemony during the COVID-19 pandemic, and what would these challenges mean for the Middle East in the post-coronavirus era?* This article argues that the coronavirus crisis has shed a light on China's leadership and governance model as a tool to undermine the US's position within the international system. The paper will further use the Middle East as a case study to advance this point, claiming that despite America's long uncontested hegemony in the MENA, the Chinese model has become increasingly appealing to Middle Eastern states who are attracted to a hegemon promoting regional development without the restrictions of democracy. With waning US power in the global arena, a rising China, and the inherent volatility of the MENA, this region should warrant our specific attention as we attempt to theorize on the emerging great-power rivalry between China and the US.

Literature Review

A Shifting World Order

The period of the COVID-19 pandemic has driven political thinkers to reexamine the states' ability to manage crises that are local and global at once. Joseph Nye envisions five different scenarios for the post-coronavirus world order, three of which are largely characterized or majorly influenced by the rise of China. In scenario "the end of the globalized liberal order,"[6] Nye focuses on the US's diminishing position as a leader of the international society, with an atrophy of the collaborative institutions that had propelled and upheld its stance so far. In this scenario, China becomes increasingly involved in setting global rules and norms – a role which up until now had been almost exclusively reserved for liberal democracies. In scenario "a China-dominated world order,"[7] China rises to prominence mainly by closing the economic gap between itself and the US. Its material dominance becomes so overwhelming that the normative international checks and balances are too weak to institutionally resist the standards and reforms China and its major companies instill. In scenario "more of the same,"[8] the rivalry between the US and China is constrained through their cooperation on issues such climate change. While the US remains the *largest* superpower, its global influence lessens significantly.

In fact, authors are dedicating growing attention to the global competition between Beijing and Washington and its implications. When attempting to analyze the reasons behind the US-China trade war of 2018, for example, Min-hyung Kim concludes that its main driving force was ""US fear" about its declining hegemony and China's rapid rise as a challenger of US hegemony."[9] Indeed, today it would be rare to find a political thinker who believes China *isn't* on the rise. Kishore Mahbubani explores China's growing geopolitical power vis-à-vis the US, and writes that America has experienced a steady decline in its soft power over recent years – a process exacerbated under the Donald Trump administration – which will challenge its ability to win the ideological battle between itself and China.[10] When debating whether a Cold War situation and consequent American victory can replicate themselves between China and the US, the author emphasizes that China has already begun taking preemptive measures against a possible containment policy through creating partnerships under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)[11] – a largescale global infrastructure strategy developed by China, spanning across almost all parts of the globe. Crucially, the author claims that China has as good a chance as the US in emerging as the dominant state in the world system, and that American victory is "far from certain."[12] Mahbubani even adds that leading strategists and countries are increasingly preparing for the geopolitical contestation between the US and China, which he sees as inevitable.[13] Unlike the Cold War period, however, American cultural and economic influence have significantly waned globally, and China's economic strength is far greater than that of the former USSR.[14]

Notably, the COVID-19 crisis revealed not only the shortcomings of the US's crisis-management, but also those of its intertwinement with the liberal democratic order. Anne Applebaum writes that the lack of clearheaded American

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guidance during the different stages of the pandemic was so prevalent that "the whole idea of transatlantic cooperation became moot."[15] As the author describes it, the most salient failure of the system was that the US, led by Trump, had abdicated its international leadership role during the pandemic. Moreover, Applebaum underscores China's role in undermining the international system. She explains that for years now, China has put explicit effort into trying to integrate itself and instill its autocratic values in multilateral organizations.[16] The partnerships it seeks to build are framed as based on a 'win-win' principle, contributing to China's growing acceptance into international circles. Indeed, as the Trump administration was repeatedly sidelining international organizations, particularly the World Health Organization (WHO), China was increasingly collaborating with them. These growing acceptance and influence need to be understood in parallel to America's diminishing ones,[17] and in terms of the emerging competition between "dictatorship" and "democracy."[18]

Reviewing these works, it becomes apparent that scholars are reaching the consensus that China is on the rise – being integrated into international institutions and progressively asserting its economic dominance. That said, while authors' conceptualizations of the emerging world order acknowledge China's strengthened position, *they fail to adequately account for the increasing appeal of the Chinese model.* Scholars today understand that China's economic and geopolitical prowess, as expressed during the coronavirus pandemic, may aid its accumulation of international power in a manner that will require the strategic attention of the US. However, they seldom consider how China's model of governance and specific style of leadership have potentially been revealed as more suitable for managing global crises than those of liberal democracies – a revelation that could significantly impact the world order COVID-19 will leave in its wake. As Niall Ferguson writes, the remarkable speed with which China had been able to contain the virus has allowed it to illustrate the strengths of its model and shape the pandemic's narrative in its favor.[19] This paper will attempt to bridge the existing literature gap by highlighting the attractiveness of the Chinese model and leadership approach as part of the country's global rise, and particularly as part of its growing influence in the MENA.

China in the Middle East

When attempting to explore the meanings of US-China competition for the Middle East, a significant factor scarcely considered is China and the MENA's historical and ideological relationship. Daniel Markey writes that although since the end of the Cold War China's ties with the Middle East have largely been motivated by the Gulf's energy resources, the country's history with the MENA dates far back.[20] Iran and China, for example, share a historical bond of social and cultural exchange which was largely enabled by Persian settlement in the Chinese territory. The extension of the emotional connection between the two former empires grew further as they experienced the humiliation of their own dissolution, and the contrasting sight of the rise of European imperialism.[21] The prominent argument Markey develops is that Middle Eastern leaders today are attracted to Beijing's "model of growth without political freedom."[22] As Iran and China still view themselves within the context of their respective long histories of power and cultural significance, they sentiments of resentment towards the West. While their political motivations often diverge, their worldview is still similar in its illiberal values, allowing them to form "mutually beneficial collaboration."[23]

This ideological relationship is doubtlessly crucial for Beijing's global and regional ambitions. In an endeavor to elucidate China's growing bonds with the Middle East, Michael Clarke writes that China's foreign policy is becoming progressively informed by the wish to combat American hegemony and its geopolitical implications, and to build "a viable strategic and economic alternative to the current US-led international order."[24] As Chinese security concerns grow, both in and because of the MENA, and American geopolitical influence in the region decreases, China is encouraged to act out an agenda aimed at reshaping regional dynamics to suit its own interests.[25] Clarke states that China perceives the US hegemony as constraining its foreign policy ambitions, both globally and in the Middle East, and holds that the American 'geopolitical resolve' has fluctuated. These two elements have factored into China's approach, which seeks to leverage its non-Western identity and sparse interference in regional politics to the country's advantage. [26]

Progressively, the American primacy in the Middle East came to be viewed by Beijing as a pivotal obstacle for its diplomatic and strategic regional prospects. This recognition, partnered with China's desire to expand its economic

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growth and promote anti-hegemonic ideology, profoundly shape the country's interest in the MENA: weapon sales, its own energy security, and relationships with certain "rogue" regimes.[27] Now, although China is still reliant on oil-prices which are in part modulated by the US, Salman et al. write that Beijing's dependence on Middle Eastern countries' oil is preventing it from risking their relationship, even at the cost of being unaccommodating towards Washington.[28] With the understanding that America's control over Middle Eastern oil and crucial naval routes are granting it global preponderance that is of strategic risk to China, the country began to specifically engage with Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia.[29] The ties between Iran and China were further solidified by the signing of a military cooperation agreement, and Chinese missiles and technology have by now even found their way into Yemen and Lebanon, with strategic cooperation only expected to grow as China's military capacities advance.[30] The importance of these bonds in shaping the post-pandemic world order cannot be understated, as China intertwines itself with MENA geopolitical dynamics. As Clarke argues, China sees itself as able to bring stability to the region through the evening out of imbalanced economic development and incremental mitigation of the US's geopolitical power.[31]

However, although scholars recognize the tightening economic and strategic relationships between China and the MENA, only few seem to pay explicit attention to the growing Chinese *legitimacy* in the region, and how it is undermining the US's long-standing hegemony. This paper aims to address the existing gap overlooking how China's model of 'peace through development' rather than 'liberal peace' is gaining increasing legitimacy from Middle Eastern leaders, who find a wealthy and non-interfering hegemon an appealing replacement for the American alternative.[32] The global hegemonic stagnation of the US, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic, will further be linked to Middle Eastern political dynamics. By bringing these two bodies of literature together, this paper seeks to elucidate the MENA's relevance for understanding the grander picture of the burgeoning US-China competition.

Theoretical Framework – Yan and Clark on Hegemony

This project is aimed at analyzing the specific ways in which China is rising in the international system and challenging the dominance of the US – making it imperative to coherently construct a theoretical framework demarcating the facets of hegemony. As the secondary purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of examining this process through Chinese IR, the principal work employed would be that of Yan Xuetong, one of the CS's most prominent figures. Yan's book, *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers,* sets itself apart by not focusing on the reasons for a hegemon's decline, but rather on the ways one rises and may replace another dominant power.[33] According to Yan, one form of international leadership is expressly suitable for this goal: *humane authority*. It is characterized by trustworthiness and consistent policies, pursues order by setting an example of following international rules, rewards those who follow them and punishes those who do not. It is therefore the leadership type most likely to overthrow a ruling hegemon.[34]

Indeed, leadership is central to Yan's perception of the ways in which a state could rise within the world order. In the international sphere, leadership mainly consists of the capacities of the state and its strategic credibility. The latter is that which allows a rising power to appeal to other states and forms the basis of its authority.[35] According to Yan, the "strategic credibility of a leading state signifies to other members of a given international community a reliable leadership."[36] Reliability is an attractive attribute in an international leader and is thus instrumentally related to how durable its leadership is perceived to be.[37] Complementarily, the competent leadership of a rising power can assist it in 'eclipsing' a dominant state.[38] Yan's perception of leadership is hence greatly informed by the notion that leading by competent and moral example is the chief way in which a state can foster the acceptance of its international status.[39]

Yan's theory (as will be demonstrated in this paper) is of great value in conceptualizing China's rise in the global arena over recent years, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, introducing complementary perspectives could help strengthen the validity of his theoretical analysis. In his book *Hegemony in International Society*, Clark explains that for the duration of the IR discipline, scholars saw the rule of one predominant state over the world order as both a historical and normal condition of international society.[40] According to Clark, the deficit of IR's conceptualization of hegemony is that it has created a discourse focusing too heavily on the *material* distribution of power. He thus adopts a framework of hegemony which assigns it the principles of domination and leadership. The

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former is one quite unanimously agreed upon in IR, and refers to the predominance of one state over others in the same system. This definition is thus both material, concerned with the practical possession of resources, and relative in that it is compared to the way these resources are internationally distributed. Clark adds another facet to this principle of domination, which refers to a normative systemic ability of a hegemon to govern interstate relations, and the willingness to do so as well. [41] As he writes, the general consensus is that the legitimacy of a hegemon and of the system in which it is positioned are derived of the consent of those (states) who are benefitting and fulfilling their self-interest.[42]

Consequently, leadership revolves not only around the actions and resources of the hegemon, but also around the way it is being perceived.[43] A leader is thus one who is recognized as being such.[44] As Clark clarifies, his conceptualization of hegemony is that a normative account of the term is necessary to understand it within the context of international society, and in order to coherently distinguish between hegemony and primacy.[45] Primacy is more accurately understood through the lens of capabilities, of what an actor *has*, whereas hegemony is also concerned with what an actor would or is expected to *do*.[46] The distinction between primacy and hegemony is central to Clark's main argument: that hegemony consists not only in the capacity to exercise power, but also the general acceptance and even desire of others within the same system for the hegemon to *be* exercising it. This idea speaks of a mutual relationship, where the hegemon acquires international recognition of its position in exchange for the willingness to oversee and maintain international order.[47]

Although Clark and Yan use some overlapping terms, there are important distinctions which ought to be drawn between them. An overarching theme that can be attributed to Clark's view of hegemony, consisting of domination and leadership, is that legitimacy is their vital foundation.[48] In this context, legitimacy is the bestowment of the hegemonic status by others and their recognition of the hegemon's position as leader.[49] In Yan's work, it is leadership which serves the basis for the rise of a dominant state – characterized by the moral actions, demonstrated capabilities and the capacity to serv as an international authority.[50] Similarly, then, both authors call attention to the normative aspects of hegemony, rather than to merely material understandings of primacy. They accentuate leadership and legitimacy, respectively, as a way to comprehensively answer the question of how a hegemon becomes one. For that reason, morality is a principal feature in both of their works. Clark explains that hegemony pertains, along with the actions and resources of the leading state, to the political morality it exhibits. An international leader must possess moral qualities which are deemed desirable by fellow states, so they would endorse its predominance.[51] For Yan, morality is the underlying element of all factors which can allow a hegemon to rise. He argues that the success of a rising state is inherently linked to adopting a leadership model governed by universal moral codes.[52] The relationship between Clark's legitimacy and Yan's leadership is thus informed by their mutual emphasis on morality as a prerequisite to both. This Capstone will therefore adopt the two pillars of Legitimacy and Leadership as those by which a hegemon can be deemed as one.

Hegemony in this paper will henceforth refer to the relative preponderance of one or more states' legitimacy and leadership, expressed both materially and normatively, over other states in the international system. It is through this conceptualization of the term that the paper will seek to demonstrate China's exponential rise during the COVID-19 pandemic vis-à-vis the US's decline. The paper will furthermore use the terms of this theoretical framework to discuss the particular hegemonic challenge China could pose for the US in the MENA region in the post-pandemic era.

Leadership

According to Yan's theory, political leadership is derived of four sources: authority, capability, morality and power.[53] Yan explains his intention with the latter, power, through its Chinese equivalent *quanli* – meaning "legitimate coercive rights or duty."[54] Indeed, Yan sees power as the type of coercion which enforces behavior.[55] As his argument holds, political leadership becomes the key component of "the attractiveness of a country's government model, which influences other countries' actions without the use of hard power."[56] Given that this paper is distinctly interested in understanding China's challenge to American hegemony in terms of the country's cooptation abilities and the attractiveness of its governance model, rather than its coercive potential, the following segments will focus on examining how this challenge manifested during the coronavirus pandemic using the sources

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of morality, capability and authority only.

Morality

Morality is the most pertinent concept for Yan's moral realism, and mainly refers to whether a country's behavior follows the nationally and internationally agreed upon norms of action.[57] Admittedly, with the coronavirus' far-reaching impacts, it is difficult to outline the international norms countries should have adhered to, and whether they did so or not. Still, a brief glance at past crises could reveal previous courses of action from leading states. Most significantly, during the financial crisis of 2008 and the 2014 Ebola outbreak, the US and other great powers ensured to collaborate with one another in finding a resolution for these global challenges. Campbell and Doshi write that whereas, in the past, US governments would assemble a coalition of states to overcome these joint challenges, former President Trump's policies during the COVID-19 were anything but collaborative.[58]

As scholars agree, the absence of American leadership became glaring during the COVID-19.[59] When examining how China's moral behavior throughout the coronavirus pandemic could help it rise globally, it is thus crucial to also contrast it with the immoral behavior – in Yan's terms – of the US. Primarily, with the outbreak of the virus in the US, then President Trump stayed loyal to his long-proclaimed policy of "America First." While countries around the world battled with the first wave of the pandemic, struggling to procure necessary medical supplies and expertise, the American government adopted an almost surprisingly nationalistic response. Rather than acknowledging the public health risks of the novel virus, the COVID-19 was framed in the US as a blatant and specific attack on the country's sovereignty.[60] Furthermore, essentially without warning or an established agreement, the US closed its borders to incoming travelers from Europe, conveying that its sole governance focus during this crisis was the country itself.[61]

In fact, in late May of 2020, the Trump administration even decided to begin withdrawing US funding and WHO membership, citing the organization's alleged control by China as the reason.[62] This decision was criticized widely, and was blamed for being an attempted distraction from America's own failings in its response to the outbreak. Global health experts further argued that a withdrawal of funds during this difficult global crisis would be unimaginable and disastrous, accusing the US government of destructively disengaging with institutions pertinent for the crisis's resolution.[63] As Francis Fukuyama put it, rather than supporting and galvanizing international institutions, President Trump antagonized and attacked them.[64] Global public health professionals explained that the US' withdrawal would be damaging not only to the organization and the international contamination efforts, but also specifically harmful to American citizens. They warned that a withdrawal would mean disconnecting the US from key channels of information, leaving the country to fight on its own and the citizens vulnerable to infection.[65] In Yan's terms, this type of behavior could be deemed flagrantly immoral, both domestically and internationally, as the US's decision not to follow cooperation norms would mean an almost direct risk for both communities is has a responsibility for: the global and the local.[66]

China's moral behavior during the pandemic therefore greatly contrasts with the US's response. Xi Jinping, head of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), had capitalized precisely on the isolationism Trump espoused during the pandemic, and made conscious efforts to counterbalance this approach by increasing China's participation in the global response to the virus.[67] He embarked on a markedly diplomatic campaign assembling international leaders and health experts seeking to find a resolution for all.[68] Some even describe China's approach as uniquely dedicated to championing the global battle against the coronavirus, proactively initiating and promoting international cooperation through funding and participating in multilateralism.[69] It is this comparison between the behaviors of the US and China towards international institutions and fellow states that can highlight the moral leadership Beijing has demonstrated in the time of the coronavirus crisis. As Yan explains, such a display of morality, accompanied by material resources, can portray a state as a humane authority and consequently propel its influence and even its legitimacy.[70] China's morality during the pandemic's outspread, and the absence of such moral adherence from the US, is thus a key contributing factor to the challenge it is increasingly posing to US hegemony.

Capability

Capability in Yan's work is conceptualized as strength.[71] The comprehensive capability of a state, subsequently,

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can be divided into four domains: culture, economy, military and politics. In this model, political capability shapes the other three elements, and is largely determined by a country's ability and willingness to reform, as well as the execution of reform in practice. Therefore, political capability is both material and nonmaterial in its nature.[72] Yan clarifies that political leadership is a crucial factor shaping political capability, and political capability ought to be understood as driving a country's comprehensive capability.[73] Competent or incompetent leadership can accordingly alter the relative capability of a great power.[74] This clarification becomes pertinent when considering Yan's argument that changes in leading states' capabilities can directly influence their relationship with other states and the configuration of the international system.[75] Analyzing China's demonstrated capability during the coronavirus crisis, and the US's shortcomings, could then indicate possible changes to the current world order.

Perhaps the most relevant starting point for examining China's capabilities throughout its pandemic response is by looking at how its leadership efforts were being perceived. As previously mentioned, in a speech given in late January 2020 by WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom, he publicly applauded China's work in combatting the spread of the novel virus. He declared that China's response to the virus was impressively rapid and has set "a new standard for outbreak response,"[76] also mentioning China's commitment to aiding to and working with other countries. Adhanom praised China for having invested itself in protecting not only its own citizens, but also people around the world.[77] Notably, Adhanom was not alone in his praises. By the end of 2020, China was commended for having responded efficiently, quickly and thoroughly to the pandemic's spread – by implementing the necessary measures to contain the virus through advanced technologies and firm policies.[78] These successes were further emphasized in contrast to Europe's and the US's continued struggles with their pandemic response. In Beijing's eyes, these were clear indicators of the superiority of its model of governance and indeed, scientists agree that China possesses marked systemic advantages in crises such as this one, due to its ability to concentrate governmental power.[79]

Undeniably, the US's apparent inadequacy in tackling the coronavirus' threat, as well as its inward-looking policy approach, have been an asset for Beijing's pursuit of global leadership.[80] Deborah Welch Larson explains that highlighting areas of superiority in relation to a dominant state can directly improve an aspiring great power's international status.[81] The repeated use of the term "incompetent" when referring to the American President and his administration's virus response was thus an unsurprising advantage for Xi. The American government's handling of the virus was even framed at times as a "catastrophic policy blunder,"[82] and what might be "one of the greatest failures of presidential leadership in generations."[83] These harsh analyses should not be overlooked. Political experts like Mireya Solís highlight that the pandemic has truly revealed that leadership can be measured in terms of competent governance.[84] The incompetence of the American administration during the pandemic took many forms and was largely a consequence of an open refusal to form coherent policies based on the advice of experts. The leadership vacuum in the international community reflected the local vacuum in the US, where state officials and governors were left scrambling to find a solution their President refused to provide.[85] It became apparent that the American government was temporally incapable, and frequently unwilling, to contain the extent of the coronavirus crisis.

As the absence of American guidance grew noticeable, the Chinese capacity to handle national and international crises received increasing attention. In the simplest of terms, Xi understood that providing the international system with much needed global goods would not only shed a positive light on the country's material capabilities, but also strengthen the view of its leadership abilities.[86] Whereas in the beginning stages of the pandemic's outbreak one might have thought that Xi's leadership aspirations would be diminished, due to the country's blundered initial response, China's rapid recovery came to stand in stark contrast to the West's continued struggle. While lockdowns were being lifted in Wuhan and businesses could return to nearly full operation, Western cities remained deeply entangled with the growing effects of the pandemic. Leaders from Europe and even the US began to seek the advice and aid of China, marking Xi Jinping triumphant and burnishing his credentials as a leader.[87] This triumph is not a minor one. The distribution of power in the international arena, Yan explains, depends on the relative capability of states.[88] The demonstration of comprehensive capabilities, especially vis-à-vis the deterioration of those of a dominant state, could then exponentially aid a rising power fulfill its aspirations.[89]

Overall, throughout the coronavirus pandemic, Beijing has been able to demonstrate precisely those necessary

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capabilities which Washington lacked. Fukuyama emphasizes the failings of former President Trump in handling the crisis, saying that he blocked the country from being able to effectively operate, and pointing to his incompetence as the primary cause for the US's inadequate response. Most significant within Yan's framework, Fukuyama stresses that even when the crisis necessitated it, Trump was unwilling to change his governance approach.[90] The willingness to reform is at the heart of Yan's perception of how a country's capabilities manifest, and the American administration's refusal to do so therefore accentuates the flaws in its model of governance.[91] In fact, even at the time of writing the book, prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, Yan claimed that the US's political leadership seems incapable of implementing needed reforms domestically, which prevents it from being able to answer the closing of capability gaps between itself and China.[92] China's successful role in the global arena during COVID-19 has consequently made the inadequacies of the US "painfully obvious."[93]

Authority

Authority, *quanwei* in Chinese, is connotated in Yan's work with "prestige or popular trust."[94] As a result, authority can propel actors to follow a certain idea due to their trust in it, and thus uses the confidence of others as its source. Furthermore, international authority is greatly derived of a country's strategic credibility: the consistency between the promises it makes and its practical actions, especially when it comes to honoring its commitments towards allies.[95] Having authority is pertinent for a hegemon, as it is intricately tied with states' voluntary will to fulfill the wishes of the dominant state.[96]

As Forman et al. put it, after its initial stumble, China has consistently portrayed responsible leadership domestically by recognizing the severity of the situation and implementing measures to halt the spread of the coronavirus.[97] Certainly, in the early days of the COVID-19's outbreak, China attempted to silence word of the novel virus' spread and was accused of withholding vital information that could have helped contain the pandemic. Nevertheless, Beijing was able to rapidly recuperate.[98] From mass-testing, to social distancing, to the use of advanced technologies, China seemed profoundly dedicated to battling the virus. The authors add that China was in fact "one of the few countries showing signs of solidarity and providing support to other countries."[99] Indeed, already in the early stages of the pandemic, Beijing showed its benevolence by sending medical supplies to other states and continues to do so today as it distributes vaccines in states with lower- and middle-income, claiming that it is simply fulfilling the role a great power such as itself should.[100] In Yan's model, this consistency between China's words and actions is important not only morally; it is key to basing a country's international authority. Conversely, the seeming 'double standard' of the US is harmful for its status within the international system and the authority it seeks to have.[101]

Moreover, former President Trump's rhetorical inconsistencies were not the only factor damaging the US's authority during the COVID-19. The trustworthiness of the superpower was further impaired by the seeming refusal of the former president and his administration to listen to the advice of public health experts, let alone adhere to it. The mayor of Miami, Francis Suarez, publicly expressed his frustration with the negligent leadership on the side of the president. Acknowledging that mask-wearing would have been instrumental for the containment of the coronavirus' spread, Suarez said that people saw no reason to do so, as their own president was not following these measures nor recognizing their value. In a rather reflecting statement, he added lamentably that people follow those who are meant to be leaders.[102] Notably, Suarez was far from being the only political figure in the country to express dismay at the administration's behavior in the time of the outbreak. A senator from New Jersey said that "to call Trump's response to COVID chaotic [and] incoherent doesn't do it justice,"[103] and that it is harming America and American lives. These calls were joined by a letter to Congress that was signed by over 30,000 global health and international law experts, who protested the Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the WHO, pointing to the direct cost it would have on the lives of citizens, as well as the lives of people around the world.[104] Even in later stages of the pandemic, in September of 2020, the American government refused to join COVAX, the Vaccine Global Access initiative, and was unwilling to commit itself to vaccine aid to its allies.

As Yanzhong Huang writes, this American approach allowed China to fill a leadership position the US had essentially abdicated.[105] Yan himself agrees that an approach which disregards the value of global alliances undermines international leadership.[106] Welch Larson also admits that former President Trump saw alliances as a burden to the state,[107] and Solís adds that such an approach, especially during a time like that of the coronavirus pandemic,

puts the US in a precarious position globally. She explains that the large policy swings in the US between one administration and the next are causing noticeable damage to the credibility of the country.[108] Yan points to the untrustworthiness of political leaders and state policies as a significant obstacle to their ability to establish themselves as an international authority. The reverberations of this lack of trust are felt in the unwillingness of fellow states to collaborate for the resolution of common challenges and threats.[109] In the age of the COVID-19 pandemic, a global crisis which solidified the importance of global governance, the hesitance to trust a major power is more than problematic; it is shedding a concerning light on future cooperation prospects. As the US stumbled with forming a coherent stance on the novel virus, China was able to gain trust, in Yan's terms, by asserting policies that were in line with the advice of experts and by conveying its desire to work collaboratively.

Apart from this increased trust, China also ensured to present its model of governance as that which allowed it to be a reliable source of expertise and aid during the global crisis.[110] In the eyes of Beijing, the central cause for the failure of Western democracies to contain the virus at home was their ineffective governmental model. The authoritarian system in place in China had been imperative in enabling the CCP to take the needed measures against the virus while also safeguarding the country's economy, showcasing the strengths of its design. The ways in which liberal democracies, especially the US, stumbled in their response and containment efforts served as proof, as far as China was concerned, that these countries are unequipped to handle crises of the sort.[111] As some concede, much of the confusion and uncertainty which were sown in the US and globally derived of American institutions showing their inadequacy, encouraging distrust in the government.[112]

That is a primary reason why the pandemic has revealed Washington as isolationist when it matters most, and ill-prepared to lead the international community's response. Precisely because such a significant amount of the legitimacy the US typically enjoys at home and abroad flows from its domestic policies and international contributions, the COVID-19 pandemic has become a test the country sorely failed.[113] Speaking of China's crisis governance during the coronavirus' phases, Asian policy scholars argue that the centralized model of China and its strong bureaucratic institutions were highly effective in containing the spread of the pandemic.[114] These observations were repeatedly shared, singling the Chinese grid governance as particularly suitable for pandemic outbreaks.[115] If the confidence of followers is the source of authority, as Yan claims, then China's authority may have spiked during the pandemic.[116] While Beijing built a strong case for why fellow states should see it as a reliable figurehead in such public health global challenges, Washington all but left an 'open door' for another leader to take over.[117] The following chapter thus engages with the way China's leadership was perceived in the MENA, and how this contributed to the country's growing regional legitimacy. This preliminary investigation into the Middle East case study will attempt to illustrate how China's hegemonic challenge to the US can manifest in the post-pandemic era.

Legitimacy

US-China Competition in the MENA During the COVID-19 Era

Yan Xuetong asserts that a humane authority derives its power and legitimacy from the way it is being perceived by others: as a benevolent state, able to meet the economic and security needs of fellow countries.[118] Indeed, during the COVID-19 pandemic, China made concerted efforts to display its benevolence and its ability to rise to the occasion as a global leader in times of crisis. These efforts were particularly pronounced in the Middle East, as President Xi capitalized on the opportunity to strengthen existing relationships and build new ones through medical diplomacy and generous aid.[119] China's vaccine diplomacy in the area, for example, is said to have helped it reap "soft-power dividends" with local BRI countries and had regional leaders feeling grateful. These sentiments are important to highlight, as they could translate into increased cooperation and allegiance.[120] The leadership vacuum created by the US during the pandemic was palpable in the Middle East and exacerbated by the practical needs of MENA states. Even countries like Jordan, a close ally of the US, found themselves in cooperating with China. The Chinese vaccine distributed by Sinopharm became the backbone of the Kingdom's inoculation program and subsequently made medical experts in the country reevaluate their previous notions on Chinese-produced pharmaceuticals altogether.[121] Indeed, Chinese vaccines were being purchased and used not only by states

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predisposed to seek non-American solutions, but also by the US's own allies, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt. With China, alongside Russia, having incrementally chipped away at American clout in the region, analysts believe its vaccine diplomacy was an attempt both to further establish itself as an adept scientific leader and to expedite its influence within the Middle Eastern order.[122] Importantly, it seems this attempt was successful. MENA countries' vaccine purchases were arguably driven by diplomatic considerations, which in turn reflect China's growing regional prevalence. As Steven Cook confirms, China's prestige in the MENA is undoubtedly growing – a significant feat in an area which has long been predominantly under the influence of the US. Like in other parts of the world, this upswing was in part propelled by the absence of American guidance, its devaluing of science, and unwavering inward focus.[123]

Likewise, Bamo Nouri and Inderjeet Parmar write how, as the pandemic progressed, Washington's dominance in the MENA was being increasingly challenged in ways which may not be easily reversible. They recognize a realignment of powers within the region, accelerated by the political necessities of the COVID-19. Middle Eastern countries, the authors argue, had to find new ways to operate both independently and collaboratively "as the international co-operative instruments of the US-led liberal order seem[ed] absent and ineffective during the crisis."[124] Notably, this absence has not only pushed China forward, due to the zero-sum nature of political power,[125] but also strengthened its alliance with Iran. With surmounting pressure on Iran by US sanctions and its domestic coronavirus crisis, China became instrumental for the country's ability to tackle the spread of the pandemic, aiding in the form of crucial medical supplies and training. It should come as no surprise then that this help greatly contributed to China's soft power in the MENA.[126] The lack of activity and declining influence of the US in the time of this crisis, and the subsequent vacuum these formed, may lead in the long term to a 'China-oriented' order supported by the country's diplomacy and humanitarian aid. Nouri and Parmar explain that because of the coercive means by which the US historically approached the region, and its leadership failure during the pandemic, its ability to influence local dynamics in the MENA is on the decline. The Trump administration's choice to persist in these ways during a global crisis which necessitated effective and responsive leadership only served to push Middle Eastern countries into partnerships which exclude the US.[127] Arab countries' choice to purchase Chinese vaccines is therefore only a small indication of the brewing partnership between Beijing and the Middle East.[128]

In terms of Yan's framework, China has been specifically able to demonstrate its morality, capability and authority in the MENA region, and thus gain growing legitimacy for itself and its governance model. As quickly became apparent during the crisis, China was more than willing to adhere to international norms of aid and cooperation and demonstrate the type of moral behavior Yan claims are necessary for a state's rise. In the Middle East, this was exemplified both in statements and action. The Chinese Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, marveled at the solidarity between China and the MENA during the stages of the pandemic, and expressed that these times of crisis highlight the shared stake of countries around the world. True to these words, China had collaborated with all Arab states in the region, including those in conflict situations like Syria and Palestine. It sent out medical supplies, hosted dozens of joint meetings with the Arab League and had Chinese medical experts visit Arab countries nearly 100 times.[129] According to Yan, moral behavior can directly contribute to the legitimacy of a state and its leadership, and thereby increase its influence upon others.[130]

In the specific context of MENA, China has importantly been able to assert its commitment to regional norms and demonstrate a morality simultaneously consistent with the international system as well as the local one. Alongside its donations and medical contributions, Beijing reaffirmed its "respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression and non-interference in internal affairs"[131] in a joint statement with Qatar. Moreover, China was able to boost its strategic credibility in the region and the perception of its capabilities. Its rapid economic recovery from the financial effects of the virus' outbreak had been contrasted with the lag of the US, and made economies in the Gulf increasingly reliant on China for developments in areas such as telecommunications.[132] In terms of the vaccine, many Middle Eastern states had placed their trust, sometimes exclusively, in Chinese-produced shots.[133] This trust is of great significance for the vindication of China as an increasingly legitimate player in all realms of crisis-resolution, and illuminates the seeming superiority of its authoritative model in combating such challenges.[134] In Yan's understanding, this trust attests to the capacity of a state to attract an international following.[135] As the theoretical framework of this Capstone project holds, legitimacy is one of the two pillars upon which hegemony stands. China's growing image as a competent leader by MENA countries, and the legitimation of its model

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considering the practical success it has had in aiding the region to combat the spread of the coronavirus, can have lasting reverberations for China's position within the Middle East.

US-China Competition in a Post-Pandemic Middle East

While it is difficult to predict in which ways China's rise will manifest globally in the post-pandemic era, there are several indicators which could suggest why the MENA region should come under scrutiny. Throughout recent years and increasingly so during the COVID-19 crisis, Beijing and its model have received broadening legitimacy in the Middle East. Perhaps the most glaring example of the type of support China is receiving in the region is the overwhelming endorsement of its BRI plans. Countries across the MENA, from Egypt to Saudi Arabia to Iran, have all committed themselves to some form of participation in the Initiative.[136] And the support does not end there. Countries in the Gulf are defying US pressure and hiring the Chinese giant Huawei to build 5G infrastructure in their respective states. Even Israel, the US's longstanding ally, is resisting pressures from Washington asking it to limit economic ties with China, who invests hundreds of millions of dollars in the country's tech sector yearly.[137] As Eyck Freymann succinctly put it: "These countries agree on almost nothing — but they all want closer ties with China."[138]

Although it could appear, at surface level, that the majority of the MENA's interactions with China are limited to economic and infrastructural endeavors, the reality of these relationships is far more complex. The gradual embrace of China into the Middle East is in part driven by its opposition to external interference in sovereign state affairs.[139] Regional leaders are heard being increasingly vocal about their cooperation with China, citing strategic partnerships as motivating these newfound bonds.[140] As many thinkers readily admit, US influence is waning in the Middle East, a fact which gives leeway for China to strengthen its own ties with local leaders and states. The most prominent feature Beijing seeks to emphasize in the MENA is its model of governance and development, one that differs greatly from the Western-connoted model of 'liberal peace,' and rather focuses on stability, aid and investment instead of democratic reform. This model is extremely attractive in a region where development without democracy could be precisely what leaders seek.[141]

Indeed, the decline of the US as a regional hegemon has much to do with its policy choices, and the MENA's dissatisfaction with American policies had only been intensified during the tenure of former President Trump. While Middle Eastern state leaders previously disagreed with the political decision-making of President Obama, but at the very least understood it, it was the Trump administration's "wildly inconsistent"[142] policies that sowed serious doubt about the US's ability to continue serving the same position it had long represented in the region. These inconsistencies can be described in terms of sudden policy swings, public internal disagreements, and mixed messaging to local leaders. Most notably, the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) not only capsized years of multilateral diplomatic efforts, it also "cast profound doubt on the reliability of any U.S. commitments."[143] As Yan writes, when a country's strategic credibility is questioned and its government deemed unreliable, its ability to be an interstate leader can be short-lived.[144] Due to increasing uncertainty about the US's intentions as well as cooperation abilities, regional leaders are progressively turning towards China to secure their economic and strategic interests, a move which has been more than welcomed by Beijing. As the region turns even more turbulent than before, with intra-regional disputes and growing domestic challenges to state leaders, it is naturally less inclined to shape its priorities around the interests of the US in the way it did before. The MENA is becoming less amenable to the control America attempts to exert upon it as it sees a country struggling to commit to neither economic nor political shared objectives.[145] Like Biden's national security adviser Jake Sullivan says, Xi Jinping is pitching the autocratic model as an effective problem-solving mechanism more overtly than ever before. With China's rise in the international arena in general, and in the Middle East in particular, the US will have to find new ways to demonstrate its democratic model works.[146]

A testament to the extent of China's legitimization in the Middle East, a predominantly Muslim region, is the marginal backlash it has received from local leaders over its treatment of the Uyghur people. Over recent years, more and more reports have been surfacing, documenting the incarceration of around 1.5 million Uyghurs in 're-education' camps in the northwest Chinese region of Xinjiang where they live.[147] The Uyghurs are a Muslim minority in the country, who are said to have long suffered from suppression of their ethnic identity and even persecution at the

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hands of the Chinese government. From destroying sacred mosques and temples, to forcefully attempting to assimilate them into the Chinese political culture and re-balance the demographic in Xinjiang through Han migration, it has become gradually apparent that China set itself the distinct mission of controlling the region at any cost.[148] In the camps, the 're-education' of children and adults takes the form of severing the Uyghurs' linguistic and cultural links to their ethnic identity; a process conducted under strict and invasive surveillance.[149] From China's end, these measures are being justified through Confucian notions of fostering social harmony, accompanied by a claimed necessity to counter the potential of Xinjiang becoming a 'breeding ground' for domestic terrorism.[150] Beijing has been able to frame this Muslim minority, because of their ethno-religious identity, under the umbrella of the international War on Terror, and render the Uyghurs a dangerous population seeking to harm the Chinese people.[151]

Surprisingly, China seems to have been able to carry out these policies with little to no criticism from Muslim leaders in the Middle East – arguably a testament of its growing regional influence and legitimacy. The Saudi Crown Prince has praised China for its crackdown on the terroristic potential of the Uyghurs and was remarkably not the only one.[152] His statement was echoed by leaders from Kuwait, Iraq, Egypt, and the UAE, who sent a formal letter to the UN conveying that China's necessary 'counter-terrorism' efforts in Xinjiang have brought "happiness, fulfilment and security"[153] to the region. Iran, Oman and Syria have further expressed their public support for Beijing's right and need to 'de-radicalize' the Xinjiang area from Uyghur hostilities, in staunch support of China's sovereignty rights.[154] Even Tukey, who had previously been a proponent of the Uyghur strife, seeing as they are a Turkic people with an Istanbul-based diaspora, has by now gone quiet on the issue. Moreover, there are even allegations that Erdogan's Tukey had arrested Uyghur people at China's request – a move fueled by the country's growing reliance on Chinese money for its weakened economy.[155] Considering MENA countries' emblematic pan-Muslim sentiments and backing of Muslim minorities worldwide, their overwhelming siding with China's repressive policies against the Uyghurs cannot be cast as anything but a powerful symbol of the legitimacy and influence Beijing is cultivating in the Middle East.[156]

Some writers, in fact, have already begun addressing the MENA region as being 'post-US,' and claim that China can be crowned the biggest winner of this transition.[157] Already being the largest consumer of regional oil, it is now also the only country which has significant economic and political ties with all of the most powerful actors in the Middle East. For Washington, this reality means that "the Middle East is reemerging as an arena of great-power competition."[158] Indeed, the alliances that China is forming in the region, especially with Iran and anti-American militias is concerning for the US and poses threats to its own assets and partnerships in the region. During the Trump presidency, harsh US pressures on the Iranian Republic have only empowered state hard-liners that are considered enthusiastically pro-China. One can expect this bolstered partnership between the two states would serve, among other outcomes, to allow Iran to up its nuclear deal negotiation bargain with the Biden administration.[159] No less substantial, America's more committed allies like certain Gulf countries and Israel are reluctant to take any side in this budding geopolitical rivalry between China and the US. While the contentions between the two great powers are not exclusive to the Middle East, and even span to maritime competition, the MENA is seemingly opening itself up to Chinese engagement. From states to organizations like Hezbollah, to Shiite factions in Iraq, all of which are developing intertwinements with Beijing, the US is facing heightened threats to its regional allies and to its own strategic assets. The importance of protecting these would be a determining factor in America's engagement with China in the MENA in coming years.[160]

An aspect which should further not be undermined is how crucial the Middle East is to President Xi's global aspirations. China's route to becoming the center of the global economy involves the ability to secure access to oil and shipping lanes in the MENA. These have fundamental importance for its geostrategic objectives.[161] There is a lot at stake for China, and it would be willing to travel great lengths in order to continue its expansion. In light of its worsening relationship with the US, China sees it as paramount to secure waterways which the US may later try to cut off in conflict. For this reason, its navy has exponentially grown and is now bigger than its American counterpart, if not more advanced.[162] With the Levant expected to become instrumental for the success of Xi's BRI, China is developing close ties with states that would assist the fulfillment of its ambitions. Through extremely generous loans and aid packages to Arab countries, priced at over twenty billion dollars, as well as promises for extensive employment possibilities for the local population, China has been able to assert its soft power in the region and

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foment an environment that would openly welcome expansionism in the form of the BRI.[163]

Consequentially, China's growing entanglements in the Middle East are almost bound to come at a certain price; one which would weaken its ability to stay neutral in regional disputes. Indeed, the importance of the Middle East for China's BRI prospects means it is re-envisioning the political order of the region, and actively attempting to create one that is multipolar, adhering to its touted model of developmental peace rather than the West's democratic peace. Because of the inherent volatility of the MENA, and China's interests within it, the country may find itself driven into involvement in security questions it has up until now avoided – largely due to the US's own regional role in defending strategic assets important to both actors.[164] With decreasing American military engagement in the region, a process accelerated during the Trump administration, China may find it difficult to be detached from the MENA's conflicts.[165] The UAE and Saudi Arabia, for example, are growing concerned that nuclear negotiations between Iran and the US could bolster the Islamic Republic's assertiveness, or alternatively cause America to entirely abandon the cause. Either way, these sentiments have the potential to propel states to form strengthened military ties with Beijing, which include hosting its military and naval bases in their territories.[166] Gulf countries recognize that China seeks to increase its involvement with the region, and that its wish to protect energy and security assets would only drive it to military advancement in the MENA.[167]

Overall, it remains unknown how the surmounting challenges China has confronted the US with over recent years, and particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, would manifest in the Middle East. Nevertheless, it appears that China and MENA countries are growing inextricably closer, in ways which may necessitate a re-engagement of the US in a region it has long sought to gradually withdraw from.[168] China's rising need to secure energy and strategic assets in the region may eventually necessitate that it mires itself in the geopolitical conflicts of the Middle East. If that is to happen, there might be little choice for the US but to find new ways to reestablish its military and political dominance over the region, even at the cost of turning the MENA into a great-power rivalry locus.

Conclusion

This article has taken on the task of highlighting the ways in which China has been able to challenge the US's hegemony in the international system during the coronavirus pandemic. It further sought to underscore the growing importance the MENA region may have as the two countries find themselves battling to regain or strengthen their legitimacy around the world. The scholarship presented in this paper was used to convey the existing literature gap which has yet to address how China's model of governance and leadership approach are progressively aiding it in undermining the predominance of the US in the current world order, and especially in the Middle East. Yan Xuetong's work has been key to the theoretical framework and purpose of this paper, as its theory of moral realism focuses on the importance of leadership in allowing a state to rise within the international system and even eclipse another dominant power. Furthermore, his work was utilized to convey the unique and meaningful insight the CS can provide in understanding global power dynamics. Adopting Yan's framework, based in the core importance of morality, authority, capability, enables us to consider a perspective that could explain unfolding hegemonic shifts. The trajectory Yan hoped China will embark on in writing in book certainly seems to be in motion, albeit discrepantly.

Through the pillars of leadership and legitimacy, which were set out as the foundations of hegemony, this paper argued that China has demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic the very morality, capability and authority Yan deems are crucial for an aspiring rising state. It was argued that by collaborating with fellow states and international organizations, showcasing crisis-containment capabilities and competent leadership, as well as having policies consistent with promises and fostering trust, Beijing has deeply challenged the perception of Washington's leadership worldwide. The American government's failures in addressing the multifaceted demands of the coronavirus crisis have only served to exacerbate its diminishing image as a competent hegemon for the world order. Considering the leadership vacuum the US seems to have opened at the time of the COVID-19 globally, this paper attempted to analyze how the growing legitimacy China and its model of governance are gaining in the Middle East could translate into geopolitical contestation in the region. It was demonstrated that close attention needs to be paid to the MENA, as an area volatile in its own right and predisposed to anti-Western sentiments, where China is getting further entangled as part of its global ambitions. In a post-coronavirus era, with a declining US dominance in the

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international arena and a rising China, newly galvanized by the leadership and legitimacy credentials it has gained, the Middle East may become fertile grounds for great-power rivalry and a possible hegemonic shift.

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