

Editorial to the special issue on “Asian Powers in the Eastern Mediterranean”

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This special issue examines the increasing engagement of Asian countries in the Eastern Mediterranean. The region stands at the heart of many significant issues. While warming 20% faster than the global average,¹ the region has significant and largely unexploited renewable energy potential. At the crossroads of key global maritime and land trade routes connecting Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, the region is also bestowed with remarkable hydrocarbon reserves, fuelling geopolitical tension between Turkey and the Republic of Cyprus (the RoC)²/Greece in the absence of a delimitation regime agreed upon by all littoral states. Moreover, the region serves as a prominent irregular migration source and route to Europe. Along with the protracted Israel-Palestine conflict, ongoing regional tensions (e.g., Syria, Libya), poor governance, and environmental degradation all serve as push factors for migrants.

Asian actors’ increasing political economic penetration in the region will likely transform the geopolitical economic landscape of the Eastern Mediterranean conundrum. Hence it is useful to set out a general framework at global and regional levels, before elaborating on the articles included in this special issue.

The Global Level

Power Shift to Asia

The American financial system or ‘dollar-Wall Street regime’³ -led crisis in 2008 precipitated the Euro-zone crisis, which hit Western developed economies more severely than developing non-Western economies.⁴ This phenomenon reheated the debate over the declining US imperial order⁵ and ‘reorientation’⁶ of the global political economy towards Asia. In this vein, there have emerged studies postulating ‘the third great power shift’⁷ heralding ‘the end of unipolarity and

the Pax Americana'.⁸ Reminiscent of Antonio Gramsci's *interregnum* in which 'the old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born', it seems that the ruling (liberal) order has lost its hegemonic capacity to rule through consent. At this critical juncture, the question to raise whether it is 'the time of monsters' (i.e. alliance of non-democratic regimes) to write the script of the emerging international order as a tragedy. Under 'the great delusion'⁹ that the United States (US) maintains its ability to sustain liberal peace, Sakwa stresses the anti-hegemonic alignment of China and Russia against the liberal world order.¹⁰

On the optimistic side, Acharya contemplates a 'multiplex world order'¹¹ foreseeing the survival of only some of the liberal elements in a series of complex, multiple cross-cutting international/regional orders. In this system, Acharya claims that the presence of multiple powers could lead to greater international cooperation and stability if Western powers accept to share leadership with the rising powers. Referring to Henry Kissinger's emphasis on the need for a coherent strategy to establish a world order within the various regions and to relate these regional orders to one another, Acharya emphasises the critical challenge of maintaining open and inclusive regional orders.¹² For the purposes of this special issue, this refers to the Eastern Mediterranean order.

Historically, Asia has been the most prosperous territory in the world. In the mid-18th century, more than half of the world's population lived in Asia and more than half the world's products were made there. However, later, Asian's economic, political, and military power gradually was lost to Europe and North America, owing to geographical discoveries and colonialism. In the 21st century, global economic development is favouring Asia again, as predicted by the Asian Development Bank. Asian's gross domestic product (GDP) will reach 52% of the world's entire GDP in 2050¹³, and China's share of global GDP jumped from 3.05% in 2000, to 13.68% in 2010, and then 18.33% in 2020.¹⁴

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was introduced by President Xi Jinping in 2013 during his visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia. 'Belt' refers to the 'silk road economic belt' which is a proposed overland transportation route modelled on the historical trade route to the West. 'Road' is the '21st century maritime silk road', referring to the Indo-Pacific Sea route through Southeast Asia to South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. It is, therefore, a global infrastructure development initiative to enhance regional connectivity with a target completion year is 2049. It aims to overcome infrastructure difficulties and is expected to accelerate the economic growth of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Hence, investigating the mechanisms behind this power shift to Asia is an interesting and intriguing topic. The Eastern Mediterranean has been an important connection between Asia, Africa, and Europe throughout its history. Therefore, it will be even more interesting to observe how Asia's role in this region will evolve. China's role in the Eastern Mediterranean after the commencement of the BRI, for instance, has yet to be seen and analysed. This special issue will shed light on these important topics.

After the end of Cold War, the US's hegemonic position was undermined by the rise of India and China. Fouskas and Gökay¹⁵ believe there is a global power shift away from North America and Western Europe to the emerging economies of, primarily, Asia. From a power perspective, Nye suggests that soft power is the ability to co-opt rather than coerce. It involves shaping the preferences of others through appeal and attraction, e.g. culture, political values, and foreign policies.¹⁶ Smart power¹⁷ is the combination of hard and soft power, underscoring the necessity of a strong military, but also requiring heavy investments in alliances, partnerships, and initiatives at all levels to expand one's influence and establish the legitimacy of one's actions.¹⁸ Articles in this issue are going to discuss the dynamic interactions of hard, soft, and smart power in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

Global Issues

This power shift to Asia has not come about, however, through a smooth transition process. Just the opposite, we are increasingly living in a world battered by various grave problems, including inequality, pandemics, climate change, and migration. Their impacts are not evenly distributed, and most of the time, one constituency's ability to benefit from a situation might exacerbate the problems of others in far territories. Global economic inequalities pervade every aspect of society, and by multiplying themselves, result in overwhelming outcomes at the poles. As a result, policy choices are made in favour of the richest and most powerful people. When inequality in outcomes and processes penetrates deeply into society, the disparities cause direct harm to all. This sometimes even paves the way for violence within society, including inter-state and civil wars. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic has further exposed the inequalities established in every aspect of society. During the pandemic, while the rich increased their fortunes at astounding rates, millions more people were forced into poverty. Most astonishingly, perhaps, is the fact that most governments in the Western world have quickly reduced precautions against Covid-19 with the aim of preventing further damage to the economy, leaving individuals to face a deadly disease alone. In a world where the only protections against

Covid-19 are the mask and the vaccine – which also does not provide 100% protection – vaccinated individuals, who are ‘bored of quarantines’, have started to be active spreaders of the virus under the banner of ‘obtaining their previous freedom.’ In other words, the vulnerable, those with sicknesses other than Covid-19, the elderly, and the disabled are left to suffer from another layer of inequality owing to the desire to re-launch the global economy. Their lives are put at risk because of the spoiled freedom requests of those who are currently healthy and young. Therefore, the pandemic has not only highlighted established inequalities and the weaknesses of the healthcare system but also the indifference of people to each other’s lives. The challenges humanity faces today are not limited to inequality and the pandemic, however. Climate change continues to pose an extremely serious challenge. Yet, despite it being a continuously discussed topic, there is no obvious productive response. Although there is significant consensus about the anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases, the actions that need to be taken to mitigate temperature increases are not being implemented.¹⁹ Last but not least, despite the support for free movement of finance and goods, free movement of people between countries remains a distant dream for humanity. Quite the opposite, migration is problematized by many, and xenophobia against various nations and classes is on the rise.²⁰ Forced migration owing to civil wars, violence, political suppression, economic problems, and climate change also remains a significant problem. The screens of internet newspapers are full of photos of suffering migrants moving from one place to another. However, the root causes of domestic or international migration are never fully discussed.

The Regional Level

Current situation in the Eastern Mediterranean

As of Spring 2022, the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean is not very bright.²¹ The promises of the Arab Spring are still not fulfilled.²² Societies are suffering from authoritarian practices at all levels of social life. Inequality is striking. When countries in the region are examined by looking at Gini coefficients, inequality in Turkey is above the world average, and in others, it is around average. Youth unemployment is rising, and most young talent remains undiscovered.²³ Violence in society is also dangerously high, as unhappiness and dissatisfaction with life is widespread. Political Islamic movements are still active and gender equality remains a distant promise.

Moreover, recently discovered oil and gas resources have created yet another source of conflict among countries in the region. A new intergovernmental organization, the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, was formally established in 2020. Even though it gives hope to some as a prime example of regional multilateralism, Lebanon and Turkey are excluded from the Forum, owing to their maritime border disputes with Israel, Greece, and Cyprus. Although it is designed to help regional cooperation and social integration, the Forum is also destabilizing efforts to switch to renewable energy by promoting further fossil fuel use. The Eastern Mediterranean, however, is already a climate change hot spot, and triggering more greenhouse gas releases in the region is hypocritical when it is resplendent with renewable resources such as wind, sun, and water. Rather than cooperating in a just way over renewable energies, establishing a semi-regional gas forum and excluding some countries is feeding the profits of multinational oil and gas companies rather than serving the needs of local people. Finally, as the Mediterranean is a gateway to the European Union, migratory flows in the Mediterranean are still viewed as a thing to be ‘solved’ or ‘stopped’. Nevertheless, these migration routes remain the principal routes for many migrants to achieve their dream lives. Also, many Europeans are unaware of the challenges that migrants face during their route, including the difficulties they have even getting to the Mediterranean coast. Most migrants, many of whom are from Sub-Saharan Africa, suffer from extremely dire conditions and are exposed to horrific violence. While the main cause of such migration, globally uneven development, remains unresolved, people continue to perceive the Mediterranean very differently: a sunny holiday zone for some, a resourceful source of wealth for others, and a violent yet aspirational destination for many poor.

Asian contact with the Eastern Mediterranean

Under these circumstances, various Asian countries appear to have set economic engagement with the region as a priority. Russia and Iran remain significant trading partners for the region.²⁴ In addition, Russia is investing in several energy and infrastructure projects, like the Akkuyu power plant in Mersin, Turkey. For Japan, examples include the scrapped Japanese-Turkish plans for a nuclear power plant and negotiations for an Economic Partnership Agreement with Turkey. In addition, through BRI, China has been investing in various ports in the region, for example in Piraeus in Greece, as gateways to European markets.²⁵ India and South Korea also stand as two other Asian countries with increasing economic aspirations for the region, despite being comparatively less engaged so far.

In addition to economic links between the Eastern Mediterranean region and Asian countries, we are also witnessing increasing military and diplomatic engagements. For instance, for Russia, deteriorating relations with NATO and the US, terrorist attacks emanating from the Middle East, and increasing military activity in the region (e.g., Syria and to a lesser extent to Libya), have necessitated intensified political dialogue with regional powers. To date, China's political engagements with the region have been comparatively less. However, they are rising at an increasing rate too, e.g., contacts at the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, China's humanitarian support to Syria, and Morsi's selection of China as the destination of his first official visit outside the Arab world etc.

The developing relationships between the Eastern Mediterranean region and Asian countries has attracted increasing scholarly attention too. To that end, the 'Asian Powers in the Eastern Mediterranean' online conference was successfully held by the Yaşar University Center for Mediterranean Studies, together with the International Business School of Guangdong University of Finance and Economics, and the University of East London Centre for the Study of States, Markets and People, on 24th September 2021. It attracted around 100 scholars from various countries.²⁶ These academic interactions form the knowledge foundations of this special issue.

Contributions

To reflect on how Asian powers' involvement has been shaping a region in flux, the articles collected in this special issue capture various current developments (e.g., global power shift, the BRI, climate change, the political economy of energy, regional conflicts). One significant feature of this special issue is that it brings together academics who adopt diverse theoretical orientations, such as realism, liberalism, multiculturalism, and critical theories. They criticize different issues and propose different solutions to problems. All these varying stances and problematizations about the Eastern Mediterranean probably reflect the many roads the region could take in the future.

In their paper, Shlykov and Koldunova investigate Russia, as an old conventional player, and China, as a new player, with regard to their relationships in the Eastern Mediterranean. Russia's perception of this region had been mainly geopolitical, while China has taken a more geo-economics-orientated perspective. The competition between Russia and the West leaves room for the development of Russo-Chinese interaction in the Eastern Mediterranean. Owing

to a lack of direct competition, Russia has acknowledged China as a partner in the Eastern Mediterranean, which could enhance its strategic capabilities.

Iran is another prominent actor shaping the geopolitical trajectories of the Eastern Mediterranean. Noting its bridging functions between various regions, including Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, Altunışık and Göçer utilize the novel concept of ‘cuspness’ to make sense of Iran’s growing actorness in the Eastern Mediterranean. Thanks to its partnership in extra-regional projects, particularly the BRI, Iran’s ‘cusp’ position in-between different regions has entered a new phase. The authors note Iran’s statecraft in using the available tools of ‘cuspness’ under the limitations of domestic (e.g. contending perspectives concerning the country’s foreign policy role), regional (e.g. Saudi Arabia), and international factors (e.g. American sanctions).

Inspired by the material characteristics of silk, Hayriye and Duan introduce the term ‘Silky involvement’ to conceptualise the tone of China’s involvement in the Eastern Mediterranean, which is different compared to their western counterparts. When it exceeds its direct sphere of influence, China’s foreign policies are more likely to rely on multilateral organisations, such as the United Nations. China has emphasised its ‘non-interference policy’ and economic issues. Taking China’s BRI as opportunities for Greece and Cyprus as an example, more and more Eastern Mediterranean countries believe China is a balancing factor that supports their economic problems and geopolitical struggles.

China’s BRI is claimed as an example of south-south cooperation by the Chinese administration. In this light, in his paper, Gülseven examines this initiative and its alternatives, such as the G7’s Build Back Better World proposal and the European Union’s Global Gateway programme. China’s development engagement in Egypt, according to Gülseven, replicates the pattern of North-South relations. Gülseven believes that infrastructure aid initiatives from China and Western aid donors in Egypt are partners in serving the global capitalist system. Although China and the West compete for natural resources and to acquire markets, they collaborate to jointly exploit underdeveloped countries and the qualified labour in these countries. Hence, these are expected to evolve into co-existing and harmonized initiatives in the future.

By focusing on renewable energy investments from China to the East Mediterranean, Hoffmann and Ergenç examine the role of China in reshaping the geopolitics of energy in the region. Nevertheless, contrary to most mainstream analyses, they do not study how China

threatens the existing order established by the transatlantic allies in the region, nor do they salute the changes as a victory against the established Western hegemony. Instead, by examining the case of the Benban solar plant in Egypt, they discuss whether Chinese renewable energy investments in the region should be read within the wider global political economy of decarbonisation, or as an element of China's geostrategic positioning in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In their paper, Zou and Işık study the impact of China's increasing seaport investments in the Mediterranean region as part of its BRI. Western European countries have long dominated seaport development and operation in the region. However, nowadays, China is also appearing as a new player in this crucial sector in the Mediterranean, both as an investor and an operator. The paper examines the main characteristics of China's seaport investment in the region and discusses whether China in the Mediterranean is a status-quo competitor or a partner for the European Union. It deliberates on the mixed attitudes towards Chinese investments in the EU and invites China to adopt an inclusive multilateralist approach.

Notes

¹ WWF, 'The climate change effect in the Mediterranean: six stories from an overheating sea', 2021, pp.3.

² Turkey does not recognize the Republic of Cyprus, instead referring to it as the Greek-Cypriot administration.

³ P. Gowan, *The Global Gamble: Washington's Faustian Bid for World Dominance*, Verso, London, 1997. For the same author's analysis on the 2008 financial see also; P. Gowan, 'Crisis in the heartland: consequences of the new Wall Street system', *Estudos Avançados*, 23, 2009, pp. 49–72.

⁴ V. K. Fouskas and C. Dimoulas, *Greece, Financialization and the EU: The Political Economy of Debt and Destruction*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

⁵ V. K. Fouskas and B. Gökay, *The Fall of the US Empire: Global Fault-Lines and the Shifting Imperial Order*, London, Pluto Press, 2012.

⁶ A. G. Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, University of California Press: Berkeley, 1998.

⁷ F. Zakaria, *The Post-American World and the Rise of the Rest*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 2008.

⁸ C. Layne, 'This time it's real: the end of unipolarity and the Pax Americana', *International Studies Quarterly*, 56(1), 2012, pp. 203–213.

⁹ J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2018.

¹⁰ R. Sakwa, 'Stasis and change: Russia and the emergence of an anti-hegemonic world order' in E. Parlar-Dal and E. Erşen (eds.), *Russia in the Changing International System*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 17–38.

¹¹ A. Acharya, *The End of American World Order*, Cambridge: Polity, 2018, pp.1–20.

¹² Acharya, op.cit., p.99.

¹³ Asian Development Bank, 'Asia 2050: Realizing the Asian Century', 2011.

<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/28608/asia2050-executive-summary.pdf> accessed on 20/03/2022 (accessed 22.03.2022).

¹⁴ For China's share of global GDP, please see [https://www.statista.com/statistics/270439/chinas-share-of-global-gross-domestic-product-gdp/#:~:text=China's%20share%20of%20global%20gross%20domestic%20product%20\(GDP\)%202010%2D2026&text=The%20graph%20shows%20China's%20share,share%20was%20about%2018.33%20percent](https://www.statista.com/statistics/270439/chinas-share-of-global-gross-domestic-product-gdp/#:~:text=China's%20share%20of%20global%20gross%20domestic%20product%20(GDP)%202010%2D2026&text=The%20graph%20shows%20China's%20share,share%20was%20about%2018.33%20percent) (accessed 16.03.2022).

¹⁵ V. Fouskas and B. Gökay, *The Disintegration of Euro-Atlanticism and New Authoritarianism: Global Power-Shift*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2018.

¹⁶ Nye, J., 'Soft Power', *Foreign Policy*, 80, 153-171, 1990.

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- ¹⁷ Nye, J., 'Get smart: combining hard and soft power', *Foreign Affairs*, 88(4), 2009.
- ¹⁸ Nye, J., *The Future of Power*. New York: Public Affairs, 2011.
- ¹⁹ J. Dupuis, and P. Knoepfel, 'The adaptation policy paradox: the implementation deficit of policies framed as climate change adaptation', *Ecology and Society* 18(4): 31, 2013.
- ²⁰ E. Turhan, and M. Armiero, 'Cutting the fence, sabotaging the border: migration as a revolutionary practice', *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 28 (2), 2017, pp. 1-9.
- ²¹ B. Aras and Ş. Kardaş, "Geopolitics of the New Middle East: perspectives from inside and outside", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 23(3), 2021, pp.397-402.
- ²² S. Roy-Mukherjee, 'Connecting the dots: The Washington Consensus and the 'Arab Spring'', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 17(2), 2015, pp. 141-158.
- ²³ Sika, N., 'Youth socio-economic and political grievances: bringing the 'political' back into understanding contestation in the MENA', *Mediterranean Politics* 26(3), 2021, pp. 330-348.
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- ²⁵ B. Wu, "China and the new Middle East", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 23(3), 2021, pp. 443-457.
- ²⁶ D. Gönenç, E. Doruk, Q. A. Huang, E. İşeri, and Y. G. Yu, (eds.), 'Asian Powers in the Eastern Mediterranean Abstract Booklet', ISBN: 978-975-6339-87-9 Izmir, Xi'an, and London, 2021. https://cms.yasar.edu.tr/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Abstract-booklet_-Asian-powers-in-the-eastern-med-1.pdf (accessed 22.03.2022).