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Sweden

Master Thesis

Reinventing the Middle Kingdom

A case study of Chinese spread of authoritarianism through International Organizations



Author: Anton Altgård
Supervisor: Martin Nilsson
Examiner: Daniel Silander
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Abstract

The liberal theory of international relations primarily associates international cooperation with liberal democratic states, to the point that a theory of scholars Poast and Urpelainen claim that international cooperation with consolidated democracies through international organizations may boost the democratization of or at least prevent democratic backsliding in non-consolidated democracies. This paper investigates the possibility of decoupling these theories from democracies and democratizing by examining whether Chinese efforts within the framework of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road foreign policy project have a similar but reverse effect on its target states, prompting developments in authoritarian directions. Though the results of study are inconclusive on account of the relative youth of the studied IOs, they indicate a strong possibility that could do with further study.

Keywords

ASEAN, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, authoritarianism, Belt and Road Initiative, China, democracy, democratization, democratic backsliding, international organizations, liberalism, one-China Policy, realism, rational actor theory



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List of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASEAN	The Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
EU	European Union
IO	International organization
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
UN	United Nations
WTO	World Trade Organization



1 Introduction

International cooperation between sovereign states has been a recurring feature of the international system for some time, as has the creation of international organizations (IO) that essentially codify and systematize such arrangements. Though IOs have been tried and tested by many forms of government to date, the most successful examples of such organizations from the post WWII-era on have been created by and are therefore primarily associated with the western world, and so by extension with the liberal democratic system of government. The European Union (EU) or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are the foremost examples here, both being associations of chiefly democratic states with relatively successful track records in achieving the respective purposes of their organizations. Juxtaposed against the all-encompassing, multi-purpose and all too often deadlocked United Nations (UN) that is comprised of a wider variety of state types, it is unsurprising that the longevity and relative success of the EU and NATO have prompted the view that it is consolidated democracies that take interest in, excel at, and succeed in generating considerable public goods through international cooperation. Membership in IOs of consolidated democracies are therefore deemed highly attractive to non-member states. As in accordance with the liberal theory of international relations democracies moreover are presumed to favor cooperation with other democracies, membership criteria in these IOs tends to generate further democratization in member states with less consolidated democracies, and to provide both strong incentives for democratization and protection against democratic backsliding for non-member states seeking to join the IO in order to access its benefits. (Poast and Urpelainen, 2018: 65) While these relationships are essentially verified developmental trajectories, the chiefly pro-democratic slant of Poast and Urpelainens' theory has of late been rendered problematic by the resurgence of strong authoritarian states that have been verified to export their own



methods and values through international ties that increasingly resemble the IOs of western democracies. If these states can manage to organize IOs of comparable benefits, it could feasibly be presumed that they by extension might embellish their alternative systems of governance with an attraction factor like that of consolidated democracies.

The backdrop to the possibility is how resurgent non-democratic states like China and Russia have exerted influence beyond their borders through bilateral ties for over a decade, for instance spreading methods of control such as surveillance technology as means of bolstering the stability of their international partners, and so also the stability of their mutual ventures. (Deiber & Crete-Nishihata, 2012; Polyakova & Meserole, 2019) Both states have participated in various international organizations for decades and have of late also begun to form their own IOs in their respective spheres of influence. While so far it is essentially a form of copying the modus operandi of consolidated democracies, the point of interest is that these states continue to reject liberal democracy in favor of other systems of governance for their respective polities, and by extension as a preferred system of governance in their cooperation partners. It therefore must be assumed first and foremost that consolidated democracy is not a prerequisite for IO ventures, secondly that democratization is not a prerequisite for membership in the IOs of these states for would-be member states, and thirdly that democratization by extension is a highly unlikely result of participation therein. This, in turn, begets several questions. For one, if democracy is not a crucial element for successful IO ventures, it prompts inquiring into what other parameters that factor into the outcome of IO ventures and so explain why some IOs achieve better results than others. It moreover bears wondering whether Poast and Urpelainens' theory applies across the board, with the system of governance of the leading state of the IO venture more so than an implausible default setting of democracy as the model of guidance for partner states that seeks to benefit from the venture. If so, it would be feasible to assume an outcome not of



democratization but rather of reverse developments in member states and prospective member states of IOs led by non-democratic states, whether in terms of IO-based connection causing democratic backsliding or reinforcing pre-existing elements of authoritarianism in the member state.

Addressing the above inquiries, this study seeks to investigate whether a reverse, authoritarian-inducing form of Poast and Urpelainens' theory exists through a case study of international cooperation through IOs of non-democratic states. While both China and Russia are potential orchestrators of this proposed phenomenon, a marked difference in both their societal organizations and their governments' respective interests and preferences in terms of foreign policy tools suggest China to be the most likely state to exhibit it. Focus will therefore be on Chinese IO Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) that was formed in 2015, and its prominent role in the Chinese government's substantial foreign policy project the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that was launched in 2013. The study commences with an outline of these international ventures and their primary target states, following which these target states are examined for signs of ongoing Chinese influence. Though the topic of research is primarily empirical of nature, verification of the presumed phenomenon would not only call for a revision of Poast and Urpelainens' theory, but also have theoretical implications for how such findings effectively would constitute a challenge to the precepts of liberal theory.

2 Theory

2.1 Previous research

The logic behind the connection between international cooperation and democratization is firmly grounded in the liberal theory of the field of international relations, what with its emphasis both on international cooperation as a means of mutual gains for states and the preference of



democratic states to pursue such ends together with democratic partners. In brief, it supposes that democracies prefer peaceful and productive relations with other democracies, and the desire to gain such relations to democratic states to access the yields thereof boosts the democratization of non-democratic states. (Doyle, 2016: 59) Poast and Urpelainen detail the mechanics of these relationships in “Organizing democracy: how international organizations assist new democracies”, using among others the example of the Baltic states’ path to EU- and NATO-membership following the collapse of the Soviet bloc in Europe. Mutual gains in this context tend to be considerable public goods, whether in terms of economic development, security, the pooling of resources (Poast and Urpelainen 2018: 7), or the provision of technical or material cooperation and assistance (Poast and Urpelainen 2018: 34). As such public goods in turn are deemed attractive from the point of view of non-members, these international organizations tend to be courted by hopeful prospective member states, whereas the evident preference for like-minded states among existing members turns democratization into a tool for these prospective members to increase their chances of a successful membership application process. Poast and Urpelainen also explain that IOs of consolidated democracies often are not open to democratizing states, either because of geographical distance or because of steep entry requirements that the democratizing state cannot feasibly attain. Democratizing states therefore tend to join related IOs, form IOs of their own with states of similar circumstances closer to home, or reform an IO they are already part of as intermediary steps to joining the IOs of interest, essentially employing the memberships they are eligible for to work towards qualifying for the more attractive IO of choice. This multiple-step process not only has the effect of bolstering the democratization process in the state, but also decreases the risk of democratic backsliding by means of providing incentives to safeguard democratic principles and institutions. (Poast and Urpelainen 2018: 65-66)



To summarize, successful IOs are supposedly primarily the realm of democracies, with consolidated democracies excelling at them, democratizing states aspiring to join or at least copy the consolidated democracies, and this very joining or copying process insulating the democratizing state from reversing to non-democratic governance. By this logic, democracy and international cooperation should be intertwined, and the capacity for international cooperation of a state correlates to some degree its level of democratization. There are plenty of examples that support the claims of Poast and Urpelainen, and so by extension the underlying precepts of liberal theory, as for quite some time after the fall of the Soviet Bloc and the consequential end of the cold war both the number democratized or democratizing states in the world steadily increased, all the while existing IOs expanded and the flora of IOs in the international system steadily increased (Doyle, 2016: 74). However, the underlying assumption that international cooperation with consolidated democracies tend to support democratization and prevent democratic developments could also feasibly imply that the reverse would be possible in the case of a non-consolidated democracy engaging in international cooperation with a non-democratic state. Such possibilities would by the logic of liberal theory have been dismissed as unlikely or even impossible, especially against the backdrop of the presumptions of the inevitable triumph of liberal democracy that in the post-cold war era initially were touted by scholars like Francis Fukuyama. (1989: 5) However, the 21st century's resurgence of powerful non-democratic states onto the international scene increasingly contradicts this supposition, what with mounting evidence of how these states increasingly engage in international relations in a manner akin to consolidated democracies.

Often considered the primary example of an internationally active non-democratic state, Russia is documented as using a mix of stabilizing and destabilizing methods within the economic, political and security sectors in their bilateral relations with other states in general and particularly in former



Soviet Republics as means of steering their developmental trajectories in Russia's preferred direction. Destabilization in this context may come in the form of undermining or meddling in election processes, or as support of secessionist movements in unresolved so-called "frozen conflicts" in countries that have yet to join but gravitate toward the west (Stent, 2019: 153; Lachert, 2019). This type of behavior affirms at least a partial relevance to liberal theory's claim that non-democratic states typically function differently from democracies in their foreign affairs and opens for the point of view that the difference between Russia and other assertive non-democratic states chiefly is Russia's high-global scope on account of its size. Conversely, Russian stabilizing methods diverge from this pattern. Granted, Russian stabilizing measures may encompass political interference in elections or the spread of methods to curb the political rights of the opposition to promote the stability of friendly ruling elites, measures which essentially are comparable those of the destabilizing toolbox, but which focuses on groups or organizations rivalling the government of the target state. Scholar Tolstrup (2009) dubs this as "negative external action" on account of its bellicose connotations, a concept that presumably should be juxtaposed to a positive external action that entails bolstering the cooperation partner (such as the government of the target state) without direct and purposeful negative consequences for another party in the polity. Russian stabilizing measures can also take this form, with political, economic, and military support being provided to strengthen the capacity of the ruling elites of other states both to effectively rule their polities and to in a long-term perspective retain their power, thereby also improving them to remain a long-term cooperation partner for Russia. (Tolstrup, 2009) Russia tends to employ both positive and negative external actions in a manner that cement dependencies and so construct lasting relationships with the target states, to the point that scholars like Tolstrup have already speculated in passing the need to decouple the concept of lasting international cooperation from its long-standing association with democracy as a system of governance.



China is documented as operating in a similar manner to Russia, though it diverges from the Russian model in its preference for positive external action by means of economic incentives that bolster incumbent regimes. This is hardly surprising considering Chinese economic development over the last few decades, as it is in this realm more so than in terms of military power that China has concentrated its efforts to compete with the west on the international arena. From a western point of view this has long been perceived as Chinese-led purchases of western-owned companies and the entry of state-dominated Chinese companies on liberal western markets (Christiansen & Maher, 2017), both of which occur but neither of which have bearing on Chinese IO engagements in ways that resemble consolidated democracies. This comes down to how in the western cases it is Chinese companies rather than the Chinese government that are interacting with western economies, making the Chinese government's involvement at best indirect and in some cases even a matter of theoretical possibility or even outright speculation. Rather it is first and foremost Africa and secondarily eastern European countries has been a venue for verified Chinese international influencing efforts, both providing ample examples of how the Chinese government acts in such relationships. (Stein & Uddhammar, 2021; Brattberg, Le Corre, Stonski & de Waal, 2021) More often than not the economic incentives in such ventures translate to investments in infrastructure or revenue-generating projects, typically funded by favorable loans more so than by immediate cash grants. Regardless of form they more importantly tend to be void of the poverty-alleviating or other specific conditions of similar ventures offered by western countries or organizations, thereby allowing the incumbent government of the target state to both gain legitimacy from the improvements and to employ the benefits of the improvements as they see fit. For the incumbent government of the target state this tends to result in marked capacity improvements, effectively increasing its durability by cementing its hold on power. For the Chinese, these projects tend to be tied to the use of



Chinese contractors, favorable agreements for Chinese trade, and in applicable cases sustained export to China of strategically important natural resources, thereby strengthening both the Chinese government's ties to the country and its immediate returns on the investment. (Bader, 2015; Stein & Uddhammar, 2021)

Once economic incentives are established the Chinese influence tends to spill over to other sectors, though the manner and pace of these spillover effects differ depending on the capacity and receptivity of the partner. Like-minded authoritarian states such as Uganda or Zimbabwe tend to be engaged in collaboration projects for the purpose of diffusing more refined authoritarian methods such as (but not limited to) the Chinese means of cyber control, in effect protecting the Chinese interests vested in the polity by providing the incumbent government with further capacity improvements. Here too Chinese suppliers become central, reinforcing the economic incentives of the cooperation in pace with other exchanges. (Radu, 2019) Target states less likely to be responsive to such exchanges from the start instead tend to face gradual pressure, with continuation or deepening of the by then already commenced economic exchange as the incentive to comply and the threat of reduction or even cancellation as the potential consequences of non-compliance. Chinese requests for target state policy convergence with the so-called one-China policy's claim to mainland Chinese supremacy over territories like Taiwan, Tibet and atolls in the South China Sea tends to be a common starting point, along with constraints of press freedom with regards to how China and topics central to Chinese interests is depicted in national media (von Soest, 2015; Brattberg, Le Corre, Stonski & de Waal, 2021). Granted, China applies such pressures across the board, including toward states that it has few hopes of influencing in these areas. However, the rate of success thereof is markedly higher in cases of close cooperation and interdependence, whereas they tend to have no or even adverse effects in states that lack a comparable relationship with China.



Recapping, both China and Russia are examples of authoritarian states engaging in peaceful and productive relations in the manner of liberal democracies. However, the Chinese with their preference for positive external action stand out as mirroring the supposed receptivity to cooperation ascribed to democratic states by liberal theory. As that implies the premise of democracy as a prerequisite for peaceful relations is faulty, there is reason to suspect that such may also be the case for Poast and Urpelainens' democracy-oriented model for IOs as a vehicle for exercising external influence. This is especially likely as IOs led by authoritarian states have become more prevalent of late, with both Chinese and Russian examples popping up in their respective spheres of influence.

2.2 Theoretic assumptions

The assertion of existing non-democratic IO-based international ventures effectively exposes a potential flaw in both the overarching liberal theory of international relations, and in Poast and Urpelainens' offshoot thereof on the relationship between internationalization through IO memberships and democratization. In brief, liberal theory only truly describes the likely behavior of liberal democratic states in the international system. It does highlight that non-democratic states function differently, but it does not account for how they function, and so by extension also fail to predict developments in how they operate over time. Rather it builds its assumption of a unique democratic propensity for international cooperation on the fact that historically dominant authoritarian states, whether communist or fascist or of a different ideological conviction, instead have tended to act assertively and aggressively internationally to the point where they were more likely to engage in conflict with or even wage war on one another over building lasting cooperation for mutual good. (Doyle, 2016: 59) Tolstrup's examples of Russian negative external actions provide ample evidence of how such behavior still is a recurring feature of the foreign policy of non-democratic states that possess sufficient capacity to pull it off. However, they also highlight the



sophistication of contemporary Russia's application of these methods in comparison to the historical parables, suggesting capacity for enhancement. Tolstrup moreover compares the actions of Putin's Russia to the actions of democratic power-player the USA in Latin America during the cold war and the resulting consequences for the at the time budding democracies of this continent. (2009) The parable negates the non-democracy connection by turning this type of behavior into a possibility for governments regardless of their system of governance, and moreover verifies the developmental variable by contrasting the behavior at the time to the different type of US behavior that is seen in the present.

The disengagement of a state's system of governance from its *modus operandi* implies first and foremost that supposed democratic or authoritarian behavior should not be considered exclusive to that system of governance, and secondly that the behaviors of states regardless of their system of governance are contingent on their circumstances and tend to shift with them. By extension, this implies that a past disinclination to cooperation in states that fit the non-democratic criteria does not automatically equate to a constant lack of capacity for such developments. Rather the assertion that international cooperation between democracies developed over time suggests that this dimension is an area of progression for states in general, which in turn would imply that non-democratic states also are not static and so may have adapted to changing circumstances by espousing methods hitherto associated with democracies. This could be explained by the concept of the state as a unitary actor in international relations, which stands in contrast to how liberal theory rather accounts for the state as composed of a plurality of actors. Unitary actors are essentially centralized, highly regulated organizations that do not allow for diverging perspectives or agendas, whereas a non-unitary actor may possess a variety of both depending on the branch or department thereof that is consulted. While chiefly a matter of a state's internal organization, unitary actors are typically described as more unilateral players on the international



stage, and so more inclined to engage in value-maximizing activities that are likely to be detrimental to and therefore could cause conflict with other states or actors. In comparison, an entity that itself is divided into several actors is associated with a lower threshold for internal conflicts that may prevent decisive external actions, as various internal actors with a stake in the outcome of the state's foreign affairs will seek to influence the actions of the state to bring about outcomes, they themselves consider favorable. (Carlsnaes, 2016: 120-121)

Liberal democracies are pluralist by default, and so feature this aspect to varying extents. The conflict-prone non-democracies of liberal theory may on the other hand have been unitary actors in the past, a notion that seems especially relevant if the objects of comparison are historical regimes such as Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, or for that matter the communist China that first emerged from the decades-long Chinese Civil War in the 1950s (Carlsnaes, 2016: 114). However, that does not mean that all non-democratic states in history have been unitary actors, or that non-democratic states of today should remain so for that matter. On the contrary, the increasing plurality of actors on the international stage is not only a feature of liberal democracy but is also an outcome that is associated with globalism. This comes down to how globalism's increasing cross-border ties on multiple levels and in multiple sectors reduce state governments from their once-dominant stakeholder role in foreign affairs to one of many such stakeholders, alongside among others private companies and non-governmental interest organizations. (Kacowicz & Mitrani, 2016: 190-192) As globalism is not a phenomenon restricted to democratic states, it stands to reason that non-democratic states too have experienced similar developments and so also may have adjusted their respective organizations of society accordingly.

Contrary to the suppositions of liberal theory, the concept of a developing non-democratic state would moreover not be a first. Rather there are historical examples also of non-democratic states choosing pragmatism



over ideology for purposes of achieving stability and relative prosperity. Linz typology of authoritarianism, for one, distinguishes not only between democratic and non-democratic states, but also between authoritarian and totalitarian states, with the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany serving as examples of the latter category and Franco's post-civil war Spain as an example of the former. (Linz, 2000: 192) These states are depicted as sharing similar characteristics, with elements of terror, mass mobilization and leaders of charismatic authority maintaining the power structure of the governing elite. However, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union displayed marked preferences for conflict and coercion as their respective *modus operandi* in the international system, whereas Franco's similarly right wing-oriented Spain avoided external conflicts and instead chose a balancing act that maintained the government's grip of power without risking outright enmity with other states. This suggests that it is chiefly totalitarian systems that are associated with outright ideological behavior in foreign affairs, supported as they are by more extensive internal control that regulates the private lives of its citizenry to counteract the interference of internal division in its external actions. Authoritarian states in contrast do not command domestic unity as readily for various reasons, and so gravitate toward pragmatic options that do not raise the stakes overmuch. Linz assumes this is a result of how most authoritarian states are ruled by limited cliques of elites that lack the mass mobilization required to rally the populace to the ambitions of the state. (Linz, 2000: 173-174) Franz, in turn, points out that it can also be a matter of perceived threats to the establishment of the non-democratic state. If said threat appears existential, it should be possible both for leaders of limited ruling cliques and for totalitarian leaders with large internal power bases to proceed carefully and aim for options that lessens the risk of escalation or turmoil both at home and abroad. (Franz, 2018: 46-47) A high unto all-encompassing game-changer such as globalization could well be precisely such a threat. Assuming such is the case, and receptibility to it means adapting to the changing circumstances,



it is reasonable to think that a non-democratic state that does so by extension also enables pluralism akin to that of democracies by means of the pluralizing effects of the phenomenon. The actors within the non-democratic state that are generated because of this must be presumed to lack the level of influence of a non-state actor in a democratic state but may still both garner influence in their field and cultivate cross-border connections of their own. That, in turn, might give them a stake in and so reason to seek to influence the foreign policy of their state to the extent that they are able and permitted to. This would in effect mean that the non-democratic government would face similar obstacles to unilateral behavior as democracies do domestically, making the tried and tested ways of democracies an attractive alternative to pursuing the interests of the state over more aggressive or otherwise unilateral activities.

Based on these assumptions, it stands to reason that the system of governance dimension of a state is more of a compatibility parameter than a prerequisite for lasting international cooperation even for liberal democracies. If so, Poast and Urpelainens' concept of a democratization boost to a democratizing partner or would-be partner would be a feasible measure to boost that compatibility, and by extension to improve the chances of a successful endeavor in the long-term. Again, non-democratic states may view the matter similarly, and moreover have ample evidence of liberal democratic endeavors whose ideas they may seek to copy and adapt for their own purposes. While the above rationale would itself be a version of the copying alternative of Poast and Urpelainens' theory, the notable difference resides in how a resourceful non-democracy might neither be democratizing nor engage in international activities to do so, nor might their efforts in deepening their international commitments seem orientated toward joining consolidated democracies so much as rivaling or competing with them with their own clusters of influence. The question, then, is if non-democratic-led IOs operate by the same principles as their liberal democratic counterparts, may they also influence a participating state in a non-democratic direction?



The answer is that such occurrences have already been verified in bi- and multilateral relations with non-democratic states, among other things resulting in the promulgation of dictatorial surveillance methods (Deibert and Crete-Nishihata, 2012: 243-244; Polyakova & Meserole, 2019). If these trends extend to IOs led by non-democratic states, it implies the existence of an antithesis of the liberal peace, with international cooperation between non-democratic states based on shared interests and values, and something akin to “authoritarianization” as an anti-democratization process to align partners in such ventures with the leading state of the IO. While requiring a break with the liberal democratic exceptionalism that underpins liberal theory, it does not so much discount it as it reconciles it with the more traditional rational actor theory of international relations. In brief, rational actor theory explains the behavior of states internationally as pursuing their interests, making both conflict and cooperation into expressions of gain-seeking when it comes to their dealings with states or other actors. (Wohlfort, 2016: 42-43) This concept is already implemented in liberal theory, as shared interests in fact are cited as a prerequisite for cooperation even between liberal democratic states regardless of their supposedly inherent predisposition to cooperation with like-minded states. (Doyle, 2016: 55) The relative success and longevity of IOs like NATO and the EU should in other words not only be attributed to the similar systems of governance of their respective member states, but also to sustained shared interests for the involved parties that together have supplied incentive for maintaining and improving these arrangements. Moreover, a combination of the theories could nuance the supposed non-democratic preference for conflict over cooperation with a rationale for why non-democratic states act differently in the present. In pace with, say, technological development it might no longer be perceived as in the state’s interest to pursue its ends to the point of hostilities, just as developments in trade or economic output may result in a primacy of preserving existing amicable relationships over seeking dispute on issues that have declined in importance.



In summary, the theoretic underpinnings suggests that non-democratic versions of both the liberal peace and Poast and Urpelainens' theory of democracy spreading through IO activities are possible, reducing the democracy-centric outlook of both to at best a democratic advantage in weighing policy options to at worst a matter of luck in historical outcomes that would reduce democracy-centric theories to correlation without causation. Of these, the former seems the more likely alternative. Building on that supposition, non-democratic versions of the liberal peace would exhibit the variable of strong and lasting state interests between member states, likely (but not necessarily) encompassing a perceived threat or other that would prompt long-term strategic efforts to be averted. Non-democratic versions of Poast and Urpelainens' connection between democratization and IO membership would in turn exhibit the variable of similar or increasingly aligning systems of governance between a member state and the leading non-democratic state of an IO. Both variables appear necessary for the conclusion that the supposedly uniquely democratic features of liberal theory may apply to other state types, and for that matter to Poast and Urpelainens' democracy-centric mechanisms of alignment between states through international cooperation, are not so much uniquely liberal democratic as they are means and methods first conceived and espoused by liberal democratic states. Suffice it to say that international cooperation between states with mutual interests must be possible even without shared values, though without a confirmed alignment process it would likely be a short-lived endeavor that would expire once either the purposes of it are achieved or once a more dominant interest of any of the involved parties makes the venture undesirable. Without strong state interests, in contrast, it is more likely that the venture would never have commenced in the first place, as shared values alone are more likely to foster ties through trade or temporary bilateral exchanges (when state interests do arise) than they are to provide a platform for sustained international cooperation. (Wohlfort, 2016: 46)



3 Method and materials

3.1 Aim

The study seeks to verify whether there exists a non-democratic version of the liberal peace, as well as whether there currently exists a reverse application of Poast and Urpelainen's model of democratizing through IO membership led by a non-democratic state, thus resulting in development in a non-democratic direction for its member states. For purposes of delimitation the investigation will be a case study, with focus on one IO of an IO-leading non-democratic country of choice.

3.2 Method

The study attempts to transplant Poast and Urpelainen's theory of democratizing and democracy-boosting through IO engagements from the democracies of their study to a non-democratic context, to test whether IO-grounded activities function by a similar logic but with an anti-democratic outcome if the leading state of the IO is non-democratic. The study is conducted as a case study, focusing on specific IOs of the non-democratic state China. The extrapolation of Poast and Urpelainen's model is chiefly mirrored in the aim of the study, for it requires a break with the underlying theory to be applicable to a non-democratic context. The study is therefore the scholarly equivalent of a two-stage rocket, with inductive analysis of existing research and theory underbuilding a case selection according to the most likely principle and providing the framework for a thorough deductive analysis of the selected case. The deductive part of the study draws upon a mix of quantitative and qualitative materials for analysis, with official documents specifying the objects of study, overarching statistics relaying whether the objects appear to be aligning on governmental level over time, and a mix of scholarly resources and news articles providing more detailed insight where necessary. A more detailed overview of the chosen materials and the rationale for their use is found in the materials section of the study.



3.3 Case selection

The prerequisites stipulated by the theoretic underpinnings call for a thorough examination of a state's likelihood of exhibiting the studied phenomenon. China is, on account of its preference for positive external actions, the most promising candidate for study. Granted, in surviving the collapse of the Soviet Bloc without dissolving its communist party-state superstructure it would also seem to be the most likely state in the world at present to resemble the totalitarian states of the early modern age. However, China is simultaneously a state that has repeatedly forsaken ideological standpoints for more pragmatic options, making it equally likely to match the theoretic supposition of a non-democratic state that reconsiders its ways of operating to respond to perceived threats to its continued existence.

Enabled by how the Chinese government derives its legitimacy in the eyes of the Chinese populace from strands of nationalism, Confucianism and meritocratic ideals of historical importance in Chinese society rather than from communist ideology, the Chinese government have hitherto managed such remarkable breaks with expectations and status quo as the rupture with the Soviet Bloc in the 1960s, the normalization of relations with the US in the 1970s, and the liberalization of the economy without accompanying political reforms in the 1980s. (Burleigh, 2017: 206-208, Ljunggren, 2017: 69-70) The globalization-grounded economic liberalizations in particular paved the way for greater plurality in Chinese society, which in turn has been boosted by lesser domestic feats of similar reforms such as the introduction of deliberative forums for policy input and pathways to limited political representation that have since been introduced into the system. (Bell, 2015: 32) These reforms are far from democratic in their expected adherence to a by the central government approved spectrum of opinions and so may seem bleak indeed in comparison to the political change that western powers assumed would be the inevitable result of China's increasing interaction with the international system (Ljunggren, 2017: 68). However, these features do enable Chinese



stakeholders other than the government and its representatives to gain influence over and cause to work for their preferred outcomes on policy issues, thereby reinforcing the Chinese government's already pre-existing inclination to pragmatism with a growing need to also consider domestic expectations in their foreign policy decisions. The result is a non-democratic state that meets the theoretical criteria for switching from aggressive, conflict-oriented foreign policy to transplanting the ways of consolidated democracies to its own activities.

On the matter of its interests China also fits the theoretical underpinnings of the study, as it has clearly defined political designs that conceivably could be served through the building of lasting international cooperation with other states. First and foremost, it is a state that prioritizes economic development, a fact that it announces publicly in its official rhetoric and displays clearly in domestic and foreign policy alike. For instance, China evaluates the performance of its public officials on (among other things) economic growth, whereas in its foreign relations it emphasizes favorable trade agreements and, in the wake of protectionist-oriented western leaders like Donald Trump, on the need for protecting the current international system and its provisions for cross-border trade against unilateral decisions of its perceived competitors. (Bell, 2015: 79; Reuters, 2017) These are priorities that are highly compatible with cooperative international efforts, and that moreover would benefit from the long-term stability that are presumed to result from international cooperation with states of similar systems of governance. Additionally, this already potent mix is augmented by a marked intention to return China to its historical role, both in terms of reclaiming Chinese historical territories and in terms of once again becoming the "Middle Kingdom", which as a direct translation of the Chinese name for China depicts the long-standing, historically grounded Chinese view of the country as the apex of civilization (Hough & Malik, 2015: 362; Ringen, 2017: 3). This dimension expands the basis for the presumed Chinese actions in the context



from merely being another outlet of pragmatism to potentially being both that and a potential source of domestic legitimacy, increasing the likelihood of its application accordingly. Suffice it to say that building lasting Chinese-led IOs that rival those of consolidated democracies would be a way to if not outright achieve these objectives, then at least to construct a power base by which they might in turn be achieved in the long-term.

In summary, China sports the features presumed necessary for a non-democratic state to seek to make the contested theories work in its favor. It moreover both has a history of copying choice aspects of democratic policy and explicit foreign policy aims and underlying motivational factors that would be served by it, further increasing its likelihood of exhibiting the phenomenon.

3.4 Delimitations

For purposes of delimitation the study will not only be constrained to China, but more specifically also to a Chinese IO-based international effort that may or may not exhibit the studied phenomenon. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a Chinese-led IO, will be this primary focus of the study, with particular attention to its role in China's substantial but also non-IO-initiated Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) foreign policy package. The chief reason for this delimitation is the Chinese initiative behind both, which makes them more likely avenues for international influencing efforts than ongoing Chinese cooperative efforts in other, non-Chinese-led IOs. Both moreover conjoin with the most-likely dimension for their primarily economic purposes in a geographical area that largely overlap with Chinese territorial claims, and that moreover roughly corresponds to the historical sphere of influence of the Chinese empire (Dollar, 2015: 171). While all states involved in either the AIIB or the BRI could potentially be of interest, the possibility of identifying the states most likely to exhibit the studied phenomenon could constitute a further delimitation at a later stage of the research. If so, this will occur by



means of focus on findings with bearings on the results of the study, whereas conversely a lack of relevant such findings could result in the state in question being written off as not exhibiting the studied phenomenon. This manner of specifying states of interests by their degree of positive findings over the course of the study will in effect also delimit a part of the study to the overarching perspective of aggregated statistics, as only states of relevant findings here will be subject to more detailed analysis.

3.5 Materials

The aim of study calls for a wide variety of sources. An overview of the purposes and constellations of states in the AIIB and the interrelated BRI require the use of the information of the AIIB itself for the former, and the Chinese government's foreign affairs department for the latter. While this could be problematic on account of partiality, it is probably safe to assume that neither outlet has cause to conceal or omit such information. Indeed, considering the economic purposes of these efforts, it is more likely they have cause to want to communicate it publicly for marketing purposes to spread the selling points of the arrangement to prospective participants. Divulging Chinese influences through these ventures of international cooperation should in comparison be more difficult. Chinese and target state sources may provide some insight, though at least bias should be expected, and perhaps also outright omissions or obfuscations in order not to invite negative reactions from outside parties. However, the determination of converging systems of governance and the verification of ongoing Chinese influences also requires statistics over time, for which sources such as the Economist's Democracy Index and Freedom House's Freedom Index may be better suited to the task. Overviews of economic exchanges might also be available through state-specific outlets, or alternatively through the World Trade Organization (WTO). While these avenues cover most of the required data, it is likely that scholarly literature and even news publications also may provide relevant angles that state-specific



outlets omit, and that the overarching views of the aggregated statistics do not detail on account of their overarching perspective. This should be particularly relevant for gleaning potential pro-China shifts in target state policies but could also feature with regards to other variables.

3.6 Operationalization and analytical framework

A good starting point for the study is to outline the scope and intent of the AIIB and the BRI, as well as to determine which Chinese cooperation partners within these frameworks that are to be studied. The theoretic underpinnings indicate that the challenge to liberal theory inherent in the research question requires a fusion of it and rational actor theory to explain international cooperation, in effect decoupling both liberal theory's international cooperation and Poast and Urpelainens' model of influencing through IO membership mechanics from their democracy-specific contexts. Instead, the assumption is that state interests are of crucial importance to international cooperation, and that the parameter similar systems of governance rather functions as a cooperation facilitator and/or guarantor of longevity in the context. This suggests that any state with a stake in the potential returns of the studied Chinese international engagements therefore should be deemed relevant to the study. While a mix of systems of governance among the participating states might itself be verification of the shortcomings of liberal theory, it is evidence of similarity or convergence with the Chinese non-democratic, party-based system of governance and these presumed target states that would indicate a reverse form of Poast and Urpelainens' theory as being in effect. Such similarity or convergence is therefore the dependent variable of the study, for which an overview of the systems of governance of these target states over time is required for analysis. The independent variable of interest is regime stability or instability, with the former presumably being more likely in already authoritarian Chinese partners and the latter being more likely in democratic target states. Stability in this context would likely mean



slow or even complete lack of significant changes in a partner state, whereas instability would be marked by more significant changes in an authoritarian direction for a democratic state. A significant change in the democratic direction for an authoritarian state would similarly indicate instability, and so a lack of or failure of Chinese influence. A significant change in democratic direction for a democratic state will be denoted similarly, that is as a mark of stability for the state and so a lack of or failure of Chinese influence, as regardless of whether there is a power transition or not over the period a bolstered democracy boosts the likelihood of such a transition taking place in the future.

Simultaneously it bears noting that results indicative of convergence with China might not be a result of Chinese influences, being that it could also be the result of separate political developments. A second step to the study is therefore to verify the existence of Chinese international influence within the confines of the established cooperation between China and the target state. While positive indications on this point will not rule out separate developments, or for that matter determine to which degree the Chinese influence has been decisive in the outcome, it will at least indicate whether Chinese influences have been present and so may have contributed to the outcome. For these purposes the independent variables are typical markers of Chinese influences as seen in previous bilateral relations, being that for China these appear to be consistent regardless of the target country. Recounting previous research, Chinese economic incentives are most likely to be present in all target states. These typically amount to lucrative contracts for Chinese contractors or suppliers, as well as increasing flow of trade between China and the target state. Chinese investments are also a parameter here, though chiefly in combination with other economical dimensions. Suffice it to say that while investments are indeed a recurring feature of both the AIIB and the BRI, and so also in supposed target states of ongoing Chinese influencing efforts, it is simultaneously a parameter that is heavily present in other states across the



globe that neither are part of the AIIB or the BRI, and/or do not exhibit other telltale signs of Chinese influence. Likely this dimension is therefore chiefly symptomatic of Chinese economic aspirations, whereas it is the dependency that results from substantial market shares held by Chinese-owned enterprises that translates to an effective influencing tool in foreign relations.

Spillover effects tend in turn to follow in the wake of these economic exchanges, often with the importance of the Chinese boost of economic growth for the target state employed as a means of applying pressure for changes in other departments. Here shifted political standpoints on China-related issues and implementation of Chinese-style repression methods are of relevance, courtesy of their apparent centrality to Chinese interests abroad. Of these, diffusion of repression methods is more likely in already non-democratic states, whereas the other markers are more likely starting points in democracies. Both however may occur regardless of the system of governance of the target, with the difference being a matter of starting points and degrees more so than one of different measures entirely. To exemplify this, a non-democratic state might presumably implement a method of repression such as the Chinese take on cyber-surveillance from the moment it is available to it, provided of course that the government of the state finds the method desirable and considers it in its interest. A democratic target state would on the other hand be less likely to respond positively to such an offer but might feasibly be persuaded to lay the groundwork for a future such endeavor by passing legislation that would allow for it at a later point in time.

In sum, the expected modus operandi of a Chinese-led reverse form of Poast and Urpelainens' concept of influencing through international organizations has some results that should apply to all target states, and some that should vary depending on the system of governance of the target state. A summary overview of these characteristics is found in table 1 below.



Table 1. Characteristics of Chinese influence in authoritarian and democratic target states

Authoritarian	Democratic
Stable	Unstable
Influx of Chinese direct investments	
Influx of Chinese contractors and suppliers	
Increase in trade volumes with China	
Shifts toward pro-China political stances	
Diffusion of repression methods: e.g., implementation of surveillance technology	Preliminary steps toward repressive policies, e.g., cybersecurity legislation

The final row of expected exhibits of Chinese target states in the context are the hardest to define. Historical examples of political shifts toward pro-China stances tend to concern alignment with the one-China policy, which considering its continued centrality to the Chinese government's overarching aims yet remains a feasible focus. Similarly, diffusion of repression methods has historically tended to be means of cyber-surveillance or curtailing of the press. However, the underlying presumption of state interest as a decisive factor suggests that China might seek different outcomes from different cooperation partners, for which attention to other developments that may fit these definitions also is necessary.



4 Analysis

The AIIB is technically an investment bank, in line with for instance the World Bank, and was at its point of conception launched as a commercial investment fund more so than as an intergovernmental organization. However, its organization is for all practical purposes that of an IO, with states as members, an application process for membership and a secretariat composed of approved member state representatives as its chief executive organ. It is moreover perceived as an IO by multiple other actors in the international system, with states such as the US and Japan clearly denoting the AIIB as a rival entity to their similarly purposed and organized Asian Development Bank (ADB). (Aiyar, 2016) The AIIB:s purpose is to serve as the primary financial motor of the Belt and Road Initiative, a substantial Chinese economic foreign policy project that aims to export the infrastructure-based development trajectory that has been the backbone of China's economic growth since its initial economic liberalizations to geographical areas of strategic interest to China in Asia. These areas largely correspond to those affected by the historical "Silk Roads", these being both its traditional namesake land routes and the historical naval paths of the in China renowned Ming dynasty admiral Zheng He that connected the Chinese empire with Europe in the past. (AIIB, 2021)

The successful constitution and implementation of the AIIB is quite the accomplishment for the Chinese government, as the perceived challenge from the point of view of Japan and the US resulted in international skepticism as to whether it would take off as intended. (Dove, 2016) However, considering the Chinese government's emphasis on its expressed intention to restore China's place in the world, it is the BRI rather than the AIIB that tends to be the focal point of Chinese efforts both within the Chinese government, in Chinese society, and in the international system at large. In practice the project is chiefly conducted through bi- and multilateral relations with target countries, as well as in some cases through regional IO:s, with the AIIB constituting the only overarching organization that effectively unifies these



efforts. (AIIB, 2021) That suggests that Chinese influencing efforts in the context of BRI may be taking place perpendicularly to what occurs through the liaisons of the AIIB. Though this gives cause to think the AIIB irrelevant to Chinese international influence, it bears recalling both the Chinese modus operandi of using economic cooperation as a gateway to deepened cooperation in foreign relations, and the Chinese intentions to make China, as opposed to a Chinese-led international organization, the apex of civilization. This accounted for, the AIIB itself is likely relevant as an indicator of where to look for other signs of Chinese influence, even as its specific activities might be of secondary importance to the bi- or multilateral contacts between China and the relevant states. On that note, it is of interest to note that the AIIB is composed of states from all over the world, but that it differs between regional partners and non-regional partners in its membership designations. Non-regional partners here are states in Europe, Africa, and the Americas, all presumably with interests in the AIIB on account of its and BRI's implications for future economic development and the potential to attract Chinese investments. Regional partners, on the other hand, are Asian and Oceanian states, excluding the states Bhutan, Iraq, Japan, Turkmenistan, Tadjikistan, Taiwan, Papua New Guinea, Syria, and Yemen. This internal division of member states into categories essentially denote target states for activities of the IO, thereby also displaying where AIIB investments may be accompanied by Chinese bi- or multilateral influencing efforts in parallel forums. (AIIB, 2021)

The above list is still broad but can be further reduced by cross-checking potential AIIB target states against commenced BRI plans, which include several land routes (called "corridors") and a maritime route. The planned and confirmed land routes are the China-Mongolia-Russia corridor, the New Eurasian land bridge, the Central to West Asia corridor and the China-Pakistan corridor. Corridors with states as their namesakes naturally denote target countries. The New Eurasian Land bridge extends from western China through Kazakhstan to Russia, ending in Moscow, from where it by extension



connects to Belarus and Poland. The Central to West Asian Corridor extends from western China through Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, connecting to Europe through Istanbul in Turkey. The Maritime Route, finally, was initially meant to go from the Chinese East Coast to Vietnam, India, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia, to then reach westward to first Kenya in Africa, and then Greece and Italy in Europe. (Belt and Road Initiative, 2021) However, increased geopolitical tensions between China and India have put an end to the latter state's participation in these plans, as well as in the parallel plans for a lesser China-Bangladesh-India land route, even as it has not gone so far as to discontinue the possibility of renewed future cooperation by ending its affiliation with the AIIB. Bangladesh and Myanmar have instead supplanted India's role in the region, to the point that there are preliminary references to a potential future China-Myanmar-Bangladesh land corridor also. (Belt and Road Initiative, 2021)

Discounting non-regional AIIB partner states as per the AIIB definition and cross-checking the remaining regional partners against target states of major BRI pathways, states of interest may be narrowed down to Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Russia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. Though comprising a wide variety of systems of governance, none of these states qualify as consolidated democracies (or in several cases as democracies at all), which by the logic of Poast and Urpelainen's model should also make them vulnerable to the influences of a non-democratic partner. This effectively confirms the suitability of the selected case for the study, warranting an investigation into the degree to which the above states feature the identified markers of Chinese influence.



4.1 Stability or instability

As described in the theory and methods sections, Chinese international influence is presumed to have a stabilizing effect on non-democratic regimes, and a destabilizing effect on democratic regimes. Stability in this context is defined as the sustained governance of the incumbent government. This is an aim the Chinese openly profess to be preferable regardless of the system of governance of an international partner, to the point that cultivating state sovereignty and stability over change in their partner states and promoting the principle of non-intervention internationally are explicit foreign policy aims of the Chinese government. (Vanhullebusch, 2015: 669-670). Instability may on the other hand have different meanings, translating to either regime change or to democratic backsliding in a system initially designed for democratic changes of power. Both are problematic from a Chinese foreign policy point of view, as the Chinese government's official stance is to downplay the typical western focus on the system of governance of a state to the importance of the state's right to self-determination on this point. This view is an extension of the Chinese claim that the Chinese system is better for China than the liberal democratic model of the west, (Ringen, 2017: 9) and tend to come into play in the form of the Chinese response to international critique against Chinese internal affairs or Chinese vetoes against intervention proposals in the UN security councils. (Vanhullebusch, 2015: 672-675) Granted, if Chinese IO efforts indeed are advanced copies of comparable western initiatives, and if similar systems of governance are indeed a facilitator and guarantor of longevity of such arrangements, it stands to reason that the Chinese state is readily aware of what it could stand to gain from influencing the target states of its IO ventures in a like-minded direction regardless of its dissonance with overarching policy objectives. It does however suggest that the Chinese might chiefly be complicit in backsliding, as that could be angled as stabilizing and cultivating the sovereignty of the incumbent government regardless of the damage to the system it operates in. Regime change would in comparison be



less compatible with Chinese policy, for which examples of such outcomes are more likely to be results of internal developments that may be condoned but not encouraged by the Chinese. These parameters established, it is necessary to classify the states listed in the previous section into one of the categories democratic or non-democratic, following which the states in either category should be defined as stable or unstable.

Technically most of the studied target states have at least a degree of democratic elements. However, a look at the Economist's democracy index, which classifies countries as ranging from full democracies to authoritarian regimes based on their fulfillment of 60 criteria of pluralism, civil liberties, and political culture on a scale from one to ten, quickly confirms that none of these states qualify as full democracies. It is important to note that the designation "authoritarian" in the context is not as nuanced as the underlying theory, it makes no difference between authoritarian and totalitarian states and so rather resembles the more general non-democratic designation that is used as a collective term for all non-democracies in this study. Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, and Singapore achieve the highest ranks on this scale, achieving the status of flawed democracies. Bangladesh, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and Turkey are in turn ranked as hybrid regimes, whereas Afghanistan, Iran, Myanmar, Kazakhstan, Russia, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam to varying degrees are authoritarian states. As the democracy index has been conducted annually to bi-annually since 2006, it also provides an indication of regime stability, as seen in the following table of accumulated results. (Democracy index, 2020)



Table 2. Democracy index ratings from 2006 to 2020.

Country	2006	2008	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Afghanistan	3.06	0.04	0.54				0.29		0.22		0.42	0.12		2.85
Bangladesh	6.11	0.59	0.35	0.01			0.08	0.05		0.30	0.14	0.31	0.11	5.99
Indonesia	6.41	0.07	0.19		0.23	0.06	0.13	0.08	0.06	0.58		0.09	0.18	6.30
Iran	2.93	0.10	0.89	0.04				0.18	0.18	0.11		0.07	0.18	2.2
Kazakhstan	3.62	0.17	0.15	0.06	0.29	0.11	0.11	0.11			0.12		0.20	3.14
Kyrgyzstan	4.08	0.03	0.26	0.03	0.35		0.55	0.09	0.40	0.18		0.22	0.67	4.22
Malaysia	5.98	0.38	0.17		0.22	0.08		0.06	0.11		0.34	0.28	0.03	7.19
Mongolia	6.60		0.24	0.13	0.12	0.16	0.11			0.12			0.02	6.48
Myanmar	1.77				0.58	0.41	0.29	1.09	0.06	0.37		0.28	0.51	3.55
Pakistan	3.92	0.54	0.09		0.02	0.07		0.24	0.07	0.07	0.09	0.08	0.06	4.31
Russia	5.02	0.54	0.22	0.34	0.18	0.15	0.20	0.08	0.07	0.07	0.23	0.17	0.20	3.31
Singapore	5.89				0.01	0.04	0.11	0.11	0.24	0.06	0.06	0.36	0.01	6.03
Sri Lanka	6.58	0.03	0.03	0.06	0.83	0.06		0.73	0.06		0.29	0.08	0.13	6.14
Turkey	5.70	0.01	0.04		0.03	0.13	0.51		0.08	0.16	0.51	0.28	0.39	4.48
Uzbekistan	1.85	0.11			0.02		0.73	0.50			0.06		0.11	2.12
Vietnam	2.75	0.22	0.41	0.02	0.07	0.40	0.12	0.12	0.15	0.30			0.14	2.94

The democracy index ranking system ranges from 0-10, with 0-4 denoting authoritarian states, 4-6 denoting hybrid regimes, 6-8 denoting flawed democracies and 8-10 denoting full democracies. It can feasibly be assumed that stability for democratic and non-democratic regimes would translate to a relatively constant rating that neither increases nor decreases overmuch. This can be verified in the cases of Bangladesh, Indonesia, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam, all of which have fluctuated decimally in either direction. For these countries the direction of the change is likely irrelevant, as the Chinese lack of focus on the system of governance of a state does not indicate a preference of development beyond that of stability in terms of maintaining the status quo on a governmental level. It bears noting that Singapore is the only country nearing the “flawed democracy” rating on the measurement scale that displays a marginally positive development. In contrast, Bangladesh, Mongolia, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka have developed in a negative direction, suggesting the presence of the very the democratic backsliding presumed to be if not a direct consequence then at least an outcome added to and aided by international cooperation with China.

Malaysia, Myanmar, Russia, and Turkey stand out as unstable in comparison to the above states, as they have shifted by one or more points over the same period. Russia and Turkey both display negative developments, as



fits the narrative of resurging authoritarianism that are associated with presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Burleigh, 2018). Though the numbers appear to suggest otherwise, they likely have this in common also with Afghanistan and Myanmar, either being states that have undergone direct regime changes in 2021 (that is, after the publication of the latest democracy index ratings). This accounted for, it is feasible to view the changes in Russia and Turkey as falling into the regime change category also, even as they have occurred under the leadership of elected national strongmen that seeks to consolidate their power rather than, as in the case of Afghanistan and Myanmar, by uprising or coup d'état. Regardless of form these developments have primarily been driven by separate developments rather than because of Chinese influences. However, an interesting inquiry is whether the Chinese connection has had a part in the change. The Chinese government's disregard for the system of governance of an international partner speaks against this, as does the marked Chinese preference for positive external actions in its foreign policy. However, it bears noting that these states at different points all have had the potential to veer toward the west instead of their current path. In brief, Russia's, and Turkey's proximity to and relations with the EU and NATO could have inspired closer connections with the west (Schmidt-Felzman, 2014; Schrank, 2021), as might have both the sustained western presence in Afghanistan following the US-led intervention against the Taliban (U.S. State Department, 2021) or the democratizing aspirations of political leader Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar following her party's strong results in the 2015 elections (BBC News, 2015). These could amount to strategic reasons for the Chinese to lend their support to existing developments despite their principles. Verification of a link between these occurrences and the Chinese connection, as well as that of the apparent backsliding in the flawed democracies, is likely dependent on the verification or lack thereof of other markers of Chinese international influence in these cases.



Finally, Malaysia is the one country on the list of target states that seems to have sustained a strong democratic developmental trajectory, making it an outlier in the context. While it might be of interest to find out why, the purpose and delimitation of this study makes it necessary to abstain from such inquiries, beyond noting further divergences from the situations of other BRI states. It is however of interest to note that Malaysian commitment to its part in the BRI remains intact despite this divergence and has remained through both intermittent worsening of diplomatic relations with China, and multiple election-based power transitions in Malaysia. (Kuik, 2021)

4.2 Economic incentives

Economic growth is both a major vehicle and a major motivator for Chinese international ventures, with direct investments and contracts for Chinese enterprises serving as gateways to further Chinese influence. As both the BRI and its cohesive framework of the AIIB are primarily economic, it is a matter of course that participation in them come with economic connotations that could serve in precisely such capacities. However, a mitigating circumstance is the extent of Chinese investments in general across the globe, as Chinese economic growth has resulted in a surplus of capital that has been invested in states well beyond the scope of the BRI. (Christiansen & Maher, 2017) Fortunately, a combination of previous research combined with a for the Chinese government unusual transparency simplifies differencing between countries that the Chinese government merely invests in, and countries in which the Chinese government invests in a manner to bolster its influencing capabilities. In brief, Chen and Lin distinguish in a World Bank policy research report on Chinese international economic ventures between Chinese direct investments, which have been conducted broadly but with greater focus on developed economies in Europe, Australia, and North and South America; and Chinese construction projects, which are far more concentrated to BRI and AIIB members than elsewhere. (World Bank, 2018: 16)



Of particular interest is the observation that BRI countries receive both mid-ranging levels of Chinese investments and high levels of Chinese construction contracts. Considering that investment costs would be higher in more advanced economies, it is reasonable to assume that the size of the investments in comparison to the size of the economy invested in explains the higher sums of direct investments into, say, the US or western Europe, reducing the differences on that point to marginal importance. Meanwhile, Chinese contractor presences in the advanced western economies are low, to the point where none reach comparable levels to those of the BRI countries that are featured in this study. It is not a stretch to assume that this bolsters Chinese influencing capacity in BRI countries. Suffice it to say that while investments also might be tantamount to leverage in relations between China and its receiving economies, it is all the more feasible to assume that a combination of Chinese investments and increasing reliance on Chinese contractors for the execution of investment-related projects would multiply the target state's receptivity to Chinese political pressures on account of the potential economic harm that discontinued cooperation might result in for the target state. Moreover, the same relationship can be seen in several African countries, some of which partake in the BRI, and all of which have well-documented pro-Chinese tendencies following China's increasing presence on the African continent. (Stein & Uddhammar, 2021; Brattberg, Le Corre, Stonski & de Waal, 2021) As many of these Chinese-African ties predate the commencement of the BRI, it is likely that they constitute a blueprint for the BRI model, and that the relationship between China and BRI target states may come to function similarly in the future.

Besides investments and contracts, increased trade volumes between China and recipient countries also tend to be a feature of Chinese international cooperation. Drawing on the above similarities of the BRI and previous Chinese bilateral engagements, it is likely safe to assume that the strategic needs of the Chinese economy dictate the form of economic exchange



taking place, which in turn implies that both exports and imports may be relevant depending on the circumstances and resources of the target country. The following table, as provided by the World Bank, displays an overview of both categories over the years 2015-2019, displaying the annual import and export between China and the target country as a percentage of Chinese total imports and exports. The interval is selected based on the formal starting year of the BRI project, with 2019 being the most recent year of fully assembled data in the database. (2020)

Table 3. World Bank statistics of Chinese exports and imports by target country

Percentage of Chinese imports						Percentage of Chinese exports					
Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019		2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Banglades	0,05%	0,05%	0,05%	0,05%	0,05%	Banglades	0,61%	0,68%	0,67%	0,71%	0,69%
Indonesia	1,18%	1,35%	1,55%	1,60%	1,64%	Indonesia	1,51%	1,53%	1,54%	1,73%	1,83%
Iran	0,96%	0,93%	1,01%	0,99%	0,65%	Iran	0,78%	0,78%	0,82%	0,56%	0,38%
Kazakhsta	0,35%	0,30%	0,35%	0,40%	0,45%	Kazakhsta	0,37%	0,40%	0,51%	0,45%	0,51%
Kyrgyzsta	0,00%	0,00%	0,00%	0,00%	0,00%	Kyrgyzsta	0,19%	0,27%	0,24%	0,22%	0,25%
Malaysia	1,78%	3,10%	2,95%	2,97%	3,46%	Malaysia	1,93%	1,80%	1,84%	1,84%	2,10%
Mongolia	0,23%	0,23%	0,28%	0,30%	0,30%	Mongolia	0,07%	0,05%	0,05%	0,07%	0,07%
Myanmar	0,32%	0,26%	0,25%	0,22%	0,31%	Myanmar	0,42%	0,31%	0,40%	0,42%	0,49%
Pakistan	0,15%	0,12%	0,10%	0,10%	0,09%	Pakistan	0,72%	0,82%	0,81%	0,68%	0,65%
Russia	1,98%	2,03%	2,24%	2,76%	2,91%	Russia	1,53%	1,78%	1,89%	1,92%	1,98%
Singapore	1,64%	1,64%	1,86%	1,58%	1,70%	Singapore	2,28	2,12%	1,99%	2,00%	2,20%
Sri Lanka	0,02%	0,02%	0,02%	0,02%	0,02%	Sri Lanka	0,19%	0,20%	0,18%	0,17%	0,16%
Turkey	0,18%	0,18%	0,21%	0,18%	0,17%	Turkey	0,62%	0,80%	0,80%	0,72%	0,69%
Uzbekista	0,08%	0,10%	0,08%	0,11%	0,11%	Uzbekista	0,10%	0,10%	0,12%	0,56%	0,20%
Vietnam	1,78%	2,34%	2,73%	3,00%	3,10%	Vietnam	2,90%	2,91%	3,16%	3,37%	5,73%

Prior to analysis of these figures, it should be noted that Chinese imports and exports steadily increased in this period (WTO, 2021), with the consequence that slight slumps in percentage need not amount to a decrease in the actual trade volumes that have been shipped between the states. Increases on the other hand would by the same mechanism likely be more solid than they appear. This accounted for, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Russia, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam have all seen increases in one or both categories. Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Turkey remain on a relatively stable level in both categories, with only marginal changes occurring in either direction. Iran and Pakistan are the only examples



of states that see shrinking trade volumes with the Chinese in the figure. In the case of Pakistan, the situation has reportedly since turned around, courtesy of a bilateral free-trade agreement conducted within the BRI framework that has already generated record levels of trade between Pakistan and China for 2021. (Assadi, 2021). As for Iran, most of the trade between it and China has been oil-based, for which the decline is likely a result of US sanctions on Iran's oil industry more so than a result of worsening ties between the countries (Tehran Times, 2021). In general, these numbers verify the typical trajectory of Chinese international ventures, thereby also confirming the establishment of economic holds on the target states beyond those of the immediate BRI project that the Chinese government could feasibly employ to exercise influence over their polities.

Moreover, the China-Pakistan situation highlights that developments tend to be a product of rather than a side-effect of intergovernmental relations. That, in turn, suggests the uneven shift in import or export increases between different partner states also are grounded in political concerns more so than by capitalist supply and demand, that the Chinese government's designs determine whether a partner state is considered a market for Chinese products, a resource bank from which to draw raw materials needed for the Chinese economy, or both. Here, too, the similarity to Chinese African ventures is tangible, further bolstering the impression that the outcomes of BRI relations is a matter of concerted effort toward a particular purpose more so than a more free-form liberalization of cross-border connections between China and the target state. (Stein & Uddhammar, 2021)

4.3 Spillover pressures

Having asserted the existence of Chinese economic holds on partner states within BRI, the remaining question is whether these holds are employed to affect the development of the partner states. As specified in the theory section, such actions may take different forms for different partners, gravitating toward



collaboration on repression methods for non-democratic regimes and carrot and stick pressures for preliminary steps toward repressive measures for democratic ones. A common denominator tends to be constraints on the freedom of information, ranging from freedom of the press to freedom of the internet by use of a combination of direct and indirect censorship and sophisticated censorship and surveillance technology. (Deiber & Crete-Nishihata, 2012; Brattberg, Le Corre, Stonski & de Waal, 2021)

The spread of surveillance technology is documented as occurring in the states Malaysia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Singapore (Radu, 2019), to some degree overlapping a Russian exchange sphere of similar technology. These surveillance technology spheres of influence moreover seem to complement rather than compete with one another, as is apparent not least of all in news of Chinese cybersecurity architects working closely with their Russian counterparts to devise a so-called “sovereign internet” for Russia. (Parker, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2020) Though less obviously connected, states Indonesia and Vietnam have also introduced harsh legislation on the topic (Lazarus, 2021; Libby, 2011; Sherman, 2019). Indeed, a look at Freedom House’s index for internet security in figures 1 and 2 below confirms that all involved BRI states are either non-free or partly free, and that all but Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Iran display unchanged or negative trends. Granted, in these cases there is no evident link to Chinese influence, but the alignment with Chinese aims and the opacity of the decision-making processes means it cannot be ruled out that it has been induced or encouraged by the Chinese. As for the exceptions to the negative spiral that makes out the norm, they display marginal advancement from very low levels and so remain unfree regardless of the positive trend. Rather it bears wondering whether liberalizations that have occurred are also in line with Chinese designs, as the purpose of the BRI is to export controlled liberalization along the lines of China’s own such trajectory in the past.



Figure 1. Freedom House index of internet freedom by state (2021)

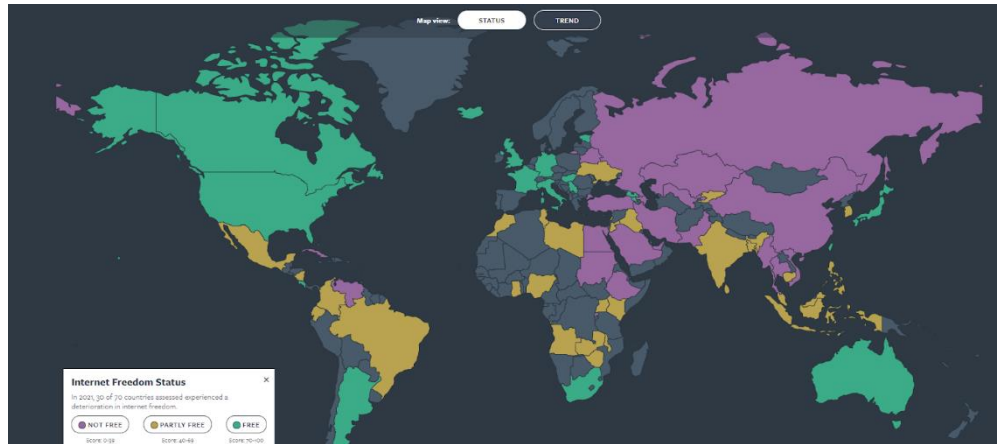
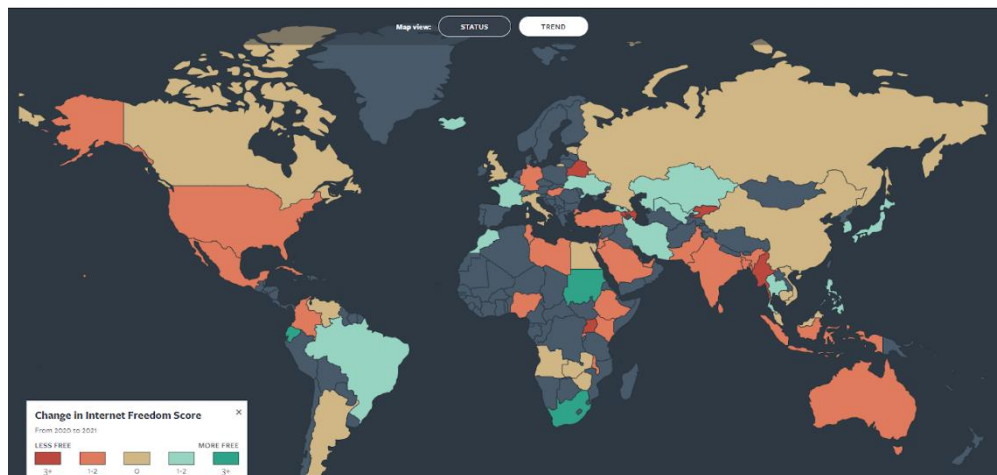


Figure 2. Freedom House index of change in internet freedom by state (2021)



The trend is similar if you expand the Freedom house index to rating freedom, as seen in figures 4 and 5. Though overlapping the democracy index to some extent, its emphasis on factors such as freedom of speech and freedom of the press makes it relevant to this section of the study. Again, non-free to partly free is the norm, with decline toward non-free constituting the trend in all but Mongolia, which stands out as free and remaining stably so. (Freedom House, 2021) Again, confirming Chinese complicity or encouragement is difficult, even as it stands to reason that Beijing has no objection to these developments.

Figure 3. Freedom House Global freedom index by state (2021)

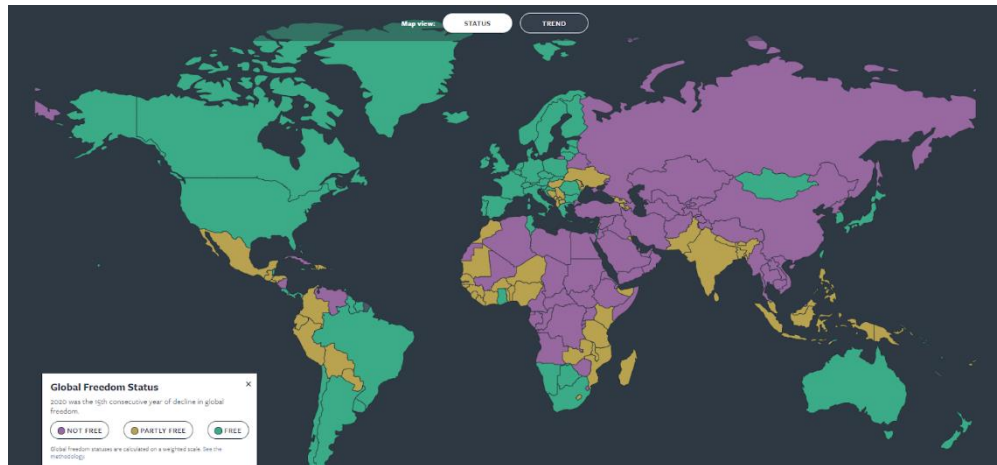
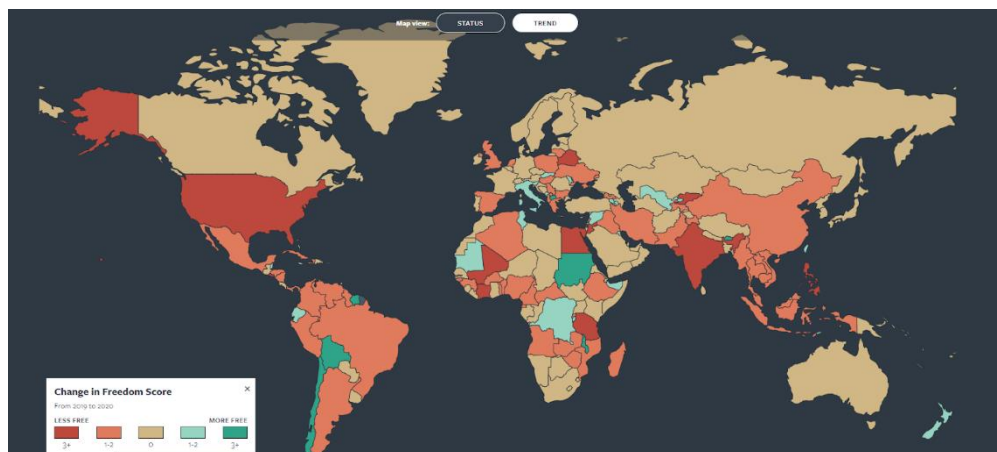


Figure 4. Freedom House change in global freedom index by state (2021)



Political pressures are harder to identify at present. None of the cited countries have formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan, and those of them that once had switched their stance to recognizing mainland China and its claims to sovereignty over all Chinese territories for decades in advance of their entry into the AIIB and the BRI. Informal relations exist, often as non-governmental cultural and economic exchanges, though this appears to be a non-issue that China hitherto has not actively sought to redress as part of its foreign relations with these states. However, there is no shortage of other political concerns related to the one-China policy that at length could feature into the BRI, for



which it also bears noting that the relative youth of the BRI could mean that the political pressures have yet to commence. Here the sovereignty of Taiwan remains a likely feature, as is evidenced by the combination of Chinese military buildup, by the political specification of a deadline for Taiwanese reclamation to 2049, and by how the removal of the word “peaceful” in the policy document detailing these ambitions suggest the possibility of a forced takeover in the future. (Lee & Tian, 2020) Considering that the BRI involves most countries in the near vicinity of such a conflict, it is entirely possible that one of the many reasons for BRI activity in this region is securing a limited conflict if and/or when such an undertaking takes place.

The possibility of pre-emptive conflict limitations with regards to the Taiwan question becomes doubly relevant considering how several of the regional BRI target states also have a stake in the South China Sea conflict, where China, Taiwan and several other states have overlapping claims to islands and atolls that primarily China have reclaimed from the ocean and militarized. Grounded in historical use of these islands, the Chinese claims are opposed by not only Taiwan, but also by Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and based on ensuring freedom of navigation in the area also the US and, though to a lesser extent, other western powers. (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021) As the very same western powers also tend to support Taiwan on the matter of Taiwanese sovereignty, if not so far as to the point of promising military aid in case of a full-scale Chinese invasion, it is entirely feasible that China seeks to use the BRI to by means of positive economic interdependencies with regional powers to avoid the issue becoming grounds for its rival claimants to side with the US-led western powers on both issues.

While defusing South China Sea tension is not an explicit aim of either China or the BRI, there is some evidence that this is currently taking place between China and BRI target states. In brief, though not the focal states of this study on account of their lack of roles in major BRI projects, Brunei and the Philippines have also joined the BRI and the AIIB, both entering these



ventures at much later dates than the other listed parties. (Sacks, 2021) Since then, while occurring perpendicularly to continued diplomatic rows between the rival claimants over the contested territories, China, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), of which all the rival claimants are member states, have negotiated a partial agreement on a code of conduct for the area. (Kärnstrand, 2021) It may be that this breakthrough is indeed a result of a mutual will to reach an agreement without western-led mediation. However, it is also plausible to conceive progress here as an example of Chinese use of their BRI-related economic incentives on BRI target states as holds to agree to their proposals, in which case further developments of said economic interdependence eventually could translate to pressure to fully comply with the one-China policy as it translates to Chinese claims in the contested areas. That, in turn, might disarm the South China Sea's relevance to the Taiwan question, thereby reducing the chances of regional support for Taiwan sovereignty in the event of a Chinese takeover, peaceful or otherwise. It remains to be seen whether such will be the case, and so by extension whether this dimension of Chinese influencing methods also will be realized in the context of the BRI. The notion does however indicate a long-term dimension to the Chinese interests and efforts, even as it also affirms that this study may be premature in relation to the youth of the project and the potential scope of the Chinese agenda.

5 Conclusions

Recapping, this study set out to analyze whether the supposition of Poast and Urpelainen that democracy-driven international ventures support democratization in non-democratic partners might be replicated with reverse results by non-democratic states, which by extension challenging the liberal peace theory that is a cornerstone of the liberal theory of international relations. Focusing on China as an example of an internationally active non-



democratic state that consistently makes a case against democracy as the best system of governance, the theory is tested by measuring whether international cooperation through the Chinese-initiated AIIB within the framework of Chinese foreign policy project BRI result in democratic backsliding in democracies or, as a presumed positive effect for non-democracies, increased capacity for control of its polity and populace for authoritarian states. As such developments could feasibly be a result of separate efforts of the incumbent governments of these states, the study cross-checks verified negative developmental trajectories against typical markers of Chinese foreign influence to determine whether Chinese influence may have been a contributing factor in these cases.

Typical markers of Chinese influence in the context of international relations are increased trade volumes between China and the target countries, an influx of Chinese contractors or suppliers, the spread of repressive practices and technologies with regards to the freedom of the internet and the freedom of the press, and political pressures on matters pertaining to the one-China policy and its contestation of territories that belong to or are also claimed by other sovereign states. All these markers are essentially verified as recurring features of AIIB member states that also are BRI target states. Granted, sole outliers exist in every category, but simultaneously none of the studied states diverge from the pattern in more than one of the categories, and far more of them conform to the expected pattern across the board. It is therefore not a stretch to assume that the thesis is correct. However, it should also be noted that this remains an assumption, as the opacity of the Chinese design for these relationships with bilateral ties subject to diplomatic discretion outside of the more transparent IO contacts as the primary arena of influencing attempts makes it difficult to verify whether the Chinese connection is crucial to, supporting of or even irrelevant to these developments. The evidence in favor of the phenomenon therefore becomes circumstantial at best, reducing it to a strong possibility more so than a verified fact.



It is plausible to think the opacity of Chinese influence in the context of the AIIB and the BRI to be intentional for several reasons. First and foremost, emphasizing the bilateral ties likely increase Chinese say in the relationship with each country, as the collected weight of the benefits to good relations with China for these countries cannot be balanced against the grouping together of interests of the target states that might have taken place if the relationship was primarily IO-based. This assertion seems doubly likely considering the example of mediation in the South China Sea, as in this case the pressure through bilateral ties seems likely to have influenced stakeholders of the collective interests of ASEAN, a non-Chinese-led IO, in a manner akin to their dealings within the BRI. This, by extension, speaks in favor of comparing China in these relations to the antithesis of a consolidated democracy in Poast and Urpelainen's model, as a by them described alternative to forming a new IO for the purposes of influencing international partners is the hijacking and reshaping of an existing IO for achieving their own aims. (2018: 184) This is itself an interesting inquiry that came to mind over the course of the conduction of this study, not least of all as China has observer status in ASEAN and so could be said to have the beginnings of a platform for such maneuvers. This could turn out to be grounds for extrapolating another dimension of Poast and Urpelainens' theory to a non-democratic context, and so might well warrant further studies in the future.

Second, the Chinese opacity is likely also instrumental to avoiding a situation where the BRI and the AIIB add to the increasing polarization between China and the West. Though the AIIB and the BRI in and by themselves do so in their direct challenge to the US- and Japan-led ABD, the relational repercussions between these actors would likely have been far greater if the Chinese-led projects could be openly linked to democratic backsliding, the strengthening of authoritarian regimes, or if applicable in relevant cases outright regime change. This is of interest considering the apparent maneuvering against western standpoints in, say, the Taiwan or the



South China Sea questions, both suggesting that Chinese efforts indeed are oriented toward building regional support for or at least disarming regional resistance to Chinese territorial ambitions in these areas. That, in turn, implies that conflict with the west is undesirable in these matters at this junction, if not indefinitely then at least until such a time as the Chinese government deems the potential for western sway over would-be rivals in the region sufficiently undermined.

Another factor that cannot be construed from the data is the longevity of the BRI arrangements, even though the evidence so far suggests the Chinese aspirations to be long-term. The time frame would be a major point in favor of whether Chinese international efforts can be compared to those of consolidated democracies in Poast and Urpelainens' model, or for that matter whether Chinese efforts in this department truly undermine the liberal theory of international relations by disproving the tenets of the liberal peace. Here it is not only the opacity of Chinese-led bilateral exchanges that obstruct predictions, but also the relative youth of the project. Granted, it is feasible to assume that the focus on economic development of the BRI are long-term interests for all involved parties, thus supplying solid grounds for both sustained cooperation and improvements to existing arrangements along the lines of the Chinese ambitions for free-trade agreements and even formal institutions for conflict mediations.

However, it also bears wondering whether this same economic dimension might itself be a challenge to Chinese aspirations, not least of all as economic improvements are traditionally thought to result in democratic developments. This could be a determining factor in Malaysia's aberrant trajectory compared to the other states in this study in the democracy index, as of the participating states in this study Malaysia has been highest on the list of the fastest growing economies in the recent decade. (World Bank, 2021) If there is something to this observation, a possible long-term outcome of the BRI for other target states could be a switch from convergence to divergence



from the Chinese model to the point of undermining Chinese aspirations for the project in pace with the increase of economic output that is generated by the project. Admittedly this possibility might be mitigated by the Chinese influencing efforts that are theorized in this study, whereas a failure to avert such a development might in turn be mitigated by the Chinese government's lack of emphasis in its foreign policy on the systems of governance of its cooperation partners. Indeed, Malaysia might be just the example of how such a scenario might progress, as ultimately positive democratic developments in the state have hitherto not affected the progress of BRI-initiated projects in the state. (Kuik, 2021) That, in turn, would mean that the prerequisites for Chinese influence remain in place, and that the lack of appliance of these to affect the supposedly less consequential system of governance might come out of Chinese prioritization of other matters (such as for Malaysia the pertinent issue of overlapping claims in the South China Sea) rather than a Chinese failure to exert influence whatsoever.

In sum, the findings are inconclusive, and the study might have been premature in relation to the time frame of the project. There is however ample evidence to suggest it is onto something, for which future further studies of Chinese influence through Chinese-led IOs is warranted.



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