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During the first few years of the 2020s, it has become increasingly difficult to talk about the future of the Middle East and Africa without eliciting the topic of great-power competition. While these regions have long been subject to the actions of external powers, the rise of China has transformed development options and skylines across Africa and reshaped the political landscape across the Middle East, while making talk of strategic competition (or worse) a constant in Western capitals. However, while the rise of China across the Global South has certainly driven debate, less attention has so far been paid to exactly how China engages with the developing world, and how this engagement affects the global liberal order.

Dawn Murphy’s *China’s Rise in the Global South: The Middle East, Africa, and Beijing’s Alternative World Order* provides a compelling look at this issue. With a close focus on Africa and the Middle East, it maps the tools (forums, envoys, aid, agricultural demonstration centers, and many more) China uses to build a sense of common cause with the Global South. The book also puts these tools in the context of the broader liberal order and shifts in the United States’ global leadership.

This roundtable focuses on the book, with reviews from Mohammed Turki A Alsudairi, Lina Benabdallah, and Austin Strange, as well as a response from Dawn Murphy.

The book is a valuable contribution to a wider conversation about China’s growing influence-building across the Global South, both via direct engagement and through the shaping of twenty-first century norms. Murphy focuses on two key Global South regions: Africa and the Middle East. This approach allows her to identify the tools and spaces China uses to promote itself as a unique partner to the developing world, one which offers different options than the United States and its allies. The choice to focus on both regions breaks from the single-region focus of earlier accounts. This comparative perspective reveals different Chinese approaches: a stronger focus on development engagement with Africa and a more political approach in the Middle East.

Murphy’s exhaustive account of the different formal mechanisms that underlie this engagement is a valuable resource that will provide many researchers focusing on the Global South a solid baseline from which to delve into the interactions flowing from China’s outreach to the developing world.

This outreach is of course drawing much anxious attention in Western capitals. The resulting discussion sometimes fudges two distinct (but related) questions: does China’s rise threaten the global power of Western countries, and does it challenge the liberal norms which underlie Western power and grow from it, but also occasionally complicate or constrain how it is exercised? Africa and the Middle East have

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significant and complex histories with both Western power and Western norms, and the book provides an interesting glimpse into the possibly transformative role of China in both regions.

Murphy’s account of their engagement with China avoids conflating Western power with the liberal international order, while not denying the close connection between the two. Rather, her analysis of Beijing’s tools of engagement is structured along twin axes: whether China competes with the United States, and whether its engagement in Africa and the Middle East converges with or differs from liberal norms. The distinction allows her to introduce nuance into conversations characterizing China’s presence in the Global South as aimed at inherently aimed at displacing US influence or liberal norms.

For example, she argues that China’s engagement with Africa via its special envoy is largely cooperative with the United States and convergent with liberal norms, even as its Middle East approach puts it in competition with the United States and its allies (139). She also argues that while China’s activities in the Middle East occasionally support liberal initiatives (for example, multilateral peacemaking efforts in Syria), China’s narrow interpretation of Westphalian state sovereignty puts it in conflict with the liberal international order (141). These distinctions show that while China’s approach to the Global South is partly integrated and standardized across regions via initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), there are also important differences between different parts of the Global South.

Throughout she also emphasizes China’s advocacy for developing country concerns. China’s claim to be a developing country and its rhetorical commitment to South-South solidarity is frequently dismissed as a cover for self-interest in Western capitals. Yet they play an important role in helping China to build networks of developing country allies, who frequently feel dismissed by the great powers, or who chafe against sanctions imposed because of lapses from the liberal international order.

The book’s outlining of these dynamics draws praise from the reviewers in this special edition. Both Benabdallah and Alsudairi commend the granularity of the comparisons and how they highlight China’s different approaches across regions. Strange also praises its careful accounts of the complexity of rising powers’ interaction with the liberal international order.

They argue that the book’s comparative approach pushes beyond current accounts of China’s interactions with single regions, while also introducing needed complexity into claims about China’s approach to the entire Global South. Overall, the book is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the multilayered nature of Chinese foreign engagement. As Benabdallah writes, Murphy “shows how creative and adaptive Chinese foreign policymaking in the Global South is.” This approach is significantly China-focused. As Murphy writes in her response, “My purpose in the book was to understand the PRC’s interests and behavior better. It is situated in a literature that seeks to understand the interests and behavior of rising powers. It is a book about China.”

However, Alsudairi and Benabdallah also suggest that more direct accounts from Global South stakeholders would flesh out the Global South side of these encounters, and add to our understanding of their relative
efficacy. In her response, Murphy points out that the majority of her interviewees were officials from China, Africa and the Middle East. To my mind, this disjuncture could partly be the result of the distance between the book’s primary focus on mapping the tools of China’s external engagement—what one might call its supply-side perspective—and the demand-side focus on recipient country agency, currently a strong theme in Africa-China studies and other regional subfields. Specifically, Alsudairi argues that the perspective tends to omit the back-and-forth and messiness of recipient country responses to these initiatives. These dynamics, in turn, reflect the complexity of the agenda debate, especially its growing focus on local and non-state actors. Alsudairi mentions elites, bureaucracies, and epistemic communities, while Benabdallah highlights private sector firms, individual entrepreneurs, and migrants. Because these actors complicate the efficacy of Chinese engagement mechanisms, linking the conversation around Chinese engagement mechanisms championed by Murphy and those engaged in the agency discussion could be a fruitful space for subsequent studies.

This tension between mapping the formal mechanisms deployed by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) party-state, and the messier realities of how they are rolled out by different Chinese actors, and how they are received by local stakeholders, is underlain by a similar tension (highlighted by Strange) that the breadth of the study necessarily sacrifices some granularity. The book’s wide scope sometimes makes it harder to color in the blank space between the PRC’s goals and their implementation. For example, while the book does an admirable job of identifying and describing different engagement tools, it spends less time on how their efficacy is measured within the Chinese system.

Strange points out that both the book’s strengths and limitations emerge from its focus on what states do rather than what they want. I would add that the book will likely add to conversations about what the state is, and more specifically, what constitutes state action and who counts as a state actor. This is particularly pertinent in relation to China. For example, Alsudairi and Strange both point out that Murphy’s mapping of formal instruments of engagement tends to leave some forms of influence-building out of the discussion. Strange highlights Murphy’s focus on official aid rather than other forms of financing, while Alsudairi raises non-publicized forms of influence-building such as propaganda and United Front activity.

Taking Strange’s example of financing, one can make the case that Chinese infrastructure projects in Africa, which are (frequently) funded by state policy banks, implemented by state-owned enterprises and underwritten by state-linked insurers, constitute a form of state action. Yet, the independent and profit-seeking behavior of these actors also makes simply framing them as worker bees deployed by an all-powerful party-state an oversimplification, especially because many state-owned enterprises are in competition with each other. In this context, Murphy’s narrower focus on mapping what the PRC itself sees as its formal engagement mechanisms is an important step towards the more complicated unpacking of the nature of Chinese engagement in the Global South.

This work of unpacking is necessarily touched by geopolitics. From her position at the US National War College, Murphy is arguably even more immersed in discussions of US-China competition than many of her fellow researchers. Her distinction between China’s competition with the US and its complex
interactions with the liberal international order provides nuance and rescues the book from the vogue in certain Washington quarters for simply describing any instance of divergence as an example of China’s malignity.

At the same time, the theoretical context of the book builds in a hefty dose of great power competition. Benabdallah writes: “the analysis that Murphy offers can come off as trapped in the orbits of power politics between China and the US.” At certain moments there is the danger of the book participating this the flattening of Africa and the Middle East as arenas for this competition. For example, in the introduction Murphy writes, “due to their resource endowments, both regions are potential future areas of conflict between China and the United States, as well as other great powers in an era of global resource scarcity” (4). There is no mention here of, say, African plans for critical mineral-driven development, or the complex ways in which Middle East powers like the United Arab Emirates wield their hydrocarbon wealth in places like Africa.¹

Yet, I would also argue that in mapping China’s engagement with these regions, Murphy is hinting at how the historical legacy of great power politics can sometimes complicate the present activities of great powers. Throughout the book, she is quite clear about how China uses advocating for developing countries as a tool to differentiate itself from the United States (especially in the Middle East.) Her methodological distinction between US interests and the liberal order provides telling examples of the tensions and contradictions underlying the exercise of Western power in these regions, and how those, in turn, create opportunities for China.

Similar tensions between lofty goals and messy realities raise controversies about Chinese power projection too, and Murphy’s careful delineation of the officially stated goals and tools of Chinese foreign policy arguably make these easier to pinpoint.

One should also add that, while this geopolitical framing can be reductive, it’s a form of reductivity currently ruling both Washington and Beijing. In other words, while one can take issue with how this framing limits the complexity of African and Middle Eastern responses to China’s presence, that flattening currently inflects thinking about these regions within great power decisionmaking. This means that some of the book’s utility to scholars in the Global South lies less in analyzing their regions’ interactions with China, than in clarifying the broader systemic shifts those interactions imply. It provides a way for different

Global South regions to map not only the formal mechanisms of Chinese engagement, but also how those impact their regions’ current position vis-à-vis US power and the liberal international order.

The book in this way provides a conversation starter between different regions of the Global South about how great power influence manifests. At its best, it provides a glimpse of how the phantasmagorical ambitions and fears of great power competition are being concretized into institutions. In the process, it offers a glimpse to the Global South of how different powers hope to instrumentalize it—an issue that should be a constant preoccupation if one happens to be a Global South government official during a moment of global geopolitical tunnel vision.

Contributors:

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Austin Strange is an Assistant Professor of International Relations in the Department of Politics and Public Administration at the University of Hong Kong. His research examines China’s contemporary and historical roles in the world economy and global development. He is author of *Chinese Global Infrastructure* (forthcoming, Cambridge University Press), co-author of *Banking on Beijing: The Aims and Impacts of China’s Overseas Development Program* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), and has recently published articles in *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, *International Studies Quarterly*, and the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, among other journals.
Over the past two decades, the Anglophone debates surrounding the People’s Republic of China (PRC), whether at the academic or popular levels, have cyclically oscillated between proclamations of its imminent Soviet-like collapse, and its ambitious pursuit of a worldwide Pax Sinica. This schizophrenic shift between a Chinese threat and a Chinese paper tiger is particularly noticeable in the United States, where the appetite for great power competition has returned with a (welcomed) vengeance following the “long decade” (to borrow very loosely from Eric Hobsbawm) of American unipolarity and the concurrent Sisyphean “War on Terror.” With China as the only possible peer rival to the United States, understanding the nature and durability of its power has become the primary focus of these debates, and especially so in relation to the “intermediary zones” (as Chairman Mao Zedong described them) of the Global South.¹

Indeed, much ink has been spilled probing China’s deepening political, ideational, and economic ties with these spaces, and perhaps even more so with the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013.² At the heart of this focus, which undoubtedly echoes the anxieties of the Cold War yesteryears over Soviet aid to postcolonial states,³ are a number of questions that are centered around the realities, intentions, and implications of the Chinese presence in the Global South: is the PRC building a still-nascent hegemony in Africa or West Asia? Are its expanding activities there damaging to the long-term interests and influence of the United States? And to what extent is it promoting, through these various relations in the Global South, alternative visions of the international order? More simply distilled, is the PRC engaged in a project of


² “Zhongjian didailun,” Baidu, no date, accessed 5 September 2023, https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E4%B8%AD%E5%9C%96%E5%B8%A6%E8%AE%BA/10415737; The theme of Chinese stagnation and policy blunders in the Global South, and the need for the United States to simply “wait it out,” is an increasingly common talking point in these debates; see for example the various articles in *Foreign Affairs* 102:5 (September/October 2023).

³ For an article about the Arab Gulf (for instance) as a space of unbridled Chinese expansion, and which also contains a brief but good overview of the recent scholarly literature and debate, see John Calabrese, “The United States, China and the Gulf Arab States in the Era of Great Power Competition,” *East Asian Policy* 15:3 (2023): 98-114.

worldmaking (in the ideational as well as material sense) that is, at its bottom-line, antithetical to the very survival and prosperity of the United States?\(^5\)

Dawn Murphy’s well-researched and timely book is entangled to many of the questions animating this debate. Building upon extensive fieldwork, over 200 interviews, and statistical data, *China’s Rise in the Global South* exhaustively examines and compares, over a discrete timeframe (1991–2019), the evolution of Chinese interests, threat perceptions, and behavior in two developing regions: Africa and the Middle East.\(^6\) The book pursues this novel juxtaposition with an eye toward identifying the relationality and impact Chinese interactions with these regions has on the United States, on the one hand—i.e., whether the PRC is cooperative or competitive—and the so-called liberal international order on the other—i.e., whether the PRC is norm convergent or divergent.

Murphy presents this analysis through a series of in-depth case studies, each of which scrutinizes a specific instrument or functional area of PRC engagement. As its core takeaway, *China’s Rise in the Global South* asserts that the PRC is locked in competition with the United States, is challenging the liberal international order, and has the capacity to carve out spheres of influence in these disparate regions. In sum, it is laying out the potential ground work for the establishment of an alternative China-centric international order (confined, mostly, to the Global South).

There is much to commend the book for. It is empirically rich, and its comparative approach is refreshing, especially when considering the mono-regional focus that mars much of the scholarly literature on the PRC’s relationships with Africa and the Middle East. The highlighted disjunctions in PRC approaches that emerge from this—i.e., emphasizing development in Africa as opposed to sovereignty in the Middle East—are insightful, and tell us much about the careful calibrations in messaging and self-performance undertaken by Chinese foreign policy elites when addressing different audiences abroad. The differentiating or functional framework adopted when thinking about the Chinese party-state’s outreach writ large is likewise praiseworthy; oftentimes, many works treat the “state” and its actions in a reductive manner (purely as “diplomacy” or “political relations”) that only occludes the complexities inherent to the utilization of the tool in question. As such, I found the sections dealing with multilateral cooperation forums and special envoys to be exceptionally good and granular, constituting some of the most detailed and up-to-date discussion of these topics I have encountered in the existing scholarship.


\(^6\) Murphy opts to use sub-Saharan Africa, but I find that an unnecessary designation; Africa would suffice.
As to be expected from a work of this scope, I have some quibbles with *China’s Rise in the Global South*. There are a few arbitrary (yet by no means major) errors and claims sprinkled throughout the book, and the sections covering Chinese engagement in Africa are shallower than those concerning the Middle East. There is also a noticeable absence in analysis of other critical instruments of Chinese foreign policy outreach, including united front work and propaganda. The description of some forms of PRC behavior as cooperative/competitive and norm convergent/divergent is unclear and somewhat random. Of course, these are all miniscule issues, and understandable in terms of the many topics Murphy is attempting to tackle in one monograph; one simply cannot cover everything in sufficient detail and depth.

Having said that, the book suffers from three shortcomings pertaining to its interpretation and anticipated long-term outcomes of the PRC’s engagement with Africa and the Middle East. First, though the various instruments of outreach are differentiated and considered on their own terms, they are nevertheless identified as the rudiments of a larger strategy pursued by Beijing to “build spheres of influence” (241, 263). This claim loses sight of the fact that much like other nations, Chinese policies and initiatives are the product of contending elite networks, bureaucracies, and epistemic communities that comprise the state. While leadership small groups headed by members of the Standing Politburo might aspire to impose unity of purpose and action across the bureaucratic behemoth that is the party-state, this is always easier said than done: there is a persuasive argument to be made that the BRI, for instance, is less of a well-integrated geopolitical strategy of escaping encirclement and directing capital flows than an exercise in narrative-

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7 For example, in a sectarian breakdown of the Middle East, Oman is identified as a Sunni state (it is Ibadi in its confessional majority), and Turkey is somehow placed beyond the Sunni-Shi’i categorizations (213-214), though its population is largely Sunni (of the Hanafi-Maturidi persuasion to boot). One odd yet repeated claim I found throughout the book was the assertion that “China does not seek to change the distribution of territory in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa;” this has the whiff of a strawman’s argument, as I have never encountered this as a point of concern in popular, academic, or official conversations.

8 It is noticeable that with the exception of South Africa, no other non-Arab African states are visited by the author in their fieldwork (see 7).


10 I do acknowledge that how one goes about interpreting the behavior of state-level actors within the international system is open to contention and debate, see Robert Powell, “Research Bets and Behavioral IR,” *International Organization* 71:S1 (2017): S265-S277.

building, covering up considerable multi-scalar fragmentation.¹² I remain, for the most part, unconvinced that the totality of Chinese actions across diverse political, economic, and military arenas is indicative of a strategy-under-execution driven by a unifying and overarching logic—notwithstanding official (and popular) rhetoric.

This brings me to the second issue, namely that the book is ultimately about how the PRC acts upon Africa and the Middle East. There is a tendency that afflicts much of the Anglophone research examining the Chinese global footprint in such regions: the local, where all politics inevitably plays out, is side-lined, leading in turn to distortions in how we can interpret the realities of the Chinese presence on the one hand, and local receptivities to it on the other.¹³ It is worth remembering that some regional actors, out of legitimacy considerations, stress (and even exaggerate or wholly fabricate) the extent of their cooperation with the PRC. It is not clear that such cases should be taken at face value as being reflective of Chinese influence.¹⁴ While the views and comments of regional interlocutors can be found throughout the book (though crowded by the voices of Western diplomats), we know little of whether they, and, more significantly, the policymakers at the helm of African and Middle Eastern states, are open now or in the future to the prospect of a Chinese alternative order, let alone in being incorporated into a PRC “sphere of influence.” For example, I suspect that the current leadership in Saudi Arabia, with its pretensions to great power status, dreams of a region—whether under a liberal or post-liberal international order—locked within Riyadh’s, as opposed to Beijing’s, orbit. Where then are the middle powers and regional potentates in this story?

This relegation of the local to invisible passivity is a natural consequence, I believe, of the American-centric debate mentioned earlier, and to which the book directly embeds itself within: the world and all its actors are but a theatre for Sino-American rivalry. Although Murphy does acknowledge that there is much research to be done on the PRC’s “normative interactions with the Global South and [to] better understand the degree to which norms of interaction are developing among those states through socialization with China,” (277) the claim that spheres of influence could materialize in Africa or the Middle East is contingent upon the normative compliance of local elites, an aspect that should have been addressed, even partially, in the book.


Finally, sufficient attention is not given to considering how durable or brittle a Chinese alternative order would be if “the existing liberal order deteriorates, regardless of the root cause of its destruction” (279, fn. 5). A key feature of the current order, after all, is the primacy of the American dollar, the end of which would have very serious implications on the character of the PRC’s economy and the types of relations it maintains with other developed and developing economies. A party-state that moves to lift capital controls and fully internationalize the renminbi will have to deal with very serious dislocations, domestic instability, and contractions in production capacity. This is but one significant facet among many raising questions about the PRC’s ability to rise to the challenge, even with all of its groundwork in the Global South.

An end to the current order, from which Chinese and other global (non-Western) elites have directly benefited from over the past forty years (and likely aim to sustain), will then ultimately transform many of the areas of engagement examined in the book, perhaps in directions suggestive of the nascent formation of spheres of influence, but undoubtedly also toward reduction and withdrawal in others. One cannot help but feel that the specter of the PRC as a challenger to the United States informs this prognosis, with the American century giving way (if the folks in the Beltway are not careful enough, so the argument goes) to a Chinese one. The implied trajectory is too linear, and too neat. I would have wished for a more thorough discussion, since the book is about the future implications of ongoing synergies between the PRC and the two regions in question.

In all, these identified shortcomings do not detract from the richness of China’s Rise in the Global South: I highlight them only because they strike me as conceptual problems that afflict much of the debate on the PRC and its interactions with Africa and the Middle East. As it stands, the book has much to offer in terms of understanding the various dimensions of China’s changing global presence, and will be of interest to both general and more specialized audiences. I definitely anticipate utilizing it, particularly the chapters focusing on specific instruments of foreign policy outreach, in my upcoming courses.

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16 China’s domestic vulnerabilities and limitations, actively debated among academics there, is necessarily part of this equation. See Daniel C. Lynch, China’s Futures: PRC Elites Debate Economics, Politics, and Foreign Policy (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).
In *China’s Rise in the Global South*, Dawn Murphy seeks to put to rest debates and questions about what China wants to accomplish in the Middle East and Africa. Murphy seeks to explicate what type of power China is, and whether its rise should be interpreted as a threat to the liberal order. The central argument of the book is that “although China does not seek to change the international distribution of territory in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, as its power grows, it increasingly builds spheres of influence in these regions and challenges the rules of the international system by constructing an alternative international order to facilitate interactions” (2). The book adds a welcome and productive contribution to the burgeoning scholarship on China-Middle East and China-Africa relations.

*China’s Rise in the Global South* centers on several main themes. First, the book does a great job of outlining the mechanisms of influence that Beijing deploys in its ties to African and Middle Eastern partners. The wide variety of influence mechanisms that Murphy lays out demonstrates the versatility of Beijing’s approach and shows how creative and adaptive Chinese foreign policymaking in the Global South is. One of the versatile tools that the book examines is forum diplomacy. While much has been written on forum diplomacy in China-African relations, especially through the mechanism of the Forum of China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), its counterpart for Arab states gets far less scholarly attention. In chapter 4, Murphy shows that China is both a competitor as well as a competitive power to the United States (US) when it comes to forum diplomacy (64).

In some areas as Murphy shows, China uses the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) to challenge the US and its strong support of Israel by advocating for Palestinian cause, while in others China upholds the liberal order by calling on parties involved to respect United Nations (UN) resolutions and mandates. Through CASCF and its multilateral structure, China scores a mix of international as well as domestic objectives. As Murphy explains, China is “taking a stand for sovereignty and territorial integrity in

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2 I deliberately use Africa instead of sub-Saharan Africa in this review, as I do not believe the Saharan/sub-Saharan divide to add particular value to the analysis.


the Middle East against US interference and interventions” (66) while at the same time utilizing the platform to garner support for its domestic policies in Xinjiang and Hong Kong. Forum diplomacy is indeed a very versatile tool that Beijing can deploy towards a multitude of gains and objectives. As Murphy states, and I agree, more important to this versatility is the fact that while CASCF tackles more political and diplomatic issues, FOCAC is less about political crises and more about trade, commerce, and economic objectives.

In addition to the versatility of tools deployed by Beijing to achieve its goals in Africa and the Middle East, another important characteristic of Chinese foreign policymaking that Murphy highlights is the fluidity in the roles played by China. China is one of very few countries that can both identify as the largest developing country as well as a great power. When dealing with situations where Beijing’s gains increase by downplaying its prowess, it can activate narratives about South-South solidarity and cooperation among developing countries. In other cases, and especially in recent years, Chinese foreign policymakers have become more assertive about portraying China as a responsible great power. In Chapter 5, Murphy outlines the mechanisms and tools that Beijing relies on to expand its influence in the Global South as a responsible and reliable power which is a different type of power than the US is (namely one that does not favor interventionism or sponsor regime change). To this end, the chapter focuses on China’s special envoys to the Middle East and Africa. The special envoys in Africa utilize different strategies and work with a different set of interests than those dealing with crises in the Middle East. The latter, as Murphy explains, are more competitive towards the US, preferring to cooperate with Russia and Iran than the former. Yet, despite the nuance, special envoys play a crucial role as they portray China as a responsible great power which is involved in peacemaking and peacekeeping (140).

In terms of the book’s contributions, one can highlight three important points. First, Murphy argues that while China is not seeking to redraw the (geopolitical) map as it were, it is ultimately interested in constructing a new/alternative order by building its own spheres of influence in the Global South. This might come off as a paradoxical statement at first given that it seems to suggest that while China is not a revisionist power it is still seeking to change the global order. Murphy contends that in the Middle East and Africa, China does not have any territorial aspirations and is not involved in disputes such as the ones in Taiwan or over the South China Sea. Indeed, by examining China’s interests and goals in Africa and the Middle, we learn more new things about China’s rising power than we do by looking at China’s behavior in South and Central Asia for example. Unlike what one might describe as aggressive or muscled Chinese foreign policymaking behavior in Asia, in Africa, and in the Middle East, China is not competing with the US over China’s territorial and sovereignty claims. Instead, it is competing over expanding political, economic, and diplomatic influence, and to gain as much support internationally as possible.

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5 For a discussion on China’s status seeking through the UN, see Courtney Fung, China and Intervention at the UN Security Council: Reconciling Status. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
Second, based on a tremendous amount of fieldwork research and an impressive tally of two hundred interviews with officials in a dozen countries, *China’s Rise in the Global South* adds an important empirical contribution. Much of the conversation on China’s rising power and expanding influence has focused on China’s relations with the US, Europe, and some parts of Asia. There is still a knowledge gap when it comes to other regions including the Middle East, Africa, and South America. As such, Murphy’s research comes at a critical time and adds an important contribution for academics and policy circles alike. Yet, the interviews could have been more inclusive of diverse voices from various backgrounds in the targeted countries instead of mostly focusing on Western diplomats posted in these countries.

A third contribution that *China’s Rise in the Global South* makes is in the nuance it brings through its comparison of China’s foreign policymaking in the Middle East vs. in Africa. Here, Murphy helpfully shows that even when nations use the same tools or mechanisms such as forum diplomacy or economic power, it is often the case that there is a difference in the goals to be achieved or behavior of competing vs. cooperating with the United States. This nuanced analysis contributes to disaggregating the Global South. It dissuades temptations to generalize about China’s foreign policymaking in the Global South from looking at a limited number of China-Africa cases.

In terms of the book’s overall argument and scope, I am compelled to ask: what about the perspective from actors, agents, and officials in the Middle East and African countries? Would the way we think about China’s rising power shift if we approach China-Global South relations from a relational perspective, where both sides (China and host countries) jointly make policies, shape the world order, and change power dynamics in a two-way dialogue rather than in a causal or linear way where China does the influencing and developing countries are its sphere of influence? In other words, what theoretical and conceptual frameworks can we develop if we flip the study and examine things from the perspective of these actors?

Relatedly, if we disaggregated stakeholders to examine the roles played by private sectors, enterprises, individual entrepreneurs, and migrants, how can we account for the potential diverging or even clashing interests of each of the actors? Additionally, what avenues for theorization would the book open up if it did not center China’s interests, its goals, and objectives? Indeed, the analysis that Murphy offers can come off as too trapped in the orbits of power politics between China and the US to fully grant the attention needed for a granular analysis of what Middle East and Africa (two extremely large and diverse regions) want from their ties to either China or the US. The book resolutely argues that the hyped engagement with the Middle East and Africa over the last few years is the result of “China’s interests,” which according to the author are shaped by “China’s domestic economic and political systems and threat perception in the international

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environment” (9). While understanding Chinese interests is important, it would be equally useful to factor in the agency and negotiating power of African actors.\(^8\)

In the end, these points do not have to be viewed as weaknesses in the book’s methodology, as much as they are indicative of how much more room there is in the fields of International Relations and Foreign Policy to examine the world from African and Global South perspectives. Future research should engage with theorizing China-Global South relations from the perspectives, interests, and agencies of these states, rather than from a Global Power perspective.

Review by Austin Strange, University of Hong Kong

The international community, especially the United States and its partner governments, has approached China’s resurgence across the Global South over the past 25 years with curiosity and concern. Today, China’s government plays a large, multidimensional role in the economic, political, and security affairs of dozens of countries across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, Oceania, and other developing regions. But popular and academic debates have struggled to reach consensus on the nature and impact of China’s rise in these places. Moreover, though productive research agendas on China’s approach to regional diplomacy, development finance, global security cooperation, and international order have formed, they have mostly remained separate.

Dawn Murphy’s *China’s Rise in the Global South* is thus an important and ambitious study. Focusing on the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, the book explores the nature of China’s region-wide interests, whether China’s approach in these regions is competing or cooperating with the interests of the United States, and whether China’s behavior converges to or diverges from the existing international order. The book’s answer to these questions is that in pursuing a suite of strategic interests, China “increasingly builds spheres of influence in these regions and challenges the rules of the international system by constructing an alternative international order” (4).

This appears to be a major claim, but Murphy quickly qualifies it with the assertion that China’s behavior is more of an insurance policy that is laser-focused on safeguarding China’s national interests against potential outside threats, rather than a longstanding plot to unseat American preponderance. She argues that a combination of factors—including a diverse set of economic and political interests, as well as the Chinese government’s perception of threats to these interests—shapes whether it pursues cooperative behavior vis-à-vis the US and whether this behavior supports the existing order (19). As Murphy puts it, “the best way to interpret China’s behavior toward the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa is to understand deeply its interests and external threat perceptions over time” (9). China has increasingly felt threatened by the US, and “its competitive economic and political behavior appears to be escalating both inside and outside the liberal order” (277).

The book has multiple strengths that are worthy of praise. First, the author provides impressive original evidence on China’s use of regional cooperation forums and special envoys in Africa and the Middle East.

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Chapters 4 and 5 examine these instruments and are the richest empirical components of the book. Scholars of Chinese foreign policy can look here to find one of the first in-depth treatments of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). These chapters are also useful for benchmarking China’s behavior via these instruments relative to the United States and the liberal international order. Murphy explains that CASCF has been inherently more political than FOCAC, in part due to longstanding Chinese support for Palestine (64), whereas FOCAC has clearly been more focused on economic order-building. Among other strategic interests, China’s government has used both fora to pursue international support for important political issues such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), to engage with South China Sea disputes, and to combat foreign criticisms about China’s domestic human rights record (66-67).

A second notable strength is the book’s value for scholars with a broad range of research interests. Chapter 3 provides readers with a useful menu of China’s primary interests in the Global South. They include, for example, supporting China’s own economic development, securing international diplomatic and other political support, ensuring domestic stability and territorial sovereignty, protecting Chinese overseas interests, and championing developing country causes (41). Chapters 6 through 8 survey China’s economic, political, and military engagement across the Middle East and Africa. These descriptive chapters holistically and clearly describe the different channels and instruments of China’s engagement. They offer accessible starting points for scholars working on related topics.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of China’s Rise in the Global South is its thought-provoking intervention into debates about rising powers and international orders. In the spirit of other recent research on Chinese foreign policy, Murphy divides international “order” into specific domains and issue areas, arguing that “to understand China’s behavior requires examining its behavior across specific functional areas (9).” She adds a new layer to the debate by benchmarking China’s behavior toward the international order and the interests of the United States, the incumbent power which is often viewed as the primary architect of the liberal international order. Table 10.1 in the concluding chapter (265) illustrates the results of this exercise: some of China’s behavior in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, such as its participation in multilateral security efforts like maritime anti-piracy and United Nations peacekeeping operations (UNPKO), has actually converged with the existing order. Other activities, such as foreign aid and China’s strict interpretation of sovereignty in various regional issues, appear to diverge from it. Most of China’s behavior is considered competitive relative to the US, a point revisited below, though China is also cooperative in a few security-related issue areas.

China’s Rise in the Global South is successful in demonstrating that the reality of China’s engagement in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa does not conform to a single narrative or caricature. Nor does it clearly suggest that China is supporting or challenging the United States and the existing international order in

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these regions. Instead, reality is messier and more nuanced, and Murphy’s approach helps makes sense of it. It also offers a useful reminder—joining a chorus of studies—that the Global South possesses enduring, underappreciated strategic value for China’s foreign policy goals.³

The book also generates important questions for continued discussion. While its comprehensive, survey-like approach is useful, tracking China’s behavior across so many countries and issue areas is difficult. It necessarily requires sacrificing granularity, and at times this trade-off is apparent in the book’s treatment of certain types of Chinese activities and their relation to the existing order. For example, Chinese foreign aid is described as divergent from the existing international order, which here presumably refers to the international development regime.⁴ Chinese aid is “primarily norm-divergent” because it lacks transparency and conditionality based on host country regime type (94). But the book points out that China’s government provides more aid to needier countries, which is also a norm within the incumbent regime.⁵ Orders are usually built upon multiple norms, and it is not clear how to benchmark a state’s behavior when its compliance levels differ across norms. As a thought experiment: If China’s government decided tomorrow to increase its foreign aid to 0.7 percent of its gross national income (GNI)—a well-known (aspirational) norm within the international development regime—would this be considered order convergent? Or would it deem China even more divergent since much larger volumes of Chinese aid would now be flowing to host countries regardless of political institutions and without much transparency?

Staying on the topic of development finance for a moment, the book also makes a curious choice to focus on concessional aid, but not on China’s less concessional development capital (246). Only Chinese loans and debt that fall under China’s foreign aid are covered (83-84).⁶ Less concessional, loan-based financing from Chinese policy banks has come to dominate China’s development finance portfolio during the study period of China’s Rise in the Global South.⁷ Arguably, it is also the component of China’s development cooperation with more consequences for the international development regime than China’s foreign aid, which is much smaller financially and arguably more convergent to the behavior of other major donors and creditors.


⁵ Dreher, Fuchs, Parks, Strange, and Tierney, Banking on Beijing.

⁶ It argues that China’s focus on debt cancellation actually converges with the existing order (84).

These observations reflect a larger challenge: Because of its laudable ambition to comprehensively survey China’s behavior in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa, the book is sometimes not positioned to define different orders in depth, leaving some of the assertions about the nature of China’s behavior up for debate.

Another thought-provoking, and perhaps controversial, aspect of this book is its unambiguous choice to study what rising powers do rather than what they might want. It explicitly sheds itself of the burden of measuring China’s preferences in chapter 2. Murphy argues that focusing on cooperative versus competitive behavior that converges with or diverges from order is a more useful framework than the well-known status quo-revisionism dichotomy when thinking about real-world outcomes (22). This approach is sensible because it is difficult, if not impossible, to measure states’ true preferences. It allows Murphy to focus much of her analysis on measuring what China has actually done in its economic, political, and security engagements overseas.

But it also raises the question of how informative these behaviors actually are with regard to international order. Studying China’s recent behavior alone risks misunderstanding what China might do in the long term. China’s Rise in the Global South recognizes the stakes of this challenge: its final sentence reads “Misunderstanding China as a rising power could have dire consequences for global peace and security” (278). But just as gauging preferences is an imperfect exercise that could generate misperceptions, the same may hold for considering only observable behavior. Because orders are costly to challenge or overturn, dissatisfied powers may have incentives to converge to them until they are more powerful later. Conversely, satisfied powers may wish to comply but fail to do so without adequate resources. Simply put, observable behavior is an imperfect signal of a state’s designs for the international system.

In fairness, the book is explicitly not interested in studying China’s order-specific preferences. Still, this leaves this reader wondering what it means for China’s behavior to be convergent or divergent toward international order in the short term. Is China thinking about order or just pursuing its concrete political and economic interests? While this is perhaps outside the scope of the book, it would be helpful to feature

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more Chinese policy and academic debates beyond specific instruments such as regional fora and special envoys to examine views toward order more generally.

Finally, the book’s measure of “competitive” behavior appears to deem the vast majority of China’s engagements in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa as being in conflict with the interests of the US (see Table 10.1 [265]). This is because “economic power” and “spheres of influence” (e.g. 167, 192) are construed using a zero-sum logic wherein these things are finite resources. China’s gain is thus necessarily America’s loss (167). That may or may not be true, but the approach yields little variation in which specific economic, political, and military tools are most “competitive” toward the US. This is apparent in chapter 6, which argues that “China’s behavior is competitive in all of the foreign policy tools examined” (144). Given countries have finite resources to respond to other states’ competitive behavior, it would be helpful if competitive behavior was measured using different degrees.

The book raises other questions that could stimulate additional discussion. Chapter 9 explicitly interprets the Belt and Road Initiative as China’s “overarching strategy that uses all of its instruments of power to achieve its objectives” (237). But the book’s theoretical and empirical approach, which is overwhelmingly focused on describing singular policy instruments, is not particularly well-positioned to defend this strong claim about these tools’ integration. Another possible point of contention is that the Global South includes dozens of countries and several regions not covered by the empirical focus on the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa.

None of the above issues jeopardize the book’s contribution to the field of Chinese foreign policy. They instead reflect the stimulating nature of China’s Rise in the Global South.

On balance, this book sheds light on China’s multidimensional relations with dozens of countries through extensive fieldwork and interviews, particularly in Middle Eastern countries, providing a useful survey for future researchers to reference and build on. It joins a growing strand of research linking China’s domestic political and other interests with its posture toward international order.10 And it provides original documentation on China’s regional fora and special envoys, two foreign policy activities that have received scant systematic attention in the literature. Building on this work, follow-up research by the author and other scholars will help make refinements in our understanding of China’s relations with developing countries and its elusive posture towards different orders in international politics.

Response by Dawn Murphy, US National War College, Washington, DC

I am sincerely thankful for the thoughtful and constructive reviews written by three superb scholars: Mohammed Turki A. Alsudairi, Lina Benabdallah, and Austin Strange. In this roundtable, they all actively and productively engaged the arguments of my book, *China’s Rise in the Global South: The Middle East, Africa, and Beijing’s Alternative World Order*. I also deeply appreciate Cobus van Staden’s contribution to the introduction and Courtney Fung’s organization of this roundtable review. One of the true joys of the topics I study and my line of scholarly inquiry is having the privilege to engage with scholars across regions, functional areas, and disciplines who are all working to understand the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) relations with the Middle East and Africa. The contributors to this roundtable represent some of the diversity of the scholars who are pursuing cutting-edge research on this topic. Over the years, my understanding of China’s relations with these regions has been enhanced by interacting with each of them.

My research and writing of *China’s Rise in the Global South* were driven by a desire to fill gaps in the empirical and theoretical literature about China as a rising power. In 2006, when I started to explore China’s interactions with the Middle East and Africa, most scholars examining China’s rise focused on bilateral relations between the United States and China and the PRC’s behavior as a rising power in Pacific Asia. China’s relations with the Middle East were understudied, and scholarship on its contemporary engagements with Africa was a newly emerging field. At that point, a comprehensive, theory-driven comparison of China’s behavior in the Middle East versus sub-Saharan Africa was virtually nonexistent in the literature.

With this book, I sought to answer the following questions about China’s behavior in the Middle East and Africa in the post-Cold War era (1991–2019): What are China’s interests? Is it cooperating or competing with the United States in these regions? Is China’s behavior converging with or diverging from liberal international norms? Is it building an alternative international order in these regions? If yes, what are the characteristics of that order? How does China portray and differentiate itself as a great power in these regions? How is it building spheres of influence? Ultimately, what does China’s behavior in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa indicate about its rise globally? To attempt to address those questions, I conducted ten years of extensive primary source research and over 200 interviews with officials and scholars from China, the Middle East, Africa, the US, and Europe.

Empirically, my book is distinctive because it methodically evaluates a wide range of foreign policy tools China utilizes in the Middle East and Africa over time and across regions and functional areas. The book is also unique because it analyzes understudied foreign policy tools in the Middle East and Africa (e.g., China’s cooperation forums, special envoys, and free trade agreements) and strives to contribute to both

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1 The views expressed in this response are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the US Government.
empirical and theoretical literature about China’s rise. While I was researching and writing the book, the Arab Awakening spread through the Middle East, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) emerged, and competitive dynamics in Sino-American relations began to manifest in regions around the world. Those changes made it particularly important to not only compare China’s behavior across regions and functional areas, but also over time.

Based on extensive research, *China’s Rise in the Global South* argues that although China does not seek to change the international distribution of territory in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, as its power grows, it increasingly builds spheres of influence in these regions and challenges the rules of the international system by constructing an alternative international order to facilitate interactions. China does not yet seek to replace the existing international order, but if the current liberal order unravels or excludes China, this alternative order could serve as the foundation of China’s economic, political, and military relations with the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, as well as much of the developing world.

Another important finding of the book is that China’s behavior varies significantly across functional areas. In the functional areas of economics and politics directly related to its vital interests, China is establishing institutions outside the liberal international order (e.g., cooperation forums, BRI) and advocating for changes to some norms of the current order. In general, its political, economic, and foreign aid activities are competitive with the US and norm-divergent from the liberal order. In stark contrast, China’s military behavior in the Middle East and Africa is primarily cooperative with the US and the West and norm convergent with the liberal order.

I am thrilled that Alsudairi’s, Benabdallah’s, and Strange’s reviews of *China’s Rise in the Global South* indicate that I achieved many of my goals with the book. All three reviewers commend its extensive fieldwork and empirical richness. They praise my novel comparative approach across regions. In Alsudairi’s words, the book’s regional “comparative approach is refreshing, especially when considering the mono-regional focus that mars much of the scholarly literature on the PRC’s relationships with Africa and the Middle East.” The reviewers also commend the book’s cross-functional comparisons. Alsudairi writes, “The differentiating or functional framework adopted when thinking about the Chinese party-state’s outreach writ-large is likewise praiseworthy.” Benabdallah notes,

> The book does a great job of outlining the mechanisms of influence that Beijing deploys in its ties to African and Middle Eastern partners. The wide variety of influence mechanisms that Murphy lays out demonstrates the versatility of Beijing’s approach and shows how creative and adaptive Chinese foreign policymaking in the Global South is.

All three reviewers specifically highlight my chapters on cooperation forums (ch. 4) and special envoys (ch. 5) as empirically pathbreaking. In Strange’s words,

> the author provides impressive original evidence on China’s use of regional cooperation forums and special envoys in Africa and the Middle East. Chapters 4 and 5 examine these
instruments and are the richest empirical components of the book. Scholars of Chinese foreign policy can look here to find one of the first in-depth treatments of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC).

Alsudairi writes, “I found the sections dealing with multilateral cooperation forums and special envoys to be exceptionally good and granular, constituting some of the most detailed and up-to-date on these topics I have encountered in the existing scholarship.”

Strange also praises the book’s theoretical contributions. He states,

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of *China’s Rise in the Global South* is its thought-provoking intervention into debates about rising powers and international orders.... She adds a new layer to the debate by benchmarking China’s behavior toward the international order and the interests of the United States, the incumbent power which is often viewed as the primary architect of the liberal international order.

I very much appreciate the reviewers’ comments that my nuanced analysis leads to a better understanding of China in the Global South. For example, Benabdallah notes that the book’s “nuanced analysis contributes to disaggregating the Global South. It dissuades temptations to generalize about China’s foreign policymaking in the Global South from looking at a limited number of China-Africa cases.” Strange states, “*China’s Rise in the Global South* is successful in demonstrating that the reality of China’s engagement in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa does not conform to a single narrative or caricature....reality is messier and more nuanced, and Murphy’s approach helps makes sense of it.”

I am also pleased that the reviewers recognize the multiple audiences for this book, including scholars, policymakers, and students. I wrote it with the aim of reaching a diverse audience, and I am glad it is viewed as accessible by many readers. Strange notes the “book’s value for scholars with a broad range of research interests” and that the book’s empirical chapters “offer accessible starting points for scholars working on related topics.” Benabdallah states that “There is still a knowledge gap when it comes to other regions including the Middle East, Africa, and South America. As such, Murphy’s research comes at a critical time and adds an important contribution for academics and policy circles alike.” I am flattered by Alsudairi’s comment that “I definitely anticipate utilizing it, particularly the chapters focusing on specific instruments of foreign policy outreach, in my upcoming courses.”

Finally, since one of the goals of the book was to understand China’s rise globally better, it was encouraging to see Benabdallah assert that “by examining China’s interests and goals in Africa and the Middle, we learn more new things about China’s rising power than we do by looking at China’s behavior in South and Central Asia for example.”
Now that I have addressed praise for the book by the reviewers, I will respond to their insightful critiques. One explicit and driving goal of my research for *China’s Rise in the Global South* was to expand our knowledge beyond Western perspectives about China’s relations with the Middle East and Africa. In their reviews, Benabdallah and Alsudairi both argue that the book should have incorporated more local voices from the Middle East and Africa. Benabdallah characterizes my interviews as “mostly focusing on Western diplomats posted in these countries.” Alsudairi claims that the views and comments of regional interlocutors are “crowded by the voices of Western diplomats.” Out of all the critiques levied by the three reviewers, this one concerns me the most, because it indicates that I did not clearly communicate to my readers the full scope of interviews informing the arguments of my book. In my opinion, one of the book’s greatest strengths is that it attempted to capture the insights of Chinese, Middle Eastern, and African government officials and scholars. *China’s Rise in the Global South* was the product of approximately 200 interviews and other primary source research conducted over 10 years (2009–2019). My interview process involved meeting with Western (US and European) government officials and scholars, but those interviews were only a small subset of the overall interviews. The vast majority of my interviews were with government officials and scholars from China, the Middle East, and Africa. I conducted in-depth on-the-ground overseas field research in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, including China (nine months), Egypt (four months), South Africa (one month), and shorter field study trips to the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait.  

During that field research, my interviewees represented a wide range of countries and international organizations, including (in alphabetical order) the African Union, Bahrain, Djibouti, China, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, the League of Arab States, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Tunisia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. Of course, I was not able to secure interviews with all the regional government officials and scholars I targeted, and I was cautious when quoting and citing my 

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1 While a visiting scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Science, Institute of World Economics and Politics, in Beijing (September 2009 through May 2010), I interviewed Chinese scholars, government officials, and economic actors, as well as a number of Middle Eastern and African embassy officials (from countries including Bahrain, Israel, Jordan, Palestine, South Africa, Tunisia, and Turkey). As a visiting research fellow at the American University in Cairo, Egypt (September 2010 through December 2010), I interviewed relevant scholars and government officials in the Egyptian government, the League of Arab States, and the African Union. In May 2011, I conducted research in South Africa, interviewing scholars and government officials. In 2013, I held follow-up interviews in Beijing regarding the impact of the Arab awakening on China’s interests and behavior after 2010 (including formal interviews with embassy representatives from Iraq, Israel, Oman, Palestine, and the United Arab Emirates as well as informal interactions with representatives of all member states of the Arab League). From 2015 to 2016, I conducted interviews in China, Washington, DC, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman on changes in China’s approach to the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa after the Arab awakening. That round of interviews also included discussions with government officials from Djibouti, Israel, and Palestine. In 2017 and 2018, I conducted interviews with government officials, intergovernmental organizations, and scholars about China’s Belt and Road Initiative in Washington, DC; Belgium; France; the Netherlands; and the United Kingdom (including officials from the European Union and NATO). My last round of interviews for this project occurred in the fall of 2019 in the United Arab Emirates, meeting with scholars studying China and government officials.
interviewees from China, the Middle East, and Africa, to protect their identities. Since opportunities to interview Chinese officials and scholars candidly can be limited, speaking with government representatives and scholars from Middle Eastern and African countries provided important insights essential to understanding China’s interests and behavior in these regions. As the project started to analyze China’s Belt and Road Initiative, I interviewed some Western diplomats to understand non-US perspectives on the initiative better. I expanded my interview targets to European government officials, intergovernmental organizations, and scholars in Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, including European Union and NATO officials. However, these Western interview targets were still only a small portion of the overall interviews. All of this is to say that Alsudairi’s and Benabdallah’s claims that my research focused on the voices of Western diplomats at the exclusion of more local voices are not an accurate representation of the interview content that informed the book’s arguments.

Another criticism shared by Benabdallah and Alsudairi is that the book should have made more efforts to understand China’s relations with the Middle East and Africa through the lens of regional country agency. I agree with their observations that my interviews and research for *China’s Rise in the Global South* focused on understanding China’s interests and behavior, not explicitly the interests and behavior of states in the Middle East and Africa. My purpose in the book was to understand the PRC’s interests and behavior better. It is situated in a literature that seeks to understand the interests and behavior of rising powers. It is a book about China. That said, China and regional countries jointly shape all the foreign policy tools that I examine in my work. The agency of countries in the Middle East and Africa is particularly relevant for understanding cooperation forums, special envoys, strategic partnerships, and military basing. Due to that interactive dynamic, perhaps I should have emphasized regional country agency more clearly throughout the book. Regional country agency is essential, and needs to be studied much more. Going forward, research more specifically emphasizing regional country and regional organization agency is essential to building our knowledge about China’s role and Sino-American interactions in these regions. For all the reasons that Alsudairi and Benabdallah highlight about the importance of regional country agency, part of my current research agenda now explores how Middle Eastern and African regional countries and organizations perceive China’s role in their regions and exercise their own autonomy in shaping and managing relations with the PRC and other great powers.

Alsudairi and Benabdallah also cite the need for an analysis that disaggregates the state and seeks to understand how sub-state actors impact China’s relations with the Middle East and Africa. Alsudairi notes the critical role of elite networks, bureaucracies, and epistemic communities that comprise the state, while Benabdallah focuses on the private sector, enterprises, individual entrepreneurs, and migrants. While researching the book, I made a methodological decision to focus on a unitary PRC state in order to dialogue with the state-focused international relations literature and to attempt to develop macro-level observations about China’s interests and behavior across regions and functional areas. In particular, I situated my work to speak to realism, Robert Gilpin’s theories about power transition,1 and work examining the socialization processes.

of states into the international order. My goal was to make claims about state behavior, and I purposely chose not to examine the role of sub-state and non-state actors. That said, I absolutely agree that studies that disaggregate the state offer nuanced understandings of relations, and exploring the sub-state level is a meaningful way to examine China’s relations with the Middle East, Africa, and the rest of the Global South.

Another similarity in Benabdallah’s and Alsudairi’s assessments is that they consider my book to be too focused on great power dynamics between the US and China in these regions. Benabdallah asserts that “the analysis that Murphy offers can come off as trapped in the orbits of power politics between China and the US.” Alsudairi comments about American-centric debates that frame the world and all its actors as only a theatre for Sino-American rivalry. Although I agree that looking at the world through the analytical frame of great power rivalry is an oversimplification, much of the academic literature I attempt to speak to focuses on great power dynamics and seeks to understand Sino-American relations and China’s rise. For theoretical and policy reasons, I examined US-China interactions as part of my analysis.

The analytical approach I chose to leverage in this book (responding to insights from realism and Gilpin’s power transition theory) leads to another one of Alsudairi’s criticisms. In one of his footnotes, Alsudairi states, “One odd yet repeated claim I found throughout the book was the assertion that ‘China does not seek to change the distribution of territory in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa;’ this has the whiff of a strawman’s argument, as I have never encountered this as a point of concern in popular, academic, or official conversations.” This type of disconnect is part of the challenge of producing a book that speaks to academic and policy debates. Although I understand Alsudairi’s point, potential territorial aspirations are part of the larger debate about the goals of rising great powers in realism, as well as Gilpin’s arguments about the interests of rising powers in power transitions. My argument speaks to this larger literature regarding rising powers and their global aspirations. Events in recent years, including Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and accusations of China’s neo-colonial behavior in regions such as Africa, make it very important to explicitly state that at this point, China does not have territorial aspirations in the Middle East and Africa, especially compared to territorial claims it could pursue in Asia, including Taiwan, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, the Indian border, and the Russian border. It is important to highlight explicitly the finding that a lack of territorial aspirations differentiates China’s behavior in Asia from its behavior in the Middle East and Africa.

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4 See Gilpin, War and Change in World Politics.
Moving on to Strange’s review, I agree with his critique that the book sacrifices some granularity in analyzing behavior within norms and in understanding state behavior on a spectrum from cooperation to competition. His examples of potential variation within foreign aid norms illustrate his points in a clear and accessible way. There is much more work to do in assessing how China’s behavior converges with or diverges from the liberal interactional order, and, as he notes, there are interesting and significant differences even within functional areas. Iain Johnston’s insightful work that illuminates some dimensions of this issue of variation across norms and within norms was published when I was completing the manuscript. To better understand China’s interaction with the liberal order, many more nuanced studies need to examine various facets of China’s convergence and divergence with relevant norms.

Strange also discusses how my study would benefit from a more nuanced discussion of different degrees of competition. Alsudairi’s review also points to how the categorization of state behavior could be better explained and more clearly justified. Although I do define my terms in the book, I really see my work in *China’s Rise* as a starting point for analyzing these issues, not a definitive answer. If my work, together with that of other scholars, generates discussion and debate on some of these issues about how China relates to the international order and the ways in which China competes or cooperates with the US in the Middle East and Africa, it has served its purpose.

Strange’s assessment of the book also claims that it studies what China does rather than what it wants, and that observable behavior is an imperfect signal of a state’s designs. His point is well taken, but the book does attempt to study what China (and countries in the Middle East and Africa) says it wants. Of course, what a state says it wants is an imperfect way to gain insights into its actual motives, but as a starting point, we should at least try to understand what a state declares its objectives are. Although the book does analyze China’s academic debates about order to a certain extent, I agree with Strange that in order to better understand what China wants, we need to focus more on China’s policy debates about order. As a result, my current research explores that issue much more closely. It examines how China’s view of Great Changes Unseen in a Century impacts its approach to the Middle East and Africa and how its Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) shed light on how China views the international order and what it wants from that order in these regions. My current work attempts to frame China’s behavior in the Middle East and Africa as part of its much broader approach to the global order.

The reviewers also made a few more minor points that I want to acknowledge. Alsudairi identified some errors in the book’s text. His observation that Oman is Ibadi and not Sunni and that Turkey (with a Hanafi-Maturidi persuasion) should be included with Sunni states in a sectarian breakdown of the Middle East is noted, and I will make sure my future work reflects that nuance. I thank him for such a close reading of the text. Alsudairi also observes that the book’s coverage of Africa is shallower than that of the Middle East.

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agree. Strange notes that the Global South is more than the Middle East and Africa. I also agree with that point. Although *China’s Rise in the Global South* has insights that are useful in thinking about China’s interactions with the rest of the Global South, my book focuses only on two significant parts of the Global South: the Middle East and Africa.

Both Alsudairi and Strange highlight additional foreign policy tools I could have analyzed, e.g., the United Front work, propaganda, and non-concessional loans. I agree that all those foreign policy tools must be examined in the broader literature studying China’s relations with the Middle East. I chose the foreign policy tools I examine in my book based on the availability of data that allowed for a side-by-side comparison of China’s approach to these regions and countries in these regions. The foreign policy tools they mention did not fit within the scope of my study, but are still important to understand in examining China’s relations with these regions going forward.

Strange also argues that the findings about China’s foreign policies in *China’s Rise in the Global South* are not well positioned to support claims in the book about BRI as an overarching strategy. That is a fair critique. My arguments about the strategic aspects of BRI are more supported by the analysis made in chapter 9, which specifically examines the origins of BRI and how it is leveraging multiple instruments of power to pursue strategic aims in the Middle East and Africa. I still stand by my arguments in the chapter. That said, the coverage of BRI is relatively limited in the book, and much more work needs to be done to understand the strategic aspects of the initiative in the regions I study and globally.

Finally, Alsudairi argues that the book does not pay enough attention to “how brittle or durable China’s alternative order would be if the existing liberal order unravels.” The book was not forward-looking in that way, but I do think that is an interesting question to consider as we consider the future of the order China is building.

As is clear, overall, I agree with (or at least sympathize with) the vast majority of the excellent critiques provided by Alsudairi, Benabdallah, and Strange. I also sincerely appreciate their praise for the book. The study of China’s relations with the Middle East and Africa is an exciting, rich, and emerging research field. I am proud to be part of the incredible group of scholars from the US, China, the Middle East, Africa, and the rest of the world who are examining these issues. We all approach this study with different levels of analysis, units of analysis, and methodologies. However, we all have the same goal: developing a better understanding of the world and providing policy recommendations based on that knowledge. I look forward to many more decades of exploring and discussing these critical issues with Alsudairi, Benabdallah, Strange, and the many other scholars who work in this space.