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Gurol, Julia; Schütze, Benjamin

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Julia Gurol, Benjamin Schütze

Abstract

From collaboration on infrastructural megaprojects to vaccine development and digital surveillance techniques: Arab Gulf–Chinese relations in times of COVID-19 are complex and multi-layered. Nonetheless, established regime-centric, analytical approaches often fail to see this complexity by almost exclusively focusing on questions of collaboration between authoritarian regimes. Such approaches not only ignore the diversity of involved actors and the inherently transregional nature of contemporary authoritarian power, but also bear the risk of reproducing binary notions of authoritarianism vs. liberal democracy that fundamentally ignore the latter's coercive core. Recent work on the duality of infrastructure as both enabling global flows of goods and (re)producing social hierarchies helps us overcome the methodological nationalism found in the majority of scholarship on authoritarian power. In this article, we provide a selective overview, through the prism of logistics and infrastructure, of Arab Gulf–Chinese authoritarian entanglements in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding authoritarian practices as territorially un-bounded modes of governance, our objective is to develop a more in-depth and context-sensitive understanding of the transregionally connected mechanisms of (re)producing authoritarian power. We argue that the pandemic constitutes a seemingly technical opportunity for the intensified diffusion of authoritarian practices that both enable certain infrastructural politics and in turn are also rendered possible by them. This emphasis on infrastructure, understood as simultaneously fostering a global circulation of goods and capital, as well as reinforcing containment and facilitating new forms of managing and repressing public discontent, provides us with a helpful lens for the development of a truly transregional understanding of authoritarian power. We discuss this argument based on select examples of digital and physical infrastructure(s) in Arab Gulf–Chinese relations, and their embedment in global flows of capital.

Keywords: China, Arab Gulf, infrastructure, authoritarian practices, COVID-19

Julia Gurol, Department of Political Sciences, University of Freiburg; julia.gurol@politik.uni-freiburg.de. Benjamin Schütze, Arnold Bergstraesser Institute, Freiburg and Young Academy for Sustainability Research at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (FRIAS), Freiburg; benjamin.schuetze@abi.uni-freiburg.de. Part of the research leading to this article was carried out in the context of the research project "Global Autocratic Collaboration in Times of COVID-19: Game Changer or Business as Usual in Sino-Gulf Relations?", funded by the Volkswagen-Foundation (2021–2022). We thank Antonia Thies, Simon Sackers and Elias Klenk for research assistance and Klara Leithäuser for proofreading.

Introduction

Authoritarian power in China and in the Arab world is mostly analysed on its own or in comparison with the other. However, interpretations of Arab and Chinese authoritarian power that are spatially bound by the physical borders of the nation-state or as a product of particular regimes fundamentally ignore the manifold connections between Arab and Chinese authoritarianisms and the multiplicity of actors from within and beyond the state involved in their (re)production. In this paper, we go beyond regime-centric notions of authoritarian power by exploring Arab Gulf–Chinese authoritarian collaboration in the context of COVID-19. We do so by assessing authoritarian power through the prism of logistics and infrastructure. We overcome the methodological nationalism that characterises the majority of scholarship on authoritarian power (Diamond et al. 2016, Linz 2000, O'Donnell 1999, Levitsky / Way 2010) by using infrastructure as an analytical prism, understanding the latter as both enabling global flows of goods and as (re)producing social hierarchies (Chua 2018: 2–3, Cowen 2014).

Democratisation scholars such as Diamond et al. (2016) consider authoritarian regimes as the sole sources of authoritarian power. In contrast, we suggest that authoritarian power has gained an international dimension not only because of the "challenges presented by regimes in Moscow, Beijing, Tehran, Caracas, and Riyadh" (Diamond 2016: 17), but to a significant extent also due to the mounting authoritarian collaboration between actors below or beyond the institutional level of the nation-state, such as transnational private firms. After all, Arab Gulf and Chinese authoritarianisms are not as easily separable as most existing accounts make us believe, given that the two produce and inform one another. However, in existing research, these entanglements have hitherto received only scant attention.

Understanding authoritarian practices as territorially unbounded "mode[s] of governing people" (Glasius 2018a: 179), our objective is to develop a more in-depth and context-sensitive understanding of the modes and mechanisms through which authoritarian power is (re)produced. While we build on Glasius's understanding of authoritarian power as consisting of extraterritorial practices (2018a), we see such power not only as sabotaging a form of pre-existing accountability (2018b: 517), but also as preventing "demanded forms of accountability via strategies of pre-emption, technocratization, and coercion" (Jenss / Schuetze 2021: 83). We argue that in the context of the global pandemic, different forms of Arab Gulf–Chinese private sector collaboration have gained prominence in advancing authoritarian practices both within and beyond established nation-state contexts. Given that they are not necessarily limited to regime contexts, an exploration of authoritarian practices from an infrastructure perspective, rather

than via the tiresome nation-state lens, is a fruitful endeavour that promises a more nuanced understanding of contemporary modes and mechanisms of authoritarian collaboration. While the state continues to play a central role in the authoritarian practices we discuss, it has become a globalised institution (Bogaert 2018). Private actors who want to share state power, in order to thereby benefit from capital accumulation, play an increasingly central role in this globalisation or transregionalisation of authoritarian power.

To disentangle the modes and mechanisms of the (re)production of authoritarian power beyond the nation-state, we assess transregional authoritarian practices through the prism of critical infrastructure and logistics. We look at select examples of Arab Gulf–Chinese collaboration in the development of both digital and physical infrastructures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Along with the examples of tracking apps, surveillance techniques and health infrastructure, we discuss the role of these infrastructures in enabling the transregional travelling of certain authoritarian practices, thereby (re)producing authoritarian power. Finally, we scrutinise the functioning of infrastructures as a tool for exerting and stabilising authoritarian power.

In a nutshell, we argue that the pandemic constitutes a seemingly apolitical opportunity for the diffusion of transregional authoritarian practices via the means of infrastructural politics. These practices, we contend, have no conventional boundaries, but stretch along the entire logistics space (Cowen 2014). As with the physical and digital infrastructures used during the fight against the pandemic, which are deeply embedded in global flows of capital, Zuboff (2019) pointedly speaks of the development of a form of "surveillance capitalism", an economic system that has at its core the commodification of personal data with the aim of making a profit (Aho / Duffield 2020). In pointing towards the crucial role of digital and physical infrastructures – developed or enhanced during the global pandemic – for authoritarian power, we build on Demmelhuber et al. (forthcoming), who describe the pandemic as a "silver platter for Middle Eastern autocrats to further fine-tune modes of digital surveillance and repression", however with a decidedly more transregional approach.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. We begin by discussing the role of infrastructure(s) for transregional authoritarianism by briefly sketching existing literature on authoritarian power, infrastructure and the COVID-19 pandemic. We then outline our argument about new forms of Arab Gulf–Chinese private sector collaboration as a key driver behind the advancement of authoritarian practices in the context of COVID-19. In the subsequent empirical section, we explore such forms of transregional authoritarian collaboration in more depth with regard to the promotion and realisation of both digital and physical forms of infrastructural cooperation (the development of tracking apps and merging of different infrastructures – e.g., the Health Silk Road and Digital Silk Road).

The role of infrastructure(s) for transregional authoritarianism

We position our paper at the intersection of three intertwined bodies of literature. Firstly, we speak to and seek to enhance literatures on authoritarian power and neoliberalism (Glasius 2018a, 2018b; Bogaert 2018; Bruff / Tansel 2019; Hasenkamp 2020; Zuboff 2019). Secondly, we build on critical research on infrastructure and logistics (Cowen 2014, Chua 2018, Khalili 2018, Ziadah 2019, Apostolopoulou 2020), which we understand as simultaneously enabling the circulation of goods and capital, as well as reinforcing containment and facilitating new forms of managing and repressing public discontent. Finally, we look at the role of logistics and infrastructure for authoritarian entanglements beyond the state level through the lens of a global crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic. Thereby we speak to the fast-growing body of literature on the political and societal implications of the global pandemic (Greitens 2020, Levine 2020, Rapeli / Saikkonen 2020, Verma 2020).

The study of authoritarian power is dominated by an inherent state-centrism. While Linz's focus on limited pluralism, limited participation and ill-defined limits of power as key features of authoritarianism (2000: 159–261) does not per se constitute an example of methodological nationalism, it has predominantly been applied to nation-states. Conventional understandings of where different world regions begin and end, solidified by respective university programmes and curriculums, have further narrowed the contexts within which politics is understood and analysed. Oftentimes, the state is assumed as the given and natural unit of analysis (Mitchell 1991). Jenss / Schuetze, in contrast, highlight the importance of taking into account transregional authoritarian connections between seemingly unconnected geographical sites. They further point to the "absence of capital accumulation and racialized forms of labour exploitation as a purpose for authoritarian power" in traditional studies on authoritarian power (Jenss / Schütze 2021: 83).

This article seeks to build on these findings. We argue that a stronger focus on transregional authoritarian practices allows us to overcome the problematic association of authoritarianism with the institutional "level of the nation-state" (Glasius 2018b: 519). It also opens our eyes to the overlaps "in the cross-border spatial cartographies of military operations, humanitarian aid delivery, and private logistics firms" (Ziadah 2019: 1685) and to the traceability of many "autocratic" techniques to "democratic" architects (Morgenbesser 2020: 1055). Bogaert (2018) accordingly speaks of a "globalized authoritarianism", which, while manifesting itself at specific sites, is produced by a whole range of state and non-state actors from both within and beyond the state of concern. In short, state-based impressions of authoritarian power are at least in part the effect of transregional authoritarian practices and entanglements.

Authoritarian power in China is partly (re)produced through collaboration with the Arab World (and other world regions) and vice versa. Hence, strategies of strengthening authoritarian power are no longer reduced to the boundaries of nation-states or regimes (Kumar 2013: 151), but rather exceed national borders. Thus, instead of simply comparing or juxtaposing Arab Gulf and Chinese authoritarianisms, and thereby reproducing flawed assumptions of authoritarianism's uniformity, as well as questionable notions of supposed spatial boundaries, this article thinks context anew (Appadurai 2013: 138). In doing so, we draw on prior work by Jenss / Schuetze (2021) and other examples of transregional studies (see for example Derichs 2017, Lowe 2015, Boatcă 2020). Fundamental to our approach is Massey's (1991: 27) call to stop thinking "of places as areas with boundaries around, [but] as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings".

Recent literature on logistics and infrastructure is highly helpful for the suggested rethinking of context, as it challenges state-centric forms of spatial imagination. While infrastructure is often presented as neutral or as a purely technocratic means for the bypassing of politics, it creates new selective connectivities based on categories of class and race (Appel 2019) and "can empower actors in various degrees or empower a single actor against others" (Kurban et al. 2017: 6). Throughout this article, we understand infrastructures as "critical locations through which sociality, governance and politics, accumulation and dispossession, and institutions and aspirations are formed, reformed, and performed" (Anand et al. 2018: 2).

We further aim to go beyond a purely material reading, as infrastructure is also imbued with non-material power and can be used to exert spatial, temporal, social, ideational and circulatory power (Star 1999, Larkin 2013). As indicated by Ho (2020: 1469), the non-material dimensions of infrastructure are relatively well explored by the disciplines of geography, anthropology and sociology, but less so in international politics. Ziadah (2019: 1685) makes fruitful use of a humanitarian logistics lens, in order to do justice to "the transnational character of both conflict and humanitarian response", and Khalili (2020: 3) demonstrates the ways in which the Arabian Peninsula and China connect via maritime transport and associated racialised hierarchies of labour, which enable powerful forms of capital accumulation (see also Bruff / Tansel 2019, Apostolopoulou 2020). Approaches that explicitly link the logistics space with transregional authoritarian practices still remain in their infancy, however.

It is this transregionalisation that has informed the emergence of a body of literature that assesses global authoritarianism in the context of global capital flows and the commodification of personal data (Zuboff 2019). In that regard, we can observe deepening linkages between surveillance infrastructures and artificial intelligence technologies for the purpose of statecraft – not only but also in terms of authoritarian power. This rise of surveillance capitalism can

be linked to the general neoliberalisation of political and economic structures worldwide (Aho / Duffield 2020). Moreover, as Bruff and Tansel argue, modes of crises at various levels of governance foster the "extant anti-democratic tendencies of neoliberalism" (Bruff / Tansel 2019: 3) and generate new mechanisms that support or reproduce such autocratic tendencies.

Thus, the emerging body of literature on transregional authoritarian power in the global fight against the COVID-19 pandemic is bringing to light the importance of authoritarian connections beyond the level of the nation-state. Recent publications on the impact of the pandemic on democracies has outlined that the declining trend of democratic quality can be interpreted as a cause for concern in the face of a global pandemic (Lührmann / Maerz et al. 2020: 10). For instance, Kurki (2020) argues that the pandemic has exposed the dysfunctions and inequalities of liberal democracies, and the flaws in conceptualising humans as separate from nature. Discussing the implications of a shift toward planetary politics, she calls for a rethinking of the "international order". Even though it seems to be common sense that the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic may seriously aggravate the situation in countries where democracy is already eroding (Rapeli / Saikkonen 2020, Bremmer 2020, Levine 2020), little attention has hitherto been dedicated to the transregional travelling of authoritarian practices in combatting the pandemic, to the latter's effects on authoritarian regimes (for an exception, see Gurol et al. 2022) and to the ensuing need to reconceptualise authoritarian power beyond a focus on established regimes. This paper dives into this gap and scrutinises Arab Gulf–Chinese collaboration during the global pandemic from the intersection of logistics, infrastructure and transregional authoritarian collaboration.

While authoritarian power always manifests itself in specific physical spaces, we argue that its imagination, performance and construction are not necessarily limited to these. Remaining stuck in established state-centric notions of context makes us blind to this transregional dimension of authoritarian power. Moreover, we acknowledge and emphasise that infrastructure "collides with and corrodes national territory" (Cowen 2014: 10). Accordingly, we will focus on the role of hitherto largely ignored non-state actors in the authoritarian (re)shaping of modes of governance, such as private firms. In doing so, we seek to go beyond the traditional understandings of infrastructure that define it primarily as an instrument of the state, serving political, economic and military purposes (Ho 2020). Instead, we emphasise the inherent nexus between infrastructure and authoritarian power, in that infrastructure enables the transregional diffusion of certain authoritarian practices, while at the same time enabling the strengthening of authoritarian power. Moreover, we follow the argument of Bruff and Tansel (2019) that global (economic) crises foster the emergence of authoritarian practices, thereby revealing the intertwinement of authoritar-

ian power and neoliberalism, and take the COVID-19 pandemic as a point of departure for our analysis.

Empirical snapshots

In the following, we will scrutinise the nexus between infrastructures and authoritarian power in a two-fold inductive manner. We first shed light on digital infrastructures (tracking apps and CCTV technology) then subsequently examine physical infrastructures (e.g., medical aid and BRI infrastructure projects). Our particular regional focus in the realm of Arab-Chinese relations is on the resource-rich Arab Gulf monarchies that are strategically important partners for China in the context of its Belt and Road Initiative, or BRI. As rising technology hubs, and given the centrality of financial markets in the Arab Gulf for the wider MENA-region as well (Hanieh 2018: 174), these monarchies constitute a most-likely case scenario to analyse the nexus between infrastructure and authoritarian power in the context of the global pandemic.

Over the course of the analysis, we show how infrastructure contributes to the transregional expansion of authoritarian power in enabling the travelling and exchange of authoritarian practices. We further explore how Arab Gulf–Chinese authoritarian collaboration unfolds beyond the nation-state, placing particular emphasis on elements of neoliberal authoritarianism and the ways in which processes of capital accumulation, technocratisation, surveillance and repression interact (Bruff / Tansel 2019, Jenss / Schuetze 2021: 83). In doing so, we dedicate special attention to the role of the private sector and specific state institutions, as opposed to unitary regime notions, in this transregional (re)shaping of authoritarian practices.

Digital infrastructures: big data, big surveillance

The two most prominent examples for critical digital infrastructures in the context of the global pandemic are tracking apps and CCTV technology. In the following, we will discuss the infrastructure-authoritarianism nexus along these two examples.

Tracking apps are a vivid example of facilitators for authoritarian practices and have become some of the most striking tools for thwarting people's privacies and freedom of movement in the COVID-19 context. In particular the Emirati firm Group 42 Holding Ltd. (short: G42) has made a name for itself as a frontrunner in developing apps that can be used for anti-pandemic purposes but also provide an additional tool for the Emirati ruling family to keep their population under surveillance, thereby enabling a more strategic collection and storage of

data that further intensifies authoritarian control.[1] In the context of the development of this infrastructure, we can observe entanglements between Chinese and Emirati firms that support our argument that authoritarian power, if scrutinised through the lens of logistics and infrastructure, should be considered as not merely bound to nation-states. For instance, there is evidence of collaboration between the Chinese-based company Beijing YeeCall Interactive Network Technology and the Abu Dhabi-based company Breej Holding Ltd.

Beijing YeeCall Interactive Network Technology was the leading firm in developing the Chinese Voice over IP (VoIP) tracking app YeeCall, which served as a template for the Emirati tracking app ToTok (Kumar / Salim 2019). Breej Holding Ltd., in turn, is closely connected to G42, which created the ToTok app. G42's CEO is Peng Xiao, the former CEO of DarkMatter's Pegasus LLC division. DarkMatter is a subfirm of G42 that gained attention in 2019 when a hacking unit called "Project Raven" targeted Emirati activists around the world (Marczak 2020). When this came to light, DarkMatter was restructured and integrated into the newly established artificial intelligence and cloud-computing company G42, albeit in its previous structure. The head of this newly established cloud-computing firm became Dan Hu, former Huawei Sales Director in Abu Dhabi. This further illustrates the linkages between Chinese and Emirati firms. As Demmelhuber et al. (forthcoming) argue, G42 thereby constitutes an extended arm of the Emirati regime and thus one of the most important non-state players in the COVID-19 context. We build on and further expand that argument and consider the entanglements between Chinese and Emirati firms in the development of tracking infrastructure as an example for the transregionalisation of authoritarian power. Focusing on such transregional authoritarian production networks allows us to capture the ways in which authoritarian manifestations in one location are co-produced by actors from another – a dynamic that regime-centric analyses struggle to fully recognise.

Similar entanglements in terms of collaboratively developed infrastructures, albeit less profound, can be found in Bahrain, where China has become a major source of external cybertechnological assistance and of knowhow for surveillance and digital technology. According to the head of Bahrain's Information and eGovernment Authority (iGA), the development of the Bahraini COVID tracking app BeAware was inspired by the successful COVID-19 mitigation efforts in China. Not only does BeAware monitor peoples' movements and extensively collect, as well as store, data, the app was also linked to a national TV show, called "Are you at home?" that was overseen by the iGA.

The iGA would select five daily winners from among the contact numbers registered in the BeAware app, with numbers called live on air to check if app users were at home. Rewarding those practicing social distancing with a prize

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1   For a detailed assessment of the role of G42 in the context of authoritarian power in times of a global pandemic, see Demmelhuber et al. (forthcoming).

of up to 1,000 Bahraini dinars, this TV show illustrates the type of carrot-and-stick strategy applied by the Bahraini regime to control and discipline its population. Participation in the programme was initially mandatory, until Bahrain's Information and eGovernment Authority added the possibility to opt out (Amnesty 2020).

While coordinated by the state, this top-down exertion of authoritarian power would have been impossible without the close collaboration also of non-state actors. The increase in control and repression through the newly established digital infrastructures also becomes apparent when considering Bahrain's electronic bracelet, which is paired with BeAware and is mandatory for all those registered for home quarantine. Location data and additional information from this bracelet are sent regularly to the app via Bluetooth. In the event of a breach of the quarantine, penalties under the Public Health Law No. 34 apply, including at least three months of imprisonment and/or a fine of 1,000–10,000 Bahraini dinars (2,700–27,000 US dollars). Premised on the commodification of human experience and enabling more efficient authoritarian control and more targeted repression (Xu 2020), tracking apps such as BeAware illustrate both transregional surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019) and authoritarian neoliberalism (Bruff / Tansel 2019). They demonstrate how transregionally entangled processes of capital accumulation and authoritarian power enable one another, and thus challenge established notions of self-contained authoritarian regime units. Moreover, this serves as a flagship example of how infrastructure can form, reform and perform governance and politics (Anand et al. 2018), thereby reinforcing authoritarian entanglements (as between China and the Arab Gulf).

Bahrain's digital advancements are directly dependent on a record of authoritarian practices that include CCTV cameras outside Shi'i villages (Jones 2020: 324), strict censorship and the publishing of sensitive personal health information online (Amnesty 2020). Shi'i villages, such as Sitra, Samaheej, Diraz, Dai, Karbabad, Arad or Al Ekr are heavily patrolled by police forces, and people are not allowed to leave villages without official permits.

In this context, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided the Sunni regime with another tool to further intensify authoritarian control over the Shi'i majority – in striking resemblance to the Chinese detention of its Uyghur Muslim minority in Western China. Affected populations not only suffer from intensified repression, as established state structures make increasing use of digital infrastructures, but are also exposed to greater risks of COVID-19 infection, as they are neglected when it comes to the distribution of masks and relief material, as well as vaccines. Thus, responses to COVID-19 in both China and the Arab Gulf contribute to the further containment of marginalised populations, rendering them more vulnerable and exacerbating pre-existing religious and socio-

economic inequalities, while at the same time reinforcing the privileged position and power of members of the regime and the socio-economic elite (Hammond 2019). A focus on infrastructure and transregional authoritarian practices allows us to understand Bahraini repression of activists and its Shi'i majority as partly co-produced by Chinese repression and detention of its Uyghur Muslim minority, against whom the surveillance infrastructures now used in the Arab Gulf were initially optimised and rendered more efficient.

While facial recognition tools by US tech firms and predictive policing systems reveal inadvertent racist biases due to the mis- and/or underrepresentation of minorities in the used data sets (Zou / Schiebinger 2018), the large-scale utilisation of Chinese surveillance tools for the tracking of 11 million Uighurs demonstrates deliberate racist discrimination (Mozur 2019). Both examples show the ease (intentional or unintentional) with which digital infrastructures enable or lead to authoritarian exclusion and control, and the similarities in terms of those marginalised and/or oppressed across established notions of space.

Yet Bahrain is not the only showcase for intensified transregional authoritarian collaboration in the field of digital infrastructure. We find similar evidence for private sector collaboration in Saudi-Chinese relations, more specifically between the Saudi Data and Artificial Intelligence Authority (SDAIA) and the Chinese firms Alibaba and Huawei in Saudi Arabia. As a joint cooperation, they launched the National Artificial Intelligence Capability Development Program. SDAIA has further been involved in the development of the digital tracking apps Twakkalna and Tabaud to combat COVID-19.

Despite their claimed primary focus on combatting the pandemic, Chinese digital infrastructure, public surveillance platforms – enhanced with AI technology, location-tracking software and personal data integration techniques – foster the diffusion of a number of authoritarian practices that provide recipient governments with an authoritarian toolkit that goes far beyond its alleged public health purpose. While most efforts emerge as initiatives of the government, or more precisely, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the private sector and firms play a crucial role as an extended arm of the Chinese state in furthering these diffusion processes.

In this regard, the pandemic has constituted a crucial booster for a transregional expansion of Chinese surveillance technology (Greitens 2020: E170). Examples thereof are manifold. Already before the pandemic, the Chinese companies Hikvision and Huawei were involved in marketing biometric surveillance systems in the UAE. Similarly, Chinese cell phone hacking software has been used by Emirati leaders to spy on hundreds of dissidents and regime critics. In a similar vein, the national police in Dubai are using the facial recognition program "Oyoon" (Arabic for "eyes") to record and analyse people's faces, behaviour and movements, in order to combat crime – including oppositional activism – more "efficiently". The technology involved can once more be linked back to the Chinese company Hikvision (Rajagopalan 2019).

Hence, we can conclude that with regard to the deployment and advancement of digital infrastructure such as surveillance technology and CCTV equipment between China and Arab Gulf states, COVID-19 has not led to a reinvention of the wheel as far as the travelling of authoritarian practices is concerned. Rather, it has catalysed processes that originated before the outbreak of the global pandemic, and has brought to our attention the transregionalisation of authoritarian practices. Just as authoritarian repression in the Arab Gulf is partly enabled by forms of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019) that descend from China, the latter has gained new opportunities for capital accumulation and technical refinement as its surveillance infrastructures are used in the Arab Gulf.

This becomes especially apparent in a work report, released by China's National Standardization Committee in March 2020, that explicitly appeals to Chinese firms and state-led enterprises to take the global pandemic as a window of opportunity to set the global standards for next-generation technologies. As stated in the report, the overall objective is to "strengthen the construction of the relevant standard system for the prevention and control of COVID-19" and promote "standards for emergency response, social prevention and control" (Standardization Administration of People's Republic of China 2020). While the first points towards obtaining a leading role in combatting the global pandemic, the latter explicitly refers to the dissemination of technology and digital norms with the objective of social control.

Physical and digital infrastructures only appear unrelated at first sight. As mentioned earlier, infrastructure is both material and non-material. Tracking apps and surveillance tools, as well as the provision of vaccines, are tied to a physical and imaginative geography that requires enclosures to make things flow (Chua 2018). The former help keep authoritarian elites in power, while disciplining and repressing minorities and oppositional activists. The latter operates via highly problematic bio-political judgments regarding who deserves privileged treatment and who not (see also Schuetze 2017).

Physical infrastructures: China's health diplomacy and the "Health Silk Road"

Physical infrastructure plays a crucial role in the pandemic context. The following section scrutinises the mutual effects of logistics and physical infrastructure on transregional authoritarian entanglements between China and Arab Gulf countries as well as vice versa.

With regard to Arab Gulf–Chinese health infrastructure, COVID-19 has led to a further boost in already existing forms of collaboration, emphasising that authoritarian collaboration is not a one-way street. On the contrary, at the beginning of the pandemic, it was mostly the Arab Gulf states that supported China by sending medical supplies and equipment. Having flattened the curve of new infections and beginning to recover from the consequences of the pan-

demic, Beijing unfolded its own health diplomacy vis-à-vis the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. This took place on various levels, as for instance on the level of central and local governments, state enterprises and private companies, but also relied on individual donations from Chinese in China and Chinese nationals residing in the MENA region (Zoubir 2020). In contrast to the ad-hoc emergency measures taken by many of the MENA countries during the outbreak of the pandemic, this initiative was much more concerted and organised and was accompanied by certain narratives about the supremacy of Chinese infrastructures and practices. In fact, as the majority of mask factories are located in China anyway, the Chinese leadership had an easy job of assuming an almost monopolistic position to provide the world with masks and medical kits and present itself as a relief supplier (Rudolf 2021: 3).

A vivid example of this is the Chinese Health Silk Road (HSR) initiative, launched at the highpoint of the pandemic in 2020. This Silk Road, as announced by the Chinese government, would work in tandem with the Digital Silk Road, thereby merging digital and physical infrastructures with the objective of global health provision. While the concept of the HSR is all but new – in fact, the first evidence of the development of an HSR dates back to 2015 – the political context of its official launch was most advantageous for China, providing the PRC with the unique chance to position itself as a "saviour" in the global crisis and to promote digital and physical infrastructures under the auspices of global health provision (Greene / Triolo 2020). Virtually from one day to the next, health was elevated to one of the most crucial elements of the BRI (Rudolf 2021: 5). Overnight, the Chinese leadership activated already established BRI infrastructure networks around the globe, among them BRI rail links and airline supply lines for aid goods. In line with this promotion and re-branding of already existing BRI infrastructure, China launched a huge propaganda campaign to buttress the claim of the superiority of China's system and anti-pandemic infrastructure. In that regard, we could argue that the pandemic provided a perfect opportunity to showcase the supposed supremacy of both Chinese public health management and centralised state governance more generally (Zhao 2021: 7). Such initiatives of ostensible soft power or image projection are oftentimes directed towards "the West" and actively challenge the Western liberal script, including its traditional institutions, procedures and norms (Wang 2011).

This once more stresses the dual function of infrastructure, which on the one hand enables the buttressing of government authority, while on the other hand making possible an exchange and collaboration beyond the state level and in the realm of the private sector. The above-mentioned examples further underline that infrastructure should not be understood merely in material terms but that the transregional logistics space can also foster the travelling of ideas, values and narratives. In the case of Arab Gulf–Chinese relations, the narratives used by Chinese officials leave no doubt regarding the role that China

ascribes itself in the context of the global pandemic. In fact, they reveal with astounding clarity the underlying Chinese motives (Zhao 2021: 7).

According to official sources, the deployment of infrastructures through the state and private firms should fuel the development of China as a "global health leader" (State Council Information Office 2020) and should contribute to building a "community of common health for mankind" (Xi Jinping 2020). At the same time, China seems to seek global leadership as a technological power and strives towards becoming the most important provider of health technology (Xi Jinping 2019, Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission) and an ostensible "cyber-superpower". This alludes to increased Chinese ambitions for infrastructuring a new global hegemony and thereby promoting the effectiveness, availability and thus also supremacy of Chinese infrastructure in comparison to Western models that seem to combat the pandemic in a less effective manner.

In a similar vein and with comparable motives, in the realm of vaccine infrastructure, China gained a first-mover advantage in distributing its vaccines in non-Western countries. The UAE and Bahrain were the first to approve the vaccine developed by the China National Biotech Group, a subsidiary of Sinopharm. Beforehand, there had been close cooperation between Emirati G42 and Sinopharm in conducting large-scale trials in the UAE and Bahrain. In collaboration with G42, Sinopharm had also set up a huge PCR test centre in Abu Dhabi in the early days of the pandemic – the first of this level outside of China (Zoubir 2020: 4).

Hence, in general terms, the global crisis-mode created a window of opportunity for China (Buckley 2020: 311) to rebrand BRI infrastructure. Two readings are striking with regard to the merger of China's mounting tech authoritarianism (Heath 2020) and physical BRI infrastructure projects in the context of the global pandemic. On the one hand, most infrastructure projects rely on inducing productivity gains in the host country and produce net benefits. In this reading, Chinese BRI projects will certainly suffer pandemic-induced shocks, as the crisis affects many BRI-related contracts.

On the other hand, the deepening interlinkages between physical infrastructure of BRI projects and digital infrastructure promoted through the Digital Silk Road can be interpreted as an example of intensifying transregional Arab Gulf–Chinese authoritarian linkages and provides evidence for the diffusion of authoritarian practices via both physical and digital infrastructures, as well as for the increasing transregionalisation of authoritarian power at large and the emergence of "new spatial geographies of control" (Ziadah 2019: 1698). Moreover, they offer opportunities for further future entanglements beyond the nation-state. Funnelling into this is what the OECD (2019: 1) describes as a "widespread consensus that mobilizing investments in infrastructure is critical for fostering inclusive growth and development, including by enhancing

countries' connectivity into regional and global value chains". Statements such as these clearly point to the centrality of infrastructure in contemporary developmental strategies. However, and in stark contrast to voiced claims of connectivity and inclusivity, we have shown that infrastructures are a central component in the transregionalisation of authoritarian power.

The travelling of authoritarian practices – not a one-way street

In the above discussion of digital and physical infrastructures in Arab Gulf–Chinese authoritarian collaboration in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have challenged established state-centric forms of spatially imagining authoritarian power. We brought into dialogue the literature on (trans)regionally connected authoritarian and neoliberal practices (Glasius 2018a, 2018b; Zuboff 2019, Jenss / Schuetze 2021, Bruff / Tansel 2019), critical scholarship on infrastructure and logistics (Cowen 2014, Chua 2018, Khalili 2018, Ziadah 2019, Apostolopoulou 2020), as well as emerging scholarship on the effects of the pandemic (Greitens 2020, Levine 2020, Rapeli / Saikkonen 2020, Verma 2020). In so doing, we zoomed in on the political economy and the infrastructure that underlies and drives the intensification of Arab Gulf–Chinese authoritarian collaboration. One of our key findings is that infrastructural development (physical and digital) in China and the Gulf countries has reinforced authoritarian power and enables new forms of infrastructural violence. Along with the example of transregional infrastructure development it has become clear how physical and digital infrastructures link together authoritarian practices below and beyond the level of the nation-state, fundamentally reshaping the nature of authoritarian rule.

Our analysis has further shown that the infrastructuring of authoritarian power entails both an increased mobility of authoritarian practices – their travelling beyond established notions of context – and highly similar forms of containment along the newly emerging authoritarian production networks (Cowen 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic presented a seemingly technical opportunity for the intensification of transregional authoritarian collaboration between China and the Gulf countries. The authoritarian practices that enable certain infrastructural politics and in turn are also rendered possible by them have no conventional boundaries, but stretch across the entire logistics space. Given that AI technology, which supports tracking apps, is deeply embedded in global flows of capital, this forms a prime example of what Zuboff (2019) pointedly terms the emergence of "surveillance capitalism".

We argue that authoritarian power needs to be analysed not in narrow regime and/or state contexts, but in new contexts such as the transregional authori-

tarian logistics space (Jenss / Schuetze 2021: 83). One of the key analytical advantages of the latter is its openness to forms of political agency that criss-cross established nation-state contexts and its focus on the nature of authoritarian power itself, rather than on the spatial units within which the latter is assumed to manifest. Our discussion of China-Gulf authoritarian entanglements is hence not to be misread as an attempt to provide a comprehensive mapping of all actors involved in practices of surveillance and repression in the Arab Gulf countries or China. Instead, our analysis offers an innovative angle to better bring to light the transregionally connected and co-produced nature of authoritarian power in these two regions. Needless to say, different "Western" public and private actors also drive the development of technologies that are used both to fight COVID-19 and to further reinforce authoritarian power (see also Morgenbesser 2020: 1055).

The empirical snapshots that we have discussed show how digital and physical infrastructures reinforce authoritarian practices in and between the Arab Gulf and China. However, while all infrastructures rearticulate space, territory and time, it is important to recall that infrastructure "does not define political or other outcomes in any deterministic way" (Cupers forthcoming: 4). As infrastructure has become an increasingly popular means for the reinforcement of authoritarian power, we will likely see the emergence of corresponding counter-infrastructures as a new mode of resistance, reminding us of the ambivalences and potentially unintended consequences that are always associated with the reconfiguration of modes of power. Dajani and Mason (2018: 131) have for instance explored "counter-hegemonic water infrastructure" in the Golan Heights, as a response to discriminatory restrictions on the use of water. Whether comparable counter-infrastructures – for instance in the form of digital collaboration among political activists – have already taken shape between China and the Arab Gulf would be an interesting topic for future research. Transregional authoritarian entanglements between various (non-)state actors show that the spaces in which authoritarian power predominantly manifests itself are not necessarily congruent with those in which it is imagined, funded, tested and/or rendered more efficient.

In short, as long as the discussion of authoritarian power remains premised on questionable notions of context that pre-assume authoritarianism's spatial boundedness and uniformity, we will fail to adequately grasp the role of newly emerging transregionally connected forms of political agency in pre-empting dissent, technocratising politics and repressing oppositional activism. A practice approach to authoritarian power and the realisation of mutually reinforcing dynamics between the latter and processes of capital accumulation are crucial first steps for the realisation of authoritarianism's spatial unboundedness and the centrality of transnational corporations in reinforcing authoritarian surveillance and repression.

While the emerging body of transregional or transnational studies has discussed the transnational character of migration (Wimmer / Glick Schiller 2003), knowledge production (Derichs 2017), ongoing colonial entanglements (Boatcă 2020, Lowe 2015), conflict (Graham 2009) and humanitarian response (Ziadah 2019), a conceptualisation of the ways in which the "revolution in logistics" (Attewell 2018: 722) has transregionalised authoritarian power is still in its infancy. The travelling of authoritarian practices is not a one-way street that exclusively leads from China to the Gulf countries or elsewhere. Instead, authoritarian entanglements between China and the Arab Gulf stabilise and enhance authoritarian power in both contexts. Moreover, they are also informed by authoritarian practices originating from democratic regime contexts. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated what we may call the transregionalisation of authoritarian rule. To better grasp the diversity of actors involved in the latter, more analytical approaches that go beyond the state- and regime-centric literatures are needed to also account for authoritarianism's transregional supply chains and production networks.

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