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CLIMATE ACTION IN A MULTI-POLAR WORLD: THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA BETWEEN CLIMATE CHANGE AND GRAND STRATEGIES

KARIM ELGENDY

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SharqStrategic

Address: Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza
Floor:6 No:68 Postal Code: 34197
Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey
Telephone: +902126031815
Fax: +902126031665
Email: info@sharqforum.org

Abstract: Incumbent and emerging great powers view the global socio-economic impacts of climate change as both a risk and as an opportunity to advance their grand strategies, with many integrating climate action into their respective grand strategies. Today there are several major infrastructure development initiatives with such ambitions: China's Belt and Road Initiative, the US-led G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, and the European Union's Global Gateway Initiative. These initiatives are poised to target the MENA region with climate infrastructure projects given its high vulnerability to climate change, with the goal of increasing their regional influence in the process.

Regional policy makers are likely to find themselves having to make choices, and regional countries could end up aligning with different great powers. This fragmentation not only creates disjointed infrastructure and undermines regional climate collaboration, but also — paradoxically — threatens to increase regional tensions. In order to address this, the region must develop a regional approach to climate action and leverage strategic competition between great powers to its advantage.

1- Grand Strategies and Great Powers' Quest for Influence

The rise of China as a great power and its strategic competition with the United States are some of the most significant geopolitical shifts the world has witnessed since the demise of the Soviet Union in the early nineties. The resultant multipolarity in the world has led the great powers to develop new 'grand strategies' to outline their strategic objectives and how they aim to advance them.

Grand strategies by great powers — regardless of whether they are revisionist, reformist, or status quo powers — invariably include strategic objectives, such as protecting national security, accessing critical natural resources and geographies, expanding their sphere of influence, and gaining power at the expense of strategic competitors. Current grand strategies are no exception, and the emerging strategic competition between great powers has led to competition for influence in developing countries.

China's grand strategy for example — in line with its stated objective to become a world leading power by 2049 — seeks to keep its rivals at bay and isolate them while securing energy, raw materials, and other strategic resources. China's Belt and Road initiative — the world's largest infrastructure development initiative since the post-World War II Marshall Plan in Europe — can be seen as part of this grand strategy, and as an attempt to circumvent containment by the United States (US) in the East and South China Sea, penetrate the markets of Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Eastern Europe, and access energy resources in the Middle East, while gradually stifling India, its regional competitor.[1]

ACCESS ENERGY RESOURCES IN THE MIDDLE EAST, WHILE GRADUALLY STIFLING INDIA, ITS REGIONAL COMPETITOR

In order to counter Chinese competition, the latest American grand strategy focuses on the Indo-Pacific region. Its seeks to contain Russia and China within an expanded Heartland[2] that includes China and parts of South East Asia while protecting the Rimland[3] surrounding them that includes Japan, India, the Arabian Peninsula and Europe. This adjustment has meant that the US will focus on protecting the main maritime routes between Europe and East Asia including the transit corridors in the Middle East. Viewed from this perspective, the US-Led G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment is an attempt to gain influence in countries that could support the objectives of American grand strategy while countering the growing Chinese influence outside of the Heartland.[4]

Today there are three major infrastructure development initiatives with global ambitions. In addition to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment mentioned above, these also include the European Union's (EU) Global Gateway Initiative, which is not associated with a security or a geopolitical grand strategy in the same way as the former two given the continent's partial dependence on the American security umbrella for its defense.[5]

A. The Belt and Road Initiative

The origins of the current phase of global infrastructure development initiatives can be traced back to 2013, when China announced the establishment of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as the One Belt, One Road Initiative.

The BRI — often dubbed the new Silk road — has two main components: a series of overland economic corridors (the Belt), including road and rail transportation connecting western China with Europe through landlocked Central Asia, and an Indo-Pacific maritime route (the Road) linking Southeast Asia to South Asia, the Middle East and Africa.

From the recipient's perspective, the establishment of the BRI created an alternative model for development across Africa, Asia and Latin America that focused on investment and lending critically needed infrastructure such as ports, railroads, roads, bridges, airports, dams, and energy infrastructure.[6] China's infrastructure development capabilities have also meant that it could deliver these infrastructure elements at a competitive cost and time of delivery.

Unsurprisingly the BRI became a popular framework for collaboration with many developing countries. While there is no official list of countries or organizations that have partnered with China on the BRI, one estimate in 2019 indicated that China had already signed Memorandums of Understanding with more than 130 countries and international organizations.[7]

The scale of China's ambition is only matched by the associated investment required. According to an estimate by Morgan Stanley,[8] China's overall expenses over the life of the BRI could reach $1.2–1.3 trillion by 2027. The average BRI funding in the first 7 years was in the order of $50-100 billion per year.[9] It is estimated that approximately two-thirds of the BRI's financing goes to power and transportation projects.[10]

China's finance of infrastructure projects has created some concerns over debt sustainability and led to some western criticism of 'debt trap diplomacy'. The accusation that China funds infrastructure projects in developing countries with unsustainable loans, then uses such debt to gain leverage over those countries, remains a subject of debate.[11]

B. The Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment

It took the best part of a decade for the US to formally announce a response to the BRI. The US announced the G7's Build Back Better World initiative (B3W) at the group's annual summit in 2021, with a stated goal to leverage $40 trillion in infrastructure investment by 2035.One year later, B3W was scaled back and repackaged as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) at the following G7 summit, with a scope that focused on providing financial and technical assistance to developing countries in four critical areas: climate and energy security, digital connectivity, health systems and health security, and gender equality and equity.

As its driving force, the US committed to mobilizing $200 billion for PGII over the next 5 years through grants, federal financing, and leveraging private sector investments. Alongside its partners within the G7, the US aims to mobilize $600 billion in global infrastructure investments by 2027 — approximately half the estimated BRI spending and a fraction of what was envisaged under the preceding iteration of the program.

While the PGII has not released details of its geographic scope, it is widely considered to be in competition with China's expanding global infrastructure development activities. The US has also not shied away from noting the context of this initiative and has highlighted links between its development strategy, national security and domestic policy priorities.[12]

US officials have also noted that the PGII is intended to be one of the hallmarks of the Biden administration foreign policy over the remainder of his tenure,[13] which raises questions about the PGII's long term potential beyond the current administration.

C. The Global Gateway Initiative

Europe's response to BRI arrived in December of 2021 when the European Commission announced the EU's Global Gateway (GG). The initiative priorities are not dissimilar from those of the PGII, focusing on physical and digital connectivity and infrastructure, clean energy, global health security and increased education capacity.

The GG — much like its G7 equivalent — is also envisaged as a values-based initiative that promotes democratic values, strong governance and transparency. It plans to spend up to €300 billion by 2027 — a quarter of the estimated BRI spending — and to direct at least half of its funding towards Africa.[14] EU institutions are reported to be building a pipeline of high-quality infrastructure projects in consultation with the African Union and with national development strategies.[15]

2- Competition and Coordination

Both the PGII and the GG prioritize high-quality, sustainable human and physical infrastructure that incorporate green principles and promise a viable alternative to China's BRI. According to President Biden, the PGII would allow countries to "see the concrete benefits of partnering with democracies"[16] The two initiatives' approach to finance is also similar with both envisioning a mix of investment, aid, and blended finance for projects. However, both initiatives — as well as the United Kingdom's Clean Green Initiative (CGI) [17] — remain underdeveloped and unclear as to their delivery mechanisms.[18]

Additionally, despite the PGII and GG featuring significant thematic and geographical priority overlaps, they have yet to develop an overarching western framework and their funding streams have yet to be merged. Instead the two initiatives — as well as the CGI which was considered part of the UK's contribution to the B3W when it was first launched[19] — are being closely coordinated.[20]

Such coordination was not offered to China's BRI. The US has thus far declined China's offer to collaborate on projects in the developing world. Yet at project scale, China's efforts could prove hard to isolate in practice due to China's significant existing project footprint in a large number of countries. China could also prove hard to ignore owing to its competitive infrastructure development capability, including lower costs and technical skills in civil engineering, construction, high-speed rail and renewable energy.[21]

3- Infrastructure Development and Influence

Infrastructure development has been used to advance strategic objectives by great powers well before the implementation of the Marshall Plan in Europe 75 years ago. From the perspective of great powers — or other countries providing support — infrastructure development allows for influence to be gained within the recipient country and is therefore critical to its grand strategy.

Influence can be gained at different stages of the infrastructure project cycle. Financing is the first and largest avenue for influence. It allows great powers the opportunity to extract concessions from recipient countries, reward allies, access local resources, and shape the project in a way that suits its interests.[22]

The second stage, the design and construction of the project, provides great powers with an avenue for setting standards, transferring technology, and collecting intelligence. The final stage of the project, ownership and operation, can also be leveraged for deeper intelligence collection and to restrict access by competitors.[23]

In addition, great powers can accrue more influence if they — or businesses they control — own and operate a network of infrastructure assets, allowing them to monopolize critical skills and technologies and making them more resilient to disruptions during conflicts and disasters.[24] This incentivizes great powers to strive to create larger networks of infrastructure elements such as ports, roads, and railroads.

4- Climate Diplomacy and Grand Strategies

The scope for grand strategies and their infrastructure development initiatives evidently encompasses more than climate change. However, the current set of grand strategies by great powers and their associated infrastructure development initiatives come at a time when the world is increasingly concerned about the risks of dangerous climate change.

Great powers increasingly view the cascading physical, socio-economic, and geopolitical impacts of climate change as a risk they need to mitigate. They also see climate change impacts as well as the climate action in response as opportunities to advance their strategic objectives.

Russia, for example, saw an opportunity to increase its agricultural land and improve navigation along the Arctic sea as a result of the disproportionate increase in temperatures across its frozen landmass. Similarly, China — which defines itself as a near-arctic state — saw an opportunity in the melting of the Arctic Sea ice during the summer to benefit from the shorter trade routes through the Arctic Circle, and planned to create a Polar Silk Route connecting China to Europe.

In addition to leveraging climate change and climate action to advance their own strategic goals, great powers also saw climate change as a less-politicized global concern which, if capitalized on, could provide their diplomacy with moral high ground, and support their soft power and public diplomacy. Additionally, the unanimity of global concern opens opportunities for engagement between countries — even those that lack diplomatic relations.

These developments and this framing encouraged incumbent and emerging geopolitical and economic powers to integrate climate action into their respective infrastructure development initiatives, and to seek to expand their sphere of influence through climate infrastructure by including climate mitigation (measures to reduce carbon emissions) and climate adaptation (measures to address existing and expected climate change) as independent projects or cross-cutting themes within their infrastructure projects.

Yet the degree to which climate is prioritized varies between the different initiatives. The PGII — and its predecessor B3W — as well the GG have both attempted to distinguish themselves from the BRI by prioritizing green investments. The PGII focuses on tackling climate change and supporting energy security through investments in climate resilient infrastructure, transformational energy technologies, and developing clean energy supply chains,[25] while the GG has a strong focus on climate, energy and transportation, including mitigation, clean energy, sustainable transportation networks, and climate resilience.[26]

In its earlier years, the BRI was criticized for its disproportionate investment in fossil fuel energy infrastructure which was not aligned with the countries' respective Nationally Determined Contributions (climate commitments under the Paris Agreement).[27]

However in recent years the BRI has made some progress towards climate-friendly investing, with the share of renewable energy projects in its energy investments rising since 2017 — when it represented 27% of all energy investments — to 47% in 2021.[28] In 2018, China launched the Green Investment Principles of the BRI, while in 2021 it pledged to phase out financing overseas coal power plants by 2030,[29] and promised to pause lending from major Chinese banks to oil and gas extraction projects.[30]

5- Renewed Competition for the Crossroads

Despite the often cited power vacuum in the Middle East region, and despite the perceived withdrawal of the United States from the region as it repositions for its new grand strategy, the region's location and geography has ensured that it remains critical for all the players.

However, different grand strategies take different approaches to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region depending on their strategic objectives. The U.S. grand strategy in the region — which traditionally focused on protecting energy security, maintaining the balance of power in the region, finding a solution for the Arab-Israeli conflict, and combating terrorism — appears more interested in the region as a way of controlling the supply of fossil fuels to China, and as a transit corridor for rapid deployment of American forces to the Indian Ocean.[31]

For China on the other hand, the MENA Region is not just the source of half of its oil supplies, but is also a strategic crossroads towards Europe, Africa and Latin America. While China has thus far steered away from intervening in the geopolitical tug of war between the US-led camp and the Russia-Iran camp, it may be forced to intervene as its economic interests in the region continue to grow.[32]

The EU, which is the closest to the MENA region geographically, remains largely absent from the region geopolitically, and appears unwilling to take sides. Instead it continues trying to shape the economies of its 'Southern Neighborhood' especially in North Africa and the Levant sub regions in a way that serves the bloc's strategic interests. For example, a major GG project is to design 'Strategic Corridors' that facilitate sustainable, secure and safe mobility and trade between Africa and Europe and within Africa.[33]

6- Regional Climate Risks

The MENA region is one of the regions most disproportionately at risk from climate change and is desperately in need of support in order to deal with its impacts. The regional climate change impacts are disproportionate to the region's share of the global population, share of the global economy, and its share of carbon emissions to date.

Warming in the Middle East is expected to be the highest of all inhabited areas on earth at almost twice the global rate.[34] The Levant and North Western Africa, where rainfall is abundant in normal circumstances, are expected to experience significant reduction in rainfall.

The MENA region, which is known for high variability in rainfall is also expected to witness increased rainfall variability leading to longer droughts, more intense floods, damage to healthy soils, and increase in arid areas. The coastal region is also at risk from sea level rise, especially in low lying areas such as the Nile Delta and the south of Iraq.

Some of these physical impacts are expected to cascade onto the agricultural sector which is expected to suffer due to reduced agricultural productivity, leading to food insecurity, increased dependence on food imports, reduced contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and loss of rural livelihoods. Similarly, the tourism sector across the MENA region will likely be adversely affected due to the increased summer temperatures and reduced water availability, leading to a reduced contribution to GDP and a potential loss of millions of jobs across the region.

Such socio-economic impacts could, in turn, lead to domestic or cross-border security risks or could act as a threat multiplier of other regional risks. The loss of jobs and livelihoods could lead to urban migration, higher urban unemployment, poorer municipal services, and ultimately increased social tensions.

Climate change could also exacerbate existing regional grievances and multiply existing threats by fueling political discontent, socio-economic tensions, and unrest, while its uneven impacts might align with existing rifts between communities within the same country.

Increased competition over water and other natural resources caused by climate change could also lead to tensions between regional countries. This is compounded by the lack of transboundary water management in many cases, and the fact that every country in the region shares at least one river or aquifer with its neighbors.

It should be noted here that no direct causal link has been established between climate and violent conflict. However, climate change impacts on agriculture, resource competition, and the deterioration of living conditions are all correlated with conflict, instability, and other forms of violence, especially in regions as fragile as the MENA region.

For energy exporting countries of the region, the global energy transition away from fossil fuels presents additional risks. A reduction in regional oil and gas exports could devalue their industries, create stranded assets, undermine their rentier economies, and upend their social contracts.

In addition, the MENA region lacks resilience and the capacity to adapt to climate hazards, and has weak and fragmented national climate plans. The region lacks a regional collaboration framework for mitigation and adaptation despite the transboundary nature of many of the climate risks it faces. Many climate change impacts are in fact shared within sub-regions such as the Levant, North Africa, and the Gulf, and some challenges — such as water — are aligned with natural geographies that have little relation with the current national borders. The region also fails to perform basic coordination tasks such as pooling resources during crises or sharing best practices on how economic sectors such as agriculture and tourism can adapt to climate change, despite sharing common climate challenges.

7- Leveraging Climate in the MENA Region

Unsurprisingly, the region is in dire need for technical and financial support in order to develop national and regional capabilities on both climate adaptation and mitigation. This fact has not gone unnoticed by great powers whose infrastructure development initiatives have a regional scope, and which are poised to target the region with climate infrastructure projects.

The EU's GG, for instance, has made a commitment to invest €8.4 billion over the next seven years to support 'job creation, sustainable agriculture and renewable energy' in Morocco.[35] The PGII's published list of initial projects do not include projects in MENA countries, but the region is expected to be included, except for the GCC sub-region.

In parallel to the GG, the EU recently proposed a "Strategic Partnership" with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) which focused on climate and energy transition. In its proposal, the EU notes that GCC countries are particularly affected and that the EU — as a climate change pioneer — can share expertise and know-how on ways to address it. It also noted the role of GCC countries as reliable LNG exporters and future suppliers of renewable energy and hydrogen, which could support the EU in improving its energy security and diversifying its energy sources away from Russia.[36]

By integrating the GCC into the European Green Deal, the EU hopes to gain a new form of influence that transforms the EU from a secondary player into a primary one, increases stability, and partly offsets the GCC countries' growing dependence on China. In other words, the EU could stand to advance its economic and even geopolitical interests in the region.[37]

8- Regional Risks and Opportunities

As great powers develop climate infrastructure in order to expand their influence, advance their strategic objectives, or otherwise support their grand strategy in any region, the region in question needs to assess whether such interventions will — on balance — contribute positively to its regional climate resilience.

Ideally, infrastructure development initiatives would complement each other in supporting the fragile MENA region to develop a climate resilient infrastructure. Yet in the emerging multipolar world, this scenario is highly unlikely.

The first obstacle facing an integrated regional climate infrastructure is that the region is yet to agree on a unified approach to climate adaptation and mitigation and is thus unable to set regional parameters for engaging initiatives on its own terms or in a way that ensures integration. In the absence of a regional framework, the initiatives are unlikely to spearhead infrastructure integration themselves, given the differing interests of each grand strategy, their quest for influence at the expense of other great powers, and their reluctance to share information.

As a result, regional policymakers are likely to find themselves forced to make a choice between these grand strategies and their associated infrastructure development initiatives. In some cases, countries might be able to leverage the great power competition to their own advantage and could access initiatives on their own terms. However, in many cases, making a choice could result in increased influence and dependence that forces countries to align with great powers. Such fragmentation would inevitably create disjointed and less efficient climate infrastructure and would invariably undermine the already poor regional climate collaboration.

Additionally, such new disjoined infrastructure also threatens to deepen regional rifts and increase regional tensions by creating competing visions on regional climate action. Climate infrastructure, as part of mechanisms that advance grand strategies in an arena of great power competition, could — paradoxically — replace one cause of regional instability with another.
The MENA region's most natural partner might be the EU, not least because of its geographical proximity and its stake in the East Mediterranean, but also because the GG is aligned with a grand strategy that is more economic than geopolitical. The EU's recognized leadership on climate action and its flagship climate initiative, the European Green Deal, also provide an additional framework for possible collaboration. However, the region should also hedge its bets and remain open to collaboration to leverage competition in order to get the best possible terms.

Yet, if the region is to make the most of its partnership with great powers on climate infrastructure, it needs to establish a regionally coordinated vision for how its different constituting geographies, countries, and sub-regions plan to address the challenge of climate change and the required socio-economic transformations. This vision will need to become the framework for regional climate action in a manner similar to the EU's European Green Deal.

Following this, countries of the region must engage these initiatives in a way that establishes genuine and equitable partnerships, where investments and funding are co-designed in line with national policies and the regional framework, and in a way that complements their existing national plans and supports their development goals.[38]

Endnotes

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karim is an urban sustainability and climate consultant based in London with more than two decades of experience. His areas of expertise include developing sustainable and resilient cities and neighbourhoods, climate policy analysis, and energy transition. His current work focuses on the Middle East and North Africa region, especially around the Eastern Mediterranean and the Gulf, but his 20 years of experience spans Europe, North America, and sub-Saharan Africa. Karim is the founder and coordinator of Carboun, an advocacy initiative promoting sustainability in Cities of the Middle East and North Africa through research and communication.