Syria’s “China Dream”: Between the Narratives and Realities

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September 15, 2019

The narrative among Western pundits as well as government officials on China’s role in the Middle East is steadily consolidating around the idea that it will soon act in the region to expand its influence, at the expense of the United States. Is this really the case? While disputing such a narrative is well beyond the scope of this article, we want to offer a more nuanced perspective on the issue by taking the reconstruction of Syria into consideration and comparing how China and the Syrian government have acted and framed China’s role.

We argue that an exaggerated perception of China’s current or imminent role in Syria pervades the Arabic and English media on the subject. This perception is a by-product of a narrative frame popularized by the Assad regime and which Western analysts and journalists, sometimes superficially taking it at face value, have picked up and widely reproduced in their work. For many years, Syrian officials at all levels have consistently sought to present China as a key player in postwar reconstruction. In 2016, Bashar al-Assad identified China as one of three primary actors that are expected to participate in this process, along with Russia and Iran.\(^\text{(1)}\) Similarly, the Syrian ambassador to Beijing, Imad Mustapha, has...

\[\text{[He sees that Syria is not ready for ‘federalism’...and reconstruction will depend on Russia, China and Iran...and he called upon Ban (Ki Moon) in a message for an acceleration of collective (global) war against terrorism...President Al-Assad: the solution lies with a government of national unity preparing the way for a new constitution], Al-Watan, last modified March 31, 2016, http://alwatan.sy/archives/47648}\]
emphasized this potential role for China in multiple conference statements and reports (available on Chinese media outlets) over the past few years, asserting in one interview with *al-Watan* that “China has vowed to be the largest and most prominent player in the Syrian reconstruction arena once a political solution is reached.”(2)

A closer examination of this Syrian narrative surrounding a Chinese role in national reconstruction, however, reveals the existence of a broader story that the Assad regime seeks to tell its domestic audience (and perhaps, a segment of the international one as well). In this broader story, Syria is self-described as a member of a Eurasian-wide coalition, comprising Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, which is purposed toward common opposition to American unilateralism and hegemony in defense of state sovereignty, self-determination, and national independence. This notion of a Eurasian-wide coalition, which takes on military, economic, ideological, and civilizational dimensions, constitutes an expanded and globalized version of yet another imagined Middle Eastern alliance: the “Axis of Resistance” (*mihwar al-muqawama*). Comprised of Iran, Syria, Iraq (sometimes), Hamas, Hezbollah, and various other sympathetic militant groups and political parties, the Axis of Resistance is presented in Syrian narratives as a network of like-minded revolutionary underdogs locked in a counterhegemonic and existential struggle against a pro-Western camp encompassing the United States, Israel, and the Gulf countries for control of the region’s future.

Like the “Axis of Resistance”, the story of the Eurasian-wide coalition serves three important purposes when conveyed to a domestic audience. First, it shows that Syria is not completely isolated within the international community nor bereft of international support. Second, it explains the ongoing turmoil in the country as being less a civil war and more a geostrategic-level assault by the United States and its allies against the “soft underbelly” of the Eurasian-wide coalition. In other words, Syria is a victim of a “universal conspiracy” (*al-muamara al-kawniyya* targeting all non-Western states that reject American interference. Third, it offers a promise of economic relief and a return to normality on the postwar stage. Only in light of this story and its domestic-oriented logic can we understand repeated attempts by Syrian officials to depict China as an “eternal ally,” a country “in the same trench [with Syria] in the face of economic measures and sanctions imposed by the United States,” a fellow warrior

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in the battle against terrorism, and a cultural partner in the face of Western barbarism. The latter theme is well showcased by a story related by Imad Mustapha, the former Syrian ambassador to the United States, in the same 2017 interview with *al-Watan* cited above: “when I presented my papers to the Chinese President Hu Jintao in 2012, and we sat down to converse, I told him I felt extreme happiness that I had moved from the barbaric West to the civilized East. He was very pleased [to hear this] and repeated the phrase three times.”

Accordingly, official Syrian discussions on the Chinese role in national reconstruction should be understood as less about signaling substantive moves toward realizing such an economic end point and more as an aspirational story told for domestic purposes. However, this story strains in the face of a reality in which limited economic assistance from China has materialized over the past few years. It also explains official Syrian commentary mostly coming from ambassador Imad Mustapha that seeks to “assuage the concerns of the Syrian people, that China’s stances are better and stronger than they appear in public” and asserts that the failure to fully capitalize on the economic opportunities presented by the China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are more due to the lack of initiative from the Syrian side than from the disinterest of the Chinese government in the national reconstruction of Syria.

Given this constant reiteration on the part of the Assad regime, it is not surprising that the term *reconstruction* (Ar., *i’adat al-‘imar*; Ch., *jingji chongjian* 经济重建) has become a major watchword in terms of how even Chinese official discourses discuss and imagine Sino-Syrian relations. Indeed, the Syrian eagerness to emphasize the importance of China’s role allows that nation to score diplomatic points easily while also strengthening and validating (at least rhetorically) China’s BRI narrative, which is based on the idea that cooperation with China can greatly help developing countries to achieve economic modernization and social stability at the same time. One example of this dynamic can be found in the statement made by ambassador Feng Biao, the then–vice director of the West Asia and North Africa Department in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the response of the Syrian government.

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(1) "النائب الصيني شدد على استمرار بادعه بدعم سورية ... العالم: دمشق وبيكين تتفقان في خندق واحد بمواقبة العقوبات الأمريكية"

(2) [The Vice President stressed the continued support of his country to Syria... al-Mu’allim: Damascus and Beijing are in one trench in the face of American sanctions], *Al-Watan*, last modified June 18, 2019, http://alwatan.sy/archives/201675; "بياو: سنبدأ بمشاريع كبيرة في سورية... لندفع إذ في أراضيها وسيادتها ... المقداد لـ *الوطن*]: لو لم نحارب الإرهابيين الآتين من الصين لعادوا وارتكبوا الجرائم بيدتهم" [Biao: we will start big projects in Syria...and Qing: we reject any violation of its territories and sovereignty... al-Mi’qdad to Al-Watan: if we didnt fight the terrorists coming from China, they would have returned and committed crimes in their homeland], *Al-Watan*, last modified July 24, 2019, http://alwatan.sy/archives/206523; "اعترفت أن مواقف الحلفاء الروسي والصيني والإيراني وحزب الله لا تقدر بثمن ... شعبان من حماة: سورية ستحرر كل شبر من أراضيها"

(3) [She considered the stances of the Russian, Chinese, Iranian and Hezbollah allies as invaluable... Sha’ban from Hamah: Syria will liberate every inch of its territory], *Al-Watan*, last modified August 26, 2019, http://alwatan.sy/archives/209806.

(5) Mazin Jabur, "أعتبر أن مواقف الحلفاء الروسي والصيني والإيراني وحزب الله لا تقدر بثمن ... شعبان من حماة: سورية ستحرر كل شبر من أراضيها"

During a visit to Damascus in 2018, Feng called on Syrian authorities to create a dedicated organ to facilitate Chinese and international investment in the Syria, and in the past few months, the Syrian government has expressed a willingness to facilitate the access of Chinese companies into the country.\(^7\)

However, an overview of Chinese interests in and actions toward Syria reveals that even the creation of such a task force would not be very helpful. This is because China is far less interested in Syria than Syria is in China. This is not to say that Beijing has not been paying close attention to Syria since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011. Three interconnected reasons, listed in order of importance, can be easily identified to explain the Chinese interest. First, the strong involvement by both America and Russia made that Middle Eastern country one of the key chessboards where the game of creating a multipolar world is played. Second, what happens in Syria is closely connected to the ever-changing balance of power between regional heavyweights. And third, the chaos in Syria provided fertile ground for the terrorism to reach unprecedented levels of threat, to the extent that the so-called Islamic State managed to establish rudimentary, state-like institutions over a large part of the Syrian and Iraqi territory. Uyghur-elements from Xinjiang have presumably participated in the fighting there since 2013,\(^8\) a development that the Assad regime has been keen on highlighting in the context of Sino-Syrian relations.\(^9\) Economically, however, and in contrast with these three distinctly strategic reasons, Syria has never been a priority in China’s economy-driven approach to the Middle East (see Figures 1 and 2).

China’s three most important moves in Syria confirm this overall strategic and noneconomic interpretation. The first was the so-called three vetoes, two no votes move between 2011 and 2012,\(^10\) which was intended to shield the Syrian government from diplomatic actions initiated by Western countries at the United Nations (UN). Second was the deployment of a delegation of high-ranking military officials, headed by Rear Admiral Guan Youfei, to meet with the Syrian defense minister and deputy prime minister, Lieutenant General Fahd Jasim al-Furayj, in August 2016.\(^11\) Guan also met Lieutenant General Sergei Chvarkov, chief of Russia’s reconciliation center in Syria. And third was the appointment of the experienced ambassador Xie Xiaoyan as China’s first special envoy on the Syrian issue in April 2016.\(^12\)

The timing of these actions is not coincidental. On the one hand, China coordinated with Russia to

\(^1\) [Biao stresses China’s preparadness to cooperate on reconstruction…Sha’ban: the Turkish assault on Afrin would not have happened without an American greenlight], Al-Watan, last modified January 22, 2018, http://alwatan.sy/archives/136326


prevent a repeat of what had happened in Libya, namely, to prevent the West from using the UN to gain legal authorization to carry out military operations leading to a regime change in Syria. On the other hand, the deployment of figures like Rear Admiral Guan and Ambassador Xie took place immediately after the Russian military intervention, which also backed a major offensive launched by the Assad military to expand the territory under the control of Damascus.

It is important to note that following its determined and effective resistance at the UN to block further Western actions in Syria, China has maintained a low profile, observing the situation and continuing to call for a political solution to be achieved through UN mediation. It is interesting that while Chinese experts have argued that Western countries must be part of the process, China has offered little more than rhetorical support to the Russian-led Sochi and Astana processes (Ambassador Xie participated only in the intra-Syrian talks, as part of the Syrian National Dialogue Congress that was held in Sochi in January 2018).

In comparison to these eye-catching actions in the diplomatic realm, actions in the economic realm have been mostly circumscribed to public declarations of intent, extremely limited economic contact, and pessimistic analyses about the challenges for Chinese companies in Syria. Some sign of interest in exploring the possibilities in the Syrian reconstruction market appeared when the first Syria Reconstruction Projects Fair was held in Beijing in 2017. The same year, about twenty Chinese companies presented their products at the fifty-ninth Damascus International Fair. In 2018, Russian media reported that some two hundred Chinese companies participated in the sixtieth Damascus International Fair in September 2018. Given that no Chinese source independently confirmed that news and that the director of the General Establishment for Exhibitions and International Markets Fares Kartli declared that the total number of foreign expositors was 236, the number of Chinese companies reported by Russian media in 2018 seems vastly inflated. In contrast, Chinese ambassador Feng Biao recently stated that fifty-eight Chinese companies would be present at the sixty-first Damascus International Fair in September 2019.

Against this background, the Chinese embassy in Syria has repeatedly warned Chinese nationals about the lack of security in Damascus and, starting in July 2018, forbade them to go to other parts of Syria. At the same time, Wang Jin, a research fellow at the Syria Research Center of China’s Northwest University, pointed out that extremely serious security problems and legal uncertainties, as well as a challenging business environment, are significant obstacles. Scholars from the Institute of West-


Asian and African Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Beijing International Studies University’s Department of Arabic Studies identified similar problems. An analyst with PowerChina International Group put forward an even more negative assessment. The People’s Daily depicted Syria as even worse than Libya in terms of both destruction and diplomatic challenges. Chinese president Xi Jinping stated China would join the efforts to rebuild Syria “within its own ability,” which most likely would also depend on how and when the reconstruction process should take place. It is thus not surprising that the previously mentioned scholars at Beijing International Studies University proposed a multilateral, inclusive mechanism to support the reconstruction of Syria that is based on the idea that, as in the diplomatic realm, Syria cannot be pacified without “sharing opportunities as well as costs.”

In conclusion, we can see that there is a significant mismatch between the words and actions of the two sides. Despite the Syrian narrative about China, which exaggerates the latter’s current and future role, Chinese interest in Syria originates from factors that have little to do with the Sino-Syrian relationship per se. Syria has never been a close diplomatic or economic partner. Instead, China’s approach to Syria has been, and is today, mostly due to the exceptional diplomatic features that characterize the ongoing war there. As one Chinese scholar pointed out, China’s most-preferred scenario for Syria is one in which coordination among external and internal actors can be achieved in order to pacify the country. In that context, China is willing to play some role. Hence, in the future, China is likely to continue to keep a low profile and avoid investing significant diplomatic or economic resources in Syria. At the same time, however, we cannot overlook the significant potential impact of narratives created by local actors in the context of international politics. This is especially true today, as the return of a global debate on great power competition has created an extraordinary demand for compatible narratives.


(22) Zhang Bo, “中国参与叙利亚重建: 优势与挑战.”

Figure 1: China's economic engagement with Syria

Sources: UN Conference on Trade and Development, People’s Republic of China Ministry of Commerce, China Trade and External Economic Statistical Yearbook (various years).

Figure 2: Syria’s Proportion of China’s Total Economic Engagement with the Middle East

Sources: UN Conference on Trade and Development, People’s Republic of China Ministry of Commerce, China Trade and External Economic Statistical Yearbook (various years).