

Syria's "China Dream": Between the Narratives and Realities

Andrea Ghiselli,
Mohammed Al-Sudairi

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.⁽¹⁾ Similarly, the Syrian ambassador to Beijing, Imad Mustapha, has

This article was written within the framework of the cooperation between the ChinaMed Project and the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies to study China's role in the Gulf and the Middle East at large.

Dr. Andrea Ghiselli is a Researcher at the School of International Relations and Public Affairs of Fudan University. He is also a non-resident/nonresident Research Fellow at the TOChina Hub and the Project Manager of the ChinaMed Project. His research interests include Chinese foreign policy and China–Middle East relations. He tweets at @AGhiselliChina.; Mr. Mohammed Al-Sudairi is the Head of Asian Studies at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies. His research interests encompass Sino–Middle Eastern relations, Islamic and leftist connections between East Asia and the Arab World, and Chinese politics. He tweets at @MohammedSudairi.

(١) "رأى أن سورية ليست مهيأة لـ«الفدرالية».. وإعادة الإعمار تعتمد على روسيا والصين وإيران.. ودعا خلال رسالة لبان إلى تسريع الحرب الجماعية ضد الإرهاب ... الرئيس الأسد: الحل بحكومة وحدة وطنية تهيئ لـ«دستور جديد»"

[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* محور المقاومة). 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* المؤامرة الكونية) targeting all non-Western states that reject American interference.⁽³⁾ 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

(2) Li Yiqing, “专访 | 叙利亚大使谈中国作用： 将是叙战后重建第一主角” [Official interview – Syrian Ambassador discusses China’s impact: it will have the leading role in Syria’s post-war reconstruction], *The Paper*, last modified April 26, 2017, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1669660; Liu Yang, “中国国内首次举办叙利亚战后重建会议” [China’s first time in domestically holding a conference on Syria’s post-war reconstruction], *Guangming*, last modified May 7, 2017, http://politics.gmw.cn/2017-05/07/content_24405685.htm; Bai Tiantian, “叙利亚驻华大使： 中国企业将优先获得参与叙重建的机会” [Syrian Ambassador to China: Chinese companies will be the first to access the opportunities arising from Syria’s post-war reconstruction], *Global Times*, last modified September 25, 2017, <https://world.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnK5k7Q>; Mazin Jabur,

“الصين ستكون «اللاعب الأبرز» في إعادة الإعمار.. والعلاقات مع واشنطن ستتحسن مع نهاية الأزمة.. والدور المصري «ملتبس»... السفير عماد مصطفى لـ«الوطن»: موافق بكين أفضل وأقوى مما تبدو عليه علناً”

[China will be the ‘most prominent player’ in reconstruction...and relations with Washington will improve with the end of the crisis...and the Egyptian role is ‘muddled’...Ambassador Imad Mustapha to Al-Watan: Beijing’s positions are better and stronger than they appear in public], *Al-Watan*, last modified August 10, 2017, <http://alwatan.sy/archives/114756>

(3) “الأسد يؤكد على ضرورة تعاون سوريا وكوريا ضد المؤامرة الكونية”

[Al-Assad reiterates the necessity of Syria and Korea cooperating against the universal conspiracy], *Akhbar al-Suriyeen*, last modified March 9, 2015, <http://www.syriansnews.com/2015/03/الأسد-يؤكد-على-ضرورة-تعاون-سوريا-وكوريا/>

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

(٧) "ببإياد أكد استعداد الصين للتعاون في إعادة الإعمار ... شعبان: العدوان التركي على عفرين ما كان ليحدث لولا الضوء الأخضر الأميركي" [Biao stresses China's preparedness 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>

(8) Colin P. Clarke and Paul Rexton Kan, "Uighur Foreign Fighters: An Underexamined Jihadist Challenge", *ICCT Policy Brief*, (November 2017): <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ClarkeKan-Uighur-Foreign-Fighters-An-Underexamined-Jihadist-Challenge-Nov-2017-1.pdf>.

(9) Blanchard, Ben. "سوريا: ما يصل لخمسة آلاف من الصينيين الويغور يقاتلون في صفوف المتشددين" [Syria: almost five thousand Chinese Uyghurs are fighting among the ranks of extremists], Reuters, last modified May 8, 2017, <https://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARAKBN1840YO>

(10) I-wei Jennifer Chang, "China's Evolving Stance on Syria," *Middle East Institute*, last modified February 18, 2013, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-evolving-stance-syria>.

(11) "Senior PLA Official Pays Visit to War-Devastated Syria," *People's Daily*, last modified August 17, 2016, <http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0817/c90000-9101047.html>.

(12) Zhang Yunbi and Chris Peterson, "Envoy Looks to Objective Role in Syria," *China Daily*, last modified April 11, 2016, http://english.www.gov.cn/news/international_exchanges/2016/04/11/content_281475325079264.htm.

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 the 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,⁽¹³⁾ 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.⁽¹⁴⁾ 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,⁽¹⁵⁾ 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.⁽¹⁶⁾

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.⁽¹⁷⁾ Scholars from the Institute of West-

(13) Li Jiabao, “美国在叙利亚被边缘化了？” [Has the US been sidelined in Syria?], *People's Daily*, last modified February 19, 2019, <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0219/c1002-30805257.html>.

(14) Fahad Shabbir, “UPDATE - Numerous Chinese Companies To Take Part In 60th Damascus International Fair – Ministry,” *UrduPoint News / Sputnik*, last modified August 23, 2018, <https://www.urdupoint.com/en/business/update-numerous-chinese-companies-to-take-p-416581.html>.

(15) “60th Damascus International Fair Set to Be Even Bigger Than Last Year,” *SANA*, last modified June 8, 2018, https://syrianobserver.com/EN/news/20225/th_damascus_international_fair_set_be_even_bigger_than_last_year.html.

(16) Mazen Eyon, “Chinese Ambassador: US Threats Will Not Deter Chinese Companies From Participating in Damascus International Fair,” *SANA*, last modified August 27, 2019, <https://www.sana.sy/en/?p=172120>.

(17) Wang Jin, “叙利亚重建的困境、归因与超越” [Reconstruction in Syria: Obstacles, causes and breakthroughs], *West Asia and Africa*, 1 (2019): 3-29.

Asian and African Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Beijing International Studies University's Department of Arabic Studies identified similar problems.⁽¹⁸⁾ An analyst with PowerChina International Group put forward an even more negative assessment.⁽¹⁹⁾ The *People's Daily* depicted Syria as even worse than Libya in terms of both destruction and diplomatic challenges.⁽²⁰⁾ Chinese president Xi Jinping stated China would join the efforts to rebuild Syria "within its own ability,"⁽²¹⁾ 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."⁽²²⁾

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.⁽²³⁾ 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.

(18) Zhang Bo, "中国参与叙利亚重建:优势与挑战" [China's involvement in the reconstruction of Syria: Advantages and challenges], *Contemporary World*, 1 (2017): 43-5; Li Shijun and Ma Xiaolin, "'一带一路' 对接叙利亚战后重建:时势评估与前景展望" [The Belt and Road Initiative and Post-war reconstruction in Syria: Assessments and outlooks], *Arab World Studies*, 2 (2018): 76-89.

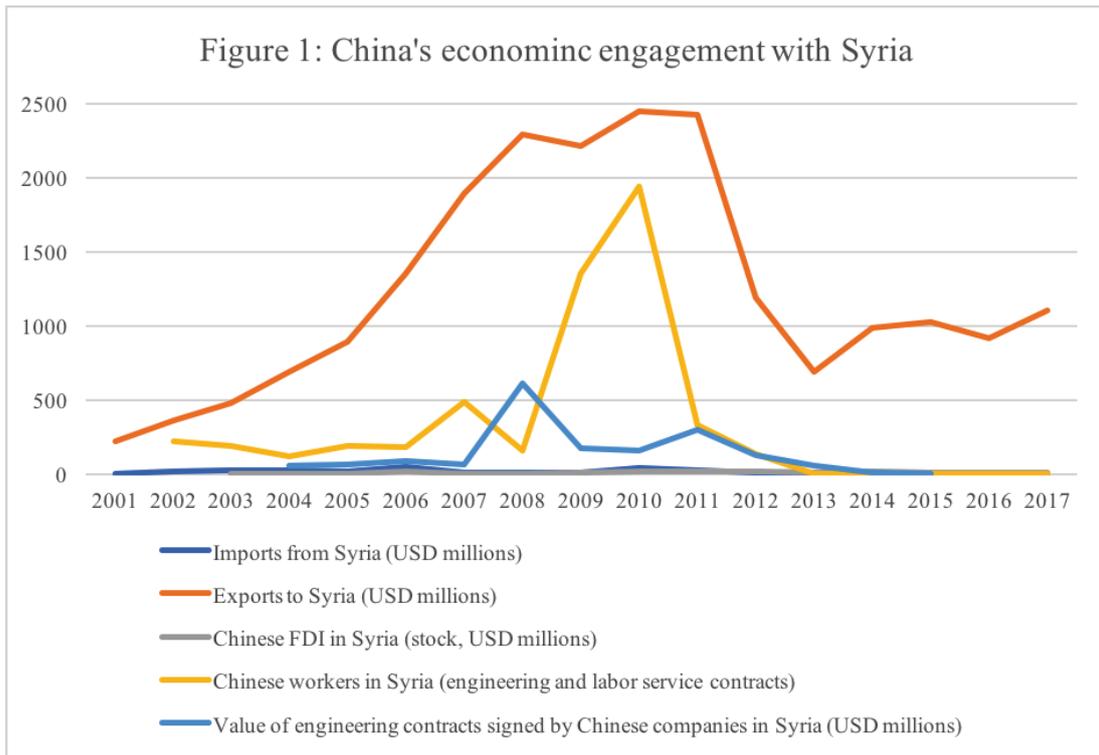
(19) Zhao Chong, "叙利亚战后重建及市场探析" [Market analysis of the post-war reconstruction of Syria], *International Project Contracting & Labour Service*, 11 (2018): 46-9.

(20) Yan Yu, "利比亚会变成又一个叙利亚吗?" [Could Libya become another Syria?], *People's Daily*, last modified May 4, 2019, <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0504/c1002-31062490.html>.

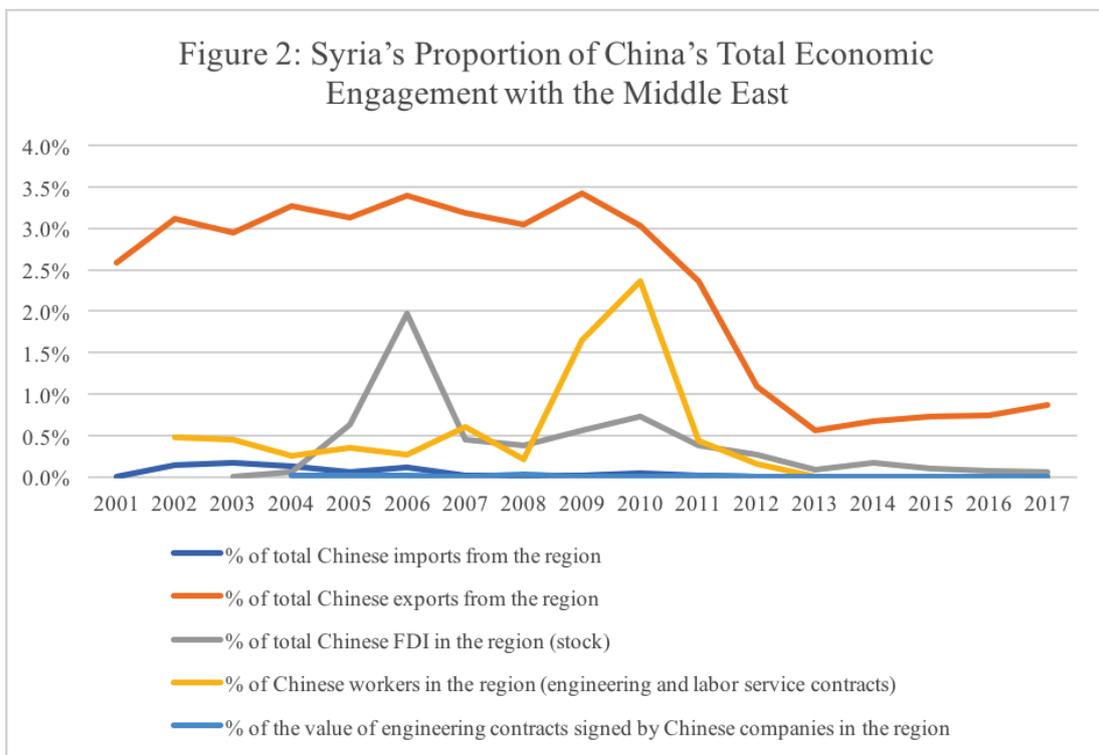
(21) "Xi expounds China's position on Syrian conflict, Venezuelan crisis, Iran's nuclear issue," Xinhua, last modified June 5, 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-06/05/c_138116801.htm.

(22) Zhang Bo, "中国参与叙利亚重建:优势与挑战."

(23) Yao Quan, "美俄在叙利亚危机中的懦夫博弈论析 - 兼论中国的战略选择方案" [The chicken game between Russia and the United States in Syria - A discussion about China's strategic choices], *Forum of World Economics & Politics*, 5 (2018): 57-76.



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



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