

The Nature of Formal and Informal Sino-Russian Political Networks: The Case of Syria

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Abstract

The world is governed economically and politically by supra-national conglomerates, in which both Russia and China are players seeking leadership and supporting the multi-polar system. This paper seeks to understand and analyze the geopolitical importance of the Arab region, with emphasis on Syria, for both Russia and China. It is further interested in the likelihood of a unified Syrian state in light of new concepts such as supportive sovereignty and security co-operation based on a balance of interests between allies instead of strategic security based on the balance of powers.

Keywords: Sino-Russian political networks, The Syrian crisis, Supportive sovereignty, Syrian Geopolitical importance.

Introduction:

Alliances between countries are usually built on mutual interests; therefore, we have to know and understand the Russian and Chinese interests in Syria. This requires identification of the Russian and Chinese dimensions and motives in Syria and how they conflict with regional and international dimensions in the case of conflict. It is thus important to study the strategic location of the Syrian Republic for the strategies of both Russia and China, recognize this location's importance for the super-powers conflict in the region, and uncover the economic interests of both powers in Syria¹.

Some wonder as to the consensus of the Russians and Chinese towards the Syrian crisis and the hidden motives that led both Moscow and Beijing to use the "veto" in favour of Damascus government three times in the Security Council. Both of them stand against any international decision proposed by the Security Council that advocates military intervention in Damascus².

The Chinese and Russian interests are mutual. Some observers perceive that they became far bolder for the first time since the Second World War in taking stances opposing the Western policy in the Syrian crisis, as both China and Russia vetoed and interrupted any proposition for political or military intervention in the Syrian affairs by others. This boldness may be due to the strategic location of Syria, seen as the last stronghold for both Russia and China in the Middle East, not to mention the Russian base or the Alexandretta Brigade assigned by the Syrian regime to the Russian warships, which assures a Russian presence in the Mediterranean Sea. This does not only reflect the geo-strategic importance of Syria for both Russia and China but the besieging of the Western policies that seek to provide new energy resources from outside the Arabian Gulf. These same policies aim at minimizing the Russian influence in the region³.

Russia installed a containment policy early on, starting with the deployment of the missile shield system in Poland. This policy was reflected in its closest geographical surroundings in the Caucasus, where Russian influence was tightened with the objective of deterring the spread of separatist movements and bolstering the region's stability. This inevitably aimed at retaining control over the oil and gas pipelines to Europe. Russian military co-operation with anti-Western states is limited to the conflict over energy resources. Such conflict established the Russian-Chinese-Iranian-Syrian alliance against the European-American-Saudi-Turkish-Qatari one.

Russia and China are bound by the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention in the internal affairs of other countries. However, they perceive attempts to control the political regimes in Syria as influencing the region's Islamic movements, which in turn has critical impacts on the Islamic movements in neighbouring Russia and possible influence on the separatist movements inside China, as well. These impacts would impose more internal stress towards institutional reform.

China uses a defensive strategy to preserve its national security against concerns of separatist

¹ International Status: China's Pursuit of a Comprehensive Superpower Status. [serial online]. January 1, 2012; Available from: Credo Reference Collections, Ipswich, MA. Accessed March 12, 2016.

² Courtney J. Fung (2016) Global South solidarity? China, regional organisations and intervention in the Libyan and Syrian civil wars, *Third World Quarterly*, 37:1, 33-50, DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2015.1078230, p.40-41.

³ RECENT DRAFT RESOLUTION: INTERNATIONAL LAW -- THE RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT -- DRAFT SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION REFERRING SYRIAN CONFLICT TO THE INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL COURT VETOED BY RUSSIA AND CHINA (13 IN FAVOR, 2 AGAINST). -- U.N. SCOR, 69th Sess., 7180th mtg. at 4, U.N. Doc. S/PV.7180 (May 22, 2014). *Harvard Law Review* [serial online]. January 1, 2015; 128:1055. Available from: LexisNexis Academic: Law Reviews, Ipswich, MA. Accessed March 12, 2016.

movements by the minority Muslim citizens. At the same time, it seeks to expand in the vital economic and political fields, secure diverse energy resources and develop its naval and army capabilities, specifically with African and Arab countries that are considered the biggest consumer markets for Chinese products.

In the last few years, we find that China has taken up the policy of reassuring opponents and abandoned its former isolation policy, under which it presented itself merely as an economic partner. Now it has become one of the most influential international powers in regional events¹.

The importance of the study

The importance of this study is evident through the escalation of the Syrian crisis, the expansion of various international interventions and their impact on the course of the crisis.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first addresses the geopolitical importance of the Arab region and Syria for Russia, the regional and international interests in the Syrian crisis, and the Russian strategic transformation towards both the Arab and Muslim worlds. The second part investigates the Chinese stance regarding the Syrian crisis as well as Chinese interests in the Arab countries.

The problem of the study

This study investigates the geopolitical transformations that took place in the international system after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the shift of the international system from a bipolar system (the United States and the Soviet Union) to a unipolar one (US) and American domination over world leadership. It traces the attempts of the Russian Bear and the Chinese Dragon to return to the international arena with a view to drafting a new multipolar world order.

Hypothesis of the study:

The study suggests that the shuffle of regional and international files in Syria led to increasing the scope of the conflict and prolonged the term of the Syrian crisis. The study points out that the most significant international geopolitical conflicts result from countries' attempts to preserve their vital interests through dominating other countries. This is what is taking place in the Syrian crisis.

Methodology

This study adopts the historical-descriptive methodology and uses the decision-making, analytical and inductive reasoning approaches to understand and analyse some events, facts and resolutions currently taking place.

The questions of the study:

What is the geopolitical importance of the Arab region for both Russia and China?

What are the world's major geostrategic transformations and their influence on the eastern Arab countries?

What are the international and regional projects contending in the region?

What is the shape of the alliances between Moscow and Beijing in what concerns the Syrian crisis?

What are the strategic interests for both Russia and China in the Arab region, particularly in Syria?

I: The geopolitical importance of the Arab region for Russia

It is said that the Russian Tsar Peter the Great (one of the greatest Russian Tsars) said, about 400 years ago: If Russia wishes to remain a great and powerful nation; it has to achieve three requirements in its foreign policy:

- 1- It must reach the Pacific Ocean even if it needs to enter into conflict with the Persian Empire;
- 2- It must reach the warm waters of the Mediterranean Sea, even if compelled to undermine the Ottoman Empire;

It must establish better relationships and alliances with Syria (the Fertile Crescent in that era) due to Syria's geostrategic node routes between the three continents of Asia, Europe and Africa².

II: The geopolitical importance of Syria for Russia

With the American occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, Russia noted a sort of siege around its zones of influence that may lead to loss of its natural resources in the area and of control of the vital pipelines that transfer gas and oil from the former Soviet Union countries to the West. The threat increased with the series of American bases erected around the world, American control of Iraqi oil and the linking of Iraqi oil to the dollar³.

The Syrian people and regime hold a key position among the eastern Arab countries in Russia's

¹ Warda Hashem Aly Eid, *The Conflict of Global Super Powers: USA, Russia and China for energy sites at Africa, Central Asia and the Caucasus (2000-2008)*, Doctorate Thesis 2013, Faculty of Commerce, Helwan University, Egypt.

² Riyad Eid, *What are the dimensions of Russian stance in support for Syria*, Opinion- research, Tahawolat website, date of publishing: 02/10/2012.

<http://www.tahawolat.net/MagazineArticleDetails.aspx?Id=266>

³ Bremmer I. *The China Decade*. *Time* [serial online]. August 31, 2015;186(8):38-42. Available from: Academic Search Complete, Ipswich, MA. Accessed March 12, 2016, p.40.

geopolitical concerns. Moscow considers Damascus as its most important strategic ally in the region because of the Russian interests there; in particular, Moscow is trying hard to keep its last naval base in the Mediterranean, Latakia, after losing its naval bases in the warm waters of Libya with the Arab Spring. Therefore, it is fighting not only in defence of the Syrian regime but also for its regional strategic, economic, political and military interests¹.

To clarify the geopolitical importance of Syria in the Russian strategy, we conduct an analytical reading of the interests and variables on the local, regional and international levels after the Arab Spring. We will list the most important factors that impact Moscow in its dealings with Damascus.

Syria is the largest buyer of Russian weapons in the region, ranking fifth among the 80 countries armed with Russian weapons. Two thirds of Syrian army weapons are Russian, and the total Russian weapons sales to Syria reached a value of \$4 billion annually. The Kremlin has lost nearly \$4 billion in armament contracts since the collapse of the Libyan regime, and it wants to avoid the same with Syria.

The Syrian President al-Assad assigned the Syrian port of Tartus to the Russians as a fixed base for Russian nuclear ships. In exchange for this strategic naval base, Moscow cancelled most Syrian debts². Tartus's importance escalated after the United States and the NATO deployed the rocket shield system in Turkey. Moscow considers this act to be directed against its national security³.

There are military agreements and economic contracts concluded between the Russian and Syrian governments in several fields, including oil and gas drilling. Losing Syria means losing such contracts and agreements, as well as Russia's only naval base in the Mediterranean.

Russian interests are at stake after the fall of its ally the "Syrian regime," and it fears the regime may be replaced by another pro-American and pro-Western regime that will surely affect Russia. Moreover, Russia is concerned with the probability of a sectarian war that will harm its national security, especially after the Arab Spring and the proliferation of political Islamic groups. This proliferation may lead to the emergence of Islamic movements that will call for the establishment of a "global Islamic caliphate" through an invitation to secede from Russia or neighbouring countries such as Chechnya or the Caucasus states.

Russia tries to preserve the competitiveness of Russian Gazprom and block proposals for economic projects detrimental to its interests. These include the establishment of gas pipelines crossing Anatolia (Nabucco), which would create a corridor for the transport of natural gas from Azerbaijan to Europe via Georgia and Turkey, bypassing Russia and offering an alternative to Gazprom⁴.

According to the *Moscow Times*, in addition to weapons, Russian companies have invested approximately \$20 billion in Syria since 2009. When the Syrian revolution broke out in March 2011, there were about 100,000 Russian citizens living in Syria. Russia gave large loans to Syria to offset fears of bankruptcy so that the Syrian government could pay its employees' salaries⁵.

Russia is interested in imposing its strong presence through maintaining the efficiency and effectiveness of its only military base in warm waters, which contributes to its primary goal of preserving equal status in the region and competing with the United States. Through the military intervention in Syria, Russia seeks to promote its presence and security control in order to combat the armed groups that could seize the northern Syrian borders as a transit station towards the Caucasus and expand their activities there⁶.

III: The shuffle of the regional and international files in the Syrian crisis

We strive to understand the nature of the war taking place in Syria and its surroundings, its probable outcomes and possible solutions. We study the geo-strategic variables mentioned above as well as the regional and international influences in Syria and the region, which caused the intervention of international and regional powers in Syria. The region has been a geopolitical chasm between Russian and American Eurasia as well as an international conflict over energy reserves since the beginning of the past century. The competitors for these resources are not interested in the freedom of the people, democracy or devolution of power, but they rather exploit such slogans in order to divide and control these nations and rob them of their resources. For these reasons, the Russian military movements in the Syrian crisis invoke clashes between Russia and the West, especially after the downing and interception of the Russian fighter jet in Turkish skies near the Syrian border.

Syrian lands became an international warfield of proxy wars because of the following factors.

First: international energy (gas), its resources and methods of supply.

¹ POWELL B, Bennetts M, Parsons C. HOW PUTIN WINS IN SYRIA. *Newsweek Global* [serial online]. October 16, 2015;165(14):12-15. Available from: Business Source Complete, Ipswich, MA. Accessed March 12, 2016, p.14.

² <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/navy-base-syria-crimea-putin/408694/>

³ Anna Puryshvaskiyam, Russian various interests in Syria, Dino Patricio Euro-Asia Institute", at "Atlantic council", Washington Institute, Political Research Center", 2023 published on 24 January 2013. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/view/russias-many-interests-in-syria>

⁴ Riyad Eid, op.cit.

⁵ Anna Borshchevskya, مصالح روسيا الكثيرة في سوريا , The Washington Institute for near east policy, 24 January 2013.

⁶ <http://alkhaleejonline.net/infographic>

Second: the battle of influence between the Russian Federation and the United States via military bases and areas of influence over central Asia, the four seas, straits and the warm waters.

Third: the Chinese-American battle concerning economy, energy, the Silk Road and the new world order as well as the Pacific Ocean.

Fourth: the Iranian nuclear file, the regional role of Iran, the security in the Gulf region and the energy routes.

Fifth: the Sunni-Shiite confrontation between Iran and its allies on one hand and Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and their allies on the other, regarding the role and the future of the region, which outlines the probable outbreak of a sectarian conflict that may ignite a serious war in the region.

Sixth: the Turkish-Syrian conflict (i.e. the Kurdistan workers party and the renewed "Ottoman Hopes").

Seventh: The conflict between Syria and Hezbollah on one hand and Israel on the other hand.

Eighth: the Arab-Islamic-American spring and the sectarian struggle in the Arab and Muslim worlds, its challenges, al-Qaeda and extremist groups.

IV: The Russian strategic transformation towards the Arab and Muslim worlds

This study demonstrates a transformation in the strategic Russian perspective towards the Arab-Muslim world after the diminishing of the communist influence and the Soviet Union's loss of the war in Afghanistan. The Arab countries' strategic location gives them a certain importance, especially in global strategic plans, which puts them under conflict and influence of the great powers in the international arena.

Most of the Arab world lies within the second cycle of Mackinder's Heartland theory, which received significant importance by Speak Mann, as it controls the world's most important marine straits and the keys to global power and domination in addition to the countries' energy resources, estimated to 75% of the world reserve of oil and 35% of the natural gas reserve¹.

The events of September 11th revealed the true face of antagonism towards Arabs and Muslims and the plans aiming to divide Arab and Muslim countries. This led to the formation of a veiled international alliance that rejects American hegemony. Also the Western animosity towards Islam led to the "reconciliation of Russian-Muslim-Arab relations" led by Putin, as Putin considers the Islamic world of strategic importance to the Russian territories and Russian Muslims to be an integral, indigenous part of the Russian population and Islam a key part of Russian population structure².

Russia succeeded in obtaining the status of an observer in the Organization of Islamic Conference, where it could later exclude Chechnya from the agenda. Putin's policy sought to stop the exploitation by any western adversary of Muslims in the Caucasus, Chechnya and Russia itself³.

V: Understanding the Chinese stance

In the era of American domination over the world and the absence of another power to retain balance after the fall of the Soviet Union, competition for power arose in the international world order. China has been considered the country with the potential for this role. In terms of human power, its population of 1.3 billion people is four times the American population, and in terms of military power, the Chinese army is considered the biggest army in the world, reaching 2.5 million soldiers. Furthermore, China occupies the third rank regarding military spending after the United States and Russia, according to US reports.

Chinese political leaders have agreed on the main strategic goal of economic reform through constant high rates of economic growth⁴. This drove China to draft new diplomacy in the Middle East, which achieves its interests through co-operation with the new players in the Arab region while co-existing with the single polarity. This exempted China of its security, political and military obligations and commitments to compete in the global armament race and allowed self-realization "through peaceful strategic reform."

VI: The Chinese situation regarding the Syrian crisis

China has adopted a certain vision to resolve the Syrian crisis in a way that ensures the satisfaction of all parties, regionally and internationally. This vision calls for the joint cooperation of regional security to combat terrorism and rejects the military intervention in Syria, raising the slogan, "Adopting diplomatic channels to resolve the crisis"⁵.

China changed the style of the "Chinese Speech" regarding countries in transition in the Middle East. It no longer adopted a passive and isolated role but rather fixed a long-term principle for dealing with the Western armament race. The Chinese mission to the United Nations vetoed any decision that would allow Western

¹ Claude Cahen, *الشرق والغرب*, Cairo, Sinai Publishers, 1995, p.79.

² Maged ben Abdel Aziz Al Turkey, *على طريق الرؤية الاستراتيجية*, *روسيا والعالم الاسلامي*, Middle East Journal, 7 January 2010, Vol. 11363.

³ POWELL B, Bennetts M, op.cit., 15.

⁴ Ghemawat P, Hout T. Can China's Companies Conquer the World?. *Foreign Affairs* [serial online]. March 2016;95(2):86-98. Available from: Business Source Complete, Ipswich, MA. Accessed March 12, 2016, p.87.

⁵ Gawad al Hamad, 2010-2005, *اتجاهات ومحددات تطوير العلاقات الصينية-العربية*, Beijing, 12-13 December 2005, Middle East Studies, Jordan.

military intervention in Syria¹.

For China to protect its economic interests in the Arab region, and especially in Syria, it resorted to the redrafting of a new security and military strategy based on increasing investment in military industrialization. It required the approval of the Russian Federation to obtain modern technology.

Economically, China has the biggest economy and achieved a high growth rate, enabling the Chinese government to free 300 million Chinese from poverty by quadrupling salaries. China also keeps the world's second largest reserve of foreign currency, including the American dollar. Commercially, the competitive prices of Chinese goods worry big industrial countries, who seek to preserve the foreign markets.²

In this context, the size of the contracts that China signed with Syria and Iran to develop the oil and gas pipelines is estimated to 10 billion dollars, which demonstrates the Chinese containment policy in the Arab region.³

The Chinese stand concerning the crisis in Syria is portrayed in the assertions of the researcher Yazid El Sayegh that in spite of the fact that Beijing has committed to the principles of wise impartiality and neutrality concerning the region, nevertheless, its current stand reflects its growing concerns in what American policy sets forth as goals that block its access to the energy resources in the Middle East. Thus, it will become more difficult to remain neutral in the time of the extreme deterioration in the Syrian case⁴.

The essence of the Chinese policy is to seek necessary co-operation in managing international affairs. Consequently, what China seeks with respect to economy and energy in the Middle East and in conflicts like that in Syria is the principles of co-operation, negotiation and resolution of disputes that China has adopted since the beginning⁵.

China took a neutral stand in the Security Council's vote for a no-fly zone over Libya in March 2011. It was also ready to use the veto against the draft resolution proposed by four European members in the Security Council for imposing sanctions on Syria late in the year 2011⁶.

NATO abused the decree of the Security Council by imposing the no-fly zone over Libya, as it did not use its weapons to protect civilians only but to assist a certain party in the civil war and topple the Gaddafi regime. This is what Syria fears most. China keeps in mind the American policy threatening to deprive it of access to the energy resources in the Middle East⁷.

VII: The Chinese interests in the Arab countries

China uses certain mechanisms to defend its interests in the Arab region, especially after the revolutions of the Arab Spring; such mechanisms are as follows:

First: Taking the initiative

China has a pressing need to complete its transformation from a regional Asian power to an international power. This goal has not yet been achieved, as argued by Zhaohui that China's monetary power-as-autonomy is enhanced, whereas its power-as-influence is still limited. China is more capable of preserving domestic financial stability from external shocks and pressures than of exercising its power to influence policy behaviours of other countries⁸.

Second: the soft Chinese power

China plays a leading role in the future of the Middle East. Its soft powers through media and culture are a key part in advocating and preserving the national Chinese interests in the countries of the region.

Third: taking chances to expand its investments

With the changes of circumstances in the Arab region, China focuses on building its foreign relations in a way that achieves and ensures its vital interests, promoting economy and increasing its investments in these countries⁹.

China considers the loss of one economic factor to be a vital loss that may endanger national security.

¹ www.una.org.uk/.../Veto

² Mohamed Al Sayed Selim, نحو بناء منتدى عربي-صيني للتعاون, China Today, Vol. 4, 2003.

³ <http://siironline.org/alabwab/diplomacy-center/019.html>

⁴ WU S. China's Efforts to Help Solve the Crisis in Syria Can Withstand Test of Time. 今日中国: 英文版 / China Today [serial online]. 2012;(8):34. Available from: China Science & Technology Journal Database, Ipswich, MA. Accessed March 12, 2016.

⁵ <http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=47151>

⁶ International law - the responsibility to protect - draft Security Council resolution referring Syrian conflict to the International Criminal Court vetoed by Russia and China (13 in favor, 2 against). Harvard Law Review [serial online]. 2015:1055. Available from: Academic OneFile, Ipswich, MA. Accessed March 12, 2016, p.1056.

⁷ Ibid, p.1060.

⁸ Zhaohui W. The Great Wall of Money: Power and Politics in China's International Monetary Relations. [serial online]. Fall 2015 2015;15(2):174-176. Available from: EconLit with Full Text, Ipswich, MA. Accessed March 12, 2016.

⁹ Nadia Helmy, التوجهات الصينية تجاه الشرق الأوسط بعد الثورات العربية, Al Siyassa Al Dawliya, January 17, 2016.

<http://www.siyassa.org.eg/newsq/2701.aspx>

It therefore seeks to preserve the resources of oil and gas, secure paths of commerce and navigation in Syria and the Arabian Gulf countries, and retain the Arab countries as significant markets for Chinese products¹.

Conclusions and Recommendations

First: The world is economically and politically governed by supra-national conglomerates that compete for leadership within the multi-polar system. These supra-national conglomerates do not abolish nationalism, but forcibly divide nations to remove the possibility of their taking an effective stance within the conglomerates.

Second: The supra-national conglomerates impose new concepts of sovereignty and security (supportive sovereignty, security co-operation) based on the balance of interests between allies instead of strategic security based on the balance of forces. This restricts countries' choices in pursuing their economic and political interests.

Third: The capitalist order needs a new Sykes-Picot to allow the region to recover from the economic problems caused by intervention through the pretext of "spreading democracy and human rights." The attempt to excite sectarian minorities is beginning divide the new Middle East ethnically and racially. The looming sectarian war between Shiites and Sunnites would dissolve the Palestinian cause completely and enforce the status of Israel regionally. The American President Barak Obama does not speak of a region but rather of sectarian groups, such as the Sunni sect in Iraq and the Sunni majority of Syria, whom he considers marginalized, and yet he does not provide them the means for political representation in an independent state. Thus, the status quo remains volatile in the Middle East (the Obama Thomas Friedman meeting)².

Fourth: The wars in the Middle East are proxy wars that aim at controlling energy resources and routes. The wars in Libya and Iraq are concerned with oil prices. One cause of the First World War was to hit the railway that connects Berlin to Mosul and divide the Ottoman Empire, the "sick man of Europe," now Turkey, in order to control Arab oil and plant Israel into the region (in Palestine). The current wars in Syria have to do with oil, its prices and links to the petrodollar—these are economic wars par excellence. They are also sectarian wars causing an estimated hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of destruction to communities through a cycle of conspiracies against the Arab countries.

Fifth: Russia established the Commonwealth of Independent States around the Caspian Sea, the customs federation the Eurasian Economic Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization for security to preserve its vital interests.

Sixth: China suffers from the Uygur Islamic separatist group in Shanghai, a group of Turkish descent and language; China seeks to secure its position on the Silk Road and the economic belt in addition to the energy resources in the region.

Seventh: Turkey is taking unbalanced strides in front of the American backing of the Muslim Brotherhood and extremists groups in Syria, and Russia offers agreements and threats after the crash of the Russian plane.

Eighth: Iran, after its success in the international acceptance of the reality of its nuclear program, has increased its own geopolitical weight, as it ranks second in global oil production. Moreover, it overlooks the Caspian Sea and the Arabian Gulf, offering its military significant power in threatening to close the Hormuz Strait to international navigation. It also holds a key role in the formation of the new Iraqi, Yemeni and Syrian crises and is a close ally to the Russian Federation.

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¹ <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/china-and-gulf-states-target-free-trade-deal-end-year-1187614884>

² http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/30/opinion/thomas-friedman-syria-obama-and-putin.html?_r=0

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