

How to Revive the “Five Seas Strategy”? The Syrian Vision



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ABSTRACT

Based on its cultural heritage and future vision, Syria launched the Five Seas Initiative in 2004, with the intention of improving regional cooperation. This initiative triggered a plethora of new paradigms and terminologies that address several developments expected to influence both the Middle Eastern conflict theater and the international landscape, particularly in the period 2010-2011. After nine years of war that served to undermine the Five Seas Initiative, and upon the failure of the hegemony of global capitalism in its crude forms, it is now time to put forward a real alternative based on common interests between regional and international actors, which would respect regional diversity away from extremism. Since Middle Eastern countries share common problems, proposed solutions to these problems would be more effective if they were formulated and carried out collectively. Ultimately, development is the only way to bring peace to the Middle East, and a lasting solution to shared problems can only be reached within the framework of "Peace Through Development". The combination of the "Five Seas Strategy" and the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) would provide such a solution by reconstructing southwest Asia and creating a network of infrastructures thanks to Syria's privileged geopolitical position at the intersection of the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, the Caspian Sea, and the Black Sea. Full engagement with this combined strategy seems to be the best way to avoid another wasted decade for the majority of Middle Eastern countries.

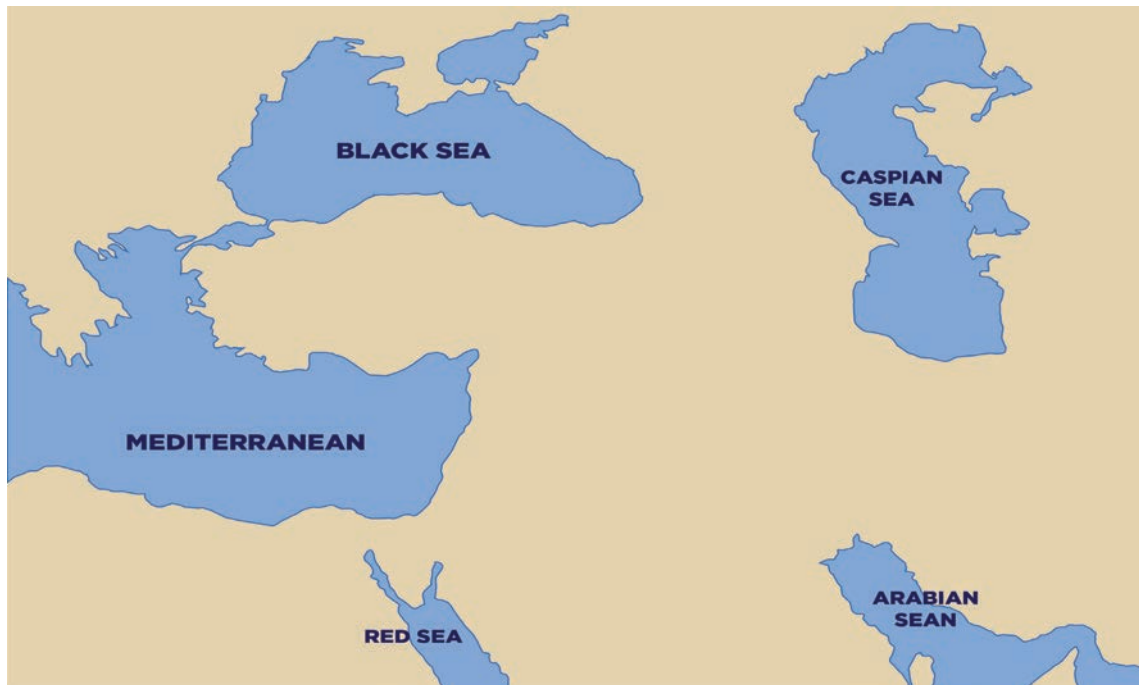
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The Five Seas Strategy: Its Origins and Development in Context

In the period between his ascension to presidency in 2000 and the onset of the war on Syria in 2011, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad sought to shift economic policy towards *infitah* (opening). This policy aimed at reigniting economic and social development, while strengthening the international and regional alliances of Syria. With this aim in mind, President al-Assad launched his "Four Seas Approach" (Stern, 2009; Syria Aims to Become, 2009) in 2004, a vision that seeks to take advantage of Syria's geographic position to place the country at the center of a regional energy and transportation network. Gradually, Damascus promoted his strategy to transform the country into a trade hub (Lin, 2011: 13) in the regions around the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea, the Arabian Sea, and the Caspian Sea. The Red Sea was also added to the list in later stages.

During the decade before the beginning of the foreign-orchestrated war on Syria, the Syrian President promoted this idea beyond the region and improved Syria's relations with many countries in the East: Iran (2001, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2010), China (2004), Russia (2005, 2008). He also visited the Balkan and European regions: Germany (2001), France (2001, 2008, 2010), Italy (2002), Greece (2003), Turkey (2004) (SANA, 2010; World Bank, 2004), Azerbaijan (2009), Bulgaria, Romania, Belarus, and Ukraine (2010).

President Assad explained his expanded vision in 2009: "Once the economic space between Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran becomes integrated, we would link the Mediterranean, the Caspian, the Black Sea, and the Gulf ...we are not only important in the Middle East ...Once we link these Four Seas, we become the compulsory intersection of the whole world in investment, transport, and more" (Badran, 2010: par.5).



Syrian Five Seas Strategy (Map:  BRIQ)

Syria, therefore, aligned itself with the key countries that lie on these shores to transform itself into a trade hub, and the Ankara-Damascus-Tehran triangle would become the core of an approach to include Iraq and the Caucasus in a geographic continuum connecting the Four Seas (Lin, 2013: 4). Several bilateral agreements were concluded, including with Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, Russia, China, Romania, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan. "The objective was the establishment of a network of operations, including commercial trade, infrastructure, transportation networks, and several huge pipeline projects (a gas pipeline from Iran, a pipeline into Turkey linking up with the planned Nabucco gas pipeline from Azerbaijan, and the rebuilding of the oil pipeline from As explained by Lin, northern Iraq into Syria) (Sandmark, 2015: 28). "The Syrian government, which sought to speed up its partnership negotiations with the European Union (EU), hastened Egypt to

start implementing the Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA), which would act as a means of access for EU countries to markets in the Arab and western Asian countries" (Lin, 2010a: par.10).

This vision signified that Syria would become the center of stability in the region, linking the Caucasus in the north with the Gulf States in the south, Iran in the East, and south of Europe. Syria as an active member of GAFTA, and Turkey, with its customs union with the EU and its reach to the Caucasus countries, would greatly benefit from enhanced partnership to turn the entire region into a mass of at least 600 million consumers, a figure that cannot be easily ignored.

The new world order, as was imposed by the US, has not let Syria (as well as other countries in the region) initiate a radical change towards building independent South-South relations, especially after the US invasion of Iraq

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by in 2003. Indeed, from a geopolitical perspective, the region's potential of at least 600 million consumers is more than sufficient to explain the reason behind the West's attempted assertion of control over the whole region.

Recently, Russian strategist Alexander Dugin (2020) noted that Russia, Turkey, Iran, China, and other countries including India, Pakistan, many other Arab countries, African countries, and Europe itself can secure real independence only by way of creating a geopolitical Eurasian alliance, a multipolar alliance.

A firmer understanding of this vision requires us to take into account the evolution of the global and regional context. The overall background can be understood by reference to the following principal dynamics:

- From a geo-economic point of view, the center of gravity of the world has started to move from west to east and from north to south. This process began during the 1990s with the emergence of new centers of growth and the formation of a multipolar global economic system as the weight of players in emerging markets increased. As a figurative expression: instead of the prevailing model of "Americanizing the world", China and other developing countries began "globalizing America" (Guéhenno, 1999). Semih Koray (2019/2020) describes this situation by arguing that "the new kind of globalization aims to globalize cooperation, and not to create a single global market in the absence of national borders".

- "As the global economic balance is shifting from the EU, the US, and other developed countries towards China, India, and other developing countries, economic decision-making power is shifting as well. Global cooperation mechanisms will need to recognize this shifting balance while continuing to allow the underrepresented to be heard" (The Economic Times, 2020: par.14-15).

- Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US sought to impose a new global pattern as the sole global pole by direct military interventions such as the US invasion of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). Later, the US also promoted the concept of soft power by preaching policy and reengineering countries through paternalistic means. This went hand in hand with the use of sanctions as a weapon (Baldwin, 1999/2000; Hufbauer & Jung, 2020).

- The worldwide protests against the 2003 war on Iraq gave way to the development of an international resistance against the US-led world order, leading five years later to the formation of the BRICS Alliance.

- The failure of the Oslo Agreement between Palestine and Israel in 1994, Israeli intransigence in respecting international legitimacy, the growth of instability in the Middle East region, and its multiple challenges showed the inadequacy of the Pan-Arab security system and its governing bodies, including the Arab League. Indeed, the First Gulf War between Iraq and Iran (1980-1988), the invasion and annexation of Kuwait by Iraq (1990), the war of the coalition led by the US to dislodge the Iraqi troops (1991), and the occupation of Iraq by American troops after thirteen years of embargo, reveal the fragility of the whole region.

- "The US stake in the stability of the Middle East is a contingent interest. It only exists because of other US interests in the region. The relationship with Israel is surely among the most important priorities of the US policy of regional

alliances" (Barnes & Bowen, 2015: 6). One should note that the wave of anti-Americanism has been exacerbated not by anti-American statements, but statements such as that of Condoleezza Rice¹ during the Israeli aggression against Lebanon in 2006: "The US-led interventions in the Middle East and Central Asia were not about spreading democracy, but about addressing regional security issues". The idea behind this was reviving Shimon Peres's project on the New Middle East, as was explained in his book published in 2003. "This statement has been simply reiterating the actual US policy. But rarely has a phrase caught as much attention and provoked as much anger on the part of moderates, who have seen in it as an expression of a new and more determined American strategy aimed against Arab interests" (Khalaf, 2006: par. 3).

- During the 1980s and 1990s, the Washington Consensus and the neoliberal dogma had become the dominant economic approach in many regions of the world, especially in Eastern European countries after the disbandment of the Warsaw Pact and the COMECON organization (1991) and their joining of the EU and the NATO alliance.

Starting with the 1990s, the global economic landscape has rapidly changed. For example, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) did not operate in isolation from the influence of the global political-economic environment. In the last two decades, the world's macroeconomic environment was shaken by the global recession, which caused an inward retraction of production and services. In other words, the financial crisis of 2008, coupled with retrenchment and distancing from multilateral agreements, sent ripples across the world. These factors still af-

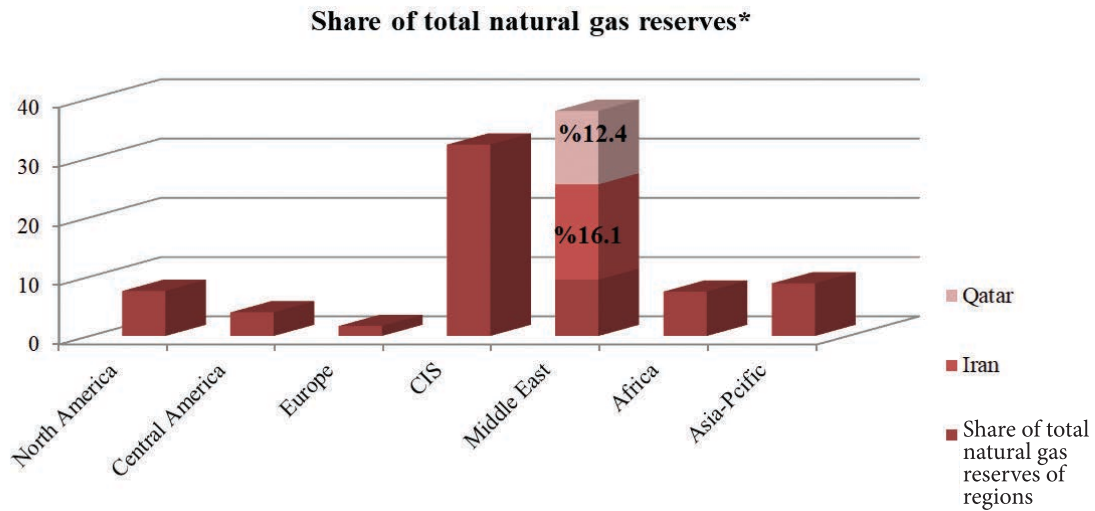
fect the discernible value and role of the WTO years later. International economic issues were largely ignored as the global attention shifted to fostering increasing levels of polarization among countries and regions across the world.

In the context of the "victory of liberalism" and the expansion of globalization, the need for regional economic alliances emerged. The new wave of regionalism can be seen as a response to the challenges of a continuously deepening polarization generated by capitalist globalization processes (Amin, 1999). A defining characteristic of international repositioning has thus been the establishment and strengthening of regional cooperation, with some important implications. Numerous alliances were formed or revived, including the completion of the economic and monetary union in European Union in 1999; the revival of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the 1990s along with the institutionalization Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1989; the creation of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR) in 1991 as well as the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) in 1992; the emergence of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 as well as the Greater Arab Free Trade Area (GAFTA) in 1997; and the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001 (Suratman, 2020)².

The Middle East has 42% of proven global gas reserves (estimated at 199 trillion m³). Moreover, Iran and Qatar represent nearly 29% of proven global reserves.

1 Condoleezza Rice served in former President George W. Bush's administration as national security advisor from 2001 to 2005 and as secretary of state from 2005 to 2009.

2 On 15 November 2020, China and fourteen other countries (including Japan, New Zealand, South Korea and Australia) signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) trade agreement, which aims to progressively cut tariffs and further market access for goods and services (Suratman, 2020).



Prepared based on 2019 data by British Petroleum Company. (Graphic: BRIQ)

From the point of view of the world energy system, the Middle East is resource-rich region for hydrocarbons. It possesses more than half of the world's conventional oil reserves, estimated at 1,734 billion barrels, of which the Arab countries represent 43%. When including Iran, this percentage exceeds 52%. Also, the Middle East has 42% of proven global gas reserves (estimated at 199 trillion m³). Moreover, Iran and Qatar represent nearly 29% of proven global reserves. Worthy of note in this regard is that world energy needs still depend on oil and natural gas. Estimated at 57.3%, moreover, the region's share in world energy trade is overwhelming. Most of these regional countries therefore control important hydrocarbon reserves as well as the means to exploit and transport them (British Petroleum Company, 2020).

From the Eve of the "Arab Spring" to Aggravating Instability in the Middle East: 2011-?

The Syrian government set out its Tenth Five-Year Plan (2006-2010), which reflects as a vision

through which the country will be transformed by 2020 into a fully integrated economy into the global economy and acquire the confidence, institutions, and creative talents necessary for Syria's global competitiveness. Under this plan, strategic projects have been put in place to build the roads, ports, and pipelines that Syria needs for achieving the "Five Seas Vision".

Despite regional instability (which persisted after the US occupation of Iraq in 2003), Israel's intransigence in pursuing the peace process following Security Council resolutions, the flow of over 2.5 m Iraqi refugees to Syria since the occupation of their country in 2003, the new wave of American sanctions against Syria, and the international financial crisis of 2008, the Syrian economy had been able to record growing economic performance prior to the Western intervention in 2011. Even though the Syrian economy was in a transition phase (adoption the social market economy in 2005, after decades of central economic planning, regulatory reform and prices liberalization), the average GDP growth rate was 4.4% in the period 2000-2010 (World Bank, n.d.).

However, the conflict that began in 2011 stalled these reform efforts and ongoing fighting continues to accelerate the country's economic decline. Because of its regional location, Syria was directly targeted by Western powers in alliance with regional powers aiming to control the Syrian vital sphere. More than 20 states have been involved in the war on Syria and hundreds of different armed groups are currently waging a proxywar in the Syrian territory. This has paralyzed the Syrian economy and destroyed the Syrian infrastructure, while also curtailing foreign trade, encouraging speculation on the exchange rate of the Syrian pound, fostering a general rise in prices, and provoking sanctions. Certainly, Syria's projects are undermined by the geostrategic ambitions of intervening countries and their intention to divide the country.

Major powers have sought to control the eastern Mediterranean space as "spatial capital"³ (Lévy & Lussault, 2003). In his classic handbook, *The Struggle for Syria*, Patrick Seale argued that those who aspire to control the Middle East must first win over Syria. According to Seale (1987) "whoever controlled Syria or enjoyed her special friendship could isolate (other Arab states) and need bow to no other combination of Arab states". It is self-evident to say that the economic dynamics were and still are a major component of the war against Syria targeting its political and economic system, and, thus, its sovereignty.

Despite all unprecedented pressures on Syria, it is not easy to understand how such an economy as the Syrian economy, which was under going structural transformations⁴ before the onset of the war in March 2011, could withstand a

war that targeted its very foundations and pillars, especially with the pursuit of Western powers to control the Syrian space.

The period 2010-2011 was the so-called Arab Spring movements, which erupted in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria. Large foreign countries strongly supported Islamic groups' campaigns against governments represented by the Arab Spring countries. "A few years ago, Turkey was also subjected to a wave of anti-government protests as part of the Arab Spring process in the Middle East and northern Africa. Ankara faced significant difficulties and even serious conflicts just like almost all neighboring and regional countries⁵" (Djavadi, 2016: 2).

Zhang Weiwei first predicted the Arab Winter in his June 2011 debate with Francis Fukuyama: "My understanding of the Middle East leads me to conclude that the West should not be too happy. It will bring enormous problems to American interests. It is called 'Arab Spring' for now, and I guess it will soon turn to be the winter for the Middle East" (Guancha, 2011).

Instead of seeking a self-reliant development model and regional solidarity with mutual benefits (win-win), some of these countries tend to align with the US/Western strategy.

The Middle Eastern region finds itself reeling from the sharp resurgence of confrontation between actors allied with the US and with other allies close to Russia. From a humanistic

3 Spatial capital refers to "all the resources accumulated by an actor, allowing him/her to take advantage, according to his/her strategy, of the use of the spatial dimension of the society. It builds on the capacity of an actor to take advantage of scale and matrix and consists of the benefits gained by control of specific geographical arrangements" (Lévy & Lussault, 2003).

4 e.g. Transition from socialist planning mechanisms to a socialist market economy approach, and the shift from an economy dependent on oil, phosphates and cotton rents to an economy based on maximizing added values.

5 Turkey is considered both in Washington and European capitals as a "model" to act as a "bridge" between Western democracies and the Muslim world of. (Djavadi, 2016).

perspective, one could argue that the Middle Eastern human and economic security has deteriorated over time⁶ in ways that go far beyond military conflicts and the petty power struggles of regional and international powers. "Virtually all the countries in the Middle East suffer from a failure to modernize and open up their economies, and from demographic pressures and acute problems in dealing with a "youth bulge" and lack of jobs" (Cordesman, 2020: 3). "The overall macroeconomic indicators are more vulnerable and uncertain, because they depend on direct oil and other sources of rent, given rising inflation and unemployment, contracting investment, elevated corporate and financial sector vulnerabilities, and patchy implementation of corrective policy actions" (Cordesman, 2020: 18). Many countries in the region seem incapable of helping themselves. Instead of seeking a self-reliant development model and regional solidarity with mutual benefits (win-win), some of these countries tend to align with the US/Western strategy, which does nothing but further "prolong regional problems rather than solve them. This, instead, allows the existing problems to fester and grow, rather than generate real progress and solutions. This becomes all too clear when one looks beyond the crisis of the day" (Cordesman, 2020: 3).

After long years of escalating conflicts, Libya, Syria, and "Yemen continue to face an unprecedented humanitarian, social, and economic crisis. Significant damage to vital public infrastructure has contributed to a disruption of basic services, while insecurity has delayed the rehabilitation of oil exports, which had been the largest source of foreign currency before the war, severely limiting government revenue and supply of foreign

exchange for essential imports. This further compounds the economic crisis and humanitarian suffering from violence" (Cordesman, 2020: 34).

"Economic and social prospects in the 2020s and beyond are uncertain. They hinge critically on the state of political and economic security in the region. Access to affordable food is a rapidly growing threat to household welfare, as global food price increases and the national currencies depreciation are now exacerbated by COVID-19-related trade restrictions on the part of food exporters" (Cordesman, 2020: 34). As described by Cordesman, "these problems are not specific to any particular nation. They have become regional – made worse in virtually every case due to the impact of the crisis on petroleum export prices and the coronavirus on the local and global economy" (Cordesman, 2020: 2). Cordesman goes on to argue that "the US has failed to achieve lasting solutions because of its prolonged wars, its lack of progress in dealing with racism, and the scale of its failures to use its wealth to deal with income inequities. The EU has failed just as badly relative to its opportunities" (Cordesman, 2020: 2).

However, the main challenge in assessing each country's performance is to understand how to "emerge out of its current problems in achieving sustained progress in meeting the needs of the entire population of the region. No state in the world has come close to perfection in meeting these goals, but many nations are at least attempting to make some progress" (Cordesman, 2020: 39).

Beyond the Ambitions of International and Regional Powers

Global powers, such as the the Triad (the USA, EU, and Japan) and emerging countries like China, seek constantly to reposition themselves.

⁶ This situation is perhaps best explained by reference to Israel's annexation of part of occupied Palestinian lands, US recognition Israel's annexation of the Occupied Syrian Golan and the American failure in Afghanistan and Iraq in the 2000s.

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Syria's allies, i.e. Russia, Iran, and China, have prevented Syria's conquest by hegemonic powers mainly the US and its proxy states in the region. Characterized by its proximity to Turkey at the crossroads between three continents of the world (Europe, Africa, and Asia), Syria (along with Iraq and Iran) seeks to regain its independence. However, it should not be deduced from this that China and Russia are acting according to a mutual and concerted strategy. While both may be driven in part by a common goal, their strategies diverge in some respects. Despite their shared desire to promote multilateralism, their priority to pursue their own interests shapes their actions.

China and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): A Newly Emerging World Order

China is an active player that connects Asia, Europe, and Africa as an engine of global economic growth. In its relations with Syria, which can serve as China's gateway to the EU, China has three main objectives: developing economic cooperation so as to advance BRI, stabilizing the entire Middle East region as much as possible, and maintaining Syria's integrity in the face of extremist threats.

China's interest in Mediterranean ports is part of a larger effort to integrate the Middle East as a stop on the Maritime Silk Road, which points to rising opportunities to strengthen the Chinese influence on the Middle East through Syria. Beijing's arrival at Syrian ports is an attractive opportunity in an initiative through which it seeks to connect itself to Eurasia and to

consolidate a foothold in the Greek Piraeus and Mediterranean ports (Dorsey, 2020)

Potential Chinese investments in Syria can be directly linked to BRI. Syria has a crucial impact on the expansion of Chinese projects to western Eurasia given that it sits at the crossroads of strategic land and sea routes for BRI (Lin, 2010b).

Syria could be the key to this route, being able to free China from its natural borders. It could also become an "unguarded back door" for China, while the US shifts towards the Pacific. The urgent need for economic reconstruction, as well as the West's disengagement from the region, makes Syria an attractive destination for China. Additionally, Syria considers China an ally and a key player for the reconstruction of its economy, which provides an opportunity to improve bilateral ties. The Chinese approach to the Syrian conflict stems from its policy of non-interference and respect for state sovereignty. This is a model that China follows with all of its partners around the world and sets it apart from the conditionalities of Western aid. Similar to Syria, China is not immune to the risks of terrorism and is keen to eradicate the risks associated with fundamentalism that may spread further in its territory. It also seeks to cooperate with its allies to eliminate threats that affect its investments in Syria.

Despite the war on Syria, China has renewed its attention to Syria as an important trading hub and partner for Chinese interests in northern Africa, southern Europe, and the Middle East. Syria is close to the EU and the Mediterranean, placed in a location close to both suppliers and consumers of products as it is a GAFTA member and trading hub via its proximity to Turkey, which operates a customs union with the EU. Chinese energy cooperation with Russia,

Iran, Turkey, and potentially Iraq, aims to stabilize the energy market and supply routes in the Middle East. As Christina Lin (2013) mentions, therefore: “there appears to be a new great game around the Greater Middle East”.



Head of Syria's Planning and International Cooperation Commission (PICC) Imad Sabouni and Chinese Ambassador to Syria Feng Biao sign an economic cooperation agreement in Damascus, Syria, on March 4, 2020. (Ammar Safarjalani/Xinhua)

As China embarks on its “look west” development through BRI, Syria’s “look east” policy seems to match with Chinese interests in the Five Seas. China’s growing footprint in the Middle East via BRI is reinforced by Syria’s vision of the Five Seas, which will also have important implications for the US, the EU, and their allies (Lin, 2013). Syria can become a key partner in China’s BRI for peaceful and harmonious development in the Mediterranean region. As Henry Kissinger states: “In the Middle East, there is no peace without Syria” (Totten, 2009). Whilst China becomes more engaged in the Middle East region, Syria is “looking east” to what it perceives as a new Pax Sinica or Chinese peace. Overall, China seems to be quietly

progressing towards economic success, thanks to the BRI strategy. Its political success will be significant in the advent of a New World Order of which China will be a part.

Russia’s Strategy: Long Term Repositioning and Access to Warm Waters

Russian interest in Syria has created a continuum of long-term strategic plans at the geoeconomic level. Through Syria, Russia enjoys an international presence alongside a range of economic and politico-strategic opportunities that will prove fruitful.

There are many direct and indirect reasons for the Russian strategy to support Syria: Strengthening the already existing Russian-Syrian alliance, preventing rising extremism, taking advantage of Syria’s strategic position, especially when it comes to securing its political and economic power in the Middle East, which represents an ideal opportunity to move closer to several powerful states in Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia (Rodkiewicz, 2017).

Russian presence in Syria allows Russia to access to the warm waters of the Mediterranean Sea⁷ as well as to initiate a geostrategic rapprochement with Syria’s neighbors.

Russia seeks to control the energy dependence of several neighboring countries and works to create and maintain an advantage over the production, transport, and distribution of resources, especially as hydrocarbons are gradually becoming the center of energy security for most states.

Syria enjoys Russian protection both within its borders and internationally. President Putin said in February 2018 that it is crucial “to help the Syrians rebuild their infrastructure, hospitals, schools, revive industry, agriculture, and

⁷ Moreover, on the Mediterranean coast of Syria, the use of a naval base in Tartous was considered as Russia’s only Mediterranean maritime window.

commerce”. The Russian reconstruction project in post-conflict Syria is presented as his version of the “Marshall Plan”. Insisting on the “humanitarian reconstruction” of Syria gives Russia a positive image as an international leader.



President of Syria Bashar al-Assad made a visit to Russia. (President of Russia website)

The Sino-Russian alliance is moving towards the multipolarity of a New World Order. The potential of their alliance cannot be overlooked. President Putin’s vision is not only a project of Russia, but it also appeals to China. Russia knows that working with China would be the ideal solution for Moscow to gain a place among the most powerful states on the international stage. Syria has presented several new opportunities for cooperation between Moscow and Beijing, before and during the war in Syria, especially as Iran (a strategic ally of China and Russia) is subject to sanctions imposed by the west, and China is caught up in a trade war with America.

For China, cooperation with Syria is seen as a way to consolidate ties with Moscow and strengthen mutual trust. There is growing economic cooperation between the two powers. Moscow and Beijing have signed several energy

accords that make Russia and Saudi Arabia rivals in the Chinese oil market. Indeed, the Sino-Russian economic partners has grown thanks to their cooperation for the resolution of the Syrian conflict. Both countries share a similar position vis-à-vis the West.

The Five Seas region and BRI could be an advantage for all parties. For China and Russia, it is more advantageous to work together in force than to work individually, to achieve shared objectives with Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Russia is keen to consolidate its position in Syria. However, this will not be possible if the country were not rebuilt. This is where China’s role is needed. China has reportedly joined with its Russian and Iranian allies to take part in future reconstruction projects and post-conflict investment opportunities in Syria.

The US as a Destabilizing Factor

Paralyzing the domestic politics of Middle Eastern countries has been a defining feature of US foreign policy since the fall of the Soviet Union. From Afghanistan to Iraq and North Africa, it is hard to name a case in which the US has contributed to regional economic development. The American administrations have spared no efforts in inflaming the Middle East, intending to occupy its space to contain China and to exhaust the Russian forces by trying to push Russia into the quagmires of new battlegrounds (Ghatrouf, 2018a). The failure of both invasions mentioned above, and the failure of Libya, Syria, and Yemen with explicit military and political support from Washington, justify the Pentagon’s decision to redeploy away from protracted conflicts in the Middle East. Acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller told US troops in a memo: “Ending wars requires compromise and partnership. We met the challenge; We gave it our all. Now it’s time to come home... To all of our Soldiers, Sail-

ors, Airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, Space Professionals, and civilians". He added that he was "weary of war" and that "this is the critical phase in which we transition our efforts from a leadership role to a supporting role. We are not a people of perpetual war – it is the antithesis of everything for which we stand and for which our ancestors fought. All wars must end" (US Secretary of Defense, 2020). After the failure of the policy of preaching to societies and reengineering them under paternalism, the US seems that, as a world pole, it could only use the weapon of sanctions or war.

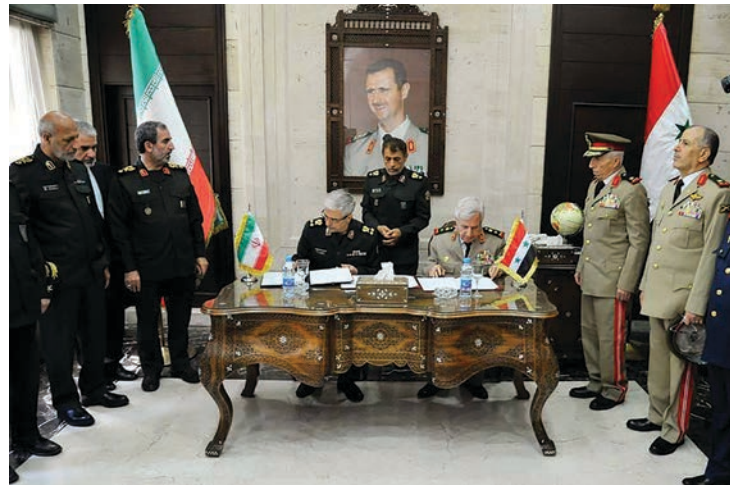
Iran: Syria As A Strategic Ally

"There is no doubt that one of the most intriguing developments in modern Middle Eastern politics has been the emergence and continuity of the Iranian-Syrian alliance since its formation in 1979" (Goodarzi, 2013a: par.1). The relationships "between Iran and Syria are quite extraordinary when one takes into consideration the volatility and shifting political sands in the Middle East" (Goodarzi, 2013b: 1).

As Jubin Goodarzi mentioned, "the alliance is of enormous importance, since both countries are situated in key locations in the Middle East, thereby contributing immensely to its geopolitical significance" (Goodarzi, 2013b)⁹. In the eyes of Syria, Iran is viewed as a strategic leader in Southwest Asia and the Gulf region.

Iran, as a close ally of Syria, is seeking with Russia and China to break the blockade and policy of containment, especially in the presence of dozens of American military bases that control the geographical space as a whole. American politician Mitt Rom-

ney has shown extraordinary candor in repeating: "Syria is Iran's only ally in the Arab world. It's their route to the sea" (The Guardian, 2012).



The visiting Iranian Chief of Staff Major General Mohammad Bagheri and Syrian Defense Minister Ali Abdullah Ayyoub sign a "comprehensive" military agreement at the Defense Ministry in the capital Damascus, on July 8, 2020. (Ammar Safarjalani/Xinhua)

***Turkey's Foreign Policy Shift From 'Zero Problems' to 'Nothing But Problems': What is Next?*¹⁰**

For years, former Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's policy of "zero problems with neighboring countries" was a flagship concept of Turkish foreign policy, boosting trade with neighbours including Syria during the 2000s. When the protests in Tunisia began and expanded, the Turkish leadership began to exploit the situation and resort to unilateralism, and preparing for war on Syria by penetrating its northern borders and turning it into a hub for terrorism. Turkey's policy in favor of increasing confrontation with neighboring countries since

⁹ Like many authors, this researcher disputes the right of Iranians to adopt their technological and economic development strategy and to have access to the Mediterranean Sea in their alliance with Syria, while the Americans expand their military bases everywhere, including in the Middle East, from Afghanistan to Djibouti, passing through the countries of the Gulf.

¹⁰ (Romano, 2020)

2011 pushed Erdogan toward a more aggressive and sectarian stance. In this period, the West became openly critical of Ankara. In 2006, “when he was asked about long-time EU applicant Turkey’s chances of joining the bloc, British Prime Minister David Cameron said that Turkey would probably not be ready to join ‘until the year 3000’ based on its current rate of progress. This gave Erdogan the perfect opportunity to react and accuse Western countries of ‘plots.’ However, the Turkish president added a new element to his ‘Western plot’ when he claimed later that the West was ‘jealous’ of Turkey and ‘of our dams, bridges, and metros” (Djavadi, 2016: par.31).

Despite the discriminatory and chauvinistic statements of some European politicians, Turkey can play an important role in the region if it adheres to the principle of regional cooperation. It is likely that Turkey will be soon forced to return to regional and international cooperation after the failure of its adventurist unilateralism, especially concerning Syria. This situation will be further accelerated by rising migratory flows and extremism in Europe, which would force Turkey to be more cooperative (English Lokmat, 2020).

The two countries, Turkey and Syria (along with Iraq and Iran), are potential partners, not only in regional security issues, but also in forg-

ing closer ties with the EU, the Balkans, Caucasus, and Arab countries.

Instead of playing on international contradictions, Turkey can be a lever in the heart of the Five Seas region, which requires to implement massive reconstruction projects not only in Syria but also in Iraq (which was not helped by the American presence for two decades) and the entire region, in cooperation with Russia and China.

The Five Seas and BRI: The Myth of the Levantine Basin Come True?

Syria, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Russia, Turkey, China, and others, can rebuild the Middle East by the means of the New Silk Road and the Five Seas. The New Silk Road lies at the heart of China’s strategy for the decades to come. This will also usher in a new era for the Middle East region, which has always been an area coveted for its strategic position and its wealth, disputed between the Eurasian empires and the maritime empires (Raimbaud, 2017).

Since the end of the Cold War (1990-1991), US neoconservatives have regarded this region as a “mission land” to be controlled in order to prevent the re-emergence of Eurasian powers. The region also constitutes a major strategic stake for China, which no longer hides its geopolitical ambitions, which extend to Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and Iran. As a “geopolitical hub”, the region allows China access to key regions, such as the “fertile crescent” or the Persian Gulf, and to limit access to rivals.

From the point of view of US rivals, the region is viewed as a strategic area to be conquered,

Turkey can be a lever in the heart of the Five Seas region, which requires to implement massive reconstruction projects not only in Syria but also in Iraq and the entire region, in cooperation with Russia and China.

For the rest of the world, China's peaceful development can be seen in a positive light as long as BRI and the BRICS grouping pursue win-win cooperation.

controlled, or unraveled. This being said, the New Silk Road envisions a "green belt" in this region. It seems that the Chinese dream is already underway (Marxist, n.d.)¹¹. For the rest of the world, China's peaceful development can be seen in a positive light (Peyrefitte, 1973, 1997) as long as BRI and the BRICS grouping pursue win-win cooperation.

The five countries constituting the core of the Middle East (Iran, Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon) are interested in being part of BRI. Indeed, Syria will have a special place in BRI. Beijing has been involved in the settlement of the war in Syria since October 2011 and has appointed a special representative in 2016. However, peace can only be restored if foreign countries respect Syria's domestic laws and national sovereignty. Reconstruction cannot be conceived in the classic pattern: a pool of donors, emanating from the West, and Syria at the mercy of the "benefactors" who destroyed it.

Still, BRI can help rebuilding efforts for Syria's devastated economy on a new basis, protecting it from external threats. BRI will provide Syria with a more stable environment, with South-West Asia being structured around two corridors (with major roles in particular for Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon), whether it is the rail corridor and motorway (going from Urumqi as the largest city in western China to coastal towns

in the Middle East) or sea routes leading to the Mediterranean via Suez (Raimbaud, 2017).

Despite Syria's economic weaknesses and the hostility of the US, Syria, through its alliance with Russia and Iran, has been able to revive Damascus' political influence in recent years. Syria faces an uphill struggle for its economic strategy but as Iraq's formidable energy resources come into play, this will enhance his vision.

Based on the current alliance between Syria, Russia, and Iran, and a relative understanding with Iraq, Syria is still able to use its geographical position to facilitate the flow of natural gas from Iraq to Europe as its only outlet on the Mediterranean, adding to the possibility of Iranian gas passing through the same pipelines. One should also keep in mind the potential oil and gas capacity on the northern side of the Syrian coast.

There is no impossibility in politics. One should take into account the possibility of restoring Syria's relations with Saudi Arabia and Turkey in favor of a more prosperous Middle East that has overcome its problems of instability.

Ironically, the Trump-led US is giving up its role as the world leader and the champion of free trade and environmental protection, while China has taken over this role. Prolonged by relentless-ness, the Syrian tragedy has dispelled the West's pretenses and exposed its most devious strategies. But the worst of all has been to whitewash terrorism on the part of Western states. As Bruno Guigue wonders: "How can we resist the nausea in front of the viscosity of these politicians who,

¹¹ As Mao Tse-tung argues: "Therefore, to overtake the United States is not only possible, but absolutely necessary and obligatory. If we don't, the Chinese nation will be letting the nations of the world down and we will not be making much of a contribution to mankind" (Marxist, n.d.).

with each attack on European soil, are poured out in indignant condemnations of terrorist violence which they have fed and praised elsewhere?" (Guigue, 2020). The war on Syria has been, from the outset, a large-scale international conflict in which a rival coalition has formed (Ghatrouf, 2018b). The distinctions between "rebels", "democrats", "moderates", "seculars", "Islamists" or "jihadists" are but superficial divides promoted by Western powers and their allies. By now, everyone understands that the reality of the Syrian conflict, for the past ten years, has been the struggle between state-sponsored terrorist conglomerates and a national army that defends its country against foreign invasion. But it has also spread its miasma to the four corners of the globe, coming back like a boomerang (Guigue, 2020).

The great crisis in the Middle East can also be a great opportunity. "At the same time, there are very hopeful developments led by China and BRICS countries. It is very difficult to predict the course of the current conflicts. One thing is for certain, though: shared development is the only way to bring peace to the Middle East, and a lasting solution can only be reached through the concept of 'Peace Through Development', as the German political activist Helga Zepp-LaRouche stresses" (Hartmann, 2015: 5). This idea has already been put on the international agenda, especially with recent events in Europe, as they relate to migratory flows to several European countries and terrorist acts in France and Austria.

In this "wasted decade" (i.e. 2010-2020), Western behavior towards Syria has failed in terms of ensuring security and development. If the West desires a more peaceful and democratic Middle East, it should develop friendly relations with Syria (Phillips, 2010a) so that the West can well join the reconstruction efforts in Syria and in other countries in the region.

Conclusion

The war on Syria, which has lasted for more than 9 years, has revealed the true face of the international and regional actors involved in this conflict. It has changed the geopolitical configuration of the Middle East as well as the entire World Order. Since the problems in the Middle East are of a collective nature, any constructive solution requires cooperation. "As ever, it seems the Middle East could prove a microcosm of international changes for the better. As the age of American unipolarity is coming to an end, perhaps hastened by unnecessary wars and economic shortsightedness, it is much more likely that international relations in the Middle East will come to reflect the multipolarization of world politics. In such circumstance, regional countries will not be the only powers who will assume a key role in global change. Emerging economies such as China, India, and Brazil will all bid for a leading role, too" (Phillips, 2010b: par.10)

Each regional country would assume a stabilizing role. "A cessation of the ongoing extremism and violence, and eventual political reconciliation, including the reintegration of vital state institutions, would improve the operational environment for facilitating the reconstruction of the economy of regional states and the rebuilding of social cohesion" (Cordesman, 2020: 34). This means that regional countries would shift their alliances and move from the current state of engagement into a forthcoming state of partnership and cooperation. "The question for western states is whether their antagonistic approach towards Syria has achieved any long-term gains. After a decade of dithering, the region is no more stable than it was in 2010. The last 10 years show that western policies of bullying, threatening, and ignoring Syria have failed. Full engagement on an equal footing would seem the best way to avoid wasting another decade" (Phillips, 2010: par.10). 

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