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China, Iran and Russia and Their Political Rivalry Over Syrian Reconstruction

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Abstrac

With the West, the Gulf States and Turkey set to play a minimal role in the reconstruction of postwar Syria, whilst Russia, China and Iran are the three actors set to potentially be the major players in the rebuild. This grouping has drawn past descriptions ranging from an anti-West axis to a superficial marriage of convenience, dependent on short term interests and context. Accordingly, it is important to consider this grouping in the Syrian context, and deliberate how the Sino-Iranian-Russian leadership of the Syria reconstruction may unfold, as this has clear implications not just for the fate of postwar Syria, but also may be illustrative of future comparable instances of reconstruction or development as US global leadership on such matters declines and within such understanding the significance of research evolves. Given this, this paper will try to unpack such problems and complexities by addressing following key objective in terms of to delineate the impending roles and interests of each of the three players. Accordingly, the research should be addressing the questions of: how these roles and interests may come into competition and tension with each other? and analyzing how aspects of these roles and interests may be mutually supportive and provide opportunities for collaboration? The paper hypothesizes that the nature and the outcomes of interests of these states are very much conditioned by the continuing pattern of influence and presence of these states and Russian one in particular. In order to finally seek to attain such objective the paper will try to foresee the balancing these areas of potential competition and collaboration alongside a consideration of the regional foreign policy mindsets of each player to attempt to forecast the trajectory of the joint China-Iran-Russia presence in postwar Syria. Through descriptive analytical approach the paper concludes – which coincides with research hypothesis - with the position that, while each player has strong areas of competition with each other, Russia's need for Chinese economic leadership and China's need for Russia's political and security leadership, combined with Beijing and Moscow having some conducive regional goals and policy mindsets, make China and Russia likely close partners through the reconstruction. However, Iran, due to ongoing spoiler role and dogged pursuit of security interests in Syria that induce instability, make it a potentially inconvenient partner for China and Russia, meaning Tehran may be distanced by Beijing and Moscow.

Keywords: Political Rivalry, Reconstruction, Conflict of Interests, Economic Collaboration Political Reconciliation.

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ملخص

تقوم دول الخليج وتركيا بالإضافة إلى الغرب بلعب دور بسيط في إعادة إعمار سوريا في فترة ما بعد الحرب، في حين أن روسيا والصين وإيران هي الجهات الفاعلة الثلاثة التي من المنتظر أن يكونوا اللاعبين الرئيسيين في عملية إعادة البناء. لقد جمعت هذه المجموعة صفاتاً مشتركة، تمتد من محور معادٍ للغرب إلى زواج مصطنع يعتمد على مصالح قصيرة الأجل. وبناءً على ذلك، من المهم – كهدف رئيس للدراسة – أن نحاول أن نقرأ كيف لهذه التجاذبات والتقاطعات في المصالح أن تأثر ليس في صياغة عملية شكل إعادة الإعمار ولكن والأهم في فهم تأثير ثقل هذه التجاذبات والمصالح في تمكين بعض الدول في الاستمرار والتأثير. وتكمن أهمية هذا المنحنى من التحليل ليس لفهم مصير سوريا بعد الحرب بحد ذاته، بقدر محاولة فهمنا انعكاس تلك التجاذبات والتناقضات في الأدوار والمصالح على دور دول هامة أخرى ومن أهمها الدور القيادي للولايات المتحدة خاصة مع الاضمحلال التدريجي الظاهر في دورها في هذا السياق. سيحاول البحث التصدي لمشكلة البحث والأسئلة المنبثقة منها من خلال:

أولاً، ماهية الأدوار والاهتمامات القادمة لكل من اللاعبين الثلاثة؟ وثانياً، النظر في كيف هذه الأدوار والمصالح تتنافس فيما بينها؟ وثالثًا، تحليل كيف لهذه الأدوار والمصالح أن تتلاقى وتبحث عن سبل للتعاون فيما بينها؟ وأخيراً، الموازنة بين مجالات التنافس والتعاون المحتملة مع مراعاة طرق التفكير في السياسة الخارجية إقليمياً لكل لاعب في محاولة إيجاد التنسيق المستقبلي بين الصين وإيران وروسيا في سوريا ما بعد الحرب. وتفترض هذه الدراسة أن مصالح هذه الدول وديمومتها مقرونه ومشروطة بشكل كبير بديمومة وتواجد قوى العظمى وروسيا بالتحديد.

يختتم البحث باعتماده المنهاج الوصفي بشكل كبير– بموقف مفاده أنه كل لاعب لديه مجالات قوية للمنافسة، ولكن – بما يتوافق مع فرضية الدراسة– يبدو التوافق الروسي – الصيني أوثق على المدى البعيد. فهناك حاجة روسيا إلى القيادة الاقتصادية الصينية وحاجة الصين إلى القيادة السياسية والأمنية لروسيا، إلى جانب وجود بعض الأهداف الإقليمية والتوافق السياسي الذهني بين بكين وموسكو، والذي سيجعل الصين وروسيا شريكين مقربين على الأرجح من خلال إعادة الإعمار. بالتوازي مع ذلك، فإن إيران، وبسبب دورها المعطل المستمر بسعيها الحثيث لتحقيق مصالح أمنية ضيقة في سوريا والتي بالتالي ستحرض على عدم الاستقرار ليجعل من نجاح التوافق المشروع الصيني الروسي أكثر صعوبة، وبالتالي ستجعل من نفسها شريكًا غير مريح للصين وروسيا، مما قد يعني أن طهران قد تُستبعد من قبل بكين وموسكو.

Introduction

The past eight years of war in Syria has left an estimated reconstruction cost of between $250-400 billion.(1) Syria itself has essentially no capacity to fill any of this deficit: its public debt increased from 30% to 150% of GDP by 2015 and the deposits in its state and private banks fell from $13.8 to $3.5 billion from 2010-2016.(2) As such, it will be left to external powers to step in and drive the reconstruction. However, a key difference between the postwar investment outlook of Syria and that of Iraq post-2003 is that Syria has less natural resources to attract the sort of investment that Iraq did. Accordingly, the reconstruction in Syria is set to be filled by actors with broader regional strategic aims that incorporate Syria, to accompany any commercial interests in the rebuilding opportunity. With uncertainty over the Gulf states' engagement in a reconstruction process that involves Bashar al-Assad,(3) Turkey's economy leaving it with negligible capacity to be involved,(4) and the US and EU refusing to deal with the Assad regime absent of a multilaterally-facilitated political process which encompasses genuine opposition representation,(5) something unlikely to occur soon, this leaves Iran, Russia and China as the main players set to drive the reconstruction.

None of these three actors are new to the scene in Syria. Building on its traditional alliance with Syria, Iran has provided military and financial assistance to the Assad regime throughout the War. The cost of this assistance to Iran has been estimated at $16 billion by the US State Department and $48 billion by a senior advisor to the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamanei.(6) This is in addition to the $7.6 billion in loans provided by Tehran to Syria during the conflict.(7) Russia's engagement has likewise been extensive and costly. Since it intervened in Syria on the side of Assad in September 2015Russia has likely spent between $2.5-4.5 billion on its presence. This assistance has been crucial for the survival of the Assad regime. Russia's intervention led to the Russian-backed Syrian Armed Forces winning back Aleppo, Syria's second largest city, at the end of 2016, turning the tide of the War and leading to the current status quo of Assad looking likely to remain in power into the future. Unlike Iran, Russia's assistance didn't also focus on aid and public investment, instead targeting private sector involvement in Syria. Alongside Turkey, in January 2017 Russia and Iran initiated and have since led the Astana process – apolitical

(1) (Hodali, 2019).
(2) (World Bank, 2017); (Cochrane, 2017).
(3) (Cochrane, 2017); (Al Jazeera, 2019).
(4) (Devranoglu, 2019).
(5) (Calamur, 2019).
(6) (Hatahet, 2019, p. 3).
(7) (Middle East Monitor, 2019) ;(Matveev, 2019a).

dialogue that has aspired to fill the void vacated by the failures of the UN-led Geneva peace talks – which was designed to display and facilitate political reconciliation between the Assad regime and the opposition, but with this opposition instead being constituted of those who are most aligned with the interests of the regime. China is the comparative newcomer when it comes to on-the-ground involvement in the Syrian situation. While it deployed special forces to Syria in late 2017 to combat the growing Uighur militant presence,(1) Beijing's primary role during the War has been to provide diplomatic support for the Assad regime and to consistently exercise China's veto on United Nations Security Council resolutions which would undermine Assad.

China, Iran and Russia in recent years have all developed well-publicized closer bilateral relationships with each other. Assertions have been made pointing to the emergence of a trilateral anti-West axis,(2) a Sino-Russian "pseudo-alliance,"(3) and the foundations having been laid for a military alliance between Beijing and Moscow.[4]However, others have also pointed out the fissures in this trilateral grouping defined by conflicting economic practices and interests often undercutting the seemingly close geopolitical alignment.(5) Similarly, China's partnerships with Iran and Russia are often defined by apparently close relations on the macro level, but cracks and sources of tension appearing at the granular level.(6) In terms of the Russia-Iran relationship, it has been raised that while both have numerous strongly aligned interests, Moscow and Tehran lack the foundations of a deep enduring partnership.(7) Given the complicated nature of this emerging partnership between these three powers, how then should we interpret these three states' leadership of the impending Syrian reconstruction process?

To answer the question, this paper proceeds as follows. Section one delineates the impending roles and activities of Iran, Russia and China in the reconstruction, discussing the specific political, security and commercial interests and projects each player is set to partake in. Section two then discusses the areas in which these respective interests and projects are set to come into competition with each other, and the likely intensity of this competition. Section three analyses the flip side, discussing the areas in which the respective interests and projects of each player may be mutually supportive, with

(1) (Lyall, 2019).
(2) (Brands, 2019).
(3) (Baev, 2018).
(4) (Korolev, 2018).
(5) (Pantucci, 2019).
(6) (Lyall, 2017c); (Wuthnow, 2016); (Lyall, 2017b) ;(Lyall, 2017a).
(7) (Therme, 2018).

opportunities for collaboration. Section four then weighs up these areas of potential competition versus collaboration and considers how the balance between the two as well as the main regional foreign policy paradigms and aims of each player point towards the potential future direction of the China-Russia-Iran leadership of the reconstruction.

The impending roles and aims of each player in the rebuilding Russia

When Moscow first intervened in the War in September 2015 its interests in Syria were largely threats-based,(1) namely pushing through the Western isolation of Russia, defeating the terrorist threat which was deemed to have the potential to metastasise and spread to Russia, and ensuring the preservation of the Assad regime which was crucial to Russian regional security interests, especially regarding maintaining access to the Tartus naval base.(2) By 2018, the Assad regime had consolidated its continuity leading into the post-war era, terrorist groups in Syria lacked substantial power, and Russia had positioned itself as the subregional security and diplomatic powerbroker, meaning the threats that had inspired Moscow's initial intervention had largely been ameliorated. Accordingly, it has been argued that Russia has transitioned its presence in Syria, and indeed the wider region, from a threats-based to an opportunities-based one.(3)

The abovementioned transition, and Moscow's designs to capitalise on its increased global diplomatic standing, is illustrated by the key initiatives Russia embarked on in Syria in 2018: the return of refugees, the launch of the Constitutional Committee (a 50-member body to be split equally between representatives of the Syrian government, the Syrian opposition and Syrian civil society), and relegitimization of the Assad government. This latter initiative is going hand in hand with Moscow's pursuit of funds to facilitate the Syrian reconstruction. In order for the Constitutional Committee to get off the ground, Moscow will need to sustain significant contact with opposition groups and local councils. The promotion of the Committee is part of Russia's attempts to achieve a base level of order in Syria as well providing at least the appearance of a Moscow-facilitated political resolution process, something expected of a regional powerbroker.(4) A further imperative process for Moscow in order for the achievement of a base level of order is the creation of a refashioned Syrian

(1) (Suchkov, 2019).
(2) (Kirmanj&Sadq, 2018, pp. 168,169).
(3) (Suchkov, 2019).
(4) (Mardasov, 2018).

military that integrates former rebel units and the Syrian Democratic Forces.(1) The key accompanying process here involves the Moscow-facilitated disbandment of ostensibly regime-loyal factions including numerous local militias(2) and the National Defence Forces – largely the creation and proxies of Iran and Hezbollah(3) – who have started acting too much of their own accord, even targeting regime forces.(4)

In order for the successful return of refugees, Russia will need to increase engagement with the primary refugee host nations of Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan.(5) Moscow has recognised the opportunity that refugee return represents for renewing the resources and strength of the Assad regime, as refugee return has occurred overwhelmingly in government-controlled areas,(6) with the ensuing humanitarian aid and reconstruction assistance primed to follow thus likely being destined for government territory.(7) The pursuit of financing for the Syrian reconstruction in order to enable the rehabilitation of the Assad regime has seen pushes for Gulf, EU, French, and German funds, so far with no progress.(8) Further to these avenues designed by Moscow to exploit its leadership position, Russia is also beginning to pursue substantial commercial interests in Syria to both recoup the costs of its military intervention and to provide opportunities for Russian industry. If Russian industry is able to stake out a leading position in the Syrian reconstruction, then Russian businesses will be in prime position to access any inflow of foreign capital into Syria, thus affording them hard currency(9) - something that has been in decreased supply following recent US sanctions.

Russia's main commercial interests in Syria include energy, construction projects, transport infrastructure, agricultural exports and arms sales.(10) Russia has secured contracts and advance deals in these sectors, and others, indicative of the preferential treatment being afforded to it by Damascus as a result of Russian military support. Indeed, Moscow is beginning to push for its economic presence in Syria to be raised to a comparable level to its security and political presence.(11) The energy and construction sectors are where Russia is looming

(1) (Mardasov, 2018).
(2) (Therme, 2018, p. 561).
(3) (Lund, 2015).
(4) (Euphrates Post, 2018).
(5) (Suchkov, 2019).
(6) (UNHCR, 2018).
(7) (Al-Monitor, 2018).
(8) (Ramani, 2019).
(9) (Ramani, 2019).
(10) (Suchkov, 2019); (Ramani, 2019).
(11) (Matveev, 2019b).

as the key player in the reconstruction process. Russian companies signed advance deals in March 2018 for the construction of a rail line linking Damascus Airport to downtown Damascus, in addition to deals for numerous industrial plants that are aimed to drive Syria's future development.([1]) Regarding energy, Moscow signed an agreement with Damascus in January 2018 giving it sole gas and oil extraction rights in territory under Assad's control,([2]) with this being followed in October 2018 by an announcement that Russia had signed a "roadmap" with Syria concerning the "restoration of oil fields and the development of new deposits."([3]) The key dynamic here relates to the majority of Syria's oil reserves being located in the Kurdish-controlled Syrian northeast, meaning that Moscow is pushing for the Syrian Kurds to accept Assad's rule.([4]) Outside of hydrocarbons, Russian firms have also secured advance deals for power generation projects in Homs.([5])

Iran:

Like Russia, Iran has emphasised the need to establish itself as a key actor in the Syrian reconstruction in order to recoup the costs it shouldered from its military intervention on the side of the Assad regime.([6]) In pursuit of this aim, Iran secured the right to operate the phosphate mines in Sharqiyain January 2017,([7]) while in September 2018 they reached an agreement with Damascus to open construction material plants.[8] The signing of an accord in October 2018 with Syria to construct an energy plant in the port of Latakia([9]) was accompanied by Iran securing a partial lease of the port,[10]and later followed by an agreement awarding projects concerning the rehabilitation of the port of Tartus to Iranian firms.([11]) These were notable developments as they are indicative of the growing interests Tehran has regarding establishing a greater presence on the Syrian coast,([12]) driven in so small part by the desire to sell hydrocarbons and other goods to Europe through the Iraq-Syria transport corridor.([13])

(1) (Ramani, 2019).
(2) (Katona, 2018).
(3) (RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 2018).
(4) (The New Arab, 2019).
(5) (Hille, Foy & Seddon, 2018).
(6) (Asriran, 2018).
(7) (eNCA, 2017)
(8) (Matveev, 2019b).
(9) (Presstv, 2018).
(10) (Matveev, 2019a).
(11) (Chinadaily, 2019).
(12) (Matveev, 2019a).
(13) (Moubayed, 2019).

Iran's economic push into Syria escalated in January 2019, when First Vice President EshawJahangiri headed a senior economic delegation that resulted in a "strategic long-term economic cooperation agreement" in addition to ten agreements – focusing on industry, trade and agriculture – and memoranda of understanding (MOUs) – focussing on education, investment, railways, housing and public services – being signed.([1]) While Iran also reportedly has secured agreements for projects in the Syrian oil and agriculture sectors, these agreements and the various MOU's are so far very light on details and should be viewed more as symbolic rather than confirmation of a consolidated Iranian economic presence in Syria, as evidenced by Iran already defaulting on some previous agreements and other agreements being walked back on.([2])

While the details and future of Iran's economic interests in Syria are uncertain, what is certain is the ongoing priority Syria holds for Tehran's security interests in the eyes of some in the upper echelons of the Iranian regime.([3]) Despite the fast diminishing need for Iranian-formed or backed militias to suppress anti-regime forces in Syria, Tehran is not planning to wind down its security presence– the aim being to establish Syria as a security buffer and source of strategic depth vis-à-vis Israel, and also to consolidate a strategic bridge to Hezbollah in Lebanon.([4])

China:

China's presence and interests in Syria are overwhelmingly commercial. Indeed, outside of Beijing's security interests in eliminating the Uighur militant presence in Syria – a threat deemed to have the potential to resurface in China, but a threat that hasnow beenlargely eliminated – the remainder of China's security focus in Syria only exists in so much as to enable the stability necessary for Chinese companies to take root, and investments flourish.[5] But, outside of limited Chinese special forces intervention against Uighur militants in Syria, this focus is not defined by a security presence, with Beijing instead leaning on other powers to establish the requisite security necessary for reconstruction to take place.

(1) (Fvpresident.ir, 2019); (Bizar, 2019).
(2) (Hatahet, 2019, p. 4); (Bizar, 2019).
(3) (Bizar, 2019).
(4) (Al-Monitor, 2019); (Matveev, 2019a).
(5) (De Stone &Suber, 2019).

The commercial interests of China in Syria pertain to dominating energy and transport infrastructure development, localizing industries like Chinese automobiles, and opening the Syrian consumer market to Chinese goods.([1]) The broad, more important, overarching goal for Beijing is to develop Syria as a key conduit for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), connecting the economic corridor that will run through Iran and Iraq to the Mediterranean. The motivation to facilitate the spread of China's BRI designs in the Middle East saw $23 billion in loans and aid being pledged by Xi Jinping for the Arab region at the China Arab States Cooperation Forum in July 2018. However, it's unclear just how much of this $23 billion will go to Syria, aside from an allocated $10 million for humanitarian efforts regarding refugee return.([2]) In terms of Chinese funds dedicated specifically to Syria, Beijing hosted the First Trade Fair on Syrian Reconstruction Projects in 2017, where China committed $2 billon towards rebuilding Syrian infrastructure.([3]) This was followed by more than 200 Chinese companies, largely state-owned, attending the 60th Damascus International Trade Fair in September 2018 – which led to China pledging deals in car manufacturing, civil infrastructure, and steel and power plants.([4]) Aside from this, Chinese funds have also been pledged to support a Tripoli-Homs railway,([5]) funded in part by the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and potentially also by Chinese state-owned banks. Furthermore, Chinese business delegations to Syria in recent years have led to numerous contracts being signed or in the pipeline, and representative offices have been prepared for opening.([6])

Areas of competition

Economic

While China has been content with the status quo of Russia furthering its global status by being the security powerbroker in Syria, when this aim is fulfilled and Moscow's interests pivot more towards commercial interests, Beijing's calculus towards Russia's presence may change. In a similar vein, while Iran and Russia entered the Syrian foray as strategic partners, developments like Moscow beating Tehran in February 2018 for a long-term deal in Syria's phosphate industry, and accusations from the Syrian real estate industry that Russia has worked to undercut Iranian involvement in construction projects in southern Damascus, have jeopardized the further improvement of

(1) (Matveev, 2019a).
(2) (Pauley & Marks, 2018).
(3) (Zhen, 2018).
(4) (Pauley, 2018).
(5) (Lyall, 2019).
(6) (Zhou, 2017).

this strategic partnership.([1]) These grievances, and wider complaints from figures high in the Iranian regime and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps,([2]) point to the potential for increased tensions once joint Russian-Iranian military operations cease. The Astana process is currently ensuring disagreements between Tehran and Moscow are somewhat able to dealt with in an orderly fashion. But once, or if, this process achieves its objective and winds down, the lack of a framework to smooth over differences and inspire coordination could prove problematic for a sustainable joint Russian and Iranian presence in Syria.

A similar, but likely less tense, eventuality could occur between Moscow and Beijing once Russia pivots more comprehensively from its security to commercial focus. For instance, Russia has consolidated a grip on Syria's hydrocarbon sector and is securing numerous construction and infrastructure contracts. Russia's position in these areas, all fields in which China is also looking to consolidate a leading position, is illustrative of the leading position offered to it by Damascus in the reconstruction process. However, the strength of the economic competition between China the two other reconstruction powers may be kept to a wholly manageable level due to the fact that China is the only actor of the three that has the money to actually implement the various reconstruction projects. As such, both Iran and Russia may turn to China as the source of funding for their involvement in the reconstruction, meaning the reconstruction playing field may unfold largely according to China's designs, and not be ferociously competitive.

Strategic/security:

While the enduring prominence of the Astana process may give the appearance to some that Tehran and Moscow are strong partners in Syria, able to reconcile any disagreements amicably, the Astana process could easily be painted more as a marriage of necessity or convenience. It should not be assumed that the importance of Tehran and Moscow's relationship in Syria will be enough to smooth over the clashing security, and to a lesser degree commercial, interests that are beginning to escalate.

The prime emerging clash here relates to Russia's desires to decrease Iran's proliferating security presence in Syria. While Iranian bases and military ties in and with Syria are acceptable to Moscow, Tehran's push to proliferate Iranian militias throughout Syria is not so.([3]) Concerning the aim of Russia

(1) (Ramani, 2019).
(2) (Faghihi, 2018).
(3) (Al-Monitor, 2019).

outlined in section one of rebuilding the Syrian military by integrating pro-regime factions and marginalising pro-Iranian factions, this has resulted in direct confrontations between Russian troops and Iranian-aligned militant groups like the 4th Division.([1])

A further aspect of the increasingly tense security balance between Russia and Iran in Syria is Iran's push to consolidate a presence on the Syrian coast. Russia's goal is to consolidate itself as the sole foreign military power on the Syrian coast –facilitated through its air base in Khmeimim and its naval base in Tartus.([2]) While Iran's October 2018 partial lease of Syria's Latakia port is only permitted for economic purposes, the concern for Moscow is that 'strategic creep' may occur, with Iranian security elements appearing and potentially exposing Russian assets or installations to Israeli attacks.([3]) In a similar vein, the Israeli air strikes targeting Iranian proxies in Syria – which have occurred throughout the War but have escalated since December 2018 –are now pressuring Moscow to restrict Iran's presence in the country.([4])

Russia's emerging relationship with Israel is pointing to the likelihood that Moscow will be sympathetic to, or at least show latitude to, such Israeli strikes against Iranian elements in Syria. The January 2019 statement([5]) by Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Ryabkov, where he indicated his discomfort with describing Iran as an ally and also emphasised Russia's understanding of the need to protect Israel's security points to the emerging tensions in Russia's political and security relationship with Iran in Syria. This Russia-Israel dynamic even led to Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh, the chair of Iran's parliamentary foreign policy commission, asserting that the Israel Defence Forces may be coordinating with Russian air defence systems.([6]) Some have even suggested that, from Iran's perspective, Russia has "changed from a strategic ally to another regional player, "with the assertion being that although Tehran and Moscow cooperate and coordinate closely when it comes to eliminating anti-regime forces in Syria, when it comes to the question of Israel the relationship is far less amicable.([7])

While China's commercial interests are not without direct competition with those of Iran and Russia's, perhaps the key difficulty for China will be navigating the often conflicting strategic and security aims of Moscow and

(1) (Haj Ahmed, 2018); (Alsouria, 2019).
(2) (Moubayed, 2019).
(3) (Matveev, 2019a).
(4) (Matveev, 2019a).
(5) (Orient Net, 2019).
(6) (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2019).
(7) (Najmuddine, 2018).

Tehran as China goes about consolidating its more commercially-centered interests within the broader BRI vision, with these commercial interests requiring stability and security in order to flourish. For instance, as Iran looks to consolidate its increased influence in Syria gained during the conflict and further establish Syria as a provider of strategic depth vis-à-vis Israel, China will need to navigate the likely insecurity of being proximate to an ongoing Israel-Iran standoff. Tehran's ambitions here will likely irritate Beijing, who, despite having close relations with Iran, is also building strong economic relations with Israel. Additionally, due to its strong relationship with Assad, Beijing is likely – in so much as its traditional stance of remaining aloof from security disagreements allows it to – to come down on the side of Russia in Moscow's push to rebuild the Syrian military at the expense of the parallel army of Iranian and Hezbollah-formed militias.

Avenues for collaboration

While China has pledged funds and agreed to multiple reconstruction deals with Syria, Chinese industry is currently waiting on the sidelines for the situation in Syria to stabilise before Chinese firms begin considering starting operations.([1]) If China invests in reconstruction before a political settlement and enduring stability is found, the underlying fractures that will remain will likely return to jeopardise the future of China's investments. Accordingly, due to Beijing's traditional non-interference paradigm in the affairs of other states, China is left largely looking at Russia as the main actor to facilitate such a settlement and stability. Indeed, the main tenets of Russia's current proactive, in comparison to China, political involvement in Syria are pillars largely synonymous with Beijing's interests, and efforts that China could fall in behind quite happily. For instance, Moscow's focus on launching the Syrian constitutional committee is something that would seem to resonate with China's traditional 'quasi-mediation strategy', where China historically pushes for participatory engagement between parties concerning political and economic, not security, considerations as a means to resolve conflict situations.([2]) Furthermore, Russia's focus on the return of Syrian refugees is also something Beijing has pledged funds towards, and Moscow's push to relegitimize the Assad government is likewise aligned with Beijing's enduring support for the regime.

(1) (De Stone &Suber, 2019).
(2) (Sun &Zoubir, 2017).

While Russia is taking the lead in terms of engaging Syria's security and political issues, something that will benefit China if successful, China will need to take the lead in engaging Syria's economic needs due to Russian industry's lack of comparative liquidity. This Chinese leadership, perhaps dominance, of the commercial aspects of reconstruction is something that, although giving rise to instances of competition between both nations' commercial interests, could in the long run give Russian industry larger returns than it would have achieved otherwise. For instance, Russia is eyeing up the modernisation of Syrian transport infrastructure as an avenue through which to escalate the profits Russia generates from its extraction of Syrian oil, gas, phosphates and other mineral resources.([1]) While there are plans for Russian-constructed transport infrastructure, the comparative advantage in transport infrastructure clearly lies with China. Beijing's leadership of remediating Syria's transport infrastructure deficit could thus directly serve Russia's greater interests in Syria's natural resources. While Russian policymakers are apprehensive at Russian industry being outcompeted by Chinese counterparts,([2]) Russia's lack of material resources to commit to reconstruction may well push it to accept that ceding ground to China is essential if Russia is to benefit commercially to any great extent. For instance, the extension of a Chinese line of credit to Syria could be the economic lifeline that makes the capital available necessary for Russian firms to follow through on the preferential contracts and agreements it is currently securing.([3])

While Russia's transition to give its commercial interests in Syria equal focus to its security interests is bringing it into more direct competition with Chinese interests in the country, the interpretation of what difficulties this will or won't pose for the Sino-Russian relationship in Syria should be construed by appreciating the situation within the regional context for both nations. Syria in and of itself is not critical to Beijing from an economic perspective – its importance instead lies in its position as a central conduit for China's regional BRI hopes as well as Beijing's desires to establish its image as the leader of regional development.([4]) However, this all requires a region with a certain level of securityand stability. If Russia can make gains in moving Syria towards an acceptable level of security – a key pillar of its central desire to establish itself as a regional security guarantor – then this would be of far greater interest to Beijing than individual contracts in Syria, meaning Beijing may be open to extending a certain amount of economic largesse in return to Russian entities in Syria. Indeed, while Russia has substantial interests in benefiting commercially

(1) (Matveev, 2019a).
(2) (Karam, 2018).
(3) (Ramani, 2019).
(4) (Suchkov, 2018).

from establishing a major stake in the reconstruction, the greater interest of Moscow is in an Assad regime that becomes consolidated and legitimised for the long term – the size of Russia's stake in the ensuing rebuild being of less importance. A legitimised Assad regime will be very difficult to achieve absent of funds flowing into Syria to facilitate the reconstruction. Therefore, finding these funds is the primary interest of Moscow, no matter their origin, evidenced by Moscow courting the US, France and Germany for investment funding.([1]) As such, China's potential economic dominance of the reconstruction process may well not be a crippling source of tension.

A final aspect of synergy potentially heralding continuity of a cooperative Sino-Russian relationship in Syria relates to the lingering number of Uighur extremists in Syria as well as extremist nationals from Russia or post-Soviet republics.([2]) While the number of these extremists has shrunk, the domestic radicalisation issue this poses for China and Russia has not disappeared,[3] with the perceived unacceptable threat this poses for even a small amount of domestic instability meaning both Moscow and Beijing are set to be collaborators on this problem into the near future.

Interpreting the joint Iran-Russia-China presence

	Russia	**Iran**	**China**
Prime interests	A secure Syria to consolidate Russia's regional position as a powerbroker and to support expansion of Russian commercial interests	Consolidation of Syria as a source of strategic depth vis-à-vis Israel and as a land bridge to Hezbollah in Lebanon, combined with pursuing rare commercial opportunities to prop up the struggling Iranian economy	Seeing Syria become a stable conduit for the BRI economic corridor that runs through the Middle East to the Mediterranean, combined with strengthening China's image as the key global provider of development
Type of presence	Primarily a security presence, with strong foundations set to expand an economic presence when the money becomes	Primarily a security presence, with agreements in place to expand a commercial presence, but these	Implicit support for Russia's security andpolitical reconciliation efforts, and laying the foundations for a

(Ramani, 2019).[1]
(Apostrophe, 2017); (Blanchard, 2018).[2]
(Suchkov, 2018).[3]

	Russia	Iran	China
	available	agreements resting on less firm foundations, both in terms of financing and implementation ability	leading economic presence
Desired status quo in Syria	Order and stability – defined by at least a rudimentary political resolution accompanied by integration of various domestic military and economic powerbrokers and factions under the umbrella of the Assad regime	Some maintenance of factions and proxies, especially in the military, to enable the fragmentation necessary for Iran to consolidate its security presence and influence in the absence of a fully autonomous Syrian state	A stable and secure Syria under the rule of a unified regime – absent of instability-causing factors like factions and non-regime powerbrokers – to enable the advent and expansion of China's economic development of the country
What they need the most to pursue their aims	Finances – both concerning the Syrian government accessing the credit necessary to commission Russian contracts as well as for the overall funding the Assad regime needs to establish its legitimacy	Sustenance of their military presence and influence	An acceptable level of security and a strong Assad government

The guiding force of China's foreign policy aims and practices is the concept of China's "new type of international relations."Here, Beijing is aiming to increase its international leadership by enhancing international security through enhancing global economic integration. Amongst others, a key aspect of the new type of international relationsis the renewal of China's New Security Concept, whereby China is looking to deepen bilateral relations with all states and avoid international relations driven by alliances and security blocs as Beijing views this as zero-sum and a cause of tension and insecurity.([1])

(1) (Centre for Strategic and International Studies / Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2008, pp. 1,2); (Li &Zhangxi, 2018); (Pham, 2018).

Reflecting ancient Chinese thought of "harmony in diversity," the focus on inclusivity and building bilateral relationships with all is believed by Beijing to be the best means of consolidating stability,([1]) with the BRI being the vehicle through which this new type of international relations is primarily being pursued. This avoidance of zero-sum security contexts and blocs is something clearly antithetical to Iran's anti-Sunni approach in the Middle East, but Syria especially. One of the key driving forces behind Iran's intervention in Syria in support of Assad is to prevent the emergence of a Sunni-axis that may be able to emerge around Iran in the case of the overthrow of the Assad regime.([2]) The perception held by some in the Iranian security elite that Iran's furthering of its security interests in Syria is of existential nature([3]) generates a ferocity of mentality and inability or unwillingness to compromise that establishes significant distance between the mindset of Tehran and the mindsets of Moscow and Beijing, making Tehran an inconveniently difficult partner in Syria. While Beijing's traditional approach of not taking sides and striving to remain friends with those on both poles of an issue makes it hard to see that China would explicitly move away from Iran in Syria or the immediate region, if Tehran refuses to deescalate its existentialist security power plays in Syria then Beijing may align closer with Russia.

The emergence of closer collaboration between China and Russia in Syria at the expense of Iran may also be made more likely by the fact that the Tehran-Moscow relationship is to a large extent built on shared anti-Americanism. Therefore, the relationship may be better understood as a "tactical entente"built on some shared economic and geopolitical interests rather than a strategic partnership built on a shared strategic agenda.([4]) However, while anti-Americanism is the fundamental pillar of Iran's political identity, it is not an intrinsic pillar for Russia, with the Moscow-Washington relationship cycling between thaws and freezes as it becomes expedient for the respective leaderships.([5]) This asymmetry between Russia and Iran has been one of the factors driving Iran to build a deep relationship with China in the Middle East.([6]) However, as noted, Iran's penchant for thriving on regional instability is something antithetical to China's aims in the region. This penchant for sowing instability–reflected in Syria by Iran's approach of using proxies to

(1) (Li &Zhangxi, 2018).
(2) (Kirmanj&Sadq, 2018, p. 166).
(3) (Bhutta, 2017, p.70).
(4) (Therme, 2018, pp. 560, 561).
(5) (Therme, 2018, p.551).
(6) (Therme, 2018, p. 551).

penetrate and influence Syrian state institutions([1])– is likewise at odds with Russia's Syria, and wider Middle East, policy of pushing to strengthen, or at least maintain, status quo regimes free from influence by external actors.([2]) While Russia's regional interest is to maintain peaceful relations with Iran, it should not be expected that Moscow won't sacrifice some of the strength of its diplomatic relations with Iran over Syria, as Russia's wider strategic ambitions aren't centered on Tehran.([3]) Similarly, in the case of China, while Beijing's interest is likewise to maintain good relations with Iran due to the depth of their economic ties and the geographic centrality of Iran to the BRI, if Iran becomes too difficult a diplomatic partner to keep close, then China will likely not hesitate in establishing the necessary distance between itself and the Islamic Republic to achieve its broader regional aims. An indicator of the likelihood of this has been Beijing's willingness to decrease oil imports from Iran since November 2018 to avoid US sanctions even when China was afforded a waiver from these sanctions.([4])

When forecasting how China may confront commercial competition with Russia in Syria, it may be useful to consider the Chinese axiom of 'yingdegengying, ruandegengruan' (hardening the hard, softening the soft) that is increasingly prevalence in Chinese strategic discourse. This approach is defined by China adopting an uncompromising, assertive stance towards issues Beijing regards as its core interests, while adopting a compromising and flexible stance towards issues regarded as secondary interests.([5]) These core interests have been delineated as the "safeguarding of China's political and economic systems; its national security, sovereignty and territorial integrity; and its sustainable economic and social development."([6]) None of these core interests come into play regarding the context of China in Syria, therefore Beijing may well employ flexibility when dealing with instances of competition with Russia in Syria, as long as China's greater goal – and something that approaches a core interest of Beijing – of the foundations being laid for the spread of the BRI across the region are furthered.

Conclusion

The respective partnerships between Iran, Russia and China, while giving the appearance on a tight-knit anti-Western bloc to some in the West, are better understood as marriages of convenience. Accordingly, deeper shared normative

(1) (Kirmanj&Sadq, 2018, p. 155).
(2) (Bhutta, 2017, p. 75).
(3) (Therme, 2018, p. 553).
(4) (Gavin, 2019); (Pantucci, 2019).
(5) (Boon, 2016, p. 641).
(6) (Gang, 2013).

foundations that typically constitute traditional alliances are absent in these relations, with this partnership instead being driven by short term matching interests and expedient instances of collaboration. As such, understanding the likely trajectory of Sino-Russian-Iranian relations within their leadership of the Syrian reconstruction can best be pursued by weighing up the matching and conflicting interests of the respective players and considering how the broader regional goals of each actor fits with the others' aims.

While each of the three actors are competing for the commercial leadership of the Syrian reconstruction, Russia and China have broader mutually supportive positions, involvements and aims that have the potential to outweigh this competition. Russia's need of Chinese funds to flow into the rebuild process to support Assad and provide opportunities for Russian firms, and China's need for the Russian-led political reconciliation and security building process to lay the stability necessary for Syria to become a key conduit to the BRI, mean that there are avenues of collaboration more valuable than individual cases of commercial interests. Outside of its military support providing a previous lifeline to Assad, Iran's broader positions, involvements and aims in Syria don't align with Russia and China to a comparable extent. Iran's determinedness and methods to cultivate Syria as a central feature of Tehran's desired regional security landscape are largely not aligned with Russia and China's interests, making it an inconvenient partner for Moscow and Beijing that both may wish to limit in the reconstruction.

Further directions in which to analyse this broader topic are numerous. A key dynamic worthy of analysis is China's impending leadership of the commercial aspects of the reconstruction process accompanied by the West being largely absent from the process. As such, this is potentially an unprecedented example of postwar reconstruction, and may be illustrative of just how China intends to assume its growing leadership in politically fraught environments, with important implications for factors like the sustainability of its non-intervention paradigm, amongst others

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