

# Russia and China in the Middle East: Rapprochement and Rivalry

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In late November 2017, the Syrian ambassador in Beijing stated that his country was interested in having “countries like Russia, China, India, and Iran take part in reconstruction” after the war, which the World Bank estimated will cost some \$250 billion.<sup>1</sup> As the war in Syria appears to be drawing to a close, Russia and China are preparing for the future, and looking at the potential business opportunities available to them. The economic capabilities of China, the world’s second largest economy, are incomparably greater than those of Russia, whose economy is far from robust. Thus despite the rapprochement between Russia and China in the international theater, the cooperation between these two powers during the war in Syria is likely to give way to economic rivalry that will remind both of them of the points of dispute between them.

This essay examines the intricate relations between China and Russia, from their historical roots to their common interests in the various theaters around the world to the points of dispute and rivalry between the two countries. The Russian-Chinese rapprochement in the global sphere, and lately also in the Middle East, despite its limitations and difficulties, is liable to bolster the standing of parties acting against Israel’s interests in the Middle East. Israel should therefore assess its relations with each of these two powers not only from a bilateral standpoint, but also from a multi-power perspective, focusing on the China-Russia-Israel triangle, and even the quadrilateral that includes the United States.

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## From Rift to Honeymoon

Recent relations between China and Russia, which have known ups and downs over the years, can be divided into three main periods: the gradual thaw in the 1990s; the economic tension surrounding military trade starting in 2006; and the honeymoon that began in 2013.

### *Gradual Thaw*

Following years of estrangement and rivalry during the Mao Zedong era, Russia and China began cautiously and gradually to grow closer to each other. The ice was broken in 1982 with a speech by General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party Leonid Brezhnev, who proposed repairing the poor state of relations between the Soviet Union and China, and stated that the Soviet Union recognized Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan. Nevertheless, it was only after seven years that a milestone was reached in relations between the two countries when President Mikhail Gorbachev visited Beijing.

At this stage, the positive relations were reflected mostly in weapons trade. The Chinese army in the post-Mao era was equipped with outmoded Soviet systems, and the Chinese weapons industry was underdeveloped in comparison with the advanced technologies of the West. In order to overcome the gap and make its army more advanced and effective, China needed foreign suppliers of advanced weapon systems, but the Tiananmen Square events in 1989 and the sanctions against it imposed by Europe and the US deprived China of the opportunity of these resources. Meantime, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian weapons industry faced a dramatic fall in sales to the domestic market, and sought new international markets. In China, it found a large market with a major budget and a great desire for large scale procurement. As a result of these shared interests, China became one of Russia's biggest weapons customers, and its leading customer in 1999-2000; in 2005 Russian arms sales to China reached a peak of 60 percent of all Russian weapons exports.<sup>2</sup>

During those years, the relationship between the countries was given symbolic expression with definitions like "a partnership of good neighbors and fruitful mutual cooperation" and "a partnership of strategic coordination based on equality and mutual benefit oriented to the 21<sup>st</sup> century," that was also reflected in political cooperation. China and Russia voted against the United States in the UN Security Council on three occasions: in 1998, they voted against the US bombardment in Iraq, and did so in a similar vote

in 2003. The third occasion was in 1999, when they criticized the US for military aggression in Yugoslavia.

In the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, cooperation between China and Russia reached new heights with the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the regular joint bilateral military maneuvers in the framework of this organization. Another indication of the improvement in relations could be seen in the 2004 agreement between China and Russia on border arrangements.

### *Economic Tension Surrounding Military Trade*

Despite China's desire to continue buying advanced weapon systems from Russia, Moscow began to fear that the Chinese were copying the Russian models and becoming Russian competitors. This concern arose when Russia noticed that China was buying far more parts than ready systems, and when there was a clear resemblance to the weapon systems that China began exporting, which appeared to be based on the Russian models. For example, the Chinese Shenyang J-11 aircraft was very similar to the Russian Sukhoi Su-27, and Chinese ground-to-air missiles looked like the Russian S-300.<sup>3</sup> Chinese submarines also included elements similar to those of Russian submarines. As a result, starting in 2006, Russia reduced the volume of its arms exports to China. While China was Russia's biggest customer in 1999-2006, accounting for 34-60 percent of Russia's annual exports of its main weapons, the rate fell to 25 percent in 2007-2009, and dropped further to 10 percent in 2010.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the diminishing arms trade, however, the two countries continued to hold joint military maneuvers, and even increased their frequency and complexity. Two joint military exercises took place in 2007: one bilateral and one under the SCO framework. In 2009, six military exercises took place: two bilateral, three in the SCO framework, and one naval exercise by the two countries in the Gulf of Aden, which simulated activity against pirates. One symbolic expression of the good relations between the two countries, despite the economic tension, was the upgrading of relations between them in 2011 to a "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination."

In the non-military sphere, broad economic activity continued. For example, China's need for energy led it to sign contracts with Russia for a supply of natural gas and oil. In 2009, a deal was concluded whereby China was to invest \$25 billion in building an oil pipeline from Russia to China in exchange for a future supply of oil for 20 years. Additional energy

deals related to the development of two gas fields in eastern Siberia and agreements for laying two gas pipelines to transport a total of 68 billion cubic meters of gas a year from Russia to China.<sup>5</sup> Despite China's desire to make progress on energy deals, however, Russia was concerned about the enhancement of China's geopolitical position, and therefore did not want the Chinese economy to advance too quickly. For this reason, Russia delayed deals for laying the gas pipeline until the 2008 global crisis, when it had to proceed with these deals for the sake of its own economy.

### *Honeymoon*

Under Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin, relations between the two countries have seen even higher levels of cooperation. The warm relations are reflected in the many meetings between the leaders: Xi has visited Russia six times since the beginning of his term, and has met with his Russian colleague a total of 21 times. In addition to the personal connection between the two leaders, their countries also have shared interests. In the economic sphere, with the decline in global oil prices and the drop in the volume of weapons sales to China, Russia has found itself in great need of financial resources. For this reason, after many years of refusal, Russia agreed in 2013 to sell China components of its most advanced systems – 24 Sukhoi-35 (Su-35) aircraft and four S-400 ground-to-air missile defense systems for a total of \$7 billion.<sup>6</sup> Russia's economic dependence on China became even greater following Russia's takeover of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, when in contrast to Europe and the US, which imposed painful sanctions against Russia, China turned a blind eye to Russia's hostile action, and continued economic relations with Russia as usual. Trade between the two countries reached \$95 billion in 2015.

Military cooperation between the two countries has also grown. Since 2012, Russia and China have conducted annual naval maneuvers, in addition to land-based military exercises, both bilateral and within the SCO framework. The various maneuvers enable the armies to practice battle tactics, coordination and logistics, and fighting on foreign territory. Since the decision to deploy the American THAAD anti-missile defense system in South Korea, the exercises have also included defense against missiles. Apart from the military practice, the two countries see additional purposes in their joint exercises. First, the exercises provide an opportunity for them to display their advanced systems and market them for export. In addition, the joint exercises enable them to demonstrate a united front

against the US and the West, and serve internal purposes by reinforcing national sentiments. In the framework of the naval exercises, China and Russia also conducted two exercises in remote waters not in either country's territory. In May 2015, a joint exercise took place in the Mediterranean Sea, and in July 2017, a joint exercise was held in the Baltic Sea. This latter exercise aroused much concern among NATO countries, which prompted President Putin to deliver a conciliatory message, claiming that the exercises were "a stabilizing factor for the entire world. No third country should feel threatened. We are not creating a bloc or a military alliance."<sup>7</sup>

### **Common Interests and Cooperation**

In addition to their joint activity in military and security matters, China and Russia share geopolitical interests. First, both countries oppose the American strategy that seeks to "contain" them. This opposition is a key factor in the united front presented by China and Russia against the US in UN institutions, especially with respect to regional disputes, such as in North Korea and Syria. In this context, the Middle East provides a favorable area for action taken by the two powers against US hegemony. The perception of an American withdrawal from the Middle East is already leveraged by Moscow and Beijing, and both countries are taking action to fill the perceived vacuum and strengthen their trade and diplomatic ties with regional actors that are concerned by the relative US withdrawal. The two powers also advocate a balance of power in the Middle East at the expense of US hegemony. They oppose regime changes and consider (at different levels) American involvement as the catalyst for the Arab Spring and the rise of the Islamic State. Both portray themselves as supporters of international law, maintain an official policy of non-intervention, and offer to serve as mediators or neutral intermediaries.

In addition, for China and Russia the Middle East represents an external arena remote from their direct spheres of influence that can serve as a pressure point against the US for the purpose of obtaining American concessions in the two powers' immediate fields of strategic interest: Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet area for Russia, and the Asian-Pacific and the South China Sea for China. Furthermore, Russian-Chinese cooperation in the Middle East serves Moscow and Beijing by assisting cooperation between them in other theaters. Russia won Chinese support through abstention or use of its UN Security Council veto on matters pertaining to Ukraine, Syria, and elsewhere. Russia returned the favor by supporting

Chinese actions in the South China Sea and opposing the deployment of THAAD anti-missile missiles in the Korean peninsula.

Both countries have immediate interests in achieving relative stability in the North African, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian regions. They seek to contain the spread of radical Islam in their countries (especially in the northern Caucasus in Russia and Xinjiang Province in China), and prefer a geopolitically favorable environment in order to expand the volume of their trade and energy-related projects. Russia in particular seeks to enhance its trading and military presence, together with energy-related projects in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Eastern Mediterranean. China, for its part, seeks to promote its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and regards the Middle East as critical for implementing this initiative. At the same time, Russia and China's dependence on the Middle East differ substantially. As an oil and gas exporter, the Russian economy is not dependent on energy resources in the Middle East, but on upheavals in oil prices. China, on the other hand, has become the largest importer of oil from the Middle East, and has become increasingly dependent on energy imports from the region. This dependence has prompted a Saudi-Chinese rapprochement, based on increased energy imports by China and better chances for Chinese investments in the Saudi energy sector. One expression of this is the important transaction where China seeks to buy 5 percent of the Saudi oil company Aramco.<sup>8</sup>

The overlapping interests of the two powers have led to mutual cooperation. Both have usually acted as coordinated partners on the Iranian nuclear program and the civil war in Syria. Russia and China supported the Iranian positions during the negotiations on the nuclear agreement and opposed sanctions. They also both supported the inclusion of Iran in international institutions and support Iran's request for full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

On Syria, Beijing provided diplomatic support for Moscow's military intervention in Syria. Together with Russia, China vetoed six of the seven resolutions proposed in the UN Security Council that attempted to condemn Syria for the use of chemical weapons against its citizens. The seventh vote took place in April 2017, after a meeting between Presidents Trump and Xi Jinping, in which the US sought to condemn Syria for using chemical weapons against the rebels. China abstained in this vote, while Russia opposed it, and eventually vetoed the resolution. Thus Chinese policy does

not automatically side with Russia, but it is determined in accordance with China's relations with the US.

On the level of public diplomacy, China has been able to justify Russia's military attacks by arguing that they are legitimate anti-terrorist actions in compliance with international law. Beijing also took several essentially military-related actions: it trained forces from Assad's army in Syria in 2016,<sup>9</sup> reported the sending of military advisors to Assad in April 2016 and early 2017,<sup>10</sup> and declared its intention numerous times to deploy military and humanitarian aid to assist Russia in Syria. In March 2016, China appointed a special envoy to Syria,<sup>11</sup> and said that it aimed to cooperate closely with Russia in working toward a political solution. While China's military and humanitarian presence is minimal in comparison with Russia's involvement, it nevertheless indicates a change in China's traditional policy of non-intervention. These measures, which signal China's willingness to send soldiers abroad, were portrayed in Russia as a development proving the legitimacy of Russian intervention, and as aid in building a Russian-Iranian-Chinese axis in Syria.

### **Suspicion and Rivalry**

Yet their fruitful cooperation and close relations notwithstanding, there is no close alliance between the two powers, and both are suspicious and cautious toward one another. The rising power of China, and especially its growing economic relations with Central Asian countries, generates geopolitical tension, with Russia regarding the rise of China as a threat and trying to preserve its power in the region. The BRI, and the commitments by various countries in the region for infrastructure projects in cooperation with the Chinese, is perceived as competition and undesirable penetration into Russia's historical sphere of influence. In order to avoid leaving the stage to China, Russia has "extended its sponsorship" to the Chinese initiative, and signed a cooperation agreement for connecting the Chinese BRI with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), founded by Russia. This agreement laid the political foundations for China's continued cooperation with countries of northern Europe and Asia, and provided China with easy access for continued implementation of its infrastructure programs in Asia, as well as for follow-up discussions about trade matters. On the Russian side, the agreement made it possible to position Russia as an important interested party in the BRI. Another aspect of this initiative, which has a strong economic dimension for Russia, is cooperation between China

and Russia on the Arctic Circle, through the joint construction of the Silk Road on Ice (SRI). This shortcut is likely to reduce the cruising time to Europe by a third.

Another reason for Russian anxiety is its demographic issue on its border with China. Although the longstanding border dispute between the two countries was settled in 2008, the agricultural areas along the border attract Chinese farmers, who rent the land for long periods. Russia fears that China will take over its territory with the help of Chinese relocated to these regions, which are sparsely settled by Russian citizens. In actuality, the number of Chinese who have crossed the border from China to Russia amounts to only 0.5 percent of the Russian population in the region, because the Chinese themselves have no interest in moving to Russia, where wages are lower than in China. Furthermore, China is encouraging its citizens to settle in unoccupied regions in China itself.

There is also a clash between the countries' respective approaches to the Middle East. Russia's main geopolitical lever in the Middle East is the use of historical alliances and proactive diplomacy to create and manage crises. China, in contrast, is still officially proclaiming its position of non-intervention and neutrality. In addition, Russia previously paid attention solely to American hegemony in the region, but is now competing with

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Whereas Russia previously paid attention solely to American hegemony in the Middle East, it is now competing with China's new economic hold, mainly in weapons trade, investment projects, and reconstruction in Iran and Syria.

Where the arms trade is concerned, Russia still has the upper hand. In 2016, Russia was second to the US among the world's leading arms exporters, while China ranked in fifth place.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the rapid increase in China's weapons sales in the Middle East is a cause for concern in Moscow, even though Russia's arms exports continue to grow throughout the region, in part due to the demonstration of the operational capability of Russia's advanced and sophisticated arms on the Syrian front. For example, the weapons portfolio of Rosoboronexport for Arab countries (23 countries in the Middle East and North

Africa) totals \$8 billion, constituting approximately 20 percent of the company's exports.<sup>13</sup> Russia's arms sales have also expanded geographically: Russia is a major supplier of weapons to Algeria, Egypt, Iran, and Iraq, as



well as to the Gulf states (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates) and other North African countries (Morocco, Tunisia). Russia has also made itself a leading supplier of warplanes and air defense systems throughout the region, with its S-400 air defense system in demand in the Gulf states and Morocco. This system has enabled Russia to enter unexpected markets, and in September 2017, Russia agreed to sell the S-400 to Turkey, a NATO member. At the same time, China is emerging as an economic competitor, not merely to the United States, but also to Russia, and has increased its weapons sales to countries in the region. China supplied Saudi Arabia and Iraq with unarmed and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs),<sup>14</sup> and in March 2017 announced a breakthrough deal in which it will build a factory to manufacture UAVs in Saudi Arabia.<sup>15</sup> For countries refusing or unable to buy weapons from the United States, the Chinese equipment is perceived as a cheap solution of adequate quality, and China ranks after Russia among the three top suppliers of arms to Iran, Syria, and Algeria.

In investments, the Russian economy has difficulty competing with China. The latter has the ability to supervise and finance gigantic construction projects and integrate them into the BRI, its flagship economic program, which is a model for international cooperation. It also launched a broad program of accelerated economic cooperation with Middle East countries: over the next 10 years, China hopes to increase its bilateral trade with Arab countries from \$240 billion to \$600 billion, and to expedite the negotiations for establishing a free trade zone between China and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).<sup>16</sup>

The BRI fits in well with China's plans to play a key role in the reconstruction of Syria when the fighting ends there. Russia has also prepared for this stage, and together with China and Iran, is well-positioned to lead the reconstruction projects and infrastructure investments. In April 2016, Russia signed contracts worth almost \$1 billion for reconstruction in Syria.<sup>17</sup> According to official Russian sources, in November 2016, Syria gave Russia preference in reconstruction projects with good terms.<sup>18</sup> Russian companies began doing business in Syrian oil, gas, and mining resources using field work by the Russian army in communications networks and mines in Syria, as well as in construction of new power stations in Aleppo and Homs.<sup>19</sup> China's investment capabilities, which surpass those of Russia and Iran, have not escaped the eyes of the Syrians, and the Syrian ambassador in Beijing said that his country would be willing to provide China with oil in exchange for loans, and that it was willing to make these

deals in yuan.<sup>20</sup> China's proven capabilities in infrastructure and its great economic power are likely to make it a leader in the enormous reconstruction projects in Syria.

## Conclusion

Relations between China and Russia are complex; they have known ups and downs over the years, but cooperation has now been established, based on a confluence of interests. The most dominant interest in the drive to cooperate may well be the desire to contain the power and influence of the US. China and Russia have joined forces for this purpose and are active in the Middle East theater, with Russia providing the active involvement and China the support from behind.

The rapprochement and cooperation between these two powers is liable to have a negative influence on Israel's strategic interests, since the two countries strengthen Iran diplomatically and militarily, empower the regime of Bashar al-Assad, and back the Palestinians' demands and views in international forums. Furthermore, the Chinese-Russian rapprochement and cooperation in the Middle East underline the relative retreat of the US, and constitute a threat to its continued hegemony in the region. Due to its special relationship with the US, Israel has something to lose from the rapprochement between the two major rivals of its ally.

While relations between China and Russia have known ups and downs over the years, cooperation has now been established, based on a confluence of interests – not least of which is the desire to contain the power and influence of the US.

The relationship between China and Russia is not perfect; it is replete with difficulties and constraints. While Russia regards cooperation with China as a supreme value, China is leveraging its cooperation with Russia based on its sense of the value of the partnership, combined with a cautious attitude toward the US. In the Middle East arena as well, a conflict of interests is liable to complicate continued cooperation between the two powers: for historical reasons, Russian has a larger presence and leverage in the Middle East than China, especially with respect to diplomacy, military presence, weapons trade, and energy cooperation. China, however, has much

greater economic might than Russia, and is positioning itself as a rising power in trade and investments. The BRI, which provides an ambitious long term vision, is an attraction for the countries of the region hungering for

foreign investments. Now that the winds of war are waning, the pendulum is swinging in the direction of economics, in which China has a clear advantage, and the rivalry between the two powers is therefore likely to be sharpened.

Despite the points of dispute and rivalry between the two powers, however, it appears that there are still further mutual advantages to the cooperation, and this rapprochement poses a challenge to Israel. The Israeli government should therefore conduct a strategic dialogue with representatives of the US administration and external experts to assess the new picture from a multi-power perspective, and formulate a comprehensive policy suitable for the emerging situation in the world in general, and in Syria in particular.

## Notes

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