

INSS Insight No. 1187, July 14, 2019

Will China Reconstruct Syria? Not So Fast

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Chinese President Xi Jinping announced recently in Moscow that China stands ready to participate in Syria's reconstruction. Some see this as a confirmation of their assessment that China will assume a significant role in the reconstruction, realizing its impressive capabilities in building infrastructure. Such reports generally link the issue to China's Belt and Road Initiative, and some have gone as far as to warn that there are inherent security risks for Israel. As with other issues pertaining to China and its policies, however, many reports on this issue reflect wishful thinking, deliberate manipulation, or baseless assertions. A considered analysis of China's interests, policy, and modus operandi points to little likelihood of significant Chinese investment and involvement in Syria in the coming years, and indicates that the danger to Israel from this possibility is highly doubtful.

In an interview to the Russian media in early June 2019, Chinese President Xi Jinping said that "China stands ready to participate in Syria's reconstruction within its own ability." Some see this statement as confirmation of their hope – or their fear – that China will shoulder the reconstruction mission, estimated by the World Bank to cost approximately \$250 billion. Some have gone so far as to warn Israel about the risks of a projected Chinese presence on its northern border. But proponents of both approaches would do well to lower their expectations. China's main objectives in the Middle East relate to energy security, sources, and supply routes, as well as trade routes to Europe and Africa. Its regional policy was described as "economic heavyweight, diplomatic lightweight, and military featherweight." China's aligned interests, toolbox, and strategic priorities all point to a low probability of significant Chinese involvement in Syria, which is located at the margins of Western Asia, a low priority area for China, and which in itself lacks significant energy or mineral resources. There is no doubt that China has the necessary capabilities for Syria's reconstruction, but its policy and conduct regarding the Middle East raise serious doubt as to the likelihood of its investing these capabilities there.

The Economic Plane: Proven Chinese Potential, Limited Motivation

China's proven capabilities in infrastructure, the scale of its economy, its available capital, and the infrastructure enterprises it leads worldwide certainly meet the requirements for the enormous undertaking of reconstructing a devastated Syria. On the

face of it, the reconstruction projects, especially in the infrastructure realm – roads, railroads, power plants, communications, and energy – suit the Chinese doctrine of “peace through development” as well as President Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which focuses on the establishment of transport, trade, and communications infrastructure between China and the global markets and sources of raw materials, especially in Europe and Africa, by land, sea, and air.

Damascus has long noted this potential, and seeks Chinese investment and capabilities. In November 2017, Syria’s ambassador to Beijing said his country would be willing to provide China with oil in exchange for loans, and would even be prepared to make these transactions in yuan, in accordance with China’s aspirations to incorporate its currency within the global exchange market.

Yet despite the capability potential, the critical question is whether China in fact actually wants to apply it in Syria. The Chinese government is generally wary of risking its investments and interests abroad, both for economic reasons and fearing a negative impact on the party and its image within China and in the world in general. After China was burned by the loss of its Libya investments and by being forced to evacuate its citizens from Yemen during the Middle East years of upheaval, it is not eager to expose itself to further risks before Syria is stabilized and the fighting there has ceased.

As in many other places around the globe, hopes and illusions about the Belt and Road Initiative have grown in Syria too. An adviser to the Syrian President said recently, “The Silk Road is not a silk road if it does not pass through Syria, Iraq, and Iran.” But geography permits easier and shorter routes to Europe – from Iran directly to Turkey – while a non-essential passage in Iraq and Syria would involve needless security risks from China’s perspective. Accordingly, though the Chinese ambassador in Iraq hailed Iraq as one of the first Arab countries to join the Belt and Road Initiative, China’s investments there are mainly in the realm of energy and not in infrastructure, in contrast to the massive investments in the infrastructures of its neighbor Iran. Syria indeed has Mediterranean seaports, but the Tartus port has already been leased to Russia for 49 years, and China has gained control and/or operating rights in many other ports in the region, including Suez, Tripoli, Haifa, Istanbul, and Piraeus.

Along with the reservations on the part of the Chinese government, Chinese companies are in no rush to work in Syria, nor were they even before the war. In 2010, Chinese investment in Syria amounted to mere \$16.6 million, and dropped to \$11 million by 2015. Challenges that Chinese firms would face in Syria are many: security risks are compounded by legislative challenges, political instability, delays and inefficiency that only increased during the war years. Chinese firms also fret about the expected returns on

their investment, and given the Chinese model of “investment through loans,” there is a reasonable concern that Syria would not be able to repay loans it receives. While some Chinese firms agreed to receive payment in oil and merchandise, this model does not allow for wide scale investments.

Thus from an economic standpoint the expectations of significant Chinese involvement in Syria’s post-war reconstruction are excessive, and that, as summarized by the deputy chairman of the China Arab Association, “The current situation in Syria is not suitable for wide-scale investments.”

The Political and Military Plane

China conducts diplomatic activity in Syria that reflects its very limited interest in this aspect of relations. China appointed a special envoy to Syria, voiced readiness to mediate between the warring parties, and in 2016 hosted representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition, separately, in Beijing. On the military plane, China reported training Assad army units in Syria in 2016 and dispatching Chinese military advisers to Syria in April 2016 and early 2017, and it has repeatedly declared its intent to send military and humanitarian aid via Russian forces in Syria.

A close review of China’s activities in Syria reveals that they are mainly symbolic and rhetorical, while any active engagement is limited and of negligible impact. On the military plane, the Chinese advisers sent to Syria deal with soft issues: medicine and logistics. Similarly, contrary to rumors circulated by opposition members, China has avoided sending troops to fight Uyghur jihadi forces in Syria, and its main response to the threat they pose is implemented within its borders as a domestic security issue, or in its near periphery. On the humanitarian plane, China’s aid to Syria came down to pledging tens of millions of dollars – if and when this will be delivered is hard to know – as well as 1,000 sacks of rice, which provides an excellent measure of the Chinese appetite for significant activity in Syria.

When it comes to policy on Syria, China conducts itself in accordance with its declared principle of “respect for sovereignty and non-interference in other countries’ affairs,” mainly reflecting its concern regarding foreign interference in China’s own affairs. In practice this means backing the Assad regime. Similarly, China’s diplomatic support for Syria should be seen through the prism of Great Power relations. With its UN votes, China has stood by Syria in supporting President Assad, and vetoed six out of seven resolutions that were tabled at the Security Council and included condemnation of Syrian authorities for using force against civilians. The seventh vote was held in April 2017 after the meeting of Presidents Trump and Xi, in which the United States asked that Syria be condemned for using chemical weapons. China abstained from that vote, while Russia

opposed and eventually vetoed the resolution. Clearly, Chinese policy does not automatically align with Russia but is also weighed in accordance with the state of its relations with the United States. At a time of high China-United States tension, China has no interest in stoking the fire over a Middle East matter that it considers marginal. Still, as a general rule, Beijing and Moscow tend to support each other diplomatically in various global spheres. For example, with Russia supporting Chinese activity in the South China Sea, China has supported Russia's actions in Ukraine and Syria. China finds Russia's dominance in Syria convenient and sees no reason to compete in a theater that it considers negligible.

Chinese researchers at the Shanghai International Studies University deem Beijing's official involvement in Syria as a "limited intervention" of the kind reserved for conflicts with only a second-tier impact on Chinese core interests and even commercial interests, and as involvement that is manifested by a symbolic "show of presence."

Given the array of China's interests and the nature of its policy in the region on the one hand, and the security situation in Syria on the other, there is little reason to expect significant Chinese involvement in terms of investment or infrastructure projects in Syria in the foreseeable future, amounting to years, at least, and decades from a reasonable perspective. In any event, even were China to choose to invest in Syria, it is difficult to see how this would pose a risk to Israel, except if Chinese involvement through investment in Syria helps Iran – China's main strategic partner in the Middle East – entrench in Syria. In all that regards Syria, Israel should focus on threats emanating from Iran, and when it comes to world powers should focus on coordinating with Russia and cooperating closely with its strategic ally, the United States; China has clearly conceded the court to both of these powers. Seen through the prism of Israel's relations with China, the matter of Syria is at the bottom of their shared agenda, and presumably it will stay there.